

# POTENTIAL OF RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA - A SYNOPTIC VIEW

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## Abstract

*India is a multi-destination country with a variety of tourist attractions and facilities. Traditionally known largely for its historical and cultural dimensions, tourism today is highlighted for its immense business opportunities. The recognition of rural tourism as an alternative to mainstream is a recent concept. The basic concept of rural tourism was envisaged with benefit accruing to local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage. In India, rural tourism in its true form is relatively new. The potential for rural tourism to be a major force in rural economic development is yet to be realized to the fullest extent. Therefore, with a view to underscore a clear potential of rural tourism in India, the present study has made an attempt to highlight the industrial potential for rural tourism and articulates a spectrum for conceptualizing rural tourism in India. The study mainly focuses on challenges and opportunities to rural tourism in India and future prospects for its sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** Rural Tourism, Indian Economy

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is currently the fastest growing sector of the Indian economy. It is a major contributor to foreign exchange earnings, provides employment to millions, acts as a vehicle for infrastructure development and is one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world. Tourism, thus, can go a long way in changing the fortunes of the country which is always reeling under the problem of unemployment and fiscal deficit. Foreign tourism along with domestic tourism may contribute to India in its mission of becoming a developed country by 2020 (Bhardwaj and Singh, 2010).

Recognizing the importance of the tourism industry in India, the Government of India has taken many policy measures such as Tourism Policy 1982, Tourism Plan of Action 1992 and Tourism Policy 1997. Through these policies, the government called for effective coordination of public and private participation to achieve synergy in the development of tourism. Various plans were identified for taking advantage of the emerging markets. Business tourism, health tourism, pilgrim tourism, adventure tourism, and rural tourism are some of the new products devised for changing demand.

Rural tourism has been identified as one of the priority areas for development of Indian tourism. The ninth (Five - year plan) has identified the basic objectives of rural tourism, that is to (a) improve the quality of life of rural people, (b)

to provide good experience to the tourist and (c) to maintain the quality of environment. In 2004 The Union Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched an endogenous tourism project to promote rural tourism in India. According to the project plan UNDP will help areas of capacity building, involvement of NGOs, local communities and artisans to build strong community- private and public sector partnership (Financial Express 2004).

Rural tourism refers to any kind of tourism that designs the rural life, art, culture and traditions in rural areas, thereby benefitting the local people economically and socially. The beauty of rural tourism depends upon seasons and local festivals and also on preservation of culture, traditions and heritage etc. As per Gannon (1994), 'Rural Tourism' covers "a range of activities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their area in order to generate extra income for their business." Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefitting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Rural tourism is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. In fact rural tourism is a multi- faceted activity and may include agri-tourism, sports tourism, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, heritage tourism, pilgrim tourism and adventure tourism. It

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is an experience oriented and location specific tourism and solely depends upon natural environment. It begins with community initiative and arrangement, celebrating local culture, entrenched local scenery. Rural tourism will benefit the local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, conservation and development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage (Mishra, 2001). The rich diversity and variety that India has in terms of different cultures, the different customs and traditions, the colorful festivals, folks, arts and handicrafts as well as the performing arts and historical heritage make many rural areas in India as potential rural tourism sites.

In India, rural tourism in its true form is relatively new. The potential for rural tourism to be a major force in rural economic development is yet to be realized to the fullest extent. The development of a strong platform around the concept of rural tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 74% of the population resides in its seven million villages. Therefore, with a view to underscore a clear potential of rural tourism in India, the present study has made an attempt to highlight the industrial potential for rural tourism and articulates a spectrum for conceptualizing rural tourism. The main aim of the study is to measure the potential of rural tourism in India. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To highlight different types of rural tourism in India.
2. To study the impact of rural tourism.
3. To identify the challenges and opportunities for rural tourism.
4. To identify the essential elements for development of rural tourism.

## RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA

The globally recognized “Incredible India” brand of tourism industry, has also a sub- brand called “Explore Rural India”. In 2002 a national tourism policy was introduced with rural tourism identified as a focus area to generate employment and promote sustainable livelihoods. As a part of the National Tourism Policy 2002, the Ministry of Tourism is developing and promoting rural tourism sites which have core competency in art, craft, culture, heritage, handloom, etc. In association with UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), The Tourism Ministry of India has launched a major rural tourism project, covering the whole country. In this project fifty villages have been chosen where access and basic infrastructure like accommodation, food and guides would be provided to promote rural tourism. The villages were chosen on the basis of craft or traditional skills such as the Patachitra painting and Gotipura dance in Raghurajpura,

Ikat style weaving in Pochampally, metal mirrors and Vaastu Vidya in Aranmula, the Chanderi weave in Prampur, embroidery in Hodka etc.

In fact in India there are different tourism destinations in different stages of the product life cycle. For example, a region like Goa and a city like Shimla have reached a maturity level. They no more require promotion and have exhausted their carrying capacity (infrastructural, environmental or social impacts). Right now their problem is of retaining their image, checking the decline to sustain. On the contrary the regions like Konkan, Vidarbha and Marathwada in Maharashtra are struggling hard to promote its attractions in rural areas and develop its tourism products (Rajkumar and Shinde 2008). The same is the case with many rural parts of India, even after having enough potential to attract both domestic and foreign tourists, profiling and attracting tourists becomes a major issue. Also there are problems of the local bodies, who are either not aware about the developmental role of tourism or are constrained by their own politics or lack of funds. Most rural tourism businesses of all kinds invest relatively little in marketing and related training (Lane, 1991). But to be sustainable as businesses, and in turn to sustain their communities and cultural landscapes, rural tourism operators have much to gain from improving marketing practice (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1994). While marketing a rural tourism destination (region, village or leisure spots) there is need of strategic approach.

## THE IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism has many potential benefits like foreign exchange, employment, higher government revenues and the transformation of agriculture into a modern service industry. But at the same time it can also cause harm to many indigenous societies. The impact of rural tourism in India can be studied under following heads:

### The Economic Impact

Rural tourism has proved to be an important source of job opportunity particularly for the economically underdeveloped people of rural communities. Local residents with few skills can readily work as food servers, retail clerks, and hospitality workers. Furthermore, rural tourism can also offer business opportunities to local inhabitants. Thus it can play an important role in poverty alleviation. Weaver (1986) notes that rural tourism results in enhanced employment opportunities, increased income potential for local residents, diversification of the local economic base, and additional tax revenues for rural areas. However, it should be kept in mind that although rural tourism is economically beneficial for India, it is a two-edged sword which may damage many

indigenous communities. The rural people have to depend on the urban entrepreneur, so the benefit may not reach them. Most of the facilities such as resorts, hotels and tour companies belong mainly to urban investors who take away most of the profit. On the other hand, jobs in rural areas are frequently low-paying, part-time and seasonal and often offer limited benefits. Moreover, local people sometimes are compelled to sell the local handicraft and farm produce products at lower price due to lack of competition.

### **The Environmental Impact**

Tourism revenues can be used for environmental improvements such as village paving and traffic regulation schemes, sewage and litter disposal. This will result in retaining existing population and businesses and attracting new enterprises and families. Moreover, rural people will learn how to develop healthy environment and to preserve the natural habitats. On the other hand, tourism risks such as degrading natural resources in rural areas can have a profound impact on the environment. Some tourism activities may cause environmental pollution from unhygienic disposal of human waste, discharge of sewerage effluent into water sources, and littering. Moreover, rural tourism will disturb natural ecology and over population will spoil the scenic beauty.

### **The Socio-Cultural Impact**

The income from tourism is much higher than what rural people can earn from agriculture. For that tourism has been accepted willingly in many rural areas in spite of its negative effects. Through rural tourism, education and health of the rural community will improve and rural people will be introduced to the modern culture. They will come out of their traditional values and beliefs. They will develop a cultural understanding through fairs and festivals. Moreover, rural tourism encourages conformity to an idle image of community which can result in growth of personal ties and community solidarity. Most significantly it will reduce migration of rural urban areas.

### **Gender Sensitization**

Integration of gender perspectives in the tourism industry is also one of the most important aspects of rural tourism, as it is the major employer of women and offers various opportunities for independent income generating activities for them. According to a study conducted by Ministry of Tourism (2007) it has been reported that gender sensitization has been successful in most of the rural sites. The women folk in the villages have been given necessary skill building

programme for sustainable livelihood. The rural tourism programme has undoubtedly helped the women artisans and the women community in and around the villages, thereby improving their livelihood. The women folk have been given training on cuisine preparation, hospitality management, institution building and other craft forms, due to which their outlook has changed. Thus, through rural tourism employment opportunities for the rural women in the tourism sector has been explored and provided, resulting in their livelihood promotion.

## **POTENTIAL OF RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Despite the fact that India is an ideal home for rural tourism, there are many challenges that have been inhibiting its growth. The growth in rural tourism has been plagued by various issues such as information asymmetry, difficult booking and payment processes, non-availability of quality budget accommodations and quality issues. Tourists are forced to visit the few known tourist destinations, resulting in carrying capacity issues and un-reasonably high tariffs at these destinations, while many others lay vacant. Therefore to promote and facilitate rural tourism in India following challenges are to be addressed and considered by the government and other concerned authorities:

### **Under -Developed Infrastructure**

Mere natural beauty along with few other attractions has never been enough to attract large number of tourists anywhere (Rousseau, 2001). India is a country of village landscape, wildlife, community life, and natural heritage that may catch the attention of foreigners. But the country suffers from underdeveloped infrastructure and lack of enough facilities that are the prerequisites for the development of rural tourism in India. Most of the villages in the country lack all-weather roads and electricity. Network of good roads connecting important tourist attractions, creation of wayside amenities and facilities along major tourist roads, strengthening of airports and air connectivity and setting up of budget hotels are some of the areas warranting immediate attention.

### **Lack of Skilled Manpower**

The human element, more than the excellence of the attraction, plays a decisive role in promoting the popularity of tourism sector. There is an acute shortage of skilled and professional manpower in tourism industry in India which, no doubt, impedes its progress here. It has also been observed

that, the trained people in hospitality management are often less interested to go to rural area to work. Hence, the rural people are required to be trained for discharging their duties. They should have enough knowledge about the village landscape and should be able to generate interest in the mind of tourist to visit the site. It should be remembered that the success of rural tourism largely depends on the quality of service provided to the tourist. So, to develop the manpower, the Government and the Tourism Industry needs to make the best use of local youths by training them to explore the huge untapped opportunities.

### **Lack of Safety and Security**

Safety and security of the tourists are major concerns to develop any kind of tourism in any country. Foreign tourists consider our country as a nation with deteriorating social and political turmoil, government instability and insecurity of life, safety and security of tourist especially women tourists. Moreover, when tourists come to India to enjoy its natural beauty, they are afraid of cheating and harassment at the airport, hijacking on the spots, and the disturbance of the beggars. All these events impede tourists' interest and enthusiasm to explore the rural area of India.

### **Lack of Communication Skills**

Due to lack of proper education, most of the people living in the rural areas lack proper communication skills. They are not in a position to communicate with the foreign tourists. This works as an impediment in promoting tourism in the rural areas.

### **Lack of Local Involvement/Participation**

Local participation is inevitable to flourish rural tourism in India. But in practice most of the rural people do not have much understanding of tourism. They are seldom involved in decision making, planning and implementing policies. Moreover, they are misguided by outside investors who hope to take most of the economic benefits from rural areas. Therefore, local people become confused about what kind of tourism they want to establish in their own area.

### **National Disasters and Terrorism**

Major natural or man-made disasters are termed as national disasters when they extensively cover a number of regions or states of the country. At one stroke they snatch the livelihood of people depending on tourism. The recent destruction brought about by floods in Uttarakhand region and tsunami seismic sea waves over large areas of our coastal regions has been a national disaster. Whenever the very existence of sea beaches has been washed away, beach

tourism is lost completely. Also the continuing terrorist's activities of militants in many other parts of India are also man-made national disasters. Kashmir is a singular example of such a region. Such disaster can be managed by adopting national level strategies to restore tourist industry and heal the wounds of the local people depending upon it. More than the funds, active participation of the local people is needed.

### **Taxation**

Travel and tourism in India is a high-taxed industry, which makes India expensive as a tourist destination. This is affecting the growth of the industry as India is losing out to other low-cost destinations. Inbound tourism is the one most affected. Various taxes are levied across the entire industry right from tour operators, transporters, airline industry to hotels. These include service tax, luxury tax, tax on transportation, tax on aviation turbine fuel (airline industry), and various taxes on transportation. In addition, these tax rates tend to vary across different states in the country.

### **Opportunities to Rural Tourism**

India is fortunate to have a series of rural tourism products. Also the promotion and aggressive marketing measures undertaken by the government is expected to aid influx of tourists. The industry would also benefit from introduction of new forms of tourism and development of niche segments. Opportunities also exist in ecotourism, adventure tourism, and cruise tourism. With increasing environment awareness and consciousness among tourists and given efforts undertaken by the government and private players, the rural tourism segment is expected to record handsome growth in the coming years.

In fact one of the success stories of rural tourism is the Hodka village in Gujarat. In this village, a village tourism committee owns and operates the Shaam-e-Sarhad ("Sunset at the Border") Village Resort. The accommodations are simple. Tourists can stay in tents or traditional mud huts, known as "bhungas". Among the attractions: specially organized workshops in embroidery and leather work; interactions with other artisan communities; wildlife including flamingos, pelicans, foxes and leopards; and nearby archaeological sites of the Indus valley civilization are the prominent tourism activities. In January 2008, there was even a pashu mela - a cattle fair. All this activity were organized, packaged and sold.

Also far away from Hodka, in the northeastern state of Meghalaya, is Mawlynnong. Neither the UNDP nor the government of India has been involved with the ecotourism effort's success in this village. Rather, a community effort has made it the poster child of rural tourism in India. In 2003, Discover India (a magazine published by Media



Transasia along with the Union Ministry of Tourism) anointed it the cleanest village in Asia. It has retained its charms. "Mawlynnong's reputation for cleanliness has even earned it a place on the state's tourism map," (BBC report). "Hundreds of visitors from all over India now visit the village throughout the year." Mawlynnong also attracts tourists from around the world.

In addition to this, India also holds immense potential in adventure and cruise tourism. India's greatest adventure tourism assets are Himalayas and its mighty rivers. Development of adventure tourism can make India a round-the-year tourist destination. Also with respect to festivals in India, desert festival of Jaisalmer concentrating on camel rides and folk dance of the area, cattle fair festival of Pushkar; Dushera of Kulu and kite flying of Gujarat in Ahmedabad are most popular among foreign tourists.

Further to add the State of Haryana has also made a pioneering effort in rural tourism. Its brochure has an opening with the famous quote from poet Rabindranath Tagore on his brush with nature, it asked, "When was the last time you chased chickens, roamed in the fields with pure wind on your face... found yourself jiggling up and down to the thrills of a bullock cart or a tractor ride?" "Rural tourism," it added, "seeks to awaken the child in you ...to experience the unforgettable whiff of the countryside...to plant baby seeds...enjoy the delights of organic food and experience many spontaneous joys of nature that you may never have known before." Haryana tourism began its foray into rural holidays in association with a dozen or so farms around Delhi. They are located in the Faridabad, Gurgaon, Rohtak and Karnal districts. One example, there is the Surjivan Farm, close to the classic Golf resort, 50 km from Delhi. Spread over fifty acres, it has ethnic huts, a dormitory and even conference facility. There are day packages, overnight stays and group tariffs. Activities include a choice of organic farming, herbal park excursions, orchards and vegetable gardens, a village safari, cattle feeding, cow milking, camel rides and bonfires. Golf and rock climbing can also be arranged. These efforts as we can see are pure tourist ventures and more in keeping with the life style change for the rich and happening people of the urban area with no role to be played by villagers and no effort by the urban to understand and bring about a change in the lives of the rural population.

Also in southern part of India, Buddhist monuments, great mosques, archaeological sites and museums are found. The southern Tirupati zone is the gateway for the largest numbers of Hindu pilgrims worshipping in the temple of Lord Venkateshwar in the Tirumala hills. The northern Vishakapatnam zone is labelled for beach tourism, prehistoric caves, hillocks, most ancient temples and for proximity to tribal life in the beautiful Araku valley. The Eastern Ghats, rivers and the lake reservoirs have been made public for experiencing the thrill of adventure games.

## Future Prospects for Rural Tourism

The launch of Incredible India campaign in the last decade resulted in a visible spurt in the flow of foreign tourists into India and earnings there from. A 2011 forecast of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) predicted that Foreign Tourists Arrivals (FTAs) will cross 11 million by 2021 (approximately one percent of the global tourist population). This is being boosted by the steady rise in visa on arrival tourist (T-VoAs) in the country. During the month of February 2013 the number of visa on arrival (T-VoA) tourists registered a growth of 54.6 percent.

The Tourism Ministry has played an important role in projecting India a hotspot for tourism. Advertising campaigns such as the "Incredible India", promoted India's culture and tourist attractions in a fresh and memorable way projecting India as an attractive tourist destination by showcasing different aspects of Indian culture and history like yoga, spirituality, etc. Also in 2009, plans were formulated to extend the Incredible India campaign to the domestic tourism sector as well. As a result of the various lessons from the earlier promotional activities, the new and revamped "Incredible India" campaign has been launched recently which made a paradigm shift in the strategy to promote Indian destinations abroad and within with two separate campaigns. While the international campaign is called "Find what you seek", the domestic campaign is titled as "Go Beyond". This is explicitly aimed at doubling the FTA in the next 5 years. According to World Travel and Tourism Council forecasts, India will be a tourism hotspot from 2009 to 2018, having the highest 10-year growth potential.

Also the healthy economic growth recorded in past few years, especially in the services industry, has led to increase in business travel. Higher disposable income and affordability have increased domestic leisure travel in India. Foreign tourist arrivals in India have also grown. The industry's performance was hit in 2009 due to the global economic slowdown, terror attacks in Mumbai (November 2008) and H1N1 virus. However, the industry has shown signs of recovery in the first half of 2010. This is a clear indicator that the long-term prospects for the Indian travel and tourism industry are bright. India is expected to witness increased tourist activity both in the business and leisure segments in the coming years. International inbound traffic is expected to grow rapidly with increasing investment and trade activity. India has been identified as one of the fastest-growing countries in terms of tourism demand.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion rural tourism can be defined as the 'country experience' which encompasses a wide range of attractions and activities that take place in non-urban areas.

The most important purpose of rural tourism is economic and social development of the rural areas. Rural India has much to offer beyond agriculture. It has a great potentiality for different growing segments of tourism like eco-tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, adventure tourism etc. However development of rural tourism in India is still at its infant stage. There are various constraints for the growth of rural tourism in India. These includes inadequate quantity and quality of facilities and services, limited availability of tourism related information, restrictive land use policies; failure to adopt and implement sustainable development and management etc. Therefore the central and state governments should recognize importance of rural tourism at priority and help in creating healthy competitive business environment. Efforts should be made to develop the human resources, create adequate facilities and suitable infrastructure like accommodation, roads, airport facilities, rail facilities, local transport, communication links and other essential amenities. There is an urgent need for understanding basics of tourism, development of personality and communication skills particularly in English and Hindi; need for basic computer knowledge; successful imparting of tourism education in the curriculum; more of local community participation and direct involvement.

With a proper marketing plan rural tourism could bring lots of benefit to our society. It could be a sustainable revenue generating project for rural development. It can help inflow to resources from urban to the rural economy. Rural tourism will emerged as an important instrument for sustainable human development including poverty alleviation, employment generation, environmental regeneration and development of remote areas and advancement of women and other disadvantaged groups in the country apart from promoting social integration and international understanding. The government should promote rural tourism to ensure

sustainable economic development and positive social change.

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