

Empowering Rural Ecotourism: Women's Village Organizations and Entrepreneurial Development in Golaghat, Assam**Mr. Atul Saikia****Research Scholar & Prof. Tiluttoma Barua****Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences****Assam down Town University, Panikhaiti, Guwahati, Assam****Abstract**

This study explores the transformative role of women's village organizations in promoting rural ecotourism and entrepreneurial development in Golaghat, Assam. By focusing on Village Level Organizations (VLOs) of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), it examines how eco-tourism initiatives can empower women economically and socially. The research highlights the types of entrepreneurial activities women engage in within the eco-tourism sector and assesses the impact of these ventures on local communities. Through detailed case studies of successful women-led ecotourism projects in Jugibill and the Children & Water Sports Park, this study demonstrates the significant contributions of women to sustainable tourism development. It underscores the importance of VLOs in providing critical support, including training, funding, and networking opportunities, which are essential for the success of these initiatives.

The findings reveal that women's participation in ecotourism leads to socio-economic benefits for their families and the broader community, including improved local infrastructure and services. However, the study also identifies challenges such as cultural barriers and financial constraints that need to be addressed to fully realize the potential of women-led ecotourism enterprises. This study underscores the importance of empowering women through village organizations to drive rural ecotourism and community development. It provides valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to support and expand women's entrepreneurial activities in the ecotourism sector, contributing to sustainable economic growth in rural areas.

Key words- ecotourism, women participation, women ecotourism entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Assam, known for its rich cultural heritage and biodiversity, boasts a multitude of tourism sites ranging from the world-renowned Kaziranga National Park to the quaint villages scattered across its districts. However, the expansion of traditional tourism in the state has led to the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, unregulated development, and significant environmental pollution, evidenced by the pervasive plastic waste and litter left behind by tourists. Despite the hospitality shown by many villages through small and medium enterprises, traditional tourism faces challenges such as unchecked tourist influx, limited job opportunities for local communities, and inadequate waste management. In this context, ecotourism emerges as a viable solution to these issues, emphasizing responsible tourism that minimizes negative environmental impacts. Ecotourism, defined as responsible travel that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people, offers a promising alternative to conventional tourism. It can address many of the adverse effects associated with traditional tourism, such as resource depletion and environmental degradation. There are numerous unexplored sites across various states and districts in India that hold immense potential for development as ecotourism spots. These sites can contribute significantly to economic development and create employment opportunities for local communities. In particular, ecotourism can foster women's participation in entrepreneurship in rural areas, transforming traditional activities into sustainable income sources.

Women in rural areas possess extensive knowledge of traditional food culture, agriculture, shelters, animal husbandry, clothing, and hospitality. However, their contributions and services often go unrecognized. Ecotourism can help bridge this gap by converting women's traditional activities into income-generating ventures. Women can provide hospitality to tourists, offering them an authentic experience of local socio-economic and cultural practices. This not only enhances the tourist experience but also empowers women by recognizing and monetizing their expertise. In the district of Golaghat, Assam, initiatives focusing on women's involvement in ecotourism have shown promising results. Women's Village Organizations (VLOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a crucial role in promoting and sustaining these initiatives. These organizations offer essential support, such as training, funding, and networking opportunities, enabling women to start and maintain ecotourism enterprises. By doing so, they help women

become active participants in the local economy, contributing to their socio-economic upliftment. For instance, in Jugibill and the Children & Water Sports Park in Golaghat, women-led ecotourism projects have been instrumental in showcasing the potential of ecotourism. These projects highlight how women, organized through VLOs and SHGs, can drive sustainable tourism development. The success of these initiatives underscores the importance of collective action and the effectiveness of community-based models. Moreover, the local youth can play a significant role in ecotourism by serving as eco-guides. Instead of migrating to cities in search of employment, young people can find job opportunities within their communities by introducing tourists to local resources and attractions. This not only helps retain the youth in rural areas but also contributes to the overall economic development of the region.

Ecotourism promotes holistic and sustainable development by leveraging local food, culture, handicrafts, language, plants, sports, historical monuments, and indigenous knowledge. It generates livelihoods for local people, preserving and enhancing their cultural heritage. By encouraging responsible tourism practices, ecotourism ensures that tourism development does not come at the expense of the environment or the well-being of local communities. Ecotourism presents a sustainable alternative to traditional tourism in Assam, addressing many of the issues associated with unchecked tourist influx and environmental degradation. By empowering women through VLOs and SHGs, ecotourism can transform traditional activities into viable entrepreneurial ventures, promoting socio-economic development and preserving cultural heritage. The success of women-led ecotourism projects in Golaghat, Assam, demonstrates the potential of ecotourism to drive holistic and sustainable development in rural areas. By focusing on the empowerment of women and the involvement of local youth, ecotourism can contribute significantly to economic growth and community well-being, providing a model for similar initiatives in other regions. The present study highlights the critical role that women's village organizations play in promoting rural ecotourism and entrepreneurial development in Golaghat, Assam. It underscores the importance of supporting these organizations to harness the full potential of women-led ecotourism, ensuring that tourism development is sustainable and benefits the local community.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate Eco-Tourism as a Catalyst for Women's Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas
2. To examine the Role of Village Level Organizations (VLOs) of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Ecotourism Development
3. To assess the Impact of Women's Participation in Eco-Tourism on Local Community Development.
4. To Identify Challenges and Opportunities in Promoting Women-Led Ecotourism Enterprises.

Materials and methods

Present study is based on both primary and secondary data. Direct interview had been done with the women by visiting the *Mohilla Gramya Sangathaon* (Village Level Organisation) which are related to the governance of the tourist sites and their entrepreneurships. Group discussion had been conducted with women to identify the prospects and limitations of the organisations. Case study method has been carried out to make in depth study and to retain the objectives of the present research work.

Area of study

The study area covers mainly two rural ecotourism sites-Jugibill(Lake) Naragaon and Children & Water Sports Park, Melmora. Jugibill(Lake) Naragaon is a beautiful tourist location under Khumtai LAC, 5.5 km away ahead to north west from Golaghat Sadar and Children & Water Sports Park, Melmora is situated amidst the Tea tourism area of greater Melamora. It is located at a distance of 16 km from Golaghat Sadar, 11 km away from NH 37 and 25 km from Degron town under Golaghat Sub division of Golaghat District, Assam. Golaghat is a District under the state of Assam. Before attained the status of independent district in 1987 Golaghat was a sub-division of Sibsagar Distrct. It attained the sub-divisional status in 1847 AD. The Sadar town is the Headquarter of the sub-division. Golaghat is the biggest sub-division in the district. The total area of Golaghat Sub-division is 1838 sq. Kilometres consisting of 6 community development blocks.

Result and findings**SITE 1- Jugibill (Lake), Naragaon of Golaghat:**

Informant Name: Purnima Knowar, age 36, Munmi Knowar, age 35

Keso Ram Knowar, age 70 years.

It was the war time the villagers used the lake area as grazing land for their herd of buffaloes. At that time the open area was around 94 bighas land. Farmers had been resolved to find a “*Min Palan Khetra*” (Fishery Project) in the greater water body. It was the starting point which resulted the cooperative society for the fishery project. A series of discussion had been overcome and in 1961 it was registered in name Japisajia Jugibari Samabai Minkhetra ltd. and the site area was extended to nearly 100 bighas of lake water and land. Since the opening the shared localities used to rear fingerling and fishing at two years of interval.



Entrance view of Jugibill (Lake) Naragaon, Golaghat.

In Dec/ Jan 2017-18 a ‘*Bird Festival*’ was celebrated at the bold initiative of the local MLA, Mr. Mrinal Saikia with active participation of the local people especially of women from different SHGs. The governance of the site was handed over to a group of 20 women under Jugibill Mohila Gramya Sangathon, a VO of self-help groups. It was the foundation of Jugibill with two entrepreneurships.



Jugibill (Lake and Park) view

The lake creates a serene natural beauty and a center of rural tourism which attracts tens of thousands of tourists during the years. Its wonderful sunrise and sunset view is unique and loving. Visitors are able to notice different species of birds while depicting scenes of the lake practically in all seasons of the year. More than 200 species of migratory birds in the winter and sacred Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) decorum on the water surface in all seasons enhance its charming. The natural environment under the governance of Jugibill Mohila Gramya Sangathon enhance cleanliness and evergreen beauty which is mandatory routine duty of all women members. The Bill (Lake) provides a livelihood opportunity to the women members of Self-Help Groups united under the tier of the VO. The members of the SHGs processing and selling local foods, handmade wooden crafts are wonderous to the visitors. Flower Fair is another fun loving with cultural programme celebrated since 2023. Nurseries have been participated for promoting sales and encouraging interest.

SITE 2- Children & Water Sports Park:

Informant Names: Monjula Saikia, Age-40, Mamoni Bora, Age-40, Sarita Bora, Age-45.

The Park was the dream of the educationist, social worker and the founder of small tea grower in Assam Lt. Gangadhar Saikia and in January 11, 2021 his son Mrinal Saikia, MLA Khumtai Constituency has inaugurated this ecotourism site.



View of Children & Water Sports Park

In the same inaugural programme the local public resolved and handed over the managerial responsibility to a group of 20 women from different SHGs. It was found that since the opening the group has been in hard working and dedicated to clean and green campus with well hospitality. Presently 16 women have been in Park care services. Cleanliness is the daily starting work of the women members and no additional workers are employed for plantations and cleanliness. The campus is totally free from plastics, bottles and wastages. Dustbins are well maintained. Visitors can take rest anywhere on green grass carpets. The local youth are very enthusiastic and responsible for the infrastructural development with an artistic mind set. One can easily catch while visiting the park and used to observe the traditional preservation of rurality.



View of Children & Water Sports Park

Handicraft wooden bridge, cottage and sculptures represent the cultural wonder of the village society. Another wonder is its cultural museum which depicted the heritage of agrarian society. Clean and green serene that easily attracts children and birds too. Children's play items are available. Most attractive one is boating in the lake which takes a *U* shape with two bridge on it. Bridges are the volunteer handiworks of the local youth which reminds everyone the traditional rural concept of '*HARIA*' and '*HOURI*'.



View of Plantation by the women members

The variety of physical features witnessed in both sites have resulted in a diversity of ecological habitats such as forests, grasslands, waterbodies which sustain floral species placing. It is also a center for commercial plants including Banana, Mango, Tea, '*Sansi*' (Agar wood), Bamboo, Can etc..



View of Boating at the Children & Water Sports Park

It was also found that women are the noble welfare caretaker of the sites. The youth and women have been able to transform the traditional rural welfare concept '*HARIYA*' and '*HOURI*' into formal group welfare scheme. *HARIYA* is a friendly group care work service that has been provided to a needy family or cultivator without taking any *penni* at risk time. At the foundation stage the groups provided the volunteer care works to their own village. The Park is the result of utmost devotion of the villagers.

Discussion

Direct interview had been conducted with the members of the managing committees focusing on ecotourism promoting women entrepreneurship in rural areas. A set of survey questions is the main agenda that have been used in the discussion during the field study. The discussion also made to identify the prospects of the sites and in relation to the research objectives. Two series of discussion have been conducted through field visit separately regarding the sites. It was 26th of may 2024, day was very hot above 40 degree Celsius, the researcher has visited the Jugibill site. Due to hot less visitors were seen in the lake side. But *Jugibill Mohila Gramya Sangathan* assembled for their VO meeting. From the discussion it was known that there is two managing committee, one is known as *Japisajia, Jugibill Samabai Minkhetra LTD* for lake and other is known as *Jugibill Mohila Gramya Sangathan* for park and bank of lake. Samabai Minkhetra had

its root back to 2ND World War time and got registered in 1961. Since the time it has cultivating varieties of fingerlings there and fishing has been celebrated every two years. They have a tradition, two/ third of fish have been distributed among share-holders, remaining are sold for the welfare of social institutions and for the help of needy families. Last year the committee had donated Rs. 50,000/ among two *Namghars*. Other than fishing no project has been carried over on lake water. Water surface is full of ever blossoming lotus coverage. The scene speaks itself to keep free from any artificial disturbance.

Prime objectives of the study is to see the ecotourism in promoting women entrepreneurship and participation. From the interview it was known that since the opening they are leading and greater Bugibill care service providers appointed through a public resolution and charge honoured by the local MLA. The members have to maintain both regular and shift duties. Clean and green care started early in the morning which is mandatory to every woman. After 10 am they maintain shift duties which includes entry fee collection, food processing, weaving, marketing, showcasing, exhibition etc. At present the women group has 18 members, provide satisfactory service and are getting satisfaction as they expect from the service. Entry fee is the main source of income. Accounts and records have been maintained properly and in weekly basis earnings are distributed among members equally. Monthly average earnings Rs. 8,000/ to 12,000 per member. Other than counter fee the women are able to possess other selling too.

Toward the of the evening researcher have visited the Melamora Site. The discussion was an excitement one where a bundle of ecotourism projects has been deeply rooted. But the discussion was done among the targeted women and its well- wishers of the Children & Water Sports Park. From the discussion it was known that ecotourism movement was rooted in this greater Melamora area along with the small tea growing in Assam. Since 2006 the practice has been grown up in an organized way. As it mentioned, that it was the dream, changing mind, personality and leadership of Lt Gangadhar Saikia who founded so many public institutions and self-employed youth in Assam. He was able to reform the interior villages through small tea growing, *sanchi* plantation, fishery projects, tea tourism, nursery, horticulture, reconstruction of land, water-bodies, rural roads etc. In 2011, Eco Tea Tourism site was established covering 20 bighas of lands at Mohghuli Bill at his bold initiatives. The former MLA Mrs. Bismita Gogoi formally inaugurated the Site on 2nd Nov, 2011. In Dec, 2016, present MLA Mr. Mrinal Saikia

launched the Children & Water Sports Park at Mohghuli Bill and 20 women are employed as park care service provider. At present 16 women have been in their service with satisfactory income. Bank of the Bill (lake) are reconstructed with lane and linked with two handiwork wooden bridges. Museum, park, play items, rest room, restaurant available for the visitors. A full-fledged resort is now under construction. The records proves the attractive entry of visitors and above it tourist from Canada, Mumbai, Delhi, Tamil Nadu have visited and highly praised the innovations. 'Meluha' is another one cultural museum established in Jan, 2022 which is very nearest to the park and a playground stands between the two. The comprising rural areas, roads and the site areas are very neat and clean. At present the ecotourism of Melamora has given employment opportunity to 50 no of women and youth. "Seuj Sapun Seswasawi Goot" a volunteer organization of cleanliness for roads, public institutions, plantation drives and plantation care service providers has been working on eco-friendliness. In 10 Aug, 2022 the organization was formally launched. The people of the area are seen to be very supportive to the Seuj Sapun Seswasawi Goot and aware on cleanliness for which the Melamora Village was honoured "Best Clean Village" award in Khumtai LAC Inter Village & Inter Tea Garden Cleanliness Competition, 2023. The Hon'ble CM of Assam Dr. Himata Biswa Sarma handed over the award on 17 March 2023. Above it, the Melamora ecotourism organized a series of competitions on cycle rally, car rally, marathon and hook-fishing etc. The women from different SHGs have a lion share in all socio cultural programme.



A View of Hook-Fishing Competition

The park has double earnings, one is accrued from gate entry and other is from boating fee Rs. 20/ for each. Accumulating earnings have been shared by the caring women group on monthly basis. The amount for each woman is range from Rs.9000/ to 15,000/ monthly. Now they are capable of providing financial assistance to their families in every need. Women are in regular and equal working, spirit to go ahead, good leadership quality and have been participated in trainings, *Mella*, social workshop and various social activities.

Conclusion

Empowering rural ecotourism through women's village organizations in Golaghat, Assam, presents a transformative approach to fostering sustainable development and entrepreneurship. This study highlights the critical role that women, organized in Village Level Organizations (VLOs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs), play in promoting ecotourism as a viable economic activity in rural areas. The investigation reveals that eco-tourism offers a unique platform for women to engage in entrepreneurial activities, providing them with new income sources and enhancing their socio-economic status. Women-led initiatives in Jugibill and the Children & Water Sports Park demonstrate the potential for ecotourism to drive community development, improve local infrastructure, and generate employment opportunities. Village Level Organizations serve as vital enablers by offering essential support, such as training, funding, and networking opportunities, which empower women to initiate and sustain ecotourism projects. The success of these initiatives underscores the importance of collective action and the effectiveness of community-based models in achieving sustainable tourism development.

However, challenges remain, including cultural barriers, financial constraints, and logistical issues that need to be addressed to fully harness the potential of women in this sector. Strategies to overcome these obstacles, such as enhancing access to education and financial resources, promoting gender equality, and fostering partnerships with government and non-governmental organizations, are crucial for scaling up these efforts. The case study of Golaghat, Assam, illustrates that women's participation in rural ecotourism not only empowers them but also catalyzes broader community development. By supporting women's village organizations and addressing the challenges they face, there is significant potential to expand rural ecotourism, drive economic growth, and promote sustainable development in similar contexts across the region and beyond.

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