



Ecotourism for Sustainable Development: a Case Study of Goalpara District in Assam

* Dr. M. Gopal Singha

* Associate Professor, and HoD, Geography, Bikali College, Dhupdhara, Dist. Goalpara, Assam, Pin: 783123

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has become the most viable and sustainable way of deriving economic development in the world today. It has enormous potential for the socio-economic transformation of an area or region. Ecotourism has multidimensional implications, such as the protection of natural areas, generation of revenue, helping in conservation of environment and biological diversity and to bring forth sustainable development. Besides, having a great employment generating industry, tourism provides infrastructural and service facilities like transportation, communication, hospital, educational institution, hotel, motel, etc. Goalpara district, located in the South Western margin of the state of Assam in the neighborhood of Garo Hills in Meghalaya has enormous potential for ecotourism. But its development as a prospective sector has been hindered by geo-economic factors like transport and communication bottleneck, lack of public consciousness and government patronage. An attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the potentiality and problem of tourism. In the study available data on geo-ecological components relating to the district and economic parameters have also been used to draw overall view of ecotourism potentiality and problems thereof.

Keywords : Viable, sustainable, transformation, geo-ecological.

Introduction:

Ecotourism refers to a neo-concept, which may be regarded as an ecologically responsible tourism. This nature oriented tourism has been evolved to generate revenue without jeopardizing ecological balance. According to Ecotourism Society, ecotourism may be defined as "Purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environment taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem; producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of the natural resources beneficial to the local people" (Epler Wood et al., 1991). Ecologically sustainable tourism is the means to keep the natural scenic beauty, exotic flora and fauna and places of historical and religious importance intact. Ecotourism is the most feasible protective measure for conservation and preservation of natural and heritage sites, provided strict rules and guidelines are followed in maintaining such places of interest. This sort of tourism has been gaining ground as an ecologically responsible tourism.

Significance of the Study :

The study is significant from the fact that the district has enormous potential and scope for establishing tourism as an important sector of economy. But despite having such potentiality the district has yet to establish a niche in tourism due to host of myriad problems.

Date base and methodology:

In the study available data on geo-ecological components relating to the region and socio-economic parameters have also been used to draw an overall view of ecotourism potentiality and problems based on extensive field survey.

Analysis:

Ecotourism in Goalpara district can be grouped into (i) Historical and religious sites having distinctive ecological set-up; (ii) Wetlands or 'beel' and (iii) Reserved Forests; (iv) cottage industry based tourism; (v) horticulture and plantation farming based ecotourism and (vi) folk culture based ecotourism.

The natural and cultural elements for promotion of ecotour-

ism are found in this district having sound heritage. Tourism in Goalpara district is based mainly on its natural grandeurs, age-old heritage, historical relics, temples, 'Satras' and 'Mosques'. These historical and religious shrines being located in the picturesque ecological set up have become the main source of attraction of tourists. Sri Sri Surya temple on Sri Surya hillocks is one of the noted world heritage sites. It is located at about 13km South of Goalpara town in Mornai and Dubapara locality. The residual hillock of granite rock base-ment with full of wilderness is an exotic site of both nature and heritage of the Hindu-Buddha-Jain religious sects. In this archeological site being covered by archeological department is scattered with the relics, especially the idols of God and Goddesses like Bishnu, Chatrabhuja and Shiva Linga, etc. which have been engraved in stone. Though these historical relics are the main attraction of Sri Surya hillock, the natural attributes like variegated flora and fauna including different species of monkeys, Golden Langur, snakes, leeches, along with other avifaunal compositions in spring and water bodies and in and around the hillock together form a bio-diversity hotspot and pleasant ecosystem. In other words it may be regarded as a sound bio-tourism site. Based on the conducive ecological condition Sri Surya hillock has become an interesting ecotourism site in lower part of Assam.

Cottage-industry based tourism:

A couple of village industries are localized in some specific geographical areas. Among these mention may be made of 'Patidoi' industry of Dubapara area near Sri Surya hill; Pottery industries in Mornai, Shimlitola, Dolgaon; weaving and sericulture especially in practice among the Rabhas and the Bodos; crafts and artifacts of bamboo, cane and wooden of rural artisans, etc.

Horticulture and plantation farming based tourism:

Horticulture and plantation farming based tourism can also be a highly prospective tourism of Goalpara district. Horticulture occupies a significant place so far as agriculture sector in Assam is concerned. The district besides, being a large producer of paddy, jute, mustard and other agricultural products has

also rich horticulture and plantation farming. Horticulture has become an important economic activity for the people of the district, more particularly for those who inhabit the south eastern part. The geo-ecological location of foothill areas ranging from Lakhipur, Agia, Krisnai in the west upto Dhupdhara in the east is quite favorable for horticultural products. Darrangiri market on N.H.- 37 has the distinction of having the biggest banana market in N.E. region. Based on these favorable horticulture and plantation farming special horticulture fair may be organized to attract tourist.

Folk-culture based ecotourism:

Folk-culture, custom and tradition of colorful ethnic communities of Goalpara district is another prospect of tourism. The rich cultural components such as traditional dress, ornaments, traditional weapons, musical instruments, food habits, folk dances, fair and festivals, songs, artifacts, handloom and handicrafts, etc. of tribal communities like Rabha, Bodo, Garo, Hajong and other ethnic groups and their way of living in different ecological settings are the sources of tourist attraction.

Problem of tourism in Goalpara district :

It is pity to note that in spite of having immense tourism potentiality, the district has taken and insignificant place in the map of tourism development in Assam. Several factors are responsible for such state of affair. Lack of developed transport network emerges as one of the major constrains. Besides, inadequate facilities in historical and religious sites, lack of proper conservation and maintenance of places of tourist interest have caused degradation to a great extent, especially the important cultural components, flora and fauna. So far the development of tourism as a concept is concerned, the district is far lagging behind. The new concept of projection for prospective model village (Kurukshetra, 2004) for tourism development is yet to initiate in the district. The Government and Non-Government organizations have yet to come forward in involving the rural people in developing tourism so that they may reap the socio-economic benefits. Apart from these, lack of consciousness among the people for such concept of tourism and hosts of other reasons pose problems for tourism in Goalpara district.

Suggestions :

Several measures may be considered for the rapid stride of ecotourism in Goalpara district. The concerned authorities should take necessary steps for identification and introduction of feasible places of tourist interest. In this connection aquatic cum bird sanctuary be opened in Urpad beel and Naitara-Chautara beel as the habitats are immensely suitable for the purpose. Sri Surya Pahar and Turkeswari Pahar should be conserved as an ecotourism oriented hill resort. The site will be more attractive if the nearby Dubapara and Matia villages are declared and developed as model village for sustainable development based on local village industries. Horticulture being a leading subsidiary agricultural sector, horticulture festival should be organized yearly in eastern Goalpara, particularly in and around Darrangiri. Arrangement should also be made for organizing different cultural festival to attract tourist.

Findings and Conclusion:

From the analysis, it has been able to draw an overall view that Goalpara district has immense potentiality for such low impact and sustainable development oriented tourism. But the district has to remain at a low bracket in tourism development due to lack of consciousness, exploitation of tourist places by communities over the years. Despite the fact of ecotourism potentiality in the district and its economic importance, the study area has been suffering from ecological changes resulting out of tourist related consequences. The seasonal rush of tourists, picnickers in particular have impacted on changing land dynamics, due to use of vehicles, sound pollution, deposition of waste materials, use of vegetative cover lands as cooking place, digging earth in extensive scale in Sri Surya hillocks, wetlands and other ecotourism places of interest, etc. In order to stimulate the growth of tourism industry extensive awareness campaign should be launched by the district authority. Besides, active participation of private entrepreneurs should also be encouraged. This situation is increasingly on the verge of ecotourism hazards in the near future. It is high time for the district authority, people in general, socio-cultural organizations, NGO's including the students' organizations in particular to embark upon way and means for the development of tourism as an important sector of economy.

REFERENCES

1. Bahatia, A.K., (1991) :Tourism Development: Principles and Practices, | Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. | 2.Bhattacharya, Anima.,(2008): 'Nature Tourism' in Tourism Management A Global Perspective | (Ed.) Deep & Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd. P. 118 | 3. Donald, E.H, (1980) : Tourism Planning and Development Issues, | George Washington University. | 4. Epler Wood M., Gatz F and Lindberg,K., (1991) 'Ecotourism Society: An Action'. In J. Kusler (Ed.), Ecotourism and Resource Conservation. Madison: Omnipress. Pp. 75-79. | 5. Robinson, H., (1976): A Geography of Tourism, Macdonald and Evans. | 6.. Singha, M.G., (2003). "Goalpara Zilla Parjyatan Udyogar Sambhabana aru Samaisya" | In Souvenir, Goalpara Zilla Sahitya Sobha Annual Conference, (Eds) Gokul Chandra Roy, Dilwar Hussain. | 7. Kurukshetra, March, (2004) : Tourism Village for Sustainable Development. | 8.. Economic Survey, Assam : (2001-2002), Directorate of Economics and statistics, Assam, Guwahati. |