

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM, ECONOMIC GROWTH AND TOURISM POLICIES OF KERALA

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Abstract

In view of the huge untapped tourism potential of Kerala, often projected as 'God's own Country' while marketing the State in the global canvass, this paper focuses on Responsible Tourism (RT) and the need to encourage RT sustainably for the rapid economic development of the State, given vast linkage effects of tourism with many other sectors, including the housing sector – another sector with maximum linkage effects. The need for taking extreme caution to preserve the natural environment and also the extensive use of ICT for environment-friendly and competitive promotion of tourism are highlighted in the paper.

Keywords: RT, Competitiveness, Sustainability, ICT, AI, Social media, e-Wom, Digital Kerala.

1. INTRODUCTION

The vast potential of tourism for rapid economic development and employment generation is widely acknowledged worldwide. Many nations are aggressively promoting tourism and India is no exception. Foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) are particularly promoted by nations rather than domestic tourist arrivals (DTAs)-that is, the tourists visiting destinations within the same nations. By attracting FTAs, such nations want to attract more foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) into their respective nations, because of the fact that when foreign tourists spend money for their boarding, conveyance, various purchases etc.

They are adding up to the FEEs of the host nations also. It may be noted that most countries of the world, especially the developing world including India, are promoting tourism aggressively for faster economic development. As a typical developing country, India enjoys a special advantage in the tourism front because the country is well-endowed with immense tourism resources, like, exceptionally rich cultural heritage, world renowned historical places (eg. Taj Mahal), vast coastal areas, diverse range of flora and fauna along with serene natural beauty, etc. Within India, Kerala State is particularly suitable for tourism promotion because of Kerala's enviable tourism resources that include, inter alia, its extreme natural beauty, vast coastal areas, conducive climate etc. and is well-known for its 'God's own Country' tag in the global tourism landscape.

As the vast tourism potential of Kerala is still underutilized, there are bright prospects for more aggressive promotion of tourism in this southern-most State of India. But, the fact remains that Kerala's natural environment is facing serious threats leading to its fast degradation because of 'ecological overkill' (Oommen, M. A., 2008) in the form of over-exploitation and unscrupulous use of its natural resources. Thus, tourism models that do not harm the natural environment alone will be sustainable in the long run. In this context, a model like Responsible Tourism (RT) is of vital significance in Kerala.

2. RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Despite the commendable attainments of Kerala in the whole of India in universal literacy, and many progress indicators in the social, cultural, healthcare, education, and such other fields; the sustainability of the widely acclaimed 'Kerala Model', 'equity' in its growth pattern etc. are seriously under threat. Poor industrialization is still a reality in Kerala even after six decades of its formation.

The growingly consumerist Kerala economy is heavily dependent on remittances of migrants from abroad, the non-resident Keralites (NRKs). Poor growth in agriculture is another issue of Kerala economy. Though the peculiar features of Kerala is conducive for the tourism sector, sustainability of tourism and other nature based industries is growingly under threat, due to the 'rudely shaken' state of 'equity and sustainability foundations' of Kerala's economic growth, where 'Ecological Overkill' (Oommen, M. A., 2008) is the new normal.

Competitiveness and sustainability of tourism vitally depend on preserving the quality of the environment, protecting the natural resources– the flora and fauna, and ensuring the ecological balance. Tourism policies and other initiatives need to be critically studied from this perspective. Sudheer (2015) has noted the potential of RT at Kumarakom for economic growth of that area. The ability of RT to speed up Kerala's economic growth is relevant in this context.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- (i) To study the potential of Kerala tourism to speed up the State's economic growth and to review the competitiveness and sustainability of Kerala's tourism initiatives;
- (ii) To study the potential of RT to promote the economic development in Kerala;
- (iii) To suggest strategies for the effective use of RT for the economic development of Kerala in a way that ensures its competitiveness and long term sustainability.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This paper is structured as a descriptive-analytical study. It is based on the analysis of authentic secondary data, like, the reports and policy documents on tourism of Govt. of Kerala (GOK) and Govt. of India (GOI), policy directives by national and international level expert groups, regulatory authorities etc. Data from above sources till Oct. 2023 were used in this study. Popular statistical tools were used for data analysis.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies focusing on the tourism policies and programs of the Govt. of Kerala (GOK) are very rare. Many studies have looked into the economic aspects of tourism and the benefits to the economy derived out of the earnings from tourism, especially the foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) from it. Some studies have examined the impact of tourism on the local community, need for preservation of environment to ensure the long term sustainability of tourism, and so on. Huybers and Bennet (2003) studied the utmost need for proper environmental management at nature-based tourism destinations, through private and public efforts so that competitiveness of the destinations and their sustainability can be enhanced.

The key aspect which needs deliberation here is the seriousness of the tourism policy (e.g. that of Kerala State in India) in ensuring the competitiveness of the destinations and hence their long-term sustainability by insisting on strict norms for environmental protection and bio-diversity conservation. This aspect is vitally significant in respect of Kerala tourism as its competitiveness and long-term sustainability are dependent on its ecology and environment, as 'Ecological Overkill' (Oommen, M. A., 2008) situation still persists in Kerala. A macro level analytical study on the sustainability of tourism sector in India with a focus on Kerala's tourism sector done by Manoj P K (2008), 'Sustainable Tourism in India: A Study from a Global Perspective with Focus on Tourism Prospects of Kerala' has analyzed the vast growth potential of India's tourism sector from a global perspective.

The case of Kerala tourism and its special characteristics have been discussed in detail in this paper. Based on its findings, the author has suggested strategies for the faster and sustained growth of Kerala tourism. A book on ecotourism in India by Singh, Sarvjeet (2009) has stated that ecotourism is entirely a new approach in tourism; it provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful displays of nature, and also to learn about the importance of biodiversity, conservation and local cultures.

Sudheer, B (2015) in his study on RT at Kumarakom in Kerala has noted that alternative and innovative practices like RT are required to mitigate the adverse effects of tourism on the environment and to ensure its long term sustainability. Regarding the Kumarakom RT project, its positive effects (e.g. employment to the local people), empowerment of local women from RT-based jobs (e.g. providing vegetables, fish, meat etc., procured locally), favorable linkages of RT on the local populace (e.g. earnings from the purchases made by tourists) etc. have been noted.

Pradeep et. al. (2017), "Community based Tourism for Sustained Economic Development of Kerala: A Study with a Focus on Ecotourism" in International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Review has studied the relevance of Community based Tourism (CBT) in the Kerala context wherein the vast growth prospects of CBT in Kerala and the vital need to preserve the quality of the environment and ecology are discussed, with the special relevance of ecotourism. The authors have suggested a few topics for further exploration of their study.

The prospects of the ICT industry were studied by some scholars. Manoj (2007) "ICT industry in India: a SWOT analysis" *Journal of Global Economy* has done a macro level study of ICT industry in India and noted its vital significance in India's economic development, and has also suggested macro level strategies for its sustained growth. Pickens (2009) has demonstrated as to how a common ICT gadget (mobile phone) could play a pivotal role in rural development and women empowerment in Philippines

through 'banking the unbanked' i.e. financial inclusion. Manoj (2010) "Impact of technology on the efficiency and risk management of old private sector banks in India: Evidence from banks based in Kerala" has noted that ICT-adoption by banks could improve the banks' efficiency. ICT's growing role in the banking, including housing finance, is also noted in two reports: (i) *Banking*, (ii) *Real Estate*, of India Brand Equity Federation.(IBEF. 2023); thus ICT adoption has become an imperative in banking and healthcare sectors in India.

Nasar and Manoj (2013) "Customer satisfaction on service quality of real estate agencies: An empirical analysis with reference to Kochi Corporation Area of Kerala State in India" have noted that higher level awareness should be provided to real estate agents; and that transparency and social networking are needed for customer service and business growth. Manoj (2013) "Prospects and Challenges of Green Buildings and Green Affordable Homes: A Study with Reference to Ernakulam, Kerala" has noted the good growth potential of green homes as they can create huge employment avenues and can ensure fast and sustained economic growth. Several studies have focused on the need for sustained economic growth through diverse kinds of interventions, models and tools; right from educational loans to exports and from SEZs to ecotourism.

Varghese, K.X, and Manoj, P.K. (2013), "Educational loans and the higher education sector in India" have noted that study loans can improve HR quality in the nation, youth employability and such loans need to be promoted. Manoj, P.K. (2015) "International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) and its impact on coffee exports from India: An analysis" has noted the key role that ICTT plays in exports and hence economic growth. While Manoj, PK (2009), *Special economic zones in India: financial inclusion: challenges and opportunities* has noted the role of SEZs in faster economic growth. Manoj, P.K.(2017)"Segmentation Strategy for Promotion of Ecotourism Products: Evidence from Thenmala Ecotourism" has noted that meticulous planning and segmentation of tourists can lead to faster economic growth by way of ecotourism.

Rajesh and Manoj (2015)"Women Employees work life and challenges to Industrial Relations: Evidence from North Kerala" have noted its key role in striking a balance between work and life by the women employees for healthier industrial relations. Manoj (2016) "Employment Generation from Rural Tourism: A Field Study of the Local Community at Kumbalangi, Kerala" has noted the huge capacity of tourism for creating employment opportunities and mooted for creating better ICT infrastructure and online services.

Manoj (2016) "Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) for Faster Housing Development in India: An Analysis in the Context of the New Regulatory Policies of SEBI" has noted financial innovations like REITs are crucial for the faster housing development in India and hence the fast economic growth of India. Manoj (2016)"Bank marketing in India in the current ICT era: Strategies for effective promotion of bank products" has noted the vital need for ICT-based marketing by banks in this digital era.

Lakshmi and Manoj (2017) "Service quality in rural banking in north Kerala: A comparative study of Kannur district co-operative bank and Kerala Gramin bank" have noted better ICT-usage in Gramin bank could make its performance superior to that of a Co-operative bank. Lakshmi and Manoj (2017) "Rural Customers and ICT-based Bank Products A Study with a Focus on Kannur District Co-operative Bank and Kerala Gramin Bank" have noted the better acceptance of ICT-based products of Kerala

Gramin Bank(KGB)vis-à-vis KDCB's non-ICT products. Joju, Vasantha, and Manoj (2017) "Future of brick and mortar banking in Kerala: Relevance of branch banking in the digital era" have noted that even when ICT is imminent and so also virtual banking, there is a need for a 'human touch' in 'brick and mortar' banking.

Joju, Vasantha, and Manoj (2017) "Financial technology and service quality in banks: Some empirical evidence from the old private sector banks based in Kerala, India" have noted that financial technologies (fin-techs) can greatly improve service quality and are vital or success in modern days. Manoj (2017) "Construction costs in affordable housing in Kerala: Relative significance of the various elements of costs of affordable housing projects" wherein cost elements are prioritized for selective cost control, ICT being an effective tool for the same.

Manoj (2017) "Cost management in the construction of affordable housing units in Kerala: A case study of the relevance of earned value analysis (EVA) approach" has proved EVA as an effective tool for managing construction costs. Joju, Vasantha, and Manoj (2017) "Electronic CRM & ICT-based banking services: An empirical study of the attitude of customers in Kerala, India" have pointed out vital relevance of electronic (ICT) enabled modern practice in banking viz. Electronic-CRM (e-CRM) for efficiency and competitiveness of the banks and also noted favorable customers' opinion towards such modern ICT-enabled products in their study.

A CRM study in the banking context by Manoj (2018) "CRM in old private sector banks and new generation private sector banks in Kerala: A comparison" points out that new private sector banks (NPBs) rank superior to the old private sector banks (OPBs) in adopting CRM especially in high-tech platforms (like, E-CRM) and hence NPBs have a better command among the customers by giving high-tech services.

Manoj (2019) "Social banking in India in the reforms era and the case of financial inclusion: Relevance of ICT-based policy options" makes suggestions on ICT-enabled policies to boost social control in banking in the ongoing ICT era. Manoj (2019) "Dynamics of human resource management in banks in the ICT era: A study with a focus on Kerala based old private sector banks" has noted that ICT-based HRM policies lead to competitiveness of banks.

Manoj (2019) "Competitiveness of manufacturing industry in India: need for flexible manufacturing systems" has noted the need for adopting ICT and modern technologies like FMS (flexible manufacturing systems) for the better competitiveness for the manufacturing industry in India. Joju and Manoj (2019) "Digital Kerala: A study of the ICT Initiatives in Kerala state" have analysed Kerala-based ICT initiatives—Kerala State being the one with the highest internet penetration and universal literacy and have made suggestions to best utilise ICT in this State for its fast growth.

Joju and Manoj (2019) "Banking Technology and Service Quality: Evidence from Private Sector Banks in Kerala" noted that as ICT in banks enhances quality and it needs to be promoted. Ali and Manoj (2020) "Impact of Falling Price of Rubber-A Case Study of Kothamangalam Taluk in Ernakulam District" has pointed out that due to frequent price falls affect the livelihood of farmers and that governmental interventions like minimum support prices are vital.

Manoj (2015) "Prospects of Responsible Tourism in Kerala: Evidence from Kumarakam in Kottayam District" has noted that responsible tourism (RT) has vast potential for supporting economic growth, if sustainably promoted. Manoj (2016)

“Determinants of sustainability of rural tourism: a study of tourists at Kumbalangi in Kerala, India” has identified the key factors affecting the sustainability of rural tourism, and improving ICT infrastructure is one such factor.

Manoj (2015) “Impact of Rural Tourism on the Environment and Society: Evidence from Kumbalangi in Kerala, India” has noted the definite adverse effects of rural tourism and the vital need to control such effects. Manoj (2019) “Tourism Sector in Kerala in the Post-Flood Scenario: Strategies for its Sustainable Growth With a Focus on Responsible Tourism” has noted the key role of RT in reviving the flood-hit Kerala economy.

Saritha and Manoj (2023), “Social inequalities in IT sector: Evidence from Kerala State in India” *Environment and Social Psychology*, have noted that prevalence of inequality in Kerala’s IT sector and the need to remove it for Kerala’s faster and equitable economic growth. Shino et. al. (2023), Corporate Decisions and Stock Price Movements: The Case of HUL in India, *Migration Letters* have studied how HUL’s corporate decisions affected the company’s share prices.

Manoj, P.K. (2015) Housing Microfinance: A Study on Quality, Cost and Default Rate with Respect to Bhavanashree in Kerala has noted that microfinance home loans have lower quality (higher NPAs) and also that their transactional costs are higher. Manoj (2023) “Affordable Healthcare and Affordable Housing: Need for an Integrative Approach for the Holistic Growth of the Digital Economy of Kerala, India” *Community Practitioner*, has noted that a knowledge society like Kerala must encourage housing and healthcare sectors holistically using ICT; thus utilizing the linkage effects of different sectors for faster national economic growth.

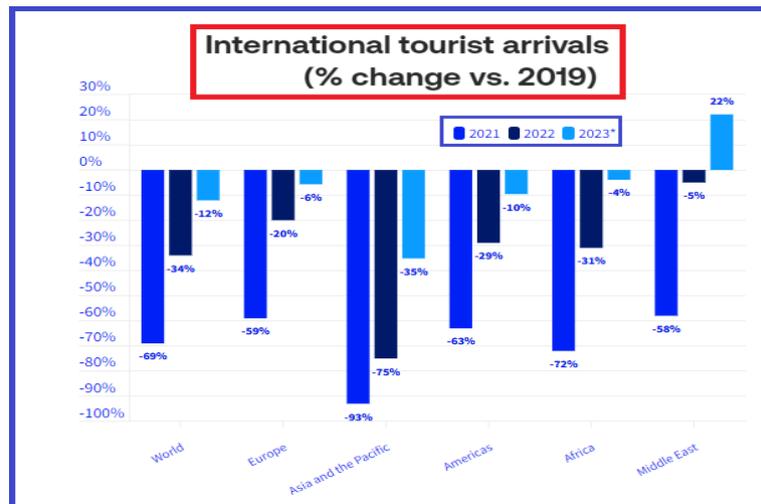
Manoj (2023) “Health Expenditure in Covid-19 Times and the Need for Affordable Houses that Nurture Healthy Citizens: A Roadmap for Digital Economy of Kerala” *Migration Letters* has noted that learning from the Covid19 experience Kerala should focus on homes that duly take care of the ‘health’ aspect as this aspect could add high social value to housing units.

Manoj, P.K. (2023) ICT for Sustained Community Development in India in the 5G Era. *Community Practitioner* has noted the vital need for high-end ICT resources that can provide better internet connectivity for fast and equitable development. UN Report (2016) *Digital Financial Inclusion* has also noted tremendous potential of ICT for digitally empowering the masses across the world, citing many global success stories also. McKinsey (2023) has noted the vital role of ICT in bringing about sustainable and inclusive growth in the G20 nations, like, India. The most recent report by UNWTO (Nov. 2023) suggests that global tourism is yet to fully recover from the crisis caused due to the global pandemic of Covid-19 which started in early 2020.

6. INDIAN TOURISM IN THE POST-COVID ERA: A CRITIQUE FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Globally, the tourism sector is yet to fully recover the pandemic-induced crisis right from the early 2020. However, there is steady improvement year and after, and one region viz. Middle East is ahead of others as of 2023-end (projected). (Figure I).

Figure I: Present Status of Global Tourism and Major Regions.



Source: UNWTO (2023), *International Tourism to End 2023 Close to 90% of Pre-Pandemic Levels*, Nov. (www.unwto.org).

While the global tourism is lagging at about 10 percent of the Pre-Covid level, the Asia-Pacific region is lagging still behind at about 35 percent of the Pre-Covid level, as per the recent UNWTO report of Nov. 2023. (Figure I). In respect of Indian tourism in particular, the latest statistics as of Oct. 2023 as per IBEF Report (2023) suggests that India too is lagging at about 30 percent behind the pre-Covid level.(Figure II). Still, the foreign exchange earnings of Indian tourism surpassed the pre-Covid level.(Figure III).

Figure II: Indian Tourism – Status as of Oct. 2023

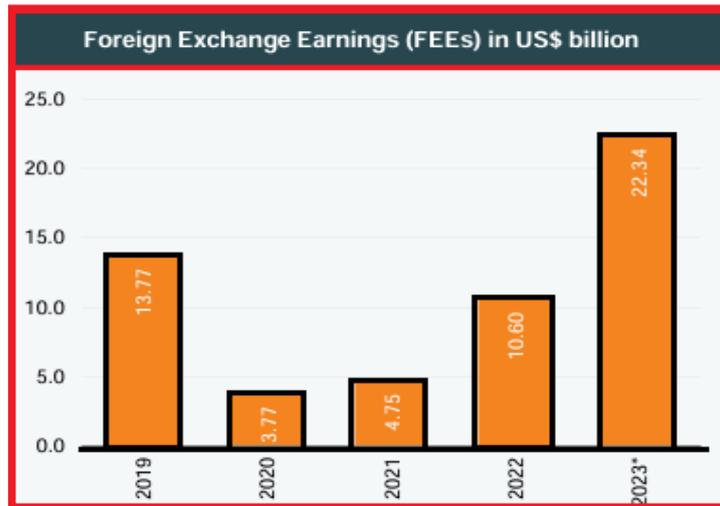


Source: IBEF (2023), *Tourism and Hospitality*, Dec. (Till Oct. 2023).

Despite the fact that Indian tourism is yet to fully recover from the Covid-induced crisis (Figure II) which in turn is a global trend, there has been appreciable and steady improvement in the foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) which have been growing year after year (Figure III). In 2023, the FEEs have already surpassed the pre-Covid level with a high margin. The above fact indicates the relevance of better promoting Indian tourism so that India can garner more and more foreign exchange. Greater FEEs can speed up the economic development of India – a vital need in the current post-Covid

scenario in India. In short, a tourism policy that focuses on attracting foreign tourists is meaningful in India.

Figure III: Indian Tourism – Trend in Foreign Exchange Earnings



Source: IBEF (2023), *Tourism and Hospitality*, Dec. (Till Oct. 2023)

Now, considering the case of Kerala State in particular it may be noted that the Domestic Tourist Visits (DTV) for 2022 (viz. 18867414 tourists) have exceeded the pre-Covid level (2019) (viz. 18384233 tourists). Thus, in respect of DTV, Kerala has already attained normalcy vis-à-vis the pre-Covid level. However, in respect of Foreign Tourist Visits (FTV) the post-Covid situation for 2022 is at 345549 tourists which is much lower than the pre-Covid level of 1189771 tourists for 2019. Besides, as against a steady growth in DTV year after year in the post-Covid scenario i.e. 2020 to 2022, there has been a very fluctuating trend in FTV characterized by sudden fall in the middle year (2021) from the 2020 level, and a sudden increase in the subsequent year (2022) similar to that of 2022. The FTV for both 2022 and 2024 are in no way comparable to the pre-Covid level (2019) and generally Kerala's FTV performance in the last few years (post-Covid) is very poor. There is an imminent need to scale up Kerala's FTV many times. (Table I).

Table I: Trend in Tourist Visits to Kerala – Domestic and Foreign.

Kerala - Foreign and Domestic Tourist visits from 2019 to 2022				
Year	DTV	FTV	Annual Growth Rate	
			Domestic	Foreign
2019	1,83,84,233	11,89,771	17.81	8.52
2020	49,88,972	3,40,755	-72.86	-71.36
2021	75,37,617	60,487	51.09	-82.25
2022	1,88,67,414	3,45,549	150.31	471.28

Source: GOK (2023), *Kerala Tourist Statistics – 2022*.

It may further be noted that in respect of foreign exchange earnings (FEE) Kerala's attainment in the post-Covid scenario is nowhere compared with the pre-Covid FEE for the year 2019. Throughout the post-Covid period of three years of 2020, 2021 and 2022 FEE could attain only upto 27 percent of the pre-Covid level (year 2019). The FEE for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022 were 27.26 percent, 4.49 percent and 27.19 percent respectively. So, there is utmost need to improve the FTV and FEE of Kerala. (Table II).

Table II: Trend in Tourist Visits to Kerala – Domestic and Foreign.

Cal Year	Foreign Exchange Earnings (In Crore)	% variation over the previous year	Total revenue generated from Tourism (Direct & Indirect) (In Crore)	% variation over the previous year
2019	10271.06	17.19	45010.69	24.14
2020	2799.85	-72.74	11335.96	-74.82
2021	461.5	-83.52	12285.91	8.38
2022	2792.42	505.07	35168.42	186.25

Source: GOK (2023), *Kerala Tourist Statistics – 2022*.

7. KERALA TOURISM POLICIES: FOCUS ON PRESERVING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

RT has got special significance in the Kerala context. GOK has been taking concerted efforts for promoting ecotourism and allied models like RT, ecotourism etc. As per GOK policy (2002), the simplest way to conceptualize ecotourism is, any tourism program that is (a) nature based, (b) ecologically sustainable, (c) where education and interpretation are major components and (d) where local people are benefited (GOK, 2002). Ecotourism and RT have been GOK's top priorities since the early 2000s. As many as 60 ecotourism destinations are there in the State spread across the 14 districts and these spots are closely monitored by the Dept. of Tourism, GOK. Of these 60 destinations, as high as 12 (or, one-fifth or 20 per cent of the total 60 destinations) are in Wayanad district in North Kerala which has sizeable tribal population (1,51,443 as per 2011 Census) and also the maximum percentage of forest cover (83.30 percent) among the 14 districts in Kerala.

Ecotourism is a nature based tourism model, and those who love nature in its original and undistorted form seek ecotourism destinations. As such tourists grow in number steadily; there is good scope for promotion of ecotourism in Kerala, because of its enviable tourism resources. Dept. of Tourism (GOK) has identified more spots having potential for being developed as ecotourism destinations. Such emerging ones are being developed as ecotourism spots by giving due thrust on conservation and environmental education. Ecotourism Directorate, GOK is mainly concerned with planning, granting financial assistance for the setting up of ecotourism spots, developing infrastructure in various ecotourism destinations, developing ecotourism products in various emerging ecotourism destinations etc. In 1997 the Govt. of Kerala (GOK) reported FTAs of about 1.82 lakhs. The GOK had planned to increase this to 5 lakhs by 2000. The total tourist inflow to Kerala in 1997 was about 50 lakhs, nearly

13 percent more than the previous year. To facilitate the expected growth in its tourism industry, the GOK has identified the need to diversify its tourism products (GOK, 2002). The following strengths are identified by the GOK to be able to support such tourism activities:

- There are 12 wildlife sanctuaries in Kerala state and also two national parks. These 14 resources can form base for the planning of ecotourism activities in Kerala state.
- Besides the above resources, Kerala has rich biological diversity— a distinct benefit.
- The water bodies formed within the forest area due to construction of dams / hydel projects provide scope for recreational facilities.
- GOK has been undertaking massive marketing campaign in the tourism front.
- Kerala tourism ensures scope for a variety of ecotourism activities like mountaineering, trekking, bird watching, and so on.
- Location-related advantages include short distance from seashore, well developed road networks leading to various prominent forest locations etc.
- Kerala tourism has forest staff who are well-trained in wildlife, ecology, and so on.
- Kerala has got well informed public and conservation groups who keep constant vigil and are always watchful of the adverse effects of tourism. (Source: GOK, 2002)

Though there are currently many opportunities for the GOK to promote ecotourism, there is no system in place for individuals to be able to experience the natural forests, except by visiting a sanctuary. There is the issue that many tour companies and project developers in Kerala do not fully understand the concept of ecotourism and market themselves as having an environmentally conscientious image (GOK, 2002).

GOK, 2002 policy believes there to be 4 types of ecotourist profiles: Dedicated Ecotourists, General Ecotourists, Casual Ecotourists, and Recreational Ecotourists. Dedicated ecotourists typically are interested in highly specialized activities such as bird or butterfly watching. These individuals require expert tour guides and are willing to pay extra for the service. General ecotourists are attracted to activities in the unaltered natural setting such as rafting, trekking etc. These individuals require little infrastructure but expect high quality educational information. Casual ecotourists visit nature attractions but it is not the primary focus of their visit. They are not as much concerned with the uniqueness of the experience. Finally there are the recreational ecotourists that enjoy relaxing in natural areas. These individuals appreciate the greenery and prefer some level of infrastructure development (GOK, 2002). The GOK, 2002 has recognized the need for regulatory policies and has adopted a national policy stipulating that tourism needs to be a unifying force that fosters better understanding through travel. The belief behind the policy is that tourism needs to help preserve, retain and enrich our world view, lifestyle, cultural expressions and heritage in all aspects (GOK, 2002). Tourism should strengthen the social and cultural values, sans damaging the natural resources. In the context of ecotourism, these policies need to

follow a selective approach, scientific planning, effective control and continuous monitoring (GOK, 2002). The following development principles have been developed:

- Involvement the local people be ensured and also that overall economic development of the area is resulted from that;
- Likely conflicts between use of resource for tourism purpose and the livelihood means for the local inhabitants must be identified and should attempt to minimize such conflicts;
- Compatibility between the scale and type of tourism development with the environment as well as socio-cultural characteristics of the local community should be ensured.
- It must be planned as part of the overall area development strategy, guided by an integrated land-use plan and associated with matching expansion of public services. (GOK, 2002).

In fact, the GOK initiated programmes for development of tourism way back in 1976 with the patronage of the GOI. After a decade (1986), GOK declared tourism as an industry realizing its immense potential for economic development. The first tourism policy of GOK released in 1995 had highlighted the need for PPP in tourism. Kerala Tourism Policy 2002, as already discussed, has planned to broaden the tourism by aggressive marketing including diversification.

Now, let us analyze critically the more recent tourism policy of GOK viz. Kerala Tourism Policy 2012, with a focus on its concerns for preserving the nature – the ecology and environment concerning the tourism sector. Kerala Tourism Policy 2012 is third in the line, as it succeeds the tourism policies of the State of 1995 and 2002, and it aims at ensuring (i) quality visitor experience, (ii) benefits to the local community from tourism, (iii) better environment for investment in tourism sector, (iv) marketing of Kerala tourism as a unique brand in domestic and global markets, and (v) the development of high quality human resources in the tourism sector. These focus areas are glaringly seen in the following highlights of Kerala Tourism Policy 2012:

- Basic infrastructure at destinations: For this end a Cabinet Committee on Tourism, Taskforce on Infrastructure Development, and Kerala Waste Free Destination (KWFD) – three distinct bodies have been formed. The policy accords added thrust on infrastructure development and management, promotion of environment-friendly practices etc.
- Community and Tourism: Better economic and socio-cultural benefits to the community, thrust on RT, active involvement of local self-government etc.
- Enabling environment for Investment: Fast track clearance of projects with investments above Rs. 10 Crore, subsidy scheme to promote RT, residential tariff to home stays, etc.
- Marketing: To promote 'Kerala as a visible global brand' with equal thrust on domestic and global markets, further strengthening the presence in global markets;
- HRD for the Tourism sector: Generating awareness among the public regarding the high employment prospects in tourism, travel and hospitality sector, creating human resources specialized in tourism and standardizing the course contents etc.

- State Tourism Advisory Committee (STAC): STAC to be formed for the purpose of tourism product development, destination development, marketing, HRD etc.

Kerala is the first State in India to bring out a strategy document Tourism Vision 2025 as a guiding force that can provide a clear vision to all stakeholders so that the tourism resources of the State can be utilized in an optimal manner. Tourism Vision 2025, GOK envisions sustainable development of tourism by promoting Ayurveda, backwaters and ecotourism. Its roadmap, inter alia, seeks to (i) allocate a higher outlay of Rs.900 Cr. for tourism sector, (ii) formulate and implement many tourism projects of diverse funding types, both large and small ones, (iii) aggressively attract investments in tourism etc. and (iv) take proactive steps for legislation for tourism, certification/grading of tourism products. It seeks to attain 7 percent annual growth in FTAs and 9 percent in DTAs. Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) could be made permanent arrangement to promote State's tourist attractions worldwide. Kerala Tourism has started a 'Green Carpet' initiative to make tourist destinations more tourist-friendly and inclusive, and also sustainable in the long run. Thus, there has been gradual yet significant improvement in the tourism policies of GOK in respect of their concerns towards the ecology, environment and bio-diversity of Kerala.

8. REVISED RT POLICY (2023): EQUITABLE AND WOMEN-FRIENDLY PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

In Feb. 2023, Kerala has revised its RT policy and resolved to implement RT as a popular programme. RT's revision as above in 2023 has been on the lines of Kerala's much acclaimed and highly successful literacy movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kerala's decentralised literacy movement culminated into Kerala being declared as the first fully literate State on 18 April 1991 by National Literacy Mission, GOI. On similar lines, in the backdrop of the Global Responsible Tourism Summit 2023, a historic declaration was drafted on the basis of ideas and proposals that emerged from the two days of discussions at the Feb. 25-28 RT Conclave held at Kumarakom in Kottayam District. As an update on 'Kerala RT Declaration of 2008' which was announced about 15 years back, on 28th Feb. 2023 the Tourism Minister of the GOK, has announced that "The focus is on making Kerala a better place with better people", and that "RT brought in a new phase of human interaction, enabling us to go deeper into the roots of society"

The 2023 Declaration, signed by the Principal Secretary of the Tourism Department of GOK and the RT Partnership & ICRT International Founder Dr Harold Goodwin, points out three distinct types of responsibilities, viz. (i) Social, (ii) Economic and (iii) Environmental. Accordingly, a vital guiding principle will take care of regular assessment of economic impacts of RT before developing any new RT project. RT initiatives that benefit the local populace will get the benefit if they minimise adverse impacts on their livelihoods. This 2023 Declaration seeks to ensure maximum economic benefits to the local residents of any RT project by way of pushing up linkages and minimising leakages by involving the local people. Thus, RT must seek to attain poverty alleviation. Regarding the social responsibilities, local populace will be involved in the planning, decision-making and capacity-building relating to the respective RT project. Besides, to reinforce gender equality and ensure safe destinations for women, as both hosts and guests, the Kerala's RT Mission (RTM) will work with civic bodies and UN Women in such RT initiatives.

Under the environmental responsibilities, given the alarming climate change, the RTM will accord high priority to reducing green-house gas (GHG) emissions, to promote the sustainable use of resources, make minimal waste (especially plastic) and also optimal consumption by practising the “3R Mantra” [Reduce, Reuse, Recycle]. Thus, top priority will be accorded to the restoration of buildings rather than constructing new ones. The 2023 Declaration seeks to develop quality products that reflect the spirit of any tourist destination, and complement and enhance its value. RT is sought to be marketed in ways that reflect the natural, cultural and social integrity of the respective RT destination. Also, Kerala Tourism authorities will adopt equitable business practices, pay and charge fair prices, and build partnerships that share and minimise risk, besides recruiting and employing staff with due regard to ILO standards. Besides, Kerala Tourism will give suitable and sufficient support to MSMEs so as to ensure that tourism-related enterprises thrive and that remain sustainable too. Further, to deliver the equality of access for differently-abled hosts and guests, the RTM will strive to deliver equal access to people living with any kind of disability. The current technology must be made accessible to all when it comes to tourism initiatives and experiences. Also, the tourism authorities will assess social impacts throughout the life cycle of the tourism project with a view to minimise its adverse effects. The 2023 Declaration seeks to make RT an inclusive social experience and ensure its access to all, including the vulnerable and the disadvantaged. The document seeks to combat sexual exploitation, particularly of children. “Be sensitive to the host culture, while maintaining and encouraging social and cultural diversity”.

The experts who participated in the Global Responsible Tourism Summit 2023 noted that GOK’s support for RT activities is a model for the entire world. The foreign representatives pointed out that GOK’s support accorded to the RT project over the last 15 years has been admirable. The delegate from South Africa (SA) opined that though SA too put forth RT resolution, SA could not make progress as Kerala could. The SA representative noted also that Kerala successfully managed the challenge of taking the local populace into confidence and could go ahead well with its RT projects.

GOK has inked a pact with UN Women to boost women-friendly activities in Kerala Tourism by training the stakeholders, like, young representatives and civil organisations. An MOU has been signed by the representatives of Kerala Tourism and the UN Women. This MOU seeks work towards promoting gender-inclusive tourism spots in Kerala. The RTM under GOK will be the implementing agency for the MOU. Thus, women-friendly tourism will be promoted by creating modules and capacity-building of relevant stakeholders, besides providing advisory support for baseline research, implementing women-friendly tourist destinations and supporting interventions to change prevalent discriminatory social norms. UN Women will help Kerala Tourism to develop reports and materials related to women-friendly tourism and their publication. The MOU strives to build synergies with other flagship programmes of Kerala and to help to rectify social attitudes which check gender-inclusive public spaces in Kerala Tourism. It may be noted that the MOU was a sequel to GOK’s renewed efforts in the direction of women-friendly Kerala Tourism which has been in place, since Oct. 2022. Besides, as women get encouragement to work in tourism that will instill a security feeling among the tourists visiting Kerala.

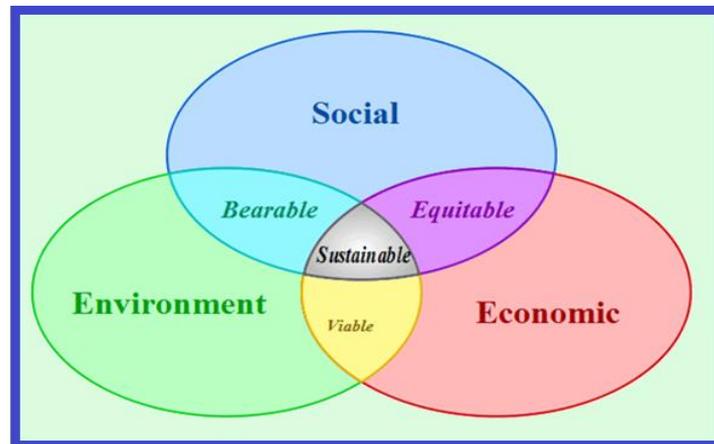
9. FOCUSING ON RT AND ALLIED TOURISM MODELS IN KERALA: SOME BROAD STRATEGIES

In view of the above facts, it is noted that it vital to adopt RT and allied models in Kerala for making Kerala Tourism sustainable. Some strategies towards this end are follows:

- ❖ Earlier initiatives of Kerala Tourism, like, 'Green Carpet' that sought to ensure inclusiveness and sustainability of tourism spots be further expanded to ensure a 'Green Cover' of all tourist spots by way of complete control of non-degradable wastes, maintaining and further strengthening full greenery. Besides, the Green Symphony among the six tourism products of beaches, backwaters, hill stations, wildlife sanctuaries, Ayurveda, and heritage sites) be also strived for by the GOK.
- ❖ Developing and marketing of less known but promising tourism destinations would be very advisable since it reduces the 'overcrowding' of tourists in well-known destinations and at the same time expands the tourism endowments of the State by gradually developing the less known yet promising tourist spots.
- ❖ Better infrastructure facilities be provided in all tourist destinations, but provision of such facilities should not be at the cost of natural environment. In tourism spots, 'Nature first, development next' policy should invariably be followed for their sustainability. ICT-based facilities (e.g. Internet) be ensured at all the tourist spots.
- ❖ New initiatives like Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) need to be further expanded and also promoted using the modern ICT-based tools, including social media so as to attract the new generation tourists, both domestic and international.
- ❖ For effective promotion of Kerala tourism and also to attract more domestic and foreign tourists, high quality human resources (HR) need to be developed and be maintained; abreast of the changes in the field. Kerala's advantages in respect of literacy, public health etc. must be leveraged through high quality HR in tourism.
- ❖ Effective and efficient use of ICT and other technological advances has to be ensured, including aligning the same with CRM practices of the stakeholders concerned. Widespread use of digital technologies, including the use of ICT-based Applications for online reservations, ticket booking, status checking, etc. have become imperatives for survival today rather than options. Wide use of ICT-based tools like e-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) and Social media be encouraged.
- ❖ In the case of Kerala, the number of foreign tourist visits (FTV) and foreign exchange earnings (FEE) being very poor in the post-Covid scenario compared with the pre-Covid scenario (2019), special thrust is required to attract more FTV to Kerala and hence more FEE. Also, ICT be used for better tourism competitiveness.
- ❖ A State like Kerala which is an emerging *Knowledge Economy* in the broader context of *Digital India*, or a *Digital Kerala* as a miniature of *Digital India*, there must be utmost priority for the use of ICT for economic development, including tourism development. However, any development should be sustainable in the long run, especially in the context of RT which needs to follow the "Social, Environmental, Economic" criteria, as specifically mentioned in the RT Declaration of the GOK of 28 Feb. 2023. So a model as suggested in Figure IV is essential for sustained tourism development in Kerala and hence the development of the whole economy, given the vast linkages of tourism sector, both forward and backward.

Other allied sectors, especially Housing and Real Estate which has got maximum linkage effects including linkages with the tourism sector, need to be promoted. Needless to mention, the vast potential of ICT and social media be leveraged for all developmental initiatives, especially in tourism. ICT tools are very eco-friendly too.

Figure IV: Equitable and Sustainable Approach to RT.



10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The State of Kerala could perform reasonably well in the tourism sector over the years. The State could market its tourism products in the domestic and foreign markets. However, since growing environmental degradation is still a reality in the State, more thrust be accorded to this aspect in all tourism initiatives. Extensive use of ICT tools and social media, including e-WOM, is an imperative rather than a choice now a days. The recent declaration of the GOK that revised the RT policy of the State in a comprehensive way and that too ensuring an equitable and women-friendly development is a welcome development in the RT front, ever since a similar one in 2008, about 15 years back. The policy of the GOK in encouraging ICT in all fields as part of its Digital Kerala drive is also a favorable factor as far as tourism sector is concerned, especially the RT segment. In the Kerala context, special attention is required to improve the foreign tourist visits (FTV) and foreign exchange earnings (FEE) into Kerala; and a focused approach is vital. Kerala is yet to recover from the evils of the Covid-induced crisis in tourism, especially in respect of foreign tourists. The revised RT policy should address this key 'foreign tourist' issue also as it affects FEE into Kerala and hence its overall economic growth.

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