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REVITALISATION OF RURAL AREAS THROUGH TOURISM

***Mr. Jitendra Mohan Mishra and ** Mr. V. Laxmi Narayan Dash**

* Mr. Jitendra Mohan Mishra, MTA. M.Phil. General Hostel#13. Pondicherry University. Pondicherry-605 014. Email: jitenban@yahoo.co.in

** Mr. V.Laxmi Narayan Dash. Research Scholar. Dept. of Anthropology Pondicherry University, Pondicherry-605 014. Email: vlndash@yahoo.com

Abstract

India lies in her villages. Nearly 98 per cent of the total geographical area of India constitutes rural areas, in which 72 per cent of the total population (70.98 per cent according to 2001 census) live. Since independence most of the national policies have been focusing upon rural development. But issues like poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, regional imbalances, and environmental degradation through deforestation; health and sanitary factors in rural areas remain unsolved. Many of the planners blame commercial viability for this matter. At the same time these rural areas posses natural and socio-cultural resources, which are fantastic sources for tourism and recreation. Systematic tourism development in rural areas through public participation can contribute towards the socio-economic development of these areas, and on the other hand it can increase the attraction base for the modern tourists, which ultimately brings in foreign currencies and contributes to the GDP of the country.

In lieu of the above, the present paper focuses upon the following:

- *To conceptualize tourism in rural areas.*
- *To study the challenge, that rural India is facing.*
- *To study the socio-economic contribution of tourism to the rural areas.*
- *To study the possible adverse impact upon environment and suggest a balance sheet.*

Introduction

The term ‘Rural’ can be characterised by two different features. First, rural people live in a farmstead. The number of houses varies from 5,000 to 10,000. Second, most of the people depend on the agriculture for their livelihood, thus spending most of their working hours on farms. As per this criteria nearly 98 per cent of the total geographical area of India constitutes rural area, in which around 72 per cent of the total population live. Despite poverty and infrastructure inadequacy, these areas witness pleasing weather, unpolluted air, natural and scenic beauty, and unique culture, which are of great attraction to the city people. If properly exploited as visitors’ attractions, these selected areas can have lots of tourists who can contribute to the socio-economic development of the area.

CONCEPT OF RURAL TOURISM

Development of rural tourism is now in its nascent stage. The complexity of attractions makes it difficult to draw an exact definition. However, Lane B (1994) gives a framework.

In his view rural tourism should be

- Located in rural areas
- Functionally rural i.e. small scale enterprises, open space, natural contact, heritage, traditional and societal practices etc.
- Rural in scale
- Traditional in character.
- Take different forms representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location.

According to Getz.D and Page S.J (1997) rural tourism can be described as

- The spectrum i.e. rural and wild.
- The rural appeal i.e. peace, solitude, lifestyle, nature, scenery, traditional people, recreation and adventure.
- The rural product and services.
- Involvement of rural entrepreneurs and operators.

Further Negi JM (1990) enumerated the attractions in rural areas. Which are

- Enjoyment of rural scenery.
- The desire for open space, quiet and piece of mind.
- Rural sports like hunting, fishing etc.
- Ethnic attractions like folk life, custom, food, drinks and festivals.
- Educational and historical attractions like castles, churches, temples, monasteries etc.

An Overview of Rural Problems

Though problems of rural areas are multidimensional, poverty can be regarded as the source of every problem. Because poor people feel discriminated against, insecure, politically repressed, and victimized by public agencies, this is the psychological dimension of poverty. Other physical dimensions of poverty are material deprivation like lack of money, unemployment, lack of food, clothing and housing and inadequate accessibility to health services and clean water and non-material factors like lack of security, peace and power over decisions affecting their lives. (IFAD rural poverty reports 2001).

Poverty in rural areas further multiplies into other problems like gaps in income, depopulation from rural areas, regional imbalances, environmental degradation and other socio-economic problems. Sometimes these problems turn to grave situations like social unrest, community violence and terrorism.

The Need for Policies to Promote Tourism in Rural Areas

1. The gap between rich and poor is unjust and inefficient also, hence needs to be focused.
2. Policies for shifting resources and assets from urban to rural, often advances economic growth.

3. Intensive investment through tourism in rural areas will create employment, thus can contribute to the social welfare.
4. Availability of livelihood in rural areas will reduce migration, thus helping in reducing urban poverty.
5. Poverty reduction and asset equalisation in rural areas assist growth and productivity.
6. Growth and distribution of public expenditure are essential for poverty eradication.
7. Tourism in rural areas will help in preserving the rural ecosystem, since part of the developmental fund will be invested for creating social forests and preserving existing forest and vegetation.
8. Financial support to the rural folk will help them preserve indigenous local culture, heritage, traditions and art forms. These would otherwise be lost due to mass thinking that maintaining the traditions are not commercially viable. Tourism can showcase the culture and art forms as the uniqueness of the place.
9. As an alternate tourism, promotion of rural tourism can broaden the attraction base of any country. Statistics reveal that most of the international tourists in India are aware of only a few well-known distinctions. Hence a variety of experience can give them sensual satisfaction.
10. Sometimes the existing tourist destinations become over crowded. Thus it leads to acute stress on physical and civic amenities of the place. The development of outskirts areas can reduce the stress on these areas.
11. Indian agriculture is at a crucial point these days, with liberalisation in agricultural production. Hence to become more competitive and self-reliant the traditional view of rural areas as the source of agricultural products has to be changed. The new and different understanding of rural areas should emerge by making these a visitors' attraction.

Socio-economic Contribution of Tourism to Rural Areas

When tourists stay in a particular destination for a long time, they come into contact with the host people. This continuous interaction affects both host and guest as well. This leads to a composite culture. Further employment opportunities created by the demand of tourist helps the host to get a regular income. Again the spiritual motivation along with financial support changes the standard of living of the rural folk. They come out of superstitions and lead a civilized life.

Sometimes it has been argued that tourism too can create some adverse impacts upon the society like cultural degradation, undue influence of western culture, prostitution etc. Hence, cautious planning would be required to minimise the adverse impact. Here we have to keep in mind that a little adverse impact is acceptable in the way of modernisation and economic development.

Conclusion

Poverty reduction is the only thing that government or any developmental institutions can do for the rural poor. However the poor have to seize the responsibility as agents of change for their own development. Rural tourism can be an ideal objective to intensify public expenditure and to encourage public participation in it. Internationally, rural tourism has been perceived as potentially sustainable. There are of course many pitfalls along with tourism development. Hence both short term and long term planning are vital in avoiding any damages to rural areas. Further

environmental management, local involvement, and sound legislation, are crucial, if rural tourism is to be promoted and to ensure its positive contribution to the lives of rural people.

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