

EXAMINING THE PROSPECT OF SUSTAINABLE ECO AND RURAL TOURISM IN PURULIA DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

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Article Ref. No.:

18102501N1ELMA

Article History:

Submitted on 25 Oct 2018

Accepted on 20 Feb 2019

Published online on 26 Feb 2019

Keywords:

Eco Tourism, Rural Tourism,
Community Empowerment, Rural
Development, Livelihood, Public
Participation

Abstract:

The effort of community empowerment is treated as an effective tool for backward area development schemes leading to restraining the magnitude of disparity. The present essay discusses the importance and potentiality of introducing eco and rural tourism towards attaining greater community empowerment in the context of retrospective observations on the process of transformation of rural livelihood in the 'Jangal Mahal' (i.e. the forestland) of the western part of West Bengal - particularly the district of Purulia, the core of present decentralized schemes and the exclusion of the local communities in decision making processes.

I

Introduction

The western part of the state of West Bengal is the vast lateritic tracts covered by the patches of dense deciduous forest (part of so called '*Jangal Mahal*') and the abode of '*Mahato*' community along with different tribal groups like *Lodha-Sabar*, *Birhore*, *Bhumiz*, *Tota*, *Kheddia* and mainly *Santal*. A large section of the population is disadvantaged by limited job opportunities, very low per-capita income, low level of GDP, low rate of literacy, especially female literacy, fragile condition of public health and above all the present political crisis leading to least social security and vanished stability. The natural hindrance of poor resource base, obviously, has posed a challenge against the process of development but this is not the only cause of present socio-economic backwardness in this region. The development programmes undertaken so far, targeting employment

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generation, income enhancement, augmentation of physical quality of life, betterment of public health etc, with the financial sponsorship of both State and Central Government, have succeeded up to partial fulfilment of the target. In most of the cases the lack of satisfactory magnitude of public participation in the planning has been exposed as the toughest challenge in gaining holistic success and failure of a plan would have every possibility to carry the benefits to a narrow part of population by depriving the rest and the inequality tends to increase away. Unchecked and uncontrolled process of growth leads to these regional disparities (Rao, 1984).

The process of rural development has long been equated with the agricultural growth (Maheswari, 1985); and the generalization of this idea may have misled the planning procedure of rural areas where agriculture has a degree of environmental and functional limitations. Now, rural development is conceptualized as a strategy designed to improve economic and social life of a specific group of people – the rural poor (World Bank, 1975). Hence, the essence of rural development lies in spontaneous people's participation in the development process and creating the capacity of the people through the empowerment of the community for sustained self-development with the rational utilization of ambient natural and social resources. Emphasis on the ecotourism and rural tourism may add a new dimension to the development process of the '*Jangal Mahal*', not only being the prospective and alternative source of employment and income generation but it can also play a vital role in the environment management and community empowerment of this economically backward area.

II

Conceptualizing eco and rural tourism

Community based eco and rural tourism has exhibited itself as a growing phenomenon in the developing areas. The essence of community based approach implies that the community should retain substantial control and involvement in the project and majority of the benefits be equally distributed within the community (Epler, 2002). IUCN (now called the World Conservation Union) has defined ecotourism as an environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature, (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) promoting conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations. Whereas, the attractiveness of rural areas for tourism and recreation can first be associated with the image of rurality. Here rurality is closely related to the traditional and romantic idea of the "good old days" of pure and simple lifestyle, intact nature and perfect integration of man with natural environment. Thus nostalgia of the origins, the need for recuperation of the lost link with nature and the basics of life in an increasingly complex, highly organized, anonymous, congested, stressful urban and inhumane surroundings, constitutes the principal attraction of rural area (Butler, 1998). However, both ecotourism and rural tourism rely on two common objectives – environmental sustainability and community participation. Ecotourism is also viewed as that part of rural tourism by some experts where it is envisaged as nothing but the nature based rural tourism. Present study is not concerned with the justification of definitional and functional complexities of eco or rural tourism; rather it emphasises mostly on those common objectives. There is hardly any debate regarding the inevitability of the environmental sustainability as an essential parameter of eco and rural tourism but, still there is no firm consensus regarding the range of magnitude of impact on environment and social system to be considered permissible in case of such tourism options. Having no impact is almost impossible. From nature's point of view, no tourism is probably the ideal tourism option. Low environmental impact or environmental sustainability, therefore, must be the part of the equation to judge whether

a particular tourism product can be called ecotourism (Huub& Valley, 1996). Secondly, the aspect of community participation; which has made the discussion of eco and rural tourism so relevant for the development of backward areas or rural development initiatives, more specifically for the developing nations.

In India, tourism provides direct employment to 9 million people and indirect employment to another 13 million, thus providing a livelihood for 22 millions. It contributes an estimated 2.4% of the gross national product (Khanna, 2010). With an amazing geographical diversity, a large area under mangroves, coral-reefs and deserts, astonishing beauties of mountains, forests, gulfs and beaches and above all about 45,000 species of plants, 1228 species of birds, 428 species of reptiles, 372 species of mammals, 204 species of amphibians and 2546 species of fishes, India possesses splendid resources to develop ecotourism. Presently there are 75 national parks and 421 wildlife sanctuaries throughout the country; out of which some have already become very popular with tourists (Raveendran, 2012). Again, the country accommodates around 833 millions of rural population in more than six lakh forty thousand villages (Census of India, 2011). Indian villages are characterized by diversified culture, traditions, customs, festivals, lifeways, heritage, handicrafts and also have the good reputation of providing earnest hospitality to the guests. Rural tourism is a rapidly growing industry in India. The Final Report of 'Evaluation cum Impact Study of Rural Tourism Projects' prepared by A C Nielson ORG-MARG Pvt. Ltd for Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India in 2012 exhibits that about 31% of the rural tourism projects sanctioned by the Department have failed to attain the objectives; other 31% of such projects have been labelled as "average projects"; and 37% projects are declared "successful" (Govt. of India, 2012). All the above information reflects an optimistic future for a successful dynamism of eco and rural tourism in the country for the coming decades.

III

A brief introduction to the study area

The district of Purulia (Figure 1) extends between 22°43' N – 23°42' N latitude and 85°49' E – 86°54' E longitude, covering a total area of 6259 sq. Km and accommodates 2930115 population with an average population density of 470 persons per sq. Km. (Census of India, 2011). This is a land of infertile lateritic tracts. The undulated landscape is characterized by the presence of a number of residual hills and hillocks, narrow river channels with the bank margins dominated by gully erosion, isolated forest patch consisting mainly of Sal and Mahua. The climate is very rough; both the summer and winter are experienced in severe form in this district (maximum temp. is 45° C in June and minimum temp. is 9° C in January on average). The soil is hardly supportive for agricultural activities; the rain fed cultivation is confined only to one cropping session (basically July to October) in a year. Only 339140 hectare land is considered as cultivable land and only 19.43% of cultivated area enjoys the opportunity of irrigation facility. But this agricultural activity is limited only to the river banks and low land areas. The district receives the lowest rainfall (1150 mm on an average) in the state whereas the shortage of rainfall from the normal often creates the drought situation in the district (District Census Handbook, 2008). Except a few urban centres like Purulia Town, Adra, Asansol etc. the rest of the district is economically backward where the hunger and starvation is not a very rare incidence and poverty prevails in its extreme form for most of the distant 'hamlets'.

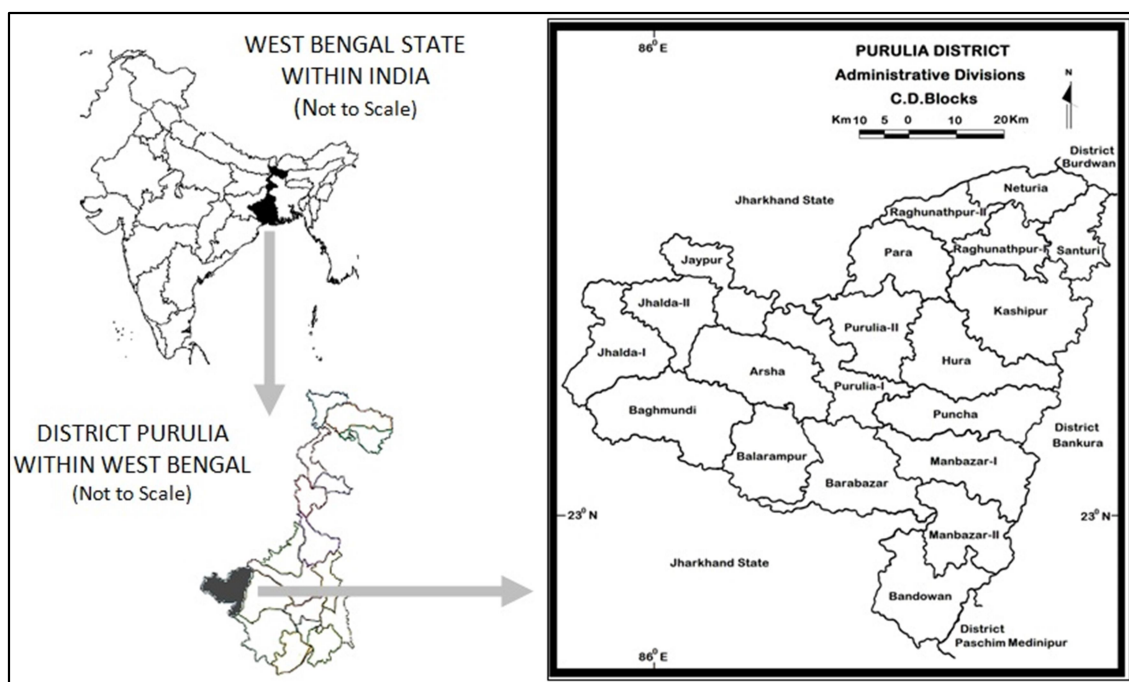


Figure 1
Location of the district of Purulia, West Bengal

IV Analysing the prospects

The prospect of the district to be developed in the field of eco and rural tourism is justified by its – 1) Advantageous geographical location; 2) Diversified tourist attractions (which includes a. The hills and Jungle, b. Dams and 'Bandhs', c. Archeological heritage sites, d. Recreational areas and picnic spots, e. Artisan's village and rural handicraft, f. Folk art & culture, g. Perceiving tribal livelihood etc.); 3) A unique rural lifeway; 4) Existing physical infrastructure; 5) Availability of human resources.

The geographical location of Purulia is such that it is easily accessible equally for the tourists of most part of the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. Purulia town is well connected with the rest of the country by both road and rail routes.

The main tourist attraction of the district, the *Ayodhya* Hill is an extension of the *Dalma* Hills of Jharkhand. With an average altitude of 610 m, the hill is ideal for rock climbing and trekking. *Gorshabru*, the highest peak of the *Ayodhya* Hills is situated at a magnificent height of 2850 feet (45 km from district headquarter). The entire range is encapsulated with deep forest and numerous waterfalls (e.g. *Bamni* falls, *Turga* falls) amidst the hills. *Pakhi* hills and *Matha* hills are also known for their spectacular beauties (Department of Tourism, Govt. of West Bengal, 2014). Besides, the forestland of the district is characterized for its enriched bio-diversity. The Northern Tropical Dry Deciduous Category of Forest (5B/C 1c Type) of this area accommodates mostly coppice Sal trees mixed with miscellaneous species like *Palash*, *Kusum*, *Mahua*, *Neem*, *Kend*. Different varieties of trees (70), shrubs (59), climbers (23), and bamboos (27) are the main species of Purulia Forest Division. Medicinal plants of more than 100 species are flourishing in this ecosystem. Plants like *Aswagandha*, *Satmuli*, and *Vrigoraj* are few of them. *Haritaki*, *Amla*, *Bahera*, *Karanj*, *Neem*, *Sal* seeds, *Bamboo*, *Sal* and *Kendu* leaves are major non-timber forest products (NTFB) found in this Division (Official Website of Purulia District, 2010). NHPC's 900 MW pump storage hydel-power plant, built in the lap of *Ayodhya* Hills on river Kasai at Baghmundi has also become one of the major tourist attractions.. The four units,

each of 225 MW, of the pump storage power project became operational between October 2007 and January 2008, with an investment of Rs.2,953 crores. The entire project cost was funded by the Japan Bank of International Cooperation, which also provided the technical expertise. There are also some other residual hills & hillocks like *Bero Hills*, *Joychondi Pahar*, *Valo Pahar* and others which are popular for scenic beauty, rock climbing and trekking. The entire district accommodates the ruins of historic buildings and forts (like *Garh Panchakot*, *Kashipur Rajbati*, *Telkupi Deul*, *Banda* and others), of archeological values. There are a numbers of natural and artificial (irrigation purpose) dams within the districts (like *Saheb Bandh* in Purulia Town; *Khairabera*, *Murguma*, *Kuki*, *Murrardih*, and *Doladanga* irrigation dams) known for their splendid beauty and winter picnic spots.

The rural Purulia is vibrant with the spectacular pieces of art and craft by rural artisans. These spots may be promoted to develop as rural tourism destinations. One may perceive the artistic beauty of lac (a kind of natural resin) art and tasar (a kind of silk) weaving, bamboo and cane knitting and wooden crafting. The artisan village of Charida, at the foothills of *Ayodhya Hills* (5 km from Baghmundi), gets international reputation in the art of designing and shaping colourful masks used for *Chhau* Dance. The *Chhau* dance which is a typical form of dance, mainly presented as a theatrical form of dance drama with its origin at the deciduous forest covered Chotonagpur plateau and plateau fringe areas of tribal habitat in Eastern India, has become a unique identity of rural Purulia. Besides the *Chhau*, the *Jhumur* song and dance, *Pata Naach*, *Bhunang Naach*, *Kathi Naach*, *Ghornaach*, *Dansai* and *Machani* are popular dance forms in the districts which is performed at different festivals (like *Bhadu*, *Tusu*, *Chatta Parav*, *Makar Sankranti*, and *Karam*) organized at different parts of the district, almost throughout the year. The district administration of the districts has published the Tourism Brochure of the District namely Destination Purulia to promote the popular tourist attractions to the people (District Tourism Brochure, 2013).

The available physical infrastructure is prospective enough for future development. The Youth Hostel and Irrigation Guest House (supervised by State Irrigation Department) at Purulia Town; Irrigation Guest Houses (supervised by State Irrigation Department) at Murguma, Baghmundi, Ayodhya, Matha and Balarampur; ten Forest Bungalows at different parts of the *Ayodhya Hills*, maintained by the W.B. Comprehensive Area Development Corporation; Forest Bungalows (supervised by State Forest Department) at Garh Panchakot, Kashipur, Surulia, Bandoean, Kuilapal and Duarshini Eco Tourism Centre provide accommodation at remote rural and forest areas. Besides, the private accommodations are also available at most of the tourist destinations. About 2300 km of surfaced road (including NH-32), 4100 km of un-surfaced road (District Statistical Handbook, 2008) and a few thousand kms of rail route (mostly electrified) under South Eastern Railway provide a good intra and inter district connectivity for the district. After all, the wistful, disciplined and industrious human resources have made the land worthy to be viewed for processing livelihood promotion.

V

A pro-community measure of development

The mass tourism, both in developed and developing countries have been mostly predominated by large scale companies and organizations, whereas the local disadvantaged groups have been marginalized in terms of occupation as well as empowerment options. Community based tourism may increase the income among the community members, particularly the non-working females leading to their betterment of the quality of life. Besides this opportunity of augmented income it also provides extra savings resulting into the investment towards capacity buildings of the community and personal development. But the most interesting outcome may be the direct involvement of

the community with the overall tourism system and particularly the tourism related decision making processes. The inflow of the tourists within the region would provide the extra opportunity for the rural handicraftsmen, artisans, small scale entrepreneurs, folk musicians and performing artists (especially the Purulia genre of *Chhau* dancers) and service providers to exhibit and marketing their arts, products and services. Rational synthesis of all the above aspects under the institutional supervision is prospective enough towards generating a new socio-economic inertia leading to stimulate the ongoing development initiatives sponsored by the State.

VI

Limitations to overcome

There certainly are a range of constraints for development of this district towards nature and rural based tourism. The provisions of accommodation at different tourist destinations are mainly the Government rest houses, holiday homes and bungalows operated and maintained by different Departments of the State Government. The booking of these accommodations is processed through a complex paper-works and seeking permission from corresponding officials through proper channels through physical presence of the candidate or the agent. The tourism sector while demonstrating the higher degree of consumer services needs to get rid off this kind of outdated procedure with modern tools and techniques of consumer facilitation to increase the level of customer satisfaction. Besides, private entrepreneurship also needs to be encouraged. The arrangement of safe drinking water supply at the tourist destinations is required to be developed as the scarcity of water is very common phenomenon for the most parts of the district. Available skilled human resources is also at present a concern, as the rural and forest fringe residents are mostly unskilled and semi-skilled labour forces with traditional knowledge associated with either manual labour oriented intensive agricultural sector or forest resource collectors. Proper training and capacity building system for developing skills and up-to-date knowledge for the modern service oriented sector of travel and tourism is required. Government should take initiatives to set up workforce for proper building and development institutions in this area. Provision of outdoor safety and security, particularly under the situation of the outrage of *maoist* movement during the past decades, is one of the toughest challenge for attracting a stream of tourists towards the tourist destinations at Purulia. Govt. of West Bengal has identified four tourism circuits in the state as priority circuits i.e. Circuit 1- Beach Tourism Circuit in Purba Medinipur (Digha – Shankarpur – Tajpur – Junput – Mandarmani); Circuit 2- Pilgrim Tourism Circuit (Ganga Sagar – Birbhum (Tarapeeth – Bakreshwar – Nalhati – Fullura – Saithia – Kankalitala, Tarakeswar, Furfura Sharif); Circuit 3- Nature Tourism Circuit (Duars and Darjeeling Circuit); Circuit 4 (Sunderban Circuit: Gad Khali, Jharkhali, Kohikhali, Frazer Island) ^[40]. In spite of having immense potentiality for nature and rural tourism, this prospective option of socio-economic betterment has unfortunately not been utilized. Lack of state sponsored package tours and campaigning for growing interest among tourists towards eco and rural tourism are also the shortcomings of the growth of such tourism..

VII

Conclusion

It may be the goal of present development policies for the backward areas like Purulia from the economic standpoint to generate employment for enhancing income per capita, leading to the betterment of the quality of life; but the social consideration proposes a pro poor policy framework of social re-engineering to provide a platform for mainstreaming the marginalized sections of the society and empowering communities in

order to address the issues of unequal right on resources and insignificant involvement in the development initiatives. The spread of extreme social movement (Maoist movement) in the whole of 'Jangal Mahal', where mostly the tribal and rural poor reside, is an alarming message against the dearth of the welfare flows percolating down to the lowest order of socio-economic hierarchy. Subsidiary schemes (like the distribution of 2 hectares of forestland to forest dwellers as per the Schedule Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 by Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India) can hardly resolve these issues permanently, unless a satisfactory level of social capital is formed through community empowerment. Eco and Rural Tourism may act as an important tool for this area with such perspective. Moreover, as Putnam (1995) writes that cooperative interaction on any aspect of social or economic activities of community members leads to development of norms, networks, associations and trust as people tend to cooperate for common welfare– this sense of incorporation enables the community to raise united voice for identity, rights and justice for all of its members under the system of democratic governance.

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TABLES

Table: 1
Population Growth and Decadal Growth Rate in Purulia District, West Bengal, 1901-2011

Year	Population	Decadal Growth Rate (%)
1901	777801	
1911	884372	13.70
1921	831497	-5.98
1931	972077	16.91
1941	1088201	11.95
1951	1169097	7.43
1961	1360016	16.33
1971	1602875	17.86
1981	1853801	15.65
1991	2224577	20.00
2001	2536516	14.02
2011	2930115	15.52

Source: Census of India, Different Years

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Table: 2
Area under forest in Purulia District, West Bengal

Year	Forest cover (in Sq. Km.)	% of land under forest cover
1988 [#]	1114	17.8
1991 [#]	1159	18.51
1994 [#]	1179	18.84
1997 [#]	1194	19.08
2000 [#]	1311	20.95
2004 [#]	1295	20.19
2006 [#]	1163	18.58
2011 [*]	750	11.99

Source: State Forest Report 2006-07, Department of Forest, Govt. of West Bengal[#]
& Economic Review 2010-11, Department of Finance, Govt. of West Bengal^{*}

Table: 3
Decadal change of population within different working groups

Population	2001	2011	Decadal Change
Total Population	2536516	2930115	15.52
Working Population	1127488	1249642	10.83
Main Workers	645506	613398	-4.97
Marginal Workers	481982	636244	32.01
Non Workers	1409028	1680743	19.28

Source: Census of India, Different Years

Table 4
Per capita GDP from different sources in Districts of West Bengal in 2009-10 at Current Price

District	Popul ation	Total GDP of the District (Rs.'00000)	GDP per Capita (Rs.)	Rank in State	Agricultural GDP of the District (Rs.'00000)	Agricultural GDP per Capita (Rs.)	Rank in State	GDP from Forestry (Rs.'00000)	Per Capita GDP from Forestry (Rs.)	Rank in State
Bankura	3596292	1203373	33461	12	363671	10112	6	19423	540	7
Birbhum	3502387	1060849	30289	17	305452	8721	13	16823	480	10
Burdwan	7723663	3585297	46420	4	623633	8074	14	21445	278	18
Cooch Behar	2822780	915214	32422	13	384152	13609	1	16573	587	6
D Dinajpur	1670931	529620	31696	14	181576	10867	4	8014	480	11
Darjeeling	1842034	940636	51065	3	176556	9585	9	22142	1202	1
Hooghly	5520389	2370115	42934	6	484422	8775	12	20021	363	15
Howrah	4841638	1968218	40652	7	181276	3744	18	14081	291	16
Jalpaiguri	3869675	1426817	36872	9	376156	9721	7	37859	978	2
Kolkata	4486679	3440200	76676	1	5530	123	19	0	0	19
Malda	3997970	1218588	30480	16	360123	9008	10	20855	522	8
Midnapore E	5094238	2678890	52587	2	491918	9656	8	22803	448	13
Midnapore W	5943300	2057166	34613	11	682779	11488	2	38251	644	4
Murshidabad	7102430	2225548	31335	15	718651	10118	5	27654	389	14
Nadia	5168488	1922724	37201	8	586607	11350	3	25135	486	9
North 24-Parganas	10082852	4368684	43328	5	459826	4560	17	28088	279	17
Purulia	2927965	824594	28163	18	195140	6665	15	18559	634	5
South 24-Parganas	8153176	2918197	35792	10	401852	4929	16	55505	681	3
U Dinajpur	3000849	756350	25205	19	266025	8865	11	13476	449	12

Source: State Domestic Product and District Domestic Product of West Bengal, BAES, Govt. of W.B., 2011