

Rural Tourism and Sustainable development in Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal: Case study of Lepchajagat

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Abstract:

Rural tourism nowadays has become a new form of tourism activity that has contributed towards economic, cultural and social benefits to the society. The paper analyzes the role of rural tourism in bringing socio-economic, cultural and environmental and ultimately sustainable development in Darjeeling hills. Rural tourism has been able to preserve the values and beliefs, protect the environment, create employment opportunities, reduce unemployment, local handicrafts, increase the income and capital of stakeholders and local people, stimulate production of organic food, and infrastructural development, and provide possibilities for sustainable and economic development in rural areas. The objective of this research paper is to find the driving forces, benefits, potentialities, challenges, issues for future research and sustainable development of rural tourism and the impact of rural tourism upon the quality of life of the villagers. This paper identifies the available tourist attraction facilities, challenges of owners at Lepchajagat, Darjeeling Hills. Mostly the stakeholders, owners and 400 tourists were interviewed on questionnaire basis. Random sampling method was applied for the selection of owners and tourists. Both the qualitative and quantitative methods have been used as methodology for the analysis of data. With regard to findings, the paper provides an overview of rural tourism at Lepchajagat leading towards socio-economic, cultural and sustainable development.

Keywords: Rural tourism, sustainable development, economic development, stakeholders, tourists, environmental improvements.

Introduction:

Rural tourism refers to activity that takes place in peaceful and beautiful rural areas which remains an important tool for rural planning and sustainable rural development (Liu,

2006). Rural tourism, an emerging phenomenon in the context of tourism has grown not only to be a potential business alternative but also a kind of recreational enterprise to the urban folks, taking them away to a peaceful destination from the hustle and bustle of swift Urban life. “Rural tourism is a form of nature based tourism that uncovers the rural life, culture, art and heritage at rural locations, thereby favouring the local communities socially and economically (Nitashree Mili, 2012). Rural tourism focuses primarily on active participation of a tourist in a rural lifestyle. Various rural areas have been developed all over India and Darjeeling hills which provide tourists with a peaceful living experience in a rural backdrop. Rural tourism develops with active participation of homestay owners, all the stakeholders and local rural people. Rural tourism provides income and employment opportunities to local people in rural areas with the utilization of huge natural resources (H. Wilson and J. Venes, 2001).

Rural tourism has emerged as a new phenomenon, which has started developing, and flourishing since a decade and connecting urban tourists with rural areas of Darjeeling hills empowering it socially, culturally, and economically (Kannegieser, 2015).

Therefore, the focus of the proposed study would be to study the role of rural tourism in sustainable development, economic development and rural development of the study area.

Literature Review:

Sustainable rural tourism encompasses not just environmental protection but also extends to economic development and social equity (Mathew, 2009). In addition, cultural and heritage attractions such as handicrafts, cultural amenities also play a pivotal role in rural tourism development providing opportunities for local communities to generate income (Rahmani, Hajari, Karimian, & Hajilo, 2013). Local communities too play important role in sustainable rural tourism development, hence it is very important to gain local communities’ support (Spencer and Nsiah, 2013) The most important benefits that residents feel improved from rural tourism are increased employment opportunities, property values, closeness to the nature and ultimately sustainable socio-economic development (Lalith Chandralal, 2010).

OBJECTIVES

The proposed research has the following objectives:

- i) To analyze the role of rural tourism in economic and sustainable development.

- ii) To identify issues for future research and development of rural tourism.
- iii) To assess the socio-economic, cultural and environmental impacts of rural tourism upon the quality of life of the villagers.

METHODOLOGY

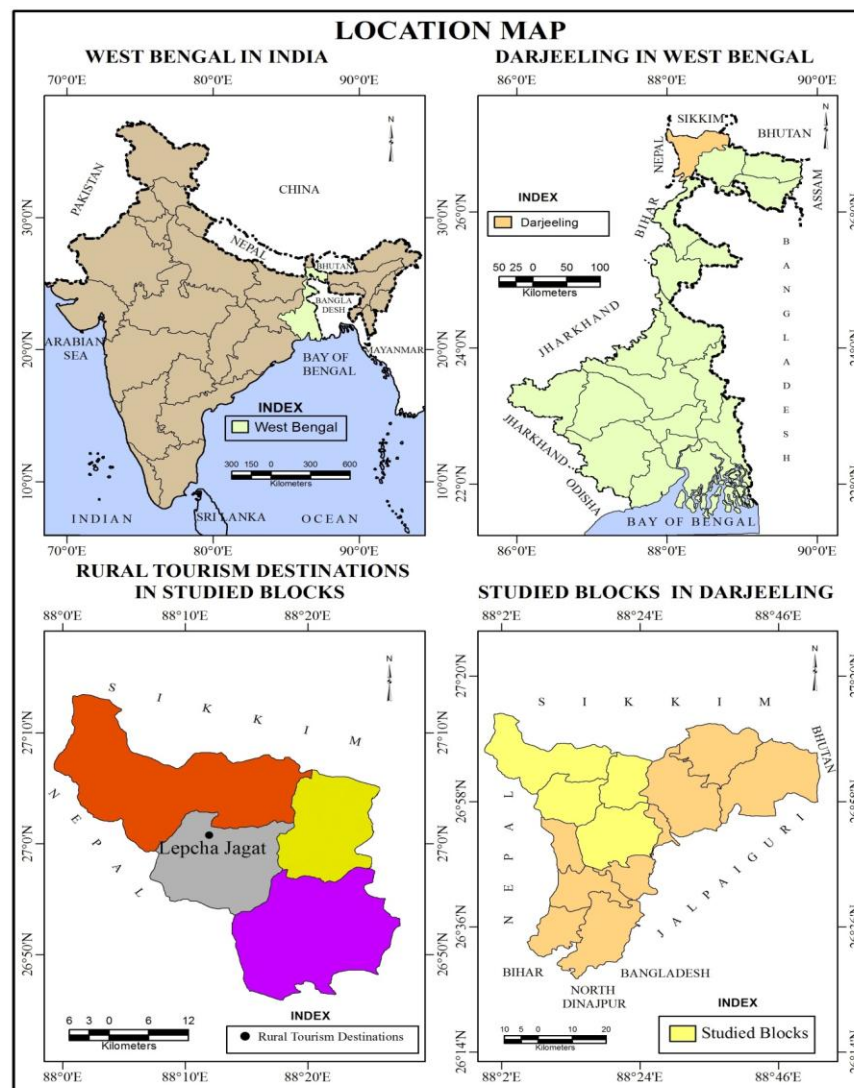
The methodology that has been adopted for the proposed study will be analytical, descriptive, comparative, evaluative and interpretive. Both Qualitative and Quantitative data has been used for the study. Structured interview was conducted for collecting primary data from experts, tourists as well as the local stakeholders. A patterned questionnaire was floated among the local people to observe their viewpoints. For the collection of secondary data, previous studies in tourism, rural tourism and eco-tourism, various publications of Tourism Department of India and Tourism Department of Darjeeling, newspapers, journals, magazines, management plans of various National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries has been studied. Specific Internet portals and websites have been browsed to get more information.

The **sample methods** have been adopted and the sample size has been given after the pilot survey of the select areas. Field studies, data collection and observations during fieldwork are the basis of the present analysis. The data has been processed and represented by different statistical and cartographic techniques.

ARC GIS 10 has been used for mapping.

The **area of the study** has been restricted to **Darjeeling Hills** within **Darjeeling** subdivision. Pakhrin Homestay, Kanchan Kanya Homestay, Salakha Homestay and Humro Homestay from *Lepchajagat* have been surveyed for the study.

Location Map of the Study Area



(Source: Darjeeling Tourism Department and GIS mapping)

LEPCHAJAGAT:

Lepchajagat is a forest village located within Sukhia block between Ghoom and Sukhia at an altitude of 6,956 feet in Darjeeling Hills.

Endowed with beautiful nature, peaceful environment and a picturesque landscape, Lepchajagat is a wonderful place for nature lover, bird photographers. Located amidst the forest, it provides an interaction with wild animals and beautiful flora, mostly rhododendron.

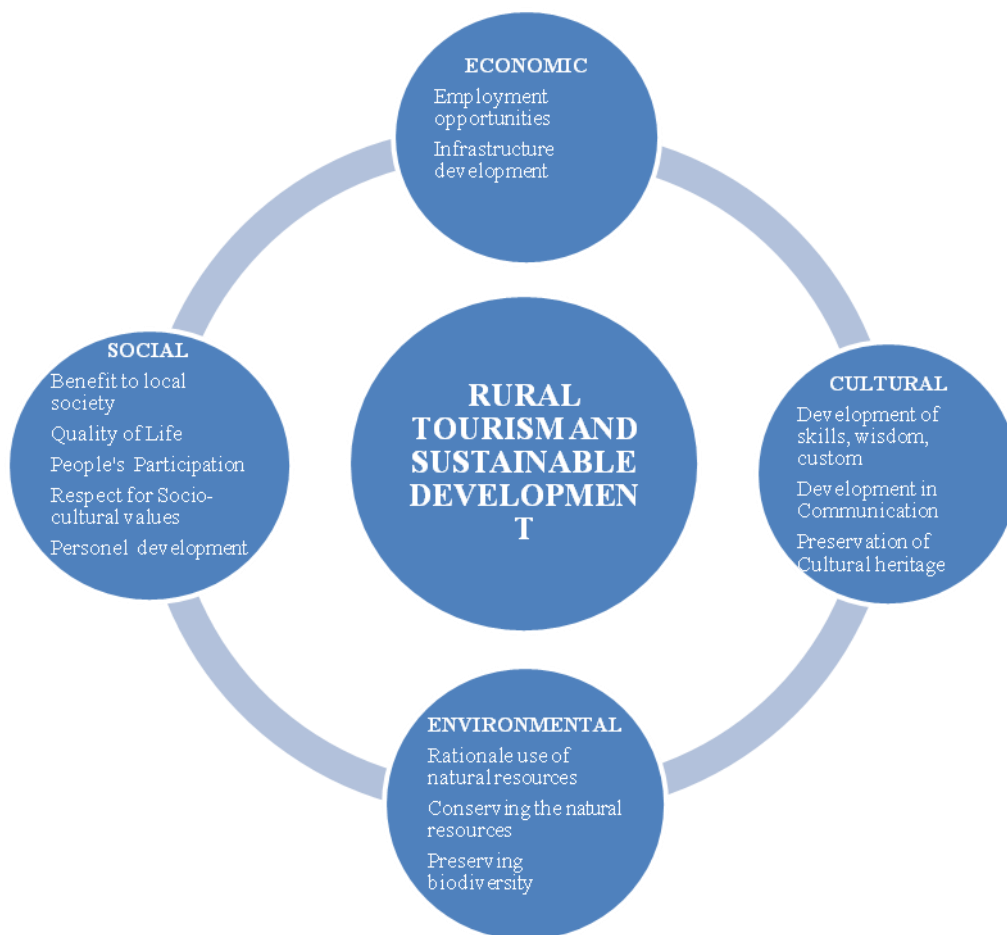
The challenges faced by hosts, stakeholders of Lepchajagat are:

- i) Lack of infrastructure
- ii) Political unrest
- iii) Lack of education
- iv) Financial and monetary Support for sustainable development
- v) Lack of trained personnel in tourism sector
- vi) Publicity

Rural tourism and Sustainable development:

Based on four pillars of sustainable development i.e. economic, social, cultural and environmental parameters, a model for rural tourism has been prepared which is as follows:

Rural tourism for Sustainable development:



(Source: Hall, 1998 and Author's Conceptualization)

The development of rural tourism contributes positively to economic growth as well as regional economic development and thus it provides benefits to the local people.

Rural tourism can be sustainable if development meets the needs of tourists and local residents while protecting future opportunities. Rural tourism offers benefits for local residents, conservation, development and educational experiences. Rural tourism is a sustainable form of nature-based tourism. It focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, its landscape, flora, fauna and their habitats, as well as cultural artifacts from the locality (Dowling, 1997; Fennell, 1999).

Tourists:

Total number of 200 tourists were interviewed, out of which 101(50.5%) were male and 99 (49.5%) were female. 146 tourists hailed from West Bengal (73%), 32 from other parts of India (16%) and 22 (11%) from foreign. Most of them were *nature lover*, some visited for *peace* and few visited for other purposes.

Homestays: Homestays are part of rural tourism where tourist stay with local people to experience local culture and tradition which generates livelihood for local people.

Four homestay owners have been interviewed and their income shows the constant development of the economy of their homestays. Following is the data of Economy of six rural tourism destinations since 2008:

Approx income of Owners in Rs.												
Destination	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
Lepchajaga	2640	2880	3900	4080	4920	1200	9240	25560	29640	2040	5880	91980
t	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

(Source: Compiled by author from registers of homestays)

The above table illustrates the income of the owners since the inception of rural tourism in Lepchajagat. It reveals that the economy has been growing constantly. Rural tourism has been successful as it has catered to economic development through generation of employment opportunities especially in tertiary sectors. The development can be seen in transport system, infrastructure, crafts, floriculture, etc. It too raised the standard of living of the rural people.

Some of the local people got the opportunity to develop themselves as entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurship has been able to capitalize local resources; it has been able to generate some scope for rural workers and labors. Rural tourism has acted as a stimulator of economic growth in this rural destination.

Some owners started earnings as homestay while some started with house turned into homestay, some are government homestays and some are private homestay in the study area. The following table shows the scenario of homestays in different rural tourism destinations of the study area.

Destinations	Homestays	House turned into homestays	Government homestays	Private Homestays
Lepchajagat	i) Pakhrin Homestay ii) Salakha Homestay	i) Kanchankanya Homestay		Humro Homestay

(Source: Data compiled by author from Field survey)

Pattern of increase in tourist accommodation facility in Lepchajagat village since 2000

Sample size: 4 Homestay

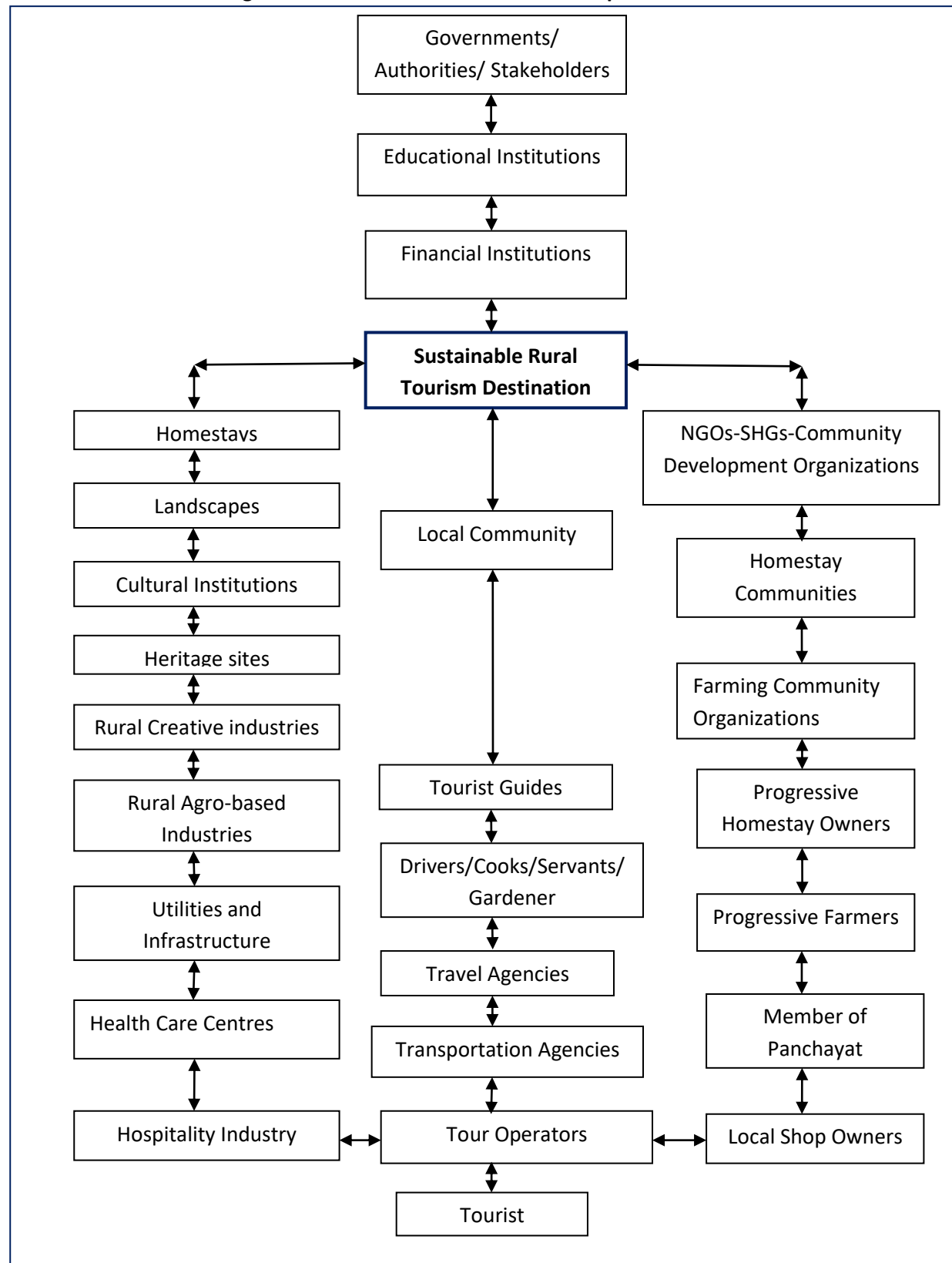
Sl. No.	Name of the Home-stay	From the year	Increasing number of room	Number of persons to accommodate
1	Pakhrin Homestay	2008	$6 + 2 = 8$	$10 + 8 = 18$
2	Kanchankanya Homestay	2013	$6 + 2 = 8$	$10 + 8 = 18$
3	Salakha Homestay	2016	$1 + 1 = 2$	$2 + 4 = 6$
4	Humro Homestay	2016	$2 + 1 = 3$	$4 + 4 = 8$

(Source: Data compiled by author from Field survey)

Stakeholder's networking for sustainable rural tourism development:

Taking into consideration the characteristics and components of rural tourism and sustainable development planning such as the sustainable tourism management, community participation, local benefits, tourists satisfaction, environment protection, educative purpose, development of specialized tourism networking, infrastructure, the study thus accounts for the stakeholders networking model for planning sustainable tourism development in rural areas of Darjeeling Hills.

Stakeholders' Networking for Sustainable Rural Tourism Development



Source: Joshi, Paresh Vidyadhar and author)

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be said that Lepchajagat has been able to develop their areas with the introduction of tourism and are moving towards sustainable development. To some extent, rural tourism has created employment opportunities, enhanced growth of service sectors and has been a means of conserving rural ecology in a sustainable manner. It has minimized the disparity between rural and urban area thereby bringing the rural area in the path of development. It has ensured environmental improvements, landscape and resource conservation leading to sustainable development. The local people are becoming aware about the positive and negative impacts of tourism. Rural tourism has a great future perspective in the rural areas of Darjeeling and can surely be an option for another income generation business. A new concern is emerging in the theory and practice of rural tourism which invests considerable importance in the economic well-being and cultural integrity of rural communities and in rural environmental stewardship. Rural tourism has brought social changes in the study area.

All the stakeholders and local people should be aware of the environmental and social consequences of rural tourism. All the owners, stakeholders should work on and progress on 3 keys of sustainable development: *making it more economically viable, socially equitable and environmentally responsible.*



Pakhrin Homestay, Lepchajagat



Kanchankanya Homestay, Lepchajagat



Subhash Tamang, a painter working
at Pakhrin Homestay



Traditional Kitchen

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