Rural Tourism: Opportunity for Nurturance or Reason for Erasure of Local Heritage? in the Context of Dapoli, Maharashtra

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Abstract:

An urbanized Indian today is reeling from the fallout of the three P's, namely population, pollution, and soaring prices. This pressure is giving impetus to a rising trend of taking small breaks from work and heading off to weekend retreats or economic holidays. Rural tourism, as a corollary, fits the bill perfectly as it becomes an economic and experience rich option for tourists.

As a part of the National Tourism Policy 2002, the Ministry of Tourism began developing rural tourism to promote competency in art, craft, heritage, and handlooms. Maharashtra state has a 720 km-long coastline, abutting the Arabian Sea. A number of villages on this coastline have become popular tourist destinations where people throng to experience the cuisine, culture, and natural beauty. Homestays, hotels, and campsites, both legal and illegal, have mushroomed exponentially in these parts. In the absence of sustainable management frameworks, these sites are showing signs of commoditization, which has impaired the built and natural environment and has disrupted the socio-cultural fiber of the locals.

This paper will examine tourism activities and determine whether they are, in fact, contributing to the erasure or supporting the nurturance of the rich heritage of these places. Five coastal villages of Maharashtra in the Dapoli Taluka will be studied as a part of this research.

Keywords: rural tourism, heritage, erasure, nurturance, sustainability, identity.

Introduction: BACKGROUND

According to Incredible India statistics of 2019, India ranks 22nd in the number of foreign tourist arrivals. In terms of domestic tourism, 2000 million domestic tourists and 35 million foreign tourist visits were reported in states in the year 2018. Maharashtra state ranks 5 in the domestic visits category and at number 2 spot in the foreign visits' category. The government of India recognizes tourism as an engine of economic growth and its potential to create opportunities for employment and poverty eradication assuming it happens in an environmentally sustainable manner. The different schemes floated by the Ministry of Tourism essentially relate to the following aspects, considering holistic development of the tourism sector:

- Tourism Product/Infrastructure Development
- Promotion and Marketing
- Human Resource Development
- Skill Development
- Market Research
- Computerization and Information Technology

As far as the coastal belt of Maharashtra goes, the following plans are in the pipeline: Development of Sindhudurg Coastal Circuit (Shiroda Beach, Sagareshwar, Tarkarli, Vijaydurg (Beach & Creek), Devgad (Fort & Beach), Mitbhav, Tondavali, Mocehmad and Nivati Fort) (Tourism, 24 MAR 2025)

Coastal villages cater to numerous tourists within a short span of time. An average coastal village with a population of 1000 to 3000 people caters to lakhs of tourists during peak season. The villages grossly lack the infrastructure, amenities or capacities to cater to a crowd of this magnitude without compensating its cultural identity. Numerous legal as well as illegal homestays have come up in the recent past that are quickly wiping out the vernacular language of the built environment of this village. An urgent need presents itself to reassess the current trend of pulling down the traditional buildings of the town and replacing them with new buildings in an indiscriminate manner. This trend is steadily erasing the towns' cultural identity and urbanization syndrome has altered its elemental qualities like charm and picturesqueness. Speculating further, in the absence of a robust, continually audited policy that follows sustainable practices for development, villages will have to face serious issues like climate change hazards and erosion of their cultural roots. Overview

A. Hypothesis

Tourist demands can become the reason for the erasure of local heritage instead of nurturing it in the case of unchecked rural tourism in the coastal villages of Maharashtra.

B. Aim

To investigate the impact on the natural and built environment in coastal villages of Maharashtra due to unchecked tourism

C. Objectives

This paper intends to look at tourist aspirations and demands and observe how they impact the social structure and cultural identity of coastal villages in Maharashtra.

The paper further tries to trace the impact on the biodiversity and environment and postulate its repercussions.

Finally, the paper will examine how these demands are shaping the architectural form, language and vocabulary of the vernacular buildings.

II. LITERATURE STUDY

Previous studies on similar lines in other parts of the world have all raised questions about the future of vernacular architecture, as in the current world individuality, context and climate are ignored by architects. Paul Oliver, in his book Built To Needs, reiterates the same notion that architects across the globe will have to recognize the importance of vernacular architecture, architecture without architects and traditional wisdom (Oliver, 2006). He suggests that there will have to be templates on which modern housing will have to be shaped in order to retain the ideas of culture, diversity and identity. Vernacular architecture is a window that gives a glimpse of human endurance and evolution is the idea that Tejinder Randhawa suggests in his book titled" Vernacular Architecture of India". This book is relevant to this study as the author is trying to understand how imperative it is that these heritage assets are not lost forever (Randhawa). The paper "Rural tourism at a glance" explains that although the goals of sustainable tourism are altruistic, in reality it caters to the demands of the tourist and in doing so some unsustainable aspects can surface in strategic plans (Kar & Sahoo, 2022). The paper discusses the idealistic goals of rural tourism and proports financial strategies to implement them effectively. The paper points out that the impact of rural tourism on rural areas can be both positive and negative and suggests that marketing plans can help structure and streamline it towards making it a success. Theories like urbanization and counter urbanization syndrome are discussed to talk about the aspiration of people and their behavior. This forms the basis on which the questionnaire for the study was framed. "Sustainable Architecture and Tourism Management" is a paper that discusses a very interesting theory about the Commoditization of tourist sites. It shows how things designed for mass consumption typically manage to dilute the essence of the product. Very importantly, it notes that modern tourism practice and the built environment are usually conflicted (Pratheep, 2013). While architectural practice and academics tend to emphasize that building is a finite activity with respect to time, vernacular architecture shows very effectively how incompleteness, shift and transience are some of the inherent qualities of architectural spaces that have not been given enough consideration (Brown & Maudlin, 2011). This is extensively stated in the Sage handbook of architectural theory, Chapter 19, Concepts of Vernacular Architecture (pages 340-355) by Robert Brown and Daniel Maudlin. The interaction between this temporal quality of architecture and its relationship with people, time, place, memory and identity is why this paper examines and investigates the inevitable change that occurs in it. With respect to Maharashtra, the government of Maharashtra, in its Tourism policy 2024, has laid strong emphasis on matters related to sustainability, protection of heritage and culture and enumerated the requisite steps to be taken to implement it. Encouragement in terms of awards and competitions has been created to achieve excellence in giving visitors the best possible experience. (https://maharashtratourism.gov.in)

III. METHODOLOGY

This research has been conducted across five coastal towns near Dapoli which are popular in Maharashtra and are visited by lakhs of tourists yearly. The villages selected for this study are Kelshi, Harnai, Murud, Karde and Guhaghar. Harnai village is historically important since it is a port and the recorded history of the place dates back to Mughal times (https://www.talukadapoli.com). The study was conducted considering three factors. The aspiration of tourists, the approach of locals in fulfilling these aspirations and their cumulative impact on the context. A survey of 120 people was conducted to understand the aspirations of people that visit coastal villages in Maharashtra for tourism purposes. The gender and age group of the respondents showcase the entire spectrum of concerned parties.

Fig 1: Gender and age data distribution
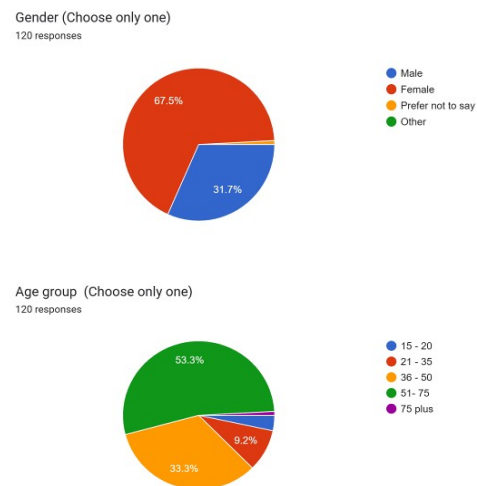
Source: Author

The questionnaire was structured to understand the psyche of the tourist in terms of his decision-making abilities and preferences while planning a holiday. The replies of the respondents were then used to examine what actions were taken by the locals in terms of why and how they were fulfilling these aspirations. The cumulative results were then examined to find out how and which aspect of the context was being affected by these actions. Tangible and intangible elements are further studied for their heritage and cultural value. The methodology chart further explains the methods used for evaluation of elements.
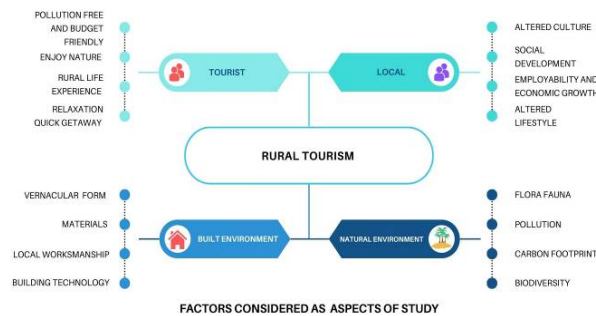
Fig 2: Methodology chart
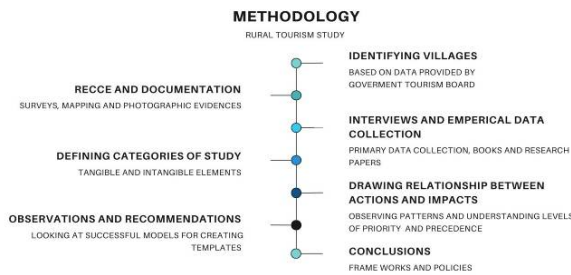
Source: Author

The entire framework of study ascertains the interrelationship between the different stakeholders and their repercussions on the built and natural environment. The diagram below enumerates how the study was organized in order to make an impact assessment.

Fig 3: Aspects of study

Source: Author

IV. ASPECTS OF STUDY

When vernacular architecture is studied by architects, the study usually gets divided into aspects like architectural style, material, workmanship and building technology. In doing so, the complex aspects of the interwoven layers of culture, language, cuisine, natural environment and sustainability are not represented holistically. Paul Oliver, in his book, Built to Meet Needs: Cultural Issues in Vernacular Architecture, suggests that the study can be organized into four areas, namely Structuralist, Phenomenological, Ethno-Archaeological and Behavioural, in order to get a holistic perspective of the changes. (Oliver, 2006)

This study uses this guideline to create a robust framework that will encompass all the nuances of the current trends in rural tourism in coastal villages of Maharashtra. These aspects are:

Altered notions of social development
Altered association with space and environment
Altered lifestyle changes
Altered built form

A. *Altered notions of social development:*

1) *Infrastructural development*

In the survey conducted by the author above, 70% of people said that electricity and hot water were non-negotiable facilities, while 50 % said they needed Wi-Fi. As a result, the villages are now connected with non-reliable network services and electricity requirements and usage has gone up exponentially. Very few renewable sources of energy are explored and villagers are not engaging in investing in solar energy, wind energy and rainwater harvesting.

Fig 4: Water tanks storing water, pucca roads, electricity and communication cables
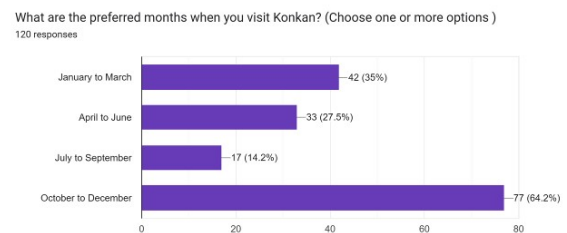

Source: Author

2) *Economic development and employment creation*

The economic gains for the villages are of a varied nature, but none of them contribute to the betterment of the villages. Homeowners that sell plots with homes move out of the village. The homestay owners make money only during a very short span of 3–4 months in the season. Agricultural income is sporadic and unreliable due to climate change and other factors. People from the lower economic strata who were practicing agriculture and worked on farms are doing menial jobs as waiters, cooks and cleaners in establishments as landowners have sold land to developers. The phenomenon of being demoted in social and economic status is on the rise. While employment is being generated, it is not giving a sense of dignity to the locals. There is a growing sense among locals that urban areas will offer jobs with more opportunities. A huge migration of high school and college students is seen who do not wish to continue living in villages in the hope of improving their lifestyle.

Fig 4: Survey showing four months of tourist season only

Source: Author

3) Impact on local occupations

A large part of the population of these villages belongs to the fishing community. Major companies from Bangalore and Mumbai bring in large vessels that use the latest technology to fish on a massive scale, leaving the fishermen with basic boats a very negligible haul. The communities have also migrated because, in the case of ports like Harnai, fish auctions take place, creating a huge problem of garbage and pollution and vehicular loads. Local children do not wish to pursue agriculture and are inclined to move to urban centers for education and better-paying jobs. Agricultural land is sold to developers who, in turn, are paradoxically building second homes or farmhouses for urban people. Over all, the local occupations are dwindling, and most available jobs are in the hospitality and food industries.

Fig 5: Garbage and Traffic issue, fish Auction

Source: Author

B. Altered association with space and environment

1) Assessment of natural environment and conservation of biodiversity

The natural environment of coastal Maharashtra includes creeks, estuaries, forests, rivers, deltas, mangroves etc. These are critically sensitive to change. With the ambitious projects linking major cities with Konkan, a large amount of road work has disrupted forests. Coastal erosion, land slides and loss of mangroves are making these villages susceptible to natural hazards. The rising sea levels will impact all these villages in the near future if steps are not taken to safeguard them. (Wildlife Institute of India). The western ghats and the Konkan region are a biodiversity hotspot. One of the major areas where the deep-rooted impacts of tourist activities can be seen is in the way the natural environment of these villages has been altered. Deforestation and overfishing have affected the bio-diversity of the region, several nesting sites of turtles and other species have been disrupted due to increased building activity and human intervention.

2) Sustainability of tourism activities

Millions of visitors annually, are now choosing Maharashtrian beaches to explore. Beach towns like Ganpatipule draw close to 2 million visitors a year. As per unverified information from a grampanchayat office in small villages of 1500 population cater to lakh visitors during the season. (https://tourism.gov.in) These villages neither have the infrastructure required to cater to these volumes of tourists nor the means to invest in installing renewable energy sources. There is an acute rise in the requirement for electricity, water and transportation

facilities during peak tourist season. No garbage disposal systems exist and wherever provided, are not monitored.

Fig 6: Littering of beaches

Source: Author

3) Pollution and carbon footprint

Road work, deforestation, the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural land, no cap on the number of visitors, no regulation or fines imposed on activities adding smoke, noise, dust and water pollution are alarming issues that need urgent attention. Rampant and popular use of RCC construction for new buildings is a major issue due to the energy-intensive production of cement.

Fig 7: RCC Construction- the popular choice

Source: Author

C. Altered lifestyle changes

1) Local cuisine

Food habits, ingredients, recipes, cooking methods and vessels are integral parts of a food culture. This aspect ensures continuance of traditional knowledge systems and records the evolution of the relationship of people with regional food. Although the survey indicates that 89% participants were interested in local cuisine only, the other 11% must have a strong influence as the boards outside homestays particularly convey availability of other cuisines. Large size commercial kitchens are seen replacing family run operations where home cooked food was the only option.

Fig 8: Survey indicates food preference to be local
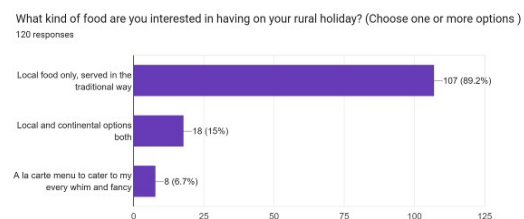
Source: Author

2) Customs and rituals

The beach culture in India is largely influenced by the manner in which tourism is practiced in Goa. The same culture of night life, food and drink is making its presence increasingly felt as more and more establishments come up in the coastal villages of Maharashtra. These village are essentially associated with the presence of major temples of religious importance and sea forts belonging to the era of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Many religious communities have their associated art forms, rituals and festivals that have been happening for centuries together.

Fig 9: Coast of Maharashtra dotted with temples
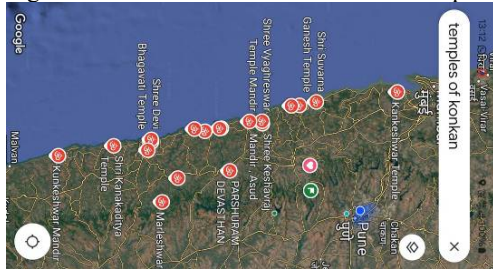
Source: Google Maps

3) Neighborhood and ownership

In the interviews conducted, one of the major concerns of resident villagers was the fast-diminishing neighborhood experience or "shejaar"[1] as it is called in Marathi. Most properties are either locked or leased and people running businesses or hotels and homestays don't bond with locals as much. People running businesses are not invested as much in maintaining the ethos of the village or the essence of bonding.

Fig: 10 Showing the parts of the village that are now mix use buildings

Source: Author, Base Map courtesy gram panchayat office, Murud.

4) Supporting traditional knowledge systems and artisans

The vernacular buildings of the Konkan area are very distinct in terms of site and siting, organization of internal spaces, use of materials. Seasonal and frequency-based maintenance and other building work that happens year-round. Use of laterite stone and Mangalore tiles. Local masons, carpenters and other workmen have learned the

craft in a traditional way passed on to them by their ancestors. The villages are also planned in such a way that all the 12 "balutedar"[2] occupy different quarters of the village. The younger generations of these artisans are reluctant to take on these professions due to the limited money they get from it. These artisans need aid and assistance in continuing the practice and ensuring it remains alive in the future. There is an acute need to record, document and promote these artisans and professionals.

D. Altered built form

1) Site and siting

There are two types of wadis in the villages, one culminating towards the ocean and the one opposite culminating in farmlands or hills. A very ecologically sensitive edge of the wadi between the Arabian sea and the homes is called a "dunga[3]" (Pawar & Telave). The function of the dunga is to maintain a divide between the marine and terrestrial species and while filtering marine water which is saline. The site is usually west- east and chronologically arranged as sea, dunga, farm, plantation, backyard, home and front yard. The dunga is an edge with multiple plant species that perform the function of preventing soil erosion, barrier against sea level rise and saline filter. In order to direct access to tourists from resort to beach, number of dunga have been cleared making the villages vulnerable to natural hazards.

Fig 11: Destruction of the dunga is significantly seen in Murud than Guhagar
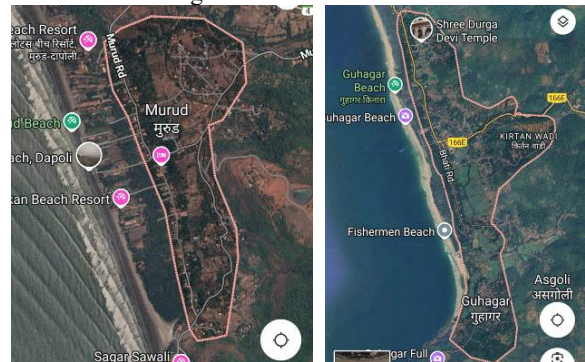
Source: Author

2) Spatial arrangements in homes

The house form has undergone tremendous change as homes are converting to homestays. The four categories of change are: addition of a few rooms to the main house with kitchen, complete addition of a block of rooms separate from the main house kitchen in main house, just rooms and kitchen no house, and lastly, to a regular hotel. This creates a huge variation in the architectural language of the villages.

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[1] Shejjar is a Maharashtrian phenomenon which celebrates bonding between neighbours through thick and thin.

[2] Balutedar were professionals providing essential services to villages, like carpentry, pottery etc.

[3] Dunga is a dune, a barrier full of plants performing a delicate role in maintaining ecological balance

Fig 12: A non-cohesive architectural character of village

Source: Author

3) Materials and building technology

Clearly, the vernacular form of the buildings is undergoing drastic an extreme level of erasure. Banal, ubiquitous buildings are mushrooming across the landscape. These buildings are neither aesthetically pleasing nor climatologically designed and end up being huge consumers of precious resources like water, land and electricity. The classical vernacular building technology and material pallets are long forgotten, and their replacements do not have a lasting impact of being drivers of positive change in the evolutionary pattern of vernacular architecture.

Fig 13: Comparison of house dating back to 1950 with a recent building

4) Aesthetics and visual appeal

Aside from architecture, there are several aspects that lend a village its charm and appeal. The hard landscape, streetscape, signage etc. These towns are under a tremendous onslaught of visual pollution in the form of advertising boards, hotel signboards and menus of eateries. They have a damaging effect on the natural beauty of the village and there needs to be mor robust mechanisms to streamline and give prescriptive guidelines that establishments need to follow in order to keep the allure of these places alive. Also, the placement of infrastructure around major heritage buildings bears little or no sensitivity to giving the monuments their due.

Fig 14: Visual pollution

Source: Author

V. INFERENCES

Although the government of Maharashtra has all the requisite inclusions in its Maharashtra tourism policy 2024 report, the ground reality of the situation is far from what is aspired. The reasons for these lapses will have to be examined. Some of the issues delineated in this study are as follows:

- Heavy consumption and depletion of energy resources
- Economic development occurs only for privileged persons, while employment created does not elevate the financial and social stature of the working class.
- The biggest brunt of the unchecked, unsustainable tourism practices is borne by the environment and the rate of its degradation is alarming.
- Loss of cultural identity and erasure of the architectural character of the villages
- Erasure of the vernacular house form, material pallet and construction practices are occurring at a fast rate.
- Essential outcomes expected from rural tourism are not evident except for creating an additional source of income for some individuals.

VI. CONCLUSION

Coastal villages in Maharashtra need prescriptive and participatory guidelines regulating the dos and don'ts looking at the big picture ahead. Regular audits and checks by authorities will weed out all the unlawful establishments that flout norms and damage the basic premise on which rural tourism is structured.

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