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SALABAT KHAN TOMB: AN UNDER EXPLORED HERITAGE SITE

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ABSTRACT

The tomb of Salabat Khan was constructed in 1579A.D. on a hill called Shah Dongar (Salabat Khan II was a wazir of Murtuza Nizamshah and was an able administrator, planner, architect and water management expert). Later this tomb was also of strategic importance. It is currently a monument with ASI & is surrounded by land with private owners & the forestry department. At a height of about 3080 feet above sea level, located on top of a hill, it is 700 and 800 feet above the city of Ahmednagar. Surrounded by vegetation and giving a panoramic view of the city, it has a cool breeze flowing throughout the day. Attempts have been made in the past to promote this historic tourist spot but have been ineffective. In the absence of adequate consolidated effort of the administration, government machinery, political leadership and local citizenry it lies in neglect. This case study attempts to focus on marketing the peripherals along with the essentials in this destination tourism.

KEYWORDS: *Subaltern, Afghanistan, women, endurance, resilience, colonialism, patriarchy, militarization, religious fundamentalism.*

INTRODUCTION

Heritage sites are a big draw in encouraging tourist services (visits, memorabilia, selling experience, entertainment etc). If well managed it provides a steady income flow for the local population & is a revenue earner for the economy. It calls for an integration of many areas of knowledge - anthropology, history, psychology, sociology, geography, economics and marketing management specially services marketing.

The fast rate of growth of heritage tourism has also brought in many dimensions of concern. With an appetite for development, many nuances are bypassed. In the impatience to maximize returns from these sites, the plunder & exploitation has resulted to another set of problems. So, though it seems easy to develop a heritage tourist site, it does involve a lot of sensibilities.

Understanding heritage tourism & its marketing

“Tourism is too important a resource to be left to the tourism professionals. Tourism needs to be part of a community mobilization strategy that can reinvent the role of heritage so that it serves the needs of everyone” Bob McNulty President, Partners for Livable communities.

Today it has added newer dimensions of concern to this kind of tourism. Prevalence of an integrated approach by all stake holders is essential to market heritage sites. It is not only the authentic recording of historical events around it, its geographic location of this site per say that is draw for its success but also other considerations as reach ability (travel convenience), importance of other destinations around it, personalities that draw people to it (living & dead), involvement of ASI & other governmental machinery in promoting it - all add up to the brand value proposition. Governmental involvement is in the cultural offerings, education, preservation, creating an identity. The commercial reward to this (lodging, boarding, food, entertainment, selling of artifacts) is usually taken by the private business sector. For the heritage brand to have a long marketing life, the overall site along with it's add on subsidiary brands of additional services & products needs to be nurtured. The site has to be preserved besides giving attention to morality, privacy, personal identity & fundamental change in human nature (Rheingold 1991). It has been established that successful marketing of a heritage site, an effective tourism plan enabled by local involvement leads to a sustainable development of a heritage site. Tourism industry can have many effects on the environment (Romeril1989). When marketing of these sites, the goal of the marketer needs to be well defined. Myopia in this has very negative consequence. There is a threat to heritage assets due to “tension between commodification & conservation” (Mc Kercher & du Cros 2002).

There are similarities between brand heritage & heritage tourism (Hudson 2013) – historical approach, applying marketing theories, identity, nostalgia and authenticity. If experience is the product of authentic heritage tourism than, nostalgia (for recollecting & longing past glory) is the food it thrives on. Served with a developed hospitality industry, this product will be delivered successfully. Tourists would be interested in the monument, museums, art galleries, theaters, festival, concerts, performances, other significant sites nearby (Williams, 2006). Tourism & hospitality sectors are in synch when we talk of experiential marketing & service excellence. With World Heritage sites, sustainable tourism and integrated management are important requirements. (Newtownabbey A. G., 2007)

Promotion of heritage tourism is popular in the digital platform. By using nosography & online communities, electronic bulletin boards, web rings (web pages, link based on a theme, chat rooms etc.) & listings allowing interactions, generates interest in these sites. Uploading the site through videography & fostering creation of a global heritage space (Sigala 2005) are ways to promote. Outbound tourism efforts are required in plenty. Within the country of its origin as well as a global presence is required to promote.

It is imperative to have research that pulls in information regarding demand (ensuring & forecasting), distribution of local marketplace (food, entertainment, and lodging), travel systems, operational capacity etc need to be in place. The visitor looks forward to an entire experience in this service.



The Salabat Khan II Tomb, Mohekari near Ahmednagar city, Maharashtra, India

The saga of Salabat Khan Tomb

It is the tomb of Salabat Khan II, who was a minister with the fourth Nizam Shah – Murtuza Nizam Shah from 1579.

This historic heritage site of Salabat Khan Tomb, lies on top of the hill of Shah Dongar, Mohekari near Ahmednagar city, Maharashtra, India. One has to walk up an incline to reach the footsteps that lead to the structure. The tomb is located in an underground crypt. It is a three storied stone structure that can be seen from anywhere in the city. This landmark is at a height of about 3080 feet above sea level (700 and 800 feet above the city of Ahmednagar). It is 13 kms away from Ahmednagar city. It is wrongly called as Chand Bibi fort, though Chand Bibi had been in this region during this period (1550–1599). This tomb is commonly referred as SKT by the locals.

The octagonal raised plain central floor, above the underground chamber, is surrounded by tall walls that have many angular holes. These holes on the walls permit sunlight & air to flow freely within the verandah which is 100 feet broad & 12 feet high. On top of the structure lies an open terrace that is very breezy. From here a panoramic view of the city can be seen & appreciated. The entire city can be seen from this height due to which it served as a strategic vantage point against any insurgency. Salabat Khan II was a minister of Murtuza Nizamshah and was an able administrator, planner, architect and water management expert. His water preservation expertise can be witnessed even today. At a height of 3080 feet above sea level during his period water self-sufficiency was created by building deep trenches that held plenty of rain fed water. This ancient rain water harvested lakes can be seen even now and do hold water during summers.

This high rise structure is surrounded by green vegetation that the forest department is looking after. A tar road is built to the top of the structure. On all the sides, corporate have invested in many a windmill. The wind here allows power generation. On one side lies a temple of a statue of Veerbhadra, built by the Nizam so that the workers from Karnataka (from the Lingayaat clan) could perform their prayers & the construction of the monument would not be affected by their absence when they desired to offer their prayers. Strangely, as per the wish of this community,

this temple cannot be seen from any height. As we go down & away from the tomb, a playground has been constructed. On either side benches & playing areas & facility has been made for children. These also are wanting in upkeep. The forest department has also constructed a “Nisarg Mahiti Kendra”, which is supposed to disseminate information. Most of the times it is unmanned and locked. In early 2000, as an impetus to tourism promotion, four rooms were constructed for tourists. The forest department also had constructed a guesthouse. Due to neglect in their upkeep and bad publicity these facilities have closed down attracting only few tourists who come by the day. It was hotel Chand Bibi & later Sai Anand hotel that provided ethnic food to the tourists along with serving them hot beverages, soups, pakoras along with Indian and Desi Chinese preparations. Both these hotels closed down as regular footfalls petered away after about an year. It was not financially viable & getting employees to work in these facilities became difficult.

Strangely there is no write up /information board/signage for the tourists. The wall housing this board is under repairs for the last year.

Early morning the entire road from the base of the hill is flooded with enthusiastic walkers. They reach midway leading a small plateau where the playground is (some return from there) & others walk right up to the top of the tomb which about two & a half kilometers is either taking the tar road or trek up the hillock.

The locals of Ahmednagar have definitely visited SKT. The pride of this heritage is not so strongly ingrained amongst the ethos of the locals.

Challenges

Till date, in the absence of proper MIS and long term planning, tourism in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra is suffering. Fragmented approach of various government departments (forest, tourism, ASI, irrigation department), a callous attitude towards environment & socio economic concerns, lack of public – private partnership & raising of adequate funding has led to this sorry affair. SKT is also a brunt of this apathy. Further, understanding the past creates an attachment to present, has still to be developed among all to appreciate this heritage site.

A self sustaining model has to be put in place. Private land owner (Pote family own about 75 acres of land around the site), tourism industry along with the government agencies and local population need to explore SKT in a better way. Paucity in allocating appropriate government funds for restoration and its proper usage has led to this state of affairs at SKT. The leadership of this region has not kept heritage tourism as of any significance in their plan of things.

Vitalizing SKT as a heritage tourism site

The target tourists would be an inflow of domestic & foreign tourists. MTDC, travel sites would host information on SKT in a very attractive & compelling way. Schools in the state, holiday goers within the country would be targeted. Being close to Aurangabad, which pulls a lot of foreign tourists visiting Ajanta & Ellora and also Mehrabad near Ahmednagar (followers of Meher Baba) would bring in the adequate foot falls. The product/experience itself needs to be well defined & understood. Nostalgia for past has to be created throughout the experience without any trace of boredom setting in. For this various options of the service could be provided at a price (guided tour only in the vicinity of the tomb, walking trail from the base on the tar

road, trekking experience, mountain climbing from mid-way, an active information center wherein all visitors will be briefed on the authentic history of SKT, heritage walk, heritage corridor- covering three or four heritage sites nearby within a day, an evening of sound & light show covering the glory of Nizam Shah's period etc.). Newer exciting models to publicize on the digital platform, information sharing across all medias to promote this site, information boards on all the seven routes around the city & on the trail along SKT, regenerating interest amongst the community, preservation of the structure & its upkeep (respecting the heritage and not writing graffiti on walls), from sheer indifference & neglect by all stake holders to having pride & attracting tourists could recreate the glory for SKT.

The unobtrusive space around SKT allows one to appreciate best in Nature- flora & fauna, mountains, cool breeze and peace around.

A tri-component model for vitalizing SKT has been suggested, all along keeping a subtle focus on the experience generated.

The first component is the governmental machinery that needs to gear up. The ASI, Forest Department, local government, all will be activated through lobbying. The basics of cleanliness- washrooms, dustbins, drinking water and creation of clean spaces can be done simultaneously. The children's play space can be cleaned up and seasonal flowering plants can be planted to beautify the area. All this leading to experience quality of the servicescape. The rusticity has to be kept intact & it cannot get a manicured look. Clean benches can be placed along the entire trail. The ancient water holes can also be revived for the tourist's curiosity. The preservation & upkeep of this structure as desired of a heritage site could be taken up earnestly. Government needs to get involved in two areas of training. Firstly, training guides to share & repeat authentic history of the place with enthusiasm. It is vital that this narration should give a true picture of recorded history with pride. The delivery of this standardized script could be given in Marathi, English, Hindi and also using translators in Japanese, Spanish, Chinese & other languages as per demand. Secondly, to develop a service culture amongst all involved in marketing & delivery of this service. Short training programme needs to be conducted in order to serve the requirements of experience marketing. Further, governmental involvement in commute to the site by dedicating a city bus plying with a good frequency should be taken up urgently. This bus can pick up the tourists within the city and from other feeder hubs around it. Travel convenience has to be looked into.

Second component is the public private partnership. The public here includes the community, large corporate (Larsen & Tubro, Crompton Greaves etc.), small businesses (like Kohinoor – a cloth retailer) and individuals can come together to pool in resources (ideas, finances, art, creativity etc.). This would bring in more involvement & ownership. To boost the economy, third party involvement in plying taxis, housing tourists, providing local cuisine as well as varieties of food, bringing in bazaar activity on fixed days, selling memorabilia etc could help in tangibilising the experience. With more avenues of revenue emerging, a sustainable model with responsible developmental activities would thus emerge.

Third component is getting the locals involved socio economically. Training them & hand holding these new entrepreneurs would be beneficial. Creating a market and employment for this slice of history – sound & light show covering the era of Nizam Shah, selling interesting memorabilia, having safe parking, eateries offering finger food & snacks along with local

cuisine & other food varieties, local bazaars & some events on some fixed days in a week or month could be baby steps in the right direction. Tour operators & local guides could become operational. Small treks could be organized. The experience can be priced differently based on the choice of the consumer (trek, heritage walk, heritage corridor tour etc.)

Great potential lies hidden in the heritage site at SKT that needs to be explored sensibly. SKT would be able to have an identity and this would dissipate the dispiritedness that mars it today.

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