

HIGH HIMALAYA FORUM



June 2012

Discussion Report

Tourism - a catalyst for revival of Heritage?

Can tourism help revive culture? How can heritage-based enterprises benefit?

High Himalaya Forum

DISCUSSION REPORT

Introduction

Tourism in India is one of the largest service industries with a contribution of 6.23% to the national GDP and 8.78% of the total employment. The awe-inspiring Himalayas attract tourists from all over the world. The rich history, the cultural and geographical diversity make its international tourism appeal large and diverse.

The culture of Himalayas is very rich, be it the visual and performing arts, crafts, traditional medicines or even the flora and fauna of the region. There have been a lot of measures to protect this culture from eroding away. Many cultural enterprises have developed in the area. There are various women's groups engaged in manufacturing various handicrafts. The traditional knowledge is very much prevalent but still interventions are required to promote these heritage products/art forms and at the same time improve the economic conditions of the artisans.

Tourism can be seen as a catalyst for the cultural based enterprises and can help in enhancing the communities' capacities and ensure that the cultural forms are preserved and allowed to evolve.

Participants of the discussion:

1. Dorje Tondup - Himachal Pradesh, India
2. Shivani Dixit - Raipur, India
3. Shamsheer Singh - Keylong, Himachal Pradesh, India
4. Chandra Mohan - Kinnaur, India
5. David Samtang - Tawang, India
6. Mr. Tsering S Sopari - Phyang, Leh
7. Abhinaba Chakravarti - Gurgaon, India
8. Tashi Chhering Negi - Kinnaur, India
9. Vinay Tandon - Shimla, India
10. Atul Kumar Kukreti - Kotdwara, India

11. Rajesh Mehrotra - Lucknow, India
12. Subhro Ganguly - Jharkhand, India
13. Dorje Tondup - Spiti, India

Summary of responses

Tourism requires integration of efforts and a collaborative mindset as against a competitive one. Collaborations and right linkages within the district or state or a particular tourist destination can bring about higher gains. Tourism and cultural enterprises can complement each other but there is a risk of cultural erosion so cautious steps need to be taken towards this end. Participants from Kinnaur felt that collaboration is needed between tourism clusters and crafts/performing art groups as such efforts would yield higher gains for both.

Community-based & other initiatives: In Kinnaur, the promotion of heritage-based livelihoods through tourism is yet to be explored. But with the growth of homestays and promotion of Kinnauri crafts and architecture, there has been some movement towards this end. People in Tawang often organize culture programmes as they seek to protect their cultural heritage. They encourage homestays and seek government support for that. In Spiti, a number of tourists visit to see the Gompas, local festivals and dances and the homestays make a good source of income for the Spitian communities. The inflow of tourists has helped the crafts and performing arts sectors in Leh. The festive seasons often bring up opportunities for the local artists to be recognised outside the state.

A multitude of approaches are being tried out to enhance the value from tourism to the local communities while at the same time trying to restrict the known ill effects of over exploitation of specific locations. Various state governments are trying to promote alternative destinations to reduce pressure on over exploited tourist spots and in some cases are charging "entry fees" for tourists.

Potential approaches to be followed: A compilation of various good practices in different areas is needed. We can draw lessons from successful culture tourism ventures across the world where similar distinct cultural groups exist. Community members need to be consulted at every stage. Organisations like TRIFED, Tribes India and State emporiums can serve as great channels to promote the art of the Himalayan artisans who lack the marketing skills. The enterprises can tap into the powerful field of social networking for wider recognition of the tourist routes, crafts and music. The travelers can be encouraged to share their stories through the web and generate interest among others. The picturesque Himalayan terrain if showcased adequately through the web can boost to the local industries and the relic art forms. The national and international NGOs working in the tourism sector should take further initiatives towards promotion of the crafts enterprises and the artists of the region.

Need for a Balanced Approach: Tourism brings great boon for the Himalayan villages. However, the Himalayas are ecologically fragile and can handle only a limited number of tourists. Many

touristy places across the Himalaya have or are becoming quite wretched. Currently the government and local thinking is to cash in on the tourism boom while it lasts or moves on. But it is important to draw the line between greed and sustainability. Tourism helps to infuse much needed capital for survival of artists and artisans in Himalayan hills. However since in Himalayan region everything is very fragile, care needs to be taken on how tourism will influence culture. There has to be sustainable development and not self-destructive.

Responses in full

Dorje Tondup - Himachal Pradesh, India

Tourism can be a catalyst. But it requires integration of efforts, collaborative mindset as against a competitive one. Collaborations and right linkages within the district or state or a particular tourist destination, can help everyone receive higher gains. Financial support may not be a crucial factor here, the spirit of collaboration is all that matters.

Shivani Dixit - Raipur, India

Tourism and cultural enterprises can complement each other. But there is a risk of cultural erosion as well. So we need to move cautiously. We can look at successful culture tourism ventures across the world - be it in Alps or Andes or in some small island states where similar isolation and distinct cultural groups exist and draw out necessary lessons. Community members need to be informed and consulted at every stage rather than imposing a new idea that may threaten their cultural integrity.

Shamsheer Singh - Keylong, Himachal Pradesh, India

The tourists who come to Lahaul come both for cultural and natural attractions. But there have been no efforts to collaboration between tourism cluster and crafts or performing art groups. Such efforts can yield higher gains for both. The tourists do not show any particular trend/ preference, the time of visit does both depend on local festival calendars. However, much remains to be explored.

Chandra Mohan - Kinnaur, India

Culture preservation through tourism is still at a nascent stage in Kinnaur. The tourism is mostly nature based here. People come here to see the desert landscape and the snow-capped mountains. Promotion of heritage based livelihoods through tourism is yet to be explored. In a few places, the concept of homestays has started in last couple of years, but it is yet to take root. These are still early days to comment on how it will impact the local culture. There is a 50-50 chance of showcasing culture through this arrangement. While people might get to experience the lifestyle, cuisine, most of them choose this option not for the experience, but as it is much cheaper. We can promote the USPs of the region - the Kinnauri shawl, the architecture - as this is what people come to see. There

is a realisation among the people now and they are looking at protecting the monasteries, temples, architectures with government support in the district. There has been some movement towards this.

David Samtang - Tawang, India

Tourism benefits transport sector, hotels and shopkeepers who sale local goods, craftsmen in the villages - everyone. We organise culture programmes some times. We seek to encourage, protect cultural heritage. The scope is very high in Tawang. We encourage 'Homestays', so that tourists get to know the life style, the cooking etc. We are looking for government support in this regard, following the success of such initiatives in Sikkim. We are not being able to do much due to financial problems. Tawang has a lot of potential as a tourist destination. We have 420 years old monastery, nunnery, old stupa like Nepal, trails for trekking. We can do a lot to promote tourism and to promote culture conservation with a bit of support.

Tsering S Sopari - Phyang, Leh

The inflow of tourists has definitely helped the crafts and performing arts sectors in Leh. The tourists love and encourage the programmes on folk songs, dances and we hope that the upcoming festivals this season - such as: Sindhu Darshan Festival, Ladakh International Film Festival would help further in promotion of the artists and the art forms. The Sindhu Darshan festival attracts mostly domestic tourists. These festivals and tourist seasons often bring up opportunities for us to be recognised and to go and perform outside the state (Delhi, Chandigarh, Bhopal). We even get to perform in foreign destinations where people invite us to perform during their festivals. People love watching the lifestyle and culture of the remote areas, the pastoral nomads and such and they take keen interest. The national and international NGOs working in these sectors should take further initiative towards promotion of the crafts enterprises and the artists of the region.

Abhinaba Chakravarti - Gurgaon, India

A multitude of approaches are being tried out to enhance the value from tourism to the local communities while at the same time trying to restrict the known ill effects of over exploitation of specific locations. The over crowding of Shimla with weekend tourists from Delhi and the traffic jams on the road to the Rotang pass are well understood. Various state governments are trying to promote alternative destinations to reduce pressure on over exploited tourist spots and in some cases are charging "entry fees" for tourists.

Two examples may be of interest. First, the approach chosen by Bhutan. They discourage 'back packers' and charge a hefty sum to restrict inflow. They provide well thought out packages to different parts of the kingdom to maintain an equilibrium. Secondly, The Sikkim experiment is to focus on 'eco friendly tourism' and promote a focus on nature. Disperse vehicles from outside North Sikkim outside the state capital and convert the 'mall' in Gangtok to a completely vehicle free zone in the evenings. A compilation of various good practices in different areas may be a good idea.

Tashi Chbhering Negi - Kinnaur, India

Today we know that Himalaya is known for its tourism attractions because Himalaya is one of the beautiful creation of nature on this earth and Himalaya is well known for natural and cultural heritages. That's why there are so many places located in Himalayas, which have lots of potential for tourism development. But on the other side, in a vast expanse of Himalayas so many beautiful places are not known. So it is very important to do something for develop these places from tourism point of view. For this every Himalayan states have to make new plans to highlight these places so that natives of these places can get new opportunity for their livelihood. These efforts can protect Himalayan cultural and natural heritages.

Vinay Tandon - Shimla, India

Because tourists bring in money, it is good for the local economy. However, the Himalayas are ecologically fragile and can handle only so many tourists (how many in a given place nobody knows). What we do know is that many touristy places across the Himalaya have or are becoming quite wretched e.g. Shimla & Manali in HP, Nainital & Mussoorie in Uttarakhand and so forth. Right now the Govt and local thinking is to cash in on the tourism boom while it lasts or moves on. The big question therefore is where to draw the line between greed and sustainability? While each place needs to find its own answers to this dilemma, it does appear that places in the Himalaya trying to become willy-nilly, like Switzerland are clearly on the wrong track. That would be the last place on earth for preserving the culture of the Himalaya.

Atul Kumar Kukreti - Kotdwara, India

Tourism definitely helps to infuse much needed capital for survival of artists and artisans in Himalayan hills. As in Himalayan region every thing is very fragile, so care needs to be taken on how tourism will influence culture, so that it should not become a means to please tourists' own fantasies about Himalaya. We have long history of YATRAS/ some sort of pilgrimage, where visitors loved, respected and enjoyed beauty of the Himalaya. So it is extremely necessary to be sensitive about all parties concerned about Himalyan ecosystem. Development needed but should be sustainable and not self destructive.

Rajesh Mehrotra - Lucknow, India

In my opinion, Himalayan artisans lack the marketing skills and exposures like any other remote tribal area of India. Organisations like TRIFED, Tribes India are great channels to promote their art. The state emporiums can do their bits too. Cultural festivals like 'Hornbill Festival' in the northeast, 'Sindhu Darshan Festival' can be useful platforms since they attract lot of tourists.

Subbro Ganguly - Jharkhand, India

Today social networking is a powerful tool. The enterprises can tap into this field for wider recognition of the tourist routes, crafts and music. The travelers can be encouraged to share their stories through the web and generate interest among others. Certain destinations have become popular recently as popular films have been shot in these locales. There are countries and local governments that offer certain benefits for luring commercial filmmakers. This in turn generates the required publicity.

The Himalaya has picturesque terrain and amazing hiking routes. If showcased adequately through the web and the motion pictures, this can beat any popular destinations around the world. And this can give a boost to the local industries and the relic art forms.

Dorje Tondup - Spiti, India

Tourism is a great boon for the Himalayan villages. Lots of people come to see our Gompas (monasteries), festivals and dance. Many of us have started homestays and we earn quite a bit in the summers - that's when the tourists come. There are not too many of them around in the winter except some young people doing some volunteer work. Earlier not too many people knew of this valley, but these days we get a lot of visitors every year. I feel if we all work together and plan how to use our resources, we can benefit more. There are lots of talented artists around. With proper guidance and advertising, they can make more money. The youth usually find some odd jobs as tour guides when people go training. They can benefit more if they have their own equipments and skills to interact with the outsiders. Many of these young kids do not know enough about the rich culture of our area. I hope someday they would know more and be proud to tell the tourists about our culture.

We would like to thank all the participants who took part in the discussion and shared their valuable opinions on the critical issue. For sharing further information on the topic, feel free to write to info@himalayaforum.org
