Missing the Woods for the Trees?

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Tourism must be seen in the context of the rights of all stakeholders. More and reliable data is needed to understand whether tourism is harmful to tigers or that people living in the forests have caused the decline in the tigers' population. The more central issue of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the rights of adivasis and forest dwellers is being lost in the battle about tourism.

Ecotourism is increasingly being seen as a driver for the eradication of poverty through economic development of communities, contributing to conservation of the environment and conservation education for tourists.

Ecotourism particularly wildlife tourism and even more specifically tiger tourism has been in the news and hotly debated largely due to two significant developments in the recent past.

In October 2010, a case was filed in the High Court of Madhya Pradesh at Jabalpur by Ajay Dubey of the Bhopal-based organisation Prayatna, asking for a ban on tourism in tiger reserves. Based on an interim order received on 19 January 2011, a Special Leave Petition (SLP) was filed in the Supreme Court in 2011.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) was also in the process of drafting guidelines for ecotourism in protected areas independently, and on 2 June 2011 issued the (Draft) Guidelines for Ecotourism In and Around Protected Areas. Subsequently, the guidelines have been finalised and submitted to the Supreme Court on 9 July 2012 as per its directions in the interim order dated 3 April 2012. The two most crucial elements of the guidelines are: (1) the phasing out of tourism from core areas, and (2) shifting tourism into buffer areas and therefore incentivising conversion of land from current land use to forest areas.

Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS) had sent its comments and recommendations to the MOEF on the draft guidelines among which are the following: (1) The guidelines need to give primacy to gram sabhas by ensuring that their approvals are sought in the process of tourism development as is the case for other forms of development. This is a massive lapse in the light of the 73rd and 74th amendments and should be rectified in the final guidelines. (2) The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (henceforth Forest Rights Act) has not been considered while formulating these guidelines. We hope that the final guidelines will ensure that the provisions of this key Act are upheld in the context of the governance
and regulation of tourism and rights of forest dwelling communities.

(3) The very important resolution of the xxI meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife in January 2002 regarding the demarcation of eco-fragile zones and the guidelines for which have been issued by the ministry on 9 February 2011 have been disregarded. The guidelines issued in February 2011 mandate regulation of tourism in a 10 km radius from the park boundaries.

(4) Along with guidelines for tourism in forests and in and around protected areas, it is important that there be regulation of tourism in a range of eco-systems, not just forests.

The Supreme Court order of 24 July 2012 in the Ajay Dubey vs National Tiger Conservation Authority (ntca) and others case is an interim one, which has disallowed tourism in the core areas in tiger reserves till final directions are issued.

Regulation or Blanket Ban?
The government, in particular the MOEP, has welcomed the ban. The Ministry of Tourism has stated that the ban will not affect tourism. Going by media reports so far, a large section of the high-end of the tourism industry has raised concerns against this move. The position of many conservationists is that tourism can be detrimental to the environment and that what is needed is regulation rather than a blanket ban. Forest rights activists have been largely silent on the issue, except for a few who believe that the ban without the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 will make the forests vulnerable to the forest mafia.

The issue of core and buffer areas in tiger reserves is a long-standing one and the ramifications of this are much wider than tourism. These in fact affect the lives of people living in the forests even more. Therefore the debate on tourism in tiger reserves needs to be located within this broader context. What the case has done is to bring to the fore issues that already existed in the past, but unfortunately without adequately taking into consideration legislations like the Forest Rights Act and the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution.

There are three arguments that the tourism industry and conservationists make in favour of allowing tourism in protected areas: Employment to local communities, contribution to conservation, and controlling of poaching. However, a realistic view of the way tourism operates and is conducted seriously challenges all these arguments.

Over the last few days, many varying estimates of how much employment tourism generates has been reported. Very few of these can claim research or sound statistical data at the local level to substantiate them. That the existing tourism-linked statistics in the country are rather unreliable is a well-acknowledged fact. The current debates therefore only underscore the need for rigorous data and analysis on the effects and spin-offs of tourism, which the state forest departments and departments of tourism need to take up.

Different Perspectives
Three significant studies that have been conducted and from which we can learn are by the Madhya Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board (MPEDB) titled “Contribution of Ecotourism to Livelihood – Bandhavgarh National Park” (date unknown), Karanth and DeFries (2010) titled “Nature-Based Tourism in Indian Protected Areas: New Challenges for Park Management” and Swaminathan and Purshothaman (2000) titled “Forest Conservation Tourism and Extraction: An Economic Perspective”.

Karanth and DeFries state that less than 0.001% of the population living within 10 km of a protected area (PA) find employment in the tourism industry. However, the MPEDB study shows that 62% of the people involved in tourism activity at Tala (a small village near the Bandhavgarh National Park with an approximate population of 1,220) are local people. However, they are all largely involved in the unorganised sector working as drivers, cooks, labour, guides and in general business. All the managerial level work is done by outsiders.

Therefore, while it is true that tourism development generates employment opportunities for local communities this “fact” needs to be understood not just through numbers but from multiple perspectives. First is the issue of self-determination. In and around protected areas the adivasis who used to own land, have due to poverty been forced to sell out to the resorts/hotels and become employees as guides and drivers (with luck), but usually end up working as security guards, gardeners or waiters at the restaurant. Therefore, the mere generation of employment does not take into account the disempowerment that the adivasis experience.

Furthermore, there is the question of ownership within the tourism industry as most of the establishment owners, whether of lodges or jeeps are usually not from the region and are more often than not from cities/towns. As seen in the case of the Kanha National Park, they can be from as far away places as Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. The income thus generated from tourism is taken away from the region and into the bigger cities. In fact, the question of who constitutes the term “local” is contentious. It is interpreted differently by communities in the vicinity of the tourism establishments, for whom local is anyone from within that community while the owners of the establishments interpret the term as per their convenience. The tourism industry at Kanha and Bandhavgarh, for example, have identified all those who live anywhere along the park boundary to be local, even if they are from a village many kms away or very often from the neighbouring district.

This brings us to the question of the local economy. It is common knowledge that resort owners are rarely from the village where the establishments are. This has two implications: (i) people from the local communities are alienated from their land, and (ii) a source of livelihood is lost for both the landed and the landless agricultural labourers. This is evident in the Kabini area, where large tracts of land have been sold to people from Bangalore and Mysore. While those who sold the land have moved to cities to ensure better education for their children and in search of other avenues for livelihoods, the people from the landless communities have been forced to migrate out of the
district in search of work. Some villagers have shared that an average of 200 people were employed by one landowner, but one establishment would not be able to provide employment to the same number. Therefore the understanding of costs and benefits of tourism needs to take these layered experiences and perspectives into account.

According to researchers, on the issue of tourism contributing to conservation, estimating the costs of regeneration and the sources of funds received by the forest department is a difficult task. First, identifying and segregating different cost components is a challenge since administrative costs overlap various activities including conservation and management. Second, identifying the source of resources (both revenue and income) is also a challenge. The forest department receives money from both the state and the central governments. According to the MoEF website, there are several crores of funds parked in the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), which is also used towards managing the tiger reserves. The Government of India also receives large amounts of funding from various international financial institutions for forest regeneration. Thus the issue to examine is if the income generated from ecotourism activities does go back to the forest department and in particular to conservation-linked activities. Currently, all earnings from the forests (non-timber forest products, timber, entry fee, etc) go back into a common pool (except in the case of Madhya Pradesh) wherein all non-plan income of the state is parked, from where allocations for different expenses are made. There is no way in the current system of functioning to ensure that the income from tourism is ploughed back to the forest department for regeneration work.

In the case of tiger reserves, the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2006 has mandated that all gate receipts are to be used for stakeholder development including conservation and community development. The only state which has proffered information on this is Madhya Pradesh, where the money from gate receipts is pooled together at the state level and then distributed to the national parks based on necessity and status of the funds.

The other argument in favour of continuing tourism in core areas of the parks is that this will be a deterrent to poaching. Poachers usually operate at night, when tourists are not allowed in the parks. Poachers also know the behaviour of the animals and are able to hunt them down when tourists are not around. On an average only one-fourth of the parks have marked tourism zones. In the case of Bandhavgarh and Kanha, which have healthy tiger populations, only some of the tigers are known to inhabit the area in the tourism zone. The majority of them choose the higher and interior reaches of the reserve. At a more fundamental level, considering that the forest department has emptied the tiger reserves of people by displacing the villagers who used to live there and who were the most obvious watchdogs for the poachers, it becomes the responsibility of the forest department to ensure that poaching does not happen instead of passing on this responsibility to the tourists.

Tourism in Context

There has also been the case for a greater regulation of tourism and there is no question about this. Tourism does need to be regulated both inside the park as well as in the periphery. While the notion of carrying capacity is the popular way of regulation within the park, it is limited in terms of the factors as it takes into consideration only disturbance to wildlife and not people in and around the area. Regulation at the entry gates has become a governance nightmare, with the collector and park director both shifting the responsibility of the same. The outcome of this is the chaos witnessed at all the gates of the tiger parks. The rampant and ugly growth of tourism establishments in the periphery has been critiqued but has seen little regulation.

Our position is that tourism cannot be seen out of the context of the rights of all stakeholders. While media reports have highlighted the issue of the right of citizens to see the tiger and forests of our country, it is also true that the rights of people who used to live in these very same forests have been violated. Section 4(2) of the Forest Rights Act says

The forest rights recognised under this Act in critical wildlife habitats of National Parks and Sanctuaries may subsequently be modified or resettled, provided that no forest rights holders shall be resettled or have their rights in any manner affected for the purposes of creating inviolate areas for wildlife conservation except in case all the following conditions are satisfied:

Some of the key conditions are:

...that the activities of impact of the presence of holders of rights upon wild animals is sufficient to cause irreversible damage and threaten the existence of said species and their habitat

...the free informed consent of the Gram Sabhas in the area concerned to the proposed resettlement and to the package provided has been obtained in writing.

It has not been established that tourism is harmful to tigers. In the same way the claim that people living in the forests have caused the decline in the tigers' population can and should be contested.

The position that the 2006 amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 mandates that core areas need to be inviolate and therefore tourism also should be banned seems a limited view. The issue of understanding tourism’s real impact and contributions needs to be studied and more reliable data needs to be worked with before conclusions are drawn. However the more central issue of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the rights of adivasis and forest dwellers is being lost in the battle about tourism (or making the battle only about tourism). We believe this issue needs to be brought back by the MoEF and NTCA into the core area of the debate!

REFERENCE

EQUATIONS (2011): “Calling to Account: Image and Ethics in Corporate Accountability in Tourism”.

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