



Tourism Vision-2020 Some Myths and Realities

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KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION:

Kerala has drawn up a comprehensive policy document "Vision 2020" in the year 2000. This document gives due consideration to the sustainability aspects of tourism growth along with the economic and feasibility considerations. The new policy seeks to develop tourism as one of the core competencies of the State and also to regulate the tourism initiatives properly taking into account the broader and long-term interests of the State, like, environmental conservation, protection of heritage and culture, development of tourism infrastructure, quality standards etc. In short, it aims at using a sustainable and integrated approach to tourism promotion in Kerala. The Department of Tourism (DoT) of Kerala state has formulated a three-pronged strategy to maintain and further improve the superior position of Kerala in the global tourism map. Accordingly, the three broad strategies are as follows:

1. Product Innovation,
2. Innovative Marketing,
3. Strategic alliance with the Government of Rajasthan.

Besides, there are efforts in the direction of obtaining the benefits of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for tourism, so that SEZs for tourism could be established meaningfully.

Problems of Kerala's Tourism Sector: Ecological Overkill, Growth Constraints.

In spite of the appreciable growth rates and also tremendous potential of the State in the tourism front, the fact remains that Kerala tourism is at present fraught with its own share of sustainability and other problems. Referring to the problems faced by Kerala from a wider perspective (viz. Kerala model of development), Oommen (2008) [10] considers Kerala's ecological problems also in detail, and calls the current scenario as 'Ecological Overkill'. He points out that the emerging ecological scenario is affected by four major crises. (Box 2.1).

First, hydrological cycle is seriously damaged, probably irreversibly. Natural systems like forests and the river systems are irreparably destroyed. Kerala's abundant wetland's sometimes referred to as "kidney of the economic system" is fast disappearing. Despite the copious monsoon rainfall, Kerala has the lowest per capita availability of fresh water. Conservation of fresh water is done only at a very modest scale. No worthwhile efforts have been made to conserve the fast disappearing forests.

- Second, Kerala with its vast coastal system of 580 kms, mountains and undulating terrains has a peculiar geography which has been considerably distorted. Kerala's rich bio-diversity is being fatally interfered to the leveling of paddy lands, mountain regions and heavy quarrying.
- Third, few parts of the world have such a rich and diversified natural base of bio-resources which over the years have been culturally dependent on the people who protected them. Unfortunately, this beautiful matrix of agro-eco system is being badly destroyed. The traditional know-how is virtually vanishing.
- Four, a consumerist society throws out heavy solid, liquid and medical wastes. The hospitals alone generate around 1.5 lakh tones of solid waste per day. It is estimated that about one million cubic metres of sewage is generated per day in the coastal areas alone.

Needless to mention, the fast deteriorating trend of the emerging ecological scenario, declining environmental sanitation and poor hygiene, would definitely have an adverse impact on development of tourism in

the state. As suggested by Oommen (2008) [10], 'a comprehensive vision and purposive actions' seems to be imminent for the state. Prakash and Nair (2008) [11] have observed 'widespread environmental damage' as one of the 'serious issue staring the state in the face', the other issues being 'high incidence of unemployment, fiscal crisis of the state government, informal nature of agriculture, industrial backwardness etc. They have observed 'Technological change, urbanization and migration have created new opportunities for the state, but these have also brought new challenges for the state, like, environmental degradation'. Premchand (2008) [12] has pointed out that the demolition of illegal resorts in Munnar, the reputed tourism destination in Kerala, in the recent past has adversely affected the prospects of tourism and has put the Department of Tourism in an 'embarrassing situation'.

As already pointed out in Part – I of the paper, ecologically sustainable tourism (ecotourism) is fast gaining momentum the world over. This in turn is because of a number of adverse impacts of tourism on the environment, which need urgent attention

Adverse Impacts of Tourism on the Environment:

The adverse impacts of tourism on the environment include the following:

Pressure on Natural Resources: Tourism adversely affects land and landscape, marine resources, atmosphere, fresh water, etc. and also pressure on other local resources (like, energy, food, other raw materials etc.).

Harm to wildlife and habitats, with associated loss of biodiversity: This mainly arises on (i) biological resources – in the form of disruption of wildlife habitats, clearance of vegetation for tourism development, increased pressure on endangered species etc., (ii) ecologically fragile areas, like, rain forests, wetlands, mangroves, coral reefs etc.

Pollution and wastes: These cause contamination of land, freshwater, marine waters and coastal areas, air etc. and also causes noise pollution.

Social and cultural pressures related to conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity: These include, (i) social and cultural impacts – that is, disturbance to the local way of life and of social structures, and (ii) adverse impacts on livelihoods – lack of benefit sharing with those who bear the tourism related costs.

Environmental Threats to Tourism: These include, inter alia, (i) global warming, (ii) loss of bio-diversity, water pollution, and local air pollution.

Ecotourism: Concept and Main Features:

Because of the adverse effects of tourism on the environment as discussed above, the concept of environment-friendly tourism (ecotourism) is gaining significance all over the world. The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of the local people." A tourism programme that is nature based, ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and generates tourist satisfaction can be called ecotourism.

Eco-tourism seeks to achieve the following broad goals: (i) To improve the material and non-material well being of communities, (ii) To protect biological diversity and maintain ecological systems, and (iii) To ensure the cultural integrity and social cohesion of communities. The key characteristics of ecologically viable tourism are as follows: (i) It has social equity and community involvement, (ii) Tourism, which maintains the full range of recreational, educational and cultural opportunities within

and across generations, (iii) It is based on activities or designs that reflect the character of a region, (iv) It is integrated into local, regional and national plans. The main features of ecotourism are as follows:

- Ecotourism seeks to make the visitor aware of the protective, productive and regulatory functions of the forests.
- Its principal aim is benefiting from nature, landscape or specific species (eg. watching lions, elephants, whales etc.)
- It involves low visitor impact and should contribute to the well-being of local population.
- It involves a purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem, while producing the economic opportunities that make conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people.
- It is a very powerful means to preserve and develop the biodiversity.
- Ecotourism involves sharing of the responsibility by both travelers and service providers.
- It underlines the sustainability of tourism, ie. The needs of today's visitors should not be met at the expense of future generations.
- It may involve travel to any area of nature for admiring and enjoying the biodiversity, natural landscapes and cultural and social heritage of the area.

Ecotourism: the Indian Scenario

The religious tradition of India is often quite conducive for preserving the nature, particularly in many rural and tribal settlements. As per Hindu religious scriptures, one is expected to follow certain rules ('Dharma', in religious language) regarding the sanctity to be maintained in temples and other places of worship, hills, sanctuaries, holy rivers and other water bodies, historical monuments etc. This is a feature that favours promotion of ecotourism India. Certain tourist locations in India have already attracted world attention because of their extreme uniqueness. Floating accommodation in Dal Lake (Kashmir) and the serene back waters (and also the boat race held therein) are just two classic examples. The above type of tourist locations bring people close to the nature.

Facets of Indian Ecotourism: Quite Diverse

Ecotourism in India has got a number of facets. These include, inter alia, the following:

- Rural Tourism: Indian society is characterized by enormous diversity and distinction between urban lifestyle and rural lifestyle. There is tremendous demand for the above kind of tourism settings – both domestic and foreign. Typically, such a setting could be a recreated village environment on the outskirts of an urban area. Some variants of the above model are already existing naturally, like, Chokhi Dhani on the outskirts of Jaipur.
- Religious Tourism: As India is home to many religions of the world, its importance as a prominent destination for religious tourism need not be overemphasized. The most important religious tourism destinations include, Bodh Gaya (Buddhists), Hardwar / Rishikesh, Varanasi, Ujjain etc. (Hindus), Amritsar (Sikhs), Ajmer (Muslims) etc.
- Nature Tourism: Large number of virgin territories available in India provides the country with good scope for nature tourism, particularly if adequate investment is made in special infrastructure, so that it appeals to the relevant special interest groups. The presence of the great Himalayas, deserts, extensive green plains, sea, lakes etc. is the advantage to India in this regard.
- Ethnic Tourism: This is another advantage of India to showcase the local culture, customs and heritage. For instance, Surajkund Crafts Mela held at Surajkund (Haryana).
- Health Tourism: This type of tourism involves a wide range of services ranging from the 'The Art of Living' to the most authentic and original forms of yoga, meditation and Ayurveda. This should ideally be conducted in the ambience of the ocean or river and the backdrop of lush forests. Of late, many affluent and health conscious foreigners, mostly from the western countries, are growingly being attracted towards this type of tourism.
- Wild Tourism: This involves, as the name suggests travel to destinations wherein wild animals, interiors of forests etc. is involved. For instance, Thekkadi (Kerala) offers opportunities to closely observe elephants and other wild animals in their natural surroundings by traveling through boats along the river flowing across such forests.
- Adventure Tourism: Adventure tourism is often targeted at special

interest groups and it involves travel to remotely inhabited places that are far removed from urban settings. Accordingly, it is often clubbed with nature tourism. Because of the very nature of adventure tourism, it is essential to develop adequate travel and transportation infrastructure to develop this kind of tourism.

- Medical Tourism: This kind of tourism is fast picking up in India and its growth potential is huge, primarily because of the relatively low cost of medical facilities in India compared with other nations. India has got a potential to attract 1 million tourists per annum which in turn would translate into USD 5 Billion to the economy.

Ecotourism in India: Emerging Concerns, Impediments and Hurdles.

From the forgoing analysis it may be noted that ecotourism is an environment-friendly, sustainable and nature-based form of tourism that is also meant to benefit indigenous people and local communities. For a country like India with abundant natural resources to support tourism, the scope of ecotourism is tremendous. In spite of the favourable features as above, there are a number of disturbing facts as well. These adverse aspects ecotourism have been pointed out by many writers, like for instance, Deiffee, J (1981) [4]. As considerations of such negative factors are necessary for formulation of meaningful eco-friendly strategies for sustainable tourism development, the most important of such negative effects are given below.

- The influx of tourists will increase the need for additional facilities, like, roads, accommodation, power, water, waste disposal facilities etc. This in turn will adversely affect the natural systems and their eco-system. Besides, such evil effects as development of rural slums, noise and air pollution, disturbance of wild life may also follow. Often unhygienic environments arise due to such slums, stagnated water bodies, encroachments, stray cattle etc. which in turn may alienate the tourists.
- Ecotourism may be severely constrained by the physical and social carrying capacities of many areas. Havoc and destructions caused to the hill stations, vandalism of historical monuments, degradation of beeches etc. are just a few examples.
- Reaction of community to tourism in general and eco-tourism in particular may not be that encouraging. Often, ecotourism is associated with unfavourable changes in local prices and employment generation.
- Lack of sufficient information and tourist guides relating to various tourism destinations, accommodation facilities, modes of transport, sanitary, toilet and drainage facilities are some other factors that adversely affect tourism industry.
- The benefits to the local people are often not at all as expected. This is the case particularly in respect of developing countries. As such, local people have either resentment or hostility towards ecotourism and their participation is quite poor. In some cases they resist such initiatives as well.
- As against the expectations, very little of the tourism money directly benefits the local people. It has been observed that outsiders dominate ecotourism, resulting in outside flow of money. World Bank observes that 55% of the dollar spent on tourism in developing countries leaks back to the developed countries.
- Rather difficult and procedural immigration and entry / exit formalities that are existing in India vis-à-vis other nations, is another impediment. Going by international best practices, such formalities have to be fine-tuned made easier.
- Though, of late, there are some improvements, generally the governmental support towards tourism development has been quite poor. Similarly, the governmental resources for tourism development are limited. This, in turn, underlines the need for ensuring active private sector participation. Besides, the high rate of taxation existing in India on tourism activities is another impediment which needs to be standardized.

Private Sector Participation through PPP (Public-Private Partnership) Model:

Participation of private sector appears to be essential in the Indian scenario looking into the resource constraints of the Government. The Government may play the roles of both an enabler and regulator. Firstly, as an enabler / facilitator – who provides the licenses to private agencies who fulfill the norms laid by the government and also agrees to comply with pre-fixed norms of service quality, use of natural resources, pollution control norms etc. Secondly, as a regulator the government ensures strict adherence to the pollution control, use of

resources, service quality etc. by the private agencies and takes remedial / corrective action in case of defaults.

Better Infrastructure and Capacity Building amongst the Local Community.

Better infrastructure facilities, like, road lines, air ports, accommodation facilities, drainage and sanitation facilities etc. need to be created with immediately for faster tourism development. India has to go a long way in this regard. Apart from infrastructure creation as above, a holistic and integrated approach would call for considerable amount of capacity building amongst the local community to manage and operate the tourism sector.

Easier Entry/Immigration Facilities are Vital.

The norms prevailing in India being rather procedural, the same need to be overhauled based on international best practices. That is to say, either a (i) Visa-Free situation, or (ii) Visa-on-Arrival situation need to be ensured, in order to attract more foreign tourism.

Enhanced Level of Services and Utilities to the Tourists.

Better services need to be provided to the international tourists, which include inter alia, readily accessible information kiosks, information guides / bulletins, clean public utilities (sanitation, drainage etc.), hassle-free arrivals, improved hygienic conditions in tourism sites and surroundings, clean air ports and railway stations and so on.

Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Status and Tax Benefits for Tourism Projects.

In view of the immense potential of tourism for economic development of an emerging economy like India, conferment of SEZ status to tourism industry will prompt many investors to invest in tourism projects. Here, it must be ensured that only ecotourism projects should be encouraged. Or, in other words, strict conditions for ensuring the protection of environment should be inbuilt. Likewise, it appears meaningful that income tax benefits like tax holidays be extended to tourism projects in notified areas which conform with stipulated conditions. This in turn would ensure faster and balanced economic development as per the Governmental priorities and that too with less strain on the natural resources.

ICT Initiatives in Tourism for Enhanced Productivity and Service Quality.

As in any other field, in tourism also ICT implementation can dramatically improve operational efficiency as well as improve the quality of service. Reliable information regarding prominent tourism locations, connectivity through rail, road and airlines be provided at various prime tourist locations for the benefit of the tourists. This in turn would reduce the hardships of the tourists and hence improve the service quality. Many research studies have revealed that the expectation of service quality by foreign tourists are often higher than whatever the providers can offer, particularly in respect of developing nations which are lacking adequate infrastructure.

Facilities for Training Manpower and Capacity Building for Providers

Capacity building for service providers (CBSP) is of utmost importance for long-term sustainability and enhanced competitiveness of tourism services. Similarly, there should be permanent mechanism for training and developing manpower of international quality. This in turn necessitates establishment of specialized training institutes in tourism, on the pattern of IIMs, IITs, etc.

Complete Co-operation and Support from Local Populace.

Last, but the not the least, full co-operation and support from the local population need to be ensured for any ecotourism initiative. For this their representation in all policy making forums is absolutely essential. Needless to mention tourism policies sans local support would not be sustainable in the long run. Moreover resentment or hostility of the localities may alienate the tourists also.

Tourism in Kerala: Need for Focusing on Health Tourism and Medical Tourism.

As already pointed out, in the special situation of Kerala apart from following all the ecotourism strategies as noted above, there is the special significance for health tourism and medical tourism. The excellent brand equity for Ayurveda treatment that Kerala possess ensures excellent prospects for Ayurvedic health tourism. Similarly, the state has got globally competitive medical facilities in respect of modern medicine also. For cardiac surgery, dental surgery, heart transplantation etc. the charges in Kerala have been observed to be quite low, often in the range of one-fifth to one-tenth of the international tariffs, while the services available are internationally competitive.

Concluding Observations

Of late, there has been increased thrust on tourism development in India. While tourism has got excellent prospects for promotion of rapid economic development particularly in respect of the developing nations, as is evident from the experiences of many a developing nation, it may be stated that the sustainability aspect of tourism has not often been given adequate consideration in designing tourism policies of government. This in turn results in excessive burden the nature beyond its carrying capacity adversely affecting its ecological balance. Besides, often there are instances wherein the interests of tourists alone are protected in a bid to garner maximum tourism earnings, unmindful of the consequences of the same on the local people. All these point to the growing relevance of the need for adoption of ecotourism in its true letter and spirit, rather than simply from the point of view of compliance with regulatory stipulations or norms. This in turn necessitates a concerted action from the part of all concerned, for the cause of sustainable tourism development. Above all, in view of the resource constraints of the government in respect of developing countries like in India private sector participation seems imminent, thus underlining the need for a PPP approach towards a holistic, integrated and sustainable tourism development.

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