

BOOK REVIEW

***Tourism and Culture – An Anthropological Study of Sundarban* by Amitava Dinda**, Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata and Research India Press, New Delhi, 2019; Price: 1975; Pp. 248; ISBN: 978-93-5171-169-8.

Sundarban has been a matter of infinite academic interest for a pretty long time for its enigmatic landscape and for its beautifully dangerous appurtenances with regard to geographical, floral and faunal characteristics. The total landmass of Sundarban covers a land area of about 10,000,00 hectares of which 62 per cent is shared by Bangladesh. The study has been conducted in remaining 38 per cent of the Indian Sundarbans which is also a popular tourist destination. The major tourist attractions are the mangrove forest inhabited by famous Royal Bengal Tiger, the turbulent rivers ending up in capillaries of creeks hemmed with *hental* and *keya* bushes and occasional sights of crocodiles on the bank. The place has been declared as Sundarban Biosphere Reserve. The Sundarban National Park area of Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) is nominated as 'World Heritage Site' in 1987. There are three sanctuaries namely Sajnekhali, Lothian Island and Haliday Island. The entire region consists of a number of tiny islands; human habitations are found in 54 of them. Almost fifty per cent of the total land area of Sundarbans is Reserve Forest. According to 2011 Census, a total of 44,26,259 people live in the 19 blocks of Sundarbans. There are substantial number of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations in some of these blocks, of which Gosaba where the author has carried out his investigations mainly houses 62.69 per cent of SC and 9.47 per cent of ST populations. Therefore, the study also carries special importance in understanding the impact of tourism on the life and culture of the backward sections of the people.

It is already mentioned that there are quite a good number of studies on Sundarban in both English and Bengali, the lingua franca of the state of West Bengal where Sundarban is located. Amal Kumar Das and others published *A Focus on Sundarban* (1981), Anu Jalai wrote *A Forest of Tigers* (2010), Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar authored *The Sundarbans* (2017). Pashupati Prasad Mahato's *Sundarbaner Adivasi* [Tribes of Sundarban] (2025) is another example of writings on Sundarban. But none of these books deals with subject matter which the book under review

has taken up. The primary objective of the book is to understand the ecological, economic and social-cultural impact of tourism on the life of the people. The book has seven chapters including conclusion. The Introduction of the book provides us with the concept of tourism in anthropology, theoretical perspectives of this study, conceptual understanding of eco-tourism, review of literature, objectives and methodology. The theoretical focus is mainly centred on the guest-host relationship as studied by different noted scholars of anthropology of tourism namely Bryden (1973), Smith (1977), Cohen (1984), Chambers (1997, 1999). The nature of this relationship actually determines the impact of tourism on a broader scale. To know about the host community, it is necessary to gather information about them. The first chapter gives an ethnographic profile of the hosts in the ecological context. Their social and cultural life has been the subject matter of chapter two. As a matter of fact, the people here live in a precarious environment. It has been premonition that the entire tract of mangrove forest will be inundated in the next 60 years as the sea level is rising. The strong and very strong cyclones have increased by 21 per cent in the last 120 years causing a great damage to life and property. The population density is increasing, but the land area is decreasing. The paradox has considerable effect on the fragile ecology of the Sundarbans. At this juncture, what effect the developing tourism business may have is a matter of serious concern as we find that the tourist flow is increasing in this area quite steadily. The author has informed us that the tourist flow has increased by about 106 per cent from 1999-2000 to 2003-2004 (p.122). The economic organization (chapter three), tourism in Sundarban Tiger Reserve (chapter four), impact of tourism on environment (chapter five) and impact on society (chapter six) present different dimensions of the effects of tourism. With the emergence of tourism in Sundarbans, the growth of hotels and lodges in Gosaba has been steady, from 13.4 per cent up to 1990, to 43.48 per cent between 2001-2005. It is noticed that the majority (47.83 per cent) of owners of these set ups are locals, majority of the employees and tour operators are locally based. But it is important to note that there is a great gender disparity in the number of male (83.75 per cent) and female (16.25 per cent) employees in tourism establishments in Gosaba. It could have been better, if the author would keep a separate category for the hotel/tourism workers in the economic profile in chapter three. Moreover, there should be a discussion of occupational shift (about which the author himself has mentioned) with quantitative data. The logic behind giving tables on the marital status could have been given. The description on the background of the tourists is rich. The study reveals that the number of foreign tourists is very low and majority of them come from various Asian countries. It is mentioned that they constitute only 0.6 per cent of the total tourists who visited

Sundarbans 1999-2002. Again about 90 per cent of the total domestic tourists are from West Bengal. From this scenario, we can ask the question whether a vast tourism potential of Sundarbans is left unexplored? Or it is judicious to engage in more touristic activities in Sundarbans keeping in mind its ecological fragility? The book might have the scope of discussion in this direction. The data on nature of tour party and the money spent are very important in planning for the future infrastructural development of the tourism in these islands. The place is potentially an eco-tourism destination. The study has also revealed that the natural beauty including bio-sphere reserve is the main motivation for the tourists. Therefore, conserving them with proper tourism policy and infrastructure should be the prime concern. At the same time, there are certain ground level concerns like pricing policy, guide arrangement, tourism destination, routes etc. The minute and meticulous observations have provided us with benchmark data for a better planning for the region. The environment and life of people are inextricably tied in this area. Not only that the environment itself has its own indicators. One interesting example of such relationship can be cited from the growth of *bain* trees in the region and gradual decline of other mangroves. Its growth indicates the rising salinity which is dangerous for some flora and fauna in general and for human settlement in particular. The tiger relocation or rehabilitation strategy also needs rethinking. The tourism has made palpable impact on the material and social life of the people. The traditional cultural performances like *Bonobibi Pala*, or *Dukhejatra* were also subjected to change under the impact of tourism. Most of the local people (about 90 per cent) are ready to heartily welcome the tourists in Sundarbans as their responses reveal (p.147). But the point is how many people will come with proper awareness of the place and living world of Sundarbans. It depends on the appropriate policy of generating awareness through proper advertisement in different media, which seems to have been lacking as the study uncovers.

The study is an excellent exercise with meticulous delineation of place and people and in addressing the interrelationship between tourism and culture. It has not only expanded our understanding of Sundarbans, but also shows us the ways of doing research on this area, people and practice of tourism. I shall be very happy to see this book find place on the shelves of academic departments and in the collection of the enlightened readers.

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