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Examining state government's initiatives for promoting sustainable tourism in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Himachal Pradesh, also known as Dev Bhoomi or the "abode of the Gods," is situated in the Lower Himalayan Hills. Agriculture and tourism, two clearly seasonal industries, are very important to its economy. Despite the massive reliance on tourism, it is much unorganized in nature and, among other connected concerns, faces a few developmental issues related to the environment as well as the exploitation of economically poorer groups of the population. The areas are in the unfortunate situation of growing polluted since they are so dependent on the seasonal inflow of tourists, whether they are coming to escape the summer heat or are drawn by the thick layer of snow. The fact that the sector is dominated by a small group of wealthy individuals, virtually to the exclusion of the rural population, who would otherwise have no other source of income besides agriculture and other seasonal activities like traditional weaving, basket making, or cattle rearing, especially during the long winter months, is a major concern. In the larger framework of social and environmental responsibility, this study examines these two facets of the tourism business and how one strategy for reversing the situation would be to educate people about the advantages of ecotourism and get them involved. This qualitative study will also consider the government policies that are promoting a start in this direction, as well as the contribution that social media and advertising make to its implementation.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Himachal Pradesh, environmental responsibility, government policies

Introduction

The lower slopes of the Himalayas are home to Himachal Pradesh, also known as Dev Bhoomi, or the abode of the gods. Himachal is home to enormous ecological diversity, including fertile valleys, snow-capped hills, and a chilly desert. Over 10,000 plant species and almost 2000 animal species are supported by these diverse, thriving ecosystems in the Himalayas. Mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish are among the species, albeit these numbers omit the enormous population of insects and arachnids, which is crucial to the survival of these biomes uninhabited by humans. There is a greater demand for and stress on the region's natural resources as a result of the growing urge to develop the area. Consequently, the region is being threatened by the overuse of these resources more and more. In addition to more conventional and broad cultivation, the development push has taken the form of building highways, hydroelectric projects, mining, significant businesses like cement plants, and tourism. Despite creating much-needed jobs, these activities are leading to further deforestation, ecosystem disruption, biodiversity loss, and accelerated environmental deterioration. Despite this push for development, tourism and agriculture—which are both distinctly seasonal industries, both extremely unorganized in nature, and both—face a number of developmental concerns linked to the environment as well as the exploitation of the economically disadvantaged segment of the population. This paper solely examines one of these activities, namely tourism.

The locations are in the unpleasant position of becoming contaminated since they are strongly dependent on the seasonal inflow of tourists, whether they are fleeing the summer heat or drawn to the heavy cover of snow. A significant related issue is that the sector is controlled by a small, wealthy group, almost entirely to the exclusion of the rural populace, which would otherwise have no other source of income besides agriculture and other seasonal activities like traditional weaving, basket making, or cattle rearing, especially during the long winter months. In a broader context of social and environmental obligations and how one might fulfil these responsibilities, this article examines the dual features of the tourism sector (Environmental costs and exclusion of poorer segment of population).

In the larger context of social and environmental responsibilities, this paper examines the twin aspects of the tourism industry—environmental costs and exclusion of the economically

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disadvantaged and how one strategy for reversing the situation would be to educate the economically disadvantaged about the advantages of sustainable tourism. This qualitative study will also consider the government initiatives that are promoting a start in this direction as well as the contributions that social media and advertising make to its implementation.

The Costs of Tourism

A variety of tourist activities are available in Himachal Pradesh, including camping, hiking, trekking, fishing, nature tours, rafting, paragliding, and more. Shimla, Kullu, Kangra, Lahaul & Spiti, and Mandi are the most well-known tourism spots in the state even though most districts offer these. The predominance of widespread religious tourism is another distinctive feature of this area's tourism. In order to visit the temples and other sites of religious and spiritual significance, many domestic tourists travel to the mountains. The demand on the resources of this culturally varied and environmentally vulnerable region has increased due to the influx of tourists, which intensified after the emergence of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. Because the environment is already sensitive, this pressure is most pronounced there. The long-standing harmonious coexistence of nature and humanity is under danger, as seen by the rise in the frequency of flash floods, landslides, etc. The rural community, which depends almost entirely on environmental costs, also pays a cultural cost because tourists introduce new cultures and as a result, demand a supportive social infrastructure.

Local cultural traditions and ways of life lose their authenticity as a result of commercialization. Among other things, establishing a rift in the historical bond between the people and the land. This is made worse by the uneven distribution of the economic benefits brought about by these tourism-related enterprises, which in turn causes discord even within the population (Wood, 2002) ^[13]. In rural Himachal, where tourism-related activities and the industry as a whole have led to significant inequalities between various parts of the population, this is something that is more evident. The highly seasonal agriculture, traditional weaving, or cow ranching are the only sources of income available to the rural community, particularly during the lengthy winter months.

Sustainable Tourism and Civic Duty

Going green is the newest corporate motto, and consumers are willing to pay more if good or service uses terms like eco-friendly, recyclable, sustainable, biodegradable, and so on (Sarkar, 2012) ^[11]. Despite being a relatively new phenomenon in India, the notions of green marketing and eco/green tourism are not far behind. Green marketing is a novel idea for promoting environmentally conscious goods and services (Sarkar, 2012) ^[11]. Ecotourism and green marketing go hand in hand because both have as their end goals the reduction of environmental effect through resource utilization, waste management, pollution control, sustainability, etc. If a location could be created with an eye toward ecotourism and the integration of the tourism sector with the community that it hopes for, the aforementioned negative effects of tourism may be avoided. The commencement of a process to reverse the fast worsening environmental situation would be aided by making the stakeholders, such as the villages, aware of the advantages

of ecotourism. Simply put, ecotourism combines nature-based travel with sustainable travel. Because it is natural based and sustainable, it preserves the environment, upholds local culture, and contributes to the community's well-being. The sustainability of a place derives from its interaction with other natural resources, whereas nature-based tourism focuses on experiencing a location's geography and climate (Priskin, 2001) ^[10]. The sustainability of a site derives from its integration with the local community (Lindberg, Furze, Staff, & Black, 1997) ^[9] since it enables local cultural values to predominate the site's management and so also protects local culture (Wood, 2002) ^[13]. According to the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), "Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people" (TIES, 1990) ^[12]. A definition states that it is, "Sustainable travel to natural areas, that is environmentally conservative while maintaining the local culture and contributing to the well-being of the host community" (Bjork, 2000) ^[1]. Therefore, good ecotourism should encourage ecological sustainability, environmental awareness, and cultural exchange (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006) ^[6]. Theoretically, sustainable tourism shouldn't have much of an adverse effect on the local ecology or culture (Hunter, 1997) ^[7]. Additionally, any form of tourism, including the majority of what Himachal Pradesh has to offer in terms of adventure, wildlife, legacy, culture, and religious tourism.

The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 gave India's environmental preservation efforts a head start. Additionally, it has begun to formulate regulations for ecotourism and sustainable tourism. With these policy reforms, the travel and tourism sector has also been compelled to operate more sustainably and responsibly toward the environment. According to the Incredible India Campaign (2017) ^[8], "Sustainable tourism implies minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive effects of all forms and activities of tourism on: the environment, local communities, heritage (cultural and natural), and inclusive economic growth". With the creation of Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (STCI) (Incredible India, 2017) ^[8], this effective campaign, begun in 2002 to promote India as a top tourist destination, received an additional boost. These criteria aim to increase interest in local heritage and culture, support community integration, and benefit the local communities economically (Drshti, 2003) ^[2]. Limiting the number of visitors a facility can accommodate is a crucial component of sustainable tourism. Depending on the resources available, this limit may be artificial. If it is exceeded, it may have a number of unfavourable effects, including the deterioration of the forest, the loss of biodiversity, the pollution of the waterways, littering, and an overloading of other infrastructure. In order to prevent overcrowding and subsequent environmental deterioration sustainable tourism should ideally maintain a continual review of a site's carrying capacity (Wood, 2002) ^[13]. This obligation falls on the shoulders of the stakeholders, who include visitors and the local tourism business.

These players in the Himachal tourism sector can contribute in many different ways to environmental preservation and fair wealth distribution. With its proposal to enhance ecotourism at the already established locations in 2000, which included building trekking paths, rain shelters, and bird-watching towers, the state administration had already

made a start in this direction. The registration process was made easier for the villages, and the luxury tax that was levied on them was subsidized (Tourism Policy, 2000). Additionally, it has developed a special set of rules for ecotourism, such as banning the use of wood as fuel, prohibiting the dumping and burning of non-biodegradable garbage in protected areas, and setting a goal for fifty percent of energy use to originate from renewable sources. Additionally, it has developed a detailed set of rules for ecotourism, such as prohibiting the use of wood as fuel, forbidding the disposal and burning of non-biodegradable garbage in protected areas, and setting a goal for fifty percent of energy use to originate from renewable sources.

The state forest department has a private-public partnership model that enables private business owners to create ecotourism destinations that have received governmental approval. For the renewal of their annual licenses, they must adhere to state regulations. Consequently, there are existing laws in existence that provide the requisite impetus. The lack of understanding about the principles of ecotourism among stakeholders, including government employees, tour guides, guesthouse owners, and tourists, has been a major obstacle to sustainable tourism or ecotourism. Although many of them are aware of its basic meaning, they are less familiar with all that it includes. However, the majority of them think that ecotourism would benefit the area since it creates jobs and, because it is planned and sustainable, it would protect the local way of life. Ever still, it's possible that some people have never even heard the word "ecotourism." Green marketing can help with this. The fundamental goal of green marketing is to make people aware of what turning green implies by educating them on its advantages and, as a result, making them more receptive to doing so. It's intriguing how this affects the behavior of those potential customers as well as other lifestyle decisions (Grant, 2007) ^[4].

While the state government advertises its ecotourism rest houses in periodicals and on the internet, larger commercial tour operators rely more on word-of-mouth marketing and the internet than homestay businesses do. Social media usage is crucial in this situation. Social media can and has already begun to assist small homestay operators who cannot afford traditional advertising in newspapers, television, or radio. Given that creating a profile on websites and apps like Facebook, Airbnb, Whatsapp, travel blogs, and other similar platforms costs free, it serves as a new method of word-of-mouth advertising. The villagers could plan guided tours, treks, hikes, and exploring off-the-beaten-path routes that would not only help keep the environment clean but would also benefit the villagers economically with proper understanding and training, but the tourists would also benefit from this personal touch, especially the ones who have never experienced an Indian village or the villagers' welcoming nature. The discerning visitors, who enjoyed their interactions with these villagers/owners of homestays as well as the authentic village experience in the middle of nature, posted pictures, left comments, praised the website, and suggested the owner to their friends and acquaintances. Because of the veracity of these first-hand accounts and the appeal of vacationing without harming the environment, in addition to the affordable rates offered by these homestays, their stories, images, and discourses have the capacity to draw in additional tourists.

Conclusion

The study shows that both the central and state governments have already taken action in the shape of their policy choices and visions for the tourism sector's environmental sustainability. The Himachal state government has also taken some decisive action to promote ecotourism and provide the much-needed assistance to the locals in the shape of various incentives like subsidies, simpler registration procedures, and so on. The resources are there including pristine and beautiful places to see and experience, educated people, widely dispersed roads, electricity, phone connections, etc., as well as awareness of and comprehension of the positive economic effects of tourism. To break the monopoly of the wealthy and powerful and to save the environment, all that was required was to organize these in a mutually beneficial process. Social media can play a significant part by developing into a tool for green marketing at this point. It is happening slowly but certainly. The monopoly of the wealthy few will be broken, a more equitable distribution of wealth will result, jobs for the rural poor will be created, the culture will be protected from the effects of blatant globalization and commercialization, and nature and man will receive the much-needed respite to resume living in balanced harmony as they had been doing before this onslaught and before this zeal for development set in. The dissemination of knowledge and training to establish small, operational, self-sustaining ecotourism models—where both the government and NGOs can step in—would be a crucial link between all these actions and the resulting effects described.

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