

Karnataka tourism hubs vent anger on litterbugs

BENGALURU, January 21, 2018 00:00 IST
Updated: January 21, 2018 04:27 IST



As overcrowding destroys popular destinations, concerned citizens are fighting to save the State's worst-hit coastal and hill regions

Last year, the world saw the other side of tourism — one where locals organised anti-tourism protests in some of the most visited destinations of Europe. The topic of ‘overcrowding in tourism’ was extensively discussed as residents complained about a host of problems, including increased cost of living and pollution.

Closer home, while the government of Karnataka's Tourism Department is aggressively promoting destinations in the State, anger is brimming among residents. Videos of locals admonishing litterbugs at popular places started doing the rounds on social media in August-September 2017, around the same time that anti-tourist protests erupted in Europe.

‘Right and not right’

“We have been assertive in telling people what is right and what is not right. We stop tourists from cooking outside, pull them up when they throw garbage out of their vehicles or dump waste by the side of the road,” said a member of the Clean Coorg Initiative (CCI), which began in December 2016 as a result of the dismal state of the Keerehole river in Gonikoppal.

They turned their focus to tourism and its impact on the district. “An estimated 12 lakh people visited Kodagu in 2017. We saw traffic jams for the first time in Madikeri and Gonikoppal. The resorts that have come up have no garbage management and, in a fragile ecosystem like Kodagu, landfills are not the solution. There is plastic everywhere in Dubare and near Abbey Falls,” CCI members said, adding that during one of their cleaning drives, volunteers collected one tractor-load of waste from a 2 km forest stretch near Gonikoppal.

“There is no thought given to how tourism is being implemented. We need a long-term tourism plan for regulation. We need a study on the carrying capacity of Kodagu. We cannot use the argument of livelihoods [tourism for developing the local economy] without making it sustainable,” said members of the initiative, sharing examples of how visitor numbers had been capped in many instances to avoid further damage. One of the suggestions CCI is making is to increase entrance fees and other charges, and utilise them for the upkeep of the destination.

Concern for the coast

Trails of trash are an old problem for the coastal belt of the State as well. Dinesh Holla, a Mangaluru-based graphic designer, is a part of Sahyadri Sanchaya, an initiative that's over two decades old and focusses on beaches and the Western Ghats. He says, “We organise treks to the Ghats every Sunday to research the effects of pollution on wildlife. The sea is also suffering. People come here to take selfies but leave behind garbage. Industrial waste and garbage from homestays is let into the sea. The latter do it on the sly.”

Volunteers of their Western Ghats Surakshata Abhiyana programme came up with a unique plan to shame litterbugs. They organised an army of students to clean the shores and appeal to the conscience of the culprits. “The other thing we tried was on Panambur Beach, where a group of

students would hide somewhere and then go after people who throw waste, shaming them in the process,” says Mr. Holla.

What waste management is to residents of Kodagu and coastal Karnataka, rampant land conversion is for locals in the State’s Malenad region. Gurudev S.H., a resident of Chikkamagaluru, who’s ironically engaged in the promotion of treks and water sports, is part of the Malenadu Jagriti Vedike that was started three years ago.

‘Uncontrolled tourism’

“Our fight is not against tourism — it is against uncontrolled tourism. We are not saying tourism should not be there, but it has to be regulated and sustainable to ensure that the Western Ghats are not under threat. In places such as Sringeri, Balehonnur and Horanadu, fertile agricultural land is being converted ruthlessly into villas, resorts and lodges, which bring in people and garbage. Sewage is being let into rivers such as the Tunga, which is already polluted,” says Mr. Gurudev.

Scientists, too, have been sounding warning bells. T.V. Ramachandra from the Energy and Wetlands Research Group, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, said a policy is the need of the hour.

“You cannot just open up all places for tourism. Some places should not be disturbed. All this is only for short-term gain,” he said.

Referring to an earlier IISc study on Chikkamagaluru, Professor Ramachandra said, “Unplanned tourism in Chikkamagaluru is really creating havoc. The district has seen largescale land cover changes in the last decade. In Agumbe, people are feeding junk to endemic species. Solid waste, especially plastic, is also a problem. Interventions, such as road widening and river diversions, are also happening. If we kill the Western Ghats, food and water security for south India is gone.”

Karnataka Tourism officials, however, said people cannot be stopped from visiting places. “It is true that the State’s visibility on the tourism map has increased in the last year-and-a-half. The government is promoting nature in general; specific locations are being promoted by private initiatives. Mechanisms will have to be brought in objectively and scientifically,” said a senior official.

5 types of problems

A 2017 report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) on ‘Coping with success; managing overcrowding in tourism destination’ said ‘overcrowding’ is not exactly alike in any two destinations.

The report focussed on five types of problems associated with tourist overcrowding: alienated local residents, a degraded tourist experience, overloaded infrastructure, damage to nature, and

threats to culture and heritage. “Overcrowding is easier to prevent than to recover from,” the report said.

It went on to highlight best practices for destinations, regardless of whether they were facing overcrowding or not: build a comprehensive fact base and update it regularly to inform and refine tourism strategies; conduct rigorous, long-term planning to encourage sustainable growth; involve all sections of society; find new sources of funding to finance investments in infrastructure; and sustainability.

The report recommends spreading visitors over time as many destinations suffer from imbalances of visitors during certain seasons, days of the week, and times of day, as well as during headline events; regulating accommodation supply; and limiting access and activities.

Sanjar Imam, president of the non-profit Karnataka Tourism Forum, said it was a balancing act.

“There are two aspects to it,” he said. “From the tourism perspective, Karnataka as a destination is not quite on the map as far as international exposure is concerned. One has to look at promoting it and the low-hanging fruits are Kodagu and Chikkamagaluru. But it has to be sustainable, with measures to ensure destinations are not overexploited. That isn’t a priority, unfortunately. Currently, the biggest thing is promotion and putting it [tourism in Karnataka] on the map.”