SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

The Nature of 'Nature Tourism': Exploring the Role of Images and Imagination in Ecotourism

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ABSTRACT

In present day tourism, ecotourism has gained significant popularity and is an avenue to foster synergy between economic, cultural, and ecological growth. This paper attempts to demonstrate how the ecotourism industry uses the power of human imagination to generate tourism imaginaries. By employing these two tools, ecotourism industry plants a very unique notion of 'nature' in tourists' minds, in which nature remains pristine and immaculate. Although this notion hardly matches the actual reality, ecotourism showcases a fabricated reality of tourist spots to fulfil tourist demands. By drawing examples from the flourishing ecotourism industry of the Sundarbans, through in-depth interviews of tourists and analysis of tour brochures, the stark differences between imaginaries and actual reality are documented. Finally, this paper concludes that what ecotourism attempts to offer through imaginaries and the primary objectives of this industry are self-contradictory and can only be attained through the power of imagination.

Keywords: Ecotourism, imagination, imaginaries, nature tourism, Sundarbans

INTRODUCTION

India, blessed with rich geographical and zoological diversity, has always had a mixed relationship with the tourism industry. On one hand, tourism is one of the most important economic activities in a country like India, which is known for its biophysical as well as cultural diversity (Kakkar & Sapna, 2012). On the contrary, increasing number of tourists to a rather undisturbed natural region always brings anxiety to environmentalists and ecologists because of its projected impact on local ecosystems and biodiversity (Rizal & Asokan, 2014). Primarily, for this reason,

in the era of global warming and climate change, the tourism industry has modified the term 'nature tourism' to ecotourism to strike a balance between its economic benefits and socio-environmental impact. Firstly, it is important to clarify what is meant by nature tourism. It has a long history of meeting different purposes such as exploring nature for adventure, hunting or to engage in nature sports. In this context, nature tourism reflects the desire of humans to enjoy the beauty of nature as its ethereal beauty has always led people to explore and marvel at it. Natural aesthetic imagination plays a vital role in fuelling the interest in nature tourism (Denker, 2004). In order to satisfy their desire to experience the awe of nature through direct sense perception, humans travel all across the world.

The traditional mode of nature tourism creates a dualistic scenario altogether. On one hand, tourists prefer visiting unspoiled, pristine nature and also like to fantasise about the local inhabitants of a place. Nature-loving tourists tend to imagine that communities still do live in the past and strive to connect with the cultural aspects of local life. On the other hand, the natural landscape of tourist spots and its vicinity has been immensely transformed by tourism activities due to consumption-based modes of entertainment that are generally preferred by tourists. Therefore, owing to consumerism, tourists still remain as outsiders and fail to connect with the local lifestyle. Consequently, this type of tourism puts a huge toll on the local

environment as it slowly ruins the natural beauty of the place. In this day and age, although ecotourism influences every kind of tourism, in the case of nature tourism, it plays a crucial role in maintaining a balance of the socio-ecological fabric of tourist spots. In an effort to preserve the natural beauty and true essence of natural aesthetics, nature tourism is now synonymous with ecotourism, which is clearly revamping the idea of nature tourism at the very level of its scaffolding. It reduces the externalities of the tourism industry on local environments and on native communities, as well as promises to bring economic benefits to the host communities. Moreover, it also tries to provide experiential satisfaction to tourists by serving a holistic picture of tourist places, and creates an opportunity for tourists to connect with the local way of life.

Simply put, ecotourism is a broad term that attempts to explore the interaction between tourism and the environment. Naturally, when the environment is at the centre of attention, native people also become an integral part of ecotourism. Due to the wide range of possible interactions between these two terms (environment and tourism), the entire concept of ecotourism contains a significant amount of plurality. To just comprehend some bits of this plurality, World Conservation Union defines ecotourism as: "… environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature that promotes conservation, has low visitor

impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (Lindsay, 2003).

Meletis and Campbell (2007) defined ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (p. 851), as per the International Ecotourism Society. To capture this multiplicity of definitions, Gilbert (2007) highlights the manner in which the term ecotourism over time has become synonymous with terms like 'alternative tourism', 'environmental travel', 'green tourism', 'low-impact tourism', 'ethical travel' and 'soft-adventure travel'.

Through ecotourism, the tourism industry tries to fulfil its objectives by evoking a different realm of fantasy in the minds of tourists. To garner tourists' attention, this paper deposits that ecotourism uses images as a tool to conjure up fantasies. To create an avenue for green tourism, ecotourism industry uses the power of imagination to form an image of nature that needs to be protected or, at times an image of serene nature that must be experienced with care. Also, these carefully crafted images of nature create an own niche market which promises to strike an optimal balance between different types of tourists who either go through the hassle of exploring pristine, untouched natural spots or enjoy a comfortable and relaxing holiday - two supposedly contradictory demands.

In this context, this essay will particularly detail how imagination plays a central role in nature-based tourism in this age of ecotourism, and how nature has been 'imaged' to evoke certain kinds of imaginations and perceptions. Firstly, the role of imagination and images of nature will be reviewed and following that, the reciprocal relationship between tourism imaginaries and the tourism industry will be examined. In the final section, by analysing a case study of the thriving ecotourism industry in the Sundarbans, India, some real world evidence is presented to prove how these images and imaginations play important roles in ecotourism and how often that creates a lofty expectation of reality. In addition, this paper will attempt to demonstrate that the promises made by this ecotourism discourse are often contradictory and tend to obscure the actual reality of a place.

Role of Imagination in Nature Tourism or Ecotourism

Imagination is considered a precious gift of God to the human mind. As Reichling (1990) expressed, "imagination might be viewed as a power of the whole of human consciousness that employs intuition, perception, thinking, and feeling" (Reichling, 1990, p. 285). Perhaps due to our self-conscious state of mind, we, humans can experience the special ability of imagination. Imagination is an extremely liberating force that helps human beings overcome and figure out various difficult situations. It also unlocks the creative world to one's mind. However, the question 'what is imagination?' has always puzzled and divided humanity. An account of that is given in the context of

this paper. Imagination is a process whereby our self-conscious mind tries to fulfil our desires. It serves as an opportunity for us to place ourselves at a particular location where we would like to be. Imagination provides us a way to go beyond our everyday framework of time and space and to explore ourselves in a new spatial as well as temporal domain. Often, through this process of imagination, individuals directly connect with nature or natural objects. Most people during their childhood have visualised various kinds of imaginary objects in the clouds or on a damp wall. Beautiful natural objects play a vital role in evoking imagination in one's mind. It is a well-known fact that the aesthetic beauty of natural landscapes has influenced poets, writers or artists over the years in their creative endeavours. A natural landscape provides a sense of aesthetic beauty in our mind, and this aesthetic beauty provokes us to imagine ourselves in front of various beautiful natural landscapes. Thus, there is a cyclical process between the imagination of natural aesthetic beauty and gratification of that beauty that invokes further imagination. It could be perceived that people travel because they want to actually sense the aesthetic beauty of nature that they have imagined or because travelling to a new place induces the power of imagination through sensory perception of aesthetic nature. Hence, this paper posits that imagination acts as a critical link between these two domains - nature and tourism.

Schroeder (2009) illustrated five types of imagination to experience natural environment. One of the main reasons for a tourist to visit new places is to experience his or her imaginations. However, one can assume that these imaginations about a place may or may not match reality. In that case, tourists often imagine any missing components of their imagination and try to fulfil their desire of seeing a place in the exact way they imagined it. Schroeder named this phenomenon as mental editing. For example, in one scenario experienced by the researcher at a forest safari, the co-tourists had pre-conceived thoughts that they would see deer or elephants in the forest, but in reality it was not really easy to capture a glimpse of wildlife. However, some of them were so eager to experience their desires that they repeatedly claimed to see a deer behind the groves although in reality there were no deer present.

In addition, tourists often imagine themselves associated to their previous connection with similar types of landscapes. They attempt to exaggerate their past memories and imagine themselves as somehow connected with landscape in the past. Schroeder gives an example of this kind of imagination as he mentions, "Perhaps the wild garden means a great deal to me because it was my stepping stone into a bit of past, with the woodland flora of my childhood abundant" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 13). He termed this kind of imagination as time travel. In time travel, at times even tourists go beyond their actual life experiences and try to connect with the local communities of earlier times by imagining their presence at that particular landscape.

Not only do people travel through time, but on many occasions tourists travel through space as well. They are prone to imagining themselves in a place other than their present location. It happens particularly after a tourist returns from a tour. For instance, when idle at home or at the workplace, he or she goes back to the recently visited natural landscape and imagines himself or herself to be present there again. On other occasions, when tourists are in a natural landscape, fictional stories or fairy tales from their memories lead them to a completely different imaginary world. Schroeder addresses this as travel to other places. The last kind of imagination is quite anthropomorphic, as tourists try to impose a human character on nature such as when they refer to nature as 'mother nature'. This kind of imagination evokes a completely different type of aesthetic beauty and is called personification. All these categories show that by imagining natural landscapes and aesthetic natural beauty, tourists seek a state of mind in which they can position themselves in a virtual world. Kearney (1993) rightly captures the effect of imagination as follows:

> It wagers that imagination is the very precondition of human freedom-arguing that to be free means to be able to surpass the empirical world as it is given here and now, and in order to project new possibilities of existence. It is because we imagine that we are at liberty to anticipate how things might be; to envision the world as if it were otherwise; to make absent alternatives to be present to the mind's eye. (p. 6)

Along with the aforementioned mode of imagination, ecotourism has a recapitulatory attribute which can be termed as colonial legacy. Mostly, in countries like India or other developing nations, colonial legacy is considered the primary source of imagination which aids the success of ecotourism (Gilbert, 2007). In this context, Echtner and Prasad (2003) identified three recurring myths which are inevitably connected to imagination and are particularly essential for tourism in developing countries: the myth of the unchanged, the myth of the unrestrained, and the myth of the uncivilised (Salazar, 2012). These three myths are the prime drivers for ecotourism expansion which attract foreign tourists to developing countries. Tourists from developed nations with their own colonial legacy still imagine developing countries as a place where one can get a taste of unspoiled and untouched nature. History evokes nostalgia for various places, and for the nature and culture of these colonies. People readily imagine historical memories, and the consequently evoked nostalgia drives them to return to those same places as tourists to cherish similar experiences. Appadurai (1996, p. 76-78) called such nostalgia without lived experience as "armchair nostalgia" or "imagined nostalgia" (Salazar, 2012, p. 871).

To extend the type of imagination as discussed above, the researcher would like to

propose one additional form of imagination. In the age of ecotourism and consumerism-driven lifestyle, this imagination can be termed as intellectual imagination. This offers a fascinating mixture between the ideology of non-consumption and conservation of nature. Tourists create an altered image of themselves which does not match their typical daily image of a consumer. In the era of increased global warming, when environmental issues have become pertinent topics even in the socio-political sphere and in popular social discourse, this altered image helps to place oneself on a pedestal. It also grants mental satisfaction as one is transformed from being a tourist as a consumer to being a tourist as a conserver. Additionally, as ecotourism provides a platform to connect local people and the tourism industry through economic involvements, tourists gain a sense of fulfilment through involvement in philanthropic work. The imagination of this altered image is the source of intellectual satisfaction for thousands of tourists who not only desire a leisure holiday but also equally cherish any intellectual stimulation they can derive out of the experience.

To conclude, it can be said that human life is somehow bound by these inclinations for imagination, beauty, aesthetic nature which can extend beyond actual life. Some even argue that the specific purpose of human life is to make the world imaginative (Salazar, 2012). When one imagines visiting a beautiful place, it automatically reinforces the assumption that the current place where one lives in is not beautiful enough and

cannot evoke similar aesthetic sensations. This assumption converts someone into a tourist as travelling to new places offers the opportunity to access the material manifestations of imagination. Projecting artistic structures onto nature is possible because of imagination as it acts as the main link between these two domains. Our imagination enables us to appreciate nature as if it was a piece of art.

The following section will be an attempt to dissect the process through which the creation of imagination happens. The ways in which creation of imagination arises in the context of tourism through imaginaries will be demonstrated. For the tourism industry, imaginaries - in the form of posters, guidebooks, photographs, and blogs are used as a means to evoke imagination in the minds of tourists. Perhaps due to this reason, the tourism industry is marked as an "image production industry" (Harvey, 1989, p. 290 - 293).

Imaging Nature in Nature Tourism

Two main agents of tourism are tourists and the tourism industry. Often times, personal imagination interacts with institutional and industrial imaginations and in the process, both are influenced by each other. When we close our eyes and imagine ourselves before a spectacular natural landscape, the perception of nature as a source of aesthetic beauty evokes certain images. Various tourist guidebooks, posters, and tourism advertisements shape the imaginations tourists form of a tourist spot. This is an example of consumer-producer relationship,

where producers present certain images in front of consumers and these images together create the imaginations held by consumers. Through these means, the tourism industry tries to portray an aesthetic nature and their posters, leaflets as well as websites are very much inclined to this. Tourists tend to exaggerate this aesthetic sense through imaginations that are based on all these advertisements. In this manner, the industry presents a paradisiacal environment to prospective tourists and promises to fulfil dreams to consume the aesthetics of local landscape and population "through observation, embodied sensation, and imagination" (Salazar, 2012, p. 866).

To capture the attention of tourists, this industry strategically uses beautiful and visually appealing photographs of forests, seas, or mountains. They never expose the all-inclusive pictures of reality. "Eco tourists are often presented with sanitised or 'greenwashed' versions of destinations" (Meletis & Campbell, 2007, p. 864). For example, a photograph of a mountain landscape will neither capture the garbage heap in the valley nor the massive crowds that may be found due to presence of other tourists. This is because the photograph of a mountain landscape with only a partially highlighted reality can evoke the desired imagination in the human mind and the subsequent aesthetic desire, while the other mentioned attributes of the same landscape can act as repelling factors. The carefully chosen frame of the entire landscape is 'picturised' so dramatically that it feels like 'this is the heaven on earth'; nothing more can exist apart from this image of the landscape.

Our minds always imagine pictures of aesthetic nature which are pristine and full of wilderness. In this context, ecotourism raises the bar as it offers tourists the added satisfaction that they can exclusively be a part of the pristine nature, and at the same time, be able to contribute to the preservation of the same. On a critical note, Meletis and Campbell (2007) pointed out that ecotourism uses nature as a product and tries to go beyond 'natural' nature and imposes an artificial image of aesthetic nature in the minds of tourists. The idea of pristine nature or wilderness also acts as one of the steps to form an aesthetic component of nature. In this case, the researcher argues that this desire to see nature bestowed with an aesthetic essence is a consumeristic attitude but hidden behind a completely different veil. To fulfil the demands of tourists, local communities are sensationalised and the entire ecotourism experience is also packaged under the façade of greenery and pristine surroundings, as these are the main drivers behind romanticising nature. To meet the aesthetic wants of 'ecotourists', the ecotourism industry crafts a special kind of landscape that is portrayed differently from reality. It can be seen that the current concept of homestay is developed to exploit the same motivation. This idea specifically opens the door to relate and connect to local people and their culture. This kind of packaging also obscures the actual reality.

By romanticising nature this way and by perceiving nature as a beautiful object, a satisfactory subjective experiential memory of fabricated reality is generated.

In recent times, it can be observed that tourists enjoy the aesthetic beauty of a tourist spot mostly through the lenses of their camera rather than actually experiencing it through their eyes. Through photography, one can very easily capture an image of pristine nature or natural landscape and later on, these images are used as a tool for evoking one's imagination. Through this, photography becomes an integral part of the culture of tourism. This culture of photography however, portrays nature with attributes that are completely opposite to that of actual reality which Salazar (2012) states with reference to Barthes and Lowenthal:

> Still photographs stand diametrically opposite of the natural flow of life. The photograph is a silent, immobile rigor mortis of reality, a symbolic death (Barthes, 1972). This temporal ambiguity is of major significance for a great deal of tourist activities which are directed at experiencing the past (Barthes & Lowenthal, 1985, as cited in Salazar, 2012, p. 875).

Through this 'picture window', tourists perceive a serene view of nature which is aesthetically pleasing but is a 'frozen' and 'static' outlook. These kinds of images of landscapes create an ecologically deceptive perception (Bookchin, 1998). Ironically, to maintain this frozen, static view, people tend to exclude human beings or other tourists who are present at a tourist spot when capturing a photo. Human beings ultimately only appear in pictures when either the subject wants to place himself or herself in the photo or when one tries to capture an image of the local people. Individuals try to exclude other tourists from their photographs to highlight that the special moment only belongs to them and sharing a moment with others somehow makes it less exclusive.

Interestingly, in this context, Foale and Macintyre (2005) bring the attempt of Sontag to compare guns and cameras. In line with this comparison and consistent with current times, guns have been replaced by cameras because nature has become something which brings nostalgia rather than fear. This nostalgia creates stimulation for imagination to preserve the wilderness of nature. The idea of pristine nature is also directly connected to the idea of wilderness. Tourists find it extremely fascinating to imagine a part of the landscape being pristine, which means it is completely devoid of other human beings. Hence, the entire conceptualisation of wilderness is based on the drive for discovery which acts as the main source of motivation for many voyagers and explorers of the past. This drive of discovery can be justified by the thrill one experiences after discovering the landscape in a pristine state. This makes the experience exclusive as the individual imagines something that is to be seen only by himself or herself. This sheer

exclusivity of experience drives tourists to visit places they consider pristine in that sense. Unfortunately, this is not really the case for most places. Perhaps due to the difficulty of even imagining a place to be pristine, tourists are further motivated to locate comparatively unexplored places for exploration. However, in this case, the idea of pristine nature is solely dependent on the nominal presence of other tourists. Generally, the presence of local people does not affect the imagination of a place to be pristine. This also points to the notion that the local people are seen to be a part of the entire landscape and are viewed as 'pristine communities'.

Tourism Imaginaries and Impact of 'Imagination' on Tourism

The impact of imagination on tourism closely depends on how tourism imaginaries are circulated throughout society. Imaginaries drive tourists and the tourism industries in many ways. To become a passionate and an ardent tourist, individuals should employ the power of imagination in several daily activities such as reading novels, playing games, watching movies, telling stories, and daydreaming because planning a vacation and going on a holiday involve the human capacity to imagine or to enter into the imaginations of others (Salazar, 2012, p. 863). Imagination has a key role in a holiday experience as most holidays are lived before being actually experienced. Before visiting a place, one should undergo the phase of imagination that is gathered from various sources and this then builds an expectation

for the holiday. Looking at this process of imagination, it can be said that any form of tourism is completely meaningless if there are no expectations formed before the direct subjective experience. Various tourism agencies seem to clearly understand this and accordingly market their advertisement as:

> A holiday is not really a holiday unless you do something different … Getting away from the urban bustle into the lap of nature, in the midst of luxury, a face-off with the wild, a bit of challenge, a little adventure and loads of fun …That is what good holiday constitutes. (Mahua Tiger Resort, 2011)

A caption like this can often be found in many advertisements. The tourism industry creates a series of imaginaries based on a "complex system of presumption" (Salazar, 2012, p. 864). These presumptive imaginaries develop a desire for a set of experiences. Summarised in one sentence, "It is hard to think of tourism without imaginaries or 'fantasies'" (Salazar, 2012, p. 865).

Along with images and numerous discourses on places, host communities are also an integral part of the tourism industry today (Salazar, 2012). It could be asserted that the future of any tourism is solely dependent on generating these kind of images and discourses, along with ensuring their effective circulation. Considering the indispensable presence and importance of images in the tourism industry, Salazar (2012) introduced the analogy of 'mass production' in the context of creating images

in tourism sector. The mass production of images and various discourses are completely dependent on tourists and their fantasies. This complete dependence on the vast possibilities that imaginations offer allow tourists to experience every moment at tourist places. This phenomenon is akin to the opening of Pandora's Box, when anything and everything is possible at any moment. At this point, it is important to highlight that a positive feedback loop constantly works as diverse imaginations and diverse conceptualisations of a place occur in the mind of a person and in the process, unveils more avenues through which fantasies about a place can be shaped. If anything, tourism forms a vital part of the "image production industry" (Harvey, 1989, p. 290-293), in which identities of destinations and their inhabitants are "endless (re) invented, (re) produced, (re) captured and (re) created in a bid to obtain a piece of the lucrative tourism pie" (Salazar, 2012, p. 866). Tourism imaginaries seem to be primarily composed of various exclusive moments. The process of generating imaginaries is complex and extends not only to the spatial domain, but is equally present in the temporal domain as well. As Salazar (2012) states:

> Tourism images and ideas easily travel, together with tourists, from tourism-generating regions (which are also destinations) to tourism destination regions (which also generate fantasies) and back. However, tourism imaginaries do not float around spontaneously and independently; rather, they "travel" in space and time through well-established conduits, leaving certain elements behind and picking up new ones along the way, and continuously returning to their points of origin. (p. 868)

In this context, it can also be seen that the very momentary nature of tourism imaginaries indicates its capacity for continual adaptation to new contexts and to new consumers.

Naturally, as local communities consider tourism as an alternative livelihood option, they get massively influenced by demands of tourists. To provide a romantic natural experience, native people drastically change their lifestyle, livelihoods, and depict themselves as being in tune with nature. As local communities use their cultural traits solely for the sake of business, it represents a very superficial set of practices carried out just to present an image of primitive harmony between nature and human beings. At the same time, tourists continue to enjoy various non-tangible objects like heritage, history, habitat, and handicrafts (Gilbert, 2007). The researcher emphasises that the consumeristic demands of tourists to meet their imagination has the ability to drastically change the entire community dynamics and can impact the way of life of locals to a large extent.

As described earlier, imagination is a self-liberating process and for tourists, this self-liberating urge acts as a guiding force to fantasise about natural landscapes. The

urge for liberation from modern day living, in terms of overcoming the monotonous aspect in most daily experiences, is one of the primary reasons for generation of these imaginaries. Tourism provides a window to temporarily escape this boredom and offers the opportunity to experience moments that are completely different and unique. Another motive behind tourism imaginaries, as put forward by the researcher, is somewhat more complicated as it is driven by a deep egoistic dissatisfaction which is entrenched in the modern way of living and pushes one to accumulate and consume in various forms. Tourism imaginaries also do the same by helping to create a self-image or by enabling an individual to satisfy his or her ego through mere accumulation and consumption of imaginaries. Dann (1976) distinctly mentioned these two underlying characteristics of tourist fantasies. There is an urge to overcome the monotony, anomie and lack of meaning of everyday life with a more satisfying experience - escapism and the desire for exoticism or difference. Besides, there is also the boosting of personality - ego-enhancement, leading to the accumulation of symbolic capital (as cited in Salazar, 2012, p. 871).

In this context, it can be concluded that tourism imaginaries can be considered as a set of tools which enable humans to expand their scope of imagination to multi-layered dimensions. However, in contrary, the presence of imagination in the minds of tourists also serves as a hindrance to experience the true essence of a tourist spot. In the next section, in order to make the claim more explicit, various ambiguities which have been discussed will be further explained with an example of the world famous ecologically-sensitive tourist spot, the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India.

An Illustration of Ecotourism in the Sundarbans

In this section, an illustration of the Indian Sundarbans ecotourism is provided to capture the way imagination and imaginaries influence ecotourism as well as to show how through these two tools, the tourism industry manipulates reality to grasp attention of tourists. During the field work[1] in the Sundarbans for her doctoral work, the researcher had scope of interactions and conversations with several tourists

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[1]The researcher has followed the phenomenological research methodology for conducting the field work for her doctoral research and that field research has yielded four articles published in various international journals: Baindur, M. and Paul, K. B. 2015. "Mapping the observer in the observation in Anthropocene: A Methodological Exploration". Humanities Circle, 3(2): 61–81. Paul, K.B. and Baindur, M. 2016. "Leopold's Land Ethic in the Sundarbans: A Phenomenological Approach". Environmental Ethics, 38(3), 307–325. Paul, K.B. 2017. "Introducing Interpretive Approach of Phenomenological Research Methodology in Environmental Philosophy: A Mode of Engaged Philosophy in the Anthropocene". International Journal of Qualitative Methods (SAGE), 16: 1–10. 1. Paul, K. B. 2017. "Towards a Community Based Ethic: A Phenomenological Account of Environmental Change from the Sundarbans's Islanders". Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Ethics, 30(5): 645–665.

who came from all over the world to visit the Sundarbans National Park. These casual interactions initially provided the impetus to explore the Sundarbans tourism industry and determine how imagination plays a significant role in the success of this industry. To systematically understand this, four random tourist boats were chosen from more than 35 boats visiting the Sundarbans and from each boat, interviews were conducted of five tourists who were chosen randomly, while keeping in mind not only the gender ratio but also from where these tourists were from. The tourists were mostly from Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal, as well as from Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. A group of foreign tourists was also encountered, who came on a tour of India with the Sundarbans at the top of their list of places to visit in India. In total, interviews were held with 20 tourists and out of that, 12 in-depth interviews (seven males, five females, and among them, three foreign tourists, five tourists from West Bengal and four from other states) were selected to be analysed thoroughly to understand their experiences of and expectation from nature tourism in the Sundarbans. The researcher decided to go ahead with this number of interviews as saturation in terms of adding any new dimension to the concerned understanding was reached during the initial analyses of the 20 interviews. The interview was guided by questions like: "Why did you choose to visit the Sundarbans? How did you take the decision to stay at the particular island you are staying? How did you get to know about tourism in Sundarbans? Why

did you choose this time of year to travel here? How has your travel experience been?" Along with these questions, general enquiries regarding the socio-economic and demographic backgrounds of the participants were made. Moreover, a request was made that the participants share the photographs they captured during their travel, and based on the pictures, the researcher tried to discuss their experiences in depth. Evidently, the primary focus of the interviews was to document the experiences of the participants. The interviews were mainly conducted on tourist boats while a few were conducted in Godkhaali, which is the mainland area from where the boats depart and return. On average, the duration of the interviews was 30-45 minutes, audio-taped and verbatim transcripts were made. Close and detailed reading of these transcripts uncovered themes such as pristine nature, local culture, Royal Bengal tiger, waterscape, and freedom from mundane life. Through repeated readings of these themes, a better understanding of these interviews was obtained and based on that, conclusions were drawn as presented here. The experiences of the researcher in the Sundarbans islands for a period of one year provided interesting insights into how the tourism industry operates in this region. Moreover, examples of tour brochures and websites were perused to explain how imagination and imaginaries play an important role in the growth of the tourism industry in the Sundarbans. Also, to gain first-hand experience of traveling in the Sundarbans, the researcher was part

of a tourist group and experienced various aspects of the Sundarbans tourism as a tourist.

The Sundarbans is one of the central attractions in West Bengal and is a focal point of the Indian tourism industry. It attracts tourists from all over the world due to its geographical features and ecological diversity. In various tour posters and advertisements, it is easy to spot images of the Royal Bengal tigers, spotted deer, or crocodiles that are carefully positioned to portray the wildlife of this mangrove forest. These images of wild creatures have such a powerful presence in the outside world that even in the second decade of the 21st century, the Sundarbans is known as a 'man-eater's place'[2]. When interacting with travellers about their expectation from visiting the Sundarbans, most of them expressed that the Sundarbans provides a pristine natural environment full of colourful birds, mangrove forest, and exotic animals as well as the backwaters in the sketch of natural scenery in an open sky that meets the sea. These serene pictures along with the images of exotic animals, especially tigers, incite imagination that makes people believe that wherever they go in the Sundarbans, they will encounter these creatures, as if the Sundarbans is the place for only these creatures. Contrary to this imagination, the official report by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) in 2012 stated that the tiger population in the Sundarbans is sharply declining. In 2004, the number was 274 but it dropped to a range between 64 to 90 in the 2012 census (Indian Express, 2013). Judging by the finding of this report, the density of tigers in the Sundarbans and its surrounding area is 4.3 tigers per 100 sq. km. Moreover, according to a report by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 2013, 101 tigers were captured in the entire area of the Sundarbans. The same source acknowledges that in 1983, the population of tigers was 264, albeit the difference in survey methodology which should be taken into consideration. Hence, it is understandable that except in the core areas of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, it is almost impossible to catch a glimpse of a tiger. Most of the travellers expressed dissatisfaction as they were not able to encounter the Royal Bengal tiger and bewailed that one needs to have good luck to have a glimpse of a tiger in the wild. Still, in every advertisement of this tourism destination, the image of tiger is placed at the forefront.

Moreover, the creation of the Sundarbans tourism imaginaries in most travel brochures suppresses and hides the underdeveloped conditions of human settlements in this

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[2]The Sundarbans is widely acknowledged as 'man-eater's place' in popular fiction and literary genre, for example see Montgomery, Sy (1995). *Spell of the Tiger: The Man-Eaters of Sundarbans*. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York; Ghosh, Amitava. (2004). The *Hungry Tide*, HarperCollins. This fictional and romanticised notion of the Sundarbans has been perpetuated to tourists coming from other countries as well as to Indians who are not aware of the present scenario of the Indian Sundarbans

area, but instead, highlights the imaginaries of isolated islands with exotic animals, waterscape[3] or just portrays intriguing pictures of the individual fisherman or a cluster of women carrying fuel-wood. Many of the advertising agencies emphasise and highlight that the Sundarbans is home to 334 species of plants, 49 species of mammals, 320 species of birds, 53 species of reptiles and 400 species of fish while the elusive keystone species of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forest, the Bengal Tiger ranges in 440 tigers only, according to the Forest Department census.

Ironically, most tour organisers avoid revealing in their brochures or advertisements the fact that the Sundarbans is also densely populated by another species, that is, humans, along with all the other types of media previously mentioned. For that matter, it is one of the most densely populated areas with an average density of 925 persons/km[2], based on 2001 census (WWF, 2013), whereas, the average density for the entire state of West Bengal is 903 persons/km[2] which is the highest[4] in India (Census, 2001). To put this estimate into perspective, the population density for the whole of India is just 325 persons/ km[2]. Although population density directly influences the rest of the claims made by these tour organisers such as the existence of isolated islands or pristine nature, this region is exclusively marketed in advertisements, either as the home of Royal Bengal tigers or as a haven for bird watchers[5]. At most, references to the islanders are limited to some tribal cultural performance by Munda or the unique way of escaping tigers in the forest by honey gatherers[6]. Tour organisers strategically bypass these facts by organising their trips through motorised boats. This then creates a distance between the tourists, and the local life and the actual reality faced by local communities. Furthermore, to sustain the constructed images of the sea, tigers, crocodiles, deer, birds, and mangrove forests, these organised tours cleverly ignore islands which are mainly inhabited by humans.

As discussed in the preceding section, the current trend of ecotourism emphasises on building a relationship between local inhabitants and tourists as well as trying to provide alternative livelihood options for the local people. However, in the case of the Sundarbans, the situation is quite different. The primary means of tourism here is through motorised boats, and most of the time these boats come from outside

[3]Please see various websites on Sundarbans' tourism such as: *Denzong Leisure* (http://www.denzongleisure.com/packages/jungle_safari_sundarban_1); *Tour De Sundarbans* (http://www.tourdesundarbans.com/gallery.php?page=1)

[4]Though in overall ranking West Bengal is ranked 6th, all of them before West Bengal are union territories.

[5]See http://www.travelchhutichhuti.com/sundarban-tour-packages.html

[6]See *Denzong Leisure* (http://www.denzongleisure.com/packages/jungle_safari_sundarban_1) and *Tour De Sundarbans* (http://www.tourdesundarbans.com /gallery.php?page=1)

the Sundarbans, mainly from Kolkata or Diamond Harbour, or Namkhana, which are the nearest major towns or cities. As most travel agencies are located outside these islands, the organised trips also procure resources from outside. In the case of individual tourists, there is an income opportunity for local boatmen who transport tourists to the surrounding areas. This study puts forward two main constraints faced by tourism in the Sundarbans region that make it tough to rely heavily on outside resources. Firstly, its uncertain climate condition makes it difficult to provide assurance of hosting tourists each and every year, so islanders cannot entirely be dependent on tourism. Secondly, the unavailability of electricity stands as a major obstacle in making all the necessary local arrangements. In this regard, it is reasonable to expect that tourists would not get much exposure to the lifestyle of the locals. Through the understanding obtained by the researcher from this study, it can be seen that negating the reality of the human settlements and present infrastructural barriers of the Sundarbans are two main reasons why the tourism industry constructs a different world based on landscape and biodiversity, which is far from the existing true essence of the Sundarbans.

On a more critical note, the researcher finds that the inhabitants of the Sundarbans are not treated as an integral part of tourism as they do not belong to any recognised ethnic group and are not labelled as 'tribal', except for the Mundas. Hence, their lifestyle and culture also do not evoke any kind of romanticism. As a matter of fact, these areas are predominantly occupied by migrants from Bangladesh, Jharkhand or other districts of West Bengal. Hence, owing to this reason, they do not obtain any indigenous status, and somehow are deliberately ignored by the tourism industry.

By assessing these facts, it can be claimed that mass production of images creates a particular notion about various tourist places. At times, these public images become so widely circulated that they completely invade the private or personalised images of a place, and subsequently, public notions percolate into personal expectations.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to explore the role of imagination and images in the discourse of nature tourism. To achieve this, throughout the entire study, the key role that imagination holds in the vast and growing tourism industry was fully explored. Various manifestations of imagination were given due importance and consideration. An attempt was also made to illustrate the means through which the tourism industry employs images as an essential tool for their business and portrays nature in a distinct manner to evoke imagination in minds of tourists. However, the questions arising here are: why has this discussion been limited to only the context of 'nature tourism' and also why is the concept of ecotourism mostly expanding in the case of 'nature tourism'? It is important to address these two questions at this stage. Pragmatically, the definition of 'nature' has so much of variation that it is quite difficult to fix a particular definition

to it. Although theoretically, nature is everywhere, still the discourse of 'nature tourism' places an emphasis on a special kind of conception of 'nature' and this gets altered depending on the situation. On the contrary, for any other type of tourism, such as religious or historical, tourist hotspots already possess certain intrinsic values. However, in the case of nature tourism, this value has to be ascribed by the tourism industry. There is little doubt that the concept of ecotourism has uncovered a completely new range of possibilities where the tourism industry can easily transform an ordinary place to a popular tourist spot. In this process of creation, the role of images, as extensively described in this study, is absolutely central. Without the portrayal of these images, it is almost impossible to draw attention of tourists to a rather unexplored tourist place.

Moreover, with ecotourism being a watershed event in the tourism industry, it attempts to go beyond the socio-environmental externalities commonly associated with tourism. Ecotourism is seen as capable of providing a win-win situation for all stakeholders - tourists, host communities, the tourism industry, and the environment. This study thoroughly analysed how a dialectical process between tourists and the tourism industry actually helps to solidify a fresh new concept like 'ecotourism'. On one end of this dialectical process, tourists are eager to take a break from their mundane life and want to experience exotic places

with the incentive of aesthetic as well as philanthropic satisfaction. On the other, the tourism industry promptly uses various constructed images as an essential tool for their business and portrays nature in a very unique manner to facilitate imagination in the minds of tourists. However, in this dialectical process, the significant role of imagination on the part of tourists is viewed as the primary initiator of this process. In this relationship, the question arises as to whether it is ethical to commoditise nature for the sake of economic and industrial gain. This question becomes more complex, when to accomplish this 'commoditisation', the reality on the ground gets obscured with a rosy and distorted image perceived of a tourist destination. Nevertheless, it would be absolutely hypocritical to put the entire blame for creating this imagination on the tourism industry. It is posited that the driver of this is primarily from the fundamental human nature. Here, it is argued that the main factor behind the imaginative minds of tourists stems from the proverb, 'the grass is always greener on the other side'. This proverb also rightfully captures the basic nature of human beings. To provide this greenery, the tourism industry continuously does a 'green-wash' especially with the support of 'green' images. Hence, tourism as an activity, opens up a unique avenue to study various subtle demands and conceptions of human minds and how they can act together to perceive reality out in an entirely different manner. This also feeds into the age-old debate that reality is what

one wants to perceive through the eye of the mind rather than what is actually present before the observer.

Lastly, on a critical note, the definition of ecotourism explicitly highlights its two fundamental attributes. Firstly, it provides the platform to interact and commune with the host community to offer a 'true' experience of the place. Secondly, it tries to conserve the host environment which also encompasses the local community. This study has explored the manner in which images and the entire ecotourism packages aid the tourism industry to portray a glossy-rosy image of nature which fits in with the imagination of tourists, and in the process, hides the actual reality on the ground. Therefore, this research emphasises that it is fundamentally impossible to capture the true essence of a place as generally, reality and imagination contradict each other. To reflect on this through an example, if the images of tourist spots show unmanaged garbage heaps or concretised local areas, then it will obviously negatively affect the imagination of tourists and subsequently, destroy tourism in that area as tourists always search for 'greener grasses' compared to their mundane reality. This kind of reality is always supressed and hidden by the tourism industry as throughout this study, it has been clearly established that without images and imaginations, the entire tourism industry cannot sustain itself. Hence, it can be concluded that the claims made by ecotourism are not only implausible, but also in a way, are self-contradictory in their very formulation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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