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LOCAL PEOPLE'S ATTITUDE AND PERCEPTION TOWARDS ECO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism perceived as a tool for conservation and sustainability across the globe. Ecotourism has become the buzzword and need of this hour focusing community development and conservation. The present study was conducted in five tourism sites in India (western Odisha) to identify the problems and prospects and also to investigate the attitude and perceptions of local people towards eco-tourism development. The study was undertaken through a sociological survey research design having 570 numbers of local people residing within the piloted study area. The research study was dependent on both primary and secondary data from which analysis was done to reach the conclusion. Structured questionnaire and focus group discussion was applied for one to one interview with village people. Quantitative data from the questionnaire was used in the SPSS package for analysis.

Keywords: Eco tourism; Attitude; Perception; Odisha

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's fastest-growing economic sectors and a vital engine of socioeconomic advancement (Nasir, Mohamad, Ghani&Afthanorhan, 2020). Ecotourism has become a burgeoning sector of the tourism industry across the world (Carvache, Segarra&Carrascosa, 2019; Xie&Sun, 2019; Vinaya&Binoy, 2020). The primary goal of eco-tourism is to safeguard and conserve nature, natural resources, and the environment. Ecotourism promotes responsible tourism in natural areas, which helps to conserve the environment, includes learning, promotes awareness, and ensuring the prosperity of indigenous communities (TIES 2015). The potential of ecotourism has gone beyond by offering protection both to the environment and local marginalized community people. The growth and development of eco-tourism in recent times soaring high and the benefits are availing by multiple stakeholders. Ecotourism is expected to expand at a 5% annual

rate and accounts for about 20% of total global tourism (Charters & Saxon 2015; Das 2011). Considering ecotourism over mass tourism is a responsible decision and an alternative way of economic diversification benefiting multiple stakeholders. According to Oh, Kim, Choi, and Pratt (2019), the alternative to mass tourism is in the form of eco-tourism. Ecotourism due to its well-recognized contribution to biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation, and socio-economic development has been promoted in many developing countries (Wang *et al.* 2017). According to Wolf, Croft, and Green (2019), there is the possibility for a symbiotic link between tourism and natural area protection. Ecotourism aims to have a low environmental effect, a low impact on and respect for the host (local) cultures, a high economic benefit to the host community, and a high level of satisfaction for recreational visitors that participate (Fennell, 2015).

The impact of ecotourism is not only the nature and natural resources but also on multiple stakeholders such as local people, tourists, and visitors. Many forms of impacts driven from the eco-tourism activities like socio-economic and cultural are the most significant. Ecotourism aims to strike a balance between its economic benefits and socio-environmental impact (Kalpita, 2018). In the backdrop discussing the local people's attitude and perception, it is essential to foresee the level of local people's involvement in ecotourism development. Thus, ecotourism focuses on the benefit of society, and the collaboration of local people is crucial (Kalaoum & Santiago, 2020). The previous study findings of (Harun & Chiciudean, 2018) reveal that successful eco-tourism destination relies on the local community and their involvement. Many decades of extensive study and research explored the ecotourism benefits and its socio-economic contribution to community people. Ecotourism is able to create employment, empower the local people as well as assist in infrastructure development. In developing countries, ecotourism has the potential to bring social, economic, and environmental benefits to the local community. Thus, ecotourism is a solution for the local people in terms of the social and economic backdrop, as well as for biodiversity protection in the region (Snyman 2016). According to Hunt *et al.* (2015), "Ecotourism economically helps local communities by providing jobs, enhances their quality of life (Social Upliftment), and focuses on environmental protection." Eco-tourism has the power to protect and conserve environmental resources by creating a healthy attitude and awareness among the local community. A proper balance should be maintained between the host residents and the visitors to achieve this work. Eco-tourism plays a significant role by enhancing the quality of life of the local community and in return, the active participation of the local community helps in developing more satisfactory plans to promote the concept of ecotourism.

While tourism contributes to the economic growth of the region in which it operates and the people who live there, it also produces new job possibilities, improves employment, and enhances the local people's quality of life (Gutiérrez, Macias, & Pionce, 2019). Similarly, another study conducted by Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, & Schelhas (2003) supports ecotourism as a source of generation of new work opportunities for the local community. Promotions of eco tourism in tribal populated areas are a boon to the local community as it provides a larger platform for financial stability and new employment opportunities (Chettri, 2004). The attitude and perspectives of the local people are required for ecotourism

development in order to identify its positive and negative indicators for conservation and preservation. Both from the supply and demand side, local people's contribution and participation are very much essential in order to maintain their harmony with conservation (Choi & Sirakaya 2006). Jalani (2012) suggests that the rate of development of eco-tourism is directly proportional to the generation of various facilities for the benefit of local people. Hence it has been always regarded as a growth propeller used by the local and regional government and stakeholders' for the benefits of visitors and the local community. Das (2013) defines in tribal populated eco-tourism destination; the local activity is primarily concerned with the conservation of the environment and local community development. Western Odisha was chosen as the case to investigate the sustainability of introducing ecotourism, to these rural/ tribal areas. Potential environmental, social and economic impact caused by ecotourism development area researched throughout the study. Therefore, a holistic case study of five tourism sites of Western Odisha is done to identify the problems and prospects that need to be recognized prior to development. Hence a qualitative analysis has been done to find out the local community perception towards eco-tourism development.

The study undertaken by (Deori & Das 2013) in Deepar Beel Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam reveals the opportunity for the empowerment of the local community as well as the protection of natural ecology and wildlife. Kerala a popular hotspot for ecotourism development and various forest management project demands the local people's participation for its successful conservation and sustainability (Thampi 2005). Similarly, Arunachal Pradesh an exotic place for wildlife, calls for the local community involvement for subsequent revenue generation and fulfills the objective of protecting the natural ecology (Athreya 2006). The research was undertaken by Woodroffe, Thirgood, & Rabinowitz, (2005) and their outcomes provide positive support in the stride of eco-tourism as helps to generate revenues and protect their values and essences as well as nature and biodiversity.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

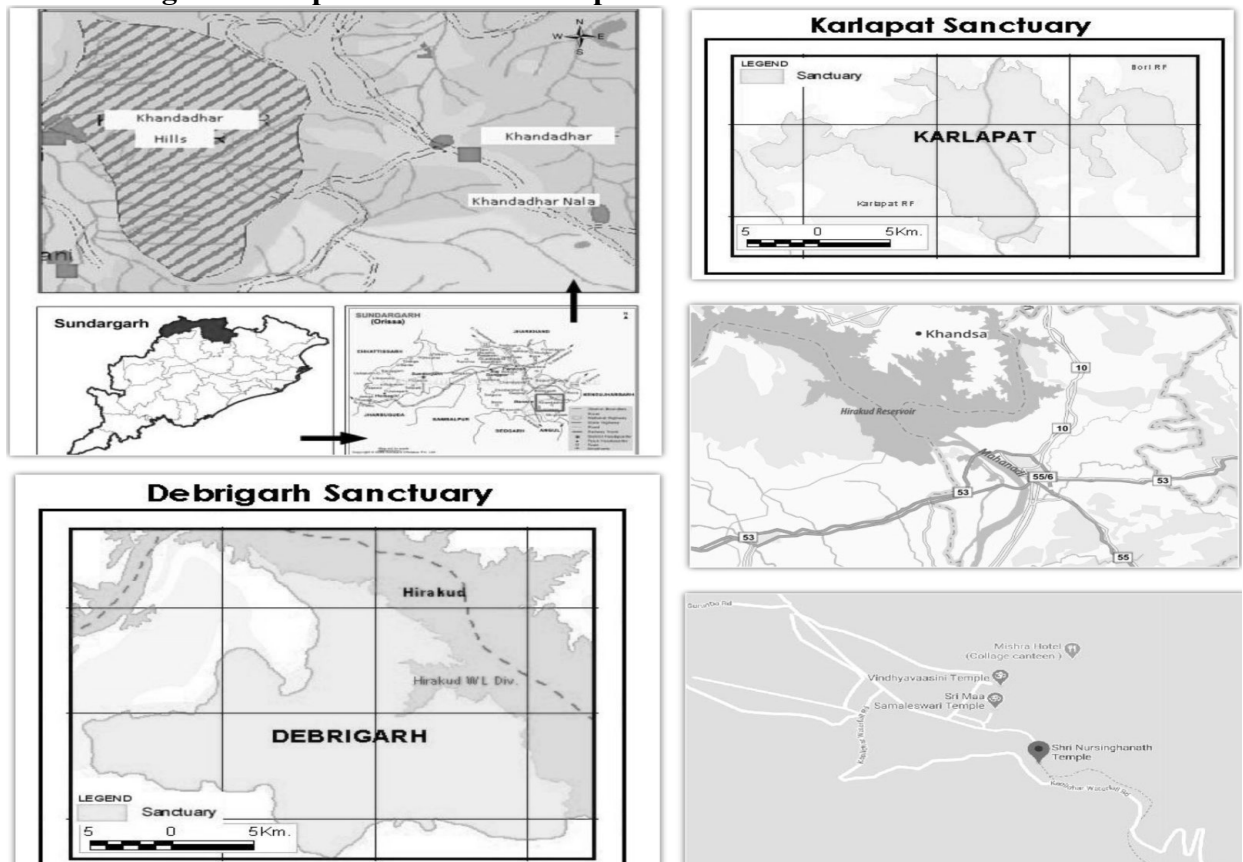
1. To identify the attitude and perceptions of local people's towards eco-tourism in the Western Odisha
2. To determine the level of involvement and participation of local people within and around the eco-tourism places.
3. To investigate the factors affecting the attitudes and perception of local people towards eco-tourism development

STUDY AREA

The serene, sublime, and scenic beauty of Odisha is the natural hotspot for various tourism activities. It is not only scattered around the eastern and southern part of Odisha, but most of the unexplored and virgin tourist destinations are in a hidden stage in the western part of the state. This western part of the state has been densely populated by the indigenous tribal people who are extremely close to nature and the environment. Hence in the context of the present study of five areas named *Khandadhar* waterfall, *Hirakud Dam*, *Debrigarh Wildlife Sanctuary*, *Nrushinghnath Temple*, and *Karlapar Sanctuary* belong to the states *Sundergarh*

and *Sambalpur*. The five eco-tourism destinations are scattered around the three different and adjoining districts in the state of Odisha, namely *Sundargarh*, *Sambalpur*, and *Kalahandi*. The *khandadhar* waterfall is located *Sundargarh* district of Odisha and it is the 12th highest waterfall in India, and its natural and enchanting beauty attracts a lot of tourist from all corners. The adjoining place of this waterfall is full of natural resources and iron ores. The tribal community *PaudiBhuyan* and *Munda* depend on this place for their livelihoods forever. *Hirakud* Dam is the largest dam in Asia built across the *Mahanadi* River located in the district of *Sambalpur*. *Debrigarh* Wildlife Sanctuary is a very popular wildlife sanctuary located in the district *Sambalpur*, a natural habitat for numerous kinds of flora and fauna. *Nrusinghanath* is a popular religious place adjacent to the picturesque reservoir *Hirakud*, located in the district of *Baragarh*. The temple of *Sri Nrusinghanath* is situated at the bottom of the *Gandhamardan* Mountain which is approximately 3234 feet high. The *Nrusingnath* has enormous tourist potential due to blending of human, natural, cultural, ethnic attractiveness, religious attractions, heritage monuments, and deep forest. Most international visitors seek ethnic and cultural mosaics, adventure, and eco-tourism, whereas domestic visitors are drawn to religious attractions, animals, and flora and fauna. *Karlapat* Wildlife Sanctuary is located in *Kalahandi* district and a very popular tourist attraction of Odisha. The beauty of perennial waterfalls is a major source of attraction here. A waterfall called *Phurlijharan* is located in the vicinity of this sanctuary.

Figure 1: Map of the eco-tourism places of Western Odisha



Source: Google map.com

METHODOLOGY

The exploratory research approach was applied in this research to gather relevant information from the target group. It also enables for the premise of doing an investigation of local people's attitudes and perceptions concerning ecotourism development in Western Odisha. A total of 570 local people from the adjoining villages close to eco-tourism places were selected for the study. Both the primary and secondary data collection methods were used. Data were collected by using the self-administered questionnaire and focus group discussions are also conducted with 20 respondents from five eco-tourism sites mentioned in the study, who are staying very close to these sites for 20 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographic profile of the local residents of piloted sites

Description		Frequency Percent
Gender	Male	380 (66.6 %)
	Female	190(33.4%)
	Total	570(100%)
Age	18-25	82 (14.3%)
	26-35	110 (19.2%)
	36-45	123 (21.57%)
	46-55	85(14.9%)
	56-65	68(11.9%)
	66-76	71(12.4%)
	77 above	31(5.4%)
	Total	570(100%)
Occupation	Cultivation	228(40%)
	Fishing	105(18.4%)
	Farm labour	102(17.8%)
	Non-farm labour	83(14.5%)
	Service	7(1.2%)
	Business	12(2.1%)

	Self-employed	11(1.9%)
	Unemployed	22(3.8%)
Education	Illiterate	154(27.0%)
	Primary	217(38.0%)
	Middle	121(21.2%)
	Matriculate	63(11.0%)
	Intermediate	9(1.5%)
	Graduate	6(1.0%)

Note. Compiled from the field study 2019

Table (1) reveals the primary data collection from the field survey in the piloted areas of intended eco-tourism development, where there is a higher percentage of male (66.6 %) respondents compare to the female (34.4%), also from the male segment, higher percentage of male youth are living in the villages so that most of the ecotourism activities could be carried by them, which are mentioned in the next page of analysis.

The occupation of the local people also determines the success and failure of ecotourism development in the proposed sites. The above study depicts that most of the local people have been engaged in the cultivation of grains, cereals, paddy, and wheat (40%), and very few have been working in organized and government sectors. Education is also a very essential part of the local people in order to create awareness about eco-tourism development. But the primary study envisages that a lower percentage of (27%) are literate up to the primary level. A very less percentage of are intermediate (1.5%) and graduate passed (1.0%).

Table 2. Respondents' Level of Involvement in Ecotourism Activities

Title	Frequency (%)
Do you know eco tourism places in your local areas?	
Yes	212(37.1)
No	358(62.8)
Are you involved in eco tourism development activities in said areas?	
Involved	189(33.1)
Not involved	381(66.9)
Does the local authority and government officials needs your help and participation in various eco tourism activities?	
Yes	292(51.2)
	278(48.8)

No	
Do the local authority and government officials spread the awareness about eco tourism activities?	
Yes	215(37.8)
No	355(62.2)
How are you involved in eco tourism activities in your areas?	
Tourist guide	11(1.9)
Conservation staff	27(4.7)
Night watchman	39(6.8)
Transporter	279(48.9)
Cleaner	108(18.9)
Facility staffs	106(18.5)
Do you participate any eco tourism awareness programme conducted in your areas?	
Yes	321(56.3)
No	249(43.7)
Do you benefitted from eco tourismactivities ?	
Yes	263(46.2)
No	307(53.8)
How would you rate the benefits obtained from the eco tourism?	
High	189 (33.1)
Low	322(56.4)
Average	59(10.5)
Do you think the eco tourism activities negatively influences the community?	
Yes	254(44.6)
No	316(55.4)
What would be the level of your involvement in eco tourism?	
High	182(31.9)
Low	252(44.2)
Average	136(23.9)
Are you happy with the eco tourism activities in your locality?	
Yes	379(66.5)
No	191(33.5)
Does the govt. Authority cooperates and coordinates with the activities?	
Yes	214(37.5)
No	356(62.5)

Note. Compiled from the field study

Table (2) reveals the respondents' level of involvement and participation in eco-tourism activities. A minimum of (37.1%) of local people know about the eco-tourism location in their areas. The table also reveals that there is less involvement of local people in ecotourism activities; it's a mere percentage of (33.1%). In the process of ecotourism development, the local authority and government officials play a very crucial role by motivating the local people towards the benefits of eco-

tourism. Hence in this context from the research study, it has been clearly mentioned that a higher percentage of (51.2%) of local authority come forward for the eco-tourism activities. The level of awareness also very good touching the percentage of (37.8%) that initiates the local people to perform various kinds of role in the eco-tourism activities like most of the local people takes the role of local transporter(48.9%) providing the communication facilities to the tourists and visitors and other works. Similarly, very few of them are also takes the role of a tourist guide (1.9%) and conservation staff(6.8%). The happiness quotient of the local people towards ecotourism development is also very satisfactory touching the percentage of (66.5%).

Table 3. Local people perception and attitude towards eco-tourism

Title	Frequency(%)
Do you have any idea about eco tourism development in your locality	
Yes	368(64.5)
No	202(35.5)
Does your locality benefitted from eco tourism activities	
Yes	376(65.9)
No	194(34.1)
What kind of benefits is derived from the eco tourism activities	
Direct	228(40)
Indirect	342(60)
What would be the level of improvement in your community	
High	388(68)
Low	62(10.8)
Average	120(21.2)
Does your livelihood is managed by this eco tourism activities	
Yes	417(73.1)
No	153(26.9)
Does your economic condition has been improved by the eco tourism development	
Yes	402(70.5)
No	168(29.5)
Does the local authority empowers you in various eco tourism activities	
Yes	297(52.1)
No	273(47.9)
Do you think eco tourism activities really conserve and protects the wildlife and parks	
Yes	269(47.1)
No	301(52.9)

Do you follow the sustainability practices in eco tourismactivities	
Yes	395(69.2)
No	175(30.8)
In your view who is most benefitted out of thiseco tourism activities	
Government	323(56.6)
Local people	125(21.9)
Tourism staff	89(15.6)
Tourist	33(5.9)
In your view What way eco tourismactivities influence?	
Positive	418(73.4)
Negative	152(26.6)

*Note.*Compiled from the primary study

The eco-tourism activities have benefited them to a greater extent showing a high percentage of (65.9%), where the direct benefit is (40%) and indirect benefit is (60%). Ecotourism always focuses on community participation and enhancing the livelihood (73.1%) of the local people, showing a higher level of overall improvement (68%) percentage. The perception of local people about the livelihood and economic condition due to the ecotourism development was also born a high percentage of (73.1 %) and (70.5%). The local people also agree that the various activities of eco-tourism help in the conservation and protection of wildlife and sanctuary, which shows a percentage of (47.1%). Sustainability is the new buzzword of the eco-tourism practices, and the local people observe the various sustainability practices (69.2%) emerges from this eco-tourism development and also positively(73.4%) influences the overall segments of the local people.

Table 4.The perceptions of the respondents to ecotourism development of piloted areas

Title	SA	A	D	SD
The eco tourism activities helps in livelihood	212(37.1%)	254(44.5%)	72(12.6%)	32(5.6%)
The eco tourism has created the infrastructure development in the locality	246(43.1%)	227(39.8%)	62(10.8%)	35(6.14%)
The ecotourism activities benefits the local people	303(53.1%)	192(33.6%)	39(6.8%)	36(6.3%)
The ecotourism development enhances the economic condition of local people	344(60.3%)	185(32.4%)	22(3.8%)	19(3.3%)

The eco tourism creates awareness about health , education , safety , sanitation and hygiene	207(36.3%)	213(37.3%)	111(19.4%)	39(6.9%)
The eco tourism activities helps in empowering the local people	202(35.4%)	219(38.4%)	89(15.6%)	60(10.6%)
The eco tourism practices helps in conserving & Protecting the wildlife and sanctuary	196(34.%)	252(44.3%)	82(14.4%)	40(7.0%)
The eco tourism benefited much to the Govt.& tourism staffs	202(35.4%)	289(50.7%)	59(10.3%)	20(3.6%)
The ecotourism benefited much to local people & tourist	216(37.9%)	218(38.3%)	87(15.3%)	49(8.5%)
The eco tourism positively influences the local people	194(34.1%)	169(29.7%)	132(23.1%)	75(13.1%)
The eco tourism negatively influences the local people	201(35.2%)	211(37.0%)	114(20%)	44(7.8%)

SA: Strongly agreed, A:
Agreed, D: Disagreed,
SD: Strongly disagreed.

The above table reveals the local People's perception towards the ecotourism development in the piloted areas like *Khandadhar* waterfall, *Hirakud* Dam, *Debrigarh* Wildlife Sanctuary, *Nrushuinghnath* Temple, and *Karlapat* Sanctuary. The local people are going along with the flow of ecotourism development that shows the percentage of (37.1%) and (44.5%). The eco-tourism has benefitted them in many ways showing a percentage of (53.1%) and (33.6%), and also significantly contributes to the infrastructure development in the piloted areas. The perceptions of the local people also speak and show a highly positive trajectory in the terms of economic condition (60.3%), health education, sanitation and safety measures (36.3%), empowerment (38.4%), and conservation and protection (44.3%) the wildlife sanctuary. The percentage rates of positive (34.1%)

and negative impact (37.0%) of ecotourism development have also been stated derived from the local people's perception.

CONCLUSION

The study result shows that the local people's perceptions and attitude towards ecotourism development in the mentioned areas are positively influencing the host population as well as tourists. Due to the ecotourism development in the tribal dense area of Odisha, the economic conditions, health education, and employment among the local people have enhanced. The study also reveals that awareness among the local people has enabled the conservation and protection of wildlife sanctuaries. Local people have shown a positive attitude toward involvement in various eco-tourism development programs that have empowered them and helped them in decision-making process. The perceptions of local people towards ecotourism development in Western Odisha clearly gives a message to the government authority of the state, stakeholders, tourism planer, and policymakers of rethinking and redesigning a holistic approach to ecotourism development in Western Odisha.

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