

A Journey of Empowering a Community for Self Reliance: Endogenous Tourism Project in Sualkuchi, Assam, India

Simanta Kalita

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/factsreports/424>

ISSN: 1867-8521

Publisher

Institut Veolia

Electronic reference

Simanta Kalita, « A Journey of Empowering a Community for Self Reliance: Endogenous Tourism Project in Sualkuchi, Assam, India », *Field Actions Science Reports* [Online], Vol. 4 | 2010, Online since 17 February 2010, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/factsreports/424>

A journey of empowering a community for self reliance: Endogenous Tourism Project in Sualkuchi, Assam, India

S. Kalita

Programme Coordinator, North Eastern Regional Cell, Centre for Environment Education,
Guwahati 781 003, India

Abstract. The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) is partnering the Union Ministry of Tourism (MoT), India, and UNDP India in implementing an endogenous tourism project (ETP) at Sualkuchi. Situated in Assam province, Sualkuchi is the largest village in the Brahmaputra basin and is famous for silk weaving. The project experimented with tourism as an engine of rural development under Indian conditions. Tourist sites entirely managed by local communities were used for the first time under the ETP.

Project activities involved rural infrastructure development and capacity enhancement of local communities through institution building, exposure, training and networking for rural tourism management.

The project at Sualkuchi faced initial obstacles as the concept was new in this part of the globe. Initially a cross section of the community was reluctant because of their unawareness, lack of skill, poor infrastructure, conservative social system and lack of faith in the socio-political system. Vested interest groups, including local influential persons and decision makers, were opposed to the idea of handing over the project management to the inexperienced community committee.

The project, apart from developing tourism, also tried to make it a learning experience for sustainable development. Empowerment of women, promotion of self help groups (SHGs), health camps, sanitation drives, and vocational trainings were the peripheral activities of the project.

Out of the total of thirty six ETP sites, fifteen sites are now open for visitors, and approximately 14,000 individuals are involved in these sites. The total income of these sites in 2008 was slightly over INR 48.7 million. In the Sualkuchi site, the income level of at least 80 families has increased by 40%. Today, the local cultural groups are performing at national platforms, the cuisine of Sualkuchi is recognized as one of the best among all the ETP sites in the country, and the villagers are now confident enough to receive tourists from all over the globe.

Keywords. Rural, development, capacity, tourism, empowerment, women, health.

1 Introduction

India has diverse ecological, climatic and geographical conditions in different parts of the country. As a result, the biological diversity of the country is very rich and it has become one of the most populous countries in the world. More resources mean less competition and less interaction with neighbours. Thus, there are numerous compartmentalized ethnic groups, who, until the recent past, were self sufficient and maintained their unique identities.

After India liberalized its economy in 1991 and adopted privatization and industrialization, it has become one of the fastest growing nations on earth. Earlier, the mainstay of the

Indian economy was agriculture. Hence, the real Indian was said to live in villages. But the recent trend of industrial growth has resulted in rapid migration from villages to urban centers, resulting in colonization. As a result, most of the Indian cities are now at the threshold of carrying capacity. Economic planning at this juncture, therefore, should take development to all parts of the country and not only create some colonies in the cities. In the past few decades, the exponential growth of population due to a high birth rate, better health care, and immigration from the neighbouring countries has led to a population explosion and food crisis. It is exerting tremendous pressure on the environment and natural resources.

The conventional development focuses on **how much** is produced. But today the more important issue for India is **how it produces and distributes**. It can always produce

Correspondence to: Simanta Kalita
(simanta.kalita@ceeindia.org)

more, because it has the manpower and technology. India is now focusing to bring in the sustainability concern into its development schemes. It is internalizing the concepts of sustainable exploitation and responsible consumption into its development plans.

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the Indian economy, which, apart from providing direct employment, gives multiplier effects for employment generation. It is also a low impact industry. The 10th Five Year Plan of India has identified tourism as one of the major sources for generating employment and promoting sustainable livelihood. Tourism in South Asia is growing fast. While world tourism registered a 6.6 per cent growth rate in 2007, India posted a 14.3 per cent growth rate.

When material products travel, development occurs in the established market sector only, but when the consumers travel to the production centers, development reaches to the remotest places. With this philosophy in mind, the Union Ministry of Tourism (MoT), government of India, adopted the new tourism policy, which positions tourism as the **engine** of economic growth. MoT launched a scheme of Rural Tourism to give an opportunity to the tourists to explore the unexplored parts of India. MoT partnered with UNDP and the scheme was renamed as the Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP). Tourism in rural areas was already popular in some parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and South India, but this was the first concentrated effort by the MoT to take tourism to the remotest villages in all parts of the country.

1.1 The Project area

MoT has selected 36 rural sites all over the country for the rural tourism project. This article deals with the activities in the Sualkuchi ETP site, where the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) has been involved as the implementing partner for capacity building of the community. Sualkuchi is one of the first 15 ETP sites that have been launched for tourists.

Sualkuchi is located on the north bank of river Brahmaputra, in Kamrup District of Assam province in India. It is the largest village in Assam. Sualkuchi is famous for its endemic golden silk. The project covers 3 hamlets, namely Bangalaghuli, Muslim Chupa and Phatna in the Greater Sualkuchi village. Apart from golden silk (Muga), tasar and mulberry (paat) silk are also weaved in the village. Silk has a significant place in traditional Assamese culture. Silk cloth is an essential requirement for all auspicious occasions including marriages, festivals and cultural events.

Tourists were already visiting Sualkuchi through tour operators. But all the established silk weavers were busy in their silk business and never paid attention to tourism. On the other hand, silk is costly and it needs a good amount of investment. There are skilled families who cannot afford to fully invest in the silk business. Consequently, the project tried to identify hamlets within Sualkuchi where the silk weaving skill is present, but local inhabitants are not fully engaged in weaving. An effort was made to train such families in tourist handling skills and establish a *weaving gurukul* (home school for weaving) kind of atmosphere. Tourism requires a hospitality

sector, cultural performances and souvenirs. Thus families with such strengths were included in the project. Based on the skills and economic conditions, 200 households in the three selected hamlets were selected for the project. The total project population included 70% unemployed youth. The main sources of income were weaving and daily wage labour. Some of the best vegetable farms in the district are situated in these hamlets and nearby. These farms are also an attraction for tourists.

The project hamlet is located in a picturesque location on a hillock on the bank of river Brahmaputra. There are hills on three sides of the hamlet and two wetlands add to the beauty of the lush green location. Winter migratory birds in thousands aggregate in the wetlands and the river bank. Sighting of river dolphins is possible if a proper site and time can be selected with the help of the local guides.

1.2 Time frame

The project in Sualkuchi started in the year 2004 with a baseline survey in the village. Since then three cottages for tourists, cultural performance area and a campus have been readied for tourists. The community has been trained and a Village Committee has been given the charge of the project since 1st January 2009. The CEE will aid and guide the village committee until December 2009 to make the project fully functional.

2 Aim and objectives of the project

The aim of the project was to establish a replicable model tourist village managed by the local community that is rich in the traditional heritage. The project focused on improving rural infrastructure and involving communities in managing tourist sites. MoT, UNDP and CEE wanted the process to be participatory and sustainable. Hence the following objectives for Sualkuchi ETP implementation were set:

- First, to promote and strengthen village institutions for village level decision making regarding tourism promotion and overall development of the village.
- Secondly, creation of basic rural infrastructure for promotion of tourism in the village.
- Thirdly, identification of the tourists' requirements in the area and fine tuning the supply side in the village for satisfying the needs of the tourists without compromising the traditional values.

Lastly, networking and marketing support to village committee for marketing of the tourist site and village produce.

3 Activities and methodologies

The following activities have been carried out to achieve the objectives. Important methodologies adapted are also explained with the activities.

At the beginning, *Participatory Rural Appraisal* (PRA) exercises were conducted. Semi-structured interviews, community mapping, ven-diagrams, force field analysis, stakeholder

matrix analysis, focus group discussions, questionnaire surveys, etc. were done in a participatory mode. The baseline generated by the PRA and survey was used for planning of the project activities, deciding roles and involving stakeholders for various trainings and exposures. Let us take the figure 1 of the 'income sources' as a planning tool example:

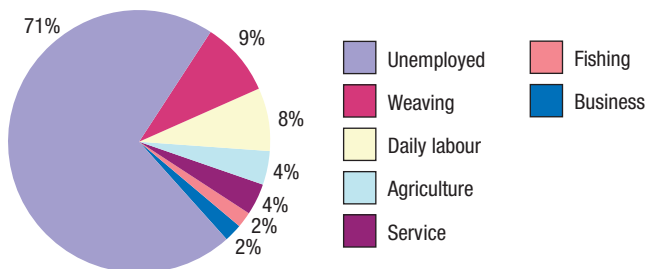


Figure 1. 'Example of *Income sources*' as a planning tool, *Participatory Rural Appraisal*.

The section involved in weaving was given orientation for tourist demonstrations and weaving based souvenir development, the unemployed were involved in construction, house-keeping, cuisine, crafts, tourist guiding, cultural performances, site cleanliness, etc. Some of the daily labourers were involved in construction.

The second phase of activities included identification of the potential villagers and confidence building through an *appreciative enquiry method*. This method was applied for identifying the right people for the right kind of responsibilities while selecting teams for hospitality, cultural performance, local cuisine, etc. *Participatory decision making* has been part of all the processes of the project. The community was given the driver's seat to decide whether to strive for mass tourism or selective tourism. For this, the project team helped the villagers to analyze the cultural background, environmental carrying capacity of the region, the products available, and the scopes of improvement. All the findings at every step were shared with the villagers. The village already had many democratic institutions that could significantly contribute towards all-round development of the village. The project brought together all these under a common roof and with nominees from all these organizations formed an *umbrella institution* namely '**Gondhmow Tourism Development Society**'. This Society is now registered under the Societies Registration Act of India and is recognized by the MoT and the UNDP as the managing agency of the ETP Sualkuchi project.

The project also addressed some *peripheral development* issues that are critical for tourism development. The project team met the local elected representatives to include the village in a total sanitation scheme and arrange for drinking water and add concrete to the roads. Health camps in partnership with the Government Health Department and private hospitals, sanitation drives were organized. At the beginning, villagers were not concerned about sanitation, so street dramas were organized and volunteer groups from outside villages were brought in for participatory sanitation drives.

For improvement of the village infrastructure for tourism, community consultations were held to facilitate dialogue for selecting the right kind of infrastructure, technology, and

materials to gel with the local ambience. CEE and UNDP identified technical experts to adapt the vernacular architecture. UNIDO supported organization and the Cane and Bamboo Technology Centre (CBTC) was engaged by the District administration to construct the cottages, the cultural performance hall, etc. Bamboo is extensively used in vernacular Assamese architecture. Hence, the main raw material for construction of the cottages was chosen as bamboo (Figure 2).

All construction requires some amount of maintenance after a few years. This project being a low investment one, it may not be able to spend much in maintenance in the future. Hence, it was negotiated with CBTC that they provide technology and local youth would be trained to construct so that in future they can maintain the structures on their own. Local youths were also engaged by CBTC to construct other projects of CBTC outside the state. For durability, some amounts of concrete and steel have also been used in the construction. But an effort was made so that it looks like bamboo. The figure 3 shows the concrete view point cum cafeteria that looks like it is made of bamboo and wood.

The district administration formed a convergence committee and additional support was garnered from line Government Departments for water supply, repairs of village roads, construction of the campus wall on one side, free saplings, improvement of the village fishery pond, etc.



Figure 2. A cottage: vernacular architecture using bamboo.



Figure 3. The view point cum coffee house.

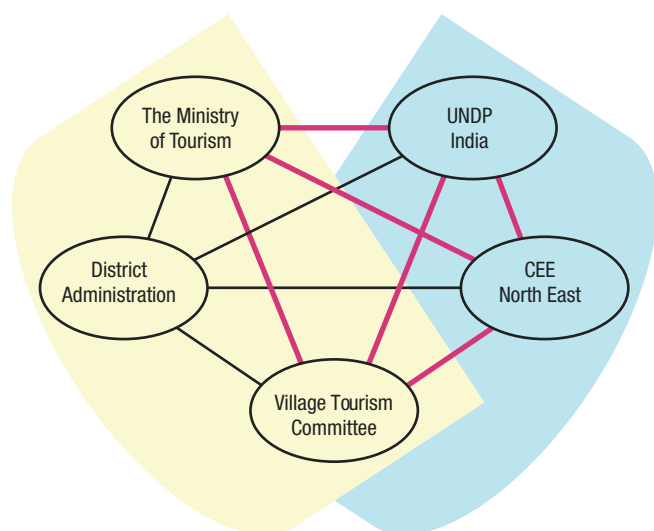


Figure 4. Main partnerships in the project and relationship.

To know the preferences of the tourists, a sample tourist survey was conducted covering the airport, rail station and hotels in the nearest city, Guwahati. To prepare the community as per the expectations of the tourists, an exposure tour for the service groups was organized to established tourist places in Nameri and Kaziranga National Park. A capacity building plan was prepared and training was organized for visitor handling skills, local cuisines, development of souvenirs (weaving, bamboo craft), etc. Groups were placed in established tourist centres in Nameri and Kaziranga to gain first hand experience of handling tourist. Since the village is rich in its traditional cuisine, the community decided to offer only traditional food as the main dish at the site. Training and refresher workshops to fine-tune the cuisine and to improve the presentation of the cuisine were organized. Local traditional soft drinks, snacks, and games, were fine tuned to presentable form through workshops.

Since the community was not experienced in managing tourist sites, it was a matter of concern for all. Thus, exposure tours for the village committee representatives to established tourist places were organized to expose them to the concept. Training for the village committee representatives on site management, waste management, leadership, and accounting were organized. Members of the village committee were placed in Kaziranga to gain first hand experience. Village committee members were involved in meetings with UNDP, MoT, District Administration and Assam Tourism Development Corporation so that the Village committee could understand and network with all the relevant people.

For marketing of the site, MoT has developed a website, www.exploreruralindia.org. Project implementation partners have compiled site specific contents that have been uploaded in the website. CEE's own website, www.ceeindia.org, also helped in this purpose. The site has now been brought under the fold of the Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC), and ATDC is promoting the site as part of its promotional scheme. The Sualkuchi site has already networked with established tourist sites in the states and local tour operators. Help Tourism, a Kolkata based rural tourism promotion organization, is now

involved in marketing of the site. Local culture and folklore have been documented and stickers, posters, booklets, etc., have been developed as take away products. Help of All India Radio has been received for publicizing the site through cultural performances from the village, interviews, etc. UNDP and CEE are producing small video clips as promotional clips of the site.

4 Key Strategies

Partnership has been a major strategy of the project. A partnership between the community, government and non-government institutions, tour operators and existing tourist circuits has been developed. The main partnerships can be explained through the figure 4.

MoT has given INR 5 million to the Sualkuchi site for improving infrastructure. UNDP has contributed INR 2 million for community capacity building. In Sulakuchi, CEE is the implementing partner for community capacity building (software). The District Administration of Kamrup has been involved as the implementing agency for the hardware construction. And the village committee (Gondhmow Tourism Development Society) is involved in both software and hardware activities as a local facilitating organization. There has been direct contact of all these organizations. CEE, although it was not directly accountable for hardware construction, facilitated the process.

A *convergence committee* was formed with the District Deputy Commissioner as the Chair where Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC), Forest Department, District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Block Development Office (BDO), etc, were involved as members. Funds from different ongoing Government schemes have been roped in through convergence.

Another key strategy has been *adaptation* of the learning to the local context. All the learning from exposures, workshops, etc., was adapted to the local conditions of the village. Local architecture, local food, local materials, and local cultural performances have been blended in a presentable manner (Figures 5 and 6).

All the ETP sites have been *branded* under the common brand name of 'exploreruralindia' sites. Common branding



Figure 5. Traditional Assamese cuisine presented in the traditional manner.



Figure 6. Local cultural performances.

has also been proved as a successful strategy. Although all the sites are unique in their respective offerings, they have been brought under the common brand to give a certified minimum standard of service and experience.

A *low impact* on the local environment has been consciously planned both in terms of physical environment and culture. A *people's charter* has been declared, which advocates for low impact on the environment and local culture. The site has been declared as a low-polythene zone. Plantation involving visitors is a customary practice so far and it will continue until the site is fully covered with greenery (figure 7). Visitors feel pride to become part of the greening mission. Traditional foods made of locally produced organic vegetables are provided to encourage a *low-carbon economy*.

Before ETP, rural tourist sites in India were managed by either private investors or by the tourism department. For the first time, ETP has developed a model where tested sites are handed over to the community. Nobody is employed by the Government or any private investors. So all decisions are taken by the community for the community. Thus, it is promoting *local participatory governance*.

5 Obstacles faced during project implementation and how these were addressed:

- A cross section of the local community initially were more orthodox and did not welcome the venture, as they thought that it would pollute their environment and culture, and outsiders would come in for jobs.

Response: Extensive consultation, confidence building workshops and handing over the decision making rights to the community were helpful. All possible contracts for construction and supplies of materials were given to the villagers and they were trained to upgrade their skills. Finally they started believing on themselves and they understood that they were the decision makers. Assamese people are by nature good hosts. They have a traditional warm way of welcoming guests. The project team helped them believe in themselves as the best hosts, and fine tuning was done through training.



Figure 7. Plantation by Tourists.

- Initially Local administrators did not understand the concept of rural tourism and they were trying to bring in exotic concepts of conventional urban-centric tourism.

Response: UNDP explained the concept to the concerned decision makers repeatedly. After several rounds of meeting and after they participated in country level workshops, the concept was clarified.

- In a community meeting in the village at the initial phase, the then District administrator said that the project in the long run would give livelihood to all the families. Some vested interest groups in the village presented the statement in a distorted form and said that the DC would give job to all families.

Response: It took a long time to make the community understand the reality. The whole economics of tourism, and its peripheral multiplier effects, were explained to the villagers repeatedly. The project team had a difficult time to make people understand this.

- Vested interest groups tried to demotivate the community

Response: Repeated consultations with the community, clarification of all the points raised by them, transparent decision making and participatory accounting helped. Peripheral benefits in the form of roads, English speaking training, health camps, etc, were also beneficial.

- Initially the road conditions were poor and the public transport system was available only at a distance of about 4 km from the project site. This slowed down the initial construction phase.

Response: The District Administration converged grants from other departments to improve the road conditions. Now, vehicles can go to the last point of the village.

- Hardware construction of the site was very slow and it was not ready yet, which posed a hindrance to receiving tourists.

Response: Since the motivation level of the villagers was high, rather than waiting for hardware to be completed, the site has been launched for the day visitors with a full package of local cuisine, village trails, weaving demonstration, and cultural performances. Now the ATDC is completing the pending hardware and by end of this tourist season, night stay provisions will be ready.

6 Results

An operational, community managed rural tourist site has been established with an accommodation capacity of 2700 bed nights per annum. One Tourism Development Society with 17 executive members selected by the community is registered which is now running the tourism venture. A 12-member trained Hospitality Group is engaged in receiving tourists. A 12-member cuisine group is trained and engaged in preparing food for visitors. In most of the written feedbacks of the visitors, food has received special mention. Two trained and equipped dance groups, one on Bodo folk dance and the other one on the Assamese National dance, *Bihu*, are earning praise through their performances at various levels. The Bihu group has already performed in programmes outside the province. Three vocal performance groups are performing in the village for tourists. Seven youths are engaged as tourist guides and earning an income from tourism. A total of 80 families are directly or indirectly making a living from tourism.

Villagers are now exposed to and sensitized about various development issues. Thirty SHGs from Sualkuchi have been started. Seven of them have already obtained loans from banks and the Block Development Office. Sales of weaving products in the site and through exhibition is strengthening the economy of the weavers. Some artisans participated in exhibitions in Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles, Delhi, Bhubaneswar and gained experience and business contacts. The village roads have been improved through convergence funds from the Public Works Department. The Public Health Engineering Department is arranging for drinking water for the villagers. Villagers are culturally enriched through the exposure visits and learning from tourists. A short documentary film and promotional clips on the project have been produced. One booklet on the culture of Sualkuchi, Publicity materials such as posters on the Culture and Birds of Sualkuchi, and stickers on Sualkuchi have been produced. The awareness of the villagers about the environment, sanitation and health has been raised. At least 30 women in the village who were initially behind curtains are today running their own small businesses.

7 Discussion

Tourists used to visit the village even before the project, but managing a tourist site of their own was a new challenge for the villagers. The slow pace of hardware construction, pacifying activities by vested interest groups broke the confidence of the villagers time and again. The CEE project team had to change strategies and rebuild confidence of the villagers almost every six months. Continuous interactions with villagers, living in the village with the villagers, exposures, involvement of the top class trainers, handing over the decision making and making them part of the meetings with UNDP and MoT helped in rebuilding the confidence of the villagers.

When the hardware was not progressing well, CEE proposed to UNDP to organize the Regional Workshop of the ETP project in Guwahati and kept a field visit to Sualkuchi. This brought together all implementing agencies of the East and North East India. After the regional workshop, hardware activities became faster. In December 2008, hardware construction was not complete, so CEE discussed with UNDP, MoT and the Village Committee and launched the site for day visitors. Now that visitors are coming, the local media is also taking interest in the project. MoT is now putting pressure on all possible channels to complete the hardware immediately. The villagers, who were hesitant about the concept, are now earning income from the project. They are now ready to even contribute for a working capital.

The local village institutions were not engaged in any professional economic activity before the project. Now the scenario has changed, and the community has the required skills, first-hand experience of handling tourist in their own village and wonderful comments from the visitors to encourage further development. Now the project is networking with different sites and tour operators.

The first experimental season of the Sualkuchi ETP site, without publicity (only through word of mouth publicity), saw more than 300 tourists visiting the village. The second season is already showing promising growth in the tourist inflow to the village. Once all the hardware is ready and more publicity is given, the income level will certainly rise.

It is said that in India, in every 12 miles, the tribe changes, the food habit changes, the language changes, and the culture changes. In most North East Indian villages, we find ethnic groups with their own traditions and languages. These are the places that are termed by the tourism sector as ‘The Paradise Unexplored’. This project has opened the gate to a mini Paradise that yet remains to be explored.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, UNDP India, District Administration (Kamrup), Assam Tourism Development Corporation, Gondhmow Tourism Development Society, Cane and Bamboo Technology Centre, Guwahati, Nameri Eco-camp, Jupuri Ghar, Lotus Progressive Centre, sSTEP, Toon Works and the entire project team of CEE including Memma, Manoranjan, Kenneth, Pradeep, Pranjal, Mukunda, Upasana, Debita, Dharani, Kakoli, Wazir, Kaushik, Nripen, Pabitra and Krishna.