



Rural Tourism in Asia and Pacific

Concept, Practices and Opportunities



Editors

P. Chandra Shekara
D. Puthira Prathap

Associate Editors

Hurain Jannat
F.A.M Zakirul Huq



Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP)

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Rural Tourism in Asia and Pacific: Concept, Practices and Opportunities

Edited by P. Chandra Shekara and D. Puthira Prathap

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Preface

Rural Tourism has emerged as a powerful driver of sustainable development, offering meaningful opportunities for economic growth, cultural preservation, and community empowerment in rural areas. By emphasizing sustainable practices and encouraging active community participation, it closely aligns with the principles of **Ecotourism**. Rural tourism supports the economic and social development of rural communities by generating income, creating employment, and promoting local products, crafts, and cultural traditions.

In the **Asia-Pacific region**, where rural landscapes are rich in diversity and heritage, the potential for rural tourism remains vast and largely untapped. This book, ***Rural Tourism in Asia and the Pacific: Concept, Practice and Opportunities***, aims to promote rural tourism by sharing best practices, case studies, policy briefs and strategic insights that can inspire and guide stakeholders and policy makers across the region.

The idea for this publication was born from the ‘***CIRDAP-INFRA International Training Programme on Rural Tourism towards Integrated Rural Development***’ organized by the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) in collaboration with Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) of Malaysia from 9-17 October 2024 in **Penang, Malaysia**. The training brought together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and development professionals from the CIRDAP member countries (CMCs) to exchange knowledge, experiences, and innovative models of rural tourism.

The book is intended for a broad audience including policymakers, researchers, rural development practitioners, tourism professionals, and others who are interested in advancing rural tourism as a tool for inclusive and sustainable development. It provides a conceptual framework, practical approaches, and real-world examples that can be adapted and replicated across various contexts.

CIRDAP gratefully acknowledge the valuable contributions of the training participants, CIRDAP experts, and other collaborators who enriched this publication with their insights and experiences. **This book contains 10 articles written by 19 authors representing 5 Asia Pacific countries.** The lead article provides an overview of Rural Tourism in Asia and Pacific countries. The dedication and engagement of authors and Editorial team have made this book a comprehensive and meaningful resource for promoting rural tourism in

We hope this book will serve as a catalyst for informed dialogue, innovative action, and policy formulation in the realm of rural tourism, contributing to the broader goals of rural transformation and sustainable development **benefiting the RURAL COMMUNITIES.**

- **Dr. P Chandra Shekara,**
Director General (DG) and
Editorial Team.

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'As a leading Professional in the field of Rural Development and Agriculture, Dr. P. Chandra Shekara has more than three decades of experiences towards integrated rural development especially in the areas namely Agricultural Extension Management Agri-Entrepreneurship Development, Agricultural Marketing Management and Public-Private-Partnership. Dr. Shekara headed three premier National Institutions in India which work for the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India: Director General of CCS National Institute of Agricultural Marketing (CCS NIAM), Director General (In-charge) of National Institute of Plant Health Management (NIPHM) and Director General of National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE) 'He published 81 Research papers including 25 books'..



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Agri-tourism in Rural Asia and the Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges

Sreenath Dixit¹

ABSTRACT

Agri-tourism, an emerging sector in Asia and the Pacific, bridges agriculture and tourism by offering authentic rural experiences. It enhances sustainable rural development, provides alternative income for farmers, and preserves traditional agricultural practices. The sector has grown significantly due to increasing global interest in eco-tourism and experiential travel. Countries like Japan, India, Thailand, and the Philippines have successfully integrated agri-tourism into rural economies, showcasing farm stays, crop harvesting, and culinary experiences. Despite its potential, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, climate change vulnerabilities, and lack of business skills hinder widespread adoption. Government policies, technological advancements, and community involvement are key drivers of growth. The future of agri-tourism lies in balancing economic benefits with environmental and cultural sustainability. With strategic investments in infrastructure, skill development, and responsible tourism, agri-tourism can play a pivotal role in transforming rural livelihoods while fostering deeper connections between consumers and food producers.

Keywords: Agri-tourism; Sustainable rural development; Farm-based tourism; Rural entrepreneurship; Eco-tourism; Community engagement

INTRODUCTION

Agri-Tourism

Agri-tourism, also referred to as farm tourism, involves travelling to rural areas where visitors can experience farming activities firsthand. It is a form of tourism that brings together agriculture, culture, ethnicity, and nature, offering visitors the chance to connect with the land, the food they consume, and the people who grow it. This type of tourism typically includes activities such as farm stays, crop harvesting, cooking classes using local produce, and more. Unlike traditional tourism, agri-tourism emphasizes sustainability and community engagement, offering tourists an authentic experience of rural life

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and agriculture. Its objective is to provide the tourists with experience rather than site-seeing-place-hopping, which are the characteristics of traditional tourism.

Agritourism is one of the emerging areas of entrepreneurial engagement for agriculturalists to cope with the economic risks posed by climate change. It essentially involves diversifying income streams from agricultural activities and the associated value chains. In a broader sense, agritourism envisages visits to a working agricultural setting for leisure, recreation, or education purposes (Arroyo et al., 2013). These engagements range from farm-based ventures to well-organized agro-technology parks (Mahaliyanaarachchi et al., 2019). Agritourism in its various formats has been reported to be strengthening resilient building engagements from locations across the countries. However, the spread of agritourism is fraught with gaps in awareness, level identification, and networking of viable agritourism spots, etc. (Mahaliyanaarachchi et al., 2019).

Global Trends in Agri-Tourism

Globally, there has been a significant shift towards sustainable tourism. As travellers become increasingly conscious of the environmental and social impact of their travels, Agri-tourism has gained popularity. From the demand side, this sector is growing due to increased awareness among travellers about environmental concerns that have led to the need for conscious tourism practices. From the supply side, this sector is seen as offering an alternative source of income to smallholder farming, which is in distress due to globalisation. It is also seen as a way of promoting sustainable tourism by supporting small-scale, family-owned farms, encouraging organic farming practices, and preserving rural traditions. New-age travellers are keener on personalized travel experiences, and Agri-tourism offers a unique opportunity to engage with local cultures, food systems, and environments. The trend toward eco-tourism and experiential travel has led to a rise in Agri-tourism ventures around the world.

The global agritourism market size was valued at USD 69.24 billion in 2019 and is projected to reach USD 197.37 billion by 2032, exhibiting a CAGR of 8.88% during the forecast period based on our analysis in the existing report. Europe dominated the agritourism market with a market share of 47.07% in 2019. The shift of behaviour towards entrepreneurship among farmers around the globe is significantly influencing the agritourism sector. In addition, the global market is expanding rapidly on account of the rising adoption of relevant strategies by the governments of various economies to boost the revenue from agriculture, as well as the tourism industry. The growing consumer demand for economical, nature-based, and sustainable tourism among tourists is acting as a crucial driving force for the market. Moreover, the increasing initiatives by

governments, private organizations, and associations to develop a strong industry by launching agritourism projects and programs will further boost agritourism market growth (Fortune Business Insights, 2024).

Importance and Scope of Agri-Tourism in Asia and the Pacific

Agri-tourism in Asia and the Pacific offers diverse and unique attractions for travellers seeking authentic, nature-based experiences. In Asia, highlights include rice terraces in Southeast Asia, tea plantations in India, Sri Lanka, and China, and coffee farms in Indonesia and Vietnam. Visitors can also explore traditional farming practices in Japan and Thailand, or fruit orchards and agricultural festivals across the region. The Pacific islands offer attractions such as coconut and taro farms in Fiji, sustainable organic farms in Vanuatu, and coffee and cocoa plantations in Papua New Guinea. Traditional agricultural practices, community-based Agri-tourism, and coastal farming also provide unique opportunities for cultural immersion. Tourists engage in hands-on experiences like harvesting, cooking, and participating in local festivals. Agri-tourism in both regions promote environmental sustainability, supports rural communities, and fosters cultural understanding while offering travellers a deeper connection to the landscapes and agricultural heritage. India, one of the most diverse in the region, showcases its diverse ecosystems, offering unique experiences across the country. In the northwest, visitors can explore desert farming practices in Rajasthan. The east features rice paddies in Odisha and West Bengal. The southern regions offer coffee, tea, and spice plantations in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The drylands focus on millet farming, while the Himalayan valleys are known for apple, peach, plum, and saffron cultivation in states like Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh (Galvez, et al., 2023).

Asia Pacific is expected to be the fastest-growing region in the global market. This can be attributed to the presence of Agri-dominant countries such as China and India within the region. The governments of the countries and other Southeast Asian countries are intensifying their efforts to develop the agritourism business to improve the agricultural and tourism economy remarkably. High government investment in the sector, coupled with the increased involvement of private and semi-government organizations in this business, can fetch abundant success to the industry of Asia Pacific in the upcoming years (Fortune Business Insights, 2024).

Agri-Tourism in Rural Asia

- 1. Overview of Rural Asia:** Rural Asia spans a vast and diverse region, from the expansive agricultural plains of China to the fertile valleys of Southeast Asia. Agriculture is a significant part of the economy, particularly in countries like India, China, Vietnam, and Thailand. Farmers in these regions

grow a wide range of crops, from rice and tea to fruits, vegetables, tea, coffee, rubber and spices. Despite the rapid urbanization in many Asian countries, rural areas remain the backbone of agriculture and continue to preserve rich cultural and agricultural traditions. Many rural communities are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, but they also face challenges like limited access to markets, infrastructure, and financial resources.

Asian farming communities are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, facing increasing threats from unpredictable weather patterns, rising temperatures, and more frequent extreme events like floods and droughts. These environmental shifts disrupt crop production, reduce agricultural yields, and undermine food security, leaving farmers with limited resources to cope. The region's dependence on rain-fed agriculture makes these communities especially susceptible to changing rainfall patterns. With many farmers already struggling to make a living from traditional farming, the need for alternative sources of income is critical. Promoting sustainable farming practices, improving access to climate-resilient technologies, and providing financial support can help strengthen livelihoods. Empowering these communities with alternative income options can reduce their dependence on climate-sensitive agriculture, ensuring long-term resilience in the face of climate change. In this backdrop, diversification into non-agricultural activities, such as Agri-tourism, can be a viable alternative, particularly for smallholder farmers. Agrifood-tourism linkages can create income-generating opportunities for farmers and tourism operators, boost employment and stimulate overall economic growth, promote the development of sustainable agrifood systems, prevent rural youth outmigration and help preserve culinary and agricultural heritage (Gálvez, et al. 2023)

2. Current Landscape of Agri-tourism in Asia: In Asia, Agri-tourism has seen varying degrees of development depending on the country. Japan is perhaps leading the region where Agri-tourism has become a booming industry, with visitors flocking to rural villages to experience traditional farming practices, such as rice planting and tea picking. Other countries of the region will need a lot of catch-up to be able to achieve the standards Japan has at present. Similarly, in countries like Thailand and Vietnam, tourists engage in activities such as rice paddy tours, cooking classes using local ingredients, and homestays on farms. India has also seen a rise in agri-tourism, with states like Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra offering farm tourism packages that include organic farming experiences and rural heritage tours. Southeast Asia, with its rich agricultural heritage, is seeing increasing demand for agrarian travel experiences that emphasize sustainability and cultural immersion.

The tourism business in the Philippines is booming, and the country is looking into the possibility of agritourism as a replacement. The country has shown commitment by ranking among the top eight agritourism destinations worldwide. Agritourism-related farms in Taiwan showed an increase in farm income, which aided in the prosperity of the family, according to a study by Chang et al (2019). The family members preferred working on the farm over working outside.

Central Asia and the Caucasus (CAC) region consists of five countries in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and three in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). CAC have a unique ecology of desert, steppe and mountain complemented by a kaleidoscope of ethnic cultures (Beniwal, et al. 2010). Despite being challenged by a harsh climate characterized by low and unpredictable rainfall and extremes of temperature, CAC is rich in plant genetic resources and encompasses centre-of-origin crops of global significance, including cereals, legumes, fruits, and vegetables. As one of the region's key suppliers of agricultural products such as wheat, cotton, fruits, and vegetables, and with its high bio-physical potential for agricultural development, there is an immense opportunity to sustainably increase CAC's agro-pastoral productivity by integrating Agri-tourism in this region the potential remains largely untapped. For instance, a study conducted in Uzbekistan reported that many rural residents lack the knowledge and business skills to implement agritourism practices. Only 12% of farmers were familiar with agritourism, and 41% did not know anything about it (Patterson and Aslam, 2024).

3. Opportunities for Agri-tourism in Rural Asia: Agri-tourism presents several opportunities for rural communities in Asia:

Economic Growth and Job Creation: By attracting tourists to rural areas, agri-tourism creates new job opportunities, from hospitality to guiding and farm management. It also helps small farmers diversify their incomes by opening new avenues like farm tours, organic product sales, and cooking workshops.

Preservation of Traditional Practices: Many rural communities in Asia rely on traditional farming techniques passed down through generations. Agri-tourism can help preserve these practices by introducing visitors to ancient agricultural methods such as terraced rice cultivation, sustainable farming, and organic food production.

Sustainable Tourism Models: Agritourism can serve as a model for sustainable tourism. By promoting small-scale, low-impact travel experiences, it encourages environmental stewardship and reduces tourism's carbon footprint. Tourists are also more likely to appreciate locally sourced food and support organic farming practices, which are central to agritourism initiatives.

Cultural Exchange and Education: Agri-tourism creates opportunities for cultural exchange. Visitors learn about the food and farming traditions of rural communities, which fosters respect for cultural diversity and supports the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

4. Challenges in Agri-tourism in Rural Asia: Infrastructure: One of the primary challenges facing Agri-tourism in rural Asia is poor infrastructure. Remote rural areas often lack the necessary road networks, transportation options, and communication facilities that tourists require. This can make it difficult for travellers to access these areas, thus limiting the growth of Agri-tourism. Besides, there could be a trade-off between the connectivity and sustainability of the enterprise, as those having better infrastructure may initially flourish and then lead to over-exploitation, causing the whole business to become unsustainable over time.

Capacity Building: Many rural communities lack local expertise in hospitality and tourism management. Without training in customer service, marketing, and guiding, local communities may struggle to meet tourists' expectations. Currently, there is not much institutional support to train and build the capacity of rural entrepreneurs in Agri-tourism.

Environmental Impact: While Agri-tourism is generally seen as more sustainable than conventional tourism, it can still pose environmental challenges, such as the overuse of local resources (water, soil, etc.) and damage to delicate ecosystems. Over-tourism in some regions may also stress local agricultural systems. Agri-tourism in fragile ecosystems must be strictly guided by the carrying capacity of not just the farm but the entire system, which supports the resource requirement for this enterprise.

Cultural Sensitivities: Agri-tourism can sometimes clash with local cultural values. For instance, some rural communities may be reluctant to open their private farms to outsiders, or they may find the commercialization of their traditions challenging. Equipping agritourists about the cultural sensitivities of their target destination may help visitors appreciate and be mindful of the dos and don'ts during their travel and sojourn.

5. Cases of Best Practices: Japan: In rural Japan, Agri-tourism has become a vital part of rural development. The “Furusato” (hometown) program encourages urban dwellers to visit the countryside for farm experiences, fostering a deeper connection to rural traditions. Visitors participate in activities like rice planting, tea picking, and local festivals. The program has contributed to both economic revitalization and cultural preservation.

Thailand: In Thailand, Agri-tourism is growing rapidly, with farmers offering tourists the chance to participate in rice planting and harvesting. The country's Agri-tourism efforts also include cooking classes using local produce, enhancing visitors' appreciation of Thai cuisine.

India: States like Maharashtra and Kerala have embraced agritourism. For example, the “Green Kerala” project promotes farm tourism by offering visitors the opportunity to stay in eco-friendly homestays and participate in farming activities. It also exposes tourists to the nearby trekking and hiking attractions. Maharashtra was the first state in India to promote agritourism. The state established the Agri-Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) in 2005, which is a unique initiative, and it owns a 28-acre pilot project in Palshiwadi, Pune district. The Konkan division of Maharashtra alone has 33 Agri-tourism centres (Wanole, et al, 2020). The Agri-tourism model has been replicated in 328 Agri-tourism centres across 30 districts in Maharashtra, which has helped to conserve and enhance the village environment, village traditions and culture, customs, village arts and handicrafts. The Agri-tourism model gives authentic experiences to the visitors by showcasing village culture, agriculture, and traditions that have helped gain sustainable supplementary income sources and generated local employment (FAO, 2020).

Philippines: Local farmers invite tourists to participate in agricultural activities like vegetable harvesting, strawberry picking, and purple yam processing. This practice allows tourists to learn about the value of farmers' produce and promotes a connection between farmers and tourists (Tugade, 2020).

Vietnam: Community-based tourism (CBT) has been pushed as one of the strategies for poverty alleviation, particularly in marginalized regions and communities of Vietnam. *Hoi An* village, a heritage destination, ranked high on sustainability, while the culture-society score exceeded its potential sustainability score. However, critical factors such as community development policies, capacity building, full community participation and institutional support, and environmental sustainability are identified as key growth factors for replicating the success of *Hoi An* village (Ngo and Creutz, 2022).

Brunei: Agri-tourism farms have adopted strategies to mitigate tourism revenue loss, including, diversifying economic activities to expand agribusiness and innovative products, using digital transformation, such as virtual tourism, social media, and contact tracing apps and encouraging community capacity building by training and upskilling local farmers (Chin & Musa, 2021).

Agri-Tourism in the Pacific Islands

1. Overview of the Pacific Islands' Rural Communities: The Pacific Islands consist of over 20,000 islands spread across the Pacific Ocean. Agriculture is a key economic activity in these island nations, with crops such as coconuts, bananas, coffee, and tropical fruits being staples. Many communities in the Pacific Islands are still relatively isolated and rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods. However, tourism is becoming an increasingly important source of income for these communities, and Agri-tourism is an emerging sector. The Pacific Islands offer a unique

Agri-tourism experience, combining tropical landscapes, indigenous cultures, and a focus on sustainability.

- 2. Current State of Agri-tourism in the Pacific:** Agri-tourism in the Pacific is in its infancy, but it is beginning to show promise. In countries like Fiji and Samoa, visitors are invited to experience the local agricultural way of life, including coconut harvesting, traditional farming methods, and cooking classes. In Fiji, tourists can visit farms that produce organic produce, learn about traditional horticulture, and even participate in cooking lessons using locally grown ingredients. Similarly, in Papua New Guinea, Agri-tourism ventures allow tourists to visit coffee plantations and experience the production of the island's famous coffee beans.

- 3. Opportunities in Agri-tourism in the Pacific: Sustainable Tourism Development:** Agri-tourism in the Pacific provides an opportunity for the region to develop sustainable tourism practices. By emphasizing eco-tourism and promoting sustainable farming practices, Agri-tourism can help reduce the environmental impact of mass tourism.

Cultural Preservation: Agri-tourism in the Pacific Islands can help preserve indigenous farming traditions. Visitors are often drawn to the rich cultural heritage of the Pacific, and Agri-tourism offers a way to showcase traditional farming practices, cooking techniques, and local lifestyles.

Economic Diversification: For small island nations, Agri-tourism offers a way to diversify the local economy. Many Pacific nations rely heavily on traditional industries like fishing and agriculture, and Agri-tourism provides an alternative income stream for rural communities, helping to alleviate poverty.

- 4. Challenges in Agri-tourism in the Pacific: Climate Change Vulnerabilities:** The Pacific Islands are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, cyclones, and droughts. These environmental changes threaten both agriculture and tourism, making it difficult to maintain stable Agri-tourism operations.

Infrastructure Constraints: The lack of infrastructure on many islands poses a significant challenge for Agri-tourism. Remote locations with limited road networks, electricity, and communication make it hard to attract and accommodate tourists.

Small Scale and Limited Resources: Many Agri-tourism operations in the Pacific are small-scale, often run by families or small community groups. These enterprises may lack the resources and capital to expand and promote their businesses effectively.

- 5. Case Studies and Best Practices: Fiji:** Agri-tourism sector is gaining traction, with several eco-friendly farms offering tours of organic farms and

traditional cooking classes in Fiji. The success of these ventures has spurred interest from other Pacific nations to adopt similar Agri-tourism models. However, there is still a long way to go as most tourists seemed interested in agritourism but presently were unaware of the existence of such venues in Fiji. Tourists preferred a short stay at working farms offering value for money experience. In terms of importance, hospitality followed by entertainment, were the two main desired services for an agritourism venue (Shah et al., 2019).

Samoa: In Samoa, Agri-tourism is integrated into community-based tourism initiatives, where visitors participate in cultural farming activities and learn about the local agricultural heritage. But, Agritourism in Samoa is a growing field that connects agriculture, culture, and tourism. It can offer unique visitor experiences and opportunities for the local agriculture industry. However, agritourism in Samoa is still in its early stages and faces challenges such as climate change, limited labour, and a lack of coordination between the public and private sectors

Comparative Analysis of Agri-tourism in Rural Asia and the Pacific

1. **Shared Opportunities:** Both regions share common opportunities, such as the potential for sustainable rural development, the preservation of traditional agricultural practices, and the diversification of rural incomes through tourism. These regions have a long agrarian culture and history with unique characteristics that offer exquisite tourist experiences.

Growing awareness and the need to generate additional income from agriculture are motivating smallholder farmers to venture into agritourism. Agritourism can also contribute to environmental sustainability by promoting organic farming and eco-friendly tourism practices, making it a win-win for both regions.

2. **Unique Challenges:** Both regions face challenges related to infrastructure and capacity building and a conducive policy environment. The Pacific Islands are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and hence need to be cautious in promoting Agri-tourism in vulnerable ecotopes. Rural Asia often grapples with issues of over-tourism, resource depletion and harsh climatic conditions.

Cultural differences also play a role, with Pacific Island nations prioritizing indigenous traditions and Asia's diverse cultures influencing Agri-tourism models.

3. **Lessons Learned:** Cross-regional learning is vital. For instance, the successful community-based Agri-tourism initiatives in the Pacific Islands could be adopted in rural Asia, while Asia's well-established Agri-tourism infrastructure could benefit Pacific nations seeking to expand their tourism

offerings. Successful models have emerged in both regions, and these could be contextualised to local conditions and scaled further. There is a lot to learn from the late starters from those countries where Agri-tourism is in advanced stages, especially from the sustainability viewpoint. Opportunities for cross-learning exists for all stakeholders of Agri-tourism - entrepreneurs, investors, trainers, communities, travellers and governments alike.

Key Drivers for the Growth of Agri-tourism in Asia and the Pacific

- 1. Global and Regional Travel Trends:** The rise in demand for authentic travel experiences, sustainability, and cultural immersion is a significant driver for Agri-tourism. Both regions are experiencing this shift, where tourists are seeking unique, meaningful, and educational experiences. Asia Pacific Agritourism Market Size, Share and Industry Trends report that the Asia Pacific agritourism market will witness a growth of 11.5% CAGR during the forecast period from 2022 to 2028, indicating a robust expansion in the region (Anonymous., 2023). Modern travellers increasingly seek meaningful and sustainable experiences. Unlike traditional tourism, Agri-tourism offers authentic cultural interactions and opportunities to engage with rural life. Visitors can participate in farm activities, taste fresh local produce, and understand traditional agricultural practices. This trend aligns with the broader global push toward eco-friendly travel, where reducing environmental footprints and promoting local economies are paramount.
- 2. Government Policies and Support:** Both regions are receiving increasing attention from governments, with policies that support rural development, promote sustainable tourism, and incentivize local communities to engage in Agri-tourism. Government-backed initiatives to link agriculture and tourism to promote farm tourism are also fuelling Agri-tourism demand. A study by FAO of the UN on Linking Agriculture and Tourism to Strengthen Agrifood Systems in Asia and the Pacific emphasizes that agrifood-tourism linkages can create income-generating opportunities for farmers and tourism operators, boost employment, and stimulate overall economic growth (Galvez, et al. 2023). Many governments in Asia and the Pacific have recognized Agri-tourism as a tool for rural development and economic diversification. Countries like Thailand, India, and the Philippines offer subsidies to farmers to diversify into tourism, provide infrastructure support, and establish policy frameworks to facilitate this growth. For example, India's "Rural Tourism Development Scheme" and Thailand's "One Tambon One Product (OTOP)" initiative promote rural tourism and Agri-tourism alike. International organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) actively promote sustainable tourism practices in rural areas. These organizations provide guidelines, funding, and platforms for collaboration

between nations, ensuring that Agri-tourism aligns with broader sustainable development goals (SDGs). Their emphasis on sustainability fosters responsible tourism that benefits both host communities and the environment.

3. **Technological Innovations:** Digital platforms have transformed agritourism by enabling easier booking systems, virtual farm tours, and marketing. Technology plays a significant role in bridging the gap between rural areas and global tourism markets. Tanina et al. (2021) argue that the adoption of digital technologies enhances the development and marketing of agritourism offerings and helps create tourist products in Russia. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have played a transformative role in promoting Agri-tourism. Visual content showcasing serene farm landscapes, hands-on agricultural activities, and unique rural experiences has captivated audiences, driving interest in these destinations. Influencers and travel bloggers further amplify the appeal by sharing their personal stories, creating a ripple effect in attracting new visitors. Innovative technologies like virtual reality (VR) and mobile applications are enhancing the Agri-tourism experience. Virtual tours allow prospective tourists to explore farms and rural settings before booking, while mobile apps provide navigation, itinerary planning, and real-time updates during their stay. Additionally, advancements in sustainable farming techniques showcased during farm visits highlight the synergy between innovation and tradition, further enriching the visitor experience.
4. **Community and NGO Involvement:** NGOs play a key role in supporting Agri-tourism by providing capacity-building programs and facilitating community-driven development. Local communities are increasingly being engaged in decision-making processes, ensuring that Agri-tourism initiatives benefit everyone. A study explored how NGOs support in Costa Rica. NGOs also play a crucial role in facilitating community involvement in tourism, providing microcredit, and creating economic opportunities for local populations (Bernardo, 2008). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been instrumental in fostering Agri-tourism as a means of rural development. Projects led by NGOs focus on improving infrastructure, offering micro-financing to rural entrepreneurs, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. For instance, organizations like the Asia Foundation and local grassroots NGOs often collaborate with governments and private sectors to ensure that the benefits of Agri-tourism are equitably distributed.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges in Agri-tourism Development

Infrastructure Development: Investment in rural infrastructure, such as road networks, communication systems and digital infrastructure, and sustainable energy, is essential for the growth of Agri-tourism.

Capacity Building and Skill Development: Training programs for locals in hospitality, tourism management, and sustainable agricultural practices are crucial to the success of Agri-tourism initiatives.

Sustainability Practices: Implementing eco-certification schemes, promoting organic farming, and integrating sustainability into all tourism activities can help mitigate environmental impacts.

Collaboration and Partnerships: Collaborations between government bodies, private sector businesses, local communities, and NGOs can help scale Agri-tourism initiatives effectively and sustainably.

CONCLUSION

- 1. Summary of Opportunities and Challenges:** Agri-tourism offers numerous opportunities for rural development, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism in Asia and the Pacific. This can be an alternate source of income for smallholder farmers who find it difficult to meet a reasonable standard of living in comparison to their urban counterparts. It will also help retain youth back in the rural setting thus aiding in curbing migration to urban centres. However, this has many challenges too. Inadequate infrastructure such as electricity, road and digital connectivity, rudimentary entrepreneurial capacity, and environmental sustainability are major bottlenecks that need addressing.
- 2. Prospects:** The future of Agri-tourism is bright, with increasing global interest in sustainable travel and rural experiences. Both Asia and the Pacific have significant potential to expand their Agri-tourism sectors, which can drive economic growth while preserving agricultural traditions and local cultures. With many governments prioritizing rural infrastructure and connectivity, besides the increased spending power of the younger generation seeking new experiences, the trends are quite encouraging in the Agri-tourism space.
- 3. Sustainability Concerns:** Notwithstanding the potential of Agri-tourism, there are growing concerns about the sustainability of the current models being pursued. While Agri-tourism is being seen as an alternative to conventional tourism which has reached saturation point in most popular tourist destinations, Agri-tourism must be promoted with utmost sensitivity to the local ecology, culture and tradition. Recent disasters due to large-scale landslides in popular tourist destinations like Madikeri and Wayanad in the western ghat areas of south India and Uttarakhand in the fragile Himalayan ecosystem are a stern caution against over-promotion of tourism in ecologically sensitive areas.

- 4. Final Thoughts:** The growth of Agri-tourism in Asia and the Pacific is underpinned by a combination of global travel trends, supportive policies, technological advancements, and community-driven initiatives. By integrating these elements, the region has positioned itself as a vibrant hub for Agri-tourism, offering travellers a blend of authenticity, sustainability, and innovation. With continued support and collaboration, Agri-tourism is set to play a pivotal role in sustainable rural development across the region. A strategic, holistic approach to Agri-tourism, one that prioritizes community involvement, capacity building, incentivizing responsible tourism and sustainable practices, and infrastructural development, will be key to realizing its full potential in Asia and the Pacific regions.

Difference between Agri-tourism and Rural Tourism

Agri-tourism and **rural tourism** are related but distinct concepts, both focused on providing visitors with experiences tied to the countryside and nature. Here's the key difference between the two:

Agri-tourism (Agricultural Tourism):

- **Focus:** Agritourism revolves specifically around the agricultural sector and farming activities. Visitors participate in or observe farming operations, such as crop harvesting, animal husbandry, winemaking, and farm-to-table experiences.
- **Experiences:** Tourists may engage in activities like:
 - Picking fruits or vegetables
 - Participating in farm work (e.g., feeding animals or milking cows)
 - Visiting wineries or dairies
 - Staying in farmhouses or agritourism accommodations
 - Learning about sustainable farming practices
- **Goal:** It seeks to educate visitors about agriculture and support farmers economically by diversifying their income through tourism.
 - farming or agricultural practices, whereas rural tourism may not necessarily involve farming activities but can include broader experiences like cultural immersion or nature-based recreation.

Both types of tourism contribute to the rural economy, but agri-tourism has a more specific focus on agriculture, while rural tourism offers a broader exploration of rural life.

Rural Tourism

- **Focus:** Rural tourism is broader and encompasses a wide range of tourism activities in rural areas. It is not limited to farming but includes the entire rural lifestyle, culture, history, and natural landscapes.
- **Experiences:** Visitors may:
 - Explore small rural villages and towns
 - Hike, bike, or engage in outdoor activities like fishing or birdwatching
 - Experience local traditions, festivals, and handicrafts
 - Stay in rural accommodations such as cottages, inns, or bed-and-breakfasts
 - Enjoy local food, culture, and rural architecture
- **Goal:** Rural tourism highlights the slower pace of life in the countryside, offering visitors a chance to disconnect from urban life and experience traditional cultures, landscapes, and lifestyles.

Activities: Agri-tourism involves direct engagement with

Key Differences

- **Scope:** Agri-tourism is a subset of rural tourism, specifically focused on agriculture, while rural tourism covers a wider array of rural life experiences, including cultural, historical, and natural activities.
- **Activities:** Agri-tourism involves direct engagement with farming or agricultural practices, whereas rural tourism may not necessarily involve farming activities but can include broader experiences like cultural immersion or nature-based recreation.

Both types of tourism contribute to the rural economy, but agri-tourism has a more specific focus on agriculture, while rural tourism offers a broader exploration of rural life.

Unique Agri-tourism Attractions in Asia

1. Rice Terraces of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, China)

- **Highlight:** Majestic, centuries-old rice terraces like those in the Philippines (e.g., Banaue Rice Terraces), Vietnam (Sapa), and Indonesia (Bali) offer visitors the chance to see ancient agricultural practices in breathtaking landscapes. These terraces are not only stunning to view but provide tourists with the opportunity to participate in rice planting, harvesting, and other farming activities.
- **Experience:** Tourists can stay in local homestays, interact with indigenous farming communities, and gain insight into sustainable rice farming practices.

2. Tea Plantations (India, Sri Lanka, China, Taiwan)

- **Highlight:** Countries like India (Darjeeling, Assam), Sri Lanka, China (Hangzhou), and Taiwan offer expansive tea plantations that are both scenic and historically significant. Visitors can explore lush tea gardens, learn about the tea production process, and take part in tea tasting and picking.
- **Experience:** Tourists can hike through terraced tea plantations, visit historic tea factories, and enjoy traditional tea ceremonies, immersing themselves in a unique cultural and agricultural experience.

3. Coffee Plantations (Indonesia, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, India)

- **Highlight:** Indonesia (Sumatra), Vietnam (Central Highlands), Papua New Guinea, and India (Coorg, Chikmagalur) offer extensive coffee plantations. Agri-tourism in these areas allows tourists to witness the coffee cultivation process from seed to cup.
- **Experience:** Coffee farm tours, hands-on participation in harvesting, roasting demonstrations, and tastings of different coffee varieties attract tourists keen on experiencing the world of coffee production.

4. Traditional Farming and Organic Agriculture (India, Thailand, Japan)

- **Highlight:** Countries like India, Thailand, and Japan offer agri-tourism experiences focused on traditional, organic farming methods. For example, in Japan, visitors can learn about rice farming techniques passed down for centuries, while in India, organic farming tours educate tourists about sustainable agriculture.
- **Experience:** Travelers can participate in planting, harvesting, and cultivating local crops, gaining an understanding of eco-friendly practices and the significance of local agriculture to the community's cultural heritage.

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5. Traditional Farming and Organic Agriculture (India, Thailand, Japan)

- **Highlight:** Countries like India, Thailand, and Japan offer agri-tourism experiences focused on traditional, organic farming methods. For example, in Japan, visitors can learn about rice farming techniques passed down for centuries, while in India, organic farming tours educate tourists about sustainable agriculture.
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6. Fruit Orchards and Farm Stays (China, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia)

- a. **Highlight:** Seasonal fruit harvesting in countries like China (peaches, apples), Taiwan (lychees, pineapples), and Thailand (durian, mangosteen) provides tourists with unique hands-on experiences. Tourists can visit orchards, pick fruits, and enjoy farm stays with fresh produce and meals.
- b. **Experience:** Fruit festivals, guided tours of orchards, and tastings of exotic fruits offer a fun and educational experience for visitors interested in food systems and agricultural diversity.

7. Flower Farms and Agricultural Festivals (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China)

- a. **Highlight:** Countries like Japan and Taiwan are known for their flower farms, especially during cherry blossom season (sakura) or lavender blooming festivals. Agricultural festivals celebrating harvest seasons, such as the rice planting festivals in Japan or South Korea's harvest festivals, are great attractions.
- b. **Experience:** Travelers can enjoy the sight of fields blanketed in colorful flowers, learn about plant cultivation, and partake in vibrant cultural festivals that celebrate agriculture.

8. Aquaculture Tourism (China, Thailand, Vietnam)

- a. **Highlight:** In countries such as China, Thailand, and Vietnam, aquaculture (fish farming) plays a significant role in local economies. Agri-tourism experiences in these regions allow tourists to visit fish farms and learn about sustainable fish farming, shrimp farming, and seaweed cultivation.
- b. **Experience:** Visitors can engage in fishing activities, understand the challenges and benefits of aquaculture, and enjoy fresh seafood at the source.

Unique Agri-tourism Attractions in the Pacific

1. Coconut and Taro Farms (Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu)

- **Highlight:** Coconut and taro are essential crops in the Pacific Islands, and visitors can explore vast coconut plantations in Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, learning about traditional farming techniques and their cultural significance. These islands also boast unique agri-tourism experiences related to tropical food culture.
- **Experience:** Guests can participate in coconut harvesting, learn how to make traditional coconut-based dishes, and explore local food markets to taste freshly harvested produce.

2. Coffee and Cocoa Plantations (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands)

- **Highlight:** The Pacific Islands, especially Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands, are renowned for their high-quality coffee and cocoa. Visitors can tour coffee and cocoa farms, where they can see how these crops are cultivated, processed, and prepared for market.
- **Experience:** Agri-tourists can experience the entire journey of coffee from seed to cup, visit local chocolate factories, and participate in chocolate-making workshops.

3. Sustainable Organic Farms (Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu)

- **Highlight:** Organic farming is becoming increasingly important in the Pacific region, with countries like Fiji and Vanuatu offering tours of sustainable, organic farms. These farms focus on local produce, permaculture, and eco-friendly farming methods.
- **Experience:** Visitors can tour farms, join organic gardening workshops, and understand how local farming practices contribute to preserving the environment and supporting healthy communities.

4. Traditional Agricultural Practices (Samoa, Fiji, Solomon Islands)

- **Highlight:** Agri-tourism in the Pacific often emphasizes the preservation of traditional agricultural practices, such as the cultivation of taro, sweet potato, and other indigenous crops. These practices are closely linked to the islanders' way of life.
- **Experience:** Travelers can engage in traditional farming activities like planting, harvesting, and cooking, as well as participate in local agricultural festivals celebrating harvests and agricultural bounty.

5. Marine and Coastal Agriculture (Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands)

- **Highlight:** Agri-tourism in some Pacific Island nations also includes experiences focused on coastal and marine agriculture, such as seaweed farming, fishpond cultivation, and shellfish harvesting.
- **Experience:** Travelers can visit coastal farms to witness how seaweed and other marine products are cultivated, offering a unique intersection of aquaculture and agriculture.

6. Community-Based Agri-tourism Experiences (Fiji, Samoa, Tahiti)

- **Highlight:** Community-run agri-tourism initiatives allow visitors to stay with local families on traditional farms, where they can help with everyday agricultural tasks and experience the island lifestyle first hand.
- **Experience:** Homestays, cultural exchanges, and learning about sustainable farming practices from indigenous people offer a rich, authentic experience that supports rural communities and preserves cultural heritage.

7. Island Eco-Farming Retreats (New Zealand, Tahiti, Fiji)

- **Highlight:** Eco-tourism combined with agri-tourism is a growing trend in the Pacific Islands. Retreats in places like New Zealand and Tahiti offer travellers the chance to stay on organic farms that focus on sustainability, permaculture, and holistic farming techniques.
- **Experience:** Guests can engage in farm-to-table dining experiences, take cooking classes with local chefs, and enjoy nature walks through organic gardens, all while learning about eco-friendly farming methods.

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Agri-tourism as a Sustainable Rural Development Practice in Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities

G. V. Norica Aiome¹, Achini Samarakoon² and Jayali Kithmini³

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka is a tourist's paradise. It is one of the favorite travel destinations in South Asia and is considered a valuable repository of crop germplasm and Agro-biodiversity. The objective of this study is to examine the potential of agritourism development as a source of livelihood development. These Central, North-central and the southern provinces of Sri Lanka were chosen for the study due to their significance as prominent tourist destinations in Sri Lanka, especially for eco and cultural tourism, as well as their status as key agricultural hubs with diverse farming practices as Community Based Tourism sites (CBTs). Six CBTs were selected for this study. The results of assessment of Agri-tourism in the study-area revealed that this sector is primarily family-driven, with family-owned businesses. Most of the farmers perform their agritourism activities alone, with little association with their fellow-farmers in the same community. Study highlighting a potential avenue for local economic development, a wide variety of agritourism activities are offered in a community. Farmers who undertake agritourism, had faced significant challenges, particularly financial constraints and infrastructure inadequacies. Individual farmer family network was not found to be efficient in CBT activities. The study suggests a well-planned community-based tourism (CBT) as a viable alternative to promoting sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Agro-biodiversity; Agritourism; Sustainable Rural Development; Community-Based Tourism; Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Agritourism has been suggested to help family farms stay in business, protect the agricultural heritage, enhance the productivity of farm resources through their recreational use, and even improve the economic situation of local communities (Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007).

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Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) is the government authority in Sri Lanka that has been tasked with planning, development, regulation, and policy implementation of tourism and related industries. Before SLTDA was established in 2007, these functions primarily resided with Ceylon Tourist Board/Sri Lanka Tourist Board/Sri Lanka Tourism Board.

Community - Based Tourism (CBT)

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is an approach to tourism where local communities are central to the planning, management, and ownership of tourism activities, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed among community members. The role of CBT in promoting sustainable rural development is increasingly recognized, as it provides an alternative to sustainable tourism that is more inclusive and environmentally friendly (Samarathunga et al., 2015). CBT has emerged as a powerful tool for achieving sustainable rural development. It provides economic opportunities for local communities and helps protect the environment and preserve cultural heritage (Iddawala et al., 2024).

While the concept of CBT is relatively new to Sri Lanka, it has gained significant popularity among global tourists. Currently, CBT stands as a well-established practice in numerous developed nations, serving as an alternative income source for rural farming communities. This trend is not exclusive to developed countries, as many regional neighbors, including Thailand, Malaysia, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Indonesia, have also embraced agritourism, contributing manifold benefits to their rural communities. In these nations, agritourism has evolved into a crucial component of agriculture and rural development, with a primary focus on enhancing the livelihoods of rural farming communities at the policy level.

For instance, the Malaysian Homestay Experience Programme was launched in 1995 with the aim of encouraging the rural communities to venture into the tourism sector by offering community-based tourism (CBT) products or services to the tourists local and international (Jamal 2012) and is being practiced successfully.

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) too has promoted CBT as part of its broader strategy for sustainable tourism development in Sri Lanka (Samarathunga, et al., 2015).

Agritourism Development Efforts in Sri Lanka

Agro Technology Parks, initiated by the Department of Agriculture in Sri Lanka, serve the purposes of agricultural extension, education, and Agri-tourism. The inaugural Agro-technology Park was established in Gannoruwa within the Kandy district, followed by a second one situated in the

Hambantota district near the Bataatha government farm (Department of Agriculture, 2023). The national spice garden concept was established to preserve the taste, aroma, and quality of local spices, providing a comprehensive knowledge of spices and products for local and foreign tourists at the Matale Central Research Center of the Department of Export Agriculture (Department of Export Agriculture 2024). These agricultural hubs showcase a spectrum of agricultural activities, spanning from cutting-edge techniques to traditional methods, catering to the diverse interests of visitors. The parks play a pivotal role in disseminating valuable information to farmers, schoolchildren, and the public.

Various agricultural varieties and technologies, along with edible landscaping featuring tropical crops, are integral components of Agri-tourism initiatives in Sri Lanka (Department of Agriculture, 2014). Also, the private sector entities and individuals within the agriculture, travel, and tourism sectors have embarked on Agri-tourism ventures. Windsor Park, overseen by the CIC Group and spanning a vast 1300-acre agriculture farm, stands out as a prominent Agri-tourism park in the country (CICAgri, 2023). Moreover, some tourist hotels and individuals have actively engaged in Agri-tourism activities within their medium or small-scale farms.

There are different Agritourism activities provide the supplemental income necessary to allow for the preservation of small and mid-scale farms, ranches, and rural communities. It can be promoted as an outlet for residents and tourists to experience direct contact and interaction with agriculture and natural resources. Increasing public interaction with local farms and ranches can promote an understanding and appreciation for the working landscapes that help maintain or enhance natural resources.

This CBT practice in different clusters all over the Sri Lanka mainly near the tourist destinations, are conducted by small scale farmers.

Policies Related to Rural Tourism

Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) is the government authority tasked with planning, development, regulation, and policy implementation of tourism and related industries.

The Government initiatives in development of tourism date back to 1937 when the Ceylon Tourist Bureau was established. However, it was closed in September 1939 due to World War II.

- After Sri Lanka's independence, tourism promotion was again considered by re-establishing the Ceylon Tourist Board which took over the function of the Tourist Bureau.
- The tourism sector was given with the enactment of Act No.10 of 1966.

- This provided the legislation for the establishment of the Ceylon Tourist Board and the First Tourism Plan has also been Developed.
- Under the UNDP country program with WTO Sri Lanka has introduced Tourism Master Plan 19.2001.
- In October 2007 according to section 2 of the Tourism Act.38 of 2005, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board (Act No 10 of 1996) was replaced by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA)
- After 2001 Tag Line was introduced for Sri Lankan Tourism as “Paradise in Sri Lanka”
- Again, Sri Lankan Tourism has Introduced a New Tag line “The Wonder of Asia”
- In 2017 Sri Lankan Government introduced 5 five-year strategic plans for Sri Lankan Tourism Development (2017-2022).

National Tourism Policy: Encourages sustainable tourism practices and the development of rural tourism to alleviate poverty. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): How rural tourism aligns with national and international development goals.

Vision 2025: A strategic framework that aims to enhance rural livelihoods through tourism and empower local communities. **Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan (2022-2025)**

Ministry of Rural Development Initiatives: Supports local tourism projects that involve community participation and environmental sustainability.

Why agritourism in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka is a tourist's paradise. It is one of the favorite travel destinations in South Asia and is considered a valuable repository of crop germplasm and Agro-biodiversity. Sri Lanka is a country with an agro-based economy. In Sri Lanka, the agricultural sector is an economic mainstay and primary national employer. Agriculture contributes to 7.9% of Sri Lanka's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2023 (Economic & Social Statistics in Sri Lanka, 2023). Agriculture and farming have been given pride of place from the times of ancient Kings. The country is scattered with enormous reservoirs and major irrigation schemes that have been used for agricultural purposes through the centuries.

The island is rich in rural tourism resources with a great appeal to a visitor. Such resources range from fauna and flora, aesthetic landscapes, streams and waterfalls, irrigation tanks and canal systems, beautiful beaches, mouth-watering tropical fruits and vegetables, historical monuments, music, dance, festivities, authentic foods, beverages, traditional agriculture, local costume, indigenous medicine and healing methods, traditional arts and sports.

Tourism in Sri Lanka accounts for almost 12 percent of the country's GDP and is the third largest source of foreign exchange reserves—behind worker remittances and the apparel industry. The rapid evolution of COVID-19 and its palpable impact brought about an unprecedented crisis in the travel and tourism industry. The contraction in international Tourist arrivals amounted to -74%, over the previous year due to widespread travel restrictions and a massive drop in demand. However, according to recent statistics, Sri Lanka welcomed 151,496 international tourists in November, the highest monthly number of visitors it received in 2023, according to the latest data released by the tourism authority. The island nation's cumulative tourist arrivals for the first 11 months of the year stand at 1.27 million, according to the SLTDA.

The tourism industry is one of the leading and fastest-growing economic activities around the world, which brings numerous benefits to the host country stimulating various income-generating opportunities. many countries make efforts to promote tourism as part of their economic development process by earning foreign exchange without exports, accelerating regional development, and increasing the level of income-generating activities. However, to derive benefits of tourism in real terms, the benefits should remain with the local community. In most developing countries, the rural community receives lesser benefits from tourism due to poor levels of tourism investments and promotions focusing on them. In this context, many development practitioners have paid attention to the agritourism concept and its application to develop the living standards of rural farming communities along with the growing demand of the tourism industry.

In rural Sri Lanka, a significant portion of the population resides, relying predominantly on agriculture as their primary source of income. Despite this, numerous individuals within agrarian communities face significant socioeconomic challenges, including inadequate income, underemployment, indebtedness, substandard living conditions, and a lack of economic and social security. Consequently, there is a pressing need to explore alternative avenues for income generation among farmers, aligning with new opportunities that can contribute to their overall social and economic welfare. As agriculture is the main livelihood of the rural people, the agricultural sector should adequately focus on the potential of building linkages with other segments of the economy. Although there are various kinds of activities and resources linked with the agricultural sector to be utilized for agritourism, it has not been captured adequately in Sri Lanka particularly, when compared to other regional countries. Since the tourism sector has been emerging as the leading economic contributor of the country, a link between tourism and agriculture would be complementary for both agriculture and tourism sectors. In the existing literature, it is evident that a significant proportion of agritourism activities are orchestrated by large-scale corporations.

However, the participation of rural farmers in this industry has predominantly been at a smaller scale. The involvement of non-farmers in agritourism is prevalent, underscoring the need for greater integration of real farmers into this sector. Recognizing the potential benefits, encouraging the active engagement of real farmers in agritourism emerges as a timely and effective solution for augmenting the income of rural farmers.

With this background, a study was taken up with the following research questions.

1. What challenges and opportunities exist for promoting agritourism among the farming community in Sri Lanka?
2. What is the current situation of agritourism in the farming community and possible agritourism activities to improve their livelihoods?

The overall objective of this study is to examine the potential of agritourism development as a source of livelihood development. Specific objectives of the study with the intention of finding answers to the framed research questions are:

1. To identify the factors affecting agritourism (including challenges and opportunities) for promoting agritourism among the farming community.
2. To examine the current situation of agritourism in the farming community and possible agritourism activities to improve their livelihoods.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area and Sample Selection

Study area specifically focusing on the central, North central and the southern provinces of Sri Lanka. These areas were chosen due to their significance as prominent tourist destinations in Sri Lanka, especially for eco and cultural tourism, as well as their status as key agricultural hubs with diverse farming practices. In selecting sample units within these districts, a combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques were utilized. This approach involved conducting Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), case studies, and focus group discussions (FGDs) along with three provinces surveys targeting farmers, tourists/visitors, and people doing agritourism places, all aimed at fulfilling the study's objectives. Divisional Secretariats (DSs) were selected to consider the potential for agritourism with the initial discussions conducted with relevant officials. However, at least two DSs were chosen from each district to exceed 50% of tourists/visitors with maximum travel destinations when doing the above practice.

From each DS, one agritourist activity area was selected (community-based tourism area). These were selected with the discussions conducted with relevant officials in the relevant DS. Additionally, the following indicators were used to

select the agritourist activity locations (mainly horticultural and plantation crops in the relevant study area), proximity to tourist attractions, natural, and cultural resources, and attractiveness, and agricultural resources and farming practices. The selected agritourist activity areas (CBTs) were used as the study areas for data collection. Farmer-level information was collected in the relevant GNDs of the agritourist activity places. The same GNDs were used for the questionnaire surveys. For the farmer (involved in agritourism) level structured questionnaire survey, the sample size was determined by applying Slovin's Formula considering the margin of error of 5% and the confidence level of 95% of a certain segment of the farmer population who were involved in agritourism in the relevant GN division. Data collection was done during the months of April to October of 2024.

Collected data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and inferential statistics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Agritourists in the Study Area

Table 2.1 Total Number of tourists visiting the Agri-tourism place per month.

Characteristics		%
Number of tourists visiting the agri-tourism place per month (April to October of 2024)	Less than 20	5
	20-40 tourists	25
	40-80 tourists	15
	80-100 tourists	20
	More than 100	35

Table 2.1 indicates that the number of tourists visiting the Agri-tourism place per month varied among the farmers. Only 5% of farmers reported receiving less than 20 tourists per month. 25% of farmers stated they have 20 to 40 tourists visiting, while 15% of farmers mentioned 40 to 80 tourists. 20% of farmers noted that they host 80 to 100 tourists monthly, and the largest group, 35% of farmers said they receive more than 100 tourists per month. This shows a range in the number of visitors across the Agri-tourism sites.

Different Agritourism Activities in the Study Area

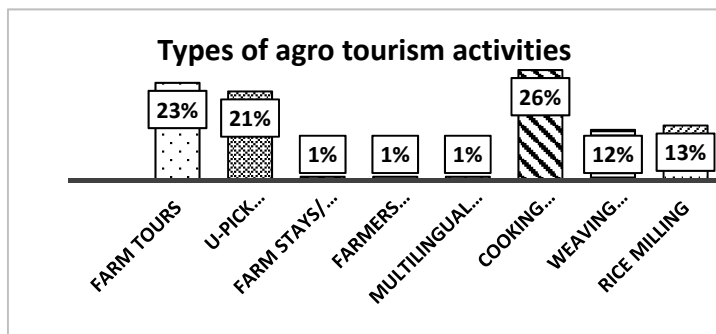


Figure 2.1 Agritourism activities in the study area.

This chart (Figure 2.1) illustrates the distribution of Agri-tourism activities provided by farmers. Cooking demonstrations are the most prevalent, constituting 26% of offerings, followed by farm tours at 23% and U-pick operations at 21%. Rice milling activities account for 13%, while weaving coconut fronds comprises 12%. Less common activities include farm stays, farmers' markets, and multilingual tour guides, each representing 1%. This data underscores the diverse experiences available in Agri-tourism settings, with a significant focus on interactive and culturally engaging activities. Most of the farmers had carried out their activities alone and there is no significant coordination with the other farmers doing agritourism in the same community.

Perceived Potential and Benefits of Agritourism

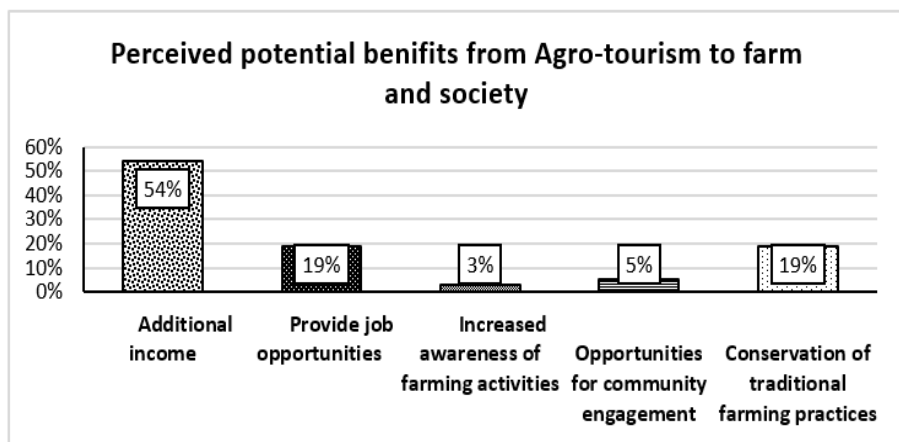


Figure 2.2 Perceived Potential and Benefits of Agritourism.

The graph (Figure 2.2) presents the perceived potential benefits of agritourism for both farms and society. Many respondents (54%) identify additional income as the primary advantage of engaging in agritourism. Job

creation and the preservation of traditional farming practices are each recognized as benefits by 19% of respondents. A smaller portion (5%) views agritourism as an opportunity to enhance community engagement, while only 3% consider it effective for increasing public awareness of farming activities. The chart emphasizes that financial gains and cultural preservation are the most valued outcomes associated with agritourism.

According to the data on the skills of family members that support the development of Agri-tourism shows that language proficiency is the most common skill (69%), followed by management skills (19%). Additionally, agriculture-related job experience and financial support were less prevalent, both at 6%. And 72% of farmers have adequate entrepreneurship skills to start an Agri-tourism business, while 28% do not. This indicates that most farmers have the necessary skills to engage in Agri-tourism.

Main Challenges Faced in Agritourism

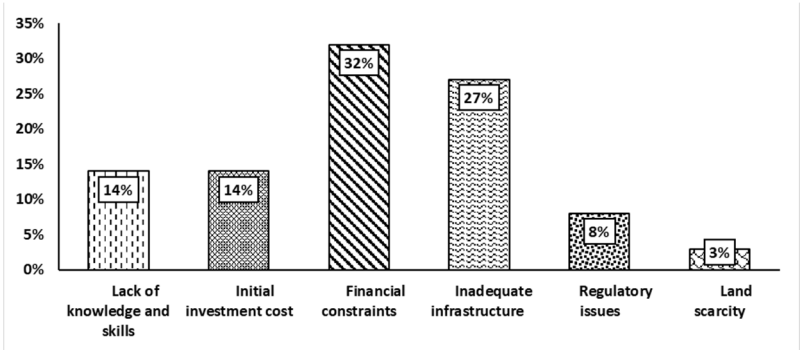


Figure 2.3 Main Challenges Faced in Agritourism.

The chart (Figure 2.3) outlines the main challenges faced by farmers when promoting Agri-tourism. The most significant challenge was financial constraints, with 32% of farmers identifying it as a key issue. Inadequate infrastructure is also a major concern, affecting 27% of farmers. Both lack of knowledge and skills and initial investment costs were highlighted by 14% of farmers.

Regulatory issues are noted by 8%, while land scarcity is identified as a challenge by 3%. The data indicate that financial and infrastructural barriers are the most prominent challenges in promoting Agri-tourism.

Farmer's Perception on Starting Agritourism Initiatives

The data collection illustrates interest in starting Agri-tourism activities on farms, indicating that 76% of respondents are in favour, while 16% are not interested, and 8% indicated that the question does not apply to them because they are already engaged in Agri-tourism

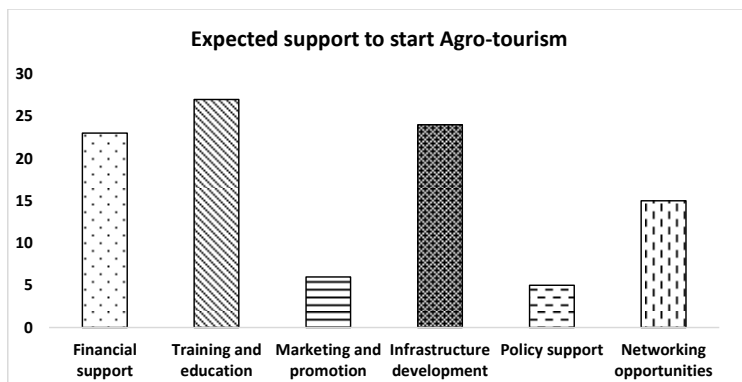


Figure 2.4 Farmers perception.

The figure highlights the key areas of anticipated support for initiating Agri-tourism ventures, with training and education as the most critical need (27%), followed closely by infrastructure development (24%) and financial support (23%). Additional requirements include networking opportunities (15%), while marketing and promotion (6%) and policy support (5%) are noted as lesser priorities.

Sources of Tourist Awareness on Agritourism

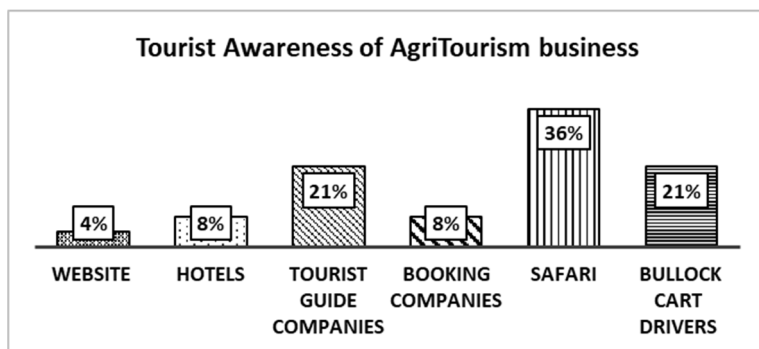


Figure 2.5 Sources of Tourist Awareness on Agritourism.

The chart shows various sources through which tourists become aware of Agri-tourism business. Safari tours are the most significant source, accounting for 36% of tourist awareness. Tourist guide companies and bullock cart drivers each contribute 21%. Booking companies and hotels each play a smaller role, both at 8%, while websites only account for 4% of the awareness.

SWOT Analysis for Agritourism Industry in Sri Lanka

Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats are vital for any industry in order to understand its capabilities and potentials.

Strengths

Rich Agricultural Heritage

Sri Lanka has a long-standing tradition of unique farming practices, which provide an authentic and appealing experience for agritourists. This cultural richness offers tourists the opportunity to engage with time-honored agricultural activities, deepening their understanding of local traditions.

Diverse Agro-Climatic Zones

The country's varied climate zones, ranging from lush tea plantations in the highlands to rice paddies in the lowlands, offer a diverse range of agritourism experiences, attracting tourists with different interests in nature, farming, and agricultural products.

Authentic Cultural Experiences

Agritourism in Sri Lanka offers tourists the chance to experience authentic cultural practices, including traditional lifestyles, crafts, and cuisine, fostering a deeper connection to the local communities.

Biodiversity and Scenic Beauty

Sri Lanka's rich biodiversity and scenic landscapes are key attractions, providing the perfect backdrop for agritourism. These natural features not only enhance the overall experience but also appeal to eco-tourists and nature enthusiasts.

Government Support for Rural Development

The Sri Lankan government's policies promoting rural development and tourism provide institutional backing for agritourism. This support enhances the viability and potential of agritourism projects, including infrastructure development and funding for local initiatives.

Weaknesses

Limited Infrastructure in Rural Areas

Poor infrastructure in rural areas, including inadequate roads, limited public transport, and a lack of essential amenities, can hinder access to agritourism sites. This can negatively impact the overall tourist experience and limit agritourism's potential reach.

Low Awareness and Promotion

Despite its potential, agritourism in Sri Lanka suffers from low visibility, both locally and internationally. The lack of comprehensive marketing and promotional efforts means that many potential tourists are unaware of the opportunities available.

Inadequate Training and Skills among Farmers

Many farmers lack training in key areas such as hospitality management, marketing, and foreign languages, which are crucial for running successful agritourism ventures. This knowledge gap can limit the quality of visitor experiences and operational efficiency.

Seasonal Tourism Demand

The agritourism sector is highly dependent on tourist seasons, leading to fluctuating visitor numbers. This seasonal nature can make income from agritourism inconsistent and unsustainable for smaller operators, particularly in rural areas with limited tourist amenities.

Financial Barriers

Developing agritourism infrastructure requires significant initial investment, which can be a financial burden for many small-scale farmers. The high upfront costs, coupled with financial risk, may deter farmers from expanding or entering the agritourism market.

Opportunities

Growing Interest in Sustainable and Eco-Friendly Tourism

The global trend toward sustainable tourism aligns well with agritourism, which emphasizes eco-friendly practices, organic farming, and low-impact tourism. This provides Sri Lanka with an opportunity to tap into an expanding market of environmentally conscious travelers.

Income Diversification for Farmers

Agritourism offers farmers the opportunity to diversify their income sources, reducing their reliance on traditional agricultural activities and enhancing their financial stability. This can help alleviate poverty in rural communities and improve livelihoods.

Government and NGO Support

Increasing recognition of agritourism's potential for rural development has led to growing support from both the government and NGOs. This support can include funding, training programs, and infrastructure development, all of which can help boost agritourism growth.

Health and Wellness Tourism

The integration of health and wellness practices, such as Ayurveda, with agritourism could attract tourists seeking holistic travel experiences. This market segment is growing globally, and Sri Lanka's traditional wellness offerings provide a natural fit for this trend.

Increasing Demand for Local and Authentic Experiences

Tourists are increasingly seeking authentic, immersive travel experiences that allow them to connect with local culture and traditions. Agritourism in Sri Lanka can meet this demand by offering unique experiences centered around rural life, farming practices, and local cuisine.

Digital Marketing Potential

The rise of social media and digital platforms provides an opportunity to reach a wider, global audience. Cost-effective online marketing strategies can help promote Sri Lanka's agritourism sector to eco-conscious travelers, millennials, and Gen Z who are often engaged in sustainable travel trends.

Untapped Rural Land Resources

Unused or underutilized land in rural areas offers opportunities for agritourism development without displacing primary agricultural activities. This can lead to the expansion of agritourism offerings and greater land utilization.

Threats

Climate Change and Environmental Risks

Climate change poses significant risks to agricultural productivity, with the potential for more frequent extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. These environmental challenges can disrupt agricultural activities and, by extension, agritourism operations.

Dependency on Tourist Seasons and External Markets

Agritourism's reliance on tourist seasons, coupled with its dependence on international tourism markets, exposes the sector to economic fluctuations. Economic downturns, geopolitical issues, or disruptions like pandemics can have a disproportionate impact on agritourism.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Agri-tourism in the study area reveals that this sector is primarily family-driven, with family-owned businesses. There is no strong and efficient community-based approach in this study areas. This points to a strong tradition of individual family involvement in agritourism operations, highlighting a potential avenue for local economic development. The study has

found that agritourism faces significant challenges in Sri Lanka, particularly financial and infrastructure inadequacies. These barriers, coupled with a general lack of awareness regarding government or private support programs, suggest that farmers may struggle to overcome initial start-up costs and operational demands. Furthermore, the relatively low engagement with existing support programs highlights a knowledge gap that limits farmers' ability to leverage external resources effectively.

To advance Agri-tourism in the country, stakeholders are called upon to provide financial support, infrastructure development, and marketing. This support will be essential to addressing tourist dissatisfaction, which centers on the quality of guided tours and the need for better signage. Strengthening these areas could significantly improve visitor experiences, thereby enhancing the sustainability and economic impact of Agri-tourism in the region.

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Rural Tourism Development in Iran: Potential, Policies and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Iran has many comparative advantages in terms of tourism, including natural and cultural resources, which are mainly related to rural tourism. Agricultural heritage, cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and rural handicrafts are the four main rural tourist attractions in Iran. In this chapter, national strategies to preserve and promote rural tourism attractions are explained, including the strategies of "The Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts" in addition to "The Ministry of Agricultural Jihad". These strategies aim to address major challenges such as limited infrastructure, environmental degradation, inadequate strategic planning, climate change, and resource management. Some of the main strategies for rural tourism development in Iran include the regulation of tourism activities, fostering international cooperation, supporting community-based tourism activities, and promoting GIAHS (Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems). Development of a national strategic plan for rural tourism that considers regional strategies concerning the differences in villages in terms of culture and capacities is suggested.

Keywords: Agricultural heritage, Handicrafts, Cultural heritage, Natural landscape, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is among the world's fastest-growing industries and a significant source of income and job opportunities. The tourism sector is deeply rooted in people, destinations, cultural heritage, and values (Raad, 2019).

The "Travel and Tourism Development Index" reports by World Economic Forum Institute show that Iran ranked 93rd in the world in 2017 (WEF, 2017) while the rank improved to 73 in the 2024 report (WEF, 2024). Therefore, according to this index, Iran has improved to 20 ranks at the time the COVID-19 pandemic could damage many tourism enterprises in different countries.

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According to this report, one of the most important indicators of tourism development in Iran is “price competitiveness” followed by “cultural resources”. In 2022, Iran was the largest travel and tourism economy in the Middle East and North Africa. Iran's tourism industry is seeing a rise in interest from Western travelers drawn to its rich cultural heritage and stunning natural landscapes (Ibid).

In terms of tourism potential, Iran ranks 15th globally; however, it ranks 45-48th in actual tourist arrivals (Azimi and Avetisyan, 2017). This discrepancy demonstrates that Iran needs to work more effectively to harness its tourist potential and increase its number of international visitors.

Apparently, opportunities for tourism in Iran are mostly found in rural areas. Therefore, in recent decades, rural tourism has been recognized as an important and growing sector (Rezvani and Bayat, 2014). It is one of the most important forms of tourism because it is a valuable source of income and job creation and can be an important tool for the social and economic development of rural communities (Jahangiri et al., 2022). Rural areas adopt rural tourism to achieve socioeconomic regeneration and development that can benefit all communities in rural spaces, and governments implement various policies to develop tourism and its subdivisions at different scales from local to national levels (Rezvani and Bayat, 2014).

Despite these realities, rural tourism as an industry has not yet been sufficiently flourished (Dinpanah & Naeimian, 2022), and little is known about the efficacy of public policies that could boost rural tourism (Rezvani & Bayat, 2014). However, many questions have raised this concern.

The main question is, what could be the goal and strategy of the government in the development of rural tourism? Hajinejad et al. (2015), in their essay on rural tourism development, explained that governments follow two main goals in developing strategies for rural tourism: rural tourism as a supplement for income-generating activities in rural areas and rural tourism for revitalization of the less developed rural habitats. They emphasized the importance of special planning for rural tourism development, which brings an integrated approach and avoids the inequality of resources in the development of tourism activities in rural areas. Similar to Hajinejad et al. (2015), Dai et al. (2023) found that rural tourism can help revitalize the countryside in China. They found that government-led tourism development could change the traditional countryside so that rural spaces have undergone remarkable changes.

In the next few section of this chapter, we explain rural tourism attraction, then we discuss the policy and structure and some initiatives that have been made to develop rural tourism in Iran after explaining some of the most significant challenges.

Rural Tourism Attractions in Iran

Tourist attractions in Iran can be divided into four categories: agricultural heritage, natural landscape, cultural heritage, and rural handicrafts (Figure1).

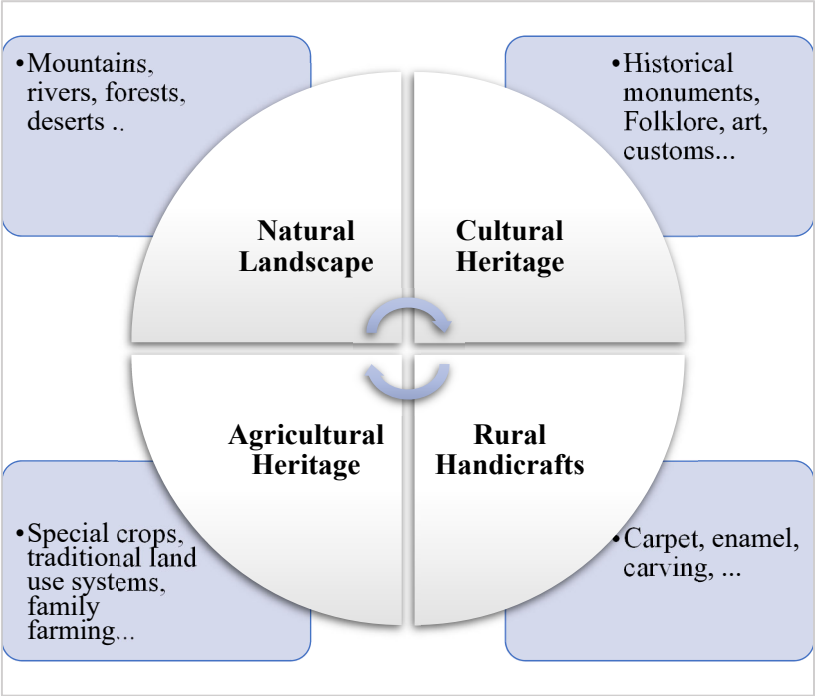


Figure 3.1 Rural Tourism Attractions in Iran.

Agricultural Heritage

Due to the prevalence of agriculture in rural communities as a form of sustainable local economy, agritourism can serve as an effective tool for attracting visitors and revitalizing villages with a thriving agricultural economy that holds potential as a tourist attraction (Eskandari and Mehr, 2020). Agricultural activity, by attracting tourists to agricultural regions, particularly rural areas, has created a sense of mental and psychological relaxation. This has contributed to a growing trend in tourism encompassing both recreational activities and experiential learning (Farsani et al.,2019).

Iran is known for its special crops, and almost all of them originate from rural areas. For instance, saffron, barbery, jujube, and pomegranates are known worldwide and originate from villages (Cardone et al., 2020; Fakhimzade., 2014).

These products fascinate tourists, who wish to participate in different stages of cultivation and harvesting. For example, saffron is a special crop that attracts

many tourists during harvesting, and jujube is a unique product that many people are interested in its landscape and go to see it.

In addition to special crops, some techniques used in different stages of agriculture are interesting and can be used as tourist attractions. For example, in one of the main centers of grapes in Iran, farmers buried the grapes to keep them fresh and consumed them in some traditional ceremonies such as Yalda or Nourooz. These special techniques originated from indigenous knowledge and tourists are anxious to see them.

Rural Handicrafts

Tourism attractions and handicrafts are the main and important factors in attracting tourists and following it increasing occupation in the local societies . Iranian handicrafts are significant artistic creatures with deep roots in the culture and history of this land. Handicrafts produced in rural areas are unique, culturally significant, and often involve traditional knowledge and techniques passed down through generations (Hosseinnia and Shoja.,2017). Every province in Iran has its special handicrafts, this cultural and artistic diversity with the support of the government can play a significant role in meeting unemployment and gross domestic development (Ghanbari et al.,2023). Examples include pottery, textiles, woodworks, basket weaving, and metal crafts. These handicrafts contribute to the economic empowerment of artisans and preservation of cultural heritage. Supporting local handicraft industries helps generate income, create jobs, and promote local craftsmanship.

Iran's Cultural Heritage

Iran has a rich cultural and religious heritage, with numerous ceremonies and attractions, particularly in rural areas that attract tourists worldwide (Chianeh et al., 2018). Some of the most notable include Nowruz (Persian New Year), Ghorban, Fitr Eid (Islamic Festivals), Yalda Night (Shab-e Yalda) and so on. These events offer visitors a deep insight into the local traditions, religious beliefs, and cultural practices, making them key drivers of tourism (Timothy,2014). For example, in rural areas, traditional music, storytelling, and poetry recitals are common in rural settings during Yalda night and offer tourists a chance to experience Persian hospitality and folklore in intimate, familial settings, often in traditional houses or eco-lodges.

Natural Landscape of Iran

Iran is home to a rich array of natural attractions that form a significant part of rural tourism, offering breath-taking landscapes, diverse ecosystems, and a wealth of outdoor activities. Iran's rural natural attractions provide a wide range of tourism opportunities, from mountainous adventures and desert safaris to cultural interactions with nomadic tribes and coastal exploration. These natural

wonders are found in different parts of the country, offering unique opportunities for eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and cultural exploration. Some of the key natural attractions in rural Iran include deserts, Mount Damavand, Caspian Sea, forests around the sea, Hyrcanian forests, and islands.

Rural Tourism Development; Policy and Structure in Iran

Generally, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts is responsible for tourism development in Iran. For example, all sites listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites are under its jurisdiction. However, due to the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad's legal duties, every activity affecting rural areas must be coordinated with the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad. Therefore, both are responsible for the development of rural tourism in Iran. Figure 2 presents the proposed responsibilities of each ministry regarding rural tourism, as required by legal duties.

Some notable initiatives and achievements in the development of rural tourism are mentioned below.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Scientific studies have proven the positive effect of being inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, the UNESCO badge is an important marketing tool in world tourism, and its presence ensures many more visitors to a site or practice recognized by UNESCO (Vecco and Caust, 2019).

Iran has been listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since 1975. Currently, Iran, with 28 sites registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List, ranks 10th in the world for the total number of registered sites, 9th for cultural sites with 26 registered sites, and 11th for natural sites with 2 registered sites (jointly with several other countries). Among the 28 registered sites, one (the Hyrcanian forests) is jointly registered with the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS)

The concept of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) evolved as a global collaborative endeavor to identify and protect traditional agro-ecosystems and landscapes that are rich in biodiversity and culture (Nath et al., 2024). The GIAHS emphasizes the role of traditional agriculture in preserving the ecosystem, indigenous knowledge, long-lasting cultural values, historical heritage, and the natural landscape of the region, as well as the

maintenance of environmentally friendly systems, and was initiated in 2002 (FAO, 2018). GIAHS was a relatively new concept for Iran as the programme drew little attention in the country till the time the Minister of Agricultural Jihad signed an MoU with FAO in 2009 (Soltani and Kiani Rad, 2024). Since the designation of the first Iranian GIAHS site in 2014, six GIAHS sites have been designated: the Qanat-base agricultural system in Kashan, the Saffron production system in Gonabad, Grape production system in Malayer, Rainfed fig orchards in Estahban, Qazvin traditional gardens, and Tuyserkan walnut production system.

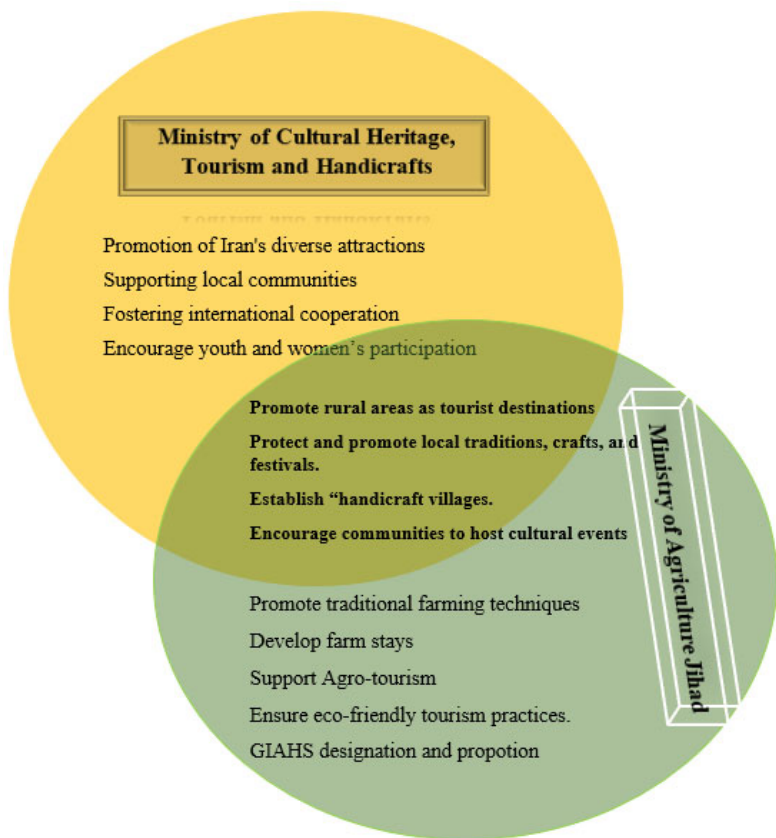


Figure 3.2 Proposed plan for rural tourism development in Iran.

Handicraft Development

Handicraft development represents local traditions and indigenous populations as well as a symbol of places visited by tourists (Shojanoori, 2015). Currently, nine million Iranians are involved in the production of handicrafts and other

rural industries such as Persian carpets, Kilim and Jajim, handmade and hand-painted glassware and ceramics, pottery, and jewelry. Bazargani et al. (2024) research on handicraft development in rural Iran, emphasized branding development. They found that brand development in the handicraft sector improves income, creates new jobs, promotes rural people's participation, and prevents migration from rural to urban areas. The Iranian government, empowering local communities, helps them make their best from branding advantages and assists handicraft artisans by providing financial facilities and necessary resources to help them conduct their activities adequately.

Cultural Festivals

In Iran, the government organizes and supports numerous festivals with deep roots in traditions and customs. Generally, these festivals are related to agricultural processes such as harvesting a special crop. The social and cultural impacts of tourism are often considered together as the 'people' impacts which arise from interactions between residents and visitors in the form on cultural events. Such contact may precipitate changes in everyday life, traditions, values, norms, and the identities of destination residents.

Empowerments of Local Communities

The community's participation and function in developing tourist villages are essential to maintaining tourism sustainability and prosperity in the village community (Kurniawati et al.,2021). Empowerment, as it represents community members' sense of control and ability to cope with a changing environment, plays a crucial role in sustainable tourism (Park et al.,2023). The empowerment of local tourism stakeholders has facilitated their progression from being "objects of tourism" to "subjects of tourism," enhancing their active participation in the local economy (Shafieisabet and Haratifard, 2020).

In recent decades, empowerment has been proposed as a mechanism for rural development in Iran (Taleshi et al.,2021). Holding workshops and financial support to encourage them to introduce their tourist attractions and use them to enrich their economy and spread their culture.

Challenges

Rural tourism in Iran faces several unique challenges stemming from economic, environmental, and infrastructural factors.

1. **Limited infrastructure:** One of the challenges faced by rural tourism is limited infrastructure, such as transportation networks, accommodation facilities, and access to basic services (e.g., clean water, sanitation, and electricity). Insufficient investment in rural areas prevents rural communities from effectively leveraging their tourism potential (Khademhosseini et al., 2024; Lak and Khairabadi.,2022; Torabi et al.,

2023). On the other hand, some studies have shown that rural tourism development can attract private investment and improve local infrastructure. In turn, this infrastructure improvement can encourage further private sector investment and enhance the quality of life in rural areas (Niazi et al., 2019; Fakhrabad & Poor, 2019).

2. ***Environmental degradation:*** With its diverse natural landscapes, including mountains, deserts, and forests, Iran has great potential for rural tourism. Tourism activities, if not managed sustainably, can lead to environmental issues, such as deforestation, soil erosion, and pollution. However, mismanagement of tourism activities coupled with existing environmental pressures has led to the deterioration of these pristine ecosystems. In some tourist sites, booming rural ecotourism activities have led to increased pollution of ecological resources as well as decreased attraction of landscapes in under-studied rural settlements. (Nagmeh et al., 2021).
3. ***Strategic planning:*** Various studies have mentioned that ineffective policies and a lack of strategic planning are significant challenges hindering the growth of rural tourism in Iran. Developing rural community-based tourism and turning tourism into an economic engine for the region to develop rural areas is one of the most important issues requiring the adoption of logical and strategic strategies in accordance with regional and local capabilities and planning orientations (Roumiani et al., 2020). Overall, leadership for rural tourism development should lead to strategic cooperation between tourism businesses and other organizations based on commitment to destination coherence (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2014). Since rural areas are scattered in different geographical zones, they have different situations, and the plan to promote tourism might be different in each of them. Therefore, a national strategic plan must consider these differences.
4. ***Climate change and resource management:*** Climate change can be one of the most important factors threatening the development of rural tourism because of its impact on rural areas and agricultural activities as one of the most significant rural tourism attractions (Chin & Lo, 2017). Climate change has attracted the attention of many researchers in recent years to better understand this phenomenon. In Iran, climate change is also a serious challenge that needs to be considered in planning for all sectors, especially the rural tourism sector (Javan et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Rural Tourism in Iran is a key sector for sustainable development, focused on preserving Iran's rich cultural heritage and empowering local communities, and can be a key driver for integrated rural development. Rural areas in Iran, preserving their traditional agricultural practices, offer visitors a wealth of

beautiful natural landscapes, engaging in farm activities, local festivals, and unique handicrafts.

Despite its great potential in various fields, tourism in Iran has not developed to its full capacity and potential, according to the international statistics mentioned in this article. Efforts to improve the country's Travel and Tourism Development Index ranking indicate great progress, but further attention to identifying opportunities and challenges is necessary for more effective policymaking, especially in the area of rural tourism. To tap into the full potential of rural tourism in Iran, it's crucial to address the existing challenges including limited infrastructure, environmental degradation, lack of strategic planning, and finally climate change and resource management.

Focusing on the importance of agricultural traditional systems, can help to conserve the agricultural heritage and special crops that are raised in Iran with the indigenous knowledge to manage water and soil. Designation of the Iranian GIAHS sites could help different stakeholders understand the value of their traditional methods and knowledge in agriculture sector. Handicrafts are also related to the agriculture sector and are a mixture of the art and expertise of the rural people. Brand development improves income, creates new jobs, promotes rural people participation, and prevents migration from rural to urban areas. Community participation in developing tourist villages is essential to maintaining tourism sustainability. Community empowerment plays a crucial role in sustainable tourism.

Finally, it is important to note that rural areas are scattered across different geographical zones. They have different situations, and the plan to promote tourism might differ accordingly. Therefore, a national strategic plan must consider these differences. By doing so, Iran can further develop its rural tourism sector and contribute to the growth and prosperity of its rural communities, while providing tourists with enriching experiences.

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Sustainable Rural Tourism in Vietnam: Opportunities, Challenges and Lessons

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam, with its many beautiful natural landscapes and rich cultural and historical heritage, has great potential for developing sustainable rural tourism. This chapter describes governmental support policies, opportunities, challenges and draws practical lessons in sustainable rural tourism development in Vietnam. These lessons of Vietnam for sustainable rural tourism include planning and development must be synchronous and associated with local characteristics; training and developing high-quality human resources; preserving cultural heritage; diversifying tourism products; strengthening the promotion of linkages; active community participation and enhancing digital transformation application.

Keywords: Sustainable development; Rural tourism; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable rural tourism is a form of tourism in rural areas that aims to maintain and preserve natural, cultural, and social resources for future generations while bringing economic benefits to local communities. According to Smith & Richards (2013), sustainable rural tourism provides important benefits in improving the quality of life for residents. By developing tourism activities based on existing cultural and natural values, people in rural areas can utilize these resources to generate additional income, thereby reducing dependence on traditional economic sectors such as agriculture. Sustainable

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rural tourism strategies need to consider the needs of host communities, the environment, local suppliers, and tourists (Bramwell, 1994).

Many studies emphasize the importance of sustainable rural tourism, not only in improving the lives of residents but also in its ability to bridge the development gap between urban and rural areas. Investing in tourism infrastructure and service development in rural areas not only boosts the local economy but also provides unique tourism experiences closely tied to the natural and cultural values of each region (Lane and Kastenholz, 2015). Additionally, sustainable rural tourism plays a crucial role in environmental protection and biodiversity conservation by promoting responsible tourism activities and raising awareness about environmental protection and the preservation of local cultural values among both tourists and local communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Sharpley, 2009).

In recent years, the development of sustainable rural tourism has become a significant field of study as countries around the world seek to leverage tourism potential in rural areas to promote economic development while protecting the environment and preserving the unique cultural characteristics of each locality. Sustainable development is seen as a comprehensive, systematic process aimed at improving the quality of life by adjusting the supply and maintenance of resources in a sustainable manner. This development must also ensure social equity and environmental protection, enabling both current and future generations to meet their needs and improve their quality of life (Podovac and Jovanović 2016).

Studies on sustainable rural tourism have expanded significantly, focusing on a holistic approach that balances environmental protection, economic development, and social sustainability. According to Lane (1994), sustainable rural tourism is a form of tourism in rural areas that aims to maintain and preserve natural, cultural, and social resources for future generations while bringing economic benefits to local communities. Sharpley (2000) pointed out that sustainability in rural tourism development is about not causing damage to the natural environment while ensuring economic and social development for the local community. Sharpley & Roberts (2004) emphasized that sustainable rural tourism must meet key criteria such as environmental protection, local economic development, and the maintenance of traditional culture.

Overall, researchers on sustainable tourism development focus on the sustainability or unsustainability of economic, cultural-social, and environmental aspects (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Gartner, 2004; Julianti and Noer, 2022). This is important for identifying solutions to address unsustainable aspects in the tourism development process of each locality. Additionally, some scholars have pointed out that the attitudes and perceptions of residents, tourists, their support, and participation are also emphasized for sustainable rural tourism development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005), or the involvement of the

locals in policy planning for sustainable rural tourism development (Blancas et al. 2011; Šimková, 2007). Scholars also believe that managing and developing sustainable rural tourism requires the participation of tourism partners and collaboration in tourism (Streimikiene and Bilan, 2015).

Rural tourism has been listed as a key factor on the 2021-2030 master plan for sustainable development in the countryside of Vietnam, helping to boost agriculture, traditional crafts and lifestyle, ecological and environment conservation, along with building on multi-value and inclusive economic structure transformations. Vietnam, with its diverse natural and cultural resources, stands before a valuable opportunity to develop sustainable rural tourism. 70% of Vietnam's population are living and working in agricultural and rural areas. This is a potential advantage for developing agricultural and rural tourism. Vietnam's rural tourism is developed on base of the close relationship between village communities and the country, ensuring the preservation of the village's cultural identity (VNAT, 2024). However, rural tourism in Vietnam has also been challenging, against small scale of investment, poor traffic infrastructure, human resources, funds and market links.

This chapter will describe support policies, opportunities, challenges in sustainable rural tourism development in Vietnam, and draw valuable lessons to promote the sustainable development of rural tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This research is the result of a literature review using a qualitative descriptive approach with relevant studies on sustainable rural tourism in Vietnam. Reports from organizations, scientific articles, and case studies from different sources about rural tourism in Vietnam were used for the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of government support policies on sustainable rural tourism development

Developing sustainable rural tourism is currently a top concern of many countries in the world. Efforts do not stop at establishing policies but also focus on implementing those policies to achieve optimal results. The Vietnamese Government has issued and implemented many mechanisms and policies for agricultural and rural development, including rural tourism in major development programs and aiming to develop rural tourism in a sustainable manner. These policies not only support the preservation of cultural values, improve people's lives but also promote long-term and effective rural economic development.

An important milestone in strengthening the legal framework for the tourism industry in Vietnam is the Tourism Law No. 09/2017/QH14 (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2017). In addition, the authorities have also developed and issued documents and policies on tourism development, rural tourism, and sustainable tourism development such as approving the Rural Tourism Development Program in the construction of new rural areas for the period 2021 - 2025, developing tourism comprehensively, quickly and sustainably in the coming time (Government of Vietnam, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). In which, it is emphasized that rural tourism development is identified as a key solution and task in the National Target Programme on new rural construction. Rural tourism development encourages the participation of local communities in tourism activities, thereby promoting indigenous cultural values and typical products of each region, contributing to the development of rural economy, building new rural areas in depth, effectively and sustainably.

Through the actual implementation of documents and policies in Vietnam, there have been shortcomings that have affected the progress and effectiveness of the proposed tourism development policies (Table 1).

Table 4.1 Summary of key documents and policies related to rural tourism development in Vietnam.

Sl. No.	Document and policy number	Name of policies	Main contents	Disadvantages/ limitations
1.	Tourism Law No. 09/2017/QH14, issued by the National Assembly on June 19, 2017	Tourism Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regulations on principles, policies and measures for tourism management and development. - Conditions for tourism business, granting travel licenses, and issuing tour guide cards. - Regulations on the management of destinations, tourism resources and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inadequacies in implementation: Some regulations are unclear or difficult to apply in practice, for example, conditions for granting licenses for travel businesses or international tour guides. - Lack of synchronization: Some regulations are not consistent with other relevant laws such as the Investment Law or the Environmental Protection Law, causing difficulties in implementing and developing

Table contd...

Sl. No.	Document and policy number	Name of policies	Main contents	Disadvantages/ limitations
			types of accommodation facilities. - Responsibilities of agencies, organizations and individuals in tourism development.	agricultural and rural tourism models.
2.	Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg, of the Prime Minister dated January 22, 2020	Approval of Vietnam's tourism development strategy to 2030	- The goal is to develop tourism into a spearhead economic sector. - Orientation to develop diverse, high-quality tourism products with Vietnamese identity. - Promote regional connectivity, sustainable development and protection of the tourism environment. - Strengthen promotion, promotion and international cooperation in the tourism sector.	- Implementation solutions are not specified: The proposed goals lack detailed action plans or implementation resources. - Sustainability is not clear: Although the orientation of sustainable development is clear, there is still a lack of specific policies on environmental protection and cultural heritage.

Table contd...

Sl. No.	Document and policy number	Name of policies	Main contents	Disadvantages/ limitations
3.	Decision No. 922/QĐ-TTg, of the Prime Minister dated August 2, 2022	Approving the Rural Tourism Development Program in New Rural Construction for the period of 2021-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The goal is to promote rural tourism in conjunction with the new rural development program. - Exploit cultural values, natural resources and typical products of rural areas. - Train human resources, raise public awareness of sustainable tourism development. - Increase investment in infrastructure and technical facilities for rural tourism destinations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited resources: Rural areas still face many difficulties in terms of capital, infrastructure and human resources to implement the program. - Lack of synchronization with other programs: Rural tourism development is not well connected with policies on new rural development or preservation of local culture.
4.	Resolution No. 82/NQ-CP of the Government, dated May 18, 2023	Regarding the main tasks and solutions to accelerate recovery and accelerate effective and sustainable tourism development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Propose specific tasks to restore the tourism industry after the COVID-19 pandemic. - Accelerate tourism development associated with digital transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dependence on international visitors: The Resolution focuses heavily on recovering international visitors after the pandemic, while domestic tourism also needs to be prioritized for development. 0- Lack of creative solutions: Recovery

Sl. No.	Document and policy number	Name of policies	Main contents	Disadvantages/ limitations
			and technology application. - Develop new tourism products, improve service quality. - Encourage the participation of businesses and communities in tourism activities.	solutions have not fully exploited the potential of digital transformation or new trends such as experiential tourism and green tourism.
5.	Directive No. 08/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister, dated February 23, 2024	On comprehensive, fast and sustainable tourism development in the coming time	- Promote the balanced development of all types of tourism: cultural, ecological, and community tourism. - Strengthen the management and protection of natural resources and cultural heritage. - Promote and advertise domestic and international tourism. - Propose measures to develop tourism in harmony between economic benefits and environmental protection.	- Lack of specific evaluation criteria: Although the goal is rapid and sustainable development, there are no clear criteria or effective monitoring mechanisms. - Pressure on the environment: Rapid development, if not controlled, can lead to overload at tourist destinations.

Table contd...

Sl. No.	Document and policy number	Name of policies	Main contents	Disadvantages/ limitations
6.	Decision No. 509/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister, dated June 13, 2024	Approval of the Tourism System Planning for the 2021-2030 period, with a vision to 2045	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning key national and regional tourism areas, points and routes. - Orientation for tourism infrastructure development, traffic connection with tourist destinations. - Identify priority areas for development, protection and promotion of cultural and natural heritage values. - Propose mechanisms and policies to prioritize investment, promote public-private partnership in the tourism sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of regional connectivity: Planning has not focused on coordination between regions, leading to uneven development. - Lack of practicality: Some large planning projects are difficult to implement due to limited resources and infrastructure.

Important documents and policies related to the tourism sector demonstrate the deep concern and clear strategic direction of the Vietnamese Government to turn tourism into a spearhead economic sector, contributing positively to the socio-economic development of the country. These documents and policies do not only provide long-term orientation but also focus on solving important practical issues, including:

Completing the legal framework: The development of regulations and policies have created a specific legal foundation, helping to effectively manage and develop the tourism industry, while protecting tourism resources.

Towards sustainable development: The documents emphasize the balance between economic development, environmental protection and preserving social values, with a focus on preserving cultural and natural heritage, while raising public awareness in tourism activities.

Focus on quality and innovation: The policy focuses on improving service quality, diversifying tourism products, and applying modern trends such as digital transformation, ecotourism, and community-based tourism.

Promoting regional connectivity: Policies that encourage coordination between localities, sectors and regions to ensure equitable development, especially in disadvantaged areas such as rural and mountainous areas.

Challenges to overcome: Despite significant policy investments, there are still limitations in implementation, especially related to resources, feasibility and coordination between sectors. Environmental protection and implementation of large projects also pose many problems that need to be solved.

Key achievements in sustainable rural tourism development in Vietnam

Although rural tourism in Vietnam is still in its early stages of development, with the advantage of possessing rich natural resources and unique culture, it creates great potential for developing rural tourism in a sustainable direction. With specific policies and goals, Vietnam has achieved a number of achievements in developing sustainable rural tourism, specifically:

i- Raising community awareness and cultural preservation in sustainable tourism development

Training and communication programs have helped rural communities better understand the role of tourism in economic development and resource conservation. According to the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism in 2023, more than 70% of localities developing rural tourism have organized training on resource conservation and economic development. For example, in Quang Nam province, 90% of Thanh Ha pottery villagers clearly understood the role of craft village conservation in tourism development after participating in the training program.

Craft villages such as Bat Trang pottery, Dong Ho paintings or local festivals are developed as tourism products, contributing to preserving and promoting cultural identity values. Tra Que Vegetable Village, Tan Hoa Village and Thai Hai Village joined the list of UN Tourism's Best Tourist Villages in 2022, 2023, 2024. This reflects Viet Nam's efforts to improve the livelihoods of rural communities while protecting its cultural heritage and natural resources.

ii- Improving infrastructure and facilities in rural areas

Support policies have promoted investment in infrastructure and facilities such as roads, electricity, water and telecommunications systems in many localities, facilitating the connection of rural areas with urban areas. Traffic routes to the northern mountainous provinces and the Central Highlands have been invested in and built, contributing to increasing the attraction of tourists to experience local tourism products.

iii- Local economic growth and improved income for local people

Tourism has created employment opportunities and stable income for local people through models of providing accommodation services (homestay, farmstay), cuisine and tour guides. More than 40% of households in rural tourism areas participate in providing services. The homestay model in Ta Van village (Lao Cai) has helped increase the average income of households by more than 25 million VND (Vietnamese đồng)/year.

iv- Diversifying tourism products and protecting natural resources

The Vietnamese Government has paid attention to issuing policies and mechanisms facilitating agricultural and rural development, including rural tourism. Many localities in Vietnam have taken their advantages to developed high-quality, unique and attractive rural tourism products. Vietnam's rural tourism products are quite diverse, such as eco-tourism, agricultural experiences, craft village tourism... Typical destinations such as Mai Chau (Hoa Binh province), Cu Lao Cham (Quang Nam province), Can Gio mangrove forest... bring unique experiences to tourists.

Some localities have implemented tourism models that combine environmental protection, reduce plastic waste, and contribute to preserving natural resources in areas such as Can Gio mangrove forest and Cat Tien National Park...

v- Support from governmental policies and international organizations, along with the success of typical models

The Vietnamese government has issued support programs such as the National Target Program on New Rural Areas and international cooperation projects of UNDP and UNESCO, providing finance and technology to promote sustainable tourism.

Typical models such as Ban Lac community based tourism (Mai Chau), Sa Pa (Lao Cai), Duong Lam Ancient Village (Hanoi) ... have been successful in combining cultural preservation and tourism development, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors each year and creating jobs for the majority of local residents.

The above achievements affirm the role of rural tourism, because it not only contributes to improving the quality of life, preserving culture and protecting the environment but also promotes the image of Vietnam internationally.

Opportunities of sustainable rural tourism development in Vietnam

Vietnam is an agricultural country with about 61.9% of the population living in rural areas (General Statistics Office, 2023). Rural areas account for 85% of the country's area, possessing rich natural resources and unique culture, creating great potential for rural tourism development. Rural tourism not only contributes to local economic development but also plays an important role in preserving culture, nature and improving people's lives. Therefore, the opportunity for sustainable rural tourism development is huge, because of:

i- Potential natural and cultural resources

Vietnam has many peaceful villages and beautiful natural landscapes such as the terraced fields in the Northwest, the Mekong Delta with its rivers and unique ecosystems, or the Lam Dong plateau with its temperate climate. In addition, each region has its own unique cultural identity, from traditional craft villages, folk festivals to typical customs and practices.

These resources are the foundation for developing specific tourism products such as agricultural experience tourism (rice planting, tea picking, etc.), eco-tourism, community based tourism, or cultural tourism (visiting craft villages, participating in festivals).

ii- Governmental support policies of Vietnam

The Vietnamese Government has issued many policies to support the development of rural tourism. Notably, Decision No. 922/QĐ-TTg dated August 2, 2022, approving the Rural Tourism Development Program in the New Rural Development Program for the period 2021-2025. This program emphasizes the connection between tourism development and improving community life, while encouraging cultural preservation and environmental protection.

Digital transformation policies in the tourism industry also open up great opportunities, helping to widely promote rural destinations and attract domestic and foreign tourists.

iii- Growing demand for experiential tourism in agricultural and rural areas

Tourists, especially the younger generation and international tourists, increasingly prefer experiences close to nature and the community. After the Covid 19 pandemic, the trend of tourism close to nature and the community has become more and more popular.

About 60% of domestic tourists want to experience rural tourism, especially eco-tourism and agricultural experiences, and craft village tourism. Foreign

tourists to Vietnam are increasingly interested in experiencing community based tourism in rural areas. According to a survey from UNWTO in 2022, more than 45% of international visitors choose Vietnam for cultural experiences, including rural tourism.

This trend creates great opportunities for rural tourism in Vietnam, where visitors can participate in activities such as harvesting agricultural products, experiencing rural life, or learning about local and traditional culture.

Challenges of sustainable rural tourism development in Vietnam

Besides opportunities, Vietnam's rural tourism also faces some challenges:

Firstly, lack of infrastructure: Although there have been many improvements, infrastructure in many rural areas is still limited, making it difficult to access tourism destinations. According to the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, only 30% of rural tourist destinations have standard accommodation, while transportation to many rural areas is still difficult.

Secondly, lack of high-quality human resources: Human resources serving tourism in rural areas are mainly untrained workers, leading to uneven service quality. There is a lack of formal training programs on communication skills, management and tourism operations.

Thirdly, pressure on the environment and culture: Unsustainable exploitation of resources, along with the rapid increase in the number of tourists, puts great pressure on the ecosystem and natural environment. Some destinations such as Sa Pa and Hoi An have experienced tourist overload, leading to great pressure on the environment and ecosystem. In addition, excessive commercialization also erodes traditional cultural identity.

Fourthly, tourism products are not yet diverse: although there are many rural tourism products, the creativity in product design is not high, leading to limited competitiveness. The products are still duplicated, not fully exploiting the potential of each locality.

Fifthly, lack of regional linkage and effective cooperation: rural tourism development requires close coordination between the government, community and businesses. However, many localities have not yet developed a regional linkage strategy, leading to fragmented development and unhealthy competition.

Some practical lessons of Vietnam for sustainable rural tourism development

Firstly, planning and development must be synchronous and associated with local characteristics: Rural tourism development planning needs to be based on the potential, cultural characteristics, and resources of each locality to create a unique mark and sustainable attraction. A synchronous, long-term development policy will help avoid spontaneous development and unhealthy

competition between localities. The development of synchronous infrastructure (transportation, accommodation, basic services) is an important factor in enhancing the tourist experience and increasing the competitiveness of the destination.

Secondly, training and developing high-quality human resources: The quality of human resources not only ensures the quality of services but also acts as a bridge between tourists and culture, nature and local communities. In the national target program on new rural construction for the period of 2021-2025 associated with the Rural Tourism Development Program, one of the four basic contents is also identified as training and developing human resources to participate .

Thirdly, preserving cultural heritage is the foundation for sustainable development: Cultural heritages in rural areas are tourist attractions, so it is necessary to promote the preservation and development of cultural heritages such as traditional craft villages, historical relics, folk festivals, etc. That is the foundation to ensure sustainability in tourism activities in rural areas in the future. The government needs to have policies regulating the preservation of cultural heritages, limiting over-exploitation, in which encouraging local communities to participate in management will contribute to preserving cultural values and creating economic value for people through tourism activities.

Fourthly, diversify tourism products: Each rural area has its own natural resources, culture, and customs, and these factors need to be exploited to create unique tourism products that are different from those of other localities. More importantly, tourism products need to focus on sustainability, not only ensuring economic benefits but also protecting the environment and maintaining ecological balance.

Fifthly, strengthen the promotion of linkages: Coordination among stakeholders is fundamental to ensure effective tourism management and development. The government plays a coordinating role, businesses provide financial resources and experience, while local communities are the implementers and preservers of cultural values.

Sixth, active community participation is a key factor: The role of the community has a certain impact to achieve sustainable results in rural tourism development. Because the local community is the one who preserves the culture, operates tourism services, and at the same time is also the one who directly benefits from this type of tourism. Encouraging community participation not only helps increase income but also motivates them to preserve culture and protect the environment to contribute to sustainable tourism development.

Finally, enhancing digital transformation application: Innovation in tourism product design and digital technology application helps rural tourism increase

its competitiveness and reach more customers. Digital transformation also supports the management, promotion and development of domestic tourism to foreign visitors more effectively. Digital transformation will provide full information about tourist destinations and rural tourism products to tourists looking for information about tourism in regions of Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

Development of sustainable rural tourism is not only to preserve and promote cultural and natural resources but also to provide a stable income for rural communities. This will contribute to improving the quality of life for people and support the nation's sustainable development goals, especially in the context of international integration and responding to climate change. Implementing the right strategies will help Vietnam harness the potential of rural tourism, promote sustainable socio-economic development, and simultaneously protect the environment and cultural heritage for future generations.

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Integrated Rural Tourism in Malaysia: What India can Imbibe and Implement?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt at looking into and realising the efforts at putting into place an integrated rural tourism policy in Malaysia with special reference to rural homestays. The different aspects of forwarding an integrated approach towards rural tourism is unique for Malaysia. Some of these positive and grounding aspects of Malaysian rural homestay tourism can be adopted in India to make the rural tourism sector more vibrant and sustainable.

Keywords: Rural development; Rural tourism; Homestay; Tourism Policy; India; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism, which has immense potential for economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation can, not only address many a challenge but also can act as a force for leveraging opportunities, thereby ensuring sustainable development and community benefits. Globally, rural tourism is growing driven by the increasing demand for authentic experiences, nature-based activities, cultural immersion and sustainable tourism practices. The increased need for genuine experiences, outdoor recreation, and environmentally friendly travel strategies is propelling the growth of rural tourism worldwide. Infact, according to worldwide trends, rural tourism is expected to develop at a rate of 0-15 per cent between 2020 and 2025.

With a right approach and correct strategy, rural tourism may create unique, tranquil experiences that are also reasonably priced. Rural tourism though holds promise as a solution to propagating decent livelihood opportunities in the villages, however, it must be carefully planned and executed to provide memorable and hygienic experiences that attract both urban and international tourists. It has enormous potential for economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. Government support and community

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involvement will be crucial to developing a thriving rural tourism sector that bridges urban-rural disparities across countries. Rural tourism, hence, must be part of a broader vision to revitalise and sustain rural communities.

However, as the world population which is projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 and climate change threaten to reduce food production by 60 per cent, one needs to consider the long-term viability of rural tourism. Ensuring food security for the teeming billions will require a comprehensive strategy which goes beyond tourism, potentially leveraging the days per year when cultivators are actively engaged in agriculture (Shekara, 2024).

Both governments and private sector are found to equally invest in rural infrastructure and tourism development. While in Europe, rural tourism is well-established, with a focus on cultural heritage and gastronomy, in Africa, rural tourism is all about community-based tourism and cultural heritage. A look at the countries across the globe reveals that in countries like the USA, rural tourism focusses upon nature-based tourism, eco-tourism and cultural experiences, in Italy, it is the network of rural hotels and B&Bs which is promoting local culture and traditions, in New Zealand, rural farm stays and homestays are offering farm-to-table experiences, and in Scotland, the focus is on cultural heritage, outings and local culinary. Given the wide and rich evolution of rural tourism, the countries across the Asia-Pacific region too are equally infested with the rapid growth in rural tourism, primarily driven by China, India, and other Southeast Asian countries.

As the Asia-Pacific region addresses the twin issues of migration of youth population to cities and towns and the reeling food security concerns, rural tourism today has become even more important as a cushion. Infact, rural tourism in the like of agri tourism coupled with homestays can provide economic opportunities, encourage young people to stay in villages, and eventually help feed a nation.

How Malaysia Fares in Polity and Economy: The Inroads

A multilingual Southeast Asian country, Malaysia with a gender ratio of 111 males to 100 females has a diverse population of 34 million people constituting 58.1 per cent Malays, 22.4 per cent Chinese, 12.2 per cent Bumiputeras and 6.5 per cent Indians (2023). At present, Malaysia 's GDP is growing at 5.9 per cent with the largest share coming from the services sector followed by manufacturing.

With authority and power vested in the federal government, Malaysia has a constitutional monarchy with three branches, viz. executive, legislative, and judiciary under the Federal Constitution. Malaysia's political system is maturing, like the West and India, with the administrative power exercised by the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and a Council of Ministers. Malaysia's multi-ethnic population is represented by its various political

parties. The smallest unit of government in the country is the local government managing roads, drainage, electricity and managing waste.

Policymaking in Malaysia is the domain of political representatives, while policy implementation is carried out by the civil servants. Policies are approved by the Cabinet and are essentially government plans of action. Malaysia's policy priorities include food security, environment and climate change, aiming for zero carbon emissions by 2050, and strengthening the agriculture sector. The government also heavily subsidises healthcare, fuel, and public transportation, and has a distributive policy to ensure everyone enjoys national resources. The education system in Malaysia faces the challenge of overcrowding, with morning and afternoon school sessions in urban areas, while rural areas have an excess of teachers compared to students.

Rejuvenating the economy in Malaysia is a key challenge with less than 25 per cent of the population living in villages. The government has a Rural Development Policy in place (2018-2030) to address this. Additionally, the government is focused on improving transportation and infrastructure, while ensuring no one is left behind. Redistributive policy in the country is implemented through the tax regime. Most policies in the country are followed by performance and monitoring digital system with a reactive and proactive approach.

In all, Malaysia's policy approach emphasises sustainability, innovation, stakeholder engagement, efficient service delivery, and ease of doing business, with a focus on inclusive development.

Rural Development Policy and Programme in North Peninsular Malaysia

All government ministries in Malaysia have policies aimed at rural development of the country. The country is providing variegated assistance - in-kind support, encouraging three to four villages to plant the same crops to achieve economies of scale, food security programmes focused on rubber, palm oil, and rural tourism, rural entrepreneurship programmes to generate jobs, including small loans and grants, training and business facilities, grants for rural entrepreneurs to sustain their businesses - loan programmes offering less than 30% repayment for rural entrepreneurs, infrastructure provision post providing homestay training courses for rural owners, continuous identification of new homeowners to establish additional rural homestays, and therefore, laying importance on continued rural development through its various programmes

Rural areas in Malaysia are governed by local authorities, which are responsible for providing and maintaining community assets. Malaysia has implemented a multifaceted strategy to address the challenges of rural poverty, sustainable development, and rural-urban migration encompassing infrastructure investments, economic empowerment, social welfare and community development, digital connectivity and decentralised governance.

Taxes and project allocations are tailored to the specific needs of each state and region.

Significant investments in rural road networks, electricity, and water supply have improved connectivity and access to public services in rural areas. The government has accelerated the construction of 5.5- to 6.5-meter-wide durable rural roads that can last seven years under the rural roads (JALB) project. Prosperous Peoples Housing and Rural Street Lighting projects have improved rural living standards. It is the community-led projects and maintenance committees who ensure local ownership and sustainability of the different initiatives.

Initiatives to promote Agri-tourism, modernise agriculture, and develop renewable energy have economically empowered rural communities across the country. Programmes like the Rural Business Challenge - a programme which provides a revolving fund and entrepreneurship training to rural youth through a competitive process, Support Programmes for Strengthening Rural Entrepreneurship - offers training, resources, and networking opportunities for rural entrepreneurs, Rural Entrepreneurship Support Program - an entrepreneurship outreach program which is a three day event that showcases ministry programmes, rural products, and facilitates connections between entrepreneurs and businesses and also gives 5-ringgit vouchers to the participants, Rural Entrepreneurship Enhancement Support Program - provides up to 10,000 ringgit as working capital or for purchase of equipment's or minor repairs, and Rural Economic Financing Scheme based on Sharia principles provide financing and training to the prospective entrepreneurs to spur rural entrepreneurship. The government is also working to provide reliable internet connectivity to rural areas, enabling entrepreneurs to leverage digital platforms like TikTok to expand their market reach. The government facilitates rural entrepreneurs' participation in international trade fairs as well on an annual basis.

Overall, Malaysia's comprehensive and integrated approach to rural development, combining physical infrastructure, economic empowerment, social welfare, and community-driven initiatives, aims to improve the quality of life for rural population and reduce the urban-rural divide.

Rural Tourism Strategies in Malaysia's National Tourism Policy

Malaysia's Agro-food industry accounts for 47.6 per cent of the country's food processing and food services sectors. This industry encompasses a diverse range of activities, including flower cultivation, livestock and poultry, fisheries, ocean aquaculture, aquatic plants, and freshwater fisheries. The Malaysian government believes that empowering the downstream Agro-food processing industries can strengthen the upstream agricultural sectors by creating demand for agricultural products and services. Given the unique characteristics of each

state, Agri-tourism in Malaysia offers rich experiences, tastes, and activities tailored to local traditions and resources.

Interestingly, it is the elder generation in Malaysia that is leading the charge to lure the younger generation back to nature through Agri-tourism and homestays. This sector is open to tourists year-round, creating jobs and income opportunities. A five-to-seven-day Agri-tourism stay can lead to a 20-30 per cent increase in income. Agri-tourism coupled with rural homestays is particularly valuable in areas with seasonal gaps in production and processing.

Malaysia's Agri-tourism offerings include farm stays, fruit-picking, cafes in fishing spots, and plantation visits. The government supports the industry through infrastructure investments, partnerships between tourism operators and farmers, and training for rural communities in homestays. Malaysia also provides technology grants of up to 2,000 ringgits (Malaysia's Currency) for high-impact agritourism products. In fact, among the 300 startups launched in 2024, a significant number were in the food processing sector.

Agri-tourism destinations in Malaysia demonstrate good practices, such as well-maintained access/ approach roads, prominent signage, upgraded facilities with halls, landscaping, drainage, restrooms, prayer rooms, and even raised homes within paddy fields. Community-based Agri-tourism initiatives have also emerged, incorporating modern touches like Agri-tourism villages, boat house tourism with aquaculture, durian farms, swimming pools, halal practices, food safety certifications, and regular GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) analyses. Though Agri-tourism in Malaysia only took off in 2018 and 2021-22, its impact in terms of sales, market penetration, resilience certification, and job creation has been commendable.

With approximately 95 per cent of micro-enterprises in Malaysia having a monthly income of less than 3,000 ringgit, the key challenges are improving quality, quantity, and consistency of rural enterprises. As most rural entrepreneurs operate home-based businesses, therefore, ensuring consistency in taste and product standards becomes crucial.

Empowering Rural Community through Desa Lestari Programme

The Sustainable Village Programme provides grant assistance to create high-income rural communities. This is achieved through involvement in diverse economic activities and job opportunities that are increasingly widespread in villages, facilitated by community cooperatives. Key sectors include livestock, agriculture, retail, tourism, services, and small manufacturing.

To date, 51 villages have received grants to run tourism activities in the country, targeting both youth and heads of households. By 2025, the programme aims to reach 130 villages, with over 900 job opportunities benefiting more than 25,000 people. The programme focuses on cooperative

empowerment, leveraging information and modern technologies, strengthening cooperative governance, and fostering strategic partnerships. Additionally, a quick win competition model is being explored to incentivise villages towards target-oriented results.

The programme's primary objective is to create job opportunities and increase incomes, with a focus on women's participation, unlike India's women empowerment-centric approach. Going forward, the programme will either provide new grants or supplement existing ones, ensuring no duplication of efforts.

The Homestay Programme

It is the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) that oversees the country's national homestay programme. This programme aims to provide exposure and knowledge about rural tourism to the student community, particularly in Tanjung Malacca, Muso Walai, and other areas. It offers free training courses to homestay entrepreneurs, as well as one-time grants selected by a committee.

The homestays in Malaysia are in clusters within 2-3 km of cities, offering authentic cultural experiences for around 100 Malaysian ringgit per stay. While there is a manual booking system, websites are being developed to improve accessibility. The homestay initiatives offer a range of cultural experiences, including traditional weddings, local cuisine, games, fishing, and cultural performances. MOTAC provides guidance to help homestay operators customise their offerings based on tourist preferences. All homestays currently provide set itineraries for guests.

Only families, not unmarried individuals, can apply to operate a homestay. Successful applicants undergo a three-day training course covering topics like dining, activities, traditions, and crafts. On the first day, participants register and dine together, the second day is for activities and the third day covers local traditions and crafts.

There are standard operating procedures in place to ensure a positive experience. The programme caters to both locals' experiencing homestays within the campus of the homestay operator but not with family and foreign tourists seeking a more immersive homestay with families. MOTAC also offers customisation options for tourists and has established an ASEAN Homestay Standard.

What India can Imbibe from Malaysian Experience of Integrated Rural Tourism

Reliving the Cultural Malaysian village life with a taste of tradition and cultural heritage

Ngah et al (2016) depicts the development of remote Malaysian villages from being agriculture-based economies to non-farm activity-based economies mostly led by tourism. Ismail and Masron (2014) views that emergence of cultural heritage tourism as a potent alternative tourism in Malaysia for both national as well as international tourist is helping in re-inventing traditional handicrafts, architecture, attire, music, dance etc. Infact, Malaysian rural tourism portrays the theme of re-living the Malaysian village life with a taste of tradition and cultural heritage. The allure of village life provides a serene and perfect escape from the modern hustle and bustles of life. One can enjoy the slow pace of life, simplicity and warmth in the villages.

The role of the retired immigrants is found crucial in supporting the economic activities in the villages through development of the tourism sector. Further, the hospitality of the homestays and community-based experiences of delicious home cooked meals and other cultural activities provide a sense of belongingness to the tourists.

From the Malaysian experience, with increasing urbanisation, India can also look into and encash opportunities in the rural tourism sector, especially in and around the urban centres for the urbanites to re-live the rural life experience. Further, the tourism sector can emphasise upon developing homestays with modern amenities but keeping rural flavours intact in the form of an innovative package to experience the rural life, tradition, culture, food and other ethnic aspects. Any start-up in this sector can be a promising initiative if one considers the Malaysian integrated experience.

Going Back to Roots

Halamy and Kibat (2016) emphasises that reconnecting to the past through re-inventing oral history can help in enhancing cultural and heritage tourism. Though the homestays in Malaysia are equipped with modern conveniences, there are enough experiences in the homestays which can take a tourist back to the old Malaysian village life and reconnect with nature, culture and community. Activities like sharing history, fishing, kite flying, engaging in traditional games and culinary making provides an authentic experience of old Malaysian villages belonging to the past. Malaysia, now a predominantly urban centric community can reconnect themselves to the old intimate Malaysian lifestyle and traditions in those homestays. Tourist can also experience the charm of traditional Malay village life through the homestays, living with local families, and experiencing the daily life of rural Malaysia. Thus, the predominant urban nature of Malaysian population and convenience of the homestays makes it an attractive destination for local as well as foreign tourist alike.

The key learning in this context for popularising rural tourism in India lies in providing a milieu of experiences of a village life along with nature, culture,

festivals, music, dance and mingling with community. Further, provision of participation in activities like fishing, boating, festivities, traditional games and involvement of tourist in preparation of local food and traditional handicrafts can add to the attraction which is more important than mere infrastructure and road connectivity. Rural Indian homestays, therefore, should focus on providing an enriching rural life experience rather than concentrating on amenities and food for achieving sustainable tourist inflow.

The Concept of Diversified Homestays

Malaysia has re-invented a more diversified form of homestays as per the diversified needs of tourist. Though the foreign tourist prefers staying with families in the homestays, the urbanite travellers of Malaysia often prefer the *kampung* or village stay which offers privacy along with a taste of homestays. These homestays for local tourist are the re-invented homes of the homestay owners which are separate stays within the same boundary of the homestays. This little innovative diversification from homestays to *kampung* stay catering to the different category of tourist in fact, makes the idea of rural homestays more convenient and business oriented.

In the Indian context, diversification of homestays according to the tourist requirements can be the key for business development in rural homestays in future. Innovative ideas in this context and applying tools like design thinking can help in coming up with innovative solutions for popularising rural homestays in India.

Emphasis on Entrepreneurship and Start-up rather than Empowerment

The homestay business is a component of the broader tourism and hospitality industry, and has the distinct features of intangibility, variability, and inseparability which can encourage the rural community to take up homestay businesses as enterprises and start-ups (Samsudin and Maliki, 2015; Sun and Ghiselli, 2010). Following these features, it is unique to find that Malaysia has given due stress on rural homestays in its rural enterprise and start-up promotion policy which has led to gainful livelihoods amidst the rural communities. This entrepreneurship focussed policy in the tourism sector in the country is attracting the right set of interested prospective rural entrepreneurs starting their own homestay ventures and complementary rural enterprises. Interestingly, it is the elderly womenfolk in the villages who are actively seen managing the homestay businesses. It is a circumvent cycle of entrepreneurship leading to empowerment rather than empowerment leading to entrepreneurship.

In India too, emphasis should be given on rural start-up in the tourism sector especially in those areas which are nearer to the places of tourist attraction.

However, there is a need to shift the focus from empowerment to entrepreneurship in the rural livelihoods policy paradigm.

Rural Tourism as Primary Livelihood Strategy

Haywood et al (2020) opine that rural tourism can improve livelihoods, aid in poverty alleviation and help in protection of bio-diversity and cultural heritage. One of the corner stones of the success of the Malaysian rural tourism policy is the adoption of rural tourism homestays by the start-ups as primary livelihood strategy. Often it is found that tourism in rural areas are secondary or tertiary practices or sources of livelihoods. However, in Malaysia, it is mostly the primary source of earning. This mindset has led to a robust rural tourist economy in the country. Bhuiyan et al (2013) views that homestays in Malaysia have been offering immediate benefits to the local communities in terms of job opportunities and improved quality of life.

India should also adopt rural tourism as primary source of earning in those pockets where there is enough tourism potential. With schemes like the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) which focusses on promoting rural start-ups, India should consider promoting homestays and other forms of community based rural tourism with enhanced capital infusion.

Clustering Homestays within Suitable Radius from Urban Centres

Clustering homestays within a suitable radius from urban centres in Malaysia has led to frequent footfalls of tourist in the rural homestays. One can enjoy quick and convenient movement from these homestays to city centres and back with ease. As the homestays provide affordability and at the same time remain within the reach of the urban areas, tourist often prefer these homestays for more affordable enriching experiences.

Cheuk et al (2015) opines that rural tourism destination competency index can be useful in measuring, monitoring and ranking rural destinations as well as helping the policy makers to initiate steps for competitiveness of rural tourism destinations. Based on the competency index, India too can pilot in promoting rural tourism clusters near urban tourist destinations to attract both domestic as well as international tourist as it would provide alternative yet affordable choice for tourist to experience diverse lifestyle and cultures.

Positioning Homestays as Experiences

Experiential tourism is a special kind of tourism where the traveller and his direct experiences, are an opportunity for enrichment of cultural, social and emotional enrichment. Because homestays are comparatively economical and they provide security and warmth of a home and leads in dissemination of knowledge of a new culture to the travellers, the homestays attract many experiential travellers (Varma, 2023). Malaysia has positioned homestays as

true experiences rather than commercial offerings which has helped the rural entrepreneurs in providing innovative solutions for experiencing Malaysian village life rather than having a commercial exploration. Moreover, Agri-tourism in Malaysia has aided the positioning of the rural homestays as enriching experiences.

India can also emphasise upon providing an enriching experience through homestays rather than seeing the sector purely from a commercial perspective to make the sector more thriving, and thereby realising its true potentiality. Also, the available and prospective Agri-tourism sites can be identified across the country to harbour diversified rural homestays suitable to tourists across categories.

Community-based Approach of Rural Tourism Management

Homestay tourism in Malaysia is based on fulfilment of essential characteristics of community-based tourism like community empowerment, community engagement, environmental sustainability, equitable sharing of financial gain, community management, control and ownership of tourism project (Dangi et al 2016; Kontogeorgopoulos et al 2013;). Further, Tosun (2006) stresses upon that enhancing opportunities for local communities requires participatory approach to gain greater and more balanced benefits from rural tourism that will further lead to positive attitude towards conserving nature and local resources, thus promoting sustainable tourism. Infact, a uniqueness of the Malaysian homestays is the community-based approach of rural tourism management. It is observed that a significant number of Malaysian homestay operators encourage the participation of communities in homestay-based tourism (Hamzah 2010). Often, more than one village come together to form cooperatives to provide community centric services for promotion of rural tourism.

Like Malaysia, empowering communities to take up tourism as a complete package by providing specialised services in the form of cooperatives or may be producer companies with emphasis on fair benefit sharing mechanism may lead to a more sustainable tourism cluster promotion across India.

Good Approach Roads and Thriving Kampung Experiences

The concept of a good approach road has made inroads in every tourist village in Malaysia with proper signage and good road connectivity. On one hand, this is creating a propagation of rural homestays in Malaysia and on the other hand, it is leading to an increasing willingness on the part of tourist to visit the *kampungs* and experience enriching stays in these rural homestays. Alternately, as Ibrahim and Razzaq (2010) views, this homestay programmes are aiding the communities through enhancing social capital, forming community

organisations and encouraging development of rural amenities and infrastructure.

Connectivity and ensuring availability of key amenities should be the pre-requisites for propagating rural homestays in India too. With increasing emphasis on infrastructure and connectivity development, India can also reap the dividend of rural tourism, provided it is promoted in a more holistic and integrated form.

Government Policy Support

Ahmed et al 2014 highlights the importance of Malaysian homestay programme in inducing awareness creation among the community members about the benefits of homestays. Paimin et al (2014) views that successful tourism development can be brought about by local community's participation and removing barriers like information deficiency, capital insufficiency and knowledge limitations. In Malaysia, the government policy support in augmenting the capacities of homestay owners through modern techniques and tools like design thinking has led to innovativeness in providing need-based solutions to community drives and initiatives. This type of capacity building initiatives has helped the rural communities to understand and appreciate the rural tourism sector in a better way and to develop solutions which are more innovative and acceptable to the community. Further, the structured capacity building initiatives have helped the communities in equipping themselves with homestay and rural tourism management techniques.

For India, there is an increasing need for capacity building initiatives for prospective rural homestays in developing innovative business models, managing the same and enhancing capability to provide the tourist with memorable experiences to achieve growth and sustenance in the rural tourism sector.

Behavioural Aspects

Behavioural aspects and mannerisms of the stakeholders in the tourism sector is another aspect which has contributed immensely to the success of rural tourism in Malaysia. Right from the cab drivers to homestay owners and community performers, a common trait is the mesmerising and service-oriented behaviour towards tourist which captures their heart and soul giving them a sense of security, belongingness and comfort.

One can perceive a mindset overhaul in Indian scenario to thrive this service industry which rely on enthralling tourist with mannerisms, etiquettes and behaviour which can provide tourist a space of comfort and stressless experience. This experience is indeed infectious which can lead to promotion of tourism destinations through word to mouth publicity.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has been successful in promoting rural tourism as a sustainable economic development model by embracing innovativeness, community involvement and policy initiatives in right mix. Ahmed et al 2014 views that homestay business is successful in providing right set of opportunities for rural development in Malaysia.

India too needs to have a bag full of the right mix to transform the rural homestays into kampung experience. The Malaysian experience thus provide important leads towards propagating rural tourism and making the sector more customer oriented and future ready. It also provides with a change of right mix of factors to usher in rural tourism. But it does need an integrated approach engaging the different stakeholders in a well-knit framework. Here, policy support would also play a vital role in charting a smooth flow and positive momentum.

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Pioneering Agritourism in Rural India: The Case of Saguna Baug

Chandrashekhar H. Bhadsavle¹

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the journey of Saguna Baug, from a traditional farm to a vibrant Agri-rural tourism center in Neral, Maharashtra, India, highlighting its innovative practices, including the Saguna Regenerative Technique (SRT), aquaculture, and immersive guest experiences like the Water Buffalo (WB) ride. It delves into the socio-economic upliftment brought by Saguna Baug, including employment opportunities for local villagers, preservation of Maharashtrian culture, and fostering respect for rural lifestyles among urban visitors. By addressing challenges such as balancing tourism with farming and maintaining authenticity, Saguna Baug has evolved into a globally relevant model for rural tourism. It aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting education, environmental sustainability, and rural prosperity. The chapter showcases how agritourism can address rural challenges such as poverty, youth migration, and environmental degradation, while simultaneously creating a bridge between rural and urban communities and provides actionable insights for replicating the Saguna Baug model in rural communities worldwide, emphasizing the power of rural tourism as a tool for sustainable development.

Keywords: Rural tourism; Sustainable Development Goal; Socio-economic upliftment; Saguna Baug; India

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where cities are expanding rapidly, swallowing up open spaces, driving families into smaller, more disconnected lives. At the same time, rural India struggles to hold on to its youth, its traditions, its sense of place. Agriculture, the country's lifeblood for millennia, is seen less as a calling and more as a symbol of hardship. *Saguna Baug*, located in Neral, Maharashtra, India is one of those rare places where these threads intertwine—a working

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farm that's also a retreat, a hub for innovation in farming techniques, and a classroom for city dwellers looking to reconnect with something real.

Saguna Baug is the brainchild of the Bhadsavle family, who took their own frustrations with agriculture's limitations and turned them into a vision for agritourism. A family farm was transformed into a model for something larger than agriculture, larger even than tourism it's a place where the divide between city and village dissolves. They began small inviting visitors to see how their rice was grown, taste the simplicity of meals cooked over a wood fire, and sleep in eco-friendly cottages surrounded by water buffalo and aquaculture ponds. From these modest beginnings, they built a model for what rural tourism can be: not just a business, but a bridge.

The story of *Saguna Baug* is the story of balance: between progress and tradition, rest and work, visitor and farmer. It invites us to imagine a world where rural life isn't a relic to be mourned but a resource to be celebrated, nurtured, and shared.

This chapter explores the philosophy and practices behind *Saguna Baug's* success, the ways it has reshaped its community, and what it can teach us about rural revival not just in India, but anywhere people feel a yearning for a simpler, more connected way of life.

Origins of Saguna Baug

Every great idea begins as a response to a problem. For *Saguna Baug*, the spark came from the combined forces of history, necessity, and an unyielding hope for the future. Its story begins with Shri Haribhau Bhadsavle, a freedom fighter who believed in India not as an abstraction, but as a collection of villages and farms where true freedom could only be found in self-reliance. His ideals were carried forward by his son, Chandrashekhar Bhadsavle, who turned a quiet piece of land at the foothills of Matheran in Maharashtra, India, into a movement.



Figure 6.1 A view of Saguna Baug.

Chandrashekhar Bhadsavle, much like his father, wasn't content to accept the way things were. He grew up on a farm, immersed in the rhythms of rural life, but he also saw its fragility. Traditional farming, for all its romance, was proving inadequate to meet the economic challenges of the modern world. Youth were leaving the villages in droves, chasing dreams of stability in cities where the cost of ambition often outweighed its rewards. Farmers, meanwhile, were left behind, struggling with outdated methods, volatile markets, and an eroding sense of dignity.

It was from this dual crisis urban overreach and rural despair—that *Saguna Baug* was born. Chandrashekhar Bhadsavle didn't just want to preserve his family farm; he wanted to reinvent what a farm could be. His vision was deceptively simple: a place where farming wasn't merely an act of survival but an experience of shared joy. He imagined a space where visitors could witness the miracle of cultivation, learn about sustainable practices, and reconnect with the roots they had long forgotten.

But the transition from a traditional farm to an agritourism center wasn't easy. *Saguna Baug* had to overcome the skepticism of both urban visitors and rural neighbors. There was resistance to the idea that a farm could serve as both a producer of food and a destination for leisure. Poverty in the surrounding areas compounded the challenge; Chandrashekhar knew that if *Saguna Baug* didn't uplift its local community, the project would never be sustainable.

And yet, persistence prevailed. The farm became a living testament to the idea that agriculture, tourism, and rural development could not only coexist but thrive together. Every step of the journey—whether it was introducing *the Saguna Rice Technique* to improve yields or building eco-friendly accommodations to host guests—was guided by the mission to restore pride and prosperity to rural life.

Saguna Baug's Agri-Rural Tourism Model

The allure of *Saguna Baug* lies not just in its idyllic setting or unique activities, but in its philosophy—a belief that farming and tourism can coexist, each enhancing the other. This isn't tourism in the conventional sense; it's not about curated experiences or luxury indulgence. Instead, *Saguna Baug* offers something far more profound: a chance to experience farming as a craft, nature as a collaborator, and the farmer as a steward of both. At its heart, the model is built on dignity—dignity for the farmer, for the land, and for the visitor. Central to *Saguna Baug's* approach is the seamless integration of agricultural operations with tourism. Guests are not passive observers; they are invited to be part of the process, to engage with the rhythms of farm life. From planting paddy fields using the revolutionary Saguna Rice Technique (SRT) to participating in aquaculture demonstrations, every activity is designed to bridge the gap between urban and rural worlds. For the Bhadsavle family, this isn't

just about entertainment it's about education, empathy, and empowerment. Take the iconic Water Buffalo (WB) ride, for instance. On the surface, it's a quirky, fun experience for visitors. But as they ride these gentle giants through the farm's waterlogged fields, they gain a visceral understanding of the labor-intensive nature of traditional farming. Similarly, aquaculture ponds double as both a source of fish and an opportunity for visitors to learn about sustainable water management. Farming workshops, meanwhile, introduce guests to innovative practices like the SRT, which reduces water consumption while increasing yield a small revolution.

The farm's accommodations reflect its ethos of sustainability and simplicity. The Pond Houses, built on stilts over aquaculture ponds, offer a unique blend of rustic charm and eco-conscious design. Mud Houses, with their earthy textures and natural cooling properties, echo the traditional architecture of Indian villages. Hospitality at *Saguna Baug* begins with the farm's emphasis on cleanliness and comfort.

What truly sets *Saguna Baug* apart is its ability to blend tourism with hands-on learning. Visitors don't just see farming; they live it. They don't just hear about sustainable practices; they practice them. Every activity, from composting workshops to bird-watching trails, is designed to leave guests with a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of nature and agriculture. It's not uncommon for urban visitors to leave with muddy hands and lighter hearts, carrying back not just memories, but a renewed sense of purpose. At its core, *Saguna Baug* isn't just a place—it's a philosophy. It reimagines tourism as a medium for connection, education, and transformation. By integrating the dignity of farming with the curiosity of visitors, it has created a model that goes beyond the transactional and ventures into the transformative.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Impact

The economic story of *Saguna Baug* is one of empowerment. For years, rural poverty and underemployment have been the twin curses of India's villages. By integrating tourism into its agricultural operations, *Saguna Baug* has created a new kind of economic ecosystem. Villagers who once struggled to find stable work now have steady employment in roles ranging from hospitality to aquaculture management. Women, often excluded from formal labor markets, are finding opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their households. For many, this isn't just a job—it's a lifeline. Tourism, of course, brings in income, but the farm's influence goes deeper. Visitors often leave with more than just memories—they purchase farm products, from organically grown rice to freshly caught fish, directly supporting the local economy. This direct-to-consumer model ensures that farmers retain a larger share of their profits, breaking free from exploitative middlemen. *Saguna Baug*, in this sense, is not

just a business; it's an economic model that offers rural communities a blueprint for resilience.

Culturally, *Saguna Baug* is a preservationist's dream. In an age where globalization often erases local traditions, the farm serves as a living museum of Maharashtrian heritage. Traditional meals are prepared with love and authenticity, allowing visitors to taste the region's culinary legacy. Folk arts, customs, and rituals that once seemed destined for obscurity find new audiences here. It's a subtle revival, but one with significant consequences: visitors leave with a newfound respect for rural life, and villagers rediscover pride in their roots.



Figure 6.2 Guided farm tour at Saguna Baug.

At *Saguna Baug*, children from the city learn how rice is grown, marvel at the ingenuity of composting, and return home with a deeper connection to the land. These are not fleeting experiences; they plant seeds of understanding that grow long after the visit ends. For the local community, this exchange is just as valuable. Youth who might otherwise migrate to cities are staying back; drawn by the farm's innovative programs and the opportunities they provide. Skills training for women and young people has become a cornerstone of *Saguna Baug*'s mission, equipping the next generation with tools for a future that doesn't require abandoning their heritage. It's a quiet but powerful counter-narrative to the story of urban migration: progress can be built at home. *Saguna Baug*'s greatest achievement is its ability to transform relationships—between people and land, between urban and rural, and between tradition and modernity. It challenges the narrative that villages are relics of the past, instead presenting them as crucibles of innovation and community. In doing so, it offers not just a glimpse of what rural India could be, but a vision of what it should be.

Environmental Sustainability

In an era when the word “sustainability” is often reduced to corporate buzzwords and hollow pledges, *Saguna Baug* stands as a quiet yet compelling rebuttal. Here, sustainability isn’t a marketing strategy—it’s a way of life, deeply rooted in the farm’s ethos and daily practices. Every aspect of its operation is a testament to the belief that prosperity and ecological harmony are not mutually exclusive but inherently intertwined.

At the heart of the farm’s environmental philosophy is its commitment to working with, rather than against, nature. Rainwater harvesting isn’t just an add-on feature it’s the lifeblood of its operations. Every drop of monsoon rain is meticulously captured and stored, feeding aquaculture ponds that teem with life. These ponds don’t merely serve as a source of fish; they are microcosms of a larger ecosystem, supporting biodiversity while demonstrating the circularity of sustainable water use.

The farm’s energy practices echo the same ethos. Renewable energy sources power much of its operations, reinforcing the idea that modern innovation can coalesce seamlessly with traditional wisdom. Organic farming methods are not just a choice but a declaration: chemical-laden practices might promise short-term gains, but they impoverish the soil and the soul of the land. *Saguna Baug*’s commitment to organic methods ensures that its soil remains fertile, its crops nourishing, and its impact regenerative.

Perhaps most striking is the farm’s devotion to biodiversity. Where monoculture has become a global agricultural default, *Saguna Baug*’s landscape bursts with variety—agroforestry practices integrate fruit trees, flowering plants, and food crops in a symphony of coexistence. This isn’t merely aesthetic; it’s ecological insurance, creating habitats for birds, insects, and other wildlife while mitigating the risks of climate volatility. Visitors are invited to witness this diversity firsthand, their awe a subtle reminder of what’s at stake in preserving the planet’s fragile balance.

In *Saguna Baug*, we see the contours of a possible future—one where rural communities don’t just survive but thrive, in harmony with nature’s rhythms. It is a reminder that the most profound solutions to our environmental crises are often the simplest: conserve water, enrich the soil, honor biodiversity, and share the wisdom of these practices with others. *Saguna Baug* doesn’t shout its philosophy from the rooftops; it whispers it through the rustle of leaves, the ripple of pond water, and the hum of life in its fields.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Every visionary project begins with a quiet act of rebellion against the status quo. For *Saguna Baug*, this rebellion came in the form of challenging entrenched notions of what farming and tourism could be. But like all journeys

of transformation, it was far from smooth. *Saguna Baug*'s story is one of navigating skepticism, compromise, and constant learning an odyssey that holds lessons for anyone daring enough to chart new territory. The first challenge was cultural. When Chandrashekhra Bhadsavle began his experiment with agritourism, locals were wary. The idea of welcoming strangers into the heart of one's farm seemed like an intrusion into a deeply personal space. Many questioned whether city dwellers, often seen as detached from the realities of rural life, would respect the sanctity of agricultural work. Winning over the community required patience, dialogue, and a demonstration of mutual respect convincing them that this wasn't about exploitation but about shared growth.

Then came the balancing act, a tightrope walks between tourism and farming. Farming is, at its core, a full-time commitment, with its own rhythms dictated by the seasons and the whims of nature. Tourism, on the other hand, operates on human timelines, with visitors arriving on weekends or holidays, expecting curated experiences. Striking a balance meant ensuring that tourism complemented, rather than disrupted, farming operations. Fields became classrooms, aquaculture ponds became sources of both produce and wonder, and every corner of *Saguna Baug* was reimagined as a dual-purpose space. Environmental risks presented their own challenges. Increased footfall brought the inevitability of waste—plastic wrappers, food remnants, and pollutants that threatened the very ecosystem the farm sought to preserve. Implementing strict waste management protocols and educating visitors about eco-conscious practices became non-negotiable. It was a reminder that sustainability is not just a philosophy but a discipline requiring vigilance and constant adaptation.

Yet, from these challenges emerged lessons that would define *Saguna Baug*'s success and offer a roadmap for others. The first was humility: start small. Instead of building grand infrastructure or chasing quick profits, *Saguna Baug* focused on authenticity—allowing visitors to experience the farm as it was, in all its rustic charm. This authenticity became its greatest asset, drawing visitors who craved genuine encounters with nature and rural life. Another lesson was the power of word-of-mouth. While modern tourism often relies on glossy advertisements and social media campaigns, *Saguna Baug* chose a different path. It focused on creating unforgettable experiences that guests would eagerly share with friends and family. This organic approach to publicity not only built trust but ensured that its growth was sustainable and grounded. Perhaps the most profound takeaway, however, was the importance of relationships. At *Saguna Baug*, guests are not treated as customers but as family. This ethos extends to the community as well—engaging local villagers as employees, collaborators, and stakeholders in the project's success. It's this emphasis on connection that has turned *Saguna Baug* from a farm into a movement, one that bridges the urban-rural divide with grace and warmth. In the challenges *Saguna Baug* faced and the lessons it learned, there is a universal

truth: the best ideas are not the ones that promise easy success but the ones that endure the trials of skepticism, compromise, and failure. *Saguna Baug's* journey reminds us that innovation often begins at the crossroads of tradition and disruption, and that the most enduring legacies are built on the strength of relationships and the courage to dream.

Relevance of Saguna Baug in the Global Rural Tourism Context

The transformation of a family farm into a thriving hub of agritourism echoes the aspirations of farmers in Australia, Tuscany, or even the American Midwest places where agriculture, community, and ingenuity converge. What makes *Saguna Baug* remarkable is not just its success but its relevance as a replicable model for rural renewal worldwide.

Consider, for instance, Australia's robust agritourism industry. Over decades, Australian farmers have reimagined their sprawling landscapes as destinations for wine-tasting tours, sheep-shearing demonstrations, and outback adventures. *Saguna Baug* operates on a different scale but with a strikingly similar ethos. Like its Australian counterparts, it integrates tourism into the rhythms of rural life, offering visitors an authentic, unvarnished connection to the land. Its activities from water buffalo rides to sustainable rice farming demonstrations embody the same philosophy: tourism as a bridge, not an imposition.



Figure 6.3 Water buffalo ride at Saguna Baug.



Figure 6.4 Live Fish show at the pond for the guests..



Figure 6.5 Removal of misconceptions about snakes through live demonstrations at the farm.



Figure 6.6 Mallakhamb (wrestling on a pole) show to visiting students as part of Agri tourism activity.

Yet where *Saguna Baug* truly stands out is in its scalability. Unlike high-investment agritourism ventures that require expansive vineyards or lavish accommodations, *Saguna Baug*'s model thrives on simplicity and resourcefulness. Its foundational principles community involvement, sustainable practices, and authentic guest experiences can be adapted to rural areas across the globe, regardless of geography or economic conditions. It's a model that doesn't demand grandeur but rather ingenuity, proving that rural tourism need not be a luxury product; it can be a tool for empowerment. This scalability is more than theoretical; it ties directly to the world's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *Saguna Baug* addresses several of these global priorities with quiet efficiency. By generating income through tourism, it combats rural poverty, offering villagers not just jobs but dignity and purpose. Through its educational initiatives, both for urban visitors and rural youth, it fosters awareness and respect for sustainable farming practices—an essential step toward achieving quality education and environmental sustainability. Its rainwater harvesting, organic farming, and biodiversity efforts exemplify the SDG commitment to responsible consumption and production.

What makes *Saguna Baug* relevant is the growing global appetite for meaningful, ethical travel. In a world increasingly disillusioned with mass tourism and over-commercialization, *Saguna Baug* offers a compelling alternative: tourism that enriches not just the traveler but also the host community. Its success is a gentle rebuttal to the idea that progress must come at the expense of tradition or that rural life must be abandoned for urban

opportunities. It reminds us that solutions to some of our most pressing challenges—climate change, social inequity, cultural disconnection—might already exist in the fertile soil of a farm like *Saguna Baug*. In the broader context of global agritourism, *Saguna Baug* is both a model and a mirror, reflecting the universal human desire to connect with the land and with one another. Its story underscores a profound truth: that the path to progress often winds through the fields, where the seeds of sustainability, community, and shared purpose are sown.

Policy Implications and Future Scope

Saguna Baug stands as a case study in how rural spaces can be revitalized, not abandoned, by rethinking their role in the modern economy. For policymakers, the lesson is clear: rural entrepreneurship thrives when it is nurtured. Grants, training programs, and financial incentives targeted at agritourism ventures can empower farmers to follow in *Saguna Baug*'s footsteps. These are not handouts; they are investments in a future where villages are not emptied by migration but invigorated by opportunity. Imagine a network of agritourism centers across India, each rooted in its local landscape and traditions, offering travelers a mosaic of rural experiences while creating jobs and boosting incomes.

NGOs have a crucial role to play here, bridging the gap between government resources and grassroots initiatives. Training programs in hospitality, sustainable farming, and small-business management can equip farmers to succeed in this unique hybrid of agriculture and tourism. Meanwhile, NGOs can act as conveners, connecting rural entrepreneurs to one another and fostering collaboration. A simple network—an online platform or regional cooperative—could amplify the visibility of places like *Saguna Baug*, creating a collective force for rural tourism. What *Saguna Baug* demonstrates is that agritourism is not a niche endeavor; it is scalable and replicable. Maharashtra's success in embracing this model should serve as an inspiration to other Indian states. In Kerala, with its rich traditions of spice farming, or Punjab, with its vibrant agricultural heritage, the potential for agritourism is immense. What's needed is not just policy support but a shift in perception—a recognition that the village is not a relic of the past but a laboratory for the future.

Saguna Baug's own path forward offers a roadmap. Scaling up doesn't mean abandoning its roots; it means extending them. Imagine *Saguna Baug* as a hub, training other local farmers to open their lands to visitors. Picture a cooperative where small farms pool resources to create shared attractions, each maintaining its identity but benefiting from collective strength. This is not just about tourism; it is about building a rural economy that is resilient, dignified, and inclusive.

The broader implication is this: places like *Saguna Baug* hold the key to a more balanced India. They remind us that development does not have to flow

in one direction from village to city, from agriculture to industry. It can be cyclical, enriching both. When a government grant helps a farmer build a pond house, when a village child learns the value of her heritage from urban visitors, when an NGO connects rural artisans with global markets—these are not isolated acts. They are steps toward a future where rural India is not left behind but leads the way.

And perhaps that is the most important lesson of *Saguna Baug*: it is not just a story of success but a call to action. A reminder that with the right policies, partnerships, and imagination, the possibilities for rural revitalization are as boundless as the fields themselves.

CONCLUSION

Saguna Baug has shown us that agritourism is not merely an economic endeavor; it is a transformative movement that dignifies rural life, nurtures the land, and fosters a deeper connection between urban and rural India. *Saguna Baug*'s success story is, at its heart, a story of balance. It bridges the rural-urban divide by offering urban visitors an authentic glimpse into village life while empowering rural communities to reclaim their economic agency. Its model of sustainable farming, eco-conscious tourism, and heartfelt hospitality has demonstrated that progress and tradition can coexist harmoniously. By weaving together economic opportunity, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship, *Saguna Baug* has crafted a vision of rural development that feels as inspiring as it is achievable. The lessons here extend far beyond the lush fields of *Saguna Baug*. As India and the world grapple with the twin crises of environmental degradation and rural depopulation, initiatives like this illuminate a path forward. They remind us that the answers to our most pressing challenges often lie in the roots of our most enduring traditions. *Saguna Baug* is a proof point that with innovation and determination, the rural economy can not only survive but thrive.

But this success cannot remain an isolated phenomenon. Governments must take note and actively support agritourism through grants, training programs, and infrastructure investments. NGOs should channel their resources into creating networks of rural entrepreneurs who can learn from each other and share their stories with the world. And individuals whether urbanites seeking respite from city life or advocates for sustainable development can play their part by choosing to visit, support, and amplify such initiatives.

The call to action is clear: let *Saguna Baug* inspire us to imagine a different kind of development one where prosperity flows in all directions, where villages are not left behind but celebrated as hubs of innovation and culture. Let us champion agritourism not just as a niche industry but as a movement that uplifts communities, preserves our planet, and rekindles our shared humanity.

Reviving Rural Contentment and Empowering Youth: The Success Story of YATRA, A Farm Tourism Venture

Samir Ranjan Bordoloi¹

ABSTRACT

Rural communities face significant challenges due to migration, monocropping, and the loss of traditional farming practices. The YATRA (Youth Attraction to Rural Agriculture) initiative was launched in Assam, India to reconnect youth with agriculture, fostering sustainability through immersive experiences. This movement had led to the creation of Green Commandos, trained agripreneurs for promoting agroecological farming and agritourism. The initiative expanded into model agritourism villages, enabling direct farmer-to-consumer engagement through experiential tourism. This initiative serves as a co-existence model, blending conservation, research, and tourism.

Keywords: Agritourism, Sustainable farming; Rural entrepreneurship; Community empowerment; Green commandos; Assam

INTRODUCTION

The world is witnessing a profound shift as rural communities face challenges that threaten their traditional ways of life. Human needs have grown into unbridled greed, leading to migration from villages to cities in search of livelihoods, leaving behind lands and traditions. Conventional farming methods, driven by the pursuit of higher yields, have not only disrupted the ecological balance but also undermined the self-sufficient and contented lifestyle that was once the hallmark of rural life.

Monocropping has emerged as a symbol of this disruption. Farmers, once the proud stewards of their lands, have become dependent on external inputs, loans, and subsidies. As marketing perishable produce becomes increasingly vital, remote farmers struggle with transportation challenges, bulkiness, and exploitation by middlemen. The result is a disillusioned younger generation—

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no farmer's child aspires to follow their parent's footsteps, leading to a steady decline in the agricultural workforce.

Against this backdrop, a revolutionary solution was born **YATRA (Youth Attraction to Rural Agriculture)**. Driven by the realization that the roots of these challenges lie in the detachment of youth from rural traditions, YATRA was conceived by Shri. Samir Ranjan Bordoloi as a movement to reconnect young people of upper Assam and few pockets of North Eastern states of India, with their heritage.

Shri. Samir Ranjan Bordoloi a BSc. (Ag) graduate turned farmer, traces the journey of YATRA in this chapter.

The Genesis of Green Commandos

It all began when I left my job and started an Agri-clinic to provide organic farming extension services. The gravity of the issues plaguing rural communities became evident. To tackle these, I invited youth volunteers to join me on immersive trips to villages. These experiences revealed the inherent beauty and richness of a rural, contented lifestyle, piquing the interest of young minds.

What started as exploratory trips soon evolved into camps and paid experiences. As youth learned about traditional farming practices and blended them with modern agricultural science, a transformative movement emerged—the birth of **Green Commandos**. This group of trained, socially conscious agripreneurs became the torchbearers of a new era in agriculture



Figure 7.1 Exploratory visits.



Figure 7.2 Classroom sessions for Rural Youth.

The First *Food Forest* of the East

As the Green Commandos gained momentum, we took a significant leap forward by planting the first food forest of the East. This initiative not only became a sustainable farming model but also a hub for camps, Agro-education, and youth training. It was here that Green Commandos honed their skills and developed innovative approaches to farming.

The food forest served as a living laboratory for agroecological practices. It also became a cornerstone for attracting visitors, creating the foundation for a thriving agritourism model.



Figure 7.3 Learning Centre.

A Movement Goes Viral

The Green Commandos movement grew beyond our imagination. Till date, over 3,500 Green Commandos have been trained at the Food Forest, with the movement becoming self-sustaining through **RAW (Reconnect & Adapt to**

Wild) camps, where participants paid ₹ INR 4,000 for a 3-day camping experience. This not only funded the initiative but also built a loyal, committed community of Agripreneurs.

Through their efforts, the Green Commandos have trained over 25,000 farmers in agroecological farming practices, spreading sustainable techniques far and wide. The success of this grassroots initiative caught the attention of government organizations, universities, and community-based organizations (CBOs). They began sponsoring youth and farmers to attend training sessions in compassionate natural farming held at the Food Forest and in villages.

As the movement scaled, Green Commandos transitioned into resource persons, integrating their expertise into government programs and developmental initiatives. Their involvement brought the co-existence model of the Food Forest and villages into the mainstream, attracting visitors from across the globe.

Model Villages of Agritourism



Figure 7.4 Activities at Model Agritourism villages.

The journey led us to co-create several **model villages of agritourism**, transforming rural communities into hubs of cultural and ecological resilience. As urban living leads to a **nature-deficit syndrome**, characterized by stress and behavioral changes, there is a growing urge among urban parents to reconnect their children with rural, natural life. This creates a valuable opportunity for enhancing farmer incomes through agritourism.

We designed immersive experiences such as **community feast festivals, orange festivals, jackfruit festivals, harvest festivals, composting festivals, soil care festivals, and seed bombing festivals**, allowing visitors to engage with rural life. These programs connect people to the roots of farming while creating economic opportunities for rural communities.

Farmers benefit directly by selling low-volume, high-value natural products to visitors, bypassing middlemen and earning fair prices. Women self-help groups provide local ethnic food, generating profits for their services, while

local youth conserve and showcase cultural traditions through music and dance performances. This win-win model preserves rural heritage while boosting local economies.

The Green Commandos play a pivotal role in this ecosystem, acting as a bridge between communities and consumers. By reversing the middlemen model, they ensure that farmers earn a larger share of profits while retaining a small margin for their own sustenance. This has given rise to **Social Agripreneurs** and **Community Enterprises**, driving a self-sustaining cycle of development.

The Green Commandos Forum

To channel the growing momentum, the **Green Commandos Forum** was established as a platform to unify efforts, share knowledge, and scale impact. A key achievement of the movement has been the placement of trained Green Commandos into government schemes and development projects. These individuals carried the core principles of compassionate natural farming into policymaking and implementation, ensuring that our ideas reached more farming communities.

Community Enterprises and Agritourism: A New Era

With the guidance of Green Commandos, communities have established **Community Enterprises** that focus on producing and marketing **low-volume, high-value local food products**. These enterprises have thrived under the umbrella of agritourism, which acts as a strategic marketing tool.



Figure 7.5 Promotion of Community enterprises at Model Agritourism Villages.

By attracting visitors to these model villages, we have created a sustainable market for indigenous products. Visitors not only enjoy an authentic rural experience but also become ambassadors for local food, culture, and traditions.

The Green Commandos facilitate these interactions, ensuring that farmers and communities benefit directly from their efforts.

The Food Forest of Co-existence



Figure 7.6 SPREAD NE Food Forest and Farm Learning Centre.

The SPREAD NE Food Forest & Farm Learning Centre, spanning 15 acres, is the birthplace of my compassionate farming philosophy, rooted in coexistence and harmony with nature. This co-existence model grows food for all creatures naturally, with innovative practices like seed bombing, no-weeding farming, no-tillage farming, and bamboo biochar making, which have drawn widespread interest. The forest serves as a hub for volunteer tourism, internships, exposure visits, and paid campsites, fostering "unlearning and learning" experiences from the biosphere.

It reconnects children with their natural habitat, teaching coexistence with compassion, while also functioning as a research and development center for climate-smart farming. Remarkably, by introducing yams through seed bombing, we invited porcupines and wild boars to share the forest, ultimately attracting leopards and restoring the natural food chain. Wild elephants frequent the forest, drawn by planted bamboos and elephant apples, which also provide us with tender bamboo leaves for herbal tea and broken bamboo pieces for biochar production profitable products that merge conservation with livelihoods.

This model is shared with forest fringe communities to mitigate human-elephant conflicts, where live fences of Assam lemon, Indian coffee plum, and wood apple trees not only deter elephants but also generate income. Intriguingly, elephants trampling our turmeric plants improve the crop quality, leading to the unique "elephant foot stamp turmeric," a premium product in

high demand. The food forest has garnered global attention, attracting visitors from Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Thailand, and beyond, alongside Indian nature enthusiasts. By blending ecological restoration, climate-smart practices, and profitability, the forest is glamorizing farming, inspiring youth, and hosting summer camps for school children, further adding to its impact and income.

The Kolongpur Community Wellness Centre: Agritourism for Doctors

The Kolongpur Community Wellness Centre stands as a testament to the resilient and contented lifestyle of the Amri Karbi tribe in the remote hills of Kamrup Metro district, Assam. This small tribe, nestled in serene greenery, inspired a movement toward compassionate natural farming and holistic well-being, led by Mohe Phangcho, a trained Green Commando. Mohe's journey began with the creation of homestead food forests in the village, embracing agroecological principles. However, during my first visit to train farmers in developing these food forests, I encountered the stark challenges the community faced due to inadequate healthcare facilities in this remote, hilly terrain with poor roads. Stories of expectant mothers delivering babies *en route* to hospitals in an old jeep, including Mohe's harrowing experience of carrying his mother on a rainy night, painted a vivid picture of the urgent need for better healthcare access.

It was then that the idea of merging Agri-tourism with healthcare emerged. I envisioned inviting city doctors to experience the tranquil beauty of Kolongpur while dedicating an hour of their time to provide medical services to the farmers. Through a social media campaign, the concept gained traction, attracting health practitioners eager to participate in this unique initiative. The resulting camps brought doctors from across the state and country to Kolongpur, offering much-needed healthcare while enjoying the vibrant community and its natural surroundings.



Figure 7.7 Kolongpur Community Wellness Centre.

This initiative caught the attention of Child Aid Network (CAN), Germany, which supported the construction of the Kolongpur Wellness Centre through Bosco Institute, Jorhat. Managed by the AVATAR (Ampri Valley Agri Tourism and Rural-connect) Farmer's Interest Group, the centre features cottages for visiting doctors, a healthcare facility, Agri-tourism activities, trails, local food, music, and demonstrations of agroecological farming practices. Additionally, it includes facilities for processing roselle herbal tea and turmeric, along with a small rural market where farmers can sell their high-value, low-volume products to visitors and doctors.

Today, a village once devoid of medical care now sees doctors visiting from around the globe, strengthening the community's access to healthcare and revitalizing the local public health centre with regular government doctor visits. The Kolongpur Wellness Centre, born from a vision of agri-tourism and community resilience, has brought smiles to everyone involved, demonstrating the transformative power of combining sustainable farming, healthcare, and tourism.

The Dondoral Orange Village Initiative

The Dondoral Orange Village initiative, nestled in the picturesque Ampri Valley, showcases the potential of Agri-tourism to transform rural livelihoods. Guided by Green Commando Kati Ranghang, I visited Dondoral, a lush village known for its premium orange orchards. As I explored the stunning orchards with visitors, I noticed the farmers' reluctance to pluck oranges, either to share or sell. Upon inquiry, I discovered that many farmers had already sold their produce to middlemen at low prices in what amounted to distress sales—forced by the immediate need for funds, often for their children's education. This left them unable to benefit fully from their high-quality produce.

This realization sparked the idea of **Orange Orchard Agri-Tourism**, which combines the natural beauty of the village with engaging activities for visitors. We introduced the *Gumguma Sunset Off-road Trail*, a four-hour trek through orange orchards, followed by a moonlit walk back to the campsite. This unique experience captivated tourists, particularly from countries like the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany, who are passionate about off-road adventures. Social media campaigns further popularized the initiative, attracting visitors from Guwahati and other parts of Assam.



Figure 7.8 Dondoral Orange Village Initiative.

The village will host its first-ever **Orange Festival** during December 2024, providing farmers a platform to sell their produce directly to visitors at retail prices, ensuring they reap the full benefits of their hard work. With support from the Child Aid Network, we developed an Orange Orchard Cottage, while Green Hub, an organization focused on responsible tourism, contributed to building a Community Kitchen and additional bamboo huts. Their responsible tourism fellows played a vital role in crafting a sustainable and comprehensive Agri-tourism package.

The Dondoral Orange Village initiative is more than just a tourism project—it's a step toward empowering farmers, fostering community development, and celebrating the region's natural abundance, all while promoting responsible and immersive tourism experiences.

The 4C Mantra: Conservation, Cultivation, Consumption, Commercialization

The guiding principle of this transformation is the 4C Mantra:

1. **Conservation** of local food to preserve biodiversity and traditional knowledge.
2. **Cultivation** of local food through sustainable homestead food forests.
3. **Consumption** of local food to promote nutritional self-reliance.
4. **Commercialization** of surplus produce as high-value products, supporting livelihoods and economic growth.

This mantra empowers communities to embrace their heritage while building resilience.

A Vision for the Future

Agritourism has proven to be more than just a marketing tool; it is a bridge that connects the past and future, urban and rural, youth and tradition. By creating experiential opportunities, we have fostered pride in rural lifestyles, inspired young people to return to their roots, and revitalized communities.

Through the dedication of Green Commandos and the principles of sustainable farming, we have redefined what it means to be a farmer in the modern era. This journey is not just about agriculture; it is about reclaiming a way of life that balances human needs with nature's gifts.

Our Understanding of Agri-Tourism Through Practice

Agri-tourism bridges the gap between urban lifestyles and rural roots, offering a direct connection to the grassroots of our villages. It allows individuals to experience and learn climate-friendly farming, becoming part of the journey from seed to plate. At its core, Agri-tourism fosters coexistence between farmers and consumers in a world striving for health and happiness. It celebrates the slower, more intentional living of humans amidst the raw beauty of nature.

For farmers, Agri-tourism provides an opportunity to share their knowledge and traditions, offering healthy food grown with care and conservation of local food wisdom. This approach emphasizes earth-friendly cultivation practices and showcases farm-to-table processes directly to visitors, acting as a powerful marketing tool at the village or farm gate. Unlike conventional or eco-tourism, Agri-tourism demands a more responsible approach, respectful of the environment, culture, and rural way of life.

The **Green Commando Forum** has conceptualized Agri-tourism into two distinct categories:

- 1. Agri-Experiential Tourism:** A short-term engagement where visitors immerse themselves in farming activities and rural culture for a day or a few days. This includes participating in agricultural operations, enjoying traditional cuisines, and experiencing the authentic lifestyle of farmers.
- 2. Agri-Educational Tourism:** Longer-term programs focused on learning, training, and collaboration. These include internships, volunteer opportunities, summer and nature camps, farm stays, rural immersion programs, and even paid research activities. Practicing farmers take on the role of barefoot scientists, imparting knowledge to visitors and participants.

CONCLUSION

The success of YATRA, the Green Commandos, and the Food Forest demonstrates that with innovation, commitment, and a deep respect for tradition, we can reverse the tide of migration and build thriving, self-reliant rural communities. The vision is clear: to make farming not just a livelihood but a celebration of life itself. Agri-tourism is not about loud, polluting, or conventional tourism practices. It aligns with the **customary laws of rural societies**, safeguarding their culture, social values, and unspoiled environments. By honoring these principles, Agri-tourism becomes a tool for sustainable recreation and education, ensuring mutual respect and shared growth for both visitors and farming communities.

Mapping of Rural Geo-tourism Hotspots using Geospatial Techniques in Jharkhand, India.

Santosh Kumar¹, Kiran Jalem² and Bijay Singh³

ABSTRACT

Latehar is located in Jharkhand, India, is endowed with diverse geological, geomorphological, and cultural features that hold significant potential for the development of rural geotourism hotspot sites. This paper focuses on identifying and mapping rural geotourism hotspot sites in Latehar using geospatial techniques such as Remote Sensing (RS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The objective is to provide a comprehensive geospatial mapping of the district's rural geotourism hotspot sites, assess their suitability for sustainable tourism development, and contribute to eco-friendly tourism strategies that can benefit the local economy and preserve environmental integrity. The methodology involves the integration of high-resolution satellite imagery (e.g., Sentinel-2, IRS) and Digital Elevation Model (DEM) data to identify key rural geotourism hotspot sites features such as waterfalls and landscape. GIS-based spatial analysis was used to evaluate landforms and accessibility of the identified sites. The findings of this study highlight several promising rural geotourism hotspot sites in Latehar. This geospatial mapping of geotourism hotspots provides a valuable decision-support tool for stakeholders involved in tourism planning and policy-making in Latehar. The study proposes an integrated framework for eco-tourism development based on geological significance, environmental sustainability, and local community engagement, contributing to the long-term prosperity of Latehar's rural geotourism sector.

Keywords: Rural; Hotspots; Geotourism; Satellite Data; Geological Site; Jharkhand

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INTRODUCTION

Geotourism refers to tourism that highlights and promotes the geological features, landscapes, and natural heritage of a region, focusing on sustainability and education. Rural geotourism hotspots are locations within rural areas that offer unique geological features and landscapes, attracting tourists interested in exploring the earth's natural history. These hotspots not only provide opportunities for adventure and education but also promote conservation and sustainable development in local communities. Rural Geotourism promotes environmental education, raising awareness about geological processes, conservation, and the importance of preserving natural resources.

Rural Geotourism Hotspots means, such type of place where not all tourist/people have the chance to see but specially people when some of the money paid by the people is used to protect the local environment & geological Hotspots. According to the global tourism body's the sector's contribution to India's GDP reached just over INR 19.13TN in 2023- almost 10% ahead of 2019 levels. Employment in Travel & tourism grew by 10% to reach just under 43MN, 8% more than in 2019. WTTC (World Travel & Tourism Council) projects that Travels & Tourism will contribute almost INR 21.15TN to the Indian economy in 2024 an increase of 21% from 2019. Jobs are predicted to increase by 2.45MN this year, equivalent to one in 11 jobs in India. WTTC estimates that across South Asia, Travel & Tourism will contribute INR 25.1TN this year, with jobs supported by the sector reaching 54.77MN by the end of 2024. Domestic visitor spending is expected to reach INR 18.3TN this year whilst international visitor spending is anticipated to reach INR 3.8TN. WTTC estimated could grow its annual GDP contribution to INR 43.25TN by 2034, representing 7.6% of the Indian economy.

Geospatial technology and Rural tourism share generic features, both across the limitations of study and using areas. Geospatial technology has been used in various study area e.g., rural development, urban planning, environmental science, geography, geology, banking etc. Similarly, tourism is best subject which is interests to environmental planners, forestry, geographers, economists, Mining and archaeologists (Giles, 2003).

The rural setting of Latehar offers various geotourism opportunities, including geological formations, fossil sites, and natural landscapes that can enhance the visitor experience. However, to capitalize on these resources effectively, it is essential to identify and map these hotspots strategically.

Study Area

Location: -Latehar District, situated in the picturesque state of Jharkhand, India, is an area rich in geological diversity and natural beauty. With its

unique landscapes, including hills, plateaus, and valleys, Latehar presents a significant opportunity for the development of rural geotourism. Latehar district is predominantly a tribal population about 45.54% of population and 66% of total population including schedule tribes and schedule castes. As per an official Census 2011, the population of the study area is about 726978. The rural and urban populations are 675120 and 51858 respectively. The study area is circumscribed in the north by Palamu and Chatra districts, in the south by Gumla and Lohardaga districts, in the east by Chatra and Ranchi districts and in the west by Garhwa district and Chhatisgarh state. The district is divided into several administrative blocks, such as Latehar, Manika, Barwadih, Balumath, and others. The district headquarters is in the town of Latehar. It is situated in the southern part of Jharkhand, bordering the state of Chhattisgarh. It lies between latitudes 23.42° N to 24.12° N and longitudes 84.00° E to 85.25° E and average elevation is 400 m above MSL.

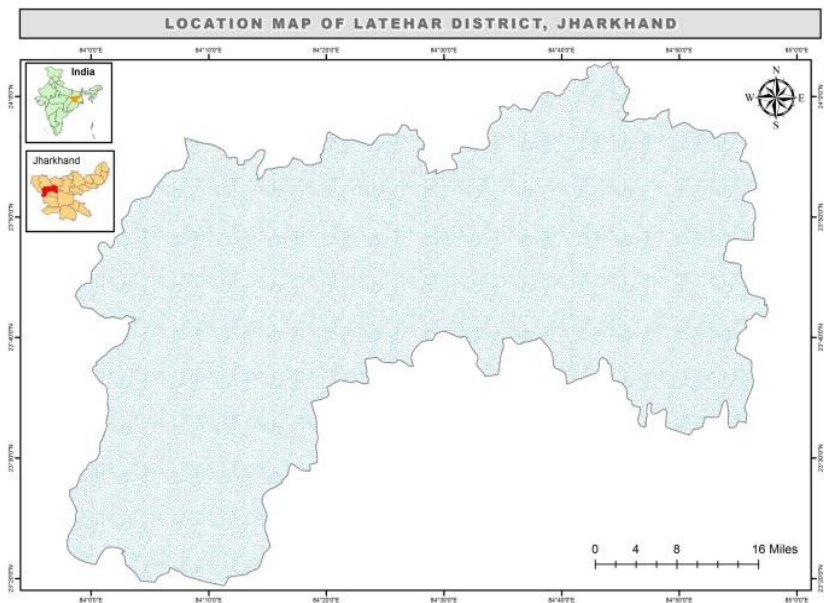


Figure 8.1 Study area.

Geotourism Hotspots: The district is characterized by undulating terrain, dense forests, and hills. The region is part of the Chotanagpur Plateau, which is known for its mineral wealth and biodiversity. The majority tribes and tribal people depend on tourism, forest, agriculture, hills, river, ponds, waterfalls etc. Tribal/rural people have unique identity in themselves and do not destroy the forests and natural resources. Lots of rural geotourism hotspots in the study area in which local people are dependent upon like Mongolia Sunset point, Upper Ghaghri Fall, Kamaldah Lake, Palamu Fort, Kechki Sangam,

Lodh Water Fall, Tubed Cave, Indra Fall, Tathapani, Narayanpur Fort, Tataha Hot Water Spring, etc., rural geotourism has enough impact on social and economic life's of local people.

Environment: The average yearly rainfall is about 1300mm. Maximum rainfall has been observed from June to October months. It has hot/warm climate in April to Mid-June, Mid-June to October is rainy and Mid-October to March is winter. Major flowing river are North Koel and Auranga.

Geomorphology: The geomorphology of Latehar District is influenced by its location in the Chotanagpur Plateau, a major geological region of eastern India. The district exhibits a variety of landforms that result from complex geological processes over millions of years. The terrain is characterized by rugged hills, plateaus, valleys, rivers, and waterfalls, and it offers important insights into the region's geological history. The southern portion of the study area is covered with forests and hillocks elevation varies from 300m to 1100m above MSL. East West trending hill ranges consisting of metamorphic rocks in the southern part. High relief plateau of Netrahat, Chadwa and Garu are in mature stage.

Geoconservation or the protection of geodiversity is being applied to specific places known as geosites, where significant earth elements (geological, paleontological, geomorphological, hydrological and pedological) are protected, preserved and managed and also suitable spatial models discussed to support a sustainable study area. Rahmani et al. (2015) to identify the geotourism Hotspot potentials in the seaside areas of the northern part of Iran and as a case study, the cities of Noashahr and Chalous. Kanga S. et al. (2014) to prepare hospitality and management with the awareness of the antique growth of topographical facts with the support of GIS tools, to deliberate and inspect the base line data to develop a database and execute critical geospatial analysis. The geospatial technology makes it easier for tourists, administration in devising their techniques about their destinations on how to find the finest way, how to set up sites to visit, what are the nearest service place and facility centre, how to customize directions, and how to evaluate approachability across destinations. N. Gill I & B.D. Bharath (2013) explored the analysis of geospatial technology-based networks for route optimization of tourists and administration destinations. Bederiana Shyti & Evis Kushi (2012) with the help of GIS geo-referenced data of Elbasan region, developed thematic layers and stated that these GIS map layers are helpful in the development of tourism industry. Fadahunsi (2011) scanned the map based on the research area, georeferenced and digitized every topography layer by layer using ILIWIWIS 3.2 Software type and maps layers exported to ArcView 3.2 software. GIS software was used to analyse the spatial-location features of geo-tourism in the study area. Gavrilu et al. (2011) studied the assessment and analysed

geomorphological heritage & structure of the Macin Mountains for geotourism Hotspots development. E. Charoul et al. (2010) presented in a paper combination of manual GIS along with multimedia, remotely sensed and GPS derivative data is realised as combination result and valuable information related to geotourism. As per the paper, special feature of the multimedia GIS was developed and it contains information about the environmental challenges and sustainable development issues for geotourism Hotspots & focuses on the assimilation of this multimedia GIS for geotourism. The spatial model of geotourism destinations contributes to geopark development to support the realization of sustainable regional development.

This paper, therefore primarily deals with:

- Identification and mapping of rural geotourism hotspots including physical resources using geospatial technology.
- Promotion & Marketing of Geotourism hotspot sites in rural areas.
- To generate tourist influx of domestic as well as international.

METHODOLOGY

The process of identifying and developing rural geotourism hotspot sites in Latehar District, Jharkhand, using geospatial technique can be divided into three main phases:

Pre Field Work: The pre-field work phase involves detailed Literature Review of Papers, Journals, Articles etc., preparation, data collection, and analysis using geospatial technology to identify potential geotourism hotspots in Latehar District i.e. Obtaining high-resolution satellite imageries (e.g., Sentinel-2, Landsat, IRS) to understand landforms, vegetation, rivers, and geological features. Analyze temporal data to identify any changes in landscape features, such as deforestation or soil erosion. Acquire DEM (Digital Elevation Model) data to analyze slope, elevation, and terrain roughness. This data will help to assess the accessibility of potential geotourism sites. This phase helps to create a robust foundation for the fieldwork and sets the direction for geotourism planning.

Field Work: During the field work phase, ground truth verification is conducted to validate the findings from geospatial analysis. This involves on-site visits to potential geotourism hotspots to collect detailed data, assess the environmental and social conditions, and interact with local communities. The study was carried out by direct inspection and aerial photo interpretation at different scales to map geotourism Hotspots, geomorphological, geological and physical features of landscape in Latehar district. The primary data collected through direct field surveys using Questionnaire forms, Interviews,

GPS coordinates, Photographs of hotspots, collecting geological samples, photographs, and physical measurements of rock formations, waterfalls, and other natural features etc. Verify the accessibility of these sites and assess conditions like slope, terrain difficulty, and visitor safety. The secondary data collected from published sources. g. books, journals and newspapers, as well as from unpublished sources e.g. Latehar DC office, Jharkhand Tourism office, DDC, DTO etc.

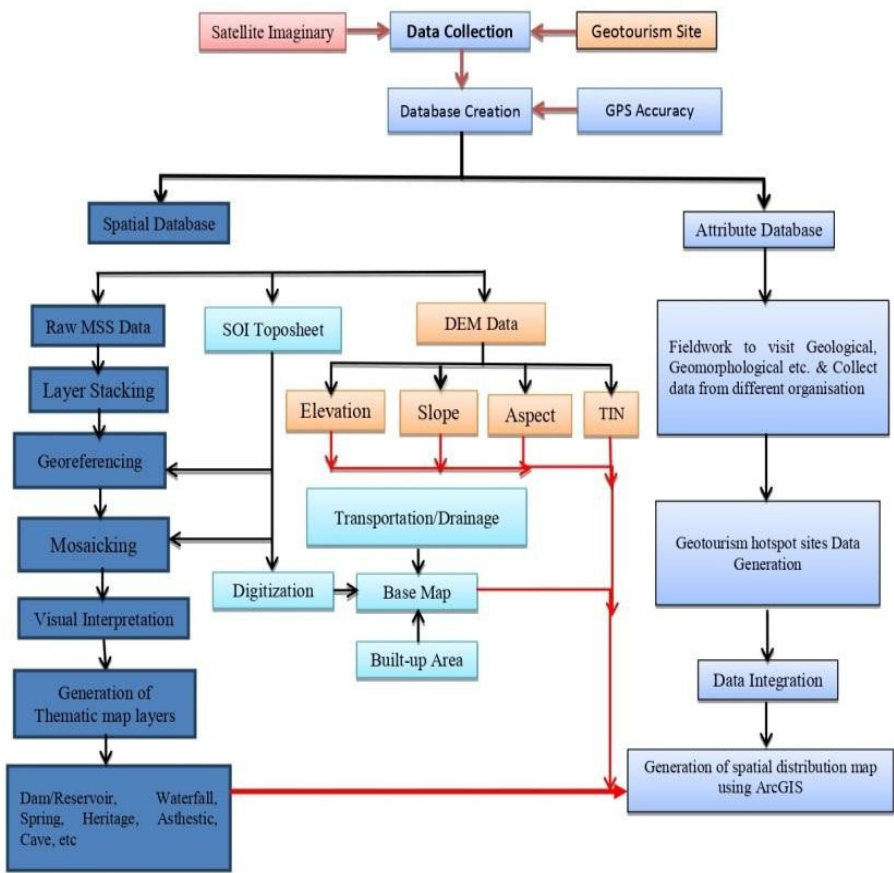


Figure 8.2 Flowchart.

Post Field Work: After the fieldwork is completed, the data collected during the ground truth verification phase is analyzed, integrated with pre-existing geospatial data, and used to make informed decisions about sustainable geotourism development. To analyze and synthesize field data with geospatial results. To develop final reports, maps, and geotourism planning documents. The collected information digitised/plotted, georeferenced and processed in GIS software e.g. geotourism hotspots, physical features, landscape etc. and

generated the Geodatabase after it was used to draw up a specific thematic map of Latehar district following classification, assessment and adoption of specific legends and exported different thematic maps.

Map Layer	Data Used
Base Map	Toposheet, Satellite Data etc.
3DModel/Slope/Aspect/Elevation	Sentinel, Cart-1, ASTERDEM etc.
Various Thematic Maps of geotourism Hotspots etc.,	GPS Survey, Ground Survey
Software Used	ArcGIS10.1, Arc Catalog 10.5 and ERDAS etc.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After processing the of satellite image and using spatial technology we found about the age of

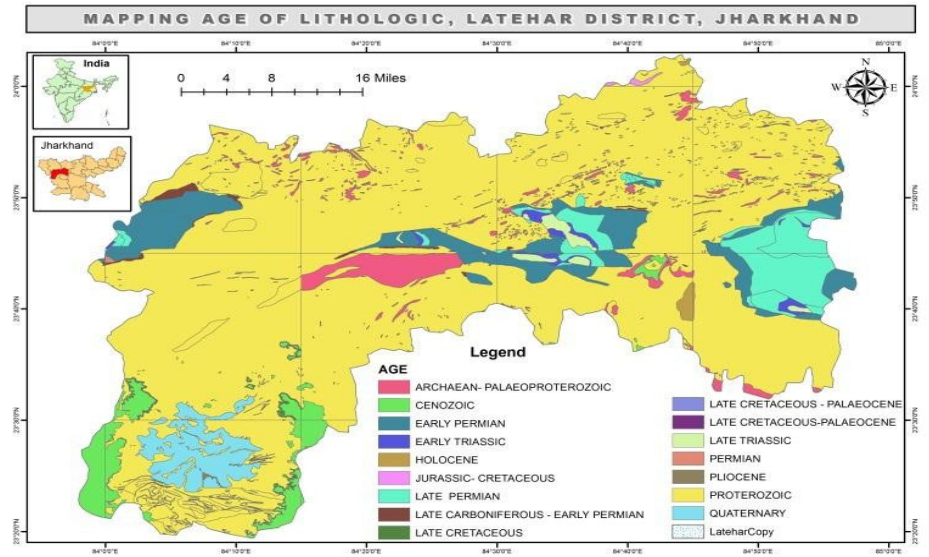


Figure 8.3 Mapping age.

Lithological structural map of the lithology in Latehar district which is shown in Fig.8.3 with legend, the final lithological structure of the Latehar district, Jharkhand.

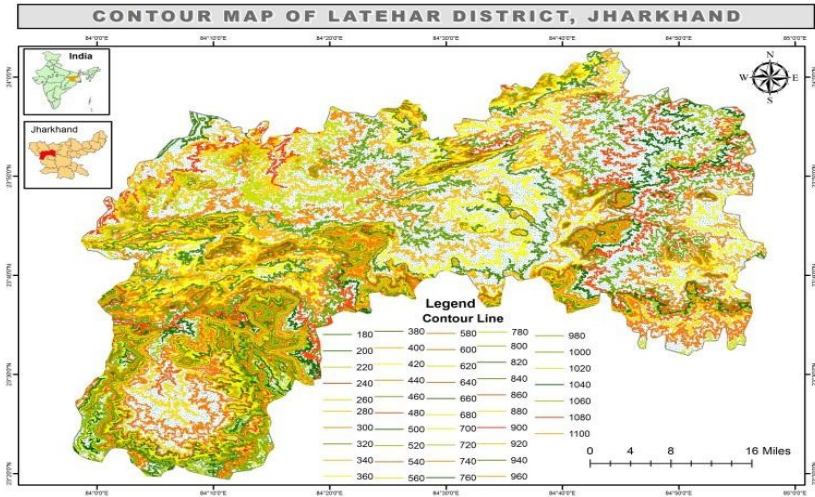


Figure 8.4 Contour map of Latehar district.

Contours of the Latehar are generated with contour interval of 20meter difference between two contour lines is shown in the Fig.8.4.

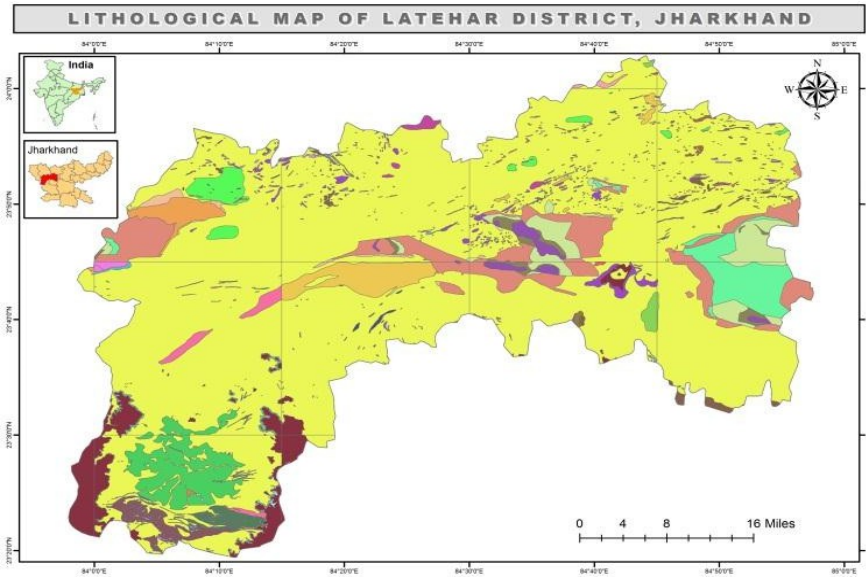


Figure 8.5 Lithological map of study area with legend.

After processing the satellite images, using spatial technology, the Lithological map of the lithology in latehar district along with its legend is shown in the Fig.8.5.

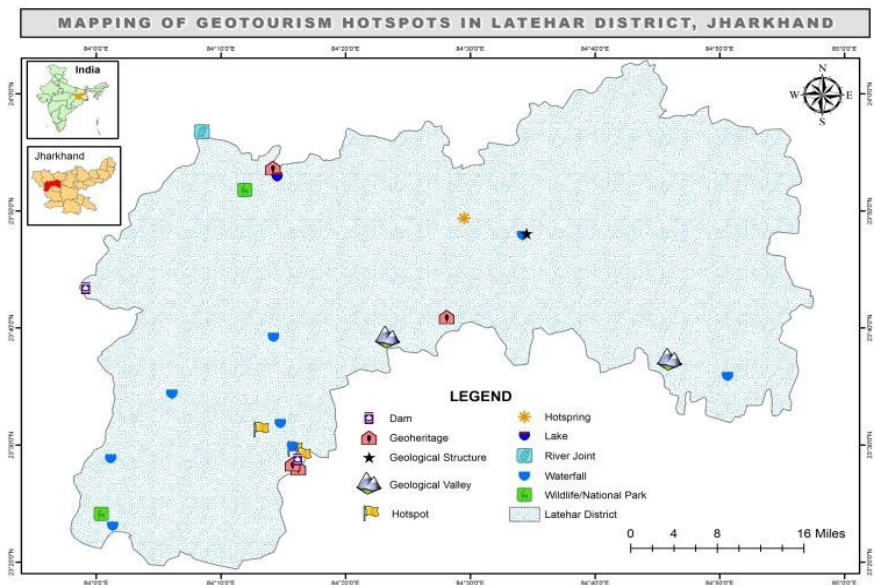


Figure 8.6 Mapping of geotourism hotspots in study area.

Geotourism map shows about the geotourists hotspots using geospatial technology with geo coordinates as well as administration. This map shows about the different types of hotspots as for example cave, Hotspring, Geoheritage, Waterfall, Dam, Wildlife etc. which are shown in the fig.6.

Hotspring: The Tataha hot water spring is located about 90 kms from Latehar. The spring is situated in the midst of the dense forest near Morwai. The spring is a perennial source of hot water. The spot becomes a major tourist attraction in winters.

KechkiSangam: At about 17km from Daltonganj, is the confluence of the rivers Koel and Auranga. There is a divisional forest rest house available for tourists who wish to stay here. The scenic beauty of the place makes it's a very favourable picnic destination.

Palamau forts: The Palamu Forts are two ruined forts located around 75 kilometres south west of the city of Latehar in the Indian state of Jharkhand. There are many mountains and deep forests all around and the river Auranga also flows nearby. There are two large forts located deep in the forests of Betla near Betla National Park. The original fort in the plains and the other on an adjoining hill are attributed to the Vanvasi kings of Chero dynasty. The fort in the plains had defences on three sides and three main gates. The fort was constructed by Raja Medini Ray.

Kamaldah lake: The Kamaldah Lake is situated at about 35kms from Daltonganj. This construction of this artificial lake took place during the rule of

Raja Medini Rai. The presence of lotus in the lake lends it its name. Elephant herds of the Palamau Tiger Reserve are often seen bathing in the lake. Siberian migratory birds arrive here in the winters.

Lodh Falls: The Lodh Falls, also known as Budhaghagh falls, are located at 10 km North-west from the head quarter of mahuadanr block in Latehar district. It is the highest waterfall in Jharkhand and the 21st highest waterfall in India. The falls are located on the Budha River within the Chhota Nagpur Plateau forests. The falls measure a whopping 143 meters (469 ft) and make a thundering sound that could be heard from over 10 km away. This is a reason enough to visit the falls during the peak of monsoon. Due to its deep location, you must have private transport at ion or hire the vehicle to visit the falls.

Sugga Bandh Waterfall: It is located on the route of Betla to Netarhat. Sugga band is surrounded by hills which makes it different from other tourist destinations. The cascade falls from the height of 80 feet on the rock. Sugga bandh is approximately 57 kms away from Betla National Park. You can come here by your personal vehicle also.

Kanti Waterfalls: It is located around 47 km from Latehar and 66 km from Ranchi. It is surrounded by dense forests which enhance its natural beauty. It is nearby Kuru block. Tourists can reach this site by a four-Wheeler 7 km from the Ranchi Daltongunj main road (NH39).

Tubed cave: Tubed cave is a natural cave located at Tubed Hills in the dense forest which is 14 kilometers away from Latehar. It is said that long time ago tigers used to live in this cave.

Mahuadanr Wolf Sanctuary: Mahuadanr sanctuary is situated in the picturesque Chechari Vally (Mahuadanr) Distt. Latehar.

Betla: Almost 170 kms from Ranchi and surrounded by lush green forests, hills, valleys and waterfalls, Betla is a serene tribal village located in the Latehar District of Jharkhand bordering the jungle.

Sarju valley: It is situated 20 km away from sub-district headquarter Garu and 25km away from district headquarter Latehar, if you are planning to drive to Netarhat via Latehar, you might come across LateharSarju Road, which is an alternate route.

Chalet House Netarhat: “Chalet” is a French word which means a wooden dwelling. This is a historical building of Netarhat is made up of logs of wood. it was established during the period of Sir Edward Gate, L.G of Bihar and Orissa in early 20th Century. Initially, it was used as summer exodus by British Officer for discussion with local influential village chiefs. Now it is being used as the camp office of D.C Latehar.

CONCLUSION

The study has mapped several promising rural geotourism hotspot sites in Latehar, Jharkhand which could help in rural and urban development. Based on this the following implications can be drawn.

- ❖ The findings of the study could facilitate in developing a model to geotourism hotspots.
- ❖ Based on the nature of geotourism site activities for generation of employment can be created.
- ❖ Geodatabase will be generating for geotourism Hotspots information system and Administration to tourist influx in domestic as well as foreign.
- ❖ The study will play an important role in strengthening applied research using latest techniques and will highlight about the studies for geotourism management. This will provide most of the up-to-date geospatial information which will in the assessment, mitigation and management of the geotourism.
- ❖ The study could guide the implementing agencies/ Government/ Tourism Department to apply the model for sustainable utilization of natural resources as well as geotourism Hotspots and geodatabase.

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Creating a Self-Sustaining Rural Tourism Ecosystem in India: The Case of Back to Village (B2V)

Manish Kumar¹

ABSTRACT

This chapter is set on a premise that rural tourism in India offers a sustainable solution to the challenges faced by small-scale farmers due to climate change and economic instability. Initiatives like Back to Village (B2V) focus on building community-based tourism models that preserve local culture while benefiting villagers economically. By providing authentic rural experiences through homestays and traditional activities, rural tourism fosters cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience, ensuring a promising future for India's rural communities.

Keywords: Self-sustaining rural tourism; Experiential tourism; Economic Impact; Social Impact; India

INTRODUCTION

India has long been recognized as an agrarian society, with nearly 65% of the population engaged in agriculture and allied activities. However, the agricultural sector, particularly for the 86% of farmers who own less than 2 hectares of land, faces numerous challenges. The increasing unpredictability of rainfall, rising input costs, and the adverse effects of climate change have made sole dependency on farming an increasingly risky proposition.

Given these uncertainties, farmers are now exploring alternative income sources, and Rural Tourism has emerged as a promising solution. With rapid urbanization 31.2% of India's population now residing in urban areas (Census

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2011) there is a growing disconnect between people and their ancestral villages. As urban dwellers seek to reconnect with their roots, rural tourism is gaining momentum, offering both economic sustainability for villagers and a unique experience for visitors.

Why Rural Tourism?

Rural Tourism is a form of *experiential tourism* that allows urban individuals particularly those from elite and affluent classes—to immerse themselves in village life. The appeal of a pollution-free environment, pure air, lush green fields, the sounds of birds chirping, and the authenticity of rural traditions have captivated urban travellers.

Types of Rural Tourists

Broadly, there are two types of rural tourists:

1. **First-generation migrants:** Individuals who spent their childhood in villages but migrated to cities for education or employment. They visit villages driven by nostalgia, reliving childhood memories and engaging in traditional activities.
2. **Second-generation and beyond:** These individuals, born and raised in cities, have never experienced village life. Their knowledge of rural India is largely limited to books or media, making their visits an opportunity for first-hand cultural immersion.

The Economic and Social Impact of Rural Tourism

Rural Tourism is not just a means of leisure but a powerful tool for economic empowerment and cultural preservation.

- **Economic Benefits:**

- **Diversification of Rural Income Sources:** Rural tourism helps reduce dependency on agriculture, providing villagers with alternative ways to earn a living.
- **Local Business Growth:** Homestays, handicraft sales, traditional cuisine, and folk performances create new business opportunities in villages, making tourism a sustainable revenue stream.
- **Employment Generation:** Various group-based activities such as village tours, traditional craft demonstrations, and cultural programs not only entertain tourists but also provide income to villagers. This directly leads to job creation in rural areas and reduces the trend of migration to cities in search of work.

- **Women Empowerment:**

- **Active Role in Tourism:** Since most tourists stay in villages, women naturally take on important roles in rural tourism, such as managing homestays, cooking traditional meals, and showcasing local crafts.

- **Economic Independence:** Rural tourism provides direct income opportunities for women, enabling them to contribute financially to their families.
- **Boosting Confidence and Social Status:** Engaging in tourism-related activities allows women to interact with visitors, boosting their confidence and elevating their social standing within the community.

Rural Tourism and Environmental Sustainability

One of the most crucial aspects of Rural Tourism is its positive impact on the environment.

1. Carbon Footprint Reduction

- Urbanization and industrialization have significantly contributed to climate change. Rural tourism promotes eco-friendly travel, encouraging people to opt for nature-based vacations rather than carbon-heavy city tourism.

2. Green Economy Development

- Investments in sustainable rural infrastructure, such as solar energy, rainwater harvesting, and organic farming, align rural tourism with environmental conservation.

3. Biodiversity Preservation

- Many rural tourism sites are located near forests and natural reserves, helping to conserve biodiversity through community-led eco-tourism projects.

The Role of Tradition and Culture in Long-Term Sustainability

Economic prosperity alone is not enough to sustain a civilization. The true essence of a society lies in its traditions, cultural heritage, and deep-rooted values.

1. Culture Over Commerce

- In a world driven by material wealth, the loss of traditions leads to an erosion of identity. Rural Tourism brings people closer to their roots, ensuring that culture remains an integral part of economic progress.

2. Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

- Traditional farming techniques, medicinal knowledge, and folk art passed down through generations remain relevant in today's world and provide sustainable solutions to modern challenges.

3. Well-being and Mental Peace

- Modern urban life is stressful, and reconnecting with nature and traditional lifestyles through Rural Tourism can improve mental well-being and promote holistic living.

The Future of Rural Tourism in India

With the growing emphasis on sustainable tourism worldwide, India is uniquely positioned to leverage its vast rural landscapes and rich cultural heritage. **Government initiatives like the Rural Tourism Scheme under the Ministry of Tourism and the adoption of UNESCO's cultural heritage preservation guidelines further support this growth.**

Predicted Trends for the Next Decade:

- **Rise in Eco-Tourism:** With climate change concerns escalating, eco-friendly tourism initiatives will see a rise.
- **Technology Integration:** AI-driven personalized rural tourism experiences and virtual reality tours will gain popularity.
- **Government & Private Sector Investments:** Increased funding for rural tourism infrastructure to boost local economies.

Transforming Rural Lives through Tourism – the case of Back to Village (B2V) project:

At Back to Village (B2V), we are passionately working towards building sustainable livelihoods in rural India. In collaboration with the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board (MPTB), we have been actively engaged in developing Rural Tourism in four tribal villages of Madhya Pradesh for over two years. Our mission is not just about promoting tourism but about empowering local communities, particularly women, by creating alternative and additional sources of income.

Creating a Self-Sustaining Rural Tourism Ecosystem

To make rural tourism a viable livelihood option, we are designing a holistic ecosystem where at least one member from every household actively participates in tourism-related activities. This ensures that economic benefits reach every family, uplifting the entire community.

A key aspect of this initiative is the construction of at least 10 homestays in each village, but with a unique approach—these homestays will be within the same building or premises as the owner's house. This not only provides authentic rural experiences for tourists but also keeps the essence of village life intact. Unlike commercial resorts, these homestays will offer visitors an opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture, traditions, and hospitality of rural India.

Beyond Homestays: *Engaging Activities for Tourists & Income for Villagers*

Rural Tourism is not just about accommodation—it is about experiencing the true spirit of village life. We have carefully curated a wide range of activities that will engage and entertain tourists while generating income for villagers. These activities are designed to involve as many households as possible, ensuring that economic benefits are widely distributed. Some of the experiences include:

Cultural Experiences:

- **Folk Songs & Dance Performances** – Witness the mesmerizing traditional music and dance of tribal communities.
- **Storytelling Sessions** – Hear ancient folktales, myths, and legends passed down through generations.

Adventure & Rural Exploration:

- **Bullock-Cart Rides & Bicycling Tours** – Travel through scenic village trails just like the locals.
- **Rural Sports** – Participate in traditional games played by villagers for generations.

Agriculture & Nature-Based Activities:

- **Farm Tours & Agriculture Guide** – Learn about traditional organic farming techniques and even try your hand at ploughing or sowing.
- **Yoga & Wellness Retreats** – Experience yoga and meditation in the serene surroundings of the village.

Local Expertise & Heritage Exploration:

- **Religious & Historical Tours** – Discover the hidden heritage and spiritual significance of the region with local guides.
- **Travel & Transport Services** (Taxi, Local Transport, Security, etc.) – Ensuring seamless experiences for visitors while creating employment opportunities.

Preserving Authenticity While Attracting Tourists

Our core philosophy is to retain the original charm, culture, and simplicity of village life while making it accessible and appealing to visitors. We believe that sustainable tourism must strike a balance between economic development and cultural preservation. This initiative is not about turning villages into tourist hotspots but about allowing tourists to experience rural India in its truest form.

By offering genuine, immersive experiences, we aim to create long-term, sustainable benefits for both villagers and visitors. Tourists get to reconnect with nature, experience India's rich rural heritage, and support a meaningful

cause, while villagers receive a stable source of income without having to migrate to cities in search of work.

CONCLUSION

Rural Tourism is not just about traveling—it is about preserving heritage, fostering sustainability, and ensuring a balanced way of life. As more urban dwellers seek to experience the authenticity of rural India, the future of this sector looks promising. By supporting Rural Tourism, we are not only securing livelihoods for millions but also safeguarding India’s ancient traditions, environmental health, and cultural wealth for generations to come. After all, a nation’s true richness is measured not by its economy alone but by the depth of its heritage and the wisdom of its traditions.

Transforming Rural Communities through Tourism in Bangladesh: Key Learnings from Malaysia

Junaed Rahim¹

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of rural tourism in Bangladesh for economic growth and employment generation, drawing insights from Malaysia's successful model. The study analyzes best practices for replicability in Bangladesh to boost the rural economy. Community-based rural tourism (CBRT) enhances local engagement, preserving cultural authenticity while ensuring equitable benefits for rural communities. The paper draws from the author's personal experience from a recent international training programme on rural tourism, which highlighted Malaysia's strategy for rural development through tourism, particularly its highly successful 'Homestay Programme'.

Keywords: Tourism in Bangladesh; Tourism in Malaysia; Homestay programme; SMART action plan

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), one out of every four jobs worldwide is generated by the tourism sector. Currently, Bangladesh's tourism industry contributes approximately 76.19 million to the economy. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) projects that by 2022, the global tourism industry will generate annual revenue of 76.19 million to the economy. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) projects that by 2022, the global tourism industry will generate annual revenue of 2 trillion. By 2050, Bangladesh is expected to attract tourists from 51 countries, with tourism contributing 10% of the country's total GDP. In 2019, the tourism sector contributed \$ 2.9 trillion to the global economy, accounting for 10.3% of the world's GDP (WTTC, 2021). In Bangladesh, the tourism sector directly employs 1.5 million people, with an additional 2.3 million individuals engaged

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indirectly. Combined, this sector provides livelihoods for nearly 4 million people, contributing a financial market value of approximately four thousand crore takas. Globally, the number of tourists currently stands at around 1.1 billion, and this figure is expected to surpass 2 billion by 2022. Notably, 75% of these tourists are projected to visit Asian countries. If Bangladesh can tap into this vast market, tourism has the potential to transform the nation's economic landscape (WTTC, 2021). Given this immense potential, rural areas in Bangladesh could serve as prime destinations for tourists seeking natural beauty, cultural heritage, and authentic experiences. By leveraging its rural charm, Bangladesh can position itself as a unique tourist destination, driving economic growth and creating sustainable development opportunities for local communities.

The rural areas of Bangladesh are rich with diversified culture, scenic beauty and a rich agricultural heritage and has a predominantly rural setting where majority of the total population lives in rural areas. According to BBS Household Survey 2022, 68.49% of the total population of Bangladesh lives in the rural areas and 45.33% of them are employed in agricultural sector and the rest in the non-farm sector (BBS, 2022). The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has reported a significant rise in unemployment across the country. According to their data, the unemployment rate surged by 3.51% in the first quarter of 2024 compared to the last quarter of 2023, signaling growing concern about job opportunities nationwide. Against this backdrop, rural tourism could play a catalytic role to generate employment in the rural areas. The concept of rural tourism as a means of rural community development is not widely practiced approach in Bangladesh. Although many Asian countries like Malaysia has already taken rural tourism as a successful model of rural community development. The Malaysian government has actively supported rural tourism through policies such as the National Ecotourism Plan 2016-2025 and initiatives under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC). Rural tourism in Malaysia includes engaging rural communities in running homestay programmes, eco-resorts, and cultural experiences. Moreover, farm based agro-tourism are also in practice to support rural economy. The significant part of rural tourism in to engage the rural community in the tourism activities. This paper is intended to highlight the experience of the author of his participation in the international training programme on Rural Tourism towards Integrated Rural Development in Malaysia. Moreover, the best practices of rural tourism have been analyzed to see the replicability of the same in Bangladesh to boost rural economy.

The general objective of the paper is to assess and understand the potential of rural tourism as a catalyst for rural employment generation and livelihood advancement in Bangladesh by analyzing the experience of the international

training programme on Rural Tourism towards Integrated Rural Development in Malaysia. This chapter would:

- a) analyze the challenges of rural tourism in Bangladesh
- +
- b) explore the potential of rural tourism as a sustainable source of employment for rural communities and
- c) examine the best practices of rural tourism in Malaysia and its replicability in Bangladesh.

1. Rural Tourism: Conceptual Issues

Rural tourism plays a vital role in fostering socio-economic development in rural areas. Defined as the movement of travelers to rural destinations to immerse themselves in natural beauty, local culture, and traditional lifestyles, rural tourism encompasses all activities that occur in non-urban settings. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), rural tourism involves “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling, and sightseeing” (UNWTO, n.d.). These experiences typically unfold in regions marked by low population density, agrarian or forested landscapes, and preserved social traditions.

The allure of rural tourism lies in its ability to evoke tranquility through serene vistas: endless green fields, farmers tending to crops, birdsong echoing across valleys, and rivers meandering through villages. Lakes adorned with native flora, lush forests, crisp air, and the rhythmic simplicity of rural life captivate visitors, distinguishing rural tourism from conventional travel. This form of tourism aligns closely with ecotourism principles, emphasizing sustainability and harmony with nature (Rahim, Junaed, 2024).

Community-based rural tourism (CBRT) further deepens this connection by centering on the active participation of local communities and stakeholders. CBRT showcases rural lifestyles, ethnic heritage, art, festivals, cultural practices, adventure, natural landscapes, and historical sites. By prioritizing local engagement, CBRT not only preserves cultural authenticity but also ensures tourism benefits are equitably shared, empowering communities while celebrating their unique identities.

2. Rural Tourism in Malaysia: Experience from Training

The international training programme on Rural Tourism towards Integrated Rural Development in Malaysia held on 09-17 October 2024, which the author attended, focused on the Malaysian strategy of promoting rural

tourism for the betterment of rural communities leading to rural development. The programme was organized by Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) of Malaysia in collaboration with Center on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and Pacific (CIRDAP).

10.1 Rural Development and Rural Tourism in Malaysia

One of the most successful programmes to improve rural based tourism is the homestay programmes (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, MOTAC, 2012). A significant increase of 38.4% occupancy rate had been recorded compared to 24.9% in 2011. Malaysian homestay programme was launched in 1995 with the aim of encouraging the rural communities to venture into tourism sector by offering community-based tourism (CBT) products or services to the local or international tourists. The concept of Malaysian Homestay Experience Programme is to sell and share the experience to the tourists. This approach encourages tourists to stay with the host (homestay operators); experience the lifestyle of the rural community; and participate in the daily activities (cooking, rubber tapping, fishing, dance learning, eating local foods, participate in the local sports, etc.). The purpose of the programme is to share the daily lifestyles, the festivals, the customs and the cultures owned by the rural community while maintaining and preserving the unique identity and heritage for the future generations.

The homestay programme aims to increase the income and living standards of rural communities, encourage the spirit of entrepreneurship among the rural youths, preserve the unique identity and heritage of the community; and encourage networking. The tourists can get a firsthand experience of lifestyle and culture of the rural community in Malaysia. This also promotes local business by providing scopes to the tourists to buy local products. The students and youths also get exposure and knowledge about the homestay industry/ concept and learning the life and culture of the village community.

10.2 Practical Experience of Rural Tourism: Learning from the Field

During the training programme, field visits to Pengkalan Machang to Labuh Banting, Kampung Trail at Lebu Banting were organized. These field visits and home stay programme offered a wide range of experience to comprehend the rural culture, food and life style. Moreover, the most significant learning was the involvement of rural community and rural development through rural tourism.



Figure 10.1 Participants observing Rural Bee keeping process.



Figure 10.2 Rural Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia producing food as a part of rural tourism activities.

As a part of rural tourism activities Rural Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia producing foods

The participants were taken to rural house where women entrepreneurs produce local fried chips and other items. These have given an opportunity to the tourists to enjoy the culture and ways of rural community involvement. The participants were able to learn the ways of rural community involvement in rural tourism activities.

Participants Observing Rural Bee Keeping Process

The home stay programme also have given unique opportunity to participate in the rural life and culture of Malaysia. Rural women were seen engaged in organizing the cultural programmes and preparing foods for the participants. The participants also participated in the activities organized as part of home stay programme.

10.3 Action Plan: Implementation of Learning of the Training Programme

The action research on ‘Self-employment Generation and Improvement of Rural Livelihood through Rural Tourism’ has been taken as a part of action plan and unit of implementation of the learning of the international training programme of Malaysia. This action research is being implemented by Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) of which the author of this article has been acting as action researcher. The main objective of this action research is to improve the quality of life in rural areas by developing rural tourism based on rural heritage, natural beauty and culture. The specific objectives of this programme are to: i) create scope for rural employment through promotion of rural tourism with emphasize on rural youths; ii) developing young agri-entrepreneurs in rural areas by engaging young agri-farm entrepreneurs with rural tourism and develop a model of rural development. The action plan followed a **SMART** Goals approach: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound (Table 1).

Table 10.1 SMART Goal Approach for Action Plan.

Goal (Short Term) Identify Potential Rural Tourism Sites and Train Local Youth		Goal (Short Term) Identify Young Agri- Entrepreneurs for Integration with Rural Tourism
Specific	Conduct a survey and organize skill-development workshops for 60 rural youth	Select young agri-entrepreneurs to participate in tourism-linked initiatives like farm tours, workshops, and agritourism events
Measurable	Number of sites, number of youths trained	Number of entrepreneurs selected, number of activities planned (e.g., farm tours, workshops).
Attainable	Collaboration with local governments, tourism boards, and NGOs for site selection and training	Collaboration with agricultural cooperatives and rural youth groups to identify potential candidates
Relevant	Equips rural youth with necessary skills for managing and promoting rural tourism	Agri-entrepreneurs will gain exposure to tourism, promoting their products and practices to a wider audience.
Timely	Complete within 12 months	Complete within 12 months
Specific	Create tourism packages (cultural, eco, adventure) managed by youth-led groups	Conduct training programs for young agri-entrepreneurs on agri-tourism covering topics like customer service, marketing, and sustainability

Table Contd...

Goal (Short Term) Identify Potential Rural Tourism Sites and Train Local Youth		Goal (Short Term) Identify Young Agri-Entrepreneurs for Integration with Rural Tourism
Measurable	Number of packages, number of visitors	Number of trainees', number of training programmes conducted (e.g., 5).
Attainable	Partner with tourism operators for marketing and promotion of packages	Partner with agricultural extension services and tourism boards to provide training
Relevant	Youths will plan and manage tourism activities, creating jobs and experience	Equips young farmers with the skills to diversify their income through agri-tourism
Timely	Launch packages by end of 3rd year	Complete by the end of the 3rd year
Specific	Ensure rural tourism contributes to local economies in target regions	Ensure youth are employed through agri-tourism businesses such as farm stays, farm-to-table restaurants, or farm tours
Measurable	Percentage of contribution to local GDP from rural tourism	Number of youths employed, number of successful enterprises (e.g., 100 farms).
Attainable	Leverage success of initial projects to integrate agriculture, crafts, and services into tourism	Support youth with access to funding, mentorship, and infrastructure development to start agri-tourism ventures
Relevant	Tourism becomes a sustainable economic driver for rural communities	Agri-tourism will become a key driver of employment and economic growth in rural areas
Timely	Complete within 5 years	Achieve by the end of 5th year

10.4 Source of Support

The action research has been implemented by the revenue budget of Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD). To strengthen the programme funding from government and donor agencies would be sought for this action research.

Challenges of Implementation

Challenges are expected while implementing this action research. The anticipated challenges are:

- Infrastructure-rural roads, security, support service etc.
- Motivation-community engagement, role of local institutions
- Policy Guideline-specific emphasis on rural tourism

Recommendation

Based on the above discussion the following recommendations have been made for consideration:

Recommendation	Implementation Approach	Responsible Department/Ministries/Agencies
Incorporate Rural Tourism into National Policy	Emphasize rural tourism in the national tourism policy, introducing special packages, credit schemes, and training initiatives	National Tourism Board to lead efforts.
Community Engagement and Training Programmes	Implement projects for active community involvement, decision-making, and hospitality and cultural preservation training. Empower local cooperative societies through GO & NGO interventions	Rural Development and Cooperative Division
Local-Level Skill Development	Utilize local institutions like Union Councils	Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRD & C) can lead the initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The homestay programme of Malaysia had enabled rural communities to host tourists, offering immersive experiences in local lifestyles, traditions, and activities. The programme had boosted rural income, and fostered entrepreneurship, while preserving cultural heritage, and promoting local businesses. Based on this, an action plan has been prepared for Bangladesh to address the potential of rural touring for rural employment generation and boost of rural economy through the action research of BARD on rural tourism. The responsibility is on the implementing agencies to overcome the challenges and move forward.

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