

Luxury Trading on Poverty: A Study of Jaisalmer and Its Water Crisis

Mahima Duggal

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

Jaisalmer is a small city in the state of Rajasthan, India. The city is known for its heritage luxury tourism. Lavish historical palaces are now converted into luxury resorts and villas which are used to accommodate tourists who want a taste of luxury in desert. The city is also known for being one of the most water deficient cities in the country. Women wearing traditional Indian clothes and jewelry, carrying several pots of water on their head, in the middle of the thar desert, is a common site here. There is no minimum, guaranteed supply of water to households (despite the construction of Indira Gandhi canal) and women are the worst hit by the water scarcity as the onus to fetch water from miles away lies on them. On the other hand, the luxury villas and resorts provide twenty-four-hour water supply to their guests. Facilities like swimming pools with infinity view of the desert are offered along with the bathtub fittings and multiple showers in each room. It is common to find fountains at the entrance of resorts. The adjacent existence of water scarcity and water abundance raises some serious moral and public policy concerns. The resource use policy of the region will be examined through this research. The lack of political will and failure of grass-root level governance will be assessed. The findings would be a roadmap to improve the living standards of the people of Jaisalmer by redefining the resource use policy of the area.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Luxury Tourism, Water Crisis, Jaisalmer, India, Hospitality, Public Policy

Methodology

This is a people centric study. The unit of analysis would be the people affected by the human induced water scarcity in Jaisalmer. The research is descriptive, exploratory and explanatory in nature. A case study approach has been adopted to narrow down one district in the geographical expanse of the thar desert i.e., Jaisalmer. Longitudinal field surveys were conducted in the water scarce district. Focused group research method (having conversation with the group of women who travel vast expanses to fetch water, talking to the people living in hamlets of urban areas at the peripheries etc.) has been used. For these conversations an unstructured oral interview method has been used. The secondary data analysis method was used to analyze the secondary sources including government documents. Government officials including the Nagar Palika commissioner, bureaucrats and the staff members of various government departments who are responsible for providing water connections under the Jal Jeevan mission to rural areas in specific and urban areas in general were interviewed.

Introduction

The love for luxury has been rising since the last couple of decades. The market for personal luxury prod-

ucts has risen nearly four folds between 1995 to 2015 (D'Arpizio, Levato, Zito, & Montgolfier, 2015). Luxury hospitality accounts for at least 17% of the luxury market. 'Luxury' in hospitality sector is synonymous with 'personalized guest experiences' (Lamba, P., 2020). It aims at exposing the consumers to the "wow" factor, something that they have never experienced before. It is an ever-evolving concept. "Hospitality", on the other hand can be defined as an industry that includes hotels, restaurants and other facilities offering accommodation and food catering, as well as clubs, resorts, attractions and the like that create the base for luxury tourism (Barrows, Powers, & Reynolds, 2012). The meaning of Luxury Hospitality depends on the guest's needs, but generally it means when a guest wants to enjoy the same lifestyle while travelling as the affluent locals enjoy. (Inside the billion-dollar world of luxury hospitality, 2019). Luxury travel and tourism is studied in context of developed regions, this is because more than often the idea of luxury is associated with developed areas. It is equally important to acknowledge that luxury does not just exist in the developed regions, but it also exists in the world's most underprivileged and resource constraint regions (Thirumaran K. & Mohit. R.2017).

This research project brings attention to the situation that exists in a small district named Jaisalmer, in the state of Rajasthan, India. Jaisalmer is called the golden city owing to its sandstone structures and gold colored sand. It has been home to many Rajputana Royal families. The place is known for its marvelous architecture. It is home to the Jaisalmer Fort which is a world heritage site. It hosts several beautifully carved out havelis which are nearly 1000 years old. ("Jaisalmer: History, Geography, Places", n.d.). Over the years the royal palaces and heritage structures of Jaisalmer have been transformed into heritage hotels (Bisht, R., n.d.) These resorts offer accommodation to the tourists who do not mind paying a hefty amount to experience the royal heritage. This research will look at how the existence of luxury in the middle of the desert has impacted the lives of the locals. There are extensive studies on luxury conducted across the world, but India specific research is a rare find. Most of the literature available in this field is written by foreign scholars who only have a bird's eye view of the situation.

Water is the scarcest resource in the city. Women must make multiple rounds to the nearby "Beri" (a traditional well which captures and stores rainwater) to get the required amount of water for the daily functioning of the households. (Bahuguna, K., 2017) In the vicinity of these villages lie the luxurious resorts that host the affluent travelers who wish to travel across Jaisalmer. This research would be looking at the impact of luxury hospitality properties in the city of Jaisalmer on the most vulnerable classes. It would also look at the parallels that exist in society.

Objectives

- To ascertain the impact of luxury properties and their water resource use policy on the local community. How has it affected their lives over the years?
- To evaluate the water crisis in the district of Jaisalmer from a feminist perspective. Women are the worst hit in the district because due to gender roles being assigned to various sexes in the society, women have the responsibility to fetch water.
- The measures taken by government authorities to regulate the luxury establishments, especially the luxury resorts, would be assessed. (India being a socialistic democracy, the welfare of people is the responsibility of the government.)

Standard Definitions and Theoretical framework

Tourism activity is defined as the activity of a person who travels and has a residence in places other than

those usually frequented, for no more than one consecutive year for leisure, business or other purposes - (UN World Tourism Organization, 1994)

According to the WTO (World Tourism Organization, 2021) Sustainable Tourism means “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Indian government has time and again accepted this definition in various official documents

UNESCO defines sustainable tourism as tourism that respects both the host and the traveler, cultural heritage and environment. It means an educational and exciting holiday that also benefits the host country. Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries. Over the last three decades the travel and tourism sector has grown many folds. With the rise in the disposable income of the middle class the craze to experience luxury has risen. Luxury is now becoming more and more popular. The impact that tourism has on the local communities is often ignored. The Eco feminine perspective which believes that women’s rights and Protection of the nature should be looked at as tandem tries to explain how environmental destruction harms women the most as they are closer to nature than any other gender. The development which ignores the welfare of society and women is labelled as “mis development” by renowned eco feminist scholar Vandana Shiva (Buckingham, S., 2015). This theory would be investigated and validated in the case of Jaisalmer through this research.

Luxury Properties

Luxury is a social signifier with no fixed formal definition. Luxury as a concept is not stable. Every generation and every culture define it and redefines it. It keeps evolving. Economic changes also play a key role in this process of evolution. The idea of luxury in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was very rigid and associated with aristocracy. Only a few people could afford and enjoy luxury. Centuries ago, luxury was a hereditary privilege. In modern times the idea of luxury is very fluid (Merwood-Salisbury, J., 2009) One does not need to be a part of the royal family or inherit a social status to enjoy luxury in the contemporary world. This transition is clearly visible in India. As early as 1936, much before India achieved independence, the single largest party Indian National Congress had made its objective to integrate all the princely states in the Union of India. Almost all the princely states became a part of India post-independence and accepted the Indian constitution as the supreme authority (Sharma, P. K., 1967). According to the agreement, the royals were to surrender most of their personal properties to the government of India, but they could keep some of their real estates with them for their personal use. These could include palaces, forts and havelis (Sharma, R., 2011). Some royals have leased out these royal palaces and forts to global hospitality chains and some have even sold them to be converted into luxury hospitality properties. The craze of experiencing the royal luxury brings thousands of tourists to visit and stay in these majestic royal residences.

Luxury as a concept in modern times is very universal in nature. When people talk about luxury, they expect comfort. Twenty-four-hour water supply, air-conditioned rooms, sometimes even swimming pools are expected to be a part of the luxury package. Such a universal idea of luxury is the foundation of the problem. This abstract idea completely ignores the circumstantial, environmental and cultural aspects of the host community. Similar is a case of Jaisalmer’s luxury hospitality industry. The palaces and forts which are now converted into hotels and resorts are expected to provide uninterrupted water supply, hand showers, bathtubs, private pools and spa services, even though some of these resorts lie in the sand dune regions of Jaisalmer. Jaisalmer is in the Thar Desert. A district which is not equipped to bring tap water

for its people is expected to meet the extravagant water requirements of guests. Jaisalmer is also a very popular destination for big fat Indian weddings.

Some resorts which are in the heartland of the city of Jaisalmer, are well connected to the Indira Gandhi canal through pipelines. Conversation with a resort manager (Saurabh, personal Communication, September 25, 2021) revealed that other resorts which are away from the city towards the suburbs manage their water requirements through either groundwater or by purchasing water tankers. Cost of one water tanker with a capacity of ten thousand liters of water is fifteen hundred rupees on an average as informed by a water tanker owner (Bheem Singh, September, 26, 2021) which might seem high to a common man in Jaisalmer where per capita income per annum is nearly ninety thousand rupees per annum but for the resorts and luxury properties this money is no more than peanuts (Rajasthan District Factbook, 2019). As per the quotation sent by some resorts including the famous Suryagarh Resort on enquiry, most of the resorts charge as high as one and a half crore rupees for two nights-three days wedding event to accommodate one hundred and sixty guests. This money is surely enough to cover the cost paid by the resort to bring in enough water to cater for the guests. Even the water tariffs are not much compared to the money the resorts charge from their guests.

Some resorts use water to improve the aesthetics. The entrance is adorned with fountains, there are multiple flower vases around the rooms with fresh flowers and water. The traditional brass utensils filled with water and flower petals are kept in the lobbies and common areas for decoration. Each brass vessel holds 7-9 liters of water which is equal to the water consumption of an ordinary man in the villages of Jaisalmer. The pictures of such irresponsible display of water can be easily found on the websites of these resorts. The place where every drop of water counts, such lavish display of water resource by the luxury properties seems to be even morally wrong. The implication of such irresponsible behavior can be understood only if one is aware about the situation on the ground and the hardships of the locals.

Water Crisis and Its Implications

Rajasthan is one of the driest states in India. It is the largest state in terms of geographical area and thus the climatic conditions vary from one corner of the state to the other corner. Jaisalmer lies in the western region of the state, which is one of the worst hit regions in terms of water scarcity (Guhathakurta, P. & Surendran, D. & Menon, P. & Prasad, A. & Sangwan, N. & Advani, S., 2020). “Water scarcity can mean scarcity in availability due to physical shortage, or scarcity in access due to the failure of institutions to ensure a regular supply or due to a lack of adequate infrastructure.” (UN Water, 2021). Western parts of Rajasthan receive an average annual rainfall of 313 mm (about 1.03 ft). The rainfall received by Jaisalmer is even below the regional annual average. It receives on average 200 mm (about 7.87 in) rainfall every year. Which means only 7 inches of rainfall in the entire year. (“Average Monthly Snow and Rainfall in Jaisalmer (Rajasthan) In Millimeter”, 2021). There is no stable source of water supply in the district and the people depend mainly on the southwest monsoon for their water requirements. Getting water from taps is a distant dream, women of the area must walk miles to get few pots of water. Indira Gandhi canal’s construction gave some hope to the people of the western Rajasthan region, but Jaisalmer did not benefit much from it. A large part of Jaisalmer is not covered by the canal or the supplementary lift irrigation projects. (“Salient features of Indira Gandhi Nahar Project”, 2021)

The state government has entrusted the Municipal Council with the responsibility of supplying drinking water to the people in Jaisalmer and the authority has clearly failed to do so. Ground water is the most widely used water supply source in Jaisalmer but over the years it has been exploited to such an extent

that the source is drying up at a much faster rate. Today ground water is available at the depth of three hundred to four hundred feet below the surface of earth (Mathrani, M., 2019). Jaisalmer was declared 'over exploited' region in the Ground Water Assessment Report in 2013.

The impact of this grave situation can be ascertained from the findings of surveys conducted across the district. On an average a woman makes 3-5 trips to the nearby well or other traditional source of water. Each trip costs a woman at least one to one and a half hours. Some women spend six to nine hours a day to fetch enough water to meet the everyday requirement of their family and cattle. Cattle are an important source of income for the residents of the district. Cattle's wellbeing is equally important to for a stable income thus their water requirement is also added in the requirement of water for a household. Every female, right from young girls aged 7-8 years old to women of the age of 75 and 80 years are seen fetching water every day. (Bahuguna, K., 2017). The situation is so grim that due to water shortage women are forced to deliver babies on sand.

Water plays a very important role in the functioning of the body of living beings. An average person uses 7 to 15 liters per capita daily for drinking as well as other activities. People suffer from several health issues due to low water consumption on a regular basis. Personal hygiene takes a back seat. It is evident from the discussion that most of the sources of water are traditional wells. These wells are not covered most of the time and thus their water is unfit for drinking. In villages like "Jhandhra", well water is too saline to drink. (Bahuguna, K., 2017)

Water Crisis and Patriarchy

Rajasthan is a patriarchal society which accepts discrimination against the women. The situation might have improved in the urban pockets of the cities, but it remains very much the same in the rural areas ("Gender Inequality in Rajasthan", 2021) Patriarchy is reflected in daily life of Jaisalmer, where women are the hardest hit by the water crisis. Women and girls of the households are responsible to fetch water to meet the daily needs of the entire family. No men can be sighted near the water resources helping women to fetch water. Jaisalmer's economy is primarily pastoral and agricultural but the yield from both these occupations depends on the rainfall ("Economy", 2021). Therefore, the men in the rural areas of Jaisalmer must depend on industries for a stable income. Women in the villages revealed that men migrate to the cities in search of jobs. Left behind are the women who are supposed to take care of the elderly and children in the house. The women are not given the autonomy to decide their course of action. It is their duty to fulfill the needs of the family, which also includes spending 7-10 hours a day's fetching water. Conversations with the women of rural Jaisalmer revealed that men and even young boys feel shy to fetch water from wells as traditionally it has been a gender role assigned to women. It is considered a work which is less "manly". A women revealed that she, just like other women in the village has lost several kgs of weight after getting married and shifting to Jaisalmer as she has to walk miles every day. Some of them complaint of sever back ache but agree that they have no choice (Bahuguna, K., 2017). Young and bright girls have to drop out of school to help their mothers get water every morning (Naik, G., 2018). Women are denied the right to education and decent living which are basic human rights. The lack of a basic resource like water pulls society several steps away from gender parity. All the above-mentioned social issues are linked to water shortage directly or indirectly.

The point to be noted here is that the lack of water is not a universal problem in the district, not everyone suffers due to it. The privileged ones do not have to face the water crisis. Water as a resource can be bought through tankers or can be extracted from as deep as four hundred feet below the surface but this

arrangement will require monetary resources. The luxury resorts have no dearth of money. This is the reason why their guests swim in a pool with a view of sand dunes without worrying about the water shortage. This points out inequality in resource access. Water as a resource is accessible to only those who can pay a heavy price for it, as it is a scarce resource.

From the Perspective of Locals

Apart from some non-government organizations and social groups, the public at large does not oppose the practices of luxury resorts. This is a broad conclusion drawn after interviewing the locals. This does not mean that they agree with the practices and resource use policy of such establishments. Tourism is one of the major sources of income for the people of Jaisalmer. People hold a belief that such luxury properties attract thousands of rich tourists to the city. These tourists spend comparatively more money on sightseeing, hiring local guides, eating authentic food, purchasing local art and other such businesses. Locals fear that any move to limit the freedom of such properties would push the tourists away. Locals are ready to trade their water resources in the hope of a better income and lifestyle. Moreover, the luxury properties employ hundreds of locals. Others who were contacted during the surveys and field visits did not have enough knowledge about the issue. Some people had a very singular view of the situation. They believe that only the geography of the district is responsible for their miseries, they do not blame the government or luxury properties, nor do they want to hold them accountable. Lack of awareness has been one of the most prominent aspects noticed.

Role of Government

The Indian constitution states in its preamble that India is a socialistic country (The Constitution of India, 1950). The welfare of the masses is the responsibility of the elected government. The presence of directive principles of state policy encourages the government to ensure the welfare of the people at all times. Article thirty-eight states that the government should ensure the social welfare of people and should work to minimize social inequalities. Article thirty-nine states that the ownership and control of the material resources shall be organized and regulated by the state to ensure common good and article forty-seven states that the state shall endeavor to provide basic standard of living the citizens. Directive principles of state policy act as a directive to the government while framing the public policy and are not enforceable by any law. Enforceable fundamental rights also put an obligation on the government to provide a decent living standard to all the citizens in the state. Keeping in mind the values of constitution, Indian government along with the state government has been making policies to improve the condition in Jaisalmer (The Constitution of India, 1950).

The Central Government, with support of the state governments, has been running social programs like the National Rural Drinking Water Program. The program promised at least 50 % of the rural household portable drinking water (at least 55 liters per capita per day). According to a CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General of India) report only 17% of the rural India has received portable water through pipelines till 2018. Jaisalmer has not benefited as much as it was expected from the project (“Report of Comptroller and Auditor General of India on ...”, 2018). Report highlights “poor fund management” as one of the reasons for the failure of the program. 98% of the schemes under this program focused on drawing water from the underground sources, which are anyways scarce. Not much has changed in the life of a women in Jaisalmer. Under various schemes, the government does provide subsidies to build water storage tanks

to help tap rainwater. On average each such storage tank costs approximately eighty-five thousand rupees. The average income of a household equals to the amount needed to construct a tank.

The government of Rajasthan has made efforts to regulate the water usage by the lodges and other tourist stay properties including luxury resorts. Industry specific water tariffs apply to hotel establishments and resorts. For the first 15000 liters charges per 1000 liter is 42.35 rupees, for consumption exceeding 15,000 liters and up to 40,000 liters is 54.45 rupees per 1000 liters and for next consumption above 40,000 liters is 60.50 rupees per 1000 liters (Public Health Engineering Department Rajasthan, 2018). These tax brackets might encourage the smaller establishments and lodges to keep a check on their water consumption levels but the luxury resorts have not shown any positive signs. Some of the luxury villas charge as high as one lakh rupees per night per room for their guests. The amount is more than sufficient to cover the cost of providing the guests with an uninterrupted supply of water.

The Rajasthan Government has an eco-tourism policy in place but unfortunately the policy does not address the issue of water wastage and the need to regulate it on an urgent basis. A hike in water tariffs every year is the only means used to discourage the hospitality industry from using less water. This method has clearly not shown the expected results, especially in the luxury tourism sector. Government needs to revisit and revise its sustainable tourism policy (Rajasthan Ecotourism Policy, 2021). If the luxury properties can arrange water for their guests, the government can definitely do so for the common man.

Recommendations

1. The government of Rajasthan has set a separate tax structure for the industries. It implies that any establishment which is considered to be a part of industry according to the government, would be charged under a different tax structure, definitely higher as compared to the domestic usage charges. Making luxury properties pay higher taxes will not necessarily help in bringing down the water usage as the high revenue of these properties can easily cover the cost of tariffs. There is no maximum usage limit of water in the state. This clearly gives a wrong message “If you can pay for it, you can get it”. Whereas such capitalistic concepts should not apply to a good which is as basic and necessary as water. Government should set strict limits for water consumption. Every hotel should get a fixed share of water. This can be ensured especially during the summer months.
2. Ground water should be declared as a public good. An establishment's ability to use technology and resources to extract more ground water than other stakeholders should be strictly regulated.
3. All the luxury resorts which offer water-based services like spas, saunas and swimming pools should be placed under mandatory guidelines to recycle the water being used. No such rule exists at present.
4. Water is a basic need. It is the responsibility of the government to provide a decent standard of living for the citizens of the country. Article 21 of the Indian constitution gives justiciable right to life to its citizens. On multiple occasions the Supreme Court has given a broader interpretation of article twenty-one. Right to life does not mean mere animal existence, it means a decent living standard. (Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India, 1996). Supreme court has upheld that environmental crisis can deteriorate the quality of life severely.
5. Lack of awareness has contributed immensely in deepening this crisis. People should be made aware of their rights. They should be aware that they must seek accountability from the elected representatives. People should actively raise the demand for a regular water supply. Government should involve and support the efforts of civil society.

6. Strict vigilance should be practiced on the sources of water being used by the luxury properties. The tax structure does not apply to the water bought by the properties through tankers, it is only applicable on the water being provided by the government. The water tankers which bring water to the luxury properties also extract the required water from bore wells. Therefore, ultimately the public resources are being sold off without people's consent.
7. There is a need to design and strictly implement a resource access policy at the state level. Natural resources which are basic to human survival must be equitably distributed.

Conclusion

The rising incomes in the third world have increased the purchasing power of the middle class. With more money to spend, the idea of luxury is becoming more and more popular. The problem lies in the very idea of luxury which is too universal. People traveling to the desert area of Jaisalmer expect twenty-four hours of air conditioning, uninterrupted water supply, swimming pools, spa and saunas. The idea of luxury being preached is very narrow. There is a need to propagate the idea of "Customized Luxury". Customized not according to the customer but to suit the surroundings. We need to define luxury keeping in mind the geographical aspects, culture, environment, community resources of the host and their traditions to make it more sustainable. The government of Rajasthan has enacted an eco-tourism policy, but the policy is clearly not enough to deter the luxury properties from using the water indiscreetly. Government needs to limit the maximum water usage limit for the luxury properties and their usage patterns should be strictly monitored. Someone's leisure should not cost someone else a heavy price.

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