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The Emerging Scenario of Rural Tourism in India: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: It is a worldwide phenomenon accepted by various scholars that rural tourism and agro based activities in tourism sector has been emerging and there are a wide and innovative set of agro tourism products and services available for the foreigner tourists during their travel in India. Actually, rural tourism includes agro tourism, agricultural festivals, special events and festivals, the celebration of village historic sites, country fairs, agricultural travel routes that feature themes. Therefore, recently in the perspective of Indian tourism scenario, rural tourism has been recognized as a revolutionizing businesses and prompting economic development. Moreover, it is known as a variant of ecotourism in the country. Today, many rural villages can facilitate tourism because many villagers are hospitable and eager to welcome visitors. Consequently, due to efforts made by tourism departments and boards of the various states and supported by Ministry of Tourism, the new concept of rural tourism has been given a due importance in the tourism sector. Most of the Indian states have been making efforts to boost the tourism activities in rural areas and rural tourism has been becoming an attractive destination for the tourists. However, there are some challenges in the growth of rural tourism, nevertheless, there are so many potentialities for the growth of this tourism in India.

Keywords: Rural India, Cultural Heritage, Tourism Market, Rural Tourism, Economic Growth.

Introduction: India has a full potentiality and has also so many worldwide famous tourist destinations with its rich cultural heritage, historical monuments and abundance natural resources. That is why; tourism industry in India has emerged as one of the major economic drivers for growth, contributing substantially to foreign exchange earnings. Today, tourism

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sector is one of the leading global industries contributing 11 percent of global GDP. The world Tourism organization estimates that there will be 1.5 billion tourists in the world in 2020, representing 21 per cent of world population. The World Tourism organization further notes that within the next 5 - 10 years, range of products on offer to tourists seeking the rural experience is to increase significantly and there is a clear trend in growth of rural tourism. Likewise, India's vast, rural diversity and heritage has a full and tremendous potential for tourism in rural areas which is envisioned to generate employment opportunities, sustainable livelihood for the local community by addressing the issues of poverty reduction and developing a vibrant local economy by revival and regeneration of the old art and crafts and preservation of the rural India culture in the changing scenario of tourism business at the global level in the near future.

Research Objectives: The present research paper highlights the following objectives:

- To understand the concept of rural tourism.
- To highlight the scenario of rural tourism in India.
- To identify some major tourist destinations of rural tourism in India.
- To explore the opportunities and challenges for the growth of rural tourism in the country.

Research Methodology: The present paper is based on the secondary data derived from various literature sources which includes various reputed books, research papers, news articles, and websites. The researcher has also noticed the statements made by various tourists who visited to different rural tourism spots and discussions with entrepreneurs, villagers, tourists, officials and other stakeholders have also been kept in view to analyze the data. The nature of the study is exploratory and the researcher has also used some observational facts in the present study.

A Review of Literature: There is a plethora of literature related to tourism sector and rural tourism in India as well as in abroad. Most of the studies have laid down a due emphasis on the

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growing importance of rural tourism in the changing scenario of tourism sector. A few of them have been cited here as a review:

Komppula (2014) in his study has opined the fact that developing rural tourism is actually the development of the region and wellbeing of the local community. Aref et al. (2009) in their study has pointed out that rural tourism can reinvigorate the conventional concepts and views on tourism and it can bring a new dimension to the sustainable development concept. Cook (2007) in his study has stated that tourism should be assimilated into the environment and the local culture of an area. Most probably the simplest definition of Rural Tourism is that it is an activity that takes place in the countryside. Cawley & Gillmor (2007) in their study has suggested an integrated rural tourism model. The study has pointed out that rural tourism and local economy both are interdependent and it is considered as a key strategy player for the regional development. Woodruffe (2000) in his study has pointed out that rural tourism facilitates the declining areas to be developed with basic infrastructure facilities and provides the host community alternative ways of employment and side by side it reduces out-migration. Moreover, it fosters a closer relationship between urban community and rural communities because the tourists who visit rural areas enjoy the natural environment and learns about nature, rural culture, tradition and heritages, farm work, art of living etc., the host receives income from tourism.

Oppermann (1997) in his study has revealed the fact that Rural Tourism is a form of tourism that takes place in non-urban settings and rural tourism, still captures a minority tourism market in India but it can be made a valuable contributor for the growth of rural economy. Moreover, it can enhance job opportunities in the rural area. However, the government of India, of late, has also realized its contribution as a potential development driver, therefore, rather it has a great impact in case of maintaining the sustainable livelihood of the rural population, promoting local culture and heritages, empowering local women, alleviating poverty, conserving and preserving natural resources, improving basic rural infrastructure, adopting new work culture and overall developing a better impression of locality and its people in tourists' mind. Robinson (1990) has pointed out that the term 'Rural Tourism' is composed of

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two terms: 'Rural' and 'Tourism'. Therefore, the term 'Rural' is viewed differently from one country to another and rural tourism is acknowledged as an economic activity that is characterized by involvement of tourists who are facilitated by a set of tourist facilities in rural areas.

The Concept of Rural tourism: Actually, rural tourism is a multifaceted form of tourism. There are a variety of terms such as farm tourism, agro-tourism, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, green tourism etc. used to describe rural tourism and it is mainly related to the rural areas. Oppermann (1997) has pointed out that rural tourism can be defined as 'tourism in a non-urban territory where human activity is going on and primarily based on agriculture. H. Grolleau defined 'Rural Tourism' as a concept that includes all sort of tourism activities taking place in rural areas. Thus, rural tourism can be defined as the 'country experience' which encompasses a wide range of attractions and activities that take place in agricultural or non-urban areas and some of its essential characteristics include wide-open spaces, low levels of tourism development, and opportunities for visitors to directly experience agricultural activities in natural environment. It is not just farm-based tourism. Rather than it includes farm-based holidays but also comprises special interest nature holidays and ecotourism, walking, climbing and riding holidays, adventure, sport and health tourism, hunting and angling, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism, and, in some areas, ethnic tourism.

The Scenario of Rural Tourism: Today, Indian villages are witnessing a drastic change and development in the wake of the process of globalization. Embracing their culture, tradition, natural resources, and artisanship, rural tourism is escalating how much importance India bestows on its rustic spirit. Therefore, starting from skill generation and subsistence to highlighting the traditional interplay of myriad communities, rural tourism is silently creating miracles, triumphantly. Today, as India has embraced some new endeavours, rural tourism has also advanced silently, turning into a major economical benefactor for communities, cultures, and traditions. Most of the studies has pointed out that rural tourism in India is nuanced with rich cultural experiences, oral history, linguistic traditions, old rituals, biodiversity, and an

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empowering interplay of historical narratives. That is why; with the advancement in rural tourism, Indian villages, which for long had been persistently dependent on paltry agricultural income, have attained limelight, bestowing them with identity, infrastructure, and development capacity. In fact, rural tourism has a potential to change the employment pattern in rural areas and today it is playing a very important role to build up weakening economies by injecting financial investment, infrastructural growth, job retention, and even conservation of bio-diversity. Recently, some emerging and well-established start-ups Grassroutes, Pahadi House, Ecologin, India Untraveled etc. have been changing the scenario of rural tourism in India. By creating innovative business models, these start-ups have started promoting the potential of rural communities and emerging youth by harnessing their zeal and projecting their adventurous, eco-friendly, and rustic beauty. Instead of opting for discovering famous historical sites, even the domestic market is witnessing a switch. Today, most of the foreigner and urban tourists of India want to experience the rural lifestyle, and spend weekends in unknown areas of India, away from the hectic urban life.

In this perspective, it may be noted that various communities in Kerala, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, and Bihar have started witnessing slow change and some of the positive impacts are visible for these communities which – in spite of their traditional and rustic richness – we initially ignored. Today, the villages have their own identity, apart from agriculture and even the women have started indulging in various handicrafts and other vocations that have helped them rise above anonymity. Thus, due to radical changes in empowerment of rural women in economic perspective, the whole scenario of rural community has changed and today women are no longer dependant on gender based disparity.

When the government of India framed its ‘National Tourism Policy’ in 2002, rural tourism was recognized as a key area for employment generation and sustainable livelihoods. In that policy it was clearly being said that, “Special thrust should be imparted to rural tourism and tourism in small settlements, where sizable assets of our culture and natural wealth exist”. Due to some positive impacts of the policy a change in the attitude of the domestic and foreign tourists was

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also experienced in the recent years and today, the tourists are now looking for such a trip that can offer them meaningful experience and quality environment. These better-educated travelers are very much interested in different outdoor amusement and recreational activities. Moreover, the concern for nature and its sustainability is growing day by day. In this connection, the interest for alternative tourism such as eco-tourism, special interest tourism, heritage tourism etc., is also increasing and such change of preference is driving these tourists to go to rural areas where fragmented nature and rich bio diversity can easily satisfy their ultimate desire in the lap of the nature. Thus, the overall tourism industry in India has shown significant growth in the past decade with trends like increasing levels of awareness, environmental consciousness, growing interest in heritage and culture and improved accessibility, rural tourism shows significant poise as a market opportunity.

Rural Tourism Sites in India: After the implementation of new tourism policy in 2002, a drastic change in rural tourism was observed and now as per the report of Ministry of Tourism in March 2011, there are 172 rural tourism sites and 52 commissioned rural tourism sites in India. A few of them are mentioned below:

Etikoppaka, Dharmavaram, Cheriyal, Pochampalli, Srikalahasti etc. in Andhra Pradesh, Durgapur, Sualkuchi, Asharikandi etc. in Assam, Kotla Mubarakpur, Nangli, Razapur etc. in Delhi, Nagar, Baroh etc. in Himachal Pradesh, Drung, Gagangir, Chahel & Sahakote, Manasbal etc. in Jammu & Kashmir, Kumbalang, Balrampur, Anakkara, etc. in Kerala, Ballabhpur Danga, Mukutmonipur, Kamarpukur, Sonada etc. in West Bengal.

Opportunities for the Growth of Rural Tourism: Today, India is emerging as a hub of tourism business in the global economy because some of the rural tourism business models which use existing infrastructure like home-stays, farm stays or community- managed guest houses, thus also leveraging the competitive strengths of rural households, offer viable and sustainable options even at low occupancies, with high growth potential and quicker pay-back. Therefore, India has a full potentiality and opportunities for the growth of tourism sector. Consequently, realizing the potential of this upcoming market, IFMR Trust has invested Rs. 50 Million in the Rural Tourism Network Enterprise. Talking about the investment, the CEO of IFMR

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Ventures, Ms. Deepthi Reddy said, "Rural Tourism Network Enterprise has tremendous potential for scale. It will open up unexplored markets to a whole new segment of travellers in India. Rather than the impersonal feel of luxury resorts, which are usually located far away from local people, food and culture, RTNE offers an authentic, rural travel experience at a fraction of the cost, typically under Rs. 500 a night". To conclude, some of the opportunities for the growth of rural tourism in India maybe as under:

- Development of accommodation infrastructure in rural areas.
- Collaborating with franchisees or property owners in rural areas.
- Maintenance and up gradation of existing infrastructure.
- Hiring and training local people for tourist activities.
- Providing an open information portal for customers/tourists.
- Creating a platform for online bookings.
- Helping the rural artisans and craftsmen in marketing their crafts.
- Financial and non-financial assistance may be provided to help local citizens to realize their entrepreneurial dreams.

Thus, some positive efforts made by tourism department and boards of the states as well as of Tourism Ministry of India not only will bring new opportunities, better infrastructure and communication facilities to the villages, but also bring the heart of India to the tourists who wish to see where true India resides. It will fulfill the dreams of urban tourists who visit in rural areas to seek peace and tranquility and moreover they keep a desire to live with harmony in natural environment and beauty of Indian villages.

Challenges: However, rural tourism is emerging as a key activity of tourism business in India, but there are some challenges as under:

- Improper communication facilities in rural areas.
- Embryonic stage of rural market in India.
- Absence of proper mode of surface transportation.

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- Lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate lodging, amusement facilities, inconsistent electricity and telecommunication problems.
- Legislation problem from the side of local administration.
- Insufficient financial support and insufficient funding by the government.
- Lack of proper marketing of rural products.
- Inadequate technical knowledge to startup businesses in local areas.
- Lack of trained human resources/staff.
- Lack of proper physical communications with the foreigner tourists.
- Lack of basic amenities such as pure drinking water, washrooms, electricity etc.
- Problem of safety and security of the tourists in local areas.

Conclusion: Thus we can say that rural tourism in India has a vast scope and there is a full potential for the growth of rural tourism industry in the changing global scenario. Here it is noteworthy to say that rural tourism is an emerging concept and the scope for its marketing is still open. It is also realized that the future of such niche tourism is very promising as rural India boasts of rich culture and heritages. Moreover, its greeneries, fabulous scenic beauty and wide range of biodiversity can easily grab the attention of city dwellers. Therefore, seeing availability, accessibility and affordability some macro-level marketing strategies should be adopted along with long-term planning, scrutiny, monitoring and regular inspection. But we need proper planning and conservation of natural resources and local heritages for the sustainable development of rural tourism by filling the gaps between 'have' and 'have not'. Moreover, here it is an urgent need to educate the rural people and develop their communication skill and language proficiency. The government needs to take necessary safety and security measures for the tourists. We should keep in mind that promoting the rural tourism is an important instrument for sustainable human resource development, poverty alleviation, employment creation, environmental regeneration, basic infrastructure development of remote areas, advancement and empowerment of host community especially women and other disadvantaged groups in the country. That is why; an effective strategy to promote rural tourism should be made by the government with the collaboration of local community.

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