Rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh in transition: Challenges for regional sustainability

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Abstract To enhance the functioning of tourism, rural tourism plays a crucial role by involving the local community and creating alternative sources of income and employment in agricultural areas and mountainous (tribal) regions. This study aims to examine the state of rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh, utilizing document analysis, qualitative interviews with various focus groups, and engaging stakeholders in discussions. Recent challenges and trends in rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh were also assessed. Furthermore, the study evaluated the current marketing structure of Himachal Pradesh concerning rural tourism products. The key findings of this research highlight the need to establish a comprehensive framework for rural tourism at both the state and national levels, focusing on general guidelines and strategic aspects of rural tourism. Additionally, it suggests the implementation of integrated provisions in marketing and regional legislation, developed in close collaboration with local stakeholders.

Keywords: rural tourism, community-based tourism, national tourism associations, regional partnership

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, rural tourism has emerged as a supplementary source of income for people residing in rural areas, especially due to instability in the declining agricultural sector (Lane, 2009). As a globally popular and widespread activity, tourism is recognized for its potential in generating employment opportunities and economic benefits. This growth potential can be harnessed as a strategy for rural development. In a country such as India, where approximately 74% of the population lives in 7 million villages and relies on agriculture for their livelihood, rural tourism offers an alternative source of income in the nonagricultural sector for the rural community.

Several factors contribute to the favorability of rural tourism. These include increasing levels of awareness, a growing interest in heritage and culture, improved accessibility, and a rising environmental consciousness. Additionally, the world has witnessed a trend of urbanization and development, resulting in an urban-centric approach. This has led to the emergence of a counterurbanization syndrome due to the stress of urban lifestyles. Consequently, there has been a growing fascination with rural areas, leading to the rise of a new style of tourism, where tourists visit villages to experience and embrace a relaxed and healthy lifestyle. This style of tourism is widely known as rural tourism.

Rural tourism plays a crucial role in supporting retail growth by creating jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby fostering nontraditional development (Wilson et al., 2001). It serves as a driving force for traditionally impoverished economies, facilitating the transfer of income, capital, and employment from developed, industrial, and urban areas to rural, nonindustrial regions (OECD, 1994). Given these significant contributions, rural tourism has gained global recognition and is now incorporated into strategies and policy documents for rural development.

In contrast to mass tourism, rural tourism operates as an alternative approach, encouraging individual and unorganized visits to rural areas (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). It aligns closely with the principles of sustainable tourism, promoting responsible travel practices. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also acknowledges rural tourism as a potential tool for conserving culture and nature and supporting sustainable regional development (OECD, 1994).

One of the major advantages of rural tourism lies in its ability to require less investment in rural areas due to smaller scale operations and lower costs. Consequently, it poses less risk while providing more immediate profits to the rural population. Additionally, rural tourism's far-reaching effects on other industries and sectors have led to its widespread adoption in developing countries as a catalyst for achieving many UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. Need and Significance of the Study
Himachal Pradesh, situated in the northern part of India and often referred to as the Land of Gods or 'Devbhoomi,' is blessed with abundant natural resources and a rich indigenous cultural heritage. The region holds immense tourist potential, particularly in rural tourism, which can contribute to sustainable development by addressing local challenges. This study aims to explore the latest trends in the growth of rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh as an alternative form of tourism and to identify essential strategic measures to establish and promote this sector effectively.

3. Key Facts about Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh, a mountainous state in northern India, is home to a population of approximately 7.57 million as per the 2021 census. The landscape of this region is truly awe-inspiring, encompassing snowy peaks, pine forests, and river valleys, with elevations ranging from 1526 ft (465 m) to 23051 ft (7026 m) above sea level. The Himalayan ranges span the lower (Shivalik), middle (Dhauladhar), and high (Trans-Himalayas) regions, rightfully earning the name "abode of snow" due to its majestic and imposing nature.

In the embrace of these mountains, various species have thrived and vanished, civilizations have risen and fallen, but the mountains have stood witness to it all. Among the settlements, Komic village, situated at an astounding 15500 ft (4725 m) above sea level, holds the distinction of being the highest permanent settlement in Asia (Figure 1). Another notable location, Kibber village, located at 14200 ft (4329 m) above sea level, boasts a monastery and the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary (Figure 2).

This beautiful land not only offers breathtaking scenery but also shelters a vibrant and faithful society, predominantly consisting of humble Himachalis (Pahadis). The people of Himachal Pradesh embrace a simple and grounded way of life, and their culture is deeply intertwined with Devian (Holiness) deities, ritual ceremonies, and Vedic beliefs. This fusion of simplicity and spirituality forms the essence of the Divine culture of Himachal Pradesh, which serves as the foundation for religious and rural tourism. Emphasis is placed on preserving their cultural heritage by safeguarding the environment.

Himachal Pradesh is traditionally an agricultural state, with a majority of its population (89.96% as per Census 2011) residing in rural areas and relying on agriculture as a primary source of income (Figure 3). The farmers cultivate various crops, such as wheat, maize, ginger, and beans, on the patches of land that gracefully cling to the mountainside. In colder climates, fruits are cultivated to perfection, but the most significant cash crops are apples and potatoes. The region is also rich in forests, boasting an abundance of devdar (Cedar) and chir (pine) trees.

The economy of Himachal Pradesh is categorized into three main sectors: primary, secondary, and tertiary. In the primary sector, key contributors include agriculture, horticulture, fishing, mining, livestock, forestry, and logging. The secondary sector encompasses activities such as electricity, gas and water supply, manufacturing (both organized and unorganized), and construction. The tertiary sector, also known as the service sector, comprises essential services such as transport, trade, hotels and restaurants, banking and insurance, storage and communication, real estate, and various personal and professional services (Harnot & Verma, 2004).
4. Rural Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

In the 20th century, rural tourism experienced substantial growth, mirroring the significant rise in global tourism (Lane, 2009). According to the 2011 census report of Himachal Pradesh, a significant portion of the state's population, approximately 89.96%, resides in villages. The rural environment, along with the state's rich culture and traditions, plays a crucial role in driving rural development through rural tourism. This form of tourism offers a diverse array of activities, cultural and natural attractions, and service facilities in agricultural and nonurban areas.

Related concepts closely associated with "Rural Tourism" include "Agritourism" or "Farm Stay Tourism," and "Ecotourism" or "Nature-Based Tourism." These concepts also emphasize income generation for agricultural enterprises while placing a stronger focus on conservation alongside the social aspects, primarily concentrating on nature-based tourism products (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997; Sharpley & Telfer, 2002; Lane, 2012).

5. Research Objectives

This empirical study aimed to:
1. Identify the current status of rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh;
2. Explore the perception of the role of rural tourism by different stakeholders in the context of sustainable development;
3. Discuss the revealed problems and constraints; and
4. Develop recommendations and relevant actions to ensure a sustainable future for rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh.
6. Research Methods

In this study, we employed a qualitative research design that involved document analysis and semistructured interviews with various stakeholders. The first author’s personal experience as a tour guide and local consultant enriched the study by offering valuable insights and a broader perspective.

The research process was divided into three main parts, as depicted in Figure 4:

Data Collection: This phase involved a field visit to local service providers in three regions of Himachal Pradesh (Chamba, Lahaul-Spiti, and Kinnaur). It also included desk research through publications, documents, and strategies, along with interviews conducted with local communities, experts, and representatives of authorities.

Data Analysis: Empirical data collected during the study were subjected to content analysis and structured to derive meaningful results. Discussions with stakeholders were held to validate the findings based on their feedback.

Conclusions and Formulation of Strategic Recommendations: The study’s final phase involved drawing conclusions from the analyzed data and formulating strategic recommendations based on the insights gained.

Convenience sampling was employed to select target respondents, which included tourists, tour operators, and rural tourism entrepreneurs (mostly homestay and budget hotel owners, as well as cab drivers). A total of 155 questionnaires were completed by tourists, 303 homestay properties were visited, and 214 responses were obtained. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 15 tour operators, 7 cab drivers, and 2 government officials.

7. Findings

7.1. Development of Rural Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

In the past two decades, rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh has evolved into a diverse and multifaceted experience, encompassing apple orchards, nature tourism, agritourism, village tours, rare rural life experiences, cultural and traditional attractions, and trekking and adventure activities. This multifaceted nature has attracted both government and nongovernment organizations, as well as tour operators, to actively engage in promoting rural tourism in the region. The rich
cultural and traditional values of Himachal Pradesh have always laid the foundation for rural tourism, further enhanced by the world-renowned fairs and festivals celebrated in the state (Harnot & Verma).

Festivals such as the international mega Dussehra festival in Kullu (October), the international Himalayan festival in McLeod Ganj (December), Minjar fair in Chamba (July/August), Sazo festival in Kinnaur (January), Losar Festival (mid-November and first week of December), Pori Festival Trilokinath (3rd week of August), and Halda Festival (January) are globally famous and attract interest from international and domestic visitors alike. Their unique cultural celebrations have prompted locals to participate in the "Himachal Pradesh Homestay Scheme 2008," which offers visitors the opportunity to experience farm life and stay with local families.

The state tourism also launched the "Har Gaon Ki Kahani" (The story of every village) scheme in 2010, where 12 villages from each district were selected to promote the associated stories and folklore through outdoor advertising and print media. This effort successfully diverted tourists from popular hill stations to explore the wildlife, adventure, and cultural attractions of the state. The main objective of Himachal Tourism is to focus on alternative forms of tourism, including rural, agricultural, wellness, and adventure sports.

Additionally, state tourism introduced "Har Ghar Kuch Kahata Hai" (Every House Tells a Story), a coffee table book narrating stories of various heritage buildings in Shimla from the British colonial era. This unique concept aimed to attract foreigners to trace the history of their families (parents and grandparents) who once inhabited Shimla during the preindependence era.

Furthermore, the "Nai Rahein Nai Manzilein" (New Routes New Destinations) scheme was launched to develop new and lesser-known destinations in Himachal Pradesh, diversifying the tourist experience and encouraging exploration beyond conventional routes.

The distribution of hotels and homestays in rural regions, specifically Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, and Chamba, as depicted in the figure, serves as a valuable indicator of the relative significance of regional tourism development. The noticeable rise in the number of homestays in less explored areas of Himachal Pradesh, such as Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, and Chamba, where homestays have reached parity or even exceeded the number of hotels, exemplifies the state’s initiatives in promoting rural tourism for regional development (Figure 5).

![Figure 5](https://www.malque.pub/ojs/index.php/mr)

This trend of increasing homestays signifies the efforts made by Himachal Tourism to encourage local community involvement in tourism. The homestay scheme, launched in 2008, aims to expand the base of stakeholders and alleviate the tourist burden experienced by the main tourist destinations, such as Shimla, Manali, Dharamshala, and Dalhousie. The overburdening of these popular tourist spots often leads to a demand-supply gap, resulting in challenges for tourists such as...
inadequate accommodation, parking, transportation bookings, and increased road traffic. These issues detract from the serene mountain experience that travelers seek (Department of Tourism & Civil Aviation, Himachal Pradesh, 2008).

The introduction of the homestay scheme also had the objective of exploring the hidden gems of Dev Bhoomi, namely, the rural villages, where visitors can immerse themselves in authentic Pahadi culture and experience the genuine essence of the region. Moreover, the emphasis on ecologically sustainable practices ensures that every activity in the region aligns with environmental preservation and responsible tourism principles.

7.2. Actor’s views on Regional Development and Rural Tourism

The interviews conducted with locals and experts provided valuable insights and diverse perspectives on the development of rural tourism. It was widely recognized as a catalyst for reviving rural areas, conserving nature and culture, and fostering community development, including the promotion of local handicrafts and traditional products. The interviews also shed light on the increasing awareness and motivation of local actors to actively contribute to the development of their communities.

Despite varying perspectives on rural tourism development, a common practice emerged: the integration of local communities into the planning and implementation process. This approach aims to create more effective rural tourism policies and foster the local community’s acceptance of such initiatives. Additionally, it can have a positive impact on the local handicrafts industry, including products such as Kullu Shawls, Kinnauri Shawls, Gents Shawls, Pattu, Jackets, Tweed (Coat Patti), Mufflers, and Caps, by generating direct employment and improving the lifestyle of the local people. However, a significant challenge lies in the majority of revenue going to outside businessmen who lease properties owned by local communities, hindering direct profits for the locals.

Ecosphere, a nonprofit organization based in Kaza, a town in Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, views rural tourism as a means to communicate with the local community while creating sustainable livelihoods through income generation and managing cultural, natural, and environmental resources. They endorse the concept of community-based tourism, collaborating with local partners from various backgrounds. Ecosphere provides a platform for the locals of Spiti to showcase and sell their work and traditional products. Every purchase made by tourists at their store contributes to cultural and nature conservation and provides a source of income for many households in the valley.

The range of local products offered by the ecosphere includes seabuckthorn products such as jam and concentrate, organic black pea (Kala Mattar) and barley, as well as various handicrafts such as socks, gloves, sweaters, mufflers, caps, inners for women, hand warmers, leg warmers, shawls, hair bands, and bags. Additionally, they promote solar technology with products such as solar lanterns, torches, geysers (Evacuated Tube Condensers), and parabolic cookers. Furthermore, they offer Buddhist Art Thangkas, which are traditional style paintings on silken canvas, along with Thangka replicas, photography posters, and postcards.

7.3. Programmes that support Rural Tourism and Agritourism

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) actively supports sustainable rural and mountain tourism-related infrastructure in Himachal Pradesh to unlock the economic potential of the tourism sector (Himachal Tourism). ADB’s assistance includes the ‘Infrastructure Development Investment Program for Tourism Himachal Pradesh (IDIPT-HP)’ program, aimed at helping Himachal Pradesh achieve the following objectives:

- Enhancing the performance of the tourism sector by attracting an increased number of tourists and extending their length of stay.
- The management of natural and cultural heritage sites should be strengthened to ensure their preservation.
- Ensuring a more equitable distribution of income and benefits derived from tourism.

The Government of Himachal Pradesh views rural tourism as an effective tool for SME development, poverty alleviation, gender equality, and environmental protection. To safeguard the areas of very high ecological and biodiversity significance in Himachal Pradesh, they have designated them National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, providing the highest level of legal protection for wildlife resources. These protected areas, including the National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, allow visitors to experience the wilderness and immerse themselves in the serene’s natural surroundings.

The Himachal Pradesh forest department also recognizes the relevance of ecotourism in the conservation and management of forests. The details of the National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in Himachal Pradesh are as follows (Table 1 and Table 2).

On October 3, 2020, the Border Road Organization (BRO) in collaboration with the Government of Himachal Pradesh and several agencies accomplished a remarkable feat by opening the world’s longest tunnel above 10,000 feet, named the Atal Tunnel, spanning 9.02 kilometers (BRO). This significant infrastructure development has led to an economic boom and increased job opportunities for the locals in the areas of Lahaul-Spiti and neighboring villages. The accessibility of the tunnel has facilitated easy travel for tourists and other visitors to the remote regions of Lahaul-Spiti, leading to a surge in demand.
for rural tourism. Consequently, this industry is gaining traction as a highly sought-after business for rural residents and is receiving growing support and funding from various organizations.

Table 1 The details of national parks in Himachal Pradesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>National Park</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Great Himalayan National Park</td>
<td>905.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pin Valley National Park</td>
<td>675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Khirganga</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inderkila</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Simbalbara</td>
<td>27.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Area</td>
<td>2407.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 The details of Wildlife Sanctuaries in Himachal Pradesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Wildlife Sanctuaries</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bandli</td>
<td>Mandi</td>
<td>32.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chail</td>
<td>Solan</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chandra Tal</td>
<td>Lahaul&amp;Spiti</td>
<td>38.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ (11.53 for Consideration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Churdhar</td>
<td>Sirmour</td>
<td>55.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Daranghati I &amp; II</td>
<td>Shimla</td>
<td>171.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dhauladhar</td>
<td>Kangra</td>
<td>982.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gamgul-Siyabehi</td>
<td>Chamba</td>
<td>108.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kais</td>
<td>Kullu</td>
<td>12.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kalatop-Khajjiar</td>
<td>Chamba</td>
<td>17.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Kanawar</td>
<td>Kullu</td>
<td>107.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Khokhan</td>
<td>Kullu</td>
<td>14.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Kibber</td>
<td>Lahaul&amp;Spiti</td>
<td>2220.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kugti</td>
<td>Chamba</td>
<td>405.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lipa Asrang</td>
<td>Kinnaur</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Majatham</td>
<td>Solan</td>
<td>30.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Manali</td>
<td>Kullu</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Nargu</td>
<td>Mandi</td>
<td>132.3731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pong Dam Lake</td>
<td>Kangra</td>
<td>207.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Rachchham-Chitkul</td>
<td>Kinnaur</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Renuka ji</td>
<td>Sirmour</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Rupi-Bhaba</td>
<td>Kinnaur</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sechu-Tuan Nalla</td>
<td>Chamba</td>
<td>390.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Shikari Devi</td>
<td>Mandi</td>
<td>29.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Shimla Water Catchment</td>
<td>Shimla</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Talra</td>
<td>Shimla</td>
<td>46.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Tundah</td>
<td>Chamba</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Area</td>
<td></td>
<td>5964.9731</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Ropeway & Rapid Transport System Development Corporation (RTDC) H.P. Ltd. is a wholly owned company of the Government of Himachal Pradesh, committed to implementing innovative transport solutions within the state (“Ropeway Projects in Himachal Pradesh”). They have an impressive list of upcoming ropeway projects (Table 3).

Table 3 List of upcoming ropeway projects in Himachal Pradesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Name of the ropeway project</th>
<th>Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Ropeway Connectivity to Killar in Chamba</td>
<td>From Bhanodi to Pregraon via Sach pass tentative length 21.80 km.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Narkanda-Hatu Peak Ropeway</td>
<td>Tentative length is 3.10 km.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Passenger Ropeways in Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>Jabj-Kasauli Passenger Ropeway in district Solan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shirigu Mahadev Temple Passenger Ropeway in district Sirmaur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pandrik Rishi Temple Passenger Ropeway in district Mandi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.4. Himachal Pradesh Tourism Policy 2019

Tourism, although considered a smokeless industry, has a significant impact on the environment, leading to increased pollution, extensive use of local land, and potential harm to natural habitats, including soil erosion and threats to endangered species. However, the environment is a fundamental element of tourism, and its preservation is essential for the sustainability of the industry. (UNESCO, 2015) recognizes the importance of sustainable tourism and has set seventeen
sustainable development goals to address various global challenges, including poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, clean water, clean energy, economic growth, infrastructure, and environmental protection.

In line with UNESCO’s sustainable development goals, the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy (2019) of Himachal Pradesh aims to achieve two specific SDGs: the 8th goal, which focuses on promoting good jobs and economic growth, and the 12th goal, which emphasizes responsible consumption. The policy aims to enhance sustainable tourism in the state by providing socioeconomic benefits to the local community through better employment and business opportunities. It also prioritizes the preservation of natural resources to offer eco-friendly and high-quality experiences to travelers while fostering a favorable environment for private investors (Department of Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2019).

The data reveal a substantial increase in tourist arrivals in Himachal Pradesh, with the number rising from 6.55 million in 2004 to 17.21 million in 2019. This growth in tourist traffic has led to the development of new niche tourism products and destinations. To effectively achieve regional development and sustainability, collaboration between the public and private sectors is crucial (Figure 6).

In conclusion, while tourism can have adverse environmental impacts, embracing sustainable tourism practices and aligning with global goals can lead to positive socioeconomic outcomes and create a harmonious balance between tourism growth and environmental preservation.

7.5. Rural Tourism Products and Entrepreneurs

Rural tourism plays a crucial role in promoting both rural and sustainable development, providing visitors with an authentic experience of rural life, culture, local cuisine, handicrafts, art, and heritage amidst natural surroundings. This form of tourism fosters social and economic growth in local communities, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to gain a broader perspective on life and improve the well-being of the rural population. Due to its low investment requirements, rural tourism offers immediate benefits and reduced risk for rural areas.

One of the significant advantages of rural tourism is its potential to curtail the migration of local youth to urban centers by providing them with direct sources of income. In regions with limited agricultural resources, such as high-altitude mountain areas, tourism becomes an essential economic lifeline. Many young entrepreneurs now engage in rural tourism during the summer season, combining leisure activities with hospitality and traditional experiences. These entrepreneurs use various online platforms and social networks for marketing, and their involvement in local associations and nonprofit organizations helps promote community development.

Rural tourism also positively impacts the local handicrafts industry, providing direct employment opportunities and enhancing the quality of life for rural communities. While hotels and restaurants managed by outsiders often prioritize profit over local resource preservation, the rise of homestay schemes has allowed rural people to be more involved in tourism-
related activities. In particular, homestays have empowered women entrepreneurs, offering them economic independence and reducing the vulnerability of rural individuals to employee exploitation.

High mountain areas are particularly attractive to international tourists seeking adventure, cultural encounters, and nature-based experiences. Homestays managed by local families have become increasingly popular in these regions. However, some entrepreneurs may lack comprehensive planning and marketing research, leading to pricing decisions based solely on market rates without understanding their underlying factors. Encouraging innovation in service offerings, experiences, and local dishes can further enhance the appeal of rural tourism.

In summary, rural tourism serves as a catalyst for sustainable development, contributing to economic growth, cultural exchange, and the preservation of local resources in rural areas. By offering unique and memorable experiences, it fosters a deeper connection between travelers and the natural beauty and authentic cultural heritage of rural destinations.

8. Discussion Problems and Constraints

Rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh is currently in its initial stages of development, necessitating more effective approaches and concerted efforts for growth. The evolving preferences of tourists, who now seek new rural destinations and immersive experiences in high-altitude mountainous regions, have spurred a significant demand for rural tourism businesses among local residents. Both the public and private sectors are increasingly recognizing the potential of rural tourism and providing support and funding.

However, our study has also identified some challenges and constraints that need to be addressed for the strategic advancement of rural tourism in the region. These issues include a lack of awareness, the need for product diversification, effective marketing strategies, capacity building, enhanced coordination, and improved governance and management.

To realize the full potential of rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh, concerted efforts are required to overcome these obstacles. By creating awareness among local communities, diversifying tourism offerings, implementing effective marketing campaigns, and strengthening governance and management structures, rural tourism can be propelled to new heights, benefiting both the local economy and tourists seeking unique and enriching experiences in this picturesque region.

8.1. Missing proper training programmes for rural tourism

The success of rural tourism relies on two crucial factors: the quality of hospitality services and the preservation of natural resources. Regrettably, there is often a limited understanding of rural tourism among local communities, leading them to primarily interpret its impact in terms of income and economic growth, neglecting the importance of considering environmental and social factors equally. To address this, local communities require support and guidance from the tourism department.

Implementing well-structured training programs can foster cooperation among service providers, facilitate effective branding strategies, and empower the community to manage their tourism products efficiently. By enhancing the rural management system through these measures, we can ensure sustainable and responsible development in rural tourism, benefiting both the local communities and the natural environment.

8.2. Lack of awareness and capacity on local levels

Tourists yearn for an authentic experience of rural life in Himachal Pradesh, steeped in rich culture and traditions. However, in some rural areas, local residents have renovated their traditional houses in a way that has compromised the area's true essence and cultural identity. This loss of traditional and cultural values calls for organizing awareness events to preserve the genuine culture of Himachal Pradesh.

Raising awareness about the significance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, maintaining service quality and standards, and adhering to the principles of rural tourism are essential for ensuring the sustainable development of rural regions. These awareness programs can also encourage active participation from the local community, leading to improved business planning, management, and marketing, ultimately benefiting both tourists and the residents of Himachal Pradesh.

8.3. Lack of Innovative Rural Tourism Products

Based on interviews with tourists in the Kinnaur, Lahaul-Spiti, and Chamba regions, their overall satisfaction with rural tourism is evident. However, they express a strong desire for more traditional dishes, local handicrafts, and high-quality services. In the competitive landscape of rural tourism, the key lies in providing authentic experiences with the local community rather than relying solely on built capital. While service quality and tourism infrastructure are important, they alone may not suffice to attract tourists.

To enhance rural tourism projects, diversification is crucial, with a focus on innovative products such as Himachal folk dance tours, apple orchard tours, and traditional music experiences. Encouraging locals to take the lead in product development will create unique and impressive destination offerings. Moreover, integrating local communities in the
planning and management processes is essential to develop compelling rural tourism products and services, especially considering the need for better integration of trekking routes with local communities.

Tourists show a keen interest in specific local traditional products and are willing to pay more for such authentic experiences. During the winter season, special attention should be given to improving infrastructure, medical facilities, telecommunication, safety, security, electricity, and drinking water facilities to ensure a satisfactory experience for visitors. By addressing these aspects, rural tourism in these regions can flourish and leave a lasting impression on tourists.

8.4. Limited information on Himachal Pradesh Rural Tourism at the national and international levels

Currently, there is a scarcity of information regarding diverse rural tourism products, mesmerizing scenic beauty, lush green landscapes, and rich biodiversity hidden within Himachal Pradesh. To boost rural tourism, a dedicated website is required to showcase its offerings, including accessibility, affordability, and availability. Implementing effective macrolevel marketing strategies will help promote rural tourism on both national and international platforms. While some NGOs and business owners have their own websites to promote their products and services, the visibility of rural tourism remains limited in the global market.

Certain hidden gems of Himachal Pradesh, such as the Trance Himalayan valleys such as Lahaul-Spiti, Pangivalley in upper Chamba, and Sangla & Chitkul valley in Kinnaur, have started gaining attention. However, to fully unlock the potential of rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh, a central leading structure dedicated to its promotion is necessary. This will ensure that the unique and captivating rural destinations of Himachal Pradesh receive the recognition and exposure they deserve at both the national and international levels.

9. Limitations of the study

During our interviews and group discussions, we made efforts to gather diverse opinions and experiences from various geographic locations and organizations within Himachal Pradesh. However, due to time and budget constraints, our outreach was limited, and we could only engage a small number of households, tourists, and government officials. Employing a descriptive qualitative research approach with a combination of questions, we aimed to identify specific innovations in rural tourism development.

In Himachal Pradesh, rural tourism is still in its early stages, and only a limited group of people are aware of rural tourism schemes. In this study, we managed to attract actors who were inclined toward cooperative and integrative approaches. Nevertheless, there might be individual entrepreneurs, or "lone fighters," operating in their own market niches without significant ties to other regional activities that we might have missed.

While we acknowledge that our results may not serve as a sufficient foundation for making recommendations and implementing changes, they can undoubtedly serve as a valuable starting point for future research in the field of rural tourism. Our efforts have shed light on the existing landscape and potential avenues for further exploration and development in rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

10. Recommendations

Himachal Pradesh boasts significant geographical potential for rural tourism, given its rich cultural heritage and pristine natural landscapes. The state offers a wide array of resources, from traditional architecture to various outdoor activities, such as healthy cuisine, medicinal herbs, hiking, trekking, fishing, rafting, paragliding, and ice-skating, all of which can contribute to the development of rural tourism. To capitalize on this potential, Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC) should foster collaboration among stakeholders, creating a common platform to discuss rural tourism opportunities, product development, challenges, strategies, marketing, branding, and training possibilities.

To ensure a safe and secure environment for tourists and to maintain standards, HPTDC should establish Local Action Groups that work closely with farmers, local entrepreneurs, nongovernment organizations, and regional municipalities. By doing so, these groups can collectively address the needs of rural tourism and contribute to its growth and success. Additionally, we propose the implementation of concrete actions in the following areas. By adopting these measures, Himachal Pradesh can unlock the full potential of rural tourism, attracting visitors from far and wide to experience its unique offerings and fostering sustainable economic growth in the region.

10.1. Limited information on Himachal Pradesh Rural Tourism at the national and international levels

To foster collaborative efforts, it is crucial to promote communication and cooperation between relevant NGOs, the National Tourism Administration, and various institutions/agencies at both the regional and national levels. In doing so, joint projects can be initiated to effectively harness the potential of rural tourism. To ensure inclusive decision-making and better cooperation, it is essential to consider the interests of local stakeholders, as they play a vital role in shaping the success of rural tourism initiatives.
Furthermore, it is imperative to establish destination management organizations in rural areas to develop comprehensive marketing plans for these destinations. These marketing strategies should extend to both national and international levels to attract a broader audience and increase the visibility of rural tourism offerings. By working together and implementing such measures, we can unlock the true potential of rural tourism, contributing to the sustainable development and growth of these regions.

10.2. Capacity building and raising awareness

Rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh is still in its early stages and would greatly benefit from organizing events and conferences focused on this domain. By bringing together practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders, these gatherings can facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration. Such events can educate and raise awareness about the benefits of rural tourism among local communities.

To ensure that rural communities are well-equipped to embrace tourism opportunities, systematic training programs should be implemented. These programs should offer updated materials on innovations in rural tourism and hospitality, destination management, business planning, and effective marketing strategies. Through these initiatives, rural areas in Himachal Pradesh can develop their potential and thrive in the realm of sustainable tourism.

10.3. Product development and diversification

To meet the evolving demands of tourists, there is a requirement to foster the development of innovative, community-based rural tourism products that offer diverse experiences. These initiatives should aim to strike a balance between social, economic, and environmental aspects, promoting sustainable rural tourism.

10.4. Marketing and Branding

To promote rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh, we can leverage national and international fairs, as well as e-marketing, to raise awareness about the region’s rich cultural, traditional, and regional identity. Such efforts will contribute to the promotion of rural tourism experiences. To establish rural destination brands successfully, collaboration between local entrepreneurs, Himachal Tourism, and various institutions/agencies is of utmost importance. By working together, we can create compelling rural destination brands that attract travelers from all over the world.

11. Final Considerations

Rural tourism, although simple to define, is actually complex in nature due to its various interpretations and forms across different countries. In Himachal Pradesh, rural tourism is still in its early stages, presenting an open scope for marketing. The state’s rich cultural heritage and pristine natural surroundings make it a promising destination for niche rural tourism. To tap into its potential, effective marketing strategies must be adopted, focusing on accessibility, affordability, and availability, with careful planning, monitoring, and regular inspection.

Conducting proper marketing research can help remove uncertainties in rural tourism businesses and bring numerous socioeconomic benefits to the local community. Rural tourism facilitates the flow of income from urban to rural areas, curbing migration to cities and providing alternative earning opportunities for the local population. It also contributes to basic infrastructure development in remote areas, poverty alleviation, and the empowerment of host communities, particularly women. To ensure sustainability, sound legislation, realistic marketing planning, and preservation of natural resources are vital.

With active local community participation, the development of basic rural infrastructure can brighten the future of rural tourism in Himachal Pradesh. By implementing sustainable marketing policies and preserving its unique cultural and environmental assets, the state can pave the way for a thriving rural tourism sector.

Ethical Consideration

The authors declare that the consent had been obtained from the participants for the interview.

Funding

The study did not receive any funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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