



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

Runa Rai

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Economics,
Sikkim University,
Sikkim

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.

