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From Wayanad to Shimla: The rising crisis of overtourism and its environmental impact

With too many visitors, the impact of overtourism on the environment, local communities and infrastructure is becoming all too evident. Several tourist destinations are now warming up to curb the rising numbers.

Written by Vaishali Dar

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Earlier this year, a series of landslides struck a few villages of Wayanad district in Kerala, in what is now being hailed as one of the deadliest in the southern state's history, with reports of over 420 fatalities, 397 injuries and 118 people missing. The landslides were caused by heavy rains that caused hillsides to collapse, destroying the areas below and resulting in the loss of lives, and property worth over Rs 1,200 crore, as per reports.

Weather-related disasters are not unusual in the region and Wayanad has always been at the risk of landslides during monsoon seasons, but a disaster of this magnitude was unprecedented, but not totally unfathomable. Being a popular tourism hub, and a favoured weekend destination for Bengaluru's wealthy IT professionals (the tech city is just six hours by road), Wayanad has been witnessing a surge in tourist arrivals over the years, leading to what is now commonly known as 'overtourism'—something that occurs when too many visitors flock to the same place, causing detrimental impacts on the environment, local communities and infrastructure.

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Even the state government seems to be aware of this fact. Just three weeks before the disaster, Kerala tourism minister PA Mohammed Riyas said, while replying to a question in the local legislature, that Wayanad was "dealing with an influx of more people than it can handle, a classic example of a place facing the problem of overtourism".

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As per reports, Wayanad has received more than 1 million domestic and foreign tourists this year, nearly triple the number it did in 2011.

In fact, the situation is somewhat similar in almost all the tourism hotspots. Last year, Goa received 81,75,460 domestic travellers and 452,702 foreign travellers as against 70,18,945 domestic travellers and 169,005 foreign travellers in 2022. This year, till April, the sunshine state received 31,95,673 domestic and 137,113 foreign travellers.

Similarly, tourist arrivals in Himachal Pradesh increased from 15.1 million in 2022 to 16 million in 2023, despite challenges posed by heavy rainfall, floods, and landslides in mid-2023. By June 2023, the state had welcomed over 10 million tourists, including 99,78,504 domestic and 28,239 foreign visitors. However, tourist inflows halted during the monsoon season due to severe weather conditions, leading to

significant losses totalling Rs 9,905.77 crore and claiming over 200 lives in rain-related incidents.

This year, till May, Himachal Pradesh welcomed over 7.4 million tourists, marking a 3.5% rise in footfall compared to the same period last year. Media reports state 32,415 foreign tourists visited the state during the same period compared to 23,174 in 2023.

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Despite having an overall low level of tourism activity and fewer foreign tourist arrivals as compared to the global average, there are certain regions in India that suffer from overtourism, says Rajiv Mehra, president of the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), an apex national body of the tourism industry in India. “Classic examples can be seen in Shimla and Manali in Himachal. Mussoorie and Nainital in Uttarakhand also suffer from similar problems and so do Ooty in the south and Goa in west,” adds Mehra.

As per Mehra, the issue arises in the peak season when these places are overcrowded with people and vehicles. “Huge tourist convergence leads to more pressure on civic amenities, which ecologically sensitive hill towns cannot take beyond a point. Mussoorie and Shimla now experience heat waves in summers, when earlier people used to visit these places to escape the oppressive heat of the plains,” he adds.

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Over 150,000 tourists swarmed Shimla in June leading to massive traffic snarls. The vehicular population of Shimla is over 80,000, including two-wheelers and four-wheelers, but over 489,000 vehicles were estimated to enter from other states in the first 10 days of June alone.

Extreme heat waves also led to a severe water crisis in Shimla, which usually needs 43 million litres of water daily, but received only about 30 million litres, necessitating water rationing every 3-4 days, in June this year. Peak summer and travel season

demand spikes to even 48 million litres, forcing hotel owners to buy water from private tankers.

Many cities like Goa, Agra, Jaipur, Manali, Ladakh, Munnar and Varanasi are now facing overtourism, says PP Khanna, board member, Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism and Hospitality (FAITH), an apex body of the tourism and hospitality industry in India. “Tourists and locals have a love-hate relationship. The one who makes money out of the tourists loves it all. The one who is a resident and hates all that the tourist brings (noise, clutter, alcohol, drugs and more) hates it completely. There is nothing in between. What’s the solution then?” asks Khanna.

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Renowned filmmaker and conservationist Mike Pandey cites Ladakh, Goa and Mussoorie as prime examples of places being overrun by tourists. “Garbage, noise and the jostling crowds at tourist sites, and infrastructure development such as the expansion of four-lane highways, have fractured the stability of the hills. It took millions of years for the Himalayas to stabilise, but the frantic building activities have stripped the mountains of their green cover and exposed the fragile mountains to the elements. Landslides have also become too frequent,” feels Pandey, who was recently honoured with the 2024 Jackson Wild Legacy Award in wildlife and environmental filmmaking.

Worldwide phenomenon

Overtourism is fast emerging as one of the biggest crises in the world. In Spain, the number of foreign tourists jumped 13% to 42.5 million in the first half of this year and is likely to beat last year’s high of 85 million, when numbers exceeded pre-pandemic levels. Tourists spent 12.3 billion euros in Spain in June, 17% more than the same month last year, helping drive economic growth, but highlighting the challenge for a government trying to find the right balance between tourism and local interests.

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In July, taking note of the growing menace, residents of Barcelona sprayed visitors with water as part of a demonstration against mass tourism, chanting slogans like 'tourists, go home' and 'Barcelona is not for sale'. Meanwhile, the ciy administration has shown an intention to raise the current 7-euro daily tax paid by cruise passengers to ensure the city benefits more from their brief visits.

Spain is not alone. Morocco is preparing to co-host the 2030 FIFA World Cup alongside Spain and Portugal, projecting an influx of 26 million tourists in the World Cup year, nearly doubling the 14.5 million travellers recorded in 2023. There are plans to add 150,000 new hotel rooms in Marrakech, Casablanca, and Agadir airports by 2030, target an increase in foreign direct investment in the tourism industry from 20-30% by 2026; develop theme parks, and exhibition centres and promote diverse experiences so that the nation benefits from the growth in tourism while minimising the risk of overtourism.

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Venice, a city of 50,000 residents, saw annual visitor numbers estimated between 25 million and 30 million. It plans to extend its day-tripper tax into next year, increasing fees for last-minute bookings to address overtourism. Tourists without advance reservations will be charged 10 euros. The tax generated 2.4 million in its initial phase by managing tourist flows and supporting local infrastructure.

Closer home in Asia, countries like Japan and Indonesia have been facing overcapacity of tourists while maintaining the strong economic benefits that come with increased travel. Japan saw a record number of overseas tourists with the monthly visitors exceeding 3 million in March for the first time. But the rise in footfalls led to blocking views of Mount Fuji by Japanese authorities owing to poor behaviour of foreign tourists.

Indonesia has also decided to suspend the construction of new hotels in some areas of Bali this year amid growing concern on local infrastructure, the environment, and culture. Foreign arrivals in Bali surged, with 2.9 million foreign visitors entering the island through Bali airport in the first half of this year, according to Indonesia's statistics bureau. The country is expected to conduct an audit to reform tourism on the tropical island of Bali to improve tourism quality and preserve local culture and jobs. With over 200,000 foreigners currently living in Bali, the island is in trouble with unexpected crime, over-development and competition for employment.

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In fact, Luhut Pandjaitan, senior minister overseeing tourism in Indonesia, took to Instagram to say, “Foreign tourists who bring problems here, such as narcotics, gangs, and other issues, we can deport them from Indonesia, from Bali, and we don’t want them to enter Bali anymore.”

In 2000, Thailand had to shut its Maya Bay for three years, which became a popular tourist destination after Leonardo DiCaprio film The Beach was released the same year, due to environmental damage.

The way forward

To address the issue, states like Himachal Pradesh and Goa are now taking alternative measures to curb overcrowding in popular areas.

In Goa, the department of tourism is aggressively addressing the challenges of overtourism by promoting the state’s lesser-known destinations beyond its famous beaches. This includes a focus on hinterland tourism, encouraging tourists to explore areas like Netravali, Bondla wildlife sanctuary, and the Dudhsagar waterfalls, or immersive experiences like museum visits, heritage walks, rural homestays and spice plantation visits.

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“With this approach, the tourist can engage with the local culture and cuisine and natural beauty, helping to reduce overcrowding in the more popular coastal regions. In line with the state’s regenerative tourism goals, Goa Tourism is promoting eco-friendly activities like nature trails and bird-watching while ensuring sustainable tourism practices that benefit local communities,” says an official spokesperson of the state’s department of tourism.

The department is also boosting awareness of unique cultural festivals in the state, such as Shigmo, Chikhal Kalo, Tripurari Poornima, Sao Joao, Bonderam and Sangodd, and developing adventure tourism such as trekking, bungee jumping, scuba diving as well exploring the backwaters of Goa, alongside spiritual circuits like the Ekadasha Teertha temple trail. “These initiatives distribute tourist footfall across different regions of Goa, alleviating pressure on heavily visited beaches and ensuring sustainable growth for the state’s tourism industry,” the spokesperson adds.

Industry experts say that one of the solutions to the overtourism woes can be a pre-registered e-pass for entry and use at the tourist destination. “It’s a clean way to control in advance for high-traffic holiday destinations. It is going to pave the way for controlled and monitored tourism. A tourist tax that is staggered over the season and non-season is also possible,” says Khanna of FAITH.

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“Also, one must check out a lesser-known similar destination as tourism money will move to the more needy locations and lessen the burden on the already overburdened ones. All overtourism destinations should have a comprehensive study by the state/UT, tourist capacity and accommodation infrastructure, transport system, etc,” adds Khanna.

Agrees Mehra of IATO: “The best-case scenario would be to create an online system for travellers to register themselves during the peak season, and they should be allowed to visit the tourist destination only after that,” he says, adding that limiting the number of travellers is the need of the hour.

“This registration may seem a bit harsh but is required in the best interest of all the stakeholders. Also new destinations can be explored where B&B-like facilities can be created, a classic example of which is Gurez Valley in Kashmir,” adds Mehra.

The idea is also to save ecologically sensitive regions. For instance, Uttarakhand, which has over 70% forest cover, has lost approximately 50,000 hectares of forest to development activities in the past two decades. “Unregulated tourism accelerates biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and habitat destruction,” says Pradip Shah, director of Grow-Trees, a social enterprise that promotes tree planting to mitigate the effects of climate change.

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The enterprise is committed to develop long-term green-living solutions that protect the environment and benefit local communities. The afforestation initiatives create significant employment opportunities for local communities through tree planting, nursery management, and forest maintenance. “Our green

barriers act as natural filters, reducing soil erosion, conserving water resources, and providing shelter for wildlife. The efforts help restore ecosystems severely impacted by excessive human activity. One of our key projects, Trees for Ecotourism in Tsomgo, Sikkim, shields the area from the adverse effects of tourism while reducing its carbon footprint," adds Shah.

"There are both wonderful and depressing examples of tourism. By most accounts, safaris in India's tiger reserves or in the East African savannah are well regulated, generate substantial economic revenues, and are wonderful experiences. Coral reef degradation across the world or the (literal) overcrowding on Mount Everest are the opposite of this," says Hisham Mundol, chief adviser of the Environmental Defense Fund in India, a global non-profit that collaborates with governments, NGOs, research and academic institutions and corporates to support India's vision of shared, sustainable prosperity.

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Mundol, who has been working as an expert in the climate space, consumer goods, manufacturing, media and technology for over 25 years, says, "Every economy where tourism is an important element has to consider the business risk of losing tourists because they are losing the very reasons why tourists came, or when the tourist experience becomes so unappealing that it loses its attraction."

Even as the Himalayan region is a source of water for 25% of the world's population, says filmmaker and conservationist Pandey, the hundreds of aspiring traders who have set up resorts and upmarket hotels to cater to the hordes of tourists must be curbed. "Even the number of tourists headed for a tour of the Himalayan base camp has escalated, as they carelessly litter the trek route and shelters," he adds.

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16 mn

No. of tourist arrivals in Himachal Pradesh in 2023, as against 15.1 mn in 2022

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7.4 mn

No. of tourists welcomed by Himachal Pradesh till May this year, a 3.5% rise in footfall compared to same period last year

1 mn

No. of domestic and foreign tourists in Wayanad this year, nearly triple the number it received in 2011

8.18 mn

No of domestic travellers welcomed by Goa in 2023, as against 7.02 mn in 2022

25-30 mn

Estimated no. of annual visitors in Venice, a historical island city of Italy with just 50,000 residents

42.5 mn

No. of foreign tourists received by Spain in the first half of this year; likely to beat last year's high of 85 mn

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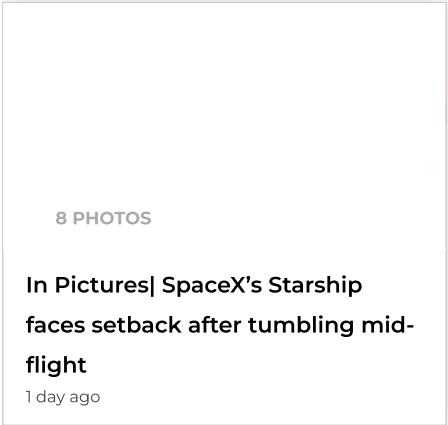

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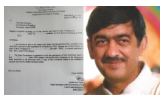

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