

RURAL TOURISM IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: IMPACT ON LOCAL ECONOMY, CULTURE AND ECOLOGY

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Abstract: *Village tourism is a relatively recent activity that is incessantly improving its operating mechanism. It has emerged as a significant alternative for local socio-economic development, because it makes use of the local natural resources, cultural heritage, traditions and customs of the villages in strengthening the rural economy. However, rural tourism needs to be implemented/practiced with due sensitivity toward conservation of ecology, environment and indigenous culture in the countryside. The rural landscape in the province of Himachal Pradesh is replete with a comely, picturesque natural environment as well as a special cultural heritage that surely facilitates and promotes tourist activities. The present paper examines the major aspects of rural tourism development in Himachal Pradesh, besides considering viable strategies, methods and techniques to promote tourism in the hilly terrain of this province. Since rural tourism is an activity, complementary to agriculture, with ample scope for economical development, it can be a way for the development and strengthening of the rural community in the state. The present paper intends to study how rural tourism can be one of the forms of tourism that incorporates the aspects of sustainable development along with essential provisos for protection of environment and development of entrepreneurship, alongside due preservation of long-established ethnic village traditions, customs, values and practices.*

Keywords: *rural tourism, village traditions, local economy, Himachal Pradesh, ecology and environment*

Introduction

The rich traditions and historico-cultural heritage along with ample natural resources are the basis of development of tourism in India. The Vedic dictum—*Atithi Devo Bhavah*, which means the guest is god—is the catchphrase of hospitality and tourism industry in India. Tourism, both urban and rural, makes considerable contribution to the image as well as economy of the country among the major developing countries of the world. Nonetheless, tourism shows a significant growth potential for sustainable rural development in India. The elevation of a strong platform around the concept of Rural Tourism is certainly helpful for a fast developing country like India, where over 74% of the total population dwells in its seven million villages.

Mostly the trends of industrialization and development have had an urban centric approach the world over. However, in contrast to constant urbanization, the stress of urban lifestyle has led to a “counter urbanization” syndrome. This has led to growing interest in the rural areas. At the same time, excessive urbanization has led to decrease in income levels and job opportunities, thereby leading to the “urbanization syndrome” in the rural areas. Rural Tourism provides a solution to these problems. Besides, increasing levels of awareness, growing interest in heritage and culture and improved accessibility, and environmental consciousness have also added to the growth of rural tourism in India (Singh and Narban, 2015).

It goes without saying that the lifestyle of a villager is different from that in metropolitan cities or other smaller cities. The villager is mostly engaged in agriculture, besides some other vocations such as handicrafts, arts, couture and tourism. Rural or Village Tourism offers opportunities for employment and business opportunities to many people in Indian villages. It brings people of different cultures, languages, faiths, customs and lifestyles close to each other and provides a fruitful exchange of culture and better understanding of life and humanity at large. It promises to generate employment for the local people and develop social, cultural, educational and human values and awareness.

The concept of rural tourism is based on the premise of sustainable rural development that exploits resources of the rural areas without causing little or no harmful impact, and generating benefits to the rural areas in terms of enhanced productivity and employment, improved distribution of wealth, and conservation of rural environment and culture. It also aims to increase the involvement of local people for better implementation of rural tourism, and devise a strategy to adapt conventional beliefs, values and mores to modern times.

Village Tourism is founded primarily on the concept of ‘sustainable development’. It is a form of nature based tourism to explore rustic life, culture, art and heritage in rural locations, thereby socially as well as economically promoting/strengthening the local communities. Rural Tourism has created tremendous impact on local economy and socio-cultural scenario of the concerned area and carries ample potential for the multifaceted development of the denizens of rural areas. Village Tourism is, in fact, an important ‘opportunity for rural development’ (Sharma, 2016).

In India, the scheme of Rural Tourism was launched in 2002-03, duly keeping in mind the economic objectives as well as the socio-cultural and ecological aspects of the rural sites. The Rural Tourism project has also been taken up with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) under the Tourism Ministry’s Endogenous Tourism Project in 2003 to support community and village-based tourism in India. (<http://www.northindiatours.org>) As per World Tourism Organization, rural tourism includes any tourism activity in rural areas organized and run by local people, drawing on local tourism resources (natural, cultural, historical, human) and facilities, tourist, including pensions and agro farms. Rural tourism is based on three axes: space, people, products (Bran, Dinu and Simon, 1997) for the reason that—

- 1) the area without human existence cannot support coexistence;
- 2) people without space or products have only a limited capacity to receive;
- 3) products that are not based space and people have only a short existence and cannot deliver sustainable development locally.

The researchers have added several activities under rural tourism which include interest in farms/agriculture, nature, adventure, health, education, arts, handicrafts and guilds and experiencing living history such as rural customs, folklore, local traditions, beliefs, and common heritage (Jolliffe & MacDonald, 2003). Thus the key parameters that define rural tourism are as follows: located in rural areas, functionally rural; based on small-scale and traditional activities and enterprises (rural in scale), relies on the traditional qualities of the countryside, develops slowly under the control of local people and is non-uniform (reflecting the complexity of the rural environment).

A Review of Literature

The rural tourism is thought to be one of the important channels to sustainable development through which rural areas can achieve economic, environmental and socio-cultural growth (Haghsetan, Mahmoudi and Maleki, 2011). Rural areas of most of the countries, where tourism industry flourishes well, have become the centre of attraction for tourism planners and holiday makers (Kneafsey, 2001). It is believed that only those rural regions that have specific cultural, natural or social charm can attract tourists and this, in turn, can have significant impact on rural development strategies (Mostowfi, 2000). According to OECD (1994), rural tourism comes into existence when the rural culture is the key component of the product on offer. This form of tourism varies from one country to another and from one region to another. Nevertheless, with the help of rural tourism activities, new business may be attracted to the village area, and economic stabilization may take place with increased demand for rural services and products. Growth with new and second incomes created through tourism including the selling of trades and crafts and other activities may emerge (Sharpley, 2002). Hall (2000) focuses on the importance of the community involvement in rural tourism and sensitiveness of social integration for rural tourism initiatives. It finds that rural tourism is one of the opportunities that rural communities might consider to improve productivity and incomes and that sustainable rural tourism can surely generate long term benefits for villagers. Hazarika, 2016 emphasizes that rural tourism is a significant strategy for rural development by providing an alternative source of livelihood and large scale employment in the rural areas. Most of the countries of the world have recognized rural tourism as an important instrument for sustainable livelihood of the rural people.

Objectives of the Study

The present study has its general objectives to explore the potentiality of rural tourism as a provider of livelihood security to the rural people and boost the local rural development in the province of Himachal Pradesh. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To study the concept of rural tourism vis-à-vis sustainable rural development.
- 2) To analyze the socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts of rural tourism in villages of Himachal Pradesh.
- 3) To discuss the Economic Multiplier Model for the local/rural economy of Himachal Pradesh.
- 4) To suggest measures to promote rural tourism in the tough hilly terrain of Himachal Pradesh.

Research Methodology

The required information has been collected mostly from secondary data sources. The data have been gleaned from various relevant books, journals, reports, e-journals and websites. The data for this study have been generated through systematic review of existing literature on rural tourism and sustainable tourism development, as also through personal observations and inferences from secondary sources.

Rural Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

According to the 2011 Census of Himachal Pradesh, 89.96 % of the state dwells in its villages. As such the rural environment, culture and people can play a vital role in the rural development of the state by adhering to the concept of rural tourism. Himachal Pradesh has got a huge diversity in terms of travel and tourism. It provides wide-ranging forms/options of tourism such as ecotourism or green tourism, rural tourism, adventure tourism, religious tourism, sustainable tourism, golf/sports tourism, nature tourism, medical/health tourism, and cultural and heritage tourism. The land of Himachal Pradesh is bequeathed with natural splendour at its best – picturesque locations; snow capped mountains, luxuriant green valleys, a cool climate and hospitable people. So Himachal Pradesh has got immense tourism potential. The tourism policy of the State government is now diversifying tourism to regions which are novel and have sufficient possibility for tourism. That's why efforts are being made to promote rural tourism and diversify tourists to countryside or new locales and decongest the over-saturated tourist destinations in urban areas.

The Government of Himachal Pradesh has launched a scheme called *Har Gaon Ki Kahani* (the story of every village), in addition to the 'Home Stay Scheme', which was launched in the year 2008 and became successful and favourite with the tourists thronging the suburban and rural areas of the province. Under 'Har Gaon Ki Kahani', fascinating tales, folklore and anecdotes related to the remote villages in Himachal Pradesh are set to attract and engage the tourists. This scheme aims at developing villages of historic significance as tourism villages by providing necessary amenities and enabling the tourists to peep into the rustic life of this state.

It needs mention here that Himachal Pradesh happens to be the first state in the country to link MNREGA with tourism promotion activities. Tourism infrastructure of the selected villages will be developed by roping in local villagers and using funds under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGA). 'Har Gaon Ki Kahani' scheme will generate self-employment and de-congest urban/suburban areas. Besides, local people will also get a chance to showcase their cuisine, folk culture, arts and handicrafts. For implementation of 'Har Gaon Ki Kahani' scheme, a committee has been constituted under the chairpersonship of the Deputy Commissioner,

which comprises the concerned District Tourism Development Officer, District Language Officer, District Public Relations Officer, District Panchayat Officer and any other member (non-official).

Sustainable Rural Development

In the shift from an “industrial” to a “risk” society (Eagles, 1992), the need for development to be “sustainable” becomes paramount. The local communities become imperative in terms of actions taken to protect their own natural environment, and also form part of wider alliances to preserve the environment globally. The place based communities have become more interested to the concept of sustainability, which integrates environmental, economic, political, cultural and social considerations (Richards & Hall, 2000). Sustainability is essential for rural tourism, since it has been proved that tourism industry has both negative and positive impacts on environment, culture and society. Sustainable rural tourism strives to augment practices which are more energy efficient, consume less water, minimize waste, conserve biodiversity, value cultural heritage and traditional values and generate local income in villages.

The issues relating to ecological sustainability can be implemented in a rural tourism enterprise in several ways. Conservation in the area may mean protecting the precious plant or animal species. Efficiency in proper use of resources is gained by installing water-efficient fittings in showers and toilets, and using renewable energy. Recycling is achieved by ensuring that all recyclable materials are collected and delivered for recycling, and the organic waste is composted. In product development, the sustainability can be taken into consideration in many ways. The environmental issues should be considered in activities for customer like fishing, hiking, boating, particularly in areas of sensitive ecosystem (Lim & McAleer, 2005). Activities in rural tourism may utilize the cultural elements from rural customs and folklore, or from local and family traditions. The tourists taking part in cultural activities are informed about the culture. This strengthens rural community’s own traditions, heritage, arts, lifestyles, places, and this all is preserved between generations. The cooperation between rural tourist companies, local enterprises and community in activity and event production increases the commitment to preserve and to provide knowledge on traditions and folklore that in turn helps to enhance the tourist experience (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003).

Thus the very essence of rural tourism is local cooperation and community involvement through appropriate forms of networking, arguably one of the most important requirements of rural tourism. The problem of rural development and planning is one of the most complex contemporary themes, because it quintessentially involves balancing the requirement of conservation of rural economic, environmental, social and cultural diversity of the country on the one hand and modernization of rural life on the other.

In both rural development and planning is at the confluence of the expansion of urban areas, the aggressive development of rural industry and the requirement due to possible areas to maintain its current size. Balanced development of the countryside can be seen as a long-term improvement of living conditions of the country, but according to the imperatives of economic, environmental, social and cultural self-respect due to population (Hanciuc, 2002). Tourism development in rural areas aims to solve key business objectives, outside motivation and satisfaction of tourism and economic issues related to the depopulation of areas caused by migration of rural population to urban centers. The concept of sustainable tourism, where rural tourism is very well defined, ensures preservation of the natural environment, traditions, customs and culture, satisfaction or fulfillment for the tourists, rural areas full of sophisticated services and lodging. Nevertheless, the contribution of tourism to rural development is important if local people participate in its development alongside preserving their ecology, environment and cultural ethnicity.

The Economic Multiplier Model

Tourism is a fast growing industry of Himachal Pradesh. Due to tremendous pressure of mass tourism on urban resources, the concept of rural tourism has been encouraged in recent years. It definitely plays a vital role in the economic development of the entire region. It brings about changes in the lifestyles and attitudes of the village people. Therefore, rural tourism needs proper and prudent implementation. Tourism destinations in the countryside require new guides, guards, researchers and/or managers to meet increasing demands and expectations of the tourists. Local people may be employed as taxi drivers, tour guides, home stay owners, folk artists and handicraft makers, or they may participate in other tourism enterprises. Besides, several other forms of employment are enhanced as rural tourism grows. Tourism is an important economic activity generating income and employment for the local rural population. Apart from increase in income and demand for local products, tourism also results in a multiplier effect. This refers to the way in which tourist expenditures filter through the economy and generate other economic activities. The multiplier effect is based on the concept of interdependency of different sectors of the economy the result of which is that any change in the host economy’s level of output, income, employment, government revenue and foreign exchange flows will be greater than the value of the initial change. The multiplier is expressed as a ratio of change in one of the above variables to the change in tourist spending that brought it about. In addition to its contribution to economic growth of the host economy, the labour intensive nature of tourism and tourism related industries results in a significant impact on the level of employment in this sector. Income and employment generation are the most obvious positive impacts of village tourism.

Thus any form of tourism that highlights the rural life, art, culture, heritage, and rural sites, thereby supporting the local community socially and economically, besides enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for more experience and enrichment, can be regarded as rural tourism. This type of tourism is being practiced in the rural areas of Himachal Pradesh. Rural Tourism of Himachal is a unique experience through which one can experience the rustic way of life, inextricably intermingled with nature, so much so the origins of various ethnic tribes and clans find their roots in nature. The success of rural tourism in Himachal owes to several factors like its location, climate, accessibility and the series of tour packages available.

The concept of home-stay is being promoted to empower the rural economy of the region. Home-stays have benefited both individual home-stay owners and local rural communities on the whole. Home-stays resulting in increased economic stability have also been linked to provide various social benefits other members of rural communities, the extent of which hinges on the level of involvement from the community itself. At present many home-stay are being opened in different suburban and rural areas for tourist purposes and it is helping in sustaining the development of the area as well as the source of livelihood of economically deprived population. Rural tourism has the potential to generate

money, which can translate into numerous positive economic opportunities for rural communities. The economic multiplier model suggests that if local income from tourist expenditures is spent within local area, an increase/multiplication in local income and jobs will follow.

The Impact of Rural Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

I. Socio-cultural impact:

Since the income from tourism is much higher than what rural people can earn from agriculture, tourism has been willingly accepted in many rural areas in spite of its negative effects. It is widely recognized that such negative impacts on rural communities have become stronger, and that rural tourism must be modified to give rural people its benefits. Poorly planned tourism can mean that villages are invaded by foreign visitors with different values, disrupting rural culture and environment.

Positive Socio-Cultural Impact:

- The rural people will learn the modern culture. They will learn to come out of their traditional values and beliefs. They will adopt different practice of modern society.
- Education and health of the rural community will improve.
- Provide higher standard of living or the rural people.
- Cultural understanding through fairs and festivals.
- Exchange of cultural will be beneficial for both tourist and the rural people.
- Reduce migration of rural people to urban areas.
- Market for local agro products and handicrafts will develop in rural areas
- The local people will try to preserve, local culture and values of the region when they realize that the tourist might come there in order to see the local culture, vales and to purchase handicrafts product at the same place.

Negative Socio-Cultural Impact:

- Modernization can adversely affect the traditional and cultural practices, agriculture and other allied activities of rural areas.
- It can create disharmony in rural development.
- Traditional products can be replaced by modern products.
- A decline in participation in rural traditional and cultural practices follows.
- Traditional houses are replaced by modern buildings, as the local culture is eroded.
- The agriculture which was the basis of traditional life can be replaced by, and becomes secondary to, tourism.
- It will create pressure on public services i.e. water electricity and sanitation.

II. Economic Impact:

Rural tourism can bring various benefits such as foreign exchange, employment, higher government revenues and the transformation of agriculture into a modern service industry; it has been a two-edged sword which has damaged many indigenous societies. The economic benefits have brought prosperity mainly to urban communities and entrepreneurs. The rate of economic return to rural communities has been low.

Positive Economic Impact:

- It will create employment opportunities for the rural people and generate income for them. They will able to provide better food and education for their children.
- Generate foreign exchange and revenue for the government.
- Demand for local and other goods and services will increase.
- Improvement in the public services i.e. .water, electricity and sanitation etc.
- Modernization of agriculture and other rural activities.
- Local small businessman will be benefited.
- It will reduce the villager's dependence to agricultural activities and single aspect economy through long term.
- The land value of rural areas will increase.
- It helps to diversify and therefore stabilize the local economy.
- It provides the opportunity for innovation and creativity in rural areas.
- Investment including foreign investment in rural areas will increase.

Negative Economic Impact:

- The facilities provider and investors such as resorts, hotels and tour operators are mainly from cities; who take away most of the profits. So economic benefits may go to urban communities and entrepreneurs. The urban investor will take away most of the profit.
- Most the products consume by tourists are from outside, not produced locally.
- There is a chance that limited employment will be generated for the rural people due to their limited knowledge and exposure. Rural people may be under paid thereby they are exploited.
- The rural people have to depend on the urban entrepreneur, so the actual benefits not reach to them.
- Due to competition the local handicraft and farm produce products will be sold at lower price.
- Increase in the price of local agro products can adversely affects their demand.
- Revenues in the forms of taxes and fees do not go to rural communities directly, but return to the state or central government.
- Rural areas have not benefited much from the multiplier effect on the development of local handicrafts, or agriculture. This undesirable situation is caused by the weak linkage between tourism and local production.
- It usually brings about increased prices for property, goods and services causing therefore, high cost of living for community residents.

III. Environment Impact:

The rural people can learn to develop the healthy environment with proper sanitation, roads, electricity, telecommunication etc for better living on one side on other side the tourist can exploit natural resources and have a heavy impact on the environment.

Positive Environment Impact:

- The rural people can learn from the visitors how to lead a healthy and hygienic life.
- Help in create and maintain the natural park.
- Local people can learn the importance of preservation of natural resources and ecology.
- They will learn to use modern tools and technology.
- They will learn to preserve the natural habitats, bio-diversity and historical monuments.
- The rural people can learn to develop the healthy environment with proper sanitation, roads, electricity, telecommunication etc. for better living.

Negative Environment Impact:

- The visitors may overexploit natural resources and it can have a heavy impact on the environment.
- Rural tourism will require infrastructure, transportation and other facilities which can cause environmental distortion. Development of infrastructure may distort the natural beauty.
- Sometimes hunting activities are done by visitors which can affect the wild life population and natural ecology will be disturbed.
- Some tourism activities such as trekking and camping have caused environmental pollution from unhygienic disposal of human waste, discharge of sewerage effluent into water sources, and littering.
- Without strict regulations on appropriate land use, high-rise buildings such as tourist hotels, and the overwhelming number of tourists, have resulted in congestion and spoiled much of the local scenery.

Suggestions

In contemporary times, it is obvious that the needs, preferences and demands of a considerable number of tourists, on one hand, and the image of the rural society, on the other, gradually change. The tourist wishes to see a new landscape and wish to fulfill not only needs of recreation, calmness and revitalizing, but also learning about nature and the rural life. Rural tourism, thus, can be considered as a stable/sustainable source of livelihood in the rural areas. Some recommendations can be made for further improvement in the following ways:

- Proper planning of master plans needs to be prepared with specific objectives and those objectives should be integrated with overall economic and social development objectives of rural areas.
- Government intervention is necessary to enhance the contribution of tourism for providing livelihood security in rural areas.
- Maintains proper co-ordination and monitoring amongst various agencies and bodies of tourism.
- Private sector partnerships and public-private partnerships should be incorporated.
- Proper development of basic infrastructure, tourist facilities, well trained tour guide enhancement of communication networks etc.
- Enhancement of the role of media in promoting tourism.
- State government should provide proper infrastructure for rural tourism development.
- Recording and formation of cultural map of Himachal which will include the existing and potential rural tourist spots and all the socio-economic elements that may contribute to the development of rural tourism.
- Promotion and advertising of rural tourism initiatives, which have been well organized and effective.
- Inspiring for infrastructural activities with sustainable rural development and enhancing transportation networks as well as production and supply of the needed goods and services for the visitors.
- Providing training courses to raise the villager's public awareness on the advantages of rural tourism.
- Planning, development and management of rural tourism based on the principle of stable development throughout Himachal Pradesh.
- To provide better Medicare facilities to the sensitive groups, such as the elderly, the children etc.
- Improvement of the means of transport, electric power supply and sanitation etc.
- Expansion of the tourism period throughout the whole year, so as to provide permanent job opportunities to rural people.
- Formation of a frame work of measures for the protection of the environment and for the maintenance of the cultural and tourism heritage.
- Establishment of an organization which can co-ordinate the rural tourism initiatives

Conclusion

Rural Tourism in the hilly region of Himachal Pradesh is beset with many incentives as well as challenges. Although it can be used as a potent tool for developing and strengthening the economy of the rural community in the state, it is not free from the perils of ecological imbalance, environmental degradation, cultural pollution and loss of indigenous traditions. Ample intensive research in the area of rural tourism is the dire need of the hour as it is one of the upcoming economic revolutions in the countryside. There is need to concentrate on how rural tourism can conform to the principles of sustainable development along with protection of ecology and environment in the rural areas. It must ensure that entrepreneurship is not developed at the cost of long-established ethnic village traditions, customs, values and practices. The native socio-cultural and traditional rubric of the villages should not be obliterated at all. A viable paradigm of rural tourism for the eco-sensitive topography of Himachal Pradesh can be developed on the basis of some of the findings and suggestions as enumerated above. This area is, however, open for further extensive research, particularly to counter the negative impacts of rural tourism on the natural as well as socio-cultural environs of Himachal Pradesh.

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