



# Rural Ecotourism: A Qualitative Analysis of Exceptional Sites from Southern Bengal, India

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - This study examines the economic, social, and ecological contributions of rural eco-tourism units in South 24-Pargana, West Bengal, India. These units focus on nursery gardens and organic farms instead of typical natural attractions, aiming to understand how such businesses can integrate tourism and achieve sustainability.

**Methodology/Design/Approach** - A qualitative approach was used with three case studies of rural eco-tourism units. Data was collected through interviews with founders using semi-structured questionnaires and analyzed inductively.

**Findings** - The study shows that eco-tourism can be both profitable and sustainable. Adding a tourism element to less successful businesses like nursery gardens and organic farms has made them economically viable. Visitors are willing to pay premium prices due to the ambiance, experience, and effective marketing.

**Originality** - This study offers a unique perspective on rural eco-tourism in a region without traditional attractions, highlighting how tourism can enhance the viability of existing businesses. It emphasizes the role of social media, word-of-mouth, and government support in promoting such eco-tourism units.

**Keywords:** Rural Eco-tourism, Qualitative Case Study, Inductive Thematic Analysis, Economic Viability, Environmental Sustainability, Indigenous Community Development

## Introduction

The modern-day industrious urbanites with their fast-paced lives, tend to rush out frequently to de-stress themselves from their hectic yet mundane routines. While the hedonistic mainstream tourists primarily venture out in the lofty mountains, hills, lush green forests, pristine beaches, rivers, lakes, and in places having proximity to natural beauty for respite and luxury during their vacations (Perkins & Grace, 2009), the townies make themselves cosy in some nearby urban resorts or suburban retreats during the long weekends. The post-pandemic 'revenge tourism' and 'counter-urbanization' conditions has given rise to both weekend tourism in the city outskirts (Balińska, 2020; Liu et al., 2022), and rural slow tourism in the vastly unexplored rustic landscapes of India (Kant, 2022; Singh & Srivastava, 2023). During the weekends mostly employed youngsters from small families of the same state tend to visit the rural ecotourism sites of India to experience village life close to nature, and enjoy good organic food at affordable prices (Mannikeri et al., 2021). Though international tourism causes a significant amount of foreign exchange inflows into the country, the volume of domestic tourism, a major chunk of which comes from the unorganized sector, is larger, and weekend rural tourism has a big role to play in it.

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The socio-economic contribution of tourism growth over the last few years is undeniable. It is a well-established fact that tourism development has the potential to influence and be influenced by local economic, financial, social, cultural, political and natural environment (Khan et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2020; Godovykh et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2021; Séraphin & Cyrille, 2024). However, the negative association between tourism development and environmental quality is also well established in academic literature (Ahmad et al., 2019). Changes in tourism approach by promoting rural ecotourism can possibly lead to new vistas of opportunities in the tourism sector. In the recent years, as a means of alternative and sustainable tourism, ecotourism is gaining more acceptance and popularity (Salman et al., 2020). It is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of local people and involves interpretation and education” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015). The compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of global ecotourism market is projected at 12% during 2024 to 2031. However, the CAGR for ecotourism demand in India for the stated period is projected higher at 15.8% (Dharmadhikari, 2024). Ecotourism entrepreneurs in rural set ups facilitate revitalization of the rural economies through active community participations (Sun et al., 2021). For many villages across nations, developing rural ecotourism has been proven to be the most viable solution to sustainable development problems (Khalili et al., 2020; Shang et al., 2020; Mehdi & Ferdowsi, 2021).

In this context the present study intends to identify few select ecotourism units in the South 24-Pargana district of West Bengal, India, where there are neither mountains, nor hills or forests, neither beaches, nor river or religious sites, but nursery-gardens and organic farms. It focuses on their performances, problems and possibilities, and presents three exceptional qualitative case studies to understand their economic, social and ecological contribution.

## **Literature Review**

### **Tourism and Economic Growth**

There are evidences in support of tourism-led growth hypothesis as well as economic growth-driven tourism hypothesis (Seetanah, 2010; Du et al., 2014; Gwenhure & Odhiambo, 2017; Roudi et al., 2018; Fauzel & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2021). Tourism creates spillover effects as an indispensable part of national development trajectory (Du et al., 2014). The relationship between tourism and economic growth may not always be linear. Brida et al. (2020) identified clusters of high and low tourism performances across eighty countries. While the countries with low tourism-performance have a propensity to be distant, the high tourism-performance countries are found to be more proximate.

Evidences of tourism-led growth are prominent in case of the island economies (Seetanah, 2010). Roudi et al. (2018) found the existence of a bidirectional relationship between tourism and economic growth for a panel of Small Island developing states (SIDS); Fauzel and Tandrayen-Ragoobur (2021) confirmed it specifically for Mauritius, an SIDS of Sub-Saharan Africa, and Cannonier and Burke (2018) observed a unidirectional causality running from tourism to economic growth in the Caribbean islands. While examining the tourism-induced Environment Kuznets Curve (EKC) hypothesis, Akadiri et al. (2017) also re-emphasised the importance of international tourism in economic prosperity of the Small Island States as well as bigger economies.

Tourism-led growth hypothesis is found to be relevant in the Indian context where unidirectional causality is found to run from tourism to economic growth (Mishra et al., 2011; Ohlan, 2017; Dash et al., 2018). Singh and Alam (2024) observed that government expenditure on tourism sector generates investment multiplier effect as well as accelerator effect both in the long run and short run. International tourist arrivals promote public and private sector investment in the Indian tourism industry which indirectly promotes growth of the economy.

However, be it tourism-led growth or economic growth-driven tourism, it is not a spontaneous response (Cárdenas-García et al., 2013). There is no denying the fact that the impact of tourism development on the quality of life is dependent on a number of socio-economic factors, the government policies, and governance of the stated region (Ahmad et al., 2019). According to Pablo-Romero and Molina (2013), the most prominent aspect on which the dynamics of tourism and economic growth evolves is the ‘degree of specialisation in tourism’ of the country as it can assign tangible economic value to natural and cultural resources (UNEP &

WTO, 2005). Practically, the association between tourism and growth has become a matter of discussion of the last decade. Instead today, we discuss about the sustainability of tourism growth (Kumail et al., 2024). Innovation and introduction of fintech to finance green tourism projects and smart tourist destinations to combat environmental degradation has become the new mantra (Sun et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024). Introducing financial-technology applications like artificial intelligence, big data analytics and crypto currency can potentially improve customer experience and payment mechanisms, thereby making the tourism experience more sustainable, robust and adaptive (Abedalrhman, 2025).

### **Tourism and Environment**

Unregulated and uncontrolled expansion of tourism activities like consumerism-driven urban mass tourism is being identified as an underlying cause of adverse externalities in the society (Chakraborty, 2022; Tiwari & Rani, 2024; Xu et al., 2024). The degree of negative impact of tourism on environmental quality of low-income countries is found to be greater as compared to their developed counterparts due to institutional failure and poor quality governance of the least developed nations (Haseeb et al., 2018). Ahmad et al. (2019) observed a negative impact of tourism on the environmental quality of the South-Asian countries of Indonesia and the Philippines. The findings of Fauzel and Tandrayen-Ragoobur (2021) are also in the similar line in case of Mauritius. Akadiri et al. (2017) found the existence of EKC hypothesis in Small Island States. However, the findings of Kumail et al. (2024) support the existence of Innovation Claudia Curve Theory in the Asian tourist destinations claiming that innovations have the potential to eventually reduce the environmental impacts in those regions, underscoring the importance of introducing sustainable green tourism strategies to effectively combat global climate change (Gan et al., 2024). A positive association could be found between tourism development and deterioration of environmental quality in Vietnam (Ahmad et al., 2019).

The Himalayas is one of the most rich biodiversity hotspots of the world. Tourists from across the globe flock in to vent out in the magnificence of the mighty Himalayas. The economies of the states like Uttarakhand, Uttaranchal, Jammu, Kashmir, Leh, Ladakh and Sikkim have high dependence on Himalayan tourism. They are the worst sufferers in terms of biodiversity loss as well as ecological imbalance, and face acute waste management problems. There are a number of studies highlighting as to how unorganized and rampant tourism practices in the Himalayan regions of India has contributed towards the sustenance and economic prosperity of the local communities, and parallelly endangered local biodiversity and caused environmental degradation in the region (Chakraborty, 2022; Ashraf et al., 2024; Tiwari & Rani, 2024).

Tiwari and Rani (2024) find that tourism-induced unbridled urbanization and unsustainable resource use has caused havoc losses of lives and livelihood, and caused ecological imbalance through the disasters in Indian Himalayan region. The fragile geomorphology of the Indian Himalayan region makes infrastructural development to support tourism, a very risky affair. Wanton destruction of forests and grasslands (bugiyals) for the sake of indiscriminate construction of roadways and stays has made these sensitive and seismically unstable regions more prone to human-induced natural disasters like melting of glaciers, landslides, flash floods, forest fires and earthquakes a frequent occurrence. Both global climate change and deterioration of local air quality have accelerated due to these anthropogenic interventions (Ashraf et al., 2024; Tiwari & Rani, 2024).

### **Tourism and Sustainability**

The World Governance Indicators (WGI) identify 'six dimensions of governance' which includes freedom of expression and association, political stability, quality and credibility of civil services, regulatory quality, rule of law, and prevention of corruption (World Bank Group, 2024). Improved environmental governance can serve as a game-changer to make tourism environmentally sustainable. However, population density and population growth rate at times act as impediments towards introducing environment-friendly tourism regulations in India as that can affect the sustenance needs of many (Gan et al., 2024).

Chakraborty (2022) mentions that ecotourism, as opposed to corporate tourism, has more potential to be socially and environmentally sustainable as "it enables profits to remain within the ambit of a specific geography that is inhabited by specific communities who work as collective", instead of incessantly looking

for immediate super-normal gains with maximum interest in resource extraction and minimum concern about the regional culture and ecology. Sensitising the indigenous communities about the need for preserving natural vegetation, culture and ecology of the region through setting up ecotourism units fulfils the economic, social and environmental needs of the communities. The indigenous communities through their traditional knowledge systems have intrinsic understanding of the sensitivities of the regional ecosystems and thus, can minimise the impact of tourism on local environment. Nonetheless, local stakeholder consultation which is a significant aspect of tourism development is largely neglected.

Tiwari and Rani (2024) have rightly observed that “Incentivization is essential for changing the general public’s attitudes and gaining support for conservation”. The Himalayan Homestay Programme 2002 undertaken by the Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust has done so by training the indigenous people in Ladakh in housekeeping and as tourist guides. Presently there are approximately 1200 homestays operational in Ladakh supporting the regional economy without compromising the ecology (Tiwari & Rani, 2024).

Contextually, the present study discusses tourism development at the micro level to encompass the three dimensions of sustainability which are – supporting rural livelihood, community development and ecological wellbeing through few case studies of three villages of South 24-Pargana district of West Bengal, India.

## Methodology

The study undertakes qualitative case studies to understand the economic, social and environmental contribution of three select pioneering eco-tourism units in the villages of South 24-Pargana district of West Bengal, India, which are devoid of mountains, hills, forests, rivers, sea beaches and religious sites. These ecotourism units mostly cater to the weekend tourism cravings of the people staying in and around the metropolitan city of Kolkata having an estimated population of 205,34,000 people. The case studies use both primary and secondary data for inductive thematic analysis of the interviews of the proprietors of the select units. The research was conducted through a comprehensive semi-structured questionnaire comprising of both open-ended and close-ended questions.

**Table 1.** Overview of the Sample

Case Study No.	Name of the Unit Year of Establishment and Name of village	Area occupied (in bigha)	Source of Data	Name of the Respondent	Designation of the Respondent
C1	Bawali Farmhouse (2008) Village: Chandipur	13.5	Personal Interview	Arup Chatterjee	Founder
C2	Arshinagar Shilpagram (2022) Village: Satgachia	17.5	Personal Interview	Arup Chatterjee	Founder
C3	Gram Bangla Retreat (2022) Village: Hatberia	63	Personal Interview	Krishnendu Basak	Founder

Source: Authors’ Compilation

The interviews were conducted on the basis of a comprehensive semi-structured questionnaire comprising of both open-ended and close-ended questions. The questionnaire was spread across five sections having a total of thirty-three questions on – the profile of the eco-tourism unit, firm productivity and linkages, employment profile of the unit, the contribution of the unit to indigenous community development, and ecological profile of the unit. The interviews lasted from sixty minutes to ninety minutes on an average and the responses were noted in the questionnaire.

Inductive thematic analysis were conducted to scrutinize the responses according to diverse semantic themes, adhering to the research question of how the eco-tourism units contribute to the economic development, ecological awareness creation and community building of the region (Braun and Clarke 2006). Secondary data was collected from the company websites and customer reviews.

## Findings and Discussion

## Unique Selling Propositions

### *Bawali Farmhouse (C1)*

Located at a humble village of South 24-Pargana district of West Bengal, India, C1 is a trend-setter, and pioneer of setting up an eco-tourism unit in the region. The uniqueness of this farmhouse lies in its nursery-based setup combined with various artistic themes associated with the culture of Bengal. Like any other business-as-usual resort, C1 offers its visitors every other kind of modern amenity and supplements them with lots of colours from flora and foliage. Moreover, the mud houses, tree houses and caves add value to the experience through differentiation (Bawali Farmhouse, 2020).

### *Arshinagar Shilpagram (C2)*

C2 is an integrated organic farming site complemented with a few mud houses to offer the experience of rural stay to the urban tourists. This plastic-free unit restrict the entry of internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles to prevent air and noise pollution. They endeavour to regularly recycle their wastes thereby sending the message of sustainable practices (Arshinagar Shilpogram, 2025).

### *Gram Bangla Retreat (C3)*

The vast expanse of organic farm, lush green close to the outskirts of the buzzing city Kolkata, and take-away organic vegetables add to the charm of the destination (Gram Bangla Retreat, 2023).

## Economic viability

The tropical climate in the Southern part of West Bengal causes seasonality in tourist arrivals at the destinations located here and hence, monsoon sees a lower occupancy rate. However, the study finds that there is sufficient demand for the select ecotourism units, primarily as weekend tourism destinations, catering to the tourists residing in close proximity to Kolkata.

Table 2 exhibits that in spite of being established only in 2022, C2 and C3 has seen satisfactory tourist footfall during 2023.

**Table 2.** Demand Profile of the Ecotourism Units

Units	No. of rooms	Maximum Occupancy	Room tariffs ranging from ₹	Visitors during 2023 (approx.)
C1	31	105	3,500 - 7,500	10,500
C2	10	20	7,000	3,600
C3	12	48	3,000 - 6,000	5,000

Source: Authors' Compilation

The founder of C1, Mr. Arup Chatterjee, initially established Ankur, a nursery garden, in 2003 at Bawali of South 24-Pargana district of West Bengal. Almost 133 imported variants of palm plants, which can play a significant role in air pollution reduction through absorption of harmful toxins, were germinated here. The villagers at the vicinity where not well educated, neither the children were getting proper education. In the given scenario he introduced few community development initiatives by setting up a non-governmental organisation (NGO), but without much success. Overall, his initiatives till then did not reap much economic returns. In his words,

*In 2008, I set up three rooms along with a kitchen and a lobby, decorated them with my own artistic sense, and started renting them out. People were sceptical about its success as there were not any natural or religious sites at the vicinity. Weekend tourism and farm-house tourism were not very well-known and popular concepts at that time in Bengal, though the concepts were familiar in Delhi, Haryana and Punjab. However, presently it has thirty-one rooms, and over the years my resort has reached such a pinnacle of popularity that it remains overbooked for most of the time of the year,*

*and the profit margin remains close to 40%. In 2024, there were approximately 1500 resorts out of which 250 resort-owners acknowledged to be inspired by my idea. I have been bestowed with many honours and accolades for pioneering the concept of nursery-stay. Presently this region has 42 resorts and has been declared as a tourism hub by the State Government.*

Inspired by his success with C1, Mr. Chatterjee established C2 where he has clubbed integrated farming practices with tourism. Here there are ten mud houses, set up on the theme of evolution of the Bengali language. Starting from vegetables, fruits and fish, to chicken, mutton, and all kinds of poultry and dairy products, he serves his tourists at both C1 and C2, the fresh organic harvests of his farm.

C3 started operating as an organic agro food product supplier specialised in multi-layered organic fruits and vegetable farming. Additionally it did goat farming, bee farming, fish farming, mushroom farming, duck and poultry farming. The organisation was also involved in export and import of organic products. In the words of Krishnendu Basak, the architect-founder,

*...however, the companies ran into loss. So I decided to set up a few rooms and started letting them out to the tourists. It has been only two years that we have set up the rooms, and already we are approaching the break-even. The visitors not only enjoy their stay here, but also carry home organic vegetables along with sweet memories. We even host corporate and personal events at our space.*

As they are within a distance of thirty-five kilometres from Central Kolkata and even closer from South Kolkata, the room tariffs and food charges though high, the pocket pinch for travelling to the ecotourism units remains within affordable limits.

The recent tourism literatures endorse initiatives that tend to promote degrowth, a socio-intellectual undertaking to rationalise unbridled economic growth momentum to ensure social equity and environmental justice (Fletcher et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2023; Sard & Valle, 2024). However, economic viability at the micro level is an essential prerequisite to ensure long term survival of the ecotourism units (Picard, 2015).

The above responses establish that the cases studied are economically viable as after shifting from loss-making businesses now they are operating either as over-booked ecotourism units, or are close to break-even after adding the tourism component to the pre-existing 'eco' part in it. The post-pandemic revenge tourism and counter-urbanization supported demand augmentation has also acted as a facilitator to this growth.

### **Community development**

Rural, community-based tourism has the potential to revive the regional economies through economic diversification by reducing the dependence on subsistence farming and agricultural land and empowers the villagers through generating supplemental income (Chen & Cai, 2024). Though such kind of tourism advocates degrowth, it promotes equitable and responsible consumption, focusing on the quality of life, instead of unrestrained consumption orientation (Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024).

It is important to note that rural tourism practices should be introduced keeping in consideration the local traditions, community wellbeing and ecological balance (Chen & Cai, 2024). The study of Yi et al. (2024) finds that mere development of a tourist destination without developing the ancillary tourism services can undermine the popularity of the rural tourist destinations. Through 'Cultural branding' and sustainable practices in the rural tourism destinations the village economies can experience a revival. Preservation of the authenticity of the local traditions, customs and ecology is of extreme importance to help the tourists experience a sense of connection with the destinations (Yanan et al., 2024). A loyalty thus generated is enduring and sustainable in the sense that it promotes repeat visit to the destinations and makes the destination popular through word-of-mouth publicity, the most impactful of all forms of publicity.

The cases studied contribute directly to community development through employment generation, and indirectly through spillovers by creating forward and backward linkages in the region. Table 3 encapsulates skill-wise and gender-wise tabulation of the local employees directly engaged in the ecotourism units along with their average salaries. Employing a total of 116 people from the neighbourhood implies supporting 116

families. Moreover, there are non-cash benefits like Employee State Insurance and Provident Fund for all the workers in the payroll of all the three ecotourism units (Table 4).

**Table 3.** Employee profile and income generation

Units	Number of Unskilled Workers		Number of Skilled Workers		Total	Average Monthly Salary ₹		
	Male	Female	Male	Female		Unskilled Workers	Skilled Workers	
C1	23	12	22	9	66	300 per day	8,500 - 16,000	-
C2	8	8	4	-	20	300 per day	8,500 - 16,000	-
C3	3	7	20	-	30	8,000	15,000	
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>116</b>			
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>			

Source: Author's Compilation

In the experience of Mr. Arup Chatterjee, in a tourism set up of twelve rooms, at least forty people needs to be directly employed, while another forty remains indirectly associated. Local supply chains are formed as the units have to depend on the local suppliers for procuring supplies like rice, pulses, spices, cooking oil, fuel and those materials which cannot be produced in the farms. There is also a demand for local e-rickshaw drivers, and tour-guides for site-seeing and village tours. The locals tend to be more cautious about the cleanliness and beautification of the surroundings to enhance the acceptance of the destinations to the tourists.

### Decent work and addressing inequalities

Wearing et al. (2012) is of the opinion that 'slow ecotourism' facilitates social justice for the host communities through creating opportunities for indigenous workforce participation. Such initiatives are expected to alleviate poverty and create a 'positive redistributive socio-economic effect' with an atmosphere of 'decommodification'.

Table 3 above also iterates the fact that the units studied are providing decent employment opportunities to the locals. While the skilled workers involved are the managers, botanists, accountants, receptionists, room-service providers or housekeepers, chefs and waiters; the unskilled workers are the gardeners, suppliers to the chef, and the sweeper. Notably, the employment ratio is highly skewed towards men for the skilled categories of work. A casual interaction with a female unskilled worker provided information in contrary to the above Table 2, conveying that though they are very satisfied with their employer, there is disparity of income between the male and female unskilled workers of C2.

Coming to the question of gender equity, Humberstone (2004) has equated ecotourism with ecofeminism in the way that since ages, both nature and women have been oppressed, and now there is a common concern to 'transform this double subjugation'. However, Agarwal (1998) opines that it is essential to increase the bargaining power of both the women and the environment-conscious people to bring better balance and equity in the tourism landscape, and education has a key role to play in this regard.

### Training Programmes and Additional Benefits

Hospitality services, like any other discipline, demands regular up gradation of skills and knowledge. Likewise in case of farming, especially organic farming, knowledge and experience are pre-requisites. As tourism, especially rural tourism requires involvement of the indigenous community both directly and indirectly, the attitudes of the neighbouring communities, reciprocated trust, shared actions, and networks appear to be remarkably significant for building social capital. Conservation education helps rural communities to build such social capital which in turn, initially slows down and eventually reverses its degradation (Sunkar et al.,

2015). Conservation in this context, does not only refer to preserving the natural resources and the environment, it also encompasses awareness and preservation of local tradition and culture, and popularising them through tourism. This is the age of digitalisation and social media marketing. Hence, technological education is also a matter of immediate importance for creating and popularising a brand and to remain relevant.

Table 4 tabulates the training programmes organised by the units at regular intervals to hone up the skills of their skilled workers at the hospitality sector.

**Table 4.** Training Programmes and Non-Cash Benefits

	<b>Training Programmes</b>	<b>Additional Benefits</b>
C1 & C2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>House-keeping and catering</li> <li>Culinary skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee State Insurance</li> <li>Provident Fund</li> </ul>
C3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hourly workshops on Industrial Training for Hospitality and Tourism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meals and accommodation for the outstation staffs</li> <li>State Insurance and Provident Fund (SIPF)</li> </ul>

Source: Author's Compilation

Mr. Chatterjee (C1 and C2) further informed that,

*In Arshinagar Shilpagram we take assistance from specialists like botanists, and experts in fishery management to train the villagers from neighbourhood in organic farming. The produces from the farm are used to feed fresh organic food to the tourists in both Bawali Farmhouse and Arshinagar Shilpagram.*

### **Achieving Sustainability**

There are three dimensions of sustainability, the economic dimension, the social dimension and the environmental dimension. However, their mutual interactions are not really linear. In many cases a trade-off has to be made between the economic dimension and the other two dimensions because, as aptly pointed out by Picard (2015), unless there is economic viability, romanticising about social and environmental sustainability might defeat the longevity of the business. Table 5, in this context, attempts to summarize how the three micro ecotourism units are attempting to balance between the sustainability parameters and the ecotourism performances.

To balance the three dimensions of sustainability, the ecofriendly products and services offered in these units are priced at premium and ultra-premium levels which not many common tourists can afford. Due to such high prices firstly, the demand can be kept under check, as scaling up can reconvert ecotourism to mass tourism by putting additional pressure on local natural resources; and secondly, the premium supports the additional cost of organic farming and keeps the projects economically sustainable (Singh et al., 2024).

### **Hurdles faced in addressing the Sustainable Development Agenda**

Any new way of life or business not-as-usual has to face multiple obstacles in financial, operational and social fronts. Firstly, both the founders interviewed in the study consider political interference at the local level to be the biggest road block in their ecopreneurial journey. Undue interference with vested interests hinders their otherwise seamless business activities.

Secondly, the government neither at the ministerial level, nor at block level tends to promote neither ecotourism nor organic farming. Mr. Basak (C3) regrets while saying that,

*No subsidies are extended by the government on installation of solar panels, or for development of rainwater harvesting infrastructure. This is making our procurement and recycling initiatives difficult, and is parallelly demotivating us from installing such expensive systems in our ecotourism*

*setups. Otherwise our businesses could have been environmentally more sustainable, left more positive footprints and created better examples to follow.*

As mentioned earlier, for successful running of an alternative not-as-usual business, acceptance and support from the stakeholders are of utmost importance. The government and the regulators as stakeholders are expected to formulate policies to support such alternative tourism initiatives to strengthen and recreate social capital. Nonetheless each of the ecotourism units is bootstrapped with no government support.

The ecotourism journey in South 24 Pargana district of West Bengal began in 2008 pioneered by C1. Of late, the tourism industry especially weekend tourism has flourished in this part of Bengal in spite of lack of natural sights and religious sites. Sadly even after almost two decades of successful journey, no specific government policy, funding, or infrastructural support has been provided.

**Table 5.** Sustainability Parametres versus Ecotourism Performances

Sustainability Parametres	Ecotourism Performances
Economic support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic wellbeing through employment generation</li> <li>• Provision for insurance services</li> <li>• Creating forward and backward linkages</li> </ul>
Conservation of environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting integrated farming and organic farming</li> <li>• Awareness about air purifying indoor plants</li> <li>• Promoting the nursery gardens</li> </ul>
Well-being of the indigenous people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educating the children of the staff members</li> <li>• Community development</li> <li>• Skill development of workers</li> </ul>
Interpretation and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing the visitors to select aspects of Bengali culture</li> <li>• Plastic-free zone</li> <li>• Pollution-free zone</li> <li>• Minimizing environmental footprint</li> </ul>

Source: Author's Compilation

## Conclusion

In the post-COVID paradigm of counter-urbanization, rural tourism has attained a new height of popularity. Parallely, sustainability of the tourism activities by way of balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions of tourism has become a matter of concern. Ecotourism, a subset of sustainable tourism, propagates degrowth which is perceivably the solution to tourism-induced environmental degradation. However, there remains a very pertinent and fundamental question as to whether the people participating in the rural ecotourism activities pursue environmental conservation altruistically, or whether they are motivated by mere economic needs, as profitability is essential for the long-term survival of the business in question. Picard (2015) has commendably referred 'conventional mass tourism' vis-à-vis 'alternative tourism' as a pragmatic vis-à-vis a romantic approach. According to him, combining the ethics of alternative tourism with the economies of scale of conventional tourism can show a mid-way of 'enlightened tourism' which potentially has the answer to the problem of lack of economic viability for ecotourism projects.

The Regional Strategic Action Plan for Coastal Ecotourism Development in the South Western Indian Ocean Region 2008 has highlighted few strategies to guarantee medium to long-term economic viability at both the micro and macro levels. Strategic planning is the backbone of achieving sustainable development. Efficient and effective tourism planning capacity leads to optimum policy implementation. The Plan also emphasises the need for assimilating ecotourism demands into the sustainable development policy of the region. Moreover, the ecotourism products and services require matching up to the consumer expectations. Good

governance, resource co-management best practices, and brand marketing are also significant corollaries. Making culture and heritage relevant to the tourists, and wise-handling of flesh trade are imperative to keep the social and cultural fabric intact (Picard, 2015).

As per the respondents, the rural ecotourism units studied are more or less successful in adopting the micro-level strategies stated above. The study presents a reverse approach where adding the 'tourism element' to the 'not so successful' existing nursery and organic-farming businesses have made them economically viable. The visitors are willing to pay premium prices not only because of the 'eco' element of the rural sites, but also because of the ambience, the experience, successful social media marketing, and word of mouth publicity.

However, the reality-check emphasises the need to thwart the enduring road blocks of political interference and corrupted economic motivations of the local political parties behind achieving the sustainable tourism goals (Falter, 2024). A supportive macro-economic and political environment of tourism development and planning is a factor of utmost importance for the success of ecotourism units. Moreover, robust social capital and absorptive social capacities are prerequisites to ensure the sustainability of ecotourism activities (Nugroho et al., 2021). Given such developments take place, the rural ecotourism units under study have the potential to become more prosperous and lead the way for similar or differentiated ventures involving larger communities, and inculcate the sense of environmental and cultural conservation among the stakeholders.

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#### **Declaration**

##### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Not applicable.

##### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

##### **Availability of data and materials**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

##### **Competing interests**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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