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TOURISM AS AN ENGINE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA – A CASE STUDY OF SUALKUCHI SILK VILLAGE, ASSAM

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Abstract:-Tourism in India, though yet to achieve its full potential, has made rapid strides in recent years. The 10th Five Year Plan of India has also identified tourism as one of the major sources for generating employment and promoting sustainable livelihood. Tourism can therefore, prove to be a viable option towards rural growth and development by giving an opportunity to the tourists to explore the unexplored parts of Rural India.

In the past ten years, with changes brought in by globalization, liberalization and economic reforms, handloom sector has been facing adverse government policies and discriminatory competition. The resultant burden is the most on the weavers. Such is the case of Sualkuchi, the famous “silk town” of Assam, which is famous for its sarees and mekhala chadars woven from mulberry, tassar and muga silks and has occupied a unique place in the cultural history of Assam since time immemorial. Hence, the present paper attempts to address the problems and needs of this 'vulnerable section' of handloom sector in the present times and suggests Tourism, particularly, Community Based Tourism as an alternative for sustainable growth and development of this part of Rural India. It is based on empirical view substantiated by both primary and secondary data obtained through field visits, project reports and government documents etc. from institutions like the Department of Handloom & Textile, Directorate of Sericulture (Govt. of Assam) and Central Silk Board etc. The study reveals that Community Based Tourism initiatives in Sualkuchi can play a vital role towards local participatory governance and self-reliance. Besides, it can also provide networking and marketing support to village committee for marketing of the tourist site and village produce, as a sustainable livelihood strategy for the weavers to overcome the crises in this sector.

Keywords: Community Based Tourism, Livelihood, self-reliance and sustainable.

1.INTRODUCTION

The sustained and rapid growth of Tourism during the past fifty years is considered to be one of the most notable developments of the last century. United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) has pointed out that since 1950 the inflation-adjusted income from tourism has grown at a staggering rate of 11 per cent a year. The number of international tourist arrivals has risen from 25 million in 1950 to 808 million in 2005 representing an annual average growth rate of 6.5 per cent over more than half a century. In terms of output, Tourism has become the biggest industry in the world.

Tourism in India, though yet to achieve its full potential, has made rapid strides in recent years. It is contributing about 5.9 per cent to the GDP of the country. While world tourism registered a 6.6 per cent growth rate in 2007, India posted a 14.3 per cent growth rate. The 10th Five Year Plan of India has also identified tourism as one of the major sources for generating employment and promoting sustainable livelihood.

When material products travel, development occurs in the established market sector only, but when the consumers travel to the production centres, development reaches to the remotest places. With this philosophy in mind, Tourism can prove to be a viable option towards rural growth and development by giving an opportunity to the tourists to explore the unexplored parts of Rural India.

1.1.TOURISM, SUSTAINABILTY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In the 1970s some critique on tourism development was brought forward mainly due to the negative impacts that it

can bring to a destination (Scheyvens, 2002). At the same time neopopulist approaches to development emerged, which held that bottom-up, rather than top-down, development is preferred. Development became more about empowerment of communities through knowledge, skills and resources. Neopopulist approaches stressed the importance of an increased role of civil society in tourism development, rather than it being market led, or state controlled (Scheyvens, 2002). This thought brought forward the idea of sustainable tourism.

Hunter (1997) describes sustainable tourism as 'a set of principles, policy prescriptions, and management methods which chart a path for tourism development such that a destination areas' environmental resource base (including natural, built, and cultural features) is protected for future development'(p.850).

The World Tourism Organisation defines sustainable tourism as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities' (UNWTO, 2012).

India, too, is now focusing to bring in the sustainability concern into its development schemes. It is internalizing the concepts of sustainable exploitation and responsible consumption into its development plan . One way of realizing this is through sustainable tourism in particular. This is so because sustainable tourism attempts to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income, employment and the conservation of local ecosystems.

The UNWTO (2004) indicates that sustainable tourism guidelines and management practices are relevant to all forms of tourism and in all locations, also including mass tourism destinations and niche segments. Brohman (1996) acknowledges that there are five recurring features of alternative/sustainable tourism. The first is that it involves small scale development, usually within villages or small communities. The second common feature of alternative tourism is that local ownership of businesses is preferred, such as family businesses instead of multinational corporations. Third, local involvement in the local and regional tourism development planning is encouraged in alternative tourism projects. The fourth characteristic is an emphasis on (environmental) sustainability. Finally, Brohman states that alternative tourism development should not harm the local culture, but rather respect local traditions and create opportunities for cultural exchange

With a special focus on the second, third and final feature of alternative tourism as described by above, we can say that community-based tourism (CBT) is a perfect example of sustainable/alternative tourism. In the context of sustainable tourism development, the importance of CBT has clearly been recognized over the past two decades. Nobody will dispute the fact that destination communities must benefit if tourism is to be viable and sustainable in the long term.

CBT generates income and employment and, as such, contributes to rural development – a benefit that especially applies in remote areas; CBT adds value to the national tourism product through diversification of tourism, increasing volume and economies of scale (Rozemeijer, 2001, p.13).

Kumar and Bansal (2011) have discussed in their paper about women empowerment and self-sustainability through tourism in the handicraft sector of Kullu Valley of Himachal Pradesh. Community-based tourism initiatives are suitable entry points for women into the paid work-force. Moreover, the local women also perceive that tourism is resulting in the growth of market for the local handicrafts.

Community-based tourism has therefore been given much attention these days as it yields the results of the purpose for which it has been advocated for.

2.PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the predominantly agrarian economy plagued by rising unemployment and a greatly reduced availability of land, weaving silk and handicraft production once provided the main opportunity for the generation of additional income to a large section of the rural folk. Thus, these village industries, the most prominent and widespread of which is weaving, seemed to be the only scope for self-employment for many in rural folk in Assam. Indeed, handloom weaving has played a very vital role in the rural economy of Assam. But in the past ten years, with changes brought in by globalization, liberalization and economic reforms, handloom sector has been facing adverse government policies and discriminatory competition. As a result, the family economy has been in turmoil. The resultant burden is the most on the weavers. In these circumstances, it becomes important to address the problems and needs of this 'vulnerable section' of handloom sector.

Globalisation and the opening of global markets may require their skills and knowledge to be upgraded to face this competition. This needs capacity building in the form of network building, site marketing etc. so that this small village of Assam, Sualkuchi, can carve out a niche of its own in the international market. Hence, the present paper attempts to argue in favour of Community Based Tourism as an alternative for growth and development of Rural India in the present day competitive world. Based on the benefits derived from the community-based tourism initiatives generally, one therefore wonders if any such benefits come the way of the local people of Sualkuchi by way of livelihood enhancement, hence the need for this research.

3.SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY AREA

Famous all over the globe for its endemic golden silk and recognised by UNDP as the “Manchester of the East”, Sualkuchi is a weaving village in the Kamrup district of Assam located on the north bank of River Brahmaputra. It is Asia's largest silk weaving cluster and is famous for its traditional handloom sarees and mekhala chadars woven from mulberry, tassar

and muga silks and has a rich cultural heritage of its own. It offers a unique experience of silk weaving practices right from rearing to reeling to weaving. This is the abode of the Baishyas of Assam, whose primary occupation is silk processing and weaving from time immemorial. About 35 kms from Guwahati, Sualkuchi is a block of Kamrup District with a population 70,762 (2011 census). There are eight Gram Panchayats in Sualkuchi block, in all of which, weaving is a dominant occupation (Office of the BDO, Sualkuchi Development Block).

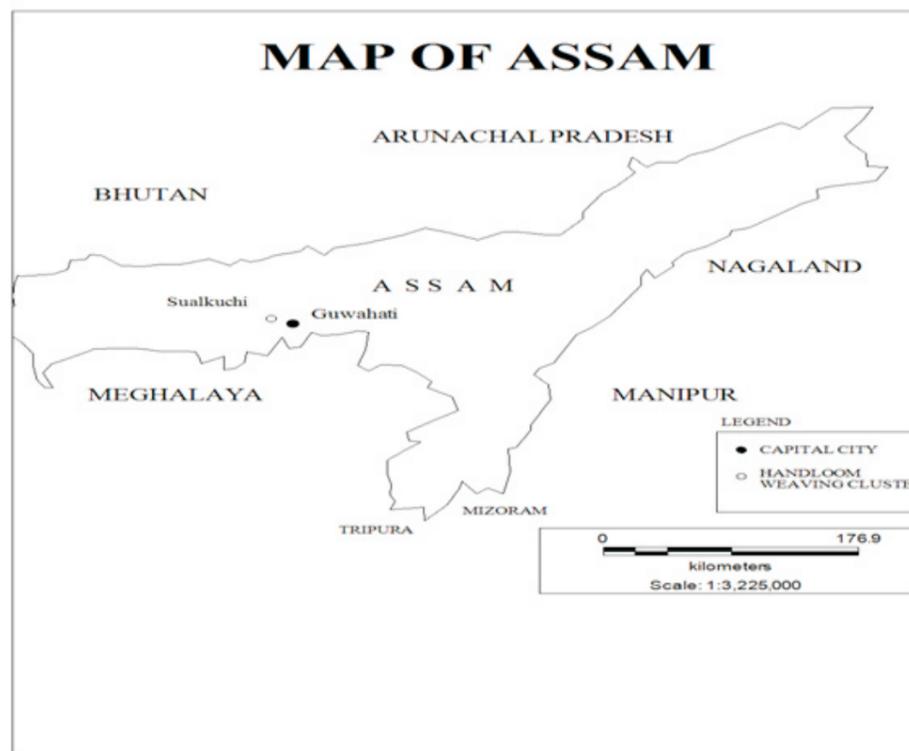


Figure: Location map of Sualkuchi silk village, Assam

4. OBJECTIVES

- a) to identify the problems and needs of the handloom industry in Sualkuchi in the present times; and
- b) to provide an alternative in the form of Community-Based Tourism for promotion of rural livelihood particularly handloom weaving in Sualkuchi.

5. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

It is based on empirical view substantiated by both primary and secondary data obtained through field visits, project reports and government documents etc. from institutions like the Department of Handloom & Textile, Directorate of Sericulture (Govt. of Assam) and Central Silk Board etc.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises were conducted. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaire surveys etc, were done in a participatory mode. Map was prepared using Mapinfo Professional 10.5 version. The baseline generated by the PRA and survey were used for identifying the present-day crises faced by the weavers of Sualkuchi and suggesting an alternative approach towards sustainable livelihood of the weavers.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN DISARRAY- A situational analysis

Assam's globally recognised handloom industry at Sualkuchi is passing through a difficult phase, with several constraints now acquiring global dimensions.

Fuelled by shortage of muga yarn, the handloom sector at Sualkuchi is getting more and more dependent on cheap Chinese tassar as raw material. While the poor colour absorbance of the Chinese mulberry has confined its roles to wrap materials, it has the disturbing potential to make deep inroads into the power loom sector for its higher tensile strength. However, exquisite touch and appearance has been the inherent strength of muga- a rare quality that Chinese tassar does not possess. Another challenge before the industry has been the gradual erosion in the supply base of artisans. Traditionally most of the artisans at Sualkuchi have been from the Bodo and Rabha dominated areas of Assam. With the demand for weavers being extremely high, unqualified weavers are likely to fill this mounting need of manpower, which in turn is sure to affect quality. Quality is the hallmark of Assamese silk and as such any compromise on this aspect will spell doom for the industry. Sualkuchi weavers are resenting anomalies in silk yarn distribution at mill gate price by six depot operating agencies who are supposed to supply pat yarn at mill gate price under mill gate price scheme and supplying yarn at 10 per cent subsidy under 10 per cent subsidy on hank yarn of cotton and Indian silk scheme to the beneficiaries of Sualkuchi. But these agencies sell the silk yarn in open market and misuse the mill gate price scheme.

It may be mentioned that the objective of supplying yarn at mill gate price is to make available all types of yarn at mill gate price to the eligible handloom weavers so as to facilitate regular supply of basic raw materials to the handloom sector and help utilize the full employment potential of the sector. The 10 per cent price subsidy on hank yarn of cotton and Indian silk is to provide explicit subsidy on hank yarn cotton and Indian silk to mitigate the cost disadvantages of the handloom sector due to long lead time in weaving due to its complex and exquisite designs and lower productivity as compared to power loom.

Recently in March 2013, the weavers of Sualkuchi went on a vandalism spree to protect their craft and livelihood, against the clandestine sale of imported silk in the name of indigenous silk. The weavers and small scale handloom entrepreneurs are facing an uphill task as some unscrupulous traders are endangering the famed handloom sector of the state by importing substantial quantities of paat fabrics by copying the designs and motifs which have been perfected by the weavers of Sualkuchi. A section of wholesalers had flooded the local shops with Benarasi silk items and local weavers and traders are fast losing market. Some traders had given their exquisite designs to artisans in Benaras who were producing items using the indigenous design of Sualkuchi. A set of Sualkuchi mekhala chadar is sold at Rs. 3500 to Rs. 6000 while Benarasi items are sold at Rs. 3000 to Rs. 4000. Customers therefore prefer Benarasi silk items as they are produced in power looms and the design is more attractive than the handloom products of Sualkuchi.

Whatever the people of Sualkuchi are, are due to their own efforts. They have not received any form of major govt. support so far. Sometimes yarns were being made available at subsidized rates but it is beyond the reach of the poor weavers.

Previously, dyeing, reeling, spinning etc. were other activities carried out by the people of Sualkuchi but today their work has been confined only to the weaving activity.

There is shortage of skilled and expert weavers, lack of finishing and processing facilities, efficient marketing facilities, modern designs, pricing and packaging.

Besides this, the acute shortage of power is a major concern, which slackens production during the peak hours.

The wages that the weavers get after toiling hard for the whole day is very low. This is because the weavers are unaware of the real value of their products in the International market.

Above all, the govt. schemes are not properly implemented.

6.2 FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CRISES

The following have been identified as the factors responsible for the disarray in the handloom industry of Sualkuchi:

- a) Information Asymmetry Due to their low education, weavers often cannot identify potential new markets for their products, nor do they understand the requirements for interacting with these markets. This reduces their understanding of the market potential of their goods, the prices of their products in different markets, Government schemes instituted for their welfare and diversification opportunities.
- b) Lack of Market Linkages- The markets for the handloom products can be broadly understood as local, retail shops- high-end as well as mainstream, exhibitions and exports. Among these, local markets are still the common markets for many weavers. While consumers of handloom products are increasingly becoming urbanized, they continue to be sold through these local markets; weavers have few opportunities to reach new consumers through relevant retail platforms such as department stores and shopping malls. Further, due to their rural orientation, weavers are often unable to access training and technology to supply their products to online markets.
- c) Dominance of Middlemen- Although middlemen are necessary to enable effective market linkages, they often, if not always,

exploit weavers by paying them a fraction of their fair wages. This may be due to lack of information on the part of middlemen about true manufacturing costs, or merely due to their ability to coerce weavers, who often lack bargaining power.

d) Lack of Aggregation- Handloom weaving typically takes place in scattered clusters in rural areas, while markets are usually in urban centres. Currently, there is a lack of organized system to efficiently aggregate goods from small producers, carry out quality checks, store approved goods in warehouses, and supply them to wholesalers and retailers in urban areas. In lieu of this, retailers have to directly source from select producers, which is often not viable in the long run, resulting in the loss of a large percentage of the market for weavers.

6.3. COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM: A WAY FORWARD

Handlooms and handicrafts provide a competitive edge and unique identity to India in the global market place. However, lack of consumer awareness about their importance as well as lack of proper advertisements to the outside world about this uniqueness of the handloom industry are the biggest challenges in the New Market Economy. With the advent of globalization and the availability of cheaper and more varied products, handlooms face severe competition in contemporary markets. They are typically perceived as traditional, old-fashioned and antithetical to modern tastes. Therefore, under such circumstances, Community based tourism can be a very suitable alternative to reposition the image of handloom industry of Sualkuchi and build consumer appreciation of the history and cultural identity associated with handloom products in the following manner:

- a) Provide market linkages: Tourism helps to bridge the gap between customers and weavers both in terms of distance as well as perceptions.
- b) Export opportunities: Tourism based initiatives can help in bringing together global stakeholders through marketing and advertisements, thereby helping the weavers to connect to multiple markets and export their products.
- c) Financial stability: Tourist arrivals will definitely bring in more money providing financial independence and help in raising the living standard of the weavers.
- d) Self-reliance: tourism can empower the weaving community in Sualkuchi towards self-reliance once they become financially sound. Sale of their products to both domestic and international tourists will strengthen their economy.
- e) Removal of middlemen: Sualkuchi weavers are unorganized and totally dependent on the dealers in Sualkuchi township. Therefore, taking tourists directly to the households, will increase their sale and they will get the customers directly. Apart from direct sale, they will get orders also. This will help them in getting a better price directly from the buyer because the middle man broker charge will not be involved.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

With problems looming large, the need of the hour is

- i) to set up professional institutes for training quality weavers to cater to quality control and save them from the clutches of the middlemen,
- ii) to promote and strengthen village institutions for village level decision making regarding tourism promotion and overall development of the village,
- iii) creation of basic rural infrastructure for promotion of tourism in the village, and
- iv) identification of the tourists' requirements in the area and fine tuning the supply side in the village for satisfying the needs of the tourists without compromising the traditional values. All these are possible only through initiation of tourism projects in such selected clusters like that of Sualkuchi.

8. CONCLUSION

The success of tourism relies on the goodwill and cooperation of local people because they are part of the tourism product. If tourism development and planning does not match with the local aspirations and capabilities, this can destroy the industries' potential. Local communities should have full control over the decision making process as well as over the execution and benefits. Only then, tourism development is seen as sustainable and the local community is independent.

On a larger scale, when every business decision is based on economic, environmental and socio-cultural considerations, tourism has enormous potential to create positive change both for the host community and for the country at large. Integrating sustainability into the handloom industry through tourism can improve long-term viability for businesses small and large, and provide a model for other large industries to make similar positive changes.

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