Rural Tourism in India: Potential and Prospects

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Abstract

India is a multi-destination country with a variety of tourist attractions and facilities. As India’s culture resides in villages and hence by the development of rural tourism, India’s lifestyle, tradition, art, craft and natural heritage can be promoted. Tourism growth potential can be harnessed as a strategy for rural development. The development of a strong platform around the concept of rural tourism should be used for a country like India, where almost 74% of the population resides in its seven lakh villages.

If the economic revolution comes to India then its base is in the plans which are made for rural areas. Rural Industry, Handicrafts, traditional art and fairs and festivals of our villages may become the base for development. This may lead towards self-sufficiency in our villages. This tourism could be sustainable revenue generation project for the government and can prevent migration of rural people to urban areas. This research paper discusses the concept and development of rural tourism in India, summarizes the impact, describe the challenges and difficulties and focuses on the development of a strategic marketing plan for rural tourism. The paper shall throw light on the government project and polices for development of rural tourism.

Rural tourism is a multidimensional destination because it has eco, ethnic, farm cultural, historical tourism with itself. The major challenge in developing rural tourism is to consider environmental and natural conservation of resources and a proper understanding between the tourist and local people to participate in tourism development.

Key words: Rural tourism, culture, heritage, local people, Tourist.
Introduction

India lies in her villages; nearly 98% of the total geographical area of India constitutes rural areas, in which 74% of the total population live. Since independence most of the national policies have been focusing upon rural development. But issues like poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, regional imbalances, and environmental degradation through deforestation; health and sanitary factors in rural areas remain unsolved. Many of the planners blame commercial viability for this matter. At the same time these rural areas posses natural and socio-cultural resources, which are fantastic sources for tourism and recreation, systematic tourism development in rural areas through public participation can contribute towards the socio-economic development of these areas, and on the other hand it can increase the attraction base for the modern tourists, which ultimately brings in foreign currencies and contributes to the GDP of the country.

If the economic revolution comes to India then its base is in the plans which are made for rural areas. Rural Industry, Agriculture Industry, and Tourism in villages will become the base of our economy. Then our villages will become self sufficient and attractive. For this rural culture which is just like saint’s life style and nurtured by nature will restore and developed again. As India’s culture resides in villages and hence by the development of rural tourism, India’s life style, tradition, art, craft, culture, natural heritage will also progressed.

Objectives of studying rural tourism

- To make clear the concept of ‘Rural Tourism’ and its significance in the current scenario.
- Identify the impacts of rural tourism.
- Strategies for marketing plan in rural tourism.
- To study Govt. projects of rural tourism.
- To identify the challenges in rural tourism.

What is ‘Rural Tourism’?

As per Gannon, ‘Rural Tourism’ covers “a range of activities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their area in order to generate extra income for their business.”

Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be
termed as rural tourism. Rural tourism is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism. As against conventional tourism, rural tourism has certain typical characteristics like: it is experience oriented, the locations are sparsely populated, it is predominantly in natural environment, it meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions.

That means rural tourism takes place in the countryside and creates value from rural opportunities. Typical characteristics of Rural tourism are:-

- Sparsely populated locations
- Predominant natural environment
- Focus on outdoor activities
- Small establishments with mainly part time involvement in tourism by the local community
- Locally owned enterprises
- Meshing with seasonal and local events

The important elements of Rural tourism are:-

- Tourists rent out cottages in countryside or sometimes become paying guests of villagers by residing with them
- Village tourism activities like farm-camping, horse riding will be provided to tourists in villages
- Traditionally furnished accommodation and food

In a nut shell rural tourism promotes non-urban lifestyle.

Concept of Rural Tourism

Development of rural tourism is now its nascent stage. The complexity of attractions makes it difficult to draw an exact definition. However, Lane B (1994) gives a framework.

In his view rural tourism should be

- Located in rural areas.
Functionally rural i.e., small scale enterprises, open space, natural contact, heritage, traditional and societal practices etc.

Rural in scale.

Traditional in character.

Take different forms representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location.

According to Getz. D. and Page S.J. (1997) rural tourism can be described as

The spectrum i.e., rural and wild.

The rural appeal i.e., peace, solitude, lifestyle, nature, scenery, traditional people, recreation and adventure.

The rural product and services.

Involvement of rural entrepreneurs and operators.

Further Negi J.M. (1990) enumerated the attractions in rural areas. Which are-

Enjoyment of rural scenery.

The desire for open space, quiet and peace of mind.

Rural sports like hunting, fishing etc.

Ethnic attractions like folk life, custom, food, drinks and festivals.

Educational and historical attractions like castles, churches, temples, monasteries etc.

Significance of ‘Rural Tourism’

Rural tourism’s greatest potential benefit is its ability to generate money which can translate into numerous positive economic opportunities for locals and their communities. For local the first benefit of tourism development is jobs both within the tourism sector and outside of it. Tourism development means more income and profits for tourist related business. The economic multiplier model suggests that if local income form tourist expenditures is spent within local area, an increase in local income and jobs will follow. The following points will highlight the significance of rural tourism in Indian context.
i) Tourism growth can be harnessed as a strategy for Rural Development. The concept of rural tourism is definitely useful for a country like India where majority of population resides in villages.

ii) The trend of ‘Urbanization’ has led to falling income levels, lesser job opportunities in the rural areas. Rural tourism is one of the few activities which can provide a solution to this problem.

iii) In many parts of India the rural economy is in doldrums due to the increase in input costs and decrease in income. Many debt ridden farmers are committing suicides. Efforts to promote rural tourism as a subsidiary occupation can arrest this trend with balanced regional development.

iv) This concept has the potentiality to attract investment from big industrial houses in rural areas including valuable Foreign Direct Investment and ultimately increase in GDP of the country by creating value from rural opportunities.

Rural tourism had both positive and negative in our society.

Positive Economic Impact –

- Assists viability of existing tourism and non-tourism businesses
- Creates new employment
- Attracts inward investment
- Encourages pluriactivity, helping to stabilize economic base

Negative Economic Impact –

- Encourages dependence on industry prone to uncontrollable change
- Creates part-time, seasonal or low-grade employment
- Incurs development costs and public service costs
- Leads to local land and house price inflation

Positive Socio-cultural Impact –

- Assists in viability of local services
- Creates sense of pride
Revitalizes local cultural traditions, events and crafts

Leads to opportunities for social and cultural exchange

**Negative Socio-cultural Impact** –

- Creates feeling of invasion by tourists; overcrowding and traffic
- Increases crime
- Reduction in local services, e.g. food shops replaced by gift shops
- Import of new cultural ideas-challenges existing way of life

**Positive Environmental Impact** –

- Leads to environmental improvements in settlements
- Provides income for conservation of buildings and natural environment
- Fosters awareness of conservation as worthwhile activity

**Negative Environmental Impact** –

- Increases wear and tear on landscape features
- Creates need for new developments which may not be in keeping with local area
- Increases pollution (noise, visual, air, water, litter)
- Affects local biodiversity

**UNDP Govt. Project - Rural tourism in India**

Rural tourism is gaining importance in Indian tourism with its economic and social benefits. It is estimated that Rs. 4,300 crore additional revenue can be generated through rural tourism. It is going to play a vital role in bridging the gap between rural & urban India.

The Government of late, has realized what the rural India can offer tot the rest of World. The tenth five-year plan has notified Tourism as one of the major sources for generating employment and promoting sustainable livelihoods. The union ministry of Tourism in collaboration with UNDP has launched the Endogenous Tourism project in the year 2004, linked to the existing rural tourism scheme of the government. The UNDP has committed $ 2.5 million for the project.
UNDP will help in areas of capacity building, involvement of NGOs, local communities and artisans forge strong community – private and public sector partnerships.

The government has decided to develop necessary infrastructure for facilitating rural tourism. So far the Ministry of Tourism Government of India, with the help of State tourism department has identified 31 villages across the country as tourist sites and providing Rs. 50,000 lakh as financial assistance for each project. Besides, an additional amount of Rs. 20 lakh would be provided for developing logistic facilities and starting community participation centers through self-help groups.

In addition the following 30 GOI-UNDP Endogenous Rural Tourism Projects for software component for Software of Rs. 20.00 lakh each have also been sanctioned during 2004-2005:-

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Challenges in rural tourism

1) Traditional belief that agriculture can help the rural people 2) Off let realization of the fact that tourism can also play an important role in developmental process 3) Absence of supporting industry 4) Legislation problems 5) Shortage of trained manpower 6) Insufficient financial support 7) Lack of proper physical communications 8) Lack of basic business planning skills

Strategies for Marketing Rural Tourism

Marketing becomes a major problem for the promotion of Rural Tourism in India. This is because the local bodies are either not aware about the developmental role of tourism or are constrained by their own politics or lack of funds. Most rural tourism businesses of all kinds invest relatively little in marketing and related training (Lane, 1994). But to be sustainable as businesses, and in turn to sustain their communities and cultural landscapes, rural tourism
operators have much to gain from improving marketing practice (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1994). While marketing a rural tourism destination (region, village or leisure spots) there is need of strategic approach on following aspects:

(a) Attractions - like promotion of rural tourism around a heritage site

(b) Infrastructure (accommodation, cuisine, hygiene, clean water (basic amenities etc.)

(c) Accessibility (roads, means of transportation) - should not be too far from railhead or airport: 2-21/2 hr.

(d) Carrying capacity of the destination,

(e) Environmental issues (Pollution, Eco-fragility, etc.)

(f) Safety, law and order situation etc.

(g) Continuous Maintenance

There is a need of comprehensive research in finding out the suitable locations, ascertain market size, tourist profile, perceptions and expectations, to demarcate roles and responsibilities among various stakeholders, complete package to tourists, product development, provision and management of infrastructure, accommodation and food facilities, promotional plans and more importantly about the role of NGOs/local government and community for the strategic implementations of project. Product development and management ensure long term viability of project.

The few essential questions to be answered and the issues to be resolved while developing the product are here for consideration:

1. What type of attractions (nature, adventure or cultural etc.), within the region have to be developed into tourism packages?

2. Whether these attractions have to be packaged and promoted as a mix or as separate attractions?

3. Do we have a market for them?

4. What type of infrastructure is to be created?

5. Is the local population receptive to tourism?

6. If the destination is highly seasonal, should huge investments be made or one should develop alternate and subsidiary accommodation?

7. How to ensure that the ecology and environment at the destination are not damaged by tourism?

8. What type of tourists is to be attracted? Etc.
After having resolved issues submitted regarding enhancement of rural tourism, the stage will come to have a destination with unique selling proposition e.g.

- An experience one cannot have anywhere in the world - equate with west
- Actually living with people
- Diversity of culture, language, food, craft
- Exposure to heritage sites
- Coming back to nature
- Health - physical and mental both: yoga, exposure to local medicine or Indian system of medicine e.g. Ayurveda, Unnani. Then there is yoga, various types of massages - Tranquility - away from humdrum, stress less and strain free stay
- Environment friendly
- Freshness in food ingredients when procured locally - may be organically cultivated
- Local crafts and cottage industry can provide unique shopping experience (inexpensive).

Conclusion

If a proper marketing plan is done 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.

Rural tourism will emerged 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.

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