

Rural tourism analysis

Sport & Tourism



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A BRIEF ANALYSIS ON THE STATUS OF RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA REFERENCE:

GIMRM024 Table of Contents Abstract2 Initiatives6 Issues Faced8

Infrastructure10Finance11 Impact12 The Way Forward13 Bibliography14

ABSTRACT Tourism is one of the primary catalysts in generating sustainable livelihood in India. India's vast rural diversity and heritage offers tremendous opportunity for rural tourism. The idea of rural tourism was born out of the need to provide first-hand experience of living in rural areas to the urban population and also as supplementary income for the local population.

The Ministry of Tourism in its Outcome Budget for 2011-2012 has emphasized on the need of giving greater focus to rural tourism with the objective of creating employment, with specific emphasis on the upliftment of the status of women and to encourage local arts and handicraft. Rural tourism has the potential of carrying the additional burden of uplifting poverty and reducing migration towards urban areas.

This research paper aims at studying the status of rural tourism in India, looking into some initiatives that have already been undertaken, both by the Ministry (The Choti Haldwani Project at the foothills of Nainital) and by organisations (NGO ViaDesh, Delhi and Himalayan Homestays, Ladakh) in different parts of India and the way forward. The paper concentrates on the following major areas: 1) Initiatives undertaken 2) Problems faced while trying to establish such initiatives 3) Infrastructure developed for this purpose 4) The finances involved 5) The impact of such initiatives 6) Its co-relation with eco-tourism and agri-tourism 7) Future plans The government of India along with UN Development Programme (UNDP) has drafted policies and implemented some on the same lines by associating and granting funds

to NGOs. Rural tourism will go a long way in realising some of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) laid out by the UNDP, to be achieved by 2015. “ The air is soft and balmy. The wild flowers are in full bloom, and the butterfly is on the wing.

The grasshopper is singing his ceaseless song, and the bees are humming a chorus thereto. ” These are excerpts from Ruskin Bond’s novel “ Mussoorie & Landour, Days of Wine and Roses”. Such is the beauty of the Indian landscape. Tourism in India is the biggest service industry contributing 6. 23% to GDP and providing a host of employment opportunities. With 5. 58 million Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in 2010 and a provisional number of 2. 92 million during the first half of 2011, the tourism industry is pegged to grow at a rate of 9. 4% annually over the next decade.

It’s linkages with a myriad of sectors in the economy, like transport, construction, handicrafts, manufacturing, horticulture, agriculture, etc. , makes it a potential economy driver, while also becoming an effective tool for poverty alleviation and ensuring growth with equality. The focus, thus, is now on rural tourism, an avenue that provides immense possibilities and opportunities for inclusive growth and equality in rural India. The Ministry of Tourism (MoT) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have collaborated in an initiative named the Endogenous Tourism Project – Rural Tourism Scheme (ETP-RTS) on rural tourism.

Initiated in 2003, the project identified 36 sites across India, where a number of pilot projects have been initiated to assess the impact of this kind of tourism in these areas. The principal objective of the project is to focus on

sustainable livelihoods and at the same time aims at the convergence of issues such as gender equality, empowerment of women, youth and other disadvantaged sections and working towards cultural sensitivity and environmental sustainability. This paper will look into one such government initiative, Choti Haldwani, which is a community based tourism project.

Apart from government initiatives, numerous NGOs have been involved in different forms of rural tourism, be it agri-tourism, treks, homestays, workshops with locals etc. In the NGO space, this paper cites the example of ViaDesh, a social enterprise, based out of Delhi that arranges expeditions and treks in Uttarakhand, the Himalayan Belt (Kargil, Leh, Ladakh etc) and Rajasthan. This paper also briefly looks at Himalayan Homestays, an initiative by the Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC), The Mountain Institute, local tour operators and villagers living in important snow leopard areas.

Traditional tourism, concentrated in coastal and mountain resorts, urban and cultural centres, has proven that tourism can bring enormous benefits to the economy, society and environment of a certain area. However at the same time there is a realization that certain parts of the country have been left behind in development. Rural tourism could be the harbinger of change in such a scenario. In recent years demands for holidays in small villages and the countryside has increased significantly in many rural regions of the world.

The challenge for rural tourism then is to focus on providing sustainable livelihoods in rural areas all while preserving the traditions, cultures and values that exist in these areas, instead of trying to “urbanise” the area.

INITIATIVES Choti Haldwani Choti Haldwani, better known as Jim Corbett's village, is located in the Nainital District of Uttarakhand. Bought by Corbett in the early 1900s, this was the last village he stayed in before migrating to Kenya after Independence, donating the land to the 40 families residing in Choti Haldwani at that time.

The village has now grown in population with 138 families making Choti Haldwani their home, and earning their livelihood mainly from agriculture. In 2001, Choti Haldwani was one of the four villages chosen to implement a community-based tourism (CBT) project. The CBN (Corbett National Park, Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, Nainital) Tourism Initiative was designed to develop a framework for conservation and tourism by making use participatory processes that seek to engage stakeholder groups for planning, to help develop a common vision, build ownership, and buy in from various stakeholder groups for plans and projects.

Many consultations and deliberations later, the USP of the village was discovered. This led to the formation of the Corbett Heritage Trail (which included historical sites like Corbett's house, the historical gun of Tejsingh and Moti's House to name a few). ViaDesh ViaDesh (established in 2010) is a social enterprise based out of Delhi. Its philosophy is engrained in its name – ViaDesh literally translates to “by way of country”.

Founded by Jamal Mohammad and aimed at promoting village life and providing sustainable livelihood options, Viadesh promotes itself as a unique holiday planner committed to giving a transformative experience to both the tourist and the host. ViaDesh works towards building partnerships with

villagers, and forging relationships with them through community interaction. The expeditions and treks give the tourist a first-hand experience of rural living. They are exposed to the unique and rich village culture that every village brings with it.

Villagers turn into guides, narrating stories from the village and sharing their own experiences with the tourists. Tourists also bear witness to the different folk songs and dances, gathering together with the village folk. Home-stays are arranged for tourists in some of the houses within the village itself. By doing this, ViaDesh ensures that the tourist is involved, from early morning, in every facet of village life. Starting from collection and preparation of fodder for animals to cooking food, to even plucking apples and apricots from plantations and planting herbs like oregano, tourists get hands-on experience of rural living. Rural locations offer an idealized release from stress and the opportunity to re-engage with a simpler, quieter way of life that offers rest and relaxation. Himalayan Homestays Himalayan Homestays is an Initiative by Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC), The Mountain Institute, local tour operators and villagers living in important snow leopard areas. The need for this initiative was felt due to the rising disparity between the rural and the urban communities due to the fact that the tourism boom in Ladakh offered little opportunities to the rural people.

The rural community was also facing the problem of diminishing livestock population due to Snow leopards. Hence they offered tourism as a solution to promote conservation as well as to combat livestock loss. Villagers defined the Himalayan Homestays in the following way: “ A traditional village based Ladakhi Homestay would share their traditional way of life and values with

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visitors provide traditional food, in an eco-friendly environment that requires little initial investment. (Source - Redefining Tourism: Experiences and Insights from Rural Tourism Projects in India) The project was implemented with various guidelines for selecting locations to setting minimal facilities such as a separate room for tourist to a toilet (with door). Also 10% of the money generated was to be divulged into the conservation fund for village activities. Initially, for setting up, they assessed the demand and preferences of the tourist by conducting a survey for the location choice, food and accommodation option as well. Interestingly, the choice was local food was rated highly.

Capacity building measures such as training the youth as nature guides. To avoid hygiene issues, community members were trained on cooking and cuisine as well. The main aim of SLC was community empowerment and hence it was decided that the tourists would be shared on rotation basis. For the homestays, which were far off, and where the tourists were unwilling to go, they were trained for additional services such as Parachute cafes, Guides etc. ISSUES FACED Rural tourism as a whole is a sensitive issue to deal with since it deals with people and also their livelihoods.

The rural people are skeptical about the kind of invasion that happens due to rural tourism. While implementing rural tourism many issues have cropped up. It is necessary to understand that the issues faced by the government are different from private and non-governmental entities. a) Finance: It deals with arranging as well as managing finances for any project. This aspect is prevalent in all initiatives from the government. Here the government has

struggled to route funds flow whereas private players have found it difficult to arrange funds for the project.

If the funds flow issues crops up at the beginning of the project then it becomes difficult to keep the local community engaged as they tend to lose interest as well as trust in the initiative. b)Pace of the Project: It is an important issue that needs to be addressed. It has been observed that private entities have tried to build upon strong finances. This has resulted in very little time for institutions as well as the local community to reflect on their performance and also absorb this transition.

In a fast paced project, the players fail to understand that this is a sensitive issue where resources and money are of equal importance. The pace of project should be best decided by the local communities involved as it would be help them adapt to their role. c)Partner Agencies: This issue is predominantly associated with the government where the implementing agencies differ in vision and also their work ethics. The government needs to understand that different agencies behave differently and hence the outcome of the projects would also vary.)Local Community: The basic motto of this project was to eradicate poverty and envisage an empowerment campaign. Many a time it has been observed that the richer community in the village gets all the control while the poorer sections takes a backseat, as they are deprived of minimum requirements for a tourist such as separate homestays or even proper education. Here the government needs to ensure that these people are involved in group activities where they could learn and also contribute. Also, conscious measures should be taken to incorporate the marginalized communities into the success story.

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Government as well as private players should make sure that inclusive growth takes place and hence the beneficiary is the entire village and not select individuals. e)Hygiene: Hygiene is an issue which has made foreign as well as domestic tourists hesitate in turning an eye to rural tourism. Basic facilities such as bathroom and sanitation have been a cause of concern for tourists. The players should make sure that proper training should be given to handle these things so that the village does not lose out.)Issues from Tourists: Tourists, many a time, tend to compare rural tourism with general tourist spots and hence get bogged down by the results. Tourists are not able to connect with the rural theme which results in loss of interest. Also, sometimes issues like food and lifestyle tend to be a hindrance in the project. Sometimes, the traditional and cultural beliefs of the rural people prevent them from catering to the needs of the tourists. g)Cultural and EnvironmentalPollution: Tourism is a phenomenon which also brings with itself the ill effects.

If not implemented properly, it can lead to destruction of the very basic cause of rural tourism i. e. the cultural heritage. Also, with hordes of tourists pouring in, the environment is at risk. Moreover, sometimes there should be strict control at some places because there are traditions and cultural beliefs of people that will prevent them from catering to all that the tourists may require and even the tourist would know that this is what he can expect in a village and accordingly will prepare them before coming to that village. The major issue faced by the Choti Haldwani community was visibility.

It gets lost in the mad rush of tourists from Corbett to Nainital. With the Himalayan Homestays initiative gaining popularity, many other institutions

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have also tried to tap into the market. But in the process, the focus has shifted from community development to profit making. It also did not consider the capacity of the community, hence impacting the social structure. Also, the influx of many tourists eventually led to negative influence on the environment. With the difficult terrain, many of the homestays would not get sufficient number of tourists.

This led to disparity between the villagers. INFRASTRUCTURE A key aspect in setting up different facilities was the formation of the Corbett Gram Vikas Samiti that coordinated with the project team (mainly from Forest Department and consultants) and took up implementation of work at the village. This ensured that the inhabitants of the village had a say in the development of the village as a tourist site. Proper footpaths were organised, information signboards were set up, an entry gate set up and renovations at the various heritage sites carried out.

To support the Heritage Trail, the following activities were carried out

1) Training of guides: Interested people were asked to register for training as guides, but since not many tourists opted for the walk, the number of guides is dwindling, but there still is hope with a number of women interested in undergoing training as guides. 2) Identifying homestays: Presently only two families provide homestays. Although the concept of homestays is fast catching up with the community, the facilities within the homes is a hurdle, as these houses are installed with the traditional Indian toilets.

Unlike ViaDesh, new houses are thus being built with better facilities for the tourist. Homestays rents and dining are very nominal at the rate of Rs 250/-

a day with Rs. 60/- per person for 3 meals. 3) Establishing a souvenir shop:

The Moti Souvenir Shop, run by the village committee, ran into trouble initially with very little funds and limited knowledge on how to run and what to sell at the shop. Eventually, with the aid of the committee, Haldi (turmeric) was bought from a lady, which was powdered and sold at the shop. The profits are given out to the lady, which has resulted in other items like pulses and spices being sold at the shop.

Also, with the help of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), three self-help ladies groups were started, who supply products like jam, jellies and pickles to the shops. In addition to this, handmade hankies, scarves, bed sheets, dupattas and sweaters from Ranikhet were sold at the shop. 4) Information kiosks: In a small section of the souvenir shop, a computer with internet connection has been set up, with a trained person manning it. Although introduced for the tourists, this has benefitted children more, as they are provided computer education with a fee of Rs. 200/-.

ViaDesh's policy is simple – no construction of new structures and the promotion of indigenous lifestyle. In an attempt to preserve the natural environment of the village and to inhibit urbanization of villages, ViaDesh, in partnership with the villagers, arrange for homestays within the village. One room in selected houses is refurbished to cater to the tourist lifestyle, which is taken care of by the residents. ViaDesh has installed eastern-style toilets in all homestays to give tourists the actual feel of rural life. Apart from this, hosts are trained about hygiene and cleanliness standards that need to be adopted.

They are also trained to follow hygiene while cutting vegetables and preparing food. ViaDesh has tried to work around the available resources and provide a comfortable experience for the tourist. As such physical infrastructure was not built for the Himalayan Homestays project unlike mud houses in other places. The trust had decided on tourists sharing the rooms with the villagers. Hence, there was a need for virtual infrastructure to attract tourists and spread awareness. The trust tied up with local operators to market Himalayan homestays.

It was a conscious effort that the local operators chosen would think as well as work in parallel towards the community. This move also helped in briefing the tourists about the norms to avoid confrontation at the later stages. The trust also developed a website to tap the tourist seeking a similar experience on the internet. To tap walk-in clients, the trust had designed posters and maps as well. It was decided that 10% of the fund would be shared with the conservation fund. Conservation fund was used for various community works such as preserving wildlife, tree plantation etc. FINANCE

ViaDesh, being a fledgling organisation, is a self-financed enterprise. Initial investment for setting up rooms, toilets etc. was made by Jamal. Participants' project donations also help to ensure that funds are available throughout the year to maintain the work done by the teams. These funds are either channelled through ViaDesh's own charity, Sustainable Tourism Trust, or partner charities. ViaDesh donates 10% of its profits from travel to community development projects in host areas, with a focus on health and education. The investment involved at Himalayan Homestays was only Rs. 500/- for one home as the people would be thoroughly trained in various

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aspects of tourism (as guides and drivers). Also, the tour operator charged Rs. 50/- for spreading awareness about the homestays. The villagers would get Rs. 300/- per tourist per night, which would be directly paid to the homestay provider, to avoid clashes with agents or guides. IMPACT The Choti Haldwani project has managed to keep alive the history and legacy of Corbett. For the tourists visiting the National Park, Choti Haldwani adds another dimension to understanding Corbett. Even though the benefits (economics of it) are limited the motivation is very high.

The interest & enthusiasm shown, the coming and working together of the community in a cohesive manner is another critical aspect of this initiative which is a significant reason why the community has been able to sustain this engagement. New jobs and supplementary sources of income have been created, with more opportunities in the offing. There has also been active participation from women in the SHGs that were formed in collaboration with WWF. While ViaDesh is still trying to evaluate its impact on villages, the potential impact of this venture and such ventures like this are enormous.

It gives the locals an alternate source of income, from homestays, guides, drivers, porters and trekking activities. This in turn prevents the migration (which is rampant in rural areas for lack of better opportunities) of people to cities. ViaDesh ensures that the money earned from homestays etc. is given to the female member of the household, thus promoting woman empowerment. ViaDesh aims for these communities to build their capacity to make things, from handicrafts to eatables like jams, and for them to be able to sell such quality items in the city market.

Initiatives like this also squash the myth that rural community is not open to change. With tourists coming in and staying with the locals, there is mutual benefit from such initiatives. It's a mutually enriching experience. ViaDesh also aims at setting up quality education and health centres within the area from the funds set aside from profit for such a purpose. Himalayan Homestays has had a positive impact on the villagers. The additional income from the homestays was helpful in buying ration in lean season and even sending children to the school.

It also helped villagers in protecting their livestock and build predator-proof pens. The income gave much deprived decision power to the women community of the villages. The tourism activity increased local participation with the fact that many parachute cafes and local businesses propped up. The flow of tourists also instilled a sense of pride in the local people for their culture and lifestyle. In a way, this activity also helped preserve Ladhaki culture as people can now take pride in displaying the distinct Ladhaki decor and cuisine.

The community on a whole has had an increased awareness of hygiene. The tourism activity also helped in checking migration of youth towards city. Homestays helped in the overall personality development of the villagers as the interaction with foreign tourists increased. Some of the added benefits for the villagers were the utilization of conservation fund, adoption of waste management practices and tree plantation activities. A change of attitude was seen in the villagers towards the snow leopards as they are now the attractions for the tourists to visit this place.

The homestay experience for the tourists helped in learning about Ladakhi cultures through nature treks and its cuisines. THE WAY FORWARD The way ahead for the Samiti at Choti Haldwani is now to work and continue development on the initiatives already undertaken, and also start new programmes like organic farming and bullock cart rides to further expand and provide different sustainable employment opportunities for the locals. ViaDesh intends to move further into different villages and start similar projects like the ones already established.

At the same time, ViaDesh aims at phasing its operations out of the existing locations, thus making these villages self-sustainable, with a well-established education and health system running. The idea of converting a livelihood problem into tourism initiative has worked well for the community based around the Himalayan Homestays initiative. Also, this project shows how rural tourism is related to eco-tourism and agri-tourism. This project has helped the community in its economic upliftment through measures such as these, while keeping the local culture intact.

This project has also helped in protecting snow leopards and generating an alternative source of income through it. It shows how a balance can be maintained between tourism and ecology. Rural tourism has immense potential in the overall development of the economy, while preserving the rural structure, cultures and keeping traditions intact. Government initiatives should constantly monitor the progress of the projects that have already been initiated, continuously identifying bottlenecks and obstacles, to ensure the smooth functioning of such initiatives.

Rural Tourism can help achieve some of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aims at ending poverty by 2015. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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