

Published: August 24, 2012 10:39 IST | Updated: August 24, 2012 10:40 IST

At the core of the debate

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Sole attraction: A tiger at Bandhavgarh National Park. Photos: Meena Menon

The Hindu

The issue of forest-dwelling communities and their rights have sunk in the controversy over ban on tourism in tiger reserves

As the Supreme Court extends the ban on tourism in tiger reserves, a report by the research group Equations demolishes certain myths about benefits to the local people from the kind of high end resorts around parks, and also points to the lack of debate on the rights of forest dwellers.

“Disguised as luxury, it valorises feudalism and colonialism, without being accountable for the fallout of this on the communities, as well as the message that goes out to the guests who visit. A guest who stays at the lodge, will go back imagining a region still steeped in these oppressive structures and worse having rejoiced in them,” says a report ‘Calling to Account — Image and Ethics in Corporate Accountability in Tourism’ in 2011 by Equations, a research and advocacy group based in Bangalore. One of the chapters examines the role of a high-end hospitality company which runs expensive resorts in the tiger reserves of Madhya Pradesh.

The report points out with examples from specific places that members of the local community are usually taken for lower rung jobs and depending on performance are promoted to higher positions. The other argument in favour of continuing tourism in core areas is that this will be a deterrent to poaching. “Poachers usually operate at night,” Swathi Seshadri of Equations said, “when tourists are not allowed in the parks. Poachers also know the behaviour of the animals and are able to hunt them down when tourists are not around.”

Forest officials, who support tourism in tiger reserves, say that it generates funds for conservation-related activities. However, the Equations report says that estimating the costs of regeneration and the sources of funds received by the forest department is difficult. Ms. Seshadri said that the rule is that gate receipts at tiger reserves go into separate accounts of a Tiger Foundation. “We don’t know how many reserves have a Tiger Foundation and the amount of money that is generated,” she pointed out.

In the case of tiger reserves, the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2006 has mandated that all gate receipts are to be used for stakeholder development, including conservation and community development. The only State which provided information for the report was Madhya Pradesh, where the money from gate receipts is pooled together at the State level and then distributed to the national parks based on necessity and status of park funds.

The people evicted from the reserves to create inviolate spaces continue to suffer both from the park management and wild animals while people visit the park for leisure. The feeling of bitterness against the park is heightened with the presence of tourism, according to the report. It also demolishes the most popular argument for wildlife tourism — creating awareness among tourists which would enhance public support for conservation measures. As anyone who has visited a tiger reserve can vouch, there is a single-minded determination among most visitors to see a tiger and forest guides are under terrible pressure to deliver. Jeeploads of people will wait for hours at one place in the belief that a tiger will cross and see nothing else the forest has to offer. Many of them would be hard pressed to identify a

common drongo.

As the report says, “The guide at Bandhavgarh shared that it was important for him to spot a tiger for the group, since a guide is considered successful only if he has been able to spot out a tiger to the tourists. The guide also shared that the pressure is very much from the tourists who go back disappointed if they have not been able to sight a tiger and sometimes turn their anger on the guides.” The Madhya Pradesh Forest Department through the MP Ecotourism Development Board (MPEDB) supports eco-tourism in forest areas. However, the Equations report found little community involvement in conservation while the Forest Department has done its best to remove the communities from the same forest areas where tourism is being promoted.

The report cites a study by Karanth, K & DeFries, R (2010) titled ‘Nature-based tourism in Indian Protected Areas: New Challenges for Park Management’, which states that less than 0.001 per cent of population living within 10 km of a protected area find employment in the tourism industry. However, a MPEDB study shows that 62 per cent of the people involved in tourism activity at Tala (a small village near Bandhavgarh National Park with an approximate population of 1,220) are local people. However, they are all largely involved in the unorganised sector — as drivers, cooks, labourers, guides and general business. All the managerial-level work is conducted by outsiders.

The core issue is that of forest-dwelling communities and their rights which have been subsumed in the debate. The more central issue of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the rights of adivasis and forest dwellers is being lost in the battle over tourism, the report says.

Keywords: [Ban on tourism in tiger reserves](#), [rights of forest dwellers](#), [tiger reserves in India](#), [Wildlife \(Protection\) Amendment Act, 2006](#)

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Printable version | Aug 25, 2012 9:55:29 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/article3812415.ece>

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