



ECOTOURISM IN INDIA

by Karuna Gopal



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Even as India's show-stopper, the Orchid Hotel with its 79 international awards embellishing her crown wowed the world on the global ecotourism catwalk, the Supreme Court of India banned tourism in tiger reserves of the country. On a bright July morning this year, a newspaper story was headlined "Roaring Court – Crouching Resorts", which highlighted the demand for regulation as both environment and wildlife are believed to be destroyed by unregulated tourism.

But for a country that has demonstrated initiative towards preservation and capability for conservation decades before others did through environmental legislations and agitations like the Chipko Movement, the Supreme Court's ban is more than just a directive—it's a clarion call to reconfigure ecotourism architecture in India.

Let me give you a peek into India's ecotourism journey, a journey that was far from a free fall.

RIDING THE GLOBAL WAVE

In the two decades between the first and the second Rio Summits of 1992 and 2012 respectively, the world has seen a plethora of national strategies for sustainable development. Ecotourism that is community driven and conservation focused was indeed a part of this global wave—it engulfed India too.

Spurred into action by increasing global market

and strong domestic pressures, India has undertaken ambitious programmes to conserve and demarcate habitats and species that need to be "protected for prosperity". As ecotourism was also meant to protect the interests of the marginalised communities like the tribals, policymakers saw it not only as an instrument for "inclusive growth" but also an opportunity to eradicate illegal mining and poaching. So budgets were allocated, legislations and frameworks were worked out, and task forces were set up just as ecotourism guidelines were drafted and the strategy as such was embedded safely in the five-year plan by the Planning Commission of India.

Predictably, the FTA (foreign tourist arrivals) jumped to 6 million in 2010 from 2.5 million in 1997. The World Tourism Organization is quite confident that India will be hosting almost 10 million by 2020. In 2011 the government made USD26.7 billion worth of investments in the sector, the second highest in Asia. So progressed the story of eco-productivity in India.

INDIAN LANDSCAPE: WHAT MAKES IT SO ATTRACTIVE?

The Indian subcontinent is one of the most fascinating ecological and geographical regions in the world. It includes the nearly rainless desert of Thar and the rainiest place on Earth, Cherrapunjee; the hot, salty Rann of Kutch;

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and the permanently snowbound peaks of the Himalayas. India, being a very vast country, has enormous tourist potential and many places of tourist interest. Tourists from West and East are equally fascinated by its diversity in human culture, manifested in the form of forts, monuments, temples, memorials, clothing, food, languages, religious practices and social customs. The remnants of ancient civilisations can be seen in many parts of the country including the monuments built by different religious sects during medieval and ancient times.

As India lies at the confluence of the African, European and Southeast Asian biological systems, it possesses interesting components from each of them. The variety of ecological conditions sustains a tremendous amount of diverse life forms. About 15,000 species of plants (out of the known world total of 150,000) and 75,000 animal species (out of a total of 1.5 million) have their homes in India. India is one of the 12 mega-diverse countries in the world. The Western Ghats and Eastern Himalayan regions are among the 18 biodiversity "hot spots" in the world. India's biodiversity is rich, often unique and increasingly endangered. On 2 percent of the world's landmass, India possesses around 5

percent of known living organisms on Earth.

EXPONENTIAL GROWTH

When India became independent in 1947 it had less than half a dozen wildlife reserves; it now has in excess of 400 parks and sanctuaries. Internationally, India is known for the famous Ranthambhore project of Rajasthan, the Jim Corbett National Park in Uttar Pradesh, Sasan Gir Lion Park at Gujarat, and houseboat cruises in Kerala. Various operational models are being practised in this sector, involving government departments, private sector, communities and other stakeholders. Self-initiated and community managed Kokrebellur at Karnataka, NGO initiated and community owned Rampuria of Darjeeling, Pastanga of Sikkim, community managed and government supported bamboo groves at Kerala are some good examples.

CONSERVATION OR EXPLOITATION?

Somewhere along the way on this dizzying journey the line between ecotourism promoting conservation and exploiting it has started blurring.

In May 2011, drunken tourists at the Dandeli

1 Vythiri Resort, Kerala 2 Tree of Life Resort, Rajasthan



As a global hot spot for ecological diversity whose ecological assets are not fully integrated into the ecotourism market, India has a great potential for growth.

Crocodile Park resort in the Dandeli-Anshi Tiger Reserve, Karnataka, killed a forest officer. His fault? He tried to stop them feeding crocodiles. More recently tourist jeeps crowded on tigers at the Kanha National Park in Madhya Pradesh. Immediately a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) was filed and the Supreme Court banned tourism in the core areas of tiger reserves. Even as newspapers are screaming that tourism is responsible for more garbage, more noise, and that it's spoiling the migratory patterns of birds and jeopardising wildlife, the owners of 45 hotels and resorts are staring at a loss of USD8 million in the peak season between October and February.

CASE IN POINT: ANATOMY OF THE GAME ALL GONE WRONG

In India, the nation cheered when an iconic actor was made the brand ambassador of Gujarat tourism but no one could see the course such a campaign would take. The month-long Rann Utsav at Gujarat, started as part of the tourism campaign and celebrated annually at the turn of the year, invariably leaves the Rann of Kutch in a bad shape. The 30,000-square kilometre terrain is an extremely sensitive ecosystem. The noise created by tourists scares the wildlife away while caged animals are fed by tourists. Busloads of tourists come, pitch AC tents, create noise that scares the wildlife while plastic bags, residue from portable toilets, and garbage just lie there. As if this wasn't enough, in March 2012, the Gujarat government proposed the

construction of a 255-kilometre-long road along major tourism sites. This area is also the breeding ground of the wild ass, and has the magnetic fields of Kala Dungar and Flamingo City, India's only nesting ground for these birds. Needless to say, conservationists are horrified.

The Rann is not 'white sand'. It is salt-encrusted clay, and is fragile. It lies on the Palaeartic migratory route, a key path for birds from the northern hemisphere to Africa. As damage to ecosystems is not necessarily visible and instant, conservationists are demanding immediate action from the government. Elsewhere in India, some wildlife parks, like Bandipur, are trying to stop night safaris. In Assam, the government is curbing tourist facilities around the Kaziranga National Park. In Bhadra, Karnataka, a new multi-core hotel under construction is facing protests.

Tribal population is unhappy too as their livelihoods are being tampered with in the name of ecotourism. As such, tourism worldwide is undergoing fundamental changes and decisions about tourism development are becoming more and more controversial and difficult to make because they can prevent or diminish traditional uses of natural resources and affect the people who have or might have benefited from those uses. Sadly today, the world over, eco-travel is being looked at with scepticism.

In 2011, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, comprising 14 international organisations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), stated that while ecotourism is growing at 20 percent annually worldwide, it is harmful to the environment if not harnessed correctly.

WHOSE GAME IS IT ANYWAY?

So who charts the ecotourism course in India? Just like in any other country it is greatly influenced by the goals of politicians, investors, developers, economists, tour operators, and international aid and socio-cultural agencies.

There are six major actors on this arena. The first are those who plan weekly jaunts with the wild, mostly foreigners and city dwellers. The second group is the government functionaries who are mandated by law to protect eco assets of the nation. The third being the ruling elite whose primary concern is national prestige so they argue for protection of certain species of wildlife. Then there are of course international conservation organisations like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), etc. While biologists are solely interested in species preservation for the sake of science the most influential actors are the activists—their interest is pervasive and their ammunition can both destroy and create policy environments. As the goals of all these actors rarely converge, policy direction in a land

as diverse as India has been at best 'hopscotch'!

END NOTE

India is one of the first countries in the world to have enacted environmental legislations covering all spheres of human-environment interaction with the earliest being the Indian Forest Act of 1927. Culturally too, India boasts of conservation being part of its genetic makeup. The Chipko Movement in the 1970s was a non-violent movement aimed at the protection and conservation of trees and forests from being destroyed. The name of the Chipko Movement originated from the word "embrace" as the villagers used to hug the trees and protect them from woodcutters. It was the strong uprising against those who were destroying the natural resources of the forests and disturbing the whole ecological balance.

Given the legal and cultural fabric of the nation, India should have progressed far. But where enforcement mechanisms are poor, institutional setup is weak and investments are low growth, it can be disappointing. Another hard lesson that India has learnt is that finding a compromise between conservation and development is often challenging.

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threshold of huge tourism opportunities, the country is not leaping. It is exercising caution—it is trying to comb the past and scan the present for mistakes and learning. Who said India's ecotourism journey was a cruise on the high seas?

- 3 The Infinity Pool Dome, Tree of Life Resort
- 4 Banasura Hill Resort, also known as "Earth Resort" in Kerala
- 5 Banjaar Tola by Taj Hotels in Madhya Pradesh

Some Dream Destinations

Let me speak a little about some of the best ecological assets in India that are grabbing international attention in recent times.

The Tree of Life resort in Jaipur that was built using only lime and stone is a true blessing for the local community. It has been built by the local villagers who later joined the resort as staff. Using very limited amount of cement and steel, the resort extensively used local stones like Khora rubble and Natata rubble. Drought resistant trees and flora available locally have been used for landscaping. Coconut Lagoon, located in Kerala Backwaters, is accessible only by boat. Mountain Trail at Mukteshwar is sited at 2,300 metres (8,000 feet) on a hill slope, facing the Himalayas, among deep valleys with over 100 fruit trees and flower beds of over 70 varieties of flowers in a vast area, which make it truly resplendent. The Dune Eco Beach Village, Pondicherry is the base for artists-in-residence, a programme providing work studios for artists from all around the world. Banasura Hill Resort, Wayanad Kerala is Asia's largest "earth" resort, predominantly constructed from mud known as rammed earth.

In the north of India, the Ananda in the Himalayas has been a sure winner for years. The Shergarh Tented Camp at Kanha National Park is one of the first nine tiger reserves established with the initial launch of "Project Tiger" in 1973. At the centre of camp is a water reserve charged all year round that attracts an array of birds. Banjaar Tola located deep in tiger territory, on the banks of the Banjaar River, is where one finds this hotel built from local material. Mary Budden Estate tucked away in a corner of Kumaon sits within the spectacular Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary. A family-run home-stay, it's housed in a fully restored, 19th-century heritage structure.

