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Eco-tourism and Sustainable Development: A Geographical Study of Bastar District

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Abstract

Bastar district is a region of significant historical and cultural importance located in the southern part of Chhattisgarh State, India. The district is rich in dense forests, high hills, waterfalls, caves, and wild animals, contributing to its scenic beauty. Bastar is home to 70% of tribal communities, including the Gond, Maria, Muriya, Bhatra, Halba, and Dhruva communities. Bastar has been a tourist attraction for its rich diversity of flora and fauna. This study explores the impact of ecotourism on the livelihood and well-being of the rural people and the environment in Bastar district, which is home to numerous rare and endangered species and rich in biodiversity and tribal culture. It demonstrates that ecotourism has helped to minimize the local people's excessive reliance on forest resources and that tourism officials should take additional steps to educate and empower locals so that they might get benefit from the development of tourism. Bastar region is an eco-tourism hub that aims to promote personal growth, environmental sustainability, and socially responsible travel. The tourism hub will offer various facilities and services to cater to the needs and interests of the tourists, such as accommodation, food, recreation, education, and adventure.

[Keywords: Eco-tourism, National Park, Waterfall, Infrastructure, Biodiversity]

Introduction

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Ecotourism is a subset of tourism where the focus is on appreciating and comprehending the natural environment—or parts of it—in the context of the culture in which it is found (Dowling and Fennell, 2003). Ecotourism becomes available when traditional tourism experiences a decline in visitors, which has an impact on tourism performance. A subset of tourism known as ecotourism concentrates on the environmental and socio-cultural aspects of a location in addition to its geographic, demographic, and psychographic characteristics (Girikallo et al, 2022). The intelligent and efficient use of tourism resources is the foundation of the industry. The main emphasis of tourism is its resources, which can also be used to fulfil demands that come up during the traveler process. Resources used by tourists are owned by the country. Despite this, resources of particular significance became globally relevant. In 1978, N. Muller used the term "ecotourism" to describe one of the many approaches to develop sustainable tourism (Azmaiparashvili, 2017). The International Year of Ecotourism (IYE) was declared by the UN in 2002, and the esteemed Journal of Ecotourism was established in the same year. Furthermore, following years of development and research, ecotourism is now a subject of study in the field of tourism research (Weaver & Lawton, 2007). "Responsible travel to a natural area that conserves the environment and sustains the wellbeing of the local community" is how ecotourism is defined. (TIES, 2015). The Republic of India has a great deal of potential for the development of ecotourism because of its rich biodiversity, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and conservation reserves, which make about 23% of its total land area (ISFR 2017). The sustainable development principle that an enterprise must be both commercially and environmentally viable as well as socially and culturally acceptable gave rise to the important and emerging field of ecotourism (Raha, et al 2021). As an alternative to traditional tourism, ecotourism emphasises social and ecological responsibility through a number of physical and mass-tourism-related elements (Barfuss et al., 2017). Furthermore, ecotourism establishes a solid scientific basis for the development and administration of a particular area by fusing behavioural perspectives with the fundamental essence of the place.

Parks and protected areas had to be established in order to meet the increasing demand for ecotourism. These locations serve as the main hub for ecotourism these days. In the setting of a specifically protected natural area, ecotourism organisers favour scientific-cognitive tourism because they think it is easy to implement. In order to be effective, ecotourism needs to promote sustainable development by creating a stable, long-term revenue stream that raises living standards for both ecotourism service providers and residents. The social dimensions of productive organisation and environmental protection are essential components of any ecotourism initiative (Eriksson, 2013).

Sustainable tourism includes ecotourism as a subcategory. The main reason behind rapid economic growth of a developing nations are to adopt ecotourism and integrate it into their plans for conservation is because of the perception that it may be a useful tool for sustainable development (Shasha, Z.T., et al. 2020). Travelling to natural areas for educational purposes or to participate in eco-friendly activities is called ecotourism, or alternative tourism. It is a type of nature-based travel that supports the social and economic advancement of the surrounding community. In addition to local cultural artefacts, its main focus is on experiencing and learning about nature, the environment, flora and wildlife, and their ecosystems (Azmaiparashvili, 2017).

To promote environmentally friendly travel habits that assist in cultural preservation, local community development, and environmental protection, the idea of eco-tourism has become a significant component of the tourist industry (Black R, 2007). An excellent location for ecotourism is the Bastar District in southern Chhattisgarh, India, which offers a unique and abundant tapestry of biodiversity, natural beauty, and cultural heritage. It is characterized by its dense forests, waterfalls, caverns, and diverse flora and fauna. The area is a part of the critically important biological Dandakaranya forest. Moreover, several Indigenous tribes, like the Gond, Maria, and Muria, considered to Bastar as a home.

Their vibrant cultural customs and ways of life provide eco-tourists with a genuine cultural experience. These tribes' traditional wisdom and sustainable living methods are manifestations of their strong ties to the natural world (Rai, R., Tripathi, S.P. 2008).

Bastar ecotourism has the potential to be a driving force for socio-economic and environmental improvements. Eco-tourism may help conserve natural resources and wildlife habitats by emphasizing ethical travel methods. It can also promote respect for and understanding of local cultures. Additionally, ecotourism may help local populations by creating jobs in the tourism industry, handicrafts, and local guiding, all of which can improve their quality of life and lower poverty.

Currently, eco-tourism in Bastar is in its nascent stage, with several initiatives and projects being implemented to promote the region as an eco-friendly destination. These include the development of eco-parks, community-based tourism programs, and the promotion of local arts and crafts. However, the region faces several challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited awareness among tourists, and the need for capacity building among local communities to effectively manage and benefit from eco-tourism activities. This study paper aims to offer insights into how the Bastar District may utilize its resources to promote sustainable development by examining the opportunities and difficulties associated with eco-tourism.

Profile of the Study Area

Geographically, Bastar District is located between latitudes 18°5' and 19°5' north and longitudes 81°3' and 82°2' east (Fig. 1). Its vast expanse of 6,596.90 square kilometers is covered by it. The district's advantageous location adds to the natural and cultural richness of the area. Rich in trees, the district

makes up a large portion of the Dandakaranya forest region. Numerous endemic and endangered species of plants and animals may found in these woodlands. Bastar's natural surroundings, which include waterfalls, caverns, and verdant landscapes, make it a desirable location for ecotourism well as a vital region for biodiversity protection.

Jagdalpur serves as the administrative headquarters for both Bastar division and the district itself. The

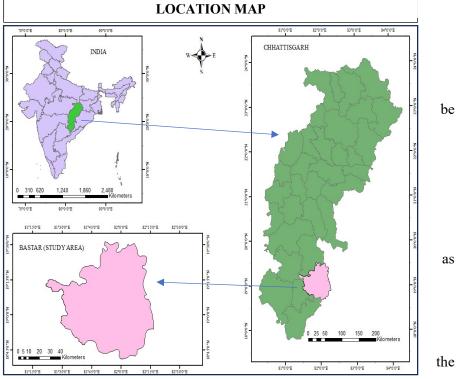


Figure 1

district is surrounded by Kondagaon to the north, Narayanpur to the northwest, Dantewada to the southwest, Sukuma to the south, and the state of Odisha to the east. Bastar was part of the larger Dandakaranya plateau before being divided from Kanker and Dantewada in 1999. The district center, Jagdalpur, is almost 305 kilometers away from the state capital, Raipur. According to the 2011 census,

Bastar has a population of 834,375, with a slight majority of women (420,669) compared to men (413,706). The district is predominantly tribal, with about 70% of its population belonging to various tribes such as the Halba, Dhruva, Gond, Maria, Muriya, and Bhatra (Dwivedi, R. et al. 2016). The district is divided into seven development blocks or tehsils such as Jagdalpur, Bastar, Bakawand, Lohandiguda, Tokapal, Darbha, and Bastar. Ecotourism has played a significant role in the region's tourism industry since the late 1980s. Defined by the International Ecotourism Society as "responsible travel that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people," ecotourism in Bastar emphasizes nature-based activities that are ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial, and satisfying for tourists. This form of tourism, which began in 1973, aligns with the district's commitment to preserving its natural resources and cultural heritage while promoting sustainable development.

Objectives of the study

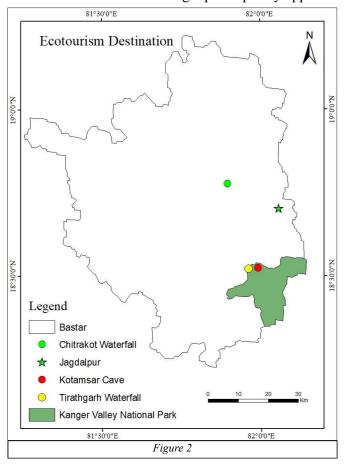
- 1. To investigate the potential of ecotourism and major natural tourist destinations.
- 2. To the study of infrastructure development of tourist destinations and its impact on the social and natural environment.

Methodology

First, comprehensive data on the eco-tourism resource base were gathered, including information on potential areas, waterfalls, scenic valleys, key locations of faunal and floral species, and accessibility. Additionally, data on infrastructural facilities—such as transportation, accommodation, and institutional availability—within the national park and other tourist spots were collected. Primary data on infrastructural facilities at eco-tourism destinations were collected using a participatory approach

field observation. Secondary data are sourced from government publications, research articles and papers, among other scholarly materials. This research was conducted in December and January 2022-23 and 2023-24. Its observations were held on various waterfall attractions, Kanger Valley attractions, rivers, limestone caves (Kotamsar and Kailash Gufa) and flora and fauna. Field observations were conducted to create an inventory of attractive physical features at tourist attractions. During the exploration, observations were conducted both directly and indirectly using indicators such as footprints, soil analysis, and sound. Information was also gathered consulting field officers and holding intensive group discussions (FGDs) with local communities around tourist attractions.

In the study region, a comprehensive description of biodiversity resources, including flora and avifauna, was provided. A location map of the study area was



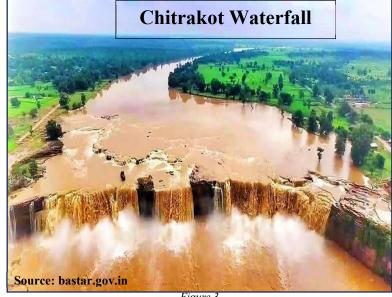
Ram Yash, Kanhaiya Lal Gupta, Puneet Yadav Jay Prakash Vishvkarma Aruna Singh Sachin Kumar Suman created, along with another map highlighting all the tourist spots (Fig. 2). The trends in eco-tourist inflow from 2019 to 2023 are analysed, revealing a growth in eco-tourism during this period.

Chitrakot

The Chitrakot Waterfall, often hailed as the "Niagara of India," is indeed a marvel of nature located in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh (Fig. 2). Standing at a height of ninety feet on the Indravati River, it presents a breath-taking sight, especially during the monsoon season from July to October. The waterfall's changing hues—from a pristine white on moonlit summer nights to a reddish tint during the rains—add to its allure. Its location, 273 kilometres from Raipur and 40 kilometres from Jagdalpur, makes it accessible for visitors seeking a blend of adventure and tranquillity. As the largest and most voluminous waterfall in Chhattisgarh, Chitrakot holds a special place as the principal waterfall of the Bastar Division. Its horse foot-like shape contributes to its comparison with the famous Niagara Falls. The waterfall is a popular picnic spot due to its proximity to Jagdalpur, and it draws travellers with its vast volume of water cascading amidst the sturdy trees and Vindhya hills. The roar of the water during the peak of the rainy season offers a thrilling experience, while the surrounding dense forest enhances its natural beauty. The site is well-lit for tourists, allowing the grandeur of the cascading water to be admired even after dusk. Chitrakot Waterfall's streams fall at least three times and can go up to seven times at different periods, making every visit unique. It's a destination that promises a

memorable experience for every traveller, encapsulating essence of ecotourism and the cultural richness of Bastar (Prasad and Bibhar, 2020).

The waterfall describing is a captivating natural wonder, located just 35 km from Jagdalpur. It's a place where visitors are so mesmerized by the enchanting play of light and shadow that they find it hard to leave. Perched on the Munga Bahar River, the waterfall plunges 300 feet down a naturally terraced slope, creating a serene spectacle reminiscent of



milk froth and water droplets. This magnificent cascade owes its existence to ancient geological events in the Numa Valley, where an earthquake led to the collapse of a lunar crater, forming the dramatic cliffs we see today. It's a testament to nature's artistry and the timeless allure of such pristine environments. If you're looking for a tranquil retreat that offers both beauty and a sense of history, this waterfall is an ideal destination (Fig. 3).

Kanger Valley National Park

Kanger Valley National Park, named after the Kangar River flowing through it, is a protected area in Chhattisgarh, India, covering 200 square kilometers. Established in 1982, the park is a sanctuary for diverse wildlife and flora, nestled among high mountains and expansive valleys. The park's forests are a mix of humid deciduous types, with teak, sal, saugaun, and bamboo trees dominating the landscape. It is home to the Bastar Maina, also known as the Hill Myna (Gracula religiosa), famed for its ability to mimic human speech and recognized as the state bird. Kanger Valley is renowned for its three significant caves: Kutumbasar, Kailash, and Dandak, which showcase impressive stalactite and

stalagmite formations. These limestone caves are active, with ongoing mineral deposit formations that create the stalactites and stalagmites. The Park provides a haven for various animal species, including crocodiles found

on the sandy shores of Bhainsadhara. The Tirathgarh Waterfall and the Crocodile Park at Kenjhardhara and Bhainsadhara are notable attractions within the park (Fig. 4). Kanger Valley National Park is a testament to India's commitment to preserving its natural heritage and biodiversity, providing a space where nature thrives and visitors can witness the harmony between wildlife and the environment.

The data from 2014 to 2023 on tourist visits to Kanger Valley National Park/Kutumsar Caves in Bastar reveals several trends. There has been a significant

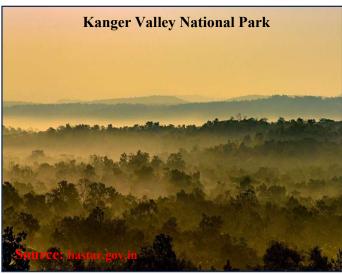


Figure 4

Table 1: Tourist Visited in Kanger Valley National Park/ Kutumsar Caves, Bastar (Forest) from 2014 to 2023 Year Domestic Foreigner Total Tourist **Tourists** Tourist 2014 38236 71 38307 50 2015 37884 37934 37 2016 60693 60730 2017 111650 30 111680 2018 47961 39 48000 87 2019 61923 62010 2020 24795 11 24806 2021 92564 3 92567 2022 155950 39 155989 2023 219866 93 219959 Source: Tourism Department, Govt. of C.G., 2023

increase in total tourist visits over the decade. The number of tourists rose from 38,307 in 2014 to 219,959 in 2023, indicating a strong upward trend in tourism to the area. The majority of visitors were domestic tourists, with their numbers showing a substantial increase, especially from 2016 onwards. In 2017, there was a sharp rise in domestic tourist visits, reaching 111,650, more than doubling the previous year's count. The number peaked in 2023 with 219,866 domestic tourists.

The data shows a significant drop in tourist visits in 2020, coinciding with

the global COVID-19 pandemic. Total tourists decreased to 24,806, down from 62,010 in 2019, highlighting the pandemic's impact on travel and tourism. However, a strong recovery is observed in subsequent years, with tourist numbers bouncing back to 92,567 in 2021 and continuing to rise after that

The number of foreign tourists has remained relatively low throughout the years, with a slight fluctuation. The highest number of foreign tourists recorded was in 2014 with 71 visitors, while the lowest was in 2021 with only 3 visitors. Despite the small numbers, there was an increase in 2023, with 93 foreign tourists, the highest in the recorded period. Finally, the data reflects a general upward trend in tourism to Kanger Valley National Park/Kutumsar Caves, with a notable recovery and growth following the COVID-19 pandemic, driven primarily by domestic tourism (Table 1).

The Tirathgarh Waterfall, nestled in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh beneath the Kanger Valley, is a majestic sight to behold. Located 35 miles southwest of Jagdalpur, it stands as one of the tallest waterfalls in India, often referred to as the "Magician of Kanger Valley." The waterfall cascades from a height of 300 feet, formed by the confluence of the Kangar River and its tributaries, the Manuga Bahar.



Tirathgarh Waterfall

Figure 5

Visitors to Tirathgarh are treated to a spectacular display of nature's power, with the vast water reservoir, the thunderous sound of the falls, and the white water rushing down in a frothy spectacle. The best time to visit and experience the full might of the waterfall is during the rainy season, which spans from October to April, when the water volume is at its peak, creating an unforgettable experience for all who witness it. The Tirathgarh Waterfall is not just a natural wonder but also a testament to the unique beauty of Chhattisgarh's landscape.

Kotamsar and Kailash Limestone Caves

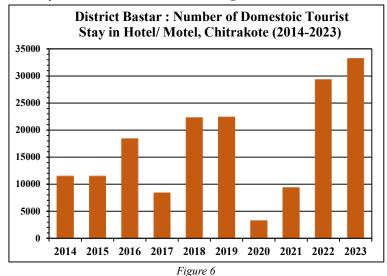
The Kanger Valley National Park, located here (Fig.2), is home to the ancient Kailash Cave, discovered on March 22, 1993. This cave is renowned for its old and exquisite limestone formations, stretching approximately 1000 feet in length and 120 feet in depth. The stalagmites and stalactites within create a natural replica of the sacred Kailash, revered by the local people.

In addition to Kailash Cave, the park also houses Kutumbasar and Dandak Caves, each with their own unique geological features. Tourists can explore these natural wonders with the help of guides and torches provided at the site. However, it's important to note that Kailash Cave is closed during the monsoon season and is open to visitors from November to June each year (kangervalley.cg.nic.in).

The region's natural beauty extends beyond its caves. The Chitrakote route near Mardum features a recurring cascade known as a 'tornado,' where water plummets 100 feet directly from the Indravati River. This waterfall, locally known as Moore Ghumar, is named after the peacocks that are often

Ram Yash, Kanhaiya Lal Gupta, Puneet Yadav Jay Prakash Vishvkarma Aruna Singh Sachin Kumar Suman

seen in the area (Chandrawanshi, D., Sanyal, D., 2022). The waterfall, along with the lush vegetation and summer clouds, adds to the splendour of Bastar during the wet season, making it a sight to behold for nature lovers and adventurers alike. The place is located in Kanger Valley National Park. It is abundant in stalactite and stalagmite columns. A narrow passageway measuring five feet in height and three feet in width leads to the caves. The cave consists of five chambers, each with many blind wells, except one that is



covered with a sheet of rock that produces a hollow sound when touched (Fig. 6).

The cave you're referring to is a fascinating geological and historical site. The extensive main path,

measuring 330 meters in length and varying from 20 to 72 meters in width, houses remarkable limestone formations. Stalagmites rise from the floor, while stalactites descend from the roof, each telling a story of the Earth's past climates and environments.

Infrastructure

It has been highlighted some key points that are essential for the development of ecotourism in Bastar district. Indeed, infrastructure plays a pivotal role in enhancing the tourist experience and can significantly contribute to the growth of ecotourism (Chandrakar, V. (2020). Here's a summary of the points is mentioned.

District Bastar: Number of Tourists Stay in			
Hotel/ Motel, Chitrakote (2014-2023)			
year	Domestic Tourist	Foreigner	Total
		Tourists	Tourist
2014	11490	254	11744
2015	11472	309	11781
2016	18394	162	18556
2017	8361	152	8513
2018	22257	216	22473
2019	22377	246	22623
2020	3240	448	3688
2021	9348	0	9348
2022	29303	36	29339
2023	33228	54	33282
Source: Tourism Department, Govt. of C.G., 2023.			

The presence of quality accommodations, diverse food options, and recreational activities are crucial in making tourist destinations like Tirathgarh and Chitrakote waterfalls more appealing.

Educating local communities about the benefits of tourism can lead to greater support and involvement, which is vital for the success of ecotourism initiatives. Encouraging the formation of cooperative societies among educated and trained youth can lead to the creation of new tourism-related enterprises, fostering economic growth (Gogelia M., 2012).

It's important to plan infrastructure development sustainably to ensure that the natural environment, local handicrafts, folk arts, and cultural heritage are preserved for future generations (Dias, Á. et al. 2021; Prasad and Akundy, 2021).

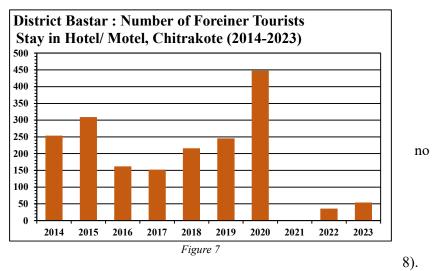
These strategies not only aim to improve the ecotourism experience but also ensure that the benefits of tourism are distributed equitably among local communities, contributing to the overall socioeconomic development of the region.

Infrastructure facilities play a crucial role in enhancing the ecotourism experience. The availability of amenities such as accommodation, food, and recreation contribute to attracting more tourists. Tirathgarh waterfall at Kanger Valley National Park and Chitrakote waterfall of Bastar are focal points for infrastructure development. The government should prioritise educating local communities about the societal benefits of tourism. Forming cooperative societies of educated and trained youth can promote various tourism enterprises. Sustainable infrastructure planning is essential to preserve local handicrafts, folk arts, and cultural heritage.

Analysing the 2014–2023 data on tourists staying in hotels and motels in Chitrakote (Bastar) reveals several significant facts about accommodation facilities. In the study region, the total number of tourists staying in hotels and motels increased from 11,744 in 2014 to 33,282 in 2023. This indicates a significant upward trend in tourist accommodations over the decade. However, a significant reduction happened in 2017, when the overall number of tourists plummeted to 8,513, the lowest in a decade. This decrease was followed by a gradual recovery, with a peak of 33, 282 in 2023 (Table 2).

Generally speaking, domestic travellers make up the bulk of visitors. The number of domestic tourists stays increased significantly in 2016 and 2018, reaching 18,394 and 22,257, respectively. The numbers also show a notable increase in 2022 and 2023, coming to 29,303 and 33,228 respectively (Table 2 & Fig 7).

The number of foreign tourists varies but remains relatively modest compared domestic to tourists. Despite the pandemic, foreign tourism increased by 448 visitors in 2020. However, there were recorded foreign tourists in 2021. The numbers increased somewhat in 2022 and 2023, 36 reaching and 54 international tourists, respectively (Table 2 & Fig



The figures show an enormous decrease in visitor stays in 2020, most likely owing to the global COVID-19 outbreak. Total tourist numbers fell to 3,688, down from 22,623 in 2019. However, there was a noteworthy comeback in 2021, with the total increasing to 9,348, and this trend was maintained in consecutive years (Table 2). Furthermore, the data show a general trend of increasing visitor stays in Chitrakote's hotels and motels, with a significant post-pandemic rebound and a dominating increase in domestic travel. Although there have been minor fluctuations, the overall trend points to the region's increasing attractiveness and improved visitor accommodations.

Biodiversity

Bastar, indeed, is a treasure trove of biodiversity and cultural heritage. The undulating topography of the Bastar plateau, coupled with its subtropical forests, receives an annual rainfall of 1200 to 1600 mm, creating a lush environment for a variety of flora to thrive. Dominant forest species like Sal (Shorea robusta) and Teak (Tectona grandis) form the backbone of the region's ecosystem. Other significant plants such as tendu, mahua, tamarind, kachnar, harra, and arjun add to the rich botanical diversity.

The collection of tendu leaves and mahua flowers has traditionally been a primary source of income for the forest-dependent communities. However, the availability of these and other valuable forest products like kosa, bamboo, and mahua has been on the decline due to factors such as external interference, adverse climate conditions, and overexploitation.

To ensure the welfare of the tribal communities and the conservation of economically important plant species, it is crucial to:

- Educate the local communities about sustainable forest product use.
- Promote the cultivation of new plantations to replenish what has been lost.
- Implement strategies for sustainable resource management

The unique combination of Bastar's biodiversity, tribal heritage, and the need for sustainable resource management highlights the region's ecological significance and the importance of preserving its natural wealth for future generations (Nonhare, B.P., et al. 2003; Prasad and Srihari, 2017).

Bastar, a region known for its rich biodiversity, lies in the southern part of Chhattisgarh, India. Let's delve into the fascinating natural wealth of this area (Mishra, S., at. Al. 2022). the bastar plateau exhibits an undulating topography, annual rainfall ranges from 1200 to 1600 mm. and the forests in this subregion are subtropical. Sal (Shorea robusta) and teak (Tectona grandis) are the dominant forest species. Other significant plants include tendu, mahua, tamarind, kachnar, harra, and arjun. Tendu leaf (new and soft) and mahua flower collection serve as the primary source of forest income. Other valuable forest products include kosa, bamboo, and mahua.

Over the past decades, forest product availability has decreased due to external interference, adverse climate, and land use chanched. To safeguard the interests of tribal welfare, economically important plant species must be conserved. Raising awareness among tribal communities about rational forest product use and promoting new plantations are essential steps. Bastar's biodiversity, tribal heritage, and sustainable resource management make it a unique and ecologically significant region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Chitrakot Waterfall, also known as the "Niagara of India," along with nearby natural attractions such as the Kanger Valley National Park, Tirathgarh Waterfall, and the Kotamsar and Kailash Caves, highlight the Bastar region's unique ecological and geological wealth. These locations entice visitors from all across the country with their captivating combination of natural beauty, adventure, and tranquility. The region's growing popularity and the appeal of its natural landscapes are highlighted by increased tourism, particularly following the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it's the stunning waterfalls, fascinating caves, or rich animals, Bastar offers an amazing experience, making it a must-see destination for nature enthusiasts and explorers. The continued development of ecotourism in the Bastar area depends on a balanced approach that prioritizes infrastructural improvements, community involvement, and biodiversity conservation. The increase in tourist lodgings and visits, particularly during the epidemic, demonstrates the region's growing desirability as a destination. However, sustainable planning is required to ensure that this expansion does not jeopardise Bastar's unique natural and cultural legacy. Infrastructure upgrades, such as excellent lodging, different food options, and recreational activities, are critical to bringing more people to natural sites such as the Tirathgarh and Chitrakote Falls. The preservation of Bastar's distinctive ecological and cultural legacy is critical. The fall in forest product availability highlights the importance of sustainable resource management and community education. Bastar can thrive as an ecological and culturally significant region if new plantations are promoted and tribal inhabitants

are made more aware. Overall, the success of ecotourism in Bastar is dependent on a comprehensive approach that incorporates infrastructural development, community engagement, and environmental care, ensuring that the region's natural beauty and cultural diversity are protected for future generations.

Ecotourism community involvement has contributed to lessening the over-reliance on forest resources for subsistence. Through their active participation in ecotourism, locals support sustainable development. Locals in tourist destinations have a favourable outlook on the growth of the tourism industry. The destination population's economic situation is greatly impacted by tourism. Even with the beneficial effects, locals' awareness of the advantages of tourism could still be improved. Communities should be educated about the advantages of tourism to society through government initiatives.

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