

Chapter VII

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF RURAL TOURISM IN DARJEELING HIMALAYA

7.1 Introduction

Though rural tourism serves many rural communities and improves their standard of living, the obstacles that hosts, stakeholders and the residents face should not be overlooked. Building an excellent rural tourist destination necessitates a significant level of investment in terms of finance, skill, time and persistence. Tourism is a sector that is influenced by a variety of factors and faces numerous challenges. Rural tourism is described in a variety of ways (Lane, 1994), it is clear that most rural tourism destinations face similar challenges (Roberts and Hall, 2001). The fundamental challenge for stakeholders, hosts, policymakers and local communities would be to come up with creative solutions to ongoing issues, allowing for the restructuring and integration of changing economic frameworks to economies (Gannon, 2009).

7.2 Challenges of Rural Tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya

The hosts, stakeholders and the local communities of Darjeeling Himalaya's rural tourism sites, Takdah, Lamahatta, Mineral Spring, Lepchajagat, Chatakpur, and Sittong, encounter multiple challenges. The major challenges have been identified and broadly categorized as a) insufficient financial and economic support, b) lack of skill-oriented stakeholders, c) political unrest, d) short tourist season, e) inadequate capacity building facilities, f) lack of basic infrastructure, g) poor knowledge of preserving natural resources, h) language problem and i) lack of advertising.

a) Insufficient financial and economic support

The business of the tourism industry is subject to extreme fluctuations. Several hosts, stakeholders and the local community in the Darjeeling Himalaya's rural tourism areas, such as Takdah, Lamahatta, Mineral Spring, Lepchajagat, Chatakpur, and Sittong, lack adequate financings, such as a bank or cooperative loans. Initially, the hosts did not have sufficient capital to build homes, manage tourist attractions, and beautify the surroundings. The representatives of local residents from all of the Darjeeling Himalayas studied rural tourism destinations worked together to get funding from a variety of sources. The survey revealed that only 20% of the entrepreneurs received financial aid while the majority of the people i.e. 80% received no financial assistance to help manage their careers. Therefore people were hesitant to take the risk. Therefore, the government should take initiatives to encourage tourism and enhance rural infrastructure by providing financial assistance.

b) Lack of skill-oriented stakeholders:

The study reveals that most of the hosts and stakeholders involved in rural tourism destinations of Darjeeling Himalaya facilities lack skill and education. The majority of them have only received primary school, indicating a lack of understanding that leads to inefficient and ineffective administration of rural tourism. As a result, the rise of rural tourism in the Darjeeling Himalaya has been constrained by a lack of skills, information, understanding, and efficient capacities.

c) Political unrest

Darjeeling Hills went through political unrest for a prolonged period that severely affected tourism in the Hills. Even during the field survey period, the area has been subjected to political unrest twice on the issue of demand for a separate state, i.e., Gorkhaland. Between 2013 and 2017, Darjeeling was wracked by mass agitation and long-term strikes (bandhs), which wreaked havoc

on tourism and the business. For over 3 months, the resorts, cottages, hotels and homestays were shuttered, preventing the owners from returning to their local homestays. “It was a tough time”, says the owner of Abiraj Homestay, Takdah and the owner of Hankhim Homestay, Sittong, emphasizing that the business of tourism is not simple. It necessitates significant suffering. It was difficult to re-establish the business following the strike. When Darjeeling as a whole experienced a loss, tourism suffered as well, and the revenue generation halted periodically.

d) Short tourist season in the Hills

Seasonal changes in tourism demand have numerous adverse effects on tourism destinations, stakeholders, hosts and the local residents. The Darjeeling hills’ short tourist season is an issue for travel operators. The tourist season lasts four to five months and is divided into two seasons: spring and autumn. The attraction of the spring season starts from March and ends in May whereas the attraction of the autumn season occurs between October and November. The remaining year is rainy and winter preventing tourists from visiting and thereby affecting the rural resident’s economic gains as the ecotourism sites and homestays remain shut. The government is concerned about tourism characteristics, so steps are being taken to boost tourism in all sectors (Rinzin, Vermeulen and Glasbergen, 2007). The local people, hosts and stakeholders from all tourist destinations in the study area suffer due to the short tourist season, which restricts their tourism activities.

e) Inadequate capacity building facilities

In Darjeeling Himalaya’s rural tourist sector, another significant difficulty confronting is the lack of capacity of residents as well as other pressure groups in terms of skills, knowledge and financial means. Most of the capacity-building facilities for rural tourism development are provided by NGOs to the private stakeholders, homestay owners which are short-term and largely

dependent on funding. To train the local stakeholders on a long-term and independent basis, the capacity-building programs must be local and community-related.

f) Lack of basic infrastructure

The poor road conditions, the poor transport and communication system (e.g. in Chatakpur rural tourism destination), lack of proper drainage (e.g. in Lamahatta), and so on, breaks down the link connecting potential rural locations and other recognized tourist sites isolating rural locations within the fringe of the tourism sector. The tourist industry cannot grow in an isolation, so it simply cannot afford to be removed from the rest of the business. As a result, establishing the basic infrastructure, particularly metalled roads and reliable transit, is a prerequisite for developing rural tourism locations.

g) Poor knowledge about preservation of natural resources

Lack of understanding about resource depletion, which causes loss of native vegetation, water contamination, biodiversity loss, and other issues, intensifies the problems of rural tourism growth. As a result, all hosts and local communities require an understanding of resources' utility and conservation. The majority of the rural tourism locations such as Takdah, Lepchajagat and Chatakpur are well endowed with natural resources but due to lack of knowledge, the hosts and the local community in these destinations could not utilize and manage the resources effectively. In rural areas, the process of knowledge building and natural resource preservation can have positive benefits concerning the provision of various opportunities in employment. If these resources are utilized properly with good skill and knowledge, it will lead to sustainable rural tourism development.

h) Language Problem

Since the rural people speak Nepali, the language problem in all the rural destinations of the study area is one of the obstacles in the path of development of rural tourism. Local people are handicapped due to a lack of proper knowledge of Bangla, Hindi, and English to communicate with tourists. Good knowledge of the main languages is, therefore, a prerequisite for the residents.

i) Lack of Advertisement

All rural tourism locations and their scenic splendour, as well as surrounding vacation spots in the Darjeeling Himalayas, are either under-advertised or under-emphasized in terms of communication and representations and information. The area remains undiscovered due to the lack of foreign and domestic visitors. Despite having exceptional tourism resources, several rural tourism areas in the Darjeeling Hills remain undiscovered to the outside world, decreasing the possibility of tourist influx.

7.3 SWOT (STRENGTH, WEAKNESS, OPPORTUNITY, AND THREAT) ANALYSIS

It is a crucial technique to properly diagnose any situation mostly the diagnosis of current status and potential of rural areas (Millan, Amador and Arjona, 2013). This strategy is justified by the fact that it may be utilized to create an effective plan that capitalizes on a company's and the stakeholders' strengths and opportunities while minimizing its weaknesses and threats. Capacity in tourism refers to the relative advantage a company and the stakeholders have in terms of skills, resources, generosity, market leadership, and the buyer-seller relationship. Contrary to this, weakness in tourism refers to a lack of assets, knowledge, capabilities and talents, or that prevents them from being used effectively. Weakness can be caused by a lack of premises, financial resources, management abilities, marketing skills, and branding. In rural tourism, insufficient infrastructure is the main drawback of rural areas. Opportunity refers to a favourable situation in

a business environment. Business opportunities can represent relationships with customers or suppliers, identifying a previously neglected market segment, technological changes, regulatory and competitive changes, and so on. In the case of rural tourism, opportunities mean talented elements. SWOT analysis can be implemented to analyze findings and determine appropriate strategies in rural tourism and tourism studies (Rahmani, Hajari and Hajiloo, 2013). SWOT analysis method can be used to analyze eco-rural tourism to make a comprehensive quantitative analysis on superiorities, weakness, opportunities and threat. (Shang, Sun and Xu, 2020).

7.3.1 SWOT Analysis of Rural Tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya

SWOT analysis shows that the right benefits of power and opportunities can greatly help the tourism industry of Darjeeling Himalaya. Effective and proper planning can eliminate vulnerabilities and threats in the development of tourism.

7.3.1.1 Strengths

- i) All of the rural tourism attractions in the Darjeeling Himalayas, namely Takdah, Lamahatta, Mineral Spring, Lepchajagat, Chatakpur, and Sittong, are surrounded by magnificent sceneries, beautiful landscapes, natural beauty all around, flora and fauna, rivers and mountains, tranquillity and a bracing climate.
- ii) Presence of affordable homestays in all the rural tourism destinations, presence of floriculture, forest park in Takdah, presence of eco-park and a small lake in Lamahatta, orange garden, peaceful environment, organic farming, Yanku River, trekking trails, scenic beauty, and viewpoints in Mineral Spring, presence of rich flora and fauna, sunrise viewpoint and forest in Lepchajagat, presence of diverse flora and fauna, floriculture, organic farming, geological formations, forest treks, typical domesticated animals, cultural landscapes and cultural heritage

- in Chatakpur and presence of a picturesque landscape, beautiful environment, Orange Valley, Riyang river, sunrise viewpoint in Sittong are the major sources of attraction for the tourists.
- iii) Availability of good parking facilities, provision of safety and security to the tourists, good accommodations, good hospitality and good food especially local and organic, in all the studied homestays are the major sources of attractions for the tourists.
 - iv) A peaceful and nature-friendly environment, rich natural resources, unique cultural heritage, pollution-free environment and diversity of all the studied rural tourism destinations enhance the attraction of the places.
 - v) A clear view of the third highest peak in the world i.e. Kanchenjunga from homestays of Takdah- Tinchuley, Lamahatta, Lepchajagat and Chatakpur of Darjeeling Himalaya during autumn and spring is another reason for tourist attraction.
 - vi) Unique cultural attributes of different tribes (Lepcha, Bhutia, Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limboo, etc.), local foods, food festivals, different festivals with nomenclatures as spring festivals, autumn festivals, etc. add new dimensions to the tourist destinations.
 - vii) The world's major heritage i.e. Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR) is located in the Darjeeling district, which attracts many tourists from all over the world.
 - viii) Arrangement of facilities by homestays of all the rural tourism destinations for adventure travel and trekking in areas like Sandakphu and Phalut on Singalila Range are great advantages to the tourists.
 - ix) Improving infrastructure in all the studied rural tourism destinations leading to tourist visits.
 - x) Hundreds of acres of tea plantation villages allow tourists to walk freely and enjoy the scenic beauty in Darjeeling's tea garden mostly approachable from all the studied rural tourism destinations.

- xi) Easy access to Darjeeling from various parts of India as well as foreign countries via Siliguri (road transport), New Jalpaiguri (rail transport and Bagdogra (air transport).
- xii) Development of facilities and services related to tourism and tourist-friendly regulations.
- xiii) Availability of both skilled and semi-skilled workers in the tourism industry.
- xiv) The Padmaja Naidu Zoological Park, Singalila National Park, Senchal Wildlife Sanctuary, and Mahananda Bird Sanctuary are located within the Darjeeling Himalaya which are additional attractions.

7.3.1.2 Weaknesses

- i) Despite its enormous potential, the studied rural areas lack government funding and efficient policies for tourism's long-term development and promotion.
- ii) Lack of coordination between different stakeholders, tourism agencies, tourism agents, homestay owners, government authorities, and local people related to tourism.
- iii) The greatest hindrance in the development of most of the Darjeeling Himalaya's rural tourist areas is the poor infrastructure, mostly the poor condition of roads as in the case of Chatakpur which obstacles easy accessibility.
- iv) Traffic jams in almost all the main junctions of Darjeeling is a major problem with the lack of traffic control, especially during the peak season of tourist arrivals.
- v) Limited capacity or absence of a training centre for qualified tourist personnel. Lack of qualified personnel in the field of tourism. Lack of qualified guide.
- vi) There is a lack of public knowledge, promotion, awareness and advertisement about the economic, social, and cultural benefits of trained rural tourism experts among communities.

- vii) Within all the rural tourism locations except Mineral Spring, there is a dearth of proper guidance for capacity building and quality of services among the hosts, stakeholders and the local communities.
- viii) Scarce family accommodation in homestays of some rural tourist destinations such as Mineral Springs and Chatakpur.
- ix) Lack of promotional strategy.
- x) Political unrest and movements in the regions.
- xi) A growing trend among young people to seek easy money.
- xii) Inadequate campaigning by the State Department of Tourism and the Darjeeling Travel and Tourism Development Corporation to market and promote existing tourism products.
- xiii) Linguistic limitations of hosts and local communities.
- xiv) Except studied rural tourism destinations, lack of parking spaces around tourist attractions.
- xv) Limited facilities in rural areas such as banking and ATM facilities, internet facilities, etc.

7.3.1.3 Opportunities

- i) The convenient geographical location of the district within the administration of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA).
- ii) Growth in the number of homestays and involvement of more local people in different activities can improve the local economy.
- iii) The increasing demand for recreational resources at the local, national and international levels.

- iv) Most urban dwellers living in crowded areas prefer a stress-free environment for a short break. Darjeeling district can take advantage of these opportunities.
- v) The public's attention can be drawn to make attempts to safeguard natural elements such as landscape, vegetation, and wildlife, environment as well as cultural elements such as traditions, monuments, rituals and different art forms.
- vi) As a member of the tourism industry can bring glamour to the individual and therefore the sector becomes a good indicator of a good quality of life. The authorities, stakeholders and hosts of Darjeeling Himalaya can take advantage of these opportunities to improve its standard of living and promote its economy.
- vii) Opportunities for introduction and sustainability of different types of tourism such as rural tourism, heritage tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism, cultural tourism, and so on.
- viii) All rural areas have the opportunity to develop their economies and socialize, preserve their culture and environment and eventually lead to effective sustainable rural tourism.
- ix) Rural landscape, natural beauty, flora, and fauna are a resource in itself and they have international marketability. Darjeeling Himalaya has the potential to provide itself with a world tourism market.
- x) Improvement of basic infrastructures and improvement in road conditions and modes of transportation in all areas.

7.3.1.4 Threats

- i) Competition with other hill stations within the administration and in the country, especially with other beautiful countryside tourist destinations in neighbouring Sikkim. They provide excellent infrastructure and tourism resources and actively promote themselves as major tourist destinations.

- ii) Poor infrastructure management makes it difficult for tourists to get in and out of all the rural attractions.
- iii) The increasing political instability and agitation caused by the national ethnic crisis have caused fear psychosis and anxiety among tourists.
- iv) Environmental threats such as vulnerable areas, natural disasters, climate change, landslides, pollution and deforestation are the most common threats.

7.4 Conclusion

The review of SWOT analysis establishes that Darjeeling Himalaya is well endowed with beautiful and natural views, landscapes, scenic beauty, different varieties of flora and fauna, and a pleasant climate which create a favourable situation for tourism, but at the same time poor infrastructure, mostly poor roads and poor transportation are matters of concern in effective tourism management in the rural areas. There are opportunities for the district to enhance employment opportunities, develop its infrastructure, increase the inflow of tourists and raise the economy.

References

- Bernard, L. (1994). "What is rural tourism?" *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Volume 2, No. 1.
- Bhan, S. (2014). "Homestay Tourism in India: Opportunities and Challenges", *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, Vol. 3 No. 2.
- Choudhury, K., Dutta, P., P, S. (2018)." Rural Tourism of North East India: Prospects and Challenges" *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Volume 23, No. 2.
- Gannon, A. (2009). "Rural Tourism as a Factor in Rural Community Economic Development for Economies in Transition", *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Volume 2, No. 1.
- Kumar, N. (2013). "Potential and Challenges of Rural Tourism in Punjab", *Indian Journal of Research*, Volume 2, No. 3.
- Lena-Marie, L., Harald, P., Michael, V. (2016): "Rural Tourism Development in Mountain Regions: Identifying Success Factors, Challenges and Potentials", *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- Millan, G., Amador, L., Arjona, J. (2013). "Sustainable Rural Tourism in Andalusia: A SWOT Analysis", *International Journal of Advances in Management and Economics*, Vol. 2, No. 1.
- Rahmani, M., Hajari, B., Hajiloo, M. (2013). "Rural Tourism Development Strategies Using SWOT Analysis: Case Study", *Life Science Journal*, Vol. 10, Issue 4.
- Roberts, L., Hall D. (2001). *Rural Tourism and Recreation: Principles to Practice*, CABI Publishing, Oxon and New York.
- Shang, Y., Sun, Y., Xu, Ai. (2020). "Rural Ecotourism Planning and Design Based on SWOT Analysis", *International Journal of Low-Carbon Technologies*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

Sharma, P., Parkash, R. (2018). "Rural Tourism in India Challenges and Opportunities", *Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science and English Language*, Vol. 6, No. 26.