

OVERTOURISM IN NAINITAL: TOURISM AT PERIL

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ABSTRACT

In the global context of tourism, many destinations of huge mass appeal have reached a point of tourism growth which is accompanied by challenges, many of which can be summed up with the term 'overtourism'. The credit system, greater mobility, expanding middle class of society, paid vacations, corporate incentives, digital media, social networking and aspirations of new generation resulted into 'too much of tourism' at some popular destinations. In such cases negative experiences of both visitors and locals undermine the very spirit of tourism that often leads to conflicts which results into greater complexity. One such case is Nainital which is a lake town in the Indian Himalayan zone facing the challenge of overtourism. Overtourism may not be the endpoint of tourism growth but it certainly needs a diagnostic system that helps in identifying the risk of tourismphobia among the local people and visitors alike. When overcrowding goes too far, the repercussions are difficult to reverse, therefore, each destination needs to develop, implement and monitor its own set of solutions.

Keywords: Overtourism, Carrying Capacity, Social Conflict, Lake Town, Overcrowding, Congestion Management, Nainital lake.

The tourism industry focuses almost exclusively on growth in terms of tourist arrivals. The targets are set to reach bigger volume of tourists with little or no concern for the impacts. In the initial years of cash inflow the euphoria catches up with the entrepreneurs, businessmen and local communities but after few decades of virtually uncontrolled growth the thresholds of resources are crossed. Recently such an excess of tourism is termed as 'overtourism'. It raises few pertinent questions:

- a) If there is excess of tourism or 'too much of tourism' what comes next in the tourism development?

- b) Is 'overtourism' the culmination of tourism development?
- c) Does 'overtourism' directly affect the social fabric of a destination by generating conflicts due to excess of tourism?

According to the UNWTO the definition of overtourism is "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way".(UNWTO, Executive Summary, 2018). The Responsible Tourism Partnership refers to

'overtourism' as "destinations where hosts or guests, locals or visitors, feel that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area or the quality of the experience has deteriorated unacceptably. It is the opposite of Responsible Tourism which is about using tourism to make better places to live in and better places to visit. Often both visitors and guests experience the deterioration concurrently" (Responsible Tourism Partnership). With the world getting richer—one billion more people will be in the global middle class by 2030—and travel becoming ever more accessible, tourism will continue to grow. The good news is that tourism is growing, creating jobs and economic activity. The challenge is that this growth can put pressure on destinations. More places will likely be threatened by their own popularity in environmental, social, or aesthetic terms (McKinsey and WTTC, 2017).

George Doxey (1975) developed Tourism Irritation Index on the four phases of a tourism destination. First phase: *euphoria*. Tourists are welcomed and the destination hosts are extremely happy to receive the first flows of tourists, and they are more than happy to offer whatever they have as a host. Second phase: *apathy*. The number of visitors starts to rise and the relationship becomes less euphoric and more dismissive. The locals resent to share their space with outsiders. Third phase: *Irritation*. When number of tourists reaches saturation point, the irritation phase begins. In other words, this is the phase in which hosts start feeling the discomfort by the presence of outsiders and become wary of the benefits of tourism. Fourth phase: *antagonism*. The residents' level of irritation begins to be expressed in direct or indirect terms and the visitors are seen as the cause of all the problems around them. Overtourism begins with antagonism. The term 'overtourism' itself was coined sometime in 2016 by Skift (Ali, R, 2016). Recently this term caught up the headlines in 2017 when there was a sudden backlash from local residents. The tourism in Barcelona, Venice and Dubrovnik endorsed this when people marched in the streets and made graffiti saying 'Tourists go home'!, in some cases local authorities hiked fees

and also stopped issuing permits to more tourism services in the tourism centres. There have been campaigns such as 'Berlin doesn't love you' have been organised. Furthermore, it is not uncommon on the city's streets to come across stickers and graffiti saying 'Yuppies Raus' (Yuppies out) and 'Tourists, Raus' (Tourists out). This dramatic reaction of locals towards the visitors made them feel outsiders in every respect. 'We have witnessed a rise in negative attitudes among local populations towards visitors due to issues of perceived overcrowding, noise and other nuisances attributed to tourists, the emergence of protests in some cities and the spread of terms such as 'overtourism' and 'tourismphobia' (UNWTO, Executive Summary, 2018). Several media outlets have published lists of destinations that are not recommended because of an excessive number of tourists. Such advisories are at times very useful to avoid the negative experience for the travellers as well the locals.

Globally, there are around two billion tourist arrivals per year, which is growing at a steady six to seven percent. But overtourism not always deals with numbers, even a small number of people at an ecologically fragile location or a rural location beyond its carrying capacity, may lead to greater complexities than scores of additional people landing up in a city. The growth of tourism can lead to conflicts over the use of space between residents, commuters and the visitors. In fact, tourism directly relates to 'carrying capacity' of any given place and whenever the number of persons exceeds the capacity it results into 'overcrowding' that compromises the comfort and safety. Ainsley O'Reilly (1986) first developed the concept of a tourism destination having a load capacity. Used in this way, the word "capacity" in its original sense, refers to the maximum quantity of tourists that can be contained in a certain space. One most recent example of overcrowding is rather bizarre when there were casualties reported from Mount Everest! UNWTO defined tourism's carrying capacity as "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic and socio-

cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction." There are five types of problems associated with tourist overcrowding: alienated local residents, a degraded tourist experience, overloaded infrastructure, damage to nature, and threats to culture and heritage. Some places endure two or more of these problems at the same time. (McKinsey and WTTC, 2017). In developing countries there are many such instances that the best of tourist destinations suffer due to excessive tourism. One such tourism destination located in the Himalayan zone is Nainital. The overtourism in Nainital marks a question on the future of this destination which in last few decades, became a centre of mass tourism in the hill region that was the most unsuitable type of tourism in a fragile ecological region as this.

Nainital- a lake town with a distinct landscape of mountainous character, draws scores of tourists every season. Nainital town is located at 29°38'N latitude and 79°45'E longitude approximately, in the Himalayan zone of India. The focal point of this tourism destination is a natural lake which is a curvilinear water body of tectonic nature. It is about 1.4 km long with NW-SE orientation, its maximum width is 0.46 km, and the total surface area is 0.48 km². The mean depth of Naini lake is 18.55 m, and the maximum depth being 27.30 m in northern half and 25.5 m in southern half. The mean water retention time or the residence time for the lake is computed as 1.16 years (EERC Report, 2002). Naini lake is situated at an elevation of 1938 m, covering an area of 11.73 sq km. Nainital as a town has witnessed growth around Naini lake, particularly the two ends of this water body, have grown as distinct clusters of settlement- Tallital, the lower end and Mallital, the upper end. In the north of Nainital lies the Almora district and to its south lies the Udham Singh Nagar district. In the east, the Champawat district and in the west, district of Pauri Garhwal is located. Nainital is known for its salubrious climate with average range of monthly maximum and minimum temperatures of 28 degree C and 7 degree C, respectively.

In 1840s Nainital attracted the Europeans who had a fine sense of landscape aesthetics. They were so much captivated by the pristine beauty of this lake destination that they started to evolve it as a summer retreat. The erstwhile Nainital was a small hill settlement with local hill folks, small service community, some people who had come from outside to settle here driven by their own instincts, some occasional travelers and people of governance. At that time Nainital had everything to cater to the needs of the people living here- a picturesque natural lake, roads wide enough to walk through, shops with all necessary provisions, educational institutions, sufficient water supply and sewer network, Boat Club as the social interactive center and recreational activities in the lake. In 1845 Nainital Municipal Board was officially formed, which was the second Municipal Board of North Western Provinces in British regime. According to the data available, Nainital had become a popular hill station by 1847. Nainital assumed much importance when it became the summer seat of the North Western Provinces in 1862.

The earliest trend of tourism in Nainital goes back to 1960's when people were drawn to this 'hill station'. The image of hill station those days was simply to travel to a location in hills with cool and pleasant climate which could give respite from heat of plains. Nainital also carried this image of hill station for years when many people came as visitors and enjoyed the serenity of this place, particularly in summer season. Those days only elite and privileged few had private vehicle to visit any place. In the latter half of 20th century more and more people could afford mobility, and by the close of the century even the middle class of society could travel with greater degree of mobility. The provision of 'paid leave', corporate incentives and aggressive marketing gave greater impetus to travel industry. The proximity to the plains, salubrious weather, serene landscape and the romantic 'sense of place' draw scores of tourists. 'Himalayan mountain tourism is a relatively new industry that has seen explosive but uncontrolled, demand-led growth in the past three decades; tourists have simply arrived

in areas formerly visited by the occasional people, and the regions have reacted to meet their needs'. (Patricia East and others,1998).

Today Nainital is a tourism destination bursting at seams. The worst part is that all the tourism activities are putting excessive pressure on the natural water body of Naini lake which is the soul of this hill destination. In fact Nainital is being threatened by its own popularity. The civic amenities like drinking water supply, sewerage system, solid waste system, electricity etc. are also under pressure due to the ever increasing need of the tourists in this town. 'While many tourists want to "live like a local" and have an authentic experience during their visit, the residents of many tourism-dependent destinations are seeing the unique sense of place that characterised their home towns vanish beneath a wave of souvenir shops, crowds, tour buses and rowdy merrymakers. They are also suffering, as local amenities and infrastructure, are put under enormous strain.'(TheWire,2018). When the rents are pushed to keep pace with holiday rentals, when narrow roads are jammed with tourist vehicles and the locals cannot even carry out their day to day activities, specially, when it affects the essential needs like medical care or going to schools, when the wildlife is scared away and lose their habitat, when the tourists cannot view the landmarks of the destination because of swarm of people, when the fragile environments are degraded and exploited – these are all signs of excessive tourism or overtourism. The World Travel and Tourism in a Report on overcrowding delineated several types of problems associated with tourist overcrowding: alienated local residents, a degraded tourist experience, overloaded infrastructure, damage to nature, and threats to culture and heritage (Mckinsey & company and WTTC 2018). Eventually, in such cases tourism creates long lasting problems than temporal benefits.

Governments, entrepreneurs, tourists, and local ethnic people each play their own roles in the system with their own goals and interests. In the entire gamut of tourism the excess of tourists or overtourism affects all other components and

creates stress and strains in the system. The determinants of tourism impacts are complex. According to Prasad (1987), the magnitude of the impact is dependent upon a number of factors such as the nature of the society, its flexibility or resilience to change, the size of the host population relative to the number of visitors, the degree of dependence of the society upon tourism, and the economic state of the society. The multi-faceted 'personality' of Nainital has given different relevance to its society, from the educationists to business people, but it heavily depends on tourism. In fact, all the changes in Nainital through time are mainly driven by tourism development here.

Population of Nainital town (NPP/ Municipal Board) has increased from 38,630 in 2001 to 41,377 in 2011. But the floating population of tourists is almost four times of the local populace specially during summers which has led the situation of 'too much of tourism' or overtourism here. The size of host population relative to the number of visitors is very significant to understand the positioning of tourism at any given destination. In the beginning there had been a kind of euphoria among locals particularly the traders and businessmen who saw it as a big opportunity of financial gains. But as the tourism totally took over this lake town and pushed the locals to the stiff competition of resources, there emerged a conflict between the two. Such a conflict is the by-product of excessive tourism or 'over tourism'.

Robinson (1999) provides four dimensions in which conflict happens: tourism industry-host conflicts, tourist-host conflicts, tourism-tourist conflicts, and host-host conflict. The determinants which influence the conflict between tourism industry and host community are: (1) the nature and the extent of the commodification of the host culture; (2) the utilization of natural resources and its cultural resources; and (3) the degree of economic dependency of the host community on tourism. The tourist-host conflicts are of more direct bearing. In case of Nainital it may be about the use of roads by the locals for walks infringed by the traffic of tourists vehicles or the prices of grocery

and other essentials where the locals are also required to pay the prices of a tourist place or the pressure on the use of water and electricity by the tourists and resultant shortage faced by the locals or the pollution of all kinds around the town which was a serene abode without the huge number of tourists spilling all over the place. The tourism-tourist conflicts are implied more in the sense where the tourism industry has certain surcharges and taxes which put some extra pressure on the tourists or any kind of regulatory measures to contain the excesses by the tourists or the tourist services curtailed by the tourism authorities for some exigencies. The host-host conflict may emerge as the result of competition to provide the services and earning the revenues or due to a sense of insecurity generated by the presence of out-groups. Such conflicts may be explained in a different way as 'destinations are comprised of three types of place: tourism, non-tourism and shared. It is believed attitudes are generally positive when stasis exists among the three types, but deteriorate during periods of rapid place change. Likewise, impacts are felt when place changes, especially when non-tourism place is transformed into either shared or tourism place.' (Mckercher,2015). Though sociologist Lewis A. Coser argued that conflict is not bad always- it can be a necessary and positive process in social relationships, instrumental in social change (Coser 1956). Thus, a certain amount of conflict is an essential element in social development and social conflict often act as 'safety valve' releasing tensions while preserving social relations with an out-group and the in-group. Similarly, Jinging Yang (2013) brought out a model 'tension-directed tourism development' which recognised the development process pushed by the tensions generated by tourism activity.

Nainital town can be approached from different directions. The major issue related to roads in Nainital is the problem of vehicular traffic through the town, particularly on the Mall road, and the parking space for the vehicles entering the town from all the access points. Inadequate width of roads, encroachments by hawkers and vendors,

mixed user pattern and continuously increasing number of vehicles owned by the permanent as well as the floating population including tourists, are the points of concern. There is no regulation or monitoring of the carrying capacity of the roads, as a result any number of vehicles enter the city till the roads are totally choked and the traffic spill over results into long trails of stranded vehicles on all the roads entering the town, many times stretching over 5 to 8 kilometres. In order to ease out the vehicular traffic including cycle rickshaws, the restriction is imposed on Mall road from 6pm to 9pm, which is ridden with another set of complications. The Uttarakhand Tourism Master plan Report takes a stern cognizance of this, 'the vehicular traffic along the mall is horrendous and not conducive for a leisurely hill resort ambiance. Even the promenade is taken up by vehicles all day and is a dangerous place to walk.' There are number of Boarding schools in Nainital with repute. When the schools close down for vacations or when they reopen after vacations, Nainital witnesses huge logjams on the Mall, shopping plaza and the hilly driveways reaching the locations of schools, mostly in the upper reaches of this lake town.

In Nainital the tourist influx reaches maximum in the months of May and June, making summer as the peak season. Another indicator of vehicles entering Nainital reflects in the revenues of toll tax of Nainital. These days the local administration has put a restriction on the entry of tourists in the town from all the arteries of traffic from Kathgodam, Bhowali, Kaladhungi. The 'Houseful' board is put up on the roads leading to Nainital but that means a rude shock to the tourists who have planned the trips with all logistics in place. Loads of tourists who disembark here, especially over long weekends, have no clue that how much this hill town can take in terms of accommodation and basic amenities. What makes Nainital one of the most sought after destination by travellers, lies in the fact that it is located at a motorable distance of average 8 hours from some of the large urban centres of northern India which come under the severity of tropical heat during summer season. It is

located at 304 kms from Delhi, 360 kms from Dehradun the state capital, and 388 kms from Lucknow. Ever since the automobile revolution happened in eighties, people have acquired greater mobility, and they are quite inclined to use private vehicles for the getaways for recreational purpose, most of the times on impulse. Last year in 2018, the High Court, Uttarakhand directed the administration to inform 'all the potential tourists who have plans to visit Nainital that they make prior arrangement for parking their vehicles in case they are coming in private vehicles'. But this may be taken only as an advisory in absence of any real time information on some forum like web portal of Nainital. As per survey in 2001 by RITES the projected volume of vehicular traffic for 2011 and 2021, only for Mall road was 20,900 and 26,000, respectively. Similarly, on the basis of growth of tourist arrival the projected pedestrian traffic on Mall road for 2011 and 2021 were estimated as 30,955 and 35,360, respectively. RITES study indicates the Parking demand in peak season for 2011 and 2021 estimated as 1500 and 1925, respectively. Though these projections could not be coordinated with any data on actual basis for 2011, but there has been undoubtedly a steady rise in the tourist arrival in Nainital with annual average growth rate of 7 percent to 8 percent.

Nainital somehow lacks the ambience which was its most distinguishable character in the older times. The Uttarakhand Tourism Master Plan Report observes, 'a common perception among operators in Nainital is that the types of tourists visiting the town, mostly day or weekenders, are not segments that are high spending or allow promotion of quality tourism. This is manifested by the increasing sprawl of stalls, cheap amusement parks and budget hotels with more and more budget tourists making their way to Nainital from nearby foothill districts like Rampur, Moradabad and Bareilly. With the erratic construction activities more and more grit, clay and boulders are likely to come down the hill with runoff during heavy rains. Such debris flows very often block the arterial roads in the town. The recent incidence occurred in July, 2015 when huge debris flow came down through a storm water drain from

Upper Mall road and completely disrupted the vehicular traffic in peak tourist season. It is important to ensure that the carrying capacity of these drains is able to cope with the increased runoff. The issue is further accentuated by the fact that Nainital lies in high seismic zone and has constant threat from landslides from the surrounding hills.

Now, there is no more scope of physical expansion left in Nainital. The settlement of Nainital occupies the slopes of catchment area of the lake. The urban growth in its physical manifestation looks quite haphazard, stacked over each other precariously without leaving any space. NLRSDA (Nainital Lake Region Special Area Development Authority) is the regulatory body of the urban development in Nainital and management of the Naini lake. Ecologically sensitive areas which are unsafe for any construction activities have been declared as 'Prohibited Areas' which form a considerable part of Nainital Nagar Palika Parishad, spread over 11.73 square kilometre. This leaves very little room for physical urban growth in safe category (CDP, Nainital, 2007). There are plans by NLRSDA to diverge the concentration in Nainital into five planning zones (CDP, Nainital, 2007):

- Development of non-polluting industries shall be promoted in Bhimtal Planning Zone.
- Development of tourism based infrastructure to be promoted in Naukuchiatal Planning Zone.
- Development of tourism and commercial activities to be promoted in Sattal planning zone.
- Bhowali Planning zone lies in the centre of the Nainital Lake Region Special Development Area and has the capacity to fulfil the demands of high level government offices.
- Nainital Planning division including the NNPP area should have development to the extent of its carrying capacity and surrounding areas of Khurpatal, Kuriyagaon and Bhavanipur should be developed to

accommodate additional population growth.

- Khurpatal area is proposed to have development in the sectors of residential, tourism, education, entertainment, government offices and commercial establishments.

Since there is no further scope of physical expansion of this lake town, the alternative spaces should be developed in a planned manner with smart technology. In ground reality though the implementation of plans has begun but the pressure on Nainital does not show any sign of relief, particularly in touristic sense. The economic gains of tourism need to be monitored by the other deficits in environmental, social, ethical and cultural terms. The factors of tourism congestion in Nainital can be best understood as-

1. Too many visitors by seasonality
2. Too many vehicles entering Nainital lake town
3. Too much physical and recreational impact on the lake
4. Uneven spread of tourists
5. Overloaded infrastructure
6. Low carrying capacity of the lake region
7. Highly limited scope of road network and volume
8. Easily approachable through Kathgodam, Bhowali, Kaladhungi state highways
9. Number of boarding schools located in Nainital
10. The location of High court, Uttarakhand in Nainital
11. Shortage of Parking areas and unauthorised parking
12. Easily accessible from plain region

Nainital is witnessing the impact of excessive tourism which is alarming for all the stakeholders. Gradually, the locals are resentful that they are not comfortable at their own place. The hotel owners

want more business and more visitors but the relations between them and visitors are also not at their best. Nainital is no more an elite tourism destination what it used to be. How Nainital has lost its glory due to overtourism, is evident in masses who embark here every minute and seen busy bargaining the goodies on the pavements, littering around freely, jostling around the Mall road displaying fake vanities mostly. 'Tourismphobia' is the buzzword in the present scenario in this small town where people are wary of tourist season when this lake town is completely seized by the tourists and locals feel captive at their own place. Destinations such as Nainital need to shift their focus from bigger volume of tourists to broader planning and management challenges to mitigate overcrowding. 'Overtourism' impacts in deeper sense the ecological balance, environmental quality, natural resources, and social & cultural integrity.

World Travel & Tourism Council has worked upon certain measures to be taken to mitigate the overcrowding due to overtourism, most of them are found to be applicable in the case of Nainital:

1. Spread visitors over season or time of visit : Nainital suffers from such imbalances of visitors during favourable season like Summer, Autumn and Spring. The peak season is summer when daily more than a thousand vehicles reach Nainital, particularly in long weekends. District administration must develop strategies to 'smooth' these imbalances so that communities and businesses can continue to reap the benefits of tourism but the adverse effects of overcrowding can be addressed.
2. Spread visitors across space: Spreading visitors geographically over space can help distribute tourists more evenly across most-visited to under-visited areas, and clear congestion in overcrowded locations. The physical capacity of this hill destination is highly constrained, and mostly tourists walk elbow to elbow on the Mall Road or choose to go for boating in the lake. On the days of heavy volume of tourists the lake is dotted all over with boats. Some circuits of ecotourism, nature tourism or rural tourism

must be evolved and the tourists must be taken through them in order to spread them geographically and also to increase their number of days to stay.

3. Maintaining the prices to regulate demand/supply: Pricing can be an effective way to regulate the quality of visitors to a destination. While increasing the costs of visiting a destination is likely to limit the number of visitors, it also promote elitism. Nainital has become a much sought after centre of mass tourism. Large number of visitors with modest means, have started thronging this destination. There is a general feeling among hotel and business community that people prefer low price and low quality product and services, and gradually Nainital has lost its elite ambience.
4. Limit access and activities: In order to mitigate the congestion in the prime areas of any destination it is required to restrict the access as per some schedule which should be known to the visitors. In Nainital in the evening hours vehicular movement is totally restricted. As such, some destinations are limiting or even banning certain tourist activities, one such activity in Nainital is banning the horse rides around the lake. These days in a direct measure to avoid overcrowding and traffic jams the administration puts 'Houseful' before people begin the uphill drive from the city at the foothill. In such a situation people either wait for sometime may be a few days or change their plans to visit any less visited destination in the region.

Overtourism has posed a question to all the concerned at this destination– is it the dead end of tourism or just a critical phase in the growth of tourism at this hill destination which needs a proper diagnostic system. Too much of tourism has resulted into social conflicts and antagonism nevertheless, tourism is the main pillar of the local economy and if managed properly, the host and the visitor may maintain their comfort zones and appropriate their respective priorities. Overcrowding can be managed through measures of congestion management at

site, reduction of seasonality by strategising the vacation packages as well as product diversification, spread of tourists in other alternative sites of tourist interest, careful planning which respects the limits of capacity. In the larger context of development at this hill destination 'overtourism' is not an eventuality after all. But it certainly needs a diagnostic system to correct the imbalances in tourism and stabilise the growth in a sustainable way to suit all stakeholders alike.

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