The Significance of Conservation and its Anticipated Impact on Rural Tourism

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The conservation issue is something very important. To achieve conservation of nature and of natural resources, it is important to connect it to livelihood.

In rural tourism conservation is an essential tool. In rural areas one should look into the backyard diversity and our traditional way of conservation. With a change of lifestyle there is increase in consumerism and this cannot be stopped as a whole. But it is possible to get back the pride of the local communities in their traditional lifestyle; which was more connected to their backyard diversity in terms of food clothing and shelter. Now local communities are moving into the mode of exploitation of nature. We have to revive and maintain pride in their rural traditions which are connected to biodiversity and this is where tourism can play a major role. This has to be reflected in the policy of the government. If this is not reflected in the state policy, then tourism will always be around developing infrastructure like airports, roads, 5-star hotels and bigger vehicles. Tourism will never be connected to more than 75 percent of the population who live in the rural areas. We have lost a lot of traditional livelihoods like crafts and handlooms - which can be brought back through encouraging rural tourism.

We need to look into rural areas tourism and think not only about accommodation and food but also about small rural enterprises, handicrafts, handlooms, and also the bioorganic agro products that actually support bio conservation.

The need is to lobby for making a policy for tourism which is more pro-conservation for our natural resources. There is little purpose shouting about what has gone wrong in the process. The purpose is to try and create a policy where further damage does not happen in the matter of conservation.

West Bengal as a tourism product has the most tangible advantage. There is so much of natural diversities from Sandakpurto to Sunderbans. We have to create rural tourism around these places highlighting the landscape and along with that highlighting the diversity of the culture through our folk music, folk culture, folk food and folk architecture. All these should be reflected through this rural tourism.

If the policy has to be implemented it has to be institutionalized and institutions have to be built where training of the tourism stakeholders have to take place. This has not happened. There are hotel management institutes which were relevant in the 1980s but no more relevant now. We do not have a proper sustainable tourism training institution in our State which is the need of the time. For a responsible tourism mission for the State, with help of NGOs and other stake holders and policy makers, it will be possible to actually create such institutions across the districts of West Bengal.

West Bengal can be a major linkage in international diplomacy because of the kinds of borders that we share specifically with not just land connectivity but also cultural connectivity – with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and to a large extent with Tibet. How best can this be used for connectivity tourism. It depends not only on state level policy but also on national level policy. We have to adapt West Bengal and create tourism circuits within the State and then connect this to the north eastern states and adjoining countries.

Kolkata is the cultural and the economic capital of the State. Siliguri should be considered as the tourism capital and the nature conservation capital of the State. Based on Siliguri one can actually connect to rest of Asia and South East Asia.

Where we have land link border it is important to implement easier facility for visa. We have a policy in Bhutan which talks about low volume and high value tourism. They get tourists at 200 to 250 $ a night whereas we get tourists which is not even 5$ a night. To get tourists we need to make visa policy easier across borders, specifically for land linked areas - international tourists should be able to get all these facilities at the border itself while they are travelling. If European Union can have a common visa why cannot we as a county also think about it when we talk about South and South East Asia. Unfortunately, we have been left out of the Mekong Circuit which includes Mekong and Irravati but not the Brahmaputra; we have been left out of the Silk Route Circuit.

In North Bengal out of 8 Districts, presently tourism is there in the 5 districts (Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Kuchbehar). There is so much of heritage in the other 3 districts but they have been left out from the circle. An integrated approach will be helpful. It is not only about the single agenda of tourism but it is a platform that allows the other developmental aspects to be included.

In North Bengal in all the 8 districts there are opportunities for service industries and for development of education facilities. Adjacent countries and states can actually access the development of infrastructure not only for basic education but particularly for tertiary education and special education courses. Special education courses could deal with nature conservation, the rivers and the Himalayas.

Creation of good medical infrastructure can attract patients from so many countries and so many states which are connected to North Bengal. Even for people living in Guwahati and Patna and around these areas it is much easier for them to reach North Bengal than Kolkata. Improvement of medical care facilities in the districts of North Bengal will boost medical tourism even in those areas and not necessarily for Kolkata alone.

North Bengal is rich in rural agro produce including horticulture and floriculture and these have potential for exporting. The present rules are so difficult; better export rules from this region are needed. For example, for a mango from North Bengal if it has to go to Bangladesh it has to travel all the way to Kolkata to get it tested over there and by the time it is tested and exported the shelf line of the mango is finished. A special policy for export of agro produce should be looked into to avail the opportunities for better trade and economic development.

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