

The Impact of Socio-Economic Factors in Promoting Adventure Tourism Across South Asian Countries

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Abstract

Adventure tourism is a type of tourism that involves travel to explore and enjoy outdoor activities and interactions with natural environments. The region of South Asia is home to a range of geographical features including the Himalayan Mountains, coastlines along the Indian Ocean, dense forests and extensive deserts. Many adventure tourism opportunities exist within this region due to its varied geography. This research paper examines the socioeconomic factors that have impacted the development of adventure tourism in South Asian countries like India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The research used a qualitative research methodology to analyze socioeconomic factors such as economic development, income levels, infrastructure, education, social norms, governance and community participation. The research suggests that while higher disposable incomes and a rising middle class are driving demand for adventure tourism both locally and globally, success isn't automatic. It really depends on having the right infrastructure, solid policies, and fair involvement from local communities. We still face significant hurdles, including poverty, environmental damage, bureaucratic red tape, and safety issues. Ultimately, the study argues that a collaborative approach is essential. By balancing economic goals with cultural preservation and environmental care, the region can truly unlock the benefits of adventure tourism and improve the lives of local people.

Keywords: Environmental, Socioeconomic, Tourism, Geography

1.0 Introduction

There has been a major shift in the tourism world away from mass tourism and towards the niche and experience-based tourism sectors. Of all the types of tourism one that has proved to be particularly robust and is showing consistent growth is adventure travel which attracts travellers interested in a physical challenge, the exposure of nature and local cultures and behaviours (Buckley, 2010). The Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) defines adventure tourism as a trip that must include a least two out of three elements: physical activity, a natural environment, and cultural immersion (ATTA, 2022). With its complex cultural and geographic range, South Asia has immense potential for development in this type of travel from high-altitude treks to Pakistan and Bhutan to white water rafting down India and Pakistan's mighty rivers as well as nature tourism and the surf of the islands of Sri Lanka.

By contrast, the creation and popularization of adventure tourism are not entirely due to natural advantages but are integrally intertwined with socio-economic attributes of tourist destinations. Socio-economic factors include the economic level of inhabitants of the place of destination, level of education, public amenities, governance of development, social justice, views towards environment and the economy regarding tourism, etc. For South Asia-region experiencing fast economic development coupled with prevailing levels of poverty, disparities between rural and urban areas, a variety of cultural attributes - the understanding of socio-economic characteristics has its significance.

The current study aims to examine the implications of these socio-economic factors for adventure tourism promotion among the nations of South Asia. The overarching research question is, how socio-economic characteristics encourage or deter the expansion and maintenance of adventure tourism as an industry in South Asia? The study uses cross-national case analysis from a variety of countries in the region to explore how economic development and the social organization influences tourism practices, and policy making. This study adds relevance by highlighting those conditions required by those involved such as government officials, service providers, and community members for

the promotion of adventure tourism sustainably, inclusively and ethically across South Asia. The case countries of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Pakistan shall be considered under this investigation.

2.0 Background and Literature Review

2.1 The Global and Regional Context of Adventure Tourism

Adventure Tourism to reach US\$ 8.8 trillion globally by 2027 ATTA (2022), estimated the global adventure travel tourism to be overUS\$586 billion in 2021 and is forecast for substantial growth and by 2027, will grow toUS\$8.8tn as increasing number of tourists is on the lookout for authentic, engaging and truly restorative travel experiences. Millennials and Generation Z in particular, tend to “prefer an experience to an owned possession” (Peri et al., 2021) and want to be engaged and connected with a destination.

Tourism is a critical part of the economy in South Asia. According to WTTC (2023) in 2022, the contribution of the Travel & Tourism sector to GDP in the region was 6.1% and it has generated millions of livelihoods. Though culture and heritage (Taj Mahal, ancient cities of Sri Lanka) and religious (Bodh Gaya, temples of India and Sri Lanka) tourism have led the region in past, adventurism has now emerged as high-valued low environmental impact alternative to help diffuse revenue and jobs to the marginal and distant areas (Pomfret, 2021). The predominant kinds of adventure activities found in region are mountaineering and trekking (Himalayas), wildlife (India, Sri Lanka and Nepal), water sports (rafting, kayaking, surfing), and desert safari (India, Pakistan).

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Linkages Between Socio-Economics and Tourism Development

The relationship between socio-economic elements and the development of tourism is much better explained. According to the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), Sustainable tourism management requires the balance between and satisfaction of different stakeholder groups, governments and international and local bodies, local communities and entrepreneurs and even, of course, tourists themselves. Especially when adventure tourism activities took place in ecologically unique zones or culturally diverse locations it became crucial to promote the participative role of local communities and in so far, its participation on decision-making to grant long term sustainability of such activities (Stone & Stone, 2021).

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which evolved in particular within the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID), can also be a valuable tool. Within the SLA framework, communities use a combination of assets such as human, social, natural, physical, and financial assets within the context of vulnerabilities, transforming structures and processes to achieve positive livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 1998). Adventure tourism can be perceived as a livelihood strategy where natural and cultural assets are utilized but requires access to other forms of capital to be successful, such as education (human capital) and roads (physical capital).

Also from an institutional perspective, the formal and informal rules, regulations, and norms are determinants of economic behavior. For example, the success of government policies, the efficiency of bureaucratic processes to obtain permits and licenses as well as standards for safety and environment are crucial institutional issues in adventure tourism operations (Bhattarai, Conway, & Shrestha, 2021).

2.3 Review of Socio-Economic Factors in Tourism Literature

Existing literature identifies several key socio-economic factors influencing tourism:

Economic Factors (GDP growth, income disparities, employment and unemployment, investment climate): Impacts on the supply side of tourism facilities and on the demand for tourism activities (Song, Dwyer, Li, and Cao 2012).

Infrastructure availability and quality of transportation facilities, communication infrastructure, and amenities like utilities. An absolute prerequisite, even more so in an adventure context in rural areas (Khadka and Nepal 2021).

Socio-Cultural Factors (Community perspective, the socio – cultural practices and ethics, the impact on the culture – possibility of conflict and acculturation): Factors concerning the acceptance of tourism in communities and society at large, including social practices related to tourism related service, ethics about environment protection and cultural heritage (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon 2010).

Human Capital: Skills and education level in the community are important to produce quality service, skills for entrepreneurship and engagement of the local population in a high value add section of the tour value chain (Liu and Wall 2020).

Governance and Policy: Political stability and rule of law, good governance in the ministry of tourism and boards of tourism, clarity of regulations concerning for operators of adventure tour etc. (Bramwell and Lane 2011).

There have been quite extensive researches done on general development of tourism in South Asia but research specifically on the socio-economic facilitators and impediments of adventure tourism in South Asia as a single subject or theme has been not put together or collated under one cover as yet. This paper aims to address this gap.

3.0 Methodology

The design for this study is descriptive-analytical and qualitative. In light of the nature of the topic, the paper reviews existing literature on a multifaceted and complex issue, and thus, a comprehensive and in-depth review of literature is considered as the primary methodological tool here. This helps to triangulate and synthesize results from individual research work for development of an overall understanding of relation between socio-economic factors and promotion of adventure tourism in South Asia (Snyder, 2019).

Data Collection: The research relied on varied secondary data sources to obtain comprehensive and triangulated results. Leading academic search engines and literature search sites like Google Scholar, Scopus and JSTOR were used. Search queries included search terms like 'adventure tourism South Asia,' 'socio-economic factors tourism development,' 'community-based tourism Himalayas,' 'tourism policy Nepal / India / Bhutan' and 'sustainable adventure tourism.' Special consideration was given to research with up-to-date publications in related areas such as sustainable development and environmental economics. However, grey literature was also considered; these included:

- Reports and publications by International Organizations (The World Bank, United Nations World Tourism Organization, Asian Development Bank);
- Publications by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and national tourist authorities;
- Policy documents and Tourism Master Plans by South Asian Governments;
- Quality journalistic articles and analyses by relevant media and specialized media covering development and tourism issues.

Inclusion Criteria sources selected by relevance to research question, date of publication with priority on the last 15 years but earlier papers selected if seminal, and author's / publisher's authority and inclusion of one or more South Asian countries.

Data analysis using thematic analysis, a review was conducted; then socio-economic themes identified (e.g. 'infrastructure deficiencies', 'community involvement', 'fragmented policies'). Data from selected sources was coded under these themes and compiled to obtain comparative interpretations across the national circumstances of South Asian countries and allow identification of common issues and divergent solutions.

Limitations as the sources were based solely on secondary data and would thus reflect the shortcomings and bias of those sources. The constant and fast paced change within the tourism industry, particularly since the COVID pandemic, means that some sources may now be considered outdated. The analysis in this paper does not incorporate primary sources such as survey or interview techniques, which may prove useful in providing a more specific 'on-the-ground' perspective, an area indicated for future study.

4.0 Results

Literature has evidenced that the push of adventure tourism in South Asia comes in the form of confluence of several socio-economic forces which get displayed in peculiar way in the form of the countries.

4.1 Economic Development and Market Demand

Strongest relationships observed correlate strong and stable macroeconomic growth with high rate of growth of adventure tourism. For instance, in countries like Bangladesh, India with relatively stronger GDP growth rates the domestic market is growing quickly in the adventure tourism sphere. This growth is spurred by the middle class and their enhanced disposable income and aspirational spending on trekking or scuba diving in a domestic environment (Kala, 2020). But for developed regions this remains competitive for cost efficient adventure tourism operators as Nepal and India offer treks with cost which would amount to a small percentage of cost in other destinations in such geographical terrain, such as Alps and Andes (Pomfret, 2021).

On the converse it's economic development that becomes the impediment i.e., high level of poverty in remote regions can make use of the local natural resource for quick profits in short term (illegally exploiting for logging / poaching, etc.). In context of economic inequality also, there can be 'leakage' of money that was paid for tours not staying in local vicinity but with cities or foreigner-based travel agents (Bhattarai et al, 2021).

4.2 Physical and Social Infrastructure

Infrastructure presents mixed challenges. There is not even rudimentary infrastructure (all-weather road access, electricity, water and internet access) in most of the potential areas (e.g., the Himalayan regions in Nepal and India, and northern part of Pakistan). Not only that the tourism development is hindered by poor access for tourist, at the same time, the development of well quality hotels, toilet facilities, emergency services become problematic and there is the risk of the tourist security (Khadka & Nepal, 2021).

The development of specialized adventure tourism infrastructure (e.g. Well-marked trail and maintenance of climbing routes, rafting-put-in/take-out points, visitors information centres etc.) uneven. Bhutan with a strategy of high value - low volume tourism, puts tremendous amount of investment for the quality maintenance and security of trekking routes. In other hand, trekking routes in some region like Indian Himalaya are faced with soil erosion and waste management problem from high use of routes without enough provision of infrastructure support (Nepal, 2020).

Social infrastructure that comprises of education and training opportunities, should be well developed. Skilled employees in tourism sector are needed ranging from accredited guides, instructors, safety providers, hotel managers, rangers etc. Nepal established a rather sophisticated system on providing training and certification for mountain guides through Nepal Mountaineering Association. It's somewhat different compared to the availability of training institutes for outdoor related careers in other countries and other activities (Liu & Wall, 2020).

4.3 Governance, Policy, and Institutional Frameworks

A clear, consistent and positive policy framework helps the countries to ensure growth occurs in a coordinated manner. For instance:

- In Bhutan's "High Value-Low Impact" tourism policy adventure tourism is specified: "Guided activity-based tours" "Set Fees for Sustainable Tourism Use" ... Provide benefits at village-level through community-based tourism initiatives (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2000).
- Nepal has had an active system in managing expeditions and trekking expeditions through permit systems from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation and delays and inconsistencies is common (Bhattarai et al, 2021).
- Sri Lanka has set out adventure tourism as a priority in the national tourism policy "Adventure tourism development will take place in designated tourism zones focusing on areas identified for surfing, wildlife and Hiking" (Muller et al, 2004).

However, fragmented policy-making, bureaucracy, and corruption may present a barrier to development. Adventure travel in India is managed by various Indian state governments and two central Indian ministries (the Tourism ministry and the Ministry of Sports and Tourism / Central Environment Ministry. There are no uniform Indian standards of safety or guide registration required (Kala, 2020). Permissions can also be a lengthy and unclear process across several nations which acts as a hurdle for micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) who, in many cases dominate the adventure tourism sector (Löfgren et al., 2017).

4.4 Socio-Cultural Dimensions and Community Participation

Tourism acceptance levels vary culturally. For much of the Himalayan region tourism is accepted, as it offers a welcome livelihood source consistent with the traditional village farming systems. However, others areas include cultural commodification, a shift in aspirations among youth, impacts of inflation upon the village economy, and resource disputes (hotels v. Villagers over water) (Stone & Stone, 2021).

Community-Based Adventure Tourism (CBAT) systems are very successful models and are heavily promoted. Two successful models include; Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in Nepal which operates with power transferred to the villagers who receive profits from treks; and homestay trekking models in the Indian province of Ladakh and in Bhutan. These and other models of tourism have proved that as long as they have ownership and control, communities are benefiting in all areas (Nepal, 2020).

By nature, CBAT is not a self-perpetuating mechanism. If communities have rich social capital-a trust network, community leaders, ability to collectively action-and supported by an external service providers-who are able to provide basic capacity building and marketing assistance (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010) then it may be work, but in strongly social separated communities or communities with feeble institutional capacity tourism may further strengthen these inequalities.

4.5 Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change

Socio-economically induced aspect the most essential. Adventure tourism inherently relies on an unspoiled natural habitat and the impact of poor resource management from untamed tours and tourism, the environmental decay as well as pollution due to poor disposal practices can directly cause a disruption on the base value of the sector. The waste generated by trekking at the base of Mt Everest and other similar areas (Pomfret, 2021) is one glaring example.

Climate impact is Another existential threat whereby decreasing number of glaciers, varying patterns in rainfall leading to floods, landslides due to severe weather (Khadka & Nepal, 2021). So, there are many of socioeconomically induced problems that impact the availability of these natural settings.

5.0 Discussion

The findings highlight that adventure tourism in South Asia cannot take off organically driven only by market demand and beauty. It needs to be a social and economic process in which barriers and enablers are intrinsically tied together.

The main enablers appear to be: (1) Economic buoyancy across the region (both in terms of drawing investment, and generating domestic market for the product), (2) The growing external acceptance of South Asia as a destination for adventure and (3) proven examples of 'bottom-up', community-involved development approaches to tourism in parts of Nepal and Bhutan. A look behind these factors may point to challenges on all the other sides. (1) Limited and fragmented infrastructure- restricting accessibility, jeopardizing health and safety, and compromising on quality of visitor experiences; (2) Lack of institutional and policy framework- characterized with bureaucratic and somewhat corrupt processes, which increase transaction cost and risk for enterprises. (3) Poverty and inequality- resulting in unsustainable resource extraction and locals being pushed into low paying jobs. (4) Increasing threats of environment pollution and Climate Change, exacerbated by poorly executed policies and meagre resources available for adaptation.

A key issue for debate here is the various developmental approaches adopted across nations. Bhutan, for instance, takes an approach driven by cost and quality where tight controls on numbers limit contribution to national earnings, but focus is placed on maintaining a niche product and preserving their culture. Nepal adopts a more liberal, market-driven approach that has helped significantly with earning foreign exchange and employment, while unfortunately creating strains of an environmentally and social nature at hot-spots. India's size and federal composition have thus naturally led to a state-wise development of adventure products with some states such as the northern states of Himachal and Uttarakhand in an active position, while others yet to develop.

Secondly the analysis will focus on the gender dimensions of socio-economic impacts. Guiding / porters traditionally in Adventure tourism are more male-dominant, yet opportunities exist to promote employment, training and women entrepreneurship in Nepal / India that may change gender norms (Lama 2020).

Eventually, a move towards an integrated sustainable development approach rather than simply from one specific perspective (sector-specific) will be critical to promote adventure tourism in South Asia. Success relies not only on adequate promotion/ marketing of tourism product but also on enhancements to overall society e.g. Improved education, health, roads, policy and governance.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper has presented an in-depth and multifaceted analysis of the role of the socio-economic context in the promotion of adventure tourism within South Asia. While the South Asian region is well endowed with an incredible natural and cultural resource base which forms a strong foundation, the ability of the region to translate the potential into the reality of a thriving and sustainable adventure tourism industry relies on its complex socio- economic realities.

The findings confirm the important economic role and burgeoning demand-both internationally and domestically-driven by economic development and rise in income levels. However, the question is whether or not the supply side – the capacity to provide safe, sustainable and high-quality adventure tourism experience – can keep pace, challenged by a lack of physical and social infrastructure, a deficit in terms of policy and governance structures, socio-cultural issues and the increasing pressure of environmental challenges. Therefore, development and tourism are intertwined, and investment in rural infrastructure, renewable energy, and in education are investments for tourism's competitiveness and sustainability.

A comparative analysis indicates that although not a single country has developed an ideal "model," they all present us with significant lessons to learn from. Bhutan represents a policy-driven approach of managing development and maximizing value, while Nepal focuses on scale and entrepreneurship through a market-driven, inclusive approach. Finally, the market power of domestic tourists is an advantage India has been able to leverage, indicating the importance of endogenous demand.

In order to make adventure tourism sustainable and contribute to broader regional development, several key approaches need to be adopted. Firstly, the national governments and state governments should come together and create an integrated vision to the adventure tourism sector focused on safety that integrates along administrative and departmental borders. Secondly, the governments as well as the private stakeholders and developers need to invest in the necessary conventional as well as unconventional infrastructure to ensure robustness of tourist destinations to the impact of climatic changes.

Thirdly, to enable local communities and ensure they reap equitable benefit of adventure tourism promotion as a sector contributing to local empowerment by making employment not low-skilled but high skilled enabling them to rise from laborers, owners, managers to certified professionals in the adventure tourism.

Fourthly, to ensure that adventure tourism projects are compliant with sustainable management of resources and equipped for climate resilience and adaptation measures.

The region's adventure tourism faces an important choice: will the sector develop haphazardly along a low-road for the poor in South Asia? Or can it strategically facilitate high-roads that empower the poor and foster sustainable and equitable regional development. We argue it is in this second road where real opportunities lie to maximize impact in adventure tourism, far beyond glossy brochures and tourism advertisements.

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