

TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENT

THERE is quite a bit of awakening on part of the nations of the world that something needs to be done to protect the environment, and conserve the precious little that we have left of natural resources after decades of indiscriminate exploitation. Tourism in these times has not helped the case. The idea is not to condemn it but to help it evolve as an activity that is more in keeping with the environmental needs.

Tourism is an industry and is a good revenue generator for the government. Basic premise of profit making also cannot be done away with, but it can surely be blended with practices that ensure protection of the environment and fulfil the purpose of providing leisure. A flourishing tourism industry needs locals that have something distinct to offer the tourists—a unique experience that is special to the place. This includes the socio-cultural environment, as well as the facilities for enjoying them.

India is a very rich nation in this context and each part of the country has something distinct to offer. However, the spread of this industry also requires an infrastructure—hotels, restaurants, guided tour organisers, fleets of vehicles, shops and what not. The cost for developing this aspect has proven very heavy, especially in the hill areas.

Tourism in its spate brings livelihood for the local people, but also escalates a number of problems. The tourist activities are, for most times, centred on the idea of picnics, rather than an exploratory foray into a new world. The result is that the place is littered with plastic bottles, empty cans, plastic packets, etc., all that the clean environment could do without.

This is an indicator to the lack of respect for the wildlife and its habitat. The great number of vehicles making their way, polluting the environs, is also quite alarming. Not only are the hilly areas at the receiving end, the heritage sites and beaches are also not spared. The litter is omnipresent. The prospects of better livelihood also draw a number of people towards the tourist centres and the increased population starts off the cycle of damage.

Traditional tourism of the past had more of a negative impact, paying no attention to the sanctity of local environment, biodiversity and indigenous people. It can often be seen in the Indian wildlife sanctuaries, where tourists travel in overloaded and rickety vans that emit dangerous exhaust and the passengers play loud music. Film-shooting camps in

such sanctuaries can be seen carrying on with their work oblivious to other concerns for days together.

Man has done enough harm in the name of development, so much so that the ecological balance of several places has been disturbed. The arbitrary acts have created an imbalance and one can only witness the effects through the climate change and weather unpredictability. The better approach is definitely to promote the industry with a basic respect for the place. This can be coupled with the environment-friendly practices of using all that is naturally available, without destroying the original make-up of the place. Solar energy can be harnessed for a good part; the other aspect that needs to be taken care of is the sewage disposal. If these and a few more concerns are addressed in the very beginning there is no doubt that the nature will not be threatened.

Now that the problem areas have been identified, newer concepts are being put forth. The newer ideal is to promote sustainable tourism. This form of tourism places highest value on culture and natural heritage, while providing visitors with value for their money and time. This strategy seeks to protect that heritage and culture which is the foundation of the travel industry. It is a strategy for, not against tourism. Tourism brings people of one culture into interaction with another. The tourist travels abroad or at home in search of pleasure, leisure, adventure, recreation at historical sites, wildlife parks, beaches, towns and villages. However, it must not be forgotten that the places travelled to are home to many and it must be respected.

Ecotourism is one rage that is fast catching up. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), founded in 1991, with its headquarters at Burlington, Vermont, US, and with global network of about 1,600 members in 110 countries, defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment and sustain the well-being of local people”. Ecotourism is a relatively new concept in India. It includes nature trails, hiking, angling and water sports and has great potential to connect people, forests and wildlife. It is an enterprise between the tourist and the local people. It encourages travellers to behave in an environmentally responsible manner. It also gives the communities an opportunity to preserve their way of life and involves them in planning, decision-making and management.