

RURAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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India with glorious past, varied cultural heritage, abundant landscapes and natural beauty presents a unique experience to tourists from across the world. From the snowcapped Himalayas to fascinating backwaters of Kerala, from sandy beaches of Goa to rich wildlife deep inside the north-east, from beautiful deserts of Rajasthan and Kutch in west to Olive Ridley turtles of Odisha, there is enough for every tourist to see something in India. The tourism has grown manifold in India with its contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product being 6.3 per cent and that to total employment in the country 8.3 per cent.

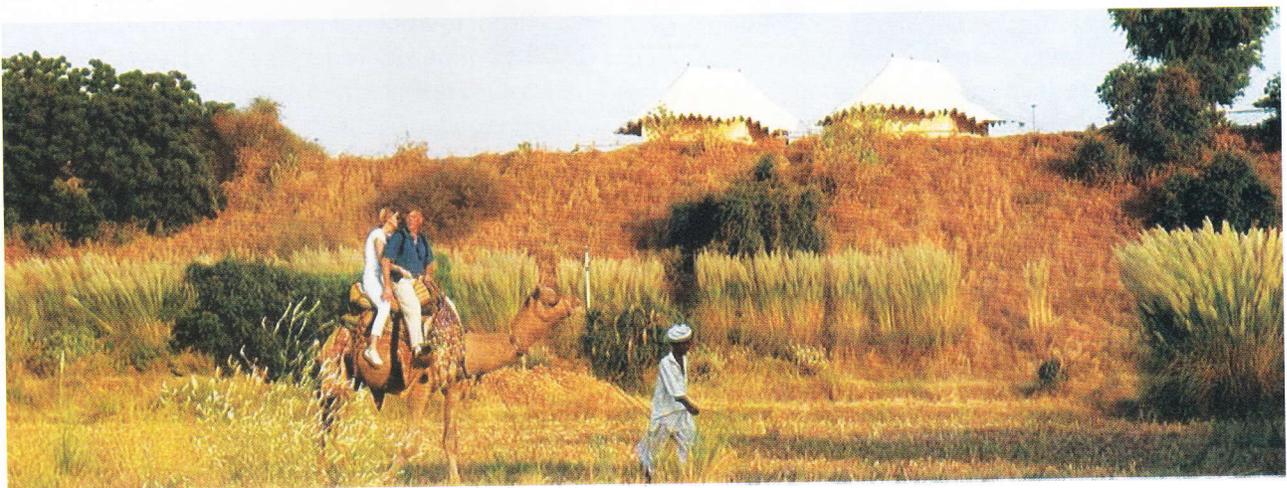
The impressive national output numbers has not shown its impact on growth of tourism in rural India primary because of lack of infrastructure in the villages and poor skill training to rural youth. With around 69 per cent of the population living in about seven million villages, as per 2011 census, rural India is where the real India lives and provides insight into the country's culture, heritage, arts and crafts and lifestyle.

Despite lack of infrastructure, a large number of foreign tourists flock villages in Rajasthan, Gujarat and south India states every year. Pochampally in Andhra Pradesh, which is famous

for its silk weaving business, Nalanda district in Bihar for its Mango Groves and Chitrakoot waterfalls of Chhattisgarh are some of the well known rural travel places in India. This proves that rural tourism has a lot of potential and there is a need to promote rural tourism to ensure sustainable economic development and positive social development.

Not only rural tourism can provide insight to tourists about "real India" it can also promote sustainability and prove to be good employment and income generator in rural areas. Moreover, rural tourism has lot of potential as stress of urban lifestyles has led to a counter urbanization syndrome, in which, people want to spend some "quality" time in more peaceful, environmentally cleaner and soothing rural environs. Furthermore, in recent years tourism facilities have come up in villages because of several initiatives undertaken for promotion of rural tourism, which provides basic facilities to tourists, but much more needs to be done.

Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, benefits the local community economically and socially, and enables interaction between the



tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Rural sustainable tourism is defined as one which can reinvigorate the conventional concepts and views on tourism and it can bring a new dimension to the sustainable development concept. In this, rural people offer small-scale accommodation units and showcase their culture and heritages while getting economic and social benefit from the activity without having any adverse impact on local environment. In fact, sustainable tourism leads to betterment of local environment as eye grabber for people from outside.

In fact, the first mention of sustainable tourism can be traced back to the Sargent Committee report of 1946, which said that Indian culture promotes sustainable way of living. And hence, cultural tourism remained the central plank of India's tourism strategy and various surveys show that heritage and culture are the two biggest draws in attracting foreign tourists to India. And now, sustainability has been added to this with foreign tourists keen to watch how people in rural India can live on very less water, naturally cooling homes and low food wastage. Recent studies of domestic tourists show that the young Indian tourists are following the footsteps of foreign tourists.

As per a scheme to promote rural tourism, in which thrust is given to promote village tourism to new geographic areas. Under this scheme, a convergence committee headed by district collector is formed and activities like improving the environment, hygiene and infrastructure are taken up. Apart from providing assistance, the focus is to converge various rural development schemes to provide village tourism in a sustainable manner.

According to various studies in rural tourism, the interest for alternative tourism such as eco-tourism, special interest tourism, heritage tourism etc., is increasing and such change of preference is driving these tourists to go to rural areas where fragmented nature and rich bio diversity can easily satisfy their ultimate desire i.e. to experience and to enjoy the rustic charms of rural India in the lap of the nature. Apart from that, meaningful holiday and fulfillment of expectation at a reasonable price also increase the chance of repeated visits by the backpackers.

For promotion of Rural Tourism several steps have been taken which underline development



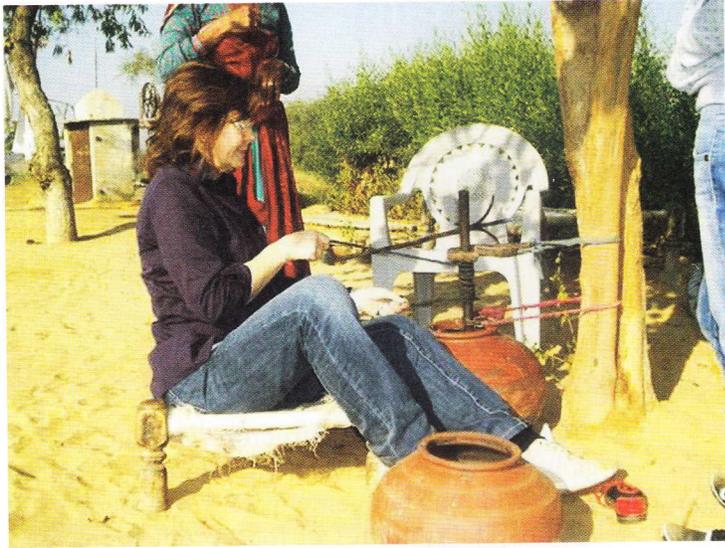
of Rural Tourism Infrastructure, promotion of organizing fairs, festivals and Tourism related events and encouragement to rural people to learn hospitality trades of food production, food and beverage service, housekeeping and bakery and patisserie for their economic empowerment.

What Needs To be Done to Boost Rural Tourism

According to AC Neilson study of 107 rural projects conducted in 2017, Jammu and Kashmir had the maximum number of successful projects and Chhattisgarh and Odisha least number of successful projects. For other states, the report presented a mixed bag.

According to the study, the important learning lessons were that the rural tourism destinations should be specific and near to places where people usually visit. Accessibility to destinations should be the first criteria for selection of destination to be developed for rural tourism, the report said, adding that advertising the destinations will help artisans in selling their products better and proper marketing of the project is required to increase tourists. Projects should be re-strategized in terms of proximity to popular sightseeing destinations and maintenance of the projects is required to keep up the momentum, the report said.

The report also said people who visit rural tourism sites prefer sustainability and homes that are made with traditional style are more preferred than urban style rooms and guest houses. It also said that rural destinations need to promote sustainable rural tourism as it is cost effective and attracts lot of tourists. The report also rightly points out that tourists coming to rural areas are willing to pay more for living in environment friendly homes and that is the way ahead. The report also said that for sustainable rural development the state



governments have to play a more proactive role and has to provide models for villagers to adopt and it should ensure quality is maintained.

Sustainable Tourism

The most widely accepted definition of sustainable tourism is that of the World Tourism Organization, which defines it as "tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems."

For developing countries it is also one of the biggest income generators. But the huge infrastructural and resource demands of tourism (example: water consumption, waste generation and energy use) can have severe impacts upon local communities and the environment if it is not properly managed.

Challenges

In many mountain regions, small islands, coastal areas and other ecologically fragile places visited by tourists, there is an increasing concern that the negative impact of tourism on the natural environment can ultimately hurt the tourism industry itself.

In other words, the negative impact of intensive tourism activities on the environmental quality of beaches, mountains, rivers, forests and other ecosystems also compromise the viability of the tourism industry in these places. Example of this, are the beaches in Goa and Pondicherry and

damage to forest ecosystems in popular tourist destinations in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. In fact, many hill stations face acute water shortage in summer months because of tourism activity much more than the potential of these places.

There is now plenty of evidence of the "life-cycle" of a tourist destination, that is, the evolution from its discovery, to development and eventual decline because of overexploitation and subsequent deterioration its key attractions.

In many developing and developed countries alike, tourism destinations are becoming overdeveloped up to the point where the damage caused by environmental degradation-and the eventual loss of revenues arising from a collapse in tourism arrivals-becomes irreversible.

Examples of such exploitation of non-renewable tourism resources "range from a small fishing village in India's Kerala state" which saw its tourist sector collapse after two decades of fast growth, because of inadequate disposal of solid waste-to several places in the industrialized world. Many hill stations and beaches in India are moving towards end of "life-cycle" as tourists are heading towards more cleaner and better tourist locations.

In addition, tourism in many destinations could be particularly threatened by external environmental shocks, notably the potential threat of global warming and sea-level rise. Significant rises in sea level could cause serious problems to tourism activities, particularly in low-lying coastal areas and small islands. Global warming is also expected to increase climate variability and to provoke changes in the frequency and intensity of extreme climate events-such as tropical windstorms and associated storm surges and coastal flooding-that may threaten tourism activities at certain destinations (United Nations Security Council Resolution, 2001).

Promoting Sustainable Rural Tourism

First and foremost step is preservation of traditional culture. The income generated from tourism can be utilised in preserving ethnic forms of art, dance and folk songs. It will safeguard rural

people's interests and will reduce the pressure to earn living miles away from their homes.

Second, as most of India's around 700 wildlife habitats fall in remote areas, eco-tourism can help in preventing further degradation of the forests and providing protection to the wildlife there. Local communities should be involved in eco-tourism activities so that they provide them employment and an incentive to protect environment.

Third, community development and involvement can help in sustainable tourism. For this, community based initiatives like encouraging women to set up more community radio centres in India, formation of folk dance groups and community based guided tourism activity can help in including all acquire key stakeholders. A successful model consisting of community practioners and potential investors can help in generating more employment opportunities apart from large revenues.

Fourth, promotion of non-intrusive tourism, meaning those coming from outside should not hurt cultural, religious and societal ethos of the locals. In many parts of India, tourists are not welcome as local traditions are a form of entertainment for them. Tourists should be made aware about local culture and ethos before allowing them visiting non-commercial and pristine rural areas.

Fifth, the sustainable tourism should be seen as poverty reduction strategy as envisaged in the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Considering that the United Nations has placed poverty at the center of the international development agenda, it can be argued that sustainable tourism development should go beyond the promotion of broad socio-economic development and give greater priority to poverty reduction. For this, a pro-poor tourism (PPT) approach needs to be converged with sustainable development strategy.

Sixth, legislative backing for sustainable tourism to ensure its development and ecological goals are met. The law can also define the role of different stakeholders including different government agencies, communities involved and individuals for sustainable tourism, and also assure quality hospitality for the tourists. The law can look at poverty reduction though sustainable production and consumption for the sector in rural

areas. In fact, it should aim for zero environment impact.

Benefits

According to a study published in 2016, Rural Tourism: Need, Scope and Challenges in Indian Context, 'rural tourism' done in an ecologically sustainable way has vast potential as it provides immense tourist satisfaction and creates local economic growth by way of alternate earning, employment, empowerment of communities and building entrepreneurship.

But, according to Nagaraju, Chandrashekara (2014), "Environmental improvements such as village paving and traffic regulation schemes, sewage and litter disposal can be assisted by tourism revenues and local heritage can also be preserved." Sustainable rural tourism fosters a closer relationship between city dwellers and rural communities providing villagers an alternate source of income and can help women to become independent decision making.

Studies have also shown that sustainable rural tourism creates urban facilities for locals in rural areas and develop a large number of semi-skilled jobs for the local population in not only local hotels and catering trades but also in other fields like transport, retailing, heritage interpretation etc. In rural areas, which get tourists, there has been revival of traditional arts, crafts, building art etc. and brings marketing opportunity for rural producers to sell their products directly to the tourists. In such villages, tourism is said to have created alternative business opportunities for locals, especially in arts and crafts, and poverty reduction has been faster there as compared to other non-tourism activity villages.

Way Forward

Though talking about sustainable development looks niche, challenges are many. Some of them are poor connectivity from nearest towns, bad condition of roads, inadequate maintenance of facilities created for tourists, very less community participation and poor quality of service leading to slow death of the rural tourism village. As India is a country of diverse languages, communication with tourists including sign boards in local languages also becomes a bottleneck for rural tourism.

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