



ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL IN THE DARJEELING HILLS: PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Global realization of damage done to the environment by traditional mass tourism has led to the emergence of an innovative tourism product like ecotourism that not only serves the tourists but also protects and enhances the fragile environment. Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment. Interestingly, it also provides alternative livelihood opportunities for the locals and thus, incentivizes them to protect the local environment.

In the Himalayan region, ecotourism has the rich potential to flourish and improve the socio-economic condition of the local population. The fragile environment of these hilly regions can be protected only with the support of the local communities. The Darjeeling hills once termed as the "Queen of Hills" and also a favorite hill-station of the Britishers, continue to attract tourists from around the world. However, in recent times, tourism in this region seems to be saturated and has created excessive pressure on the local resources. To dissipate this unhealthy pressure, tourists have to be channelized away from the saturated urban Darjeeling to its rural areas. Fortunately, in recent times, even tourists have started exploring rural areas. This has encouraged the growth of ecotourism and home-stay tourism in the Darjeeling Hills. Keeping this new and environment-friendly trend in mind, stakeholders are required to study and understand how ecotourism can be established as a sustainable form of tourism in the region. In that direction, our study tries to examine the current status of tourism in the Darjeeling hills, identify the prospects of ecotourism, pinpoint the constraints, and finally suggest solutions for the development of ecotourism in the Darjeeling hills.

KEYWORDS: *Ecotourism, Darjeeling Hills, environment, hill station, homestays*

I. INTRODUCTION

Darjeeling in the northern part of West Bengal is considered as one of the most magnificent hill resorts in the world offering natural beauty in the form of serene snow peaks, splendid green and steep hills crisscrossed by lush-green tea-gardens, dense forests rich in rare species of flora and fauna, crowned by the majestic Himalayas and thus attracts nature lovers from all walks of life. It is known located at the base of mighty Kanchenjunga and is also known as the Queen of the Hills. This small biodiversity hotspot is also home to rich and diverse cultural amalgamations. Also, its historical importance lies in the fact that it was the former summer capital of East India Company and therefore major buildings around the town still exhibit the influence of British architecture further enhancing the outlook of this hill station. The natural beauty and serene atmosphere of this region continue to mesmerize and attract tourists for adventure, leisure, and special interest tourism. The major tourism products of Darjeeling and adjoining areas are Tea Tourism, Bird-watching, Toy Train-a World Heritage product, trekking, water Rafting, Butterflies Tours,

Forest Safaris, and Wellness Tourism. Darjeeling district has been identified as "the most highly frequented tourist destination in all of West Bengal", with over 5,00,000 domestic and 50,000 foreign visitors annually in 2012 by the West Bengal Interim Report (Kannegieser, 2015). Moreover, in recent years, tourist arrival in the area has increased to about 4.5 lakh tourists every year (Das & Roy, 2016), and thus accommodating these inflows have been a serious issue lately.

Although the tourism industry is the major source of livelihood for the local population, the rapid growth of the tourism industry has been putting continuous and tremendous pressure on the resources of this fragile hill station. This unsustainable pressure has started to degrade the resources of the tourism industry in Darjeeling. This calls for the promotion of an alternate form of tourism that generates livelihood opportunities for the local populace but without further degrading the environment. Under such circumstances, the promotion of Eco-tourism in Darjeeling Hills becomes the need of the hour. It incentivizes local communities for both serving the tourists and



conserving the local environment.

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II. TOURISM STATUS IN THE DARJEELING HILLS

Globally, tourism has become one of the world's largest industries and also a very fast-growing sector of the world economy. Darjeeling district has become increasingly reliant on tourism for employment and contributor to local, national, and regional economies which highlights the need for special attention to the relationship between environmental conservation and protection and sustainable tourism development.

In Darjeeling, tourism is one of the largest net earners of foreign exchange after the tea industry. The tourism activities usually take place between March and December. The first season is from April to June and is important for the local economy as most of the foreign tourists visit Darjeeling during this season. The second season starts in October and continues till November when tourists mostly from other parts of West Bengal visit the area.

During 2008-09, the area saw an influx of around 4.5 lakh tourists. However, this figure saw a sharp fall owing to the political movement in 2009-10. During 2010-11, the tourism industry picked up again and tourists started visiting the region again. According to a report from the Tourism Department, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, Darjeeling, around 4.7 lakh tourists had visited in the year 2012-13 while in 2013-14 the figure was just 3.9 lakhs including both foreign and domestic tourist. The Foreign Tourist Arrival has slightly increased from 16.1 thousand in 2012-13 to 16.4 thousand in 2013-14 at a compounded annual growth rate of 2.34%. It can be observed that the development of the tourism sector which sustains around 80 percent of the local population is very much dependent on the uncertainties in the area.

Various developmental schemes undertaken under the Hill Development Programme can be considered as an important contributor for increased tourist arrival in Darjeeling in the recent years. Every year Darjeeling receives a huge influx of both foreign tourists and domestic tourists. The majority of foreign tourists come from developed countries like Germany, Canada, U.K., U.S.A., Japan, and Australia while a large number of domestic tourists from all over the country visit Darjeeling every year. Most of the tourists i.e. around 60-70 percent tourists flock to Darjeeling during April, May, June, and October. During these periods of good business, Darjeeling has to bear enormous pressure of tourists and has to face several problems like shortage of drinking water, sanitation problems, an increase in transportation cost, an increase in hotel tariffs, etc.

During the summer months, tourists visit local hill-stations like Kalimpong, Sandakphu, Lava-Lolaygaon, and Kurseong to beat the heat of the plains. Domestic and foreign tourists visit other tourist spots in the Darjeeling hills like Mirik lake resort, Botanical Garden, Nightingale Park, Senchal Lake, Dhirdham Temple, Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Center, Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary, Ghoom Monastery, Tea Gardens, etc. Besides, pilgrimage tours in the Darjeeling district occupy a special place in tourism. The Japanese Peace Pagoda, Dhirdham temple, Dali Monastery, Ghoom Monastery, The Zong Dog Palri Fo-Brang Gompa.

The tourism sector in Darjeeling District still shows great potential for development. According to the Tourist Bureau of Darjeeling, more than 4,00,000 visit the place from different parts of the world as well as the country. Despite so many adverse effects of tourism in this tiny hill area, the economy continues to derive livelihoods majorly from the tourism sector. Thus with proper planning and management, the tourism potential of the area can be tapped for further income generation and regional development. Also, for a long-term development objective, proper planning and growth of the sector are necessary. Despite regional disturbances, the tourism sector in Darjeeling Hills has not experienced an overall setback even in the previous decades. Rather, the tourism industry here has expanded largely due to the emergence of many more tourist zones, resorts, and adventure sports. Thus, tourism in the area has to be developed further but in a sustainable way that does not degrade the natural resources, uplifts the local community and at the same time also brings about regional development. For this, the eco-tourism potential of the region has to be explored to channelize tourists away to newer natural areas. The next section deliberates upon some potential areas for ecotourism in the Darjeeling Hills.



III. ECOTOURISM CONCEPT

Generally, ecotourism refers to the travel destination where the natural beauty is the main area of attraction. It means nature-based tourism. It is completely a new and alternative approach to tourism and mainly depends on the idea of sustainability. Many definitions of ecotourism have evolved so far. The term "ecotourism" was coined by Hector Ceballos Lascurian in 1983 to describe nature-based travel.

The term "Eco-Tourism" was first coined by Hector Ceballos in 1983 to describe the idea of nature-based travel. As per Ceballos Lascurian (1987), ecotourism means visiting a comparatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural area mainly to study, admire, enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as existing cultural heritages (both past and present) found in these areas. The Ecotourism Society has defined ecotourism as "purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment. At the same time care should be taken that the integrity of the ecosystem is not altered. while making natural resource conservation economically beneficial for the local community.

In 1992, Elizabeth Boo (1992) lately defined ecotourism as that part of the tourism sector which considers tourism along with sustainable development. Valentine (1993) described ecotourism as that kind of tourism which is based on undisturbed natural areas, is ecologically sustainable, and contribute to the conservation of these natural areas. International Ecotourism Society describes ecotourism as a responsible journey to natural areas that conserves the environment and at the same time improves the well-being of the local people also. Furthermore, ecotourism has gained greater significance since the „Berlin Declaration of Biological Diversity“ in 1997.

IV. UNSUSTAINABLE MASS TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM

Mass tourism has led to increased pressure on tourism resources and thus has become a very serious problem for the tourism industry. It has led to overcrowding of the tourism sites and has negatively affected both the local population and nature through overuse or destruction of local natural resources. It has been expanding unsustainably. Lack of concern for the welfare of the local community and natural environment and resources of the local area has led to an unsustainable expansion of mass tourism. Most of the policies formulated for it are improper or ineffective. For example, overemphasis is laid on the convenience and benefit of the tourists only with little or no concern for the welfare of the local community. However, it has to be understood that the local community, local environment, and its natural resources are all an integral part of the tourism. Negligence of this fact and overcrowding of tourists in popular tourist destinations sometimes lead to more environmental degradation of the environment as compared to revenue earned from tourism at that spot.

In some cases, even biologically-rich areas face irreparable environmental degradation due to such unplanned and indiscriminate tourism approaches. As a result, tourists, local people, and nature have been negatively affected. In developing countries, tourism leads to social, economic, and environmental effects also. A large influx of tourists creates unsustainable pressure on the limited resources of these places. Local environments are damaged for construction activities

The principles of Ecotourism are exactly the opposite of this trend of conventional tourism. It aims to confer social, economic, and environmental benefits which are the three pillars of sustainable development. Ecotourism has gained increased importance since the „Berlin declaration of Biological Diversity“ in 1997 where certain codes of ethics of ecotourism were developed. Sustainable ecotourism includes these internationally accepted codes of ethics of ecotourism. Ecotourism became prominent and has been occupying a significant place globally after the year 2002 was declared as the International Year of ecotourism. It has the potential to create jobs for the local population. Ecotourism opportunities not only help them generate income but also provide training skills to them with which they can move to other areas also. Ecotourism is aimed at minimizing any kind of negative impact on the environment. It also attempts to incentivize conservation by providing financial benefits to the local population. Also, ecotourism provides people with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the experience of nature in an enjoyable way and also educates us about nature making us more compassionate and responsible towards nature.

If implemented correctly, ecotourism becomes a low-cost and positive alternative to unsustainable mass tourism. It also allows for employment creation and income distribution in otherwise neglected communities and areas. Ecotourism reduces the adverse effect of tourism on nature and the environment (Singh & Narban, 2015). With its scenic natural beauty and favorable climatic condition, Darjeeling Hills possesses tremendous potential for the growth and development of eco-tourism.

V. POTENTIAL OF ECOTOURISM IN DARJEELING HILLS

The two main forms of alternative tourism have gained popularity in Darjeeling viz. Rural and Tea tourism (Das & Roy, 2016). Rural Tourism of Darjeeling Hills is a unique experience with so much nature, so the origins of various ethnic tribes and clans find their roots in nature. Even ethnic cottages and Homestays are becoming popular in rural areas. Ecotourism can be successfully promoted in Darjeeling Hills owing to its location, climate, and accessibility. The diverse landscape, favorable climate, and the slopes with tea plantations make up most of the rural tourism in Darjeeling hills (Bhutia, 2016).

1. **Lamahatta** is a small beautiful village situated just 23 km away from Darjeeling



town and rich in different traditions and cultures. From here one can enjoy a beautiful view of mighty Kanchenjunga. It has some natural trails and a beautiful eco-park. There are many homestays in Lamahatta where one can stay and enjoy the beauty of nature, local food, traditions, and cultures.

2. **Chatakpur** is a small forest village located at an altitude of 7,887 feet within the Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary in Darjeeling District and is bounded by the Kanchenjunga Mountain Range in the North and the river Rely Khola in the south. The geographical location of this village makes it a paradise for nature lovers. Also, the village has several forest trails that are ideal for light treks and birdwatching.
3. **Gorkhey**: is another small beautiful valley village that lies at the edge of Singalila National Park and is surrounded by thick pine forest. Phalut and Sandakphu are two popular summits on the Singalila ridge. The tourists can avail of the services of organized treks to the ridge.
4. **Latpanchar**: Located in the Mahanadi Wildlife sanctuary and having birdwatching potential, Latpanchar is famous for The Rufous-necked hornbill bird which is today found only in few parts of Asia.
5. **Mineral Spring**: This place is for those who want to experience the rural life of mountain people. It is a small rural village, 16 Km away from Darjeeling town. The majority of the local people are farmers and are engaged in farming crops and vegetables. They sell their produce in the nearby market. Besides farming, animal rearing is the other option for making their daily living. The total households of Mineral Spring are 40 as per the 2011 census. Around 30% of people are engaged in rural tourism. Some have set up homestays, some are engaged as skilled workers, and some provide necessary ingredients in running the homestays while some have opted to operate taxi services.
6. **Takdah**: It is a cantonment area located under the Rangli-Rangliot block of Kurseong subdivision at an altitude of 1400 feet. There are many tourist destinations scattered in and around Takdah. Endowed with a hanging bridge, orange garden, Teesta River, Rungli tea garden, rock climbing, and many viewpoints it has become a famous rural tourism destination. businesses and are making their livelihood from it. There are about 56 homestays. Besides homestays, floriculture, forest parks have contributed towards the development of rural tourism at Takdah. Orchids from this region are sold all over the country as well as in the global market.
7. **Neora Valley National Park** stretches in the north up to an altitude of 3,200m. Rachel Pass is the highest point in this park where it forms a boundary with Sikkim in the North and Bhutan in the North East. The entire forest is crisscrossed by mountain streams. This forested land on hilly terrain was earmarked as a National Park in 1986. During spring and summer, varieties of colorful Rhododendrons bloom in full. There are some 10 different species of rhododendrons found here and some are about 300years old and its varieties bloom. It is also inhabited by the endangered species like Red Panda and the Black Asiatic Bear which The Barking Deer, Goral Deer the Leopards, Leopard Cat, Himalayan Thar, Flying Squirrel, wild cats which can be seen during treks along the forest trail. Around 265 species of birds along with rare species like Rusty Bellied Shortwing, Mynahs, Swallows, Flycatchers, and Parakeets can be found here.
8. **Happy Valley Tea Estate** is established in 1854 and is the second oldest tea estate of Darjeeling. It is situated at an altitude of about 6400 ft and only 3 km away from Darjeeling town. It is also one of the highest tea factories in the world. The months of March to May are the busiest time here when plucking and processing are in progress. Tourists can have a beautiful glimpse into the tea manufacturing process in this tea estate.
9. **Singalila National Park**: It is a national park located on the Singalila Ridge at an altitude of more than 7000 feet above sea level, in the Hills. It is also famous for the trekking route to Sandakphu that passes through it. This national park also has town highest peaks of West Bengal, Sandakphu (3630 m), and Phalut (3600 m). Two important rivers, Rammam and Sirikhola also pass through this park. It is also an important spot for bird watching in the Eastern Himalaya.
10. **Makaibari Tea Estate**: It is a family-owned tea estate situated in the beautiful Kurseong valley of Darjeeling. It is one of the oldest and the very first to establish a factory in the region. Tourists can enjoy a nature walk through mountain and valley areas, walk through mountain villages, bird



watching. Farming and processing of tea in organic can be seen here.

11. **Sandakphu-** It is the highest peak in the state of West Bengal, India. It is located in the Singalila National Park. There is a small village on the summit with a few hotels. From its summit, visitors can see the four highest peaks in the world, Everest, Kangchenjunga, Lhotse, and Makalu. Tourists can have a beautiful view of Kanchenjunga, also known as the Sleeping Buddha or the Sleeping Shiva. Only in Sandakphu can we find a rhododendron and silver fir forests.

deer, porcupines, civets, monitor lizards, and snakes.

12. **Tinchuley:** located at a height of around 5800 ft, Tinchuley is a tiny mountainous village in the Darjeeling Hills. The word Tinchuley means Three Ovens and the place is named so owing to three prominent hilltops surrounding the place looking like an oven. Tinchuley faces the Kalimpong hills. It's a developing tourism place. In Tinchuley, World Wide Federation (WWF) has supported around 17 households in developing a model organic village and promoting village tourism.

VI. CHALLENGES

Darjeeling being one of the oldest tourist spots in the country has been under tremendous set back due to manifold reasons. Tourism activities are still in its conventional state and have not been updated with the modern concepts of tourism. Despite efforts to promote tourism, much success has not been realized due to existing structural challenges. Ecotourism is not an independent sector. For it to grow, rural development should take place in terms of better facilities and accessibility. The development of the sustainable tourism industry in Darjeeling Hills faces another challenge in the form of a lack of coordination between government agencies. Besides, for ecotourism to flourish in the Darjeeling Hills, the following major challenges have to be addressed.

1. **Unplanned infrastructure:** Continuous and indiscriminate construction of multi-storeyed hotels, roads, etc on the fragile hills have already degraded the area and continues to do so with the rise of urbanization. Numerous commercial activities along new tourist routes are sprouting and the flow of garbage into the old sewage system is ever increasing.
2. **Short tourist season in the Hills:** The Darjeeling hills have a short tourist season which is a challenge for the regional

tourism industry. The tourist season occurs only for four to five months. The rest of the months either remains cold or receive heavy rainfall which restricts tourist arrival. During these hard times, ecotourism destinations remain closed negatively affecting the income and employment of the local community.

3. **Low advertisement:** Even if Darjeeling is famous worldwide and tourists flock from all over the world to the town, ecotourism destinations of the Darjeeling Hills are least advertised and remain rarely visited.
4. **The poor road network in the rural areas:** Rural areas in the Darjeeling Hills lack proper road networks acting as major barriers for the growth of ecotourism in the region.
5. **Political unrest:** Darjeeling hills have been seeing many political disturbances in recent years owing to demand separate statehood. Such disturbances in the area have ruined tourist seasons and discouraged tourists from visiting this area.
6. **Insufficient existing facilities:** The trekking route to Sandakphu and Phalut is the major attraction of Darjeeling for foreign tourists. Very limited existing facilities at major trekking trails for the tourists.

VII. POSSIBILITIES

Despite numerous challenges, ecotourism has the potential to flourish in the Darjeeling Hills. Some of the possible solutions are listed below.

1. Tourism should be planned and managed within environmental limits and with due regard for the long term appropriate use of natural and human resources.
2. Formation of associations or collectives of the hosts to create an organizational structure and strengthen their position when coordinating with the government bodies.
3. Local communities should be encouraged to participate in the planning, development, and control of tourism with the support of the government and the industry. Especially, indigenous people, women, and minority groups should be encouraged to participate to ensure equitable growth.
4. All stakeholders in tourism should be educated about the need to develop more sustainable forms of tourism. This includes staff training and raising awareness, through education and marketing tourism responsibly, of sustainability issues amongst host communities and tourists themselves.
5. Research should be encouraged to assess the impact of tourism projects, find solutions to the problems faced, and also explore newer markets



and innovations.

6. Ecotourism and homestay business are labor-intensive activities. Thus, government and private institutions should create human resources for absorption into this industry.
7. Forest cover has to be improved as per the National Forest Policy direction that hill stations like Darjeeling should have 60% forest covers of its total geographic areas. Wildlife depletion has to be checked and to be increased in its number by appropriate conservation programmers and improvement of other infrastructures as stated above at the earliest.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Darjeeling Hills which is already under population pressure and urbanization have further been suffering under over-tourism. Tourism is the major source of livelihood cannot be sacrificed. Rather, the tourists can be diverted towards rural areas and potential spots of ecotourism in a much-planned way. As such, unhealthy pressure will be relaxed on local resources. Thus, exploring new natural ecotourism destinations is necessary for flourishing tourism to generate livelihoods while conserving nature. However, the development of such an alternative form of tourism requires overcoming various challenges inherent to the region.

Evidently, with the recent introduction of sustainable rural tourism in some areas, the local areas have observed improved infrastructure and livelihood opportunities. Ecotourism activities have provided an opportunity for both local people and tourists to learn about the positive and negative impacts of tourism. All the stakeholders and local people should be imparted more knowledge regarding the environmental and social consequences of eco-tourism. Finally, the region requires a concentrated and collective effort of all stakeholders to make eco-tourism economically viable, socially equitable, and environmentally responsible.

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