

Jana Prerit Abhiyan

People's Plan for a Samarth Bastar

1 Responsible Tourism with People's Participation

Bastar region offers an immense potential as a tourism destination. Its attraction lies in its features such as i) natural beauty with the dense forests, waterfalls and rivers besides the salubrious climate ii) the various ancient monuments, temples etc.; the local crafts and arts; the various festivals including the Dassehra, goncha, madai, as also the tourism event Bastar lokotsav and iii) the glimpse it can offer of the tribal lifestyle, values and culture – distinct from the lifestyle adopted by the rest of the population.

1.1 Potential and Possibilities

It is surprising that some of the spots with exceptional scenic beauty are not relatively known to the general tourists in the country. Bastar region – and Chhattisgarh state as a whole – has not been promoted as a tourist destination in the manner it deserves to be promoted. This may also have been a blessing in disguise in a way. Tourism, with reckless expansion of facilities and irresponsible attitude of tourists, has been known to have a damaging effect on the charm of pristine environments in India. This may get aggravated in the days to come with the rising middle class and higher disposable incomes. The underpublicized tourism potential of Chhattisgarh or Bastar is, therefore, an opportunity to take precautionary measures to conserve the environment while trying for a higher tourist inflow.

In Chhattisgarh, while the government has taken up various initiatives to promote tourism, there exists considerable scope for exploiting the potential for tourism further. There is especially scope for tourism based on the themes of experience of tribal life, stays in forests, promotion of indigenous produce and cuisine etc. Responsible tourism – based on conservation of nature, minimal damage to environment while creating tourism infrastructure etc. – can be promoted as a mainstay of Chhattisgarh tourism.

With innovative measures of participation by the people, tourism and related services can be one of the principal means of providing livelihoods to people in an equitable and sustainable manner. This could also serve as a means to promoting local agricultural and forest produce.

1.2 Existing schemes and arrangements

The infrastructure and facilities for tourism in Bastar is limited. Generally, tourism in India has been influenced more by considerations of convenience of travel, comfort, cuisine, cost and safety. The average Indian tourist is not attracted by the offer of an experience of a different lifestyle or of adventure (though this is changing too some extent with the new generation preferring off-beat destinations and varied experiences). As such, Bastar, with its limited infrastructure and connectivity as also lack of facilities offering comfort, has not been

a popular tourist destination. The perception of security risks has also contributed to the low inflow of tourists.

The state government promotes tourism through the government agencies by way of advertisements, information channels etc. and also through organisation of events such as Bastar Lokotsav etc. There exists a good scope for focussed efforts on building an exclusive brand of Chhattisgarh tourism.

Besides the government efforts to boost tourism, many private ventures have also been initiated for providing services to tourists. Besides the usual service providers such as hotels, restaurants and travel operators, there is a social venture which provides customised packages for tourists including providing an experience of tribal culture. There are also some individual entrepreneurs who arrange for home stay for tourists in some of the tribal villages.

1.3 Reasons for under-utilisation of potential

1.3.1 Pattern of control

- i. The tourism infrastructure in Bastar is negligible and inadequate in comparison to the potential. Whatever efforts that are being taken for publicising the potential of tourism in Bastar, are mostly through government tourism agencies with some supplementing efforts by private players.
- ii. Private players have not yet made major investments nor set up any sizable infrastructure for tourism promotion for Chhattisgarh. The efforts in the private sector are mostly by individual entrepreneurs and not by any well-known corporate entities.
- iii. A major block to promotion of tourism is the security perception due to the presence of left-wing extremism (LWE) in Bastar. However, the presence of LWE is limited to certain areas and tourism can certainly be promoted in the rest of the region.
- iv. The locals do not have much stake in tourism. Generally, locals in tourist areas have considerable stake in tourism which mostly moves the wheels of local economy. Bastar has not been promoted as a tourist spot, in spite of the potential, due to which neither do the locals derive much benefit in a big way from tourism nor do they have any say in the matters related to creation of tourist infrastructure and facilities or provision of services.

1.3.2 Institutional capabilities

Tourist destinations are created when there is a confluence of efforts by multiple actors such as various wings of the government on one hand and several private players on the other hand. Besides the direct efforts of the government agencies responsible for promotion of tourism, the role played by the government in other areas, such as provision of infrastructure, regulation of various service providers and the assurance of safety and security of the tourist, are equally important. The creation of an eco-system, besides promotional efforts by the government, facilitate investment and setting up of various types of facilities and services by the private sector.

As mentioned earlier, the government agencies have not created any institutional or infrastructural arrangements commensurate with the potential for tourism nor have private players set up any major facilities for tourists. However, a Tribal Tourist Village is being set

up by the government in the neighbouring Kondagaon district over an area of three acres aimed at providing an experience of tribal life to tourists.

1.3.3 Adequacy of financial provision

The absence of any major investments for tourism and the overall low level of activity in the tourism sector have resulted in limited demand for large financial investments in the sector. It also appears that as long as the presence of LWE in parts of the district is seen as an inhibiting factor, there would not be any major investments in Bastar for tourism. This presents an opportunity for initiating small ventures providing facilities to tourists with the participation of the local population. The financial requirements for such facilities are not expected to be very high.

1.4 Steps suggested

The absence of any major investments in setting up tourist infrastructure till date, either by the government or by private sector, presents an opportunity to learn from the experience of other tourist locations to create an exclusive brand of Bastar tourism. It has been observed that many a times, reckless expansion of tourist facilities and large inflow of tourists take their toll on the ecology of the area. There have also been cases where the place loses its original charm due to unplanned expansion of tourism infrastructure. Bastar can embark on a tourism journey which eschews unplanned development of infrastructure, opts for small aesthetically pleasing structures in tune with the architecture of tribal homes, selects the cuisine to be promoted, ensures conservation of environment and focusses on providing the tourist with an experience of the tribal life and its rich traditions. The Bastar brand could represent the serenity of its natural beauty, the simplicity of the way of life of the residents and their oneness with nature. The experience of the tribal way of life could be considered to be a proposition as important as its natural beauty for attracting tourists and the relevant segment of customers could be approached accordingly.

Tourism in Bastar should also be used as a means of promoting awareness of conservation of environment. Certain demarcated areas near tourist spots such as waterfalls or temples etc. could be made free of plastic and outside food. Proper arrangements be made for food etc. in a planned set up. Tourists entering forest areas for tourism purposes should not be allowed to carry plastic packets or bottles. Public efforts would also be needed to ensure that such guidelines are followed.

Tourism in Bastar could also be constructively used for familiarising people with an alternative approach not just to production of food or acquisition of resources but essentially to an alternative philosophy of living and of mankind's relationship with nature. For the last few decades, in the course of its struggle for eradicating poverty and addressing scarcity of food and resources, our society has developed an approach of attempting to derive maximum output from given resources, especially in agriculture and food production. The recourse to the intensive mode of farming including the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides etc., which was perhaps the need of the hour then, has over the years taken a toll on our environment, food chain and health.

Simultaneously, the evolution of the modern lifestyle in an urbanised environment with its appliances, gadgets, amenities, mass produced foodstuffs etc. has driven people away from what could be termed a more natural lifestyle. There are villages in Bastar where the farmers use only indigenous seeds and do not use any chemical fertilisers or pesticides whatsoever. The advent of worms and pests on the farm does not perturb them nor does it cause any

worry about loss of potential output. While this could be considered by many as an extreme approach, there is a need to inculcate some of the elements of this worldview in our approach to contemporary ways of farming and consumption. An exposure to this natural worldview could be offered to a tourist by promoting homestays or treks in villages.

Tourism would thus also provide an opportunity to enhance the income of residents of villages where intensive modern methods of agriculture are not used and natural ways of farming are exclusively followed. Such villages should be encouraged to continue with their traditional methods and any possible loss in output in farming due to their natural ways of farming could be more than compensated through revenue from tourism.

The achievement of the diverse goals – of providing livelihoods to people, promoting conservation, providing tourists with an experience of the tribal lifestyle etc. – could be achieved best through the participation of people.

It is proposed that villagers and local residents could be involved, after requisite training, in the provision of tourist facilities in the following areas:

- i. *Home stays and small cottage hotels:* Home stays could be organised either by individual villagers who are trained in the provision of services to tourists or by groups of residents in a village on a community basis. Such home stays could preferably be in contiguous clusters of villages. Small cottages, rather huts, akin to the tribal homes could be built by the community and managed by a few persons entrusted with the responsibility. Services such as food, information on tribal lifestyle and local resources, a glimpse of tribal music and dance etc. could be provided collectively. Treks in the forests could also be offered with accompanying persons who could also provide information on local flora and fauna including medicinal plants.
- ii. *Food stalls:* Locals could set up small food stalls especially providing local food items to the tourists in various places such as towns, market places, tourist spots etc. These too could be run individually or on community basis.
- iii. *Sales of handicrafts and local forest and agricultural produce etc.:* Sales outlets for handicrafts and local produce such as organic rice, millets etc. and forest produce such as imli, chiraunji, amla and their products could be organised in towns and in tourist clusters.
- iv. *Travel services, hotels etc.:* Residents of towns such as Jagdalpur and other areas could provide taxi services etc. besides small or medium sized hotels for stay of tourists.

If people's participation is to be the mainstay of the proposed ecosystem, *supporting systems* would be required in three areas:

- i. *Training* would have to be provided to the residents, especially those providing homestay etc. for running the guest houses and taking care of the guests. Similarly, people running food stalls would have to be trained in hygienic methods of preparing food, serving customers and also in modification in recipes wherever required
- ii. *Marketing* of the facilities through website and social media etc. would have to be done in a centralised manner. This would also involve planning of the itinerary of the tourists and carrying out the required co-ordination. Mechanism of interaction

with the tourist during the stay would also need to be established for feedback as well as the meeting of any urgent requirement.

- iii. *Provision of facilities* such as medical aid in case of emergency and other services would have to be planned for. For ease of provision of medical services, it would be better to have clusters of villages providing homestay services.

These functions could best be performed by an overarching organisation of people (including a for-profit or a not-for-profit organisation or a co-operative society etc.) or by a government body specially formed as a wing of the tourism department. Of course, over time there would be private businesses providing packages to tourists and co-ordinating with various service providers.
