

# RURAL TOURISM: A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** Tourism industry all over the world has emerged as one of the major economic drivers for growth and development contributing significantly to foreign exchange earnings. Tourism is one of the leading global industries contributing 14 percent of global GDP. The world Tourism organization estimates that there will be 1.9 billion tourists in the world in 2030, representing 23 per cent of world population. The World Tourism organization further comments that within the next 5 - 10 years, array of products on offer to tourists looking for the real and rural experience is to increase substantially. Rural tourism is considered to be an emerging stratagem for cultural heritage and sustainable development in most rural areas of India. 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 highlight the rural tourism potential in India. With tools like increasing levels of awareness, industry partnership involvement, heritage and cultural education, improved accessibility, the prospects of rural tourism base can be realized and can result in subsequent overall community development.

**Key words:** Rural tourism, cultural heritage, Nature tourism, community collaboration, community development.

## INTRODUCTION

India with its glorious history, natural beauty, varied landscapes and cultural heritage has attracted tourists from times immemorial from different places to enjoy its spiritual heritages, cultural, religious and natural endowments. It is evident from the snowcapped Himalayan mountain ranges in the north to the serene 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 colorful and priceless bounty for tourists. Tourism has emerged as one of the major segments of the Indian economy, contributing 7.23 per cent to the national GDP and 8.87 per cent of the total employment in India. 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. Tourism the fastest growing sectors in the World witnessing a significantly high growth in recent decades in international as well as domestic tourist arrivals especially after year 2000. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), despite occasional shocks, worldwide international tourist arrivals have witnessed uninterrupted growth from 26 million in 1952 to 282 million in 1982, 538 million in 1998 and reached the 1.2 billion mark, at 1,035 million in 2012. Later in the next year 2013 saw this number growing to 1,089 million, recording a growth of 6 per cent. The growth in international tourist arrivals for South Asia has significantly been on the higher side. The number of international tourist arrivals grew to 15.8 million in 2016, marking the compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.4 per cent (UNWTO, 2018). Tourism in India has been growing simultaneously over the years, with every part of India contributing something to its grandeur and exuberance. The year 2016 witnessed a growth of 10.6% in Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India, which is higher than the medium/median growth rate of 4.7% witnessed in International Tourist arrivals, globally. FTAs during 2016 were 82.03 lakh as compared to the FTAs of 72.68 lakh during 2015. 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 concept of rural tourism covers all the aspects of travel whereby people learn about each other’s ways of life and customary traditions. Rural tourism signifies the visitor’s interest in the customs of the indigenous and exotic people. It can be considered as a form of special interest tourism different from general tourism, which focuses directly on the rural people.

The definition of rural tourism has been the subject of many debates in the literature without arriving at any firm consensus (Seaton et al. 1994; Pearce 1989; Bramwell 1994). Rural tourism could be fascinating for the foreign as well as domestic tourists as villages present the interesting sites because of their unique lifestyles, fresh environment and splendid beauty. 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 situation and course 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 (MacDonald and Lane in Jolliffe & Bramwell, 2002) and experiencing living history such as rural customs, folklore, local traditions, beliefs, and common heritage (MacDonald & Pedford in Jolliffe, 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). 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, culture, art 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 local events and seasonality; and it is based on the preservation of culture, heritage and traditions.

## **POTENTIAL FOR RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA**

Rural India has much to offer to the world, rich in tradition of arts, crafts and culture, rural India can emerge as an important tourist spots. 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. 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. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is implementing Rural Tourism Schemes to promote village tourism as the primary tourism product to spread tourism

and its socio-economic benefits to its rural and its new geographic regions in India. The primary beneficiaries are rural communities especially women and unemployed youth. The implementation is done through a convergence committee headed by the district collector/district magistrate. To achieve rural tourism objectives, various hardware and software activities were coordinated with key identified projects partners/ implementing agencies. Under this scheme the Ministry of Tourism is supporting 168 potential rural tourism destinations in terms of infrastructural facilities. The ministry of tourism in collaboration with UNPD has launched the Endogenous projects linked to the existing rural tourism schemes of the government. These projects seek to promote local culture and craft based tourism for sustainable livelihoods and integrated rural development during the 13<sup>th</sup> five year plan. 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. the USA, Canada and Australia have housing tourist spots in country side. Rural tourism may include pilgrim tourism, heritage tourism, Farm tourism, adventure tourism, nature tourism or folkways and ancient culture tourism. Specific potential areas for rural tourism in India may be The Hills of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, backwaters of Kerala, dances and Folk songs of Orissa, The Punjabi cuisine, Shanti Niketan in West Bengal, the Nithyagram of Karnataka, the tribes of Bihar, natural beauty of Meghalaya, folk dances of Andhra Pradesh, Teej festival of Rajasthan, the Holi of Nandagaon Banaras, mask dances of Sikkim. WTTC (World Travel & Tourism Council) survey conducted in the year 2016 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 4,680.4 billion (4.9 per cent of GDP) in 2018 to INR9,523.1 billion (5.3 per cent) by 2030.
- Travel & Tourism is expected to support directly 42,439,000 jobs (6.2 per cent) by 2030.
- The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, is forecast to rise to 57,480,000 jobs (9.2 per cent) by 2030.

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 sustainable 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

sustainable development. The development of a strong platform around the concept of Rural Tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 73 per cent of the population resides in its 7.2 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 resulted towards 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.

Rural tourism comprises thirteen aspects that can attract tourist to rural areas:

- Fresh and Non – Polluting environment
- Village Handicrafts
- Traditions
- Language
- Art, music including concerts, folk music and folk dances, painting and sculpture
- History of the region including its visual reminders like historical monuments
- Architecture giving the area a distinctive appearance
- Gastronomical art of a particular area
- Education systems
- Types of work and the technology in use
- Dress and leisure activities

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POSITIVE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF RURAL TOURISM**

Tourism is a socio – cultural event for the tourists and the hosts. It helps to revive the local people's interest and pride in their culture, traditions and values. The homogenous influence of mass media and the hegemonic culture generally tend to push the local folk traditions into oblivion. It may certainly help in re-establishing pride in traditional skills and values. It also provides ample opportunities to study the religious and ritualistic services. Festivals, religious functions and public performances provide inputs to symbolic qualities of rural tourism. Rural tourism development has a great appeal for many rural communities because of anticipated economic benefits, such as increased income and employment. Tourism development in rural areas can change economic scenario of the rural economy and is highly desirable to most rural communities. The flow of money generated by rural tourism will find its way into the overall rural economy through the multiplier effect. The rural people can be brought to the mainstream population with financial empowerments, societal developments and cultural adjustments with the benefits from rural tourism such as 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.

## **RURAL TOURISM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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. The design of rural tourism as a sustainable development strategy promoted by the Ministry of Tourism is the result of planning and control, aiming at transforming the traditional areas from individual to associative. It goes from totally unrelated zones to “globally local” development regions. This is, therefore, the reason for an adequate implementation of rural tourism as a development strategy. The municipal management should be part of the local development, which means, according to what Borja and Castells (1998) state, the new frontier of urban management is able to prepare the city to meet the challenges of global competition (p. 14). 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. To develop a strategic marketing plan for rural tourism one 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.

## **CHALLENGES FOR THE GOVERNMENT:**

- 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. Therefore it is urgent for India to promote, plan, and control rural tourism aimed at economic, social and environmental balance. The philosophy of rural tourism actually ties in perfectly with the principles of the state tourism corporations, in terms of leisure and social recreation for its population. However, low cost and rural tourism may affect, and actually have a highly positive impact, on habitats and local communities. In government programs and plans, the subject of rural tourism remains a pressing need to address,

but guidelines and specific actions fail to trigger the activity. Rural tourism is a “product in the stage of birth”, and it is imperative to create a culture towards those in local regions as well as in international tourist markets.

### **MARKETING USP (UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION) FOR RURAL TOURISM:**

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.

### **ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN PROMOTING RURAL TOURISM:**

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 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. 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. 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.

Table 1: State wise Rural Tourism Projects completed/ about to be completed

S. NO	SATE	PROJECTS COMPLETED TILL DATE	PROJECTS ABOUT TO BE COMPLETED	TOTAL
1	Andhra Pradesh	4	6	10
2	Arunachal Pradesh	2	3	5
3	Assam	2	2	4
4	Bihar	1	0	1
5	Chattisgarh	4	3	7
6	Delhi	2	0	2
7	Gujrat	3	2	5
8	Haryana	1	0	1
9	Himachal Pradesh	1	2	3
10	Jammu & Kashmir	10	13	23
11	Jharkhand	1	1	2
12	Karnataka	3	2	5
13	Kerala	4	2	6
14	Madhya Pradesh	3	4	7
15	Maharashtra	1	1	2
16	Manipur	1	2	3
17	Meghalaya	1	2	3
18	Mizoram	1	0	1
19	Nagaland	8	4	12
20	Orissa	5	3	8
21	Puduchery	1	0	1
22	Panjab	3	2	5
23	Rajasthan	1	2	3
24	Sikkim	7	4	11
25	Tamil Nadu	4	5	9
26	Tripura	4	6	10
27	Uttarakhand	2	2	4
28	Uttar Pradesh	4	2	6
29	West Bengal	4	3	7
	Total	88	78	168

Source: Annual report, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018

## SUGGESTIONS TO PROMOTE RURAL TOURISM:

The government should provide encouragement for financial investments in rural areas and human resource development and should identify the villages with immense potential for development of rural tourism destinations to showcase the core competencies of rural India. They should help in restructuring and liberalization of policies to promote rural tourism. Measure should be taken in encouraging and involving the local community to participate at all levels for their benefit only. There should be substantial growth in 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. There should be adequate maintenance of proper documentation of tangible and intangible heritage of rural & tribal areas of India for promotional campaigns. Steps should be taken to improve the service quality with a focus on creativity and innovation, promotion of public-private partnerships, update the rural tourism database and produce an annual report on rural tourism.

## CONCLUSION:

It is hoped that with the positive approach of the central government, state governments, panchayat samities, non – government organizations and local people constructive efforts will be made in promoting rural tourism. Rural areas are an integral part of the modern tourism experience. Rural tourism no doubt 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 with many projects of rural tourism through encouragement of community participation and mobilization. Indian culture has always generated immense sense of astonishment.

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