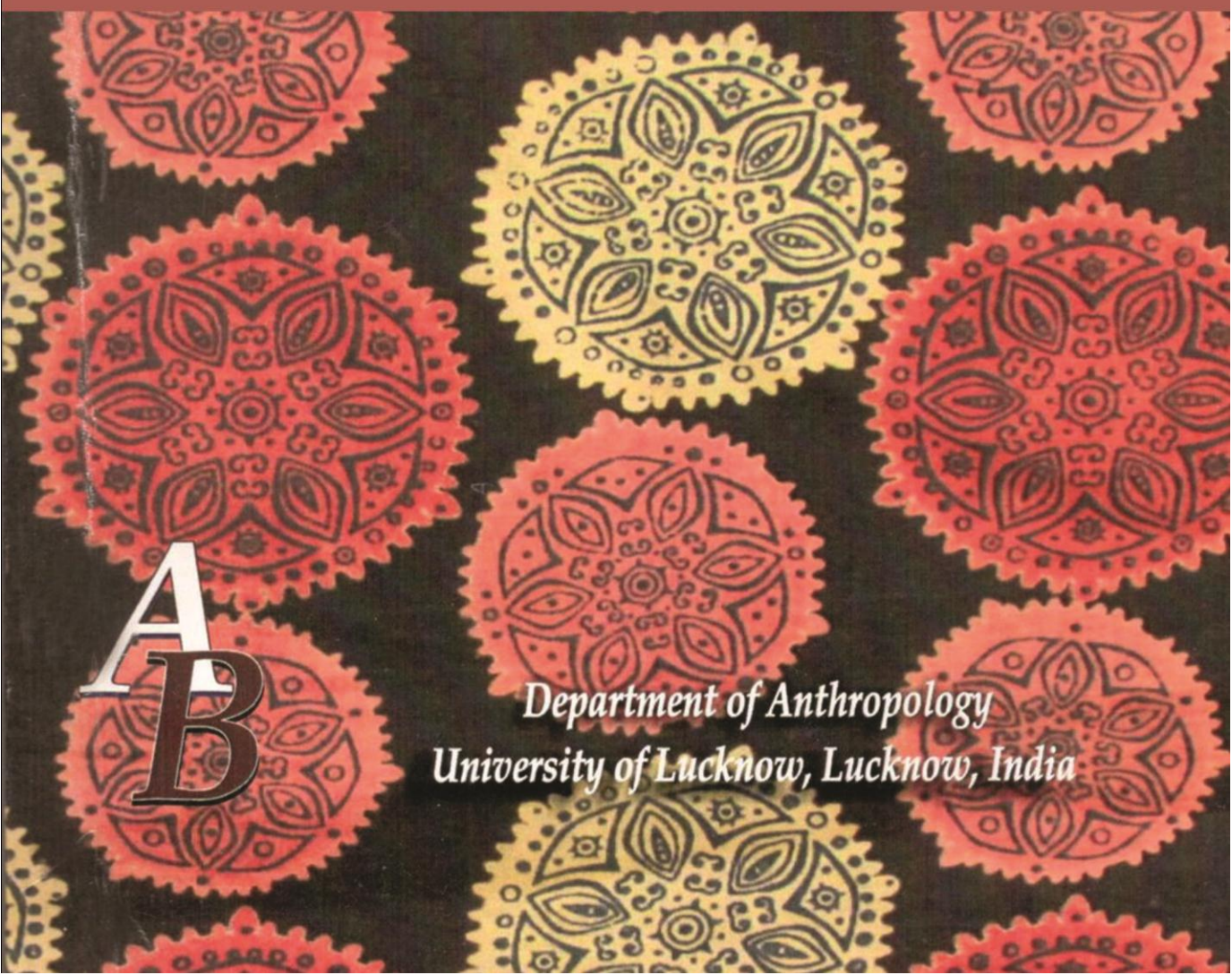


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Rural Development through Ecotourism: A Case Study of Okharey Village, Sikkim

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of ecotourism in the development of rural community in the village of Okharey, Western Sikkim. In this context the objectives of the present study are to find i) the impact of ecotourism on rural community; and ii) the role of government agency in the marketing of rural ecotourism destinations. Mixed methodology approach was used for this paper. Primary data was collected from the respondents using structured questionnaire, interviews, Group discussion as well as by observation; for an in - depth case study. Secondary data was collected from the books, journals, government reports and internet sources. The study reveals that ecotourism is transforming this village into a model village for ecotourism development; as ecotourism has contributed in reviving the cultural values as well as provide a means of livelihood. Further, it was observed that socio-economic status of people has improved after they got involved in providing ecotourism services. Suggestions for appropriate planned and ecotourism activities are being mentioned.

Keywords: Rural Development, Ecotourism, Eco Tourism Zones, Local Community, Impact

Introduction

Ecotourism, based on the principles of ecosystem structures and functions, is an important tool for the development of rural community. World Commission on Environment and Development's Brundtland Report (1987) stated that Ecotourism is rooted in the concept of sustainable development. Ecotourism encompasses a spectrum of nature-based activities that foster visitor appreciation and understanding of natural and cultural heritage. Ecotourism is considered to be sustainable due to the following characteristics - a) attracting tourists to natural environments which are unique and accessible; b) tourism that brings about improved nature conservation, through education, changing attitudes in local people

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and governments, community development and altered political priorities; and c) providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for local people.

Ecotourism is a development tool in ecologically sensitive areas and one of its most important features is the highlighting of lesser-known natural sites, globally. Ecotourism encompasses a spectrum of nature-based activities that foster visitor appreciation and understanding of natural and cultural heritage and are managed to be ecologically, economically and socially development which means to be an alternative type of sustainable development for rural communities. At the same time, it is also a money-spinning economic activity based on the locally available natural resources that act as an alternative sustainable economic development plan for rural communities. Interim Report, Govt. of Sikkim, (2009) mentions that ecotourism is the solution for environmental and socio-economic problems in the rural areas as it has the potential for the regeneration of rural areas into a beautiful destination. Ecotourism, if managed properly, have positive impact on local community that leads to - improved socio-economic condition; increased education, employment, and income opportunities, as well as infrastructural development.

Background

Sikkim is a small state located in North-East of India with a total geographical area of 7096 sq.kms. Sikkim is well setting for ecotourism development due to its abundant natural beauty, flora and fauna and unique essence of indigenous cultures. Govt. of Sikkim, FEWMD report (2011) mentions that the state is embraced with rich biodiversity of more than with the rich biodiversity of more than 4,500 species of flowering plants, more than 50 species of Pisces, 690 species of butterfly, 16 species of amphibians, 78 species of reptiles, 550 species of birds, 154 species of mammals. The forest coverage of the state was 37% in 1975, 43.95 percent in 1993 then it steadily increased to 47.34 percent in 2013.

Sikkim is growing fastest in terms of tourism and is renowned leading ecotourism destination in the north-east region of India. The state is predominantly rural in nature and being promoting ecotourism improves income generation without harming the environment. Tourist visiting the rural parts of state motivates the local community to engage themselves in environment related tourism business. Ecotourism is the only viable industry to enhance livelihood opportunity to the rural community of Sikkim. Yuksom is the first village to practice ecotourism under the JICA project with the collaboration of Forest Department. Ecotourism in Sikkim is reflected in the combination of Trekking and Homestay which actually falls in Rural and Adventure tourism. Trekking is the major recreation activity for the visitors to enjoy within the natural world in Sikkim (Watabe, 2010) Ecotourism focuses on environmentally sound practices and generating widespread economic benefits, offers an opportunity for Sikkim to improve the livelihoods of its mountain communities and protect its unique heritage. Ecotourism in Sikkim is practices in the fringe area of Khanchendzonga National park (World Heritage Site) and the Wildlife Sanctuary. (Wildlife Circle, 2014)

Literature Review

Ecotourism is studied on different aspects and its development due to which an extensive literature review was made for this study. Campbell(1999), holds the view that the absence of government planning and intervention led to *ad hoc* development of ecotourism at Ostional, Costa Rica. The Lack of awareness and increased outside investors has great impact on rural community. However, despite the positive attitudes of local residents toward tourism the benefit shared was limited for tourism development. Fennell (2000) in his book highlighted the need of eco - friendly tourism in order to get maximum benefit without affecting and altering physical and social quality. According to Nilson (2006) ecotourism is ecologically and economically sustainable nature and culture tourism. He opines that the important factors for the improvement of sustainable rural ecotourism is development of better nature and culture travel package. Ecotourism contributes direct money to the local

rural economy. Tambe, Bhutia, & Arrawatia (2007) highlighted that different ecotourism activities developed in unique geographical settings makes possible to perform tourism activities throughout the years resulting ecotourism as an important economy contributor to Sikkim.

Cotthem (2007), viewed Ecotourism, a new source of income that transforms rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The study finds that "Increasing numbers of rural communities are signing commercial agreements with private companies to develop ecotourism pursuits on community land". This enables poor rural people to diversify their livelihoods and creates economic incentives to protect natural resources. Therefore, the development of Sustainable community-based ecotourism depends on how local people are maintaining control over natural resources. Bhattacharjee & Kumari (2009) in their study reported that the increase number of tourists in Khanchendzonga National Park due to the world renowned Dzongri Trail has created enormous pressure on its natural resources results in degradation near the settlement of tourists campsites. Buckley (2009) in his book *"Ecotourism: Principles and Practices"* has mentioned that Ecotourism has an immense potentiality to generate economic return from the undisturbed natural environment. Community based ecotourism is recognized as one particular type of Ecotourism where the primary focuses is on the involvement of the local communities and are socially benefitted to a larger extent. Chakraborty (2009) in his study mentioned that the transformation of the state into ecofriendly greenest destination is moreover due to the construction pattern of Urban centres of Sikkim. Kumar & Kumar (2009) holds the view that local people are very much enthusiastic to developed ancient caves as an important ecotourist site in Bihar. Hence, such movement would benefit the people socially and economically. Oliveira & Silva, (2010) indicated that tourism development in rural areas improved the social and economic dynamics of local communities. The participation of local communities enlarged the sustainability of the destination by increasing economic activities and conservation of natural resources. However, the natural and cultural resources enhanced the development of environmental and green forms of tourism. Karmakar (2011) in his book *"Growth of Ecotourism in North Bengal and Sikkim"* mentioned that the influence of ecotourism on small communities is all based on the locally available natural and cultural resources. Soft adventure tourism and camping is an acceptable ecotourism product in the rural area due to which local community of Sikkim are motivated to get involve in ecotourism related activities. Tugba, Gulen, & Canan (2011) in their study indicated that ecotourism would be more understandable through environmental, sociological and economic category. Community based ecotourism has significant potential effect to develop positive attitude of the local communities.

Aslam (2012) critically analysed and reviewed the existing published and unpublished literature on sustainable rural tourism. Lee (2005) quoted in (Aslam, 2012) mentioned that agricultural resources is a traditional economic base to sustain rural development and contributes largely towards the growth of tourism industry. The holistic process reviewed that understanding and awareness of stakeholders and local community is the primary requirement of sustainable tourism in rural areas. Bhattarai & Pandey, 2012 in their study stated that Sikkim is the home of Mt. Khanchendzonga the third highest mountain in the world, land of elaborate festivals and fairs, snow-capped mountains, lakes, religious hubs, hot springs, diverse cultures and natural wonders becomes an essential aspect in a refreshing atmosphere that promotes ecotourism in Sikkim. Sikkim is gaining popularity in the contest of ecotourism hotspot destination of India. Dorobantu & Nistoreanu (2012) in their study on *Rural Tourism and Ecotourism: the Main Priorities in Sustainable Development Orientation in Romania*, mentioned that there is a close relationship between rural tourism and ecotourism in order to preserve the local traditions and their feasible equilibrium is the need for sustainable development. The rural life style has transformed from agriculture to the

industrial dependence since the major changes in technology. However, the change not only creates opportunities to rural community but favored with the challenges due to overexploitation of the natural resources. Therefore, ecological thinking makes possible of rural tourism development sustainably. According to Murphy(2013) the modern holiday industry begins when the people travelled to natural areas for relaxation from the congested urban environment. Dam(2013) in her study indicates that majority of tourists are unaware about sustainability aspects of ecotourism in Sikkim mostly among the domestic tourists. Ecotourism in Sikkim is practiced in protected areas where trekking, mountaineering and homestay are the main activities offered to tourists in this pristine environment with warm local hospitality. The author opines that development of ecotourism spots and products should based on nature and culture aspects which ultimately provides an income opportunities to the local communities.

Kakroodi & Gosha (2013), in their study has mentioned that the increasing number of tourist in Javaherdeh village develops supplementary activities in the field of agriculture, cultural, employment, and income. As to many countries, only village is a source of cultural and natural heritage. Expansion of ecotourism activities in rural areas attracts more environmental concerns people. Rao & Pawar (2013), in their study highlighted that involvement of local community in ecotourism is very low and neglected in process of ecotourism project implementation in Dandeli. Despite being neglected, the communities respect policy and reduce in illegal trading of forest products. The study revealed that the local communities were not prioritized for job in the Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary even though the Ecotourism project generates entrepreneurship to a larger extent. Therefore, active participation of local communities with Tourism Development Agencies led to positive effect of ecotourism and balance between conservation and development. Andrei, Gogonea, Christescu, Sztruen, & Busuioc (2014) highlighted that ecotourism is viable alternative for economic development of Romanian rural communities. Collaboration of various specialists is highly required in Protection and conservation of rural tourism. In this regard, the participation of local people in environment protection, economic and cultural – historical traditions contribute in eco-rural development. Chaudhary & Lama (2014) holds the view that despite being local communities as the central stakeholder for the development of Community Based Tourism in rural areas, the lack of awareness has led them to remain unexplored and isolated. Hence, the NGOs encouraged the local communities realizing their role in Community Based Tourism Development. Chakrabarti (2014) critically analyses that Sikkim has been identified as a popular tourist destination in the world and major role is played by the government in reviving tourism in the state. There is a need of the collaboration of the government agencies and private agencies for the development of tourism in the state which is seen working in isolation with each other. The author felt that Sikkim needs to have an integrated approach with the involvement of all the stakeholders and the local communities and then only tourism can be developed in a better way all over the state. According to Kumar (2014) Sikkim is the first state to structure an effective ecotourism policy with due support and assistance of experts from Japan. The ecotourism policy outcome revealed the state as the status of the cleanest state on the basis of their conservation initiatives. Hence, the state has been declared as the best ecotourism destination of the basis of a survey conducted by the world's leading travel guide 'Lonely Planet'.

According to Pandey (2014) Tourism in Sikkim is not only for its natural beauty but also to see the tribal culture and traditions due to which tourism helps to preserve indigenous life style and culture. He has highlighted that ecotourism is the only suitable option for the development of socio-economic life of the people in the state. According to Laitpharlang (2014) eco-cultural tourism is a heady force for the overall economic, social and cultural development as well as biodiversity conservation. He has mentioned that responsible tourism as a form of tourism ultimately supports in the conservation of environment and

culture through rural lifestyle. Viji (2014), holds the view that ecotourism is the most suitable economic sector in the rural areas that diversify the local economy within the community and create employment directly and indirectly to the people who are excessively dependent on agriculture. The author opines that majority of the income from ecotourism is retained with the local people due to which they pay attention in conserving the environment. Winkler & Zimmermann (2014), hold the views that ecotourism has big effect on small development in community level in terms of local empowerment and protecting the pristine nature. It is necessary to make participation of local community in ecotourism project planning and to educate them in sustainable ecotourism development. Therefore, with this participation communities benefits financially if not then the ecotourism project discontinued. Dahal (2015), stated that community based ecotourism has a great impact on indigenous community that transform the lives of poor people, alleviate poverty and develop conservation as well. This study considered social capital as one of the important aspects for the success of Community Based Ecotourism Development. According to Chettri & Sharma (2016), communities participation necessary required to reconcile conservation of mountain ecosystem due to which a strong thrust has been given to community development. The study revealed that protected areas have increased greatly in number and shown that biodiversity conservation requires a comprehensive and multi-scaled approach. Therefore, the conservation efforts based on community participation has been more effective. KC (2016) suggested that a better cooperation among different entrepreneurs and appropriate management policy has high rate of beneficial impacts in the development of rural areas according to the review of ecotourism researchers.

Thomas (2016) has mentioned that ecotourism is an important environmental friendly source of income and has positively contributed directly and indirectly to economic impact on the local communities. Nsukwini & Bob (2016), in their study hold the view that the involvement of Nompondo communities residing adjacent to protected areas is highly benefitted in various ways from ecotourism and develop a positive relation between Park and the community. Therefore, the local community has changed their perception positively towards Park management and realized its strength in socio-economic impacts and benefits. Community involvement is increasing in nature conservation and ecotourism development. Nugroho, Pramukanto, Negara, Purnomowati, & Wulandari (2016), in their study holds the view that ecotourism has changed the rural lifestyle from agricultural to tourism-friendly society and improve welfare to farmer and promotes conservation. The study revealed that homestay is an essential part of rural tourism development that generates revenue to the local community. Hence, Homestay is a platform to showcase the products and services, and evaluation of quality standards of tourism in rural areas. Doke (2017) holds the view that Ecotourism is 'environment- friendly' tourism and is the fastest growing segment of international tourism in the world that contributes environment protection and sustainable use of natural resources for tourism development in Bhor. In addition, it has great potentials of economic development and the conservation of natural environment area. According to Acquah, Nsor, Arthur, & Boadi (2017) " increased awareness and respect for local cultures, putting the communities in the global spotlight and increased support for conservation are the socio-cultural benefits of of ecotourism in the sanctuary adjacent communities". Therefore local people develop positive attitude towards ecotourism practices in the village and the conservation efforts. Jefferies (2017), stated that ecotourism is different from the general tourism since it requires specialist stakeholder in conservation knowledge or skills.

Kaewkhunok (2018), mentioned that Ecotourism Policy is an important tool in changing the ecotourism management in the state of Sikkim. In addition, participation of the local people to in ecotourism activities is based on ecotourism policies and regulations issued by the Ecotourism Council. According to Seal (), the growth of tourism enterprises increases the

power of women within the family and the community. Tourism hospitality in addition is the central part for its growth. Das (2019) highlighted the issues and challenges of sustainable tourism development in the state of Sikkim in terms of ecology, limited employment opportunities to the local, lack of regulation/ standards, connectivity, and communication. The high influx of tourist in the state has led to pressure on the infrastructure, environment and culture due to which a new approach in sustainable planning of the region has to be initiated. Furthermore, it is suggested that Research should be undertaken throughout all stages of tourism development in Sikkim.

Research Gap

Tourism has transformed the occupation pattern of rural areas in Sikkim for more than a decade. The educated youth are being trained in different fields of tourism and thus their involvement in tourism sector is increasing day by day. Ecotourism is preferred by tourists as it furnishes a taste of rural lifestyle along with soft adventure in pristine environment, rather than staying in bigger towns and cities. State government of Sikkim has been promoting ecotourism with incentives provided directly to the local community as ecotourism is an important tool for socio-economic growth of rural community. However, no study has been undertaken to find out the role of ecotourism in sustainable development of rural community of Sikkim. This study is an attempt in case study mode to fill in this research gap.

Objectives:

This study will focus on finding:

- (i) The impact of ecotourism on rural community; and
- (ii) Role of government agency in the marketing of rural ecotourism destinations.

Methodology

A descriptive research methodology has been used for this study. The village selected for the Case Study, namely Okharey is popular for ecotourism and is located in the western part of Sikkim. The present study is based on both quantitative and qualitative method based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected using Random sampling technique in the study village of Sikkim. The sample size used for the study is 60 respondents. The primary data has been collected using structured questionnaire and observation. Personal interviews were also conducted to find out the socio-economic condition of the local residents in the study area who are involved in the ecotourism activities. Secondary data has been collected from the various literatures like government reports, journals, books and internet sources. The findings are presented in the forms of table analysis along with column, line, bar graphs and pie charts.

Findings

Ecotourism enhances the impacts on socio-economic status of the local community in Sikkim. This study provides the imminent impact of ecotourism related activities in the case study area namely Okharey. The data in the present case study is analysed and interpreted in the light of the objectives of the study.

Objectives 1: To find out the impacts of ecotourism on rural community

Okhrey is a base village for Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary and is one of the mostly visited natural spot in Sikkim. This village is well-known for Ecotourism zone identified by the Forest department. The village is inhabited by the well known Himalayan tribe the "Sherpas". The diverse flora and fauna, symbiotic living of the local community and their traditions and rituals, trekking routes with the majestic view of Mt. Khanchendzonga supports in promoting ecotourism in the village. In an earlier time, the village is dominated by the agriculture as the main occupation and income source but now tourism is the main source of income besides government jobs. The village is transformed into a beautiful ecotourist destination. The village is famous for the major production of Potato in the state.

Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary is the main attraction for tourists to be halted in this village. The increasing number of educated young generation in ecotourism business ultimately benefitted to the whole community in the context of income, employment, eco-friendly infrastructure development, environmental conservation and education, etc. To understand the perception of the local community about the benefits of ecotourism, the Gender and Age are considered an important factor.

Field Visit



Interaction with Local People

Table 1 shows that out of total 60 respondents, 38 (63%) were males and 22 (37.3%) were Females. *More males than females were involved in ecotourism business and for this reason larger number of male respondents was represented in this study.*

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	38	63
Female	22	37
Total	60	100

Table 1: Gender distribution of the respondents

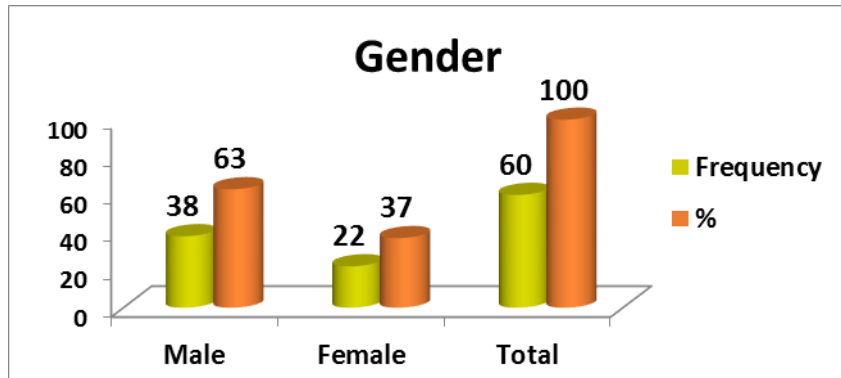


Figure 1: Gender of the Respondents'

Table 2 shows the age groups of the respondents who participated in the study in order to understand the perception of the local people regarding the benefits of ecotourism, respondents belonging to wide section of age groups were selected for the study. This shows the majority of respondents (46.6%) involved in ecotourism belong to this age group of 20-30 years. Besides, more than (41.6%) of the respondents belonged to the age group of 30-40 years, and nearly (5%) belonged to the age group of 40-50 years. Participation of respondents in the age groups of below 20 years (3.3%) and above 50 years (3.3%) was minimal.

Age Group	Frequency	%
Below 20	2	3.3
20-30	28	46.6
30-40	25	41.6
40-50	3	5
Above 50	2	3.3
Total	60	100

Table 2: Age distribution of the Respondents

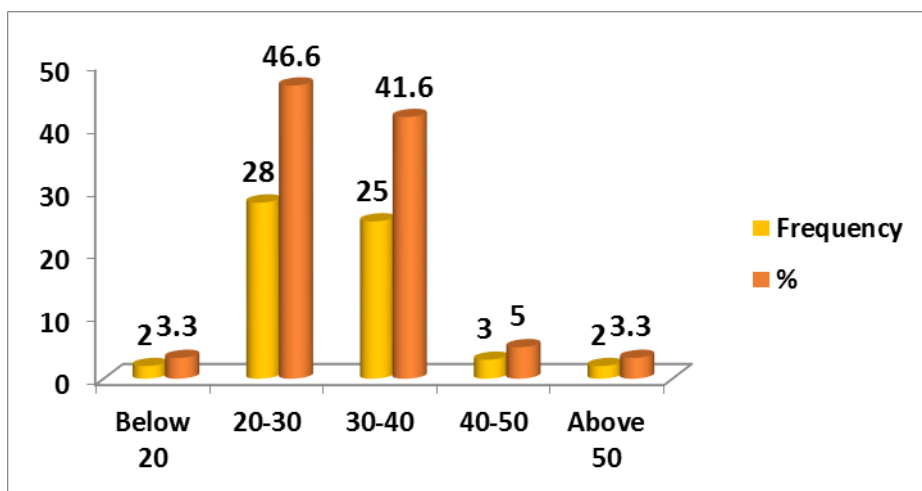


Figure 2: Age Group of the Respondent

Table 3 shows the occupation of 60 respondents Out of which 25 (41.6 %) respondents were running home stays, 8 (13.3%) respondents were involved in Preparation and selling of Local wine, 7(11.6%) were trekking guides, 7(11.6) were tourist cab drivers, 3 (5%) were bird watcher guide, 2(3.3%) respondents owned Restaurant, and 2(3.3%) of respondent worked as porter in trekking group, and 2 (3.3%) % of the respondents run Forest Trekkers Huts within the sanctuary.

Occupation	No of Respondents	Percentage %
Homestay Operator	25	41.6
Trekking Guide	7	11.6
Bird watching Guide	3	5
Porters	2	3.3
Tourist Cab Drivers	7	11.6
Local Wine Preparation	8	13.3
Culture Performers	4	6.6
Restaurant	2	3.3
Manager in Forest Trekkers Huts	2	3.3
Total	60	100

Table 3: Occupational breakup of Respondents through Ecotourism

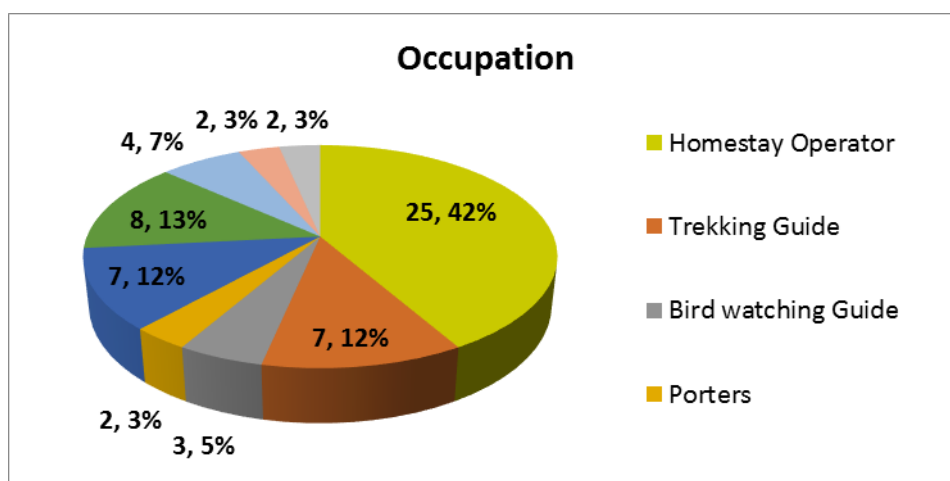


Figure 1: Respondents' Occupation due to Ecotourism

Table 4 show the respondents' approximate annual income earned through ecotourism. It was observed that a huge difference was made in earning of income pattern of local community. The survey in the study area revealed that approximate annual income from ecotourism varied from less than Rs. 5000 to Rs. 3, 00000 or more. The study observed that 17 respondents earned between Rs. 2, 00000 to Rs. 3, 00000 per year which was larger number of respondents in the survey study and the respondents were satisfied with this income. Out of 60 respondents, 10 respondents earned in between Rs 1, 00000 to Rs 2, 00000 per year and the

study shows that this is an additional source of income. The 10 respondents earned in between Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000 per year, 7 respondents earned in between Rs 50,000 to Rs 1,00,000, whereas 5 respondents earned between Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000 per year and 4 respondents earned between Rs 30,000 to Rs 50,000 per year, 3 respondents earned more than 3,00,000 hence 2 respondents earned between Rs 10,000 to Rs 20,000 and 2 respondents earned below Rs 5000. *The data shows that local communities are largely benefitted in terms of income generated through ecotourism and ecotourism has supported to uplift their economic level and living standard.*

Income in Rupees	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Below 5000	2	3.3
5000-10,000	2	3.3
10,000-20,000	10	23.3
20,000-30,000	5	28.3
30,000-50,000	4	6.6
50,000-1,00,000	7	11.6
1,00,000-2,00,000	10	16.6
2,00,000-3,00,000	17	3.3
Above 3,00,000	3	3.3
Total	60	100

Table 4: Appropriate Income from Ecotourism

Table 5 shows the knowledge and understanding of ecotourism among the respondents who are participating in offering ecotourism activities. Out of 60 respondents 55 (92%) of the respondents are aware of ecotourism whereas 5 (8%) of the respondents are not aware of ecotourism. *The survey study revealed that majority of the respondents has some amount of knowledge about ecotourism and its practices.*

Opinion	Frequency	%
Yes	55	92
No	5	8
Total	60	100

Table 5: Knowledge of Ecotourism

Table 6 depicts the understanding attributes of ecotourism by the local community. Out of 60 respondents 15 (25%) of the respondents understand ecotourism as "rest and relaxation in a homestay", 13 (21.6%) of the respondents indicates to "trekking through the forest", 12 (20%) of the respondents refer to "see natural scenic beauty", 10 (16.6%) mention "visiting wildlife sanctuary" and another 10 (16.6%) of the respondents' mention "see indigenous cultures and traditions" as ecotourism.

Attributes	No of Respondents	Percentage %
Visiting Wildlife Sanctuary	10	16.6
Rest and Relax in Homestay	15	25

To see indigenous cultures and traditions	10	16.6
To see natural scenic beauty	12	20
To experience trekking through the forest	13	21.6
Total	60	100

Table 6. Understanding attributes of ecotourism by the local communities

Table 7 shows the inflow of tourist to Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. The study revealed that 95% of the tourists' data mentioned in above table stays in Homestays at Okharey at least for minimum of two days. and the revenue generated from the entry tickets are utilized in plantation and conservation of the Rhododendron Sanctuary and rural activities for ecotourism development. The data shows that there is a huge difference between Domestic and International tourists visiting towards the Sanctuary. *The carrying capacity is automatically maintained due to its seasonality.*

Year	Domestic Tourist	International Tourist	Total	Entry Fees Collected (In Rupee)
2005-2006	2159	27	2186	65,250
2006-2007	2559	20	2597	71,565
2007-2008	2099	13	2122	62,705
2008-2009	2890	15	2905	79,555
2009-2010	3574	13	3587	97,835
2010-2011	3025	16	33041	1,09,810
2011-2012	3315	10	3325	1,84,870
2012-2013	3193	12	3205	1,73,435
2013-2014	3640	19	3659	1,75,325
2014-2015	3327	07	3334	1,85,850
2015-2016	3098	32	3130	1,95,830
2016- 2017	3787	44	3831	2,639,30
2017-2018	4248	36	4284	2,75,850
2018-2019	3098	22	3120	1,80,420
TOTAL	44012	286	74326	376910

Table 7: Tourist Inflow in Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary since from (2005-2018)

Source: Forest Check post, Barsey Wildlife Sanctuary, West Sikkim

Objectives 2: To find out the role of Government agency in the marketing of rural ecotourism destination.

Department of Forest Environment and Wildlife Management is the nodal agency for ecotourism development in Sikkim. This department has established a separate Ecotourism Cell under the Directorate of Ecotourism for the marketing of ecotourism zones and products. Ecotourism Policy has been formulated by the department for proper implementation and control on ecotourism zones. Department has consulted with the local community in planning process and the available products in Okharey.

1. Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary is the protected area of Sikkim and the forest department has relaxed rules for allowing the tourists to enjoy the beautiful and Colorful sanctuary. The Forest department has demarcated this protected areas in the three zones such as:

- *Core Zone*: Totally restricted and prohibited all the human activities except for the maintenance work.
 - *Buffer Zone*: Multiple use zones such as plantation and afforestation.
 - *Tourism Zone*: Tourism utilization zone, such as trekking and camping only in the designated area or routes.
2. **Accommodation within the Barsey Sanctuary**: Forest department has established a Trekkers Hut within the sanctuary area such as Guras Kunj and Forest Barrack. These trekker's huts are lease out to the local interested people of Okharey to operate and serve to tourists under forest department.



Guras Kunj



Forest Barrack

Source: Courtesy; the Roaming Shoes

3. Local community are the member of Ecotourism Development Committee (EDCs) in this zone and plays the following roles:
- ✓ Assistance in forestry works.
 - ✓ Assistance in eco development activities.
 - ✓ Assistance in ecotourism activities.
 - ✓ Assistance in the implementation of various forest legislations.
 - ✓ Protection and conservation of forests, environment, wildlife and biodiversity
4. Forest department organises awareness programme and capacity building training provided to the local people in the study area on Homestay operation, Cooking, Trekking and Bird Watching Guides etc.
5. The study revealed that Directorate of Ecotourism has identified this study area as ecotourism zone in Sikkim based on the ongoing rural tourism activities within the village.

Protected Areas	Location	Ecotourism Zone	Ecotourism Activities

Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary	West District	Okharey	✓ Trekking and Hiking through the forest within the Sanctuary. ✓ Relax in Homestay with local hospitality. ✓ Observing Cultural activities. ✓ Visiting Oldest Monastery. ✓ Bird watching ✓ Village walks ✓ Tasting Local cuisine and wine ✓ Participate in Agro-farming ✓ Gastronomy
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Table 8: Showing study area, Okharey West Sikkim

6. Online promotion and marketing of this zone in the departmental websites of Sikkim Forest Environment and Wildlife Management Department.
7. Constant support from Forest department in the organization of first (2015) and second (2018) Ecotourism festival in order to boost ecotourism benefits in the village.



8.

Source: FEWMD, Government of Sikkim

Discussion

Findings of the study revealed that Ecotourism in Sikkim is still in the nascent stage of development despite being practices since 1995. It was observed that increase in tourist inflow is larger in number only after the declaration of ecotourism zone 'Okharey' by Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department. Okharey is a newly growing ecotourism destination in Sikkim. The local community has prioritized ecotourism as an important sector for economic development in the village only after attending the various trainings related to ecotourism services. The organization of ecotourism festival in the village by Ecotourism Cell, Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department motivated the local community to engage themselves in Ecotourism related activities. Survey revealed that 90% of the local people in the study area are aware of Ecotourism and its benefits due to the awareness programme, trainings and ecotourism festival organized by Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department time to time.

Directly and indirectly Locals are engaged in Ecotourism business in Okharey and to some people it has been an additional source of income. Homestay is pioneered as a tool to empower local people and gives an ample opportunity to sustain their livelihood but the local communities of Okharey are not satisfied with the distribution of Homestay permissions by the Tourism department as they feel it is biased to political influence among the local community. Ecotourism is a potential source of income generation in the remote

village areas and employment opportunities to the local community. The indirect economic benefits in the form of multiplier effects are much more in the rural areas of Sikkim and Okharey is no exception to these benefits. The local community is opting for ecotourism in small scale and is largely focused on mass tourism since 'more footprints more money.' The locals are more excited to engage themselves in ecotourism related business in the village only if the inflow of tourist in village is arranged by the department.

The survey study shows that out of the 60 respondents, 99% of locals are involved in ecotourism related business and are largely benefitted in economic upliftment and standard of living as they have all basic domestic amenities. It was observed that requirement of constant training is a high demand of the local community.

Interviewed with Mr. Mingma Norbu Sherpa (Founder of homestay establishment in Okharey and now a Power Minister, Government of Sikkim) brought forth the fact that he was the first person to *provide accommodation service* to tourist in his private house along with local food for a minimal rate of Rs 300/- to the tourists visiting to Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary in the year 1998. So, we can say that *homestay and tourism* existed long before the declaration of this village as ecotourism zone by Forest department. He said that to a large extent Nature lovers have visited since 1998 till date. He has encouraged the locals to run homestay in their private houses so that at least a minimum income would be generated. Slowly the locals have developed interest in homestay business and now this study has revealed that Majority (80%) of the locals are running homestay in Okharey (30 in number) and many more plan to start in the coming days. Locals are satisfied with the income generated from homestay and are a great inspiration to other local communities in the adjoining villages.

It was observed that around 10% of the Locals are indirectly engaged in ecotourism business though selling of organic vegetables, local meat and dairy products to the homestay owner. *Women are largely engaged in the preparation of Local Wine which ultimately generates income Upto Rs 50,000 to 1 lakhs per year.* Moreover, the locals are economically benefitted as they are engaged in various ecotourism supporting jobs.

Interview with the members of local NGOs namely, "Okharey Ecotourism Development Committee" revealed that the local community are more dependent on them regarding tourist inflow to the village. It was observed that this committee motivates the locals to actively participate in Plantation, Beautification of the village, Cleanliness drive in the village and the Sanctuary as well as showcase of cultural programme to tourists. Interaction with local Association further revealed that the reason to visit this village is to relax in Homestays, Cool environment, Trek to Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary and to see the culture of indigenous tribes.

Lastly, it was observed that ecotourism practices in Okharey have improved the socio-economic conditions of the local communities with the income earned from various ecotourism related activities especially Homestays. With the income earned from ecotourism 70% of the local community enhances in providing good education to their children and uplift the living standard and fulfilled the basic necessity in their lives. *Interestingly, Ecotourism practices in the village has revived the culture and traditions of the indigenous tribal community 'The Sherpa'.*

Conclusion

This paper examined the socio-economic impacts of ecotourism in Okharey, an ecotourism destination with huge potentiality of attracting tourists. Ecotourism plays an important role in the study area in the overall socio-economic development of the local community as the income generated through ecotourism goes directly to the local community and they are happy and satisfied with their involvement in ecotourism. The positive impact of ecotourism in the study area has led to the revival of their culture as well

as their involvement in the conservation and preservation of natural resources which supports ecotourism growth to a larger extent.

Suggestions:

Okharey village is proving to a great inspiration to other villages. However, a few changes will prove to be a boon for all concerned.

1. Build Permanent link with tourism promoting agencies; travel agencies, tour operators and others to promote this remotest rural village.
2. Tourist's feedback to be made mandatory with regard to the ecotourism activities, Homestays, amenities and the services availed. This will help improve services.
3. Wider Promotion of Homestay ecotourism through electronic media (websites, portals, blogs, etc).
4. Capacity building programs on homestay, birding, trekking guides, nature guides, porters, trek cooks, etc are to be imparted to the young people and women in the surrounding villages of Wildlife Protected Areas.
5. Construction of footpaths as nature walks and Canopy within the Wildlife Sanctuary would enhance ecotourism.
6. Avoid any construction of Cafeteria in the villages by the Department of Tourism & Civil as it will impact the local people in earning their livelihood.
7. Tea house can be operated in the fringe's villages of the Wildlife Sanctuary and which will ultimately benefit the rural people, particularly women.
8. Homestay opportunities provided by Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation; Government of Sikkim is not successful as it was not distributed to the interested people. In future, scheme benefits should be distributed after proper survey and interactions with the villagers to promote ecotourism.
9. The primary attraction in the study area is Trekking which in turn generates employment and income opportunity; so Trekking trails need to be maintained from time to time at least before the season starts.
10. Media and Publicity is required in the study villages to promote ecotourism, local media can also be encouraged.
11. Tourist wants to extend their stay in the village but it has never been possible due to unavailability of Banking and ATM facilities. Therefore, these basic amenities in ecotourism villages like nationalized bank along with ATM facility need to be provided.
12. Capacity Building Training Programmes to be organized for nature guide, trekking and homestay business regularly so as to keep people motivated as well as to inspire new people to join the business of ecotourism.

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