

Ecotourism in Sawantwadi: An Overview

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Introduction

Ecotourism is known to have originated in East Africa sometime in the 1970s. However, it became popular less than a decade ago when conservationists and environmentalists began to realize the potential of combining people's love for nature with their concern to protect it. Ecotourism is numerously defined and understood. Basically, it implies "tourism that is sustainable". More specifically, it implies environmentally responsible travel that promotes the preservation of a region's natural resources along with the social, economic and cultural well being of its people.

Ecotourism in Sawantwadi

Located 54 km from Panjim, the capital of Goa, Sawantwadi is a one-hour drive from Dabolim Goa airport. Goa is an international tourism destination, which receives around 11 lakh tourists annually, of which 6 lakh are international. It is estimated that 60% of these tourists are from UK and Germany, most of who have a keen interest in the pre and postcolonial lifestyles of the monarchy in India. Thus, heritage tourism is an important component of Sawantwadi.

Established by the Sawant Bhonsale dynasty almost 300 years ago, Sawantwadi is basically a heritage town with several ancient heritage spots including Lester gate (1895), the Great Royal Palace (1790s), *Chitnis wada* (1836), *Mathi*, *Atmeshwar Tali* (1891), *Vithal Mandir*, *Raghunath market* and 200 years old *Kolgaon darwaja*.

Ecotourism is another major component of Sawantwadi. The town is blessed with natural beauty.

Established around a beautiful lake, Moti Talav, it presents a panoramic view of Narendra hill in its background. Located at 16⁰ 20'N, 73⁰ 45'E and 367 feet above sea level, it receives about 350 – 400 cm of annual rainfall and is a miniature replica of the green belt of Konkan, trailing along the Western ghats of India. It is replete with ecological wonders providing a rich and unique biodiversity with interesting locations such as Kesari River, which provides water supply to the town of Sawantwadi, Nageshwar falls, Ragheshwar point, and the scenic village of Amboli. During monsoon, the whole region is converted into a giant drainage basin that canalizes rainwater into rivers and lakes, absorbing the rest deep underground to provide for lush greenery throughout the year. The Gazetteer of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts published in 1880 cites more than 20 places of ecological interest in Sawantwadi.

Despite the limited tourist amenities in Sindhudurg district, international tourists visit the remote yet well known hill station of Amboli, known for its unique biodiversity, flora and fauna. Amboli has 10 – 12

species of fauna including tiger, giant squirrel, leopard, bison, wild boar, hedgehogs, moonjack and langoors. As part of the Sahayadri hills, it has the second largest biodiversity in the whole of India, and hence is preferred by students and research scientists working on medicinal plants and herbs. There are more than 59 varieties of medicinal plants and more than 11 varieties of trees with medicinal value in and around Amboli including *Adulsa*, *Arjun*, *Bharangi*, *Bhumyamalaki*, *Punarnava*, *Shallaki*, *Jyotishmathi* and *Gokshur*.

Sawantwadi is also known as a Handicraft Town with 250 years of tradition in the manufacture of wooden handicraft, pottery, gold and silver embroidery, lacquer ware and *ganjifa*. The *ganjifa* is a specialty of Sawantwadi consisting of 150 Indian playing cards that were traditionally gifted to *Chattrapatis* and *Peshwas*. Some of these gifted by the Indian kings to the British monarchy are preserved in the Victoria & Albert museum, London as well as the Playing Cards Museum in Stuttgart, Germany.

A clan of indigenous people, the *Chitkaris*, is skilled in the art of painting on playing cards, wooden and clay artifacts, jewellery and other embellishment. The paintings have intricate patterns depicting royal lifestyle as well as spiritual beliefs of the people in the region, dating back to almost the 7th century. This art has been preserved and patronized by the Royal family under the aegis of Sawantwadi Lacquer ware Handicrafts, which manufactures handicrafts, *ganjifa* and typical Sawantwadi pattern of furniture painted in natural watercolor and coated with lacquer, so durable it almost lasts forever.

Unfortunately, the numbers of these skilled artists is dwindling rapidly. There are not many incentives for artists to continue their occupation. Traders and brokers who export these commodities exploit the craftsmen. In addition, trees such as *Pangara* and *Fanas* whose timber is used for making wooden toys are no longer available locally due to indiscriminate and unsustainable extraction. They are now brought in from neighboring states making it nearly impossible for self-employed artisans to afford them.

Ecotourism is therefore, essential not only as a base to develop an economy, but also to revive the cultural tradition of a place about to become extinct. The Report prepared by the Tata Consultancy Services for the development of tourism in Sindhudurg district, rightly identifies Sawantwadi as the ‘entry point of Maharashtra from Goa’. “It would serve as an information and cultural center for the district”, concludes the report.

Sawantwadi Municipal Council

The Sawantwadi Municipal Council was established 120 years ago. With the 74th Constitutional Amendment coming into force, the municipalities as local self-government have a wider role to play. As one of the most progressive Municipal Councils in Maharashtra, pioneering campaigns for cleanliness and ecological restoration of the region, the Municipal Council of Sawantwadi has chosen specific thrust areas

such as conservation of environment, heritage and art and craft, eradication of poverty, employment generation and socio-economic planning. It has chosen tourism as the priority sector to take care of all the aspects mentioned above. The Municipal Council of Sawantwadi has considered the ecological, cultural and socio-economic aspects in the planning of tourism in Sawantwadi. The basic amenities are already either commissioned or nearing completion.

Ecotourism Activities

A tourist reception center, which will cater to the needs of tourists arriving in Sawantwadi and seeking information about various tourist spots, is nearing completion. A picturesque garden consisting of musical fountain, garden restaurant and a mini amusement park, are already functional. A water sports center has been established at Moti Talav lake. The area around the lake has been beautified and a Geneva Jet Fountain is installed at its center further enhancing its beauty. The Municipal Council has carried out a massive cleanliness program in the town using eco friendly methods like treating waste water with water hyacinth, treating biodegradable waste with vermiculture, segregating plastic, glass and paper at source, generating biogas from public toilets and reuse of waste water for maintenance of sports complex turf. Health amenities like swimming pool, gymnasium and health clubs, indoor and outdoor auditoriums are also under construction.

Three unique projects that are shaping up in Sawantwadi are: Shilpagram, Environmental Awareness Center at Narendra Dongar and an Ayurveda-based health Center.

Shilpagram:

An Artists village, Shilpagram is a replica of the ancient Raghunath market built in 1891. Being developed on a lush green plot of 5 acres, it is built maintaining natural contours and with minimal damage to the surrounding ecosystem. The Shilpagram plan includes working areas for artisans to manufacture wood, clay and bamboo handicrafts as well as pottery and a very rare leather-craft known as *Pinguli* art. The tourists will be served local food that shall be prepared in their presence by people wearing local costumes. Local folk art like *Pinguli* puppet show, *Dhangari Nritya* (shepherd dance), *Dashavtaar* and *Koli Nritya* (fisher folk dance), shall be presented in the specially built Amphitheatre at Shilpagram. Cottages are provided for tourists staying overnight. The plan also includes waterfalls operated on solar energy, replicating the famous Amboli waterfalls. Waterfalls and streams have been planned to create a village ambience. The State Bank of India has sponsored the landscaping of the place. Large-scale tree plantation has been undertaken in the entire complex. All structures at the Artist village are constructed using locally available laterite stone.

Environmental Awareness Center:

The Environmental Awareness Center is situated on Narendra hill, with 11 acres of tabletop park site land demarcated by the forest department from the lush reserved forest area of the region. The hilltop presents a panoramic view of the Sahayadri hills on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other. The project is a joint collaboration of the Municipal Council and the Forest Department of the Government of Maharashtra, funded by the Municipal Council and other prospective sponsors. The Center will cater to nature loving tourists as also students and locals with interesting activities such as trekking routes, bird watching and nature trails. It will consist of a Nature Interpretation Center providing information through posters and audio visuals about the flora and fauna of the region, a herbarium for medicinal plants, a *Lepidoptera* or butterfly zoo as well as a mini planetarium for stargazing. It will also have dwelling units made of semi permanent and local material such as mud houses, cave houses, tree houses, etc. The Center will also serve as a demonstration center for eco friendly construction technologies as well as for renewable energy, watershed management, water and waste recycling. It will be a self-sustainable demonstration model for locals and tourists.

Ayurveda Health Resort:

Sawantwadi is known for the practice of traditional Indian medicine called Ayurveda. It has one of the best Ayurveda colleges in the country where students from all over India are admitted. Ayurveda professes treatment of mental and bodily ailments through Panchakarma – five methods by which intoxicants in the human body are removed by treatments such as herbal bath, etc. The center is proposed to be built using eco friendly techniques of construction such as laterite stones and mud walls.

The Municipal Council of Sawantwadi has also undertaken a massive tree plantation program along roadsides and gardens. Local varieties of trees that are on the verge of extinction are being specially planted and propagated. These include Moha, Pangara, Palas and Bahawa.

Rachana Sansad's Institute of Environmental Architecture

The Rachana Sansad's Institute of Environmental Architecture, Prabhadevi, Mumbai, which conducts Postgraduate courses in environmental architecture, is planning and coordinating the ecofriendly development of the project in collaboration with other organizations such as Shivsadan Renewable Energy, and forestry and ecological consultants such as Prof. Nandkumar Moghe and Prof. V.N. Joglekar.

Conclusion

Indeed, places like Sawantwadi, with their natural marvels need to be preserved for their own sake. They provide inspiration and spiritual regeneration. They are a powerful representation of the forces of nature. Ecotourism must sustain these resources, not only because they serve as an evolutionary link to our future, but for the pure joy of experience. Further, Ecotourism is likely to fuel the demand for greener and eco friendly lifestyles, by catering not only to foreign tourists in search of simple and peaceful lifestyle, but also for the local tourists looking for affordable yet unique atmosphere distinct from urban concrete jungle. At the same time, Ecotourism provides opportunities for local people to improve their standard of living and preserve their cultural heritage, arts and crafts.

Sawantwadi, with a population of 25,000, has 816 families living below the poverty line. The Municipal Council of Sawantwadi plans to bail out at least 25% of this “below poverty-line” (BPL) population through Ecotourism in the next 6 years. For this purpose, youth from BPL families are being selected and trained for various tourism activities. They shall be employed on a profit sharing basis with the Municipal Council. Ecotourism will thus bring a new ray of hope in the lives of these people.
