

# **Cooperatives and Tourism : An Asian Perspective**

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## **Current Scenario**

Tourism in Asia is in a thriving condition. Every country is involved in promoting tourism in a big way. Tourism has become a top priority of the economic agenda of all the countries. For example, if in Malaysia tourism is the top revenue generating sector, in India tourism is slowly getting due focus taking into account the country's rich heritage and cultural tradition. However, a review of the tourism trends in Asia clearly indicates that while economic considerations have reigned supreme, the social aspects are not being given due importance as far as the strategic tourism considerations are considered. Tourism it appears is developing an elitist bias as broadening of its social base with participation from all sections of the society is clearly not visible. The important role of participatory and community based organisations like cooperatives in promoting tourism has yet to be recognised. As a result, the concepts like "sustainable tourism", "peace through tourism", "poverty reduction through tourism", 'community tourism', etc. which can best be implemented through participatory institutions have yet to be popularised in a big way.

The cooperatives in Asia in the recent years have diversified themselves into various areas of socio-economic activities. The cooperative model in the Asian countries is considered a strong force for solving the various socio-economic problems. The failure of the public sector and various limitations of the private sector have compelled the policy-makers to pin their faiths on the cooperative system. For certain activities/areas, the success of which is based on the ability of the grassroot institutions to tackle them with their participatory and people-based approach, the cooperatives are considered to have an advantage over other organisations. For example, in India the cooperatives are considered most effective organisations in the field of rural insurance. Similarly, because of their vast network and reach, the cooperatives are considered best promoters for rural electrification in India.

## **Tourism : A Neglected Field**

The cooperatives in Asia have yet to recognise the importance of tourism despite the rapid growth of tourism sector in Asia. Following are the main reasons :

- ◆ Lack of definite data base on the number of cooperatives involved in the field of tourism, inability to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the ones which are present, etc.
- ◆ Inability to analyse the changing socio-economic dimensions of tourism sector in Asia, and demarcate the areas in which cooperatives have a strategic advantage over other forms of organisations.
- ◆ Lack of policy research in this field which can provide definite indicators for future. For example, it is generally agreed that taking into account the growing tourism sector in India and the presence of strong network of Indian cooperatives, there is lack of policy research in this field which can show a way ahead for definite policy initiatives.
- ◆ Inability to strategically link the cooperative sector with the tourism sector in those countries in which tourism is in a boom. For example, in Malaysia and Thailand, tourism has emerged as a big force. But, the cooperative sector has yet to come up strongly in this field.
- ◆ Inability of the cooperatives to extend their areas of operations or activities in the field of tourism. For example, some of the sectoral Asian cooperatives are in a best position to incorporate tourism in their agenda, which is not being done. For example, the dairy cooperatives in Asia should think of linking tourism in their activities, or promote tourism cooperatives exclusively. The, dairy cooperatives in India have ushered in milk revolution in the country. They have empowered the masses in the rural areas to trigger off a milk revolution. They have developed milk brands which speak of cooperative supremacy. The areas which are strong-holds of cooperative milk sector can be promoted in a big way as hot tourist spots. Similarly, the school cooperatives in Malaysia are very strong. Taking into account the buoyant condition of tourism in Malaysia and the vibrancy of school cooperative sector, how can tourism be promoted through cooperatives in a big way?
- ◆ Weak advocacy for tourism promotion is also a big hindrance. Holding of Advocacy conferences by the cooperatives in the area of cooperative tourism can set the ball rolling in a big way and create a conducive atmosphere for tourism promotion. This can also establish links, with other international tourism organisations who have to be sensitised on the cooperative agenda. However, due to lack of awareness, this is not being done at present.

Similarly, lack of development of cooperative literature in the field of cooperative tourism is also a sign of weak advocacy. There is also lack of documentation of few successful models of cooperative tourism in the Region.

## **Indian Case**

Starting in 1904, the Indian Cooperative Movement has made rapid strides in all the areas of socio-economic activities. The cooperative concept has worked wonders in India. Today there are more than 5 lakh cooperative societies with a membership of 23 crores and working capital of Rs. 198.542 million. The cooperative credit institutions are disbursing 46.15% of agricultural credit and cooperatives are distributing 36.22% of total fertilisers in the country. The share of cooperatives in production of sugar is 59% and they cover 55% of the handlooms. The cooperative networking and reach is so vast that the cooperatives cover 100% of total villages and 75% of the rural households. The cooperative movement is the world's largest movement,

India's economic reforms have given a big push to tourism sector. Tourism is today projected as an engine of economic growth and an instrument for eliminating poverty, solving unemployment problem, opening up new fields of activity and the uplifted of women. New opportunities are being tapped to promote eco, adventure, rural, postage, wildlife and health and herbal including medical tourism. The Indian Government is now considering **Rural Tourism** as one of the thrust areas. Keeping into account the strength of Indian cooperatives it wants that cooperatives should come up in the field of Rural Tourism as the cooperatives cover 100% of the villages in the country. The UNDP- Ministry of Tourism Project on Tourism talks about strong community-private and public sector partnership for boosting rural tourism in the country. The Indian cooperatives due to their immense reach and wide network are strategically well positioned to take a leading role in the field of Rural Tourism.

## **Paradigm Shift in Tourism**

An analysis of the tourism trends in Asia clearly indicate the following :

- ◆ Shift in focus towards decentralised form of tourism which can effectively tackle the problem of poverty allegation by generating jobs. It is now well understood that tourism can best fight poverty by generating jobs ,both in the rural and urban areas.

- ♦ Growing recognition of social aspects of tourism which can provide equal opportunities of travel for all, promote respect for culture, values, sustainable development, etc.
- ♦ Realisation that economic spin-offs from tourism sector can be used for the betterment of the society, and creating a peaceful atmosphere in which there is understanding and cooperation amongst all.

In all the above areas, the cooperatives in the future are well-positioned to formulate effective strategies so that they emerge as lead players in promoting decentralised form of tourism. The world tourism community is looking towards the cooperatives to play a strong balancing role in tourism development so as to help in creation of an equitable society. It is heartening that cooperatives are now considered an effective instrument for poverty alleviation. A rich academic debate on this subject has emerged. International organisations now view cooperatives as an important tool for bridging the divide between rich and poor. Poverty, being endemic in Asia, can the cooperatives in Asia tackle the problem of poverty by linking their agenda with tourism? This is a big challenge.

### **Strategic Initiatives**

ICA being the apex body of the world cooperatives must play a pro-active role in promoting tourism in the Asian Region, ICA's specialised organ, TICA must align with Bureau of International Social Tourism (BITS) with which it has strong relationship, so that initiatives in the following areas may be undertaken.

- ♦ Establishing strong networks with the Asian Cooperatives, and locating areas of collaborations.
- ♦ Undertaking, a big research project so as to gauge the effectiveness of cooperative model in tourism sector in Asia. Other projects may be conceptualized after this..
- ♦ Sensitising the tourism bodies in Asia on on the importance of cooperative sector in Tourism, and forging useful collaboration with them.
- ♦ Organising conferences and seminars on important thematic issues.
- ♦ Due to lack of presence of international bodies championing the cause of social tourism in an effective manner, TICA-BITS may think of setting up a Centre with the relevant support so that definitive advocacy/promotional measures may be taken for promoting tourism in the Region.

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