

Comparative Analysis of Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) Models in India and Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism offers innovative possibilities when community-based ecotourism (CBET) is implemented through Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs). However, the operational and management dynamics of these models remain underexplored, particularly in India and Sri Lanka. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of CBET-based SPVs across eight ecotourism destinations in the two countries. It aims to examine the operational nuances and management practices that underpin these models and to assess their adaptability for diverse tourism ecosystems. By generating field-based data and assessing eight CBET models, the study offers a useful resource for academics, researchers, and practitioners. It advances the mission of CBET by identifying replicable best practices and strategies for SPV implementation in other destinations. The researchers conducted extensive field visits to the selected destinations and engaged with local communities, tourism stakeholders, and government and non-government agencies involved in CBET initiatives. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes the structure, functioning, livelihood impacts, and overall effectiveness of these models. The findings highlight opportunities to strengthen CBET practices and develop innovative constructs, models, and frameworks. The study contributes to the evolution of community-driven tourism systems while supporting sustainable livelihoods.

Keywords: Community; ecotourism; landscapes; livelihoods; sustainable tourism

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Community-Based Ecotourism

Globally, community-based ecotourism (CBET) is closely linked to the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) (Wang et al., 2016), which enables communities associated with Ecotourism Enterprises (ETEs) to participate in Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs). CBET usually involves multiple stakeholders, including federal, provincial, and local governments; non-governmental organizations (NGOs); the private sector through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) models; and local communities. Stone (2015) states that CBET is based on community participation, collaboration, and empowerment. However, because of the diversity and multiplicity of stakeholders, empowering communities to adopt ecotourism-based livelihood options can be complex. It is also important to understand how prepared community members are to participate in CBET models and how effectively they are trained to manage tourism as a business. Noh et al. (2020) identify community capacity-building as an important initiative that can help communities administer ecotourism destinations, which are often fragile and require protection, preservation, and conservation. Goodman et al. (1998) consider training and capacity-building a necessary condition, while Smith et al. (2001) identify them as essential to

development because they improve engagement and empower communities to perform better in their chosen activities.

1.2 CBET in India and Sri Lanka: Status, Statutes, and the Way Forward

This paper explores the management of CBET in India and Sri Lanka and offers an in-depth analysis of core aspects such as the general framework of ecotourism, the operation of Ecotourism Enterprises (ETEs), sustainability issues, and the role of community involvement. It highlights how local communities have been engaged to support the success of Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) established over time and identifies best practices and lessons learned from both countries.

India

Forests are important spaces where ecotourism destinations and Ecotourism Enterprises (ETEs) have been developed across India. The Indian Constitution provides for both the federal and state governments to function jointly with regard to forests. Forests were moved from the State List to the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution through the Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act of 1976, which came into force on January 3, 1977. This enabled the federal government to frame broad forest-policy laws that serve as guidelines for state governments in law-making, management, and regulation (Swarna & Khan, 2022).

Item of Entry in the Indian Constitution	Entry Details	Transferred from
Forests	Entry 17a	Entry 19 of the State List
Wild Animals and Birds Protection	Entry 17b	Entry 20 of the State List

The Protected Area (PA) policy changed over the years and many views about PAs have moved with a new set of ideas and approaches emerging (Phillips, 2000) the influenced the legal position. The interpretation gets amplified when one reads the Wild Life Protection (WPA) Act of 1972, Section 2 (24A) that was inserted by the Act of 16 of 2003 made effective on the 1st April 2003. The law reads as follows: “Protected Area” stands for a national park, a sanctuary, a conservation reserve, or a community reserve notified under Sections:

- ☐ Section 18 (wherein the state government declares a forest area as a sanctuary),
- ☐ Section 35 (state government declares a national park),
- ☐ Section 36A (state government declares a conservation area after consulting the local community/communities) and
- ☐ Section 36C (herein the state government declares a privately owned or community owned land as a community reserve)

Through the above, it can be ascertained that the state governments in India are entitled to declare and ensure the areas are protected and the local community plays a dynamic role. Bhattacharya (2017) speaks of major changes that took place in the approach to PA, whicerh are to be considered; that forest areas are networks within the ecosystem and no longer to be treated as islands; besides they are guided by the goal of conservation with a focus on social and economic objectives and the final aspect which speaks of the fact that the management is not with and for the people.

One can see that PAs generate economic benefits through sustainable use of the resources to local

communities which ushers in economic benefit through wildlife tourism. Sekar (2003) sees this as a potential to generate substantial revenues for the community, and thereby contributing to the protection of the ecosystem. Porter et al. (1998) in a report discuss the importance of identifying sustainable means of livelihoods such as tourism in the forests and its significance in promoting stakeholder participation in conservation. Kumar et al. (2020) provided another perspective wherein PAs were initially established to conserve biodiversity in the face of inevitable human centric development. However, they have emerged as a critical tool for not only safeguarding various species within the forest but also for poverty alleviation of the community by improving human livelihoods.

Khan et al. (2024) make a mention that the CBET SPVs management took a turn in July 2005 (MP Forest, n.d.), when the State of Madhya Pradesh, announced the creation of the Madhya Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board and appointed a Senior Officer (now retired) of the Indian Forest Service as CEO of the Board. Dr. AK Bhattacharya IFS, a seasoned officer of the Government was placed to build a framework for Ecotourism and its practices for the first time in India.

It was the well-researched publication meant for the Forest Officers of India, Joint Forest Management, a handbook, by DK Sharma (Sharma, n.d.) that provided a finer understanding of what needs to be done for community-oriented forest projects. The study and report helped the officers, practitioners, researchers, and academics to know that Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) were created as a democratic, decentralized, and transparent local institution of the forest fringe dwelling communities, who are part of the Gram Sabha (Village, the last unit of Governmental Administration and connect with the community) as per the provisions of applicable Joint Forest Management (JFM) rules and guidelines. The JFM rules established were in existence much earlier than all the SPVs for eco-tourism. Typically there was one JFMC in a revenue village. However, in special situations, wherein a historical collaboration between neighboring villages, or where it does not make sense to divide the forest a JFMC would cover two or more villages. The JFMC that juxtaposed itself with the Gram Sabha, the Village Panchayat, as part of the Constitutional-Local-Self Government (LSG) mechanism ensured a quicker understanding of the veracity of functioning. Thence, across India, the State Government set up SPVs/ETE including eco-development committees (EDC), which would promote Ecotourism in the area specified. The EDCs were set up, and their working, role, responsibilities, powers, funds were created as per the state level rules. The operational areas for the EDCs are restricted to PAs, forest and non-forest areas with the primary objective of, protection of wildlife and the biodiversity surrounding it; and to undertake eco development activities for the communities.

To understand the functioning better; the EDCs had to: besides, building an investment climate in the forest area, had to ensure participation of the rural communities in conservation and protection of the resources, where the communities were equal partners. Another important facet was that the community would manage the forest resources with the support of the FD staff in the area considering the dynamics of common pool resources and the knowledge they possessed. The economic activity which becomes critical to the EDC would ensure, the concept of revolving funds that would help in the creation of income-generating programs (IGP) activities. With a clear framework in place the EDC construct has evolved in India and ensured for a betterment of the CBET, which we will see in the case studies that follow.

Sri Lanka

When one speaks of CBET in Sri Lanka, the name that comes up often is of Dr. Palitha Gurusinghe, a stalwart amongst Ecotourism professionals. His phenomenal work Sri Lanka, ‘Story of Ecotourism,’ considered to be the first publication on Ecotourism in Sri Lanka which was launched in September 2017 (Weerasuriya, 2017) speaks of how people never understood the concept of Ecotourism as they often got mixed up with Adventure and Nature Tourism. This is a critique to ensure a qualitative understanding of the happenings on the front of Ecotourism in the Nation. Petropoulos (2018) interviewing Dr. Gurusinghe, who states, “ecotourism was never heard of even in the 90s, despite the fact I had worked as tour guide lecturer, a tour operator, and even as a travel agent. Though the Ecotourism Society was formed in the United States of America in 1990, and slowly got popularized across the world.” Inspired by the principles of ecotourism, Dr. Gurusinghe was instrumental in founding the Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation (SLEF), supported by individuals and like-minded organizations; which went on to get recognition as the ‘National Ecotourism Society of Sri Lanka,’ by the Sri Lanka Tourism Authorities in October 1998.

The primary objectives of SLEF were to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism in the country and to protect natural biodiversity. To address these objectives, SLEF, under the leadership of Dr. Gurusinghe, undertook the following initiatives (Petropoulos, 2018):

Introducing and popularizing of the concept of Community-Based Ecotourism Enterprises (CBEs) in Sri Lanka and to assure socioeconomic and sociocultural benefits to the communities which in turn would support in the alleviation of poverty in the country,

Setting up of a research and training body to develop quality ecotourism initiatives,

Establishing a research and information Data Base and Research Centre for South Asian Region (RETSA),

With the support of GTZ establishing an Association of Small and Medium Enterprises Tourism Sri Lanka (ASMET),

Putting together training programs for eco guides in the domain of nature, adventure, and ecotourism, besides tour operators, hoteliers, and guest houses,

Establishment of Sri Lanka Eco Tours, as a ‘model travel agency,’

Support the Tourism authorities to develop National Policies, Guidelines and Action Plans to develop ecotourism in the country,

The objectives, the vision, led to a mission that one could savour and build upon to ensure quality CBET, which further ensured, it impacted the community, from all aspects, Social, Cultural, Environmental, Economical, and even Political, as has been seen in various SPVs across the world.

USAID (n.d.) in a document had this to say about tourism in any country, which can support the tourism ecosystem into a potential business enterprise: “.....tourism is a valuable tool for environmental conservation. Because of its income-generating potential and other benefits. Tourism encourages governments and communities to value and protect the resource base on which tourism often depends.....”

Though the opportunities for Sri Lankan ecotourism is enormous, Gnanapala & Sandaruwani (2016) argue that local village communities in Sri Lanka do not sufficiently benefit financially from tourism development even though ETEs make great efforts on encouraging sustainability practices in tourism. Samarathunga et al. (2015) who studied four ETEs at Heeloya, Padawigampola, Panama, and Rekawa, articulate that tourism and its potential in delivering benefits to the local community is still a subject of

great debate. Rathnayake & Kasim (2016) highlight that communities have been impacted but do not give attention to the sustainability practices which lead to the development of the tourism business on account of the lacunae in government planning, policies and regulations. The reason can be on account of high level of poverty, low level of education, lack of industry know-how, and poor attitudes among the community.

Another facet in Sri Lanka that is worth mentioning is that the when one speaks of Ecotourism, Forests and its resources become important for destinations. The Sri Lankan forest and wildlife management was carried out by the Forest Department till 1949, when the Department of Wildlife Conservation was established. About 55% of the forest lands of the country came under the Forest Department while the balance forest area is managed by the Department of Wildlife Conservation with an exception of very small extent of isolated forest patches under the purview of provincial administration (MWFRC, n.d.). Unlike in India, where there is an elaborate mechanism to manage the forest areas with the help of the community through EDCs, the Sri Lankan Forest Department operates Ecotourism directly without any ETE. The Private players get to transport the visitors, who buy the tickets and venture into the Forest area. Gnanapala & Sandaruwani (2016) suggest initiatives and visits to community-based activities including farming, fishing, handicrafts, festivals, religious and cultural programs, sports, bird watching, and wildlife should be experimented in the dynamics of ETE, which will add value to the community. Dissanayake & Samarathunga (2015) in their research construct on ETEs provide inputs about the challenges of implementation and promotion of community-based tourism in Mihintale that can be applied to the other destinations of Sri Lanka as well.

Lacking in tourism awareness,

Poor leadership amongst people,

Lacking in education and training,

Lack of motivation,

Non-availability of finance to engage in community-based tourism

This is a clear articulation of the fact, if the Sri Lanka CBET ecosystem were to focus on the above postulates, the movement towards community involvement will bring in an advantage to promote quality tourism. Despite the efforts of stalwarts of Ecotourism, much work needs to be done by academia, the corporate stakeholders, the Government, the common people, NGOs, the machinery of local self-government should come into play and opportunities provided for the community to participate in CBET SPVs.

Another important facet that would one would need to focus would be on the promotion of gender equality by involving women and creating self-help groups (SHG), provide them with access to credit, training, and income-generating programs/initiatives (IGP), and extend as much support to women-owned businesses as this would become the mainstay of the ETEs. The academia of Sri Lanka will surely have to play the role of a bridge to understand the best practices from India other nations which will further accentuate a qualitative construct for ETEs to come up in larger numbers.

2.0 Case Studies

2.1 Indian Case Studies

2.1.1 Gulf of Mannar, Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu: CBET on the High Seas

The Gulf of Mannar, India's first Marine Biosphere Reserve and South East Asia's first such reserve, extends from Rameswaram to Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu and covers a total area of 10,500 km². The

marine biosphere reserve contains a chain of twenty-one islands and adjoining coral reefs off the coasts of Ramanathapuram and Tuticorin districts, which form the core zone. The surrounding seascape of the Marine National Park (560 km²) and a 10 km strip of coastal landscape covering the districts of Ramanathapuram, Tuticorin, Tirunelveli, and Kanyakumari form the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve. Known as a “Biologists’ Paradise,” the area has more than 4,223 species of flora and fauna. The mangrove habitats support diverse marine fauna, and more than 50,000 migratory birds visit the area. The Ramanathapuram forest department oversees several protected areas, including Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park, Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, Therthangal Bird Sanctuary, Sakkarakottai Bird Sanctuary, Melaselvanoor-Keelaselvanoor Bird Sanctuary, Kanjirankulam Bird Sanctuary, Chitrangudi Bird Sanctuary, and thirteen mangrove blocks.

The ‘Gulf of Mannar National Park and Biosphere Reserve’ area has been considered for the marine biodiversity heritage in India which should be conserved and managed as a ‘Centre of Excellence for marine biodiversity conservation, livelihoods, recreation, and nature education’ (Management Plan, n.d.). The clarity of thought is to ensure participation of the community in the area, which will usher in a people connect and options for livelihoods.

Illustration 1. Gulf of Mannar National Park (Gnanapala et al. 2026) and Biosphere Reserve (Management Plan, n.d.,)

The twenty-one islands (Illustration 2) of the area are divided into 4 groups (Mandapam, Keelakarai, Vembar and Tuticorin groups) based on their proximity to the mainland area (Gnanapala et al. 2026).

	Group of Islands	Name of Islands
1	Mandapam (7)	Shingle, Kurusodai, Pullivasal, Poomarichan, Manoli, Manoliputti and Hare
2	Keelakarai (7)	Mulli, Valai, Thalaiyari, Appa, Poovarasampatti, Valimunai and Anaipar
3	Vembar (3)	Nallathanni, Puluvinchalli and Upputhanni
4	Tuticorin/Tuthookudi (4)	Kariyachalli, Vilanguchalli, Kasuwar and Van

Illustration 2. The Islands of Gulf of Mannar National Park (Gnanapala et al. 2026) and Biosphere Reserve (Management Plan, n.d.,)

The Gulf of Mannar area ETEs

Kurusadai Island Ecotourism EDC, Mandapam (Gnanapala, 2026)

Located 14 km from Rameshwaram, the EDC takes the visitors to Kurusadai Island which is located about 4 km to get a feel of nature and see the dilapidated English buildings which were part of the Biodiversity centre. Kurusadai is the only area in the National Park where Ecotourism has been allowed according to the Management Plan (RSIS, n.d.,) of the Park. A total of 11 community members are direct beneficiaries and employed for various vocations including ticket collectors (2), boatmen (5), support staff (4). The salary range is from Rupees 8,000 to Rupees 11,000. The TNFD has provided a space for a shop and small restaurant which cater to needs to the visitors.

Ariyaman Community-Based Ecotourism, Mandapam (24 km) (Gnanapala, 2026)

Located 24 km from Rameshwaram, the Ariyaman CBET is boating on the high seas, organized by the EDC and the TNFD. The local community members are operating as boatmen. However, the District Administration and TNFD has stopped the activities on account of rough seas for a temporary period.

Pichai Moopan Valasai Manal Thittu CBET, Erwadi (Gnanapala, 2026)

82 km, west of Rameshwaram, the Erwadi EDC has a total of four boatmen (salary Rupees 11,000/person), one ticket collector and security guard, who are paid Rupees 6,000, making it six direct beneficiaries. The TNFD has provided space for a local shop which selling, water, sea-food, and other requirements to the visitors. Thirty percent of the collections are given to village community to be used for any purpose the EDC decides.

Karankaadu Mangrove Ecotourism, Ramanathapuram (Gnanapala, 2026)

90 km, east of Rameshwaram, the EDC has three employees including two boatmen, one ticket collector, and a security guard who are paid between Rupees 6,000 to Rupees 11,000 monthly. The priest at the St. Sengol Annai Church (Our Lady of Angels) who motivated the local people was instrumental in creating the EDC with the TNFD. The village gets thirty percent of the share collected from the boating activities in the Mangrove. The EDC has provided for a shop and restaurant facility which caters to the visitors.

Tharuvaikulam Coral Ecotourism, Thoothukudi (166 km)

The CBET initiative is identical to the product in Erwadi, where a boat with a glass floor engages the visitors to see the corals in the sea bed. When the researchers went to the destination, it was temporarily closed for various reasons. The destination is located 166 km southwest of Rameshwaram and is close to Tiruchendur.

2.1.2 Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR), Agarzari, Maharashtra: Community-Led Ecotourism

Chandrapur, Maharashtra, where Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) is located has the successful story of Agarzari (Swarna et al. 2020), where the EDC caters to the needs of visitors to showcase Tigers and its ecosystem. With forty-five households, and a small population who depend completely on Ecotourism, Tiger Safari has been the mainstay. It was the community that decided its fate, supported by the Maharashtra FD (MHFD) whose focus was to reduce poaching, illegal collection of forest produce and the overall preservation and conservation of the forest.

The mainstay occupation of the community at Agarzari is agriculture (Swarna et al. 2020); with lands in the buffer zone of the Tiger Reserve. The authors established that the community would also get to the forest for collecting the forest products. However, the collection of forest products has come to a halt on account of the interventions of the MHFD and the Revenue Administration departments of the state of Maharashtra. Except for collecting the “Mahua” flowers, during a particular season of the year, no other activity is allowed in the forest. Agarzari got the first Buffer Tourism activity in 2011 in TATR, and Chaoji (2019) states TATR has a total of ninety-one villages with a population of one lakh who have become an integral part of the preservation and conservation.

TATR from a technical perspective becomes an epicentre for human wildlife conflicts (HWC) considering the dependency on the forests by the community members in the area. Chaoji (2019) mentions that there was a time when the Gond Tribe was all over the area of the present TATR. The local community has been weaned away from the forest area and has been provided for alternative livelihood options that are as follows (Swarna et al. 2020); owning of Safari vehicles and employment as drivers in them; working at the visitor tents and as cooks in the kitchen; employment at the butterfly

park centre and the canteen attached to the centre; working as contract labour with the FD to ensure fire line creation, afforestation programs, and for census activity; one special area of work was the incense stick manufacturing factory; collection of mahua flower once a year was allowed as well; besides, the local youth were trained in nature education and adventure activities.

The TATR example is a phenomenal illustration for anyone who yearns to learn about CBET, as the ripple effect of the FD intervention, ensured, the community, which otherwise in conflict with the nature, became the protectors, and that very nature gave them an opportunity to evolve businesses for a lifetime. The primary foundation came from CBET activities and other income generation programs that were started.

2.1.3 Bastar, Chhattisgarh: CBET in a Naxal-Affected Region

The dense forest cover of Bastar provided a shadow for the Naxal movement that first appeared in Chhattisgarh in 1980 and spread across the state, with the districts of Bastar and Dantewada impacted (Amrita, 2023). Naxalism is a violent movement, with the Government of the province and the Naxals involved in violence on either side. As mentioned by a retired forester of the area who wanted to remain anonymous. “Naxalism is a violent movement. Those who have an inkling about the movement know it. If you look for information on the Naxalite movement, you will find several instances of reports of violence. There have been killings and other violence from both sides – the Naxals as well as the government. While the Naxals have been blamed for attacks on the military and government, the police force and government are also blamed for wanton killings and disappearances. As usual, the simple tribal people of Bastar get caught in the middle. Their voices are seldom heard. Those who suffered were the tribals of the area. Caught in the crossfire of the establishment and the people who wanted to be considered as the ones saving the local community, the region lost out on the tourism promotion. Time and again there were disturbances, in the form of killing of the staff from the uniformed services, be it para-military or the police.”

Bastar with its valuable historical monuments, heritage, protected areas, National Parks, sanctuaries, rivers, ravines, cave systems, and cultural heritage is an opportunity in waiting for the local community to engage with and get them back to the mainstream. Attempts by the FD have ensured forward movement in this regard. Ghanvir Dharmasheel (Dharmasheel, 2023), the Senior Forest Officer in the region stated, “for the past two to three years, visitors from the region and the neighboring provinces are coming for day trips/excursions to the region; which means the destination has a promise to be promoted for CBET.”

In 2022, the number of footfalls reached a staggering 0.5 million.” Dharmasheel goes on to mention, “the EDCs, which are run by the Forest Department with the community playing a dominant role, are organizing, trekking tours, nature walks, visits to heritage destinations and even organizing ‘kayaking’ on the rivers. Some of the EDCs have also started organizing homestays and formal accommodation for those who would like to stay at the location and one is finding a change in the visitors’ mindset, who are willing to stay in the region, despite the happenings of the past.” Dharmasheel added, “the EDCs are being run by the local communities, which also includes the Naxals who have surrendered arms and want to move towards the mainstream.” Hence, the Bastar story can be seen to be moving towards an inclusive approach, where the local community and the surrendered Naxals want to join the mainstream. The FD is willing to walk the talk and ensure opportunities for business through the natural resources in

the region. From this, a new story emanates about the optimism of the region and how community-based tourism proves to be a game-changer.

2.1.4 EDC Case Study in West Bengal

With a total of 115 EDCs, West Bengal had about 5,10,000 members from the community who are protecting about 6,560km² of forest area, amounting to 54% of the state forests (Ghosh, 2018). The EDCs in West Bengal were primarily created as per the provisions of the National Forest Policy 1988 of the Government of India vide letter No. 6.21/89-PP dated 1st June 1990, which outlined and conveyed to the State Government a framework to create massive people's movement through the involvement of village committees for the protection, regeneration, and development of forest lands.

Thence the EDCs were constituted to bring about cooperation of forest fringe communities to protect, preserve, and conserve the wildlife areas. West Bengal Forest Department (WBFD) make the best of efforts to create Management Plans and Micro plans for the EDCs that would help in adding value to the efforts of preservation and conservation. The constitution of the Micro Plans had postulates (Swarna et al. 2020) that evolved around the protection, conservation, and preservation of the forests. Finer aspects like ensuring reconnaissance and familiarization of the forests which would lead to socio-economic resource surveys, and identification of impact zone would be part of the micro plans that would help the SPVs to deliver for the community in a multitude of ways.

The community ensured that they worked with the FD and focused on issues that were required by the forest areas. The qualitative relationship between the FD and the Community, and the people, ensured drinking water, cooking gas distribution, installation of water pumps to facilitate drinking water, paddy thrashing machines, horticulture seeds for sowing in the fields, renovating the village schools which were in a dilapidated condition, organizing timely medical camps for the village folk, constructing a community hall to be used by the community, and even public toilets. It is clear that once there is a learning experience and the involvement of the community in CBET, and support from the machinery, the scenario will only lead to improvement and change.

2.2 Sri Lanka Case Studies

2.2.1 Passikudah: An Opportunity for CBET

Because of the shifting coastlines, sustainable, and environmental measures, there need to be planned ecotourism initiatives, reported Moseley & Malwatte (2013). Kaldeen & Hassan (2019) speak about coastal tourism development as a complex phenomenon that threatens the marine life, habitat conservation, and social stability leading to sustainable ecotourism. A tour operator Gurusinghe (2024) mentions, "Sri Lanka, had gone through the 2004 Tsunami disaster and the 2009 civil war that had torn apart the country. Some of the places which were already well known, became tourist destinations which made the country not only proud but also provided an opportunity for the local community to partake from the profits of tourism. In the case of Passikudah which means the 'Green-Algae Bay,' through CBET there has been an enormous scope to ensure community participation." Gurusinghe goes on to mention, "Passekudah is ideal for bathing and swimming as the sea is clear, calm, and is protected by the reef; it is therefore a perfect setting for sunbathing, windsurfing, and skiing (World Tour, n.d.)."

Located 35 km from Batticaloa in the Sri Lankan Eastern Province, Passikudah, has been considered a 'blue economy' destination with Beaches, water sports activities, scuba diving and snorkeling, and even heritage/religious tourism. Audley (n.d.) provides a very touristy, blog, which mentions, Passikudah, being famous for its golden bay, and clear, shallow waters in which one can wade fifty meters out to sea. The blog further confirms, whilst snorkeling one can see the best of corals and shoals of reef fish in the bay. Ganapala & Karunathilaka (2016) deep-dive research on Passikudah, where they got to meet with the community people and interview 251 respondents. The research states that only 44 were directly involved in Tourism in the destination, which clearly means that the local community is bereft of the opportunities that abound in tourism. 179 of the respondents were willing to be involved in tourism which is a clear construct that if an opportunity of livelihood is provided for, the members of the community are willing to walk the extra mile to ensure success for the tourism scenario. The research also threw up a data which stated that 194 of the 251 respondents were willing to get trained and become part of tourism enterprises. Thereby one can see that most of the community nearly 71%, were willing to engage in tourism activities through tour guiding, working in hotels, providing services including boat tours, food and beverages, accommodation (homestay tourism), and selling handicrafts and other products. In the current circumstances new generation, and the community in Passikudah have come forward to participate in tourism activities, but there is no formal structure where the community can participate either through a Government mechanism or an NGO. Some of the community members have got involved in jobs with homestays, small restaurants; but the intent of creating ETEs is still lacking. Though various organizations in Sri Lanka have identified the way to bring about ETEs in the micro small medium enterprises (MSME) space; not much has been done. The academia and the business stakeholders need to work with the Government at various levels and ensure. Ganapala & Karunathilaka (2016) mention of the fact that about 18 community members after receiving temporary licences from the Divisional Secretariat, started to operate shops that were catering to the domestic and foreign visitors. This in a way a small but good beginning towards the creation of formal ETEs.

2.2.2 Arugam Bay: A Destination for Community Empowerment

Raisa & Gunapalan (2014) romanticize about Arugam Bay and state, "at the beginning it (Arugam) was a fishing village and the tourists were visiting the destination as hippie tourists. The visitors loved the nature and suddenly they saw the huge waves in Arugam Bay and prepared a surfing board using the 'coconut stud' and started to surf on the waves. Word of mouth ensured, and the tourists came in large numbers and considered the bay as a good place to surf and started to arrive at the bay. Thereafter, the local fishermen saw the incoming tourist and thought of providing accommodation for them, and started to rent their 'kajan' (Cadjan (One Thatch, 2023) huts. Soon the tourist activity starts to increase and the fishermen started to build small guest houses." Arugam Bay had arrived on the tourism front; and one could visualize a destination par excellence on the CBET front.

If the Tsunami of 2004 ravaged Arugam Bay, the 2009 Civil war took the toll on the population. But Arugam Bay has braved it all. Rated as the top ten surf destinations in the world, Arugam Bay also came to be known as Ofek's main point (Klanten et al. 2022). The bay has a unique position to cater not only to the needs of the visitors but also bring the community closer to livelihood options and opportunities through CBET. Lakpura (n.d.) informs, that from the 1960's the surfers of the world have been coming to Arugam Bay, and it is a place that provides an opportunity for both the amateur and the professional windsurfer to become one with nature.

Rohan (Rohan, 2024) and his family who run a Vihanga Village (a sustainable forest resort) in Dambulla (https://www.makemytrip.com/hotels-international/sri_lanka/dambulla-hotels/vihanga_village-details.html), who have often visited Arugam Bay by themselves and with foreign travellers had this to say, “Arugam Bay beach destination is a creation of the Nature and the local community, though fishing and agriculture is the main stay, other business activities that will be preferred by the community is to have souvenir and gift shops for the local arts and crafts, organizing of folk and cultural events including dances, and plays, community members performing the role of guides, as beach guards, surfing which is very popular; to mention a few. Some will operate the tuk-tuk (local three-wheeled vehicle) and ferry around the visitors and eke out a living.” Rohan, further adds, “May to September would be the peak season, with July and August months offering the best opportunities for surfing and beach get-togethers. It is here that the Community in Arugam Bay will have to make the best out of tourism, as October to April, on account of the low tide, and surfing cannot be done, would account for an off-season. It is during these months, that the local community should focus on their traditional fishing and agricultural activities that will help them to survive.”

The Tourism Development Master Plan (2020-2030) authored by the Urban Development Authority (2020) speaks of the establishment and strengthening of the Community-Based Organizations (CBO) which will introduce the local community and engage in ecotourism activities through the ETEs. The Master Plan categorically speaks of the host community being an important facet in ensuring community participation. The plan also enumerates the postulate of opportunities and engagement that have to work in collaboration. The plan very skilfully speaks about the fact that, empowerment of the community by provisioning for social infrastructure and adequate opportunities as one better the local economy, would add value to the destination. This clear understanding is important as it values the tourist destination and the local community who play a dynamic role over a period of time (Urban Development Authority (2020).

To provide more opportunities for local communities whilst empowering them, the Management Plan speaks about initiating a SPV to strengthen the existing CBOs and the introduction of new CBOs based in different sectors including local hoteliers, three-wheel drivers (tuk-tuk), restaurant and food outlet operators, spa and salon operators, safari operators, farmers, and fishermen at the Panama village, Komari village, and Arugam Bay handicraft village.

The idea of creating Arugam Bay Tourism Task Force (ABTT) as an ETE to coordinate adds value to the facet of CBET. The idea of having tour and safari guides, instructors for surfing, boat operators, handicraft demonstrators and sellers, groups taking care of food and other culinary practices, professionals and scientists to resort the coastal zone regulation based on the restoration mechanism, professionals to manage the spas, and salons and other recreation and entertainment facilities. This is a clear construct to prove a point that the ETE would add value to destination and mechanisms of CBET.

Arugam Bay ETE/CBO is sure inspiration for the CBET model (s) in Sri Lanka to emulate the ‘best practices,’ that have come out the Management Plan, which clearly brings about an empowerment of the Community. Once facet to be known, is the surfing as an activity is the major activity, and it should ensure the local community is made to participate and be empowered, as the surfers and general visitors will be sharing space with the local populace. With the Government of Sri Lanka pitching in to promote quality surfing (Ladduwahetty, 2021), it is only a matter of time, before the opportunities are seized and

the community gets to play a role and ensure CBET.

2.2.3 Mirissa: A Significant Opportunity for CBET

Weerasekara & Amarawickrama (2016) eloquently speak of tourism in Mirissa, which is about ensuring a participation of the community in tourism/ecotourism that augurs well for the destination. In fact, the authors state that, Mirissa indicates an inward spread towards land-based tourism systems rather than spreading linearly along the coast. We are all aware of the fact that tourism in Mirissa is more related to the coastline, with the Whale Watching product being marketed effectively by the tourism system, besides, surfing. Miththapala (2011) in a well-researched IUCN document speaks about the whales, which has given Mirissa its tourism position. The publication informs the readers, Blue Whales, the Sperm Whale, and Spinner Dolphins migrate from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal during the months of December – January and reverse migrate in April, making Mirissa an important location to watch the mammals move from place to place.

Dharmasena et al. (2023) elaborating on the tourism scenario of Mirissa state, Mirissa, a popular tourism destination offers the options of secret beaches, coconut tree hill, whale-watching, snorkeling, surfing, partying, and nightlife. Clearly a destination for all types of visitors who flock to Mirissa, with most of them coming for the Whale Watching boat trips that are the crème de la crème in the area. The local communities had created a important source of livelihoods by selling homemade food to restaurants and beverage outlets, considering the fact that the visitors showed interest to consume the local cuisine. A few others even provided boat services, tuk-tuk, and entertainment through traditional dances and events, which helped in the income generation at a local level. Tripadvisor (n.d.) which is looked at by visitors for reviews, very elegantly mentions, in Mirissa it is the whale-watching boat trips that steal the show, thence, Mirissa got the sobriquet of the, “Whale watching capital of Sri Lanka.”

Laurance (2005) in a well-documented write-up reports in the aftermath of 2004 Tsunami, that the first of accommodation in the form of tourist cabanas appeared in 1980 and by the 1990s the village had become well known to the visitors across the world. Though the 2004 Tsunami and the 2009 civil war played on the economy and the social fabric of Sri Lanka as a nation, Mirissa as a destination was able to spring-back, considering the tourism products it had to offer.

Buultjens et al. (2016) states that by 2008, there were two large operators in Mirissa, who catered to the international visitors, and the local fishermen community had modified their boats and catered to the local visitors. A small 620 participated in whale watching in 2008. There has been no looking back, as the whale watching has only increased (illustration 3) and ensured a benefit to the local community.

	Year	Number of boats	Number of visitors, Mirissa	Number of Visitors, Galle (Buultjens et al., 2018)
1	2008	2	620	NA
2	2012	11	15,000	7,000
3	2013	30	17,925	6,500
4	2014	34	79,219	6,900

Illustration 3. Whale-watching data for Mirissa (Buultjens et al. 2016)

One can see that academia has provided for an understanding of the opportunities that exist for the

Mirissa area to promote tourism/ecotourism with data, which if understood in the context of promoting tourism with the support of the community, will augur well for the ecosystem. Buultjens et al. (2016) in the seminal *Whale watching in Sri Lanka: Perception of Sustainability*, conclude by stating, whale watching is a tourism value creation for the conservation of the species, but one needs to adopt to sustainable management and measures and should ensure participation of the local community in large numbers, which will have an economic and social impact in the region. When the researchers met with a tour operator and a resort owner in Galle, who did not want to be quoted by name, stated, “Sri Lanka is a haven for whale watching, besides, Mirissa (south coast), Trincomalee (east coast) and Kalpitiya (west coast); but the businesses lack sustainability and responsibility. The locals are mere spectators, as they are not part of the tourism/ecotourism product of whale watching. The ideal trend would have been to train them to spot whales/dolphins, act as life guards, and as nature guides. But then the control of the whale watching boat economy is with others, except for the small fishing boats converted to boats for whale watching.” An article by Nanayakkara (2020) clearly brings out the specificity of having responsible whale watching with trained people, preferably locals. The article makes a mention, without demand fishermen, retired mariners, local and foreign entrepreneurs will not invest in boats, licenses, safety equipment, guides, merchandise, and other paraphernalia that is required to make a living from the activity. One can read, between the lines as it is clear that the local community role was small.

The Sri Lankan Navy (<https://whalewatching.navy.lk>) contributing its bit to be part of the whale watching scenario has a more robust program which takes about 300 passengers from Galle towards the Indian Ocean on specific days. The ride is utilized by both the local populace and global visitors. Illustration (2) provides for the number of visitors via the Navy ship for a period.

Though the Sea Mammals Regulations, of 2012 (Ecolex, n.d.), guide the principles of whale watching along with other relevant laws including Merchant Shipping Act No. 52 of 1971 and Wildlife, Fauna, and Flora Protection Act No. 469 of 2019 (SLTDA, n.d.), it is clear the tourism/ecotourism ecosystem besides, adhering to the norms, should bring into play the local community perspectives and ensure the opportunities are created and accepted by all the stakeholders.

2.2.4 Heeloya, Sri Lanka: Empowerment of the Community

Eranda & Niroshana (2019) referring to tourism in Sri Lanka, make a point that, agriculture tourism has the potential to generate jobs, increase income, and utilize rural resources sustainably to ensure impactful social development of the people within the community. It is belief of many researchers like Farrington & Mitchell (2006) contend it is always important and critical to make the communities entrepreneurial, such that one can link the communities with the economic activities directly, lest they only focus on the nuances of consumption economics in their seminal research paper, ‘How can the rural poor participate in global economic processes?’ It is the community connect that helps in the establishment the finer aspects of ecotourism coming to fruition. Countries like India and Sri Lanka, which have focused on Agriculture for long now. And it is up to the tourism ecosystem to help and support in creation of CBET models in the domain of agro tourism and augment it for the future. Speaking about Heeloya Knuckles Valley tourism village and a few other places in Sri Lanka, Pattiyagedara & Fernando (2020) state, recent trends in tourism demonstrate a shift toward non-urban tourism, which has remarkably strengthened the livelihood of communities. Dassanayake (2023) adds another layer and states, the Knuckles Mountain Range presents an exclusive opportunity for rural tourism, which Heeloya, a village nestled within a bio diverse area, springs a surprise to the visitors. The community is optimistic about

the potential of rural tourism, which has encouraged a participatory approach and community engagement to ensure that it remains in connect with the cultural essence of Heeloya and the facet of adventure at the Knuckles Mountain Range. One needs to be aware, that when Heeloya village tourism was launched, it was not that, all accepted, there were some who opposed the same well; but then slow but steady, the village tourism has succeeded from the time it started its course to making efforts to becoming a successful product from 2015 with 30 local families (Eranda & Niroshana, 2019). Heeloya clearly emphasizes local decision-making and aims to provide long-term sustainable benefits such as poverty eradication, preservation of cultural and natural resources, and inclusive economic growth. However, sustainability remains a major challenge for many CBET initiatives, both globally and regionally.

Thilakarathne and Dassanayake (2020) bringing to essence the repertoire of Heeloya, discuss the reasons why Heeloya is a successful illustration of CBET and enumerate the following facets:

The Community of Heeloya and the area surrounding it, have a deep bond with nature, which creates an opportunity of support for rural tourism,

The biodiversity of the area is exquisite, which offers a gateway, an opening to a better understanding to nature in the Heeloya area, by engaging in harvest festivals, and camping sites (Pattiyagedara & Fernando. 2020),

The destination offers a unique travel experience through the green landscapes and helps one to understand the traditions practiced by the communities,

The paddy fields and vegetable cultivation in the area, provides a unique opportunity for the visitor to explore and get an experience about the sustainable agricultural practices,

The immersive cultural interactions, introduce a unique feature to CBET, and the local communities willingly share their life with the visitors,

Homestays provide the visitors, an opportunity to be a guest and live with the local families, partake in the daily tasks, and yes, focus on sustainable and frugal living.

With the communities focusing on guest delight/satisfaction; the tourism product will be a successful one.

The Heeloya CBT initiative has delivered tangible economic benefits, improving the livelihoods of participating families. The project offers tourists immersive experiences in rural Sri Lankan life, blending traditional hospitality with cultural and environmental awareness. However, as the project has expanded, it has encountered significant sustainability challenges:

Economic Sustainability: While tourism generates income, there is a need to ensure equitable distribution of benefits and reinvestment in community infrastructure and services.

Environmental Conservation: Increased tourism activities risk straining the village's natural resources, emphasizing the need for eco-friendly practices and resource management.

Cultural Preservation: Tourism can sometimes lead to cultural erosion or commodification, requiring careful integration of cultural heritage into tourism offerings.

These challenges underscore the importance of analyzing the triple bottom line including economic, social, and environmental sustainability of Heeloya project. Addressing these issues holistically is critical for ensuring a long-term viability of the initiative.

It's clear these add, a value to Heeloya Rural tourism as a product, considering the fact, that if the community is open to ideas of participating in sharing their societal and cultural values with the guests, leading to the guests having an experience that will be difficult to forget and to live a life of the locals at least for a few hours or even a few days. A review on Trip Advisor helps us to assess the opportunity that Heeloya has provided for. Wijerathna (2021) candidly mentions, "Heeloya is a tourism village

famous among local and foreign tourists due to the scenic beauty and the most alluring, unique farming systems in the hilly lands. This clearly implies to a peaceful village in Sri Lanka which caters to sightseeing activities, ushering in immense peace of the visitors. Rice farming and home gardening are an integral part of the way of life of the villagers of Heeloya. The village is evidence of great ancient technology and scientific livelihood of farming families.” With offerings that include farm-based activities, traditional cuisine, homestays, adventure experiences, and the village's natural attractions Heeloya if nurtured well will be one of the phenomenal success stories. However, the initiative faces several challenges: limited awareness among locals about tourism's benefits, insufficient skills and knowledge about the industry, language barriers, lack of leadership and motivation, and a lack of financial support.

The Heeloya Homestay Tourism Village highlights the promise and complexity of CBT as a sustainable tourism model. To overcome its challenges, stakeholders must focus on:

Enhancing local capacity through training and education on tourism management.

Strengthening leadership and governance structures within the community.

Securing financial and institutional support from government and private entities.

Promoting sustainable tourism which balances economic growth, protects environment and preserves the culture.

One needs to note that, with strategic interventions and a focus on sustainability, Heeloya has the potential to serve as a model for rural tourism in Sri Lanka and beyond.

3.0 Learning, Conclusion, and Way Forward

The comparative review of multiple case studies across the two countries provides several important learnings. The following observations can support further research, baseline-data development, and practical decision-making by academics, researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders.

3.1 Framework of CBET in India and Sri Lanka

India boasts a robust framework for tourism development at both the federal and provincial levels. However, Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) models tend to thrive when driven by localized understanding and implementation. A key aspect of success lies in establishing a clear starting point, often facilitated through the creation of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) tailored to the destination's needs. In Sri Lanka, while initial efforts to create a supportive policy framework for CBET were promising, the follow-through has been insufficient. This gap may be attributed to various factors, lack of motivation, insufficient knowledge, lack of resources, political influences, etc. Despite these challenges, the local tourism ecosystem and communities have demonstrated resilience and a willingness to embrace and advance CBET practices. For both India and Sri Lanka, a collaborative approach involving key stakeholders, local communities, academics, researchers, and NGOs, could play a transformative role in expanding the CBET landscape. By fostering partnerships and sharing best practices, these nations can strengthen CBET initiatives, ensuring sustainability, cultural preservation, and economic growth. Such collaborative efforts have the potential to set benchmarks and inspire widespread adoption of effective CBET models across the region.

3.2 Identification and Training of the Community

In India, the FD makes efforts to identify a community, and inspire them to create opportunities for themselves. The administration in the case of destinations, at the district level, comes to support and add

value, in the form of roads, infrastructure, and see capital required for the destination. Forest Officers and the district administration along the village administration, though find it difficult to convince the community to be part of the ETE; it is the identification of committed leaders and good training will go a long way to ensure the success of the CBET model. In India, too, the Gram Panchayats (Village council) very rarely get involved with the CBET models in the destinations. If the Village Councils get involved, a lot of issues will be sorted, as the Village Council are Constitutional Bodies in India, which have wide powers to utilize for the benefitting the community. In case of Sri Lanka, the government has not played a role in motivating the community to participate in CBET initiatives. However, academic institutions, NGOs, and some local authorities have made efforts to better engage the community and advocate for CBET development to benefit the local populace. Organizations such as SLEF, ASMET, SMENTS, and leaders like Palitha Gurusinghe have actively promoted ETEs and CBETs. Despite these efforts, a more unified and collaborative approach across all destinations is necessary to drive meaningful progress in establishing CBET and ensuring its success.

3.3 Role of the Forest Departments

The roles of Forest Departments (FDs) in India and Sri Lanka offer valuable insights into the development of Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET). Both nations operate within federal and provincial governance frameworks; however, their approaches to involving local communities in conservation and tourism efforts differ significantly. In Sri Lanka, FDs and conservation authorities primarily operate in isolation, with minimal direct involvement from local communities. This lack of integration hinders the development of sustainable CBET models, as communities remain disengaged from the benefits and responsibilities of ecotourism. Conversely, in India, the creation of Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) has been a pivotal step in fostering community participation. These committees serve as an essential mechanism for engaging local populations in ecotourism initiatives, providing a structure for shared decision-making, benefits distribution, and environmental stewardship.

The EDC model offers valuable lessons for Sri Lanka's authorities, NGOs, and local communities. By adopting a similar approach, Sri Lanka could enhance community participation in CBET initiatives and empower local stakeholders to contribute to sustainable tourism development. Universities in Sri Lanka which offer programs in tourism and hospitality should take an active role in this transformation by collaborating with FDs and conservation authorities. Through joint efforts, they can advocate for CBET models, conduct research, and implement educational programs that emphasize the importance of community involvement. Academia and researchers in Sri Lanka are already well-versed in the principles of CBET and its broader applications, such as ETEs. These institutions can play a critical role in bridging the gap between policy and practice by providing evidence-based strategies and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Provincial governments in Sri Lanka should also prioritize the establishment of ETEs, which can serve as catalysts for community-driven tourism development.

The creation of ETEs and robust CBET frameworks can transform tourism into a powerful tool for equitable growth. Beyond economic benefits, these initiatives have the potential to deliver significant social, cultural, environmental, and even political impacts. For instance, CBET can help preserve cultural heritage, promote environmental conservation, and empower marginalized communities, contributing to inclusivity and sustainable tourism landscape in Sri Lanka. By learning from India's successes and leveraging its academic resources, Sri Lanka can build a CBET model that not only meets immediate tourism goals but also ensures long-term benefits for all stakeholders.

3.4 Role of Academia and NGOs

Academia has consistently focused on researching tourism destinations and offering evidence-based solutions to enhance community-based tourism (CBET). In both India and Sri Lanka, there is a need for CBET destination managers to actively facilitate research opportunities. Academic insights play a critical role in improving the planning, implementation, and sustainability of CBET initiatives. However, in India, academics often face significant challenges in obtaining the necessary permissions to conduct research in these destinations. While state forest departments (FDs) and other provincial authorities are generally cooperative in granting approvals, the process tends to be bureaucratic, time-consuming, and highly dependent on individual officers or bureaucrats. This officer-centric approach not only delays the research process but also discourages academics from engaging in in-depth studies that could be beneficial for CBET stakeholders. To overcome these hurdles, it is crucial to establish streamlined procedures for granting research permissions, supported by clear policies that prioritize academic contributions. A collaborative framework involving government bodies, CBET managers, and academic institutions could help create a more efficient and researcher-friendly environment. By doing so, both India and Sri Lanka can leverage academic expertise to address key challenges, improve destination management, and ensure long-term success of CBET initiatives.

NGOs no doubt become the eyes and ears of the community, and as they work with the Government (FD and Tourism Departments); to create baseline data, and provide inputs for improvement, it goes a long way to assuage quality in CBET. The NGOs too should not look at profitability alone, but contribute to societal evolution through the community and help to accrue the benefits of Tourism/CBET.

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