Rise of a new ecotourism spot: The case of a multiethnic mountain village in North Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The concept of 'ecotourism' is a newly emerged concept in the purview of tourism industry. It is a form of tourism which is essentially a nature-based tourism and intended towards conservation of natural areas as well as resources, thereby, becoming the part of sustainable development. Most importantly, from an anthropological context, it involves the members of local community enabling them to be economically benefitted at the same time. The given study has been done at the outset of a multiethnic mountain village named as Sillary Gaon, administratively falling under Kalimpong district of West Bengal. This village, commonly known as 'New Darjeeling' of West Bengal, grows out to be a new ecotourism spot of the state. The present study tries to explore the historical underpinnings behind the growth and development of this new ecotourism spot, most importantly, by highlighting on inter-community and intra-community network responsible in this regard. The study is the outcome of first-handed fieldwork, the most preferred approach in anthropological discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual permanent places of residence for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes. Tourism industry includes all socio-economic activities that are directly involved in providing services to tourists [1]. Tourism turns out to be the largest industry worldwide in terms of employment and gross domestic product. This industry has been growing rapidly as well as changing at a fast pace [1]. The concept of ecotourism, relatively of much recent origin, as a component of green economy, is however, now becoming one of the fastest growing segments of tourism industry [2]. The term 'ecotourism' was coined in 1983 by Hector Ceballos Lascurain, a Mexican environmentalist, and was initially used to describe nature-based travel to relatively undisturbed areas with specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying scenery and its wild animals and plants as well as existing [3]. Ecotourism guarantees the sustainable use of environmental resources, while generating economic opportunities for the local people [4, 5]. Ecotourism in all forms is often proposed as being able to ensure environmental conservation while enabling economic benefits to accrue to the local communities [6]. According to Chesworth (1995)[7], ecotourism has outlined six characteristics. These are a) ecotourism involves travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas and/or technological sites b) it focuses on learning and the quality of experience c) it economically benefits the local communities d) eco tourists seek to view rare species, spectacular landscapes and/or the unusual and the exotic e) ecotourism do not deplete resources but even sustain the environment or help undo damage to the environment and f) ecotourism appreciate and respect local culture, tradition, etc. It thus focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and their habitat, as well as cultural artefact from the locality. A symbiotic and complex relationship between the environment and tourist activities is possible when this philosophy can be translated into appropriate policy, careful planning and tactful practicum [8].

The principles of sustainable tourism were envisaged by the World Tourism Organisation in 1988 as “leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while marinating cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems”[1]. Sustainable tourism has been defined as development that meet the needs of today’s tourists and hosts regions, while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future [1]. Sustainable development through ecotourism is a concerning issue in the world today. Dimensions of ecotourism development refer to the environmental, economic, and social aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance between these dimensions must be established to maintain its long – term sustainability [9]. Ecotourism is rooted in the concept of sustainable development, as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development’s Brundtland Report (1987) [10,11,12,13]. According to the Brundtland Report by the WCED it is proven that the milestone for its emergence was the Brundtland Report by the WCED in the year 1987. Previously many ideas had been developed at the IUCN- the World Conversation Union and referenced in the World Conservation Strategy published in 1980 [14]. Ecotourism is often perceived as a tool for promoting sustainable development by providing the alternate source of livelihood to local community which is more sustainable. Ecotourism is increasingly being lauded as a sustainable development option for rural communities, one that is able to spur economic development [15] and instil environmental protection at the same time [16]. It is widely regarded as a panacea for solving many of the environmental and economic problems of less developed nation. Yet, regardless of how socially and environmentally responsible ecotourism may be in theory, in practice it remains rooted in tourism industry [17].
Ecotourism in India, has become a buzz word in very recent times, however, the term came to Indian context especially when World Tourism Organization launched the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002 under the United National Environmental Program [18]. Ecotourism is thus increasingly becoming more beneficial for developing nations as such tourism is mainly intended towards improving the living conditions of adjacent inhabitants with respect to health, education and most importantly, levels of personal income [19, 20]. Apart from economic benefits of the local community, ecotourism has lead to revitalization and enhancement of local culture [21,22]. Such cultural revitalization is based on the premise that societies find niches through tourism that help build group solidarity, pride in traditions and strengthened identity [23,24] Estimate has shown that the value of eco tourism in case of developing countries is more than USD 500 billion annually [18]. India has provided a substantial share to this market on account of this rich biological and cultural diversity and heritage and entrepreneurship skill in the tourism industry that has capitalized on ecotourism [18]

Keeping in view, the concept of ecotourism, and most importantly, the anthropological perspective of ecotourism that brings forth local community involvement, the paper will address the issue in context of a small multiethnic village of North Bengal. The village named as Sillary Gaon, which lies at the backdrop of pristine natural settings, grew out to be a new ecotourism spot. Often referred as “New Darjeeling” these days, the business of tourism is now maintained jointly by majority employed residents of the village.

**METHODODOLOGY**

The present paper is an outcome of the most revered method of anthropological fieldwork. The paper has its objective set in finding the history and development of ecotourism in the studied locale, here it is Sillary Gaon. It further tries to explore the network mechanism related to the spread and sustenance of ecotourism industry in this place. The paper will also try to represent the way ecotourism business in this very locale contributes to the well being of the village community.

The present work is predominantly based on a qualitative approach where data has been collected using observation, case study, structured and semi - structured interviews and narratives. Selection of informants in regard to meet the objective had been crucial. Owners of establishments related to eco tourism, employees attached to different aspects of ecotourism had been taken for study. Representation of finding in the present paper will be made predominantly in the form of descriptive note. In the subsequent paper, we will at first highlight the general overview of the village, which will be followed by discerning the history of the area, the way this business of ecotourism comes to the present day and still being sustained. To understand the development and maintenance, the intra-community and inter-community network will be represented in the write up and as earlier stated these will be substantiated with case studies.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Sillary Gaon is a multiethnic mountain village lying in the Northern fringes of the State West Bengal. Multietnic, in the sense, that the village consists of people from different ethnic communities. There are three major tribal groups residing in the village, which includes Tamangs, Thapa and Sherpa where Tamangs are found at the highest proportion which is followed by Thapa and Sherpa communities. Also there is one non-tribal community called Rai which is present in the village as well. Administratively under Kalimpong district, the village being a mountain village is located about 6000 feet above the sea level. The village do not have any post office and do not render any banking facility. The nearest banking facility is availed from Pedong - 9km away from the village. The village also does not have any police station of its own and the nearest police station is at Kalimpong, 96km from the village. The village has one primary school and one primary health centre as well.

Coming to the context of the general layout of the concerned village, it can be said that, the village appears to have been grossly divided into two saddles-the upper tier and lower tier. From the entrance of the village, there are two kachha pathways which got bifurcated into two strata of the village settlement. The path got further subdivided into three respective tiers-lower, middle and upper. A cemented narrow path connects the tiers and crosses the main path almost at right angle. From the upper tiers, a cemented staircase leads to the village boundary at the highest altitude point from where the forest path leads to the nearby village on the other side of the slope. Apart from these, narrow kachha by- lanes exists to connect different houses in the village. The village is basically curved in appearance. Its outline is distinctly marked off from all directions and well observable for the village is located in the prominent slope position. The Northern limit of the village lies up to the border of the village playground at the lowest strata of the village. Beyond this, the downward slope marks any further settlement impossible. The Southern border of the village lies at the highest point of the village beyond which the village merges with the forest area. This boundary is distinctly marked with the fencing of the forest boundary by barbed wire. The Eastern side of the village boundary encloses the village entrance while there is a place in the western flank that consists of place of local community worship called ‘debithan’. The houses are scattered and the residential units consists of two types of houses-one meant for accommodation of tourists and other for the inhabitants of the village.

**Historical insight of ecotourism in the village Sillary Gaon:**

The village, Sillary Gaon, was established in the early half of 1970. The settlement pattern centring round the present day village, initially started with construction of three houses. Gradually over the course of time, the number of houses goes on increasing with arrival of new residents within the settlement. People came from various parts of North Bengal including Nepal and Sikkim, initially to this area, in order to work for an experimental project with the nearby cinchona forest department. The area where the settlement pattern of the village arose was located in the midst of Cinchona plantation. These people were utterly in a very poor state and therefore they came there in search of a better prospect. People who came and thronged the area were actually immigrants from places like Pedong, Kalimpong, Algarh, Sikkim as well as Nepal, hailing from Thapa, Tamang, Mukhia, Sherpa (all tribes) and a single Brahmin community who basically came forth in search of good fortune and better prospects in order to work with the forest department. These labourers were then engaged with an experimental work with the cinchona forest department. The authority of this forest was in an attempt to cultivate Sillary plantation, a type of vegetable. Unfortunately, their experiment did not succeed as the climate was found to be unfavourable for the growth of the plants. But, however, this
dismissed working class has nowhere to go instead continued staying in that area. They were financially poor and could not sustain their life properly. This is to be mentioned that the village was initially being named as ‘Mithuntar’ which latter changed its name to Sillary basti in a popular perspective for the then presence of sillary plants in the locality. It is important to mention in this regard that the name Mithuntar has been developed from astrological viewpoint. The place used to serve as a grazing ground. The zodiac Taurus which symbolizes a bull. So the locality was named as Mithuntar.

Tourism now emerges to be the most predominant mode of occupation in the village in the form of primary occupation. It was Sabestian Pradhan, who later instilled the idea of running tourism industry in the village by constructing home stays. He himself owns a hotel at Lava and runs a home stay at Rishi Kholla. The business of tourism was, therefore, formed in the village so that the villagers can become financially stable and can offer their wards a better future and favourable prospects.

At the outset, the tourism business began merely with the establishment of three home stays formed by four families of the village. Presently the village has seventeen (17) home stays managing ecotourism. These families who are engaged in the business constructs home stays and provides hospitality to the tourists in form of food, accommodation, and other requisites basic amenities. All the members of the houses are intimately involved in this business and related affairs. Those who do not owns the home stay however works on other home stays by doing various activities like cooking, driving, cleaning, and other related works. The business of tourism was therefore formed in the village so that the villagers can become financially stable and can offer their wards a better future and favourable prospects. Over the years, the settlement grew and ultimately the village comes to existence which is known as Sillary Gaon. In the recent times, the village has gained immense popularity from tourist point of view and hence the settlement got renamed as Sillary Gaon. Presently, there are nineteen (19) Tamang families and altogether there are eighty seven (87) Tamang individual residing in the village. There are seven (7) Thapa families and in total there are twenty seven (27). Thapa people inhabiting in the village. There are four (04) Rai families having the total population of twenty five (25) Rai people and three (03) Sherpa families comprising of sixteen (16). Sherpa people in the village. In total, there are thirty three families (33) in the village.

Aspects of ecotourism in the village setting- the present scenario:

The tourism industry in the village, Sillary Gaon, arose in the backdrop of pristine natural settings. The village being situated at the foothills of Himalayan range is naturally endowed by admirable scenic beauty, which itself provides a thrust to the entire business of tourism in the village, most importantly, an ecotourism industry. Pertaining to the concept of ecotourism it has been well explicated in the present context that the village took a number of measures to conserve the natural environment and utilizing the environment judiciously for catering the needs of tourist. The villagers are simply found to run the business by constructing home stays. There is not a single instance of hotels being flourished in the area so as to prevent the admirable beauty of the spot to get destructed. A great diversity of flora and fauna is also seen in the village. Almost all the home stays seen running in the village are found to be decorated with flowering plants like marigold (saipatri), zinnia (begonia), dalia, and so on. Further, all that home stays are found to grow vegetables like pumpkin, squash, maize as well as variety of spices in their own kitchen gardens. The villagers are found to feed the tourists with the vegetables and fruits being grown at their own kitchen garden. It is only when the tourists load increases, the owner of home stay are then found to buy vegetables and fruits from nearby market at Pedong.

Coming to the context of source of drinking water in the village, the villagers are found to utilise forest spring for their own drinking purposes as well for the tourists coming. In this regard, the villagers are found to use indigenous system for purification of water. For this purpose, they plant trees like banana near the spring and is believed by them that the roots of the plants filter the water and make it suitable for drinking purposes. The water is then temporarily being stored in the tank and is further supplied to the houses through respective pipelines. Some of the home stays of lower settlements are often found to use underground water for drinking purposes as well. Moreover, in order to save electricity, home stay do not provide geysers for providing hot water to their tourists but uses firewood for heating water. No form of power back up system is provided in the village. Fire woods are also used for cooking purpose and gas oven occasionally used for making tea and coffees. The villagers are also found to be very cautious of keeping their environment clean. In order to keep their environment clean, the villagers are found to drain out waste water through pipes. Some even dug the ground and pour their waste materials there. These materials are later converted into dung from where waste water is drained out, this water that passes out get absorbed in the soil. The solid wastage is first separated. Plastic materials from the waste materials are disposed off; the remaining is burnt out at a spot within the territory of village meant for that purpose.

The business of ecotourism therefore in the village therefore takes to consideration the natural environment, exotic flora and fauna and pleasant weather in such a manner that the tourism flourished conserving the natural environment, benefiting the villagers economically as well. The entire businesses of tourism in the village can be well understandable through the network mechanism operating in and across the village at inter- community and intra- community level. All the activities pertaining to the running of the home stay are jointly managed by the family members. There remains a clear division of labour among the villagers according to age and gender to sustain the network of tourism. Women are mainly engaged in cooking while young daughters of the house serve food to the tourists. Men are involved in driving car, doing carpentry work, cleaning and dusting the home stay. Young boys serve as guide for the tourists whenever needed. Those villagers who themselves do not own a home stay also work in the home whenever needed for which they are paid, though some are permanently recruited. Relatives living outside the villages too come along to help the villagers and sometimes recruited temporarily when in need. It is to be remembered in this regard that those sons and daughters who got married and live in the vicinity or beyond the village frontiers, if work for the home stay owned by their parents are usually paid for the same.

Table no 01: The Human Resource and Grade - Wise Division of Labour Industry in Sillary Gaon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total No of person employed</th>
<th>Total no of person employed in tourism and related affairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>66(100.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26(39.39%)</td>
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</tbody>
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From the table, it is evident that female are more involved in ecotourism industry in Sillary Gaon. This has a number of reasons assigned to it. Firstly, males often get engaged in the form of profession like service, carpentry, tailoring and so on. Sometimes, they even move out of the village for earning their livelihoods. Whereas women who are mainly domicile in the village itself get involved in home stay related activities. Two, workforce in regard to housekeeping and cooking is mainly managed by female workforce, hence their participation in their industry more.

In context of intercommunity network, the ecotourism in Sillary Gaon is also supported by certain external agencies as well. Earlier the tourists who used come to the village got the information for the place and home stay mere verbally from those who had already visited the village. However, now-a-days many of the home stays are linked up with certain private agencies which provide impressive advertisement on websites and television attracting more tourists. These private companies however get commission per tourist. The local self governing body too played detrimental role in building up village roads, improving transport facilities, and providing electricity thus helping the influx of tourist. Furthermore, the women of the village who are engaged in cooking were also imparted training for few months by a Kolkata based NGO who taught the village who are engaged in cooking were also imparted training for few months by a Kolkata based NGO who taught the villagers certain Bengali recipes to cater the taste of Bengali tourists visiting mostly to Sillary Gaon.

CONCLUSION

The business of ecotourism therefore emerged in the village Sillary Gaon as the outcome of failure of experimental work with forest department in cinchona plantation. The ecotourism industry flourished in the village so as to economically benefit the local villagers who earlier came to work there for a better prospect. Endowed with admirable natural beauty, lying in the lapse of nature the village Sillary Goan remains a significant ecotourism spot in West Bengal. The tourism undoubtedly thrives because of this natural environment and the villagers therefore practice the tourism in such a manner so that the nature remains untouched. The entire tourism industry developed and maintained intricately at village level as a web of interaction between the local villagers, the kins living in the village as well beyond the village frontiers. Further, there remains some connection with private agencies and local governing body as well thus justifying intra community as well as inter community network in sustaining the tourism industry. Moreover, the life style of the villagers has been affected by a sense of satisfaction as well as economic and social security for their people. As a result of exposure with non-localised tourists flock and every day social interaction with these tourists, the villagers are changing their life ways. Such change in life ways has been reflected greatly in their food pattern, dietary habits as well as in their dressing style and sense. Change in their lifestyle conditions is also detrimental in generation of “money” which in turn helps them to accumulate capital for further improvement of their tourism business. These exposures to tourist from different communities and mostly hailing from urban locale are also in turn helping to develop a worldview of cosmopolitanism as well.

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