

# **Enhancing domestic tourism in Kataragama and Yala, Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

Tourism has become a major source of income, employment generator, government income earner etc. but its potential has not been much explored particularly in relation to domestic tourism. With a view to investigate enhancing domestic tourism in Sri Lanka, this paper deals with a detailed analysis of the barriers to growth of domestic tourism and to identify the problems and prospects of domestic tourism with particular emphasis on the Kataragama Sacred City and the Yala (Ruhuna) National Park. The study is mainly based on a sample survey of 200 domestic tourists and 100 individuals representing service providers in the two sites. The study identifies problems of supplying drinking water, accommodation, meals, transport, communication, and information services prevailing in the study area. Investments by private parties are not at a satisfactory level due to inadequacy of investments by private parties. The study makes a series of proposals in order to facilitate the increase in arrivals and to obtain full participation of domestic tourism in the social and economic development in the study area.

## **1. Introduction**

Tourism has become one of the largest industries in the world economy. By the year 2003, tourism was second to oil industry. In the same year, the contribution of tourism to the world output was 12 percent and one out of fifteen employment opportunities were created by the industry. Seven percent of the world's total investment and thirteen percent of per-capita expenditure were contributed by the tourism industry (Francois & Lionel, 1995).

In general, the significance of tourism in the developed economies is known to be comparatively higher than that of developing economies. Percentage contributions of tourism to the GNPs of selected developed countries are 7.58 in Japan, 8.11 in Germany, 8.05 in Australia, 9.5 in Belgium 5.75 in USA and 4.6 in the United Kingdom (WTO, 2003). On the other hand, percentage GNP contributions of selected developing economies are: 3 in India, 3.6 in Thailand, 2.4 in Malaysia and 1.7 in Sri Lanka (WTO, 2003). One reason to observe lower percentage contributions of tourism in developing economies is that, in these countries the term 'tourism' is often used to mean only the arrival of foreign nationals. Therefore, the value of tourism represents only the income generated by hotels, restaurants, recreation centers, travel agents and other income generating activities whose main purpose is to offer services to foreign tourists. Thus, so-called international tourism over-emphasizes domestic tourism as a counterpart activity.

There are three reasons for under-estimating the role of domestic tourism in the socio economic development of these countries: (i) role of the international tourism and its contribution to the growth of the economy by way of foreign exchange earnings, employment generation, government revenue and multiplier effects which are considered to be higher compared with domestic tourism, (ii) the services related to international tourism are well established, i.e., there are

formal establishments sector to cater the international tourists whereas domestic tourism is undertaken informally and (iii) inadequate information services on domestic tourism and its related activities. It does not mean that the local people do not engage in travel or tourism activity but reveals the fact that relevant information is not compiled and analyzed in assessing the total tourism product of the country.

In the Sri Lankan context, the significance of overall social and economic development expected for domestic tourism has not been properly understood; it is very informally organized and there are very few attempts to explore its identity of potentiality and the problems faced by domestic tourists. They are useful for planning and implementing strategies to obtain maximum contribution of domestic tourism to the overall development while providing facilities for local tourists to engage in travel and tourism activities within the country.

This paper attempts to analyze the barriers to growth of domestic tourism, and to identify the problems related to the industry and to recommend suitable measures to develop the domestic tourism in Sri Lanka. To study this, Yala and Kataragama are selected as study areas because these areas are very famous for domestic tourism among the other tourist regions in the country.

The sacred city of Kataragama is a place of worship for every religious group in the country. It is second only to Anuradhapura as a place of attraction to Sri Lankans (Tantrigama, 1995a, 1996b). There is evidence that Kataragama has been a place of attraction for pilgrims and tourists since 1055 A.D. (*Soratha*, 1993). The Kataragama season falls in the month of August when the *Kataragama Esala Perahera* (Procession) takes place. The annual festival in August is famous particularly for the fire-walking ceremony and extreme expiatory penance as well as a colorful *perahera*.

Yala is considered to be one of the most popular conserved areas in Sri Lanka. It was declared a National park in 1938. It is a popular destination for tourists seeking opportunities for viewing varieties of flora and fauna. Kataragama and Yala are located in close proximity to each other with two different purposes of tourism. Kataragama is approached by domestic pilgrims/tourists for religious purposes while Yala is a famous foreign and domestic tourist attraction for recreational purposes. Though the two places are two different tourist zones, the Tourism Master Plan of 1993 has identified them as separate zones in the south-east tourism zone (WTO/UNDP, 1993). The reason for the selection of this area for the study is its being a place of tourist attraction with different tourism purposes. A specific characteristic of this area is that it is attracted by tourists in most seasons of the year whereas the other places of tourist attractions in the island are only seasonal. The arrival of domestic tourists and pilgrims in Kataragama reaches its peak from July to August and November to March. In addition, this location attracts a large number of domestic tourists throughout the year especially during weekends. Yala National park gets the biggest crowds of domestic and foreign tourists during the periods from November to April and July to September.

## **2. Methodology**

This study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. In order to collect primary data, a questionnaire survey was carried out during the peak period from December to January 1997 and the off seasonal period at end March 1998. The reason for the selection of these two periods is the need for in-depth analysis of the problems faced by domestic tourists both in terms of demand and supply sectors. The problems in the demand sector were identified during the peak period while the problems in the supply sector were identified during the off-season. In addition, the two seasons are of significance for the identification of the prospects of domestic tourism industry.

A group of randomly selected 200 domestic tourists/pilgrims who visited Kataragama and Yala areas were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. Further, 100 individuals related to the service sector were interviewed: Hotel Owners (25), Cafeteria Owners (15), Guest House and Restaurant Owners (20), Households (10), Shop keepers (20), other businessmen (10). Data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques and presented descriptively.

## **3. Characteristics of Domestic Tourists Visiting *Kataragama & Yala***

According to the survey, the majority of the domestic tourist arrivals were from the Colombo District (24%), Gampaha District (18.5%) and Kalutara District (12.5%). The least number of arrivals were recorded from the districts of Monaragala and Nuwara Eliya which were below 3 percent. One specific feature was that the majority of the tourists who arrived in the study area were males (58%). Sixty percent of domestic tourists according to the sample were in the age group of 30 – 49 years. Almost 20% of these domestic tourists belong to executive levels such as managers, administrative officers, doctors etc. Other professionals were employed in the government and private sectors. The teachers and clerks in the non-executive level were 19.5 percent of the total sample. The skilled labourers like carpenters, drivers, masons, mechanics, employed in the government semi-government and the private sector were 16.5 percent while 5.5 percent of the sample was pensioners like teachers, armed personnel, postal officials and other government department and corporation officers. Most of the pensioners were teachers. The highest number of the sample was self employed and private entrepreneurs (24%).

The majority of the executive group visit Kataragama and Yala for recreational purposes. Kataragama is a transit point for the town dwellers who tour Yala and to other places of interest in the south east dry zone tourist region. The highest number of domestic tourists were Sinhalese (72.5%), 20 percent were Tamils and 5 percent were Muslims. There were 2.5 percent of Burghers and other races. The tourists who arrive during the Kataragama Perahera season (July – August) were mostly Hindu Pilgrims. The mode of transport of most of the tourists was hired vehicles (47.5%) while 3.5 percent had used the public transport and motor cycles and bicycles were used by 2 percent of the sample. Out of the total sample 55 percent of the domestic tourists had come with their family members, 25 percent with friends, 12 percent in groups and 7.5 were individual travelers.

The main purpose of travel, as indicated by the domestic tourists on the study area is religious (52.5%) while pleasure seeking shared 37.5 percent. Six percent

of domestic tourists· pilgrims visit this area for cultural and archeological interests. Visiting friends and relations for business purposes accounts for 1 percent. The majority of the tourists (62.5%) stayed only a single night on the whole tour while 35 percent was on two nights stay and 2.5 per cent stayed more than three days.

The survey shows that 35 percent of the sample had reserved accommodation in advance. But 65 percent was not aware of the availability of accommodation facilities. The reason for this is the lack of experience and difficulties of getting right contact persons. A significant percentage of (35%) had found accommodation in Pilgrims Rests. Temples and schools had provided accommodation to 24 percent and 12.5 percent respectively. In addition, 15 per cent had found accommodation in Guest Houses and 10 percent stayed at outdoor places. Circuit Bungalows of government departments and other forms had provided accommodation for 3 percent. Most of the Pilgrims Rests are administered by religious organizations and the utilization of these was at a satisfactory level during the festival season. The survey reveals that tourist arrivals on weekdays were very low. The demand for hotels, accommodation canteens, restaurants, lodges and shops was at a very low level during the weekdays in off -season..

#### **4. Problems Encountered by Domestic Tourists and Service Providers in Kataragama and Yala**

The problems are described below in relation to the: (i) problems faced by domestic tourists, (ii) problems faced by service providers and (iii) problems caused by tourists themselves.

##### **(i) Problems faced by Domestic Tourists**

Eighty percent of the sample faced the problem of lack of water. It has been revealed that the water available in this area is not of good quality. Additionally, it was reported that there was a lack of water for drinking, bathing and washing purposes. Supply of pipe borne water is not enough for the total tourist volume at any given time. There is a tendency to bring drinking water from their houses or to buy bottles and çans on their way. As this is the dry zone, drinking water is highly in demand.

A major problem as indicated by about 50 per cent of the respondents was obtaining suitable accommodation at a reasonable cost. Most of them were not aware of the available places of accommodation. The lower income groups look for cheap accommodation but such accommodation units are limited in number. Fifty percent of the domestic tourists get meals at Hotels, Canteens and Boutiques. The meals supplied by them are not of good quality. Some of the major problems related to bad quality meals being unhygienic and costly.

Non – availability of sanitary facilities to large numbers of tourists and pilgrims arriving at the study area has also been a major problem. It was observed that there were long queues at the temporary latrines provided by the *Pradeshiya Sabha* and at low cost rest rooms. In some places, there was only one latrine for about 50 persons. The tourists in small groups staying at dormitories are mostly affected by the menace of mosquitoes. The pilgrims who prepared their meals themselves numbered 60 percent of the sample. These groups lodged at

Pilgrims Rests, Schools, Temples and Rest Rooms. The major problem faced by them is the difficulty of buying spacious rooms and food items.

The health and medical facilities in the study area were at a very low level. There are only 3 medical centers in addition to the hospital in the city limits. The lack of medical centers for emergency situations is another major problem in the area. There is no information centre for historical, archeological and environmental information to serve the tourist in the study area. Another problem is the lack of reading halls, libraries, sports centers and other recreational facilities for tourists. The mass media facilities like television, radio and newspapers are not available at the places of stay. The provision of such facilities has been considered by the Urban Development Authority and the *Pradeshiya Sabha* but the main hindrance of implementation is said to be the lack of funds.

Lack of adequate transport facilities has also been felt by tourists. They have to fully depend on their own vehicles to move from one place to another within the area. The inter-city bus services to Kataragama are available only from a few main cities. A limited number of buses operate from cities like Colombo, Galle, Badulla and Matara to Kataragama but not from any other towns. Most of the tourists and pilgrims are disturbed by beggars. There are over 100 such beggars on any day frequenting the area. This number increases during weekends and festival seasons. The tourists are disgusted over this situation. The situation has been aggravated by the non-availability of a programme for the removal of such beggars.

#### **(ii) Problems faced by Service Providers**

The problems faced by the tourism related industries such as business, shops, pilgrim rests, the households, industries, hotels, canteens and other related institutions and individuals are as follows.

Many business establishments have faced various problems due to the bad conditions of roads, water, electricity, and telephone and bank services. The expansion of tourism supply sectors with a high demand has been hindered by the limited space of available land. Another major problem faced by the entrepreneurs who run tourism related businesses is the difficulty in obtaining loans, getting guarantors and high interest rates.

The quality management of many hotels, pilgrims rests and guest houses has been restricted due to the lack of skilled employees. The dependence on temporary staff has made the difficulties in management. The delays of approval by various institutions for construction projects have badly affected some business enterprises. The policies of two different types by the Urban Development Authority and *Pradeshiya Sabha* in tax collection and maintenance of public amenities have affected the development of such enterprises.

#### **(iii) Problems caused by Tourists**

There are problems caused by tourists too. Many local tourists visiting the study area have created problems to the tourism supply sector. An accountable number of situations and incidents unfavorable for the industry and the operators have been reported in the study area and other areas as well. The study has identified the major causes as drunkenness, lack of understanding the cultural aspects of the host territory, negligence of diplomatic concerns, undermining

hospitality priorities provided by causing problems for hotel management and staff, and by displaying rudeness impoliteness and indecency. They make fun in groups and go into quarrels, which disturbs the rest of the tourists.

The tourists are used to putting garbage by the side of the road. Not only the Kataragama area but the areas such as Tissamaharama, Kirinda and Sella Kataragama are polluted with garbage. The areas are full of polythine bags, empty food parcels, papers and king-coconut shells. They have inscribed their names on stones and trees, which damages scenic beauty.

## **5. Enhancing the Domestic Tourism Sector in Kataragama and Yala**

The study area of Kataragama Sacred City and Yala National Park could be raised to level of enhanced tourist attractions. The area is popular as a place of annual visits of all communities of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims irrespective of the unsatisfactory security conditions in the country. There is a need of increasing the arrivals, but no progress has been made in the related sectors. The study reveals that the increase in per capita income in turn increases the expenditure capacity of tourists. Hence a progress in the sectors of tourist attractions is needed. Basically, the tourism necessities of food, accommodation, transport and other infrastructure in the study area should be developed to enhance the tourist facilities which would, in turn, result in the increase of direct and indirect income to the tourism business sector as well as to the people of the area.

The following proposals are made in order to enhance the tourism sector in the study area.

The problem of scarcity of water could be resolved by the use of the resources in the area with the commencement of a large scale water supply project in Kataragama. This would make provisions for the supply of pure water to the tourist-related enterprises like hotels, shops, pilgrim rests, guest houses and private households. This is an essential service to the area since it develops a major facility for tourists. Public wells could be built in the city limits.

As most of the tourists prepare meals by themselves, the daily income of the business places has come down. The businessmen have to be properly motivated for the provision of quality and nutritious food. The Guest Houses provide food only to a very limited number of tourists. There is a necessity for a system where all the guest houses, rest rooms provide meals to tourists so that they could buy meals and refreshments at the same place they stay the day or night. A system of canteens/cafés would serve the purpose of providing meals to the tourists.

daily removal of garbage at the Sacred City should be implemented with proper supervision. The *Pradeshiya Sabha* and the Urban Development Authority hold responsibility on this issue. Grants for the proper management of sanitary services should be allocated either from the Provincial Council or from the central government to the above institutions. These two institutions should pay special attention to the control of mosquito menace in the area too.

The limited available public toilet facilities should be further expanded in the city limits. Either the *Pradeshiya Sabha* or the UDA should intervene in the maintenance of the system and take necessary action for the renovation of

unusable public toilets. The expansion of the security measures in the areas of Yala and Kataragama is a necessity under the present circumstances. There should be a proper network of security in the city. The present level of unsatisfactory security measures should be remedied at guest houses and pilgrims rests by at least appointing security officers at such places. The respective institutes could maintain the system.

It would be a profitable business if the bus services to Kataragama operate from various parts of the island, since there are a large number of daily arrivals of tourists from those areas. The domestic tourists would find it easier if there are luxury and semi-luxury bus services. The proposed Tourists Service Centers in main cities could provide tourist transport services which would make the tours comfortable and efficient.

The telephone network should be widened and the open telephone boxes are necessary and these should be properly maintained. The study observed the need for quality assurance of foods and refreshments sold in the study area under very low hygienic conditions. There should be an authority to supervise and maintain a proper marketing system.

The price controls of essential food items are a felt necessity. The health authorities should take necessary steps to avoid the sale of inferior food items. The super market facilities are essential for the use of the medium and high income level groups of tourists.

It is proposed to construct new kitchen rooms at rest rooms for the low income groups of tourists and pilgrims. The provision of kitchen utensils is necessary to make their tour comfortable. A facility like the provision of gas for cooking under reasonable charges would make the situation easier.

The expansion of the health and sanitary facilities in the city is very important and, the services provided by the available hospital should be expanded and the number of doctors too should be increased. Additionally, channelling centers should be established in the city. Trees should be planted by the side of the roads to provide shade for the pilgrims to rest. The establishment of a park in the city would make tours more pleasant and relaxed. The necessary steps to stop environmental hazards such as teasing animals, hunting, and removal of tree branches should be immediately taken to avoid the threat of extinction of flora and fauna of importance in the study area. The attention of the Central Environmental Authority and the Department of Wildlife should be drawn to this factor. A national information centre with the facility of obtaining information of places of historical and archeological importance in the study area should be established. This would educate the tourists arriving at the places of importance in the area and create an interest in these places.

It is necessary that the government intervenes in the development of the infrastructure in the study area. Basically, the tourist industry could be encouraged by expanding the facilities like water, electricity, telecommunication and transport. This would have a direct effect on the tourists' number of days spent in the area. There must be groceries at these points for the tourists to purchase their needs. Provision of loan facilities to the state and private sector institutes which provide tourists needs, provision of tax concessions and consultation services would facilitate further investment in the service industry.

This study concentrates on the need for awareness and facilitating the local tourism where as the present system has given its priorities only to foreign tourists. The focal points should be the identification of tourist regions, conservation of these regions and the development of the infrastructure of the respective zones. This would undoubtedly enhance the contributions of the tourism industry to the economy of Sri Lanka.

## 6. Conclusion

Tourism creates multiplicity of income generations, employment, regional development and social harmony of a country. Unfortunately Sri Lankan tourism industry has paid less attention to the domestic tourism sector but more attention to international tourism. As a result of this, the industry has not been giving satisfactory benefits to the economy. The study reveals that tourism demand and supply sectors have faced many problems under the present situation. The demand sector basically faces issues quality accommodation, meals, transport, health and the supply sector basically faces the insufficiency of infrastructure (water, electricity and telecommunication). The study region is more popular with domestic tourists and pilgrims than the other tourist regions in the country. Domestic tourists and pilgrims prefer Kataragama to Yala because comparatively lesser facilities are available at Yala. The area can be blessed with more economic benefits from domestic tourism if a proper corporate plan for both demand and supply sectors is implemented in Kataragama and Yala.

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