

# Kerala's Responsible Tourism Approach

*Saroop Roy B.R.*

Tourism, a multi-faceted industry cutting across various productive sectors of the economy, plays a significant role in the growth of developing and developed nations. It mobilises resources, generates employment, and drives regional development. Being a capital-light and labour-intensive industry, tourism is also an effective tool to address issues related to absolute poverty.

Kerala, situated in the southern part of peninsular India, is widely known for its salubrious climate, backwaters, ayurveda, beaches and scenic beauty, yoga and culture. These natural and cultural endowments, along with educated and hospitable people, form the basis of its tourism business. Total tourist arrivals in Kerala in 2018 was more than 16.7 million (M), and 1.09 M were foreign tourists. The share of revenue from foreign visitors touched USD 1,318 M (INR 8,764.46 crores). Domestic tourist arrivals exceeded 15.6 M. Tourism's contribution to the state's GDP is estimated as 10 percent. (Economic Times, 2019).

## The Kerala Policy Initiatives and Sustainable Tourism

Kerala declared tourism as an industry in 1986 and its first tourism policy was announced in 1995, focusing on infrastructure, product, human resources and market development. Although the policy focused on new investments and promotion of tourism in a big way, a separate section on "areas to be vigilant" brought out the vision of the state government to move on sustainable lines. Major recommendations of the policy include:

- Regulation of construction activities and entry of tourists in environmentally sensitive areas;
- No relaxation of building construction and environment rules for tourism development;
- Vigil against drug traffic and sexually transmitted diseases; and
- Enforcement of the Tourism Registration Act to inculcate an added sense of responsibility among the traders and an increased feeling of security among the tourists.

The second policy document, Tourism Vision 2025 announced in 2002, aimed to make tourism a private sector activity, with the state playing the

role of a facilitator. In spite of this, the state's leaning towards sustainable development was visible in the policy document. The tourism vision slogan was "Conserve Nature & Culture and Promote Tourism". The Vision document had the following statements on sustainability as its objectives:

- To promote sustainable and eco-friendly tourism based on the carrying capacity of the destinations;
- To conserve and preserve the art, culture, and heritage;
- To identify, conserve, and preserve special tourism zones; and
- To involve PRIs and NGOs in the development of tourism infrastructure and tourism awareness.

Although both the above policy initiatives were intended to implement a sustainable model of tourism, the focus shifted to creating more infrastructure, product development and marketing efforts. This resulted in attracting more tourists to the state with negative impacts on the economic, social, and environmental fronts. The tourists were neither high-yielding nor did they have the sense to conserve the destinations.

An action programme for practising Responsible Tourism (RT) was developed in 2007 to promote tourism along sustainable lines. The success of its implementation in a few pilot destinations gave policy-makers the confidence to adopt Responsible Tourism as a blanket programme while framing their subsequent state tourism policies in 2012 and 2017.

The 2012 state policy urged to strengthen and promote Responsible Tourism and called for tourism development in any destination to benefit the local community on economic, social and environmental fronts. Major recommendations include:

- Generation of local employment opportunities;
- Formation of a Task Force against Trafficking and Abuse, and to prepare action plans to implement and monitor zero tolerance on trafficking and substance and child abuse in tourism. (Kerala is probably the first state in India to make such a strong statement against child abuse in its tourism policy);
- Active involvement of local self-governments in tourism development;
- Initiating a campaign, "Kerala Waste-Free Destination", in association with local self-governments, self-help groups and NGOs for waste management;

- Measures to promote local handicrafts and local cuisines; and
- Initiating life-saving initiatives, like deploying trained life-guards and life-saving volunteers in waterfront areas, and creation of Contingency Response Cells at the state level to act quickly to manage such eventualities.

The current tourism policy, which was released in 2017 -- basically a continuation of the 2012 policy -- states that Responsible Tourism (RT) is the official tourism policy of Kerala. The major recommendations include:

- Formation of Responsible Tourism Mission to extend the programme from pilot destinations to the entire state;
- Linking the RT project with the existing poverty alleviation programmes in the state;
- Making the state a Carbon Negative Green Capital and attracting tourists;
- Conducting carrying capacity studies in major tourism destinations;
- Implementing a green protocol at destinations, and promoting tree-planting, use of non-conventional energy sources, rainwater harvesting and scientific waste management techniques;
- Actions to curb illegal activities conducted on the pretext of wellness/health tourism; and
- Formation of a Tourism Regulatory Authority to improve efficiency and avoid exploitation.

## **Kerala's Responsible Tourism Initiative**

Responsible Tourism is an approach to manage tourism and maximise economic, social, and environmental benefits while minimising costs to destinations. The initiative was launched in February 2007, wherein 203 delegates -- comprising representatives of Government departments, including tourism, local self-governments, Non-Governmental Organisations, tourism industry, academicians, media, etc. -- met and discussed thoroughly for two days the negative impact of tourism. A State-Level Responsible Tourism Committee was formed, with representation of all stakeholders, to take forward the initiative. The implementation of the RT project at field level was initiated in 2008 on a pilot basis in four destinations, known for beach (Kovalam), backwater (Kumarakom), wildlife (Thekkady) and hill station (Wayanad). The action plan for practising RT was implemented through a consultative process, keeping in mind the basic tenets of Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria.

The preparatory stage involved scientific assessment of the daily requirements of hotels, resorts, accommodation establishments and other service providers in tourism. Concurrently, a tourism resource mapping of the locality identified areas where the community could fit into the tourism business. This was followed by a sensitisation programme among community and industry to accept and practise this in the larger interest of the society, tourist and tourism business.

Looking back at the last eleven years' experience in implementing RT initiative in Kerala, one finds that both society and industry have marched ahead, making visible contributions to ensure sustainable development of tourism. A brief account of benefit to society, industry ownership of the programme and the way forward reveals how Kerala is managing RT for ensuring sustainable tourism development.

### **Benefits to Society**

Using inputs from tourism resource mapping at local level, various programmes have been implemented under three major headings -- economic, social and environmental -- and the resulting benefits to society is given below.

### **Economic Benefits**

To provide economic benefits to the hitherto excluded in the tourism sector, suitable programmes were designed, which faced many operational difficulties. Feasible solutions were adopted, with stakeholders' participation, which ultimately resulted in institutionalising the system with well-defined roles and responsibilities. It is estimated that the total economic benefit to the community through local sourcing is around USD 3.50 M (INR 25 crores). The major initiatives and systems developed in connection with economic benefits are briefly discussed.

### **Formation of Production Groups**

The preliminary assessment of daily requirements of hotels and resorts at each destination revealed that these were met by agencies outside the local community. Considering the potential for the local community to enter into economic activities related to the operation of hotels and resorts, a system has been implemented which ensures a regular supply

of products. New production groups have been formed, in addition to the existing Kudumbashree Groups (Self-Help Groups) of the State Poverty Alleviation Mission. Farmers Groups were formed and households were encouraged for homestead farming. Micro Enterprises were started to supply products like curry powders, flour, meat, fish, candle, *chappathi*, *pappad*, etc., to hotels.

### **Formation of Supply Groups**

To ensure a timely supply of vegetables to hotels, supply groups led by panchayat (Local Self Governments) called “Samrudhi”, collect products from farmers for hotels, ensuring regularity of supply. Excess produce is then sent to local market outlets.

### **Institutional Mechanism**

To ensure a sustained operation of the system, and to effectively address issues likely to emerge, the following systems were also developed.

### **Constitution of Price Committee**

Accommodation units were following a centralised purchasing system in which the prices of almost all products were fixed well in advance, at least for six months. Local communities could not supply farm products under this system, as they were not carrying out agriculture on a purely commercial basis. The RT initiative only gave them an opportunity to strengthen their livelihood activities related to farm products. Hence, they were unable to supply their products at a fixed price for a fairly long period, as commercial operators did. Through discussions with the accommodation units, a consensus was reached to review the market price of agricultural products and fix a price for local products agreeable to both local farmers and the hotels. Price Committees were constituted, with the President of Local Self-Government as Chairman, and representatives from hotels and resorts, farmers and the Department of Tourism. The committee meets periodically to review and fix the price of products.

### **Constitution of Quality Assurance Committee**

To address issues likely to arise in connection with quality and standards, Quality Assurance Committees were also constituted with the President

of Local Self-Government as Chairman. The other members include chefs of hotels and resorts, health inspectors, veterinary surgeons, agriculture officers and representatives of farmers and the Department of Tourism. They ensure the quality of products and gives confidence for hotels to purchase locally produced goods.

### **Social Benefit**

While developing tourism, it is imperative that utmost care is taken to conserve the social and cultural aspects of the destination. Steps have been taken to ensure conservation of art and culture. In order to enhance the capacity of the local community to link with various jobs and to develop as tourism entrepreneurs, a number of training programmes have been given to them, including on manners and etiquette for auto, taxi and boat drivers, food production, candle making, *pappad* making, glass painting, life guarding, escorting, guiding, souvenir making, etc. So far, 5,206 people have been trained in these various aspects.

### **Art and Culture Promotion**

A detailed study was undertaken to identify the local art and culture. Meetings were conducted with local women and children to form cultural groups. They were given training, and women cultural groups were established to perform traditional art forms like “Thiruvathira” and “Kolkali”, and a Children’s Group was formed to perform the “Singari Melam” at Kumarakom. For promoting local art forms like “Paniakkali,” “Vattakkali,” and “Kolkkali,” separate groups have been formed at Wayanad to perform for tourists. These groups are linked to hotels for performance and participants are remunerated.

### **Souvenir Making**

Skilled handicraft makers were identified and skill development programmes conducted to develop local souvenirs, made out of different materials like wood, coconut shell, paper, coir and clay. There are artisans who earn more than USD 3,000 per month selling their products to tourists, which many hotels showcase.

## **Village Life Experience Packages**

Village Life Experience is an innovative package developed to showcase rural life and sustain traditional occupations. Tourists are taken around villages to experience village life, enjoying a visit to a fish farm, vegetables and fruits farm or paddy fields, and learning about coconut leaf weaving, broom-stick making and screw pine weaving, and traditional fishing techniques like bow and arrow fishing, net fishing, pottery, etc. The average cost for a half-day trip is USD 15 and money earned is equally divided among villagers who participate in the tour. In order to develop the package, training was given to local community members, on the new products, and manners and etiquette while dealing with tourists, and guiding skills, etc.

## **Samrudhi Ethnic Food Restaurant**

One major issue at Kumarakom was that it did not have a place where traditional food was available. As part of the RT initiative, ethnic food items of Kumarakom were identified, and an Ethnic Food Restaurant was established, managed by the women from Kudumbashree, in 2011. This has become a major eating spot for tourists, with reasonable prices. Kudumbashree members were trained in micro enterprise development, accounting, and aspects of food safety and hygiene. The enterprise, initiated with an investment of USD 4,170 (INR 0.3 M), has grown into a business worth more than USD 21,000 (INR 15 M) in the last eight years.

## **Labour Directory**

A labour directory of unemployed professionals and skilled and unskilled labourers of each destination was set up to help the industry identify suitable candidates for specific jobs.

## **Environmental Benefits**

One of the major issues of tourism is environmental problems like waste management, land use change, pollution, threat to flora and fauna, etc. Major activities to address environmental issues include the following:

## **Waste Management**

Awareness campaigns for public and other stakeholders were conducted on proper waste treatment and disposal. Household and industry surveys have identified the average waste generated daily. Biogas plants and pipe composts have been supplied to households and industry at subsidised rates. Collection of non-biodegradable wastes was also introduced. Steps have been taken to promote alternative materials like paper and cloth bags, and products made of areca nut, bamboo and screw pine, by training local community members.

## **Protection of Mangroves and Local Trees**

Mangroves play an important role in the protection of the ecosystem in backwater areas, but many mangroves were destroyed by tourism and related activities. Awareness campaigns were conducted and 1,600 seeds of mangroves have been distributed to resort owners and local community members to plant near the backwater frontage. Concurrently, planting of local species of trees like mango, jackfruit tree, etc. has also been undertaken at various destinations.

## **Reconversion of Fallow Land to Cultivable Land**

Although the traditional occupation of the local community is farming, many owners have been keeping their land fallow to sell for tourism development. Data was collected on available fallow land, and with the help of Kudumbashree units at Kumarakom, 55 acres of fallow land were converted into a good harvested paddy field. Another 30 acres owned by a church was reconverted into 10 Kudumbashree group's vegetable cultivation land.

## **Role of Industry**

The industry plays a decisive role in strengthening and promoting the RT initiative. The micro, small and medium enterprises developed with community involvement, and the initiative taken in social and environmental fronts, will be sustained only with the support and co-

operation of industry players. Hence, steps were taken to incorporate the activities of RT initiatives with industry operators by suitably designing a framework for their operation.

## RT Classification Criteria

The RT Classification for hotels and resorts was developed imbibing the principles of GSTC Criteria. This new classification is to ensure that hotels and resorts are committed on socio-economic and environmental fronts. A detailed check-list of activities applicable to hotels and resorts was prepared under four headings -- sustainable management, socio-cultural responsibility, economic responsibility and environmental responsibility. Activities that are expected to be initiated/supported by property owners are clearly spelled out under each heading and credit points are assigned. The maximum total score is 1,000 and the minimum requirement for being classified is 50 percent of the total score. A separate minimum was also fixed for each segment, as shown below:

**Table 1. Distribution of Scores for RT Classification**

Criteria	Total Score	Minimum Requirement
Sustainable Management	200	60
Socio-cultural	250	75
Economic	250	75
Environmental	300	90
Total	1000	
A minimum total score of 500 is needed for qualifying a unit for classification		
Classifications	Total Scores	
Platinum	750 - 1000	
Gold	600 - 749	

A comprehensive awareness programme on the roles and responsibilities of hotels and resorts to promote sustainable tourism development was given to all property owners in the state. With a view to bring more properties within the ambit of the RT initiative, the Government has linked subsidies and incentives to various parameters that will protect environment, heritage, culture and economic interest of local community.

## **Agenda 9 – The CSR Charter**

Imbibing the principles of Responsible Tourism, Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) Society, the forum for all tourism service providers in Kerala (including Hotels, Resorts, Tour Operators, Travel Agents, Airlines, Ayurveda Centres, Farm-stays, Homestays, Houseboats, Organisations promoting Eco/Adventure/Culinary tourism, Speciality Hospitals, etc.) has adopted Agenda 9 -- the CSR Charter:

- To undertake solid and liquid waste management in our establishment and partner with the local body for the waste management initiatives at the destinations;
- To plant trees within our establishment and associate with growing trees at the destination;
- To reduce water usage and conserve water through rain water harvesting and recycling;
- To promote organic agriculture and encourage using organic produce;
- To reduce energy use by using energy from renewable resources, energy efficient lights and equipment;
- To reduce the use of plastics;
- To do local procurement, wherever possible, and encourage local produce;
- To create livelihood opportunities for the local community; and
- To promote local arts, crafts and cuisines.

The adoption of CSR Charter stands as a testimony to the wide acceptance of RT initiatives, principles and classification by the industry.

## **Moving Ahead**

Enthused by the overwhelming acceptance of RT initiative from local community and industry players, the Department of Tourism is designing projects and programmes to be implemented at destination level, so as to convert each and every destination in the state -- a better place for people to live in and better place for people to visit. A Ten-Point Action Programme called “Green Carpet” was developed in 2016, covering all aspects that have a direct or indirect bearing on visitors to a destination. It includes the following:

- Clean and hygienic environment with a scientific system for collection and management of solid waste;
- Well-maintained public toilets;
- Improved accessibility and well-maintained lighting system, pathways, signage, tourist facilities and equipment;
- Safe drinking water and food;
- Adoption of green principles and moving towards carbon neutrality;
- Safety and security arrangements along with contingency response system;
- Facilities for authentic information, feedback and complaint redressal system;
- Trained and Responsible staff, volunteers and service providers with distinguishable name badges;
- Community participation in development, operation and management;
- Designated Destination Managers for effective co-operation and management.

These programmes invite the voluntary co-operation of all stakeholders in 79 destinations across the state. This Green Carpet initiative is the first step towards developing a Classification system for Tourism Destinations in the state.

With added confidence gained from international awards and recognition, including the UNWTO Ulysses Award for Innovation in Public Policy and Governance (2013), PATA Grand Award (2011), PATA Gold Award (2014), PATA CEO Challenge Award (2015), World Travel Mart – International Travel & Tourism Awards (2017 & 2018) for the RT initiative in Kerala, the Government of Kerala is all set to bring the entire state under the concept of Responsible Tourism. The Government has established a RT Mission under Department of Tourism in June 2017. In the last year, the RT Mission was able to generate 12 crores (USD 1.6 million) economic benefit to the community through local sourcing, which is almost the same amount generated in the last ten years since 2008.

On the social front, the Mission was able to train 2,269 local community members in the first year itself. At present, there are more than 6,161 registered units under homestays, farm stays, tented accommodation units, local tour operators, shikkara (a kind of boat) operators, country boat operators, RT chauffeurs, art & cultural units, handicraft & souvenir units, paper bag & cloth bag, perishable products like milk, vegetable, value-

added food products like pickles, supply units, weaving units and so on. A total of 12,322 people directly -- and 32,838 indirectly – benefit from the activities of the units registered under the mission.

As part of environmental responsibility, the mission mainly focused on the reduction of waste, especially plastic. As part of the Clean Vembanad initiative, the mission, in association with industry partners, local community, and related organisations, removed 55 loads of plastic waste from the Vembanad Lake at Alappuzha region. A unit registered under RT Mission is collecting plastic waste from Kottayam and Alappuzha and converting it into plastic bricks. With the continuous effort of the mission and the support of the industry at Thekkady, all resorts there have replaced plastic straws with environmentally friendly straws made of coconut fronds or bamboo. All resorts at Kumarakom and Thekkady have removed plastic water bottles and started using glass bottles. (Radhakrishnan, A. S., 2018).

The policy initiatives of Kerala Tourism and the Kerala RT experience undoubtedly prove that Sustainable Development is not a *mantra* to recite, but a concept that can be practised in tourism.

#### References:

- Tourism Policy Kerala. (1995). Thiruvananthapuram. Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala
- Kerala Tourism Vision 2025. (2002). Thiruvananthapuram. Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala
- Kerala Tourism Policy. (2012). Thiruvananthapuram. Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala
- Kerala Tourism Policy. (2017). Thiruvananthapuram. Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala
- Radhakrishnan, A. S., (2018). Responsible Tourism: scaling up the mission. The Hindu. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/rt-scaling-up-the-mission/article25275136.ece> Accessed on 28.08.2019
- Kerala records 6% rise in tourist arrivals despite floods and Nipah virus scare. (2019). Thiruvananthapuram. Economic Times. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/travel/kerala-records-6-rise-in-tourist-arrivals-despite-floods-and-nipah-virus-scare/articleshow/67995390.cms?from=mdr> Accessed on 28.08.2019