

Abstract

Tourism is defined as travel for primarily recreational or leisure purposes to broaden one's knowledge and wisdom. Tourism has become a huge social phenomenon in many countries throughout the world. It is motivated by every human being's intrinsic yearning for new experiences as well as the desire to be both informed and entertained. Tourism's usefulness as a tool for economic growth and job creation, particularly in distant and backward areas, has long been recognized in the global economy. In terms of gross revenue as well as foreign exchange earnings, it is a large service industry globally. Tourism has the potential to grow at a fast rate, resulting in the development of destination infrastructure. It can build on the country's performance in the service sector and provide long-term growth models.

Rural tourism, a growing trend in the tourism industry, has transformed into not only a significant potential opportunity but also a type of recreational activity for city dwellers, transporting them to a calm location away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Rural tourism is a type of nature-based tourism that explores rural life, culture, art, and heritage in rural areas, thereby benefiting socially and economically the local communities. Both 'Rural Development' and 'Sustainable Development' enhance rural tourism. It takes numerous forms because it brings individuals from different cultures, faiths, languages, and lifestyles together and gives them a larger perspective on life. It not only creates jobs for people, but also fosters social, cultural, and educational values, and it is one of the ways that rural communities hope to boost production and profitability.

Rural tourism in the Darjeeling Himalaya is expanding at a faster rate, owing to tourists' strong desire for tranquil and scenic rural settings. Darjeeling's rural tourism also offers natural beauty, a rich culture, and a plethora of biological diversity. The current study looked at how sustainable rural tourism has aided rural development and socio-economic

development in the Darjeeling Himalaya. The **objective** of the present research paper has been to understand the scenario of rural tourism in the Darjeeling Himalaya, to identify the nature and trend of growth of rural tourism in the study area, to investigate the geographical factors determining rural tourism and the resulting benefits in the study area, to investigate the rural tourism's potentials and opportunities in the study area, to analyze the impacts of rural tourism and tourist behaviour in the study area, to analyze the diverse challenges of rural tourism in the study area, and to identify concerns and prospects for future rural tourism study and development in the study area. The study too identified the available tourist attraction facilities, behavioral and functional aspects of tourists, challenges of owners at six rural tourism destinations of Darjeeling Himalaya namely *Takdah, Lamahatta, Mineral Spring, Lepchajagat, Chatakpur and Sittong*. The methodologies adopted for the present study are analytical, descriptive, comparative, evaluative, and interpretive. Both Qualitative and Quantitative data have been used for the study. To achieve primary data structured interviews were conducted among the tourism experts, the tourists as well as the local stakeholders. Primary data from tourists too were collected through a Questionnaire (Schedule). For dissecting the impression of homestay owners a total of 40 respondents were selected randomly. For analyzing local people's perspectives, a total of 120 respondents were selected (20 samples from each destination), and to perceive the impression of tourists a total of 420 respondents were interviewed (70 samples from each destination). For the assessment of authorities who were legitimately or in a roundabout way engaged with ecotourism, 50 respondents were chosen randomly. The primary data were collected mainly through pre-tested questionnaires, personal interviews, and focus group discussions. For the collection of secondary data, previous studies in tourism, rural tourism, and ecotourism, various publications of the Tourism Department of India and Tourism Department of Darjeeling, newspapers, journals, magazines, management plans of various National Parks and Wildlife

Sanctuaries were studied. Specific Internet portals and websites were browsed to get additional information.

Rural tourism can be a means of conserving rural ecology sustainably. It minimizes the disparity between rural and urban areas thereby bringing the rural areas in the path of development.

Concerning **findings**, the paper has provided an overview of rural tourism at six different destinations leading towards economic and sustainable development. The major findings of the study show that the rural tourism destinations in Darjeeling Himalaya have been successful sources to generate reasonable employment opportunities and thereby income, not to a large extent, to the many of the local community who enjoy limited employment opportunities related to farm and non-farm activities in their local area. It has been able to help the rural areas develop their social and cultural exchange and protect the natural environment as well.

The study which has also analyzed the satisfaction level of the tourists has brought about that the service rendered by the homestay owners and the residents at all the rural tourism destinations of Darjeeling Himalaya is the most important factor affecting the satisfaction level of the tourists towards the destinations. Views of the local community and stakeholders have been studied and the need for sustainability has been emphasized with community participation. In brief, the present research study gives a useful analysis background for planning the rural tourism strategies for socio-economic and cultural development and the protection and conservation of the environment and thereby raising the standard of living of the local community who depends on rural tourism destinations for their subsistence living.

Chapter I discusses the different perspectives of the study of tourism, concept, and meaning of tourism, various definitions of tourism, different types of tourism, concept, and meaning of rural tourism and sustainable development, types of rural tourism, rural tourism in the world,

India and Darjeeling Himalaya in particular. There are a plethora of studies on rural tourism and sustainable development which focus on diverse aspects of rural tourism such as concept, management, marketing, and behavior of rural tourists, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of rural tourism. It has been found that rural tourism began in India in the 1980s but it started flourishing during and after the 1990s. After reviewing the published literature, reports, and documents it has been found that rural tourism is happening all over the world and has created its own space. As for rural tourism in India, it is on record that a good number of domestic and foreign tourists visit rural tourism destinations of India, particularly during the spring and autumn seasons to enjoy peace and nature. It is understood that rural tourism plays an important role in the sustainable development of any region. This chapter also presents the design of the research. It explains the research problem, objectives and hypotheses, importance and restrictions, and different methodologies of the study.

Chapter II deals with the information about the study area, specifically the geographical features like physiography, climate, natural vegetation, drainage, geology, and soil, the combination of which plays an important role in attracting tourists. It also deals with the history of Darjeeling during the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial phases. It presents the demographic profile of the people of Darjeeling, their economy, language, and culture which have great significance in tourism.

Chapter III presents the natural and anthropogenic potential of select rural tourism destinations of Darjeeling Himalaya. It has been found that most of the rural tourism destinations of Darjeeling Himalaya have great natural potential especially varied landscapes, scenic beauty, varied species of flora and fauna, views of sunrise and sunset from vantage points, gurgling streams, and pleasant climate as well as comprehensive anthropogenic potential such as ancient monasteries, bridges, orchard farming, organic farming, floriculture,

eco-park, trekking sites, bird watching areas, etc. which attract tourists from different corners of India as well as different parts of the world.

Chapter IV analyzes the role of rural tourism in sustainable development encompassing economy, society, culture, and environment. It has been found that due to the influx of domestic and foreign tourists, the economy has improved in all the rural tourism destinations in the Darjeeling Himalaya substantially. The socio-cultural exchange has taken place and protection and preservation of the environment have been given more emphasis by all the hosts, stakeholders, and tourists. The number of homestays, the number of rooms, and tourist accommodation have increased significantly in all the rural tourism destinations in the study area. Rural tourism in all the destinations have succeeded in creating jobs, income, cultural development, social benefits, environmental development, and awareness sustainably.

Chapter V presents the behavioral and functional aspects of tourists. Tourists' behavioral aspects such as origin, gender, marital status, education, occupational structure, the purpose of visit, frequencies, economic status, etc. have been studied to ascertain their specific impression upon rural tourism in the selected rural tourism destinations of Darjeeling Himalaya, namely Takdah, Lamahatta, Mineral Spring, Lepchajagat, Chatakpur, and Sittong. Rural tourism in the study area has been influenced by tourists' behavioral aspects. It has been found that most of the tourists from India and abroad visit Darjeeling mostly for nature observation and for peace.

The satisfaction levels of the tourists too were analyzed based on facilities such as accommodation and parking facility, food, service, infrastructure, transportation, the behavior of the local people, scenic view, peaceful environment, safety, cleanliness, availability of drinking water, hot water for the bath, timely tea and snacks, etc. It has been found that most of the tourists were satisfied with parking facilities in all the rural tourism destinations of the study area. Similarly, they were well satisfied with the safety, beauty of tourist places,

accommodation, and food. However, they were not satisfied with transportation and shopping facilities.

Chapter VI deals with the testing of considered hypotheses. It has been found that the considered hypotheses have been proved positive. As per the hypotheses, it has been found that - rural tourism has enhanced the growth of service sectors and opened up the door of employment opportunities, it is unique in the study area, the growth of rural tourism in the study area has been steady over the years, rural tourism has a great impact on the quality of life of the local people.

Chapter VII presents the challenges and opportunities in tourism. SWOT analysis was done to know the strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya. It has been found that despite certain weaknesses and threats Darjeeling Himalaya has a considerable amount of strength and opportunities for tourism development in near future.