



TRAVEL GEOGRAPHY OF KERALA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Tourism has been projected as the sole savior of Kerala economy, capable of saving it from fiscal crises. Starting from the very first Government formed after State Formation, all Governments of Kerala have given priority to tourism in their plans and policies. Thus, the abundance of natural wealth of the State has been subjected to indiscriminate marketing, in the name of tourism. This paper makes a survey of the geographical resources of Kerala Tourism and analyses the historical transition and transformation of the geography of Kerala due to the development of tourism. The negative and positive impacts of tourism promotion on the geography of Kerala are subjected to criticism.

Key words: Tourism, Geography, Kerala, History

Introduction: Nature has bestowed its abundant bliss upon Kerala. Referring to the logo of Kerala Tourism- ‘God’s Own Country’, a foreign tourist is said to have commented, “the God who made Kerala must have green fingers”. Kerala has a distinctively diverse geography, which has been highly useful for the promotion of tourism. At the same time, its geography has been found totally unsafe and unsuitable for heavy industries. Ever-increasing density of population and the absence of scope for heavy industries have historically led administrators to think of alternatives suitable to Kerala. Tourism has been found to be the sole solution to save the State from the looming fiscal and unemployment crises.

Tourism is essentially a geographical phenomenon. Except in the case of modern Virtual Tours, Tourism involves a movement across geographical space. Tourism developments make both positive and negative impacts upon geography. The same has happened in Kerala. Tourism has badly affected the geography of certain destinations while at several other places it has contributed to the protection and preservation of the geographical uniqueness. This paper makes a survey of the geographical resources of Kerala Tourism as well as analyses the historical transition and transformation of the geography of Kerala on account of the development of tourism.

Beaches and Beach Resorts

Kerala has a long coastline of 590 kilometers (Gulati, 1984, p.5). The entire coastline is dotted with sandy beaches and rocky promontories and lined with greenish palm trees. These beaches have long been famous for their beauty and safety. India's most renowned and spectacular beach resort, Kovalam, is located sixteen kilometers away from Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala Tourism, 2010, p.4). On the northern end of Kerala, Bekal in Kasaragod district was developed as a Special Tourism Area in 1991 (Sumesh Mangalassery, 2007, p.121). In between Kovalam and Bekal, there are many other beaches which attract tourists from all over the world. They include Papanasham Beach near Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district, Thirumullavaram beach in Kollam district, Alappuzha Beach and historically well-known Kappad Beach in Kozhikode (Mini Antony, 2010, p.436-38). Muzhuppilangad beach in Kannur is the longest 'drive in beach' in Asia (Department of Tourism, 2018, p.2).

None of these beaches were known to the outside world or were marked on the tourism map of the globe until Independence. These beaches were safe zones of the fishermen of the surrounding villages. From 1960's planned development of tourism was initiated at Kovalam by many agencies and tourists began to flow. Tourist resorts are built without any restriction. Kovalam, at present, epitomizes the dismal effects of Third World Tourism and draws attention to the impact of commercial tourism on Kerala (T. T. Sreekumar and Govindan Parayil, 2002).

Mountains and Hill Stations

In popularity, mountain areas are second only to coastal regions, generating fifteen to twenty per cent of annual global tourism (United Nations Environment Programme, 2007, p.11). Tourists are attracted to mountain destinations for many reasons such as climate, clean air, scenic beauty, local culture, history and heritage, unique wildlife and for snow based activities. The Kerala Region of Western Ghats (*Sahyadri*) covers 450 kilometers which accounts for more than twenty eight percent of the total length of Western Ghats (Department of Economics and Statistics, 2018, p.26). Except for a few breaks, the Western Ghats sprawls continuously across the eastern side of Kerala. These mountain ranges have played an important role in the history of Kerala and have protected the culture of Kerala for many centuries from foreign influences. In the tourism scenario of the State also, these mountains play a significant role. Anamudi, the highest mountain in Kerala, is also the highest point in India to the South of Himalayas (Sreedhara Menon, 2000, p.4). Anamudi literally means 'an elephant's forehead'. It has a height of 2695 meters above Mean Sea Level and is located within Eravikulam National Park of Idukki district (Munnar Wildlife Division, 2014, p.15). No permission is allowed to tourists for climbing Anamudi nowadays, but its panoramic view can be enjoyed by them from a distance at Rajamala. Agasthyarkoodam, named after Sage Agasthya, is the second highest peak in Kerala and is situated in Thiruvananthapuram district (Department of Tourism, 2011, p.10). Trekking is allowed to tourists and the forests surrounding the mountain is popular for the presence of a great variety of birds and a number of medicinal plants

(Mini Antony, 2010, p.448). Meesapulimala in Idukki district, the second highest peak in Kerala, is a rising destination for adventurers and trekkers in recent times. Chembra peak in Wayanad and Pythal Mala in Kannur are other famous trekking spots in Malabar.

The Western Ghats in Kerala has a number of hill stations to its credit. The Highlands of Kerala, which is an area of major tourist attraction, enjoys a cool and invigorating climate throughout the year (Department of Economics and Statistics, 2018, p.68). Even when the plains are hot and humid, the highlands remain cool. Ponmudi in Thiruvananthapuram is an idyllic hill station. This hill station is famous for its proximity to the Sea and to the airport and railway station. Another popular hill station in Kerala is Munnar. It was one of the prominent summer resorts of the British Government in South India (Department of Information and Public Relations, 2004, p.36). Munnar still remains the most visited hill station in Kerala. Jatayupara at Chadayamangalam in Kollam district is yet another hill station where the Jatayu Adventure Center has been built for adventure tourists. It has the world's largest bird sculpture and a rock theme park (Kerala Tourism Department). Other than Ponmudi and Munnar, the Western Ghats houses many other hill stations in Kerala. They include Devikulam and Vagamon in Idukki district, Nelliampathy in Palakkad and Nilambur in Malappuram among many others. On account of its climatic similarities with Ooty or Udagamandalam in Tamil Nadu, Nelliampathy is called 'Poor man's Ooty' (Basheer, 2012, p.106).

River System and Waterfalls

Kerala has a peculiar river system. It comprises forty-four major rivers originating from the highlands and their innumerable tributaries and distributaries. All these rivers are comparatively very short and none of them are longer than 250 kilometers. Even the longest river in Kerala, Periyar has a length of 244 kilometers only. All the forty-four rivers of Kerala originate from the Western Ghats and the forty-one west-flowing rivers out of them are controlled by the steep westerly slope of these mountains (Prasannakumar V., 2007, p.18). Three rivers which rise in Kerala flow eastwards, one into Karnataka and the rest two, to Tamil Nadu. All the west-flowing rivers empty themselves either in the backwaters in the coastal area or directly in the Arabian Sea. Historically, these rivers have connected various ports of Kerala with the hinterlands of the region, promoting trade thereby.

This peculiar river system has a special significance as far as the tourism resources of Kerala are concerned. These rivers make lakes, backwaters, waterfalls, estuaries etc in their course. Majority of these rivers passes through steep valleys in their early stages. Therefore they create a number of big and small waterfalls in their course. Athirappally and Vazhachal waterfalls in Chalakudy River are the most famous waterfalls in Kerala. They are located in the Thrissur district near the entrance to the Sholayar Forest Range (John Samuel). Other major waterfalls of Kerala include Valara and Cheeyappara falls in Idukki, Palaruvi falls in Kollam, Perunthenaruvi falls in Pathanamthitta and Chethalayam falls in Wayanad (Mini Antony, 2010, p.446-47).

Lakes, Lagoons and Backwaters

The rivers and streams of Kerala form numerous lakes and lagoons. An interesting chain of backwaters extends along the coast of Kerala. These are either expansions of rivers at their mouths or extensive sheets of water receiving the accumulated flow of several rivers and streams (Francis, 1989, p.402). This continuity facilitates easy transport and communication. They constitute four National Waterways (The Gazette of India, 2016) and the largest among the backwaters of Kerala is Vembanad Lake which sprawls across three districts. Ashtamudi, Sasthamkotta and Vembanad Lake are three wetlands listed among the Ramsar Sites (Kerala State Remote Sensing and Environment Centre, 2010, p.89). The chief lakes in North Kerala are Kumbala, Bekal and Kavvayi while those of the South include Ashtamudi, Kayamkulam, Vellayani and Sasthamkotta. Kumarakom in Kottayam district is another prominent backwater region of tourist interest in Kerala. It is a peninsula jutting into the Vembanad Lake and an area of pristine beauty (George Abraham, 2011, p.639).

In addition to natural lakes and lagoons, Kerala has a number of man-made lakes and reservoirs. Majority of these lakes are reservoirs of dams constructed for the purposes of irrigation and generation of hydro-electricity. These dams and reservoirs are major picnic spots in Kerala. Major spots among them are Idukki, Mullaperiyar, Malampuzha, Neyyar dams. The reservoir of the Mullaperiyar dam is a major wildlife tourist destination known as Thekkady Lake or Periyar Lake (Madusoodhanan and Sreeja, 2010 p.7.). Neyyar Dam along with the adjoining Neyyar Sanctuary and Lion Safari Park constitute a major destination near the capital city of Kerala (Johnson Palackal, 2003, p.23).

Islands

Kerala has only a few islands in its list of destinations. But those who are in the list are among the prominent tourist destinations in Kerala. Kuruva Island in Wayanad district is a river-in island of less than thousand acres. Tourists are not allowed to enter the island but still they can enjoy the beauty of the island from bamboo rafts riding in the surrounding river, Kabini (Mathrubhumi). The city of Kochi has five islands- Vallarpadam, Fort Kochi, Bolgatty, Vypin and Willingdon (Ayesha Sarkar, 2013, p.19). Vypin Island in Kochi is another famous island in Kerala. It is a part of Kochi, the bustling tourist destination in Kerala, and the Goshree Bridge connects the island with the mainland. It was formed as a result of the flood of 1341 in River Periyar (Namboothiripad, E. M. S., 2012, p.16). Vypin Island houses many attractions for its visitors, including Cherai Beach and Pallippuram Fort. Bolgatty, another island in Kochi is a high-flying tourist spot in the city. Extensive promotion of tourism has led to unaffordable pressure of population on these islands.

Forests and Protected Areas

Kerala has a forest cover of nearly twenty-eight percentage of its total area (Forest Survey of India, 2017, p.218). Forests of Kerala are renowned worldwide for the presence of many endangered species of flora and fauna. Forests in Kerala form

part of one of the thirty-two biodiversity hotspots in the world (Kerala State Planning Board). The State has initiated many measures for the protection of its forest cover, while opening them for the tourists. It has a well-established system of protected areas consisting of sanctuaries, national parks and community reserve. There are five National Parks and seventeen Wildlife Sanctuaries. There are Sanctuaries established with special purposes, such as protection of a special fauna or flora. Examples of such sanctuaries include Kurinjimala Sanctuary which was established in 2006 for the protection of *Neelakurinji* (*Strobilanthes Kunthiana*), an endangered shrub (Wildlife Warden, 2015, pp.2-3). Kerala Forest Development Corporation formed in 1975 is vested with the responsibility of promoting ecotourism in the forests. The Corporation looks after the tourism activities of mainly four destinations- Munnar in Idukki, Gavi in Pathanamthitta, Nelliampathy in Palakkad and Arippa in Wayanad. Tourism related activities of other protected areas are managed by the Department of Forests and Wildlife. There are fifty five ecotourism destinations in Kerala at present, with Wayanad district having the highest number of them, nine (Kerala Forest Department, 2017). Active participation of tribal people has been ensured by the Department to protect these forests. Tourism provides them with opportunities for employment and income. Therefore tourism helps to protect the forests in Kerala and to ensure their livelihood.

Conclusion

Tourism has made a deep and profound impact on the geography of Kerala. Almost all aspects of the geomorphology of Kerala have been affected by the promotion of tourism in the State. At some destinations such as Kovalam and Munnar, tourism has drastically affected and changed the entire scenario. The impact of tourism on the backwaters of Kerala has also been found everlasting. While at some other places, it has made some minor but noticeable changes only. Beach of Bekal and the hill-station of Thekkady are found to be of that category. Again, at some destinations, the impact was positive on the geography of the location for which the Protected Areas of Kerala are notable examples. With the active participation of locals, Forests were begun to be preserved well. But at certain other places, the impact was highly negative to the geography. Munnar can be seen as the major example of negative impact of tourism. From an overall assessment, it can be seen that tourism has been both beneficial and harmful to the geographical uniqueness of Kerala.

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