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ECO-TOURISM REVIVAL AND RESILIENCE: STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-COVID ERA OF SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on eco-tourism and sustainable development in South and Southeast Asia, aiming to identify challenges such as reduced tourist arrivals, supply chain disruptions, and strain on conservation and local communities. Nonetheless, it also reveals opportunities in domestic tourism promotion, digital technology adoption, and community-based initiatives. Employing a review analysis, the research addresses knowledge gaps and provides valuable insights for policymakers. By promoting resilient and responsible tourism practices, this study contributes to the advancement of sustainable tourism in the region, considering the intricate relationship between eco-tourism, sustainable development, and the pandemic's ramifications.

KEYWORDS: *Eco-Tourism, Sustainable Development, Covid-19, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Challenges & Opportunities*

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explores the intricate intersection of eco-tourism and sustainable development in South and Southeast Asia. Through a comprehensive analysis, it dissects the pandemic's impact on these vital sectors, uncovering challenges like dwindling tourist inflows, supply chain disruptions, and strains on conservation and local communities. However, amidst adversity lies opportunity. The study unearths prospects in the form of domestic tourism promotion, the embrace of digital technologies, and the cultivation of community-driven initiatives. Adopting a review analysis methodology, the research systematically bridges gaps in knowledge and provides invaluable insights for policymakers. By advocating resilient and responsible tourism practices, the study plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable tourism in the region. This encompasses a holistic approach that underscores the delicate interplay between eco-tourism, sustainable development, and the far-reaching repercussions of the pandemic. Ultimately, this study signifies more than a mere examination of challenges and opportunities; it embodies a call for action. By accentuating the symbiotic relationship between eco-tourism and sustainable development, it propels South and Southeast Asia towards a future characterized by balance, resilience, and a shared commitment to responsible tourism practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Eco-tourism and sustainable development have gained increasing attention in the global tourism industry due to the growing recognition of their potential to foster economic growth, protect natural resources, and promote social inclusiveness. In the South and Southeast Asian region, which is rich in diverse ecosystems, cultural heritage, and natural attractions, eco-tourism has emerged as a significant component of the tourism sector. It offers opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism activities, preserves biodiversity, and contributes to the overall sustainable development of the region.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the tourism industry worldwide, disrupting travel patterns, closing borders, and leading to a decline in tourist arrivals. South and Southeast Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, have faced significant challenges in sustaining their eco-tourism initiatives amidst the pandemic. The closure of national parks, restrictions on international travel, and reduced tourist demand have posed severe threats to the livelihoods of communities dependent on eco-tourism. Nonetheless, the pandemic has also presented unique opportunities for revaluating and reshaping the tourism sector towards resilience and responsibility. It has highlighted the need for sustainable practices, community engagement, and the integration of health and safety measures. As countries gradually reopen their tourism sectors, there is a pressing need to explore innovative strategies that balance economic recovery with environmental conservation and socio-cultural well-being.

This paper aims to delve into the challenges and opportunities faced by eco-tourism and sustainable development in the South and Southeast Asian region, with a specific focus on India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. By examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these countries' eco-tourism initiatives, the study seeks to identify ways to navigate the current challenges and develop a pathway towards resilient and responsible tourism. Through a comprehensive review analysis, the research aims to contribute to the existing knowledge and provide insights for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and local communities to foster sustainable tourism practices in the post-pandemic era.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "tourism" refers to the practice of leaving one's usual area for an extended period of time (more than 24 hours) to engage in activities such as recreation, commerce, or studies (Camilleri, 2018). When individuals or groups engage in travel that involves appreciating the vast living and nonliving creations of nature in an environmentally benign manner without exploiting or significantly impacting the natural surroundings, it is called "ecotourism" (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). Ecotourism is a form of tourism that emphasizes environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, aiming to reduce environmental damage and provide economic benefits to local communities. It can effectively contribute to environmental conservation, poverty alleviation, and cultural preservation. The industry is expanding as more tourists seek environmentally conscious ways to connect with nature and learn about diverse cultures.

Typical activities in ecotourism include visiting natural areas such as forests, mountains, and beaches, engaging in outdoor pursuits like bicycling, camping, bird watching, and whale watching, as well as exploring local communities, museums, and cultural institutions to gain insights into the region's history and culture. Developing nations, in particular, prioritize economic development and the preservation of natural resources, leading to the rapid expansion of ecotourism as an alternative form of tourism. The essence of ecotourism lies in visiting natural areas to learn about nature, flora, fauna, and their habitats while appreciating the cultural aspects of local communities. By providing an alternative source of income to local communities, ecotourism aims to promote and conserve nature while ensuring sustainable resource utilization (Blamey, 2001).

Ecotourism can benefit the environment and local communities in several ways. It can provide an economic incentive for conservation, raise awareness about environmental issues, and foster development. Through ecotourism trips, tourists can support the local businesses and communities of the tourism spot. Promoting the use of environmentally friendly commodities such as banana leaves, bamboo glasses, bamboo huts, avoiding plastic packaging, and utilizing recycling products can be encouraged (Bansal & Kumar, 2013). Additionally, tourists can engage in various activities in ecotourism spots such as hiking in national parks, camping in forests, bird watching in wetlands, and visiting villages in developing countries to learn about local culture and history.

The study focuses on a region where South and Southeast Asia physically connect, characterized by its rich forests and natural beauty. The presence of hills, streams, and rivers adds to the scenic charm of the area. Moreover, the absence of harmful industries in this relatively untouched and pristine environment makes it highly attractive for tourism. The region holds enormous potential for tourism by leveraging its natural resources, such as forests, hills, and rivers, and promoting its untouched beauty to attract tourists from around the world. The lack of industrialization and its adverse effects on the environment further enhance the appeal of this area as a nature-friendly destination. It is also home to a multitude of ethnic groups and diverse cultures, with over a hundred tribes residing in the area, offering a unique opportunity for cultural exploration and immersion. The historical influence of colonialism and subsequent cross-migration add layers of historical and cultural significance to the region, making it an intriguing destination for tourists interested in heritage and diverse cultural experiences.

The study acknowledges a shift in tourist preferences towards nature-friendly environments and historic places. Increased awareness of the detrimental effects of global warming and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened people's understanding of the importance of sustainable tourism and their desire for destinations that provide a respite from urbanization. The regions of India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh have the potential to fulfil these preferences due to their natural beauty, environmental preservation, and historical significance. The pandemic has caused significant economic and social disruptions in the eco-tourism sectors of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Travel restrictions and lockdown measures have led to a decline in tourist arrivals, resulting in reduced revenue for eco-tourism operators and local communities. This has created financial hardships, job losses, and increased socio-economic inequalities (Gursoy et al., 2021). Eco-tourism plays a crucial role in promoting environmental conservation in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. However, the pandemic has disrupted conservation efforts due to limited resources and reduced tourist presence. Challenges include maintaining protected areas, wildlife monitoring, and ensuring sustainable practices in the face of restricted mobility (Smith & Newsome, 2021). The post-pandemic recovery offers an opportunity to rebuild the eco-tourism sectors of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar in a sustainable and resilient manner. Emphasizing sustainable practices, community engagement, and capacity building can contribute to the long-term viability of eco-tourism. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including governments, local communities, and tourism organizations, are vital for a sustainable recovery. Eco-tourism in these countries often showcases rich cultural heritage and promotes community empowerment. Engaging local communities in decision-making processes, encouraging cultural exchange, and promoting community-based enterprises can enhance the socio-cultural benefits of eco-tourism. Additionally, sustainable tourism practices can protect cultural assets and promote cultural preservation (UNWTO, 2020).

This study light on the transformative impact of crucial developmental projects that hold the potential to reshape the economic, social, and tourism landscape of the region. Among these projects, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport and Transit Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Cross Border Railway Connectivity stand out as pivotal initiatives aimed at fostering regional connectivity, economic growth, and sustainable development.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport and Transit Project is a testament to cross-border collaboration, connecting India's Mizoram state to Myanmar's Arakan state. This ambitious endeavor seeks to establish a network of inland waterways and

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highways linking Mizoram to the Bay of Bengal deep-sea port in Myanmar. While the initial completion date was set for 2014, challenges and delays have pushed the timeline to 2024. Nonetheless, this project holds immense potential to bring about substantial socio-economic benefits, including the creation of jobs, expansion of markets, and opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses. By enhancing connectivity, the project is poised to stimulate trade and economic growth, while strengthening diplomatic ties between the two countries.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is another transformative project aiming to boost connectivity and collaboration across the region. Conceived under the visionary leadership of former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihar Vajpayee, this trilateral road construction endeavor spans from Kolkata, India, to Bangkok, Thailand, covering a distance of approximately 2,800 kilometers. This highway is expected to bridge the gap between the nations and facilitate seamless movement of goods, people, and ideas. While the project faced delays in the past, a completion target of 2027 has been set. Its potential inclusion of Bangladesh further emphasizes its regional significance and potential to enhance cross-border cooperation.

The paper highlights the role of these projects in unlocking the region's tourism potential. Improved connectivity through the Kaladan Project and the Trilateral Highway not only boosts economic growth but also opens new avenues for eco-tourism. The projects allow for the preservation of natural resources and cultural heritage while offering economic opportunities to local communities. Moreover, the introduction of air connectivity, facilitated by the Airports Authority of India (AAI), contributes to increased accessibility and convenience for tourists from Southeast Asian countries. This advancement aligns with sustainable tourism practices and serves as a catalyst for regional tourism growth.

In the context of the post-COVID era, these developmental projects take on renewed significance as they contribute to the revival and resilience of the eco-tourism sector. Strategies aligning with sustainable development principles ensure that economic growth goes hand-in-hand with environmental conservation. By engaging local communities and empowering them to participate in the tourism industry, these projects lay the foundation for a holistic transformation that benefits all stakeholders. Through interconnected efforts, these initiatives demonstrate the potential for sustainable development, connectivity enhancement, and eco-tourism revitalization to work in harmony, ushering in a brighter future for South and Southeast Asia.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in this study is a comprehensive review analysis. The study is grounded in a thorough examination of existing literature related to eco-tourism, sustainable development, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry in the South and Southeast Asian region. This approach aims to synthesize and analyze insights from a wide range of sources to provide a holistic understanding of the subject matter.

The study primarily relies on secondary data from various reputable sources. These sources include academic journals, reports, and databases that cover the domains of eco-tourism, sustainable development, and the tourism industry. Notable sources of data include "India Tourism Statistics at a Glance-2022" and reputable online platforms such as Our World in Data (https://ourworldindata.org/tourism). These sources offer a wealth of information and statistical data relevant to the study's objectives.

The data collection process involves systematically collecting relevant information from the identified sources. The research team accessed academic databases, reports, and online sources to gather data on topics ranging from eco-tourism destinations and their characteristics to the principles of sustainable development and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of eco-tourism, sustainable development, and the impact of COVID-19 in the South and Southeast Asian region, various types of visual aids such as graphs, charts, and diagrams were utilized. These visual representations help illustrate trends, patterns, and key findings within the data. The graphical elements enhance the clarity and effectiveness of conveying complex information.

The study narrows its geographical scope to three countries in the South and Southeast Asian region: India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. These countries were chosen based on their significance in the context of eco-tourism, diverse cultural and ecological assets, and their respective responses to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.The research includes Table 1, which lists major eco-tourist spots in the specified countries. This table provides a snapshot of the unique attractions each country offers to eco-tourists, underlining the rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and natural beauty that characterize the region.

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Table 1. Major Eco-Tourist Spot in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh

Country	Region	Famous Tourist Spots
India	North East Region	Loktak Lake, Manipur
		KeibulLamjao National Park, Manipur
		KazirangaNational park, Assam
		Reiek Heritage Village, Mizoram
		Hsinbyume Pagoda
Myanmar	Sagging Region	Sagaing Hill
		LekyunSekkya Buddha
		Irrawaddy Dolphin
		Boga Lake
		Cox's bazaar Beach
Bangladesh	Chittagong Region	Chandranath Hill
		Chittagong Commonwealth War Cemetery

Source: Authors'

This study's methodology relies on a comprehensive review and analysis of existing literature and secondary data. By drawing from diverse sources and employing visual aids, the research aims to present a comprehensive understanding of eco-tourism, sustainable development, and the impact of COVID-19 within the context of the South and Southeast Asian region, with a specific focus on India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study focuses on three key regions in South and Southeast Asia: North East India (India), Sagaiang (Myanmar), and Chittagong (Bangladesh). These regions serve as the junction where South and Southeast Asia physically connect. The topography of these regions is characterized by abundant forests and natural scenic beauty, with hills and numerous streams and rivers flowing through the area. Importantly, the absence of harmful industries in this region ensures the preservation of the environment, making it highly attractive for tourism. This untapped potential presents an opportunity to attract tourists from various parts of the world. Moreover, the regions boast a rich cultural heritage and diverse ethnic groups. With over a hundred tribes residing in the area, there is a unique opportunity for tourists to explore and immerse themselves in different cultures and food habits. The historical influence of colonialism, where the British colonized the region from present-day Pakistan to Myanmar, further adds layers of historical and cultural significance.

The study also acknowledges the shifting preferences of tourists towards nature-friendly environments and historic places. The detrimental effects of global warming and the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened people's awareness of the adverse impacts of modernization and urbanization. As a result, there is a growing demand for destinations that offer a respite from urban areas and provide opportunities for sustainable and nature-friendly tourism experiences. The regions of India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, with their natural beauty, environmental preservation efforts, and historical significance, are well-positioned to fulfil these preferences and attract tourists seeking such experiences. This study highlights the significance of the South and Southeast Asian region, particularly the areas of North East India, Sagaiang in Myanmar, and Chittagong in Bangladesh, as potential hotspots for tourism. By capitalizing on their natural resources, cultural diversity, and historical context, these regions can attract tourists seeking nature-friendly and culturally immersive experiences while providing economic benefits for local communities.

5. RESULTS

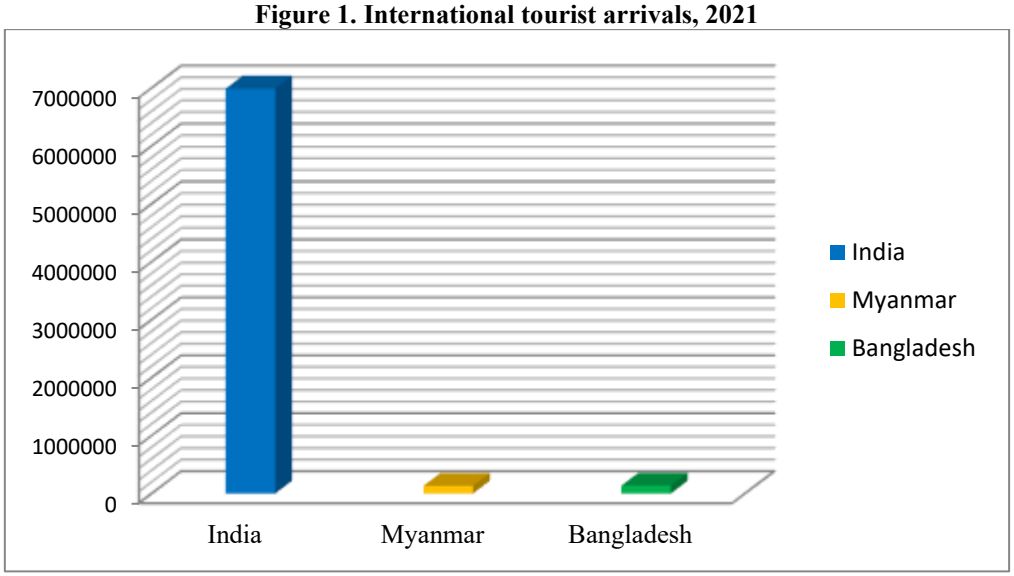
5.1 Tourism, Eco-tourism and Sustainable Development: An Overview

Connectivity is a critical factor in the development of any country, and tourism is no exception. Without good connectivity, it is difficult to attract tourists, and the tourism industry cannot reach its full potential. The three countries i.e. India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh are working together to improve connectivity in the region (Camilleri, 2018). They are focusing on all modes of transportation, including roads, air, rail, and water connectivity (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). This is a positive development, as improved connectivity will benefit the tourism industry in the region and boost economic growth (Blamey, 2001).

Tourism plays a significant role in India's economy and is experiencing rapid growth. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2021, tourism contributed ₹13.2 lakh crore (US$170 billion) or 5.8% of India's GDP and supported 32.1 million jobs. Although these figures were lower than pre-pandemic levels, the country's economy rebounded significantly in 2021 following the downturn in 2020. It is projected that the sector will continue to grow at an annual rate of 7.8%, reaching ₹33.8 lakh crore (US$420 billion) by 2031, accounting for 7.2% of GDP. In October 2015, India's medical tourism sector was estimated to be worth US$3 billion, with a projected growth to US$7-8 billion by 2020. In 2014, approximately 184,298 foreign patients travelled to India for medical treatment.

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Figure 1. International tourist arrivals, 2021



Source: Authors estimation based on https://ourworldindata.org/tourism

In 2019, approximately 323,000 tourists visited Bangladesh. This figure might be considered relatively low compared to the total population. As of 22 May 2019, the total population of Bangladesh was around 166,594,000 inhabitants. Consequently, this results in a ratio of approximately 1 tourist for every 515 local residents. In the 2010-2011 fiscal year, tourists accounted for 73.84% (313,127 arrivals) of overseas visitors to Myanmar. The primary mode of entry for these tourists was by air, representing 69.26% of arrivals. Land and sea arrivals accounted for 29.97% and 0.77% of the total, respectively. In addition, there were 110,914 visitors who arrived through other visa types, constituting an additional 26.16% of the total. Notably, tourism revenues in Myanmar experienced significant growth in 2012, reaching over $534 million, compared to $315 million in 2011. The figure 1 represents the international tourist arrivals in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh in 2021. It can be observed that India recorded the highest number of international tourist arrivals, followed by Bangladesh and Myanmar.

5.3 Impact of COVID-19 on tourism and eco-tourism development

The Union Tourism Ministry's report on tourism statistics in India for the year 2021 reveals some interesting trends and figures. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, there were notable developments in both domestic and international tourism.

Foreign tourist arrivals in India during 2021 stood at 1.52 million, reflecting a significant decline of 44.5 percent compared to the previous year's figure of 2.74 million. This decrease can be attributed to the impact of COVID-19 and the various travel restrictions imposed globally. Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu emerged as the top destinations for foreign tourists in 2021. While specific figures were not provided, the report indicates that these two states witnessed the highest number of visits by foreign tourists during the year.

Conversely, domestic tourism experienced a positive growth trend despite the challenging circumstances. The number of domestic tourist visits in India rose to 677.63 million, representing an 11.05 percent increase compared to the figures of 2020. This substantial growth demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of the domestic tourism sector. Regarding popular tourist sites, the Taj Mahal, Red Fort, and Qutub Minar emerged as the top three most visited sites in India during 2021-22. The Taj Mahal alone accounted for 3.29 million visits, making up 12.65 percent of the total footfall from domestic visitors.

Among centrally-protected monuments, the Group of Monuments at Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu stood out as the most visited site by foreign tourists in 2021-22. Unfortunately, specific visitor numbers were not provided for this monument. Analyzing year-on-year trends, domestic visitor numbers experienced an impressive 98 percent growth in 2021-22. In contrast, foreign visitor arrivals declined by 23.4 percent during the same period. These figures underscore the contrasting impacts of the pandemic on domestic and international tourism.

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Table 2. Top 10 Source Countries for Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India in 2021

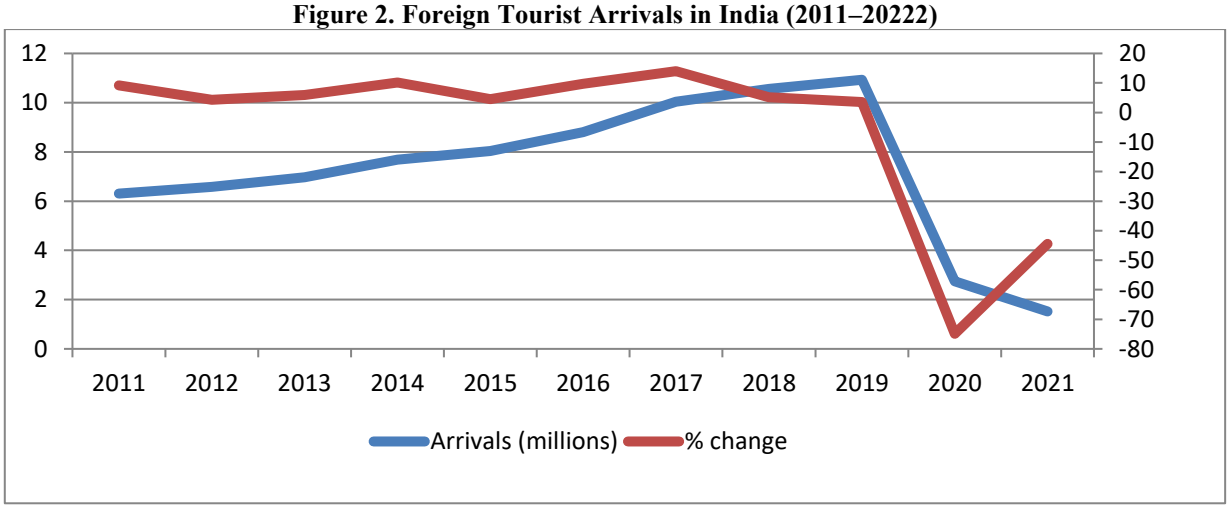
Rank	Source Country	Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs)	Percentage (%) Share
1	United States	429860	28.15
2	Bangladesh	240554	15.75
3	United Kingdom	164143	10.75
4	Canada	80437	5.27
5	Nepal	52544	3.44
6	Afghanistan	36451	2.39
7	Australia	33864	2.22
8	Germany	33772	2.21
9	Portugal	32064	2.1
10	France	30374	1.99

Source: India Tourism Statistics at a Glance- 2022

Interestingly, in 2021, while foreign tourist arrivals experienced negative growth, there was positive growth observed in the arrivals of non-resident Indians (NRIs) and international tourists. NRI arrivals increased by 52.6 percent compared to 2020, indicating a strong desire among NRIs to reconnect with their roots and explore India. Among the top 15 countries contributing to foreign tourist arrivals in India were the United States, Bangladesh, the United Kingdom, Canada, Nepal, Afghanistan, Australia, Germany, Portugal, France, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Russia, Iraq, and the Netherlands. Collectively, these countries accounted for approximately 80.9 percent of the total foreign tourist arrivals, underscoring their significance in India's tourism landscape.

Lastly, the tourism sector's foreign exchange earnings in India for 2021 amounted to USD 8.797 billion, representing a notable increase of 26.4 percent compared to the previous year. This growth in foreign exchange earnings highlights the sector's resilience and the gradual recovery of international tourism. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the tourism sector in India has demonstrated resilience and adaptability. The growth in domestic tourism, positive trends in NRI and international tourist arrivals, and increased foreign exchange earnings signify promising signs of recovery for the industry. However, continued efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of tourists and industry stakeholders remain crucial in sustaining this recovery and fostering future growth.

Figure 2. Foreign Tourist Arrivals in India (2011–20222)



Source: Authors Estimation

The figure 2 present's foreign tourist arrival data for India from 2011 to 2022, showcasing the number of arrivals in millions and the corresponding percentage change. Analyzing the table, we can observe the following trends: From 2011 to 2019, India experienced consistent growth in foreign tourist arrivals. The numbers steadily increased each year, with varying growth rates ranging from 3.5 percent to 14 percent. This positive trend reflected the growing popularity of India as a tourist destination, attracting visitors from around the world.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on foreign tourist arrivals in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, the number of arrivals plummeted by a significant 74.9 percent, as travel restrictions and lockdown measures were implemented globally. This decline in arrivals was the most significant decrease observed in recent years, highlighting the immense disruptions caused by the pandemic. The adverse effects of the pandemic continued in 2021, with foreign tourist arrivals further declining by 55.4 percent compared to the previous year. This decline can be attributed to ongoing travel restrictions, health concerns, and uncertainties surrounding international travel during the pandemic.

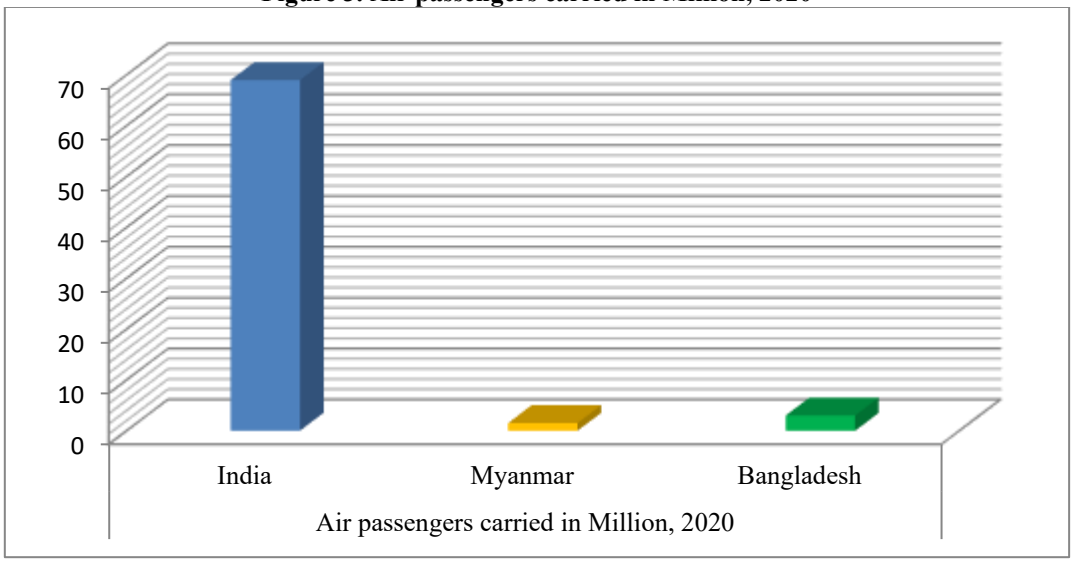
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on international tourism, disrupting travel patterns and significantly reducing foreign tourist arrivals in India. The sharp decline in arrivals during 2020 and 2021 indicates the

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challenges faced by the tourism industry due to the pandemic-induced restrictions and the prioritization of public health and safety. As the world navigates the post-pandemic recovery phase, it will be crucial for the tourism sector to adapt and implement measures to ensure the safety of travellers. Rebuilding traveller confidence and promoting India as a safe and appealing destination will be essential for reviving foreign tourist arrivals and stimulating the recovery of the tourism industry.

In 2020, the number of air passengers carried in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh showcased distinct levels of air travel activity. India, as a populous country and a major player in the aviation sector, recorded the highest number of air passengers carried at 68.96 million. This significant figure underlines India's robust domestic and international air travel connections. Myanmar, with a smaller population, reported 1.51 million air passengers carried in 2020 (see the figure 3). While comparatively lower than India, this number still reflects a notable amount of air travel within the country. As Myanmar's tourism industry continues to develop, air transportation plays a vital role in facilitating both domestic and international travel.

Figure 3. Air passengers carried in Million, 2020



Source: Authors estimation based on https://ourworldindata.org/tourism

Similarly, Bangladesh recorded 2.98 million air passengers carried in 2020, indicating a substantial volume of air travel within the country. As a growing economy and a hub for trade and commerce, Bangladesh's aviation sector has witnessed positive growth, contributing to the increasing number of air passengers. It's important to consider that these figures are specific to the year 2020 and may have been significantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The global travel restrictions and reduced passenger demand during the pandemic undoubtedly impacted air travel in all three countries. However, these numbers provide a snapshot of the air passenger activity in 2020, showcasing the varying levels of air travel within India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh during that period.

6. DISCUSSION

In the context of eco-tourism, sustainable development, and COVID-19 in the South and Southeast Asian region, it is crucial to address the lack of clear-cut distinction between eco-tourism and other forms of tourism in India. This ambiguity leads to a vague approach when evaluating the contribution of eco-tourism to conservation and development. To qualify as eco-tourism, a touristic activity must demonstrate environmental sustainability, ensure local development, and promote conservation (Pujar & Mishra, 2021).

Considering the current state of the tourism industry in the region, which is still in "recovery mode" due to the severity of the pandemic and other geopolitical factors, building resilience in eco-tourism destinations, becomes paramount. Governments and businesses must anticipate and plan for potential shocks to minimize or prevent negative effects on the industry. This includes exploring successful tactics for reviving tourism, fostering environmental awareness, and providing direct financial benefits for conservation while respecting local culture and supporting human rights and democratic movements (OECD, 2022; Honey, 1999).

Community participation plays a crucial role in the growth of eco-tourism. Collaborative efforts involving residents, businesses, and agencies allow for diverse perspectives and the identification of unique attractions that align with tourists' interests while safeguarding natural resources. Inclusive decision-making processes enhance sustainable tourism and respect for stakeholders. Examples like the Eco-development project in the Periyar Tiger Reserve showcase the importance of including locals in the process, reducing reliance on forest resources, and creating new economic opportunities outside of protected areas. Conversely, the lack of community trust in the ecotourism operation in Dandeli resulted in limited benefits for the local population and hindered the development of the

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wildlife sanctuary (Lim & Tan, 2020; Thampi, 2005; Rao & Pawar, 2013).

Sustainable development is a core objective of eco-tourism, and it can contribute to achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting responsible tourism activities that balance social, economic, and environmental sustainability. By valuing nature and local traditions, eco-tourism incentivizes less extractive use of natural resources and relies on the generosity of visitors to ensure ecological sustainability and economic progress. Moreover, when tourism practices are based on local or indigenous culture and tradition, cultural sustainability becomes a vital component alongside environmental, economic, and social aspects. Successful examples like Kakum National Park demonstrate how tourism can stimulate local economies and diversify previously farming-dependent communities (Pujar & Mishra, 2021; Das, 2011; Singh, 2016; Mensah, 2017; Kala, 2013).

By incorporating these considerations into the research study focusing on India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and pathways towards resilient and responsible eco-tourism in the South and Southeast Asian region can be attained.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development of connectivity infrastructure among India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh is a positive step towards promoting tourism, economic growth, and regional integration. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport and Transit Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and cross-border railway connectivity initiatives are expanding transportation options and accessibility in the region. These projects have the potential to create new opportunities for tourism, generate employment, and facilitate the growth of small and medium-sized businesses.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the tourism industry, leading to a sharp decline in foreign tourist arrivals in India. However, domestic tourism showcased resilience and experienced positive growth, indicating the adaptability of the sector. The recovery of international tourism will depend on how measures taken to ensure traveller safety and regain confidence in travel.

It has observed that most of international tourist arrivals are in India, followed by Bangladesh and Myanmar in 2021. The number of air passengers carried in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh in 2020 reflected varying levels of air travel activity, with India recording the highest number of passengers. The aviation sectors of Myanmar and Bangladesh have also shown positive growth, contributing to increased air travel within their respective countries.

In the context of eco-tourism and sustainable development, it is important to distinguish and promote environmentally sustainable practices in tourism. Community participation, inclusive decision-making, and the consideration of local culture and traditions are vital for the success of eco-tourism initiatives. By valuing nature, promoting responsible tourism, and incorporating cultural sustainability, eco-tourism can contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals while ensuring the conservation of natural resources and supporting local economies.

As the South and Southeast Asian region recovers from the impacts of COVID-19, it is crucial to focus on building resilience and fostering responsible tourism practices. By addressing challenges, embracing opportunities, and incorporating sustainability principles, the region can work towards a resilient and responsible tourism industry that benefits both the environment and local communities.

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