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The Dynamics of Host Participation in Tourism for Effectively Offsetting Agrarian Crisis in Wayanad

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Abstract

Wayanad, the green paradise of Kerala, is located in the southern most part of the Deccan plateau. Wayanad, where majority of the population completely depend on agriculture for their livelihood, has been facing a high magnitude agrarian crisis in the last few years. This district has witnessed a number of farmer suicides and as a result of this; farmers are forced to look out for some additional source of livelihood along with agriculture. Having a remarkable image of a beautiful tourist destination, the government of Kerala has identified Wayanad as a Tourism District and tourism is an emerging sector here. The scenic beauty, exotic landscape and rich heritage sites of Wayanad offer several opportunities for a 360 degree tourism expansion in the district. Considering the district wise foreign tourist arrivals, Wayanad shows the highest variation among other districts of Kerala in the last few years. In a fast urbanising country like India, places such as Wayanad have enormous value. It is no exaggeration to mention that Wayanad is one of the few Indian districts which still retains its charm as a rural district. It is not swept by mindless urbanisation like many other regions of India. Of course, this unique characteristic gives

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enormous tourism potential to the place. Keeping in view the distinctive features of Wayanad, especially the natural attractions and the indigenous culture, a sustainable tourism model can be an effective alternative to offset the agrarian crisis of the district. The present scenario of host community participation in the various facets of tourism in Wayanad is intensively studied in this paper. It aims at proposing concrete ways in which the benefits from tourism can be channelized productively to uplift the affected sections of society facing agrarian crisis in Wayanad

Introduction

Indian economy is predominantly rural, and agriculture continues to be the most important source of livelihood in the country. Indian agriculture is passing through a deceleration in growth over the last two decades. This has created a crisis both in terms of survival and sustainability. Agrarian distress and farmer suicides are subjects of widespread discussion in recent times. Farmer suicides have risen to grave proportions and increasing incidences of farmer suicides is indicative of a larger crisis on the socio-economic front. The problem of agrarian crisis has been addressed in this paper from the perspective of Wayanad, the rural agriculture district of Kerala. An attempt has been made to identify the causes and symptoms, and impact of the distress. Agriculturists of Wayanad were interviewed for gathering their perception on the changing trends in tourism, and their outlook towards different avenues of Wayanad tourism that is progressive in nature. Host communities of popular tourist destinations of Wayanad namely Edakkal Caves, Soolichippara Waterfall, Pookot lake, and Kuruva Island were also interviewed using structured questionnaires to unveil the present status of host involvement in tourism.

Agrarian Crisis in Wayanad: An Overview

Wayanad, the green district of Kerala is situated in the southernmost part of the Deccan plateau. The district is distinct with the cultivation of perennial plantation crops and spices. The major plantation crops include coffee, tea, pepper, cardamom and rubber. Wayanad is endowed with rich bio-diversity and natural scenic beauty.

Wayanad is a relatively rural tribal area. In the early 1950s, families immigrated to Wayanad from central Kerala and started farming practices on the revenue lands. They settled in Wayanad and started to clear the forest land and cultivated food crops like paddy, tapioca, and vegetables. The climate during those days was inhospitable that many could not survive. Thousands died of malaria and attacks by wild animals. Those who survived in spite of the odds transformed Wayanad into a paradise of prosperity. (K.N. Nair et.al, 2007) Till the year 1931, Adivasis constituted the majority of the population in the district. In the course of time around early 1940s, the non-advasis who immigrated from nearby places, became equal in size to Adivasis and subsequently exceeded the Adivasi population. These immigrant non-advasi farmers in the early periods mostly cultivated food crops such as paddy, tapioca, vegetables, and oranges. However, they later switched over to other perennial and cash crops namely coffee, pepper, arecanut, coconut, cardamom, and ginger. and slowly started depending on the cash crops alone. This was due to the better prices these commercial crops fetched and were also less labour intensive. (Jose George et al, 2006) The soil was highly fertile and yield levels of crops like pepper were very high. The prices of cash crops were highly remunerative in the 1980s and 90s. Such a favourable situation for commercial crops in turn led to the economic prosperity of the region. The higher income from agriculture resulted in modifications of the consumption behaviour of people. The renowned place, Pulpally, known for its higher yield of pepper and also called 'Mini Gulf' in the local parlance (K.N. Nair, Vineeta Menon, 2007) is located in this region. Transformation of the whole region with the newly formed wealth was visible all around. It contributed to an overall spurt in the

construction activity, where concrete houses replaced the old houses and vehicle registrations had steeply increased. Interestingly, lured by the profit potential, commercial banks stepped up the sanction and dispersal of loans for houses and agriculture. Large number of farm labourers also migrated from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and settled in the region. There was a tremendous demand for four-wheel vehicles and every farmer household flaunted a jeep at home.

Unfortunately, such a rosy situation did not last long. The pepper cultivation in course of time was infected with pests and disease. The gradual change in the climatic conditions also played havoc with pepper cultivation. Added to these, the gradual decline in the region's rainfall since 1990s played the spoil sport. Around the same time, largely due to external factors, there had been a crash in the prices of all cash crops since 2000. Coffee and pepper were the worst affected crops. In between, in 2004, the region had also witnessed a severe draught. Thus, by the end of the last decade, the region was beset with economic and environmental shocks affecting all segments of the society. Agriculture on the whole bore the brunt. The changed life style and the heavy investment in agriculture drifted the farmers into an economic quagmire. Farmers began to default on the loan repayments. Many families could not find any alternative for the loss of livelihoods amidst huge financial debts. They found suicide as the only way out from this as reflected by the highest number of suicides in 2006 among the farming communities in Wayanad. Unfortunately, almost every day, the news of 'farmer suicides' occupied media headlines with running scrolls on the various regional TV channels of the electronic media.

Agrarian Distress in Wayanad: Causes and Symptoms

The major factors which contributed to the decline of agriculture in Wayanad include the decline of agriculture prices in the world market, lopsided developmental role of the government and climate change. The most important factor that seems to be responsible for

the severe agrarian crisis in Wayanad is the crash of the price of agricultural products as a result of the economic reforms. The crash in prices since late 1990s of pepper, cardamom, coffee and tea has adversely affected the economy of Wayanad. The price crash has resulted in a drastic decline in the income of farmers and the cost of inputs in agriculture has been increasing at a faster rate than the price of agricultural commodities. The traditional farm practices followed by most farmers resulted in the ecological degradation of land. All these setbacks have cumulatively affected the fortunes of agriculture in the Wayanad region. It had a disastrous affect on the region's prosperity. Consequently, farmers failed to pay back interest on the principal amount of loans in time. Eventually, farmers landed in a debt trap. As on 31 March 2004, the amount overdue to the banks in Wayanad was Rs 133 crores. The loan disbursed to agricultural sector in 2004-05 financial years was Rs 430 crores (George, 2006). The increase in the bank interest rates and the accumulated interest on arrears aggravated the crisis. As the rate of defaults in payment of loans increased, banks proceeded to confiscate the land and houses of farmers leaving them with no other option than suicide.

The crisis in agriculture has many manifestations, of which suicides of farmers is the saddest one! Suicides by farmers today are actually a symptom of a much wider crisis in India's farm and agriculture sector (Sainath 2006). For the past couple of years, farmers' suicides has become a major issue in academic deliberations, policy analysis, and in everyday discourses. In comparison, the ratio of suicide is higher in Wayanad. According to the State Farmers' Debt Relief Commission, there were 371 suicides in Wayanad between 2000 and 2006. Since 2001-02 farmer suicides due to indebtedness have dramatically shot up in Wayanad. The sudden drop in agricultural income has multidimensional effects on the life of farmers. Either sudden or gradual slide in the standard of life and the related stress and strain in social relationships invade the life of the peasant family. It was found that the suicide victims in Wayanad borrowed from private moneylenders. The mental and social tensions, as well as stress in the family due to the economic insecurity create an atmosphere of utter

hopelessness. In such conditions disappointments in life eventually force farmers to commit suicide. A sample survey of households, where the farmers committed suicide in 2004, conducted in the Wayanad district by the district unit of Kerala Karshaka Sangam threw up several important findings. According to this survey, the males/heads of the family took the brunt of the distress. They were forced to approach the private moneylenders since their land documents were already with some nationalized or co-operative banks. These banks are reluctant to give further loans since they have nothing more to give as collateral. In this background, the private lending agencies chip in with schemes, many of which are debilitating in the long run.

Alternative Strategies to Face the Crisis

Agrarian crisis and the increasing number of suicides were the crucial issues of discussions in the media and in the various forums of farmer associations with the help of farmer associations such as Farmer's Relief Forum and INFARM. Demonstrations and protests of farmers became the order of the day. Debt relief commission was appointed which offered special relief packages. The bank debts were written off for many. The short and long-term strategies adopted by households to cope with agrarian distress varied across different socio-economic groups. The farmers reduced their consumption and farm expenditures and also attempted to diversify the crop pattern with the introduction of new crops like vanilla. They diversified towards organic farming, animal husbandry, and dairy. Marginal farmers started to think about various alternatives to bring additional income like working with SHGs. Farmers are into ginger cultivation in neighbouring places like Coorg in Karnataka by taking land on lease. But as the investment is very high in these places, it is not an appropriate alternative for all the farmers. Many of them changed from agriculture to small scale business or found some alternate employment. Wayanad being an agricultural district loses its charm in the event of crisis in the agricultural sector. The situation perforce

compels many a farmer to look around for alternative sources of income. As such, for those who prefer to get out of agriculture and those who prefer to stay on in agriculture, tourism of late, emerged as an alternative source.

The major reason for the emergence of tourism as an alternative vocation is the rich unexplored natural and cultural tourism resources of Wayanad, in which agricultural practices, cultivation, and plantations provide novel experiences to tourists with minimum investment at the destination. Farmers need not invest much to promote Farm Tourism and related hospitality services. This can be an additional source of income, when they provide the space for tourists, both foreign and domestic, to stay with them by way of homestays, and an opportunity to experience their agricultural practices and farm produces. The community approach towards tourism would change the tourism scenario itself. Most importantly, a sustainable cultural and natural tourism development will lead to a fiscally secure local community.

Tourism Scenario of Wayanad

With an objective of promoting rural and farm Tourism in Wayanad, the Government of Kerala has rightly identified Wayanad as a Tourism District and as a result tourism has emerged as a fast progressing sector in Wayanad. The scenic beauty, exotic landscape and rich heritage sites of Wayanad offer unique and exciting opportunities for tourism promotion

Wayanad has boundless potential, with a variety of natural attractions, wildlife, plantations, and cuisine. Wayanad is a multi-faceted destination with immense potential for rural tourism (villages, people, agriculture, ethnic manifestations and rural artifacts), Heritage tourism (Edakkal caves, Pazhassi memorial, Jain temples, Heritage museum), Leisure tourism (Pookot lake, soochippara waterfall, Meenmutty waterfall, Lakkidi ghat pass), Island tourism (Kuruva islands), Adventure tourism (Meenmutty

waterfalls, Chembra peak, Pakshipatalam), Hydel tourism (Banasura sagar dam), Pilgrim tourism (Tirunelly temple, Sita Devi Temple, Valliyurkavu Temple, Pallikkunnu Church, Varambetta Mosque, Jain temples), Wildlife tourism (Muthanga wildlife sanctuary, Tholpetty wild life sanctuary), Tribal tourism (tribal communities, their lifestyle, culture, rituals, language, costumes, food habits, festivals, art forms), Plantation tourism (plantations of coffee, tea, cardamom, pepper and rubber), Spice tourism (cardamom & pepper), Health tourism (herbals, Ayurvedic treatment centres), Festival tourism (tribal festivals, religious and regional festivals), Shopping tourism (Spices, handicrafts, honey, herbals), Home stay tourism and Ecotourism (Tholpetty, Muthanga, Kuruva Islands). Besides, Wayanad is attracting special interest tourists seeking to enjoy nature, jungle walks and indigenous cultural forms. Further, with respect to district wise foreign Tourist arrivals, Wayanad district registers the higher number of foreign tourist arrivals among the districts of Kerala in the last few years. The tourist arrivals to Wayanad in 2010, registered the mark of 4, 08,151, a steady increase from 3, 68,459 in the year 2009, with a growth rate of about 11%.

Tourism: The Perception of Farmers

It is heartening to note that with so many natural attractions and strengths, Wayanad evolved itself into a popular brand in the past five years. The number of domestic tourists visiting this rural district in 'Gods own country' has steadily been increasing. A place which was not in the tourist itinerary until recently, began to find a prominent place in the itineraries of many a tourist including foreign tourists. In spite of the potential, for a long time Wayanad was out of the Kerala tourism map. It was largely due to the conservative attitude of the local community which did not realize the importance of tourism. That apart anti-social elements with their indulgences brought a bad image to the place. However, as days passed by, a new realization dawned on the local community and the district administration and tourism began to receive due attention. As a

result, various stakeholders started taking a fresh look at the tourism promotion. Being a new age destination with a variety of products and resources, tourist arrivals to this place increased, and as a result the land price increased many folds. Local communities have started enjoying the benefits of tourism development. The administrators of tourism in Wayanad have also taken a pro-active stand in terms of facilitating developmental activities. Farmers have realized the importance of tourism as an alternative source of income as they cannot solely rely on a steady source of income from agriculture. Thus, in and around the tourist sites, small business establishments dealing with handicrafts and tourist information centres sprang up. For the local people, the very sight of so many tourists around is a pleasant surprise, more particularly those who had never seen such a large number of people from far off places before.

Community Based Tourism: An Effective Method to Deal with Agrarian Crisis in Wayanad

Tourism is highly recognized as a key community development tool with the recognition of its economic contribution in strengthening the economies. The host community is the economic, social, cultural, and infrastructural resource base for most of the tourism activities. In this regard, needless to say that local community participation and thus, their empowerment take the centre stage in sustaining the tempo. Community participation entails that the beneficiaries mobilize their own resources, define their own needs and make their own decisions about how to meet them. A community based approach to tourism development is a prerequisite to sustainability. Local participation is advocated in two levels: in planning and management of tourism products and execution of the same. Community participation alone can create a favourable attitudinal change in the host community about tourism and enable it to grow further.

Sustainable tourism is found to be an appropriate solution for redressing agrarian crisis. At the same time, it may be noted that

as the number of tourists swell, there is a pressure on the limited infrastructure and infrastructural facilities. The number of rooms in hotels and resorts are not enough to fulfil the requirement. The situation throws yet another business opportunity – ‘HomeStays’ – a relatively new option for tourist accommodation. The promotion of Homestay concept in its wake contributes for the conservation of natural resources by way of preventing reckless construction of hotels and resorts affecting the natural environment. The proper utilization of available local resources, a principle of sustainable tourism would be fulfilled this way. Even though Wayanad is known as a rural area, there are a number of palatial bungalows and almost in all parents stay alone as children study outside or work outside. There is a remarkable scope for Homestay promotion, which would provide an additional source of income for the inmates of such homes.

The popular tourist sites in Wayanad are scattered across the district. As these sites are not very visible to the outside world by virtue of their distance from the Airport and the railway station, local communities have to take the initiative in putting up these wonderful sites on the tourism map. The local communities whose land and houses are around the sites are the ones involved in tourism now. In Edakkal, Soochippara, Kuruva, Muthanga, they have started small shops of indigenous products, handicrafts and ethnic food centres. All these are less capital intensive. In the process of promoting tourism, enterprising and willing women found jobs at the tourist sites as attenders, guides, and guards. Thus, ample opportunities are thrown open for the employment of men and women in various tourism related activities.

In this backdrop, it is appropriate to look at the promotion of tourism from the ‘Responsible Tourism’ perspective – a concept and approach for tourism development widely talked about in the recent times. Towards this, the government of Kerala has identified four districts for promoting responsible tourism with emphasis on sustainability and conservation of natural resources. Incidentally, Wayanad district is one of the four districts. Through such initiatives

indigenous products are marketed by Self Help Groups (SHGs) like *Kudumbasree*, farmers and artisans. In addition to selling directly to tourists, they also supply to the various outlets in the hotels and resorts. The local-self-government, district *Kudumbashree* Mission, NGOs, social workers and the tourism industry work together to achieve a holistic development of the region. Further, as part of the responsible tourism activities, a Responsible Tourism cell has been set up in Wayanad which started ethnic restaurants operated by the tribal community with tribal, i.e. ethnic and indigenous snacks (Ministry of Tourism).

Sustainable Tourism models, be it Ecotourism, Indigenous tourism or Responsible tourism will provide better living conditions to the host and indigenous communities through extra income generation and emergence of new entrepreneurial opportunities, protection of indigenous culture and sustainable development of the region. The results of the study show that the host communities involved in tourism are happy with their incomes moving upwards. They are also able to balance their agricultural activities and tourism business.

Results and Discussions

The present study conducted among the local community involved in tourism related activities at the tourist sites like Pookot, Kuruva Islands, Soochippara waterfalls and Edakkal caves revealed that among the people engaged in tourism, 61 percent were male and 39 percent were female. It is interesting to know that participation of women in the tourism activities is highly satisfactory. As regards social identity, majority were Christians (60.9%) followed by Muslims (21.7%) and Hindus (17.4%). Another finding, which is a matter of concern is the poor participation and involvement of the tribal community in spite of Wayanad being a tribal dominated area. As the data indicate, it is evident that Christians of the region seem to be more inclined towards tourism activities as compared to the other two social groups namely, Muslims and Hindus. Therefore, efforts

need to be directed to involve the later two groups also for an all-round participation in tourism.

With respect to the age of the respondents who are actively engaged in tourism activities. It was found that about 45 % of respondents are in the age group of 41-50 years followed by 30% in the group of 31-40. The age-wise distribution of respondents reveals that most of those who are in their forties are actively engaged in tourism activities, while relatively younger population in their twenties and thirties are not well exposed to tourism. This is an issue which needs to be addressed and young people need to be motivated in large numbers to participate in the promotion of tourism in Wayanad. The educational background of the respondents show that 69.6% have only school education, 17.4% are graduates, 8.7% have completed their plus two and 4.3% have technical education. It may be inferred that by and large those who studied up to school level are living in the region and are trying to supplement or make a living in tourism while those of the population who are highly educated prefer highly paid jobs elsewhere. The study also found that for 52.2% of the respondents, agriculture does not provide a steady source of income. For 39.1% of the respondents, tourism is the source of additional income. The analysis clearly points out that those who are associated with tourism are satisfied with the benefits they get from tourism (95.7%).

There is a unanimous opinion among the host community that tourism empowers the local community as almost all the respondents are fully conscious of the importance of tourism. As found out from the views expressed by the respondents on the whole the perception of the local community with regard to promotion of tourism in Wayanad district is quite positive. Almost all the respondents were unanimous in tourism's potential to create jobs. Similarly, the respondents seem to be fully convinced that, given the resources of the region, tourism obviously provides alternative livelihoods for the people. Thus, the respondents strongly believe that tourism helps to mitigate the region's poverty.

Recommendations

With the declining ability of agriculture as a continuous source of income/venue generation, tourism obviously is a viable option. Yet, not many host community members are involved in tourism related economic activities. It is very clear from the study that those who get benefit from tourism are satisfied. It may be noted that only a small percentage of the local community, predominantly those who live near the tourist sites are positively inclined towards tourism. Tourism as a vocation and its advantages to the host community need to be aggressively communicated. The areas of host community participation in tourism need to be identified and promoted.

In view of the advantages associated to the host community through tourism in Wayanad, it is high time that the issue is examined from the entrepreneurship perspective as well. Setting up business units like handicraft shops, wayside amenities, indigenous shops or ethnic restaurants promotes indigenous entrepreneurship among the local community. There are instances of initiatives taken by women motivated through SHGs of Wayanad. The tourism department of Kerala, KTDC, and DTPC, could explore the right opportunities where the entrepreneurial instincts can be triggered and channelled towards starting tourism related business across the district. The developmental efforts need to be directed towards guiding and supporting the SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) initiatives by offering various incentives like entrepreneurship training, subsidies and tax holidays. All these measures would change the landscape of Wayanad and help it find a firm place as an indigenous tourism destination.

At the same time the growth in tourist arrivals to Wayanad signals issues related to sustainability. The threat to fragile natural resources, however, cannot be lost sight of. Therefore, any addition to the existing infrastructural facilities with respect to hotels and resorts to accommodate increasing number of tourists need to be handled properly. One of the appropriate sustainable practices would be

promoting Homestay concept in Wayanad. Beautifully furnished houses located amidst spice or rubber plantations are aplenty which would offer a unique experience for tourists, as well as, additional income for families.

As such, promoting farm tourism has huge relevance in Wayanad. The spectacular sight of tea, coffee, spices, and rubber plantations is a visual feast to tourists. It would be a different experience for them to walk around these plantations and to involve themselves in the farm work here, observing and participating in cultivation. Farmers would be more than delighted to get extra earnings from tourism by showcasing their farming skills and yields. Financial assistance from banks would encourage the farmers to spend more on their farms or plantations to make it more attractive like a farm house to attract more tourists because in the event of assured benefits from tourism, there could be a spurt in tourism entrepreneurship.

Projects like 'Kanavu', and 'Uravu' actively working with the objectives of empowering the weaker sections of the society and making them self confident and self-reliant need to be promoted and should function enthusiastically and consistently with the continuous support from the government.

As the study traces, the tribal communities are still away from the mainstream of tourism. The indigenous community is still struggling for their existence, and they are ignorant about the benefits that accrue from tourism. They should be educated about the benefits of tourism promotion in a sustainable fashion in their own habitats. Workshops and campaigns involving social and environmental activists may be organized to enlighten and convince the local community the prospects of a win-win situation.

Conclusion

The study brings to light that farmers in Wayanad, at least fifty percent are not aware that promoting tourism would enhance the quality of

life. Homestays, farm tourism, indigenous tourism concepts, and other projects are viewed with skepticism mainly because of the unpleasant experience with agriculture. In this connection tourism stakeholders can play a vital role in building confidence among farming communities of Wayanad. The landscape of Wayanad has huge potential in enticing hordes of tourists from far and wide. The local community requires professional counsel and assurance to take a plunge into tourism related activities. In prospect such farmers can become dynamic employers whereby they can not only have a steady income but also provide employment to many hapless people in their own neighbourhood. The present study thus, highlights the need for tourism and agriculture to go hand in hand.

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