

Impacts Of Rural Tourism On Architectural and Cultural Heritage - The cases of Sualkuchi and Mawlynnong, North-East India

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Abstract - The World Travel and Tourism Council forecasts Indian tourism sector to grow at annual average growth rate of 7 per cent over the next ten years. The rate of growth of tourism in India is indeed fast.

Tourism is conceived as a powerful means of attracting the foreign exchange and is an easy resource of boosting the national economy. Tourism brings in investments, creates jobs, and promotes sales of crafts, local arts etc.

Due to this importance, it has been observed that the architectural and cultural heritage, including the natural resources have all been exploited in promoting tourism. Such an approach has over the years reduced the architectural and cultural heritage to a mere economic commodity, which minimizes or sometimes completely ignores its social, cultural, historic, environmental as well as architectural values.

This research paper is an attempt to understand the impacts of rural tourism on the architectural and cultural aspects of the rural Indian communities as it is practiced today, to put forward a case for the need to redefine rural tourism.

This has been achieved through documentation, analysis and thorough research of two cases from the north east of India: Sualkuchi, which is a historic weavers settlement in the state of Assam, well known for the production of Assam silk and the second is Mawlynnong in Meghalaya, which has recently been designated as the cleanest village in Asia, both being recent favorites of national and international tourists.

Key Words: Rural tourism, architectural conservation, heritage, culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades there has been a tremendous growth in Indian tourism. The *Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2015* ranks India 52nd out of 141 countries overall [2]. The country has considerable potential in tourism which is known and appreciated around the globe. India has had a rich and ancient history which has left behind several monuments and sites along with numerous archaeological finds which are of interest to the world tourists. There are 36 world heritage sites in India designated by UNESCO out of which 28 are cultural sites and recently the city of Ahmadabad has been listed as a world heritage city [6]. The topographical and socio-cultural

diversity has also contributed massively to the tourism industry. Due to these factors several economies have been completely based on this industry for its endurance.

The priority given to this particular industry has led to the exploitation of the art, craft, architecture, culture, as well as natural resources to a degree where it tends to lose its worth. It has been seen that many historic sites and monuments while catering to the large number of tourist population has lost its authenticity. Pollution and over population has often times led to damage and even destruction of the fabric of the monuments and works of art. It is not only the architectural heritage but also the cultural heritage of the country which seems to be at stake. In tourist areas the youth of the natives in many cases adopt the tourist's behavior; clothing, habits etc and social conflicts grow. Many a times the false portrayal of the culture of the host community to entertain the tourist also leads to the loss of cultural values in the younger generations.

On the other hand tourism has positive influences as well. It brings people of different cultures together, providing a direct contact between them and thus serves as a powerful means of interaction and exposure to the world cultures.

One important category of tourism in India is rural tourism. The Ministry of Tourism had launched the scheme for rural tourism with the intention to benefit the local community economically and socially. Although rural tourism is a new concept in India, it has within a short period of time been undertaken in several rural areas in the country, and has transformed the local communities.

2. RURAL TOURISM

Different countries define rural tourism differently depending on the context. In India, according to The Ministry of Tourism, "Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism". Unlike usual tourism, rural tourism is experience oriented. Being rural, the destinations are less populated and have a rich natural setting. It meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions. [3]

This concept is a very recent one in the country. The government and travel industry's effort to promote India abroad with campaigns such as "Incredible India" was initiated only this decade.

A national tourism policy was also introduced in 2002, with rural tourism identified as a focus area to generate employment and promote sustainable livelihoods.

Tourism, especially rural tourism is a live agent of change. The tourist is usually seen as a possessor of wealth whereas the tourist sees the host community as a storehouse of information. It is because of this impression that many rural communities tend to commercialize their culture and heritage.

Here the emphasis is more on rural tourism mainly because, unlike general tourism, rural tourism prevails over a comparatively smaller area and thus the impact is much more. Another fact is that the tourists to rural areas usually do not belong to rural areas themselves, so there is a vast difference in the understanding and culture.

4. DEFINING ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

"Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations." [6]

The term *heritage* is closely linked to identity. It is what connects the people living today to their past in terms of not only history but also traditional, cultural and social aspects. This connection can be inferred from the etymology of the word 'Heritage' which has been derived from the Latin term for heir, "*heres, heredis*", with the modern term referring to that which may be 'inherited'. [7]

4.1 Architectural Heritage

Architectural heritage can be interpreted differently in different parts of the world. For this research, the following definition of architectural heritage has been considered:

Architectural heritage is considered to comprise the following permanent properties:

- *Monuments*: all buildings and structures of conspicuous historical, archaeological, artistic, scientific, social or technical interest, including their fixtures and fittings;
- *Groups of buildings*: homogeneous groups of urban or rural buildings conspicuous for their historical, archaeological, artistic, scientific, social or technical interest which are sufficiently coherent to form topographically definable units;

- *Sites*: the combined works of man and nature, being areas which are partially built upon and sufficiently distinctive and homogeneous to be topographically definable and are of conspicuous historical, archaeological, artistic, scientific, social or technical interest. [4]

4.2 Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage comprises of several aspects of heritage such as:

- *Tangible cultural heritage*: Movable cultural heritage like paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts, Immovable cultural heritage like monuments etc.
- *Intangible cultural heritage*: Oral traditions, performing arts, rituals etc.
- *Natural heritage*: natural sites with cultural aspects such as cultural landscapes, physical, biological or geological formations. [8]

4. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative analysis was the approach adopted for this research considering its exploratory nature. Interviews, documentation, observations and secondary sources were the main modes of inquiry in this study. The two settlements chosen for the study was based on their history, rural vernacular character and also the fact that both the settlements underwent economic, socio-cultural, architectural as well as ecological changes in the recent past after tourism was introduced. Oral history has been a very important tool to learn the history of the settlements as very few written data was available. A thorough literature study was also carried out to understand the aspects of rural tourism which has helped in analysing the case studies.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

Tourism affects the economy and lives of communities and has proven to be a benefactor for many destinations. Like any other economic activity, tourism can have negative impacts on communities as well. These must be minimized and measured against the benefits that tourism brings.

Following are two cases from the North-East region of India, through which we can identify some impacts on the architectural and cultural heritage, which rural tourism has brought to these indigenous communities.

5.1 Case 1 – Sualkuchi, Assam

Sualkuchi, a settlement in the Kamrup district of Assam, has developed over the years from its earliest mentions in 4th century BC, as a major centre for production of the indigenous fabrics especially the Pat and Muga silk. The

structure of the heritage settlement as it is today was basically established by Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a administrator of the Ahom kingdom during the reign of Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603-1641). This patronage led to the advancement and development of sericulture in Assam.[1]

The significance of the settlement as a silk production center can also be judged by the fact that while the settlement was being planned during the 17th century, people from different occupation backgrounds (like fishermen, goldsmiths, potters, fish-net makers etc) were brought in to support the main ‘Tanti’ (weaver)’s community. This is apparent, as the settlement was planned on the basis of these occupation based communities.

Sualkuchi is prone to earthquake and floods, as a result, the physical growth and vernacular architecture of the settlement has evolved as a response to the natural environment along with the occupation of silk production.

The growth of the settlement has been regulated by the natural setting. The settlement is located between natural features which forms its boundaries, the Bor beel which is a wetland; to the north west, the Gandhmou hills to the east, the river Brahmaputra to the south and the Siddeshwar hills to the west. The Siddeshwar hills form a small valley in between. This valley seems to connect the Bor beel and the Brahmaputra River. This whole natural system ensured drainage of the water to the river and thus prevents floods.

The water harvesting system in Sualkuchi is another important feature. There are number of manmade ponds or ‘pukhuris’, which act as water reservoirs during dry seasons and also recharges the ground water. The locations of the ponds were also selected based on the natural drainage.

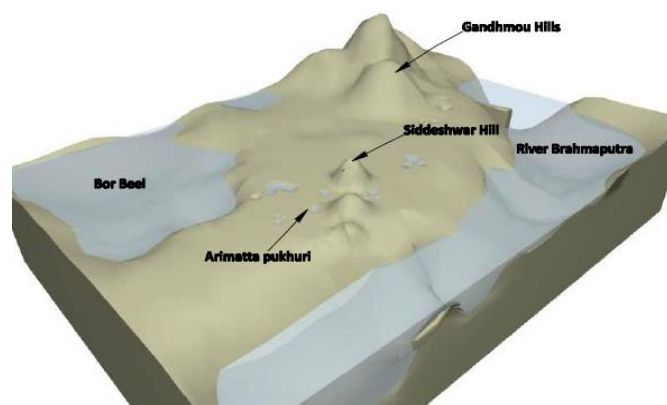


Fig -1: Natural Setting of Sualkuchi, Source : Author

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) is partnering the Union Ministry of Tourism, India, and UNDP(United Nations Development Programme) India has implemented an endogenous tourism project at Sualkuchi.

This project has brought about a lot of changes in the settlement including the development of infrastructure and economic condition of the communities. But along with the positive changes, there has been transformations which call for attention.

Architectural heritage: The vernacular architecture of the settlement is a result of the quality and value that the particular culture has produced. It is typified by Ikra¹, durable bamboo framework, and mud plaster. Weaving being the main occupation and an important aspect of the culture plays a dominant role in shaping the architecture of the settlement. Every vernacular household has tried to accommodate weaving inside the house.

When we zoom in into a cluster, the planning of a traditional cluster becomes very evident. Each cluster functions as an individual unit which combines with other clusters to form a system. With reference to the Figure 2, it is clearly seen that the spaces for every activity related to silk weaving is clearly designated. Linear spaces along the roads are used for drying the silk yarn and the finished fabric. Whereas common open spaces bounded by two or more dwellings are used for silk reeling. The weaving of the silk takes place inside the house and the central space is used for silk rearing in the mulberry plants. The core of the overall area forms the market place where the finished products are sold.



Fig -2: Functioning of a historic cluster, Source: Author

In terms of architecture and planning this setup has been very important since history as it ensured smooth running of the process of silk production. This system does not exist today in the newly developed areas of the growing settlement. With tremendous amount of money flowing into the settlement, most of the people have commercialized the traditional process of silk weaving and it is no more a household tradition.

The historic structures like the Siddeshwar devalaya, a historic temple reconstructed during the 18th century and

¹ Ikra: A type of reed locally known as ‘Ikra’ used extensively in walls and roof of vernacular houses.

Hati Satra, which is said to be a 400 year old monastery, faces threats of vandalism and issues of maintenance due to the increasing number of tourists.

Also, several resorts and guest houses have been constructed which seem like a dire imitation of the rural vernacular architecture of the settlement. Influence of foreign cultures has also brought about changes in the traditional methods of construction. Ikra houses with sloping roofs which were climate responsive and sustainable, have been replaced by concrete and glass, flat roofed houses which are wrongly considered to be a symbol of social status.



Fig -3: The vernacular architecture and its imitation in concrete, Source: Author /factsreports.revues.org

Cultural heritage: Weaving is the cultural heritage of the settlement. It is one of the main centers which produces Muga silk (*Antheraea Assamensis*) which is said to be one of the costliest silks in the world and is a vital part of the Assamese culture. This is now under the threat of inauthenticity as there have been compromises in terms of raw material. Sualkuchi had gained notoriety when it was found that cheap quality Benarasi silk was being sold as Sualkuchi silk with traditional assamese motifs on it.[5] Such a situation has undoubtedly aroused due to the huge difference in demand and supply of Assam silk.

The natural and manmade ponds form an integral part of several rituals for the local communities. Many of these ponds have been filled up for new construction of buildings and roads which not only disturbs the natural water drainage but also affects the ecological balance which in turn has hampered the production of silk.

5.2 Case 2 – Mawlynnong, Meghalaya

Mawlynnong is a small hamlet of about 500 residents located in the East Khasi hills, about 90 km from Shillong in the state of Meghalaya. It is largely an agrarian settlement with bettlenut and hill broom being the main products. Until 2003 no tourists visited the remote community, which had no roads and was accessible only by foot. Later in 2003 it was voted as the cleanest village in Asia by Discovery India magazine. It was reinforced by BBC and National Geographic in 2004, and UNESCO endorsed it in

2006 – the village has thus won fame in the national and global scenario.

Nearly 130 years ago there was an outbreak of cholera in this remote settlement. Without the availability of medical facilities the Christian Missionaries suggested that cleanliness was the only solution. Since then, cleanliness has become a daily ritual for the local inhabitants.

The flow of tourist to this settlement has been increasing day by day with visitors now reaching 250 a day in high season, swelling the village's population by 50 percent. [9]

Architectural heritage: Mawlynnong is a vernacular settlement. The architectural heritage mainly comprises of traditional thatched structures, built on stilts and mainly residential. Palm leaves, bamboo and bettlenut trees provide the raw material for construction. Another important heritage structure is the 'Church of the Epiphany' which is said to be a 100 years old structure built by the Christian missionaries from Bangladesh in the 19th century.

Due to the inflow of a large number of tourists to this settlement, most of the residences have converted the whole or at least part of their house to a restaurant or guesthouse.



Fig-4: Residence converted to a restaurant, Source : Bikram Aditya Nath

Poor emulation of the vernacular architecture is seen throughout the settlement. Some vernacular houses which were not able to take the pressure of overcrowding were quickly replaced with construction materials like G.I sheets, PVC pipes and concrete which does not require very frequent maintenance. As a result, the vernacular character of the settlement is drastically changing. There have also been several instances of overcrowding of the church premises which may in near future brew issues of vandalism and thus cause damage to the heritage structure.

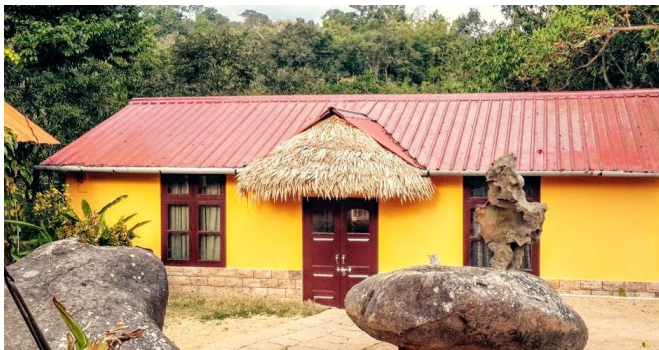


Fig -5: Poor imitation of the vernacular architecture,
Source: Author

Cultural Heritage: Bamboo basket weaving and broomstick making are the two traditional crafts of the settlement which have substantially reduced as people see more profit in dealing with other commercial products. Overall the traditional knowledge system of the use of locally available materials for craft and construction is slowly being lost.



Fig -6: Change in the architectural character of the settlement, Source : Author

6. CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism is a very important tool towards rural development. However the emphasis should not only be on economic development but also on positive cultural-economic changes. It is important to understand that our past is as important as our future. The rural communities being richer in aspects of culture and tradition are more vulnerable to the loss of their architectural and cultural heritage. Thus, rural tourism should encourage conservation of those values and make an attempt to cause as little impact to the heritage as possible.

It cannot be denied that the challenges in this aspect are many but there are equally immeasurable opportunities. With proper planning and implementation, rural tourism can prove to economically, culturally and socially strengthen the rural communities. It is also very important to create awareness among the people about the importance of architectural and cultural heritage and why and how those can be conserved.

Keeping all the above factors in mind, it can be said that rural tourism is not only about the economic development but a lot more and thus there is a need to re-evaluate all the aspects of rural tourism and redefine it.

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BIOGRAPHY



Farha Shermin holds a Master degree in Architectural Conservation from School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. Her main area of interest is the study of Indian vernacular settlements. Her research and publication interest include Heritage conservation, Vernacular Architecture and traditional settlement planning.