A literature review of ecotourism in India: policy implications and research gaps

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Abstract

This essay is an overview of recent research on ecotourism in India, evaluating the social, environmental, political and economic implications of several case studies and highlights the need for re-evaluation of the national policy. It also outlines the evident research gaps, suggesting what needs to be further investigated in order to have a more comprehensive view of the reality of current ecotourism practices with the view of ameliorating them. Concisely, there is an inherent need for ecotourism policy reform in India to prevent ‘pseudo ecotourism’ growth and destruction of environmentally vulnerable areas.

Table of abbreviations

<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>BEES</td>
<td>Bhitarkanika Ecotourism and Eco-development Society</td>
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<td>EDCs</td>
<td>Eco-development committees</td>
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<td>ICZMP</td>
<td>the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Project</td>
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<td>SHGs</td>
<td>Self-help groups</td>
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<td>TIES</td>
<td>The International Ecotourism Society</td>
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1. Introduction

As a subset of ‘sustainable development’, ecotourism has been defined by the International Ecotourism Society as ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people and involves interpretation and education’ (TIES, 2015). Further, the significant aims of ecotourism practice include environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community participation, economic benefits, and empowerment of vulnerable groups (Cobbinah, 2015). Ecotourism is hard to plausibly criticise given that it is often championed as the panacea to the downfalls of mass consumption tourism (Duffy, 2015, cited in Voumard, 2019). However, the ambiguous national policy, (Poyyamoli, 2018) lack of evidence of social empowerment (Das and Chatterjee, 2015) and minimal effort into environmental conservation (Banerji and Datta, 2015) are amid a few of the criticisms which have been exemplified by recent research of case studies of ecotourism in India.

To explore the reality of ecotourism practice in India, several case studies have been cited. The case study of Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, in Odisha helps emphasise some social
implications of poor ecotourism practice; while both Silerigaon, in Darjeeling and Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve exemplify the adverse environmental impacts of pseudo-ecotourism. The Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve also highlights some political implications of recent ecotourism practice. In contrast, the Kaziranga National Park in Assam, offers some optimism, ecotourism initiatives are more successful than the former case studies due to clear indications of increased incomes, standard of living and awareness of the importance of various issues as a result of ecotourism.

2. Policy implications

Undoubtedly, the policy surrounding ecotourism is akin to its implications. Poyyamoli (2018) evaluates the shortcomings of the National Ecotourism Policy for India, 1998, distinguishing between the reality and rhetoric it presents and enforces. A significant gap in the policy is the very definition of ecotourism itself which fails to include: the equitable sharing of income via active community participation and the conservation of heritage and culture, both of which are fundamental to effective ecotourism practice (Cobbinah, 2015). Thus, the definition is ‘erroneous and misleading’ (ibid., p.51). Further, the ambiguity of the policy is reiterated through its ‘operational guidelines’ (ibid., p.53) which do not provide any quantifiable indicators to assess the impacts of ecotourism approaches across India. Finally, the official policy document itself is inaccessible online to researchers and critics, thus limiting the advice that can be given to ameliorate the policy.

Consequently, these multiple shortcomings of the policy have allowed ‘pseudo ecotourism’ to thrive in India; which involves ‘greenwashing’ of practices as well as carrying mass tourism techniques ‘under the guise of ecotourism’ (ibid., p.50). The effects of this have the potential to be harsher than those of traditional mass tourism due to the environmentally sensitive ‘ecotourism’ destinations (Weaver, 2001, cited in Poyyamoli, 2018). Poyyamoli (2018) is not alone in his critique, as Cabral and Lochan Dhar (2019) have also labelled the policy as ‘lackadaisical’ (ibid. p.12). Given the inaccuracy, ambiguity and ‘pseudo ecotourism’ it encourages the National Ecotourism Policy for India, as Poyyamoli (2018) suggests, needs to be revised in order to prevent ‘pseudo ecotourism’, its effects and encourage the proper practice of sustainable ecotourism nationwide.

2.1 Social implications

A central part of ecotourism practice is the social benefits for the hosts and the creation of community ownership of the schemes (Jalani, 2012, cited in Das and Chatterjee, 2015). These social implications often manifest themselves in terms of social empowerment which refers to: ‘a community’s sense of cohesion and integrity has been confirmed or strengthened by an activity such as ecotourism’ (Shecyvens, 2000, p. 241). Exploring this concept, through the case analysis of Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, in Odisha, as seen in Figure 1, Das and Chatterjee (2015) concluded that ecotourism in this area of India is in a ‘nascent stage’ (ibid., p.144).
The research suggested that although 30 eco-development committees (EDCs), which sought to reduce locals’ dependence on the natural resources, had been set up, they were ineffective in encouraging social empowerment. Only 21% of ecotourism participants and 9% of non-ecotourism participants were members of an EDC, alluding to minimal progress in social empowerment.

Furthermore, Das and Chatterjee (2015) highlighted that local members of the Bhitarkanika Ecotourism and Eco-development Society (BEES) were not informed of the ‘division or utilisation’ (ibid., p.142) of the money generated via tourists. Locals were unaware of the monetary benefits of ecotourism, depicting little equitability. Additionally, gender inequality existed between self-help groups (SHGs) which were established by locals to support and encourage social empowerment and increase their bargaining power (Rath, 2007, cited in Das and Chatterjee, 2015). The forest department failed to promote the SHGs led by women; however, the male-led SHGs were promoted by the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Project (ICZMP).

This research illustrates in Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary, as seen in Figure 1, ecotourism has failed to encourage social empowerment and has created social inequality, two serious issues which do not correspond with ecosystem practice. Following Poyyamoli’s (2018) work, this example could be classified as ‘pseudo ecotourism’ as it failed to meet the standards of authentic ecotourism and led to the detriment of societies instead of empowering them. The social implications of this Indian case study further highlight the need for ‘better and more rigorous policies’ (Das and Chatterjee, 2015, p.145) for effective ecotourism practice in India.

2.2 Environmental implications

Arguably, environmental sustainability and conservation are paramount in the activities of ecotourism (Honey, 2008, cited in, Cobbinah, 2015), thus although ecotourism promotes socio-economic benefits, environmental ones are of utmost importance. While researching small scale ‘ecotourism’ initiatives in Silerigaon, an eastern Himalayan village within
Darjeeling, as seen in Figure 2, Banerji and Datta (2015) described an ‘umbilical cord’ between the focus of environmental conservation and the expansion of ecotourism.

![Location map of Silerigaon, Darjeeling, India. (Banerji and Datta, 2015)](image)

Although the research found that both locals and tourists perceived an increase in forest cover over recent years, it was also notable that 59% of respondents noticed a decline in non-polluted water over the last decade. Further, 71.43% of local stakeholders noticed that the number of wildlife in Silerigaon had decreased and attributed this to increased human intervention. Banerji and Datta (2015) suggested that environmental conservation as a result of tourism capital currently lacks ‘adequate vigour’ (ibid., p.47) in the area, questioning whether or not these initiatives can be deemed as ‘ecotourism’ at all.
Concerningly, pollution as a result of ‘ecotourism’ in India is not rare. Chowdhury and Maiti’s (2016) research into the ecological health of the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve, as shown in Figure 3, found the highest concentrations of lead metal pollution surrounding the ecotourism ferry routes. This was a result of a boom in the use of fossil-fuel operated ferries to accommodate the influx of tourists. Although Chowdhury and Maiti (ibid.) sympathise with the vitality of ecotourism as an industry to the economically marginalised in the Indian Sundarbans, they advocate for a symbiotic relationship between conservation and ecotourism (Salam et al. 2000, cited in Chowdhury and Maiti, 2016) especially given the sensitivity of the Sundarbans’ ecosystem.

![Figure 3. Location map of the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve, India. (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2019).](image)

Both Chowdhury and Maiti (2016) and Banerji and Datta (2015) reinforce the shortcomings of ecotourism policy in India and its failure to regulate ecotourism initiatives. As a result of these failures, environmental conservation as a product of ecotourism capital is limited and environmentally sensitive areas are being exploited, which are implications inconsistent
with genuine ecotourism practice. In order to rectify these issues, there is a pressing need for the revisiting of national ecotourism policy in India.

2.3 Political implications

Ecotourism in the Sundarbans of India (Fig.3) has also recently been the focus of research by Ghosh and Ghosh (2019). The research set out to discover the equitability of implications of ecotourism, from a political ecology perspective.

This involves looking at the intersection between environmental events or issues and political spheres. Several power struggles were found in the ecotourism practices between the conservation agencies, authorities, locals as well as tourists themselves. One significant finding postulated conflicts between the federal government and their conservation priorities and the local authorities and tourism priorities. Consequently, this prevents the effective application of ecotourism to the area, as the local government cannot promote ecotourism on a big enough scale to provide sufficient and significant profit in terms of capital.

Furthermore, the conflict between the tourists and locals over environmental values has led to an ‘insider’, ‘outsider’ mentality whereby locals have become ‘disenchanted’ (ibid., p.356) to the potential benefits of ecotourism. Lastly, in Pakhiralaya, one of the villages surrounding the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, a site of ecotourism, 50 households sold up their land for tourism development, resulting in outmigration. Ghosh and Ghosh (ibid.) emphasise that contrary to assumptions, ecotourism cannot be considered a ‘magic bullet’ (ibid., p.363) which will inevitably result in local development and environmental conservation. Instead, power balances in ecotourism initiatives are complicated and in the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve (Fig.3), the benefits of ecotourism were inequitable, outlining further need for re-examination of national policy.

3. The outlier – Kaziranga National Park
Not all recent research of Indian ecotourism is as sombre, as shown by Das and Hussain (2016) whilst researching the impact of ecotourism on economic welfare using evidence from Kaziranga National Park, India (Fig.4). The findings of the research suggest that the total expenditure of ecotourism households is 1.7 times that of agrarian households. In the park, ecotourism has become a more attractive industry than agriculture due to the human-wildlife conflict that arises when park animals destroy crops, as well as the everlasting threat of flooding. As a consequence of ecotourism, respondents believe that they gained a greater awareness of various issues, which has increased their political empowerment within their local area. Moreover, the standard of living of the locals has been significantly enhanced due to the capital generated from ecotourism, increasing access to education, medical insurance and loans to invest in their businesses. This case study unveils that ecotourism in the Kaziranga National Park (Fig.4) has fulfilled the core values of the practice as outlined by Cobbinah (2015), illustrating a multiplier effect of tourist expenditure which correspondingly strengthens the local economy. As shown, the results of this are multifaceted with positive socio-economic impacts while conserving the environment.
Unlike the previously cited research, the findings of Das and Hussain (2016) depict a successful ecotourism initiative. Although there is little mention of policy, it can be argued that the ambiguity of the policy does not necessitate unsuccessful ecotourism practice. This example gives hope that with policy clarifications and reforms, other initiatives can have the same positive implications on local populations and set a precedent for environmental conservation.

4. Research gaps

Despite the recent research into the issues surrounding the practice of ecotourism in India, there are inevitably existing research gaps which hinder solutions to the negative socio-economic, political and environmental implications of ecotourism, as previously implied. As a more comprehensive evaluation of recent research on the topic of ecotourism in India, Puri et al. (2019) outline several gaps in research. The paper posits that a foundation of ecotourism is biodiversity conservation. Thus, further research needs to investigate the effectiveness of conservation goals via environment impact assessment studies. Equally, it is imperative to monitor changing land-use and resource consumption patterns as a result of ecotourism initiatives to ensure that ecotourism doesn’t become an ‘extractive industry’ (ibid., p.136). Additionally, Puri et al. (ibid.) contend that research into the social and ecological ‘carrying capacity’ (ibid., p.137) of the proposed ecotourism site, in order to prevent tourism hindering the balance between conservation and development, which is of pressing urgency. Consequently, these research gaps offer guidance into future action that needs to take place in terms of improving ecotourism practices in India.

5. Conclusion

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<th>Key conclusions</th>
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<td>Bhitarkanika</td>
<td>Social empowerment of locals lacked vigour with low participation rates in eco-development committees. Those who were members of the eco-development committees had little knowledge of the expenditure of profits from the ecotourism initiatives. Gender inequality in the promotion of self-help groups which sought to increase the bargaining power of locals.</td>
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<td>Wildlife Sanctuary</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Silerigaon, within Darjeeling</td>
<td>Locals noted a decline in water quality in the last decade A large majority of local stakeholders noted a decrease in wildlife in the area.</td>
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<td>Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve</td>
<td>High concentrations of lead pollution around the ecotourism ferry routes Conflicts between locals and visitors over environmental values were commonplace Conflicts between</td>
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local authorities and federal government over priorities with regards to tourism and conservation

| Kaziranga National Park | Ecotourism has had positive impacts on economic welfare, standard of living and increased political empowerment amongst locals. |

Looking forward, the practice of ecotourism is likely to become more of a pressing issue. The aims of the Sustainable Development Goals make it more critical than ever that ecotourism initiatives promote rather than hinder environmental conservation and prevent further degradation of environmentally sensitive areas. Unfortunately, as a majority of the cited research shows and Poyyamoli (2018) asserts, ecotourism initiatives in India have previously been examples of ‘pseudo ecotourism’ which can cause further ecological damage as well as having inequitable socio-economic implications. Recent research into ecotourism in India has emphasised that the National Ecotourism Policy is ‘lackadaisical’ (Cabral and Lochan Dhar, 2019, p.12) and demands for ‘better and more rigorous policies’ (Das and Chatterjee, 2015, p.145), thus current practices mean that ecotourism cannot be the ‘magic bullet’ (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2019, p.363) between conservation and development without policy reform.

Although this essay is limited in length, clear patterns and examples of poor ecotourism practice across India have been unveiled and these ‘pseudo ecotourism’ techniques will continue to prevail unless national policy transformation occurs.

6. References


