

Homestays of Kalimpong: Emerging and Sustainable Economy and its impact on socio-economic fabric of rural society

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is seen as one of the fastest growing industries and is a major contributing factor in the economy of the world. It is diverse in nature and has gained immense importance globally being a lucrative business. Over the years the tourism industry has incorporated many new forms keeping in view the changing needs of a traveller. Homestay, a popular form of hospitality and lodging whereby visitors share a residence with a local of a city or village to which they are travelling has emerged as a popular alternative to hotel accommodation. Homestays offer several advantages such as exposure to everyday life in a new location and an opportunity to live a local's life, experience local culture and traditions, friendship and foreign language. This popular trend of 'homestay tourism' which is far economical has been favoured by many who like to travel frequently. Today as many travellers are interested in spending time in nature there has been an increase in the number of rural homestays that have opened giving impetus to rural tourism.

This drift from traditional hotel accommodation to homestay accommodation is seen in Kalimpong, a newly formed district in West Bengal in the foothills of the Himalayas. The increasing demand for homestays may be explained by recent global social and cultural changes resulting in greater interest and appreciation in cultural heritage, lifestyles and environmental concerns (Kannegieser, I. 2015). Homestay tourism provides economic benefits creating opportunities for both men and women. This paper attempts to highlight the emerging trend of homestay tourism in Kalimpong District as an alternative source of income, its opportunities and challenges.

1. Introduction

Travel and tourism are considered as one of the many diverse and growing sectors in an industrialized world. It is constantly evolving and is seen as a major contributing component to the growing economy of the world. Tourism seen as a lucrative business has gained immense significance worldwide. Of late the tourism industry has incorporated new forms of tourism keeping in view the changing attitudes of the traveller. With the change in the outlook and rising demands of the travellers there has been a growth in tourism, more significantly in the rural areas thus giving thrust in rural tourism and the emergence of homestays.

West Bengal tourism department reported 42% of tourist travel looking for rural and adventure tourism, to experience rural and raw beauty. With this, came the concept of homestay tourism. Globally homestay tourism is defined as a form of tourism where tourist can stay with the members of the family wherein social and cultural interaction takes place along with exploring various tourist destinations. In the Indian context, homestay means any house preferably located in the rural setup where the house owner or his/ her family members are physically residing in the unit and earmarks some rooms exclusively for the tourists (West Bengal Homestay Tourism Policy, 2017).

2. North Bengal Hills as Tourist Destination

Tourism Industry in the North Bengal hills consists of two sectors: Urban tourism and rural tourism. Urban tourism is focussed on catering to tourists in the town area whereas rural tourism is relatively a new phenomenon and is focussed in giving the travellers a unique local experience. North Bengal hills has always been a preferred tourist destination for a number of reasons like the pristine Himalayas, world renowned tea, flora, etc. Previously serving as a mountain retreat to the Europeans in the colonial period and still continues to be a preferred tourist destination even in the 21st century.

The district of Kalimpong, which was earlier a sub-division of Darjeeling district, has gained prominence as one desired tourist destination by many. Kalimpong often referred as 'Darjeeling's quiet cousin' or 'sleepy town' is located at the base of Himalayan range but relatively at a lower altitude compared to Darjeeling due to which the weather is much milder and pleasant throughout the year. Kalimpong, known for its beauty and world-renowned flora is the centre of diverse culture and tradition of the Bhutias, Lepchas, ethnic tribal groups of the Nepalese or the Gorkha community.

It is witnessed that tourists are slowly but steadily travelling to the rural areas to spend their holidays and stay in houses or homestays among the locals. Thus, inducing the concept of

homestay tourism. Globally homestay tourism is defined as a form of tourism where tourist can stay with the members of the family wherein social and cultural interaction takes place along with exploring various tourist destinations (West Bengal Homestay Tourism Policy, 2017). Homestays act as an attractive alternative tourism product, suitable especially to the rural areas where an extensive infrastructural investment is not possible but has the richness of local culture and natural beauty to offer to the tourist. Homestay tourism in Kalimpong is still in its evolutionary stage but it has the potential to evolve as an important sector of the tourism industry.

In this paper an attempt is made to show the change that has occurred in the last decade in the tourism industry, the flow of tourist to the rural areas and its impact upon the social, economic fabric of the society.

3. Objectives of the study

- To study homestay tourism in and around Kalimpong offering as an alternative source of livelihood
- To assess homestays as an important driver of growth and development in rural areas
- To assess the participation of the women and their economic upliftment
- To identify the challenges faced in the development of Homestay Tourism

4. Methodology

The study has been based on observation available from different journals, reports and available literature. Information about the rural bustees on the periphery of the Kalimpong was collected to understand the reason in choosing these rural areas as the desired tourist destination. Information gathered through personal observation, interaction and interview with the local people associated with homestay tourism. Closed and open-ended question were asked in the interview. All the collected data were analysed. The nature of the present work is both descriptive and analytic.

5. Homestays as an alternative source of income

Homestay tourism is the potential sector for alternate source of income for the rural entrepreneurs. It provides the rural people an alternative opportunity of livelihood and income right in their village without much infrastructural investment. The study confirmed that the homestays in the district of Kalimpong, West Bengal helps in addressing the local unemployment issues. Homestays in rural areas has proved beneficial to both the individual homestay owner and the community at large. It helps in creating job opportunities not only to the individual owners and catering sector but it also creates opportunities to smallholders like the local taxi owners, trekking guides, tourist guides, shopkeepers, local artisans and craftsmen.

In order to attract tourists, sustainable homestay accommodations emphasize traditional living styles, local culture, and customs (Bhuiyan, 2013). Homestay tourism acts as a catalyst for the revival of local art and craft, local cuisine and even acts as a medium of preservation of local culture and environment. This business offers financial reward and

monitory help to the local native community for restoring, protecting and conserving the environment and their indigenous culture (Laurie, 2012). Since, both the domestic and international tourists are interested in experiencing the flavours of local cuisine, regional craft, music, costume, indigenous festivals and rituals, and above all to experience the pristine unadulterated environment. This stimulates new markets for the locals to show case and trade their local crafts, local produce thus generating an extra income for the entire community.

Numbers of Home stays have appeared in the different areas of Kalimpong district like Sillery Gaon, Lava Lolaygaon, Chibbo Busty, Dalapchand, Sinji, Ramdhura, Takling, Samthar, Tashiding, Algarah, Pedong, Reshi and Rishyap to name the prominent villages. Every hamlet, every village in different corners of Kalimpong is spreading the concept of homestays. Since homestays have been found to be an important source of income, increase the financial stability of families and communities, contribute to social upliftment, and create a space for increased cultural exposure (Anand, 2012).

6. Homestays as a driving factor for growth and development in rural areas

With the implementation of West Bengal Homestay Tourism Policy of 2017 with the vision to promote Homestays across West Bengal as an important driver of equitable growth and prosperity. It offers an alternative source of livelihood, development and growth in remote locations, preservation of local skills, enterprise development at the micro level thereby ensuring inclusive growth and sustainable environment management provided impetus to the homestay owners. This policy ensured that the homestay owners will be assisted by the Department of tourism in collaboration with Technical Education and Training, Government of West Bengal, to run and operate the homestays professionally. The department organizes trainings for the owners and youths at regular intervals for skill and capacity building.

Homestays having provided economic stability to a certain degree and has ensued the reverse migration of the youths in the rural areas of Kalimpong. There is retention and involvement of the local youths in the industry, many of them working as tourist guide, nature walkers, etc. To make these homestays easily accessible there is demand for the proper communication resulting in some improvement in the roadways. Due to pressure from the local people roads are maintained at regular intervals by the concerned department, even pocket routes are taken into consideration.

Financial stability of families and communities through homestay tourism has provided for higher education of the younger generation as they are able to send their children to towns and cities for pursuing higher education.

Floriculture one of the important industries of the region also developed along with the homestay tourism. Homestay tourism being seasonal in nature, the local people get engaged in floriculture during the off-season, which provides decent additional revenue.

7. Participation of Women in Homestay Tourism

OCEDE (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000) has reported that there has been increase in women's rural entrepreneurship globally since the early 1980's. In the Indian context the role of women in rural areas are generally confined of being a homemaker. The long-embedded tradition of "male the breadwinner and women the homemaker" does not provide much opportunity to the rural women to explore their entrepreneurial skills. However, the same cannot be said about the rural society of Darjeeling or Kalimpong District. These social constraints which challenges the entrepreneurial success of women in rural set up are almost absent though not entirely absent. We have to acknowledge that these limitations and restrictions on women do exist to limited extent.

The social framework of the communities in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong district provides ample opportunities for the women in both rural and urban sector to be independent and self-reliant. In many cases homestays has proven very beneficial to the rural women since it helps them to get engaged into homebased self-employment and earn their living without travelling to distant places. Homestays which Sharma has classified as "micro enterprises" not only enhances national productivity, and generate employment but also helps to establish economic independence, personal and social capabilities among rural women. The open interaction with the tourists has helped in developing the interactive skills of the women. Homestays not only bring an income to the household but it also acts as a tool for developing self-confidence and social upliftment of the women in and outside the household as they become an integral part of the industry.

8. Challenges of Homestay Tourism

Homestays as an emerging economic activity has gained considerable recognition for providing economic benefits, generating employment opportunities for all sections of the society, creating social harmony. On the socio-cultural front homestays provides a platform for intercultural interaction between the hosts and the visitors, creating cultural awareness. Though tourism plays a significant role in the economic activity of the North Bengal hills, homestays is still in its inception stage. Its enormous potential remains untapped due to number of reasons. Poor infrastructural facility is one of the major concerns. Communication and poor transport connectivity to some of the villages like Sangsey, Tinchuley, Tanek Busty, Sillery Goan, etc needs immediate focus from the

local administration and the Government. Emergency healthcare, electricity, water supply is becoming a hindrance to promote better service to existing as well as potential homestay visitors.

Various development schemes and programmes are being initiated by the West Bengal Tourist Development Corporation and Bengal Tourism Department under the Accelerated Hill Development Programme, to provide better facilities to the tourists. In many cases people are not aware of the Government schemes, parameters, registration and other policies related to homestay business. Homestays in the region lacks skilled human resources like guides, entrepreneurs etc due to the lack of proper training centres. Further, entrepreneurship and creative skills among the owners of the homestays does not develop.

Another major challenge for the homestay tourism in Kalimpong region is the poor marketing network. Kalimpong compared to other nearby hill stations like Darjeeling and Gangtok has not fully developed as a tourist centre. It is very essential to promote Kalimpong as a tourist destination and the provider of best homestay facilities. The lack of proper language communication skill and the need for computer knowledge among the rural homestay owners has made the condition demanding.

9. Conclusion

Homestays are to be considered as a very important small-scale enterprise to develop the economic well-being of the people in the Kalimpong district. Homestays and rural tourism generate small yet steady amounts and contributes to economic prosperity and community development of the area. Homestays are an attractive alternative tourism product to experience natural resources, local lifestyle, local cuisine, cultural heritage and authentic social interactions. So, for the development of homestays in Kalimpong District the local people should be made aware and conscious to take initiatives to conserve the natural resources and cultural heritage. There needs to be structure in place to develop rural tourism and homestays and more community and government initiatives to improve and develop skilled human resource. There is a need for training centres, committed entrepreneurship, development of creative skills among the owners of the homestays.

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