

TRIBAL ENTREPRENEURIAL POSSIBILITIES IN SIKKIM

Rajiv Jairu¹ & Bikash Sharma²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing, Sikkim

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing, Sikkim

ABSTRACT

The phrase North East is often used as an umbrella term to denote the eight states located in the north-eastern part of India. However, the distinct linguistic heritage, diverse ethnicity and culture of the eight states which together make up the North East defies any sort of generalization. To speak of the North East as singular entity would therefore be a misleading proposition. The present paper attempts at examining some of the pertinent tribal entrepreneurial opportunities in the context of the state of Sikkim.

KEYWORDS: North East, Ethnicity, Culture, Entrepreneurship

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INTRODUCTION

PREMISE

To speak of North East as a monolithic realm is one of the most common mistakes that mainland Indians make. So much so considering the rich and diverse ethnicity, culture and ways of life of the eight states which make up the 'North East', many people have aversion to use the term altogether. The seven sister states are so rich in natural resources and cultural heritage that one may justly be tempted to compare them with the seven colours of a rainbow. Sikkim, the younger brother, alone houses numerous tribal communities each of them possessing peculiar traits. No doubt the north-eastern states lag behind other bigger states of the mainland in areas of commerce, industries, human resources, accessibility and so on. Connected by a slender chicken's neck, even the weather forecast of national news channels do not cross beyond Kolkata. However, the region is moving ahead in its own steady pace. The blooming tourism sector facilitated by the rich natural resources is aiding to place the north east on a global space. A lot is being done, yet a lot more can be done. Despite being a small state with a population around a million, Sikkim is definitely making a mark in areas such as tourism, organic farming (the first fully organic state of India), health, education, handicrafts, pharmaceuticals, to name a few. However, the state has its own set of challenges, the problem of unemployment being one of the most pertinent ones. The reason behind such scenario is overreliance on government as the primary job provider and the inability on the part of the government to create jobs to accommodate the ever-increasing educated group of youth. A fortunate few get into government sector, while a substantial number take up jobs in private sector like pharmaceutical, hydro power plants, privately run educational and health institutions etc. Still, the problem of unemployment looms large and the demand thereof is too loud to be ignored. There are a handful of young educated minds who choose to do something different from the herd. These are the

adamant entrepreneurs who are hell bent on establishing themselves on their own. Not only do they establish their own identity, but they also work towards bridging the gap of unemployment by providing job avenues. Considering the fact that Sikkim is a cornucopia of natural resources, diverse and rich ethnic and cultural heritage and blooming tourism sector, entrepreneurial prospects have a promising and fertile future ahead. The present paper is a modest attempt to explore some of the entrepreneurial possibilities in the context of Sikkim.

ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITIES IN SIKKIM: NOW AND AHEAD

As outlined in the introductory note, Sikkim is one of the tiniest states of the Indian region. With the population of around ten lakhs it contributes about 0.05% of the total population of the country and 0.22% of the total area (Census 2011). Notwithstanding the meagre size of the population, the state is home to numerous tribal and ethnic communities. H. H. Risley in *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* talks about the three main ethnic tribes of Sikkim viz., Rong or the Lepchas, Khamba or the Bhutias and the Limboos. Besides these three tribes, there are several other ethno-cultural communities within the Nepalese community. Socio-culturally Sikkim is a patriarchal society wherein the male head of the family is the decision maker and bread winner. However, unlike the characteristic patriarchal setup, the state is moderately liberal in matters of women's involvement in decision making and employment. Gender inclusiveness forms a living fabric of the Sikkimese way of life.

The state is definitely progressing in leaps and bounds in tourism, health care, pharmaceuticals, education etc., yet it is perennially vexed with the problem of unemployment. In such a scenario, the role of entrepreneurs becomes a thing of paramount importance. However, the educated youths of Sikkim seem to shy away from the risk associated with entrepreneurship. Not that they are not interested in business, but the dearth of technical know-how associated with the business enterprise holds them back from venturing into it.

Although, Sikkim is endowed with ample natural resources and vibrant tribal and ethnic heritage, it still has not been explored to its optimum. The opulence of such resources in the region provides a befitting ambience for this enthusiastic bunch of entrepreneurs who share a propensity for business. Tourism is one of the most rapidly growing sectors globally and Sikkim being one of the favourite tourist destinations, there are multifarious business opportunities associated with it. As testified by the Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim, around 1.5 million tourists visited Sikkim during 2017. This number will certainly shoot up in the next few years, thereby creating the opportunities of excess demand of the businesses associated with it such as hoteling, home stays, hospitality, tour assistant, event management, travel agencies, marketing etc. In addition to this, the glorious tribal identity such as rich oral tradition, resonant folk music, unique habitats, tribal handicrafts, history etc., of the Sikkimese people can also be converted into business opportunities. Aspiring entrepreneurs may follow suit of states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala etc., as to how native culture can be made into a source of lucrative business.

Not only Sikkim is known for its scenic beauty, it also has a rich history of art and craft. Each tribal community has its own unique traditional arts and craft. Sikkimese craft is not an inanimate thing, rather it is a living entity where history and culture breathe life into it. Handloom Weaving, Wood Carving, Carpet Weaving, Thangka Painting, Wooden Mask, Soft Toys, bamboo-based furniture and artefacts etc., are in constant demand. Not only do they possess aesthetic value, they also have historical significance as they let a peep into the Sikkimese culture and history.

The North-Eastern states together grow about 68% of India's Bamboo. In the Union Budget 2018-19, bamboo was labelled as "Green Gold" considering its multifarious uses from cradle to grave. The allocation of a mammoth ₹1290 crore for the National Bamboo Mission clearly indicates its future prospect. Bamboos make a pervasive presence throughout Sikkim. In fact, it has been an inseparable part of tribal identity in the remote parts. Lepchas, the aboriginal tribe of Sikkim for instance, specializes in bamboo-based handicrafts and paraphernalia. Be it the royal hat "Somok Thyaktuk" or a hunting hat "Serabu Thyaktuk" or even musical instruments like 'Tungbub'(Guitar) and 'Puntong Pulit'(Flute), all are made out of bamboo. A range of bamboo-based handicraft and memorabilia can provide employment opportunities for skilled and unskilled people, especially to the unemployed youth.

The state has earned laurels all over the world for being the first fully organic state in the country. The government decision to put a ban on the import of select chemical fed fruits and vegetables has had a positive repercussion for the local entrepreneurs. As per Sikkim state mission the government hopes to make the state completely self-reliant in agricultural production by the year 2030. This is indeed a futuristic move made by the government. However, the government alone cannot succeed in realizing this huge dream. Hence, the private sector and entrepreneurs must play the part of stakeholders in this grand design. As agriculture is the main stay of Sikkim, the rural tribal communities have to play the role of an anchor by incorporating the traditional modes of agricultural production with a new modern one without diluting the essence of organic farming. This would result in an increase in production which will help mitigate the ever-widening gap between demand and supply. The surplus thereof, if any, may be considered for export. Sikkim is famous for production of Black Cardamom, Ginger, Turmeric, Buckwheat, Sikkim Mandarin Orange, Baby Corn, Broom etc. The persistent rise in the demand for these products necessitates large scale commercial enterprise. Here, the entrepreneurs can play an important role, provided the government acts as facilitator in matters of policy decision. A natural corollary to organic farming is village tourism. As majority of Sikkim resides in villages, the village way of life, culture, customs, rituals and belief systems can be promoted and made into a feasible business opportunity. With the passage of time one can observe a gradual shift in the taste of the tourists. Rather than indulging themselves in a plush cosmopolitan setting, insipid night life, wine and dine culture, they would rather be interested in the peaceful and serene countryside, far from the hurly-burly of city life. Village tourism thus has immense prospects and though it is gaining ground of late, it still requires further expansion and promotion.

Floristry is another commercially lucrative field that needs to be fully explored in the state as Sikkim houses around 5,000 species of flowering plants. According to the report by Agricultural & Processed Food Product Export Development Authority (APEDA), GOI, 2015, in 2018-19 around 19,726.57 MT floriculture products worth ₹571.38 Cr. were exported by India. This indicate the upswept demand of flowers all around the world. Despite its rich flora, Sikkim has not been able to exploit to its fullest. Floristry thus may prove to be a promising business opportunity for young entrepreneurs. An enterprise related to floristry is bee keeping/honey farming. Flowers and honey Bees are said to have a natural reciprocal relationship. It is the wonder of nature that flowers require bees for pollination while the Honeybees need flowers to make honey. If these two activities are done simultaneously, it can certainly prove to be monetarily feasible and bankable business.

Sericulture or silk production in Sikkim was initiated by the Govt. of Sikkim in the year 1977-78. However, till date, sericulture practice in Sikkim remains confined to a handful of governmental farms and nurseries. It can be a remunerative business opportunities in the hill state considering all types of silkworm found in India viz. Mulberry silk, Eri

silk, Tasas silk has ample scope for its growth in the region. The dearth of technical expertise and infrastructure in sericulture sector necessitates Public-Private Partnership to venture into this field. Traditional apparels made of silk is famous among the tribal communities in Sikkim especially among the Bhutias.

CONCLUSIONS

Opportunities and challenges are like the two sides of a coin. No doubt there are ample possibilities to be tapped in the region, yet there are certain hurdles which need to be tackled. Connectivity still is one of the major impediments in the development of the region. Sikkim still lacks rail connectivity. The recently commissioned Greenfield Airport situated at Pakyongis almost non-existent. Proper connectivity helps stimulate economic activities as it results in reduction of logistic cost of goods and services. To be globally competitive, connectivity needs to be streamlined. This would boost tourism which will facilitate entrepreneurial temperament.

The north-eastern region is a progressive one. However, as we march forward we tend to wipe off or at least forget our past. It is like walking on the sea shore against the tide; the more we move ahead, our footprints become a bit hazier. We may not be able to fight the tides or remain still yet we can stop and turn around to look at where we had begun. Tribal entrepreneurial opportunities discussed in this paper, especially those pertaining to local tribal identity and ethnic heritage can be a look into our roots, celebrating where we had begun.

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