



Prospect of Rural Co-operative Tourism Development in North East India: Case of Sikkim

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Co-operative tourism is emerging as new method of tourism encompassing collective efforts of tourism service providers in facilitating tourism products. Recently, Indian States and Union territories have tapped into the benefits of co-operative tourism and its impacts on socio-economic development of destination areas. Kerala, West Bengal, for example has done exceedingly well in reaping the benefits of co-operative tourism in different spheres of tourism products. The North Eastern Region (NER) in general, and Sikkim in particular, have potential to excel in this field of tourism. The paper explores the prospect of rural co-operative tourism development in Sikkim and suggests ways and means of executing it.

Introduction and Background

Co-operative tourism embraces co-operative principles of tourism development in destination management. In this context, co-operation denotes working together with common economic or social objectives, and a co-operative society is a voluntary association of persons working together to promote common economic interest. The members of the society come forward as a group, pool their individual resources, and utilise them in the best possible manner to derive common benefit. Such societies are either registered or un-registered under the law of the land. As Pourjam and Dehghan (2010, p. 3) point out, "in most developed countries and Asian countries especially India, tourism co-operatives have played an important role in national development". Community based tourism organisations (CBT) have close affinity with their host communities in rural settings and work together to derive common economic interest of its members; most often working along co-operative lines.

Tourism co-operatives are a subset of all co-operatives that aim to maintain ethical values in all aspects of services. These multipurpose co-operatives organise and manage all stages of tourism, which includes advertisement, guidance, accommodation, travel itineraries, holding domestic and foreign tours, travel and hospitality services, accommodation and related services, and dining houses and restaurants (Pourjam & Dehghan, 2010). There are also single purpose co-operatives that carry out a part of the job or provide a single service. As in Iranian tourist co-operatives, as outlined by Pourjam and Dehghan (2010) this may be in the form of transporting, guiding and leading tourists, advertising, or specific services.

In a presentation on the International Labour organisation (ILO) and tourism, Vocatch (2010) outlined the development of the concept of "tourism for working people" (p. 4), which originated in France. These "social tourism co-operatives" constitute a strong movement both in France and in neighbouring Belgium and legislation was enacted to oversee the movement here and also in Italy (Vocatch, 2010). Vocatch (2010) also describes how the movement spread to other parts of Europe, including for example, Greece, Portugal, Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK). In some countries existing consumer co-operatives have created networks of travel agencies such as Travelcare (Co-operative Travel, UK); Viajes Eroski (Travels Eroski, Spain); and Dansk Folke Ferie (now FolkeFerie.dk, in Denmark) COOP and Der Touristik — parent company to ITS Coop Travel (Switzerland); and M. Travel (part of the Hotelplan Group, Switzerland) of which Hotelplan Holding AG is a 100% subsidiary of the Federation of Migros Cooperatives, which celebrated its eightieth birthday in 2015 (see www.hotelplan.com).

The advent of the European Council of Social Tourism (CETOS) in 1986 heralded a new era in harnessing co-operative tourism, making available around 33,00,000 beds for tourism with,

then, an annual turnover of around 7.2 billion USD (ILO, 2000, p. 57). Its members, however, in addition to consumer co-operatives, included associations such as youth organisations and organisations promoting family values, which were not necessarily legally registered as co-operatives even though they may work along co-operative lines (ILO, 2000).

In Italy, Legacoop Tourism is the main national co-operative structure bringing together 350 associated co-operatives: hoteliers and other tourism operators, both incoming and outgoing tour operators, and numerous workers co-operatives which manage hospitality structures such as hotels, camp sites, holiday homes and mountain refuges. Its range of attractions also includes farming co-operatives (offering farm house holidays) and fishing co-operatives (that offer hospitality in the fishermen's houses and opportunities to participate in fishing boat trips). There are also co-operatives operating wild life parks, providing ecotourism, school trips, education for the environment and trekking (Vocatch, 2010, p. 6).

In Asia, there are important companies that have their origins in co-operatives created to provide services for their members, particularly in Japan and Korea. There are also tourism co-operatives operating in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Vietnam, China and India. Such co-operatives have played an important role in national development and perceive co-operative tourism as an effective tool for socio-economic development: creating employment and job opportunities for local people on the one side and earning foreign currency on the other.

The Indian Government considers rural tourism as one of the thrust areas of tourism development in the country. Given the strength of Indian co-operatives, it is envisaged that co-operatives could become established in the field of rural tourism as, overall, co-operatives cover almost 98 per cent of villages in the country (Gaiker, 2015). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) — Ministry of Tourism, Government of India project on tourism stresses strong community, private and public sector partnership for boosting rural tourism in the country. Indian co-operatives, because of their reach and wide networks, are well positioned to take leading roles in the field of rural tourism (Verma, 2008, p. 1).

Success stories of some tourism co-operatives suggest that the European scenario may, on a smaller scale, be replicated in India. For example, Medially Fishermen's Cooperative Society (MFCS) in Kolkata, West Bengal is a successful fishery co-operative which has utilised waste water to produce fish. The society has now ventured into developing a nature park, which has emerged as tourist hot-spot in the city. The park has attractive boating facilities and an ecosystem has been created that attracts many birds. The animal park is another attraction having deer, rabbits, and tortoises (Verma, 2005, p. 1).

Alleppy Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC, established in 1987) is a co-operative society of houseboat owners and other stakeholders in the houseboat tourism business in Alleppy, a backwater town located in the Southern part of Kerala. The case of Alleppy is a revelation of the otherwise unnoticed benefits of co-operative alliances in an industry like tourism with the provision of truly authentic products and the opportunity for mass customisation, together with the members' concern for sustainable development in the region (George, 2007, p. 1).

In North Bengal, a group of people have formed a co-operative society to work in the tourism sector (Sharma, 2009). The Tourism Cooperative Society Limited initially set up with 47 members. It has set a new business model by organising villagers at Santarabari in Eastern Dooars and Fulbari Division of Makaibari Tea Estate, Kurseong. The society members, including government employees and bankers, come from eight districts of West Bengal, including Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri in the North; and Kolkata, Burdwan, Howrah, Hooghly and the two Parganas in the South.

Drawing on the experiences above, the present piece of work is an attempt to link the growth of rural co-operative tourism with CBT in the touristically sound North East Indian state of Sikkim. The paper explores the relationship between co-operative tourism and community based tourism; assesses the present status of community based tourism in adventure and ecotourism products in Sikkim; and suggest ways and means of promoting rural co-operative tourism in Sikkim.

Methods

This study examines the prospect of rural co-operative tourism, the by-product of community based tourism (CBT) in Sikkim. It focuses on using co-operative tourism as an effective tool for better protection of biodiversity and natural resources on the one hand and enhancement of income to the local community on the other.

The study is descriptive in nature mainly using published reports in newspapers and journals, annual and study reports of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India along with Department of Tourism, Government of Sikkim including other print and internet publication relating to this field of study. The information derived from sources were processed and analysed as per the need of the study.

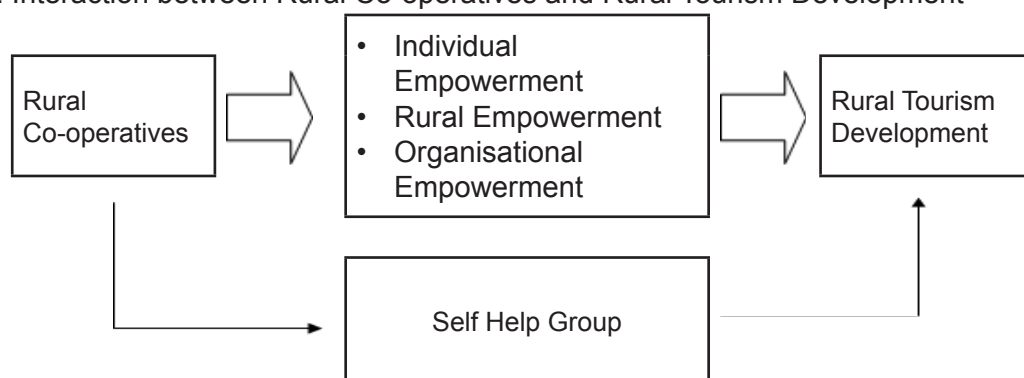
Review of Literature

Broad stakeholder involvement, according to de Araujo and Bramwell (2000, p. 272) “has the potential to increase the self-reliance of stakeholders and their awareness of issues [and to] facilitate more equitable trade-offs between stakeholders with competing interests”. Equally, it can promote shared ownership of decisions and more “consensus” (Warner, 1997, cited by de Araujo & Bramwell, 2000, p. 272). Moreover, they cite Gray (1989) in suggesting that collaborative planning entails a “collective process for resolving conflicts and advancing shared visions involving a set of diverse stakeholders” (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2000, p. 273), and in a tourism context, use Jamal and Getz’s (1995, p. 188) definition where collaborative planning is seen as a “process of joint decision making among autonomous, key stakeholders ... to resolve planning problems ... and/or to manage the issues related to planning and development” (p. 273). Such planning in tourist destinations is:

usually considered to involve direct dialogue among the participating stakeholders, including public sector partners, and this has the potential to lead to negotiation, shared decision making and consensus building about planning goals and actions ... Much collaborative planning is made in working groups with a small number of individuals, who often are representatives of organisations or stakeholder groups (de Araujo & Branwell, 2000, p. 273).

Morrison (1998, p. 192) proposes, for example, the adoption of a strategy of marketing consortium membership as one of the means of accentuating the positives for small hotel firms in peripheral destinations and ameliorating the negatives. For certain activities/areas, success is based on the ability of grassroots institutions to use participatory and people-centric approaches. In this regard, co-operatives are considered to have an advantage over other organisations (Taboli & Yadollahi, 2011). Capacity building through rural co-operatives is necessary, then, for stakeholders involved in tourism to engage local communities (Bushel & Eagles, 2007, p. 7). Raik (2002) stresses that rural co-operatives can affect rural tourism through three major levels: community (informal group), organisational (tourism) and individual (people), a relationship of this kind is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Interaction between Rural Co-operatives and Rural Tourism Development



Source: Aref & Gill, 2009, p. 72

Aref and Gill (2009, p. 72) cite Verma (2008) in suggesting that rural co-operatives “must play an active role in promoting tourism in rural areas through establishing strong networks with tourism organisations and fostering collaboration with local people”.

Community based tourism (CBT)

Community based tourism (CBT) emerged in the mid 1990s. It is small-scale and involves interaction between host communities and visitors, and is seen as particularly suited to rural areas. CBT is managed and owned by the community, for the community. It is “a form of ‘local’ tourism, favouring local service providers and suppliers and focused on interpreting and communicating local culture and environment” (Asker et al., 2010, p. 2). Asker et al. (2010, p. 3) list several CBT attributes, including:

- a) Aiming to benefit local communities, particularly rural and indigenous peoples or people in small towns, contributing to their well-being (income generation) and well-being of their cultural and environmental assets.
- b) Hosting tourists in the local community.
- c) Managing tourism schemes communally.
- d) Sharing profits/benefits equitably.
- e) Using a portion of profits/resources for community development and/or to maintain and protect a community cultural or natural heritage assets (e.g. conservation).
- f) Involving communities in tourism planning, decision making, development and operations.

Millen and Edwin (as cited by Pourjam & Dehghan: 2010, p. 3) warn that local community involvement will not be sustainable unless people themselves tend to get the control of their destiny.

Pearce, Moscardo and Ross (1996, p. 7) observe that successful cases of tourism development through community based tourism projects in the developing world can be cited as examples of how tourism can foster national and international co-operation, understanding and peace. The Costa Rican Community Based Rural Tourism (CBRT) organisations like ACTUAR (Costa Rican Association of Community Based Rural Tourism) and COOPRENA (Cooperative Consortium-National Tourism Network) are examples (Trejos et al., p. 17). Both ACTUAR and COOPRENA have their own tour operators who perform as a marketing ‘arm’ for their members’ tourism supply. In 1997, Symbiosis Tours was created as a tour operator that belongs to COOPRENA and its affiliates (Trejos et al., 2008, p. 21).

The Government of India, along with UNDP and a self-help women’s group is developing and promoting 31 villages across the country as rural tourism sites (Verma, 2005, p. 6). The aim of this project is to promote community based initiatives, strengthen bonds between cultures, establish co-operation, understanding and peace between social groups (MacDonald, 2007). Village tourism started in Sikkim with Sikkim Himalayan Home stays which is a project of Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS), a non-government organisation (NGO). ECOSS started the project in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The main objective of the project was to promote community based tourism, low impact tourism, and to generate scope for local people or communities to be economically benefitted. The purpose of the project was to initiate village tourism at potential villages with villagers as facilitators. Once the villagers under the project become proficient enough to receive guests, then whole control regarding continuity of tourism transfers to a local body of that particular village. In other words, when communities of that village become self-sufficient enough to perform as service provider or efficient enough to maintain host-guest relationships in a sustainable manner, then the purpose of the project is supposed to be more-or-less successful for that project village (Das & Roy, 2012, p. 4).

Community Based Tourism (CBT) in North East India

CBT has its meagre presence in the North Eastern Region (NER) of India: Barring Sikkim, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. CBT, with active involvement of locals, is almost invisible in the region. Recently, there has been renewed impetus in the form of active support and co-operation from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) projects for village tourism development in select villages in India with lively participation of local people. Such Endogenous Tourism Projects also involves local implementing non-government organisations (NGOs) (Kalita, 2010). The project aims to develop selected rural destinations in India as rural tourism villages.

The activities of the project have been organised into 'hardware' and 'software' components. The hardware component includes construction, renovation of buildings, roads and water facilities while the software activities consist of community sensitisation, training, capacity building and skills development. The Centre for Environment Education (CEE, 2009) for example, is carrying out software activities in Sualkuchi, a weaving village in Kamrup district of Assam that has been recognised by UNDP as the "Manchester of the East".

Sualkuchi is the largest village in Assam, and is famous for traditional handloom work and its rich cultural heritage. It offers a unique experience of silk weaving practices right from reeling to weaving. Thousands of visitors visit Suakuchi every year. The aim of the project is to offer tourists a unique experience and give the community a sustainable livelihood from tourism. As described above, once the villagers have the capacity to handle tourists, the project will be handed over to the Village Tourism Committee. The other important (mainly NGO) partners of CEE in village tourism projects are: the North-East Social Trust (NEST — Durgapur, Assam), ADITHI (an NGO working in partnership in Nepura, Bihar), Dzumsa (— the political/administrations of Lachen, Sikkim), Women's Interlink Foundation (WIF — a local NGO in Ballavpur Danga, WB), the Association for Social health & Advancement (ASHA — Muktamanipur, WB), and Panchayet (village council — Kamalasaragar).

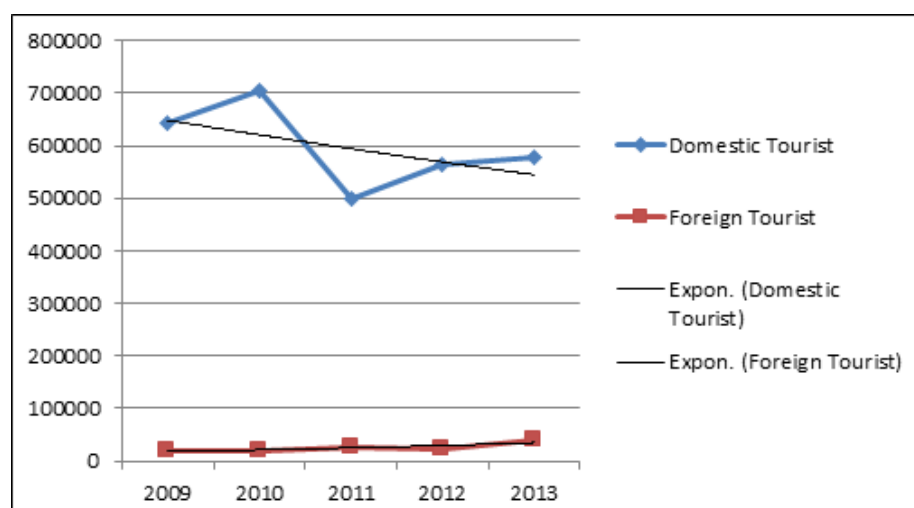
Similarly, Help Tourism, a tour operator and destination management consultant, has initiated more than 31 projects for total community involvement near national parks, and biosphere reserves in different parts of East and North East India. Such places include Pelling (West Sikkim), Lava (Kalimpong), Garumara Jungle Camp (Dooars), Rishyap (Kalimpong), Tinchuley (Darjeeling), Bali Jungle Camp (Sunderban), Uttarey (West Sikkim), Varsey Jungle Camp (West Sikkim), Manas Maozigendri (Bodoland), Kamlang and Namdhapa (Arunachal Pradesh), Ziro (Arunachal Pradesh), Chilapata Jungle Camp (Dooars), Kolakham — Neora Valley (Kalimpong), Dibang Valley Jungle Camp (Arunachal Pradesh) (Bhattacharjee & Ganguli, 2011, p. 7).

The success of community inclusive projects of Lava, Lataguri, Tinchuley, and Manas demonstrates that community empowerment through tourism initiatives can be a practical and powerful way of sustaining economic and environmental well-being of fringe societies near national parks. The training and constant monitoring of the members becomes crucial. The Government interventions in this regard would help in strengthening effectiveness of the process (Bhattacharjee & Ganguli, 2011, p. 8).

A Focus on Sikkim

The former erstwhile Kingdom of Sikkim joined the Indian Union in 1975. At only 7096 square kilometres and with half a million people (as per 2001 census), Sikkim may be among India's smallest states, but its biodiversity, topographical variations and ethnic diversity belie its size. The state is divided into four districts — North, South, East and West with Gangtok the capital in the east district. More than three quarters of Sikkim's borders are international, with Nepal, Tibet (China) and Bhutan bounding the landlocked state to the west, north and east respectively. Figure 2 shows the influx of domestic and foreign tourists visiting Sikkim during 2009-2013 (collated from information from Ministry of Tourism annual reports and tourism statistics – www.sikkimtourism.gov.in and www.tourism.gov.in).

Figure 2. Tourist Influx in Sikkim during 2009-2013



The above figure suggests that domestic tourists are the mainstay for revenue generation in Sikkim whereas foreign tourists represent less than 10 per cent of total tourist influx in the state during 2009-2013. The figures show an increasing trend for foreign tourists and a decreasing trend for domestic tourists during the period under review. However, amongst the eight North Eastern States (NESs) of India, Sikkim is the highest recipient of foreign tourists during the last twenty years or so.

For promotion of rural tourism, the concept of home stays was introduced in Sikkim in the late nineties. Such a scheme was initially put in place to shift tourists from congested tourist pockets while creating job opportunities for locals. In doing so, satellite areas have emerged as tourism sites in far flung areas of the state. A brief picture of home stays in Sikkim is shown in Table 1.

The village tourism centres in Sikkim are generally run, promoted and maintained by local people. Each village tourism destination has its own local body or community based organisations (CBOs) e.g. Kewzing Tourism Development Committee (KTDC) at Kewzing village alongside Ravangla; Dzongu Ecotourism Committee (DEC) at Dzongu; and Khedi Ecotourism Development Promotion Society (KEEP) at Pastenga. These CBOs work for the interest and welfare of the local people as well as regulating the total system of village tourism, including distribution of profit generated from tourism sector. Those villagers who are interested in participating in tourism activities are directly involved, but on a rotation basis, so that each willing village member may get the chance to take part in such tourism activities.

Table 1: District wise Spread of Home-stays in Sikkim 2008

District	Location	No of Households (approx.)	Capacity (No of Persons) approx.
East	Pastenga	12	35
West	Assam Lingzey	12	40
West	Yuksam	4	20
North	Hee Bermiok	8	12
North	Lachen	8	40
South	Dzongu	6	15
South	Kewzing	15	30
Other Areas		50	200
Total		115	392

Source: 'Prefeasibility Study for Construction of Skywalk at Bhaleydhunga, Sikkim', Final Report, Department of Tourism, Govt. of Sikkim, 2008, p. 112, cited by Dam, 2014, p. 167).

The same rotation arrangement is followed by the villagers in the case of receiving guests. Local youths are involved in tourism activities as tourism guides. Those who are good performers in cultural programmes are also directly involved in entertaining guests through cultural performances; while outsiders' involvement is strictly prohibited in such tourist destinations. Similarly, constructions of hotels are also forbidden. Most significantly, the whole tourism activities in these villages are performed by the villagers in a collective way through the CBO and whatever profit is earned is distributed among the participants based on their level of participation. A fixed percentage of such profit is kept by the CBO for office funds to keep the whole system operating (Das & Roy, 2012, p. 4). The ownership of tourism resources is basically collective and indicates individual ownership of tourism resources is neither claimed nor permissible. Therefore, the maintenance of such resources or natural environment becomes the responsibility of the villagers.

As tourists' interest in home stay in the state increases, several schemes have been implemented through Central and State Government initiatives. During 2012-2014, 718 home stays were sanctioned by the State Government, out of which 278 were taken up during 2013-2014 (Government of Sikkim, 2014 p. 20) As most of the villages in Sikkim are maintained by ethnic communities in respective localities, it has created bonds amongst host communities in offering quality tourism products to guests. In fact, hosts offer food, accommodation, porters, guides as well as entertainment in the form local dance. In doing so, host communities across Sikkim prefer to host guests from around the world. The "Atithi Debo Bhava" (Guest is the God) has become a buzzword for Sikkimese people in general, and tourism service providers from the state.

Bhattacharjee and Kumari (2004, p. 10) describe a comparative study on community based ecotourism in Pelling and Yuksam districts in west Sikkim. During May 1996, participatory community based ecotourism was well developed in Yuksam. Mostly local people participated and still participate in tourism endeavours in Yuksam, which has served as the basis for future tourism planning and development in Sikkim. The rhetoric of Yuksam's community based ecotourism (CBE) relies entirely on local peoples' participation. There is little influence of outsiders in CBE and it is attributed to, as much as possible, local peoples' attitudes and dedication towards the CBE management. Due to the involvement and utilisation of local resources, there are a few sophisticated hotels and lodges in Yuksam. The situation is altogether different in Pelling, however, where CBE is almost absent due to pressure and influence of outsiders; there is very little local peoples' participation visible here.

The Yuksam-Dzongri is a high-altitude trek along the Rathong Chu River in west Sikkim passing through dense forests, placid alpine lakes and offering breath taking vistas of the third highest mountain in the world — the Mount Kanchendzonga. In the last few years, new trekking trails like Everest Singalila in Hee Bermiok, Yambong Singalila at Nambu and Arelungchok-Dzongri in Labdang have been opened. These have resulted in improving socio-economic conditions for people residing in these remote villages in Sikkim. Similarly, the Tsomgo Lake Development Committee (PSS i.e. Lake Conservation Committee) has been constituted for the management of the area (Rastogi, 2006).

After the implementation of CBE in Sikkim, there has been considerable improvement in local peoples' economic condition. Now people who are involved in tourism businesses are benefitting more than in other sectors (Chaudhary & Lama, 2014). They are receiving higher wages in comparison to what they used to get previously with derived benefits distributed equitably, following transparent mechanism.

Discussion and Conclusion

The state of Sikkim has a perfect setting for rural co-operative tourism development because of a wide network of CBOs (Community Based Organisations) in the state. Sikkim's Ecotourism Policy (Government of Sikkim, 2011) has enlisted strategies to forge ties with stakeholders

including developing partnerships with local stakeholders and tour operators/travel agents. It has also encouraged partnerships between NGOs, CBOs, Tourism Development Committees (TDCs), SHGs, Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs), and Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) to manage ecotourism sites; establish and enhance networks with key stakeholders, including research institutions, private sector associations, public agencies and national and international NGOs.

Sikkim Tourism Policy (Government of Sikkim, 2016) does not recognise the importance of co-operative tourism development in the state. However, in the guise of responsible tourism, it has acknowledged multi-shareholder processes and co-operation within a shared understanding that to take and exercise responsibility can bring about rapid and significant change. Local bodies will play crucial roles in planning, development, implementation and management of tourism in their areas.

As most of the CBOs in Sikkim work along co-operative lines, despite not being recognised and registered as co-operative organisations, then such CBOs may easily be transformed into co-operative societies by involving strategic partners for overall tourism development in the state. Such alliances can be forged in all aspects of tourism service provision, maintaining sound management principles. While forming co-operative alliances, the co-operative development agencies may consider the following points:

- Be more selective, by putting more money into projects with sound management.
- Increase the knowledge based, by using resources to support new approaches to service delivery, identifying what works disseminating this information.
- Become better coordinated, by being less interested in donor agency prestige and more interested in how communities, governments and donors can work together to improve services.
- Be more self-critical, by evaluating agency objectives and impact of agency activities.

Such co-operatives can be formed among service providers, which includes hoteliers, porters, guides, tour operators/ travel agents, marketing agents, taxi operators, aviation companies, central and state government employees, and project implementing agencies. Such associations can be extended to national and international levels especially for attracting foreign tourists. The successful growth of Alleppy Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) in a backwater town in Kerala as well as Medially Fishermen's Cooperative in Kolkata provide lessons for forging ties with strategic partners to both draw in tourists and generate income for stakeholders. However, such co-operatives should not be formed for reaping private benefits and there continue to be challenges in considering what motivates tourism organisations to co-operate and how does one facilitate co-operation? Moreover, what are the outcomes of co-operation? Unravelling answers to these questions — and discovering the co-operative advantage — will be all the more challenging given the fragmented nature of tourism field.

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