

# COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT THROUGH REGENERATIVE TOURISM

Dr Anil Chandhok <sup>1</sup>, and Dr Amitabh Mishra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Professor, University School of Business, Chandigarh University, Mohali (Punjab).

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, University School of Business, Chandigarh University, Mohali-Punjab.

\* Corresponding author: [anil.e4863@cumail.in](mailto:anil.e4863@cumail.in)

**Abstract.** The regenerative tourism represents a transformative approach to the travel and tourism industry, whereby focusing on the long-term sustainability, local empowerment of the community and focus on environmental restoration. Unlike the traditional models that often exploit the local natural resources and local communities, regenerative tourism seeks to create a mutually beneficial relationship between the stakeholders like travellers, businesses, and host communities. This new emerging approach goes beyond merely minimizing negative impacts and strives to actively restore ecosystems, preserve cultural heritage, and promote social well-being. The regenerative tourism involves deeply integrating local communities into the tourism ecosystem, ensuring that they play a pivotal role in the decision-making and benefit directly from tourism activities. This approach fosters local entrepreneurship, enhances cultural exchange, and ensures that the wealth generated from the tourism stays within the community. It also emphasizes environmental stewardship by encouraging travellers to engage in conservation activities, contribute to sustainable practices, and support businesses that prioritize ecological restoration. This paper is an attempt to explore the potential of regenerative tourism as a tool for community empowerment. In this paper, the case study of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is referred which is the best live example of successful regenerative tourism initiatives and assesses the social, economic, and environmental benefits for local communities. By focusing on a holistic model of tourism that nurtures both human and environmental well-being, regenerative tourism offers a sustainable path forward for the future of travel and tourism sector.

**Keywords:** Community- Empowerment; Regenerative -Tourism; Local -Communities; Environmental- Restoration and Cultural- Heritage

## 1 Introduction

Tourism sector has been a driving force in the national and global economy, providing job opportunities, fostering cultural exchange, and generating significant income for local communities. However, over the last decades, the conventional tourism model has come under scrutiny for its negative impacts on local cultures, ecosystems, and economies. Mass tourism often leads to resource depletion, environmental degradation, and a lack of equitable distribution of tourism-related profits, there is an increasing need to rethink the way we approach tourism (Hall & Gossling, 2016).

The regenerative tourism has emerged as a new modern approach that focuses on creating a positive, long-lasting change for both local host communities and for conserving the environment. Unlike traditional “sustainable tourism,” which focuses on minimizing negative impacts, on the other hand the regenerative tourism purely works to restore and enhance natural and cultural resources.

The regenerative tourism basically moves around on the community empowerment. Traditional tourism often marginalizes local communities, leading to an unequal distribution of wealth and power. In comparison to this, regenerative tourism prioritizes the involvement of local people in decision-making processes and ensures that the local community be directly benefited from tourism activities. By encouraging the local entrepreneurship, providing special education and training, and promoting equitable business models, regenerative tourism seeks to elevate local communities to become active participants in shaping and carving the tourism activities and sharing the maximum dividend arises there from.

### **Community Empowerment through Regenerative Tourism and Hospitality – A case study of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board**

The Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, located in the Trikuta Hills of Jammu and Kashmir, India, is one of the most common visited pilgrimage places of India. The shrine, dedicated to Goddess Vaishno Devi, attracts millions of pilgrims annually, making it a central hub for religious tourism (Bhardwaj, 2020). However, the region's popularity has brought with it some challenges such as environmental degradation, overcrowding, and unequal economic benefits for local communities. In response to these issues, the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has pioneered initiatives that align with regenerative tourism principles to empower the local community while ensuring sustainable development and conserving the environment so that the environment should not get polluted because of too much crowd of the visitors.

#### **1. The Challenge: Overcrowding and Environmental Pressure**

Over the years, the Vaishno Devi pilgrimage has witnessed a massive increase of tourist visitors. According to the previous trends, more than 8 million pilgrims visit the shrine annually, placing considerable pressure on the environment, local infrastructure, and the surrounding communities. The steady increase in tourism in the area has led to several issues and challenges:

- **Environmental degradation:** The continuous inflow of tourist activities have caused deforestation, water depletion, and waste management issues.
- **Cultural and social impact:** The rapid commercialization of the area has altered the traditional way of life for local communities, leading to a loss of cultural heritage and an increased dependency on tourism-based income.
- **Economic inequality:** With the tremendous flow of pilgrimage in the region, there is significant revenues from tourism, the local communities have not always benefited proportionally. The external tourism companies have often captured the majority of the profits.

Recognizing these issues and challenges, the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board set out to adopt regenerative tourism practices to both empower the local community and restore the environmental and cultural heritage of the region.

## **2. Regenerative Tourism Strategies by the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board**

The Shrine Board has planned and executed several initiatives that align with the principles of regenerative tourism. These strategies are aimed at focusing on the sustainability, local community empowerment and engagement and the restoration of natural and cultural resources.

### **a. Sustainable Infrastructure and Eco-Friendly Initiatives**

- **Green Energy Projects:** The Shrine Board has wisely invested in the renewable energy projects for generating electricity for their self-consumption and their self-dependence on electricity, such as solar power, to protect and conserve the environment. Solar panels have been installed at various places for the purpose of generating electricity for lightening the pilgrimage route, helping to power lights, water pumps, and other facilities sustainabl (Pereira & Filho, 2020).
- **Waste Management Systems:** With irregular flow of visitors visiting the shrine each year, waste management is one of the major challenges. To address this issue, the shrine board has implemented

- waste segregation and recycling programs, encouraging both locals and tourists to minimize the waste. The waste Management system is operating with such an efficiency that hardly any waste can be seen on the routes and at any other place of destination.
- Water Conservation and Reuse: The region, being mountainous, faces water scarcity issues. The board has wisely invested on rainwater harvesting systems, water treatment plants, and wastewater recycling initiatives to ensure sustainable water usage. Pilgrims are also informed, educated and encouraged to participate in water conservation drive during their visit so that water can be used with minimum wastage.

#### **b. Local Community Engagement and Empowerment**

- Promoting Local Enterprises: One of the major concern of the shrine Board is its effort to empower the local residents by promoting small-scale businesses owned by local people (Singh, 2021). These include handicraft stalls, priority to local residents for food vendors, and small hotels. The shrine board has created an ecosystem where local vendors and service providers are integrated into the tourism value chain, ensuring that a larger portion of the economic benefits stay within the community and they feel empowered (Ram, 2019).
  - Cultural Preservation and Education: The board has worked to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the region by supporting traditional crafts, music, and dance. Pilgrims visiting the shrine are encouraged to participate in cultural experiences, allowing them to connect with the local culture. Training programs in traditional handicrafts and arts have been provided to local youth, ensuring the preservation of traditional skills while offering a viable source of income (Nanda, 2020).
  - Skill Development and Livelihood Programs: In collaboration with local authorities, the board has initiated skill development programs aimed at creating employment opportunities for the youth. These programs focus on areas such as hospitality management, tour guiding, and environmental conservation, enabling locals to take on more significant roles within the tourism industry (Raj & Morphet, 2007).
- c. Community-Driven Environmental Restoration
- Eco-Trails and Sustainable Pilgrimage Routes: The board has developed and promoted eco-friendly pilgrimage routes that reduce the ecological impact of the thousands of pilgrims who trek up the mountain every day. These routes are designed to minimize deforestation and soil erosion while offering an immersive experience of the natural beauty of the region. Additionally, eco-trails promote awareness among pilgrims about the importance of preserving the environment. The Board has also introduced timber train facility to reduce the time factor for the pilgrimage (Sindhe, 2011).
  - Tree Plantation and Afforestation Projects: To combat deforestation caused by the growing number of visitors and the associated development, Board has invested in large-scale afforestation and tree plantation projects around the shrine and along the pilgrimage routes. These initiatives not only help restore the natural landscape but also promote biodiversity in the region (Rinschede, 1992).

### **3. Results and Impact**

The regenerative tourism efforts of the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board have resulted in a variety of positive outcomes for the local community and the environment.

- Economic Empowerment: Local community businesses have experienced a significant growth due to the board's initiatives. Small-scale vendors, artisans, and tour guides now being benefited from an increased flow of revenue, which has improved their standard of living. Additionally, the skill development programs have empowered local youth to gain employment in this diverse sectors, reducing the dependence on seasonal labour (Timothy & oslen, 2006).
- Cultural Revitalization: The cultural programs and support for traditional crafts have helped preserve the unique heritage of the region. The local population has developed a stronger sense of pride in their traditions, and pilgrims benefit from a richer, more authentic experience.
- Environmental Restoration: The efforts to reduce waste, conserve water, and plant trees have had a

measurable impact on the environment. The region's ecological footprint has been reduced, and there has been a noticeable improvement in local biodiversity. The eco-friendly pilgrimage routes have helped reduce environmental degradation, making the pilgrimage experience more enjoyable and sustainable. The electrical autos are plying to transport visitors from one destination to another with fare fixed by the Shrine board so that there is no scope for bargaining (Beaumont & Dredge, 2016).

- **Enhanced Community Participation:** One of the most significant outcomes has been the active involvement of the local community in the decision-making process. The shrine board has included local stakeholders in the planning and implementation of tourism-related projects, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably.

#### **4. Key Initiatives for Empowering Local Communities Through Economic Inclusion:**

a. **Promotion of Local Enterprises** A key goal of the Board's regenerative tourism strategy is to ensure that the economic benefits of tourism activities must reach to the local community. The board actively encourages local entrepreneurship by providing space for small-scale businesses, such as local handicraft stalls, food vendors, and souvenir shops, along the pilgrimage routes and at the shrine. This initiative helps local artisans and vendors to tap into the revenue generated by tourism, allowing them to thrive economically.

b. **Skill Development and Capacity Building** To increase the employability of the local population, the shrine Board has implemented several skill development programs aimed at equipping locals with the skills required for the hospitality and tourism sectors. These programs cover areas such as tour guiding, hospitality management, eco-tourism, and sustainable practices, providing young people in the region with the opportunity to work in the tourism industry, thus creating long-term livelihoods. Many locals have also become trained as tourist guides, offering insights into the region's history, culture, and natural environment, which enhances the pilgrim experience.

c. **Support for Women Entrepreneurs** In a bid to promote gender equality, the Board has introduced several initiatives to support women entrepreneurs. Local women are encouraged to run businesses such as handicraft stalls, guesthouses, and food services. Training programs are organized specifically for women to improve their skills in areas like marketing, financial management, and product development. This empowerment of women has led to an increase in their participation in the economic activities surrounding the shrine, thus contributing to a more inclusive local economy.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is an exemplary case study as how the new approach of regenerative tourism can empower the local communities by offering the job opportunities at one hand and also preserving the cultural and environmental assets of the regions on the other side. By focusing on the sustainable practices, the board has created a model that benefits all the stakeholders which includes pilgrims, the environment, and the local community. The case study of Shrine Board highlights the transformative potential of regenerative tourism in pilgrimage tourism, where both spiritual and material benefits can be derived without compromising on the ecological and cultural integrity.

As tourism sector continues to grow, the shrine board's efforts serve as an inspiring example as how tourism, when approached with a regenerative mindset, can play a pivotal role in empowering the local communities by offering jobs and also ensuring the sustainability of natural and cultural resources for future generations.

Over the last few years, the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has achieved significant milestones in the areas of sustainability, community empowerment, and environmental regeneration. By integrating green technologies, eco-friendly practices, and local empowerment initiatives, the board has set a benchmark for regenerative tourism in pilgrimage destinations. These new practices not only improve the quality of life

of local communities but also significantly contribute towards the long-term sustainability of the region's natural resources and cultural heritage

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