

Homestay as a Driver of Sustainable Development Goals in the Himalayan Region

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Abstract

The Himalayan region has remote areas with abundance of scenic beauty and cultural heritage. Lately, mass tourism has caused irreparable damage to the natural systems of the hill states of the Himalayas. As an alternative to mass tourism the concept of homestay, as the 'soft tourism' with low start-up cost and low visitor impact, has been promoted. Homestay offers affordable and inexpensive lodging for tourists in the existing traditional houses, sometimes renovated for the visitors to make a comfortable stay. Homestay as a means of community-based ecotourism, is adopted as an effective measure of providing livelihoods to the locals. It is about managing all the resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs of people can be fulfilled, while maintaining the cultural integrity, ecological processes, bio-diversity and nature support systems through homestay, as a social entrepreneurship. In this work, homestay is envisaged as a driver to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by steering the pathways to a sustainable future for all concerned in the selected hill states. They address the challenges the hill communities face today, including those related to poverty, hunger, gender inequality, climate change, environmental degradation etc.

Keywords: *Homestay, Community-based ecotourism, Sustainable Development Goals, Soft tourism, Himalayan region.*

Homestay, has lately emerged as the most viable alternative to 'hard tourism' in those development¹ regions where the local economies are positioned in close alliance with nature and culture. Homestay, as a concept is as simple as 'staying at some locals or foster family's home'. The guest of a homestay would be staying in home-like accommodation with shared living spaces, facilities, and amenities (Lama 2018). Utilities and meals are usually included and the length of stay could be daily, weekly, monthly, or unlimited unless specified otherwise by the host (Rivers 1998). The guests of homestay can share the local customs, traditions, cuisine, language and environment so naturally that it yields an experience of 'live like locals' for the tourists. Though, homestay may not represent a new form of tourism accommodation but they are increasingly gaining popularity among the tourists through tourism portals. They act as a means to provide either direct or alternative income to local communities, support local participation, alleviate poverty, empower women, showcase local culture and heritage (Acharya and Halpenny 2013).

Homestay provides a nature-friendly platform for community development as it has low carbon footprint on the natural environment and ecology. It requires low capital outlay thus increasing access to the poor (Rea 2000). Thus, homestay tourism product is regarded as pro-poor which can uplift the lives of the common man. It also promotes gender equality and women empowerment which is a unique characteristic of homestay enterprise. In this context, the homestay as a tourism product, can effectively drive some of the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nation General Assembly, such as eradicating poverty, gender equality, decent work and economic growth. These goals are important because they are holistic in their approach on the principle of 'leaving no one behind'.

Homestay becomes a natural choice in community-based ecotourism which has linkages with skill development, livelihood alternatives, social entrepreneurship and community empowerment. Community-based ecotourism refers to the

¹Development Regions are the regions identified for the purpose of development to reduce social and economic disparities.

collective ownership of an ecotourism enterprise by a community who shares the liabilities and profitability as stakeholders in it. The members of the community may not be necessarily homogeneous in their social or cultural identities though they often belong to the same geographical area. The ecotourism enterprise may be regarded as 'soft tourism' where the thrust lies in the conservation and protection of nature, and wellbeing of inhabitants, as envisaged by the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Such an enterprise at the level of community is primarily responsible for generating the livelihoods for locals through ecotourism activities which are not only compatible but also complementary to the ecosystem of that place. Particularly, in the remote hill region where the mass tourism has precipitated irreparable damage to the ecology of sensitive mountain system, the ecotourism has emerged as a viable alternative of mass tourism. Community-based Ecotourism emerges as a subset of tourism, and the plan to develop community-based ecotourism needs encouraging homestay as a 'package' among those who would like to move away from stereotyped ways of mass tourism. However, ecotourism serves a niche market which remains seasonal and sensitive to many external influences such as political and economic dynamics of the region.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) identified three main types of Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) prevalent in the different parts of development regions: The first type of Community-based Ecotourism enterprise is in which ownership lies with the local community and they are fully responsible for its management. The members from community find their vocations in this enterprise by rotation and all the benefits are accrued to the collective ownership which can be used for community development. The second type of CBET involves some enterprising groups within the community. The third type of CBET is a joint venture between a group of individuals or a family and a business partner from outside the community (UNEP-DTIE). Tourism is seen as an instrument to reduce poverty and a contributor to the conservation of cultural and natural resources. Here, Community-Based Ecotourism is seen as the tourism that is managed by the community for the community. World Wide Fund (WWF) enumerated several basic preconditions for Community-Based

Ecotourism, which are equally relevant for homestay as a means to tourism development, such as low impact visitation, scenic landscape and attractive flora and fauna, receptive local community for visitors, effective community decision-making, no threats to indigenous culture and people, a potential demand by the tourists and means to sustain it.

It has been observed that in the past decades India's GDP has grown rapidly but there persists an economic gap between the urban and rural areas. Owing to this reason, there has been a consistent flow of migration from rural to urban cities. In order to fill in the void, the Government of India has taken initiative to develop tourism in the rural hinterlands. The Government of India established a programme called 'Indigenous tourism' with the support of UNDP, to promote India's cultural heritage and traditional craft as an alternative tourism model for rural India. On the basis of initiatives of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India the State Governments also prioritised the tourism in rural and indigenous destinations, and the 'Homestay' was recognized as the most viable tourism product at such destinations. There is a prerequisite of accessibility in order to develop homestay tourism in the hills. Though it may serve special interest groups of tourists with inclination for natural and cultural elements, nevertheless the comfort and safety remain significant factors in homestay.

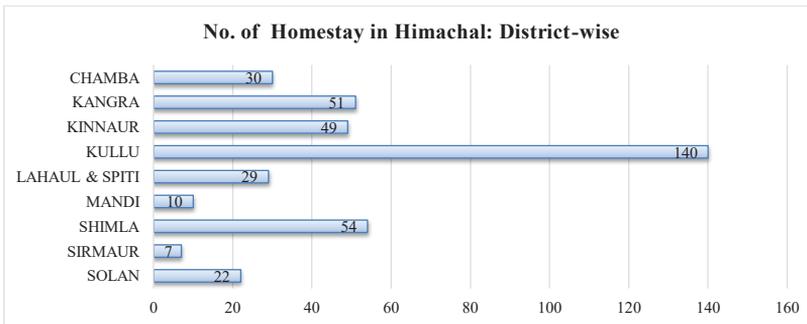
Homestay in Uttarakhand

Homestay is an emerging phenomenon in Uttarakhand, which can not only empower the women of the hill community but also cater to its economic prospects. In Uttarakhand, homestay tourism is randomly spread across the state but is mainly being developed near Ramganga basin around Jim Corbett's village, Kyari, Binsar, Bhakrakot, Dhikule, Agora and Sharmoli. Sharmoli homestay is well known among foreign and domestic tourists. Uttarakhand has 335 homestays comprising both urban and rural, out of which Kumaon Administrative division has 133 homestays (Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board). It has more potential to grow in the Kumaon region because of its landscape's aesthetic appeal and unique hill culture. Uttarakhand government started 'Deendayal Upadhyay Atithi Awaas (homestay) Yojana' with a focus on bringing

out one of the best models of the homestay. The scheme has two aims to encourage homestay: first, to develop basic infrastructure and secondly, to enhance capacity building. Currently, almost a hundred households are officially registered in the three valleys under the homestay scheme. The Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam has brought several villages of Vyans, Chaundas and Darma valleys under this scheme. This has paved the way for developing a first-of-its-kind Tribal Circuit for tourists in Uttarakhand. There is yet another case of Homestay at Sharmoli. It is a small village in Pithoragarh, a successful model of women empowerment which is managed and operated by women groups of the community (Macek 2012). This village as the gateway of Johar valley, has set an example in the growing tourism economy through developing community-based tourism programme with the aim of improving the livelihood of the community and preserve natural and cultural resources of the village.

Uttarakhand is lately emerging as a popular choice among travellers owing to its proximity to the densely populated plains which undergo excessive heat in summer. The road network in Uttarakhand suitably connects the rural areas even in the higher altitude. Though, due to outmigration of young men in search of better opportunities of earning, most of the villages have more women and old people who can engage in homestay enterprise at household level.

Fig.1



Source: Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, 2017

Homestay in Ladakh (Jammu & Kashmir)

Ladakh symbolizes a landscape of sublime beauty. Though it is characterized by difficult terrain and fragile ecosystem, it makes a strong appeal to travellers from all over the world. In 1974, Ladakh was opened to tourism and soon after this, there was an influx of tourists in Ladakh. In the past few decades, there has been a large inflow of tourists which resulted in pressure on its natural and cultural resources. The 'Snow Leopard Conservancy' brought homestay model in Ladakh to conserve the natural and cultural environment and empower local communities. Presently, there are many agencies and organizations working towards conservation through the homestays. According to Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh, there are 72 homestays in function. The main external organisation which initiated the Ladakh homestay movement is Snow leopard conservancy-Indian trust, the State wildlife department, WWF-Leh, UNESCO etc. A study conducted by Anand.et.al, (2012) focused on homestay, namely Kozark Project, located near the Lake Tsomoriri, that has shown huge success in addressing local livelihood needs through biodiversity conservation initiatives. This project integrated the conservation measures with supplementary income-generating opportunities to Changpa population, a local community. The project demonstrated sustainability and green approach through the practices of green, efficient and renewable energy sources, efficient water consumption and waste management and conservation of fragile ecosystem and biodiversity.

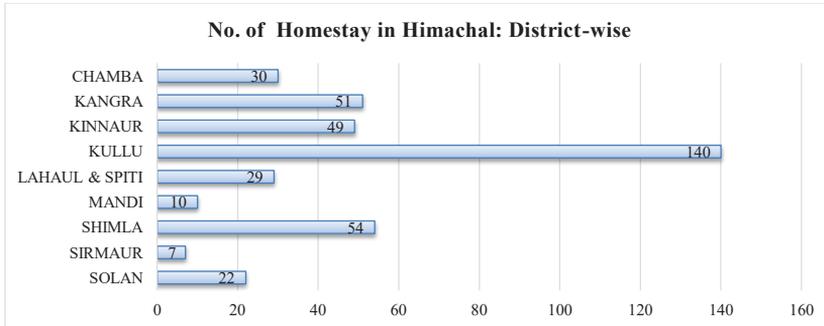
The Homestay model in Kashmir valley is either not prevalent or negligible, due to the political instability over the decades. It may prove to be a high potential tourism product in Kashmir, considering the scenic landscape and distinct cultural identity.

Homestay in Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh is a fast-growing tourism destination in India. It has a high potential for rural and community tourism initiatives. Himachal Pradesh launched Homestay scheme in 2008, as community-based ecotourism in selective manner. According to Tourism and Civil Aviation in Himachal Pradesh (2011), there

are 392 homestays in the state, mainly concentrated in Palampur, Dharamshala and Kullu. Himachal Pradesh has witnessed unprecedented haphazard growth of mass tourism in Kullu – Manali region. This has led the tourists to look around for new options of tourism. Homestay has certainly come up as an alternative to mass tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

Fig. 2



Source: Tourism and Civil Aviation Department of Himachal Pradesh (2011)

Sustainable development goals and homestay

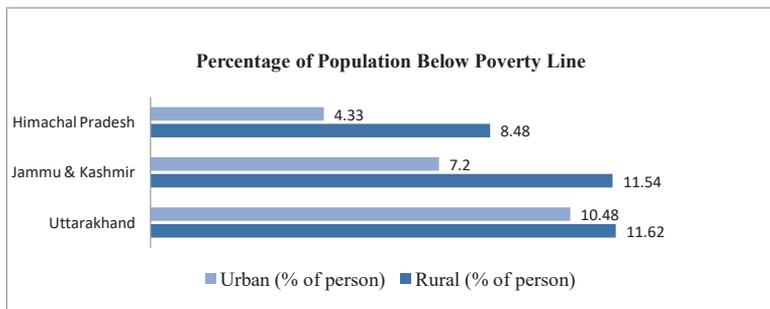
In some of the states of the Indian Himalayan region, the homestay could make some success story, but to sustain its impact, the policymakers need to steer it towards the Sustainable Development Goals, such as – 1 (no poverty), 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth), and 13 (climate action). These are specific goals which are relevant in the context of community-based tourism, particularly in the hilly regions of the Himalayas. The fact remains that ‘the SDGs are integrated, that is- they recognise that the action in one area will affect the outcome in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability’ (UNDP).

SDG 1: No Poverty

The Himalayan communities, settled in the deeper regions of the nature, are dependent on the rain-fed agriculture which yields the minimal output. Due to the difficult terrain in the high altitude zones

the agricultural land is limited to the river valleys. In the absence of any productive alternative of primary occupation, the hill states remain vulnerable to poor economic conditions. In the Fig. 3, the percentage of population below poverty line shows that in all the three hill states the rural population below poverty line is higher than the urban counterpart of the same. It validates the potential of homestay as a tourism product to become instrumental in reducing the poverty in such rural areas. Comparatively speaking, the position of Himachal Pradesh is better than Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir where the government.

Fig. 3



Source: Based on MRP consumption, 2011-12 (RBI Annual Report- Handbook of Statistics on Indian Economy, 2015)

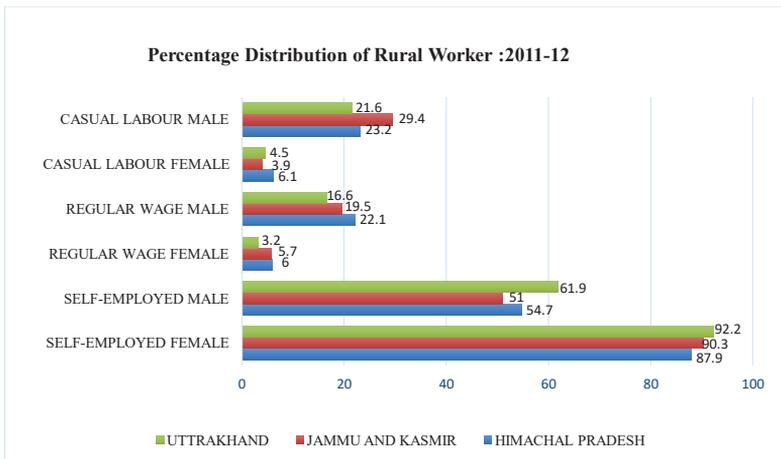
Government policies need to push the tourism strategies in favour of rural population in a more diverse and sustained manner because ‘poverty is more than just the lack of income or access to resources – it manifests itself in diminished opportunities for education, social discrimination and the inability to participate in decision-making processes’ (UN India). In this situation, the Homestay as a means of community-based ecotourism development can help significantly in reducing the poverty at the grass-roots by providing a viable economic activity to the stakeholders at household or community levels. The income thus generated will bring about the opportunities for the locals to develop resilience to any vulnerability- natural, financial or social. Community-based ecotourism can be promoted in the interiors of the hill regions where the prerequisites of natural beauty, cultural resources like folk art, folk dance etc. are adequately present, besides the ecotourism

activities like nature walk, nature photography, bird watching, hiking, participating in the customary practices etc.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

The inequality of gender is deeply embedded in the social fibre of this region which needs to be corrected through an intensive shake-up at the level of community. The Gender Inequality Index measures the inequalities on the three significant parameters- health, empowerment and labour market. In the context of homestay, as an occupation for individual household as well as the community in rural sphere, it is relevant to look into the inequalities pertaining to labour force and assess the participatory rates on the basis of gender therein.

Fig. 4

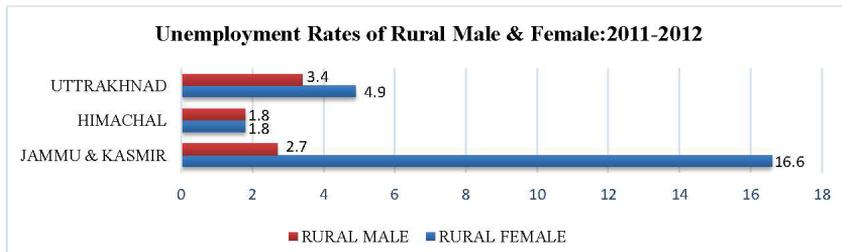


Source: National Sample Survey office, 68th round, July 2011- June 2012

Fig. 4 shows the percentage distribution of rural workers, where female casual labour percentage is very low as compared to the males in Himalayan states (Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh). Similarly, in the regular wage category also, female participation is far less than males. It is only in self employment, which takes into account the contributing family workers, the females show significantly high percentage, as they are primarily engaged in farming and other household chores. This

indicates the gender inequality prevailing in the labour force of the hill region.

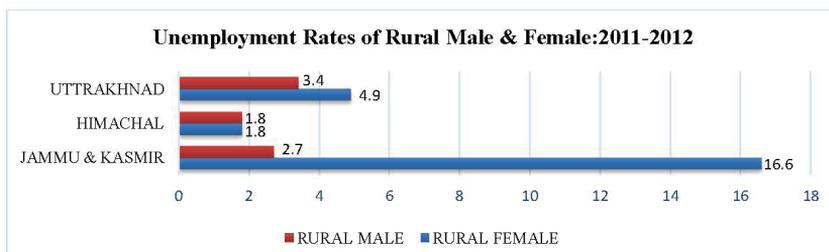
Fig.5



Source: National Sample Survey Office, 68th round, July 2011- June 2012

Fig.5 depicts the unemployment rates of rural workers of the Himalayan region. In Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttarakhand, rural females unemployment exceeds the rural males, particularly, in the case of Jammu and Kashmir the inequality is glaring at 16.6 percent compared to 2.7 percent for males, though this kind of inequality may be attributed more to non-economic reasons. It is only Himachal Pradesh which has the same unemployment rates for both rural men and women which is 1.8%, probably due to the engagement of females in orchards and organic farming. The higher unemployment of females adequately indicates the economic inequality on the basis of gender.

Fig. 6



Source: Women and men in India, 2019(Based on census 2011 data)

In Fig. 6, the data shows the rural workforce participation rate. There exists a huge gap between rural men and women workforce

in the selected Himalayan states. In the case of all the three states the inequality prevails in the participation of women in workforce. 'By investing in the empowerment of women, we not only make progress on Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, but also make gains on the alleviation of poverty and fuel sustainable economic growth' (UN India).

The goal of gender equality can be well achieved by making the homestay a social and community enterprise in which the women should be the actor as well as receiver of the benefits produced by it. 'Homestay as tourism product operated by women in rural areas is described as a vehicle for community development through women's emancipation from gender inequality and conventional labour division' (Acharya & Halpenny 2013).

SDG 8: Decent work and Economic growth

This SDG aims at the inclusive economic growth characterised by the decent jobs for all. 'A continued lack of decent work opportunities, insufficient investments and under-consumption has led to an erosion of the basic social contract underlying democratic societies, that all must share in progress' (UN India). The mainstay of hill economy is primary occupation which is traditionally prevalent in the selected states, but there is a dire need to supplement this with job opportunities of present relevance of diverse nature, such as offered under tourism. A qualitative change can be brought through the training in soft skills, hospitality and service. The youth and women can emerge as the prime beneficiaries within the larger extent of a community.

TABLE-1

**Gross State Domestic product at current price (in crore):
Base Year 2011-2012**

State	2016-2017	2017-2018
Himachal Pradesh	125634	140613
Jammu and Kashmir	125379	138488
Uttarakhand	195125	222836

Source: Directorate of Economics & Statistics of respective State Government (2012)

As per Table-1, all the three states experience growth in their Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). The economic condition of these states shows an upward growth. GSDP is the prime indicator of any economic development, it shows that these states have the potential for more growth and development in the long run. It also shows that there is a need to invest in various sectors of economy; private, public or private public model. Tourism is a potential sector which can contribute well in the percentage of GSDP than other economic sectors. Homestay, as an enterprise under community-based tourism has a range of services from skilled to unskilled. As they are managed and controlled by the local community the economic growth becomes a collective endeavour for the benefit of all.

SDG 13: Climate Action

In India where nearly 300 million people depend on forest for their livelihoods and subsistence, the selected Himalayan states of Uttarakhand, Himachal and J&K must protect and conserve their forests for maintaining the natural resource base. The 'soft tourism' variants such as nature tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism, are non-exploitative and non-consummative in their impact. Such tourism types cause minimal impact on nature. In fact, the homestay enterprise is committed to protect their nature and culture because the visitors are inclined to appreciate the worth of such resources during homestay which translates into the income of locals. The climate action initiatives under homestay may range from use of energy efficient and non-renewable alternatives like solar energy, to water conservation through indigenous methods. It may be very exciting for the eco-tourists to see the water-mill in the villages or the 'natural springs' getting recharged during wet season. The homestay must pledge to manage the waste generated from the visitation of tourists.

Conclusion

Homestay in the Himalayan region emerges as a viable alternative to mass tourism. The impact of homestay may be as low as living like locals. The inclusive nature of this tourism identifies it as pro-poor and pro-women tourism. Involvement of youth in community-

based local level tourism plays a vital role in achieving economic, environmental and social development, thereby reversing the outmigration to the plains. It is not only a tourism product but also a driver of sustainable development goals as envisaged by United Nations, in respect of several of the goals. Homestay may become an effective tool to eradicate poverty in a unique manner by providing source of income to the locals in their native hinterland. Thus, by improving livelihood opportunities it reduces the vulnerabilities and provides resilience against natural, economic and cultural challenges even in far interiors of the hill region. In the context of gender equality in the hill communities it has become a leveller of a sort which redefines the stereotyped responsibilities of women at household and community levels, and empowers them to manage the enterprise as a decision maker. Homestay, as a part of community-based ecotourism entails decent work for all women and men, which steadily and surely steer towards economic growth in the development region of high mountains. The climate action among the hill community is closely tied to their indigenous wisdom which is revived, redefined and rediscovered in the pursuit of community-based ecotourism.

Homestay, as a driver of Sustainable Development Goals in the Himalayan states, needs a discreet planning and management with professionalism at its best, supplemented by well-organised training programs in hospitality, communications and soft skills. Homestay enterprise also needs forward-looking strategies to ensure that they are sustained to fulfil the SDGs in a time-bound manner, on the universal call by UNDP.

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