

Coastal tourism in Alibaug, Raigad District: A menace or a bonus?

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Introduction:

Coastal area protection has become matter of concern all over the world because this zone is under enormous stress of anthropogenic activities like land exploitation, sand dredging, over exploitation of natural resources and also the tourism. Tourism is a fast growing industry affecting marine biodiversity directly or indirectly (Croall 1995).

It is well known that India has 7500 km coast line with coastal areas as west coast comprising Gujarat, Konkan region of Maharashtra and Malabar Coast and east coast comprising Coromondal coast and Orissa-West Bengal coast line.

Konkan coast comprises Thane, Mumbai, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg. Though Mumbai has a long coast line it has undergone complete urbanization. It is highly commercialized and has lost its calmness. Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg and Goa (about 350 to 600 km from Mumbai, Pune) are far from these cities. Therefore, these places are not preferred by day trippers and weekend picnickers who are more interested in stress relief.

The study area i.e. Alibaug (latitude 18° 38' 28" longitude 72° 52' 45") is a part of Konkan region of Maharashtra state. On all the three sides it is surrounded by Arabian Sea. Its bordering villages are popular for beaches with shimmering sand and fresh air. It is an astonishingly beautiful place with eye soothing greenery of coconut trees. This attracts people from nearby cities like Mumbai and Pune (located at about 110 km and 200 km respectively).



In the vicinity of Alibaug, Kashid, Murud, Kihim are popular as choicest seashores for these visitors. Nagaon beach is almost established as weekend picnickers' paradise while a nearby village Akshi is an upcoming tourist spot. The natives are neither aware of the rich biodiversity other than edible fish nor are they conscious about negative impact of excessive tourism. Present work focuses upon marine life and effect of tourism on the same.

Material and Methods

The paper focuses upon richness of Biodiversity around Alibaug and increasing trend of upcoming tourism there.

The study period is from November 2008 till date. The data collected is based on the field visits made twice a month. Interviews of local people and picnickers were conducted to know the level of awareness and their idea of tourism.

The data related to biodiversity was collected mainly in form of photographs and video clips so as to avoid disturbing the flora and fauna. Few empty mollusk shells were collected as samples. The molluscans available in large numbers were also collected as samples and were preserved in formalin solution. Few samples of algae (available in ample) were collected and preserved in form of herbarium sheets.

Line-transect method and quadrant methods were applied for studying population density. Sediment and water samples were collected for analysis.

While working on a project sanctioned by University of Mumbai, conditions of different shores were observed and the adverse effect of tourism was realized.

Observation

The study location is mainly dominated by sandy beaches with intermittent rocky patches. These beaches are very safe and secure for visitors to enjoy. The fort built by King Shivaji and his warriors and Mughal emperors add to its historic value. Thus, it has become a perfect picnic spot.

Alibaug is a small town and has shed its age old appearance years back. It has emerged as the main place of tourism and many high end resorts and hotels have come up here. These are places of interest for those interested in modern amenities.

Kihim village has a sandy coastline extending to over three kilometers with a small rocky patch. This shore is preferred only for roaming around or for swimming. There are no recreational activities like water sports, paragliding. Though, this place is a tourist spot the molluscan diversity has still sustained itself (Kurve and Sinha, 2011). Over 73 different molluscan shells were observed on this coast.

The locals are also quite aware in Kihim. Some social groups have been formed here which undertake regular cleaning of beach and also propagating the movement. Though the houses have been converted into resorts, they have been taking due care of the nature. There are resorts in Kihim which are ideal eco-friendly resort. Separate dustbins are provided for segregation of dry and wet waste which is made into manure and used for growing plants. Waste water is used for watering plants. Hot water is provided by solar heater. Kitchens work on fuel from Biogas plant.

Kaashid located about 25 km from Alibaug is another place of attraction. The approach road also flaunts scenic beauty with open Arabian Sea on one side and hills on the other. A long coastline measuring about 3km has sandy shore and plantation along the shore. Shady shore and open sea are the plus points of this area. Ample parking space and many small food vending stalls add to the facilities. Local villagers have gone a step ahead and provided changing cabins for the tourists. Hammocks are tied to the trees and attract younger generation. Not only snacks but also lunch and dinner are served at cheaper costs by small hotels around this place. Though better resorts and hotels are available, visitors prefer these country side hotels which serve homely food of good quality and also cheap. Tourism has been a major factor in bringing economic progress and prosperity in these villages. The beach is not so badly polluted because local governments (Grampanchayats) have taken initiatives in cleaning it regularly. Pay and park facility is provided by grampanchayat and the amount collected as parking charges is used for this purpose.

Few other beaches which are coming up as recently developed beaches seem to be facing the problems of pollution. Leftover food, plastic carry bags and other factors are causing pollution on these beaches. Grampanchayat at Nagaon has appointed staff for collecting entry toll from car owners. Around 150 to 200 cars visit this beach every week. This money is utilized for cleaning beach at least once a week. This takes care of the problem of littering and pollution. The villagers have taken to selling of household products like Tamarind, Onions, and Rice flakes. Almost every house has got modified for greeting tourists. Swings and dining tables are set in the gardens next to houses. Parking facility is also available. This has become an attraction for visitors. Cheap yet tasty food is served almost everywhere. Thus, tourism has caused a transfer scene in Nagaon. The financial status of villagers has been elevated drastically. They are leading a better life.

Looking at this drastic change, nearby villages have started thinking about tourism as a lucrative source of income. As such, this beach is very rich in marine life. Exotic marine forms like colourful Sponges, corals (like Gorgonia), aplysia, Sabella, sea-anemones, brittle stars are sighted on this beach (Kurve and Kurve 2011). The villagers unfortunately, are not aware of this richness of marine fauna. They are trying to follow the footsteps of Nagaon natives. Gradually, they are also preparing to welcome visitors. The villagers and grampanchayat authorities have shown interest in developing Akshi beach also as a tourist spot. They are also about to invite water sports and various such activities to attract the tourists.

Discussion and conclusion

10-15 years back, coastal tourism in India was restricted to Goa, Kerala and Peninsular region for domestic and foreign tourists. Konkan coast as a potential tourist hub was considered thereafter. Yet, in this short span of about 10-15 years, it has been undergoing a fast development as a major tourist attraction in Maharashtra state. To bring the demands and suppliers together, private landlords have taken to developing infra-structure. There is a boon in construction business consequently, causing land exploitation, coastal encroachment leading to pollution and waste generation.

Indian beaches at Goa, Kerala, Tamilnadu have undergone revolutionary development as tourists attractions even for foreign tourists. These places have been commercialized to a notable extent and have established themselves as popular tourist beaches. In addition to having sun, sand and sea these places are approachable even for foreign nationals as the airports are comparatively closer from these cities. These places are totally developed for inviting tourists from India and abroad. Social and economic development of these is also influenced by tourism.

In Maharashtra, only Mumbai has the airport at a communicable distance from seashore. Yet, it is established as business hub. This has led to excessive strain on resources and infrastructure in Mumbai. There is crowding in Mumbai. Globalization movement and IT boon have elevated the financial status of middle class families. Other side of this picture is the rise in mental stress. To overcome this stress, they keep looking for some places of relief and respite. These people have started looking for places of serenity. Weekend picnics become the most suitable solution to this problem. Environment happens to be a good option as holiday destination. Alibaug shore being about 100km from Mumbai, it is the choice of people for spending weekends.

So, the workforce goes for weekend outings at nearby places like Alibaug which is also known as mini Goa. The clean and virgin beaches near Alibaug are the relieving spots during weekends. The beaches like Kihim, Kaashid, Murud are frequented by picnickers. These have been established as tourist spots.

Yet, there is not so much of commercialization as that in Goa or other coastal States of India. Affordable staying, food, easy commuting and scenic sea views are the main assets of these places. These cater to the taste of both middle class and higher class populations. Kihim, Kaashid and Murud have already established themselves as places of tourists' interest.

Other nearby shores are on similar lines preparing to invite visitors. Among these, Nagaon has taken a leap by creating various facilities to invite guests. Water sports, affordable lodging and boarding and ample parking place attract the tourists. Water sports operated in the intertidal zone disturb the shallow water and generate threat to marine flora and fauna. Because of their driving force and oil and grease degrade the water quality (Sawkar *et.al.*). Driving vehicles on exposed part of sandy beach during low tides crush molluscs and other sand dwelling animals. The sandy beach of Nagaon is a classic example of this phenomenon.

There are several places in Konkan region identified by Government of India as tourist area (Mangal Padhye 2011). In some places, ecotourism is also implemented for protection of marine environment. But there are many unprotected coasts like Alibaug, vulnerable to anthropogenic activities such as construction on beaches, water sports, driving vehicles, beach littering. Tremendous tourist response and eagerness of villagers to welcome them are the key factors in causing this change.

Further, there are no means by which these beaches can be conserved like sanctuaries. Nobody has a control over what an individual takes away from the seashore (shells or any other form of living being). This is likely to lead to habitat loss and challenge the survival of marine life.

There are many beaches that are not known to tourists. The local fishermen community has conserved their culture. But if the same rate of development continues in few years from now there is quite a possibility of these coasts losing their importance as spots of marine biodiversity.

A location becomes tourists' spot because of healthy environment. But if there is excessive tourism without awareness, the environment will deteriorate. This will spoil the environment. Consequently, the place will not only lose its value as a tourist place but also biodiversity. Considering the current state of Alibaug, it appears mandatory to make people aware of the environment and the need for its conservation.

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