

## SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS OF RURAL TOURISM

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Rural tourism has an immense possibility for exotic destination seekers and has been recognized as a key business opportunity by the stakeholders mainly due to the growing demand for domestic weekend holidays. It is therefore paramount that the third party involved that is the rural community should be the equal beneficiary through tourism with minimal damages to its socio-cultural structure.



**T**ourism as an activity undertaken by individuals provides diversification from routine functions of one's day to day life. Today tourism is recognized as one of the largest industries of the world. It contributes to employment generation, enhances income and enables fair distribution of wealth from an economic perspective. Simultaneously it provides a ground for cultural exchange, enhances tolerance and mutual respect amongst different cultures and promotes international friendship. It is also one of the surest and economical means of gaining exchange income (Rezvani, 2004).

Tourism is an enormous subset of the entertainment industry. Though the movement of tourists from point of origin to a new destination is temporary and non-remunerative, it is still a rejuvenating experience. In the recent years with the changing dynamics of tourism, the industry

has witnessed shifts from mass tourism to tourists being more specific in their taste for seeking new and unexplored destinations. This presents a challenge to the service providers to discover exotic places and package these to attract the new breed of tourists and also as a means to beat competition. Many forms of Special Interest Tourism (SIT) catering to the new needs of the tourists have emerged. One such trend has been to present the urbanized tourists a chance to travel from concrete jungles to greener pastures. This has led to the introduction of rural tourism. With growing demand for short weekend breaks especially amongst the domestic markets, the increasing popularity of forms of tourism which comprise rural tourism represents a large and important sector for the overall tourism market. During the last two decades, a strong undercurrent of community-based tourism has become an underlying principle in the realm of

new, alternative and responsible tourism (Singh, Timothy & Dowling eds. 2003, 5–6).

### Introducing Rural Tourism

Rural tourism can be defined as the country experience which encompasses a wide range of attractions and activities that take place in agricultural or non-urban areas. The essential characteristics of this form of tourism include wide-open spaces, low levels of tourism development, and opportunities for visitors to directly experience agricultural and/or natural environments. Rural tourism can be defined according to its relationship with its environment (Lane 1994)

Prerequisites of rural tourism that lend a unique experience to tourists are that the destination should be:

- Located in a rural area
- Functionally rural. It should revolve on small settlements, open space and in contact with nature and the natural world, traditional societies, their heritage and traditional practices.
- Traditional in character, growing organically, and connected with local families. It will often be very largely controlled locally and developed for the long term good of the area.

One of the most important features of rural tourism economy is the motivation that the private sector has or investment in tourism because it is small, varied and simple. The role and importance of tourism in the process of rural development had been proved in many countries. Considering the importance of tourism in the process of rural development planning, it is of paramount importance to take it into account in rural planning and plans. For the purpose of playing the positive role of tourism in the process of rural development, paying attention to environment management, local contribution, firm laws, marketing and realistic planning in tourism seems necessary (Rezvani, 2005). Rural tourism is an important means of enhancing employment and income and can help social and economic development of rural societies (Sharpley, 2001). Rural tourism must be in balance with other rural needs and a long term protection of rural resources (Shsrpley, 2001).



Rural community-based tourism is small scale tourism in rural areas, where the local people are actively involved in tourism development. It is often perceived as a sustainable and responsible form of tourism. However, in practice, the planning and evaluation of the tourism development is often concentrated only upon rapid economic and environmental impacts and the socio-cultural significance is left without proper attention. The issues about socio-cultural development have not been considered seriously enough in alternative tourism contexts. In tourism research, it has been widely accepted that the hosts can benefit from tourism only when they are accepted as agents of their own development (Shen, Hughey & Simmons 2008, 7; Wild 2008, 74, cf. Li 2006).

### Positive Impact in Building Rural Societies

Rural tourism, though just a minority tourism market, is making a valuable contribution to rural economies. Its contribution can be expressed not only in financial terms, but also in terms of jobs, contributions towards funding conservation and encouragement to the adoption of new working practices. In terms of the social fabric of the rural community, definitely an additional source of income that comes from tourism contributes positively to this community. The rural society through tourism can overcome their complete dependence on agriculture for revenue. Tourism can also build a sense of pride amongst the rural community in their heritage and traditions. The rural community is also exposed to the urban world directly and interactions between the two can lead to encouraging mutual respect.



The development of rural tourism contributes to the social benefits in several ways. It leads to the maintenance and support of public transport. Increased social contact brings opportunities for cultural exchanges, greater awareness and the revitalization of local customs, crafts and cultural identities. It can also aid in preventing the youngsters of these communities to shift to urban centers as they are now exposed to an array of alternate income through tourism. The role of women can also gain momentum as they participate and gain economically from tourism. The facilities created for tourists can benefit the residents in terms of upgraded infrastructure, health and cleaning of public spaces. Thus the standard of living of the rural community is on the surge.

One of the major positive impacts on the rural society is the resurgence of cultural, traditional and historical traditions. This caters to a conducive environment for conservation and sustainable management of local and indigenous culture, arts and crafts. The presence of tourists who are in awe and praise local talent and art can make the rural society realize the importance of their culture and thus tourism can play an important role in conserving and developing art. Due to this awareness amongst the local rural population, tourism has the strength to stimulate pride in local heritage.

However though the positive implications of tourism and the opportunities it brings to the rural area is evident, a systematic and integrated approach to planning and managing rural tourism is necessary. The fundamental and dominant land use in rural areas is agriculture and this is a fragile resource highly susceptible to environmental and social change. It is vital therefore that the very

characteristics that attract tourists are not degraded due to excessive tourism development. It is important to address the negative implications of tourism so that these can be countered before they impact the socio cultural structure of the rural society.

### Acculturation

Acculturation is a process of adaptation and adjustment (Ebin et al., 2001). It is the change that one culture has on another. When local people entertain tourists, they adapt tourists' needs, attitudes and values and ultimately start following them (Nash, 1996). This often happens in a less sophisticated society where, stronger culture dominates the weaker (Burns, 1999). In particular, the youth are vulnerable to this impact as they often copy tourists' lifestyle. This process though not immediately evident takes a foothold gradually and the very culture that differentiate the rural from urban gets affected. Typically in tourism, the community being acculturated is the destination community, which then experiences dramatic shifts in social structure. Noticeable changes occur in clothing habits and food. Local costumes gradually get replaced by costumes as worn by tourists. Food too undergoes subtle changes as it is made in a way that caters to the taste of tourists. These changes over a period of time severely dent the original rural structure.

### Cultural commodification

Cultural commodification results in the transformation of value-from sacred to profane and from real to the unauthentic (Shepherd, 2002). Cole (2007) summarises that tourism collects various cultural components and then sometimes adds something artificial to make it eye catching. This is then packaged and sold to tourists. Tourism can turn local cultures into sellable items or commodities. Religious rituals, traditions and festivals are reduced to commodities that conform to tourist expectations. This results in what is now termed as 'reconstructed ethnicity'. The actual and sacred significance of a ritual or tradition loses meaning even to those who had been following them religiously. This endangers the social customs of the community.

### Demonstration Effect

One of the most detrimental impacts on the culture of the host community is the demonstration effect. The demonstration effect is

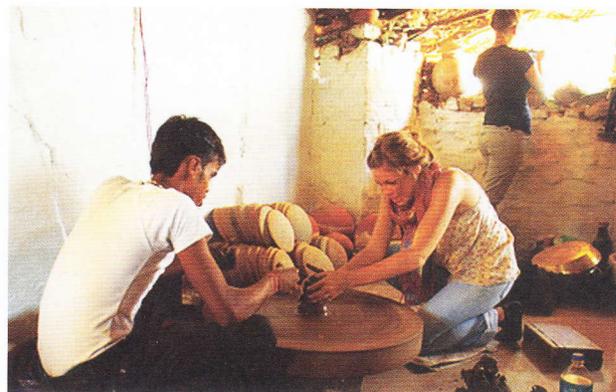
the occurrence of rural communities and cultures adopting western style and behaviour that they have observed in visiting tourists through interaction. It has been observed that young people bring changes in the material goods they use and in their gestures and postures, which is defined as demonstration effects by Burns (1999). By being in contact with lifestyles and different consumption patterns, local residents directly compare their standards of living with those of other people. This can lead residents to adopt tourist's demonstrated behaviour. According to Burns (1999: 101), the demonstration effect refers to the process by which traditional societies, especially those which are particularly susceptible to outside influence such as youth, will voluntarily seek to adopt certain behaviours (and accumulate material goods) on the basis that possession of them will lead to the achievement of the leisured, hedonistic lifestyle demonstrated by the tourists.

### Standardization

Landscape, accommodation, food and drinks must meet the requirements of the tourists in spite of the fact that tourists actually move to exotic rural destinations for experiencing change. The tourists most often look for familiar features at such destinations. Standardization of cultural tourist areas means bringing recognizable features such as food, hotels, and movies to exotic destinations to make the tourist feel more comfortable in their surroundings. Standardization also means taking a culture and changing it to appeal to the tourists. Standardization means offering a common product on a national, regional or worldwide basis" (Jain, 1990, P.422). According to Clow Standardization means presenting a unified theme across nations and cultures" (Clow, 2005, p.162). This can severely damage the appeal of the rural area in the long run. At the same time, it also further damages the local produce as the host community is forced to adapt to the tastes of the tourists.

### Staged Authenticity

Tourism poses a significant threat to a society's culture as a result of its ability to modify traditions. MacCannell notes that tourists are thwarted in experiencing reality and the authentic truth due to the commercial role of the tourism industry.



Subsequently, 'staged authenticity' in tourism settings seems to discourage modern tourists to search for authentic experiences. Adopting cultural expressions to the tastes of tourists or performing shows as if they were 'real life' constitutes staged authenticity. The rural environment, traditions and rituals which are meant to be performed only on certain occasions and have a spiritual meaning for the performers due to interference of the tourists may undergo severe irreversible damages. These beliefs and rituals are performed as shows to keep up with the demands of the tourists. They are merely duplication of traditions as a staged show. The performers showcase original rituals and thus are not spiritually connected to the rituals. By and by such events become a routine and lose their intrinsic worth to the rural society.

### Cultural Erosion

Tourists on their visits to rural destinations seek to purchase the local arts, crafts and cultural manifestations as a souvenir. The local craftsmen then respond to these demands but keeping up with the tastes and requirements of the tourists make changes in design of their products to bring them more in line with the demands. This leads to cultural erosion and eventually the original version of the artefact becomes just a museum piece. This once again severely damages the rural structure as authenticity is lost due to modern demands and interventions.

### Cultural Clashes

As the local rural population feels threatened by the constant flow of tourists due to the changing patterns of their world, anti-tourist attitudes may begin to manifest amongst the rural population. As a result of different cultural background, values,



lifestyles, languages and levels of prosperity cultural clashes may occur eventually destroying the tourist– host bond. Apart from this, job level frictions may occur. This happens mainly as stakeholders are usually the beneficiaries of tourism economically as compared to the local community. This may further antagonize the local population towards tourists.

### Ethical Issues

Other negative social influences of tourism of rural societies can be felt in rise in prices of basic commodities which are hiked due to the tourists but impacts the local community. Crime rates may typically increase with growth of tourism activities in the rural area affecting the local population. Another concern due to growing tourism in rural areas is the employment of children as they work for low pay. The ill of child labour is another issue that needs to be addressed by the tourism industry. Rural areas may also experience a surge in flesh trade as these bring easy money.

### Conclusion

Since the positive and negative outcomes of tourism depend on human factors, including the attitude and behaviour of tourists and hosts during the interactions, so tourists, tourism and hosts are jointly responsible not solely (Spanou, 2007). Strengthening local cultural value is a vital point. In Indonesia, local people agreed to stage dance and music, but disagreed to stage rituals because they didn't want to commodify their core value (Cole, 2007). The success of rural tourism lies in creating a balance between the positive and negative impacts of tourism and maintaining a healthy

rural environment. As any other business activity, rural tourism is also profit-oriented. Nevertheless, because it is driven by the accountability principles, rural tourism should be based not only on the core features of rural tourism (local biodiversity and eco-systems support, sustainable development), but also on understanding the lifestyle of the users of products and services of rural tourism (Moutinho 2000). Rural tourism has an immense possibility for exotic destination seekers and has been recognized as a key business opportunity by the stake holders mainly due to the growing demand for domestic weekend holidays. It is therefore paramount that the third party involved that is the rural community should be an equal beneficiary through tourism with minimal damages to its socio-cultural structure.

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