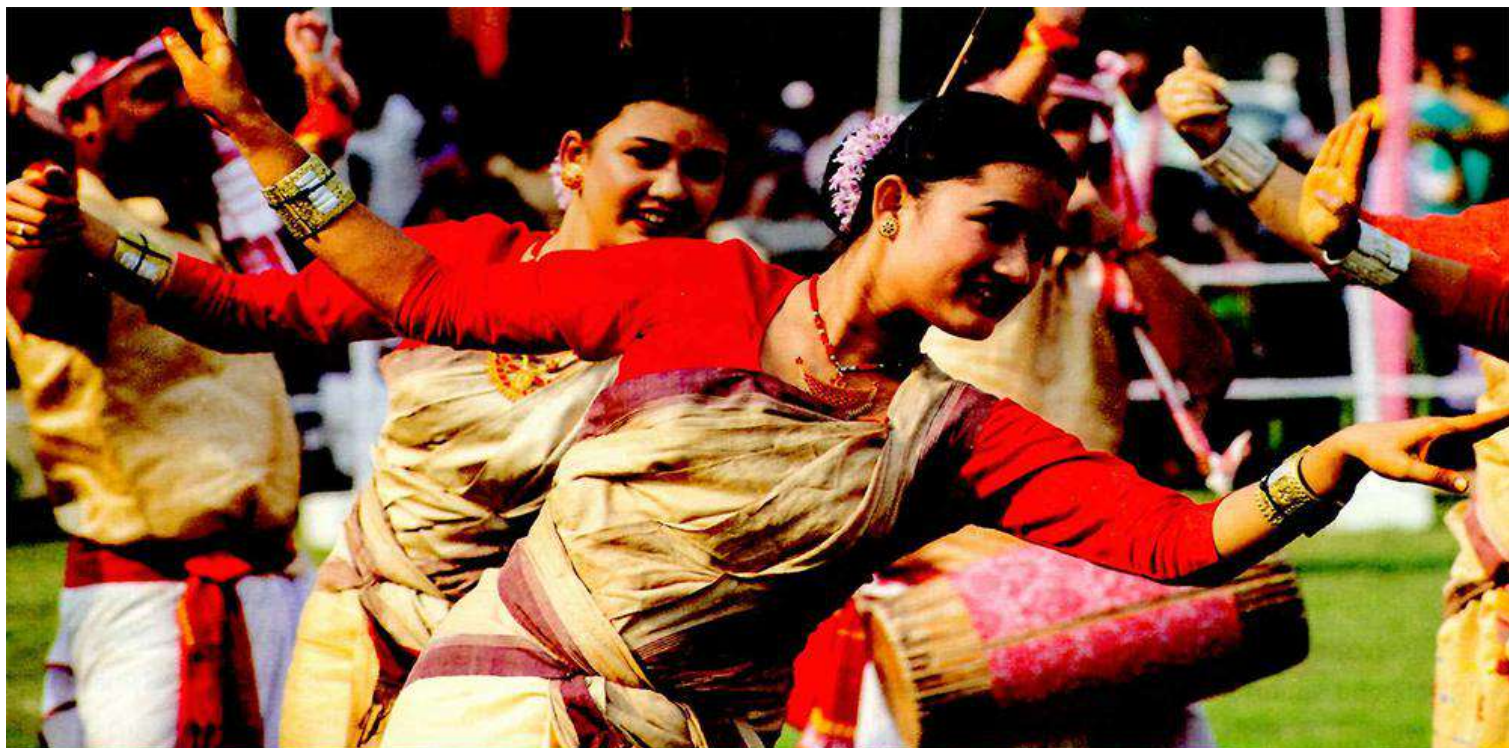




Rural Cultural Tourism

A Community-Led Development Model

Rural cultural tourism has emerged as a powerful approach to sustainable development by linking heritage conservation with community livelihoods. India's villages, rich in cultural traditions, crafts, festivals and indigenous knowledge, offer significant tourism potential. Drawing on examples such as Pochampally, Raghurajpur, Hodka, Sualkuchi, Khonoma and Dhudmaras, this article examines how community-based tourism supports cultural preservation, strengthens local economies and reduces migration. It also explores government initiatives, key challenges and pathways for building an inclusive and sustainable rural tourism ecosystem.

Dr. Kamakshi Maheshwari
Chandradeep Singh

Everyone is trying to run past the time. In the current era of turmoil, trends, transition, technology, culture and heritage seems a far fetched thing or merely the part of an itinerary, which might or can be easily skipped.

India, home to more than a billion people, has nearly 68 per cent of its population residing in rural areas. These regions continue to preserve traditions,

cultural practices, and heritage that are gradually disappearing from many urban centres. Pochampally, a village in Telangana, one of the best example of the living the culture and heritage, still have most of the families practicing the age old tradition of weaving, Ikat sarees. They are not simply practicing but earning the living out of it.

In 2021 the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recognised Pochampally as

*The author is Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management. Email: kamakshi.maheshwari@iittm.ac.in
The co-author is Research Scholar, Jiwaji University, Gwalior.*

one of the best tourism village of India, followed by Dhordo, Gujarat in 2023 and Madla (M.P.), Dhumaras (Chhattisgarh) and Khonoma(Nagaland) in the Upgrade Program. These are not just the accolades but a signal for the inclusion of rural heritage and tourism in the global development agenda.

In India, the villages are not just the geographical units but the repositories of the linguistic, artistic, and spiritual traditions for millennia. From state to state the music change, festivals change attire change, cuisine change. The vivid diversity ranges from handloom clusters to Pattachitra to mask making to tribal dance to island community life. Such diversity requires not only conservation but also transformation into sustainable livelihood opportunities for local communities.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, the domestic tourist visits in the year 2024 is more than 300 crore, the major benefit of the same is limited to the heritage sites in the cities. Rural tourism is an important tool to manage the equitable distribution of these resources. As villages are not merely the monumental attractions but the living culture, art, craft, cuisine, ritual, farming practices and many more.

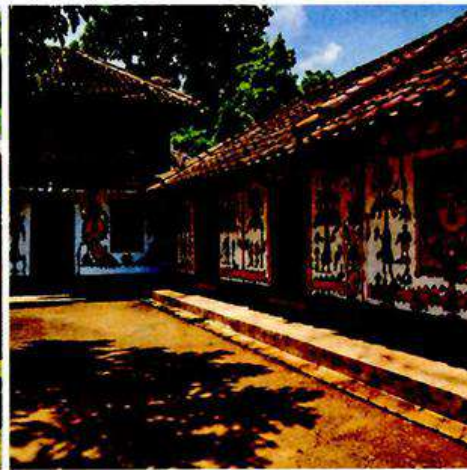
The economic benefits of tourism can be availed only when the community including the artist, weaver, dancer, guide, homestay operator, self-help group become part of the single value chain. For example, Radhuraipur,

Odisha is developed as the heritage craft village. Almost every house in the village is associated with pattachitra or palm leaf engraving or mask making or wood craft or gotipua tradition. The success of the Raghurajpur model cannot solely be credited to the craft but to the vision of Odisha tourism and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) to develop it as the living heritage unit. The revenue generated from tourism directly reached to the craftsmen without any intermediaries. The village has shown the signs of reverse migration, when the son of an artist witnesses the foreign tourist buying the art from his father, he no longer wishes to move out his village. Cultural tourism in rural areas can have no greater object than uplifting the economic status of the community and preserving the culture for the generations to come.

Hodka village in Gujarat's Kutch district is another testament to community-based rural tourism. The craft of the Rabari and Harijan tribes of the area is the bridge between the visitors and the local culture. Tourists stay in traditional mud houses, eat local food, participate in the craft workshops and experience the life of the locals.

Sualkuchi in Assam, often referred to as the "Manchester of the East," is one of India's most prominent silk weaving villages and is renowned for the production of Muga silk. The Ministry of Tourism recognised Sualkuchi as a Best Tourism Village (Craft





Category) on World Tourism Day 2024. Visitors to the village can observe the entire weaving process firsthand and experience its vibrant craft ecosystem.

The current tourism landscape is witnessing a transition from standardised tourism experiences to the rediscovery of traditional and community-based forms of travel. This shift does not represent the creation of a new tourism form; rather, it reflects the resurgence of longstanding practices and traditions that have existed for generations but were previously overshadowed by mainstream tourism products. For this transition to generate sustainable livelihoods and ensure the long-term preservation of cultural assets, rural tourism requires supportive governance structures, targeted investments, and community-centred policy frameworks. Recognising this potential, the Government of India has introduced a range of initiatives aimed at integrating heritage conservation, local livelihoods, and tourism development within rural landscapes.

Clearer Framework at Policy Level

Rural tourism is now getting a clearer framework at the policy level. The Ministry of Tourism has launched the National Strategy and Roadmap for the Development of Rural Tourism in India and the National Strategy for the Promotion of Rural Homestays in India. Both the strategies identifies the potential of the rural heritage and developed with the vision to preserve the heritage and culture of rural India. To explore the potential of rural tourism in India the Ministry of Tourism has conducted the Best Tourism Village competition in 2023 and 2024 which receive more than 2500 villages as entries to the competition. The competition has identifies certain villages as the best villages which act as the model villages. These villages act as the template

to be reproduces at the village level for different types of villages.

Government support for rural tourism has also been strengthened through the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 scheme. Among its major themes are heritage and culture, sustainable tourism, and rural tourism development. The scheme has sanctioned 53 projects worth of Rs.2207.81 Cr. of which around 115 Cr. is sanctioned to the development of cultural and heritage villages. Also, as a sub-scheme of Swadesh Darshan 2.0, Development of Homestays in Tribal Areas scheme was launched to support the tribes with financial assistance to develop homestays in the villages with the objective to provide awareness for livelihood while preserving and celebrating culture of tribal communities. The initiative will assist in developing 1000 homestays with assistance of upto Rs. 5 lakh par homestay.

Digital Platforms and Social Media have Given Newer Eyes to Rural Culture

Not only the ministerial interventions but the digital platforms and social media has given newer eyes to rural culture. Videos and reel of the craft villages, weaving process, village fairs and festivals, experience of the village stays have shown the reach in millions and acting as the pull factor for the tourist towards a novel experience. The successful model of rural tourism, beyond the increasing number of tourists, is the one that is community centric and focus of promotion and preservation of the rural heritage and culture. It should be more community-centric than visitor-centric. Sualkuchi of Assam serves as a significant example of community centric cultural preservation by carrying the centuries-old silk weaving tradition of Muga silk and making both the livelihoods and cultural identity of the local weaving community.

Khonoma village in Nagaland stands as a successful example of preserving traditional Naga culture, local architecture, and community conservation practices through tourism. In Mawlynnong, Meghalaya, the active participation of the local community has transformed the traditional rural lifestyle, culture of cleanliness, and local customs into tourism attractions. Similarly, in Dhudmaras, Chhattisgarh, a model for local heritage preservation and community-based development has been created by integrating tribal culture, folk art, and the natural environment with tourism. These examples demonstrate that when local communities participate in the ownership and management of tourism activities, tourism can become an effective tool for preserving cultural diversity and rural heritage.

With the increasing popularity and the number of tourist, also comes the pressure on the village. In many villages, road connectivity, signage, drinking water,

sanitation, waste management, last-mile transport, and reliable internet connectivity remain inadequate. A second issue is cultural commodification, where authentic rituals, craft processes, or community etiquettes are reduced to mere performance material and a product available for sale. A third challenge is 'benefit leakage,' where a significant portion of the income flows out of the local community particularly when external operators, middlemen, or booking systems become dominant. The fourth challenge relates to carrying capacity; if the influx of visitors to a craft village or island destination exceeds the limits of local water resources, waste management systems, climate resilience, and social balance, it can lead to the erosion of the very heritage being showcased. While the Ministry of Tourism's rural tourism strategy emphasises sustainability, regular coordination among panchayats, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), local youth, and district administrations remains weak in many areas

regarding ground-level implementation.

For the future policy and planning rural cultural tourism should not just be viewed as another form of tourism, where the focus is on increasing the number of tourists but on the better and equitably distributed values. A comprehensive initiative integrating cluster-based planning, carrying-capacity assessments, skill certification, GI-led branding, homestay standards, women's Self-Help Group (SHG) participation, and digital market integration should be the part of consideration. Examples such as Pochampally, Raghurajpur, Hodka, Majuli, Spiti, and Kalpeni demonstrate that when community ownership, adequate infrastructure, and institutional support converge, heritage is not merely preserved, it becomes a source of livelihood more importantly an alternative form of livelihood and an additional source of income. The most pragmatic approach for policymakers is to integrate schemes like Swadesh Darshan 2.0, PRASHAD, PM Vishwakarma, and e-Shram with state tourism systems into a unified rural heritage value chain; this would enable villages to transform their culture into income through fair, regulated, and sustainable means, rather than simply "selling" it. □

Major Schemes for TOURISM SECTOR

- PRASHAD**
Develops pilgrimage sites with world-class amenities.
- SWADESH DARSHAN**
Creates themed tourist circuits for rich experiences.
- INCREDIBLE INDIA 2.0**
Promotes India as a unique cultural and heritage destination.
- DEKHO APNA DESH**
Encourages domestic tourism through initiatives and awareness campaigns.
- MICE TOURISM**
Boosts business travel by supporting events and conferences.
- NIDHI**
Collects tourism data to support policy and planning.