



Analysis of Community Based Tourism in Latpanchar, Darjeeling (India)

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ABSTRACT

Community based tourism is taking its place in the world as an alternative to traditional tourist destinations, especially in developing countries. This form of tourism allows for greater contact with the local community and for the tourists to experience new sensations while enabling the economic and social development of the geographic area. In this paper, the results of fieldwork carried out in the Latpanchar Village (Darjeeling District of West Bengal, India) is presented, assessing the opinion and perception of tourists visiting this area survey was on both the quality of the services offered by community based tourism enterprises, as well as the potential of the tourism resources in the area. The main results of the investigation endorse the quality of services offered to tourists by local businesses and highlight the hospitality of the local community, a key element for the development of this kind of tourism, particularly in different villages of this district. Similarly, it highlights the tourist satisfaction with services received and the need to strengthen the training to tourism staff through aid. The originality of this research comes from analysis of the demand made on a concrete base for Latpanchar, a village which is producing a huge economic development through the community based tourism approach.

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1. Introduction

In the last few years a change has been observed in the behaviour of tourists, who are now looking for another means of discovering locations, demonstrating themselves to be actively involved in their travels. Therefore, they are looking to explore new destinations where local culture, ethics, indigenous customs and the historical heritage are increasingly important, and, in this respect, they are

seeking to experience cultural diversity as a means of self-enrichment (Guzmán et. al., 2011). Similarly, from the perspective of the suppliers, it considered possible for tourism to become a complementary activity (but never the only economic alternative) to the traditional economic sectors of the local community, on the premise that it is the community's residents who develop and manage these processes. Undoubtedly, this could favour the progress of local communities, offering tourists the opportunity to learn

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about its cultural heritage and to enjoy its natural resources, always on the basis of one fundamental central theme: the initiative and the management of the use of these natural and cultural resources for tourism purposes must come from the local community itself, which must also establish the limits of such tourism development.

The coordination of this kind of tourism based on community management offers developing countries vast development opportunities for the creation of cooperatives and other forms of social association. In this sense, tourism is considered to be a basic tool in the fight against poverty, with initiatives in place such as the so-called ST-EP (Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty) programme developed by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO). The WTO points out that sustainable tourism can be a fundamental tool in socio-economic development and in the reduction of poverty in certain rural areas. Opportunities to sell certain goods and services can be established through the development of the area's cultural, social and environmental resources, thus offering small scale opportunities for job creation (especially for women) and can serve as a complementary (never substitutive) activity to agriculture, livestock farming and fishing. Scientific literature in this field (Novelli and Gebhardt, 2007) highlights that tourism is one of the highest growth sectors in the world economy and that the promotion of tourism development in rural (and urban) areas in disadvantaged parts of developing countries is not, a priori, either bad or good, but rather depends on different social, political, economic and environmental factors. For example, the African continent has experienced an exponential growth in the number of tourists, but this has not led to local communities obtaining economic, social or environmental benefits (Novelli and Gebhardt, 2007). Nevertheless, the impact of tourism must be measured by taking into account two essential elements (Nyaupane et al., 2006): firstly, the local community's level of involvement and level of control over tourism; and secondly, the number and the profile of tourists visiting the area in question. The aim of this paper is to present an analysis of the state of community based tourism in a specific geographical area, the village of Latpanchar in Darjeeling district, India. This village has not yet structured tourism development on the basis of mass tourism as has happened in the other tourist spots of Darjeeling district. This village is reacting to increasingly significant flows of tourists

who visit the visit by way of small tourism companies managed by the community itself.

Knowledge of resident's perceptions regarding tourism development is highly required in order to understand the significance and value of local participation (Pearce et al., 1996). The findings from previous studies show a diversity of perceptions and hence diverse indications of host community quality of life, which has sparked a lot of research into this issue over the last decades (Murphy 1985; Lankford 1994; McCool & Martin 1994; Simmons 1994; Pearce et al. 1996; Mason and Cheyne 2000, Williamson & Lawson 2001). The reason why many of these researchers have noted the need for further analysis within this field is the increased evidence showing that communities are not homogeneous groups of like-minded people, but rather a collection of individuals with ambivalent or mixed feelings in relation to the perceived impacts they have of tourism (Brougham & Butler 1981; Joppe 1996; Lepp 2008, Hernandez et al. 1996). Research into the antecedents of resident perceptions towards tourism can therefore help planners in a significant way. If it is known why residents support or oppose tourism, it will be easier to select those developments which can minimize negative social impacts and maximize support for alternative modes of tourism (Williamson & Lawson, 2001). It is further suggested that to consider local issues and personal values of residents rather than looking at demographic variables and factors, will be more helpful when interpreting and understanding community perceptions.

Johnson et al. (1994) discusses resident perceptions in a rural area experiencing an economic transition and refer to several studies conducted by Getz (1994). In their studies, they propose the following relationship; in rural communities with low economic activity and low tourism development residents have high expectations for future tourism development, and have therefore more favourable perceptions towards tourism. They conclude by indicating that resident perceptions towards tourism are related to the level of economic activity within the community (Johnson et al., 1994). From their study investigated on Fiji, King et al. (1993) propose that residents of communities dependent on tourism can clearly differentiate between its economic benefits and social costs. Yet, they found that the awareness of certain negative impacts does not necessarily lead to opposition towards further tourism development (King et al., 1993).

2. Study area

Latpanchar perhaps tops the list of hidden and unseen destinations in North Bengal Hills. Latpanchar is one of those destinations which still lie untapped. A hidden and unseen destination in the north Bengal hills situated in the lower Darjeeling hills in Kurseong subdivision, Latpanchar is the highest point in Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary at 4200feet is known for its old quinine plantations the place holds enormous wealth of natural forests. The beauty of Latpanchar lies mostly on its lush green virgin forests covering the undulating slopes of hills. These untouched forests are the natural home for many rare species of mountain goat, wild boars, tigers, leopards, jungle cats, gaurs, and different kinds of deer, porcupines, civets, monitor lizards and snakes. Attraction of Latpanchar is the spacious forest bungalow in the middle of the wilds. The cozy wooden structure with large windows and balcony brings the outdoor wilderness right inside your bedroom. The more adventurous travelers can spend night in tents pitched around the bungalows.

Latpanchar is also popular for the bird lovers and jungle trekkers. Several short treks originate from here leading to some treacherous terrain through the deep forest covers. The most important trekking trail goes up to Gulma peak - an unexplored hilltop in the Sanctuary and other down to Sevok following a rather difficult stream through the virgin wilderness. From Latpanchar one can also trek to Namthing Lake, one of the very few places left in Himalayas that houses Salamander, a rear and endemic reptile of the region. The best part of visit to Latpanchar is that one can enjoy the beauty of the hill without having to jostle among tourist crowd. Latpanchar can be reached from Siliguri with a 2 hrs drive covering 48 kms via Kalijhora on NH 31-A. The lake of *Namthing* is situated at an altitude of 4250 ft above sea level; the beautiful lake is the natural habitat for a number of rare species. *Namthing Lake* is only the second place in the region where one can see the Himalayan Salamander in the wild, the only other place being Jorpokhri.

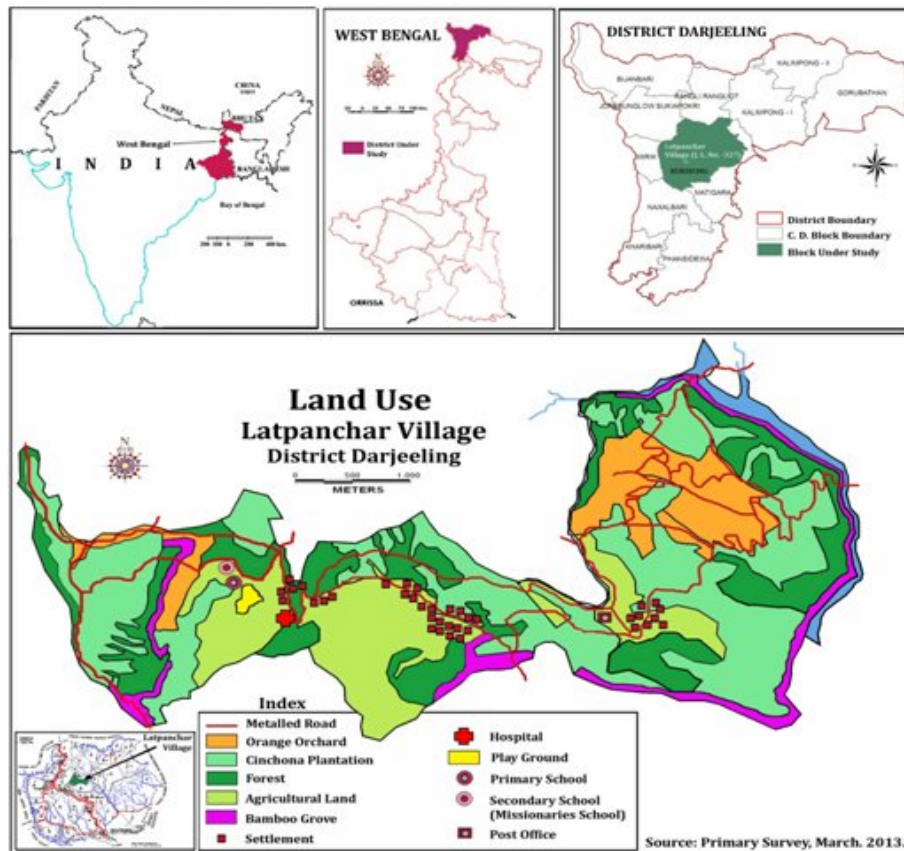


Fig. 1 Location of the study area



Fig. 2 Environmental scenario of Latpanchar village

Latkothe is about 4 km from Latpanchar. The mountain road through the Cinchona, Sal, Teak & Pine trees reaches here to disclose the wonder of nature. Tourists can spend a day in this place or may further visit the Kuhi area with special permit from the forest department. Colorful butterflies and birds will welcome you to the region. *Ahal View Point* that is locally called *Sansaridara View Point* is an obsession of Latpanchar with tourists. On a sunny day, from Ahal, tourists can drink to the gripping glimpse of Mt. Kanchenjunga, Dooars, Terai plains and the Teesta River which gives a spectacular view of 360°. Sitong is another nearby village of Latpanchar, which is famous for its orange orchards and natural extravaganza. You can continue further to Chatakpur near Sonada and further to Kurseong. After coming down to Sevoke, one can visit another nice destination called Mungpoo.

Being a small place there is not much option of good hotels in Latpanchar. However the government maintained Forest Bungalow spread over a hill slop overlooking the vast forest canopy of Mahananda Sanctuary far below is the best place offering cozy and comfortable stay. A small privet hotel 'Himalayan Resorts' offers few rooms with basic facilities. The suitable time to visit Latpanchar is between October and April. During this time, Latpanchar remains free from bad weather.

The present paper embraces the following objectives (i) to explore the status of Tourist at Latpanchar Village, (ii) to analyse the economic impacts of ecotourism on the study area, (iii) to evaluate of

different issues related to quality of tourism and (iv) to suggest to policy makers, planners and academics that economically backward regions can be developed through the promotion of ecotourism.

2. Materials and methods

The methodology used for this research investigation is based on fieldwork carried out using surveys completed by tourists during their stay on the village of Latpanchar. The survey was designed with the aim of delimiting, analysing and evaluating the state of community based tourism on this village. It was completed by tourists coming from different parts to this village, selected through a simple random sample. Prior to this, a pre-test consisting of 15 questions was carried out in order to detect any deviations or errors. The total number of valid surveys obtained was 120. The fieldwork was carried out between March to May, 2012 and December, 2012 to January, 2013.

The measurement instrument applied to the surveys was an 18 item questionnaire, with questions relating to the motivation for travelling to Latpanchar, the socio-demographic information of the person surveyed, the use of services offered by community tourism enterprises and their opinion and evaluation of different aspects of the village. This questionnaire was made available in three languages (English, Bengali and Hindi). The tabling and analysis of the information obtained was carried out through the design of an appropriate database. Uni-variant and Bi-variant analysis techniques have been applied to obtain the corresponding results.

Table 1: Socio Demographic Characteristics of the Tourists

Variable	Percentage (%)	Variable	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	Level of Education	Primary
	Female		Secondary
Age	Under 30	Place of Origin	University
	30-39		West Bengal
	40-49		Uttar Pradesh
	50-59		Maharashtra
	60 or over		Sikkim
			Assam
	Bihar		
	Others		

(Source: Tourism Survey at Latpanchar Village).

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Status of Tourist at Latpanchar Village

The main socio-demographic characteristics of those surveyed are shown in Table 1. In accordance with Table 1, it can be seen that the typical profile of an average tourist visiting Latpanchar village is a woman between 30 and 49 years old with a university degree. Similarly, the main place of origin is west Bengal, followed by Uttar Pradesh and the Maharashtra. No link was found between the sex and age of the tourists surveyed (contingency coefficient = 0.401; $p = 0.098$). Similarly, there was no link found between sex and level of education (contingency coefficient = 0.275; $p = 0.528$), nor between sex and country of origin (contingency coefficient = 0.417; $p = 0.609$).

In terms of tourist motivation for visiting the Latpanchar, the main reason is leisure (56.1%) and to visit forest (14.6%). Furthermore, the length of stay is also very important: 56.2% stay on the village for more than a week, while 34.1% stay between three and seven days. Furthermore, the independence hypothesis also holds between sex and the number of nights spent on the village (contingency coefficient = 0.222; $p = 0.546$). Finally, for 73.2% of those surveyed it was their first visit to the village.

3.2 Economic Impacts of Ecotourism

With respect to international tourism, in Table 2 the number of tourists and overnight stays in the period 2008-2011 are presented, as is the income generated by tourism. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that approximately 50% of overnights stays take place in the Latkuthi (Forest Bungalow at Latpanchar), but recently accommodation provided by the villagers is very cozy in nature. Most of the tourist tries to stay at the village as they got lot of preferences there. This paper is going to focus on the community based village tourism at Latpanchar, which is developing through the development of tourism based on community involvement and the concept of sustainability.

Economy of Latpanchar village is based mainly on agriculture and forestry. Due to the forest which dominates village, the soil is very fertile and many different agricultural products are grown, with cinchona and orange being the most important. In addition to this, a large proportion of its residents

receive remittances from emigrants living in the Bangladesh, Nepal or other countries from orange. Concentrating on tourism, this represents an important growth sector, with the lofty mountain chain of Kanchendzonga which the main attraction for visitors. In fact, this volcano is still active and last erupted in 1995. Together with the draw of the natural beauty and the biotic diversity (both in terms of flora and fauna) which surrounds it, tourism resources are concentrated in the village which surrounds this area and in incipient orange orchard, generated by the increasing importance of orange production in this area. All these tourism initiatives rely, above all, on the support of the Governmental Cooperation, although they are also funded through micro-credits and receive financial support from the Govt. of West Bengal.

3.3 Evaluation of Different Issues Related to Quality Of Tourism

Another aspect analysed in this study was the evaluation of a series of key elements for the development of tourism. Thus different aspects related to tourism in Latpanchar are presented using a 5-point Likert Scale (1 – very poor quality, 5 – very high quality). The average evaluation can be seen in Table 3.

In accordance with Table 3, the tourists surveyed considered the hospitality, food and public safety, mountainous view and flora-fauna as the best elements, in that order. At the other end of the scale, the need for better information and signposting on the Latpanchar village, as well as the development of conservation, information and signposting, transport links areas are highlighted as elements requiring improvement as regards to tourism development in the area. These results could serve to encourage the different branches of local government on the village and private businesses to strengthen these elements which tourists consider weaknesses, taking into account however the average level of satisfaction of the tourists surveyed (4.13 in a 5-point Likert scale), a figure which reflects the high level of satisfaction which tourists visiting this area have. This demonstrates that the majority (84.6%) of tourists are either satisfied or very satisfied with their stay.

Table 2: Number of Tourists and Overnight Stay during 2008-2011.

Year	2008-'09	2009-'10	2010-'11
Tourists	1,742	4,188	9,141
Overnight stays	876	2098	7681
Income generated by tourism (in '000 Rs.)	159.05	1313.59	1830.31
Income generated by tourism (% of GDP)	16.8%	22.4%	29.7%

(Source: Kurseong Block Office, Darjeeling District, West Bengal).

Table 3: Evaluation of different issues related to quality of tourism.

Variable	Result	Variable	Result
<i>Hospitality</i>	4.29	<i>Ecology</i>	3.54
<i>Food</i>	4.12	<i>Cleanliness</i>	3.5
<i>Public safety</i>	4.09	<i>Price of the trip</i>	3.08
<i>Mountainous view</i>	4.08	<i>Restaurants</i>	3.04
<i>Flora and fauna</i>	4.03	<i>Shopping areas</i>	2.96
<i>Hiking</i>	3.79	<i>Conservation</i>	2.92
<i>Accommodation</i>	3.66	<i>Information and signposting</i>	2.81
<i>Telecommunications</i>	3.59	<i>Transport links</i>	2.72

(Source: Primary Survey on Tourists at Latpanchar, 2012-2013).

4. Conclusion

Community-based tourism is developing in different parts of the world as a consequence of tourists' search to discover new destinations instead of traditional ones. This is facilitating the creation of certain tourism products which allow local communities to generate wealth for themselves, considering tourism to be a complementary economic activity and never an economic alternative to traditional activities.

In this paper a study into a specific area, the village Latpanchar of Darjeeling district, has been presented. In this area tourism is becoming one of the key driving forces in the economic development of both the village and the district as a whole. Therefore, diverse community tourism initiatives are being created with the aim of ensuring that the wealth generated through tourism has a direct impact on the residents of Latpanchar. The main results of the study show that the typical tourist visiting this village is educated to university level, comes from different parts of India (mainly West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra) and stays on the village for about a week. Moreover, the majority of tourists visit the village for leisure and study purposes. However, the use of community tourism enterprises, such as for example those providing sporting activities and tour guides, is still insufficient. Finally, and most notably, the majority of tourists who use services provided by community enterprises will do so again, since they consider the quality of service to be superior to that provided by other kinds of businesses.

In conclusion, various branches of local government, NGOs and villagers ought to commit themselves to turning the village of Latpanchar into an example of

how well-managed community-based tourism can produce a high level of satisfaction on the part of tourists.

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