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Kurukshetra

A RURAL DEVELOPMENT MONTHLY SINCE 1952

Rural Tourism

**Rural India:
The Ecotourism Frontier**

**Homestays: India's
Tourism Future**

**Vibrant Villages
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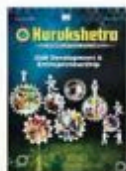
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Editorial

India's heart beats in its villages. From the colorful crafts of Kutch to the tea gardens of Assam and the tranquil backwaters of Kerala, rural India holds an incredible variety of landscapes, traditions, and lifestyles. For decades, these regions remained away from the tourism spotlight, but today, rural tourism is emerging as a powerful force for sustainable development and cultural revival.

Rural tourism allows travelers to experience the soul of India—its people, their customs, and their close bond with nature. Unlike crowded cities, the countryside offers peace, authenticity, and a slower pace of life. Tourists can live in homestays, enjoy traditional cuisine, take part in farming activities, or learn local crafts. These experiences not only provide memorable holidays but also help preserve India's rich cultural diversity.

The rise of rural tourism also carries strong economic potential. It creates jobs in villages, supports local artisans, and encourages entrepreneurship among youth and women. By generating income within villages, it helps reduce the need for people to migrate to cities in search of work. Moreover, when visitors buy handicrafts or attend folk performances, they contribute directly to the revival of traditional arts and heritage.

The Government of India has recognized that rural tourism can be a powerful driver of inclusive growth. Several national and state-level initiatives have been launched to strengthen this sector. Swadesh Darshan Scheme, a flagship initiative of the Ministry of Tourism, develops theme-based circuits across India, including rural, eco, and cultural circuits. The goal is to improve infrastructure in lesser-known areas while maintaining their natural and cultural integrity. Dekho Apna Desh Campaign, started in 2020, encourages citizens to explore India's hidden gems—especially its villages. It also focuses on training and awareness programs to build skills among those involved in rural tourism. Rural Tourism Clusters under Swadesh Darshan 2.0 the revised version of the scheme emphasizes destination-based development, helping states create rural tourism clusters that connect villages with nearby heritage and nature sites.

State level initiatives are also playing a significant role in encouraging tourism activities in villages. States like Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha have pioneered unique programs. Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission links local communities with travelers, while Madhya Pradesh's Rural Tourism Policy (2021) and Odisha's Eco-Retreat program emphasize sustainability and local participation.

While the prospects are bright, rural tourism faces several challenges—poor infrastructure, limited digital access, and lack of marketing are major hurdles. Many villages also need training in hospitality and environmental management. To address these issues, cooperation among the government, private sector, and local communities is essential. Investment in eco-friendly facilities, digital literacy, and skill development can unlock rural India's full tourism potential.

"Rural tourism is more than a travel trend—it's a bridge between India's rich past and its sustainable future. By empowering villages through cultural and economic revival, it embodies the spirit of Atmanirbhar Bharat. With sustained policy support, innovation, and responsible participation, India's villages can stand as global symbols of sustainable tourism—where progress walks hand in hand with preservation."



Rural India as a Hub of Ecotourism

National initiatives such as the National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022), *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, and PRASHAD have been instrumental in developing eco-circuits, sustainable infrastructure, and capacity building through hospitality institutions. Strengthening eco-certification systems, managing visitor flow, and promoting lesser-known destinations can ensure long-term sustainability. Harnessing this untapped potential can transform rural India into a global exemplar of inclusive, responsible, and regenerative tourism—advancing the nation’s journey toward sustainable development and green economic resilience.

*Dr. Sudheer Kumar Shukla

**Dr. Harveen Kaur

Ecotourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of India’s tourism industry, offering a model that links economic growth with environmental sustainability and social inclusivity. Defined by the International Ecotourism Society as “responsible travel to natural

are as that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of local people, and involves interpretation and education,” ecotourism resonates strongly in the Indian context, given the country’s rich biodiversity, cultural heritage, and rural landscapes. In recent years, India has witnessed a transformation in how tourism is perceived and practiced. Travelers

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increasingly seek authentic experiences that minimise environmental footprints, empower local communities, and preserve natural habitats. At the same time, policymakers and state governments have recognised ecotourism's potential to drive rural development and conservation. This article explores India's ecotourism landscape—its growth trajectory, policies, impacts, and challenges—while drawing lessons from successful community-led models across the country.

Policy Landscape and Government Initiatives

The rise of ecotourism in India has been shaped by deliberate policy interventions and institutional support. The National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022) provides a comprehensive framework that aligns the Ministry of Tourism's development agenda with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change's (MoEFCC) conservation goals. It focuses on promoting responsible tourism in ecologically sensitive areas, setting standards for eco-certification, and encouraging community participation.

Among the flagship government programs, the *Swadesh Darshan Scheme* has been particularly influential. Since its inception in 2014–15, the Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned ₹5,292.91 crore for 76 tourism infrastructure projects, of which 75 were physically completed by 2024. Under its upgraded

version, *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, the focus has shifted to sustainable and responsible tourism. In 2023–24, 29 projects were sanctioned, followed by five eco-circuit projects in 2024–25. Notable examples include the Pathanamthitta–Gavi–Vagamon–Thekkady circuit in Kerala, emphasising rainforest trekking and birdwatching, and the Dalma–Betla–Netarhat circuit in Jharkhand, with a focus on forest and wildlife conservation.

The PRASHAD scheme (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive) has also contributed indirectly to ecotourism, with ₹1,646.99 crore sanctioned across 48 projects, some overlapping with eco-spiritual tourism destinations. Other initiatives, such as the *Dekho Apna Desh People's Choice campaign* and the *Paryatan Mitra/Didi program*, emphasise responsible and inclusive tourism, particularly involving women and youth in rural areas.

Importantly, the government has invested in human capital for the sector. As of 2024, India had 56 Institutes of Hotel Management and 13 Food Craft Institutes, many of which offer specialised training in sustainable hospitality and ecotourism. This focus on skill development ensures a pipeline of professionals equipped to manage the growing demand for eco-friendly services.

Rural India: Growth and Market Dynamics in Ecotourism

India's ecotourism sector is witnessing rapid expansion, offering substantial opportunities for rural transformation. In 2024, the market was valued at USD 19.8 billion and is projected to rise to USD 50.4 billion by 2033, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.8 per cent (IMARC Group, 2024). The broader tourism sector contributed about 5 per cent to the national GDP in 2024, underscoring its role as a major economic driver. The domestic tourism continues to dominate this landscape, with 2,509 million domestic tourist visits recorded in 2023, reflecting strong internal demand for rural and nature-based experiences. The foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) reached 9.66 million in 2024 marking a 19.8 per cent increase over the previous year, while foreign exchange earnings from tourism touched ₹2,77,842 crore (MoT, 2024). Importantly, changing consumer behavior is reshaping this growth—82 per cent of Indian travellers now prioritize sustainability when planning their trips (IMARC Survey, 2025). This shift in consumer preferences is driving new demand for eco-lodges, green resorts, homestays, community-based tourism, and nature-based experiences particularly in rural and semi-rural destinations known for biodiversity, culture, and traditional knowledge (such as wildlife safaris, trekking, and birdwatching).

Government policies— particularly the National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022), *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, and PRASHAD schemes—are fostering eco-circuits, sustainable infrastructure, and skill development through 56 hotel management and 13 food craft institutes (MoT, 2023). The rural impact is substantial: communities engaged in ecotourism earn 35–60 per cent higher household incomes, while women lead over 18,000 tourism enterprises in Kerala (Kerala Tourism, 2023). Youth-led initiatives in villages like Khonoma (Nagaland) have reduced migration and cut poaching by 70 per cent, and models such as Mawlynnong (Meghalaya) and Periyar Tiger Reserve (Kerala) demonstrate how ecotourism can sustain clean, conservation-oriented economies.

Such preferences are also transforming the hospitality industry, which is increasingly adopting energy-efficient, waste-reducing, and culturally integrated practices aligned with the Government's National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (2022) and Travel for LIFE mission. Tourism remains one of India's largest employment generators—12.57 per cent of total jobs are linked to travel and tourism (MoT, 2024). The sector supports 42 million jobs currently, with projections to reach 48 million by 2025 (WTTC, 2024). For rural and ecologically sensitive regions, ecotourism presents a



Table 1: Key Policies related to Rural Eco-tourism and their Features

S.No.	Policies	Key Objectives Relevant to Rural Eco-tourism	Rural Components
1.	National Strategy & Roadmap for Rural Tourism	Promote rural tourism as driver for job creation, local culture, convergence with other welfare schemes; make rural tourism sustainable & inclusive.	Cluster development, local crafts, homestays, marketing support for villages, governance/institutional support.
2.	Swadesh Darshan / Swadesh Darshan 2.0	Thematic circuit development (including Rural Circuits), improving infrastructure, visitor experience, community participation, sustainability.	Rural circuits: specific projects in Bihar, Kerala under "Rural Circuit" theme. Also rural tourism infrastructure in identified circuits.
3.	PRASHAD Scheme	Develop pilgrimage-spiritual tourism infrastructure; improve access, amenities; integrate with heritage. Some sites are rural/spiritual in villages.	Some pilgrimage destinations are in rural areas; projects include amenities that benefit local communities.
4.	Ecotourism / Sustainable Tourism Strategy & Guidelines	Promote conservation, biodiversity protection, regulate ecotourism around protected areas; ensure ecological & socio-cultural sustainability.	Rural areas near forests, wildlife, and biodiversity zones are targeted; community involvement required; advisory for protected area buffer zones.
5.	National Strategy for Promotion of Rural Homestays (2022)	Standardise and promote homestays in rural areas, enabling rural households to earn income; ensure quality, marketing, capacity building.	Homestay owners in villages; support/training; link to scheme projects under Swadesh Darshan etc.

Source: IMARC, 2024

vital opportunity for income diversification, women's entrepreneurship, and youth employment, offering sustainable alternatives to migration and resource exploitation.

By aligning community participation with market-driven sustainability, rural India stands at the forefront of India's green growth story—emerging not only as the heart of ecological preservation but also as the engine of inclusive economic progress.

Economic, Social and Environmental Impacts

a) Economic Impact

The ecotourism generates substantial benefits in rural and remote regions. It provides an alternative to agriculture and extractive activities, reducing pressure on fragile ecosystems while enhancing household incomes. Studies show that communities engaged in ecotourism report a 35–60 per cent increase in annual incomes compared to those outside the sector. It

fosters micro-entrepreneurship, skill diversification, and income stability, especially in ecologically sensitive and remote regions. For instance, the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala generates ₹60–80 crore annually, with over 50 per cent of revenues benefiting local communities (Kerala Forest Department, 2023). Similarly, Mawlynnong in Meghalaya—hailed as Asia's Cleanest Village—has witnessed a 60 per cent rise in household incomes since 2010, driven by bamboo homestays, eco-guiding, and waste-free tourism models (Meghalaya Tourism Report, 2023).

b) Social Impact

The social dividends are equally transformative. It has empowered women, youth, and marginalized communities through participation, leadership, and equitable benefit-sharing. For instance, in Kerala, 18,000 women manage microenterprises linked to ecotourism, ranging from homestays and handicrafts

to guiding services. This has strengthened women's financial independence, increased their participation in decision-making, and reduced seasonal migration. Youth engagement has also been profound. In Khonoma, Nagaland, ecotourism has reduced youth outmigration by 30 per cent, as young people now find meaningful employment as guides, hospitality staff, and conservation workers. Such outcomes underline ecotourism's role not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a tool for social empowerment and rural revitalisation.

c) Environmental Impact

Ecotourism is increasingly recognised as a conservation financing mechanism. Visitor fees, eco-lodge revenues, and community contributions are channelled into biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration. In Madhya Pradesh, tiger conservation programs receive funding from tourism revenues, ensuring healthier prey bases and forest regeneration. In the Western Ghats and the Sundarbans, ecotourism revenues support mangrove protection, coral restoration, and anti-poaching patrols.

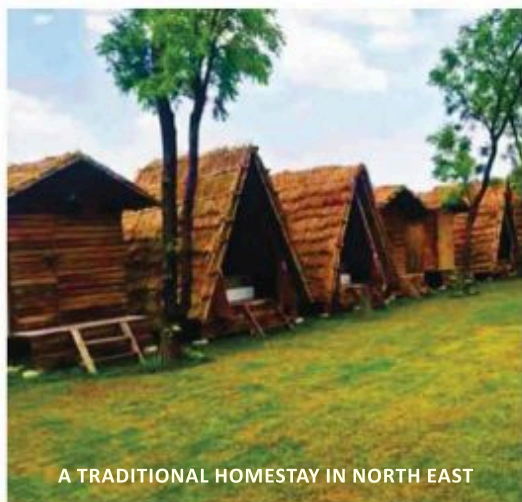
Challenges and Risks

Despite its transformative potential, ecotourism in rural India faces significant challenges that could undermine its sustainability. One major concern is

the risk of over-commercialisation and greenwashing, where superficial 'eco' labels mask unsustainable practices. This not only dilutes the authenticity of cultural and ecological experiences but also threatens long-term sustainability. Another challenge lies in managing carrying capacity. Popular destinations such as Ladakh, Jim Corbett National Park, and parts of Kerala have witnessed overcrowding, which strains local ecosystems and infrastructure. Without strict visitor management and ecological guidelines, these destinations risk degradation. Climate change poses additional threats. Glacial retreat in high-altitude areas, sea-level rise in coastal ecosystems like the Sundarbans, and increased forest fires all jeopardise the ecological foundations of tourism. Finally, there is a pressing need for stronger regulatory mechanisms for eco-certification, standardisation, and monitoring to prevent exploitation and ensure accountability.

Conclusion

Ecotourism in India holds immense potential as a catalyst for rural transformation, blending economic growth with social empowerment and environmental conservation. Achieving this requires a multi-dimensional approach: promoting decentralised and diversified destinations to ease pressure on flagship sites; integrating ecotourism with climate-resilient livelihoods such as organic farming, renewable energy, and handicrafts; and expanding capacity-building programs for guides, entrepreneurs, and hospitality workers to ensure quality and inclusivity. Strengthening partnerships between government, private sector, and communities is essential, particularly for financing conservation-linked enterprises. Equally critical is enforcing ecological carrying capacities and robust certification standards to preserve authenticity and sustainability. Addressing challenges such as greenwashing, overcrowding, and climate impacts will require innovation, regulation, and strong governance. If pursued responsibly, ecotourism can become a scalable pathway to rural prosperity, biodiversity protection, and resilient livelihoods, cementing India's role as a global leader in sustainable development. □



A TRADITIONAL HOMESTAY IN NORTH EAST



Homestays: India's Tourism Future

Homestays have emerged as a significant driver of India's tourism transformation, fostering cultural exchange and inclusive economic growth. They effectively address accommodation shortages while promoting community participation, women's entrepreneurship, and sustainable livelihoods. However, fragmented regulatory frameworks and limited digital integration hinder their full potential. NITI Aayog's Model Homestay Policy Framework advocates single-window clearances, digital registration, and capacity-building initiatives to streamline the sector. Strengthened through policy synergy and community engagement, homestays can become a pivotal pillar of India's *Viksit Bharat 2047* vision.

*Yugal Joshi

**Divya Nandini

In the post-pandemic years, as its path to recovery India's tourism sector has reinvented itself. Domestic travelers are exploring unknown corners of the country, seeking authenticity over luxury, and connection over convenience. Amidst this transformation, homestays — once viewed as informal, small-scale alternatives — have emerged as the quiet revolutionaries of India's tourism economy. Yet, as NITI

Aayog's 2025 report "Rethinking Homestays: Navigating Policy Pathways" reveals, this revolution is being held back by missed opportunities.

A Tourism Revival Riding on Local Roots

In 2024, India's travel and tourism sector contributed ₹21.15 lakh crore to the national economy — a 21 per cent jump over pre-pandemic levels. Domestic tourism alone accounted for ₹16 lakh crore in

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spending, signaling an inward shift in travel patterns. By 2034, the sector is projected to contribute 7.6 per cent of the country's GDP, creating over 6 crore jobs.

But as demand rises, supply lags. India faces a shortage of over two lakh hotel rooms, particularly outside metros and tourist hubs. The gap is largely being filled not by big hospitality chains, but by ordinary households turning their homes into guest spaces. Homestays are now one of the fastest-growing segments in tourism, expected to expand at an annual rate of 11 per cent between 2024 and 2031, according to Cognitive Market Research.

Platforms like Airbnb, MakeMyTrip, and Booking.com have catalysed this trend— MakeMyTrip's homestay segment already accounts for 10 per cent of its hotel sales, and Airbnb alone supported 85,000 Indian jobs in 2022 while contributing ₹7,200 crore to GDP. These numbers suggest that the 'small' homestay economy is quietly becoming a national growth engine.

The Cultural Capital of Hospitality

At its heart, the homestay model revives an old Indian idea: *Atithi Devo Bhava*— the guest as god. The 2006 Incredible India Bed & Breakfast Scheme was designed to bring this ethos to life, encouraging locals to host travellers in authentic, community-based settings. The model works beautifully with India's

cultural diversity— from tea planters' cottages in Assam to terracotta homes in Kutch, from restored havelis in Rajasthan to spice plantations in Kerala.

Unlike hotels that isolate guests, homestays invite them into local life. They connect travellers to regional cuisines, crafts, and customs, while ensuring that tourism revenue flows directly to families rather than external corporations. In doing so, they also serve broader national goals— promoting inclusive livelihoods, women's entrepreneurship, and sustainable rural development.

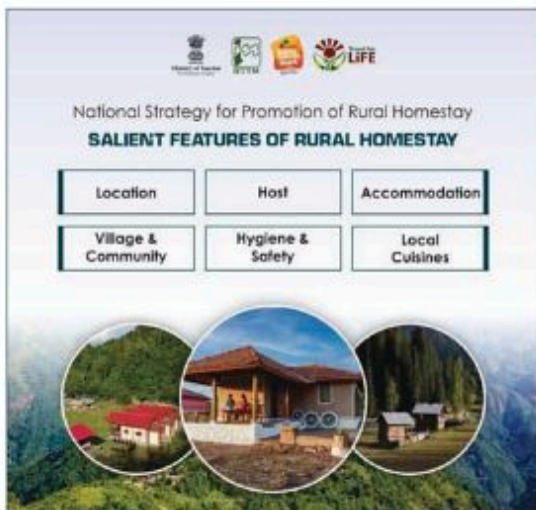
Tourism Satellite Account of India estimates that the homestay sector has an employment multiplier of 4.38 and an output multiplier of 2.04— the highest among all sub-sectors of tourism. Every rupee earned in a homestay stimulates nearby trade, agriculture, and services, especially in rural regions where other industries are limited.

In Uttarakhand's hill villages, for instance, homestays have reduced migration by providing locals with steady income. In Kerala, they've empowered women; many are now entrepreneurs managing family-run stays. And in Goa, the state's Hinterland Homestay Incentive Scheme is pushing tourists beyond beaches to explore its cultural interiors.

The government has also made significant efforts to fuel this theme through offering MUDRA loans and putting forward themes like Top 50 tourist destinations.

The Policy Puzzle: Too Many Cooks, Too Many Checklists

Despite the tailwinds in the sector, India's homestay ecosystem has been entangled in fragmented regulations. This is a finding in the NITI Aayog report's fieldwork across four states— Kerala, Goa, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh. To start a homestay, operators may need to visit up to six government offices, submit 10–15 documents, and wait months for approval. There are multiple and often overlapping policies: in Uttarakhand alone, both the *Atithi Griha Awas Yojana* and the *Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grih Awas Yojana* apply. Kerala requires both a tourism





department classification and a municipal license, while Goa's 2022 Ease of Doing Business order was followed by a new policy that reinstated old compliance burdens.

This results confusion, delays and a shadow economy of unregistered homestays. Over half of operators find it difficult to navigate the paperwork, while 70 per cent remain unaware of available subsidies or training schemes. Even after registration, many are charged commercial electricity rates instead of the promised domestic tariffs— a disconnect between tourism departments and utility boards.

Such regulatory fragmentation in tourism also reflects a broader challenge in India's microenterprise ecosystem. The Economic Survey 2025 calls for states to “get out of the way” of small entrepreneurs— and the homestay sector may be the perfect place to start.

Missing the People

The report's most striking insight is the gulf between policy intent and on-ground reality. Governments across states have launched well-meaning initiatives— from Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission to Uttarakhand's

capital subsidies and Goa's furniture grants— but implementation remains patchy.

In Uttarakhand, for example, subsidies under DDUGAY are often delayed for years after homestay construction. In Uttar Pradesh, despite the *Gange Gramin Krishi Prayatan Yojana* identifying 330 potential homestays, only a handful have become operational due to lack of training and financing. Meanwhile, in Kerala and Goa, where homestay associations like HATS exist, operators complain that state-run marketing portals attract negligible traffic.

The absence of digital visibility and coordinated branding has stunted growth. While OTAs thrive on global platforms, state portals are rarely user-friendly, and many lack basic booking mechanisms. Operators depend on word-of-mouth or private listings, missing out on the benefits of integrated digital promotion.

Community Connections: The Missing Link

Homestays thrive when communities see value in them— but the report finds that local awareness is still low. In parts of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, even

taxi drivers and shopkeepers confuse homestays with hotels. Without local buy-in, the idea of community-based tourism remains aspirational.

This disconnect is not inevitable. In Kerala's Fort Kochi, homestays have successfully integrated artisans, boatmen and performers into the tourism chain. Similar models could be replicated across states through training programs that go beyond operators to include the wider community—shopkeepers, guides, and artisans. After all, sustainable tourism is not only about where travellers stay, but also about who benefits.

From Policy Silos to Policy Synergy

NITI Aayog's report doesn't just diagnose the problem; it sketches a blueprint for reform. Its proposed Model Homestay Policy Framework urges states to harmonise regulations under a few key principles:

1. **Ease of Doing Business:** Replace multi-step approvals with single-window, online registration requiring only essential documents—ownership proof, ID and GST (if applicable). Provisional registration should allow operation pending verification and renewals should be automatic.
2. **Digital Integration:** A unified portal for registration, self-declaration of compliance and marketing could bring transparency and efficiency. Randomised inspections, instead of rigid paperwork can ensure accountability.
3. **Destination-Centric Incentives:** Rather than subsidising individual properties, incentives should focus on developing clusters—circuits that link homestays across themes like wellness, heritage, or adventure. This approach can spread tourism benefits more evenly.
4. **Utility Reforms:** Homestays should be classified as residential units for water, power, and property tax—a small policy change with big economic relief.
5. **Capacity Building:** Partnerships with private sector experts and OTAs for regular Homestay Business Summits could create peer learning networks and introduce new skills in digital marketing, sustainability, and experience design.
6. **Awareness and Outreach:** A National Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaign could familiarise aspiring hosts and travellers alike with the idea of homestays—transforming

perception from informal lodging to integral tourism infrastructure.

A Vision for *Viksit Bharat* 2047

Although India already has many homestays—with some thousands registered and many more unregistered—the sector is still in a transitional phase regarding formal regulation and policy. Current initiatives, such as state homestay policies, national strategies, and proposals for streamlined registration, show efforts to set structure from early on. While some Western countries are debating how short-term rentals affect housing affordability, India has the opportunity to lead with a balanced, well-crafted policy framework.

If executed well, these reforms could turn homestays into a pillar of India's *Viksit Bharat* 2047 vision—not just as accommodation providers, but as incubators of inclusive entrepreneurship.

Economic Empowerment: With low entry barriers, homestays can bring lakhs of families, especially women, into the formal economy.

1. **Balanced Regional Growth:** By dispersing tourism beyond overburdened hubs, they can promote lesser-known destinations and reduce ecological stress.
2. **Cultural Revival:** Every homestay becomes a living museum of local art, craft, and cuisine.
3. **Environmental Stewardship:** Smaller footprints and community accountability make homestays inherently more sustainable than large-scale resorts.

From Rooms to Relationships

What makes the homestay model remarkable is not its economics, but its humanity. It transforms travel from consumption into connection—a chance for visitors to experience India's soul through its homes and hosts. It redefines 'luxury' not as marble lobbies or imported linen but as the warmth of being welcomed into someone's world.

Yet for this quiet revolution to realise its potential, policy must move from control to enablement—from paperwork to partnership. As India races towards its tourism goals for 2030 and beyond, the most meaningful progress may come not from building new hotels, but from empowering millions of homes to open their doors. □



Rural Tourism to Boost Livelihood

Rural tourism represents the essence of inclusive growth, as it not only contributes significantly to the national income but also fosters community development. It generates positive externalities such as the preservation of culture, heritage, rituals, cuisine, and biodiversity. Another important and steadily emerging branch of tourism in India is medical tourism. It is evident that rural areas have immense potential to attract tourists. An integrated approach to developing rural areas, making them easily accessible, can successfully tap into this potential and enhance their contribution toward building a *Viksit Bharat*.

Dr. Ishita G. Tripathy

Tourism has remained a vital driver of economic growth. Visits of tourists to enchanting India from ancient times has been well chronicled. In recent times too, the country has continued to attract tourists. In 2024, over 19 million tourists arrived in India, implying almost Rs. 2.77 lakh crore foreign exchange earnings. In 2023, there were 2,509 million domestic tourist visits (Table-1). The contribution of the tourism sector in India's Gross Domestic Product is 5 per cent. In 2023-24, the tourism sector created 8.5 crore jobs. In 2024, India was ranked

39th by the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Development Index. As per World Trade Organization, tourism commitments have been undertaken by more than 133 member countries, which indicates that most members want to expand their tourism sectors.

Development Tourism

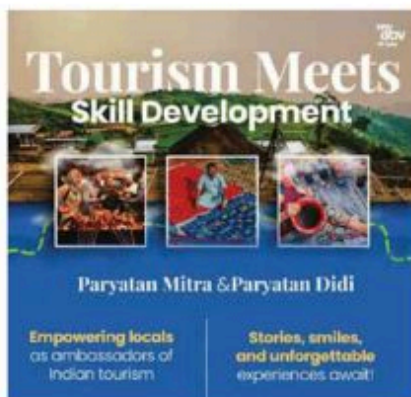
Rural tourism is the epitome of inclusive growth as it not only contributes significantly to national income but also fosters community development. It boosts local industry, increases employment and leverages local unique selling points. By unveiling the natural beauty,

culture and simplicity of countryside, it empowers the youth and women. It has positive externalities such as conservation of culture, heritage, rituals, cuisine, biodiversity, etc.

The development of tourism in any area is a definite and fruitful way of not only showcasing the characteristic, attractive features of that area, but also an effective way of strengthening all linkages enhancing those features. A recent example is *Kumbh Mela* celebrated by more than 62 crore people in Prayagraj in January-February, 2025, where not merely the infrastructure related to transport and accommodation had to be arranged, but also multi-tier security and monitoring systems, crowd management mechanisms and provisions for senior citizens and differently-abled citizens had to be efficiently organised. This mega event embodied development tourism for boosting religious and cultural tourism and driving local development by creating tremendous opportunities for small businesses, handicrafts, transport, hospitality and other services. Development tourism has a constructive impact on industries, employment and economic development.

Tourism: The Policy Intent

Three different, yet integral pillars of rural tourism are homestays, destination weddings, and medical tourism. Accordingly, Government policies have focused on facilitating these aspects. Yoga and Ayurveda have been associated with India for centuries. Their significant benefits have always drawn people from all over the world, more so in the aftermath of the pandemic due to recognition of alternative healthcare remedies and a focussed approach for generating awareness.



One of the focus areas of Budget 2025-26 is 'Tourism for employment-led growth'. The announcements entailed the development of top 50 tourist destination sites in the country in partnership with states. To attain this objective, the following measures are being taken:

- Organising intensive skill-development programmes for India's youth, including in Institutes of Hospitality Management;
- Providing Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency (MUDRA) loans for homestays;
- Improving ease of travel and connectivity to tourist destinations;
- Providing performance-linked incentives to States for effective destination management, including tourist amenities, cleanliness, and marketing efforts; and

Table-1: Tourism in India

Year	Number of International Tourist Arrivals (in crore)	India's Rank in International Tourist Arrivals	Foreign Exchange Earnings through Tourism (in US\$ billion)	Domestic Tourist Visits (in crore)
2019	1.7	24 th	30	232
2020	0.6	19 th	13	61
2021	0.7	18 th	9	68
2022	1.4	17 th	21	173
2023	1.9	Not Available	28	250
2024	2.0	Not Available	33	Not Available

Sources: 1. Economic Surveys 2023-24 and 2024-25, Department of Economic Affairs, Government of India. 2. Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 4032, replied on 18.8.2025. 3. India Tourism Data Compendium 2024.

- v. Introducing streamlined e-visa facilities along with visa-fee waivers for certain tourist groups.

Another important and steadily emerging strand of tourism in India is medical tourism. To strengthen that, Budget 2025-26 announced that 'Medical Tourism and Heal in India' will be promoted in partnership with the private sector along with capacity building and simplified visa norms.

India's National Strategy for Eco-tourism was formulated in 2022. Eco-tourism, which is one of the fastest growing segments within tourism, is usually based in rural hinterland. Irrefutably, the recent growth of Eco-tourism will pull up with itself the development of rural areas. Successful Eco-tourism requires concerted and converged efforts of various stakeholders, including those involved in development of rural areas, culture, skills and conservation of natural resources. The Strategy rightly suggests that village Panchayats need to be consulted in preparing plans for developing Eco-tourism in their villages. Further, for greater community linkages, the Strategy underscores the role of non-Government Organizations (NGOs) which work in sustainable and responsible tourism, integrated rural development and livelihood promotion in rural areas.

Government Interventions

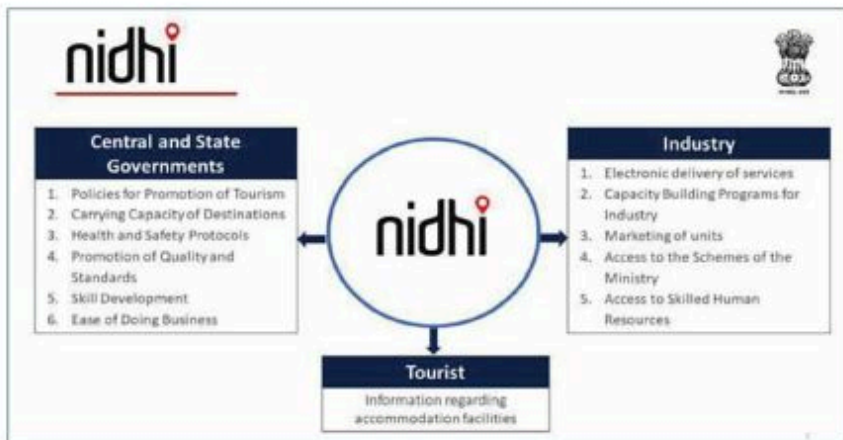
In 2014-15, the Government of India had launched *Swadesh Darshan*, to complement the efforts of State Governments/UT Administrations, with the objective of building tourism facilities in the country. 75 projects out of the sanctioned 76 worth Rs.5,288 crore have been completed. Since 2022, Swadesh 2.0 has been working towards developing sustainable and responsible tourism destinations. Further, the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive (*PRASHAD*) aims to develop tourism infrastructure, including historical places, heritage cities and pilgrimage places. Supplementing these, the 'One District One Product' initiative is beneficial in capturing the essence of each district in the form of a product which can easily be used by/gifted to tourists.

The Government of India has identified rural tourism as a niche tourism product requiring development and promotion. Rural tourism is appropriate for enhancing experiential tourism, whose demand is growing world over. It is an appropriate win-win situation for the local economy and visitors. Homestays capture the flavour of rural India by offering tourists to experience for themselves India's diverse ways of living, apart from

Table-2: Number of Rural Homestay Facilities registered on NIDHI Portal

States/UTs	Total Count	States/UTs	Total Count
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	1	Maharashtra	43
Andhra Pradesh	7	Meghalaya	6
Arunachal Pradesh	33	Nagaland	1
Assam	28	Odisha	14
Bihar	1	Punjab	3
Chhattisgarh	2	Rajasthan	9
Goa	26	Sikkim	16
Gujarat	4	Tamil Nadu	137
Haryana	1	Telangana	2
Himachal Pradesh	68	Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu	1
Jammu & Kashmir	2	Tripura	1
Karnataka	6	Uttar Pradesh	955
Kerala	77	Uttarakhand	93
Ladakh	6	West Bengal	570
Madhya Pradesh	50		

Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 3574, replied on 11.8.2025



appreciating and enjoying the cultural richness. To attract tourists, it becomes mandatory for destinations to be appealing and to adopt environmentally sustainable policies. In line with measures being taken to enhance ease of doing business, many state governments have adopted 'tourism and hospitality' as thrust areas.

Ministry of Tourism's Best Tourism Village Competition, launched in 2023, encourages villages to become attractive tourist spots, by aiding villages through capacity building sessions and in surmounting challenges of connectivity, marketing and digital infrastructure. Moreover, under 'United Nations World Tourism Organization's' 'Best Tourism Villages', Indian villages such as Pochampally in Telangana, Khonoma in Nagaland, Dhordo in Gujarat, Madla in Madhya Pradesh and Dhudmaras in Chhattisgarh have recently benefited.

In consonance with the demand of the digital world, the National Integrated Database of Hospitality Industry (NIDHI) portal has been registering accommodation units nationwide. The number of rural homestay facilities registered on NIDHI portal is given in Table-2. Similarly, Ministry of Tourism's Incredible India Tourism Facilitator Certificate Programme aims to create a skilled cadre of tourist facilitators through online certification courses, along with the larger objective of formalising employment.

A report released by NITI Aayog in August, 2025 is based on challenges faced by homestay operators, local communities and regulators from onboarding to

operation. It quotes the homestay market in India's market sales revenue to have reached Rs. 4,722 crore in 2024. The study recommends capacity building for regulators, incentivisation through subsidies, non-commercial rates on utilities and improved ease of doing business.

The Government of India complements the efforts of state governments/UT Administrations undertaken to develop and promote tourist destinations. To facilitate ease of travel to India, e-visas are available to 171 countries under 9 sub-categories, including for purposes of Tourism, Medical, Medical Attendant, Ayush and Ayush Attendant.

Concluding Remarks

It is evident that policies and programmes intend to promote rural tourism through a multi-pronged approach, given that the results are far-reaching and have efficacious spillovers on the rest of the economy. Economic Survey, 2023-24 quoted a report by Capital Economics which had estimated that Artificial Intelligence could lead to a slowing down of India's services export growth by 0.3-0.4 per centage points a year over the next decade. In this context, the Survey recommends that public policy should focus on less skill-dependent tourism sector. Rural areas have a huge potential to attract tourists. An integrated approach for developing them, to make them easily accessible, can tap that potential efficiently and enhance their contribution in designing *Viksit Bharat*. □



Vibrant Villages Programme

The Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP), launched by the Government of India, aims at the holistic development of border villages with a focus on tourism-driven growth. It strengthens infrastructure, connectivity, and livelihood opportunities while promoting eco, agro, and cultural tourism through community participation. The initiative enhances local entrepreneurship, showcases indigenous art, crafts, and cuisines, and helps curb outmigration by creating sustainable jobs. The ongoing VVP phase-II expands the programme's reach and emphasises digital integration, education, and cultural vibrancy. Through this initiative, India envisions safe, self-reliant, and vibrant border communities contributing to *Viksit Bharat@2047*.

Dr. Jagdeep Saxena



Indian villages, called the soul and pride of the nation, are at the epicenter of recently evolved sector of rural tourism. Our villages, across the country, offer unique opportunities to experience India's diverse cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, age-old arts and crafts, and ancestral customs. Agricultural farms, in the lap of nature, offer unique home-stays and exposure to rich rural-life. Despite enormous potential of tourism,

the majority of villages lack proper infrastructure to support tourism related activities. Limited digital services, poor road-connectivity, interrupted power supply, low profiling of local products, and lack of tourism awareness are the major issues of concern. To address these challenges, in 2023 Government of India approved an ambitious programme for comprehensive and inclusive development of identified villages. Launched as 'Vibrant Villages Programme' (VVP), it supported interventions in focused areas, such as

road-connectivity, housing and village infrastructure, telecom-connectivity, conventional power supply and renewable energy, and livelihood generation through local resources. Promotion of village tourism is one of the key areas identified for development, improvement and advancement at local level. At ground level, VVP specifically promoted community managed home-stays and supported local fairs and festivals to attract tourists. Based on unique geo-characteristics, concerted efforts were made to promote eco-tourism, agro-tourism, wellness and spiritual tourism, and wildlife and adventure tourism. Active participation of local artisans helped branding of art and craft products, and in some cases local cuisines as well.

Initiatives for Improvement

The Government of India launched VVP as a centrally sponsored scheme with financial outlay of Rs.4,800 crore for the fiscals 2022-23 to 2025-26. Perhaps, for the first time, funds were allocated specifically for the integrated development of villages located along the northern international borders. This aligns well with the transformational vision of 'New India', which calls the traditional last village of India as the first village of India. In the first phase, the VVP was implemented in the selected 663 villages across to 19 districts and 46 border blocks of four states and one union territory. State-wise breakup of villages are as

follows: Arunachal Pradesh – 455, Himachal Pradesh – 75, Sikkim – 46, Uttarakhand – 51 and Ladakh – 35. The District Administrations of these states prepared Vibrant Village Action Plans for each village in collaboration with respective Gram Panchayats. Centered around tourism potential of the village, the development strategy spearheaded skill and entrepreneurship development in border villages. Active involvement of community institutions, such as cooperative societies, NGOs, SHGs etc., ensured participation of local youth and women in all these endeavours. Ecologically sound and economically rewarding agri-businesses were promoted based on the concept of 'One Village One Product'. Co-ordination with other stakeholder institutions ensured delivery of central and state government schemes to all eligible beneficiaries. Creation of physical and digital infrastructure catalysed livelihood generation for all age-groups.

In a noteworthy gesture, the Government of India invited distinguished guests from villages under the VVP to participate in Republic Day 2025 celebrations. While interacting with dignitaries and guests Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation, Shri Amit Shah presented a brief update on the initiatives taken by the Government of India. Based on the review of issues faced by 662 villages, 626 projects were formulated for holistic development, whereas, 901 employment-related projects were initiated. He said, along with these, schemes worth Rs.556 crore were developed for advancement in agriculture, education, health, energy, cooperatives, and Khadi and Village Industries at village level. To improve land connectivity, Rs.2400 crore was spent on construction of 113 roads and eight low-suspension bridges, and 4G connectivity reached to 342 villages. Out of these 662 villages, 474 have been electrified on-grid and 127 off-grid, and 43 new power projects have been developed at a cost of Rs.238 crore. Specifically to boost village tourism, 102 projects at a cost of Rs.48 crore developed local View Points, Adventure Tourism, Eco-Resorts and Tourist Centres in the identified villages.

New Phase, New Programmes

Encouraged by the success and significant impact of Vibrant Villages Programme, the Government of India approved its second phase (VVP-II) in April, 2025. The Programme, in continuation to VVP-I, will continue till the FY 2028-29 with a total outlay of Rs.6,839 crore.



Must-Visit Villages

Kongthong Village, Meghalaya

Popularly also known as 'Whistling Village', Kongthong is located in East Khasi Hills district with stunning picture-perfect views. The village has earned the unique nick-name due to an amazing trait. The villagers of this village communicate by whistling a tune instead of calling out their names. Each member has a unique and distinct tune called out after them. This custom makes Kongthong a perfect gateway from the maddening noises of the city.

Khonoma Village, Nagaland

Khonoma located in Kohima district is the first officially declared 'Green Village' in India. Forest-covered hills and mountains and luscious paddy fields give the village a unique natural view with long-lasting impression. Various traditional locations of the village are popular sites where tourists bond with villagers over a cup of locally brewed rice beer. But the most recommended and visited activity is the farming experience that was introduced to interested tourists, where they go to the paddy fields and get hands-on practice of the farming technique in the village. Long winding roads and well-maintained streets of Khonoma offer tourist-friendly reach and an attractive ambience.

Turtuk Village, Ladakh

Located on the banks of Shyok River at Leh district in Ladakh, Turtuk village is a favourite destination in the region. Long ago, it was under the occupation of Baltistan empire, hence, the name Turtuk, which in Balti language means 'desire to stay'. Turtuk is astoundingly beautiful with barren mountains,

gleaming water bodies flowing in the midst of the village, and magnificent views of snow-clad Himalayan ranges. Stone walls and houses built on cobblestone alleys are popular sites among visitors. Turtuk village is a unique blend of the Parsian and Tibetan culture.

Mawlynnong Village, Meghalaya

Internationally famous as 'Cleanest Village in Asia', Mawlynnong village in the East Khasi hills district is also called 'Crowning Glory' of Meghalaya. Tourists have an amazing experience when they observe sparkling clean streets, unsullied drainage systems, bamboo-basket dust bins, and well-trimmed hedges all along the village. One of the most visited sites are the living root bridges, which have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As a traditional custom, native villagers keep doors of their houses open all the time, and you can enter these homes and take a look around for a more immersive understanding of the lifestyle of the locals. The village has some very stunning and adventurous treks as well.

Chatpal Village, Kashmir

Chatpal in Anantang is a village of imperial beauty with stunning scenes and unique cultural traditions. Chatpal is the living testimony to the idiom 'Heaven on Earth' attributed to Kashmir. Flocks of sheep grazing the meadows, an energetic river rushing by, and stunning alpine forests, all add to the beauty of Chatpal. The uniquely styled mud houses give a traditional look to the entire village setting. Long nature walks are also famous through the rich green alleys, and they also offer opportunities for bonding with locals.

Activities in this phase will cover villages located in the blocks abutting international land borders, other than the northern border already covered under VVP-I. Strategic villages have been selected for programme implementation in following states and UTs: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

The Scope of VVP-II has been extended and some new focus areas have been identified with new vision and

mission. This phase lays more emphasis on enhancing vibrancy in target villages by promoting activities, such as village level fairs and festivals, awareness camps, celebration of national days etc. Showcasing of local culture and heritage of villages is also organised to attract visitors. The project also aims to develop tourist circuits connecting border villages. Sustainable livelihood opportunities have taken a centre-stage by focusing on agro-based value chains and branding of local agri-products and cuisines. VVP-II aims to saturate all villages in four thematic areas, namely all-weather

road connectivity, telecom connectivity, television connectivity and electrification through convergence under existing scheme norms. Education infrastructure is getting a facelift, especially with integration of digital technologies like SMART classes. Technology would be leveraged and information database like PM Gati Shakti shall be used for implementation of the VVP-II. Over all VVP-II endeavours to create better living conditions and adequate livelihood opportunities to ensure prosperous and safe borders. This will also help in achieving including growth and curbing out migration of villagers, especially youth.

To accelerate, motivate and inspire village tourism, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has launched the 'Best Tourism Village Competition' (BTVC) at national level. In the inaugural edition of the BTVC (2023), a total of 795 villages filed applications from 315 districts across 31 states and UTs. After scrutiny on the pre-determined parameters, a total of 35 villages were recognised as the Best Tourism Villages of India. The second edition of BTVC (2024) saw applications

from 991 villages from 30 states and UTs. A total of 36 villages were recognised as winners across eight categories, namely Adventure Tourism, Agri-Tourism, Community Based Tourism, Craft, Heritage, Responsible Tourism, Spiritual and Wellness and Vibrant Village. The BTVC winner 2023 demonstrated best practices to preserve and promote cultural and natural assets through community-based values and commitment to sustainability in all aspects. Best practices of the winner villages are shared with other villages for the replication of the existing models and the development of villages.

Village tourism is the key driver of local economy and opens up a new gateway to promote a wide range of local products. This also helps preservation of heritage and culture along with local rituals, customs and social practices. The Vibrant Villages Programme is fostering and strengthening the commitment of the Government of India for the vision of Viksit Bharat @ 2047 for the 'Safe, Secured and Vibrant Land Borders'. It also aligns well with the initiative towards 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'. □



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Health & Wellness Tourism



Individuals may be experiencing different levels of health; someone may need a surgical intervention for an ailment and, as a reactive response, may indulge in medical tourism. Others, as a preventive approach, may pursue wellness tourism to address a psychosomatic condition which may be hindering their well-being and may eventually aggravate into overall physical disorder. With its ancient healing traditions, India, as a destination, offers a unique blend of curative paraphernalia necessary for medical tourism that drives wellness tourism demand.

Dr. Suyash Yadav



While academically studying the history of travel and tourism, earliest landmark events, shaping travel and tourism happened during the years 1600-1800, which witnessed the popularity of spas as the first example of resort based tourism in the western world (Sharpley 2006). In 1730, health experts suggested, that sea water is useful to cure many diseases, as a result many resorts around the English coast (Europe) were established to attract visitors, seeking to cure themselves by sea water. Travel history is filled with instances of travel to places having hot springs and geysers, as the water contained minerals, which helped in nullifying various

bodily ailments. Pilgrimages aimed at seeking a spiritual experience have also been some of the earliest travel motivators. In nut shell we can say that, travelling for the purpose of gaining better health and well-being has existed historically. Over time, this form of tourism has reshaped, owing to physical and mental complications of human body, created due to human evolution and globalisation.

Tourism Seasonality and Niche Tourism Products

It is myopic to consider that tourism is merely motivated by leisure requirements. MICE, wellness, medical, adventures etc. also propel tourist movement. Tourism arrivals at any destination are affected by

many factors, with seasons playing a major role in tourist inflow. The tourist footfall increase during the 'peak season' and gets reduced in 'lean season'. The period from October to March in a year is considered peak season in India, especially for inbound tourism (with the arrival of tourist). One of the core responsibilities of the apex tourism policymaking body of any country is to make strategies, so that the destination can counter seasonality and attract tourist footfall uniformly throughout the year. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (MoT, GoI) develops and promotes 'Niché Tourism' products to counter seasonality and make India a year-round destination. Niché Tourists are tourists with a specific interest. Niché Tourism is also referred as Special Interest Tourism and may thrive even during the lean seasons.

Medical Tourism and Wellness Tourism

According to the Annual Report 2024-25 of the Ministry of Tourism, GoI, 'Medical Tourism and Wellness Tourism' has been identified as one of the eight niche areas of tourism development. Although Medical, Health and Wellness Tourism may sound similar, but there are some fundamental differences, with reference to the clientele/traveller identity, approach

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India added 11 lakh medical seats in 10 years (130% increase) and will add 10,000 more next year

adopted to deliver well-being and health care, setting, duration of stay etc. In 2022, the Niché Tourism division of the ministry, formulated a 'National Strategy for Roadmap for Medical and Wellness Tourism'. Medical Tourism (also called medical travel, health tourism or global healthcare) caters to that segment of tourists whose objective is to seek a surgical intervention for an ailment, driven by a variety of reasons. Wellness Tourism on the other hand includes those seeking destinations and activities that enhance their lifestyle and help them proactively maintain and improve their health and well-being.

Medical and Wellness tourism is not only about foreigners coming to India. It is also important that domestic tourism (within India) and outbound tourism (Indians travelling abroad) are also undertaken to pursue medical and wellness objectives. According to India Tourism Data Compendium 2025 of the ministry, international tourist arrivals in India stood at 14.65 Million in 2024. Medical tourism accounted for 6.48 per cent of total foreign arrivals in India in

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BOOSTING MEDICAL TOURISM | HEAL IN INDIA

BUDGET 2025

Union BUDGET 2025-26

- 1 Government to promote medical tourism with private sector collaboration
- 2 Simplified visa norms for international patients
- 3 Enhancing India's position as a global healthcare hub

2024, with significant contributions from South Asia (20.27 per cent), Africa (18.93 per cent), and the Middle East (17.88 per cent).

Drivers of Medical Tourism

There are many motivators for foreigners opting India as a medical tourism destination. Affordability of medical care in India is a major factor. According to a *Policy Bazar* report, published recently in *Economic Times* in September 2025, even NRI community tends to prefer India for medical care, due to affordable cost of surgeries compared to western countries. Latest medical technology is available in India and Indian hospitals are internationally accredited. Majority of doctors and surgeons at prominent Indian hospitals are trained or have worked at medical institutions in US, Europe, or other developed nations. This builds trust among visitors. Indian doctors and para-medical staff can converse in English which eliminates the language barrier. Moreover, waiting time in India for surgeries is relatively less.

Benchmarking in hospitals also fosters of trust in medical tourist and catalyses demand. The Joint Commission International (JCI) standards for patient safety and quality of care, and offer accreditation to hospitals that meet certain standards. As of now, approximately sixty four JCI approved hospitals are there in India, with maximum concentration in Delhi followed by Mumbai. India also has enough NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers) accredited hospitals. NABH is India's apex body for setting benchmarks in healthcare quality and patient safety. Medical Tourism is not just for unavoidable surgeries; it also covers elective surgeries like cosmetic and dental care. Medical Tourism is often referred as 'Medical Value Travel' (MVT).

Key Components of Wellness Tourism

Allopathic or modern medicine is based on scientific principles, evidence-based practices, and the use of pharmaceutical drugs and surgical

interventions to diagnose and treat illnesses. AYUSH stands for Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha/ Sowa-Rigpa, and Homeopathy. AYUSH comprises of disciplines other than Allopathy, which are associated with traditional medicine system. Wellness tourism offerings in India comprise of AYUSH practices and even travel motivated at seeking a spiritual experience. Well-being pursuit may be the primary motivator or secondary motivator of travel.

- **Ayurveda** has its origin in Atharva-Veda. Ayurveda provides most comprehensive definition of healthy person as one in whom *dosha* (meta-physiological entities), *agni* (metabolic fire), *dhatu*s (tissues), *malas* (excretory products) and their activities are in balanced state and whose *atma* (soul), *indriya* (sense organs) and *manas* (mind) are in sound state.
- **Yoga** promotes health management by addressing psychosomatic and stress disorders. Eight steps of yoga are called "*Ashtang Yoga*". They are: *Yama*





Hahnemann. It is based on the principle of “like cures like,” which argues that the substance that causes symptoms in a healthy person may treat identical symptoms in a sick person, strengthening the body’s defence mechanisms.

Facilitating ecosystem of Medical and Wellness Tourism

The ecosystem necessary to enhance of ‘Medical Tourism and Wellness Tourism’ comprises of: (1) medical service providers hospitals, (2) wellness service providers, wellness centres, spa’s, (3) travel agents and (4) tour operators, who work as tourism facilitators offering packages comprising of transportation, accommodation, visa facilitation and hospital formalities. Subject to certain conditions, the aforementioned stakeholders’, may be provided financial assistance,

(restraints), *Niyama* (observances), *Asana* (Physical postures), *Pranayama* (Control of breathing), *Pratyahara* (withdrawal from the worldly objects), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (Meditation) and *Samadhi* (integration of mind and body).

- **Naturopathy** believes that body is constitution of *Pancha-mahabhootas* – *akash* (space), *vayu* (air), *prithvi* (earth), *jal* (water), *teja* (sun- heat and light). The balance of these elements is health and its imbalance is ill- health.
- **Unani** system is one of the oldest systems of medicine, based on the teachings of Hippocrates, Father of Medicine. The system offers preventive, curative and rehabilitative healthcare.
- **Sowa-Rigpa** is also one of the oldest medical traditions across the world. This system was reinforced in the Trans-Himalayan region. It is popular in the Himalayan societies of Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh (Spiti and Lahaul), Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal (Darjeeling), Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim.
- **Homeopathy** was developed in the late 18th century by a German physician named Samuel

under the provisions of the marketing development assistance by MoT, Gol.

The visa facilitation process for the wellness/ medical tourist and attendant has also been simplified free. As on December, 2024, e-visa facility to India has been extended to the nationals of 167 Countries under ‘e-Medical Visa’, ‘e-Medical Attendant Visa’, ‘e-Ayush Visa’, ‘e-Ayush Attendant Visa’. To ease follow up visits of a surgery, triple entry is permitted for e-Medical Visa and for e-Medical Attendant Visa and extension may be granted up to 6 months on case to case basis on merits of each case by the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO)/ Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) concerned.

‘Heal in India’ is an initiative of the Government of India where, Health & Family Welfare and AYUSH ministry, are developing a one- step portal to promote MVT (Medical Value travel), with the help of CDAC, to promote above forms of tourism . Thus, through medical and wellness tourism, visitors may alleviate their issues diminishing their wholeness. In this process employment generation takes place, foreign exchange earning contribute to strengthening the balance of payment. □



Tourism to Promote Rural Art and Culture

Rural India's art and culture embody the nation's heritage, but face challenges from modernisation. Tourism can act as a bridge between livelihood and legacy, helping artisans sustain traditions through meaningful visitor engagement. Community-led models like Raghurajpur and Khonoma, along with initiatives such as *Swadesh Darshan 2.0* and *PM Vishwakarma*, highlight how heritage and sustainability can coexist. By linking education, technology, and inclusion, rural tourism fosters pride, empowerment, and ecological balance. Promoting rural art through tourism thus revives cultural roots while creating pathways for sustainable development.

Hemanth Menon

If India were to close its eyes and listen, it would still hear the pulse of its villages: the clatter of looms, the beat of drums during harvest, and the steady rhythm of chisels shaping temple wood. These sounds carry memory. They echo centuries of faith, patience, and rhythm, the language of a civilisation that found beauty in everyday work. Yet as the world grows hurried and mechanised, much of this quiet artistry risks fading into memory.

Tourism, when understood not as business but as bridge, can reconnect art with audiences and livelihood with legacy. It can turn curiosity into connection and empathy into preservation. For rural India, it is not only economics. It is the identity, spirit, and continuity. Sometimes it is as simple as a stranger asking a weaver, "How long did this take?" and listening not just out of curiosity, but also out of respect. In that quiet exchange, culture breathes again.



craftsman at work carries home more than an object; carry a story. In Raghurajpur in Odisha and Hodka in Gujarat, such encounters have restored confidence where pride had withered. Craft trails and homestays have brought income and meaning back to the same courtyards that once stood empty.

Handled carefully, tourism helps tradition breathe again. A craftsperson who meets admirers instead of middlemen understands that their skill still matters. When art becomes a livelihood, it becomes an aspiration.

When Livelihood Becomes Legacy

Every community in India has its own rhythm and hue, a way of turning work into worship. The terracotta horses of Bankura, the masks of Majuli, the scroll paintings of Odisha, and the embroidered mirror work of Kutch are not just crafts. They are a culture's vocabulary. Yet in many villages, the younger generation moves towards cities and other professions for availing better opportunities. The thread of transmission weakens. A weaver becomes a driver, a painter joins a factory line, and with every shift, an old song of skill turns mute.

Tourism has the ability to change that story. A traveller who sits beside a folk musician or watches a

When the Village Becomes a Classroom

In the quiet of a mud courtyard, a visitor learns to shape a pot. Each pot spun in that space is a quiet revolution against forgetting. Rural tourism can transform such spaces into classrooms without walls, where learning flows in both directions. Visitors discover patience and symbolism, while locals rediscover the worth of what they already know.

Across India, weaving workshops in Kanchipuram, blue pottery sessions in Jaipur, and bamboo craft demonstrations in Tripura have become small schools of cultural education. Students visiting under '*Dekho Apna Desh* or *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat*' learn about

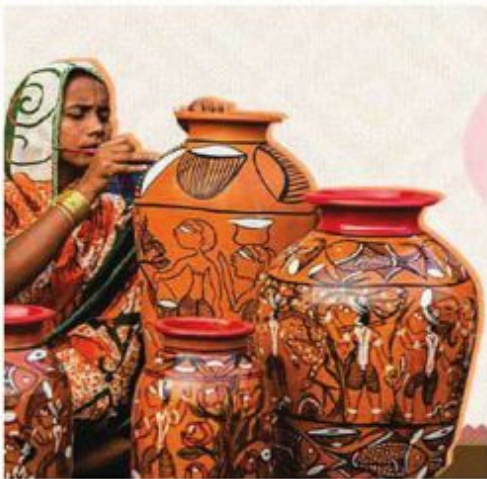
अविश्वसनीय
Incredible India

Ministry of Tourism
Government of India

Dekho Apna Desh
Paintings of
Odisha &
Maharashtra

Pattachitra from Odisha

Warli Painting from
Maharashtra



sustainability through living examples. This is also widely encouraged through the New Education Policy 2020. Design institutions work with rural artisans to reimagine traditional motifs in modern forms. Such collaboration preserves heritage and also allows it to evolve.

When travel becomes education, heritage stops being nostalgia. It becomes knowledge that breathes and adapts.

The Hands That Tell the Story

The people themselves lead the most enduring examples of cultural tourism. In Hodka, Gujarat, villagers manage the *Shaam-e-Sarhad* resort built entirely of mud and thatch. Its design reflects the surrounding desert. In Khonoma, Nagaland, tourism operates under community rules that prevent exploitation of forests and customs. In Raghurajpur, every home doubles as a studio. Visitors walk through an open-air gallery of living art.

Such places show how ownership transforms tourism from performance into partnership. When locals plan and manage what visitors see, dignity and decision-making remain within the village. Women-led collectives like Kudumbashree in Kerala have turned hospitality and handicrafts into platforms for leadership. *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, launched in 2022, and the PM Vishwakarma scheme, introduced in 2023, strengthen

this shift by offering training, credit, and digital access.

Tourism thrives when communities remain custodians of their culture. What emerges then is not staged authenticity but lived heritage.

Culture in the Age of Screens

The loom may sit in a remote village, yet its rhythm can reach across the world. Technology has become a new thread in the weave of preservation. Through digital exhibitions, e-commerce platforms, and social storytelling, rural artisans now find visibility that once seemed impossible.

The GI tags are helping crafts become synonymous with place: Madhubani for its paintings, Channapatna for its wooden toys, Pochampally for its ikats, Kullu for its shawls. Responsible travel companies curate 'Craft Trails of India', guiding visitors through workshops instead of showrooms. A young artisan uploading a short video of her process can reach audiences across continents.

For the next generation, digital exposure has turned tradition into aspiration. Visibility is no longer a privilege, it is power. And when tradition meets technology, culture learns to travel without losing its roots.

Art, Ecology, and the Earth Beneath It

In many villages, the same hands that weave cloth also tend to the soil. Art and earth have always shared roots. Rural tourism that promotes craft must also protect the environment that sustains it.

In Asia's cleanest village, Mawlynnong which is located in Meghalaya, community-led tourism preserves both ecology and tradition. Thenmala in Kerala blends forest walks, bamboo workshops, and homestays to promote sustainable living. Crafts using natural dyes, clay, and jute remind travellers that sustainability is not a modern invention but an inherited wisdom.

Architecture in rural India often mirrors this balance. Walls of mud and lime breathe with the seasons, roofs of local grass keep homes cool, and courtyards open to the sky become classrooms. Visitors who stay in such homes discover that climate-sensitive design has existed here for centuries. To protect craft is to protect the soil and seasons that inspire it.

Recognition Beyond Revenue

The true success of cultural tourism cannot be measured by revenue alone. Its deeper value lies in recognising the intangible. When a traveller understands the patience behind a weave or the story hidden in a dance, a quiet transformation begins. Respect travels both ways, narrowing the distance between the urban and the rural, between the digital and the handmade.

Such recognition restores dignity. A folk singer who once performed only at harvest fairs now sings to audiences that listen to his meaning, not only his melody. A potter whose name was once unknown now sees her work displayed globally. Tourism becomes a dialogue of equality, where appreciation replaces charity and understanding replaces pity.

This exchange is another kind of diplomacy, not between nations but between people. It redefines how culture is seen, not as a souvenir but as a shared inheritance that grows stronger each time it is shared.

Tourism as a Bridge of Inclusion

Rural tourism also carries within itself the promise of inclusion. When women lead homestays, when tribal youth guide visitors through forests, when artisans from marginalised groups conduct workshops, the circle of participation widens. In Uttarakhand, the Umang women's collective has made handcrafted products central to the visitor experience. In the North-East, eco-camps run by local communities employ young guides as interpreters of their own stories.

Such models remind us that culture is not mere spectacle but participation as well. They prove that preservation and progress can coexist. Tourism that includes every voice ensures that what is being showcased is not only heritage, but hope.



The Road Ahead

To preserve art through tourism, India must build not only roads and resorts but also respect. Infrastructure and imagination must move together. Villages need connectivity and comfort, but they also need storytellers who can express the poetry of what they create.

Training must go beyond technical skill to include entrepreneurship, design thinking, and digital confidence. The National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism in India encourages collaboration amongst ministries including Tourism, Tribal Affairs, Rural Development, MSME, and Culture to channel benefits directly to artisans. The PM Vishwakarma scheme provides financial and design support in eighteen traditional trades, while Travel for LIFE promotes responsible travel among citizens.

Private initiatives play an equal role. Ethical tour operators, travel startups, and educational institutions can design experiences that generate steady demand for authentic products. Success should not be counted in numbers alone, but in footprints left behind in the form of revived workshops, recorded traditions, and self-assured communities.

Every traveller who returns home with a story instead of a souvenir adds another stitch to this fabric of continuity.

From Roots to Routes

India's rural art reflects its values: patience, precision, and balance. Promoting it through tourism is not an act of commercialisation but one of revival. Each journey that reaches a forgotten village, each conversation that listens instead of consuming, becomes a quiet gesture of preservation.

The task is not to change what villages look like. It is to help the world see them as they are: self-reliant, creative, and quietly proud. When artisans become entrepreneurs and visitors become witnesses, development itself turns into an act of culture.

Between roots and routes, between memory and movement, India discovers not only a model for tourism but a metaphor for continuity. The sounds that once seemed lost, the loom, the drum, and the chisel, were never gone. They were only waiting to be heard. □



Myth, History and Story Telling Tourism

India's villages are not just geographical entities but living narratives that embody the nation's history, culture, and collected wisdom. Each village carries its own identity; displayed in its traditions, crafts, legends, and community values. When these identities are narrated through storytelling-based rural tourism, they become instruments for both cultural conservation and sustainable economic development. From Mawlynnong's story of cleanliness and community discipline to Raghurajpur's artistic legacy and Sarmoli's women-led tourism model, villages across India demonstrate how identity-driven tourism can empower communities while securing heritage. This article explores how storytelling tourism transforms visitors into learners, connects culture with commerce, and provides a pathway towards comprehensive and sustainable development. As India moves toward *Viksit Bharat @2047*, empowering villages to tell their own stories ensures that progress preserves memory and enriches the soul of the nation.

Dr. Kamakshi Maheshwari

Beyond India's bustling cities and iconic monuments lies a quieter, richer world the Indian village. Rural India is not merely geography; it is a living chronicle of stories, customs, and community life that shape the nation's ethical and cultural fabric. Over two-thirds of Indians live in villages, where the rhythm of life is specified by seasons, stories, and simplicity.

In recent years, travelers have begun to move away from standard sightseeing toward relevant and substantial engagement seeking authenticity, involvement, and emotional connection. This shift has brought rural tourism into focus: a form of travel that does not just exhibit a place but narrates its story. When thoughtfully designed, rural tourism turns the identity of a village into its strength, fostering sustainable

livelihoods while maintaining its cultural soul.

The beauty of this approach lies in its simplicity; every village has something to tell. Whether it is the legend of a river, the craftsmanship of a local artisan, or the wisdom of a community ritual, each of these stories contributes to India's extensive cultural narrative. Rural tourism, when built upon these stories, can ensure that the country's development journey remains rooted in its civilisational memory.

The Village as a Living Identity

Every Indian village carries its own narrative, a unique identity shaped by its landscape, history, and people. For instance, Mawlynnong in Meghalaya is celebrated as the cleanest village in Asia. But behind this recognition lies a deeper story of community awareness and shared discipline. Cleanliness here is not a campaign; it is a culture; an intergenerational practice of dignity, equality, and ecological respect. Visitors to Mawlynnong witness not exclusively pristine surroundings but moreover a way of life that redefines harmony between humans and nature.

Similarly, Hodka in Kutch tells the story of resilience amid harsh terrain, where villagers have transformed customary mud architecture and mirror

work into sustainable tourism. Raghurajpur in Odisha narrates its legacy through the complex and detailed brushstrokes of Pattachitra paintings, while Sarmoli in Uttarakhand expresses empowerment through its women-led ecotourism model that merges livelihood with conservation.

In Tamil Nadu's Chettinad region, ancestral mansions and culinary traditions form a living museum of trade and cultural fusion. Meanwhile, Banavasi in Karnataka, one of India's oldest towns, proceeds to celebrate poetry, temple architecture, and festivals rooted in its ancient identity.

Each of these examples shows that the core of rural tourism lies not in imitation but in interpretation. By understanding and displaying what makes each village unique; its story, its identity, its rhythm; tourism becomes a force for cultural revival and sustainable development.

Myth, Memory, and Meaning

In Indian consciousness, the village has invariably represented more than habitation; it is the cradle of mythology and ethical imagination. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are replete with pastoral imagery forests, rivers, and hermitages symbolising the balance between humanity and nature. Mahatma Gandhi's Gram Swaraj echoed the identical concept: that villages are not the periphery of India but its philosophical centre.

Even today, this symbolism remains alive. The festivals of harvest, the worship of trees and rivers, and the stories of local deities represent humanity's coexistence with the environment. When a traveller witnesses a craftsman painting a Pattachitra in Raghurajpur or stay in a mud bhunga homestay in Kutch, they are not merely exploring a location; they are entering a living narrative of creativity, coexistence, and continuity.

Thus, rural tourism becomes a bridge linking India's civilisational ethos with its modern aspirations. It is not exclusively about promoting destinations but moreover about interpreting identity; ensuring that development preserves meaning, not just monuments.

Storytelling Tourism: Narrating the Village Soul

Every Indian village is a repository of stories; of gods, ancestors, rivers, and heroes. Long before they were written, these tales thrived in the gentle voices of dadi and nani, shared in evening courtyards as lessons



of life and virtue. Storytelling has invariably been the pulse of India's cultural continuity.

Today, storytelling is emerging as a new grammar of rural tourism. Travellers come not exclusively to see but to listen; to comprehend how myths, memories, and local wisdom shape everyday life. The *Baul* singers of Bengal, the *Bhopa-Bhopi* narrators of Rajasthan, or the *Pandavani* performers of Chhattisgarh all embody storytelling as living heritage.

A weaver's theme, a folk song, or a temple legend becomes a window into combined and united memory. Villages are hence not relics of the past but custodians of living heritage, where temples, crafts, and festivals form an unbroken conversation between myth and memory. When understood through tourism, these stories transform into shared experiences, turning history into something living and participatory.

Such storytelling-based rural tourism creates a human connection; one that invites travellers to become part of a village's ongoing story, and in doing so, helps local groups rediscover pride in their heritage.

From Identity to Economy: Linking Culture with Commerce

When the identity of a village becomes its narrative, tourism becomes an instrument of empowerment. Storytelling-based tourism generates employment and dignity within groups without displacing their traditions.

- **Cultural continuity:** Tourism helps monetise authenticity, giving new life to endangered art forms, rituals, and oral traditions.

- **Women empowerment:** From Sarmoli to Kanthalloor, women-led homestays and cooperatives have become spaces of both economic independence and cultural declaration.
- **Inclusive expansion:** Local youth become storytellers, guides, and interpreters, blending customary knowledge with modern hospitality abilities.

Government initiatives such as *Swadesh Darshan 2.0*, *Dekho Apna Desh*, and the Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP) have begun integrating such models, transforming heritage into livelihood and identity into opportunity. The success of Kerala's 'Responsible Tourism Mission', which has linked self-help groups to tourism supply chains, shows how storytelling and community-based tourism can lead to equitable development.

Thus, storytelling tourism does not commercialise culture; it circulates it; turning tradition into a living economy.

Conservation through Community: The Sustainable Approach

Unlike standard tourism that often imposes exterior narratives, storytelling tourism places the community at the centre. It ensures that development remains participatory and sustainable. When local groups become narrators of their own heritage, tourism transforms into a form of cultural conservation.



Folk artists performing during a cultural event under the 'Mera Gaon Mera Gaurav' initiative



It promotes ecological sensitivity, safeguards conventional knowledge systems, and strengthens intergenerational learning; a process best described as cultural regeneration. In this model, heritage is not consumed; it is shared. Visitors become co-learners, not consumers, and rural spaces evolve as living classrooms of sustainability and culture.

Storytelling tourism furthermore reduces migration stresses by making relevant and substantial livelihoods within villages. When villagers realise that their identity and culture have economic value, they invest more in safeguarding their environment, art, and way of life; guaranteeing that development nurtures alternatively without disrupting the community fabric.

The Digital Turn: New Platforms for Old Stories

Digital technology has given rural tourism a new canvas. Villagers are applying smartphones, short recordings, and social media platforms to tell their stories to share their crafts, music, and festivals with the world. From presenting homestays online to documenting local rituals, digital storytelling has democratised visibility.

This transformation is especially empowering for rural youth and women. Through digital platforms, they can market local products, conduct virtual tours, and connect with travellers directly. The Incredible India Tourist Facilitator Certification programme and multiple state-led digital literacy missions have further enabled rural entrepreneurs to present their stories globally.

Technology, when ethically used, amplifies identity instead than erasing it. It permits rural tourism to merge tradition with innovation ensuring that the stories of villages reach the world without losing their authenticity.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite its potential, storytelling-based rural tourism faces obstacles. Many villages still suffer

from insufficient system, limited sanitation, and poor connection. There are gaps in training for hospitality, guiding, and cultural interpretation. Moreover, over-commercialisation risks diluting authenticity and commodifying heritage.

To address these difficulties, an integrated and harmonised and comprehensive approach is required. Ministries of tourism, culture, and rural development must cooperate to create integrated rural circuits concentrated on storytelling and heritage interpretation. Capacity-building programmes should be expanded to train rural youth as interpreters, digital material creators, and eco-guides. Local schools and community centres can play a role by introducing heritage literacy teaching children to value and document their own village stories.

By merging cultural conservation with economic chance, India can create a model of tourism that is both sustainable and soulful.

Conclusion: Telling India's Rural Future

Rural tourism is not about making new stories; it is about rediscovering those already written in the lives of people and the rhythm of the land. Each Indian village; whether it is Mawlynnong, Raghurajpur, or Sarmoli; carries a story that specifies its identity and its place in India's cultural mosaic.



When tourism embraces this identity, it does more than generate earnings; it maintains pride, memory, and meaning. It turns villages into storytellers and travellers into learners, linking economy with feeling and development with dignity.

As the country envisions *Viksit Bharat@2047*, empowering villages to tell their own stories will ensure that development does not erase memory but enriches it, turning rural India into both the guardian and narrator of its timeless heritage. □



Agro-Tourism

Boon to Sustainable Farming

India has emerged as the world's 4th largest economy in 2025. With 15 different agro climatic zones, diverse cropping patterns and culture, agro-tourism can play an instrumental role in becoming a *Viksit Bharat@2047*. The agro-tourism sector can boost sustainable and advanced agricultural ecosystem, in tandem with socio-economic and environmental development. Regulatory reforms with capacity building of farmers, skills training, financial assistance, and infrastructure development can make agro-tourism sustainable and remunerative.

Dr Tanu Sethi

India is an agrarian economy with, about 46.1 per cent of total workforce engaged in agricultural and allied sector activities, contributing approximately 17.8 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in FY 2023-24. It is imperative that the agriculture sector contributing majorly to the National GDP. Agro tourism is a boon to sustainable farming as India moves toward to inclusive economic development in tune with the call made by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to build an *Atmanirbhar Bharat* by 2047.

Agro tourism is defined as a form of tourism where tourists plan their trips partially to engage in agricultural activities or enjoy an agricultural setting (UNWTO,

2012). However, agro tourism definition varies across countries owing to its policies and rural ecosystem. Agro-tourism promotes sustainable agriculture as it enables a connection between consumers (tourists) and agri-producers, promotes indigenous farming and cultural practices, environmental stewardship, and provides additional income to farmers.

Agro tourism offers sustainable and inclusive business opportunities in the country. As per IMARC Group study (2024), India agritourism market size reached USD 1,177.9 million in 2024 and expected to reach USD 4,911.9 million by 2033, exhibiting a growth rate (CAGR) of 17.9 per cent during 2025-2033. India with 15 unique agroclimatic zones has abundant opportunities to promote agrotourism. States like

Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab etc. are already endorsing agro Tourism. Therefore, formalising comprehensive schemes/programmes on agro tourism shall help achieve India's National and International commitment and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs), especially poverty, alleviation food security, eliminating hunger, decent wages and economic growth.

Agriculture Growth: Agroclimatic & Tourism zones

The agriculture sector in India showed significant resilience with consistent growth rates, averaging 5 per cent annually from FY17 to FY23. This is attributed to various government initiatives that envisage enhanced productivity, crop diversification and increase farmers' income. In the second quarter of the FY 2024-25, the agriculture sector recorded a growth rate of 3.5 per cent.

India is the largest producer of milk, pulses, and spices worldwide and second largest producer of fruits, vegetables, tea, farmed fish, sugarcane, wheat, rice, cotton, and sugar. India's foodgrain production grew steadily from 265.05 million tonnes in 2014–15 to an estimated 347.44 million tonnes in 2024–25, showing a strong rise in agricultural output. Around 80 per cent farmers fall under the small and marginal category. Recognising the unique challenges faced by these farmers, the Government of India has shifted its focus from a production-centric approach to an income-centric strategy, with emphasis on raising awareness among farmers for use of the latest and sustainable agriculture technologies.

The Government of India under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi recognises Farmers as key stakeholders and drivers of India's growth. As India enters *Amrit Kaal*, its empowered farmers stand ready to lead the nation from food security to global

food leadership. There are many programmes initiated for rural development and ensuring a dignified life for the people of rural India.

The agro tourism can further help to empower farmers, boost economic growth, and foster sustainable and advanced agricultural ecosystem in the country. India has vast opportunities to promote agro tourism-based business models because of diverse agro-climatic conditions, variety of crops, peoples, cultures, deserts, coastal systems, islands etc.

Synergy between Tourism and Agriculture

According to the UN World Tourism Organization, tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. Over the years, Tourism has experienced continued growth and increased diversification in becoming a key driver for socioeconomic progress in nations worldwide (UNWTO, 2019). Many states in India are practicing agrotourism, including Maharashtra, Kerala, Gujarat, Karnataka, Punjab, Haryana, and Nagaland.

Maharashtra Government formalised agro tourism by establishing the Agro Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) in 2005. It covers more than 200 villages. More than 1,000 Agro Tourism Centres (ATCs) are registered with more than 80 lakh tourist footfall in the rural areas. The Maharashtra Government has recognised 500 farms as agro tourism centre under its tourism policy. This will boost agro tourism and socio-economic development.

Similarly, Agri-Tourism Multi-State Co-operative Society Ltd (ATCOS) established in Kerala State, is registered by the Central Registrar, Govt. of India for promoting agricultural and tourism activities. ATCOS focuses on activities in farm tourism especially spices fields, home stay, organic cultivation, resorts, yoga and naturopathy, back water tourism etc.

Organic farming is the traditional farming system in India and attracts various types of tourists, including researchers, farmers etc. Sikkim, the first organic state in the world, has registered many agro tourism sites. Rural-women participation has been increased in Sikkim through agro tourism. The unique highland plantations and scenic rural settings of Karnataka State are attracting many tourists. The coffee plantation





stays in Coorg are a famous tourist destinations. Punjab state agri tourism initiatives showcase the agrarian life and offers tourists various experiences of learning and enjoying rural settings. The Punjab Farm Tourism Scheme was launched by the Department of Tourism & Cultural Affairs, Government of Punjab. It aims to provide a cultural experience to domestic and foreign tourists through their exposure to village and provides additional sources of income to the farming community. Thus, visitors can connect with the agricultural roots of the region, appreciate the hard work of farmers, and gain a deeper understanding of the culture and traditions.

Integrated farm-based experiences with nature and hospitality supports sustainable tourism practices and provides livelihood opportunities for farmers, especially women farmers and local communities.

Enhancing Farmers and Community Participation towards Agro Tourism

Agro tourism in rural landscape is a progressive model for socio-economic and environment development. For farmers, agro tourism is a potential way of expanding farm operations, increasing appreciation of the agricultural land, increasing long term sustainability for small farms, promotion and marketing of farm-based products in new and innovative ways and developing new consumer market niches. It also improves the rural community participation to generate additional revenue for local businesses, infrastructure development and services. It will strengthen the rural economy through job

& income creation, along with marketing of local traditions, art and craft goods.

International Agencies like The United Nations Industrial Organization (UNIDO) with technical assistance of UN-Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) are promoting agro tourism for rural development in alignment to the targets of the UN-SDGs across different countries. To scale up agro tourism, provisions like financial support, infrastructure development, awareness and skill training on sustainable farming methods are required to mobilise rural resources- local communities/farmers. Many packages of practices on sustainable farm management have been developed by agricultural research institutes and Government bodies. Also, a UNIDO-India FARM project under the aegis of GEF-UNIDO initiative was launched in India on 24th July 2024. It aim to promote ecofriendly crop protection solution. The project is implemented in India by HIL (India) Ltd. These awareness and skilling will bring change at the grassroots level amongst farming communities to choose agri-inputs and promote sustainable farm management.

Wayforward

Agro tourism is a niche sector that is defined variedly across countries. India has emerged as the world's fastest-growing major economy, with real GDP growing at 6.5 per cent and nominal GDP tripling from ₹106.57 lakh crore (2014–15) to ₹331.03 lakh crore (2024–25). The formalisation of this sector will contribute to economic and agricultural development in the country.

India has around 6.65 lakh villages with unique culture and cropping patterns. Identification of sustainable rural landscape is essential to optimise the agriculture and tourism returns.

Thus, it's pertinent to establish that agro tourism is much broader than mere foreigners visiting organic farms. It includes inbound, outbound and domestic movement of policymakers, regulators, academicians, farmers and other stakeholders and it also boasts of a rapidly growing section of institutional training, workshops, and agricultural events.

Capacity building of farmers, skills training, financial assistance, and infrastructure development through policy intervention are necessary for making agrotourism sustainable and remunerative. □



Kartik Poornima Fairs **Vibrant Celebrations Boost Rural Tourism**

***Kartik Poornima*, celebrated across India, blends faith, tradition, and rural enterprise into a vibrant cultural event. Rooted in ancient rituals like sacred bathing and lamp lighting, the festival sustains artisans, farmers, and local markets. Diverse regional celebrations— from *Pushkar Mela* to *Boita Bandana*— showcase India's living heritage. Eco-friendly initiatives and cultural programmes strengthen community participation and preservation. The fair exemplifies how devotion and rural tourism together nurture cultural and economic revival.**

Garima Sanjay

In the heart of India's vibrant cultural tapestry lies the *Kartik Mela*, an extraordinary celebration that transcends its religious roots to embody a harmonious blend of faith, tradition, and tourism. Held during the sacred Hindu month of *Kartik* (October-November), this festival is not merely a religious event but a dynamic showcase of India's rich heritage, economic vitality, and spiritual fervor. From the shimmering ghats

of Varanasi to the bustling markets of Pushkar, the *Kartik Mela* breathes life into local economies, preserves centuries-old traditions and draws travelers from across the globe. Yet, to ensure its enduring legacy, sustainable management, environmental consciousness, and robust safety measures are imperative. A Tapestry of Faith and tradition the *Kartik Mela*, celebrated across northern India, is a vibrant mosaic of spiritual rituals, cultural performances, and economic activity. Falling in

the Hindu lunar month of *Kartik*, the festival coincides with the transition from the monsoon to winter, marking the harvest of *kharif* crops and the sowing of *rabī* crops. This seasonal shift is deeply intertwined with agrarian life, community bonding, and spiritual renewal. The festival's centerpiece, *Kartik Purnima*, is a day of sacred river baths, charity, meditation, and the lighting of lamps, symbolising the triumph of light over darkness. Across India, the *Kartik Mela* takes on unique regional flavors:

- **Varanasi's Dev Deepawali:** The ghats of the Ganges come alive with millions of flickering diyas, commemorating the divine descent of gods to the river. The ethereal spectacle of Ganga *Aarti* and boat rides attracts thousands of tourists, boosting local artisans, boatmen, and vendors.
- **Prayagraj's Triveni Sangam:** The confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati rivers draws pilgrims for sacred baths and rituals, particularly along the Yamuna's Balua Ghat. The mela fosters a thriving market for rural artisans selling handcrafted goods.
- **Odisha's Boita Bandana and Bali Yatra:** This maritime festival honors Odisha's ancient seafaring traders with the ceremonial floating of tiny boats made of banana leaves. The Bali Yatra in Cuttack, one of Asia's largest open-air fairs, celebrates Odisha's cultural and commercial legacy.
- **Pushkar Mela, Rajasthan:** A world-renowned event blending spirituality and commerce, this fair centers around the sacred Pushkar Lake and Brahma Temple. It showcases camel trading, folk performances, and desert culture, making it a global tourism magnet.
- **Tamil Nadu's Kartikai Deepam:** At Tiruvannamalai's Annamalaiyar Temple, a colossal flame atop the Annamalai Hill symbolises Lord Shiva's infinite light, drawing millions of devotees and visitors.
- **Maharashtra's Tripurari Purnima:** Marking Lord Shiva's victory over the demon Tripurasura, this festival sees devotees lighting lamps along rivers like the Chandrabhaga in Pandharpur, accompanied by devotional music and rituals.

Each celebration, steeped in local lore and traditions, reflects India's remarkable unity in diversity,

weaving together faith, folklore, and festivity. A catalyst for tourism and economy the *Kartik Mela* is a powerhouse of religious and cultural tourism, invigorating local economies and showcasing India's heritage on a global stage. Government initiatives like the PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive) and *Swadesh Darshan* schemes have transformed pilgrimage sites into world-class tourist destinations. Enhanced infrastructure—beautified ghats, improved lighting, and better amenities—has elevated the visitor experience in places like Varanasi, Pushkar, and Tiruvannamalai. The economic ripple effect is profound. Local artisans, weavers, and small-scale entrepreneurs find a vibrant marketplace for their handicrafts, handlooms, and traditional delicacies like *sattu*, *litti-chokha*, and jaggery-based sweets. Cultural performances—folk dances, nautanki, and puppet shows—not only entertain but also preserve India's intangible heritage. In Odisha, the *Bali Yatra* promotes eco-tourism and heritage festivals, while Rajasthan's *Pushkar Mela* is marketed globally as the 'International Pushkar Fair', blending spirituality with adventure tourism. The agrarian and cultural connect, *Kartik Purnima* aligns with a pivotal moment in India's agricultural cycle, bridging the *kharif* harvest and *rabī* sowing. This transition fosters a sense of renewal and community, as rural India pauses to celebrate with fairs, feasts, and rituals.

This agrarian-cultural synergy underscores the festival's role as a celebration of life, community, and sustenance. The Government of India has recognised *Kartik Mela's* potential as a driver of economic growth through culture preservation and related initiative. The seven regional cultural centres of Ministry of Culture promote folk and tribal arts through events like the National Cultural Festival and *Lok Rang*. Programmes like 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' foster inter-state cultural exchange, while the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* scheme preserves traditional arts. Initiatives like 'Vocal for Local' and 'Hunar Haat' empower rural artisans by connecting them to broader markets. Tourism-focused schemes like PRASHAD and *Swadesh Darshan* have upgraded infrastructure at pilgrimage sites, ensuring better accessibility and sustainability. These efforts not only enhance the visitor experience but also position India as a global hub for spiritual and cultural tourism.

Kartik Festival's Deep Ties to Agriculture, Seasons, and Local Traditions Across States

State/Region	Agricultural Phase	Seasonal Shift	Cultural Practices	Key Events	Government Support
Uttar Pradesh	Kharif harvest complete, rabi sowing begins	Monsoon ends, winter begins	Ganga baths, diya offerings, fairs	Varanasi Dev Deepawali, Ayodhya Deepotsav	Swadesh Darshan for tourism expansion
Bihar	Paddy harvest, wheat sowing starts	Winter onset	Kartik baths, folk songs, pilgrimages	Simaria Ganga Mela, Rajgir Mela	PRASHAD for Ganga ghats development
Rajasthan	Kharif fodder harvest, rabi prep	Dry, cold winds begin	Animal trade, folk dances, fairs	Pushkar Mela	International promotion by Tourism Department
Maharashtra	Kharif ends, rabi sowing starts	Monsoon ends, dry days	Diya offerings, Shiva worship, folk music	Tripurari Poonima, Pandharpur baths	MTDC's religious tourism circuit
Odisha	Paddy harvest, sailing season begins	Active sea breezes	Boita Bandana (boat festival)	Cuttack Bali Yatra	Eco-tourism and cultural schemes
Tamil Nadu	Kharif rest period, winter prep	Dry season begins	Lamp lighting, Shiva worship	Kartikai Deepam (Tiruvannamalai)	PRASHAD, Incredible India promotion

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, IMD, State Tourism Portals, Wikipedia (2024).

Challenges and the Path Forward

Despite its vibrancy, the Kartik Mela faces challenges that threaten its sustainability:

- **Limited Market for Traditional Arts:** Artisans struggle to compete with modern consumer preferences.
- **Waning Interest Among Youth:** The younger generation shows declining engagement with traditional crafts and performances.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Rural areas often lack adequate tourism facilities and sanitation.
- **Crowd and Environmental Management:** Overcrowding and pollution, especially in river-based festivals, pose significant risks.
- **Digital Outreach:** Local cultures are underrepresented on digital platforms, limiting global visibility.

To address these, a multi-pronged approach is essential:

- **Training and Market Access:** Equip artisans with

skills and e-commerce platforms to reach wider audiences.

- **Youth Engagement:** Introduce cultural education in schools and digital campaigns to spark interest.
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Implement eco-friendly practices and better crowd management systems.
- **Digital Promotion:** Leverage social media and virtual tours to showcase the mela's cultural wealth globally.

Conclusion

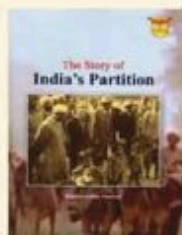
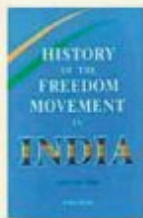
As a beacon of India's heritage, the *Kartik Mela* is more than a festival—it is a living testament to India's spiritual depth, cultural diversity, and economic resilience. By harmonising faith, tradition, and tourism, it has the potential to become a global model for sustainable cultural festivals. With coordinated policies, private investment, and community participation, the *Kartik Mela* can continue to illuminate India's heritage while empowering its people and enchanting the world. □



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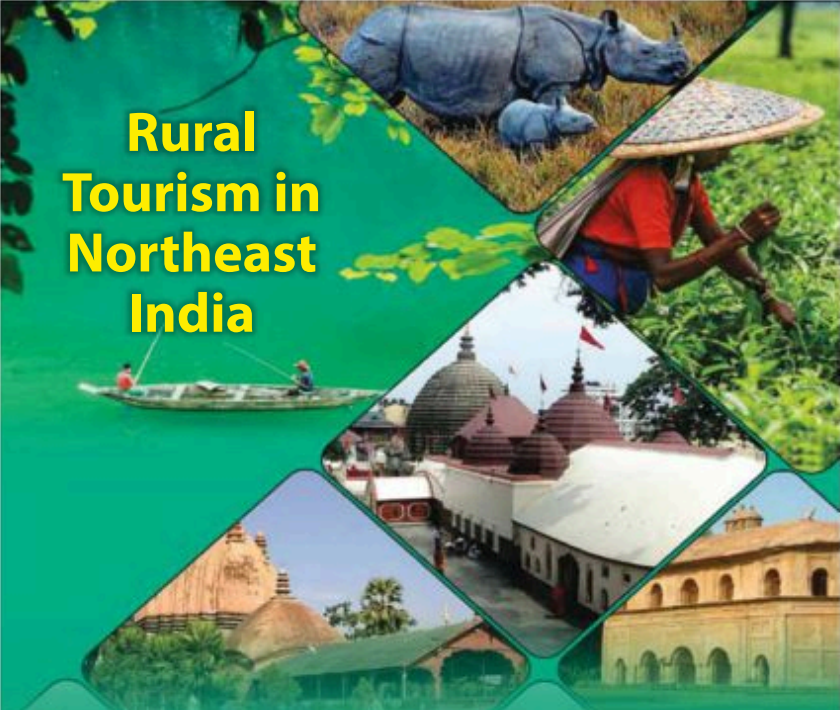
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Rural Tourism in Northeast India



Northeast India, with its rich culture and scenic beauty, is emerging as a leading destination for rural tourism. Government initiatives like *Swadesh Darshan* and schemes such as Assam's *Aamaar Alohi* have empowered local communities through homestays and skill development. Improved air, road, and rail connectivity has boosted accessibility and livelihood opportunities. Each state promotes unique experiences— from Majuli's cultural heritage to Meghalaya's eco-friendly villages. Together, these efforts showcase how tourism can drive sustainable growth while preserving the region's vibrant traditions.

Samudra Gupta Kashyap

T

he Northeastern region of India is an emerging paradise for rural tourism in India. The rural population of this region stands at 72.36 per cent of the total area,

against the national average of 68.84 per cent. This gives the Northeast an edge over the other regions as far as rural tourism is concerned, more so in an era when urban residents are increasingly looking for taking a break from the cacophony of



common man. Tourist inflow has also increased because Central government employees are permitted to travel by air to the Northeast to avail Leave Travel Concession (LTC).

The *Swadesh Darshan Scheme* has benefitted rural tourism in the Northeast in several ways. It includes funding infrastructure development for thematic circuits like heritage, wildlife, and eco-adventure, most of which are in rural areas. This has helped improve facilities and increase tourist arrivals in the region, a sizable chunk of which has visited various rural destinations.

the concrete jungle to spend some quality time in rural tranquility.

Given this emerging scenario, and the fact that the Government of India has laid increased emphasis on rural tourism, most states in the Northeast have rolled out their respective tourism policies with special focus on rural tourism.

Initiatives taken by the Ministry of Tourism have helped support rural tourism initiatives in the region in several ways. These include financial assistance for infrastructure development, promoting the region in various international and national tourism events, and complementing state-level efforts. Projects undertaken by other ministries to accelerate the pace of development in the region have meanwhile provided a major boost to the overall tourism sector in the Northeast. The Ministry of Tourism works with the state governments to help involve local communities in various tourism projects. One major area is skill development and capacity building programmes for the service providers in order to improve hospitality services.

Rural tourism has also received a major boost in the Northeastern states— aptly called ‘*Ashtalakshmi*’ by the Prime Minister— because of major improvement in communication infrastructure. While railway and air connectivity to the region have undergone drastic change, road infrastructure has undergone a revolutionary transformation in the past few years. Subsidies given to the airlines for flying to Northeast India under the Regional Air Connectivity Scheme called UDAN has made fares affordable to the

State-wise initiatives:

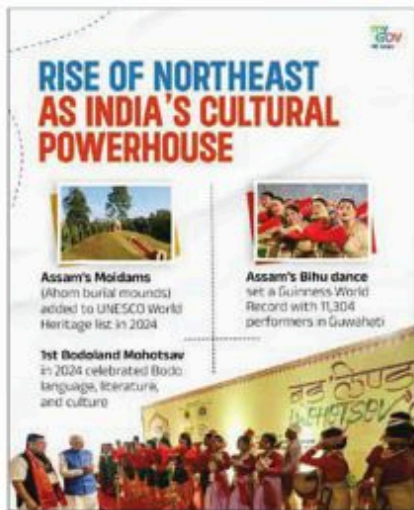
Every state of the region has started laying emphasis on rural tourism in the recent years. Assam’s latest tourism policy, adopted in 2025, particularly speaks about promoting rural tourism by developing infrastructure, encouraging local participation, and providing economic benefits to rural communities. Meanwhile, launched in 2022, the ‘*Aamaar Alohi*’ (Our Guest) scheme has provided a major boost to Assam’s rural tourism by providing funds for rural home-stays. Meant for educated unemployed youth in specific rural destinations, this scheme also provides training to facilitate local experiences like traditional crafts, cuisine and culture.

Incentives provided by the Government of India and state governments have particularly helped promote rural tourism activities around Kaziranga and Manas, two of Assam’s seven National Parks which attract a large number of tourists. While rural tourism incentives have provided additional accommodation close to the National Parks, visitors now stay one or two extra days to have an experience of village life in Assam. This has generated new livelihood opportunities in various forms— like hiring of vehicles, bicycles and bikes, sale of handloom and handicraft products, and providing folk entertainment like music and dance, in addition to rural hospitality and food.

In Assam, a few destinations have been exclusively set aside for rural tourism. The most significant is Majuli, the world’s largest river island. Located in the heart of the Brahmaputra, the 483 sq km island district is a heritage island, having more than 20 *Satra*

or Vaishnavite monasteries, all established during the peak of the neo-Vaishnavite or Bhakti movement in the 16th and 17th centuries. Every *satra* is a hub of spiritual, social, and cultural activities, and preserves traditional arts like *Bhaona* (masked drama), dance, music, and manuscript art. Crossing the mighty river to reach Majuli is in itself an exciting adventure. Putting up in a home-stay or a thatch-and-bamboo rural resort, one can visit villages of different communities including the colourful Mishing tribals, each a living museum of tradition and heritage. Majuli is a designated Important Bird Area (IBA) too, and numerous wetlands here have recorded over 225 avian species, both resident and migratory.

Keeping in mind the large tourist flow to Kaziranga, local entrepreneurs have established the Jugibari Rural Tourism Project covering several villages in Khumtai block, about 50 km from the National Park. It offers village home-stay facilities, displays typical Assamese rural life including fishing and bullock-cart ride and offers boating in a small lake. While bird-lovers can spot several species of resident and migratory birds here, one can also sit on a traditional Assamese loom and learning to weave, husk paddy in a *dheki*, and taste various kinds of traditional Assamese recipes and *bihu* sweetmeats. Since almost every family in Khumtai also has a small homestead tea garden where one can learn firsthand how Assam tea is grown and produced.

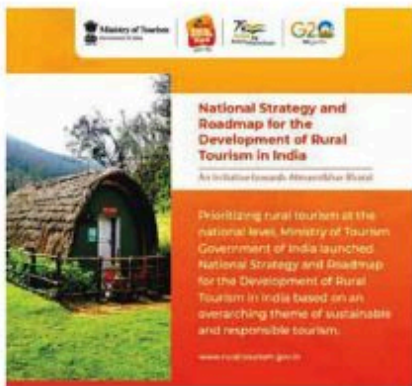


Located at fifty kilometers away from Guwahati, close to Pobitora wildlife sanctuary is Mayong, an occult village where about 100 persons have kept alive the tradition of curing various diseases and warding off the evil eye through *mantra* and magic. Apart from several ancient temples located in the vicinity, Mayong also has a rural museum which displays various traditional articles used by rural folks. Located at thirty kilometers west of Guwahati on the other hand, the famous Assam Silk village of Sualkuchi too has taken to rural tourism in a big way. Staying a couple of days, visitors not only enjoy the Assamese way of life but also see for themselves how *muga* – the golden Assam silk – *paat* (white silk) and *endi* (warm silk) fabrics are woven on looms.

Though its capital Shillong is often referred to as ‘Scotland of the East’, tourism in Meghalaya is largely rural-based, with the state’s policy focusing on rural tourism through sustainable development by empowering local communities. Two of world’s rainiest places– Sohra (earlier called Cherrapunji) and Mawsynram, for instance, are essentially rural destinations, while Mawlynnong is known as Asia’s cleanest village. As Nongriat and Riwai are known for their amazing root bridges, Shnongpdeng village draws tourists because of the crystal-clear Umngot river situated nearby. Meghalaya has recently also made taking local guides for difficult treks mandatory, apart from conducting safety audits, appointing tourist police and 24x7 help-lines.

In Manipur, the emphasis of rural tourism is on creating a supportive framework for sustainable development. This includes public-private partnerships, apart from encouraging local participation from Panchayati Raj Institutions and NGOs, and promoting eco-friendly and low-impact activities. Promotion of the state’s cultural and natural heritage is also another priority, and several villages– Andro, Maram Khullen, Liyai Khulen, Purul and Chadong– have already emerged as ideal rural destinations in the state. Among them, Andro, known for its fire worship tradition and pottery had the Best Heritage Tourism Village in 2024.

Home to 17 major tribes, Nagaland’s emphasis has largely been on rural tourism. The state’s policy has been to focus on eco-tourism, culture and heritage, in the process boost the rural economy by promoting sustainable growth. With better infrastructure and road connectivity, rural tourism has already started creating



livelihood opportunities in the particular destinations. Khonoma, a village where the British had fought the last tough battle to subjugate the Nagas, leads the rural tourism sector with focus on heritage, history, culture, eco-friendly practices, bird-watching and hiking. Meanwhile, a 'Best Village Competition' launched recently encourages villages to meet certain criteria that makes them eligible for rural tourism development.

The new tourism policy of Arunachal Pradesh, adopted earlier this year, intends to redefine the frontier mountain state as a destination for experiential, sustainable, and community-driven tourism. Barring Itanagar, Naharlagun and Pasighat, the state is largely (77 per cent) rural, which has prompted it to involve the local communities in tourism-related activities. These include funds for home-stays, improvement of infrastructure, training for various kinds of hospitality services, and promotion of certain unique destinations. While Dong— the first village in India to see sunrise— has emerged as a popular destination, other emerging rural tourism destinations in Arunachal Pradesh include Shergaon (heritage village), Silluk (cleanest village), Thembang (most ancient village), Hong (village of traditional wooden huts and paddy-cum-fish cultivation) and Tenganjani or Kongmu-kham (village of the golden pagoda).

Mizoram's rural tourism policy on the other hand focuses on leveraging rural areas for tourism while preserving local culture and the environment. While the policy aims to position Mizoram as a sustainable and responsible destination with specific focus on rural

and adventure tourism, local communities have been trained and engaged to harness rural potential through initiatives like home-stays. Mizoram has promoted a few villages close to Aizawl as rural destinations, with the focus on experiencing tribal life, cuisine and culture. Two such popular destinations are Reiek and Sialsuk. A village at 1,548 metres above sea level, Reiek has several traditional home-stay facilities; visitors particularly enjoy traditional Mizo cuisine, apart from a labyrinth of caves and caverns which whisper ancient tales. At 1,100 metres, Sialsuk is popular for its picturesque, rolling green hills and breathtaking views. While Reiek had won the Government of India's 'best rural tourism award' in 2023, the award went to Sialsuk in 2024. Well-connected by air, Mizoram has recently also found place on India's railway map.

Important to note, every outside visitor to Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh have to obtain an Inner Line Permit (ILP), which is available online. Originally introduced by the colonial rulers in 1873, the ILP mechanism is intended at protecting local indigenous cultures, traditions, and unique demographic balance from influx of outsiders to these states where citizens from other parts of India are also debarred from buying land and other immovable property.

In Tripura, rural tourism is part of its broader eco-tourism focus, which aims at promoting community-based and responsible tourism. Increased emphasis has been laid on developing rural infrastructure, conserving local arts, crafts, and heritage, and providing financial incentives to motivate local youth through schemes like *Paryatan Sahayak Prakaipa*. The policy also aims to make eco-tourism as a sustainable industry so that it helps generate revenue as well as livelihood opportunities, at the same time preserving biodiversity and cultural heritage.

In Sikkim, where tourism generates the maximum revenue, the state's rural tourism policy revolves around its broader ecotourism framework. Its policy has been to keep construction to the minimum in the ecologically sensitive areas, ban cutting of trees, and restrict tourist flow to rural areas by issuing limited number of entry permits, imposing environmental fees, and restricting stay time for each tourist. The state promotes experiential tourism through home-stay living, traditional cuisine, indigenous crafts, village life, and cultural immersion. □



Rural Festivals From Tradition to Economy

Rural festivals in India symbolise cultural heritage and serve as catalysts for economic growth. Supported by schemes like *Swadesh Darshan*, PRASHAD, and TRIFED, they promote tourism and local entrepreneurship. Events such as the Hornbill Festival and Surajkund Fair showcase community-driven success in cultural preservation and income generation. These celebrations strengthen rural livelihoods through community ownership and sustainable tourism. With proper planning and infrastructure, India can emerge as a global hub for festival-based rural tourism.

Rural festivals are not just rituals and ceremonies; they are a reflection of the village's spirit, cultural heritage and livelihood. When government policies and local community initiatives come together, these festivals can be transformed into economic opportunities. By focusing on sustainability, local ownership, and effective marketing, these events can be taken to new heights.

Mawlynnong, in Meghalaya, Sualkuchi in Assam and many successful examples like in Odisha show that even small community initiatives can change the fate of villages by attracting national and international visitors. Government schemes whether it's *Swadesh Darshan*, PRASHAD, DAY-NRLM or TRIFED initiatives, when implemented effectively on the ground rural festivals can truly complete the journey from tradition to economy.

Rural Festivals and Government Initiatives: An Overview

Schemes/ Initiatives	Operating organization	Objectives / Key Features	Latest Status / Statistics	Impact on rural festivals
Swadesh Darshan 2.0	Ministry of Tourism, Government of India	• Development of theme-based tourist destinations • Priority given to rural, spiritual and cultural tourism • Rural fairs and festivals included in the tourism circuit	52 projects worth ₹2,108.87 crore approved	• Strengthening the rural festival infrastructure in many states • Increase in local employment and tourism
PRASHAD Scheme	Ministry of Tourism, Government of India	• Rejuvenation of religious tourist places • Inclusion of local religious places in the tourist circuit	Several new projects approved	• Better facilities for tourists visiting during religious festivals • Increase in local business
Incredible India Campaign	Ministry of Tourism, Government of India	• Taking rural festivals to a global audience • Digital branding and promotion of state fairs	--	• Increase in the number of foreign tourists • International recognition of rural crafts and culture
Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM)	Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India	• Empowerment of rural women and self-help groups • Participation of SHGs in fairs and festivals	10.05 crore women and over 90.8 lakh SHGs active by June 30, 2024	• Increase in income from stalls and group sales in the fair
TRIFED / Van Dhan Vikas Kendra	Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India	• Marketing of tribal products • Value addition through Van Dhan Kendras	Hundreds of centers have been established across the country	• Increase in tribal income through sale of forest produce in festivals and fairs.
State Level Investment Package	State governments	• Investment and development through state-sponsored fairs and cluster packages	Several states register domestic tourist growth and investment proposals in 2024	• Commercial expansion of festivals through state-sponsored fairs and cluster packages
Self-reliant India Campaign – Tourism Village Initiative	Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India and State Governments	• Developing selected villages as tourist villages • Promotion of local handicrafts and cultural events • Active participation of women SHGs	--	• New energy in the rural economy • Employment opportunities for women and youth

The soul of India resides in its traditions, customs, and festivals. Celebrating every occasion— from harvest to seasonal changes— has not only strengthened the social fabric but also profoundly impacted the rural

economy. Today, as India rapidly progresses towards becoming a 'developed India' rural festivals and celebrations are still a part of our culture. As powerful medium of economic activities are emerging.

Rural Festivals and Community Ownership Model

Community ownership model is proving to be a powerful approach for rural festivals and tourist destinations. In this model Local communities own their own resources, programmes, and services. The direct benefit is that villagers actively participate in every aspect of the event— whether it's managing fairs, operating homestays, showcasing local crafts or guiding tourists.

This model strengthens the local economy, as the income reaches the community members directly. Simultaneously, it ensures cultural preservation and sustainable development of tourism. For example, this model is implemented on a large scale in Meghalaya's Mawlynnong village or Rajasthan's Community fairs where in tourist experience is enhanced and the economic condition of the village is also strengthened. The community ownership model not only creates economic opportunities but also protects and encourages tradition, culture and local participation.

In India, in the last few years the concept of rural tourism has gained new momentum. Many states have adopted festivals as their tourism identity. For example, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland is no longer just a cultural event but is also a branded tourist product. Similarly, the Surajkund International Crafts Fair in Haryana provides a global platform for rural handicrafts. In Jharkhand 'Johargram' like models are integrating folk culture with modern tourism. Similarly, the Pushkar Fair in Rajasthan, *Chhath Puja* in Bihar, and *Pongal* in Tamil Nadu and *Thrissur Pooram* in Kerala etc. Local and outside people participate in these events. Millions of tourists join in, whereby their direct economic impact can be felt in rural areas. Thus, the involvement of festivals in rural tourism not only creates the identity of the state but the basis of sustainable development.

Socio-economic role of rural festivals

Around 65 per cent of the India's population lives in rural areas. In these areas, traditional fairs, festivals, and folk festivals not only have religious and cultural significance but they are also seasonal catalyst for the

local economy.

- **Employment Generation:** During the festivals, local artisans, artists, weavers, farmers and small traders get temporary and seasonal employment.
- **Encouraging rural tourism:** Tourists are attracted by these events which increases the demand for local accommodation, food and transportation services.
- **Platform for local crafts and arts:** Many fairs provide a live platform for local art – handloom, handicrafts, folk dance and folk music.
- **Cash Flow in the Village Economy:** During festivals, business transactions increase, which keeps cash circulating in rural areas.

Variety of rural festivals in India

Almost every state in India has some kind of rural festival or fair that holds its own identity.

Northeast India: Hornbill Festival (Nagaland), North India: Surajkund International Crafts Mela (Haryana), Pushkar Fair (Rajasthan), East India: *Chhath Puja* (Bihar), *Tusu Parva* (Jharkhand) and South India: *Pongal* (Tamil Nadu), *Thrissur Pooram* (Kerala).

Local and foreign tourists participate in the event which makes direct economic impact in rural areas.

Two successful case studies

Case Study 1: Hornbill Festival 2024, Nagaland

The 25th edition Hornbill Festival was held in 2024, and a historic increase in tourist numbers was recorded this year.

- Total visitors: 2,05,968
- Foreign tourists: 2,527





- Domestic tourists: 56,217
- Local visitors: approx. 1,47,224
- Last day attendance: 32,081 (152 foreigners, 8,113 domestic, 23,816 local)
- Contribution of this festival to total state tourist arrivals: approx. 44.8 per cent.
- **Economic Impact** : Estimated revenue from tourism, local sales, stalls, homestays and transportation Reached ₹139 crore.

Properties

- The state government took steps like eco-friendly management and digital ticketing.
- The event received wide coverage in national and international media.
- Benefited the local communities “Community Ownership Model” was implemented.

Case Study 2: Surajkund International Handicrafts Fair (2025), Haryana

In 2025, the fair broke all previous records for attendance.

- Total Visitors: 15 Lakh+
- Number of registered visitors (official figure): 120 million tourists/visitors (multiple days inclusive)
- Participation of 1,600+ artists and artisans
- Event duration: February 7–23, 2025
- **Economic impact**: Local revenues on big scale were generated from accommodation, food, handicraft sales and ticketing.

Properties

- The fair developed into a platform for international

partnership connecting rural artisans with the global market.

- Haryana Tourism promoted the fair as a brand – developing a sustainable tourism circuit.

Possibilities at the practical level

Considering these rural festivals as strategic tourism-based development model may change the economic scenario of rural India.

- **Sustainable employment**: Tourism promotion activities should be organised throughout the year, not just during festivals.
- **Tourism infrastructure**: Roads, transportation, toilets, accommodation, digital payments can become sustainable investments.
- **Income enhancement at the village level**: Direct increase in the income of small vendors and artisans.
- **Culture Preservation and Branding**: Folk culture gets recognition globally.
- **Employment opportunities to youth**: Event Management, Guiding, Creative Industry.

Challenges

While the potential of rural tourism is immense, certain challenges also arise. Environmental pressure and lack of waste management, erosion of traditional forms due to overcrowding, lack of proper distribution of economic benefits to local communities, dependence on weather and lack of infrastructure are some of the challenges that need to be addressed. Budget allocation for local infrastructure development, community participation and improved technology (such as e-ticketing, digital payments, crowd management) can provide solutions to some of these issues.

Conclusion

Rural celebrations and festivals are a connecting bridge between cultural heritage and economic opportunity. The two examples of Hornbill and Surajkund make it clear that these events have a multiplier effect on the state's economy. If rural festivals are linked in a systematic manner to tourism policy, digital promotion and community ownership, it will not only increase the income of millions of villagers but also give India a recognition as “festival tourism centre”. □



Vocal for Local

The 'Vocal for Local' initiative of the Government of India is a programme to promote self-reliance by encouraging the use of locally made products and services to strengthen the domestic economy. Key aspects include promoting indigenous products through platforms like the Government e-Marketplace (GeM), prioritising for local suppliers in government procurement, and providing financial and skill development support to local artisans and entrepreneurs. The initiative draws inspiration from the *Swadeshi Movement* and is part of the broader '*Aatmanirbhar Bharat*' (Self-Reliant India) campaign.

Key components of the initiative:

Government Procurement: The Public Procurement (Preference to Make in India) Order, 2017 prioritises local suppliers, with provisions to ensure that only 'Class-I Local Suppliers' (offering products with over 50

per cent local content) can bid for many government procurements unless a global tender is approved.

Promotion of Grassroots Entrepreneurship: NITI Aayog launched the initiative under the Aspirational Blocks Programme to bolster local economies. This includes creating a dedicated '*Aakanksha*' window on the GeM portal to showcase local products from Aspirational Blocks.

Support for Artisans and Handlooms: The government provides financial assistance for upgrading equipment, design innovation, and marketing support for handloom and handicraft products. It also organises exhibitions and events to help artisans reach wider consumers directly.

Digital and Skill Development: Through partnerships with entities like the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) and Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), the initiative provides technical and



operational support, including help with e-commerce onboarding, financial literacy, and skill development.

Citizen Engagement: The government encourages citizens to support local businesses by purchasing locally made goods, particularly during festivals. This is often promoted through campaigns that feature celebrities and public figures.

The Government of India promotes its 'Vocal for Local' initiative through various policies, programmes, and digital platforms to encourage self-reliance and empower domestic businesses.

Announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2020 as part of the broader *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* Abhiyaan (Self-Reliant India Campaign), the initiative urges citizens to support indigenous goods and services, particularly during festivals and holidays.

Public Procurement (Preference to Make in India) Order, 2017: This order, amended in September 2020, mandates preferential treatment for local suppliers in government procurement. It restricts or requires special approval for global tender inquiries up to ₹200 crore to ensure that local suppliers have a fair chance to bid.

Support for start-ups and MSMEs: The government provides financial and structural support to Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and start-ups.

This includes schemes like:

Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP): Provides subsidies to entrepreneurs starting

new micro-enterprises.

Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE): Offers collateral-free credit to MSMEs.

Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI): Organises traditional artisans and industries into clusters to improve their competitiveness and marketability.

Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme: This programme offers financial incentives to domestic manufacturers to enhance their production, boost exports, and reduce import dependency in key sectors like electronics, pharmaceuticals, and automobiles.

Digital platforms and marketing

Government e-Marketplace (GeM): An online platform for public procurement where government departments purchase goods and services. In collaboration with NITI Aayog and the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), a dedicated 'Aakanksha' window was created on the GeM portal to showcase local products from 500 Aspirational Blocks.

Start-up Runway: GeM also offers this specialized platform for start-ups recognised by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) to sell their products directly to government entities with relaxed procurement norms.

Marketing support: The Ministry of Textiles runs social media campaigns and organises events to promote the handloom and handicraft sectors and help local weavers and artisans reach a wider consumer base. The government also encourages celebrity endorsements to increase public awareness and support for local businesses.

Broader economic goals

The 'Vocal for Local' campaign is a significant component of the *'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'* (Self-Reliant India) vision. It is aimed at strengthening domestic industries, creating jobs, preserving cultural heritage, and making India a global manufacturing hub. While it has led to increased manufacturing and reduced imports in some sectors, the government continues to refine its strategies to address challenges like maintaining competitiveness against cheaper foreign alternatives. □



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