

Salesian Journal 2009
Rural Development through Rural tourism
Thinking away from mass tourism

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My presentation attempts to briefly present the history of tourism in Darjeeling Hills and analyse the present issues related to mass tourism within the Darjeeling Hills and some aspects pointing out the betterment of the situation, through sustainable tourism. This paper would not have come about without the help of Fr. George SDB, Principal, Salesian college Sonada.

Nestling in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas lies Darjeeling, the northern most district of the state of West Bengal, India. Post 1988, the hill sub-divisions of the district and sections of the plains came under the Autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC).

The rural areas of Darjeeling with 70% share of the total population are far flung and communication infrastructure almost non-existent. Access to the market is extremely difficult leading to an accentuated exploitative structure with remuneration for agricultural produce extremely low for the farmers. Farmers sell their products to middlemen who also provide money during the lean season. Thus at the time of harvesting the farmers are bound to sell to the middlemen at their rates irrespective of the market price. Most middlemen also have shops selling essential goods with a very high profit margin. The villagers also take credit from the informal sector at extremely high interest rates ranging from 60% to 120% per annum. Thus the farmers of the hills are in a constant cycle of debt and low remuneration entrapping them in poverty.

One of the effective ways of breaking from this bondage is in promoting, facilitating and strengthening people's organizations. These strengthening organizations will lead to development, of many one such activity being rural tourism or Community based tourism.

The Tea Plantations present a unique situation. Extremely profitable at the macro level yet the share of profits hardly reaching the labourers. Each plantation has a permanent set of workers living within the plantation. Of them, only the permanent workers (20% of the plantation population) are entitled to benefits from the management according to the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. Because of these benefits the low daily wage seems justifiable. But the Plantation Labour Act, an unjust Act, leaving out 80% of the population, as it is applicable only to the permanent workers, which again is not implemented properly in any garden in Darjeeling. To make matters worse, many gardens

in Darjeeling are closing down or are sick due to mismanagement and lack of reinvestment by the tea companies.

The Himalayas are a very sensitive young mountain range and the Eastern Himalayas, of which Darjeeling is a part of, is among the world's ten most critical centres for biodiversity and endemism. It is one of the 25 global Biodiversity-hotspots. Today the green cover is only 41.2% (official forest figure) due to rampant legal and illegal felling; of this more than a quarter of the forest has undergone degradation to less than 10% canopy cover (Sanskritayana 1997). Deforestation is a complex problem and cannot be attributed to a single factor. Some of them are: malfunctioning of the administration, corruption, energy needs and unemployment. This has led to serious problems of landslides and water scarcity. A recent trend is the influx of wild animals in the agricultural fields due to loss of their habitat.

In such a socio-ecological system, the adoption of organic farming is a positive and economically viable option. Organic farming has great relevance in today's world, in a world with growing environmental degradation and ecological destruction. To the farmers practicing organic farming, it means a healthier living environment as well as access to a growing niche market. Darjeeling is famous for her natural beauty and agricultural products of tea, spices, oranges, non-timber forest products and medicinal plants. These products are specific to the Darjeeling area and command a niche market. The economic benefit can be measured in increased price offered for the products. The tangible and intangible benefits, of going organic, are tremendous, for the practitioner too. Organic farming, as one of the products, of community based tourism becomes a major attraction.

In the urban areas, fallout of unplanned growth is being felt everyday with scarcity of water, unmanageable waste production, vehicular pollution, over-crowding and illegal and unsafe constructions. The problems get accentuated with mass tourism in the tourist season.

Darjeeling is known for the four T's which of course are Tea, Tourism, Timber and Toy-Train and these are also the main source of income of the Darjeeling Hill Areas. We have already seen the state of Tea in Darjeeling and it can safely be said that the situation of Tourism in Darjeeling is also on the verge of a downward trend.

The evolution of the town of Darjeeling dates back to 1835 after Captain Lloyd established a sanatorium here. The completion of the Calcutta Darjeeling Road in 1838 was the first step towards introducing modern communication. The introduction of narrow gauge railways in 1881 increased the accessibility of Darjeeling. In the colonial

period, the tea industry was the pivot of growth and development. An inflow of civil servants, officials, planters, and labourers helped the gradual expansion and many civic amenities were gradually appended to this town. This helped the development of ‘second’ homes around Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong of the wealthy landlords in eastern India.

The formal introduction of tourism was only in 1938 when the first hotel, The Darjeeling Family Hotel, was constructed. It was followed by the Nilson Hotel. Woodlands followed shortly by Drum Druid, Rockville, Bellevue, Central Hotel and Hotel Mount Everest. Till 1975, tourism was managed privately with little encouragement or interference by the government. The Tourism Department of the Government of West Bengal came into being in 1958, and the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation in November 1975, with the task of supplying the visitors with basic information about places of tourist interest. The establishment of Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council in 1988 led to tourism activities being transferred to the DGAHC. However, the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation continues to operate in the area.

Entry for foreign tourists into the Darjeeling Hill Areas was closed after the Indo-China war in 1962. This resulted in a decline in tourism activities in the area. Consequently, infrastructure development suffered. The restriction was lifted in 1985 and the number of tourists, particularly the foreign tourists visiting Darjeeling increased remarkably. When compared with the growth in the resident population, the increase in tourist population is far greater. The increase in the number of tourists has been so rapid that infrastructure facilities is not able to keep pace.

Tourism is an important economic activity in mountain areas generating incomes and employment for the local population. The tourists every year spend to the tune of Rs. 70 crores. Everybody right from a chaiwala upto the hotel owner benefits from the tourism. Apart from an increase in the income and the demand for local products, tourism also results in a multiplier effect. This refers to the way in which tourist expenditures filter through the economy and generate other economic activities.

Tourism, especially mass tourism results in adverse impacts, leading to environmental stress. The first major source of environmental stress is the permanent restructuring of the environment brought about by a variety of major construction activities. Intense building activity leads to the creation of urban areas lacking in aesthetic value. Often it is in complete discord with the surrounding natural resources and scenery with the result that the site is no longer scenic and tourists move to other destinations. The second area of environmental stress results from the generation of increased waste residuals. Tourism activities also result in soil erosion, change in plant cover and species

diversity. The fourth area comprises seasonal population increases resulting in physical congestion and an increased demand for natural resources. These negative impacts often result in a decline of tourist numbers, which in turn results in adverse economic impacts with a substantial decline in income and employment. Hence there is a need to sustain tourism activities through proper planning intervention.

The rapid increase in tourist population has also resulted in the creation of high-density urban areas lacking in aesthetic value. Construction activities along the steeper slopes has exceeded the carrying capacity of the land. Hence, the frequency and intensity of landslides has increased. These high-rise buildings obstruct views, the raw material for scenic tourism. In addition, the increase in the built up space to provide for tourist amenities has taken place at the expense of forested areas. The rapid increase in urban and tourist population is also associated with the water shortage.

So Darjeeling, which is known as the “Queen of the Hills”, is now or can be no longer said to be the queen of the hills. Rapid urban growth, and the ever-growing resident and tourist population put tremendous pressure on the fragile ecosystem of the Darjeeling Hill Areas. During the British days, only single or double storied houses of light construction were allowed to be constructed to admirably suit the low load bearing capacity of the soils here. With rapid urbanization and demand for constructions created by tourism and a total lack of control, we have now ended up with concrete jungles, many of which are continuing to grow vertically to six storey's or more! To have one such building located on a wide expense of land is one thing; but to have a continuous stretch of such tall buildings, one on top of the other, spells disaster.

Till date most of the local people of Darjeeling has seen tourism as a boon but it remains unquestioned by the masses whether it is really a boon. Because, ever since Darjeeling has been made the thrust area of tourism, we have seen adverse affects on its environment. To begin with Darjeeling has witnessed a sudden growth in the number of Taxis/Vehicles, which is now posing a major threat to the health and environment of the people in terms of vehicular pollution and accidents on roads. Traffic regulation is adversely affected during the tourist seasons where taxis cram up the roads and parking spaces.

Apart from this, the resource of Darjeeling is put under much strain during the tourist season. The people experience shortages ranging from fuel to water-Darjeeling being famous for its water crisis. And besides with inappropriate measures of waste disposal the tourists leave behind with them a huge quantity of waste, which they generate during their stay and it is impossible for one to overlook the unhygienic and dirty conditions of the place.

Excluding the Siliguri Sub-division where there is a red-light area, the Darjeeling Hill area has no red-light area as such. But with the boom of Tourism, the Darjeeling Hill Area witnesses a sudden rise in sex trade. So the risk and threats of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS has become an imminent threat to the people of Darjeeling.

Though most people look upon tourism as a means of making a living, it is seen that the assets of tourism do not belong to the people. When it comes to running hotels it is the people from the plains who run these hotels or lease them. And in the rural areas there is very little or no people who are involved in tourism, so the question of them benefiting does not even arise. The only ones who benefit are the travel agencies. And even if mass tourism does reach to the rural areas, the effects tourism will have on the value systems, culture and as mentioned above the health and environment remains to be assessed and analysed to come up with a suitable solution.

Thus it may be safely be said that the role of tourism in the Darjeeling Hill Areas needs to be re-evaluated which should be followed up by judicious action by the locals and the authorities involved. And it is up to the people what they want-whether Tourism in Darjeeling should be made class tourism or mass tourism.

In the present time, the appropriate option is to promote Eco-tourism and its different forms. One such emerging activity which is being advocated is Community based Tourism(CBT). CBT is where a significant number of local people have substantial control and involvement in its development and management and the major proportion of the benefits remain within the local economy. Community based tourism has been used to describe a variety of activities that seek to positively link conservation with economic development.

The aim of CBT are

1. To Conserve Natural and Cultural Resources through regulating tourist.
2. Generation of economic benefits and other benefits among communities.
3. Promote equitable distribution of the benefits.
4. Motivation and empowerment for communities to build ownership of resources.
5. Ensuring visitors satisfaction.
6. Ensuring sustainable management.

To conclude the success of CBT is possible by having market linkage. This is again possible by having facilitator, individual, or institute working as community partner as well as supporting and strengthening by public and private sectors. The development of CBT is possible through the process of participatory planning of the possible stakeholders through a 4 ‘D’ cycle model. The 4 ‘D’ model is ‘Discover’, ‘Dream’, ‘Design’, and ‘Deliver’. Discovery leads to identification of resources man made or natural which has

a potential to be marketed. This becomes the bases of the Dream which envisions the process that would work well. Which again becomes the bases of the Design leading to planning and prioritizing the processes, which are strengthening of appropriate skills focusing on human resource development. A possible potential CBT Enterprises could be Naturalist Guides, Home stays, cooks, organic farming and processing, Pack Animal Operators, Porters, Lodges or resorts within the area, Tea shops and Restaurants and Handicraft etc. A case study of local entrepreneurship can be looked at Sikkim Himalayan Homestay, supported by UNESCO and promoted by Ecotourism & Conservation Society of Sikkim and other developing CBT is at Aambotay, Mineralspring promoted by DLR Prerna. The area or the community must be accessible. As a sub group of ecotourism CBT is based upon nature and cultural attractive. Focusing upon the sustainability, it must have participation of stakeholders in planning and management process. It must have an in build system of fair benefits sharing among the stakeholders. And lastly the fourth 'D', Delivery which is implementation or execution of the proposed design.

CBT creates an opportunity to develop the capacity of the community and sharing the benefits too and also minimizes the negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment.

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