

Community owned Home-stay in Nafarganj, Sundarban – setting new paradigms in eco tourism

Sundarbans – a fragile mangrove ecosystem in southern part of West Bengal, India is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is part of World's largest deltaic system in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin with mangroves as the key adaptive flora. It is also home to the mangrove tigers- *Panthera tigris tigris*. Out of 102 islands 48 are uninhabited tiger land along with countless biodiversity resources in the innumerable creeks and channels that form the unique landscape. No doubt, the number of tourists recorded is more than three and a half lakh in the year 2013-2014. Conventional tourism makes a package of 2-3 days including boat ride to forest areas in the National Park and night stay at hotel in the inhabited islands. Thus local communities are not always linked to the economic benefits of tourism, except for boat owners.

Community led Tourism is emerging as a very popular word in tourism sector especially for those tourists who intend to travel to pristine landscapes, creating low carbon footprints and are eager for experience based travel options. It aims to deliver sustainable economic development by building the capacity of local communities to realize the potential value of their natural and cultural heritage to create tourism enterprise opportunities through an institutional model. It has to be kept in mind that 4.5 million people who live in the 54 islands have limited livelihood opportunities. Monsoon dependent cropping pattern along with the saline threats have further limited the existing opportunities. In this context, community owned Home Stay tourism is a viable alternative livelihood opportunity for the marginalized communities. Instead of depending on individual private efforts being driven single handedly, the community model brings all aspects of a tour package (accommodation, travel, sightseeing and activities) under the ambit of an institutional structure, which amongst other things, promotes the entire destination rather than fragmented independent entities.

YES BANK Limited through its Knowledge Banking Approach had prepared a roadmap document in 2015 titled "Tourism Roadmap Document on Sunderbans: Blueprint for Transformation" with assistance from NEWS as Field Expert for conducting surveys, socioeconomic profiling, infrastructure gap assessment amongst others. The document highlighted the roadmap for positioning Sunderbans as the most favored tourist destination in the world through promotion of community based eco tourism in the region including identification of suitable clusters for developing the same.

Thereafter, despite all challenges, NEWS supported with friends oriented towards this model showed a new direction in ecotourism for the first time in Sundarbans – the community owned home stays.

When the communities take charge, innovation knows no bound and the spirited women of Birinchibari village, Nafarganj Gram Panchayt in Basanti block of Sundarbans hosted their first guest from Belgium in Home Stay accommodation and managed their entire culinary in their own style.

The tourists, from 7th of March to 10th of March stayed for 3 nights and 4 days in the village ambience, spending one day in the National Park area. On the first day, after lunch they visited Birinchibari Shri Durga Primary School to plant a banyan tree and inaugurate a kitchen garden which is initiated by the women in charge of the mid-day meal programme with the hope that in future their children will get 'no pesticide' vegetable for mid-day meal. In the school yard, school children recited poems, did yoga exercises, hoisted national flags, dressed themselves in 'go as



you like'. Guests loved every moment they spent with the children. They ate fruits, boiled eggs with the children and donated each an 'ason'(seating mat) to sit in the school. In the evening the guide briefed them about the history of Sundarbans. On the following day, they visited the Sanctuary area, saw many birds, crocodiles, deer, monkeys and enjoyed the river cruise through narrow creeks and channels. The women group cooked and served food in the boat. On 9th of March, 2016 after breakfast, in the morning, they engaged themselves in the agricultural fields, helping the farmers to sow seedlings of onion, beans, trimming bitter gourd plants, lending hand to kitchen gardens. They also discussed with the farmers about their initiatives on no pesticide farming. It may be noted that the USP of this home stay is no pesticide farmed food from local village. Afterwards, they went to Bhasapara mudflat to have a mangrove walk and also did carbon measurement at the mangrove plantation area. Mangrove stewards from local communities that NEWS is developing in the villages along with the guests were directly involved in this activity. This impressed them very much as they now understood that mangroves sequester carbon much more than terrestrial plants. After the scheduled programme, guests took their lunch and some rest at Homestay. In the afternoon they went to Nafarganj local market to see solid waste management and an interactive session was held there with the market committee. In the evening, they returned to community kitchen area to attend cultural programme. A *Krishna-Radha* drama sequel was presented keeping in mind the ensuing Holi festival. Also it was the time of "Shiva ratri" festival and a 'Nataraj' dance was also exhibited by a local lady. Post cultural event, they interacted with the entire women group who were in charge and had dinner together in the community kitchen. Last day, guests went around the village for bird watching guided by noted Bird guide of Sundarban – Nityananda Chowkidar, spotted 28 species of birds including owl, woodpecker, bee eater etc.. As the day went on, they made a fishery visit, interacted with the prawn farmers. Also they met fishermen got acquaintance with their daily lives and did fishing in the village pond which is a part of family farming programme that NEWS is working there. After lunch and some rest, guests started towards Kolkata. The food menu was decided by the community women with lot of skills and innovation that included, *Bhapa bhetki*, *Chingri Malaikari*, *Crab curry*, chicken stew, with various types of local rice varieties. Desserts included homemade curd, *Payesh*, *Kheer*, even *Soru chakli* pancakes with honey. They were happy with the safety and security and the only major complain was late serving of food and noise of microphones in the villages. Otherwise, the feedback forms of the guests reflect their experience of great enjoyment along with a comfortable stay in Sundarbans.

It may be noted that all these programmes included in their package were paid by the tourists and was arranged by Terres de' Adentures from France and their Indian counterpart Sea and Sky Travels based in Delhi.



Feedback from guest

Thus, in a time when the NREGA activities are nil, agricultural fields are also dry the Community owned Homestay ecotourism brought socio economic benefits. Infrastructure like a temporary Jetty was built (part of their tour cost), which will sustain for more than 2 years and every villager will be gained from this. Now they can use and maintain a new modern toilet which will improve their health and protect their dignity. From market place every day they will get a lot of bio waste and these will be converted into bio fertilizer in their compost pit. Vegetables, eggs, chicken, rice, pulses, milk etc almost everything for the guests were collected from the villagers so that the economic benefit got distributed among a large section of the villagers. Community women also gathered some special skill like



cooking, communication, basic hygiene, hospitality services etc. Now the community is more confident and they are interested to carry on and expand this type of tourism. They need your support and recognition for this unique initiative.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 8



Fig. 4



Fig. 11



Fig. 9



Fig. 12



Fig. 10



Fig. 13



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig. 1- Active participation in farming	Fig.5- Active participation in carbon measurement	Fig.9-Home-stay tourism team
Fig.2- Interaction with organic farmers	Fig.6- 'Go as you like' performed by school children	Fig.10-Cultural programme performed by local children
Fig.3- Visit to prawn culture field	Fig.7- Awareness drive by school children	Fig.11- Observing solid waste management at local market
Fig.4- Angling in integrated fish and paddy cultivation farm	Fig.8- Last minute preparation of community kitchen	Fig.12- Temporary jetty for Home-stay tourism
Fig.13- Home-stay toilet		