Mapping Issues and Challenges in Culture and Tourism

EQUATIONS
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This is a background note, which outlines the broad issues and challenges in the Culture and Tourism. The note also indicates at possible strategies to address these issues and challenges.

I. Overview

Cultural tourism has historically been an important form of tourism, even before it was formalised in the manner that it exists today. A pilgrimage to religious sites has been important milestones for all communities and religions. For the past several decades heritage tourism has also gained impetus.

There are several definitions of cultural tourism, among which we quote 2 here.

“...not just the consumption of the cultural products of the past, but also of contemporary culture or the 'way of life' of a people or region. Cultural tourism can therefore be seen as covering both 'heritage tourism' (related to artefacts of the past) and 'arts tourism' (related to contemporary cultural production).”

(Richards, 2011 a: 7)

“Cultural tourism: passive, active and interactive engagement with culture(s) and communities whereby the visitor gains new experiences of an educational, creative and/or entertaining nature.”

The different forms of cultural tourism are:
- Heritage tourism
- Arts tourism
- Creative tourism
- Urban cultural tourism
- Rural cultural tourism
- Indigenous cultural tourism
- Religious/Pilgrimage tourism

Heritage tourism is understood as the representation of the past. Cultural tourism and heritage tourism have been globalised when the UNESCO started the process of declaring historically important sites as being heritage sites, which need to be preserved. However, in India most heritage tourism sites are living cultural sites for communities. There cultural and heritage tourism are not only interactions with monuments and other physical entities but more importantly are interactions with communities.

The following are some of the issues in cultural and heritage tourism which need to be addressed while planning for tourism.

II. Challenges/ Areas of concern

1. Comoditisation of culture

Traditions and cultural heritage form an important part of the experience that tourists seek in their travels to a country as diverse as India. However, a line needs to be drawn between a cultural experience as a tourist and commoditising culture as a product for tourism. We also need to be clear of what is being treated as “national heritage”, who defines it as "heritage" and who owns it. Our comments come from experiences of communities of the insensitivity and disregard that tourism promotion and activities are often guilty of.

Culture – tangible (in the form of monuments, arts, crafts) and intangible (customs, values, beliefs, ways of life) are intrinsic to communities’ identity and existence. It is living and must not be converted into ‘products’ and packaged for tourism. The focus should be on providing the tourist a cultural tourism experience that allows for authentic and contemporary interaction with communities through mutual respect and dignity and NOT on developing ‘cultural tourism products’.
Any heritage building should not be privatised. It is advised that innovative solutions be thought through as these are the collective heritage of communities and their entry into these spaces should not be restricted.

2. **Adivasi communities and cultural tourism**
A scrutiny of the colourful and attractive tourist brochures printed by central and state tourism departments provides ample evidence of the fact that adivasi people and their culture are considered as ‘tourism commodities’. Even more disturbing is how the adivasi woman is represented as exotic and desirable. Adivasi villages are depicted as mystical, paradise-like, intriguing places that provide the viewer a glimpse of mystery, a taste of an alien culture. References to tribal culture, folklore, culture and traditional belief systems of these ancient people, often border on the arrogance and sometimes ignorance that typifies mainstream thinking. Commodification is evident – a traditional motif becomes an “artefact” or “souvenir”, traditional dresses and accessories – “costumes” and ancestral traditions – an “experience”. The word ‘product’ when applied to cultural practices of the adivasis’, a mainstream notion and perception of culture in general and adivasi culture in particular is being fostered. It is strongly recommends to the Ministry of Tourism and its state-level counterparts that sensitivity towards cultural aspects of tourism begins by reflecting on the promotional material and language currently in use particularly in terms of the respect it accords adivasis, women in particular and their cultures.

3. **Impacts of cultural and heritage tourism**
The impacts of cultural and heritage tourism are also seen on the informal sector which services the destination like street vendors, auto and other vehicle drivers and service staff at hotels, etc. While the informal sector is present at sites under all forms of tourism, they are most vulnerable in cultural and heritage tourism since there is a constant threat of eviction.

4. **Role of the Ministry of Tourism and State Tourism Departments**
Vulnerabilities of local communities living in and around cultural and heritage tourism destinations are high due to the exotic nature of the tourism ‘products’. In this context the most important priority would be to ensure that women and child are protected and mechanisms for the same need to be developed by the Ministry and the State Departments of Tourism.

In India many of the cultural and heritage tourism destinations are also located in areas which are in conflict with the state. The Central and State Tourism governments have often made statements about the role of tourism in conflict resolution. This attitude of the state is dangerous since instead of addressing the cause of conflict; the state is further antagonising people, thereby worsening the conflict. Like in ecotourism where conservation is the excuse for ecotourism, in cultural and heritage tourism destinations like Chhattisgarh, Jammu & Kashmir and the North Eastern States, tourism should not be used to divert attention from the reasons of the conflict. Doing this would not support tourism (since an important pre-requisite for tourism is peace) and would also not resolve the situation forcing people to live in a state of constant turmoil. Therefore the role of cultural and heritage tourism in cultural exchange and learning needs to be highlighted through appropriate material generated and placed at tourist destinations as well as in popular media.

**III. Strategies to address challenges**

Tourism Products in Heritage Tourism
- Lived cultures – both tangible and intangible should not be made tourism products
- Heritage buildings should not be privatised and they should be run either by the government or the local communities
- Clear guidelines as to what cultural products maybe or may not be used as souvenirs

Tourism Impacts
- Studies on Tourism Impact Assessment (TIA) be made mandatory for all cultural and heritage tourism development.
Social Aspects
- Ensure no change in land use pattern in adivasi areas unless Community Based Tourism (CBT) is initiated by communities and approved by Grama Sabhas
- Private land which is not adivasi may be used
- No mapping of adivasi communities as it is voyeuristic and does not further cultural exchange
- Creation of Special Tourism Zones (STZ) and land banks be discouraged

Economic Aspects
- No attempt to curb traditional livelihood patterns of communities living in tourism destinations
- Mechanisms to protect the interests of the informal sector be put in place

Tourism Education
- Material to enhance cultural exchange and learning be developed and made available at tourist destinations and advertisements along the same lines placed in popular media.

Governance
- Local communities should play a key role in defining and developing cultural and heritage tourism in their region
- Model of community benefit sharing be developed in adivasi areas. This should be done with the Gram Panchayat
- Panchayat Extension to the Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996 and The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 be upheld.
- Declaration of cultural and heritage tourism destinations as world heritage sites should be done only after completely understanding its implications on local communities. The final decision should be taken only after getting approval from the communities and all the Gram Panchayats in writing within the heritage sites.

Regulation
- Local bodies should be actively involved in the entire tourism development process particularly decision making and regulation

Role of the Ministry of Tourism
- Formation of a Cultural Tourism Policy by also involving representatives from Local Self Governing Institutions (LSGIs) and civil society organisations
- Specific guidelines and Regulatory mechanisms for the mitigation of negative impacts be put in place
- Coordinate with Ministry of Tribal Affairs to influence their policies on tourism.
- Mechanisms for the protection of women and children from local communities living in and around cultural and heritage tourism destinations.
- The Results – Framework Document (RFD) of the Ministry of Tourism should cover both quantitative as well as qualitative indicators. These indicators along with infrastructure development should also cover issues of social, economic, cultural and political aspects of cultural and heritage tourism.

IV. Sum up

Our aspiration for Heritage Tourism is that it will be a tool for cultural exchange and the developing of mutual respect and equal relationship between communities and tourists.

Special issues of the North Eastern Region

The North Eastern States have a rich and special cultural heritage. Many parts of the 8 states have not been explored much. The locale and the fact that much of the traditional practices remain almost untouched also make the region an exotic destination. Other than Heritage Tourism, Adventure Tourism is also a form of tourism that has and is currently being promoted.

The current Tourism Master Plan developed by the North Eastern Council (NEC) shows limited understanding of the region. The Group needs to suggest to the NEC that there be extensive consultations on the Master Plan with communities and other stakeholders in the region before implementing the Plan. This is imperative given the sensitive nature of the geographical location as well as the political and social conflict that the region is experiencing.
To assess the impact of lifting the Protected Area Permits and dilution of the Inner Line Permits.

It is also recommended that Protected Area Permits and Inner Line Permits need to be brought back into regions, where communities have a demand for this. This is necessary as these Permits are a means to ensure that land is not taken away from the indigenous communities, which would have detrimental impacts on the land available for jhum cultivation, which in the absence of industries and ban on hunting, form the basic livelihood of the people.

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End Notes
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