

RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA - A GLANCE

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Abstract :

India is famous worldwide as a popular tourist destination with its rich cultural heritage, historical monuments and abundance natural resources. The tourism industry in India has emerged as one of the major economic drivers for growth, contributing substantially to foreign exchange earnings. Tourism is one of the leading global industries contributing 11 percent of global GDP. The world Tourism organization estimates that there will be 1.5 billion tourists in the world in 2020, representing 21 per cent of world population. The World Tourism organization further notes that within the next 5 - 10 years, range of products on offer to tourists seeking the rural experience is to increase significantly. There is a clear trend in growth of rural tourism. India's vast, rural diversity and heritage offer tremendous potential for tourism in rural areas. Rural tourism in India is envisioned to generate employment opportunities, sustainable livelihood for the local community by addressing the issues of poverty reduction and developing a vibrant local economy by revival and regeneration of the old art and crafts and preservation of the rural India culture. This paper is an attempt to have a glance on the rural tourism services in India.

Keywords : Rural Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Nature Tourism.

Introduction

India with its glorious historical past, cultural heritage, varied landscapes and natural beauty has attracted tourists from times immemorial from different places to enjoy its natural endowments, cultural, religious and spiritual heritages. From the snowcapped Himalayan mountain ranges in the north to the docile backwaters of Kerala in the south, from the sandy beaches of Goa in the west to the variegated wild life sanctuaries of the northeast, India holds a colourful and priceless bounty for tourists. Tourism has emerged as one of the major segments of the Indian economy, contributing 6.23 per cent to the national GDP

and 8.78 per cent of the total employment in India. There is no doubt that tourism is an important growth industry that can develop into a major foreign exchange earner for India.

With the Phenomenal growth of tourism industry worldwide the Government of India has introduced many a policy measures to promote tourism. New tourism products and packages are designed like business tourism, health tourism, Rural Tourism, Eco-Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Pilgrimage Tourism, Adventure Tourism, Sustainable Tourism etc to make "Incredible India" as an attractive tourist destination in the world.



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Indian economy is transforming to knowledge economy from the agrarian one, but still one can know India from its villages. In spite of industrialization and globalization, India still lives in villages. The villages of India are the strengths of the country, as it is here that the 'real India' resides. The rural heartland of India is an untouched treasure with its distinctive life styles centered on art and crafts, culture and natural heritage. The tourism sector of the country has seen exponential growth over the last few decades but rural tourism as a concept was never given priority. Rural India has much to offer to the world. Rich in traditions of arts, crafts and culture, rural India can emerge as a hub of important tourist spots. Those in the developed world who have a craze for knowledge about traditional ways of life, arts and crafts will be attracted to visit rural India if the concept of rural tourism is marketed well. It is not that the concept is not workable. In absence of any promotional activity for rural tourism, thousands of foreign tourists visit rural areas in Rajasthan, Gujarat and south India every year. This itself is the proof of viability of the concept of rural tourism. The government should promote rural tourism to ensure sustainable economic development and positive social development.

Concept of Rural Tourism in India:

The definition of rural tourism has been the subject of many debates in the literature without arriving at any firm consensus (Pearce 1989; Bramwell 1994; Seaton et al. 1994). First of all, rural areas where rural tourism occurs are difficult to define since criteria used by different nations vary enormously; secondly, not all tourism which takes place in rural areas is strictly 'rural' – it can be urban in form, and merely be located in a rural area; thirdly, different forms of rural tourism have developed in different regions and hence it is hard to find characteristics that are common to all of the

countries; fourthly rural areas are in a complex process of change due to the impact of global markets, communications and telecommunications that have changed market conditions and orientations for traditional products.

In a broad sense it can be defined as 'a state of mind, and technically, according to activities, destinations and other measurable, tangible characteristics' (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Over time researchers have constantly added to understanding the activities that encompass rural tourism. The list includes interest in farms, nature, adventure, health, education, arts, and heritage (Bramwell and Lane in Jolliffe & MacDonald, 2003) and experiencing living history such as rural customs, folklore, local traditions, beliefs, and common heritage (Pedford in Jolliffe & MacDonald, 2003). The key parameters that define rural tourism are: 'it is located in rural areas, functionally rural; based on small-scale and traditional activities and enterprises (rural in scale), relies on the traditional qualities of the countryside, develops slowly under the control of local people and is non-uniform (reflecting the complexity of the rural environment) (Thomson Learning).

Tourism is termed rural when the rural culture is a key component of the product on offer. Rural tourism is any form of tourism that showcases rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, out of which local community is going to be economically and socially benefitted. The distinguishing feature of tourism products in rural tourism is the wish to give visitors personalized contact, a taste of the unique village life and, as far as possible, allows them to participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyles of local people. Hence a rural tourist destination could be defined as a wider area dominated by the natural and/or farmed/forested environments where specific natural, economic and socio-cultural features,

such as tradition, local cooperation, trust and reciprocity are harmoniously embedded and as such create a unique tourist product that is predominantly small scaled, nature friendly, 'ethno-cultured', in other words 'sustainable'.

Rural tourism is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. It is multifaceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism and ecotourism. As against conventional tourism, rural tourism has certain typical characteristics: It is experience-oriented; the locations are sparsely populated; it is predominantly in natural environments; it meshes with seasonality and local events; and it is based on the preservation of culture, heritage and traditions.

Potential for Rural Tourism in India:

There is a lot of potential for rural tourism in India though it is in its nascent stage now. But it will grow. There is a huge market out there. 'Rural' as an entity is fast disappearing, especially in the developed world. Even for young urban Indians, rural would be something that they would want to connect to. Both Indians and foreigners can be targeted and for the foreigners the experience is a novelty.

Rural India has much to offer to the world. Rich in traditions of arts, crafts and culture, parts of rural India can emerge as important tourist spots. Those in the developed world who have a craze for knowledge about traditional ways of life, arts and crafts will be attracted to visit rural India if the concept of rural tourism is marketed well.

It is not that the concept is not workable. In absence of any promotional activity for rural tourism, thousands of foreign tourists visit rural areas in Rajasthan, Gujarat and south India every year. This is the proof of viability of the concept of rural tourism. Today, the village destinations are market based known for their

rich tradition, crafts and culture. Some states are taking their own initiatives to promote rural tourism, their main objective being to generate employment opportunities.

Although, rural tourism is a new concept in India but in Europe and other parts of the world it has been practiced since long as people want their children to have firsthand knowledge and experience of rural life. Countries having agriculture economy e.g. Australia, Canada and the USA have housing tourist spots in country side. Rural tourism may include heritage tourism, Farm tourism, pilgrim tourism, adventure tourism, nature tourism or folkways and ancient culture tourism. Specific potential areas for rural tourism in India may be Gujarat, backwaters of Kerala, The Punjabi cuisine, The Hills of Uttar Pradesh, Shanti Niketan in West Bengal, dances and Folk songs of Orissa, the Nithyagram of Karnataka, the tribes of Bihar, natural beauty of Meghalaya, folk dances of Andhra Pradesh, Teej festival of Rajasthan, mask dances of Sikkim, the Holi of Nandagaon Banaras.

WTTC survey conducted on the various countries in the world reveals the following interesting facts about India's expected tourism growth in future.

- The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP, including its wider economic impacts, is forecast to rise by 8.8 per cent p.a. from INR 3,680.4 billion (4.5 per cent of GDP) in 2011 to INR8,523.1 billion (4.9 per cent) by 2021.
- Travel & Tourism is expected to support directly 30,439,000 jobs (5.2 per cent) by 2021.
- The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, is forecast to rise to 47,480,000 jobs (8.1 per cent) by 2021.

These facts indicate the potential of tourism in generating income, employment, investment and benefits. It is perceptible to plan tourism industry to spread the growth to rural regions and promote regional development. As the core economic importance of agriculture to the rural economy becomes less significant, other forms of economic activity are promoted through government departments and various public sector agencies in India. Large-scale economic development in rural areas often causes conflict because the dominant many are against industrial development, commerce and the construction of buildings on undeveloped sites. The residents also feel that their way of life is under threat. However, new employment opportunities are welcomed by those seeking employment or improved opportunities.

Rural tourism is in its emerging stage in India, but it will grow. There is a huge market out there. The experience of many countries shows that rural tourism can be seen as an alternate source of livelihood and employment. Tourism growth potential can be harnessed as a strategy for Rural Development. The development of a strong platform around the concept of Rural Tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 74 per cent of the population resides in its 7 million villages. Across the world the trends of industrialization and development have had an urban centric approach. Alongside, the stresses of urban lifestyles have led to a 'counter urbanization' syndrome. This has led to growing interest in the rural areas. At the same time this trend of urbanization has led to falling income levels, lesser job opportunities in the total areas leading to an urbanization syndrome in the rural areas. Rural Tourism is one of the few activities which can provide a solution to these problems. Besides, there are other factors which are shifting the trend towards rural tourism like increasing levels of awareness, growing interest

in heritage and culture and improved accessibility, and environmental consciousness. In the developed countries, this has resulted in a new style of tourism of visiting village settings to experience and live a relaxed and healthy lifestyle.

Rural Tourism – A Means to Empower Rural India:

The concept of rural tourism has a noble cause, it is another kind of sustainable tourism that exploits resources in rural regions, causes little or no harmful impact, and generates increasing benefits to rural areas in terms of rural productivity, employment, improved distribution of wealth, conservation of the rural environment and culture, local people's involvement, and a suitable way of adapting traditional beliefs and values to modern times.

Rural Tourism can develop a win-win situation for both the rural and urban communities. For developing the rural tourism we need to understand the rural environment, demography, socio-culture, economic and political background of that place. How can rural people be involved to enhance their socio-economic condition. To develop a strategic marketing plan for rural tourism we have to understand the target customer their needs and wants and how to match it with our rural infrastructure.

Rural tourism will bring people of different cultures, faiths, languages and life-styles close to one another and it will provide a broader outlook of life. It will not only generate employment for the people but it can also develop social, cultural and educational values and can prevent rural-urban migration. Thus rural tourism could attract tourists by providing excellent glimpse of the village ambience with local cuisine. Moderate, but clean, accommodations for tourists should be constructed by the villagers in traditional design and architecture. Bank finances should be made

available at attractive terms and conditions for promotion of such projects. Rural Tourism has now becoming an essential part of the tourism industry. Once the infrastructure reaches the villages and the concept is marketed in domestic and international markets, nothing can stop penetration of tourism deep inside the unexplored countryside.

Positive Economic and Socio-cultural Impacts:

Rural tourism can create positive economic impacts in the rural areas by providing employment for the rural people and generating income thereby bringing societal developments. The rural people can be brought to the mainstream population with financial empowerments, societal developments and cultural adjustments with the following set of benefits from rural tourism -

- Creation of employment opportunities especially for the rural youth.
- Rise in the Income level.
- Generate foreign exchange
- Demand for other goods and services will increase.
- Improvement in the public services.
- Generate revenue for the government.
- Modernization of agriculture and other rural activities.
- Local small businessman will be benefited.
- Stop movement of people to Metros for job opportunities
- Education and health of the rural community will improve.
- Increase in standard of living
- Cultural understanding through fairs and festivals.
- Exchange of cultural beneficial for both.

- Foreign tourist will bring cultural change faster.
- Market for agro products and handicrafts will develop in rural areas
- Farmers and artisans will develop a direct contact with the customers
- Help in development of rural areas

Rural Tourism in India - Challenges Ahead:

- The economy.
- Poor basic infrastructure.
- Insufficient Financial Support
- Lack of Rural Investment.
- Lack of Trained Manpower and Business Planning skills
- Lack of Basic Education
- Skeptic Local Involvement
- Communication difficulties
- Insufficient government concerns.
- Lack of trust and threat of exploitation by city people.
- Specialized marketing approach.
- Lack of Government Legislations.
- Marginalized assets due to lack of documentation & publicity.

Marketing the “Experience” in Rural Tourism Services in India:

Rural tourism in India has great future, since it not only provides natural elements of beauty but also the indigenous local traditions, customs and foods. Direct experience with local people can be a unique selling proposition to attract tourists. Every state in India has some unique handicraft, traditions and foods. Marketing the Rural Tourism products is not an easy task a specialized attempt should be made for it.

If a proper marketing plan is done for rural tourism, it could bring lots of benefit to our society. It could be a sustainable revenue generating project for rural development of our government. It can help inflow to resources from urban to the rural economy. It can prevent migration of rural people to urban. Both short-term and long-term planning, implementing and monitoring are vital in avoiding damage to rural areas. Environmental management, local involvement, sound legislation, sustainable marketing, and realistic planning are crucial for development of rural tourism.

The Rural tourism should not go for a mass marketing. Rural tourism should develop different strategy for different segment to make it successful. Trying to appeal everyone is a common mistake. To be effective and successful, marketer need to focus on particular segment or segments at a time like newly married couples, family, retired persons, youth , foreigners, artists, corporate etc.

Since tourism is predominantly a consumer activity, it should be demand driven, concentrated on the visitors and their needs and motivation. Hence the motives attracting people to the villages are seen as a reflection of a growing interest in the outdoors, and a number of other general trends of tourist motivation. The attractiveness of rural areas for tourism and recreation can first be associated with the image of rurality. Here rurality is closely related to the traditional and romantic idea of the “good old days” pure and simple lifestyle, intact nature and perfect integration of man in his natural environment. The create of an environment that will help the tourist experience rurality and not rush to create urban comforts in a rural setting, is required because that is what the ‘tourist will want’. The inclusion of this experience in rural tourism is definitely going to attract the tourists.

For creating a rural tourism experience the natural, cultural, human or capital resources indigenous to the rural area would have to be attractive to tourists. Key factors in relation to competitive advantage which should be taken care are the attraction (including its authenticity), quality of service and facilities, the destination’s accessibility and pricing (perceived as value for money).

At last, with the combination of the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and competitive advantage the community will need to learn and compete within the bounds of the market. In the marketing of the rural tourism above all it is the marketing of an ‘experience’ that sells.

Government Initiatives to promote Rural Tourism in India:

Rural tourism was not given priority up to 2002 .In the year 2002, a National Tourism Policy was introduced with rural tourism identified as a focus area to generate employment and promote sustainable livelihoods. ‘As a part of the National Tourism Policy 2002, the Ministry of Tourism is developing and promoting rural tourism sites which have core competency in art, craft, culture, heritage, handloom, etc.’

Indian government had recognized the challenges and opportunities for local communities to enhance rural tourism. The Ministry of tourism allocated funds for promoting rural tourism. The government encouraged every state to involve the local people in the rural areas to participate in tourism related projects, which were formulated by the tourism department officials in consultation with local people and NGOs. These projects were in the nature of providing glimpse of the village ambience to the tourists with local cuisine, art and culture. The essential elements identified for development of rural tourism were creation of

infrastructure, restructuring and liberalization of policies, encouragement for investment, protection of law and order, appointment of Tourist Police, creating complaints handling mechanism and standardization of goods and services.

Ministry of Tourism and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in India have been involved in an initiative on Rural Tourism. Covering 36 sites spread geographically over the country, these pilot project experiences had much to offer in terms of learning about the intersection between community dynamics and tourism projects. The Endogenous Tourism Project- Rural Tourism Scheme (ETP-RTS) is a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (MoT) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiated in 2003 and being implemented currently at 36 sites across the country. While the primary objective of the project is to focus on sustainable livelihoods, it extended beyond the achievement of mere economic objective of employment and income augmentation, putting it on a much larger canvas of community based action. The project aims at a convergence of issues -sustainable livelihoods, gender equality, empowerment of women, youth and other disadvantaged sections and working towards cultural sensitivity and environmental sustainability. It goes on to suggest that if tourism is to fulfill its promise of being a transformative agent, capable of changing the minds, values and behavior of the tourists and the local citizen alike – as well as of providing a broad impetus to local economies throughout India, then tourism needed to be ‘radically altered in design and concept’.

Encouraged by the success of 'Incredible India' campaign in attracting foreign tourists, the tourism ministry is focusing on promoting

tourism in rural India. India's 'explore rural India' campaign, specifically designed to attract foreign tourists for a longer stay in the country and enhancing earnings of the local population, has identified more than 167 rural tourism projects. Besides improving infrastructure such as roads and street lights at the sites, the tourism ministry is stressing on imparting tourism-related skills to villagers. It has tied up with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to provide vocational training to locals. The ministry allocated five million for infrastructure development at the rural sites while UNDP provides two million for each site through the ministry for skills development. The project involves developing two important components namely Hardware and Software. Hardware activities aim to develop infrastructure for receiving the Tourists and Software projects for improving capacity building, tourism promotion and market linkage support for the host communities.

Success Stories of Rural Tourism in India:

One of India Rural Tourism project's success stories is Hodka village that won PATA Gold Award 2010. Shaam-e-Sarhad (Sunset at the Border) Rural Resort, owned and operated by the community of Hodka, a Village near Bhuj (63 kms) which is capital of the Kachchh region of Gujarat .Hodka village is surrounded by an area of impressive natural beauty, an ideal base location to discover Kachchh. Kachchh is renowned and visited by guests from all over the world for its arts and crafts and also visited by bird watchers for spotting migratory birds in winter. Designed in local style, and exquisitely decorated with mirror work, textiles and other local crafts, the Shaam-e-Sarhad Rural Resort which is managed by the rural village community is the perfect gateway to a unique travel experiences in India. The resort can

accommodate up to 30 people. The cost of staying in tents is US\$40 a night, while at the bhungas it is around US\$60 a night. The popular attractions are specially organized workshops in embroidery and leather work, interactions with artisan communities, the visit in wildlife including flamingos, pelicans, foxes and leopards and visit to nearby archaeological sites of the Indus Valley Civilization and pashumela, a cattle fair. All these activities are successfully organized, packaged and sold by village community. Shaam-e-Sarhad Rural Resort is an excellent example of how local communities can come together and execute a eco-tourism concept that increases awareness of local arts and crafts and employment and is a good example for other upcoming rural tourism projects in India.

Another case of Anegundi Rural Tourism Project in Karnataka can be taken as a good example which is closed to the world famous Hampi. The village on the bank of mighty river Tungabhadra having astonishing natural beauty ,rocks and boulders, greenery of paddy and banana plantation along with ancient temples and vernacular houses, , true village traditions ,cultures and festivals .The village was a sleepy village some 10 years ago because of its location in the world heritage site. The village was not permitted to take up construction activities particularly rebuilding old houses. The village community took an initiation for social and economic empowerment through conservation of natural and architectural heritage and in doing so secure the future of site through sustainable integration of the people of the land. Through community mobilization the villagers developed rural tourism by riverside landscaping, revival of local tradition and cultural activities. They even developed software activities, awareness programmes on tourism, local heritage and

vernacular architecture culture, traditions and art developments and made tourism a strategy for livelihood.

The Successful agro-tourism experience of Malegaon village of Baramati taluk of Pune is a classic example of agro- tourism in Maharashtra which transformed a drought prone area where the suicide cases were increasing to a successful model village for agro-tourism. The agro-tourism venture has a positive effect among the community .The main attractions of the area includes farm tours; tractor and bullock cart rides; grapes, mangoes, and other horticulture farms and by-product farms; Visit to birds and animal farms, Jaggery making unit; Emu bird Farm; Sugar factory; Taluka Milk Collection Centers, a village temple and Museum. The overnight stay arrangement is at the farm itself. The lives of the farmers changed with an increasingly annual income of 25 per cent considerably with the agro-tourism destination venture. They have learned soft skills to handle customer service and to market their product and became entrepreneurs.

There are many a success stories of Indian Villages, where through community participation the villagers successfully developed the concepts of rural tourism, marketed the same and benefitted socially and economically out of the efforts.

Recommendations to Manage Rural Tourism in India:

Rural tourism can help in creating sustainable development in some of our villages in rural areas.

Governments should recognize importance of rural tourism at priority basis and help in creating healthy competitive business environment. Along with Government, the local community NGO should participate in

developing rural tourism destinations and thereby providing high quality of service to the tourists. Some of the suggestions to promote rural tourism are -

- Creation of adequate facilities and suitable infrastructure like accommodation, roads, airport facilities, rail facilities, local transport, communication links and other essential amenities which are the bare essentials for development of rural tourism.
- Restructuring and liberalization of policies to promote rural tourism.
- Encouragement for financial investments in rural areas and human resource development
- Identifying the villages with immense potential for development of rural tourism destinations to showcase the core competencies of rural India.
- ‘Honey pot areas’ need to have pressure relieved by publicizing lesser-known regions so that traffic is dissipated from popular zones.
- Encouraging and involving the local community to participate at all levels for their benefit only.
- Proper documentation of tangible and intangible heritage of rural & tribal areas of India for promotional campaigns.
- Promotion of public-private partnerships.
- Continuing to build the capacity of the Rural Tourism Unit.
- Improving the service quality with a focus on creativity and innovation.
- Update the rural tourism database and produce an annual report on rural tourism.
- Fill the narrow gaps between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’.

Conclusion:

Rural areas are an integral part of the modern tourism experience. Rural tourism no doubt will emerge as an important instrument for sustainable human development including poverty alleviation, employment generation, environmental regeneration and development of remote areas and advancement of women and other disadvantaged groups in the country apart from promoting social integration and international understanding. The government should promote rural tourism to ensure sustainable economic development and positive social change with many projects of rural tourism through encouragement of community participation and mobilization.

Indian culture has always generated immense sense of astonishment. As true Indian it is the duty of each of us to put our best efforts for the creation of formidable BRAND INDIA.

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