

Tourism and Transport

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Transport is integral to the tourism industry. If tourism has grown, it is largely because of improved transportation. This holds true for Bhutan, yet access can make or break a destination. Today, as thousands of vehicles enter the country with the sudden growth in regional tourism, questions are being raised about whether Bhutan is also headed down the path of mass tourism that has destroyed the environment and local culture of many a destination.

Research suggests that a properly managed transport system is vital in keeping a destination sustainable and has a bearing on the tourism experience.

But transportation in tourism is often seen just as a means of getting to and leaving a destination. It is seldom considered in the perspective of the sustainability of a destination and, because of this, a number of bio diversity destinations around the world have reportedly been destroyed because of easy access.

As the spectre of mass tourism looms over Bhutan a transport policy in the context of tourism has become critical to minimise negative impact on the natural environment, degradation of tourist sites, and to ensure that tourists enjoy a high-end experience.

A Touchy Issue

In July this year, a taxi drivers' association in the Indian town of Jaigaon, bordering Phuentsholing, complained about Bhutanese road safety authorities.

In the letter addressed to the Office of the Consular General of India in Phuentsholing, they alleged that Bhutanese authorities were stifling the movement of Indian vehicles with regional tourists in Bhutan. The association threatened to call a strike and to do the same for Bhutanese vehicles travelling through Jaigaon and to other parts of India.

The association was reacting to a change in the issue of route permits for Wangdue Phodrang and Punakha districts, which would be done in Thimphu instead of Phuentsholing. Permits for Thimphu and Paro would continue to be issued from Phuentsholing.

Bhutanese road safety officials are outraged that a group of taxi drivers across the border can hold the country hostage over how Bhutan manages the flow of foreign vehicle traffic.

Such reactions are nothing new. “Every time we try do something, they make a noise,” said Prem P Adhikari, chief regional transport officer of the Thimphu region. “Given our limited transport infrastructure, we cannot have too many foreign vehicles entering the country, in view of congestion and safety issues.”

Managing traffic inflow from India into Bhutan is a touchy subject and is handled with sensitivity lest it impacts Bhutanese vehicles travelling through India every day, a majority in transit. Indian vehicles are given free entry into Phuentsholing right up to Rinchendeng checkpoint, beyond which a permit is required.

But road safety officials say the number of Indian vehicles entering Bhutan with regional tourists are reaching a stage which, if not managed now, will cause serious problems in a few years. Former Secretary for MoIC, Dasho Kinley Dorji, says that this is the right time to re-iterate a clear and long-term transport arrangement between the two countries. Given the maturity of Bhutan-India relations, both governments will not allow a handful of profiteers to influence something as important as legal cross-border movement. Reciprocity based on the interests of the two countries has always been respected at the highest level.

By Air, By Road

Air and road are the only two modes of travel by which visitors enter and exit Bhutan. Air travel has been the primary mode for tourists since Bhutan began flight services in 1983. Arrivals by air have steadily grown with the increase in flight frequency, connectivity to more destinations in the region, and the start of a second airline.

However, in recent years, road has become the primary mode of travel with the growth in regional arrivals, mainly from India, with 99 percent entering via Phuentsholing, Bhutan's commercial hub and main road link to India.

For example, of the 274,000 visitors in 2018, 71,807 were international arrivals and 202,290 were regional tourists. While a majority of international arrivals flew in, 63 percent or 127,000 of the 202,290 regional tourists came by road.

This translated into thousands of vehicles entering Bhutan. Between July 2018 and June 2019, more than 12,000 route permits were issued for light vehicles, including two wheelers, coming from India.

“Bhutan cannot afford to have such huge numbers coming in,” said Bhimlal Suberi, Chief Planning Officer of the Ministry of Information and Communications. “Something needs to be done or it will become a huge mess.” As it is, traffic in Bhutan is worsening, with the government unable to control private vehicle imports in the absence of an adequately developed public transport system.

Besides putting a strain on Bhutan's limited road infrastructure, increasing vehicle pollution and congestion along highways and in urban centres, roadside waste has become a problem. Chukha district officials have had to clear trash left by regional tourists travelling on their own, only to see another pile the next day. It is one of the reasons why “no littering” signboards have sprouted along the highways.

Another practice coming with traffic from India is feeding of wild animals, monkeys in particular, along the highways, which is part of the tourist experience in the neighbouring Indian hill districts of Darjeeling. Signboards have been put up to discourage such practices but troops of monkeys sitting on culverts and looking expectantly at passing vehicles suggest it is ongoing.

Noise pollution is another issue, particularly with motorcycle tour groups. A novelty just a few years ago that residents marvelled at, it is now seen as a nuisance. People have lodged complaints against the loud noises of unguided motorcycle tour groups venturing into rural areas, camping

wherever they find a good spot and leaving behind a trail of trash. Close to 2,500 route permits were issued between June 2018 and July 2019 for regional motorcycle tour groups.

An even more serious issue with traffic from India is that it is becoming a front for illegal activity. According to road safety officials, registered Indian taxis, vehicles owned by tourists and private vehicles owned by local travel agents in Jaigaon enter Bhutan with regional tourists. Of this, more than 80 percent are private vehicles owned by Jaigaon agents operating commercially. By Indian motor vehicle regulations as well as Bhutan's, it is illegal to use private vehicles for commercial use.

Yet Bhutanese road safety authorities turn the other way, wary that Bhutanese vehicles travelling through India could get harassed if they take action. The recent protest by the taxi drivers' association in Jaigaon was largely by the illegal commercial operators.

Given the sensitivity, Bhutanese authorities do not strictly check vehicles entering the country with tourists for proper documentation, insurance and road worthiness. Sometimes, when documents are seized from Indian vehicles for traffic violations, no one shows up to claim the documents, according to road safety officials.

While local transport operators are not keen on catering to regional tourists -- particularly those coming on their own -- because they haggle over the rates, they resent Indian taxis being allowed to operate in Bhutan. A Thimphu taxi operator pointed out that even in India, taxis of one state cannot operate in another state. "Taxis from West Bengal cannot be used for local sightseeing in Sikkim," he said. "Here Indian taxis are given a free rein."

Reciprocity

A specific agreement on road transport, like there is for air services, does not exist between India and Bhutan. The movement of motor vehicles between the two countries is based on goodwill, according to officials of the communications ministry.

There is an agreement on trade, commerce and transit between India and Bhutan, which permits Bhutanese vehicles to travel through India on transit. According to road safety officials, more than 90 percent of Bhutanese vehicles travelling through India are on transit, and a small number travel to nearby Indian destinations in West Bengal, Sikkim, and Assam.

While the Indian side always insists on the principle of reciprocal services, road safety officials say that it is simply not practical, given the sheer difference in geographical size, population and vehicle numbers between India and Bhutan. Bhutan has always understood reciprocity in the context of the asymmetry in size and population. “Even if all of Bhutan’s 80,000 vehicles enter India, it will not be felt, whereas even 50 vehicles coming from India at one time can slow and jam traffic in Bhutan,” said RSTA’s Director General Pemba Wangchuk.

Policy

Road safety officials in Phuentsholing say that, without a standard operating procedure, they are not clear on how to manage the inflow of traffic from India with regional tourists. But something needs to be done quickly to stop the illegal practices before they become entrenched. West Bengal traffic officials have reportedly requested Bhutanese authorities to clamp down on private Indian vehicles being used for commercial purposes.

Even otherwise, the sheer numbers can overwhelm Bhutan and needs to be managed sooner rather than later, said RSTA’s DG. “Today it is 12,000, tomorrow it will be 30,000, then what do we do?” he questioned. He said that framing a transport policy in the context of tourism had become paramount not only to keep the numbers at a sustainable level but also to ensure that visitors are safe and have a good experience in Bhutan, and that Bhutanese do not resent their presence.

As the government fine-tunes its tourism policy, a key aspect should be a transport policy covering both air and road transport to keep tourism sustainable and of high value. Frequency of flights to Indian cities should be increased to make it easier for regional tourists to fly in, and reliability of domestic flights improved to spread tourism beyond the western region. The two airlines do arrange charter flights to Indian cities for regional tourists.

For road transport, the policy should insist on stringent emission levels, noise control, road worthiness, insurance and in improving the public transport system.

“There are regional tourists who drive their own cars all the way from Delhi and Kolkata and they are most welcome if they meet the requirements,” said Pemba Wangchuk. “But private Indian vehicles used for commercial purposes must be stopped, and local sightseeing should only be allowed through local transport operators. Tourists should also have a choice of options, to either travel in a small bus or, if they prefer, a chauffeur-driven luxury car.”

To ensure local communities in the interior also benefit from tourism, the policy should also insist on road travel stopping a few hours from the destination so that visitors can trek there using local services and resources for food, lodging and portage.

High-end Experience

Experts in the tourism industry and decision makers suggest that one way of defining the transport policy for the tourism sector is to simply apply the existing organised system for international arrivals for all tourists, irrespective of where they are coming from.

Most of the issues today with regional tourism pertain to the “unmanaged section” who are coming on their own through agents in the Indian border towns. If regional tourists also apply through the e-permit system to visit Bhutan, arrangements for their visit can be planned in advance and authorities in Bhutan can keep the numbers at a level that is sustainable for the industry and memorable for the visitor.

That way, when regional tourists arrive at the border, they need not go through the hassle of waiting for hours to get a route permit to drive into Bhutan. “At the border a guide will pick them up and everything else, from transport to hotel, will be taken care of,” said the DG. “This way their experience of Bhutan will be much better and safe as well. At the end of the day visitors must feel welcome and have a high-end experience and that must begin from the airport and at the borders.”

If the industry is to be managed well it must start with managing travel, said Damcho Rinzin, deputy chief marketing officer of the Tourism Council of Bhutan. “For long-term sustainability, systems must be put in place so that the local people feel tourism is important, and not develop a dislike for outsiders because of overcrowding and competition for resources,” he said. “If it is ‘business as usual’, sustainability of the industry will be at stake, there will be major implications on international arrivals and people to people relations with India could deteriorate.”

Experts point out that, in the final analysis, how people travel, how destinations are packaged and the policy of the government as reflected in regulations, will ultimately determine sustainability of tourism in Bhutan.