

**Responsible Travel**  
**Does it Benefit Conservation and Local Communities?**  
**Experiences from India**  
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# Responsible Travel: Does it Benefit Conservation and Local Communities?

## Experiences from India

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*Tourism as conducted in the conventional sense has never really benefited local communities and has also caused more harm than good to surrounding ecosystems. Of late there have been efforts to make travel more responsible. India recognizes this as ecotourism. Ecotourism or tourism carried out in a responsible and sustainable manner can potentially enhance the livelihoods of local people, and also ensure that fragile ecosystems do not degrade. The term 'Traveler's Philanthropy' may be new to a country like India, but the concept is not. This paper first looks at the some significant economic, environmental and social impacts that conventional tourism has had on the country. It then examines five initiatives from different parts of the country that are practicing elements of traveler's philanthropy. These initiatives also have a range of different players. The paper finally discusses the different aspects that need to be kept in mind for the concept of traveler's philanthropy to gain more popularity.*

India is home to over a billion people and represents a wide spectrum of biological, cultural and geographic diversity. The confluence of three major biogeographic zones, i.e. the Indo-Malayan, the Eurasian and the Afro-Tropical makes India extremely biodiverse in its genes, species and ecosystems (TPCG and Kalpavriksh 2005). It is one of the world's 17 megadiversity countries. Even more amazing is the diversity of India's people. The Anthropological Survey of India has identified 91 eco-cultural zones in India inhabited by 4,635 communities, speaking 325 languages/dialects (Singh 1992).

Tourism is the largest service industry in India, with a contribution of 6.23% to the national GDP and 8.78% of the total employment in India (Ministry of Tourism 2009). The tourism industry in India generated about US\$100 billion in 2008 and that is expected to increase to US\$275.5 billion by 2018 at a 9.4% annual growth rate<sup>2</sup>. In the year 2009, 5.11 million foreign tourists visited India while the domestic tourism sector saw 650 million tourists<sup>3</sup>.

India offers a range of tourism options to tourists. India's ancient cultures and civilizations lend themselves to cultural tourism. Rural India offers another kind of tourism. India is also becoming a focal point for medical tourists by providing quality healthcare at affordable costs. Given the diversity of ecosystems, India also attracts a large number of tourists who seek to go to places of natural beauty. Nature tourism in the country has become almost synonymous to ecotourism.

### ***The Conflict: Tourism, Conservation and the Community***

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=283557041913>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tourism.gov.in/writereaddata/CMSPagePicture/file/marketresearch/publications/IndiaTourismStats-2009.pdf>

However, conventional tourism besides bringing in considerable revenue to the country's exchequer has also done inordinate harm to the social and ecological fabric of the country.

### **Economic Aspects**

It is argued by proponents of tourism that economic reasons are key for the promotion of this industry. Tourism has the ability to generate high income and employment for the local economy. However, that is only one side of the story. Tourism is also impacted by inflation and leakages. The concept of leakage refers to the loss of revenue generated by tourism to the economy of another country. Leakage from many developing countries may be so significant that it significantly neutralizes the total revenue generated by tourism, with little benefit to the local community. A study of tourism 'leakage' estimated that 40% of all money spent by tourists ended up leaving India<sup>4</sup>. Studies carried out show that on an average, of every US\$ 100 spent on a vacation tour by a tourist from a developed country, only around US\$ 5 actually stays in a developing country destination's economy (Bhatt and Liyakhat 2008). Tour packages organized by foreign companies to India, where the airlines, hotel, transport, guide services are all owned by the foreign country with the local region / community benefiting insignificantly from tourism is a good example of leakages. There are also instances that indicate that the claim of employment generation in the local economy by the tourism industry is restricted to low skilled jobs and labor.

### **Environmental Impacts**

Tourism is highly dependent on the natural environment. Nature-based tourism is rapidly gaining popularity and also contributing considerably to state exchequer. Despite this, one of the primary responsibilities of the tourism industry should be the protection of the environment. This however does not happen at most destinations. Tourism in most locations is unregulated and results in land, water and noise pollution. Tourism that goes beyond the carrying capacity of the destination will degrade of the place rather than enhance its beauty. There is also the issue of the consumption of natural resources at the cost of the local communities. In the coastal state of Goa, a popular national and international tourist destination, the water table has fallen below the level of village wells as a result of deep wells dug by large hotels for their consumption (Bhatt and Liyakhat 2008).

### **Socio-Cultural Impacts**

There are two dimensions to the socio-cultural impacts of tourism. One is the inability of the conventional mode of tourism to actually develop into an economically and socially viable option for local communities and second is the lack of acknowledgement about the social impacts from the industry. Tourism has played a significant role in privatization of common resources in tourism destinations and the displacement of people and forest dwellers from their homelands to make way for hotels and resorts. Tourism-related activities have also made children vulnerable to sexual and non-sexual forms of exploitation. There are also problems relating to health, drugs, crime and trafficking of people.

The Andaman Islands that lie in the Indian Ocean have within them, indigenous communities called the *Jarawas* that have been living there for centuries. Their total population is 260, but

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.leaplocal.org/leakage-from-tourism.html>

they will still survive if left undisturbed. One of the biggest threats today to the *Jarawas* is a road that runs right through their forest settlement. Popularly called 'Jarawa tourism' where tourists stop on the road and give them alcohol, tobacco, biscuits. There are also reports of sexual exploitation. The Supreme Court of India has ordered the closure of the road where it directly affects the *Jarawas* but it still continues to be in operation (EQUATIONS 2004).

### **Towards Responsible Tourism and Traveler's Philanthropy**

Of late there have been efforts to make travel more responsible. India recognizes this as ecotourism. Ecotourism or tourism carried out in a responsible and sustainable manner can potentially enhance the livelihoods of local people, and also ensure that fragile ecosystems do not degrade. The term 'Traveler's Philanthropy' may be new to India, but the concept is not. Today there are several tourism initiatives where communities are active partners resulting in an increase in self esteem, income and addition to community assets thanks to the support from visiting tourists. Models differ but the bottom-line remains the changing profile of tourists and tourism itself that is helping enhance local livelihoods and conserve biodiversity.

In this paper I look at some case studies from across India that have incorporated the philosophy of Traveler's Philanthropy. These case studies are from different parts of the country and have been initiated by different kinds of institutions ranging from Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), both local and international, government institutions and donors.

#### ***From Fugitives to Responsible Citizens***

##### **Periyar National Park, Kerala**

The Periyar Tiger Reserve spreads over 777 sq.km. of tropical evergreen, semi- evergreen and moist deciduous forests is situated in the southern state of Kerala. The reserve has over 2,00,000 people living around it. It also is visited by over 4,00,000 tourists every year. Besides this, thousands of pilgrims visit the Sabarimala temple situated close by between the months of November and January. These pilgrims pose one of the biggest threats to the reserve. Poaching was also rampant in the area as communities found it an easy way to earn money. Conflicts between the reserve authorities and the people were thus inevitable.

In the late 1990s, forest officials in this protected area used the Global Environment Facility (GEF)-funded Ecodevelopment Project to establish a unique ecotourism programme. Different Ecodevelopment Committees (EDCs) were formulated depending on the function and interest of the respective group. Through the community-based ecotourism programme, hotels in the vicinity were contacted and requested to add forest treks into their itinerary for tourists. Taking into account the threat from large-scale unplanned tourism, tourist zones were delineated and tourist numbers were strictly monitored. Forest treks were conducted by the ex-poachers EDC and other tribal trekkers. EDC members also helped to patrol the forest at night. Other EDC members were given a shop by the tiger reserve gate where they could sell souvenirs to tourists. Income generated from these activities went into the respective EDC account. Each member of the EDC receives a monthly salary out of this account. One EDC specifically handles two of the pilgrimage routes through Periyar to the Sabarimala temple and helps by providing alternative fuel sources; facilitates waste management, and generates conservation awareness for the pilgrims (Kothari and Pathak 2006).

Community based ecotourism programmes are generating around USD 133,656 annually and providing direct employment to more than 500 tribal families. More than 2000 families participate in the Sabarimala pilgrim season business and earn substantial income. In 2004, a public trust called the Periyar Foundation was established primarily to ensure the sustainability of these initiatives. The Foundation has so far been able to conduct 25 programmes for the capacity building of the staff as well as EDC members. The Foundation has also been able to access funds (USD 33,414) from the Tourism Department towards improvement of tourism facilities. The Foundation in the long run hopes to facilitate the community for a greater share in the presently privately/government-run tourism operations. (Personal communication: Pramod Krishnan, Field Director, Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala, India in July 2005.)

### **Manas National Park, Assam**

Manas situated in the north-eastern state of Assam is known for its rare and endangered wildlife, not found anywhere else in the world. This includes the Assam Roofed Turtle, the Hispid Hare, the Golden Langur and the Pygmy Hog. It is a National Park, Tiger Reserve and a World Heritage Site. The '80s were a turbulent time for Assam with the beginning of the movement to demand a separate land for the *Bodos* (an ethnic tribal community of Assam). This movement took a huge toll on the national park first, since the insurgent groups and militants used the forests as hideouts and second because, both national and international poaching groups took advantage of the situation leading to destruction. The once resplendent park became a mere shadow of its former self.

In 2003, the *Bodo* Accord resulted in the establishment of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). This also brought with it a realization that Manas once the pride of the *Bodos*, needed to be restored to its former glory. Local youth and activists from the All *Bodo* Students Union (ABSU) decided to take the responsibility for this through their local unit of *Chapaguri Koklabari Anchalik Committee* (CKAC). The restoration of the park and the endeavor to make it an important tourist destination was thus incorporated as a special package in the *Bodo* Accord. The Accord also emphasized that participatory tourism should be promoted in Manas.

Through the support of the ABSU and CKAC, came into being, the Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society (MMES), primarily to look after conservation and ecotourism issues in and around Manas. The name itself indicates prosperity and good health, both important for the Manas National Park. A membership organization, MMES members include ABSU workers, former Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) members, ex-poachers, ex-timber fellers and local community members from fringe villages of Manas.

MMES set up the Manas Maozigendri Jungle Camp to facilitate tourism in the area. MMES carries out what it terms 'participatory tourism' where the tourists are encouraged to participate in various activities of MMES such as patrolling in the park, monitoring and census of various faunal species. Revenue earned from tourism does not go back to the community. The entire profit is spent for conservation after paying expenses and salary/remuneration for the voluntary guards who protect the park and also record wildlife sightings.

In 2005, Help Tourism, an organization promoting tourism, particularly in the Northeast stepped in to support MMES specifically in its ecotourism work. Help Tourism has helped in motivating

the local people, has ensured that an appropriate institutional structure is in place and has also facilitated capacity building through training programs in the hospitality sector.

Out of the 60 plus villages in the fringe area of the park, at least 17 are involved in various activities of MMES. MMES gets some support from the Forest Department who has accepted the Society and its members as partners in conservation. But even more significant is the fact that the political system in the form of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) supports this initiative and would be keen to support many more of this kind.

### ***Welcome to my Home: Community-based Homestays in the Himalayan Region***

The community-based homestay movement is growing across the Himalayan region and is becoming an important source of livelihoods for resident communities. Homestays offer an innovative and fresh opportunity to tourists and are actually ideal examples of ecotourism. These are community-run initiatives where benefits from tourism go directly to the community and if located close to an area of conservation value, also contribute to the protection of the site. Almost all the Himalayan states have started promoting home-stay based ecotourism. For example, selected organizations in the three Himalayan states of Jammu and Kashmir (primarily Ladakh), Himachal Pradesh (primarily Spiti) and Sikkim are promoting homestays under the banner of 'Himalayan Homestays'

#### **Tso Moriri Lake, Ladakh**

Ladakh is a unique trans-Himalayan region in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Situated at an altitude of 4595 meters above sea level, in this region lies the brackish water lake of Tso Moriri. Tso Moriri is spread over an area of 120 sq.km. with a maximum depth of 40 m. and is one of the world's highest lakes and the largest brackish water body in the Indian Changthang that extends into Tibet's vast northern plateau land. The lake represents a unique wetland type in the trans-Himalayan biogeographic zone and harbors a distinctive assemblage of fauna and flora, significantly, the black necked crane. It is the breeding ground, particularly for the barheaded geese and key staging posts for many other migratory water birds.

The Changthang plateau is also inhabited by the nomadic *Changpa* community that moves with its livestock in search of grazing grounds in tune with the changing seasons. However, more and more *Changpas* are resorting to a settled way of life. A permanent settlement of *Changpas* exists on the shore of this lake. This is the village of Korzok.

With the increase in tourism in Ladakh and the Tso Moriri wetland, local people have been increasingly feeling the need for a greater stake in this industry and have been discussing ways and means of doing so with the World Wide Fund for Nature- India (WWF India) team that has been working in the region for over ten years. The women folk of Korzok were, in particular, increasingly getting interested in this concept where they could let out a room in their house to tourists and play local host to tourists while also earning something from this initiative. With support from the WWF India team working in this region, ten homestays were initiated the summer of 2006.

Each homestay has one room dedicated for the tourist within an archetypal Ladakhi household. The room allocated is meant for two to three tourists and is provided with the very basic amenities like mattresses, blankets etc. Tourists are expected to use the indigenous Ladakhi toilet

facilities, which are clean and environmentally friendly. Tourists eat with the host family in the typical Ladakhi kitchen, where the lady of the house serves them a traditional Ladakhi meal or what the tourists ask for. Most of the homestays have a spectacular view of the lake. Overall, these homestays provide the complete Ladakhi experience to tourists, besides of course offering comfortable accommodation at a reasonable rate to enable the tourist to enjoy the lake and its environs.

The distribution of tourists is carried out by two homestay owners by rotation. There is a fixed tariff for all homestays, which is very strictly adhered to. At present benefits arising out of this enterprise go directly to the homestay owners. The ten homestay owners take the lead in collecting garbage every month. The non-biodegradable garbage is sent back to Leh at the end of the season. Each homestay also has a register for tourists to provide their feedback to their hosts. The homestay movement is becoming increasingly popular in Ladakh and is now being promoted by multiple agencies.

### ***Empowerment through Entrepreneurship***

#### **Hodka, Gujarat**

Sham-e-Sarhad (located at Hodka), at the edge of the Gujarat desert, in the western part of the country, is an initiative under the joint Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. The ETP has supported capacity building of rural populations in tourism related activities at 36 rural sites in 20 states of India. The project also helped support and strengthen rural infrastructure to support responsible tourism. The premise has been that tourism would open up new livelihood opportunities for low income rural communities, especially the unemployed youth. And this is indeed tourism with a difference<sup>5</sup>.

The Hodka resort is located in the midst of the desert amongst the community that lives there. This community is diverse ethnically and presents a unique cultural mosaic. The region is also rich in handicrafts. The planning for the tourism initiative involved detailed consultations with the community that were facilitated by a local civil society organization the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan. Also present at these consultations were representatives from the local administration and state tourism department. Local communities here have by and large been always been excluded from tourism related activities in the past. As a result they have never gained from it either. Projects such as these have facilitated the capacity building of the local community and encouraged them to show case local culture and handicrafts.

The resort is built in traditional architectural style. All the employees except for the manager are from the local community. The food served there is local. The women from surrounding villages used to earlier cook food and send it to the resort. Now however, there is a full-fledged kitchen run by the local women. The resort also showcases indigenous dance and music by having live performances by the community every evening. The Hodka Tourism Committee comprising of representatives from eleven villages manage the resort. The committee includes four women members. Part of the revenue generated is used for the upkeep of the resort and the rest for the development of villages in the area. This is indeed a unique opportunity for the local community

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hodka.in/>

to display their cultural heritage as also gain employment. The clientele to the resort is also different. It is meant for those who believe in learning from a new culture but also in giving back to the community for the enriching experience. The community hopes to also train some of the youth as wildlife guides to further enrich visitor experience by exposing tourists to the desert biodiversity<sup>6</sup>.

### **Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh**

The Eaglenest wildlife sanctuary is situated in the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. It covers 218 sq km of prime forest, most of it at high altitudes. One of the biodiversity hotspots, this state is endowed with rich biodiversity. The sanctuary is also unique in another way. It has a motorable road, something most other protected areas in the state lack.

An astrophysicist visited the Eaglenest wildlife sanctuary in 1995 in pursuit of his passion of bird watching. He was also keen to document the biodiversity of the place along with the local tribe, the *Buguns*. But the *Buguns* had other priorities. Stomachs first, conservation later. Thus started the bird watching tours led by the astrophysicist. The first one in 2004 with three foreign tourists. *Buguns* were however skeptical how birds could attract tourists in large numbers and bring in the much needed revenue. The first group spent ten days in Eaglenest. Only locals were employed as staff and the *Bugun* community was also paid a community fee. The amount of revenue collected was equivalent to a laborer's wage for a year. Part of the revenue was used to subsidize education expenses for local students (Athreya 2006).

Ramanna, the astrophysicist has since managed grants to keep the project of documenting biodiversity going. Several internet e-groups helped support a 'commercial-advertisement-for-a-good cause' on their non-commercial email groups. Internet advertising has helped bring Eaglenest to the fore as a prime birding area. Tour operators started bringing regular groups to the sanctuary. The *Bugun* Welfare Society, a local NGO has helped in setting up subsequent tours. Training of *Buguns* was an important component of this venture. Training included administration to run the camps, health and hygiene, cooking to suit foreign palates and other cross-cultural sensitivities.

By 2005-6 the area started attracting more and more birders. Thus was born the idea of 'Vacations-for-Conservation'. This non-profit venture was supported by Ford Foundation. The idea was for participants to get a vacation at one of the country's best wilderness locations where they contribute to conservation while having fun. The program generates income for the local community who in turn get more experience in handling tourists. The participants are also expected to pay a tourist community fee to the community. The biodiversity inventory got a boost with more hands on the deck.

The biggest incentive for the *Buguns* has come with the discovery of a new bird species as part of the biodiversity inventory. The bird (*Bugun liocichla*) has been named after the *Bugun* tribe. This has given a tremendous boost to the tribe's self esteem and Eaglenest is today a much

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<sup>6</sup> [http://infochangeindia.org/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=345](http://infochangeindia.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=345)

sought after bird destination. From the three birders who came in 2004, today the sanctuary gets over 200 visitors, more than half from overseas (Athreya 2010).

### **The Way Ahead**

The concept and the philosophy behind traveler's philanthropy are very relevant for a country like India. The initiatives described indicate that in many ways, this concept is already being practiced by responsible travel organizers. But for the concept to get popular and viable, it is important for several things to first be put in place.

### **External Support**

All the projects described had external support in some form or other. This kind of assistance is needed to build capacity, provide infrastructure etc particularly in the initial stages until the enterprise becomes self supporting. The Periyar project was part of a larger project funded by the Global Environment Facility. Manas and Ladakh received support from NGOs, Hodka was part of a larger UNDP and Government of India project. Eaglenest was supported through various funding grants. Traveler's philanthropy will help in continuing this kind of support, provided it is not done in an *ad hoc* manner. Eventually, once this concept gets more acceptability, it will need to be institutionalized.

### **Strong Local Institutions**

The sustainability of any initiative is finally dependent on the presence of strong community institutions. Such institutions may already exist or may evolve as the initiative flourishes and becomes viable. Sometimes, there could be dormant institutions that get revived as a result of these interventions. Institutions are site and situation-specific and need to evolve as what is best suited to the context. The Periyar initiative discussed here strengthened existing Ecodevelopment Committees and used them effectively to ensure the sustainability of the same. In the case of Manas, Eaglenest and Himalayan Homestays, institutions were established as a result of the ecotourism enterprises. But each is community-based and will sustain itself as long as the tourism activities continue.

### **Capacity Building**

It is unrealistic to believe that communities can start and sustain an activity like tourism without adequate capacity building and support. Capacity building is needed in various aspects of the enterprise and this includes: housekeeping, accounting, waste recycling, nature interpretation and guiding and simple aspects of how to deal with tourists from other cultures. Capacity building should be an ongoing exercise depending on the need of the target audience. Capacity building does not necessarily have to be done by outside experts. In Ladakh for example, women from one part of the district were called upon to train women in another part to help with community-based homestays.

### **Publicity and Marketing**

Traveler's philanthropy is a relatively new concept and needs to be marketed. The traveler needs to be informed about the concept and what it entails for him/her to make an informed choice and also meaningfully contribute to the enterprise. Marketing needs to be strategically carried out through different media so that the traveler has adequate information to make a choice and opt

for destinations that have the facility for the traveler to contribute.

### **Documentation**

Marketing and the right kind of publicity is possible only if there is enough information available about such initiatives. Good documentation would help provide this kind of information. Documentation could become part of the traveler's philanthropy concept where travelers to these sites can offer to document the initiative and also help in publicity of the same.

### **Traveler Orientation**

Travelers coming to sites that offer this concept also need to be oriented. This could be done through good publicity and interpretation material. An interpretation centre at each site could be thought of planned and included in the budgets for better orientation, education and awareness of the traveler.

### **Experience Sharing**

Initiatives that offer this concept are still few and far between. It is important for propagators of these to share their experiences with other such individuals and institutions. This becomes even more important for community-based enterprises. Communities often work in isolation. Experience sharing with others can be inspiring as well as educational. This could be done ideally through cross-site visits, meetings and workshops and other forms of documentation that include written documentation and films etc.

### **Creative and Charismatic Individuals**

Most of such initiatives are started by creative and charismatic individuals who had a vision and the capability to carry forward ideas within or without the system. The success of the Periyar enterprise can be attributed to many dynamic forest officers who used existing schemes creatively to the benefit of the communities. One individual actually made the Eaglenest initiative possible. However, such individuals must also realize that for the sustainability of initiatives local capacity must be built and local institutions strengthened. The contribution of such individuals nevertheless needs to be acknowledged and their strengths tapped upon for initiating other enterprises.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of ecotourism has gained considerable momentum in India in the last ten years or so. There has been support for many small and large initiatives that have been genuinely beneficial for local communities and have attempted to address local conservation issues as well. The next step is to link these initiatives to the traveler who wants to give something back to the host community. The concept is picking up. There are tour operators promoting what is called, 'voluntourism'. India as a country rich in its biological and cultural heritage has a lot to offer a traveler, but it is time to give back to help conserve and sustain this heritage. India has an age-old tradition and still follows the philosophy of, "*Atithi Devo Bhava*", which literally means "Guest is God". This is the essence of Indian hospitality. However, what needs to change is the fact that the guest gives back to the host. Traveler's philanthropy will indeed change the face of tourism in coming times.

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