

# Amenitisation of Rural India for Nature Tourism

In spite of its significance, Rural Tourism is still perceived with scepticism, both by the rural communities from entrepreneurial perspective as well as by the prospective tourists in India. As a result, the potential of Rural Tourism continues to be largely untapped. Compared to countries where Rural Tourism is an established option, the need for providing enabling amenities in Indian villages is not recognised which has led to the declining interest. The process of creating an enabling environment, hitherto referred to as 'Amenitisation', is a multi-stakeholder engagement rather than merely a policy intervention.



\* Prof. (Dr.) Virendra Kumar Paul

## Rural India and Nature Tourism

**T** rue potential of tourism in India lies in the rural areas. The notion of rural conjures open areas, small settlements, farms, abundance of nature, and living in folk culture. And, this is where the opportunities of tourism in India

exist. Contrary view is rather misplaced in the context of Indian tourism. Who would want to see, say Shimla, if nature trails and the open landscapes dotted with small traditional houses and temples are removed from itinerary? If every view point in Cherrapunji is obscured and vastness of cloud-laden colourful sky with exotic patterns is deprived by edifices of urbanisation,





*Kardang Village, Lahaul Valley, Himachal Pradesh*

then who would want to go ‘Scotland of the East’ as Meghalaya is known for its rolling hills? Why then, even contemplate to urbanise tourism potential in India which has diversity and richness of nature experiences still largely unexplored. If villages are cloned to emulate urbanisation and deprive the experience of real nature, then possibly India is certainly not a preferred tourist destination. Artificiality by interventions such as fountains, ‘disco lights’ is no match for something as simple as a nature walk. Rural India is custodian of nature and proliferation of urbanisation is rather robbing the nature from the very custodians. And tourism is the economic boon for the, still to be developed, rural India. In this respect, the tourism needs pristine beauty of nature, and ‘amenitisation’ is the key to unlock the prospects of giving experience of life and living in nature for global appeal to the unique Indian tourism. Let’s explore the hypothesis further.

Rural India has a unique experience to offer targeting not just domestic and urban, but also foreign travellers. While Home Stay concept has existed in India for quite some time, it still has not multiplied in a manner so as to furnish the possibility of expansion. One of the reasons could be the lack of comprehensive packaging of the Home Stay concept. For instance, there is apparent absence of skills sets to deal with value tourists to give a wholesome experience. Be that the issue of reasonable professionalism in upkeep of

accommodation, sanitary infrastructure, service quality, or reliable support such as local transportation, there is a need for creating an attractive ecosystem. Besides, complexities of socio-cultural issues and gender roles need a rather community engagement to participate in such schemes of rural based tourism. It is important to underline the fact that most of the Home Stay entrepreneurs are from the lower and medium income groups which specifically require strategic intervention and hand-holding to deliver a sustainable micro entrepreneurship tourism business model.

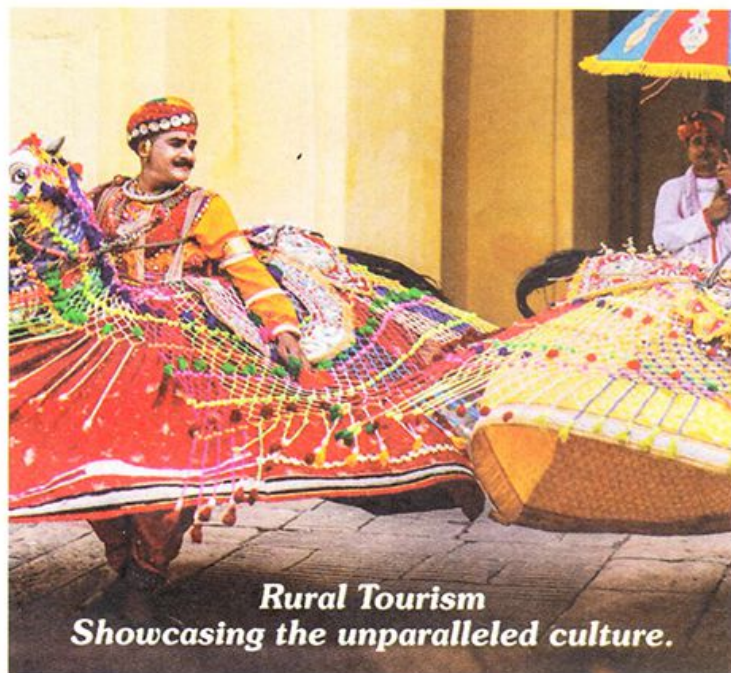
### Rural Tourism

Rural tourism, as per World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) has characteristics as having: low population density; landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry; and, traditional social structure and lifestyles. In Indian context, rural tourism brings sustainable development to the aspirational countryside at the same time preserving cultural identity and social values for posterity. Urban migration is leading to immense pressure on limited capacity of cities to provide basic infrastructure and dwindling job opportunities. Rural tourism opens rather entrepreneurship based job opportunities and therefore is the key driver to check urban migration phenomenon.

This is certainly not an out of the box thinking. In Bhutan, for example, community-based tourism is a well



laid out strategy of sustainable tourism wherein village tourism provides an experience of the Bhutanese way of life. As a result, it delivers economic and livelihood benefits to the village communities. This strategy overlays selling of local farm products directly by the village folks thereby giving them additional financial dividends. As a policy intervention, the necessary training gets imparted to give a professional edge to the village communities.



**Rural Tourism**  
**Showcasing the unparalleled culture.**

Innovative tourism entrepreneurs are experimenting with, for example, Farm Tourism where people actually work in farms and experience agriculture. It is exciting when such 'off beat tourists' get raw materials and vegetables for their meals from the farm and even cook traditional cuisine themselves in traditional kitchen environments. Using dairy products purchased from a confectionary is a convenience everyone would want, but to experience how it is produced starting from milking the cattle to processing using raw methods is indeed a leaning for the generation which has no connect with the folk life. Away from luxury cars, Nature Walks in villages is an untapped tourism potential where real rural life is showcased with touch-and-feel of cattle without earthly smell being artificially suppressed. In villages, one experiences the purity of dairy that one relishes in the luxury of homes.

In another innovation, Volunteer Tourism is also an important variant of rural tourism, wherein the tourists visit rural areas and enjoy their stay at the village and they contribute by teaching children, creating art work or adding value to knowledge like better agriculture. In return, they get life-changing

social bonding as well. Social service is becoming an increasingly significant area of engagement for the people who want to contribute to society and are 'no more' driven by the material achievements in career. Such enthusiasts are willing to devote their quality time through Volunteer Tourism in villages and contribute, including evolving creative solutions to the village problems.

### **LiFE actions that everyone can practice in their daily lives:**

- Donate old clothes and books
- Do not let pets defecate in the public places
- Do not discard waste in water bodies and public spaces
- Practice natural or organic farming
- Plant trees to reduce the impact of pollution
- Use rechargeable lithium cells



### **Panacea for Environmental Challenges**

Rural tourism is perhaps the best way of experiential promotion of sustainable lifestyle nestled in the nature. It is now a well-established fact that changing lifestyle is the most important aspect for sustaining development without infringing into the rights of the future generations on resources. At the same time, it reinforces the conviction in the minds of the rural populations to refrain from embracing the unnecessary urban attitudes of resource consumption. Instilling a sense of pride in the traditional LiFE principles is best way to ensure conviction and perpetuity.

At the 28<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties (COP 28) Dubai, the need to address climate change vulnerabilities in fragile eco-systems of Himalayan Mountain range were emphasised. It is now being contemplated that, if current urbanisation and other development practices continue unabated, 75% of the Himalayas would lose their snow cover by 2100. India has a huge Rural Tourism potential in villages in across Himalayan region in Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal, Uttarakhand, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland,





Tripura, and Sikkim which is around 12.56% of the total area of the country. However, in terms of climate crisis-based development paradigm, this geographical region is the most significant, not just for India alone.

It is essential to integrate Rural Tourism with the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE) policy which was also highlighted at COP 28 by India.

India is committed to long-term low carbon development with a goal of reaching net-zero by 2070. 'Enhancing forest and vegetation cover consistent with socio-economic and ecological considerations' has been articulated as one of the low carbon development strategic pathways. Rural Tourism is the perfect solution to the low-carbon development strategy with multiple secondary benefits to other strategic pathways wherein pollution, emission in urban transport, energy demand in cities, carbon dioxide removal etc are being specifically addressed. In fact, Rural Tourism creates a much-needed sustainable carbon dioxide sink harnessing green resources.

### 'Amenitisation'

In spite of its significance, Rural Tourism is still perceived with scepticism, both by the rural communities from entrepreneurial perspective as well as by the prospective tourists in India. As a result, the potential of Rural Tourism continues to be largely untapped. Compared to countries where Rural Tourism is an established option, the need for

providing enabling amenities in Indian villages is not recognised which has led to the declining interest. The process of creating an enabling environment, hitherto referred to as 'Amenitisation', is a multistakeholder engagement rather than merely a policy intervention. The 'Amenitisation', both tangible and information access could be categorised in three groups.

### Affirmatory Amenities

The foremost may be termed as Affirmatory Amenities in absence of which the very idea would fail to create interest in Rural Tourism. Affirmatory Amenities include:

- **Access to healthcare:** Villages being rather remote from the main town, need to have reliable access to healthcare, especially for emergency support within a reasonable time. While aged populations may in any case be vulnerable, the younger 'adventure spirited' populations would need emergency support in case of any untoward incidents.
- **Sanitation and waste management:** Lack of sanitation and effective waste management is a major inhibitor. This can lead to unsightly conditions. In a small village level setting, it is fairly easy to overcome this challenge.
- **Access to safe potable water:** Assurance of safe potable water is important to ensure that the visitors would not fall sick.



- **Green power:** Besides having reliable power, it is important not to have to resort to noisy generators. Green power using solar panels is an explicit statement of environment consciousness.
- **Street lighting:** It is most essential for the safety and security for those who are not familiar with the surroundings. In any case, it is too restrictive to be confined just to the room after sun-set.
- **Smart security solutions:** For security needs, linkage to external remote support through smart solutions is an essential enabler.

### Supportive Amenities

Basic Supportive Amenities would be necessary for creating tourist-friendly environment which would include:

- **Digital services:** Beyond mobile connectivity, access to digital services is a convenience to stay connected which can otherwise be an apprehension of disruption for career-sensitive populations.
- **Travel connectivity:** Preference of a remote location is an attractive option if supported by travel connectivity.
- **Explicitation of restrictive practices:** Making tourists aware of sensitivities of local communities and enhancing compatibility with tourists, bringing restrictive practices to the fore is a significant catalyst. Such common restrictive practices include dressing, gender issues, food, alcoholic beverages, religious sentiments, behavioural customs, use of certain language jargon, etc.



- **Access to conveniences:** Availability of basic confectionery, grocery, packaged food, bakery, and bank ATMs is a significant relief from the burden to stock up supplies.

### Value Adding Amenities

It is necessary to provide Value Adding Amenities which would create a memorable impact and an enhanced experience of the folk culture, the unique selling proposition (USP) of Rural Tourism. These would include:

- **Digital skill set:** The interface between the tourist and the village host is through digital technologies which requires enhancement of digital literacy of village communities to handle social media engagements, e-marketing of home-stays, and home-based local produce.
- **Hospitality skill set:** Host communities need to acquire hospitality skill sets for professional treatment of the guests. National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism in India, under the aegis of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, has specifically delineated a 150-hour Homestay course as a part of its reforms to bridge the skill gap as a major initiative to boost entrepreneurial skills of Home Stay owners.
- **'Village Kutir Udyam':** Local art, craft, cuisine, pickles, wellbeing engagements, facilitation of outdoor activity such as trekking, are home-based value-added enterprises that give enhanced memorable experience to a tourist. At the same time, it gives additional income with no burden of overheads to the village communities.
- **Local community connect:** Targeting the volunteer tourists, connecting with organised local community groups is significantly motivating. It also helps in giving exotic exposure to cultures and life-styles wherein guests can also participate in family and social activities. A step further, village festival calendar can be a value adding USP.

### Conclusion

Rural Tourism has a transformational potential for the villages. It is now for the other stakeholders to synergise their efforts and contribute to sustainable development of villages through Rural Tourism. □