

Homestay Tourism and Sustainable Development in the Indian Himalayan Region: Prospects & Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In developing countries like India, homestay tourism is a relatively a new concept that has been introduced in the field of tourism and travel. It has number of benefits at social, economic and environmental level and simultaneously, it has certain limitations also. Purpose of this research paper is to evaluate the social, economic and environmental issues of homestay in Indian Himalayan Regions so that various tourism policies can be framed. Another purpose is to decide whether homestay is good & safe for an individual as a host and as a guest. Future potentials of home stay tourism has also been highlighted in the present paper and it also carry number of challenges faced by homestay tourism. Some proposed measures to improve homestay tourism have been given. It has been linked with sustainable development also. As per the expectations of the author, the present paper is going to give a lot of ideas & benefits to not only those people who are connected with tourism and travel but it will also give an idea to the govt., environmentalist, young generation, gen-z (specially residing in Himalayan region), spiritual and religious organisations, people interested in knowing the traditions and culture of other regions and to both guest and host community. The focus of the paper is empowering local and rural communities towards homestay tourism and preserving heritage culture of the people residing in Indian Himalayan Regions. Various marketing strategies to promote home stays has also been highlighted in this paper.

Keywords: guest, homestay, host, indian himalayan region, tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

“Tourism is travel for pleasure or business and all the commercial activities of providing and supporting such travel.”

“Tourism is the temporary short term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live & work and their activities during the stay at each destination. It includes movements for all purposes.”

India has a great heritage of historical places like Taj Mahal, various forts, lakes, natural sites and religious places, specially Himalayan region of India is full of natural, religious and spiritual sites. These regions provide a complete satisfaction to nature lovers and to those who are on the path of religious & spiritual findings. Tourism industry is of great importance in any economy. India has a great potential to extract a lot from tourism. Present paper provides a detailed view of growth, performance and sustainable development of tourism in Indian Himalayan region.

Forbes magazine ranked India as the 7th most beautiful country among the top 50 most beautiful countries in the world's ranking. **The World Travel and Tourism Council** calculated that tourism generated 13.2 lakhs cr. Or 5.8% of India's GDP and supported 32.1 million jobs in 2021. From these figures we can easily evaluate the future scope of tourism specially in Himalayan region of India where number of religious places like Haridwar, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Naina Devi, Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rudraprayag, Gangotri and Bageshwar etc. exist and other places full of their natural beauty like Auli, Chopta, Nainital, Mussorie, Chakrata, Munsiyari, Rishikesh, Kausani, Harsil and Almora etc. also exist.

In this paper author has explained various social, economic & environmental benefits of homestay in Indian Himalayan region. Following are some of the definitions of homestay:

“Homestay is a formal hospitality and lodging whereby visitors reside at a place hosted by another person.”

“Homestay offers an insight into the culture, traditions, history and everyday life of a family.”

“A homestay is a stay at a residence by a traveler and especially by a visitor who is hosted by a local family.”

“Homestays are houses inside farms or plantations or in some villages which are away from town and city.”

The length of stay can be minimum of one night and maximum of one year or more. It can be provided for free in case of social networking services or in exchange of money. Wonderful thing is that some people have converted their farm houses, heritage houses or hill cottages with a view to accommodate a couple of guests. Guests live in a homely atmosphere and get a chance to mingle with another local family who are mainly the host.

This paper also analyses the existing policies and regulations regarding homestays and suggests various measures for their improvement. Homestay tourism is also connected with rural development in Himalayan regions. Most important aspect of homestay in Himalayan regions is providing spiritual benefits to the guests which will provide peace of mind, help in developing positive attitude towards life and other spiritual benefits. Purpose of this paper is to explore various marketing strategies to promote homestay tourism. A number of issues has been discussed to empower the youth, local communities and villagers in order to prevent migration, as a large number of residential homes are lying vacant, seems to be just like graveyard due to shifting of the masses to metropolitan or urban areas. Purpose of the paper is to remove the dullness and loneliness in rural life and to bring liveliness and prosperity in these areas.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand the concept better, following are some of the inspirational matters related to tourism sectors.

According to the latest findings in May 2023, Himachal Pradesh has the highest number of homestays, while Tripura has the least number of homestays. The homestays in Jammu and Kashmir received the highest ratings. In Himachal Pradesh, homestays are available at a variety of pricing, ranging from 300 to 38,000 INR a night. Overall, it was observed that rural homestays are equally good as in urban areas.

The Economic times, published Oct., 2022, Gauri Ben, host from Gujrat has welcomed guests from around the world and now earns more as compare to harvesting crops.

Soraya and her daughter Fabia have hosted more than 400 guests from around the world.

Nearly 55% hosts in India said that the income earned through hosting has helped them economically in staying their home in 2021.

55% of the hosts want to connect with people from different countries to know their culture & traditions and share more about the Indian culture with them.

Mahindra & Mahindra Group Company has made admirable efforts in this context.

Mahindra & Mahindra group company Club Mahindra Holidays, has undertaken a nation-wide training programme to give a boost to the scheme. More than 70 home owners have been associated with Club, Mahindra Holidays, for offering the homestay tourism, these houses are spread over States considered as popular tourist destinations such as Kerala, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Karnataka. The company had undertaken a nation-wide training programme for these house owners.

Travel portal ‘Yatra.com’ has also initiated a project for homestay.

Make My Trip a travel company & its partner websites have over 50 million+ active users, it has more visibility and recurring bookings of homestays that will definitely boost the hosting business.

Hari Nair, CEO and founder of Holiday IQ says that homestays appeal to families and vacationers looking for a relaxed holiday. Travellers (44%) going as family prefer homestays.

Shiju Radhakrishnan, CEO and founder of a site itraveller, observed that personalised holiday packages have another interesting observation, "As solo travelling is increasing day by day, so there is rise in demand for homestays. Destinations like Coorg, Goa and Pondicherry have heavy bookings for homestays."

The 2010 Commonwealth Games saw a sudden rise in the concept of homestay, luxury homestays can go up to Rs 3,000 a night, while a decent homestay for Rs 500 - 600 in many parts of India is also available.

All these findings show the chances of future aggressive growth of homestays. It requires more govt. initiative for its growth and development.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the social, economical and environmental issues of home stay tourism in Indian Himalayan region.
2. To study the issues empowering local communities and preserving their cultural heritage through homestay tourism.
3. Finding the measures for improving homestay tourism and various marketing & promotional strategies.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Researcher has used the descriptive judgmental and analytical approach to find the effectiveness and future perspectives of homestay and interaction with local communities and review of descriptive studies. Various sources such as, descriptive secondary data, from books, websites, research papers, magazine, e-books, journals and direct interactive sessions with villagers on random basis.

V. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The present study confines to the role of homestays, its future perspective and challenges. Study also covers the measures for improvement of homestays. It also covers various strategies for marketing and promotion of homestays.

VI. HOMESTAY TOURISM BENEFITS IN INDIAN HIMALAYAN REGION

Social Benefits

1. Helpful in developing new skills in number of areas like; customer service, marketing, communication, managing a business.
2. Opportunities to learn new things from a different culture.
3. Increase the social bonding among people of different countries.
4. Reducing the social differences.

Economical Benefits

1. Opportunities for host to own and operate their business as micro entrepreneurs.
2. Developing personal and professional passion among host communities.
3. Helps in bringing foreign exchange into local communities that benefits local guides, cooks, drivers and retailers etc.
4. Rise in local businesses and more job creations.
5. Flexible opportunities of doing business, because it's all about welcoming people into own home as and when feel comfortable.

Environmental Benefits

1. homestay will give a push to adequate infrastructure facilities like; dustbins, collection vehicles and waste collectors etc.
2. Opportunity for biological diversity.
3. Follow up of Swachh Bharat Mission of the Central Govt. in a more disciplined manner.
4. With the rise in tourism, steps have been taken to promote eco-tourism.
5. Forest and wild life resources have been taken care of, since large number of tourists visit more frequently.

VII. EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION THROUGH HOME STAY

Rural homestays and local communities are complementary to each other's progress. Interaction with the visitors will also expand the knowledge and horizons of local people. A civilized and developed community will attract increased turnover of guest community and it will generate income. At the same time rural homestays rejuvenate local art and craft, redevelop rural areas and revitalize rural life. Rural homestays infact brings liveliness and remove dullness in rural life. Home stay tourism not only give economic benefits to rural communities but also promotes local art, traditions, culture, architecture and food habits. It enhances the professional and communication skills of the local communities. Home stays also prevent migration and it results in preservation of old-age heritage.

Varied experience is obtained by tourists in various fields like; ethnic tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism, pilgrim tourism, adventure tourism, agro tourism etc. Rural homestays provide tourists an opportunities for a number of activities such as taking a tour of the village to know local history and insights, trekking, getting practical learning about weaving silk or

cotton cloth, indulgence in farming, learning local skills such as cooking local cuisine, experiencing house boat sailing, camel rides, elephant rides, interaction with tribes and face-off with wild life. During this process there are more chances of exchanging of ideas between host & guest communities, guest community can provide valuable informations & ideas to the host communities for further development.

It provides an opportunity for the host community to acquire extra skills in the field of tourism for their personal as well as professional development. As compare to mass tourism, rural home stay is low scale & low density concept, it's flexible and natural, providing alternative source of income to rural population. Since it is owned and controlled by the local communities, so all economic and non-economic benefits go directly to them. Homestays are helpful in creating entrepreneurial and job opportunities in rural areas.

VIII. MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR HOMESTAY

1. Develop a homestay website with vision and mission statements and creating various homestay tourism apps.
2. Joining various communities related to tourism and travel and thus building strong connection, a good reputation and a solid client base.
3. Use of well defined social media strategies to promote homestay tourism.
4. To ensure good quality services and amenities and arrangement of exciting events to entertain the guest.

IX. FUTURE OF HOMESTAYS

In 2008, according to **Ministry of Tourism**, homestays are a central part of the tourism product in most of the small tourism projects in India. It's one of the most sustainable tourism activities in Indian Himalayan region. As per **West Bengal Tourism Dept.**, rural tourism accounted for about 42% of visitors in Himalayan region seeking to experience the rural and raw-beauty of north east region in India.

Butter and Hall (1998) observed that tourists often look for isolated destinations for pleasant experience. Reality of natural environment, historical and cultural heritage are their top priorities. Visitors are in pursuit of an authentic Indian experience and more about the people, society and culture of Himalayan regions. It will give a huge upliftment to homestays in these regions.

Rural tourism is a recent concept gaining popularity these days and it's linking the visitors with rural communities around Himalayan regions and thus strengthening the concept. So the concept of homestay tourism has been flourishing in Himalayan regions.

X. CHALLENGES

Inspite of bright future of homestays, it has lots of challenges creating obstacles in the development of homestay.

1. Host communities in mountain areas have limitations with letting people stay in their houses and eating with them.
2. In some states of Himalayan regions homestays are subject to caste. The people consider that homestay is only for those who are considered superior in Hindu religion.
3. Some traditions discouraged the concept of homestay, like; not allowing outsiders or women to enter in some parts of the home specially kitchen and place of worship (home temple).
4. Lack of confidence and safety concerns are also limiting homestays.
5. The biggest challenge is eating habits in Himalyan regions, cultural differences, lack of accommodation and lack of hospitality skills.

XI. PROPOSED MEASURES FOR IMPROVEMENT OF HOMESTAY

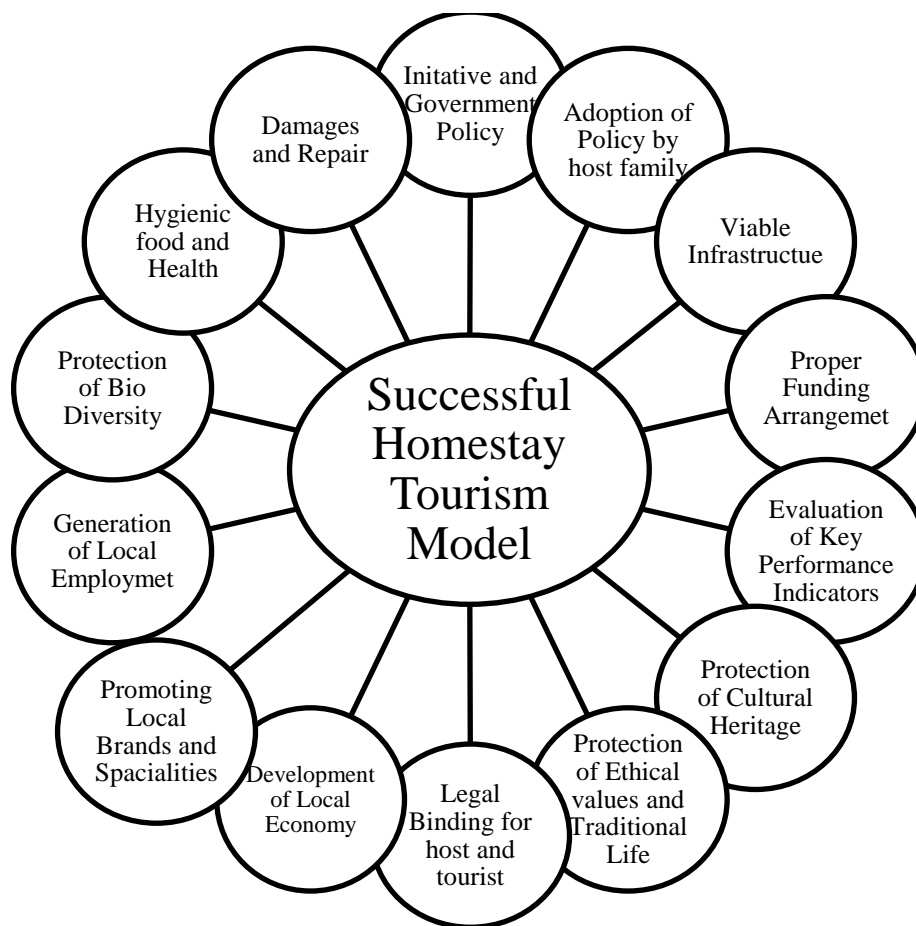
1. Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change is responsible for the implementation of policies and programmes relating to the country's natural resources including rivers, lakes, waterfalls, forest and wildlife etc. Ministry can provide guidance and support to the rural home stays.
2. Ministry of Rural Development can contribute a lot in the development of the rural homestays.
3. Ministry of Culture can contribute towards the promotion of culture and heritage in rural areas and can help in attracting tourists.
4. Initiative can be taken by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship regarding skill development programme for rural homestays.

5. Dept. of Agriculture and Farmers welfare can support for developing agro-tourism. Demonstration of organic practices can be made for tourists so that they can buy authentic organic products.
6. Youths of the host communities can be inspired for rural homestays.
7. Opening of universities, colleges and institutes in Indian Himalayan regions offering Travel and Tourism courses, like; BTA(Bachelor of Tourism Administration), BBA(Tourism and Travel Management), MBA(Tourism and Travel), MBA(Tourism, Hospitality and Aviation Programme), MBA(Tourism and Leisure), B.Com(Tourism and Travel management),MTA(Master of Tourism Administration).
8. Tourism related professional courses like; photography and course on tourist guide should be conducted for the host communities.
9. Adventurous tourism activities like; rafting, bungee jumping, canyoning, hiking, paragliding, mountain biking, sky diving, caving surfing, water sports etc. should be encouraged by the govt. in Himalayan regions.
10. Creating awareness among the host communities regarding homestay advantages and disadvantages.
11. Work from mountains is a great challenge and should be aggressively promoted. It would be great if the government can focus on improving internet connectivity at several identified destinations, if not the entire state.

XII. FINDINGS

Homestay tourism could be need of hour keeping in mind the changing world, a successful home stay tourism model is discussed below:

Model for Home stay tourism



1. Initiative and government Policy

Without proper initiative and government support nothing is possible, so the desirous groups must come forward and take initiative, therefore, government need to frame comprehensive policy.

2. Adoption of Policy by Host Family

Desirous host family must study the government policy and adopt keeping in mind strengths, weaknesses and scope in their local area with the guidance of tourism department.

3. Viable Infrastructure

The core groups and stakeholder must frame and develop viable infrastructure for the promotion of homestay tourism with involvement of local beneficiary who can be the back bone. For this youth can play an active role.

4. Proper Funding Arrangements

Without proper funding, the scheme of homestay tourism will not work, as poor villagers may not be able to take risk and develop necessary facilities and support to attract foreign tourist, have huge fun and technicalities required for.

5. Evaluation of Key Performance Indicators

Before launching the scheme all the issues and key areas for the support of Homestay tourism must be boosted and properly planned and analyzed as success of scheme is based on proper assessment and proper arrangement.

6. Protection of Cultural Heritage

With attraction of outsiders there are chances of dilution of local cultural heritage which need to be protected and developed for the attraction of foreign tourists, as most cultural sites are not properly taken care of by the Ministry of Tourism and culture.

7. Protection of Ethical Values and Traditional Life

The shining & glamorous lifestyle of tourists may have bad impact on the present lifestyle of the villagers and there are chances of disappearing the old ethos and ethical values which need to be protected, at least the coming generations should know values of our traditional life and ethos that mean to know that what was the life of our ancestors.

8. Legal Binding for Host and Guest

No one should be able to dominate and exploit any one, as poor innocent masses of the village can be exploited very easily and no one take responsibility as it has been shown in the movie, "Ram Teri Ganga mailee."

9. Development of Local Economy

Use of local village homemade products must be promoted and encouraged instead of outside purchase, it will protect environment, strengthen the local economy and will improve the quality of village life. For this, government NGO's must arrange some training programmes for local community to serve better to the tourists.

10. Promotion of Local Brand and Specialities

Every village must have their uniqueness and specialities to attract tourist like special cuisine having special taste and value of tradition so that tourists love of using it again and again.

11. Generation of Employment in Order to Make Smridh Bharat

Efforts should be made to generate more and more local employment for the local employable youth so that pressure should be diverted back from metro city where life is likely to become very often like a hell.

12. Protection of Biodiversity:

Ministry of Environment and Forests must have special viable plan to protect forest and wild life and endangered species like "chiru" along with medicinal plants and extrication of other varieties must be kept safe.

13. Hygienic Food and Health

Every possible effort should be tried to serve valuable high quality hygienic food along with best health treatment to the tourist during their stay at home and all emergency arrangements must be available during the hard time. It means tourist must not be left on the mercy of God.

14. Damages and Repair

Every place has limited capacity to absorb natural pressure and environmental threats. So the proper arrangements must be there to cope up with natural disasters. It should not repeatedly become Shimla or Kedarnath again and again.

XIII. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that homestay tourism is a flourishing concept in tourism and beneficial from economic, social and environmental point of view. It's an effective way of minimizing rural poverty and reverse migration and preservation of culture and old-age heritage. It brings liveliness in rural areas. Simultaneously, since safety is the first concern for everyone, so both the parties guest and host has to decide at individual level from legal perspective, whether homestay is good or safe for them. Furthermore, the study also shows a lots of obstacles like; lack of infrastructure, hospitality skills, adjustment power, trained tourist guide and good communication skills. A successful homestay means to make the guests feel pleasant and inducing them to visit again and again and at the same time availing the opportunity to develop personal and professional skills of host community, creating employment opportunities and inspiring the youth to get higher education and look for new jobs and livelihood at door step.

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