

Tourism development in J and K create new opportunities

Tourism as an industry has been flourishing and growing since time immemorial. For the last few decades specific attention has been given to this smokeless industry. Tourism has emerged as an important as well as organized industry which scattered its benefits over large segments of the population. Kashmir Valley, known universally as the Paradise on Earth is one of such regions of India which offers variety of experiences to the tourists. There is a need to focus our attention to achieve the required prosperity, well-being and high quality of life for the people of the region by generating the income in the tourism sector. Tourism growth potential can be harnessed as a strategy for rural development. The development of a strong platform around the concept of rural tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 70 per cent of the population resides in its villages. There is a need to find out the importance of rural tourism in sustainable development of the region and also to enhance rural tourism development in Kashmir Valley. Development of rural tourism and betterment of the society are closely associated with each other.

Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Rural tourism is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism. As against conventional tourism, rural tourism has certain typical characteristics like; it is experience oriented, the locations are sparsely populated, it is predominantly in natural environment, it meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions.

Kashmir Valley has the potential to develop the rural tourism industry. Tourists want to see new places which are close to nature and away from hustle and bustle of city. In Kashmir Valley the nature of rural areas is not polluted at par with other states in India, thus there are enough potential for development of rural spaces for development of tourism in the region. Tourism industry is also called the 'Smokeless Industry' because without using any chimney, having more advantages than disadvantages. The sustainable tourism development could be achieved only due to development of rural spaces for tourism. Tourism comprises of the biggest component of the tertiary sector. In fact, one in every 16

workers in worldwide owes his or her job in tourism. Tourism will become the world's number one export industry by the turn of century. So the rural space development could not only provide us the clean environment but also the revenue in the form of tourism. Thousands of the rural people get attached with this industry and get jobs in this sector. Rural tourism is often considered to be intrinsically sustainable, as it attracts small number of visitors, there is no need for extensive infrastructural development, tourists are usually genuinely interested in the local culture and traditions. One of the main attractions of rural holidays is the personal interaction with local residents, so hosts and guests are able to share ideas and knowledge and consequently tourism can fulfill its role as the 'industry of peace', as a tool of mutual understanding.

Nevertheless, if rural tourism development is analyzed on a deeper level, certain doubts arise concerning intrinsic sustainability. The most significant issue to be investigated is the economic profitability of rural tourists' services, since the demand is often seasonal, the occupancy rates are low and the investment required for creating or improving facilities for tourists is often high. In most rural tourists' destinations, it is quite unlikely that tourism can be viable as a sole source of income. Rural tourism can usually be only one of the income-generating alternatives in a region, so its role in sustainable development is highly influenced by the performances of other economic sectors especially agriculture.

The Valley of Kashmir occupies the topmost position in the map of India. Kashmir, along with the region of Jammu, Ladakh and Gilgit forms the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The physical locations, the compatible seasonal division, the richness of flora and luscious fruits and tempting vegetables have attracted every body's imagination in the Valley of Kashmir and as such it is rightly called "Paradise on Earth". Kashmir Valley is endowed by nature with location advantages that it has the potential to become hub of tourists' activity. It is surrounded by beautiful mountains and snow capped peaks which makes the stay in Srinagar pleasant. Excellent scenic, cultural, religious and cultural places are within short distances ranging from a few kilometers to 40 kilometers. Even drive, walk or horse ride to these places is enchanting. Snowy peaks, frozen lakes, ski slopes, pine forests, fresh water streams are the major tourists' attractions of the Valley.

Tourism growth potential can be harnessed as a strategy for rural development. The development of a strong platform around the concept of rural tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost

70 per cent of the population resides in its seven million villages. Across the world the trends of industrialisation and development have had an urban centric approach. Alongside, the stresses of urban lifestyles have led to a 'counter-urbanization' syndrome. This has led to growing interest in the rural areas. Rural Tourism is one of the few activities which can provide a solution to many urban problems. Besides, there are other factors which are shifting the trend towards rural tourism like increasing levels of awareness, growing interest in heritage and culture and improved accessibility and environmental consciousness. In the developed countries, this has resulted in a new style of tourism of visiting village settings to experience and live a relaxed and healthy lifestyle. This concept has taken the shape of a formal kind of rural tourism. So we need to plan the same concept in our country in general and Kashmir Valley as particular.

Rural tourism is a challenging service among the landscapes and cultural heritage of rural communities. Tourism has many potential benefits for rural areas. This activity generates local incomes, employment and growth of welfare and is a valuable contributor to rural economy. Rural tourism can serve as an important source of tax revenues for local jurisdictions and promotes the usage and sale of local food products. Rural tourism prevents viable traditional occupations from being displaced and offers rural residents the business opportunities and creates new employment opportunities. Rural tourism preserves tradition and heritage of rural areas. It promotes the environment improvements within the settlements and respects the natural diversity.