Chapter 10
Accessing Community Rights and Livelihood Through Tourism:
A Community-Based Tourism Initiative in Kumirmari, Sundarban

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ABSTRACT

The Sundarbans is the mangrove forests of the Gangetic delta spread across parts of Bangladesh and India, with the majority lying in the former country. Over the past two decades, the people of the islands have been faced with growing restrictions on their access to the forests. They now look towards tourism as an alternative source of livelihood. Tourism is rapidly developing in the region since the beginning of the 21st century, and the area is popular among national and international tourists. However, the ill-effects of mainstream tourism on the local population are also visible here. This chapter traces the different phases of a community-based tourism initiative by the people of Kumirmari, an island in the Sunderbans. This alternative model of tourism aims to combine aspects of community involvement, ownership, governance, benefits, and empowerment, and support the local people in accessing their community and livelihood rights.

INTRODUCTION

The Sundarbans derives its name from the word Sundari, a species of the mangrove tree, thereby giving it its name 'Forest of the Sundari Trees.' The Sundarbans, created by the delta of the rivers – Hoogly, Meghna, and Brahmaputra and its innumerable tributaries, is the world's largest mangrove ecosystem, spread across Bangladesh and India. Out of a total of 25,500 sq km, about 9630 sq km is located in India (Bera & Sahay, 2010).

The forest is home to unique flora and fauna and possibly the only mangroves in the world that is also home to the Bengal tiger. The Sundarbans has an estimated 425 species of wildlife, which includes crocodiles, sharks, dolphins, snakes, spotted deer, and over 240 bird species, including a large number of migratory birds.

The Indian Sundarbans (henceforth referred to as Sundarbans) comprises of 102 islands, 54 of which are habited, spread over the districts of North and South 24 Parganas, West Bengal (see Figure 1), with a total population of around 4.37 million (CSE, 2012).

The primary occupation of the people is agriculture (60%), followed by fishing (18%), with the other organised and unorganised sectors making up the remaining 22% of the workforce (CSE, 2012). Basic amenities and infrastructure such as electricity, water supply, education, and health services are, severely lacking on many of the islands. While the islands closest to the sea are vulnerable to storms and cyclones, those closer to the forests are vulnerable to attacks from tigers and crocodiles. An added challenge for the people of the islands since the 1970s has been the various legal measures that have severely curtailed the area of the forest available for the people of the Sundarbans.[1]

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), could have granted rights to the forest dwelling communities. However, in reality the people of the Sundarbans have to fight for their forest rights, as the West Bengal government does not even recognise the very applicability of this Act by claiming that there is no habitation of people in the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve and in some parts of the Biosphere Reserve. The fact, however, is that more than a million people from the islands continue to remain directly and indirectly dependent on these forests for their livelihood through fishing, honey collection, and collection of other minor forest produce, rights of which are recognised under the FRA.

Figure 1. Map of the Sundarbans
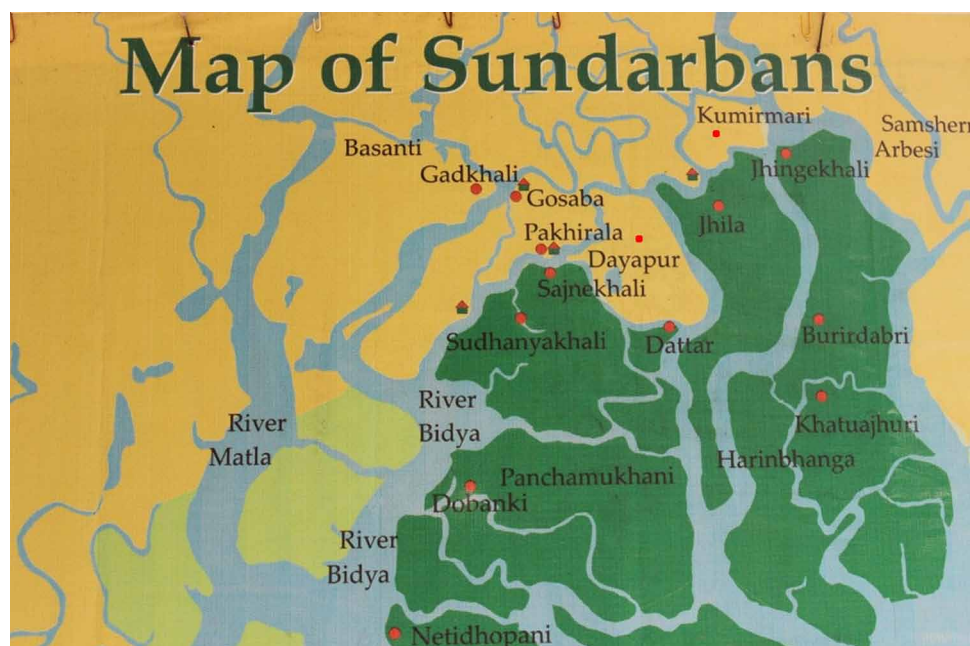
With the tourism industry contributing significantly to today's economy, coastal and ocean tourism is turning out to be the single largest contributor. The scale of marine and coastal tourism is wide and includes activities such as fishing, snorkelling, scuba diving, windsurfing, and yachting, as well as the enormous infrastructure for coastal recreation, including restaurants, hotels, shops, marinas, theme parks, tour companies among others (Minocher, 2014). The development of coastal and marine tourism in India follow similar patterns.

Tourism in the Sundarbans, though restricted to a few islands until now, has started gaining popularity in the past decade and half. Islands around the Gosaba block (administrative division in the Canning subdivision of South 24 Parganas district) have seen a spurt in the construction of hotels. Mainly outside people who have also started purchasing land bordering the forest areas, own these hotels. Local people find it difficult to establish hotels here, as banks are hesitant about giving loans to people from the local communities, since they are sceptical about their ability to repay.

The main wildlife safaris start from the Gosaba islands. While fishing is banned in the eight blocks, which make the core zone, tourist boats are allowed to go into three of the eight blocks. 55 boats are allowed per day; however, these boats often cut through fishing nets, causing huge financial losses to fisher folk. Loud noise, effluents and littering with beer cans and plastic bottles from the boats is also causing a decline in fish population in the region where the boats ply.

Another visible impact of mainstream tourism is the sexual exploitation of local women, who engage in sex work due to poverty. The behaviour of tourists, who walk into the villages in a state of inebriation, curtails the free movement of people, especially women, thereby affecting the culture of the place.

There has been no participation of the local people in the process of tourism planning and regulation in the region. Their involvement is limited either to working in hotels as support staff (cleaning and washing) or to selling souvenirs and fruit (EQUATIONS, 2014).

With the growing restrictions on their access to the forests, and with the increase in the flow of tourists, the local people look towards tourism as an alternative source of livelihood. This they believe would limit the out-migration, and help sustain their struggle for their rights to access the forest.

This section briefly traces the development of tourism in the Sunderbans. It details the definitions and different models of community-based tourism (CBT) functional mainly within the country. The chapter sets the context in which the CBT initiative in Kumirmari Island is planned. It further elaborates on the different phases of the initiative, combining the realities and aspirations of the people, their response to mainstream tourism and learnings from other CBT initiatives. It concludes with insights gained and proposes the next steps for the initiative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussions around community-based development started in the 1960s and community-based tourism (CBT) came to exist as a concept during the 1970s in response to the negative impact of the international mass tourism development model (de Kadt, 1979). Pearce (1992) *suggests that CBT presents a way to provide an equitable flow of benefits to all affected by tourism through consensus based decision-making and local control of development.* According to Cornelissen (2005), "*The theoretical premises of CBT have a long history, originating from the participatory and empowerment development models that emerged as a new paradigm in development discourse in the 1970s*" (p. 21). It is argued that from an

alternative development perspective, development also began to focus on community-based initiatives, stressing local participation, self-reliance, empowerment, and sustainability.

The different models of tourism sharing most of the above attributes include community-based tourism, ecotourism, community-based ecotourism, sustainable tourism, rural tourism, endogenous tourism, and village tourism. Telfer collapsed these different models under the broad title of community-based tourism (Telfer, 2009).

Different terminologies have evolved around the basic idea of CBT. According to Newsome, Moore, and Dowling (2013), *"It is a form of 'local' tourism, favouring local service providers and suppliers and focused on interpreting and communicating the local culture and environment. It has in the past been pursued and supported by communities, local government agencies, and non-government organisations (NGOs)" (p. 21).* Goodwin and Santilli (2009) defined CBT: *"Where the local community has substantial control over, and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community, even those who are not directly involved in tourism enterprises gain some form of benefit" (p. 11).* Giampiccoli and Nauright (2010) *spoke of CBT that "must be initiated, planned, owned, controlled and managed by the local community members towards the achievement of their needs and wishes" (p. 52).*

Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre, has put together a list of attributes that are common to CBT in Effective Community Based Tourism: A Best Practice Manual (Asker et al., 2010):

- Aiming to benefit local communities, particularly rural or indigenous people or people in small towns, contributing to their well-being and the well-being of their cultural and environmental assets
- Facilitating tourists in the local community
- Ownership and management of tourism by the community
- Sharing the profits/benefits equitably
- Using a portion of the profits/resources for community development and/or to maintain and protect a community cultural or natural heritage asset (e.g., conservation)
- Involving communities in tourism planning, on-going decision-making, development and operations.

An important aspect that is largely not covered by many CBT-implementing bodies is the role and involvement of the local self-governing institutions (LSGIs) - panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) in rural areas, and urban local bodies such as municipalities and municipal corporations. The Constitution of India in Article 40 in the Directive Principles of State Policy states: Organisation of village panchayats: The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. Therefore, participation of people in decision-making on development issues is a right. The subsequent changes made to the Constitution through the 73rd and 74th amendments further strengthen this provision (Shukla and Singh, 2008). In tourism, this would relate to the involvement of the local self-governing institutions in the processes of planning, monitoring, and regulation of the nature and scale of tourism development that is being envisaged (EQUATIONS, 2005).

While community-based tourism has many positives aspiring for equitable, fair and locally empowering form of tourism production, governance and consumption, these relatively small-scale operations also face a number of challenges. Blackstock (2005), states that from a community development

perspective, CBT has three major failings, firstly, it tends to take a functional approach to community involvement; secondly, it tends to treat the host community as a homogeneous bloc; and thirdly, it neglects the structural constraints to local control of the tourism industry. Challenges facing CBT is the competition and threat posed by mainstream tourism, the long-term viability of the initiative, whether it is controlled by a few, external groups jostling to profit at the expense of the local people (Telfer, D. & Sharpley, R., 2016, Nelson, 2004). Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2012), suggest that the role of CBT in community development needs to be explored in the light of the contemporary economic system, such as the international cooperation in CBT projects shows the unfortunate result of this reliance on external development agency funding which is a top-down process.

Mayaka, Croy, and Mayson (2012), stress on three key dimensions of CBT: participation; power and control that shape desired CBT outcomes. Participation of the resident community in the tourism venture and development process, the exercise of power and control of the community over the development process which may vary from empowerment to dis-empowerment thereby resulting in the level of achievement of desired outcomes or benefits from transfer of full benefits to community to no community benefits at all.

Community-Based Tourism in India: Models and Issues

Based on prior work by EQUATIONS related to CBT within the Indian context, it can be stated that there is limited awareness and understanding about the philosophy of CBT among communities, implementing organisations, the tourism industry, and the government.

Discussed briefly in this section are the more common models of CBT that exist in India. The Ministry of Tourism (MoT) defines rural tourism as "*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*." (Ministry of Tourism, 2003). Rural tourism as a model was initiated by the MoT in 2003 in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme under the banner of the Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP) (EQUATIONS, 2008).

An evaluation cum impact study commissioned by MoT states that the number of jobs created by this activity is not high at the moment, but the diversification of the attractions and services could induce a significant growth in this field in the near future. The contribution of rural tourism to the local economy is relatively moderate in most rural destinations, at least in terms of household income. There are no reliable statistics on the actual income from rural tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2012).

A review of the ETP done by EQUATIONS (EQUATIONS, 2008) highlighted the following aspects. The ETP was conceptualised with the twin goals of development and tourism. The implementers faced with the challenge of devising ways in which the tourism product gets a 'value addition' because it is closely integrated with development processes (of empowerment, asset generation, and enrichment equity). However, in the rush to 'implement' these tourism projects, many initiatives slipped into standard project mode; thus the important development goals of equity, gender, empowerment, and social transformation, all of which require time and effort, were side-lined.

Various national and international financial institutions are involved in funding tourism projects. National banks such as NABARD, and Syndicate Bank and state cooperative banks have invested in rural tourism. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is currently funding the implementation of CBT

initiatives as a part of the Infrastructure Development Investment Program for Tourism in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Uttarakhand (ADB, 2012).

In both instances, when the projects where supported by the Ministry of Tourism or various national and international financial institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were hired as the main implementing agency. The NGOs play a key role in defining the approach of the initiative. While many of the organisations were able to popularize the concept of tourism as an income generator, however the overall picture of tourism with its negative and positive impacts was less visible to the communities. The role of implementing organisations is to be able to juxtapose the community level processes and then respond / challenge tourism which works within a market driven framework. The initiatives detailed below were able to achieve this twin objective.

The Mountain Shepherds Initiative (MSI), based in Uttarakhand, see themselves as a community-owned and operated ecotourism initiative. Started in 2006, MSI was born out of social struggles to reclaim people's land and forest rights, and the attempt to achieve a new relationship between tourists and local communities based on equity and mutual learning (EQUATIONS, 2008). Himalayan Ark (previously known as Sarmoli Nature Tourism Enterprise) is an initiative combining tourism, conservation, and livelihood, started by the women of Munsiyari in Uttarakhand (Kothari & Pathak, 2013). Another innovative model is the Ladakh Himalayan Homestays programme that fosters conservation-based and community-managed tourism development in remote settlements through a process of participatory skills development, capacity building, and programme ownership (EQUATIONS, 2008). While each of these tourism initiatives have had their challenges, a key reason that they function well even today is that they were not bound by a project or a timeline. Each had a long-term vision in keeping with the aspirations and needs of the people, and created spaces for dialogue, community involvement, and ownership.

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN KUMIRMARI

In March 2014, Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS)[2] was invited by the Sundarban Jana Sramajibi Manch (SJSM)[3] to visit the islands and interact with the people. SJSM was already working with the people on the implementation of the FRA and was keen to initiate a CBT model on the islands. Long conversations, over a period of a week, took place between the two organisations on getting to know one another, sharing areas of work as well as discussing tourism-related issues in general and specific to CBT.

Kumirmari and Shamsher Nagar were the two islands selected by SJSM for initiating the model. The discussions with the people on these islands pertained to two broad categories – (1) building an understanding of the place, the communities, their issues and challenges, and (2) the status of tourism development and their own understanding of tourism. The social and economic backgrounds of the people from both these islands were similar. However, the need to initiate an alternative model of tourism was felt more in Kumirmari. Other factors considered were the interest, enthusiasm, and willingness of the people to engage with some form of tourism. Additional reasons being that it is geographically smaller and the fact that until now there had been no tourism development on the island.

SJSM and EQUATIONS had also not collaborated on any work prior to this. For SJSM, it was their first engagement with tourism itself, and for EQUATIONS, only the second time on implementing a tourism initiative; the first was over a decade back. Also given the limited human and financial resources at hand, it was agreed to start this process in Kumirmari and, in time, to work across other islands.

Based on the insights and learnings gained from the various approaches to CBT, and given the complexity of implementing community-based tourism, SJSM and EQUATIONS decided that the process of establishing CBT in Kumirmari should start, by first building an in-depth understanding of tourism, its issues, and impacts rather than quickly get into setting up an enterprise. This would enable the community to make an informed decision on whether they would like to pursue tourism as an alternative or explore other options. As a process, the two organisations also consciously worked first towards the aspect of planning and regulation of tourism. At every step, the attempt of both organisations was to work with the principles of social justice, equity, and democratic decision-making.

The engagement of SJSM and EQUATIONS with the people of Kumirmari from 2014 can be divided into four key phases:

- Relationship and awareness building.
- Kumirmari Jana Paryatan Samiti.
- Envisioning tourism.
- Declaration of the Kumirmari tourism manifesto.

Phase One: Relationship and Awareness Building (Time-Period 1 Year)

The members of SJSM and EQUATIONS spent considerable time in the Sundarbans and in Kumirmari in conversations and meetings getting to know the village, the people, and their issues better. SJSM spoke about the forest rights struggle, while EQUATIONS extensively discussed tourism and its impacts.

Kumirmari village is located in the Gosaba Block of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. It is situated 20 km away from Gosaba and 107 km from Canning, which is the nearest town.

Kumirmari has a total population of 17,451 people, of which 8885 are males and the rest, females. There are about 4,344 houses in Kumirmari village. Most of the people are from Schedule Castes (SCs), constituting 85.29%, while the Schedule Tribes (STs) constitute 9.09% of the total population. The SC community is economically better off than the ST community is as many of them are also land owners (Census, 2011). The total geographical area of the village is 2020.8 hectares. According to rough estimates as shared by the people, 5% own more than 20 bigha[4] land, 73% own between 1 and 2 bigha, and 22% own no land. The main source of livelihood for the people is agriculture while the latter are mainly dependent on the forest (collection of non-timber forest produce) and fishing, work as daily wage labourers, or migrate out to cities and towns.

The island of Kumirmari, similar to other islands in the Sundarbans, lacks basic civic amenities. There is neither electricity nor a medical centre even till today. People are largely dependent on solar power to operate lamps and fans, charge phones, or watch television. Sanitation facilities are at a minimum. The village has only one certified medical practitioner, with the nearest additional primary health centre at Chhoto Mollakhali (four kms) and the primary health centre at Gosaba. The common mode of transport is motorboats between the islands and cycles and rickshaws on the island.

The idea was to interact with as many people across all locations of the island. Kumirmari village is divided into 13 gram sansads. Over 50 meetings across the 13 gram sansads (with an average of three to four in each) were organised during this phase. The multiple meetings in each gram sansad helped reach out to a larger number of people. Some of these would consist of a mix of members from various groups of people—women, youth, and elected representatives from the panchayat. The meetings were usually timed during early mornings/ evenings, as the period in-between was when most went to

work or got busy with their daily chores. People from different gram sansads extended their support in organising the meetings, as they were keen to understand more about tourism. On an average, 60 people participated in each meeting, while in two meetings the number was as high as 300. There was equal participation by women in the meetings.

The discussions revolved around the historical and current situation of the people and the island with regard to social, cultural, economic, political and environmental changes. The challenges of health and education and the lack of alternative livelihood options were raised. An attack by a tiger or a crocodile was not of as much concern as the harassment faced by the people by the Forest Department. Issues ranged from confiscation of fishing boats, fish catches, honey and wax collected bribery / payment for licences and permits for entering the forest area, denial of community rights, and harassment by forest guards when crossing the core to reach the buffer areas.

The discussions on tourism started with building an understanding of the various forms of tourism, types of tourists, and their motivations. The adverse impacts of tourism were discussed in detail, as EQUATIONS believed that the people ought to be aware of these dimensions, which would have to be considered carefully should they choose to engage in tourism.

The presentations during the meetings highlighted the following aspects of tourism:

- Loss of traditional occupations when local economies became dependent on tourism.
- Widening economic differences.
- High incidence of contractual work.
- Reinforcement of existing structures by reaffirming social hierarchies in terms of jobs ascribed to women, caste groups, and indigenous communities.
- People who are dependent on natural resources often find themselves restricted, as tourism is developed without taking into consideration the carrying capacity of these regions.
- Sexual harassment of women and children, human trafficking, and child labour are also fall outs of tourism.
- Tourism, if not planned and regulated, changes the entire social, cultural, and economic nature of the place where it thrives.

Repeatedly, it was stressed that tourism cannot and will not be the solution to the rural crisis, and the introduction of tourism must not be seen as a substitute for more stable and sustainable livelihood options. This is critical particularly as tourism is an activity that is based on consumption, and it seeks to substitute, in the rural context, livelihoods based on production (EQUATIONS, 2008b).

A question repeatedly asked was about how local communities can involve themselves in the tourism activity in Kumirmari? How can tourism become a supplementary source of income for them? This gave EQUATIONS an opening to share with the people the various alternative tourism models that have been detailed in the literature review section. Through the discussions, their perceptions and ideas about tourism were made clear, which in the beginning matched the mainstream notions of tourism.

This phase was a slow process, as EQUATIONS needed to build the trust of the people of Kumirmari. While SJSM is based in the Sundarbans, EQUATIONS is based outside the state. Staying in different people's homes in different gram sansads during each visit supported in building an understanding of the local issues and developing a connection with the people, and this was crucial.

EQUATIONS was often asked what their stakes were—did the organisation hope to get money through this work? Another misconception was with respect to EQUATIONS being a funding agency

wanting to invest in tourism. Many a times, local people approached the organisation to support their personal business through marketing and promotion. It took time to clarify EQUATIONS works with limited funds, but SJSM and EQUATIONS hoped to work with and support the people in setting up an alternative model of tourism in Kurmirmari. This was an important learning—to clarify expectations as and when they arise, to be clear about what could be delivered on and what could not.

Early on in the interactions, the organisations realised that Kumirmari is a highly political place. It was crucial for the organisations to understand the local politics and to ensure that party politics did not influence the work. A conscious effort was made to remain neutral, and establish and maintain a healthy relationship with all involved.

Phase Two: Kumirmari Jana Paryatan Samiti (Time-Period 4 Months)

The participation of people in decision-making on development issues is a right. The passing of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution, which came into effect in 1993, considered as landmarks in the history of participatory democracy. A structural shift took place from mere representative democracy to participatory democracy; thus, good governance precepts were put into operational space. These amendments resulted in LSGIs being conferred constitutional sanction (Jayal, Prakash, & Sharma, 2006).

The involvement of the people from the very beginning was imperative. Another was the continuous engagement with elected representatives—pradhan[5] and gram sansad representative.[6] Apart from the discussions on tourism that were held with the people, the role of the PRIs in the planning and regulation of tourism, and the resulting changes attributable to mainstream tourism in the Sundarbans as a neglect of this function, was examined. It was found that they lacked awareness of their roles and responsibilities in this regard. However, this was not surprising, as this is broadly the case across the country. Even the Ministry at the centre or the Department of Tourism at the state level work in this myopic fashion, where greater importance is given to the development of infrastructure, skill building and marketing, and much less to planning, regulation being a factor that need not even be considered.

After the initial meetings with the panchayat, SJSM and EQUATIONS then started being invited by the panchayat itself to talk about tourism-related issues and how these are affecting the local community and environment of Sundarbans. These conversations pushed the panchayat to call a gram sabha (village level meeting), which was attended by over 400 people. During this meeting, the people of Kumirmari affirmed that they would like to engage on a tourism initiative that is pro-people based on their vision and aspirations. A resolution was passed to form a functional committee for tourism under the West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act, 1973, which will engage itself extensively in this process. This committee will be accountable to the gram sabha for its functions and decisions.

Thus started the second round of meetings at the gram sansad level. The objective was to elect/select two representatives, one man and one woman, from each of the gram sansads. A set of criteria for who can be a part of this committee was put together by SJSM and EQUATIONS in consultation with the panchayat representatives (refer to Appendix 1). In the event that there was no nomination (self/ other) from a gram sansad, it was agreed that SJSM, EQUATIONS, and the gram sansad representative could identify members, who would be approached and invited to join the committee. Gram sansad representatives took the responsibility of organising and convening meetings in their respective sansads.

A month prior to these meetings, village-level mobilisations were initiated, urging people to attend the meetings. Methods adopted to inform the people were microphone announcements, connecting

with people individually, and putting up notices in public spaces. Each gram sansad saw an average participation of 50–70 people. At the meetings, the purpose of calling the meeting was shared as was the criteria for selection of committee members. This was followed by elections, wherein a person either nominated himself or herself or was nominated by another. Votes in favour or against a member were cast with a show of hands.

A gram sabha was called for by the panchayat on 12th September 2015 to pass a resolution for the formation of the Kumirmari Jana Paryatan Samiti (KJPS) (Kumirmari People's Committee on Tourism). Twenty-six members formed this committee—the panchayat pradhan as the president, three panchayat representatives, 20 members from the 13 gram sansads, one member from SJSM, and one from EQUA-TIONS. The first two categories were as mandated by the West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act, 1973.

A brief profile of the 20 members that were elected/selected is as follows:

- Age: Three persons were over 50 years of age, seven persons in the age group of 30–50 years, and 10 in the age group of 18–30 years.
- Caste: Five people were from the adivasi community (ST) and 15 from the dalit community (SC).
- Gender: 15 men and 5 women.

The objective of this committee was to develop in-depth knowledge on tourism-related issues to take on the task of planning and regulating tourism in Kumirmari. As a group, they would be responsible for taking this process forward. They were also to identify members from the community who could be invited to join them.

The open, transparent, and democratic manner in which these proceedings were organised strengthened the organisations' relationship with the people. A belief in the process and in the organisations was built when the people observed the organisations reaching out to each individual to join in. The efforts to achieve a balanced representation based on gender, caste, class, age, and education were appreciated.

Phase Three: Envisioning Tourism (Time-Period 1 Year)

This was a crucial phase in the process. At the end, the people of Kumirmari would need to decide if they wished to pursue community-based tourism as an alternative livelihood option, weighing the pros and cons and making an informed decision.

SJSM and EQUATIONS proposed to KJPS a process of envisioning tourism in Kumirmari—an image of their desired future. A statement of vision showing where they wanted tourism to go, and what it would be like. This would meet two objectives: 1) Tourism was bound to start on the island eventually. This manifesto would aid in the planning and regulation of tourism on the island. This itself would be a valuable contribution should the people decide that they did not wish to pursue CBT. 2) The vision document would be the guideline/ basis for implementing CBT.

This phase was further divided into three broad interventions:

- First draft of the vision document.
- Field visits to tourist spots—mainstream and alternative.
- Vision document finalisation through consultations in the gram sansads.

The rationale for this process was to be able to capture the views and insights of KJPS members before and after the field visits and to observe any shifts in the thought process. To put together the first draft of the vision document, a four-day intense workshop was organised in Gosaba.

The motive was to start at the level of the individual and move to a collective vision, for which the Appreciative Inquiry tool was used. According to Cooperrider (2012), "Appreciative Inquiry (AI) represents a paradigm shift in the world of sustainable organisational development: a radical departure from traditional deficit-based change to a positive, strengths-based change approach". This model identifies four phases in AI that occur after the "affirmative topic" is chosen, which for this group was the Vision for Tourism in Kumirmari. The group went through the steps of discovery (appreciating), dream (envisioning results/impacts), design (co-constructing), and destiny (sustaining).

A second tool used was the basic World Café method modified to meet the requirements of the task. The World Café is a powerful social technology for engaging people in conversations that matter, offering an effective antidote to the fast-paced fragmentation and lack of connection in today's world. Based on the understanding that conversation is the core process that drives personal, business, and organisational life, the World Café is more than a method, a process, or technique—it is a way of thinking and being together sourced in a philosophy of conversational leadership (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

Small groups of three were made. A set of nine questions were identified upon which the groups deliberated. The questions related to the following:

1. Understanding communities and the locality.
2. Tourism context and development.
3. Tourism product, infrastructure development, and marketing.
4. Role and benefits sharing.
5. Impact of tourism.
6. Equity, empowerment, social justice, and development.
7. Capacity building.
8. Institution building.
9. Regulation and monitoring mechanism.

People's thoughts and opinions were captured. These were then discussed and agreed upon within the larger group. They were not easy dialogues—each of the participants was forced to delve deeper, slowly, systematic, bringing clarity into the various dimensions of the issues involved.

A parallel conversation was one linked to the functioning of the tourism committee. The discussion related to the roles and responsibilities of the members, structure, finances, membership criteria and period, ways of functioning, process of re-election/selection of new members, and the accountability of the KJPS, among others. A result of this was the realization that a second entity needs to be formed—one that will be involved in the business of tourism. KJPS as a committee, whose mandate was to plan and regulate tourism, could not be involved in the business of tourism, as that would result in a conflict of interest.

The workshop was followed by four field visits—three within West Bengal (mainstream tourism) and one to Uttarakhand (community-based tourism)—as a step to learn and experience different forms of tourism. Across the visits, tools for learning included meetings, observation, reflection and documentation, and debriefing sessions at the end of each day.

In West Bengal, members of KJPS started from locations closer to home, albeit looking at things through the lens of tourism. The members visited neighbouring islands such as Gosaba, which has seen a spurt in tourism activity since the past decade. This was followed by visits to Bakkhali, Frazerganj, and Henry's Island, which are popular beach tourism destinations of the Sundarbans. A third visit, slightly further away, was to Mandarmani, which is also a beach destination. These visits highlighted the issues of the forest and coast and their impact on tourism, effects of rapid tourism development on the local ecology, the people and their livelihood, and coastal violations by the tourism industry.

At these places, interactions with the following categories of people took place: the fishing community, people dependent on the forests, women, shopkeepers, people working in hotels and restaurants and the unorganised tourism sector (van drivers, boatmen, photographers), and elected representatives.

The field visit in Uttarakhand yielded many insights through engagement with people associated with the Mountain Shepherds Initiative (MSI), a community-based ecotourism initiative. Foremost among them was the actualisation of the 2001 Nanda Devi Declaration (EQUATIONS, 2010), which has guided the philosophy and inclinations of the MSI. Second was the option of tourism as a solution to the social struggles of the community to gain rights over its resources. Conversations took place about how MSI has approached larger development issues, the consideration of principles of social justice, infrastructure development, capacity building, institutional and operational structures, and monitoring mechanisms.

The draft vision document was then revisited and revised based on the new insights gained. This document was taken back to each of the gram sansads and presented to the people, and feedback sought, followed by the finalisation of the manifesto.

The people of Kumirmari expressed their interest on developing a community-owned tourism model that would combine aspects of community involvement, governance, benefits, and empowerment, and support the local people in accessing their community and livelihood rights. KJPS would endeavour to support the people of Kumirmari to exchange and share their experiences, leading to a broader discussion with communities of other islands in the Sundarbans on tourism-related issues. Finally, KJPS would also attempt to have the tourism industry and government acknowledge that the community-based model of tourism is a tool for communities' empowerment.

EQUATIONS developed a framework for community involvement in tourism, adapting from Roger Hart's ladder of participation. This initiative in Kumirmari is aimed at the highest level – that of ownership, where the community owns the enterprise, which becomes the capital of the community. The pace, nature, forms, and stakeholders are all decided by the community, and all others involved are supporters of the enterprise (EQUATIONS, 2014).

Phase 4: Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto (Time-Period 3 Months)

The method of evolving the manifesto was a powerful process, whereby the people of Kumirmari articulated their vision for tourism, spelled out principles, and gave direction for work. Among members of KJPS, it increased their feeling of belonging and ownership.

On 20th December 2016, the gram sabha of Kumirmari passed a resolution accepting the Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto (Appendix 2; see Figure 2). The Manifesto reflects the principles of non-exploitative, equitable, sustainable, and just tourism.

Over 400 people attended the declaration from Kumirmari and neighbouring islands. Being a watershed moment for the people of Kumirmari, this declaration was also attended by a few alternative tourism practitioners working across the country. Representatives from the Mountain Shepherds Initia-

Figure 2. Declaration of the Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto through a Gram Sabha meeting

tive, Himalayan Ark, Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (the organisation that supported setting up Ladakh Himalayan Homestays), and GypsyFeet Travels (a responsible tourism operator in Northeast India) spoke about their initiatives. This connect and exchange was a beneficial one, as it provided an opportunity to learn and take inspiration from the people who have been working on and been successful with alternative tourism models for over a decade. Stories the people had heard from EQUATIONS in the course of time were now being spoken backed up with practical knowledge. From their own experience, the practitioners shared insights on how the people of Kumirmari could develop their own model of community-owned tourism.

INSIGHTS

Three and a half years of engagement on tourism with the people of Kumirmari provided valuable insights based on the challenges faced and lessons learnt.

Taking everybody into confidence irrespective of caste, class, or gender ranking was a principle that the organisations stayed committed. The panchayat, which is the governing body at the village level, was kept informed on a regular basis. This helped build a broader understanding of tourism-related issues among the people and gain their trust.

A dialogue on tourism and its relation to a wide range of areas had to be a constant feature in the planning of such an initiative. Complex ideas needed to be broken down as; to most tourism was an alien subject. Conversations started with first defining what tourism is, how it connects with people's lives, its contributions and hazards, and realizing that different forms of tourism exist apart from what they had known until now. Some who saw a direct connection to their livelihood (dependent on fishing and forests) were able to grasp the concepts quicker than others who had until now not been affected by tourism. On other occasions, there was a complete refusal to accept the reality; for example, when the matter of how sex work is growing in Sundarbans was discussed. This could be attributed to the facts

that (1) their image was affected and (2) it was shared by an external person. The endeavour was to encourage people to reflect and participate in discussions. While there was conceptual clarity among the KJPS members now, how these will pan out on the ground was the next step in this process.

The initial two years saw a great deal of movement of people. A major challenge faced by SJSM and EQUATIONS was bringing people together and asking them to contribute considerable time without any financial support in return. At one level, this shows the sense of ownership of the people towards this process. On the other hand, KJPS had members who were daily wage labourers; for them this was the toughest. These were important factors to be considered. Some processes took longer as they had to be spread across time. On the other hand, some processes were completed earlier than planned—the field visit to Uttarakhand was initially planned to include interactions with both MSI and Himalayan Ark, which would have involved a two-week travel. As many of the KJPS members voiced concern over travel longer than 10 days, a choice was made to visit only MSI. However, on the declaration of the Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto, Himalayan Ark was also invited so that an opportunity to learn was not missed.

Currently, from the initial 20 members, KJPS is down to nine (six men and three women). Some who had joined earlier were hopeful of financial benefits. Recognising that this was not to be, they resigned soon after. Others migrated out for work; some lost interest. Getting people to join, especially women, remains a challenge. Once new members join, the cyclical process of understanding and engaging in tourism will need to start again. The next step complicates matters further, as a new enterprise is to be set up, which will have to run in parallel to KJPS. The economics are always easier to understand; the aspects of planning and regulation are tougher. Therefore, a conscious choice was made to start with the initiative with the latter. The challenge going forward will be to give equal attention to both.

Powerful people from the community aspired to gain out of this initiative by trying to dominate the scene or approaching the organisations with proposals of constructing hotels and seeking support for marketing. Given the political stakes that businesspersons hold, each of them was met and explained the purpose of the work in Kumirmari. In time, proposals such as these reduced. It was important to keep the dialogue open on what this initiative may be able to achieve and what it will not be able to achieve.

Sebele felt, based on extensive research on community-based tourism in Botswana, that the lack of certain skills could hamper the progress of projects related to the tourism industry. Communities need to acquire managerial, entrepreneurial, and marketing skills to ensure that they break through into the tourism market and gain a fair share of benefits from the industry. Community-based ventures cannot succeed if the locals do not acquire these skills, which are essential for sustaining any successful business/enterprise (Sebele, 2010). To start work on building capacities slowly, three members of KJPS went to Uttarakhand to work at a forest lodge operated by MSI. They were to pick up skills on guiding and hospitality. Only one stayed the entire duration of two months while the other two members returned home within 20 days, as they were not able to adjust in a different environment. If one is unwilling to extend beyond their comfort zone, the path ahead will be difficult.

A positive outcome of this process is that it has generated interest among people from neighbouring islands to initiate a similar exercise. People from Shamsher Nagar wish to develop their own tourism manifesto, while people from Dayapur want to start with a conversation about tourism, its ill effects, and measures the community can take to mitigate them.

With three institutions working together and a fourth that needs to be established, building a healthy collaborative relationship based on the values of participation and dialogue was imperative. These values make interventions more democratic in nature. A set of guidelines were agreed upon to ensure transparency, accountability, and joint ownership of the process.

CONCLUSION

There is still a long way to go. With the acceptance of the Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto, the future course of action is to set up the tourism enterprise and, in parallel, continue to strengthen KJPS. This would involve the following tasks that either are currently in progress or are in the process of being initiated.

- **Financial Resource Mobilisation:** Until now EQUATIONS was able to support the work in Kumirmari. The next stage, however, involves the setting up of infrastructure, building capacities, and marketing, all of which are resource-intensive. To sustain work, funders have been approached.
- **Registering the Tourism Enterprise:** To initiate tourism in Kumirmari, a new legal entity will have to be registered. KJPS will take the lead in this process and acquire the required permissions for implementing the tourism initiative. Legal advice is being sought for the formation and development of the by-laws, rules, and regulations.
- **Capacity Building on Tourism and Allied Services:** There is a need to build the capacities of youth, men, and women on tourism and allied services, so that they can benefit from the ownership and control of the assets that will be created. These include basic homestay set-up, guiding and bird watching, entrepreneurship and institutional management, fluency in English and Hindi languages, familiarity with the history and culture of the area, etc.
- **Construction of Accommodation in the Village:** To start with, constructing a small accommodation unit (six-bed capacity) in the traditional form for tourists as this will also meet broader objectives—using local relevant materials, providing opportunities to local vendors, and benefiting the local economy. Home-stays are another option that are being explored.
- **Tourism Information Centre:** Setting up a tourism information centre that is envisaged as a space to share information with the tourists about Kumirmari; an office space for KJPS; a research and resource centre for assessing the impact of tourism, putting together and sharing learnings and best practices; and a centre that is equipped with basic IT facilities.
- **Marketing and Promotion:** Careful thought will be put into creating an experience that is respectful to both the visited and the visitors, communicating what the experience of the place could potentially be, and attracting those tourists who are looking for an experience. Appropriate marketing and publicity collaterals will be devised. To support in building capacities of the village youth to handle the marketing and promotion of the initiative as well as to establish connections with sensitive and alternative travel and tour operators willing to support the initiative.
- **Strengthening KJPS:** KJPS will need to be the holder of ideas as set out in the Tourism Manifesto. As an institution, KJPS has a key role in ensuring that planning processes are accountable, transparent, and participatory. Information on tourism development and plans are available in the public domain. Members of KJPS will need to ensure that the tourism is regulated so that it respects and complies with the relevant laws, is not exploitative in any way, and functions along the principles of sustainability and equity. SJSM and EQUATIONS will work with KJPS on these areas.
- **Exchange and Sharing of Experiences with Communities of other Islands in the Sundarbans:** Providing support to KJPS to exchange and share experiences about this model with the people and panchayat of other islands to build awareness on tourism. This would help in the larger discussion on challenging the policies and practices of the mainstream tourism industry in the Sundarbans.

The first group of tourists (who are also friends) arrive in January 2018. This marks the beginning of the next phase of the work, which will throw up its own set of challenges but also provide the people of Kumirmari an opportunity to try to transform the nature of tourism—from its very consumptive nature to one that has the elements of interaction, learning and human contact as well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Community-Owned Tourism: A form of tourism in which the community owns the enterprise, which becomes the capital of the community, where the pace, nature, forms, stakeholders are decided by the communities and all others involved are supporters of the enterprise.

Envisioning Tourism: A statement of vision for where one wants tourism to go, and what it will be like and the core values that are the guiding principles. The principles describe how one intends to operate as they pursue their vision; the lines, which they will and will not cross.

Gram Sansad/Gram Sabha: A body consisting of persons registered in the electoral roles relating to a village comprised within the area of the panchayat at the village level. In many states, it is known as gram sabha while in some states like West Bengal it is known as gram sansad.

Livelihood: Livelihood is a broader sociological term rooted in the concept of social justice, where culture and identity form its basis and it is dependent upon the landscape and ecology. It is connected with community and property rights indicating dignity, control, empowerment, and sustainability apart from income generation.

Panchayat: An institution of self-government for rural areas.

Planning: This implies designing processes taking into account the views, aspirations, experiences, realities, and concerns of the people of Kumirmari about. Information on tourism development and plans are available in the public domain. Planning for tourism is not a one-off process but cyclical and iterative, based on a loop of experiences, impact, and learning.

Process: A series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular result ensuring the values of equitableness, justice, accountability, and democracy.

Regulation: Tourism is regulated so that it respects and complies with laws, is not exploitative in any way, and functions along the principles of sustainability and equity. Regulation ensures that common resources are not privatized by the tourism industry, which is accountable and works within the framework laid out by the Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto.

ENDNOTES

[1]   In 1987, the Sundarbans was declared a Natural World Heritage Site by UNESCO and subsequently a Biosphere Reserve under Project Tiger of the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change, wherein core and buffer areas were created. The core areas have been deemed to remain inviolate. While the core areas comprise of islands not habited, the islands and rivers in the core area are used for fishing and honey collection. The interpretation of inviolability of the core area has restricted the movement of the community specially the fisher people, who often have to take circuitous routes to reach buffer zones or the sea, resulting in loss of livelihoods.

[2]   EQUATIONS is a research, campaign, and advocacy organisation that studies the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism from the perspectives of the local communities.

[3]   SJSM's key area of work is on the implementation of the Forest Rights Act through establishing gram sabhas in the Sundarbans region of West Bengal.

[4]   1 Bigha = 1,618.7 square metres.

5   Pradhan: Elected head of panchayat under the West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act, 1973. The Pradhan is selected from among the elected gram sansad representatives

6   Elected representative of gram sansad under the West Bengal Panchayati Raj Act, 1973

APPENDIX 1

Criteria for Tourism Committee

1. A long-term commitment from the person willing to associate with this process.
2. There will be no direct benefits to the tourism committee representative in lieu of working with tourism committee.
3. Equal representation based on gender, caste, class, and age will be maintained.
4. Changes to the committee can take place based on the rules established by the committee members themselves.
5. Members of the committee will commit to sharing equal responsibility for the work.
6. The tourism committee will go through rigorous training and capacity-building sessions on various aspects.
7. A Terms of Reference (ToR) will be prepared collectively, duly signed by the Head of committee, SJSM, and EQUATIONS. This ToR will detail the scope of the work, roles and responsibilities, and financial matters.
8. This committee will represent Kumirmari on tourism-related issues until such time that other institutions are formed for specific purposes. This will involve travel as required and participation in various debates and meetings.
9. This committee will be responsible for informing and soliciting views of the people from their gram sansads and the panchayat about the process and progress of work.
10. A detailed documentation of the proceedings will be maintained and copies of these submitted to the panchayat, tourism committee, SJSM, and EQUATIONS.

The tourism committee will be responsible for resolving village-level conflicts related to tourism.

APPENDIX 2

Kumirmari Tourism Manifesto

(This is a translation of the principles from the original Bengali text)

The way mainstream tourism is growing in Sundarbans, it is evident that Kumirmari will not remain an exception in witnessing such unplanned tourism development. If the current practices are pursued, the people of Kumirmari will have to pay the heavy price of losing their rights over the lands, forests, and rivers and letting the uniqueness of the social and cultural resources of the region fade away. In the not-too-distant future, we may also be displaced from our homeland.

We, the people of Kumirmari, have come together to form the Kumirmari Jana Paryatan Samiti to protect our homeland, preserve our livelihood and culture, and safeguard the future of the next generation from the big corporates.

We have formulated a declaration to protect the rights of the people of Kumirmari and its environment and natural resources from the negative and harmful impacts of tourism development. Today, on 20 December 2016, at Karmakar Para, Kumirmari, we are placing this declaration to the gram sabha of Kumirmari for its approval. After approval, it will be applicable to all forms of tourism activity and development in Kumirmari Island.

We will fulfill our commitments and responsibilities in keeping with the following principles:

1. We will develop and establish community-owned tourism in Kumirmari Island and the Sundarbans.
2. We will promote community-owned tourism programs, distributing the benefits and profits among a large section of the community rather than a few individuals.
3. We will promote tourism in a manner that will enhance the quality of life of the local people and preserve the flora and fauna of Kumirmari.
4. We will give first preference and equal employment opportunities to unemployed youth, women, needy families who have suffered due to animal attacks, and marginalised, vulnerable, and differently-abled people in our tourism programs. Adivasis and economically discriminated, marginalised people will get priority in this process.
5. We will work towards creating employment opportunities for the local communities and ensure their participation in tourism-related activities.
6. We will ensure women's participation equally at all levels.
7. We will prevent any form of exploitation of children, women, and workers. We will develop and implement policies for protection to prevent as well as to respond to any form of exploitation owing to our tourism initiatives.
8. We will ensure that women are not presented in a derogatory manner in tourism promotional materials. We will strive to prevent the sexual exploitation of women and children attributed to tourism in Kumirmari. We will ensure the local people participate and earn significantly from the tourism programmes.
9. We will take positive steps towards preserving the historical, cultural, and natural resources of the island.
10. We will develop a regulation to preserve the ecological diversity and richness of the region and prevent any unlawful and antisocial activities related to tourism on the island.

11. We will take on the responsibility to develop various kinds of regulatory mechanisms as and when required and will regulate tourism activity in Kumirmari while extending our support to other panchayats/ islands.

12. We will comply with legislation, guidelines, and regulatory frameworks such as those maintained by the panchayat, Pollution Control Board, Coastal Regulation Zone, etc.

13. We will work in unison with the panchayat, tourism industry, and local agencies to raise awareness on waste management and the importance of a pollution-free environment.

14. We will exchange ideas and experiences with other communities and sensitize them to the impacts of tourism. We will collaborate with other institutions and people with similar goals.

15. We will give priority to local people's interests and decisions in all the development programmes that affect the community.

16. We will ensure that land usage by big corporates will not be permitted without significant community participation. However, if the community itself decides to undertake any tourism-related activities/programmes along with a corporate, or a development activity, then KJPS will support that initiative.

17. We will generate/form public opinion to negotiate with the government to control the movement of tourist boats and launches in the areas where our people go for fishing and catching crabs.

18. We will actively participate in all programmes including tourism initiatives, keeping in mind the benefits to the people and sustainable development.

19. We, the members of KJPS, will be humble to and respectful of people from all strata of the community. We will take inputs, report them in the organisational space, and incorporate the feedback of the community in our decision-making process.