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Legacy NDIA जनपक्षीय राजनीति और विकास

Agenda

Atithi Devo Bhava?

Shivani Pandey/New Delhi

A few days back the Supreme Court banned tourism in core areas of all tiger reserves. These are areas where there is a higher concentration of tigers. India is home to more than half of the world's estimated 3,200 tigers with most living in wildlife reserves. The move though apparently being done to aid conservation efforts could have a ripple effect leaving many jobless. However the other side of the story is equally sad. The ruling comes as a verdict for the PIL filed by social and environmental activist Ajay Dubey. He believes that tourist activities disturb the animals and restrict their freedom of in their movement natural habitat. Tourists are not just noisy they often litter around in the parks that can pose as a threat to not just tigers but other animals as well.

As a situation it is grave since the conservation of tigers is an important issue that concerns the environment and should not be overlooked. At the same time a complete ban on any kind of tourist activity would lead to chaos within the regional and tribal communities currently employed in the sector. And those economically affected range from forest guards, guides, safari jeep drivers, naturalists, shop owners, resort owners and workers in it and not to forget their families. Infact there is a long list of tribals whose means of living will be affected. Like those tribal dancers making their living out of dancing in front of the tourists or those souvenir makers and hawkers who sell knick knacks.

Madhya Pradesh chief wildlife warden H S Pabla says tourists act as the eyes and ears of the forests. "In 2011, the state received a huge Rs 16 crore as entry fee from different national parks, which almost equals the funds sanctioned by the Centre for forest protection. And these funds were used to pay the staff engaged in forest protection. Banning tourism would leave no other option but to sack them from their jobs on account of lack of funds to pay their salaries. Eventually the forests will be left at the mercy of the poachers," Pabla said, informing that about 500 forest guards patrol inside Kanha alone every single day.

Another important point is that of actual preservation of the big cats. Wildlife conservationists believe that tourism is like a checkpoint where most of the tigers are tracked and traced helping the Forest Department in listing the tigers. Also if there are no tourists it would be easier for poachers and hunters to get in and have their own way since lack of tourism would mean lack of resources to preserve the national parks. Also those tribals currently dependent on tourism would then resort to illegal means of trading the animals inside the parks in order to survive.

"The highest densities of tigers can be found today in the most heavily visited tiger reserves," said a statement from Travel Operators for Tigers. "The busiest reserves have the best protection due to revenue from tourists," said Julian



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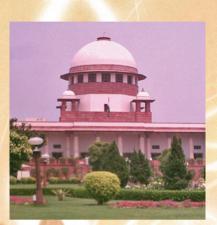
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Matthews, chairman of Travel Operators for Tigers. "The problems are outside the park gates, not inside them. If tigers hated the interference for a few hours a day, why are there now so many living and breeding in the tourism zones of reserves like Ranthambhore, Bandhavgarh and Pench?" There is evidence to suggest that 17 tiger reserves either have very few or no tigers left in them. And as a matter of



fact no tourism has ever been allowed in or near these reserves. On the contrary, loggers and poachers have had it their own way.

That kind of rings a bell is it a good idea to have a complete ban or have stringent rules for tourists that include fines and challans for defaulters? We cannot ignore that tourism has its positives, a large part of which is the financials and the economic reasons especially for the locals to protect and preserve these areas. If there is no tourism it will certainly lead to corruption as without any financial backing local communities would be tempted to



go the wrong way to earn their living. Plus with less tourism there will be less media and political scrutiny and even support by various NGOs would be limited.

So is there a way out? Well Parth J Shah, President, Centre for Civil Society suggests something on the lines of CAMP-FIRE program Zimbabwe. of "Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources is a conservation-based community development program that gives ownership of natural resources to local people and enables them to derive benefit from wildlife management" says Parth. CAMPFIRE generally regarded as one of the world's most successful conservation programs has helped in the conservation of the elephants at the time providing millions of the rural poor of the country with their source of livelihood. Zimbabwe's elephant population has soared from 48,000 in 1984 to 67,000 today and land set aside for wildlife habitat has increased from 12 percent to 33 percent of the country. In contrast, over the same period in Kenya, where a protectionist approach to wildlife management was followed, the elephant population plummeted from 100,000 to 26,000.

The program uses sport hunting, in particular hunting of elephants, to raise funds for conservation and provides local people with an incentive to preserve elephant habitat and guard against poaching. CAMPFIRE has benefited wildlife and has improved the lives of some two million rural Zimbabweans. The program funds schools, hospitals, roads, and access to water, and provides other necessities. The program that has been running in Zimbabwe for more than two decades works on the idea that wildlife is best protected when the people living in the same area reap economic benefits from them through tourism or hunting.

Another interesting point is that such sport hunting licenses are strictly controlled and monitored by local authorities and revenues go directly to Rural District Councils, who decide both how the money is to be raised and how it is to be spent. This not only gives the locals a say in the matter but also empowers them. Locals decide if hunting is to be allowed and how much money should be charged for such a sport and after the revenue is generated how the money needs to be channelled. Well this not only makes the community more accountable and reduces the burden of the State it brings money and smiles to the poor living in such regions. Above all, how can we appreciate the beauty of Mother Nature if we don't get a chance to visit the sanctuaries?