

Sustaining the Andamans

The islands are a challenge for administrators and tourism players. How does one open up their stunning natural treasures and unique cultural identity to visitors, without further endangering an already fragile ecosystem, asks Payal Dhar



Are the Andaman Islands a tropical paradise or an ecological travesty? That's a trick question, because the truth on the Andamans is complicated. On the one hand is the promise of adventure on its secluded beaches, lush rainforests, mangrove creeks and underwater worlds. But scratch the surface of this surreal landscape and a very different story emerges — of a threatened ecosystem and vested interests champing at the bit to exploit its hidden treasures.

When Ranja Sengupta visited last November, she was surprised, though not at the islands' famed unspoiled natural beauty. "I thought it would be more developed," she recalls. For such a sought-after holiday destination, she had been expecting the attendant commercial hubbub. "Havelock is still quite rural," she says about one of the most popular islands, a pleasant discovery, but one tinged with a sense of foreboding. She feels that in a few years the region will no longer be the unblemished paradise it is today. Change is in the air.

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands, cut off from the Indian mainland, blessed with breathtaking natural beauty, and a reputation for the unknown and exotic, checks all the requirements for being transformed into a tourist haven. This in turn translates into opportunities for the locals (and tourism companies, of course), infrastructure development in the region and overall economic prosperity. But the Union Territory comes with a giant "Handle with Care" sign.

The Andamans are an invaluable and fragile ecological treasure. Their isolation in time and space has made them a unique biodiversity hotspot, among the last remaining untouched ecosystems in the world, on land as well as in the littoral and marine environments. Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS), a non-profit tourism research and advocacy group, believes there may be over a thousand species of plants and animals that are endemic to this region. It also has India's only active volcano — on Barren Island, which erupted only last month.

One school of thought advocates a complete ban on tourism unless it can be equitable, non-exploitative and sustainable. At the other end of the spectrum are governments and businesses with their eye on a prize of a different sort. Hardly surprising, considering that half a million tourists are expected to land in the Andamans this season.

A recent blog post on the NITI Aayog website says: "[The islands] can significantly contribute to the GDP by leveraging the gains from promoting infrastructure and tourism on a large scale." It goes on to describe how the ecosystem can provide medicinal plants and renewable

energy resources for the rest of the nation. The term "exploit" is used more than once. In fact, plans are afoot to open up some eco-fragile islands in the Andamans (as well as the Lakshadweep Islands) to the aforementioned large-scale tourism. Pankaj Sekhsaria, an environmental scientist, believes this owes to the authorities and powers-that-be being uninformed about the geological, ecological and socio-cultural realities of the place. "This is not the way meaningful development is going to happen," he says.

Swathi Seshadri of EQUATIONS is equally sceptical of impending official plans, even if they talk of sustainability. "They may have the right terms, but government initiatives have nothing to do with sustainability — there is nothing actionable in their plans. They are going to side with the big corporations." But are the behemoths of tourism completely ignorant of the contexts in which they operate, even arrogant enough not to care, or blindsided by profit margins? In today's times that would involve living under a rather massive rock.

Barefoot at Havelock, one of the big guns in the tourism space here, claims to be "the first and only ecologically friendly resort in the Andaman Islands", its barefoot moniker signifying a back-to-nature experience. Samit Sawhny, managing director, lists the use of locally sourced building materials,

rainwater harvesting, water table and forest renewal, and providing employment to the local community as their sustainability credentials. Taj Hotels' new property, the Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andamans, has its own biogas facility, water-bottling plant and rainwater harvesting reservoir, and a no-single-use plastic policy. It also claims to have enlisted the help of locals to reduce the hotel's carbon footprint.

When Sengupta visited, she was impressed at the way environmental norms were being adhered to. "It was better than Puri, for instance," she says, citing examples like no-plastic rules, strict timings for some of the remote islands, and the standards of cleanliness. While all of this is heartening, one cloud on the landscape is that sustainability certification is in its infancy in India. The ministry of tourism woke up only a couple of years ago to chalk out the Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (STCI), based on guidelines set by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). However, accredited certification bodies are yet to materialise.

While Taj is seeking certification from EarthCheck for its Andamans hotel (79 of the group's other hotels are already certified), Barefoot isn't interested. Sawhny feels that certification standards aren't relevant any more, and that every location has unique challenges that one has to build smartly and operate within.

THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS' ISOLATION IN TIME AND SPACE HAS MADE THEM A UNIQUE BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT



(Clockwise from top left): Neil's Cove, Havelock Island; diving in the deeps; kayaking in waters around a mangrove forest; a back-to-nature cottage at the Barefoot at Havelock resort



He finds the process of adhering to the demands of certification "a rat race of ticking somebody else's boxes" when most of the demands may be irrelevant to the destination.

Though Barefoot and Taj are examples of changing times, many still have a sketchy understanding of exactly what sustainability might mean. C B Ramkumar, India's representative on the GSTC, says, "Most destinations stop at being environmentally friendly. That's easier to understand and apply than sustainability." A hotel, for example, isn't sustainable even if it uses solar power, harvests rainwater and cultivates its own organic vegetables, when the very land it is built on violates zoning laws.

In fact, Barefoot at Havelock found itself on the wrong side of this issue about a decade ago. One of its hotels, under construction in Colinpur village, was found to be violating the buffer zone (BZ) around the reserve of the Jarawas, an indigenous people of the Andamans. An acrimonious court battle ensued, and Barefoot was asked to stop construction. When asked about the current status of that property, Barefoot was unwilling to give a clear answer. However, the larger picture is even more

interesting, if disturbing. A closer look at the sequence of events in the drama of the buffer zone notification and its implementation reads like a poorly plotted thriller.

"There have been allegations that the BZ notification was brought in to target specific commercial entities," Sekhsaria wrote in *The Hindu* a few years ago. "Of the hundreds of...commercial enterprises in this buffer zone...only a handful were sent closure notices in the first three years after the notification came into force." Local populations too have had reservations about it. There is no clarity on how non-tribal villages in the buffer zone will be impacted, what will happen to the commercial activities that are their livelihoods.

Meanwhile, the Andaman Trunk Road continues to cut through the Jarawa reserve (even after the Supreme Court asked that it be closed in 2002), being the main access route to the tourist sights on Baratang Island. After international outrage earlier in the decade when evidence of "human safaris" in the reserve surfaced, Sawhny says that the authorities have at least taken steps — such as vehicles only being allowed in convoys and not allowed to stop — to curb the likelihood of that sort of thing

happening again. However, it is impossible to say if it has completely stopped. "The road still has traffic," says Sekhsaria, which will always be a problem. If sea routes were developed instead, he adds, that would be welcome.

In these times, sustainability is no longer a catchphrase — it must be a critical component in our everyday lives. In the case of tourism, it is a simple equation, says Ramkumar, "Don't consume more resources than you give back to the economy."

So then what does it mean for tourism on the Andamans? "This is difficult to answer in abstraction, in yes or no terms," says Sekhsaria. "People want to see the islands, it's a beautiful place. The conditions under which tourism is happening have serious problems, though." As custodians of the planet's natural history we haven't exactly been doing a sterling job. The WWF's 2018 Living Planet report finds that humanity has wiped out 60 per cent of the world's fauna since 1970. Then there is apathy and greed from officialdom. If anyone has the power to change things, perhaps it's tourists themselves. As and when they demand sustainable norms and zero-waste options, the authorities and tourism industry will be forced to respond.

Reviving the art of traditional craft

Geetanjali Krishna on Cheli Aipan, an initiative to make traditional folk art lucrative

At a time when Indian contemporary art is expanding to global markets, a tiny organisation in Almora, Uttarakhand is trying to revive domestic interest in a traditional folk art through a unique initiative. Locals call it Aipan, the traditional terracotta and white motifs drawn on floors and walls on ceremonial occasions. Traditionally passed down from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, Aipan consists of rhythmic geometrical patterns on a terracotta painted base. "Every motif is a symbol, and especially the aipans painted for specific religious deities have such profound meanings," says Namita Tiwari, the diminutive artist who has been at the forefront of Aipan's revival.

She founded the outfit Cheli Aipan in 2015, where young women aged between 22 and 35 learn to paint Aipans and market the products they make. The idea, Tiwari says, is not only for them to make some extra money from a traditional skill, but to develop an understanding and appreciation of the art form itself. Recently, Potli, the acclaimed DIY children's craft kit maker, partnered with Cheli Aipan to create an Aipan kit for children, and introduce their traditional art to a larger audience.



Cheli Aipan is a replicable model for reviving folk arts and folk pride as the craft tradition has been eclipsed by lack of economic opportunities

It began when Tiwari, a prize-winning Aipan artist, decided to revive the folk art by training a group of thirty students. Funds from the local administration enabled Tiwari to set up a base in one of the oldest houses in Almora, where ceremonial Aipan paintings had been preserved lovingly. "I found most young people in the area knew little about its significance," Tiwari says.

As the young artists explored the world of Aipan further, they started learning about their cultural tradition. "In order to broaden the market for Aipan, we started painting on a variety of products," says she. "So we

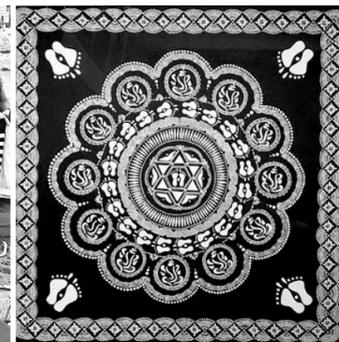
started painting Aipan motifs on paper, cloth, wood and even saris."

Over time, Cheli Aipan has developed a niche market, selling about ₹60,000 worth of products every month. "Of this, the artists get between ₹50-1,000 per piece, depending on the size and intricacy of work," she says.

Cheli Aipan participates in fairs and exhibitions across the country. At the recently concluded buyer-seller meet organised by District Industry Centre Almora, Tiwari and her cohorts at Cheli Aipan had showcased a range of products to buyers across the country. "The district administration regularly buys our products to gift to visitors," she says. "More such regular orders will help us expand better."



POOJA RATNAKAR



PHOTOS: COURTESY CHELI AIPAN

Tiwari aims to train more and more young women to keep Aipan alive. "The art their grandmothers and mothers practised, will give them a modest side income and keep their culture alive," she says. This is significant, for Kumaon has some of the highest migration rates in the country and many have observed that its rich and varied art and craft tradition has been severely

eclipsed by its lack of economic opportunities. In this context, Cheli Aipan is more than a mere livelihood generation program or a social business — it represents a highly replicable model for reviving folk arts as well as folk pride.

Meanwhile, Tiwari and her students are painting symbols representing the feet of the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, on wall

hangings for the upcoming Diwali festivities. She says, "our Aipans have already gone to US and Dubai — we hope they soon reach other parts of India as well."

To learn more, follow Cheli Aipan on Facebook. For the DIY Aipan kit, contact Potli — A bag of wonders on Facebook