



Social, Environmental and Economic Impact Assessment of Covid-19 on Rural Tourism in India

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ABSTRACT: Several commentators suggest that India has the potential to become a global superpower,^{[1][2][3][4]} a state with an extensive ability to exert influence or to project power in much of the world. Factors that contribute to a nation acquiring such clout can be economic, political, demographic, military and cultural. In 2019, India was the 5th largest economy.^[9] The COVID-19 Pandemic dealt another blow to the Indian economy, but it was able to bounce back, unlike many western European countries. In 2020 India was the 6th largest economy.^[9]

Effects of COVID-19

- severe effects because tourism depends on travel
- quarantine restrictions
- fear of airports and other places of mass gathering
- fears of illness abroad
- issues with cross-border medical insurance
- tourism enterprise bankruptcies
- tourism industry unemployment
- airfare cost increases
- damage to the image of the cruise industry

I. INTRODUCTION

Organisations working in tourism sector have been facing several crises concurrently. The findings of this study on rural tourism should hopefully provide feedback and guidance to face the future challenges that might emerge in the tourism sector. India is a country that possesses an abundance of riches, including wealth, power, and beauty bestowed by nature. It is a place where some regions are considered a paradise on earth. If one were to search the entire world for such a place, India would be the country they should look to. [1,2,3] A country whose geographical journey begins from the snow-covered Himalayan mountains in the northern region, passes through the desert landscapes of Rajasthan, and then crosses the lush forests of Madhya Pradesh. Next, it sails through the extensive backwaters of Kerala before culminating in the crystal-clear waters of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This journey offers a thrilling experience through high-altitude terrains and peaceful lowlands. [5,7,8]

Tourism is a vital industry that has become the fastest growing service sector in India. It has a positive impact on various aspects of development, including social, economic, cultural, educational, and political.

The industry employs both skilled and unskilled professionals, and its potential for expansion and diversification is vast. Apart from generating economic benefits, tourism plays a crucial role in enhancing India's soft power by facilitating cultural interactions between Indian citizens and people from other countries. Such interactions foster regional cooperation and contribute to political stability in the region.

The travel and tourism industry is a rapidly growing sector globally, outpacing the global economic growth rate with a growth rate of 3.5 percent in 2019. This sector contributed a significant 10.4 percent to global GDP, providing employment opportunities for around 330 million individuals and accounting for 27.4 percent of global service exports. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the industry, causing the economy to come to a standstill and resulting in a decline in the sector's contribution to global GDP and employment by 49 percent and 19 percent, respectively. In the domestic context, the sector played a significant role in the Indian economy, accounting for 6.9 percent of GDP, 5.8 percent of total exports, and 8.8 percent of employment in 2019.



India's rich heritage and culture have not translated into significant success in the international tourism market, as the country holds only a marginal 1.2 percent share. This is due to limited tourism development in traditional cities and towns with historical, architectural, and cultural significance. Additionally, poor infrastructure and communication have contributed to the under-exploration of many magnificent tourist attractions, hindering sustainable growth in the industry. To address this issue, India requires a comprehensive approach to developing rural tourism, which holds the potential to drive the sector forward in the future.

Journey of partial success

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), "rural tourism" is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, rural culture, and sightseeing.

Rural tourism offers an alternative to busy urban tourist destinations, allowing visitors to enjoy a healthier and more culturally enriching experience. It can also serve as a buffer during times of overcrowding in popular tourist destinations by absorbing some of the tourist influx.

In India, the rural economy currently makes up 46 percent of the national income, with 68 percent of the population, 64 percent of total expenditure, and 33 percent of savings. This indicates the potential for rural tourism in the Indian market, particularly among millennials who are drawn to new cultures and unconventional, adventurous experiences.[9,10,11]

The Ministry of Tourism has identified rural tourism as a niche area for the development of rural India. To promote local products and services through tourism, a national strategy framework has been drafted that aims to create employment opportunities and empower women. In 2014, the Government of India launched the Swadesh Darshan Scheme to position rural tourism as a major driver of socio-economic sustainability and social integration in rural India.

Historically, pilgrimage and rural tourism have been interlinked and complement each other in generating employment and developing peripheral infrastructure.

To develop selected rural areas and provide hassle-free services to tourists, the Ministry of Rural Development launched the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban mission in 2016. NITI Aayog has identified certain islands, including four islands of Andaman and Nicobar and five islands of Lakshadweep, for holistic development. The development of the Lakshadweep model of sustainable tourism could make India a role model for the world without jeopardising the region's fragile and sensitive biodiversity.

The Indian government has also allocated a significant amount of funds towards the flagship Swadesh Darshan scheme, with Rs 1,412 crore being set aside in comparison to Rs 600 crore in the previous financial year. As part of the revamped Swadesh Darshan scheme, 50 destinations spread across 15 states will be identified and promoted under India's new tourism policy, which is primarily focused on destination tourism. Additionally, the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD) scheme will also receive almost the same amount of funds as the previous year, with Rs 250 crore being allocated towards it. To boost tourism in border villages, the government will facilitate tourism infrastructure and amenities through the Vibrant Villages Program. Furthermore, the approach towards tourism will be integrated with the art and craft sector. The Unity Mall will be established in state capitals or the most prominent tourism centres to promote and sell each state's unique "one district, one product" (ODOPs), "geographical indication" (GI), and other handicraft products. Despite various developmental efforts undertaken by the government, rural destinations have been unsuccessful in attracting tourists.

Face of Adversity

Compared to urban populations, rural populations are not only impoverished but also less familiar with the concept of cultural and rural tourism. Additionally, they lack knowledge about how to market their cultural, artistic, and craft-related services to tourists. Poor transportation, insufficient infrastructure, and inadequate lodging further prevent these areas from being recognised as tourist destinations.[12,13,15]

In rural areas, the main problem is that most people rely on agriculture or traditional artisanal businesses that do not provide sufficient income. This results in families struggling to make ends meet, with few earning members and high expenses. Due to cultural taboos and low literacy rates, many people are not able to explore other economic opportunities. As a result, rural migration has become a major issue in India.

One solution to this problem is to develop rural tourism, which can create new economic activities and increase demand for services. However, this can also bring challenges such as increased competition and crime. Therefore, it is im-



portant to carefully plan rural tourism development to ensure that local communities benefit and the environment and natural resources are protected.

To achieve this, education and proper understanding of both tourists and local people are essential. There also needs to be a democratic movement that allows people at all levels to participate in tourism development and decision-making. Overall, rural tourism has the potential to provide economic opportunities for rural communities, but it must be carefully managed to ensure that it benefits everyone involved.

Major challenges faced in rural tourism development in India are the lack of digital literacy, marketing, and proper tourism infrastructure. While technology can increase travellers' confidence to travel, the low level of digital literacy in rural areas hinders the adoption of technology-based solutions. Despite having a higher number of internet users in rural areas than urban areas, almost 60 percent of the rural population does not actively use the internet. To address this issue, Indian tourism startups can provide digital literacy and simplified digital solutions to improve the livelihoods of local communities.

Moreover, extensive advertising through all media, especially social media, should be an integral part of rural tourism development. Advertising should be segmented, with each segment treating a different target group. Additionally, the quality and capacity of transportation and basic tourist infrastructure, such as toilets, parking, and lodging, are often substandard and unreliable in many rural areas. Therefore, developing community-based tourism infrastructure and attracting public-private partnerships can be a solution to this issue. Also, multi-modal connectivity in line with Gati Shakti should be launched to provide seamless connectivity to rural tourism sites. Infrastructure development is necessary for a rural destination to develop and sustain.[17,18,19]

Navigating the future

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has launched a new initiative called "The Best Tourism Villages," which aims to recognise villages with exceptional cultural and heritage assets. In 2021, Pochampally village, located in Telangana, was selected as one of the best tourism villages by UNWTO. This recognition has the potential to serve as a source of inspiration and encouragement for other villages that rely on tourism for economic development. It is recommended that the government focus on the North Eastern States, which have significant potential for instant growth in tourism. For example, Sualkuchi village, known as the "Manchester of the East," is famous for muga, an exclusive golden silk yarn only available in Assam. Additionally, Mawlynnong village, inhabited by the Khasi tribe, is referred to as "God's Own Garden" and is located in Meghalaya.

Rural tourism can play a crucial role in promoting local economic growth and bringing about social transformation. Therefore, it is essential for the government to recognise its significance and create a sustainable environment to support stakeholders. To facilitate rural tourism, the government should provide both financial and infrastructure support. A potential measure that could be implemented is the implementation of a unified tax system for tourist vehicles in India, which would simplify transportation logistics.

Furthermore, a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders and actions is necessary to bridge the gap between urban and rural development. This would require the convergence of various schemes from different ministries focusing on rural development, with the aim of promoting sustainable rural tourism.

II. DISCUSSION

The development of rural areas is built upon intangible and constantly shifting factors that, through social relations formed in a specific territory, foster a local dialectic. This, in turn, produces a specific type of social capital and a local self-identity (Lee et al. 2005). Local networks articulate the information flow, resources, and identities for the production of beneficial rural development (Jesus and Franco 2016).

On the other hand, the study of rural development and the role that social networks play in such development is particularly relevant in periods of crisis (Schweitzer et al. 2009). In the current century, two economic crises have had an impact on the rural India. First, there was the economic crisis of 2008 and more recently, the health crisis due to Covid-19, which has also led to a major economic crisis (Carli 2020; Mahajan et al. 2020; Kyrgidou 2021; Untarua and Hanb 2021; Carracedo et al. 2021; Coros et al. 2021). As these two crises are so different, the analysis of their respective effects on the activity of tourism promoters in the rural world is of relevance, in order to appreciate the different behaviours in each case. At the same time, given the parameters of the functioning of the rural world, it is essential to observe the behavior of the agents in terms of gender. Indeed, gender is a variable with a crucial role in explaining rural development (Manolova et al. 2020; Phillipson et al. 2020).



Additionally and according to Latour's actor-network theory (Latour 2007), in order to properly understand the network of social relationships, it is not only the influences among the different actors and their contexts that we have to determine, but the tangible and intangible elements that act as a medium for actors and orient their interests, actions, and connections as well. The interactions between different nodes within a network are based on the actors' position of power, their resources and knowledge, their perception of the matter in question and other participants who partake in it, and the rules of the interaction itself, among other aspects characterized by each actor's role (Caalders, 2002; Hwang and Stewart 2017).

In the current India, association appears as a strategy for individuals and local businesses to develop (Luis Busson 2012). Some elements that influence the formation of networks are the participation of individuals in different types of associations, which allows them to acquire a broader list of contacts and the subsequent access to benefits such as resources and information, as well as being able to participate in the decision-making in the fields they are concerned with (Verbole 2003).

Among the associations present in rural environments, we may find rural tourism associations, whose objective is to boost and develop this economic activity through promoters' participation. Doing so sets the path for networks born from this activity to institutionalize and thus constitute formal networks for families and individual promoters to resort to, if their local informal networks become unable to help them develop their activity further (Francès 2007).[20,21,22] The atomization of rural tourism enterprises, their small dimension, and their low level of promoters' professionalization are features that condition the supply of rural tourism, and subsequently limit intermediate agencies' interest in their commercialization (Francès 2006). Due to this issue, new associative models have appeared among promoters, which have been more or less in accordance with the public administration's management, promotion, and marketing policies for the sector. Some of the reasons behind the formation of these entities are the integration of several actors into a single image and action strategy, the possibility of joint promotional and commercial acts, the creation of a centralized reservation system, access to training, becoming eligible for grants and subsidies, the implantation of higher-quality systems, receiving technical support and assessment, and so on (Cassel and Pettersson 2015). Belonging to a rural tourism association also aids in maintaining a cooperative attitude, so that the resulting human resources generate advantages that can assure the economic viability of the services they offer. Both the cost center (for provisions, input, and services, among others) and the profit center (reserves, activities, integrated packages) represent tangible economic advantages, among other scale economies, that could not be achieved otherwise.

On another matter, there are certain sociodemographic features that condition a person's participation in associations and, among them, one of the most important is gender. In this regard, it appears to be that men and women approach networking differently depending on the objectives of the association. Therefore, women tend to have a higher presence in non-governmental organizations, parent associations, and religious ones. These types of associations have a public dimension but do not hold a significant amount of political or economic power and simultaneously conform to the traditionally female-dominated aspects of life. On the other hand, men generally participate more in political parties, unions, sports associations, and scientific and professional organizations (Figuroa-Domecq et al. 2020).

From another point of view, it has been shown that men and women are not represented equally when participating in associations, resulting in unequal access to the benefits of this social capital. In this field, women's public representation is traditionally lower than that of men, which have normally been the visible focus of public spaces. Nevertheless, women's participation in rural associative structures remains high (Lee et al. 2005).

Moreover, the instruction of human capital that participates in the development of rural tourism is crucial (Zhao et al. 2011; Kyrgidou 2021). Rural tourism associations, in particular, have provided a space for the exchange of experiences and knowledge for the sector and where promoters have found opportunities to participate in specific training for the activity (Petridou and Glaveli 2008).

The study of networking in rural tourism during two different economic crises, one in 2008 (pre Covid period) and the recent one caused by Covid-19 pandemic, is the focal point of this research, parting from the idea of identifying gender-based differences in promoters' attitudes and opinions towards it.[23,22]

III. RESULTS

More than just a health crisis, COVID-19 pandemic has stressed across social, economical and emotional dimensions of human well being and health. The sudden enforcement although willful and honest, perpetuated a sense of insecurity and uncertainty as a result of livelihood loss, especially for the people employed in unorganized and private sectors across different urban centers of the country. The unexpected scenario not only caused widespread joblessness but also created varied conditions of psychological stresses foreseeing the less likelihood of returning of pre-COVID conditions. As an outcome of the pandemic, the involuntarily return of youth was seen as a boon for reversing the undesirable and



unprecedented trends impacting the traditional rural dynamics. Present study is an attempt to highlight impacts, challenges and opportunities under and after COVID-19 on rural populace of Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) amid the sudden halt of remittances and jobless aspiring youth. A systematic approach was followed, where 16 villages in eight Blocks of KSL were assessed and migrants (n=815) were interviewed for compiling the information. Results revealed that COVID-19 has impacted (both positively and negatively) various sectors such as agriculture, tourism, overall family income, etc., as perceived by the respondents. Sectors like restaurants/shops, tourism, and agriculture emerged as potential cash generating avenues, with 30 %, 21 %, and 20 % respondent's perception, respectively. It is also revealed that in the absence of immediate alternatives, and policy intervention, villagers engaged themselves in the time tested traditional sectors of livelihoods or created their own niche by integrating traditional wisdom and acquired skills.

The three organisations studied responded well to survive the COVID-19 crisis, and, the responses were grouped into three broad themes, namely importance of a good team supporting the business, increased digital engagements and the need to diversify their customer bases. Practical implications Organisations working in tourism sector have been facing several crises concurrently. The findings of this study on rural tourism should hopefully provide feedback and guidance to face the future challenges that might emerge in the tourism sector. Originality/value This study would perhaps be one of the first to map the responses of organisations working in India during the COVID crisis, where rural tourism has slowly started to become a significant rural development strategy.

India is such a diverse country. Each village has stories hidden at its heart and is unique in some way or other. It is fantastic to see how language, food, behavior, lifestyle, culture, customs, natural resources, demographic subtleness etc. change when you travel across rural India. There is an abundance of facets for one to explore. There is immense potential to develop 'Rural Tourism' in India – It can offer unique experiences and opportunities to understand local life, and to immerse in India's rich traditional and cultural heritage.

Tourists almost never get to see the real side of India – rarely do they get to experience India in its raw form. Promoting rural tourism has dual benefits – it will give tourists an opportunity to experience and explore the rich heritage of India, and on the other hand it'll allow people living in rural India to make a living through tourism.

Anyway, this is not a new concept at all. Rural tourism, even if on a small-scale, has been tried and tested in India for decades. So, why are we talking about this again now? Because, there is a new dimension that has been introduced recently– yes, you guessed it right, it's 'COVID'. Rural tourism can get a big boost in this situation if we can grab the opportunity. As Albert Einstein said, "In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity." [15,17,18]

COVID-19 may facilitate the emergence of new destinations that are lesser known and visited

The pandemic has forced most of us to stay indoors over these past few months, and that has kindled a desire to travel in all of us. We just want to head out of the house and go somewhere. Our heart says, "Go anywhere", while our mind says, "Be careful, we are still in the midst of a pandemic". While we are embroiled in this dilemma, one thing is for sure, our mindset is changing. Our mind is looking for a middle ground probably, where it says, "Yes, I want to go somewhere, but with no risk, or with limited risk." With this, a new set of destinations may emerge which are less-known and less-visited. If this trend continues, sooner than later we will step into a world where Travel will be democratized and reach the remotest of areas.

People travel for various reasons – some travel to break the monotony and take a break, some travel for adventure, where as some travel to explore new places and cultures, etc. Many want comfort and convenience during their travels. But when the urge to travel overpowers the need for comfort, that's when new travel locations are going to emerge. With COVID-19, people's mindset is changing. People are preferring to go to less congested places, and they are willing to take road trips than get on crowded flights. So, I assume, by the time the pandemic is behind us, we may have cultivated a mindset that's ready to explore remote and unique places and not just the stereotypical tourist destinations that most of us were used to. This in turn is going to provide a big boost to the rural economy.

Think about taking a vacation where you can milk the cows, pound the grains to remove the husks and winnow the rice, chop wood, light the chulha (earthen stove), make cow dung cake, cut the grass, cook authentic Indian food, travel in bullock carts, engage in traditional fishing & farming activities, enjoy seasonal fruits and local beverages. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? How about spending some time with the local farmers, artisans, housewives and other members of the



village communities, to see the centuries-old skills and traditions? If this sounds interesting, I am sure rural India has the potential to be a tourist destination, with proper planning and implementation.

But the Indian village experience is not really that easily accessible. There are many things to be improved like the roads, sanitation, drinking water, food, electricity, and healthcare, etc.

With COVID-19 and the push towards exploring unvisited territory, we might not need top-class infrastructure to woo travelers to go to the villages as their new destination. If there are decent roadways to reach the location and ample accommodation in the villages, tourists may not care about other facilities.[12,13,15]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

But having said that, below are the basic things that are required to make the rural travel destinations hospitable

1. Decent Roads to reach the destination. There are many villages in India that are very isolated and not easily accessible. And under difficult weather conditions, it becomes worse. To promote tourism, the first thing that we need is for the roads to reach even the remotest parts of India.
2. Each of the villages may need to have a guest house (with very basic facilities), tented camps, or a homestay to host the guests. Tourists can even stay with the indigenous families from the village and experience firsthand how the villagers go about their daily lives.
3. Basic needs like drinking water, hospitals/clinics, transportation, etc. must be taken care of.
4. The villagers also need to be trained on how to welcome guests and first aid. And if 'Rural Tourism' becomes an affordable and convenient reality in the Post-COVID era, there are a bunch of benefits that will follow suit.[11,12,13]

From the villagers' perspective: Tourism can generate employment opportunities for the villagers, who can then earn a decent livelihood without having to migrate elsewhere. With an additional revenue stream like this, the villagers can improve their standard of living and take care of their families.

From the Tourists' perspective: They will be able to see the real India, which is otherwise rare. There's also a feel-good factor; tourists would feel better spending their money in supporting the less privileged. It's a win-win situation which will help in growing the country's economy and at the same time, it will bring a change in the lives of the rural population.

In order to ensure that this transformation happens quickly, the public and private sectors need to join forces. The results may not be immediate, but it will create an impact over a period of time.. If we are able to pull this off, it would come as a ray of light in the midst of this pandemic. I hope rural tourism will help our rural economy thrive and flourish.[22,23,24]

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