WHY TOURISM ELUDES THE GRASP OF STAKEHOLDERS? SOME REFLECTIONS ON SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: The paradoxical attributes of tourism for being good and bad at a time makes it open for criticism. This paper questions whether this dualism is inherent in its character or is circumstantial. No stakeholder wants tourism to elude his grasp, why then it goes awry in many cases. To explain this phenomenon the paper takes a back view of the industry and underpins shortfalls that are responsible for its downturn. Barring nature catastrophes, spread of epidemics and war, etc., in most cases, tourism stakeholders were found at fault for ignoring essential tenets of sustainable development; they fall prey to avarice and compromise with short-term market forces resulting in negative consequences in physical and socio-cultural settings. The environment suffers often irreversibly. Mass tourism, weak community resilience, poor knowledge-equipment of stakeholders, aspect of seasonality, unskilled workforce, limited knowledge of ecological systems, policy failure and lack of governance and community inertia are some of the features that weaken tourism industry. Only a few but important features will be discussed in this paper. By comparing stakeholders' good and bad practices at two mountain destinations, Whistler resort in Canada and Manali in the Indian Himalayas, the paper concludes that paradox in tourism is a myth; tourism is neither good nor bad, it is what stakeholders make of their recreational resources.

Keywords: sustainability; tourism industry; stakeholders; resilience; Manali; Whistler.

Introduction

No other enterprise perhaps is so open to criticism as of tourism. Even a man in the street can comment on this industry (Young, 1973). The matter of fact is that tourism is a big paradox that tends to self-contradict. At times, it can be good, can be bad; can conserve and consume resources; it is resilient to shocks, can be vulnerable; earns wealth but drains out in leakage. It is much misunderstood phenomenon. Even a single man can disrupt this trade. The question arises 'why people should engage themselves in such a dubious industry?' Nevertheless, tourism has many superlatives such as it earns foreign currency, creates jobs, transfers money from richer to poorer regions, builds public infrastructure, improves quality of life, slows down the rate of rural exodus. Since it focuses on the beautiful and unique attractions, conservation of these fascinating landscapes becomes a patriotic obligation. Interestingly, there are cases when tourism becomes a partner of conservation. It preserves vestiges of history and heritage, re-uses ruins and abandoned royal palaces for tourism, and urbanizes remote and far-flung peripheries. There are countries who majorly depend on it. Question crops up whether this duality really exists in tourism or circumstantial? To find an

answer to this question we have to look back into its historical background. The major crux of the problem is mass consumption of resources by tourists.

Tourism is an offspring of the Western culture, propelled by the forces of globalization, capitalization and modernization, and pampered by post-industrial society who had money, leisure and strong desire to see this beautiful world of sights and sounds. In its nascent stage it was hailed as innocuous, clean and smokeless industry respecting natural and cultural environments. Suddenly, with the advent of railways around the mid-19th century, tourism burgeoned, and further egged on. Thomas Cook's package tour programme accelerated the rate of growth. He cleverly arranged visits to the Great Exhibition in 1851 in London, which attracted 6 million visitors (Page, 2007, p. 40). Remarkably, he connected the coastal resorts for a better flow of visitors. This virtually led to the birth of mass tourism – a blessing to the avaricious stakeholders of tourism and blight to those who sought a destination of peace and solitude.

Mass Tourism – The Boom Effect

The unprecedented growth of the middle class with their Bohemian lifestyle brought a bad name to tourism. With the speedy transport technologies tourism spread all over the globe. 'Boom and bust' was given the name to this mass tourism syndrome (Singh, 2012). Many tourism destinations and resorts were overwhelmed due to the visits of too many people. In the year 1997, 613 million travellers left their homes (this figure does not consider domestic holidays and day trips). In 2015, this figure soared to 1.18 billion, almost 52 million more from 2014 and expected to rise up to 1.6 billion tourist arrivals in the year 2020 (UNWTO, 2016). The most striking feature of the tourist numbers was that of China who received one hundred million outbound. The growth of Asia and South Pacific was remarkable, and the Middle East attracted 50 million more tourists. Altogether tourism earned a wealth of USD 1260 billion. Considering these benefits any stakeholder would be tempted to run a business so lucrative. Thus, tourism earned the reputation as one of the biggest and fastest growing industries of the world.

As we have noted above tourism can be a lucrative business, should it run on the principles of sound management; very opposite results may occur if the industry treads on undesirable paths that we have touched briefly in this paper. Even though tourism appears to be rewarding business for investors and entrepreneurs, the concept of tourism-entrepreneurship has not been properly understood by stakeholders (Ateljevik and Page, 2009). The boom and bust phenomenon of mass tourism albeit generated wealth in the host countries, it also damaged society and environment at places irreversibly. To cite one example from the Adriatic Sea, where a small island Svet Stefan existed with tall palm trees was converted into a landscape of high rise hotels within a decade (Singh, 2016). Too much of touristic development is a hazard to natural settings and social ethos of a destination (Ateljevic & Page, 2009). Great attraction acts like a magnetic pull and tourists rush to it like bees to the hive. Tourism consumes places and cultures to the end where a few returnees come to see the tragedy of their favourite touristic destination. Thus, many beautiful places have been degraded and damaged by huge crowding of tourists. Crises of tourism are the crisis of mass tourism (Poon, 1993). Tourists do not affect the environment directly, their very presence in large number

disturbs the ambience. This aspect becomes more visible in fragile environments, such as parks and protected areas. In some cases, bio-capacity has been outstripped by ecological footprints. Tourism is the biggest consumer of ecosystem services. For example, tourists consume almost 7 to 10 times more water than residents. According to an estimate 40 per cent of the world's population was found suffering from a serious water shortage. Water-use varies within a range of 100 litres to 2000 litres per tourist per day. It is reported that Global oil production is going down and it may last a few years more. We are consuming our planet day by day with our consuming style of life. Mass tourism perpetuates over consumption (Singh 2016).

Ecotourism: The Failed Alternative

If mass tourism is too huge, can the small tourism be more manageable. Let us test this hypothesis. A Mexican architect Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin (1987) came out with a mantra for enjoying nature with conservation, which was given the name of 'ecological tourism' popularly known as 'ecotourism'. Delightful as the phrase was, it was considered the best practice of tourism in remote, unused nature, where visitors shall respect the environment, Communities' resource owners shall run the business for the community and by the community, maintaining the values and identity of the place. Ecotourism was self-reliant, self-catered, self-employed and a self-managed activity. It was a source of recreation and education. The last quarter of the 20th century had a high resonance of ecotourism.

Since ecotourism happens in the green environment such as Parks, protected areas, unspoilt natural areas found in high mountains meadows and marine waters, more visitors desired to be there to enjoy nature's splendid spectacle; they may pay off any exorbitant cost to the tour operating company. Thus, more and more areas of natural beauty were exposed to hedonic tourists who had, in some cases, little respect for the rare environment. Many places of excellence were green washed in the name of ecotourism (Cater, Garrod, & Low, 2015). In fact, only ecotourists should be allowed to enter into the eco-tourism confines. But how to identify an ecotourist among hedonic visitors. A few countries have been able to manage ecotourism successfully. In South Asia, Bhutan sets an example where a limited number of tourists are given admission for a high-cost. They are allowed to follow designed routes and trails monitored by guards from the beginning to the end.

Ecotourism despite the scathing criticism, is the fastest growing segment. Annual growth rate varies from10 to 30%. According to WTO (1998) estimates ecotourism accounts for 20% of the the world. As the popularity of ecotourism grows the market is shifting more towards the casual or soft end. Any one entering the 'hard' ecotourism market must appreciate that the absolute market is small as operators are expected to offer exceptional experiences. These businesses would be of small scale and with high price. Not many stakeholders have marketing knowledge, particularly the new entrants. Many operators are quite ignorant as to how tourism distribution works (McKercher, 2001).

It is an unkind paradox that ecotourism, by definition, had to be small; taking place in peripheral regions of natural beauty, should be practiced in cities and urban

agglomeration and natural areas as large as the Grand Canyon hosting millions of visitors.

Ecotourism should serve as a saviour of our planet through conservation measures. Most indigenous lands have been converted into federal parks, refuges, cultural heritage sites and monuments (McLaren, 1998, p. 100). Our planet supports a population of 7.3 billion, reducing its carrying capacity because of over consumption. Ecotourism, considered as the subsidiary of sustainability, was predated by stakeholders given the culture of greed. Nature was sold as commodity and this aspect of commodification defaced tourism's ethical veracity and ecotourism, despite noble values could not flourish into a green movement. Nevertheless, ecotourism builds three outcomes: a positive force for conservation, protection of landscape features, and benefitted the host communities. Ecotourism may have failed as an alternative, but it perpetuated the concept of small is beautiful and infused the spirit of environmental awareness.

Tourism in Developing Countries

Many Third World countries have embraced tourism as their panacea for their poor development and poverty. It gathered momentum when nomads from affluence discovered beautiful landscapes untouched by modernity in the Third World. A sizeable literature has appeared in print through research journals, books and media. The works of many scholars are replete with tourism downside (Boorstin 1961; Turner 1982; Crick 1996; Britton 1983; Cohen 1978; Butler 1974; Davis 1978; Graburn 1976; MacCannell 1973; Nash 1978; Smith 1978; Turner and Ash (1975). Recently, Harrison and Sharpley (2017) have brought out a very useful book "Mass tourism in the Small world" which also could not offer any remedy for the problem of over-crowding. Most of them are social scientists who did not find tourism development as a fruitful economic activity for the Third World. They believe that adoption of tourism would affect adversely, specifically the traditional businesses, paving the way to the dependency model. In some countries, the tourism industry already accounts for 30 per cent of the GNP; in distant regions, such as islands where this rate may reach up to 90 percent.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders play vital role in the development process. According to Freeman (1984) Stakeholders are "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist". By definition, everyone associated with the organization and development of tourism activity is a stakeholder. Therefore, collaborative approach would better help promote tourism. A more integrated and holistic approach to SD can be achieved by involving stakeholders of different level in the development process.

Stakeholders, particularly of primary level, are supposed to be equipped with new tourism knowledge and they must find out the easy ways to transfer it to those who need it. The effectiveness of the transfer process depends upon an accurate assessment of the type of knowledge to be transferred (Cooper, 2015, p. 313). Cooper lays stress on knowledge management and believes that effective knowledge transfer must be understood as the most important commodity and learning the most important process

(p.313). There is a poor record of sector's knowledge transfer. Predominance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) lack managerial expertise or training which finally affects growth of business and competitiveness. It has been observed that the tourism sector is characterized by low-risk takers. It has been found that SMEs in tourism are generally averse to research. Surprisingly, many stakeholders do not know about the SD concept, let alone the access to the research journals or books. Transferring, exchange and sharing knowledge are imperatives for the success of tourism sector (Cooper 2015). This process leads to innovation (Scott 2015).

Stakeholders should know what tourism can do and how to avoid negative consequences. To Obliterate 'the bad' in tourism, makers/owners including stakeholders must be on the alert in determining scale and speed of tourism. Tourism has a propensity to grow like cancer; control, small caution and care are important to the balanced growth. Tourism business has some given weakness which should be guarded against.

In passing, we shall like to discuss a few significant shortfalls that are responsible for tourism decay and decline which eludes the grasp of stakeholders. Some shortcomings are in-built, and a few are an act of omission and lack of stakeholders' knowledge equipment. Sometime nature plays foul. It is not possible to discuss all of them here, only a few are mentioned here for want of space.

Seasonality

Seasonality is the arch enemy of tourism that hampers the full growth of the industry in making proper use of facilities and infrastructure, resulting in unnecessary excess-capacity for most of the year (Butler, 2001, p.17). Dynamics of seasonality affects tourism as the seasons are now experiencing instability and unpredictability. In fact, seasonality impacts on all aspects of supply side including marketing, quality of employment and skill availability (Baum and Lundtrap, 2001). Nevertheless, the mature owners of destinations introduce all-year season.

Limit to Growth

Crowding of tourism at one centre of attraction is the persisting problem. No alternative has been found so far. Of course, they bring wealth to the hosting destination, but they also bring with them noise, congestion and other environmental challenges. Experiments in creating niche tourism have not been successful instead some of them have wooed the mainstream. Strategies like limit to growth, carrying capacity and reduction in the accommodation sector failed to manage the growth. Due to the rapid growth, many destinations fall to decay and fail to complete their life-cycle. As long as human beings have the right to enjoy this planet (tourism for all), the problem of 'too many' will remain a challenge to the stakeholders for they would never be able to decide 'how much is not too much?' Effective knowledge management is the answer. The endless growth in a finite biosphere is not possible. Stakeholders must find out the optimum level of visitors at a given destination to maintain sustainability. As stated earlier in this paper, a tourist consumes more water than a resident, so more tourists means more water is needed. Therefore, conservation of water resources is of prime

importance. Stakeholders of tourism should take note of this aspect that the growth of tourism cannot be endless. They shall have to accept the fact that water consumption should be within the limit of the biosphere. There is a need of re-engineering of culture to create a sustainable civilization that can thrive without degrading the planet on which we depend (Assadurian, 2016).

Human Resource: Spine of Tourism

Tourism is a labour-intensive industry which depends on an adequately supplied skilled workforce to serve its global consumers. It supported about 277 million jobs in 2015 and directly generated 2.5 million jobs. It needs a face-lift in labour-skills for sound development. It is a pity that this sector has a number of gaps to improve customer service quality through greater access to tourism training, exploring barriers to increasing tourism labour mobility, career pathways, skill development and workforce planning especially young people and women SMEs. Research has pointed out that the biggest challenge that the industry faces is 'talent shortage'; recruitment and retention are other hurdles in the progress of business. Other problems are high turnover rates, high mobility to other industries (Baum, 2006), poor perception as an industry, poor promotion and career prospects and poor working conditions (Hughes & Rog, 2008). This challenge has to be met by the practitioners and stakeholders. For a service organization to achieve success, managers must consider their human resources to be a critical element (Lee Ros and Pryce, 2010). Managing people in the hospitality and tourism industry is becoming a more challenging task as we move ahead into the 21st century. To meet, these challenges and to build a competitive advantage, managers must provide sound leadership. Customer satisfaction is the be-all and end-all of hospitality business.

Destination Resilience

Emerging from ecological sciences, resilience is now in tourism's usage. According to the concept, every system has the capacity to absorb disturbances (internal and external) and yet retain the same function, structure and identity. It may not be true in case of socio-ecological studies because the human system does not return to its original state after disturbances. The concept of resilience can be harnessed to address long term structural changes caused by tourism. Since tourism industry is largely composed of vulnerabilities, and resilience building, as stated by Becken and Khazai (2017) can reduce vulnerabilities, it is expected that stakeholders may be careful on capacity building. Discussing the resilience and destination governance of Whistler, Sheppard (2017, p.70) pointed out eight resilience-enhancing factors: strong and effective governance; shared vision, values and single-mindedness; strong partnerships, collaboration and community involvement; community and corporate memory; taking care of social issues; well-resourced community; sense of place and sense of connectedness; and passion, pride and a can-do attitude. If stakeholders can adhere to some or all of the above factors, strong destination resilience can be developed. Much of the Whistler's success, as Canada's best resort, was largely due to strong resilience and effective destination governance (Butler, 2017).

Pathways to Sustainable Tourism

David Weaver (2012) posed a most wishful question, whether sustainability can shake hands with mass tourism. The question still remains unanswered except the dominance of selective practices such as recycling, energy use reduction, codes of conduct, environmental award schemes, and eco-certification programme. The fact of the matter is that the environmental management measures adopted in the name of sustainability are small-scale and shallow. There are a few commercially viable large-scale tourism destinations which have excellent environmental performance (Weaver 2016). Sustainability means authentic development backed by efficient supply chains which is not easy to achieve. So, what makes it difficult to access? Hansruedi Muller (1997, p.33) sums up the answer: 1. reduce the boom factor; 2. reduce inequality; 3. give priority to principles and objectives of ecological environment and biosphere; 4. respect the right of future generation and their hand in shaping their world. In sum, stakeholders should remove the barriers that withhold implementation of sustainability, such as, human barriers and lack of demand. To facilitate these hurdles, stakeholders should subscribe to Travelife, a web-based certification system which allows its users to monitor and self-assess their sustainability performance (Baddeley and Font, 2011).

Before planning for the tourism sector, the managers of tourism can prevent and modify such activities which may threaten environmental attributes. These should be addressed in ecosystem-specific and site-specific management indicators. The use of indicators is critical to both the successful measurement of tourist destinations' environmental assets and attributes. Other key building blocks include monitoring and standards. These benchmarks may be environmental thresholds. We should use tourism intelligence in taking note of warning indicators, such as, loss of repeat visitors, reduction in the number of visits, etc. The factors can be many including ecological, cultural, social and economic. Managers should better understand the positive and negative, tangible and intangible, direct and indirect impacts. In theory, there are a number of factors that exist. Best practice tourism sites can teach better 'how to find a pathway to sustainability?' Impacts are warnings to the makers of tourism if they go unheeded, the destination would fall prematurely. One of the shortcomings has been the ignorance of the concept of ecosystem upon which the entire structure of sustainability depends.

It is in this context that we compare two mountain destinations as a best practice and a bad practice: Whistler resort in Canada and Manali in the Indian Himalayas. Both the resorts have very close similarities in their physical settings. Rising from a small mountain village, they had a few households, visited by occasional mountaineers both perched on high places. As the road came up, the two blossomed into flourishing resorts within a short period of time, both introduced ski-lift as a prime activity, both attained fame and popularity. They unfortunately parted ways as they appeared boldly on the world tourism map. Whistler strictly followed the planning process and growth management strategies and developed according to ecosystem-specific site, periodically monitored the growth trends. They faithfully carried out the 'do's and don'ts' of sustainability. Manali on the other hand diverted from the mantra of 'small is beautiful' to expansionism, ignoring the vulnerability of ecosystem. Eventually, a small rural

village turned into a congested urban destination. Manali is no more a pasture land, but an overbuilt mountain resort with no limit to growth. The next generation of tourist shall witness patches of green and may wonder 'where have gone the green pleasure domes of the Kulu Valley'.

Concluding Remarks

The aforementioned examples of two resorts manifest that tourism development is not an easy task. Stakeholders have to be alert on some development sensitive points, such as, performing the policy goals, strict governance, understanding of ecosystems (economic, social, environmental and political) and reduction of over-consumption. They should distinguish between growth and development for efficient use of common pool resources. In brief, the development should be seen in the words of Brundtland (1987) 'to reconcile human activities within the law of nature'.

Sustainability shall not happen by itself. Unless communities practice the tenets of sustainable development, it will remain a far cry. Resilient Societies give a promise of SD. In this case Manali destination had a fall due to laxity and indolence of the local community. Marzuki and Hay (2016) holds the view that according to stakeholder theory, it is the moral obligation of primary stakeholders to involve experienced players of the community in sustainable growth of tourism, besides keeping all parties informed of development design. Sustainability shall remain a beleaguered quest as long as society remains unsustainable. Liaison and cooperation among stakeholders is vital to achieving various gains from tourism.

Active stakeholders seek involvement in the undertaking while passive ones have less motivation (Cater et al., 2015). Jamal and Getz (2000) argue that "Greater efforts should be directed towards bringing the marginalized community-based voices. It is observed that collaboration between diverse stakeholders through tourism partnership will result in more equitable and more sustainable development. Participation in policy-making might help in democratizing decision-making process and can lead to capacity building (De Araujo and Bramwell, 2004). Unfortunately, Manali's stakeholders were enticed by capitalists and corporate who modified their sustainable policy and short-term market forces took over the green policy affecting the life cycle of the resort. To revitalize, Manali needed a new and differentiating tourism policy which should be based on soft tourism rather than currently practiced hard tourism; defensive rather than aggressive; slow rather than fast – A policy that promotes value consciousness.

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