Sustainable tourism in India: Progress and challenges

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Abstract

This paper investigates the issues faced in sustainable tourism development in the country considering the environmental, socio-cultural and infrastructural scenarios in different regions of the country. The author of the study mentions that around 318 million visits were received by the state of Uttar Pradesh, 219 million for Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh had 193 million visits as a tourist 'hub' in 2022. The price of tourism packages such as Lakshadweep Samudram, a five-day tour, costs between Rs 25,500/- to Rs 37, 500/-. Environmental impacts include issues such as a growing number of visitors to environmentally sensitive areas such as the Himalayas and Sundarbans, increasing garbage generation in regions such as Goa, and loss of traditional heritage in the Indian state of Goa among others. Government programmes seem to have a large potential, but their effectiveness is reduced by the lack of consistent implementation and poor infrastructure. Such priorities include community-based tourism, good waste management practices and strict enforcement of the regulations.

Keywords:

Tourism/tourist, Sustainable/sustainability, Environmental, Communities/community, Heritage, Development, Resources, Management, Infrastructure

Introduction

In India, the development of a coherent tourism policy has become an issue of tremendous magnitude. The recent advancement of the Indian tourism industry is unravelling a multitude of prospects as well as challenges for sustainable tourism within the country. This research intends to focus on one of the key challenges that sustainable tourism in India encounters, which is the balance between environmental conservation, socio-cultural aspects, and the economics of development. Considering such aspects as the intergovernmental frameworks, the participation of the local population, and the infrastructural restrictions, the research attempts to propose approaches that such conflicts may be overcome. About more specific objectives, the research uses case studies from varied regions with the end goal of presenting practical suggestions that are aimed at the continuous consideration of the development of tourism in India.

Aim and objectives

Research Aim:

This research aims to evaluate the progress and challenges of sustainable tourism in India and proposes strategies for achieving a balance between tourism growth and ecological preservation.

Research Objectives:

- To analyze the environmental impacts of tourism in ecologically sensitive regions of India.
- To assess the socio-cultural effects of tourism on local communities and heritage sites.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of government initiatives and policies promoting sustainable tourism.
- To identify actionable strategies to address infrastructure gaps and resource management challenges.

Problem statement

Sustainable tourism in India is progressing but still faces several challenges. One of these challenges includes the rise of tourism which has had negative impacts on pristine areas like the Himalayas, Western Ghats, and other ocean borders. Overcrowding areas such as Goa and Manali have made excessive consumption of natural resources such as energy and water and also created a vast amount of waste that local capacity is not able to support, thus becoming a strain on the environment (Fernandes, 2022). In addition, haphazard and excessive tourism infrastructure development leads to disturbance of delicate ecosystems and loss of biodiversity. Socio-cultural factors also abound such as the loss of indigenous cultures, and local community exploitation which makes it even more challenging to pursue the sustainability agenda. While initiatives such as STCI by the government are designed to tackle such issues, their inconsistent application and low local/situational awareness continue to impact advancement. Other concerns include insufficient use of climate-friendly fuels like renewable energy and low capacity to manage waste disposal systems. Policies and political will are missing challenges in the effective management of economic growth and the protection of the environment (Ghosh, 2022). Unless corrective measures are taken shortly, the rapid and unfettered expansion of the tourism industry can lead to irreversible damage to the rich cultural and natural heritage of the country like none other. Sustained efforts and cooperation by stakeholders such as the government, the private sector, and the locals are necessary to ensure that tourism development is compatible with the sustainability principle and the management of the environment in the long run.

Research Methodology

The study employed a secondary research method by largely relying on already existing data and analyzing the topic. To be able to get information, secondary data sources were used and only those that were credible and authoritative. Government websites became the major source of data as they could be relied on to provide up-to-date statistics, reports and policy papers. Further, the study sought to gain deeper insights into the subject by examining research papers, articles and other relevant institutional reports that were published. The data collected sought to address the understanding of trends, challenges and initiatives that are associated with the research topic. Concerning the selection of sources, priority was given to the aspects of authenticity and relevance to enable the accuracy of the findings to be ascertained. The study attempted to present a comprehensive analysis of a problem by integrating information from several materials. This way, the study restricted itself to an orderly review of the literature that was already available which lowered the burden of primary data collection but ensured that the aim of the study was well answered.
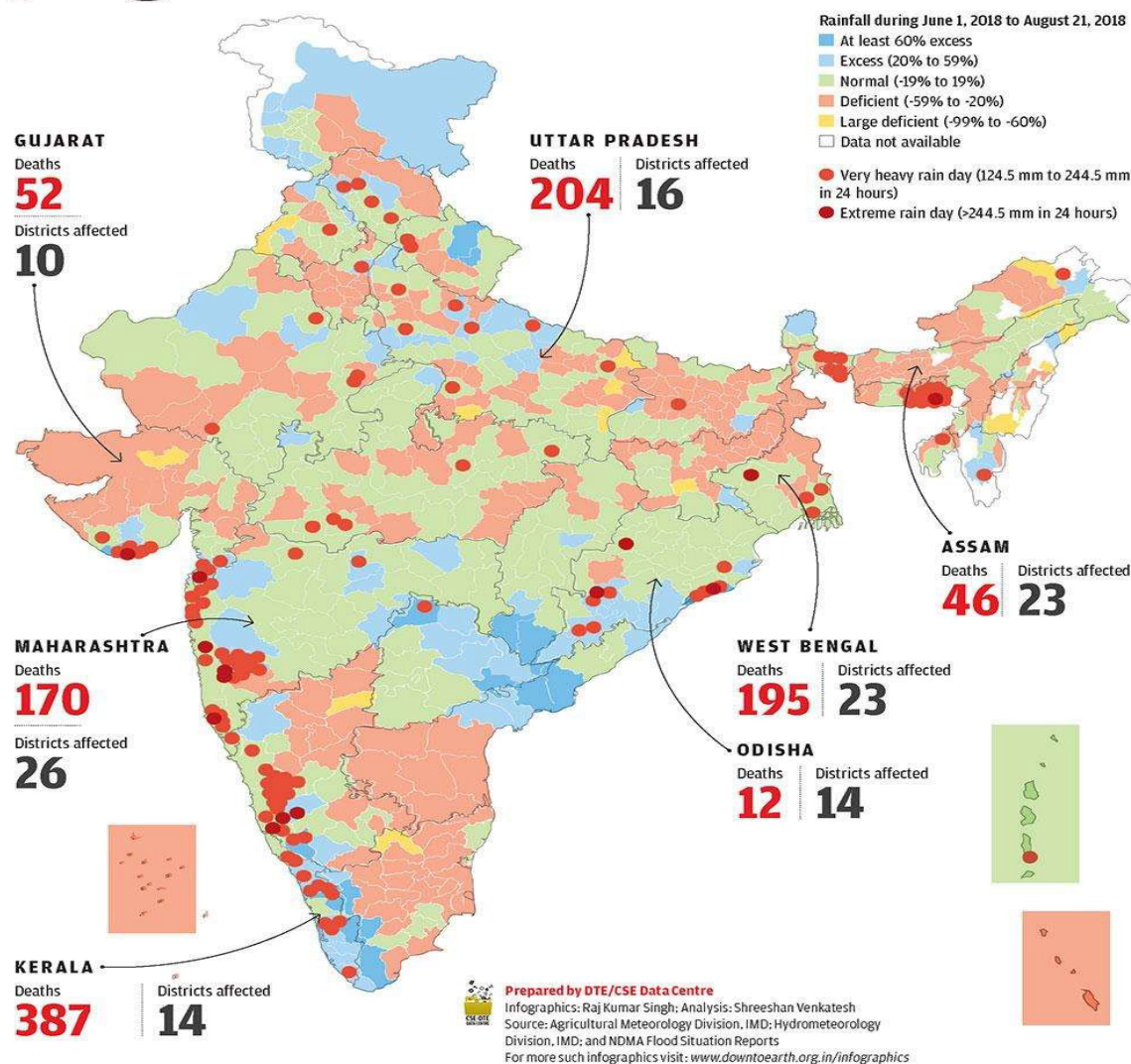
Result and Discussion

Environmental Impact Assessment of Tourism in Sensitive Regions

Sundarbans, the Himalayan belt and Kaziranga National Park have been the areas where environmental impact assessments of tourism development in India have thrown up tough challenges and adverse effects of tourism (Roy, 2020). Ecotourism in the Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve has resulted in substantial damage to the environment due to ferry traffic leading to lead pollution and animal-human collisions. Ecotourism supports income sources for the communities but uncoordinated activities have caused ecosystem stress which has depleted wildlife and contaminated water bodies. An earlier study found that in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the pressure of mass tourism in areas such as Manali, Mussoorie etc has increased beyond allowable limits and resulted in the degradation of mountains (Pathania and Kumar, 2022).

Figure 1: Excess rain plague in India

(Source: downtoearth.org, 2024)

The situation is aggravated by the presence of weak infrastructure, unregulated enterprises, and a lack of sufficient funding for the ecotourism small and medium enterprises. While there are government efforts to promote rural tourism and conservation by promoting village stays, these efforts are undermined by the poor spread of tourists and lack of regulation. Kaziranga National Park, on the other hand, indicates that tourism can have positive effects such as enhanced income and the understanding of environmental protection (Koch and kumar, 2021). However, economic gain and the need to protect the environment is a concern that has to be addressed in all regions as a priority.

Socio-Cultural Implications on Local Communities and Heritage Sites

The socio-cultural impact on the local people and the heritage of India by way of tourism is a mixed bag. In the heritage cities of Rajasthan including Jaipur and Udaipur, tourism has enhanced the tourism development of the historical forts, palaces and the preservation of the traditional arts. Local craftspeople, say, block printers or jewellery makers, have benefited from the influx of tourists who have created a demand for their art. The

cultural heritage in turn, such as Theyyam and Kathakali performances in Kerala has also gained international status and has nurtured the sentiment for the local culture and has created jobs. The photograph below depicts the States that were popular among Indian tourists for the year 2022. Uttar Pradesh recorded a total number of 318 million visits, Tamil Nadu 219, Andhra Pradesh 193 (Florian Zandt, 2024). The states of Karnataka (182 million), Gujarat (136 million), Maharashtra (111 million) and Rajasthan (108 million) also received a fair amount of tourism. In total, there were some 464 million visits to other states, which signifies that there's no lack of tourism across India (Florian Zandt, 2024). Despite the fast-growing trend of tourism, there are adverse aspects that have come along with this which are, cultural degradation and commercialization. Goa has been greatly altered due to mass tourism. The commercialisation of traditional festivals and the changes to the livelihoods of indigenous fishing communities have been damaging.

The Most Popular States for Indian Tourists

Domestic tourist visits per Indian state in 2022, in millions

State	Visits (millions)
Uttar Pradesh	318
Tamil Nadu	219
Andhra Pradesh	193
Karnataka	182
Gujarat	136
Maharashtra	111
Rajasthan	108
Other	464

Figure 2: The Most Popular States for Indian Tourists

(Source: Florian Zandt, 2024)

The dramatic rise in tourists to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, for instance, the Ajanta and Ellora caves, has featured the degradation of age-old sculptures which are of prominent cultural value (Sheth, 2023). In Ladakh, over-tourism has hurt the recreational traditions of the Ladakhi people as they undergo modernization. The economics of over-tourism usually benefits the foreigners and the local population bears the burden of increased expenses with no equal returns. Such socio-cultural issues lead to the conclusion that within some limits, tourism as an economic activity does not only harm the culture but brings some benefits to the locals as well.

Evaluation of Government Policies on Sustainable Tourism

Numerous policies and initiatives are underway in different parts of India to enhance sustainable tourism although their practical implementations differ. The Eco tourism Policy of Himachal Pradesh for example advocates for the locals to take the lead in tourism activities while conserving the delicate ecosystem of the

Himalayas. The picture below indicates estimates that served as package rates for 5 days of leasing the Lakshadweep Samudram arranged in hierarchical order according to the accommodation class category of a passenger either adult or child (lakshadweeptourism, 2023). For the Adult Diamond Class, the prices rise to Rs 37500 for the whole package. In addition, the cost of Diamond Class for children is Rs 33000. Gold Class for adults goes at Rs 28500 while Gold Class for children at Rs 25500. Included in these prices are transfer charges and charges for the tour (lakshadweeptourism, 2023).

Package rate for Five Days Lakshadweep Samudram Package.

Class of Accommodation	Transportation Cost	Tour Charges	Total
Diamond Class (Adult)	Rs.25,000/-	Rs.12,500/-	Rs.37,500/-
Diamond Class(Child)	Rs.25,000/-	Rs.8,000/-	Rs.33,000/-
Gold Class (Adult)	Rs.18,000/-	Rs.10,500/-	Rs.28,500/-
Gold Class Class(Child)	Rs.18,000/-	Rs.7,500/-	Rs.25,500/-

Figure 3: Package rate for Five Days Lakshadweep Samudram Package.

(Source: lakshadweeptourism, 2023)

Homestay programs implemented under this policy have paid off in terms of increasing tourist numbers while also creating employment opportunities for rural households. However, barriers such as poor oversight and inadequate waste management systems limit it to being just that. In Rajasthan, heritage work done in the area is sponsored by the Heritage Tourism Scheme where cultural practitioners are also involved. This has revitalized crafts and created jobs (Kar *et al.* 2022). On the downside, the lack of proper monitoring of its commercialization has at times resulted in the over-commercialization of heritage sites, which has diluted cultural essence. The Adopt a Heritage Scheme which is implemented across the country has been able to hand over the management of heritage sites to private businesses with moderate success in places such as the Red Fort in Delhi (Sharma, 2021). This scheme has however come under fire for marginalizing local people and focusing on business at the expense of community participation Instead in Kerala, the Responsible tourism initiative has been unprecedented in caretaking between ecology and culture. It secures rural economies and enhances traditional practices by directly involving local inhabitants within the area of tourism. Nevertheless, sustainability has not been achieved because different regions of the state have diverse environmental and cultural sensitivities. Despite all these measures, actual practice is still erratic.
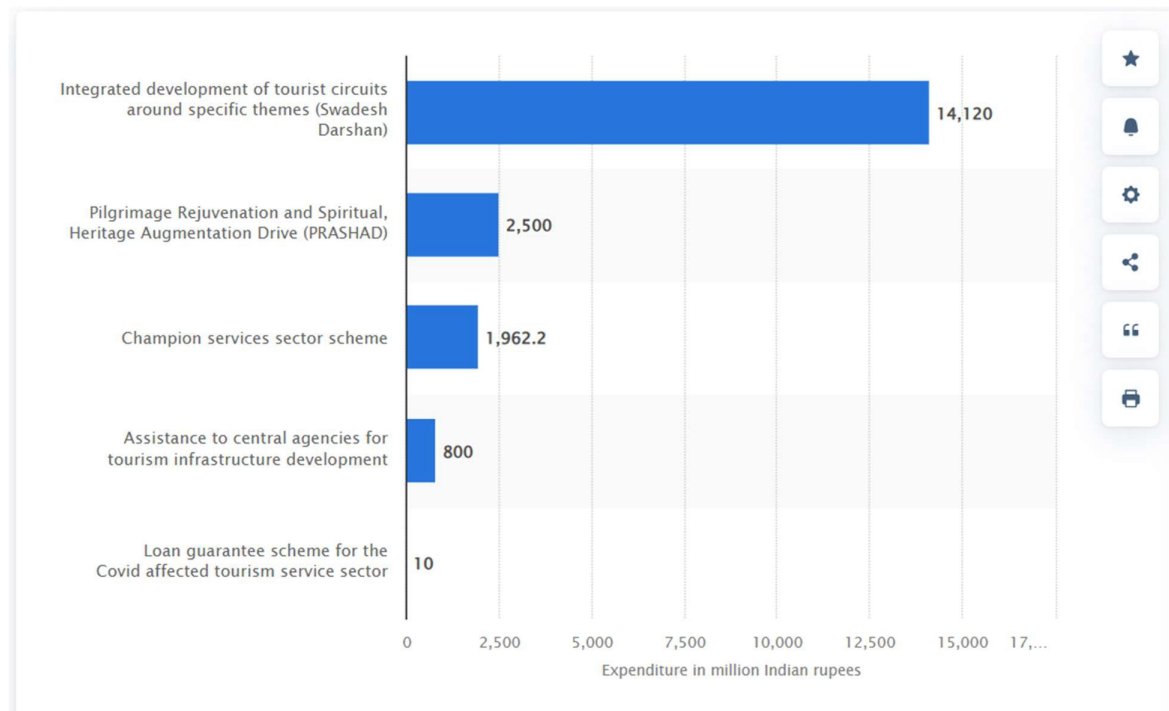
As observed, the Sundarbans Ecotourism Policy attempts to promote tourism and conserve mangroves but lacks proper infrastructure and sufficient tourist awareness about the area, and as a result, causes pressure on the environment. This problem, however, is not restricted to the Sundarbans and extends all over India where policies do not account for cultural appropriation and uneven resource distribution exacerbated by over-tourism and show that there is a need for stronger measures to be put in place, better infrastructure and more community involvement in decisions concerning the insatiable dependence on tourism (Sharma, 2021). Policies for tourism that are sustainable have to be modified to suit the local circumstances to be able to respond to the local challenges while conserving the local culture and the environment.

Resource Management and Infrastructure Challenges Identified

There are, however, resource management and infrastructure factors that are barriers to sustainable tourism in India, especially in ecologically and culturally sensitive regions. In isolated areas like the Sundarbans, uncontrolled tourism activities result in the depletion of water resources and increase in pollution which adversely affect the mangrove ecosystem as well as the dependent communities. The lack of sufficient waste management systems leads to the disposal of plastics and other non-decomposable materials in the environment which hazards wildlife and interrupts the ecological balance (Sandhya Keelery, 2024). In backward Himalayan destinations such as Manali, and Ladakh, insufficient attention to infrastructure planning has resulted in challenges like traffic issues, scarcity of water, poorly managed solid waste, etc. These areas are mostly plagued by the challenges of over-tourism and over-dependence on local resources which are unsustainable, while the

development of sewage facilities has remained pathetic, resulting in rivers and streams being polluted and affecting human and environmental health.

Figure 4: Expenditure of infrastructure in the tourism sector across India in the financial year 2024, by type*(in million Indian rupees)*

(Source: Sandhya Keelery, 2024)

This problem is compounded by the rapid and unregulated construction of tourist accommodations that lead to land degradation, landslides and loss of habitats. Similar things are being witnessed in Goa where unplanned coastal development weakens the beaches and the mangrove forests. With the expansion of tourism, local fishing communities are left with very few opportunities as the coastline is encroached on tourism infrastructure. Water resources are also monopolized by hotels and resorts making it hard for the locals to get the much-needed supplies. The region of Rajasthan, especially the arid regions such as Jaisalmer, has fallen over the edge due to the depletion of water resources due to unsustainable resource exploitation, however, it is not only limited to water. Since there is a dearth of sound waste management practices around historical landmarks such as Jantar Mantar, there are plenty of littering issues that turn many tourists off these sites (Mathur *et al*. 2022). Touristic expansion is a necessity in India. However, such economic developments need to be attempted with ecological safeguards. Then there are other constraints such as limited renewable energy, poor public transport and poor road infrastructure which are major impediments to the development of sustainable tourism. This in turn requires effective policies that manage resources efficiently, better enforcement of environmental regulations and green infrastructure investment which does not undermine India's natural and cultural heritage while enabling local communities to thrive.

Proposed Strategies for Enhancing Sustainable Tourism Practices

The problem of sustainable tourism development in India is multi-faceted, thus requiring a strategic approach for its various regions. Community-based tourism promotion may increase the power of the local communities and prevent resource depletion. For example, in Kerala where the Responsible Tourism Initiative may be scaled up, there are opportunities for training local communities on eco-tourism practices to promote fair earning. Such models can also be applied in Ladakh, where the growth of homestay programs can be limited to tourism development without compromising on the conservation of the local culture and environment (Vogel and Field, 2020). Better waste management systems are essential as well, particularly in crowded areas like Goa and Manali. The practice of waste separation at the source and establishment of recycling facilities in tourist areas served, coupled with educating the pagans can go a long way in preventing destruction. Electric buses and

bicycles are the other options for carbon emissions reduction in these regions. Carrying capacity assessment of the fragile ecosystems- Sundarbans and Kaziranga, for example- can help manage the number of tourists visiting an area and avoid overexploitation of resources (Areendran *et al.* 2020). The ongoing efficient regulations should be put in place making it impossible for these areas to be encroached through unplanned development that would thereby work to the detriment of wildlife habitation and scenery. It also means that different policies will need to be in place to strengthen heritage tourism as well. Rajasthan's heritage property owners could be provided incentives to promote sustainability and protection of adverse environmental effects while maintaining consistency of culture.

The proposed tax incentives or subsidies to encourage energy-efficient restoration of protected buildings would also have long-term benefits. Partnerships with technology companies can also improve efficiency (Kumar and Shekhar, 2020). For instance, employing AI in tracking tourist activities and spotting areas with a heavy influx of tourists can assist management in directing holidaymakers to less affected areas. At last, it is important to remind people about the proper behaviour related to tourism and tourism development. Promoting understanding of the cultural context and trying not to impact nature too much will help build a healthy environment for future generations. With the adoption of these approaches, India will be able to conserve its natural and cultural assets whilst garnering revenue through tourism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study takes stock of the efficacy of sustainable tourism in India situated within the rubrics of its achievements as well as problems faced over time. Although several government policies and community-based programs have brought some positive change, these have unfortunately not been adopted uniformly across all areas. Environmental negligence in ecologically sensitive regions like the Sundarbans and the Himalayas brings forth the need for better management practices coupled with stricter laws. Likewise, socio-cultural changes in Goa and Ladakh demonstrate the relative effect of tourism on local cultures and economies. Rajasthan's forts and Ajanta caves are some of the heritage sites that have been over-commercialized to the point of threatening their cultural values and integrity. Other political arrangements, including Kerala's Responsible Tourism Initiative, however, documented pockets of success, speak to the failure set against a picture of progress being made for the country at large. Resource deprivation and poor infrastructure coupled with a lack of effective monitoring continue to frustrate the realization of sustainable development. Suggested practical implementations assert community development, technology, and social campaigns as tools to be used; but stress that they must be properly carried out and there is political backing for it. This research thus argues that for sustainable tourism to be achieved in India, a wider perspective is required involving all the stakeholders to ensure economic growth from tourism does not impede ecological and cultural environments. Otherwise, the rich natural and cultural heritage of India stands threatened in the long term, threatening the resources which are the very basis of its tourism industry.

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