

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM: THE SIKKIM EXPERIENCE IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

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## Prologue

### Community development in India

In India, the history of community development dates back to the days of sovereign kings when village *panch*, under the leadership of *sarpanch*, was assigned the duty to look after community welfare. In the early twentieth century, community development programmes in India underwent a sea change when social reformers and missionaries experimented with various rural development programmes suited to the Indian rural scenario. For instance, the Sriniketan experiment by the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore [in the 1920s] and the Sewagram experiment [1933] by Mahatma Gandhi, made people aware of their right to participate in and receive the benefits of community development programmes. After independence, the Government of India took the initiative to formalize community development programmes focusing broadly on agriculture and related matters, communications, education, health care, social welfare, supplementary employment and housing.<sup>1</sup> The first national community development programme was launched in October 1952 with the basic objective of improving the plight of the enormous rural segment that was plagued with illiteracy, malnutrition, and social evils. The idea was to involve the local people and involve them in activities for the development of their own community. The emphasis of such programmes was on people's voluntary participation. Due to inexperience in the initial years, the village communities could not derive much benefit from such programmes as they interpreted these to be the duty of administrative caretakers.

Later, to ensure the involvement of people in the processes of nation building as well as community development, the government took the initiative to establish *Panchayati Raj Institutions* [PRI]. Long before India became independent, most Indian villages had five-member governing bodies to oversee matters related to community development, land disputes, social justice, etc. Rural India easily identified PRI as self-governing bodies for community development and accepted the institution. The autonomy enjoyed by the PRI encouraged the rural communities to take initiative in managing their own affairs and to be involved in the development process. Though the financial power of the PRI was limited, they were entrusted with the tasks of constructing village roads, bridges and, irrigation channels and doling out relief in times of scarcity.

In some states of India, especially in Kerala, the people's campaign for local development reached a new height. The state served as a model of people's participation for community development. The mass movement was so effective that Kerala figured as a leader in the areas of elementary education, health care, status of women, land reforms and public distribution systems. The economic plan of the state, for the first time in the history of economic planning in India, earmarked more than 35% of the state's outlay for community development programmes to be implemented by local bodies. The people's

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<sup>1</sup> Singh, Katar (1999): Rural Development: Principles, Policies and Management, Sage Publications, New Delhi, pp. 156-160

campaign was carried out in six phases, each of which had clearly defined objectives. The failure of outdated village councils (*gram sabha*) was a warning to the campaigners. Therefore, in the first phase proper care was taken to perceive and identify local needs. In the second phase, the thrust was to incorporate the traditional and intrinsic wisdom of local people before implementing modern techniques. The steps that were taken in this regard were (i) participatory as well as scientific enquiries about the problems of development and available resources of the locality for the preparation of a comprehensive local development report, (ii) organizing seminars in every *gram panchayat* and in all municipalities to discuss development reports, and (iii) collecting recommendations from the participants regarding actions to be taken. In the third phase, emphasis was laid on the formation of task forces to prepare detailed project proposals for implementation of the recommendations put forward by the participants of development seminars. At this stage, it was necessary to train the task force members so that they could draft the project proposals on a uniform format. The training would ensure that each and every project was conceived with a sound knowledge of its forward and backward linkages, with an eye to overall integration. This was the most difficult phase of the campaign in terms of 'conceptual clarity and operational problem'<sup>2</sup>.

The fourth phase was to finalize and incorporate the projects approved by the local bodies in the Annual Plan of the *gram panchayat*. The fifth phase was devoted to integrating the *panchayat*-level plans into the higher tiers so that the village development reports and centrally sponsored programmes were placed on an equal footing. The suggestions that came from lower tiers were incorporated in the development plans of higher echelons, viz. *block panchayats* and *district panchayats*. The sixth phase was the final stage where the viability of the projects prepared by the local bodies was examined before they were approved for implementation, and training was imparted to local representatives, officials and resource persons to ensure success of local-level planning.

It was felt that decentralization of power was much required for the successful execution of community development programmes. Decentralization of power works on certain basic principles such as (a) autonomy, (b) subsidiarity, (c) role clarity, (d) complementarity, (e) uniformity, (f) accountability, (g) transparency, and (h) people's participation.<sup>3</sup> It is also seen as an answer to the crisis of development. Following the Kerala model, some other states in India adopted the principle of decentralization and successfully used the PRI as a vehicle of community development.

## Community development in Sikkim

Since Sikkim came to the democratic fold of India only in 1975, it did not experience the community development programme launched in India in the early 1950s. However, as a protectorate of India, the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim was largely guided by the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950, and in pursuance of the Treaty, the institution of local self-government was introduced in Sikkim in 1951. Local bodies called *local area panchayats* came into existence and were constituted of elected members. But the institutions were defunct in no time as they failed to generate much enthusiasm.

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2 Thomas, T.M. and Franke, R.W. (2001): Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign and Decentralised Development in Kerala, Leftword

3 Biju Kumar, V. (2000): In Response to Development Crisis: Decentralised Planning and Development in Kerala, Journal of Rural Development, NIRD, Hyderabad, 19(3), pp. 339-369

A proper attempt to establish PRI in Sikkim was made with the formulation of the Sikkim Panchayat Act of 1965. Following the Act, *block panchayats* were formed in each revenue block [village]. These *panchayats* were constituted of five elected members. The 1965 Act was in force till 1981, during which period four elections were held in the years 1966, 1969, 1972 and 1976. The functions of the *block panchayats* were basically related to development, community welfare and agency. The development functions included (i) agricultural development, (ii) dairy development, (iii) development of cottage industries and cooperatives, and (iv) minor schemes of irrigation, embankment, etc. The welfare functions took cognizance of (i) sanitation, health, hygiene, and conservancy, (ii) mother and child welfare, (iii) construction, repair and maintenance of school buildings, (iv) prevention of epidemics, (v) maintenance of burning and burial grounds, and (vi) maintenance of civic amenities, such as drinking water supply, village approach roads, etc. The agency functions were basically organizational, such as community programmes for afforestation, soil conservation, immunization, etc.

Though the functions of *panchayats* were quite elaborate on paper, actual implementation was limited to execution of minor schemes and settling local disputes. Paucity of financial resources was the major impediment as the local body was allotted only 10 percent of land revenue collected from the area. The system could not continue for several reasons. Since only the land revenue payees had the right to elect and be elected, much of the population consisting of tenants and landless workers remained unrepresented. It required no fertile imagination to assume that the unrepresented segment received few or no benefits from a body, the members of which were not elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage. Under such circumstances, community development and people's participation were far-fetched ideas and rural development programmes could not make much headway.

Between 1965 and 1981, major changes took place in the governance of Sikkim. The hereditary monarchy was replaced by democracy. The transition from monarchy to democracy took its own time, and reorientation of the existing *panchayat* system was long overdue. In 1982 the Government of Sikkim introduced a new Panchayat Act with a two-tier *panchayat* system consisting of *gram panchayat* at the block level and *zilla panchayat* at the district level. This time, election of *panchayat* members was based on universal adult suffrage though there was provision for nominated candidates from disadvantaged classes, scheduled castes and tribes, and women. In total, 138 *gram panchayats* were elected. On average, there was one elected body for every three villages/revenue blocks. Each of the four districts had one *zilla panchayat* constituted of the presidents of all the *gram panchayats* within the district. The president and vice-presidents of the *zilla panchayat* were elected by the members from among themselves while the district collector was the secretary. The term of office for all local bodies was five years. The 1982 Act kept ample provision for community development but the financial resources were limited. Though the *panchayats* possessed the power of taxation, they hardly exercised the same 'for fear of antagonizing the people'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in spite of enjoying the power to formulate development plans and execute village-level schemes, the *gram panchayats* could not achieve the expected results. People's participation, too, was wanting during the initial phase. Due to the overbearing influence of local political parties, these bodies fell short of reaching the common goal of involving each member of the community.

The Panchayat Act of Sikkim was again revised in the year 1993 and following the enforcement of the Act, the Panchayat Cell of the Government of Sikkim was reorganized. Under the new Panchayat Act,

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4 Dhamala, R.R. (1994): 'Panchayati Raj Institution in Sikkim: Participation and Development', in Sikkim: Society, Polity, Economy, Environment, ed. by M.P. Lama, Indus, New Delhi, p. 64

District Planning Committees comprising the president of the *zilla panchayat*, elected members of the *zilla panchayat* and the municipalities, members of the state legislative assembly and parliament came into existence in all four districts of Sikkim.

## Zumsa

Formally elected PIR apart, there are exceptional and extraordinary cases of traditional village *panchayat* in at least two villages in the North district of Sikkim. In the villages of Lachen and Lachung, the *zumsa* (traditional village *panchayat*) is responsible for all major decisions taken for the development and welfare of the village community. The *pipons*, or office holders of the *zumsa*, are elected by direct voting and their term of office is one year. One senior *pipon*, one junior *pipon* and a *gyapon* (secretary) look after the office of the *zumsa*. *Pipons* are traditionally elected from among the male members of the community because women are not eligible to compete for office though they have voting rights and can take part in the decision-making process. The *zumsa* meetings are to be attended by at least one member from each family. Violation of this is taken as an offence and the offenders are fined.

The responsibility of a *zumsa* includes supervision of development works and settling local disputes. In addition, a *zumsa* also reserves some power to deliver verdict in criminal cases of a local nature. The traditional institution of the *zumsa* is protected by the 1982 Panchayat Act of the state. The election process of the *zumsa* and the positions held by the *pipons* are recognized by the state government. Traditionally, the *zumsa* has more autonomy than the *gram panchayats* in other areas and the influence of political parties on a *zumsa* is negligible. The voluntary as well as mandatory participation of people in *zumsa* meetings adds credibility to the functioning of the institution. Needless to say, the *zumsa* is a time-tested and well-oiled vehicle of community development.

## Community development vis-à-vis availability of resources in Sikkim

The discourses on the structure and functioning of a *gram panchayat* or *block panchayat* would not bear much significance unless an assessment of available resources of a locality was carried out. Understandably, the availability of resources for the development of a community is one of the prime concerns of all local bodies, rural or urban.

In the land-locked mountain state of Sikkim, the availability of usable resources is somewhat limited due to the terrain conditions. The state has huge potential for hydro-electricity generation but difficult terrain prohibits the development of infrastructure required for power generation, especially in those areas where water is most abundant. The state forests are magnificent; to conserve the biodiversity and to protect the hill slopes from erosion and land degradation, they should be saved at any cost. A good part of the forests has already been destroyed to provide land for agriculture, settlements and roads and also to provide fuel, fodder and timber. Therefore, the state forests are seen as resources to preserve rather than use. The mineral resources of Sikkim can hardly be exploited due to difficulties in mining operations, though geological explorations have confirmed sizeable reserves of copper, zinc, mica, coal, limestone, dolomite, marble, etc. The cost of mineral extraction has rendered mining at most of the places uneconomical due to mutilated rock structure and rugged topography [Report of the Geological Survey of India, Sikkim Circle, 1980]. The soil resources of the state are limited and prized. Their

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thickness and quality vary according to the gradient of the hillside slopes and ground cover. The steeper the gradient, the thinner the veneer and the quality of soil, too, tends to be poorer. Surface run-off during monsoon carries away unprotected topsoil and diminishes this invaluable resource every year. In valley areas, the soil layer is thicker but the texture is coarse. The sandy and porous nature of soils along river courses renders them unfit for cultivation. Forest soils, though richer in nutrients, are not available for agricultural purposes. However, at higher altitudes, where rainfall is scanty, the soils have developed *in situ* and they have the ground cover of alpine-type grasslands. These lands are ideally suited for cattle, yak and sheep grazing.

Under such circumstances, the livelihood options are extremely limited in Sikkim. Following the dictates of nature, the local communities in villages usually practice either subsistence agriculture or pastoral economy. But these two age-old practices are no longer sufficient to support the steadily increasing population. The limited scope of agricultural expansion in this mountainous state has made the local communities aware of the problems of saturation and overexploitation. At the moment, only 11.5 per cent of the total area is devoted to cultivation. The actual area available for cultivation is shrinking due to continuous pressure from the secondary and tertiary sectors, such as establishment of new industries, expansion of the built-up area of urban centres, extension of roads, construction of power plants, etc. The constraints inherent in subsistence-type farm economy are also posing problems. Small size of land holdings, overdependence on seasonal rain, inadequacy of suitable farm machinery, problems of marketing, etc. render the growth of agriculture slow and stunted. Besides, natural calamities, such as landslides, rock-slips, flash floods, etc. wreak havoc from time to time.

The scope of industrialization is also very limited in the state. Though the small-scale and cottage industries are doing reasonably well, large-scale industries are ruled out. Dearth of locally available raw materials, lack of proper transport and communication systems, distance to market, etc. are some of the basic locational problems. Not even sufficient level land is available for the construction of large work sheds. Though the climate of the hill state favours the location of certain precision industries, infrastructural handicaps and lack of entrepreneurship deter industrial development.

While the mountain topography delimited the scope of further expansion in the areas with agriculture and modern industrial development, it provided for an altogether different occupation in the form of tourism. The very location of the state in the Himalayas and the presence of world-famous peaks like Kanchenjunga, Siniolchu and many others, the abundance of exotic flora and the assemblage of the ethnic cultures of the Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali stocks have made this state one of the most enticing places of the subcontinent. It attracted mountaineers, wildlife enthusiasts, adventurers, vacationers, and excursionists from areas far and wide and in less than three decades secured its place on the map of world tourism. It has been predicted that in the years to come, tourism will become the major revenue-earning industry and the natural environment will prove to be the most valuable resource of the state.

By and large, development of Sikkim largely depends upon (i) agriculture, (ii) dairy farming, (iii) cottage industry, (iv) hydro-electricity generation, and (v) tourism. While the first three are traditional economies with limited scope of expansion, the fourth is still in the nascent stage due to operational problems. The last mentioned, however, i.e. tourism, appears to be the most promising and fastest-growing economic sector. In a country like India where the majority of the areas lie within the warm tropical zone, a cool mountain environment is undoubtedly a prized commodity. The mountains offer an ideal retreat during the long summer months when the inhabitants of the torrid subcontinent desperately want to escape the

heat and humidity. The mountains of Sikkim feature a plethora of topographic, climatic and biotic exclusivities, each of which individually or collectively represents a highly productive tourism resource.

The 'tourism products' offered by the state are as varied as the clients. Sikkim is a hermitage for the ascetic kind, a biodiversity hotspot for the wildlife enthusiast, a treasure trove for nature lovers, a health resort for the health-conscious, an ideal retreat for vacationers and a huge playground for adventure sports. With such a wide range of recreational activities, tourism has established itself as the most diversified and popular industry of the state.

## Tourism as a common pool resource in Sikkim

'Common pool resource' is defined as a single pooled resource that can be used by an entire community for its economic development. In this sense, tourism – more specifically ecotourism, nature tourism and adventure tourism – is based on a common pool resource. Tourism develops by tapping the resources offered by mountain landscape, seafont, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, flora, pasturelands and heritage sites. All these items, either singly or in combination, may act as a common pool resource. The natural landscape and ethnic cultures are major subjects of common interest. Under normal circumstances, such resources, especially the landscape varieties, offer open access to all and sundry, provided, of course, that no restrictions are imposed on free tourist movement. As long as the natural scenic attributes of a place appeal to and attract viewers, its potential as a common pool resource remains high. Thus, the discovery of a tourist destination becomes a boon for the resident community which can design an action plan to extract maximum benefit from such a resource over a sustained period of time.

As is the case with all common pool resources, responsibility for resource management and utilization primarily lies with the local residents and committees. The local stakeholders using tourism resources remain responsible for preservation of natural and cultural heritage sites, joint forest management, promotion of local food and handicraft industries and development of micro-enterprises.

In Sikkim, some of the major tourist destinations are in 'protected areas' that are state properties. Although the ownership of such areas lies with the state administration, the local communities and tour operators enjoy usufructuary rights as far as tourism activities are concerned. In some areas, the state administration has reserved the right to issue permits for the purpose of checking and regulating the flow of visitors. Other than the 'protected areas', there are certain vintage cultural and religious sites where the local institutions reserve the operational rights related to tourism. For example, in West Sikkim, the sacred lake of Khecheopalri, a popular tourist destination, is being looked after by the 'Khecheopalri Holy Lake Welfare Committee'.<sup>5</sup> The revenue earned from visitors to this lake is used for development of the lake area and the local community at large.

## Tourism as a livelihood option in Sikkim

It is strongly felt that there is an urgent need to diversify mountain economies and develop alternative livelihood opportunities for the local inhabitants. At the same time, the fragile mountain environment is also to be taken care of so that present and immediate gains do not outweigh the basic requirements in the long run. Alternative livelihood is to be selected in such a way that it mitigates both poverty and

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<sup>5</sup> Sharma et al (2000): Ecotourism in Sikkim: Contributions toward Conservation of Biodiversity Resources, in Institutionalizing Common Pool Resources, ed. by D. Marothia, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi; p. 533

environmental degradation simultaneously. It appears that tourism has an answer for both. According to mountain development specialists, mountain tourism is a singularly important sector in integrated mountain development.<sup>6</sup>

In Sikkim, tourism has emerged as a lucrative livelihood option in the last ten years or so. The reasons behind the wide acceptance of tourism in the state may be summarized as follows:

- It generates income by providing direct as well as indirect employment to the local residents. For example, in villages like Pelling in West Sikkim or Lachung in North Sikkim, tourism has opened opportunities for earning a livelihood by means of lodge-keeping, portering and transport services where, even a decade ago, the local residents depended primarily on agriculture.
- It diversifies the economy by introducing tertiary activities and new infrastructures in areas that are basically rural. It helps develop local expertise in certain professional services, such as guides, interpreters, etc. Existing tertiary sectors like trade and transport receive additional impetus and become more organized. The village of Yuksom in remote West Sikkim amply supports this statement: Since the village is located on a mountaineering route, it stores most of the necessary provisions required by the trekking and mountaineering groups. The local residents have successfully diversified their economy by providing food (both processed and unprocessed), fuel (kerosene oil, gas cylinders, etc.), porters and pack animals (yaks), guides and interpreters, camping accessories and minor repair works. The local communities have wrought remarkable changes and improvements in the quality of life by tapping the opportunities offered by tourism.
- It stimulates the village economy by generating demand for additional agricultural produce and bringing welcome changes to the local market. In Sikkim, the farmers in most of the villages have taken keen interest in diversifying crops and increasing the output, especially during the peak tourist seasons. For example in the villages of Sombaria and Hilley, falling en route to the tourist destination Varsey in West Sikkim, farmers are producing vegetables in place of some traditional crops and have substantially increased the output.
- Tourism is believed to be a boon by many villagers since it promotes local industries, such as, food and beverage processing, souvenir and handicrafts, etc. The production of indigenous fermented food, viz. *churpi*, *kinema*, *gundruk*, etc. and local beverages, viz. *chang*, *janr*, *rakhshi*, etc. increases due to the influx of tourists and the subsequent rise in local purchasing power. Similarly, local handicraft industries, such as, carpet weaving, woodcarving, *thanka* [religious scroll] painting, mask making, artifacts, etc. grow to meet the demands of the tourists.
- The young educated segment of the Sikkimese, both rural and urban, consider tourism as the best prospective area of investment and opt for professional training in tourism management, hotel management, catering, etc. Even those who are less educated or uneducated are learning the skills of lodge operating, guiding, driving, cooking and serving for the tourists. Irrespective of locational, educational or financial backgrounds, an average Sikkimese feels that association with tourism activities makes him richer both financially and in terms of experience.

## Emergence of a host community

Tourists are basically buyers. They buy comfortable travel and accommodation for recreational purposes in a place where they are not natives. On the other hand, the residents of that place play the role of

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<sup>6</sup> Sharma P. (1999): Mountain Tourism, Constraints and Opportunities, in ICIMOD News Letter No. 28, Kathmandu, p. 2

hosts by providing food, shelter and essential services required for comfortable living, albeit in lieu of price. Selling of such services does not necessarily demean the significance of the term 'host', because in this case the guests and the hosts must have a symbiotic relationship. Whatever may be the physical attraction of a place, the tourists cannot derive satisfaction in the absence of a supportive host community. The emergence of a host community again depends upon the advent of tourists.

The host community in Sikkim emerged very gradually. During initial periods of tourism, most of the tourists were of the 'explorer' type and used to arrive with full logistical support, hardly requiring local hospitality. After the 'explorers' came the 'elites', who used to travel the areas less visited by the masses to experience exclusiveness arranged at a premium by tour operators. Since most of these tour operators were non-locals, the local residents did not have much scope to play the role of host. However, once a place acquired the identity of a tourist destination, mass tourists invaded the place and there was a steady increase in the demand for resting places, eateries and overnight accommodation. This ushered in the emergence of the host community.

For a considerable period, the local communities were hesitant to take a proactive role in tourism-related activities. Third parties operating from distant cities were reaping the benefits while the locals gained only marginally. Tourism hit Sikkim in a big way only after 1990 following the lifting of the restriction imposed on outsiders, especially foreign tourists, with regard to visiting certain areas in inner Sikkim. Initially, the available accommodation fell far short of the demand. The tourists were willing to pay exorbitant prices for boarding and lodging, and many local residents converted their spare rooms into lodging rooms overnight. Those who did not have ready accommodation either opted to enlarge their houses or constructed new ones exclusively for the use of tourists. Lodges, hotels, rest houses, holiday homes, youth hostels, inns and motels sprang up at every place marked as a tourist destination. New tourist destinations, viz. Yumthang, Varsey, Pelling, Ravangla, etc. were identified and a host community emerged from among the local Lepcha-Bhutia-Nepalese of Sikkim.

## Development of tourism in Sikkim

Tourism specialists claim that the 'most backward regions' often offer 'the most exotic' resource base for the promotion of tourism.<sup>7</sup> While this may not be applicable for most of the under-developed countries of the world, it is largely true for the states located in the Himalayas. For such areas, tourism is one, if not the only way to enhance economic development. It can be stated without much hesitation that Sikkim, which till very recently was one of the least developed states in India, has achieved commendable success by exploiting its exotic scenic beauty. The mountain environment of the state is ideally suited for outdoor recreation and the saleability of its aesthetic properties is undoubtedly a boon to the local community.

The inhabitants of Sikkim, though aware of the physical attractiveness of the state, were initially very reluctant to open up their world to the outsiders. Even as late as the 1970s, visitors had very limited access to this land of Mt. Kanchenjunga, Green Lake, Tista River, Red Panda, rhododendrons and prized orchids. Traditionally the people of Sikkim had attachments to their northern neighbours and therefore, visitors other than Tibetans were not entertained. For certain socio-political reasons, Sikkim preferred to keep the borders to the east, west and south virtually closed. The topography of the state



helped maintain this isolation. Besides, development of Darjeeling as a prominent hill resort and the resultant transgression by outsiders made the Sikkimese wary.

Unlike some other hill stations in the Western and Central Himalayas, Sikkim never figured on the route of popular pilgrimage centres and therefore, the people of Sikkim were less exposed. Other than receiving Tibetan dignitaries, lamas and businessmen travellers, the local residents did not have much scope to play host. However, there is apparently no reason to believe that the Sikkimese lacked experience as far as hospitality was concerned. Rather, the ostentatious hospitality extended to some high priests from Tibet and their retinue during the regime of the *Chogyals* (god-kings) of Sikkim, as chronicled by eyewitnesses, amply speaks for the ability and benevolence of the host community.

The political reasons for Sikkim's aloofness were far more deep-rooted. Earlier, Sikkim's status as a protectorate of India compelled the state to go by certain rules imposed first by the British and later by the Government of India. For quite some time, Sikkim played the role of a buffer state between two powerful neighbours, viz. India and the People's Republic of China. For reasons of security, Sikkim's borders were heavily guarded and the northern as well as eastern sectors were kept out of bounds for all external visitors. Even after Sikkim ceased to be a protectorate state upon its annexation by India, the restrictions continued. About twenty-five years ago, when Sikkim became a constituent state of the Indian Union, domestic tourists showed keen interest to visit the state. Sikkim attracted a large number of trekkers and adventure tourists from all corners of India. Unlike neighbouring Nepal or Bhutan where tourism largely depended upon foreign tourists from the very beginning, Sikkim had the opportunity to build up the tourism base with the help of resources and experience gained from domestic tourism.

Restrictions on foreign tourists were a major stumbling block on the road of state tourism development. Foreigners, though they were allowed to enter Sikkim on producing an inner line permit, could travel only up to Gangtok, the state capital, and no further, and that too for a very brief period. In 1981, during a conference on tourism promotion of the state, the locals were unified in their demand for relaxation of the restrictions on foreigners. It was commonly agreed that some amount of restriction was necessary because of Sikkim's strategic location in the Himalayas. The state government asserted that some relaxation of restrictions could be made 'without jeopardizing security interests', and that 'nothing should be done that could compromise defence requirements'.<sup>8</sup> However, no consensus could be reached in this regard due to apprehension of political complexities. Nevertheless, the message that the economic development of the state and its people largely depended on tourism development was conveyed to all concerned.

In subsequent years, there were repeated petitions on behalf of the local communities for relaxation of the restrictions on the entry of foreigners into inner Sikkim, but to no avail. A parliamentary committee was set up to look into the matter but the committee was in favour of continuance of the restrictions. The local tour operators sought permission for conducted tours in the restricted areas 'so that the state was not deprived of the revenue due from tourism'<sup>9</sup>, but their plea was turned down for reasons of security.

Restrictions notwithstanding, the number of foreign tourists who visited Sikkim with limited entry permits rose from approximately 1000 in 1980 to about 5000 in three successive years.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the

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7 Singh, Tej Vir & Kaur, Jagdish (1983): 'Role of Tourism in the Regional Development of the Himalayas', in *Development of Hill Areas: Issues and Approaches*, ed. by T.S. Papola et al, Himalaya Publishing House, Bombay, p. 413

8 Times of India daily, New Delhi, May 2, 1981

9 Times of India daily, New Delhi, August 24, 1984

10 The Statesman daily, Calcutta, October 9, 1984

Sikkim tourism department planned to open some of the attractive spots for domestic tourists. It proposed to conduct tours to Tsomgo Lake in East Sikkim. The icy lake in the midst of snow ranges is a magnificent sight to behold. Within a few years, the lake emerged as one of the largest tourist attractions in the whole of Sikkim. In another significant move, the Yumthang Valley in North Sikkim was thrown open to domestic tourists. The splendours of spring flowers in the valley rendered it one of the most sought-after places in Sikkim. The presence of a hot-water spring nearby made it a popular destination for local visitors as well.

During the years 1986 and 1987, there was a downslide in tourist flow, both domestic and foreign, due to political agitations in the neighbouring Darjeeling Hills. Violence and blockage of the highway leading to Sikkim severely affected traffic movement and distracted tourists. The number of tourists plummeted from 41,000 in 1986 to about 31,000 in 1987.<sup>11</sup> This was a major setback for the nascent tourism industry of Sikkim. During this period, many local investors, who joined the industry after much hesitation and speculation, leased out their lodges to outside investors and thus lost much of their hold in the business.

By the year 1988, the situation improved as the political agitation in the Darjeeling Hills subsided. The tourism business revived and Sikkim gained, since many tourists considered Sikkim a better option as a summer resort than Darjeeling that was in a shambles after the agitation. Lack of safety and poor maintenance in the post-agitation period diverted many a tourist from Darjeeling to Sikkim. In a bid to attract more tourists from the upper segment, the Sikkim tourism department started a helicopter service from Bagdogra, the nearest airport to Gangtok, and a ride over Mt. Kanchenjunga, the third-highest peak of the world. In addition, there were food festivals, music concerts and flower shows.

By the end of the decade, the industry was firmly established and gradually taking an organized shape as more trained professionals entered the field. New packages like guided treks, yak-safaris, river rafting, mountain-biking, etc. were mooted to attract adventure tourists. Guided treks on a number of trails in the three lower districts of Sikkim encouraged group tourism. Much in the line of camel or elephant safaris in some other states of India, the local tour operators offered yak safaris across the alpine meadows in West and North Sikkim. Rafting in the turbulent Tista and Rangit rivers was arranged for the lovers of water sport while mountain biking was promoted as well. To accommodate the increasing number of tourists, hotels and lodges appeared in tandem. Many enterprising locals converted their spacious houses into lodges almost overnight. Others constructed new buildings to house hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, etc.

1990 ushered in a new era in the history of tourism development in Sikkim. The persistence of the people of Sikkim bore fruit as the Union Government lifted restrictions on the movement of foreign tourists in certain areas of Sikkim. As the rules were relaxed, the foreigners could get visit permits directly from the state authorities and were allowed to visit the West, South and parts of the East districts of Sikkim. However, the North district still remained out of bounds for them.

The existing infrastructure available for the purpose of tourism was far from adequate. Transport and accommodation, the two vital prerequisites for the development of tourism, were insufficient. During the two peak tourist seasons, one in spring and the other in autumn, the state capital Gangtok had a chaotic look as large numbers of tourists found it difficult to get accommodation or transport. Lack of tourist management and organizational skills handicapped the local operators while tour operators from

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11 Amrita Bazar Patrika daily, Calcutta, March 3, 1987

outside the state had a field day. Still, over and above, the local communities accrued huge financial benefits from the visitors as well as from the lease-holders.

The state authorities were highly optimistic about the future of the tourism industry, and the planners rated tourism as one of the biggest resource generators for the state exchequer. On this assumption, the state government took the responsibility to prepare a master plan for tourism. Ecotourism, nature tourism and adventure tourism were given weight in the master plan and countries like Japan and Switzerland were approached for help in translating the plan into reality.<sup>12</sup> To serve the tourism sector better, the Tourism Development Corporation was set up in the mid-1990s. It was specifically created to look after and monitor all segments related to tourism and ensure professionalism and accountability in the industry.<sup>13</sup> Besides, steps were taken by the state to protect the ecology, environment and culture. Ancient ruins of archaeological importance, monasteries and other religious sites were taken care of. Tourist information centres were also set up at different entry points and towns.

In the year 1995, about 96,000 tourists visited Sikkim, of which 90,000 were domestic [Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism Project [1996 –1999]. The foreign visitors to Sikkim chiefly comprised British [14 per cent], German [13 per cent], French [10 per cent], American [9 per cent], Japanese [6 per cent] and Swiss tourists [5 per cent] [Rai & Sundriyal, 1997]. The volume of tourists in Sikkim was expected to exceed 100,000 at the turn of the century.

At present, there are five major tourist circuits in the state along with four nature trail circuits. These circuits cover areas with various tourist interests such as adventure, culture, religion, etc. Most important of the circuits is the religious/heritage circuit covering Pemayangtse monastery – Rabdentse ruins – Sangachoeling monastery – Khachodpalri lake – Norbugang chorten – Dubdi monastery – and Tashiding monastery in West Sikkim.<sup>14</sup> This circuit involves a large number of villages and incorporates major development for conservation of historical monuments, preservation of the environment and village welfare. The resident communities of these areas are actively involved in tourism-related activities and community development.

## Community participation in tourism planning

In a state like Sikkim, tourism management calls for joint planning involving the government, the private sector and the local community. A positive approach of the government agency helps create an environment conducive to the growth of tourism by improving the infrastructure, standardizing services, setting norms for environment and community-friendly tourism, monitoring the quality of services, marketing tourism products and sharing revenues between local bodies and the central exchequer. Private or non-governmental organizations can act as catalysts by mobilizing the local communities and training them in tourism-related activities. They help develop and implement programmes that promote tourism and link it with economic and environmental development of the local communities. They can also initiate the process of participatory planning. The local planners can play a very significant role by providing necessary inputs regarding carrying capacity and availability of resources.

Reference can be made to a collaborative project that took place in 1996. The Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism Project was a joint venture of a government agency, an NGO and the local communities of

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<sup>12</sup> Amrita Bazar Patrika daily, Calcutta, October 3, 1995

<sup>13</sup> Hindustan Times daily, New Delhi, November 19, 1996

Yuksom in West Sikkim. The project collaborators included the G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, The Mountain Institute of Sikkim, The Travel Agents Association of Sikkim, The Green Circle and Khangchengdzonga National Park [both NGOs], and the local communities living in the project area. The chief objectives of the project were, i) to increase community and private sector biodiversity conservation, ii) to increase economic returns from community based tourism and ecotourism, iii) to improve and contribute to policy-making on conservation and ecotourism.<sup>15</sup> More than two hundred local people participated in the project work. They prepared ecotourism plans and formed an organization to monitor conservation of natural resources and heritage sites. They carried out programmes like removing the garbage accumulated in the village and along the trail owing to tourism activities, tree plantation and village beautification. Most of the participants underwent training in services related to ecotourism, such as porters, guides, cooks, travel agents, lodge operators, pack animal operators, etc.

During the preparatory sessions preceding actual planning, all the local participants were asked to point out the positive elements and attributes of their village and community. Their responses were: (i) their village is green, pollution-free and important from the point of view of history and culture, (ii) the community members believe in unity, they are ready to help each other and look forward to meeting tourists from different countries of the world.

When asked to project their visions about their village in ten years' time, they expressed a desire to have: (i) more forest cover in the village, (ii) more tourists visiting their place, (iii) no litter in the village and along the trails, (iv) more income from tourism, and (v) a 'Little Switzerland' in their homeland. As is common with every Sikkimese, all the villagers make the reference to Switzerland whenever they are asked to describe the aesthetic aspects of their village. They take great pride in comparing the beauty of their state with that of Switzerland. The fact that they have never seen the Helvetian landscape does not stop them from dreaming of a 'Little Switzerland' at home.

On the basis of information collected from the participants, a preliminary report was prepared that expressed the need of making (i) a list of environmental and community attributes, (ii) ecotourism resource maps, (iii) a collection of local legends, (iv) analysis of the use of available forest resources, and (v) a socio-economic analysis of tourism benefits.

To translate the vision and plan into reality and action, the following programmes were taken up: (i) village beautification by planting native tree species, (ii) training courses for lodge operators and naturalist guides, and (iii) preparation of a tourism promotion brochure. Side by side, the community members formed a local organization, the Khangchengdzonga Conservation Committee (KCC), that developed a Code of Conduct to be followed by the visitors. To educate unmindful visitors, signboards with the Code were put up at vantage points. The lodge owners, too, were given a copy of the Code to remind the guests.

By the year 1997, a fully-fledged ecotourism plan for the village of Yuksom was developed. The local communities willingly participated in project activities, made their contributions and attended the training courses. They realized that unless the tourism services were standardized, economic returns would not be steady. The Yuksom experience served as a model for others and the ball started rolling

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14 Draft Ninth Plan of Sikkim, 1997-2002, Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Government of Sikkim, 1998, pp. 269-270

15 Sikkim Biodiversity and Ecotourism (1996-1999), in Research and Development Programmes in Annual Report, 1996-1997, G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, Almora, pp. 31-33

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when Yuksom community members acted as resource persons for the community ecotourism planning at Khecheopalri Lake, another destination.

## Conclusion

Community development is based on the twin premises of i) development for all and ii) people's participation. Advocates of community development programmes lay particular stress on people's participation and see 'participation' as a key element in the development process.<sup>16</sup>

The community experiments in Sikkim give a clear indication of the fact that people's participation in development programmes is a basic requirement for integrated mountain development. Government agencies do play a key role in policy formulation, but to execute them, all the tiers ranging from village to block to sub-division and district should be taken into consideration. It is important to solve localized problems at the local level and as long as such problems do not cross the borderline, the involvement of upper tiers is to be kept at bay.

Community development is intrinsically related to sustainable development. Again, sustainable tourism development is possible only if the planning is participatory. Some specialists emphasize that 'sustainable tourism is, perhaps, an impossible dream'.<sup>17</sup> But it is commonly agreed that community involvement is a cornerstone of successful as well as sustainable mountain tourism and with proper coordination of local communities, voluntary organizations and government agencies, tourism can be made sustainable.

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<sup>16</sup> Oakley, Peter and Marsden, David (1983): *Approaches to Participation in Rural Development*, Geneva, ILO, p. 19

<sup>17</sup> Swarbrooke, John, (1999): *Sustainable Tourism Management*, CABI Publishing, Wallingford, Oxon, p. 41

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