

EMPLOYMENT POTENTIAL IN RURAL TOURISM

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The focus all these years revolved around existing tourism products, be it pilgrimage centres, monuments, beaches and other heritage sites leading to issues related to sustainability of tourism. Therefore, it is high time that the resources which are hitherto unexplored and unexploited are examined and brought into the tourism map of India. There is a social obligation also to make tourism an all inclusive platform for the overall development of the nation. Thus, there is a need to broad base tourism such that it is no longer perceived as a product/ industry purely of the urban elite, for the elite and by the elite!

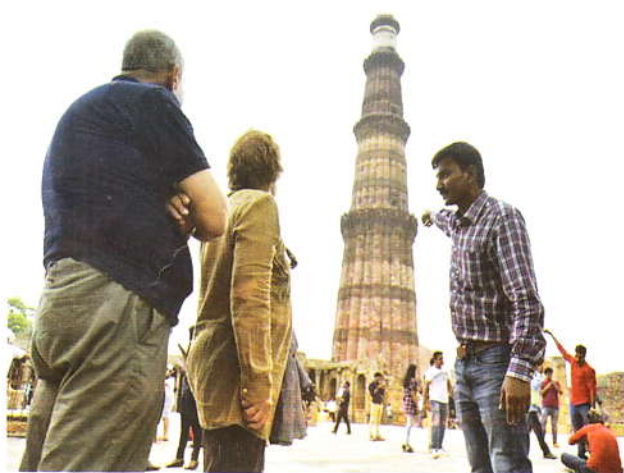
The fact that tourism industry has emerged as a major sector which contributes for the faster development of any region/ nation needs no emphasis. By virtue of tourism industry's ability to create jobs with minimum capital outlays, through exploiting natural endowment of resources is widely acknowledged. Therefore, it is no surprise that policy makers have turned their attention towards promotion of tourism of all hues. However, unfortunately the focus all these years revolved around existing tourism products, be it pilgrimage centres, monuments, beaches and other heritage sites leading to issues related to sustainability of tourism. Therefore, it is high time that the resources which are hitherto unexplored and unexploited are examined and brought into the tourism map of India. There is a social obligation also to make tourism an **all inclusive platform** for the overall development of the nation. Thus, there is a need to broad base tourism such that it is no longer perceived as a product/ industry purely of the urban elite, for the elite and by the elite! The present paper, therefore, addresses some of the issues related to making tourism an all inclusive concept through an entrepreneurial approach to the human resources

development. More particularly, by bringing the innumerable natural resources of rural India through creation of right awareness among the rural folks about the potential of tourism industry and how tourism could contribute for the uplift of rural India. The issue calls for a multi pronged approach, viz., identification of the region specific natural resources of rural India, creation of awareness and preparation of rural youth for an active involvement in tourism related activities.

Need for an Entrepreneurial Approach:

Entrepreneurship as a concept and practice encompasses all human endeavours. It is region, sector and gender neutral. Yet, it is a pity that entrepreneurship is largely construed as an activity relevant to manufacturing sector, leaving aside several other human endeavors where entrepreneurship spirit is dormant. Human curiosity, imagination, spirit of enterprise, the urge to excel and the desire to achieve - all along have brought the mankind from the nomad status to what it is today where the human race is now all set to conquer even other planets. Needless to say, it is entrepreneurship which drives people towards action leading to the overall development.

From the above description, it is evident that entrepreneurship is the key for economic development of any sector. Tourism is no exception! Nothing happens in the economic system unless someone takes the initiative and uses the resources judiciously. **To quote Peter Drucker, "Every mineral is another rock and every plant is another weed until someone finds a use."** In simple words, entrepreneurship involves shifting of resources from 'low productivity' areas to 'high productivity' areas. As such, it is appropriate to capture the hitherto unexploited rural resources and develop them as innovative new tourism products.



Natural Resources of Rural India:

As the saying goes, **India lives in villages** - the scenic beauty, pollution free weather, coupled with innocence of the people living close to the nature, the native wisdom and practices, artifacts and lifestyles constitute a huge treasure waiting to be explored by the urban elite living in concrete jungles. Despite the huge exodus of rural population to urban areas over the last few decades, still rural India has its own charm. More particularly, in a context where many urban kids assume rice, vegetables, etc., are produced in factories similar to soft drinks, ice-creams and many other personal accessories.

Various agricultural practices season-wise, right from sowing to harvesting, cattle rearing, milking of the cattle, food grain storage, farm equipment, lush green fields with natural flora and fauna, the rivulets and rivers, village tanks and lakes, the landscape, rich folklore, social bonds and relationships, community involvement in organising festivals and social/ religious events of the village - each one by itself offers exciting experience to many a tourist. Interestingly, of late, there is a perceptible change in the orientation of many conventional tourists to explore the beauty of rural India, largely triggered by urban monotony, fatigue, job stress, pollution, traffic snarls. Rural tourism incidentally provides an excellent alternative with a wide range of benefits to the tourists as well as the service providers in the rural areas.

Thrust Areas for Action:

In order to promote rural tourism, the following issues need to be addressed in an organized fashion. Otherwise, despite the importance and need for development of rural tourism, it will become

another fad or rhetoric. An entrepreneurial approach is the need of the hour. Involvement of tourism professionals, extension officers of government at taluk/ district level, opinion leaders from the villages and the rural youth is essential to make any headway in rural tourism. Following aspects need to be addressed on priority basis:

Rural Tourism Resources Mapping:

As mentioned earlier, there is no dearth of resources in rural areas which make awe inspiring tourism products. The folklore, dance and drama, artifacts, handicrafts, trades like pottery, weaving, brick making, poultry farming and cattle rearing, farm management practices, besides the unpolluted landscape of the villages offer irresistible temptation to visit and explore. Region specific social rituals, festivals and community participation in organizing these events make visit of the village a memorable experience. Each place has its own specialty/unique characteristic. A systematic survey to identify such distinct products/ practices/ processes may be initiated in order to showcase the attractions. Resources **mapping** brings to the fore what rural India has to offer to tourists. Some villages are known for their rich folklore, some are known for better farm practices, some are known for scenic beauty, some are known for traditional martial arts while some for floriculture and the other for fish ponds and prawn culture. Rural India thus offers mind blowing diversity. What is required is effective product design and communication. In the absence of systematic resource mapping, any attempt to promote rural tourism is akin to a blind man throwing the stone. The several distinct rural resources may apparently look very humble and mundane. But the experience and novelty they offer to the discernable tourists are priceless.



Awareness Creation:

Many of the practices, rituals and the elements of nature may be the integral part of villagers' day to day life. They may appear to be so routine. They may not be aware of the value of all these resources, leave alone exploiting them for economic good. Therefore, developmental agencies need to educate the rural folks about the value and strength of what they possess. Video clippings, documentaries, short films, exhibits, etc., come in handy in portraying how rural tourism is beneficial and possible. Short films of rural tourism products of Maharashtra, Kerala and Meghalaya where rural tourism yielded rich dividends may communicate the message more loudly. Such an exercise obviously tickles villagers and enables them to relate themselves to tourism effectively. Successful rural entrepreneurs engaged in rural tourism may be invited to address and educate villagers about the positive economic impact of tourism on the villages.

Identification of the Service Providers at the Village Level:

The services required for the tourists who visit the village are varied in nature ranging from arranging accommodation, food, sightseeing to entertainment and engaging the guests. Opportunities may be created to experience the different facets of rural life. Some of the enterprising tourists may prefer to try their hand in many activities. In other words, tourists need to be taken onboard. This obviously requires smart individuals/volunteers from the local community. At the village level, though all the people share in common many things, they significantly vary in terms of knowledge levels, backgrounds, cultural affiliation, religious faiths, understanding,

appreciation, interpersonal skills. Therefore, identification of people with the right mindset is crucial. Now that many schemes of the government are executed/ delivered through different village level bodies, existing channels/bodies may be roped in to take up tourism as well. The self help groups (SHGs) called by different names in Indian states, village Panchayats, voluntary groups of village youth, philanthropic associations, opinion leaders, Taluk level extension officers, etc., may be relied upon. Rural Tourism Promotion and development initially may piggy back on these village level local groups till it finds it's own wherewithal. Individuals active in these bodies may be identified and imparted basic skills with respect to importance of tourism promotion at the village level, the benefits that accrue to the villagers and the basic skills in handling the tourists.

Skilling the Unskilled:

In spite of the developments in technology, telecommunication and transport facilities, still a substantial portion of rural India retain the rural ambience, exuberance and pride. By and large, they are far from hypocrisy and down to earth in their disposition. Most of them are good at traditional trades or occupations. A little effort in terms of imparting nuances of social etiquette, courtesy, interpersonal relationships, techniques of engaging tourists, will undoubtedly equip the villagers with the nitty-gritty of handling tourists.

It may be noted that traditionally Indian society is known for its hospitality. The adage '**Athithi Devo Bhava**' is more than true in the Indian context. One could find the manifestation of this philosophy in



every aspect of the rural India cutting cultural and linguistic barriers. For that matter, village life is embedded strongly on the dictum, '**One for all and all for one**'. This spirit pervades the entire spectrum of rural India.

Hospitality and accommodative spirit being the core values of rural India, a little orientation/ training with respect to operational aspects of tourism is enough to make villagers embrace tourism/ tourists. Educated youth in the villages may be imparted basic computer skills such that they can connect with the tourists before and after the visits and also with the various service providers in the supply chain. Basic skills in using the technology will make wonders given the present penetration of smart phones and access to internet. Now that there are many user friendly apps, the target group in the villages could be familiarized with the use of apps so that dependence on intermediaries may be minimized. Participants at the village level in various tourism operations may know the preferences of the tourists, how they wish to spend time in the village, what they want to see and experience, the kind of food they like to taste and souvenir items to take home.

Optimum Utilization of Human Resources:

Most of the agricultural operations are seasonal. As such, villagers have long spells of free time at their disposal. Some of the rural youth may find alternative income generating sources by engaging themselves in tourism and allied activities. Once people are convinced of how tourism transforms their lives with additional income, the attitude of the villagers in turn could change and in the process they become more receptive to tourists. Engagement of willing individuals or families in tourism activities resolves many a problem faced by the rural India. Household incomes will increase, consumption patterns will modify for the better, confidence levels boost up, better understanding of the world around and the people become a reality. Interactions with the tourists who are from different places and cultures will broaden their perspective of the world around. A right platform is created which ensures cross fertilization of ideas and fraternity feeling/ universal brotherhood.

Ecosystem for Rural Tourism:

Accessibility, Accommodation, Attractions and Amenities – popularly known as 4 As in the Tourism parlance constitute the four important pillars of Tourism. Mere possession of various

tourism attractions does not guarantee tourism promotion automatically. Adequate infrastructural facilities such as seamless transport facilities to reach the rural tourism destinations, facilities for the stay, a receptive local community to host tourists, health care centers with basic facilities, ATMs and telecommunication facilities, internet connectivity are essential for promotion of tourism in rural areas. Such an ecosystem needs to be created and sustained. Information about specific rural tourism centers, availability of facilities and the key people to contact may be put up in the websites of rural tourism portals. Further, given the cultural diversity of India, place specific cultural ethos, values, do's and don'ts in the village also need to be pronounced clearly. Connoisseurs of rural tourism regardless of their orientations/cultural backgrounds can acquaint themselves with the profile of the village, cultural nuances and practices. This would help the modern tech savvy tourists to gain a clear view of the village they wish to visit and minimizes the chances of any misgivings/conflicts during their stay at the village. Prices of various services also may be indicated in the websites. Profiles of earlier visitors/groups and their testimonials would further reinforce the value of the place. Presentation of information with all these inputs helps the tourists plan the visit and enjoys the stay with least inconvenience to the host community. Eventually, it would be a **win-win** situation to both the tourists and the host community.

Conclusion:

Given the importance of Tourism promotion in the National context and the need to broad base tourism, it is high time that adequate attention is paid to Rural Tourism. Abundant physical as well as human resources available for tourism promotion in rural India offer enormous core for rural tourism. Creation of awareness among the rural folks and with minimum intervention in terms of imparting basic skills would certainly keep rural tourism on a high pedestal which in turn would reduce the gap between urban and rural India. Balanced regional development which is an avowed national objective can be achieved with minimum investment. Rural tourism thus provides an alternative model for the overall development of rural areas of India. Gandhiji's dream of '**Gram Swaraj**' may be realized for the prosperity of the Nation.

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