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3. At The Outset Of 3rd Decade Of Devbhoomi- Rise Of Tourism In The State Amidst Pandemic

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Abstract

One cannot ascertain the exact impact or evaluate in numbers the humanitarian disaster caused by Novel coronavirus (Covid-19). This goes true because the global economic crisis triggered worldwide has a very big picture to show. The pandemic has hit hard at the Foreign Exchange Earnings, severely disrupted job opportunities, created vent in local and national developments and all of this combined has directly affected the tourism industry. Tourism sector undoubtedly brings in economic growth for a region as an industry, but, one cannot disagree that many tourist destinations are susceptible to such pandemic and natural disasters. Bearing the double brunt of tragedy is one such state of Uttarakhand. From the 2013 Kedarnath tragedy caused by torrential downpour and subsequent flooding to the current global pandemic, this state has come a long way in terms of growth in tourism and will continue so post the Covid-19 situation is combatted. This article will focus on how the state of Uttarakhand has dealt with the impact of several natural disaster and what will be the future face of tourism of the state post Covid.

Keywords: *Tourism, Devbhoomi, Natural Disaster, Covid, Homestays, Economic development*

Introduction

Tourism is a big boon for this planet. World Travel and Tourism Council has given special mention to India stating that it is home to numerous tourist destinations and heritage sites across the world. Mr. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was the first person to recognize the importance of tourism in the country. He conceived tourism as not only a means to garner foreign exchange but also a means of seeking international cooperation, understanding and peace between the nations. The World Travel & Tourism

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Council calculated that tourism generated INR6.4 trillion or 6.6% of the nation's GDP in 2012. It supported 39.5 million jobs, 7.7% of its total employment. The sector is predicted to grow at an average annual rate of 7.9% from 2013 to 2023. At this pace, India would be among one of the top three countries with the fastest growing tourism industries over the next decade. Amidst this setting, there are several states in the country which add to the incredible potential that Indian tourism has earmarked for generations to witness and one such state is Uttarakhand.

The scenic beauty and divine atmosphere of Devbhoomi transcends cultural signification and speaks about a broad visual experience. The state of Uttarakhand preaches tourism not just through its deeply revered religious pilgrimages for followers of different faiths but also through significant Himalayan ranges and glaciers, the scenic beauty of Ganga and Yamuna arising from glaciers of the state and various hill stations and wildlife spots not to be missed. The state accounts for nearly 70% of its area covered through forests which adds to emerging prospects for tourism to flourish by playing the critical role of green lung. Tourism and Hospitality support 80% of the economy and livelihood in the state. The divine pilgrimage sites, snow capped mountains, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, trekking sites give a satisfying experience. The Char Dham yatra beginning from Yamunotri, Gangotri and concluding at Kedarnath and Badrinath speaks volume about the sacred and religious beliefs infused in the environment there. The state has always been susceptible to carving out a niche for itself not just nationally but also on global platform inspite of all odds just because tourism is the heart and breath of the state. Whilst discussing about the positives of the state, it becomes more important to give a mention to the state's build up of many additional resources for cultural, adventure, nature and leisure tourism which add to the strength and assets of Devbhoomi. People are well acquainted with the Char Dham in the state, but there are several unexplored places such as Panchbadri, Panchprayag, Patal Bhuvneshwar and Panchkedar which also need a special mention. The cultural heritage of the state goes beyond counting. There are innumerable local fairs and festivals beginning from Jhanda Mela (Dehradun), Surkanda Devi Mela (Tehri) to Nanda Devi Mela(Nainital) and Chaiti Mela (Udham Singh Nagar) which have been drawing tourists attention over ages. The wildlife heritage is not just restricted to Jim Corbett National Park but also provide many more attractive destinations like Rajaji National Park, Govind Pashu Vihar and Chilla and Saptarishi Ashram. Eco tourism in the state

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cannot be missed out as its diversity is not just about flora and fauna but also extend to wide scope for Trekking, jungle safaris and nature walks.

However, the state has always been subject to challenges arising ever since its inception in 2000 as the 27th state of India. Just before Uttarakhand was about to take birth from the northern part of Uttar Pradesh it faced the Chamoli earthquake in 1999 caused by major thrust faults that arose due to undergoing shortening of Himalayan range. Following that, nearly after a decade of the formation of the state, there were 2 major setbacks in 2012 and 2013, the Himalayan flash floods and Kedarnath tragedy. There were Landslides and flash floods triggered by sudden cloudburst. More than 5000 people were killed and 3lakh trapped who were on Char Dham pilgrimage visit. In 2021 there was a massive flood at Dhauli Ganga river as a part of Nanda Devi glacier broke off causing death of nearly 150 labourers working at a power project. This incidence had almost refreshed memories of 2013 floods. And not to forgot, the recent mishap took place when state was already caught in guards of Novel Coronavirus. Covid changed lives globally. It nearly impacted 50 million jobs associated with global travel and tourism industry including India and its states. Uttarakhand being a prime tourist destination in northern part of India suffered a huge blow. Covid bought life to a standstill and tourism sector was worst hit. The year 2020 was a turmoil for Indian economy and tourism sector almost took a detour with people returning home due to job losses.

Now, at the backdrop of the entire lockdown era, the state has been on its toes to break the shackles of pandemic through creating a more sustainable tourism by means of promoting it on a local platform and through collective support of Government and its people. With decline in cases of Covid over last 2years, the state is all set to revamp the tourism sector as it considers it to be one of the major promoters of economic growth and livelihood for its people. The government has already on its way to recovery by strategizing on 2 grounds, one is the 200 cr relief package announced for stakeholders of tourism industry and other is rolling out of self –employment opportunities for its youth populace. Amidst the jibe which nature has been constantly taking on the state partnering with the ongoing global pandemic crisis, it will be enlightening to learn from this study that whether people are interested in visiting areas affected by natural disasters and that how tourism industries do not always suffer long term consequences.



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A backdrop of 3 Decades of Devbhoomi- Trail of Natural Disasters to Global Pandemic:

The state had taken birth immediately after witnessing the Chamoli disaster caused due to avalanche. The massive flood in the Dhauliganga river was totally uncalled for as it led to more than 200 to be missing and destroying the Rishiganga power plant and Tapovan- Vishnugadh hydel power project. The quake had not just hit the foothills of Himalayas but also affected several other districts with major damage to infrastructure caused by landslides. This definitely was not a good start to the innings and just after completion of a decade, the state witnessed back to back devastating floods in 2012 and 2013. The Himalayan flash floods in 2012 not only claimed lives but also wept off several homes in Garhwal region, the Assi Ganga Hydel power project and a major chunk of Gangotri National Highway. Following it was the mid day cloudburst in June 2013 preferably the greatest rainfall than the state usually received. This disaster baffled everyone as it was quite unprecedented. Destruction of homes, bridges, roads led to severe impact on infrastructure of the state. The impact was such that even after 5 years of the flash floods, insignificant number of people who perished were identified. Tourism took a reverse gear in 2013 and post this authorities decided for major overhaul in nearby areas. Government declared year 2015 as year of tourism in state. It also decided to go for means of dark tourism in Kedarnath as adopted by USA and France in the past to attract tourists to places that are identified by death, destruction and tragedy. A memorial forest in the name of "Smriti Van" was proposed in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the disaster. The state also decided to go for a keeping a record of tourists so that upcoming visits to pilgrimage sites could be more organized.

So far the state had just begun to recreate tourism post its 2013 tragedy unknown in the shadows of another pandemic that was yet to come. This time, nature took a heavier toll than before. The state had although banned entry of domestic and international tourists but still, no one had clues of where this would go and with this order coming into force, the tourism industry has already witnessed a freakish lockdown till "further orders". The COVID-19 pandemic took a direct shot at the tourism sector of the State, which is a mainstay for the residents, offering employment and income to hundreds of thousands of families. As per the Uttarakhand Finance Department, revenue loss was estimated at around 8000 crores due to lockdown restrictions. In terms of employment, close to 2.3 to 2.5 lakh people engaged in the hotel industry had lost their jobs by mid of 2020. The state where hotel

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bookings were in full swing before 2019 faced a staggered exit due to Covid with multiple hotels being converted into quarantine centres. The Char Dham yatra was suspended leading to job losses of thousands of people. Restrictions imposed on number of visitors accounted for just a miniature of previous year's numbers, worthless to mention the figures. In a comparative analysis wherein the number of tourists stood at approx 3.5 to 3.9 cr from 2017 to 2019, it drastically fell down to less than 80 lakhs post 2019 thereby creating financial uncertainty. The situation gradually improved in June 2021 witnessing nearly 90 lakhs tourists coming to the state but the Haridwar Maha Kumbh mela saw a major flouting of Covid guidelines making the situation spin put of control. The Char Dham yatra which is the backbone of state's economy was first disallowed and then delayed. The Kailash Mansarovar yatra and Adi Kailash trek have been postponed for 2 continuous years.

Future Face of Tourism in Uttarakhand: Overhaul of Infrastructure:

Tourism in Uttarakhand took a reverse gear after 2013 and amidst the pandemic there has been continuous strenuous efforts for a major overhaul in nearby areas. Without a doubt, it is needless to say that times are tough for the state ahead but revival is on its way. The gates of decked up Kedarnath temple have been opened along with portals of Gangotri and Yamunotri but the Covid impact has left its clear mark. However, the government stands committed on taking up initiatives to build tourism back and has adopted two-pronged strategy in the state. On one hand, relief package of 200 crore to respective stakeholders related to the tourism industry has been announced and on the other hand various schemes have been brought on the floor to encourage self-employment opportunities for the local youths and provide newer dimensions to the state's tourism industry. Tourism Minister of the state, Shri Satpal Maharaj has also underlined that after reading the mindsets of the new age travellers, the state is directing it's energy towards the development and promotion of it's offbeat locations, adventure destinations, Homestays and immunity-boosting cuisine etc (illustrated below). These initiatives have added to constructive changes in the state tourism and is getting positive response from the tourists of all age groups.

1. Trekking Traction Scheme:

Government initiatives in this regard is to promote trekking and workation hand in hand thereby helping local communities who reside in areas suitable for treks and in remote areas. This scheme will



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be a positive start to strengthen self employment and boost economy of rural areas. This will scale up adventure tourism wherein tourists would get facilities to stay in remote rural areas.

2. Promotion of homestays:

The concept of homestays have been in practice since 2015 (the year of Tourism) and its demand took a rise post pandemic. People are now moving to less crowded places and travelling in big groups. The government is not only granting financial support in this regard but also training people for marketing their facilities better and providing better hospitality.

3. Bagging on adventure tourism to revive the industry:

A separate wing for adventure tourism is being brought in by Uttarakhand Tourism Board to cater to all age groups. River rafting and national skiing championship will be key components of adventure tourism initiatives of the state. Three national level adventure sports have already been undertaken at Almora, Nainital and Pauri.

4. Unveiling of new tourism spots:

In continuation to the promotion of trekking, 70 new tourist spots are about to be linked with discovery of 13 new trekking routes. These routes shall connect locals with new employment opportunities in developing basic amenities along these routes which will be a challenge. This initiative which will cater widely to niche tourists by its new offerings shall also open doors for aggressive marketing for Uttarakhand. The revival of tourism in the State began after the second wave when government focused on promoting multiple destinations in the state which was shortlived but soon geared up post the ebbing of 2nd wave of Covid. Travel and tourism took an upward lift and turned out to be favoured avenues leading to transformation of the state with improvement in health and well being of people.

Conclusion

The current situation of tourism has been such that the number of visitors are increasing year after year. Recently, at the India Today Tourism Survey and Awards 2021 held in November 2021 for India's finest tourist destinations, Uttarakhand has won three awards out of 9 separate categories- the

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Best Wildlife Destination was bagged by Jim Corbett National Park , Rishikesh earned The Best Adventure Destination and Kedarnath was declared the Best Spiritual Destination. Post Covid, this has been a blessing in disguise for the state made possibly due to being the best destination choice for masses. Northern India has enormous potential for tourism and the state of Uttarakhand needs nothing but sustainable and environmental friendly approach to regain the industry. If the situation persists and this type of event re-occurs, with huge loss of life and destruction and state government doesn't take strong action, then we have a reason to worry, but, the government has been planning several proactive steps which will bring positive changes in different sectors and this will further signal a constructive road to recovery. Uttarakhand has begun the concept of homestays which shall definitely curb the impact of external shocks arising due to the pandemic which has changed the mindsets of people to move to open places from crowded junctions.

With this effort being taken by the state and utilizing it to revamp tourism many concerns will be addressed. Firstly, environment will be in safe hands by removing the jamming in the tourist centres, next, more opportunities of livelihood will be extended to rural masses who were earlier untouched and most importantly, with the concentration of tourism in few places being warded off there will be a surety of tourists staying for longer duration and thereby creating a positive cycle for the state to flourish. To walk hand in hand with the 'new normal', government has laid stress on reforms which shall definitely bring back recovery as people will now prioritise cleanliness and hygiene amidst pandemic. Once this surety is given, tourism will see a huge influx of tourist and there will be rapid recovery and growth in the sector.

Consistent efforts of the State Government will go a long way to ensure long term and sustainable development in the State. Keeping the positive side of everything in mind just as times post 2013, the state will definitely bounce back. The government is hopeful of retaining its precious natural environment and so should we be.

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