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RATNA BHARALI TALUKDAR

Jan Chrastina, a Doctor of Medicine of Czech Republic and a member of a group of six foreign tourists visiting Sikkim, avoided "other destinations of India overpopulated by international tourists" to experience the thrill of journey along the hilly curves, seeing hot springs, majestic monasteries, awesome caves among others, serenely located in the mountainous State. The team was aware of the September 18 tremor that

devastated the State. However, it could not deter them from visiting Sikkim. The team spent four days of its two-week long tour in India and Bhutan.

"It's been wonderful to witness nature's wonders. It is peaceful and serene. Our travel agent in Czech Republic assured us (there is) no problem in coming to Sikkim now. And, I love mountains. I would rather love to trek the mountains," says Jan Chrastina, adding he has

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no problem with the bad roads, rather, found the roads "nearly normal", considering the havoc triggered by the tremor.

As international tourists find "no problem" with "nearly normal" roads despite damages caused by tremor and domestic tourists are thrilled to enjoy chill in wintry holidays - for nearly one third of the population in Sikkim, who rely on tourism directly or indirectly have found a great relief to overcome the setback of initial slow down of business.

For thousands of quake hit families in rural Sikkim, tourism has been proved to be the most sustainable livelihood option to quickly rebuild their lives as it was the only sector which helped them to gradually overcome in less than two

feet altitude in the worst hit North District of Sikkim, is an example. "Till mid-November about 25 vehicles (one vehicle carrying five tourists on an average) have come. This is quite low as compared to 200-250 vehicles that come normally in the same period in previous years. Some of them have food while some stays back. However, I am happy that I have been able to start earning once again," she says. Lachung, 120 km off the capital city Gangtok, is one of the hot destinations in Sikkim for both domestic and foreign tourists. The magnificent Yumthang valley, the Singba Rhododendron Sanctuary on way to Yumthang the Lachung monestry, apart from the snow-



months time, the period of uncertainty that gripped them in the aftermath of the devastation. For, tourism integrates hotels or home stays, food suppliers and cultivators, travel agents, transport services, shop owners and a number of other stakeholders.

Twenty-two year old Ongmu Lachungpa, mother of one, who owns the Orchid Lodge with 15 rooms at Lachung, located at 8000

capped mountain peaks are major tourist attractions of Lachung, she adds.

The tremor took lives of 77 innocent persons, collapsed or damaged 53,172 houses including hotels and lodges and 642 school buildings, according to official statistics. The devastation made the State Government open 53 relief camps immediately to provide accommodation to these displaced families. I

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also served evacuation notices to occupants 57 buildings, rendered unsafe by the tremor.

In sharp contrast to the experience of Lachungpa and other families of being able to quickly rebuild their lives around tourism, thousands of families affected by natural disaster like flood and erosion or by manmade disaster like ethnic violence in States like Assam, have to live in make-shift relief camps for months and years together and rely entirely on government relief in absence of any sustainable livelihood option like tourism.

"Although the tremor hit the entire State, fortunately, except North District, which is still devastated in terms of allowing permit to

The State is a nature's paradise, and most of its tourist hotspots remained intact to the thrill of tourists, says the senior IAS official and adds that revenue generation in private sector through tourism goes up to Rs 400 crore a year.

Sikkim, the Land of Peace and Tranquility as described in the Tourism Policy, 2010 of the State - is one of the most preferred tourism hotspots for both foreign and domestic tourists and perhaps is the only State in the country where number of tourists visiting the State in a year exceeds its total population. During 2010, the Department of Tourism of this tiny, mountainous State with a population of 6.14 lakh (2011 Census) recorded 7,00,011 domestic and



tourists to visit the district, other tourism destinations remained almost safe and intact, says N Yethenpa, Secretary Tourism. However, the Department missed the first tourism season in the State, during mid-September for three months, she adds. The Department is, however, determined to overcome the slow down by the next season, that is from April to June.

20,757 foreign tourists. Sikkim also ranks highest on country's Green Protection Index (0.903) by protecting its natural resources as per Green Indicators 2004. In 2003, the State Government announced to make it an Organic State by 2015, which also added to tourists' attraction.

Apart from its unparallel natural beauty,

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the Buddhist monasteries too, attract large number of religious tourists from the South-East Asian countries each year, says Yethenpa. Domestic tourist Sabita Talukdar, a senior lady from Guwahati who was on her family trip to this earthquake-hit State, prioritizes Sikkim as one of her favourite tourist destinations on a number of counts: excellent human behavior of local people, cleanliness and polythene-free zone and more comfort with relatively a low-budget.

"Immediately after the shock there were initial cancellations of up to 60-65 per cent, putting us into deep trouble. The situation, however, is far better now and slowly has come to normal. Still, even today all of our rooms are not sold," said Ramesh Gurung, General Manager, Sikkim Retreat, an associate of Hotels and Restaurants Associations, Sikkim, indicating that the slow down still has an effect on the business.

Tourism, being the core economy which is promoted by a distinctive policy push, number

of tourists visiting the State has shown a steady growth, making this hill station a tourists' paradise. The peak period is, however, April and May, when mountain peaks are covered with snow and colourful wild orchids including vivid varieties of Rhododendron and other beautiful flowers blossom. During 2010 for instance as many as 1,18,234 tourists visited Sikkim in May, against 62,362 in October.

Statistics: Tourists Visiting Sikkim /Source (Official web portal- Sikkim Tourism)

Year	Domestic tourists	Foreign
2005	3,47,650	16,514
2006	4,21,943	18,049
2007	4,65,204	17,837
2008	5,12,373	19,154
2009	6,15,628	17,730
2010	7,00,011	20,757
2011(till April)	3,68,965	10,414

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Arjun Chettri, co-proprietor Sikkim Darshan Travels is one stakeholder of tourism sharing the experience of Lachungpa. "We were fully prepared and made new investments in procuring luxurious cars. Instantly after the tremor, the rate of cancellation was very high pushing us into trouble. I am quite that the lull period did not last long and is now almost over."

Arjun deals with at least 50-60 clients during the first season (mid-September to December). The next season, which is April-June is more profitable, he says. Some government departments and the fast growing corporate sector, particularly pharmaceuticals and hydro power bigwigs, too provide them business.

Chettri, however, is critical about major infrastructure challenges including absence of a state-of-the-art restaurant with a suitably maintained toilet facility for international and domestic tourists throughout the 114 km. Stretching from Siliguri to Gangtok, they have to travel prior to entering Sikkim. Stating tourism has a bright future and there is no end, Arjun feels there are challenges ahead and those involve in the business need to be ready

for improving skill and manpower.

Approximately 500 tour and travel agencies are now operating in the State making the business overcrowded. This is mainly due to lack of capacity and manpower to work in the newly entered and fast growing corporate sectors. As scope of employment generation for local youths in these sectors is far below than expectation, more youths have entered into tourism.

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