

**ECO TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH BENGAL:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF JHANDI VILLAGE IN GORUBATHAN,
DOOARS REGION**

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ABSTRACT:

Eco tourism is one of the fastest growing markets in tourism industry. It is not only a process of travelling to destinations where flora and fauna, cultural heritage are the primary attractions but it is also about preserving the place that inherently benefits the environment and local population of that particular place. It is ideal for environmental management and protection. Jhandi a small village in Gorubathan, Dooars region is one of the most attractive tourists' destination and highest peak of Gorubathan with optimum climate ambience. The serenity and beauty of the village along with the tremendous natural resources, like water resources, agricultural resources, soil resources, mineral resources, forest resources and wild life resources has been perfect place for the people and it has an immense impact on attracting the eco tourist from different places. The village has not only succeeded in promoting eco tourism in the region but have tremendously affected the development of the village and the locals as a whole. Of these issues of significance, the study has conducted an exploratory research to analyse the current scenario or development of eco tourism/ village tourism in Jhandi village. It will also attempt to explore the tourism practices and sustainable development in the village and highlight the future prospects and possibilities that can be executed for the implementation of eco tourism in a larger scale.

Key Words: Eco Tourism, Sustainable Development, North Bengal, Jhandi Village

INTRODUCTION:

The concept of tourism emerged in late 1960's and 1970s for the concern of inappropriate use of natural resources (Tran and Do Quynh, 2011). The approach has been taken to minimize the depletion and effects on natural environment and to enhance the protection of natural resources. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization, eco tourism is nature based form of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas (Valtonen, 2013). However in broader outlook, eco tourism is a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment and some component thereof, within its associated cultural context and to attain socio-culturally sustainable outcomes as well as financial viability (Tran and Do Quynh, 2011). Moreover, it has been suggested that ecotourism does not necessarily need to be based on purely natural or undisturbed area but it can be focused on observing a single element in a small scale ecosystem, for example, a certain species of flora or fauna (Valtonen, 2013).

Eco tourism has been extensively labelled into nature based, adventure based, wild life, cultural based and food based tourism and so on. It is not only a process of travelling to destinations where flora and fauna, cultural heritage are the primary attractions but it is also about preserving the place that inherently benefits the environment and local population of that particular place. At local level, ecotourism is aimed to ensure long term inclusive development through the genuine participation of its stakeholders (Chan and Bhatta, 2013). It is portrayed as smaller in size and scale, but the major concern is not on the dimension and extent of ecotourism but how it is planned, implemented and managed to contribute to economic, social and cultural development of the local communities related to destination.

It helps in community development by providing the alternate source of livelihood to local community, which is more sustainable (Kiper, 2013). As such tourism in rural areas entails the opportunity to back sustainable development by highlighting not only the economic aspect but the

socio-cultural dimension as well (Gronau and Kaufmann, 2009). Carefully planned and operated ecotourism sites, especially if it is village-based and includes local participation, is able to provide direct benefits that might offset pressure from other less sustainable activities that make use of natural and cultural resources. (Kiper, 2013).

With the above backdrop, the present study has made an attempt to bring into attention the narrative analysis of the development of eco tourism in Jhandi Village, Gorubathan which has received little academic attention despite being a potential eco hotspot in North Bengal. It will further explore the tourism practices and its impact on the socio-economic status of the villagers, endorsing both sustainability and development in the region.

JHANDI VILLAGE:

Jhandi is a small hamlet in Gorubathan, Dooars region that lies in the in the lap of northern part, North Bengal and it is popularly known by Jhandi Eco Huts and continues to become the most attractive tourist destination from past ten years. It is one of the highest peaks in Gorubathan with optimum climatic ambiance situated on 6,200 ft. above sea level. The serenity and beauty of the village along with the tremendous natural resources has been perfect place for the people and it has an immense impact on attracting eco tourists from different places. Surrounded by attractive natural landscape and endowed with natural flora and fauna, this place is the nearest and reachable hill top from plain land of West Bengal.

METHODOLOGY:

The study is primarily based on ethnographic research, collected using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Primary data has been collected purposively from the selected location. Snowball sampling has been used as; it helps to locate the desired respondents required for the study through the referrals of initial respondents. On the other hand secondary data was collected through different journals, articles, newspapers and internet sources. A semi- structured questionnaire has been conducted with four people, the manager of Jhandi eco huts, the owner of home stays and around 17 local people of the village. In order to ensure confidentiality and emphasize the voluntary nature of the interview all potential respondents was asked for prior appointments to ensure their convenience and was given the choice of opting out of the interview.

JHANDI ECO HUTS: THE STORY BEHIND :

Jhandi is a small village where tourism and agriculture is the principle source of economy and earnings of the people. Prior with the introduction of eco tourism in the village, the earnings of the people were dependent on agriculture and farming. Jhandi Eco Huts was started by Dr. P.D Bhutia in September 2011 with the construction of beautiful eco huts which he initially named as 'Lava Escape'. So in 2013 when Rajen Pradhan took property in hand, he changed the name into Jhandi Eco Huts. The name has its own significance and meaning attached. The word '*Dara*' in Nepali means a hill and the word 'Jhandi' originates from the word Jhanda or Flag. So, generally people in villages used to put religious flag on top of the hill nearby¹. As Jhandi is a top hill village lies in the vicinity of Gorubathan, Dooars Region, thus the name Jhandi Eco Huts. The reason behind changing the label is to upgrade the business for marketing purpose, which was degrading by that time period and to attract tourist for exploring the sublime beauty of the village more so, of the hill top. The hill top provides tourists with the enchanting view of Kanchenjunga, Teesta River, Sunrise and Sunset Dooars, Night View Kalimpong and Nathula Mountain Ranges. Also as narrated by the villagers, prior to becoming the popular tourist destination, Jhandidara was also known as '*Nayak Dara*' which was named after a Nayak or Subedar² who used to stay in the village. So Jhandi Eco Huts not only

¹ <https://www.north-bengal.com/jhandi-dara-kalimpong.html>

² Subedar is a rank of junior commissioned officer in Indian Army.

attract people for the pleasant views or to enjoy the tranquillity of nature but such stories narration by the local villagers make it more fascinating for tourist to explore and enjoy their stay in Jhandi Eco Huts.

PRESENT SCENARIO OF ECO TOURISM IN THE VILLAGE :

Jhandi Eco Huts have altogether four eco huts with ten rooms providing best accommodation and basic facilities. The area is surrounded by forever lush green tea gardens, vegetables, colourful wild flowers and forest. In Jhandi Eco Huts, the minimum tariffs start from Rs. 1500 to Rs 4000 depending on cottage type and number of occupancy. Each hut is labelled with Nepali indices, which is a manifestation of the local specifics available in Jhandi Village. For instance, *Laliguras Eco Hut* (Rhododendron flower), *Geet Khola Eco Hut* (Name of river in Jhandi), *Gauthali Eco Hut* (Name of the Bird) etc. Thus, each eco hut is with not only the purpose to accommodate people but it is also an attempt to allow people to recognize the natural significance of the village.

The major initiative taken by Jhandi Eco Hut is not only to attract tourist from different places but to promote local food, provide organic experiences, exploring village lifestyle, support local business and bolster employment opportunities in the village which has lead to a sustainable livelihood development in Jhandi village. Following the narration of Rajen Pradhan, *“previously the rate of cow milk was Rs 25 per litre. But he told his staff to increase the rate to Rs 35 per litre and whatever the extra profit they used to get, they make it a point to share it with the villagers. This is one small step towards integrating community people along with us.”*

Subsequently, the rise of tourist in Jhandi Eco Huts has profound impact on the construction of home stays and small restaurants by the locals in the vicinity areas. Presently, a total of eight to nine home stays are available in the village. In terms of topography, Jhandi Eco Huts is built in the highest hill top of the village. So tourist prefers their stay more than into other homestays. But what make it different are their cooperation and support among them and the local people. One of the home stay owner stated, *“People usually come to stay in Eco Huts and explore the place but whenever they cannot accommodate people, they send it to our homestays and we make sure to give them the equal comfort and hospitality in our place.”*

Different categories of tourist hail from different places, predominantly from Kolkata, Cooachbehar, Alidurpur and Siliguri. Presently, a significant number Photographers and Bird Watcher has also been visiting the place along with some foreign tourists, who are interested in hiking, trekking or just experiencing the peaceful and traditional life of village. One of the Jhandi Eco Hut staff speaks, *‘The inflow of tourist has been very impressive during the last three years. In fact, more than 1,200 tourists have visited the village during this year from various parts of West Bengal predominantly from Kolkata.’* Not only tourists but lately the locals from nearby places frequently visit Jhandi to hanging out with their friends and families. The season for visits starts from the month of October till the month of May. But as per the staffs and people of Jhandi, the flow of the tourist has been declining lately, due to the uphill rough road condition. But despite such difficulty, eco tourism in this region is still flourishing, thereby becoming one of the major Eco Tourism hotspot in Gorubathan, Dooars Region. It has no doubt contributed towards the sustainable livelihood of the people in diverse ways which has been illustrated below.

CHANGES AFTER IMPLEMENTATION OF ECO TOURISM :

The implementation of Eco Tourism has bought some developmental changes in Jhandi village.

Creating Opportunities for People: After Eco Tourism has been implemented in the village, job opportunities for the local people especially the youths who were unemployed and are interested to work in Jhandi Eco Huts were appointed in various departments as a manager, staff, caterer, etc. Gradually, career options were diversified as trainers, tourist guides and trekkers. The narration of 25 years old staff from Jhandi Eco Huts, *“I have failed my Class 10 Madhyamik Examination so I was ideally sitting at home doing nothing. So Jhandi Eco Hut needed some staffs. So I joined them and*

after one year I saved my money for my education. I reapplied for examination and I got through. I am continuing my education but during weekends and holidays, I come here to work.”

Creating job for the rural youth has given them the opportunity to earn whilst saving for their higher education, which needed more attention. Another 45 years old respondent from the village stated, “*It is no doubt that our village has changed a lot after tourism has been introduced. If you ask, there are people who have generated income via local business, opening shops, building home stays that somehow contributed towards improving education of children and youths. Earlier, families who could not support financially for children’s higher education has now started sending them to colleges and universities.*” Thus the above two narrations shows the relevant effect of tourism not only on economic capital but it has also enhanced the cultural capital of people in terms of attaining higher educational qualifications.

Promotion of Local Business: Eco tourism has catered towards employing local people as well as it opened a new trajectory for those people who wanted to promote or start local businesses in the village. Even though people are not exclusively involved in tourism industry, they are benefitted by promoting/ selling local foods, organic vegetables, flowers, fruits, handicrafts etc. Moreover, it has been observed that, villagers no more go to the local market to sell their goods. All the goods get supplied locally to those who are involved in home stays and business activities, thus reducing the transportation of carrying charges as well. A 36 year lady who owns a small fast food restaurant on the way to Jhandi Eco Huts narrated, “*After tourist started coming to this place, I thought of opening a fast food zone but was sceptical whether they might come to eat. Gradually people started to come in my restaurant and enjoy the food. I usually serve Nepali food like momos, thukpa, aludam, chowmein etc. During tourist season, earnings are good and I am able to support my family.*”

Following the above narrations, a 38 years old man speaks, “*I am a farmer and I cultivate almost very cash crops and seasonal vegetables in my field. So, these days it is very difficult to procure organic vegetables and fruits. So whenever people from nearby places come to visit Jhandi, they buy it from me. I do not have an actual shop but I made small hut nearby my home to sell my vegetables. I also supply them outside my village. I cannot say, I am earning a lot but it helped me support my family.*” Thus the above two narrations illustrate the circuitous effect of tourism in the village, which has contributed towards improving the economic afflictions of the villagers.

Overall Development of Village: The fundamental change eco tourism has brought in this village is the improvement in transport facilities, water management and availability of electricity. Initially roadways were not there. There was a Kuccha (unrepaired) road and it was not in a good condition. On the other hand, the vital problem people have to deal was the shortage of water. People have to carry water from nearby streams and provide in eco huts and home stays. After the functioning of Eco Tourism, there has been an improvement in all these sectors. Constructions of small roads are also taking place within the village through rural development schemes which has significantly benefitted the villagers as well as the tourists who want to explore the place. There is no doubt that, Jhandi eco huts has been an attraction for the tourists which helped in implementing new rural projects for the development of the village. It has successfully rejuvenated the mundane life of the villagers and people are gratified with the changes that they have witnessed after introducing Eco Tourism in the Village.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND AWARENESS AMONG THE PEOPLE :

Eco Tourism has no doubt led to socio-economic changes as well as cultivated an individual capacity building among the people. As most of the tourist come from different places and speak different languages, there were difficulties in verbal communication or in interpreting any valuable information by the locals. Thus over a period of time, there has been an improvement among people, particularly among those who are directly or indirectly associated with tourism business, by learning and communicating in languages like Hindi, English and Bengali, which according to them was necessary for the development of their businesses. On the other hand, it also offers tourist the

opportunity to engage with local people and experience their way of life. A lot of people residing in this area are simple-minded and their daily activities revolve around the natural environment. But the development of eco tourism in this region and the everyday interaction new people has somehow made them aware of the preservation of nature and has been consciously taking initiative for the sustainable development of the village. One intentional effort made by the villagers was to minimise the use of plastic and impose restriction on littering garbage or plastics in the village. It is one of the steps to promote an eco friendly tourism in the village.

EXPERIENCES SHARED BY TOURISTS :

Far away from the hustle bustle of city life, coming to village and enjoy the natural beauty painted with myriad culture and traditions in itself was a unique experience for tourist in Jhandi Eco Huts. A couple from Kolkata who has been staying in Jhandi Eco Huts for two days has narrated a unique incident, *“One thing we notice in this village is that, people do not lock their homes whenever they go out. There is no use of lock and key in the house, which means that villagers here are like family, so loyal and trustworthy. The harmony we see in villages cannot be found in city life. It was something I learned and experience from here.”* Sharing similar observation, a tourist from Coochbehar speaks, *“We really like the place, although coming to this high up terrain was a little difficult for us but we have enjoyed every moment here. The hospitality and care we get from people is what I love the most about this place. And I think this kind of warmth and love we get only from village people.* Thus it can be said that, the beauty of Jhandi lies not only on captivating beauty of nature but it is more than that. The harmonious nature and the warm hospitality these tourists had experienced is often overlooked rather it is a significant paradigm that can contribute or promote eco tourism in villages like Jhandi Village.

FUTURE PROSPECTS OF ECO TOURISM IN THE VILLAGE :

Many developmental changes and proper infrastructure facilities need to be provided to boost up tourism sector in the village. Interviews with the respondents have highlighted some of the points that need to be introduced in future or should be taken into consideration for eco tourism to be flourished in Jhandi Village.

- a) Construction of pitch road in the village is a huge concern for the villagers, as it can affect the evolvement of tourism in the village.
- b) Lately, some of the villagers have started selling their land to business entrepreneurs from other states who claim to build star hotels. Thus, the people who run home stays and eco huts express worryness, that their idea of creating a sustainable and eco friendly tourism business might affect in coming future.
- c) This village has a great potential to turn into a major exotic eco hotspot but for that people who wants to get involved in tourism sector should not only look upon this business as a financial venture but also should make genuine contributions to the conservation of natural environment and resources as well.
- d) Very little is known about this area or the village. So, to attract the local as well as foreign tourists, the networking or the advertisement should be in large scale in every possible way is necessary.
- e) Ecotourism in the village is totally self -funded. In this case, if the Government or even tourism department should extend their support in some way or other the ecotourism in the village would definitely flourish in future.

CONCLUSION :

Eco Tourism has played a significant role in providing sustainable livelihood for the people thereby becoming an alternative source of income generation in Jhandi village. It has not only generated employment opportunities for rural youths but it was successful in integrating local businesses or

marketing local products that has led to a community empowerment. The frequent interaction and assimilation with tourists from different regions has enhanced the social, cultural and educational values of the villagers. They had learned to preserve and utilize natural and cultural resources in a sustainable way as to enable the economic development of the village. It can thus be argued that, with proper organisational strategies and publicity, ecotourism with its rich natural endowments can do a lot for the good of the rural economy and society.

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