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RURAL TOURISM: EXPLORING THE CULTURAL AND HERITAGE OF OUR NATION

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Abstract

Rural tourism in India is a rapidly growing sector with vast potential to drive economic growth, preserve cultural heritage, and empower local communities. Echoing Gandhi's view that "True India resides in its village," the article highlights how India's diverse villages offer unique cultural experiences that attract city dwellers seeking to reconnect with their roots. While rural tourism provides alternative livelihoods, reduces out-migration, revives traditional crafts, and promotes women's entrepreneurship, it still holds a small share of the market due to gaps in connectivity and amenities. The Government of India has responded with a National Strategy and Roadmap for Rural Tourism, aiming to integrate schemes for poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and self-reliance under Atmanirbhar Bharat. Key benefits include job creation, skill development, cultural exchange, improved infrastructure, environmental conservation, and sustainable income beyond agriculture. Better road networks, digital payment systems like ETC, and initiatives such as UNWTO's "Best Tourism Villages," which recognized Telangana's Pochampally in 2021, are boosting accessibility to remote areas, especially in the Northeast. To unlock its full potential, rural tourism needs coordinated policy support, infrastructure investment, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, enabling travelers to experience authentic India while fostering inclusive, sustainable development in its villages.

Key Words: Rural Tourism, Cultural and Heritage of Nation, Promoting Rural Tourism, Atmanirbhar Bharat

Introduction

Tourism has long been one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries, with both developed and developing countries relying on it for economic growth. Although urban and mainstream travel destinations have always been popular among travelers, the demand for offbeat and rural tourism has grown exponentially in recent years. This article aims to make a compelling case for rural tourism in India and how accessing the most remote parts of the country has become easier in this day and age.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "True India resides in its village." Indian villages have a unique diversity and cultural rituals that are extremely valuable to the tourism industry. Because of the recent growth in the Indian rural tourism market, many Indian villages have now found a place on the tourist map. It not only gives the villagers a much-needed additional source of income but also allows visitors to interact with them and gain a rare insight into their way of life. The villages are said to be at the heart of India.

Rural India – Back to our roots

Most city dwellers long to escape the madness of the city every now and then. They seek a place of serenity and peace to disconnect from work and reconnect with their roots. Come to think about it, we have all experienced rural tourism in our own unique ways at some point. School vacations were spent at ancestral homes, running around with cousins, playing in the front yard, and visiting the farm to steal mangoes from the neighbour's trees. Back then, all of this felt like routine. Something we all did every summer. But as we grew older, vacations started to become a thing of the past, and our trips to our roots became a luxury.

This is when we realise how important it is to reconnect with our roots and experience the simple lives of rural dwellers. Although rural tourism in India is thriving, better connectivity and amenities are needed to help it reach its full potential and attract even more visitors, as it has the potential to become a source of sustainable livelihood for rural communities.



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The Government's Efforts in Promoting Rural Tourism

Rural tourism continues to hold a very small share of the Indian tourism market, even though it can be a valuable contributor to the rural economy. Recognizing the enormous potential of rural tourism in India, the Ministry of Tourism has developed a **National Strategy and Roadmap for the Development of Rural Tourism in India** – an initiative aimed at *Atmanirbhar Bharat*. The Indian government has also viewed it as a potential tool for developing remote villages. The national strategy and roadmap for rural tourism development aim to prioritize rural tourism at the national level. It also aims to bring together various programmes addressing issues such as poverty, women's empowerment, and rural economic development.

Developing and promoting local agricultural and handicrafts through tourism can generate income and jobs in rural areas while also empowering local communities, youth, and women, thereby fulfilling the government's goal of self-reliance. Developing digital technologies for rural tourism, developing clusters for rural tourism, providing marketing support and increasing the capacity of stakeholders while strengthening governance and the institutional framework are some of the strategic pillars of this policy.

The Benefits of Rural Tourism – Stimulating Economic Growth

Rural tourism promotes the social and economic development of rural residents. It provides alternative employment opportunities for locals while also reducing out-migration. Rural tourism also plays an important part in reviving traditional culture, craft, and art by providing rural producers with marketing opportunities to sell their products and services directly to tourists. Developing and promoting local agricultural and handicrafts through tourism can generate income and jobs in rural areas while also empowering local communities.

Tourists rarely get to see the real India; they rarely get to experience India in its natural state. Promoting rural tourism has a lot of benefits, as it primarily allows tourists to experience and explore India's rich heritage, and it allows people living in rural India to make a living through tourism.

Here are some benefits of promoting rural tourism:

- **Reducing the reliance on agriculture:** Agriculture is the sole source of income for the rural masses in India. However, rural tourism has emerged as a potential tool for reducing their reliance on agriculture.
- **Reviving traditional culture and art** – Rural tourism promotes the revival of traditional art, craft, traditions, and culture, providing rural producers with marketing opportunities to sell their products and services directly to tourists.
- **Alleviating poverty** – Rural tourism has the potential to alleviate rural poverty. Local communities can shape their societies both economically and socially with the help of rural tourism.
- **Foster entrepreneurship** – Rural tourism is a new concept in India that requires creative, energetic, and enthusiastic young people. It has broadened the career opportunities for these young entrepreneurs.

Rural Tourism Benefit Rural Communities – A Catalyst to New Opportunities

- **Job creation** – The main benefit of promoting rural tourism is the creation of job opportunities, particularly for those who do not have agricultural land to meet their economic needs.
- **Developing new skills** – To cater to tourists, the entire tourism and hospitality industry requires specific skills. When tourists begin to visit the local areas, members of the local community begin to learn new skill sets.
- **Cultural exchange** – It also promotes culture because a local community shares their culture and traditions with tourists, learning about their cultures in the process.



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- **Reduces urban drift** – One of the challenges that most countries face is the movement of people from rural to urban areas. The promotion of rural tourism reduces urban drift by providing people with job opportunities in their communities. Furthermore, with the rise of tourism comes infrastructure development, which encourages people to stay in their communities rather than migrate to urban areas.
- **Improves residents' quality of life** – Because social interaction occurs between tourists and locals, rural tourism has enormous potential to improve residents' quality of life. They have global access to information, products, and services. As the number of tourists increases in this region, the local government begins to build infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and hospitals.
- **Opportunities for entrepreneurship** – The tourism industry has enormous potential for new business opportunities, as interested individuals can venture into a variety of support services. There are numerous entrepreneurial opportunities available as a result of the rural tourism industry.
- **Builds community pride** – Rural tourism can also help to diversify communities by allowing locals to start leveraging their existing resources for economic and social benefit. Communities with unique resources can earn a living by improving their skills and boosting community pride.
- **Environmental advantages** – With increased tourist traffic in any community, there is a risk of environmental degradation. On the other hand, landscape conservation can be promoted to preserve authenticity. It can also encourage local communities to adopt eco-friendly practices.
- **Improves sustainability** – Rural tourism has the potential to provide a sustainable livelihood to rural communities as a source of income regardless of the seasonality factor. Because rural economies are predominantly agricultural, there is always the risk of seasonality, which can affect rural people's income-generating opportunities. In such a scenario, rural tourism can provide a sustainable source of income for rural residents.
- **Women empowerment** – Women have more opportunities to participate in the growing village economy as tourism grows in rural communities. Female workers can be employed in a variety of tourism service delivery processes, such as housekeeping, food and beverage delivery, and so on.

Rural Tourism Preservation – An Effort to Conserve

The preservation of rural heritage will aid in the promotion of tourism and development in rural India. The Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development (ITRHD) is an NGO dedicated to the preservation of Indian heritage and culture in rural India.

Most rural areas are accessible by road as most of these regions lack flight connectivity. Good physical connectivity in urban and rural areas is essential for economic growth. The vast road network of India includes approximately 65,600 km of national highways; 64,200 km of state highways and major district roads, and approximately 2.7 million km of rural roads. Despite the fact that nearly 70% of India's population lives in rural areas, approximately 40% of rural areas are not connected to all-weather roads, even after seven decades of independence. Where they were linked, the quality of the roads was not always of the highest quality. Several rural roads became unsuitable for motorized traffic due to insufficient funds from the state, poor maintenance, and earthen tracks, particularly during the monsoon season.

It also includes providing better accessibility to the northeastern states and those with difficult terrain like hills, deserts, tribal and backward areas. The North East region of India is a remote region with natural beauty just waiting to be discovered. A good road network can encourage people to explore North East India. The Center has approved 16 projects in the North Eastern region under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, which focuses on the integrated development of theme-



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based tourist circuits. The Modi government has made significant efforts to connect the North Eastern states and the region with the rest of India via rail, road, and air links.

India is also on the verge of a digital revolution. The technology being used in the country for the digital payment ecosystem in the toll and transit space has advanced significantly. One such example is when the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) decided to use advanced technology for toll collection on national highways. Tolling-related technologies are currently gaining traction for accepting digital payments in lieu of cash at toll plazas. With a focus on implementing an effective and efficient toll collection system, electronic toll collection (ETC) emerged as the key solution for enabling a quick, efficient, and cashless payment option for toll fare collection. The implementation of e-tolling would help vehicle users reduce their fuel costs and cut the average waiting time by around 10 minutes at the toll plazas and will enable several significant improvements in traffic control by enabling faster throughput and reducing congestion, as well as reducing or eliminating toll revenue irregularities. As a result, there will be more convenience and transparency, and this can help with better accessibility to rural areas.

Conclusion:

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has launched a new initiative called “The Best Tourism Villages,” which aims to recognise villages with exceptional cultural and heritage assets. In 2021, Pochampally village, located in Telangana, was selected as one of the best tourism villages by UNWTO. This recognition has the potential to serve as a source of inspiration and encouragement for other villages that rely on tourism for economic development. It is recommended that the government focus on the North Eastern States, which have significant potential for instant growth in tourism. For example, Sualkuchi village, known as the “Manchester of the East,” is famous for muga, an exclusive golden silk yarn only available in Assam. Additionally, Mawlynnong village, inhabited by the Khasi tribe, is referred to as “God’s Own Garden” and is located in Meghalaya.

Rural tourism can play a crucial role in promoting local economic growth and bringing about social transformation. Therefore, it is essential for the government to recognise its significance and create a sustainable environment to support stakeholders. To facilitate rural tourism, the government should provide both financial and infrastructure support. A potential measure that could be implemented is the implementation of a unified tax system for tourist vehicles in India, which would simplify transportation logistics.

Furthermore, a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders and actions is necessary to bridge the gap between urban and rural development. This would require the convergence of various schemes from different ministries focusing on rural development, with the aim of promoting sustainable rural tourism.

Rural tourism gives a great deal of exposure to different cultures that breathe in the interiors of India. It is so varied and vibrant that a whole lifetime is too short to explore it completely. A road trip to the off-beaten paths above clouds to scenic landscapes is the best way to soak in the raw experience of rural India. From mysterious, unexplored wonders to a cultural heritage that will inspire, a trip down the narrow rural back roads, past unspool landscapes of swaying palms, rice fields, and mud huts, gives one a chance to truly dwell in the authentic rural experience.

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