

Ensuring livelihood through Eco Tourism

Uttarakhand is known all over India and world as a place of breathtaking natural beauty. Beneath the scenic state of Uttaranchal, which is known for its great Himalayan mountain range, rivers and tourist spots, lies a painful reality of poverty and resulting discrimination and violence. After getting the status of a separate state in 2000, people of Uttaranchal thought that they would have a great administration and consequent development resulting in their prosperity. But the reality is different. On the one side - the Garhwal region of the state is now witnessing rampant privatization of water bodies to harness power for the prosperous cities in north India by not only displacing a number of villages but denying the people affected of proper rehabilitation and hiding crucial facts related to the dam projects. On the other side - in the Kumaon region the tribal communities like Tharus and Boksas and Dalit communities like Shilpkars are getting further marginalized owing to the fact that they have no access to the productive resources or are fast losing them because they are falling into the debt trap to cater to their needs and emergencies. As a result of this lop sided development, not only local people suffer but also environment becomes degraded.

Eco tourism not only offers an alternative livelihood for the communities in the region but also preserves the environment and culture of the region. Eco tourism can also be means to involve the civil society in contributing to the environment protection and culture of the region. The youth of region which often migrates to other cities for work can be productively involved in this.

A model of eco tourism has been tried out in Urgam Valley, Joshimath, Uttarakhand. At first the organisation – Jandesh carried out an awareness campaign for the community in the villages for the community to understand the importance of eco tourism – dos and dongs, alternative livelihood. A similar such exercises are carried out for the persons who are interested to come into the region for eco tourism. Thereafter, a cooperative society at village level consisting of village level volunteers is formed for this purpose in Urgam Valley, Joshimath. The role of the cooperative society is ensuring community ownership of the eco tourism. The members of the cooperative society are the villagers who are interested in eco tourism. The members pay a fee of Rs 100/- for one year besides a monthly fee Rs 20/-. Within the cooperative society, there is Operational Committee which looks after the needs of eco tourists, the trekking route, and information centre. Uttarakhand offers diverse culture, flora and fauna, spiritual centres which can be covered under eco tourism. Operational committee looks after the different means by which the eco tourist can satisfy their urge to savour the beauty of the place. Other community organisation like the SHGs in the area also become involved in this project by various means like providing their traditional cottages for the night stay of the tourists. Jandesh helps the village cooperative society by linking them with different institutions like Youth Hostels Association of India which are interested in this project. Some of the trekking route which has become quite popular is Helang-Kalpeswar-Dumak-Kalgut Panar – Rudranath-Gopeswar. This route offers breathtaking natural beauty, ancient temples like Rudranath, Kalpeswar and flora and fauna.

So far the eco tourism has offered a minimum of three months of support to the communities. Jandesh has so far trained 15 youths to serve as guides. Organisation has also trained 10 porters. 30 families are involved in this venture. Every family is earning Rs 25000/- to 40000/- a year from this. This is a great support to the families which suffer from lack of livelihood in this difficult geographical terrain.

But there is a great scope to increase the scope and reach of this project so that more and more people are benefited by this.

Brief Profile of the Writers:

Debabrata Patra has been working in ActionAid International India since last 7 years. He is now based at Lucknow and is responsible for the Food and Livelihood Initiatives of ActionAid in UP and Uttarakhand. Debabrata has Post Graduate and M Phil degree in Sociology and has also Training in Environment Education from CEE, Ahmedabad.

Mr. Laxman Singh, a very committed person, heads the organisation - **Jandesh** and is responsible for the overall functioning of the organisation. Mr. Negi has been associated with various local movements like Gharat Movement (Campaign for water rights), Chhino-Jhapto movement (Campaign for forest rights), Maiti movements (Campaign for preserving traditional practices environment conservation) since 1996. Besides he has been associated with Viraj network that is operating in Chamoli district level. As an activist, Mr. Negi has been working for the basic rights and entitlements of the Shilpkar community. Besides this Laxman Singh is a prolific writer and has authored many books such as Kalpa Kshetra Vikas Andolan, Lok Jagar, Tourism in Panch Kedar, Jungle me Amangal (on Van Panchyat guidelines) and so on. He also contributes regularly to the local, state national newspaper and magazines.