

RURAL TOURISM IN RAJASTHAN: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Rajasthan being situated in the northwest part of India is a land of majestic Aravali Hills, crowned with sand dunes of Jaisalmer and Bikaner, scenic and serene beauty. The very rich culture heritage and most hospitable people make journey to Rajasthan a most enjoyable experience of life both for foreign and domestic tourists. The customs and traditions, fairs and festivals, handicrafts, art and music reflect the very broad spectrum of the Rajasthani culture where much of the Rajasthan thought, philosophy and culture is being reflected all over the State. Tourism sector is a significant contributor to the state GDP, earns valuable foreign exchange for the country, provides significant employment, generates tax revenue etc. Besides historical, natural and cultural tourism, pilgrimage tourism provides an extra boost to the state's economy. Rural tourism in Rajasthan makes an enormous contribution to local economies through employment generation and sustainable development. Rural tourism showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby, benefiting the local community economically and socially. This paper aims at examination of the role of government in development of rural tourism in Rajasthan and analysis of various opportunities and challenges for rural tourism development. A holistic policy for the development of rural tourism is required for transformation of rural areas of the State.

INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan has emerged as one of the popular tourist destinations in India for both domestic and foreign tourists. The number of tourist arrivals in the state has increased fourfold in the last thirty years and in 2015, the state received 14.7 lakh foreign tourist and over 351.8 lakh domestic tourists (Annual Progress Report 2015-16, Department of Tourism, Govt. of Rajasthan). The state is well known for its diversity in terms of natural, cultural, historical and archaeological heritage.

The historical forts and palaces, heritage hotels and havelies, colorful fairs and festivals, local art and handicrafts, etc. has been a unique selling proposition for tourists coming to the state. The desert environment in the western Rajasthan is also a major attraction for visitors, particularly the foreign tourist. Earlier, tourism in Rajasthan was small industry that was largely confined to the foreign tourists and domestic pilgrimage.

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Tourist arrivals were restricted to a few thousand tourists annually and were primarily recorded in select places such as Jaipur, the state capital, Udaipur and Jodhpur (for foreign tourists) and the pilgrim centers of Ajmer, Pushkar, Ramdevra and Nathdwara (for domestic tourists).

However, over the last few decades, due to the focused efforts of Rajasthan State Government agencies and some entrepreneurs, tourism has grown from an elite and pilgrim phenomenon to a mass phenomenon putting Rajasthan firmly on the foreign and domestic tourist map. Today, tourism constitutes an important industry that has opened up new vistas for economic development of the state. As compared to the past, where the tourism in the state meant desert tourism, heritage tourism and pilgrim tourism, today the tourists have a wide canvas of places, attractions and activities to choose from in the state, which enhances the overall tourism experience.

The government of Rajasthan has recently recognized the importance of rural tourism in economic development of the rural areas of the state. Inspired by the development of the concept and practices of rural tourism, government have initiated rural tourism for many regions of Rajasthan since each region is endowed with unique features in terms of natural scenes, Historical heritage, culture-food, dress, festivals rituals, and the like. Thus each local region offers ample scope of promoting rural tourism. The development of a strong platform around the concept of rural tourism is useful for a state like Rajasthan where 75% of the population resides in 44,795 villages (as per Census 2011). The present paper aims at examination of the role of government in development of rural tourism in Rajasthan and analysis of various opportunities and challenges for rural tourism development. It also comes out with a number of policy

recommendations for rural tourism development.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RAJASTHAN

As Per the Tourism Strategies and Rural Development Organization report Paris 1994, rural tourism is not an accidental or temporary growth phenomenon. The forces behind the growth of rural tourism are partly connected to long term changes in the travel market, partly to improvements in transport and communications and partly to the efforts of public agencies charged with assisting rural change. The following key factors can be said to be responsible for rural tourism growth in the past and which will continue that growth into the future also:

COUNTER URBANIZATION SYNDROME

The trends of industrialization and development have led to an urban centric approach across the globe. Along with this, the stresses of urban life styles have led to a counter urbanization syndrome. With the rising income level of professionals and work pressure to achieve the targets, they want a long holiday to rejuvenate their mind for peace and harmony and they can get these in the rural areas not in the city. This has led to growing interest in rural areas. On the other hand, the growing trend of urbanization has led to falling of income levels, lesser job opportunities leading to desertion of villages. Rural tourism could be a solution to this. Rural tourism as supplemental income can contribute to the increase of well being of the rural inhabitants, the reduced out migration and to the development of the rural area. Tourism is increasing the life quality of the inhabitants of the rural area and it reduces the differences between the rural and urban region.

HERITAGE INTEREST AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Along with this, increasing level of awareness, growing interest in heritage and culture and improved accessibility and environmental consciousness is also increasing the importance of rural tourism. Rural areas are well suited to heritage interpretation and conservation, possessing many historic landscapes, artifacts, and linkages. Over the last two decades there is a boom in the level of interest in heritage both man-made and natural.

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Increased level of education in rural areas is most important part. This will help the villagers in smooth interactions with the tourists. Increasing levels of education correlates with increased income of a particular person and the clusters.

TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Considering the expansion of railway transportation in Rajasthan and improved road connectivity which shortens the relative distance between regions, rural tourism in Rajasthan faces strong development opportunities. Better connectivity of road, rail and air transport can increase the tourist traffic in any region.

HEALTH CONSCIOUSNESS

In a village one can have verities of outdoor recreational facilities ranging from walking, cycling, camel safaris, jeep safaris etc. Tourists like to visit villages to experience and live a relaxed and healthy lifestyle.

ROLE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

To increase the rural tourism concept in rural areas, regional agencies including those who

are connected with arts, crafts, folk music, natural conservation etc. should be encouraged to take part in the development tourism in rural areas.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM IN RAJASTHAN

Rural tourism projects have a definite perceptible socio-economic impact on residents of rural areas in Rajasthan. Some of these are briefly discussed below.

GROWTH OF INFRASTRUCTURE

One of the major issues in connection with rural tourism models is to prioritize the infrastructure facilities for the use of tourists. Many studies indicate that rural tourism has improved the availability of basic infrastructure in the area.

GENERATION OF EMPLOYMENT AT LOCAL LEVEL

Rural tourism contributes positively to the increase in employment. Youths are found to be engaged in one or the other work related to the rural tourism projects. Handicrafts also get encouragement due to rural tourism. Rural Tourism in Rajasthan has helped to generate additional income to the residents.

ENHANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

The development of tourism in the place led to conscious efforts among many villagers to develop their knowledge and skills. As the tourism in Rajasthan matures there will be significant value addition to their knowledge and skill.

PRESERVATION OF CULTURE AND TRADITION

Residents are generally positive about the influence of rural tourism on their culture. It

has been felt that tourism contributes positively to the cultural advancement of the region.

CONSERVATION OF ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Since rural tourism model in Rajasthan is in its infancy the number of tourists to the place is very low. Therefore the damage to ecology and environment due to tourism is also minimal. People feel that the implementation of rural tourism project has enhanced environmental consciousness and has resulted in better preservation of ecology and environment.

CHALLENGES IN PROMOTION OF RURAL TOURISM

Any kind of promotion has its own challenges. Major challenges that rural tourism Development faces are as follows:

CONSERVATISM

It is a general belief that only agriculture can help the economic development of rural people and nothing else. Delay in understanding that tourism may also play an important role in developmental process of rural areas hinders the growth of rural tourism.

LACK OF LOCAL INVOLVEMENT

Since the villagers lack knowledge and skills, they may get the jobs of unskilled worker in the rural tourism projects. The basic concept behind rural tourism is to emphasize on participation of rural people. But in practice local people are rarely involved in decision making, planning and implementing policies.

NEED OF TRAINING FOR TRAINED MANPOWER

In rural areas the awareness of customer expectations is limited. Sometimes workers have only basic skills in hospitality and service.

Moreover a rural location sometimes entails limited supplies and uneven quality in the services available. There is need to educate the people in villages with regards to knowledge, etiquettes, communication etc. People trained in hotel management would not like to go to the rural areas so it will have to depend on rural people who are required to be trained to cater to the needs of the tourists.

ILLITERACY

Vast majority of the rural populations are uneducated and illiterate. Their culture, religion, superstition have a strong influence on their attitudes and behaviors. They follow a slow life style pattern and like to stick to their traditional jobs whether they are remunerative or not and are not interested to take up risk. Thus there is lack of entrepreneurship in rural areas.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Language and education is the basic hindrance in communication and creates negative impacts on tourists. Villagers will have to understand the tourist expectations and needs. There should not be any communication gap between the guest and the host.

INADEQUATE FINANCIAL FUNDING

For the development of any project capital investment is must. Government should encourage rural tourism by providing financial support to start the projects. Sufficient financial support is required for essential developments like human resource, enforcement of rules and regulations, building of physical infrastructures, and to preserve the local culture, traditions, heritage, art etc.

TAXATION ISSUES

Tourism is a part of entertainment so all hotels, motels and cottage having license are paying

high taxes to the government. But in rural tourism as rural people will also be involved, there should be a provision of tax exemption.

INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES

Majority of the villages in Rajasthan are not connected with good quality roads. For developing tourism in rural areas, not only all-weather roads but also safe drinking water, electricity, telecommunication, safety and security, etc. are needed. Also medical facilities are rather poor in rural areas of State.

CONCLUSION

While tourism is an important instrument for economic growth and employment generation, it is also faced with many challenges as its consequence. Principles of sustainability is crucial to tourism, which lead to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems with participation of local communities in the protection of its natural and cultural endowments leading to a more sustainable growth. There are many key drivers that can push vibrancy in the tourism sector. The approach to skill development for the tourism sector is multi-pronged and addressing the requirement of all segments is a major challenge. State government also have instituted Incentive mechanisms such as subsidized land cost, relaxation in stamp duty, exemption on sale/lease of land, power tariff

incentives, concessional rate of interest on loans, investment subsidies/tax incentives, backward areas subsidies and special incentive packages for mega projects. All these efforts if implemented in word and spirit may lead to rural transformation of Rajasthan.

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