

Ecotourism in Assam and the Contribution of Women in Its Development

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ABSTRACT

In this present scenario, Eco-tourism sector is developing progressively, people are more conscious about the nature and the preservation of the natural assets. The concept of eco-tourism has come into light in the recent years, it is one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. This sector not only helps in the development of the economy but also create ample opportunities to maintain the country's natural resources. In this paper, the prospect of eco-tourism, along with the contribution of women in the development of this sector and major obstacle in the path of its development in north eastern region have been discussed. As we all know, women are very closely related to the environment. They play a very crucial role in the protection of the environment. But despite the progress in this field, we can see that women are still underestimated in the matter of decision-making process on the environment. There may be various reasons for this, like illiteracy, lack of information and training, stereotypical attitudes, gender inequality, political issues etc. When all these obstacles are addressed, the process of development of eco-tourism along with the collaboration of women, will not only lead to the process of economic development as a whole but also to the development of women identity in the society. In order to expand this sector, there is an urgent need to draw the attention of the government. So that the development can take place in proper and optimum way. The government can play a very vital role in the whole development process of this sector.

Keywords-*Eco-tourism, environment, women, economic development, government, natural resources, contributions.*

INTRODUCTION

Due to the onset of globalization the process of development in all the economic sector are taking place rapidly throughout the country. Tourism sector in general and eco-tourism in particular got momentum due globalization specifically, due to 'Act East policy'. The state of Assam with perfect flora and fauna and cultural diversities has tremendous prospect for the development of ecotourism. Assam is also counted as one of the primedestinations of tourism.

Tourism is a widespread and fast-growing industry contributing significant amount to the world GDP. According to the report published by World Travel and Tourism Council in 2018 the industry accounted for 10.2 per cent of the global GDP. It turns as a major source of foreign exchange, domestic products, income and employment. Tourism entrails various categories such as - Cultural Tourism, Religious Tourism, Medical Tourism, Adventure Tourism, Sports Tourism, Eco-tourism etc. Among these Ecotourism is one, which is very important for the nature lovers. It has emerged as the strong segment of tourism over the past few decades all over the world. As defined by the International Tourism Society, Ecotourism refers to 'Responsible travel that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people'. It is also called 'Nature Tourism'. The objective of the ecotourism is to minimize the impact brought about by the tourism on the environment. The idea is to focus on uniting conservation, communities and sustainable development through the means of travel. The people who are engaged in ecotourism need to abide by certain rules and regulations. Countries like Kenya, Costa Rica, South Africa have already successfully promoted ecotourism. In India, Kerala is the only state that successfully promoted ecotourism. If we talk about Assam, it has immense scope for developing eco-tourism due its mesmerizing scenic beauty. Till now Assam is not fully industrially polluted state of the country. Its green forests, high hills, charming rivers are the basis on which an eco-friendly tourism can be developed. Natural beauty of Assam attracts a large number of nature lovers and animal lovers who love to see the colourful wildlife in their natural habitat. The high hills, green valleys, the rivers and its tributaries in the state give the state an extra ordinary look. The dense forests, rich flora and fauna and large waterways provide breath-taking scenes.

Objectives;

- 1). To examine the potentiality of women in developing Eco tourism in Assam
- 2). Contribution of Eco-tourism in economic development in general and women in particular.
- 3). How women can preserve the environment.

Prospect of Ecotourism in Assam

The north-eastern region which is very commonly known as 'The Land of Seven Sisters and one brother Sikkim' is situated on the foothills of the mighty Himalayas, surrounded by hills and mountains. The entire region has multiple ethnic and religious groups making a colourful picture and cultural melting pot. The state of Assam is the heart and soul of the north-eastern region of India. The state is blessed with the land of red rivers, blue hills, and lush green tea gardens. Assam comprises three geographical areas- the Brahmaputra valley, the Barak valley, and the intervening Karbi plateau and North Cachar Hills. The awesome landscape of the state of Assam painted with the lush green tea gardens along with the roads, the hillocks, the bountiful flora and fauna, the dark green forest, the streams, lakes, blue hills, flowing streams, rivers, and the mysterious clouds, the rich bouquet of cuisine of the different community etc., which attract the tourists throughout the year. The state is having abundant number of natural resources and biodiversity. The State of Assam is the home to five of the National Parks and 19 wildlife sanctuaries. These wildlife sanctuaries are located in different districts of the state. They are especially famous for animals, birds, and reptiles.

The eco-tourists have destinations to these natural and protected reserve forests. The National Parks are home of the various endangered species, like one-horned rhinoceros of Assam, the big four cat species, a variety of primates, herds of elephants, deer, various species of birds, etc. The Manas National Park is not only home to wild animals, but also to an abundance of flora and fauna that is super inspiring. Its size is more than 950 square kilometres. Trees, shrubs, ferns, grass, climbers, herbs, and bamboos grace the park beautifully. A total of 365 species of birds have been officially recorded in the park, 16 of which are widespread. There are roughly 50 species of reptiles and 11 species of snakes at the park. It is a perfect destination for the excellent choice for those who enjoy wildlife wanderings and stopgaps. situated at a distance of 176 km from Guwahati. Kaziranga National Park is having the area of 430 square kilometres area which is sprinkled with elephant-grass meadows, swampy lagoons, and dense forests, it is the home to more than 2200 Indian one-horned rhinoceros, approximately 2/3rd of their total world population, the park is the home to two-third of the world species. The National Parks like Manas, Nameri and Dibru-Saikhowa are excellent spots for bird watching.

The state is also famous for 'Jatinga Valley' in Halflong of North Cachar Hills district where every year during the month of October, migratory birds come and commit, people call it as mass suicide. During winter season migratory birds from across the planet come to the serene water bodies across the National Parks, lakes and beels of Assam, it is the perfect destination for birds watching. The river Brahmaputra flowing across the heart of the state is a lifeline to the people of Assam just as Nile to Egypt. The Brahmaputra River of Assam also host to world's largest inhabited river island 'Majuli' and world's smallest inhabited river island 'Umananda'. The island of Majuli has a very rich heritage and has been the abode of Assamese 'Vaishnavite' culture with tremendous option for spiritual and eco-tourism. The island has been the cultural capital and cradle of Assamese civilization for the last five hundred years. Just 1 km east along the Brahmaputra River there a is the hill called Agni Garh, a famous battlefield featured in the epic Mahabharata which dates back to hundreds of years BC. Agni Garh, is the rampart surrounded by fire, is one of the most beautiful places in Tezpur.

Facing the Brahmaputra, the hillock provides a panoramic view of both Tezpur and the river. On the other hand, the state is famous for renowned silk 'Muga' (Golden) and 'Eri' (Ahimsa). These two silks are produced only in Assam and cannot be found anywhere else in the world, as the silk-worm can survive only in the natural conditions that is found only in Assam. With the passage of time and rapid globalization the prospect of 'eco-tourism' is gaining momentum in the state. The rich natural beauty and its diversity, exotic cultural and ethnic diversities, unexplored rich biodiversity, provide tremendous potential for development of ecotourism in the region. Moreover, the construction of the Bogibeel bridge over Brahmaputra, the Bhupen Hazarika Setu between Dhola and Sadiya in Upper Assam has boosted the connectivity and created ample opportunities for the development of ecotourism in the state.

Relationship between women and environment

Both men and women are related to the environment differently, making it necessary to take into account the linkage between men and women and environment. Women and environment are very closely associated with each other. Perhaps we can say that women understand nature more than any other person. Women and environment tied with same thread that is mother. In other word we can also say that women are the preserver of our nature. Women and nature are both breeder and feeder. The women play an important role in the society where she living around.

They play a very significant role in the management and conservation of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy and often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them. Women interact with natural resources more closely, experience the impact of environmental degradation more than anyone else. The relationship between women and environment attains significant place because women are perceived as victims of environmental degradation. Precisely, women have two main vital links with the environment. At the one hand, women are traditionally the custodians of nature and protect environment for generations due to their usual motherly character in the society. Infact, women are closer to nature than men are. This closeness, therefore, makes women more nurturing and caring towards their environment. Also, women's consciousness of ecological issues makes them better managers of natural resources. This association between women and natural resources exists because of their social and economic roles, which requires them to provide food, fuel, fodder and income for the surrounding resource base.

On the other hand, the degradation of these natural resources has a disproportionate effect on them. Hence women suffer most of the burden of risk when a natural disaster like floods, drought occurs due to changing world climates. Whereas women were previously neglected or ignored, there have recently been increasing attention paid to the impact of women on the natural environment and, in return, the effects the environment has on the health and well-being of women. It is now widely acknowledged that the gender-environment relations have valuable ramifications with regard to the understanding of nature between men and women, the management and distribution of resources and responsibilities and the day-to-day life and well-being of people. The Earth Summit / UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 clearly acknowledged the important role which women need to play in regard to sustainable development. Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 emphasizes gender mainstreaming and outlines the necessary increased involvement of women at all levels of decision-making. As it has been discussed above that Assam has the tremendous scope for the development of ecotourism, provided that, if the participation of women in this sector is appreciated.

BENEFITS OF ECOTOURISM

Empower the local communities:

It has also been found out that sharing of some of the social, economic benefits can empower the local communities. This can also help the indigenous people through informed consent and also participation in the zone of ecotourism management enterprise.

Financial benefits:

Ecotourism not only cares about our impact on the natural environment but also the source of financial benefits that are being distributed between local businesses, communities, and big enterprises that exploit the resources of a particular tourist destination. The benefit of Ecotourism is that both local and private entrepreneurs share the financial benefits in a fairway. As a result, the construction of low-impact facilities is encouraging too by these practices.

Minimize the environmental impact:

One of the bitter truths is that humans are the ultimate destructor of the environment. The adverse impact on the environment is going to get lessen with the promotion of ecotourism, as the people are going to look into the environment in a different way. Moreover, the main aim of such tour is to help in preserving the natural environment from any natural and manmade calamity and also lack of any waste due to extravagant lifestyle.

Protecting the endangered species:

Another very important reason behind the growing popularity of the ecotourism is, the wild animals are getting extinct due to human intervention and habitat destruction. Forest areas are being lost for ever and wild animals are losing their habitat. By enabling the ecotourism, we can prevent the extinct of endangered animals and safeguarding them for future generations.

Obstacle the path of the development of ecotourism

(a) Insurgency:

The problem of insurgency has become the stumbling block in the course of development of Assam. It founded every development strategy and hampered all the development work. Kidnapping, extortion, killing, bandh, strikes, and curfews have become the order of the day. The foreign and the domestic tourists consider it risky to visit this part of the country, in view of the prevailing law and order situation. The general impression has been that any foreign or domestic tourist could be a soft target of the insurgents.

(b) Lack of Infrastructure:

To attract tourists, there must be dissemination of information, infrastructural facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, clean and hygienic food and accommodation, availability

of water sports equipment, and the like. Most of the places of tourist attraction are not by the side of the national highways, and approach roads are in bad condition. This is a strong discouraging factor, which works against a good inflow of the tourist. It appears that the potentialities for developing tourism to a stable source of revenue are not matched by proper policy and strategy.

(c) Communication gaps between tourists and people:

Another very serious problem in the path of development of ecotourism in Assam is the language. The people fail to provide the proper information and the knowledge to the tourists. The tourists are always very curious to more about the place where they visit, when they get the incomplete information, they become unable to convey the information to others. So, the scope of visiting to spot again become very less.

(d) Flash floods, heavy rainfall, waterlogged road:

As the mother nature blessed the state with all natural beauties with high hills, blue sky, greenery, variety of flora and fauna. It typically, made the climate of Assam as the 'Tropical Monsoon Rainforest Climate' due to which the region receive high amount of rainfall as compare to the other region of the country. Because of which the people of Assam face the problem of flood every year due to which most of the tourist destination were used to remain shut for half the year.

Steps to be taken

For that a host of matters to be addressed properly, including:

- (a) Development of good approach roads to the spots of tourist attraction has to be increased.
- (b) Creation of infra-structural facilities homestay like good quality tents with provisions for food and other logistics,
- (c) River cruising and water sports, bird watching towers etc. These facilities are likely to attract eco-tourists. It may be noted that eco-tourism is yet to come to the take-off stage.
- (d) Environmental education and environment awareness program has to be organised time to time so that people can understand the importance of the environment for our globe.
- (e) Compulsory women education.

CONCLUSION

Despite of diverse tourist attraction Assam experience more than 4 million tourist across the world every year which generate on an average revenue of Rs 3.1 million. There is the need to promote Assam as one stop tourist destination with aggressive marketing strategy and tourist packages tour. The India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project is need of the hour. It will develop the infrastructure that can support other things. The infrastructure, lack of skilled manpower, absence of environment friendly hospitality sector etc., are the main obstacle in the path of the development of ecotourism. Moreover, the geography of the place also hinders the normal construction. Due to the poor connectivity hinders the prospect of tourism development. The above discussion clearly shows that, the state Assam has lots of opportunities to attract domestic as well as international tourists. But due to various weaknesses and threats, the development of ecotourism in Assam is not up to its potential level. Ecotourism can be made successful only when there is consent and active participation of local people especially the women as well as the State government in planning and management of the ecotourism programme. The implementation of the 'Act East Policy' is the key to development of the whole North-eastern Region including Assam. Consciously travelling to the nature gives the newness and more satisfying learning experiences of travel that is irreplaceable, and these benefits can be enhanced through ecotourism.

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