

Rural Tourism and Homestays in India: Impact on Local Economy, Culture and Ecology

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This study explores rural tourism as a sustainable form that encompasses environmental preservation, entrepreneurial opportunities, and the preservation of traditional village customs, values, and practices.

Methodology: The research methodology employed a literature review approach, focusing on secondary data sources. The search utilized the Google Scholar database as a search engine, with the initial 500 results sorted by relevance to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant scholarly sources. Finally, 31 articles were selected for this study.

Principal Findings: Operating homestays can provide alternative accommodation options and catalyze the promotion of rural tourism, benefiting the local community, economy, and regional art and culture. A well-executed marketing plan in rural tourism can bring significant societal advantages by channeling resources from urban to rural areas and curbing rural-urban migration.

Applications of the study: This study can be helpful in the tourism and hospitality industry. It is instrumental in promoting rural tourism and supplementary accommodation like homestays in India, thus boosting the local economy and promoting local culture and tradition.

Novelty/Originality of the study: Tourism and related industries substantially impact employment due to the sector's labor-intensive nature. Village tourism can generate income and employment and contribute to rural development, preventing rural-urban migration and promoting sustainable revenue generation.

INTRODUCTION

The rich traditions, historic-cultural heritage, and ample natural resources are the basis of India's tourism development. The Vedic dictum—*Atithi Devo Bhavah*, which means the guest is God—is the catchphrase of India's hospitality and tourism industry. Tourism, both urban and rural, makes considerable contributions to the image and 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 robust platform around Rural Tourism is undoubtedly helpful for a fast-developing country like India, where over 80% 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 a decrease in income levels and job opportunities, thereby leading to the “urbanization syndrome” in rural areas. Moreover, the present ecotourism culture in our country creates massive concern for the future sustainability of tourism infrastructure (Pujar & Mishra, 2020). Rural Tourism provides a solution to these problems. Besides, increasing levels of awareness, growing interest in heritage and culture, improved accessibility, and environmental consciousness have also added to the growth of rural tourism in India (Singh & Narban, 2015).

The lifestyle of a villager is different from that in metropolitan cities or other smaller cities. The village is mainly engaged in agriculture, which is becoming highly mechanized and therefore requires less manual labor, causing economic pressure on some villages, leading to an exodus of young people to urban areas, besides some other vocations such as handicrafts, arts, couture, and tourism. Rural tourism focuses on participating in a rural lifestyle. It can be a variant of ecotourism. Any village can be a tourist attraction, and many villagers are hospitable. Rural tourism offers employment and business opportunities to many people in Indian villages for better implementation of rural tourism, and it devises a strategy to adapt conventional beliefs, values, and mores to modern times (Bran *et al.*, 1997). It brings people of different cultures, languages, faiths, customs, and lifestyles close to each other. It provides a fruitful exchange of culture and a better understanding of life and humanity at large (Mostowfi, 2000). It promises to generate employment for the local people and develop social, cultural, educational, and human values and awareness.

Likewise, Rural Tourism can create a tremendous impact on the local economy and socio-cultural scenario of the concerned area and carry ample potential for the multifaceted development of the denizens of rural areas through the incorporations of homestays which become an emerging concept in Rural tourism and hospitality industry which is also considered to be the best alternative to hotel accommodation (Kneafsey, 2001). Homestay helps to come across the land,

people, culture, and cuisine of any place in its perfect aspect, unlike hotel accommodation. Different types of houses are converted to homestays like heritage homes, farmhouses, estate bungalows, ancestral homes, etc., that give a pleasant stay away from busy towns and cities but near places of tourist attractions. Homestays contribute to conserving the local cultural and natural heritage while ensuring sustained income for the local population.

The researchers have added several activities of home stays under rural tourism, which include interest in agriculture, nature, adventure, health, education, arts, handicrafts, and experiencing living history such as rural customs, folklore, local traditions, beliefs, and shared 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, 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. So, the present article intends to study how rural tourism can be one of the forms of tourism that incorporates the aspects of sustainable development along with essential provisions for the safeguarding of the environment and progression of entrepreneurship, abreast due to the conservation of long-established ethnic village traditions, customs, values, and practices.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The present study explores a few research questions discussed in the entire literature.

First, the present study aims to find the role of rural tourism in safeguarding the environment and village tradition and culture while simultaneously satisfying the guests' needs and preferences.

Secondly, the present study explores homestay's role as an alternate accommodation to promote sustainable rural tourism.

Thirdly, this study also aims to discover homestay's economic multiplier effect on rural tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review mainly focused on the sustainable development of the rural tourism sector. Homestays as an integral part of rural alternate accommodation are also an important area emphasized in the literature review. Finally, the literature has also explored the impact of rural tourism and homestay on the environment, economy, and culture.

Rural tourism can enable rural areas to achieve sustainable, productive, ecological, and socio-cultural development. (Haghsetan, Mahmoudi & Maleki, 2011) In the most significant number of instances, the travel and tourist part of the rural areas flourishes well and attracts vacationists and other types of tourists. It is regarded as accurate that rural or semi-urban areas where specific cultural, natural, or social charm is observed can enchant globetrotters, and this, on the contrary, significantly impacts the rural growth design. Hazarika, 2016 points out rural tourism as a notable area for rural progress by giving another way of occupation and comprehensive in the rural areas.

Concept of Homestay

Homestay is considered the latest trend in the hospitality and tourism industry and is also regarded as one of the perfect hotel accommodation replacements. Homestays, while ensuring sustainable income for local people, consider conserving local and cultural heritage. Besides spending quality time with a family during the homestay, other experiences add value to their travel. This type of environment is found along with the tour, which gives different types of entertainment to the tourists, such as fishing, birding tours, rural cycling, trekking and mountaineering in adjacent forests and hills, earthenware-making, elephant and jeep riding, folk dance, and others as per availability. It becomes popular with tourists who desire to know and interact with the local people and cultural attractions. Dey *et al.*, 2020 opined that the location of the homestay, the transportation facility available to reach there, and the rural and cultural attractions of that area become essential factors in rural homestay choice.

Batabyal *et al.*, 2021 also identified a safety and sustainability diaspora for the supplementary accommodation sector, like homestay, with new average sustainability in this area as a future trend. The basic concept of home remains the same everywhere, even if the place is different. A homestay recommends an intuition into the traditions, history, culture, and family life. Customers can taste home-cooked food with local and fresh spices and condiments. Foreign and many local tourists gain confidence in experiencing the comfort of a cozy environment as robust protocols do not spoil the stay. They relish the homemade delicacies and rest in the heavenly peaceful environment away from the commotion of city life. The quest for this type of travel originated in a noble accommodation area, i.e., homestay. One can clearly say that these Homestays offer a home away from home feel. Pasanchay & Schott (2021) primarily focused on homestays for their vital role in maintaining SDG1 No Poverty and SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Rural Tourism in West Bengal

As per the 2011 Census of West Bengal, 69.58% of the state lives in rural areas. Human resources, culture, and subculture play a significant role in developing rural tourism. West Bengal enjoys enormous diversity in tourism. It bestows an array of tourism like medical tourism, sustainable tourism, village tourism, religious and pilgrimage tourism, quest tourism, and heritage tourism. The state of West Bengal, especially the Darjeeling Himalayan region, is filled with inartificial magnificence– beautiful locations, snowcapped ranges, abundant green ravines, a pleasant weather pattern, and gracious persons. The state government is now developing new policies for tourism diversification, thus creating ample tourism possibilities.

The Government of West Bengal, with the tagline “Experience Bengal – The Sweetest Part of India,” focuses on preserving its excellent tourist spots, along with the ‘Home Stay Scheme,’ which was initiated in 2017, was observed to become a favorite of the tourists as it focuses the rural and suburban areas. The Government of West Bengal, Department of Tourism, has launched the West Bengal Tourist Guide Certification Scheme for the selection, training, and Certification of West Bengal Tourist Guides who will tell the enchanting stories, myths, and folklore linked to the distant villages of the state to charm and satisfy the tourists. Through this scheme and by imparting appropriate measures, tourist villages will turn into significant historic rural areas to give travelers a memorable experience ([Ray et al., 2012](#)).

It needs to be mentioned here that the West Bengal Incentive scheme is an initiative to impart support to the growing travel and tourism sector of the State to generate employment and revenue, Providing Incentives to the new Tourism Units and this to be the country’s second state to connect The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with publicizing activities of tourism. A few selected villages’ tourism infrastructures will be further improved by using the rural area people and utilizing funds. The ‘West Bengal Incentive scheme’ scheme will help dynamic, willing, and potential youths to begin their venture as independent entrepreneurs, and ultimately, it will raise the number of entrepreneurs and de-congest urban/suburban places. Rural people can also display their products, handicrafts, local cuisines, etc.

Sustainable Rural Development

To shift an “industrial” to a “risk” society ([Eagles, 1992](#)), the requirement for the growth to be “sustainable” is most important. Rural and semi-urban inhabitants are more prone to saving their natural resources for the global preservation of the environment ([Janjua et al., 2021](#)). Nowadays, communities show more responsibility toward sustainability, which positively impacts cultural, political, environmental, and social life ([Richards & Hall, 2000](#)). As the travel and tourism sector impacts both positively and negatively on the environment, rural tourism must follow sustainability in all aspects. It is essential for sustainable rural tourism to find innovative ways that are more energy efficient yet consume less electricity and water. It also should focus on conserving biodiversity, reshaping cultural heritage and traditional values, and developing local people by increasing their income through rural tourism ([Takuli et al., 2022](#)). It has been observed that the heritage of the local community impacts local people and tourist engagement, which further controls the rural tourism infrastructure that leads to customer satisfaction ([Sharma & Sarmah, 2021](#)).

Ecological sustainability issues can be executed in several ways in rural tourism. Protecting species of animals and plants is called conservation in a particular area. Recycling can be ensured by verifying that all recyclable products are gathered and sent for recycling. Sustainability can be implemented in several ways in the product development cycle. [Chatterjee and Karmarkar \(2023\)](#) emphasized the application of the sustainable development goals in the hospitality and tourism sector for their sustainable transformation. Sustainable factors must be considered in sensitive ecotourism activities like boating, hiking, mountaineering, trekking, fishing, etc. ([Lim & McAleer, 2005](#)). Cooperation and support among travel houses, tourist offices, and rural communities will positively impact the preservation and knowledge enhancement of folklore traditions and other cultural activities to boost tourism ([Jolliffe & MacDonald, 2003](#)). The study by [Basak et al., 2021](#) found that creating tourism employment, demand-based handicraft production, and proper coordination and connection in the market in rural areas is essential.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important necessities of rural tourism is the cooperation and involvement of the local community through proper networking. Alongside the urban areas, the steady development of the rural areas is considered proof of the long-term improvement of the country, though social, cultural, and economic areas need to be considered because of the population ([Hanciuc, 2002](#)). The main objective of rural tourism is to find solutions to rural problems, economic issues, and tourism issues caused by the movement of village people to cities. Sustainable tourism secures the preservation of natural resources, culture, sub-culture, traditions, and customs to exceed the expectation level of the tourists with some necessary facilities like quality food and accommodation. In their studies, [Kunjuraman et al., 2022](#) showed concern about the adverse effect of community-based ecotourism on rural tourism. However, suppose village people engage themselves in the tourism development of the rural areas besides their cultural, ecological, and environmental preservation. In that case, the contribution of tourism to the development of rural areas can be adequately justified.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted is a review of literature from secondary data like journal articles and books or book chapters. The authors initiated the research by designing a plan, which was established because of the relevance of the present topic. The initial step was to formulate the questions that the authors considered to answer in the research. Keywords were searched in the Google Scholar database by providing “(Tourism OR Economy OR Environment) AND (Rural OR Homestay OR Village)”. The first 500 results were ranked by relevance in the Google Scholar search engine study. A total of 65 articles were considered after the initial search. After the articles were screened for duplicates or relevance, 30 were selected for this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Homestays as Economic Multiplier

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in West Bengal. Due to the massive constraint of significant tourism on metropolitan resources, the idea of rural tourism has been stimulated. It significantly impacts the economic growth of the whole area. It enables the changes in the behavior and attitude of the rural inhabitants. So, proper application is essential

for the growth of rural tourism. Village people can be easily employed as cab drivers, tour guides, small hotel or homestay owners, folk artists, small store owners, food service outlet owners, and handicraft makers, or they may take part in other tourism-related areas. Apart from that, many other different types of employment opportunity are grown as village tourism develops (Balasingam & Bojei, 2019).

Tourism is considered a crucial economic venture that generates income and employment opportunities for ordinary people in rural areas (Hall & Brown, 2000). Besides increasing the income level and demand for village products, tourism can help to obtain an economic multiplier effect—the way by which expenditures of the tourists transfer through the economy and earn other monetary activities. The multiplier effect is established on the basic idea of the interconnection of various sectors of the economy; the outcome is that when there is any change in the economic level of the host, foreign exchange, revenue earned by the government, employment opportunity, and flow of income level will be much more than the earlier value (Shahudin *et al.*, 2017). The multiplier is exhibited as a ratio of change in one of these variables to the change in spending of the tourists that caused it. Furthermore, its impact on the economic growth of the host economy and the service-oriented nature of tourism and tourism-related sectors provides a crucial impact on the number of jobs in this sector. Income and employment generation are observed as the most fascinating impacts of rural tourism. The rural tourism of West Bengal is an extraordinary experience dependent on several factors, such as a soothing climate, perfect location, easy accessibility, and different types of customized tour packages.

The concept of Homestay has gained so much attention, especially in rural areas, in the last couple of years, as there is hardly any better way to explore the incredible diversity and rural touch than a homestay. Different homestay options include bungalows, havelis, and simple rural accommodation. The best way to learn about Indian tradition and culture is to spend quality time with Indian families (Kulshreshtha & Kulshreshtha, 2019). This valuable local awareness proves to be immensely helpful in learning about rural culture. Several hosts feel honored to share valuable insights with their guests, including their food habits, local sightseeing, and specialties, which can be experienced in a tour book. As there is a significant distinction between the food cooked at home and food cooked in a hotel or restaurant, one cannot taste the authentic actual flavor of the soil in a hotel food, but only in a home-controlled establishment the actual flavor of the rural food can be relished.

Thus, rural communities and individual homestay owners benefit from this heavenly homestay concept. As many other industries in rural areas are directly or indirectly related to homestay, this increased economic stability through homestay positively impacts and creates substantial business opportunities for all these industry houses (Ogucha *et al.*, 2015). Nowadays, homestays are primarily found in remote rural areas and suburban areas, and the poor economy is primarily observed in those places, so homestays help revamp the economic level of those backward areas and improve the economic level of the rural people. Like other tourism sectors, rural tourism also has the potential to earn many businesses that can create various economic opportunities for the village people. As per the economic multiplier model, multiplication in local income will happen if tourist expenditure is spent within the boundary of the local area, and this will also generate a more significant number of jobs in the local area.

This initiative of the state and central government to provide budget accommodation to foreign tourists under the homestay concept is becoming very popular. Even private hotels and homestays are moving this forward. Under this initiative, a person with several rooms in his establishment can rent rooms to tourists cheaper than hotels, and tourists will experience a taste of the local food and culture.

Impact of Rural Tourism in West Bengal

As the income generated from tourism is more than what village people can get from agriculture, the acceptance level of tourism in many rural areas has increased a lot. Due to the positive socio-cultural impact, rural people will move away from their traditional values and beliefs and accept the positive aspects of modern culture, improving their health, education, and livelihood (Kundu, 2012). Fairs and festivals in the village will benefit the rural people and the tourists through the exchange of culture. There is a high demand for handicrafts and local agro products among tourists in rural areas. As tourists mainly come to a village or rural area to experience the local values and traditions and purchase handicrafts, the village people must conserve the rural culture and heritage.

Rural tourism has a brilliant economic impact that generally gives many advantages, such as foreign exchange earnings, creating jobs, entrepreneurship, increased government revenues, and the conversion of agriculture to a contemporary service industry. Rural tourism generates income for the village people by increasing their employment opportunities. However, to provide the benefit of rural tourism to the village people, it has to be wisely maintained. As most of the investors in the village in the forms of hotels, resorts, theme parks, etc., are from urban areas, the flow of the economic benefits is observed to happen from rural to urban areas as being the investors, they will get hold of most of the revenues.

In this way, economic benefits might move to urban owners and entrepreneurs (Ray *et al.*, 2012). There is a possibility that a handful of employment will only be initiated for the village people because of their knowledge and information. To exploit them further, rural people may not be adequately paid. Local handicraft products can be sold at a lower price in this competitive market. Village areas may not benefit much from the multiplier effect on rural tourism. It has been observed that improper linkage between rural tourism and local production houses is responsible (Sharpley, 2002).

Besides, on the one side, the local people can learn the standard of a better living from the tourists to lead a healthier life by developing basic infrastructure like roads, healthcare, and electricity, maintaining proper hygiene and sanitation, and

maintaining land and other natural resources in an environmentally friendly way, on the other hand, the tourist can hurt the environment and ecology as various requisites of rural tourism such as transportation, infrastructure, increased population, and deforestation, etc. will result in ecological deformation. Infrastructure developments are proven to deform the natural enchantment, and environmental ecology is also distorted when hunting activities endanger the wildlife population. Tourism activities like mountaineering, camping, and trekking can result in environmental degradation from human waste disposal and the unhygienic release of sewage into water bodies.

Development of homestays and rural tourism

In contemporary times, the primary challenges are the requirement to conserve the ecology and natural environment, the necessity for education, genuine recognition for rural people and tourists, and the demand to generate a popular campaign encouraging people to engage in village tourism development. To increase the rural people's quality of life and maintain a sustainable rural ecology, more attention must be given to improving the bare landscape and infrastructure, providing occupational training, and promoting rural handicrafts (Chin *et al.*, 2014).

Introducing a cooperative system can efficiently create a positive impact in rural areas and develop village tourism and homestays. There are many ways to grow rural tourism and homestays.

- First, an appropriate plan needs to be prepared according to the aims and objectives, which should be aligned with the village's sociocultural and economic development.
- Secondly, to increase tourism contribution and ensure rural livelihood security, the state or central government needs to be approached.
- Thirdly, proper coordination among different travel bodies and tourism houses is required.
- Fourthly, transportation networks and basic infrastructure must be developed while maintaining sustainability in rural areas.
- Fifthly, it is urgent to enhance the role of the media in promoting rural tourism activities, including present and potential village tourist destinations, as a contribution to the development of village tourism through advertisement and promotion.
- Sixth, improved healthcare infrastructure must be provided for privileged groups, such as older adults, adolescents, and children.
- Seventhly, to develop rural tourism and homestays and create permanent jobs for the village people, some necessary measures like infrastructure development, hygiene and sanitation measures, and sustainable measures are to be maintained (Kontogeorgopoulos *et al.*, 2017).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we can undoubtedly say that the present study has proved that homestay could produce supplementary accommodation areas and a way for rural tourism promotion and its positive impact on the rural people, socio-culture, and economy of the village areas. The study also found the hurdles to overcome for developing and promoting rural tourism. More emphasis should be placed on forming policies for sustainable development and environmental protection measures in rural and sub-urban areas. Both the state and central government can earn a lot of revenue and foreign exchange if sustainable rural tourism projects are adequately nurtured, and this inflow of resources from the urban and suburban economy to rural areas can stop the movement of village people to urban areas for employment and business opportunities.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Every research has limitations that can be focused on further study. Firstly, only articles that are written in English are considered in the study. Secondly, a review of the literature is the method applied in the study. So, further study considering more study and quantitative analysis methods need to be considered. A few areas, as depicted by Januja *et al.*, 2021 branding of homestays, entrepreneurship areas of homestays, and homestay owners' training and development can be considered as future areas of study. The qualitative study will also be an area of future research, as it will involve interviews with homestay owners and rural tourism service providers. More intensive research in rural tourism is needed as sustainable rural tourism is one of the upcoming economic revolutions in the rural areas of our country.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare no conflict of interest and ensure that no unethical practices were followed during the study.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Study conception: Pratim Chatterjee, Subho Ghosh; draft manuscript preparation, analysis, and interpretation: Namrata Chakraborty, Pratim Chatterjee; all authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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