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Blog

Ashish Kothari

Is Responsible Tourism an Oxymoron?



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A homestay owner in Saspote in Ladakh : All photographs by Ashish Kothari

'3 Idiots' was a delightful film. Unfortunately, at least one of its unintended side effects has nothing delightful about it. Remember the climactic scenes where Aamir Khan's identity as Phunsuk Wangdu is revealed, next to the magnificent Pangong lake in Ladakh? That loving pan of the camera mesmerized millions of viewers, many of whom must have immediately resolved to visit the lake. And so, in following years, tourism to Ladakh has jumped to figures so high that the region simply cannot bear the load. Leh is mushrooming with guest houses and choking with vehicles, Pangong is facing garbage problems and disturbance to wildlife around it, and the delicate cultures of the area that have survived hundreds of years are suddenly threatened by the crass commercialism that such unregulated tourism inevitably brings.

This is not an isolated picture, it is repeated in various forms and intensities across India. As the world arrives to 'Discover India', as it revels in 'Incredible India', nature, communities, cultures all get hit. Undoubtedly tourism also brings benefits such as increased incomes and livelihoods, greater possibilities of cultural exchange ... but such benefits get cornered by tour operators and companies, retailers, and a few people amongst communities.



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Cars at Kaas Plateau in Maharashtra

There is however another side to the picture, as yet tiny compared to the mainstream, but significant in showcasing the potential. I am talking of ecologically sensitive, community-run visitation. Note that I am distinguishing between tourism which has elements of voyeurism and unequal power relationships built in, and visitation which is mutually respectful and culturally sensitive. There are an increasing number of initiatives in India towards such alternative approaches. One such is homestays, which if managed well and run by communities, incorporating ecological principles, can truly be win-win-win ... the visitor, the host family or community, and the nature around them, all benefiting. Starting perhaps in the beautiful Himalayan landscape of Sikkim (its initiators being the Khangchendzong Conservation Committee, <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/conserving-sacred-spaces-kanchendzonga-conservation-committee-sikkim/#.Vk2MFoQxSIw>), taken up in Ladakh (Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust,

<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/protecting-snow-leopards-with-local-communities/#.Vk2MU4QxSIw>), Muniari (Maati, <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/homestay-with-a-difference/#.Vk2MkoQxSIw>), and many other places in India, this is rapidly becoming a popular alternative to mainstream hotels (<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/community-based-homestays-innovation-in-tourism-1/#.Vk2ND4QxSIw>). Unfortunately, perhaps too rapidly, because now some state governments have programmes to support a big expansion of homestays, and typically this means that the careful process of facilitating communities to be able to manage such facilities is given short shrift. Homestays cannot become another mass tourism option, that would be their deathknell.



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Garbage dump at Tso Kar in Ladakh

Another emerging alternative is community-run resorts and camps. These are typically on community lands, or government land given to them for this purpose, and often involve collaboration between the community and an external NGO or government agency. Good examples of this are Shaam-e-Sarhad run by the Maldhari community in Kachchh (<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/experiencing-the-banni-through-hodka/#.Vk2MtoQxSIw>), and Camp Hornbill run by the youth of Kyari village in the outskirts of Corbett Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand (<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/camping-heights/#.Vk2M14QxSIw>). Both in this and the homestay model, communities may also run guiding facilities, produce organic food and local crafts and other produce to enhance earnings, and offer ways by which visitors could get involved in community activities. All this enhances the experience of learning from each other, increasing mutual respect, and building a lasting relationship.

Common to these and other similar initiatives are the principles of ecological and cultural sensitivity, decision-making by communities, and most revenues or returns being retained by communities or those amongst them who manage the facilities. Even with these, though, there remains the dilemma of the ecological impact of people travelling from all over the world to stay in a responsible visitation facility, with enormous carbon footprints; one can only say that perhaps if this really does lead to stronger local ecological conservation and greater cultural exchange leading to global peace, it may be worth it.

So what about the claims of ‘responsible tourism’ by tourism companies that run big facilities like 5-star hotels? Recently I attended a big gathering of indigenous people, local communities, NGOs, academics, and government officers in Shillong, where one such company was advertising ‘responsible luxury’. I’m afraid I don’t think such efforts make the cut, not fully anyway. When a 5-star facility recycles its water, sources organic food from local farmers, installs solar energy, and so on, it is certainly being significantly more responsible than its counterpart who continues to run conventional operations. But when one notes that such tourism is accessible to a tiny minority of people, that most of the profits from it are cornered by an equally tiny minority, and that there continues to be a highly unequal relationship between the tourism operator and surrounding communities.



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Homestay at Sarmoli near Munsiri in Uttarakhand

What about the mushrooming ‘community-based ecotourism’ that many government agencies and NGOs are promoting? Much of this that I’ve seen is conventional tourism with a green coating. Community-based simply means that some people from surrounding communities are employed as cooks or middle-level managers, and a local dance troupe may be invited to showcase local ‘culture’. A bit better may be where some members of the community are consulted by the group running the operation. Ecotourism simply means it is tourism in an ecologically interesting place, not necessarily that it is ecologically sensitive. Decision-making remains outside of the local community. I’m generalizing a bit, but this is to my mind the dominant reality.

Tourism policy in India is increasingly realizing the potential and need for genuinely community-run, ecologically sensitive visitation. But it is very far from making this a core principle or practice. I doubt it ever will get there, unless there is substantial pressure from communities, civil society, and visitors who want to see a fundamental change away from tourism towards visitation. Documenting the successful examples of this and showing their potential, bringing their practitioners together into a critical mass, and demanding policy shifts are some pathways we need to engage in.