

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF HOMESTAYS: A CASE OF TIRTHAN VALLEY IN HIMACHAL PRADESH (INDIA)

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Abstract

The homestay programme has evolved as an instrument for employment generation and economic development of a local community. Economic empowerment is important because it enables the host residents to be rewarded with a significant proportion of the financial benefits from tourism. The study area for the present study is the Tirthan Valley in Himachal Pradesh. It is known as the gateway to The Great Himalayan National Park, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The case study method will be used for the research purpose. Primary data will be collected using a questionnaire and in-depth interview. Homestay owners, local vendors, and other service providers will be interviewed using convenient and snowball sampling technique. The contribution of homestays will be studied from various aspects like average income earned, number of jobs created, women entrepreneurs involved, reverse migration, development of infrastructure, rise in standard of living, etc. This study contributes to tourism research by exploring the economic contributions of homestay programme.

Key Words: Homestay programme, Economic development, Community-based tourism, Employment generation, Tirthan Valley

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Introduction

Homestays are defined as private homes in which unused homes are rented to tourists for the purpose of enhancing the income of local people and also to enhance the experiences of the tourists visiting them. This

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concept is particularly found in rural areas that include both the cultural and the natural sites. These kinds of initiatives invite tourist to experience and witness the culture of the offbeat sites and also to inject money directly into the economy of these areas. The owners of the homestays generate additional income by proving the resources which are already with them, that is their own home, to the tourists.

Whereas tourism is usually thought of as a process which provides income generating activities for the population (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Ibrahim & Abdul Razzaq, 2011; Tourism, Plan, Tourism, & Program, 2010), the homestay programmes have been considered as a tool which helps in the development of the community (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Ibrahim & Abdul Razzaq, 2011). Homestays are also considered as small-scale enterprises and the hosts as micro-hospitality entrepreneurs. The supplementary income generated for hosts in rural areas contributes to economic and community development in an area (Malla Thakuri & Nepal, 2017). The attention of homestay concept has received attention from public and private stakeholders because of the clear opportunities it presents in the economic development of the area. It helps in raising the standard of living of the local population both directly and indirectly .

The tourism industry has experienced fast growth and rapid changes in the recent times. It has become one of the leading industries of the world and is still growing at an increasing pace. The destination managers struggle hard to plan and develop a tourist attraction in the present competitive scenario. The researchers have opinionated that motivation and loyalty are also dependent on the kind of atmosphere a destination has (Agarwal & Chakraborty, 2018). The atmosphere of a destination is directly dependent on the happiness and economic wellbeing of the host population. The social media also plays an important role in the creation of this atmosphere. It stimulates and activates the users and helps them in knowledge creation (Lakshmi, Jindal, Nanda, & Mehra, 2018)

It is very important to note that the homestay concept is not new to India. It is from the ancient times that the doors of the family were always open to the visitors. This was an era when no one had even heard about the concept of commercial accommodation and the guest was considered equivalent to God.

A study on the contributions of homestay development becomes much more important in an area which is natural in characteristic and is very

fragile and vulnerable to destruction. It is well accepted now that the support of local community is very important in any of the protected areas (Bhalla, Coghlan, & Bhattacharya, 2016; Chee Hua, May-chiun, & Susan Su-Zhuang, 2016; Ibrahim & Abdul Razzaq, 2011; Kamisan Pusiran & Xiao, 2013; Lehsius, Ahmad, Kassim, & Ibrahim, 2015; Meimand et al., 2017). It has been suggested that by creating local incentives and benefits for the local villagers, tourism can instill the feeling of local guardianship in them and they can become caretakers of the nature along with getting benefits from it. Local communities generate income directly and indirectly through homestay programme, which also empowers them by providing local employment, poverty alleviation, attracting tourists and enriching the experience of tourist by showcasing natural and cultural heritage of the destination (Agyeiwaah, 2013; González-Rodríguez, Martínez-Torres, & Toral, 2016; Mohd Nor & Kayat, 2010; Pakshir & Nair, 2011; Razzaq et al., 2011; Sita & Nor, 2015; Yusof, Ibrahim, Muda, & Wan Mohd Amin, 2012).

Himachal pradesh homestay scheme

A Home Stay offers tourists an experience that is made possible only by staying with the host community. Himachal Pradesh government implemented 'Har Ghar Kuch Kehta Hai' (every house speaks something) programme in the year 2008 which was termed very successful in boosting the community based tourism in the state. Under this scheme the state tourism department compiled a list of heritage and historical buildings and sites which can be promoted along with the homestay programme for the purpose of tourism. After the successful implementation of the same, the tourism department came up with another scheme called 'Har Gaon Ki Kahani'. In this scheme the tourism department asked villagers to contribute by telling popular stories that are related to their native villages and explained them that these could help in attracting tourists to the villages. These stories, folklores or fables were termed as a major pull for attracting tourists to the rural areas. The scheme was expected to generate a lot of employment for the local population in the villages of Himachal Pradesh (Gangotia, 2013).

The primary goal of the tourism department was to popularize the local assets available in the villages and to provide an opportunity to the tourist to experience the social and cultural aspect of the destination along with the natural beauty. The government also wanted to promote fairs, festivals, dance, music, food and lifestyle of the locals under this scheme.

The villagers welcomed the scheme with open arms and it was a huge success. It became quite popular with the foreigners who generally want to experience the authentic side of rural India. This experiential feeling was possible only by staying with the hosts in their own homes without any fancy frills and fancies usually found in modern accommodations. A few concerns were also raised by the implementation of the scheme by the hotel industry. The Hoteliers Association opposed the scheme because the scheme could have affected the business of hotels in the due course of time. Their main concern was that the tourists would prefer homestay accommodation over hotel accommodation as the tariff was low in homestays and almost the same comfort was available along with decent room and food in a homestay. Most importantly, home-cooked food and a friendly environment where a guest will be able to interact with the host and other guests was something that a hotel cannot offer. The environment provided by hotels was mostly artificial and aloof in nature. The other challenge that was faced was that the locals needed to be educated so that they would be able to understand the benefits of homestay programme and show interest toward it. This was done with the help of volunteers and self-help groups. Tourists also needed to be educated so that they can act responsibly and pay respect towards the fragile nature and culture of the area. The target was achieved with the help of various volunteers so that the maximum benefits of tourism were achieved without compromising on the carrying capacity of the region (Gangotia, 2013). As of now, the homestay scheme in Himachal Pradesh is a huge success and is very popular amongst the tourists.

Objectives

It is very much clear that no form of tourism can be successful without considering the benefits for the community. One needs to identify all the elements that can be a barrier to the development of tourism programme in an area, relate these barriers to the concept of homestay and then introduce solutions to minimize the risk and maximize the benefits.

The main objective of the current research included -
firstly, to understand the perception of the local community towards the homestay program in the Valley, and
secondly, to review and analyze the economic impacts of homestay programme on the local community.

Literature Review

Homestay concept

Although homestay is considered as a relatively new concept, as a matter of fact, it is merely an age-old concept where travellers used to stay with a family as a guest and there was no concept of commercial accommodation system. The definition of homestay is always different in different situations and different countries. Homestay is termed as a type of accommodation where a tourist gets a chance to live with the host family and experience the local culture. They can interact with the host and experience the family's daily lives. Researchers have referred homestays as commercial homes where visitors or tourists pay an amount to stay in private homes where they can interact with host or family (Lynch, McIntosh, & Tucker, 2009). All kind of services are provided by the local community and the hosts. The homestay seeks to give a tourist an experience that draws him away from crowd, hustle and bustle of the urban areas. It takes them to a locality that is primarily rural or ecological in nature. The homestay provides a tourist with clean, comfortable and budget friendly accommodation. Since the people living in remote and rural areas follow the practices of traditional living in a better way, homestays become an ideal way for the tourist to get in touch with local customs and culture. These accommodations have the distinctive potential to push cultural exchange by sharing life and family experiences (Richardson, 2004). The other terms by which homestays are generally known as cultural stay, host families, farm stay, bed and breakfast, guest house, and self-catering small hotels (Mapjabil et al., 2015). The homestay concept has also been discussed in several other ways and that has led to homestays being known as various other names as cultural homestay, heritage homestay, educational homestay, leisure stay, culture stay, volunteer stay and urban stay (Mapjabil et al., 2015).

Community-based tourism concept

Community-based tourism concept is considered new in tourism studies and not much research has been done on it. The concept of community-based tourism involves the participation of local community in the development of tourism in their local area. The studies on this concept started around 1990s (Asker, Boronyak, Carrard, & Paddon, 2010). Community-based tourism is considered as a sub-sector of the tourism industry. The importance of community-based tourism has also been

highlighted by the Third World Countries in their development agenda (Mapjabil et al., 2015). The main aim of introducing the concept of community-based tourism was initially to provide an alternative source of income for the local residents through motivating tourist to visits these areas, interact with local communities and encourage the locals to provide accommodation for the tourists (Mapjabil et al., 2015). Community-based tourism is considered very important for the local community as it empowers them and supports them by increasing the rate of development. It initiates various schemes which can increase awareness amongst the locals on how they can protect the environment and promote awareness through cultural exchange (Richardson, 2004).

Sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism is a form of tourism which can help in sustaining local economies without causing any damage to the cultural and natural environment it depends on. Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the tourists visiting the region and the host residing there while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is considered as a strategy through which the resources can be managed in such a way that all the needs - social, economic, aesthetic etc., can be filled while preserving the biological diversity, ecology and socio-cultural assets of an area (Butler, 2007; Hussin & Kunjuraman, 2014; Kayat, 2014). The terms like sustainability, sustainable tourism and sustainable development are well established and well researched concepts in the literature that are used frequently and interchangeably by the researchers (Affizzah, W., & R., 2017; Samsudin & Maliki, 2015). The researchers are of the opinion that sustainability can be a tool through which negative impacts of tourism can be dealt with and long term planning can be made feasible through sustained development in an area (Liu, 2003).

Community-based tourism & economic benefits

The travel and tourism industry is considered as one of the biggest employers in the developing countries. Homestay as a form of community based tourism provides opportunity for travellers to spend money within local communities which brings a rise in the regional income sometimes by even more than the value of spending due to the multiplier effect (Lynch et al., 2009). This contributes to the increase in the economic condition of the community and it also increases the social and cultural benefits brought by the increased purchasing power. As explained by the

researchers, the homestay program enables the locals and the hosts to contribute in various types of schemes that can help in raising the standard of living of the local communities by focusing on economic development and social advancement of the local hosts (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2015).

Study area

This study focuses on the homestays available in the Tirthan valley and the surrounding areas like Gushaini and Banjar. Tirthan valley, also known as the gateway to The Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) - UNESCO World Heritage Site, is an Eco zone in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh state of India. The name of the Valley comes from the Tirthan River that flows from Tirth. The river has its origins located in the GHNP, and ends at Larji in the Beas River. The river originates from the cold glacial springs of Hanskund, a snow-capped peak in the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP). UNESCO declared GHNP a natural World Heritage Site in the year 2014. GHNP is a home for various species of animals that are considered threatened mammals (Snow leopard, serow, himalayan tahr, musk deer), three globally endangered birds (Western tragopan, koklas, cheer pheasants) along with many varieties of medicinal plants. The sanctuary shelters more than two hundred varieties of bird species, which are an attraction to birdwatchers from across the world.

Figure 1: *Location map of Tirthan Valley*



The region is dotted with Himalayan villages. It is located at an altitude of 1600 m and is known for a diverse mix of deodar forests, rhododendron

forests, western mixed coniferous forest, ban oak forests and Himalayan alpine pastures. Tirthan is an off-beat destination that is an attraction to all groups of visitors. This Valley is an ideal place for various adventure activities like trekking, fishing, wildlife watching, and discovering unexplored villages located in the hills. In addition to the natural aesthetic experience, the Valley is also one of the best bird watching destinations in Himachal Pradesh.

The Valley is also known for the trek to Sirloser Lake. The lake is located atop the mountain which can be accessed through a six-kilometer-long trek from the Jalori Pass. The lake is famous for its clear and sparkling water which reflects different shades of nature in itself. A short distance from the lake is located a small temple that is devoted to Goddess Buddhi Nagin who is known as the mother of the sixty Nag Devtas of Himachali folklore. The Tirthan River is also very famous for trout fishing option available from March till October. The primary form of accommodation available here is homestays provided by the local community and camps. The visitors to the Valley are those who do not want to stay in fancy hotels and want to meet the locals, know their tradition, and be a part of their culture.

Figure 2: Location map of GHNHP



Research methodology

For the objective of the research to be achieved, a qualitative research approach as chosen (Caldas, 2009). The case study method was chosen to conduct the research (Yin, 2009). Face to face in-depth interviews and

field observations as well as personal field notes were used to collect the data for the study (Caldas, 2009; Seidman, 2006). The case study method helped to gain an in-depth knowledge of the community as it involved interactions with the locals and having a better understanding of their perceptions. The research work included primary and secondary. To obtain the maximum output, the data was collected from three perspectives – firstly, the secondary sources like newspapers, magazines, and research articles were studied. Secondly, individual interviews were conducted with homestay operators and local vendors and service providers; and thirdly, field observation was done to analyze the community participation from an academicians' perspective.

A total of twenty-one respondents were selected for the study. Amongst these respondents thirteen were homestay owners, four were restaurant owners and four were local service providers. Snowball sampling method was used to choose the respondents for the study. Snowball is also known as chain referral sampling. This is a purposive sampling method which takes several factors into consideration like the kind of resources available for study, availability of time, the objectives of research and data saturation. Data saturation is a point where the additional data cannot bring additional insights to the research (Banks, 2009).

The first interview in this study was conducted with Mr. Panki Sood who was a homestay owner. Mr. Panki Sood's suggested the rest of the respondents, as he was well aware of the people and the registered homestay owners in the area. This was done as the researcher was not familiar to the area and also the locals gave more accurate answers after the introduction of Mr. Panki Sood. In addition to this, three respondents were selected based on convenience-sampling method. This method was used to have a better understanding of the perceptions of the local community who were not having any kind of direct contact with the homestay owner.

The interviews were conducted based on various topics, such as why the locals were participating in the homestay programme, the inhibitors, the benefits or challenges of a homestay programme, advantages or disadvantages of having a tourist in their own home, contribution of homestay in generating economic benefits, development of infrastructure because of homestay programme, the socio-cultural impacts and natural impacts of homestay on the local area, etc.

To assure conformability of the data, the researcher recorded all the interviews. The respondents were explained the objective of the research and their consent was taken. The key points mentioned by the respondents were summarized at the end of the interview and the respondents were asked to confirm these points. The researcher did the interpretation of the data after conducting interviews at the end of each day. The recording of the interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed after each interview session.

Discussions

The findings indicated that the Himachal Pradesh government uses the tourism departments to invite the local communities to get involved in the homestay scheme and benefit from the tourist activities. Any person from the local community who can fulfill the basic requirements of the homestay programme can apply to the Ministry and become a homestay host. The officials from the Ministry inspect a home by visiting and checking the various requirements considered in the homestay. The host receives a permit for the homestay operation upon approval and the Ministry further assists them in training and capacity building. The Ministry also encourages them by promoting the establishment.

It was observed that almost 70% of the community was directly or indirectly involved in the activities associated with tourism. The community including homestay owners and other service provider benefit in several ways like providing accommodation, selling goods, operating restaurants, tour and treks guiding, etc.

Creation of jobs

The respondents clearly indicated that tourism activities in the area create a lot of job opportunities. It was observed that because the number of tourists is gradually rising in the Valley, there can be more opportunities to create more jobs and employment. The homestay programme has created job opportunities in several areas like tour guides, fishery experts, adventure sports experts and nature experts. Apart from these, jobs like housekeepers, cooks, and taxi drivers are also directly related to the homestay programme. The homestay tourism scheme has grown manifolds in the area of the hill state because it has provided employment avenues for many local people.

Women entrepreneurs

The research focused on the issue of involvement of women in the homestay business and tried to explore the ways they benefited through it. Eleven respondents from the local communities who participated in the survey were female and the rest of them were males. The research reflected that the women in the local community were more motivated in the homestay programme in comparison to the men in the family. The results show that the homestays in the Valley were mainly run by the women who were involved in activities like cooking, planning, managing, interacting with guests, etc. The homestay in the Valley was an opportunity for women that supported and promoted the idea of sustainable community development by encouraging gender equality. Female ownership of homestay business was helping in regular income generation for women and involved them in mainstream development. Mostly, the women who were working as local guides, running food outlets and selling handmade souvenirs to tourists were of the opinion that the income from homestays has made a significant change in their lives. The income has equipped them with decision-making powers that they used to be deprived of. This has led to a higher sense of achievement and involvement of the women of the Valley.

Rise in standard of living

The development of homestays has increased the standard of living in the area of Tirthan valley. The homestay business has led into development of various facilities like hygienic conditions, schools, recreation grounds, library, etc. Furthermore, the communities receive income and profits from tourism development and it also gives them the confidence to stand on their own feet. The government has also supported the scheme by providing them with various benefits which include exempting the homestays from paying commercial taxes, and supplying them water and power at domestic rates.

Development of infrastructure

Tirthan Valley is equipped with basic infrastructure like roads, drinking water, sewage and drainage, public toilets, electricity, security and communication. It also has several natural springs, public transport services and *pucca* roads. The locals are of the opinion that because of the inflow of tourists these services are taken care of and also because this

area falls into the eco zone of GHNP, the government also takes special care of the infrastructural facilities.

Bringing economic sustainability

The homestay program has succeeded in motivating the tourists to choose the homestay accommodation and off-beat destinations in place of the popular conventional tourist destinations. This has helped in popularizing these destinations and providing alternative income source to rural entrepreneurs. The local population now has an alternative source of income which helps them in the seasons when there is no agriculture. It also provides employment to other members of the family apart from the headman.

All this supports the family economically and they have a regular source of income throughout the year. The primary employment of most of the locals in the Valley is agriculture and some of them also work in miscellaneous areas like shopkeepers, government departments, etc.

Reduction in poverty and reverse migration

Home-stay tourism is a major scheme which helps in the reduction of poverty in an area. The results indicated that because of extra income generated through various tourism activities there is a reduction in poverty level in the village. Also, the youth who had migrated to other cities in search of jobs have started to return because there is ample of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities available.

Increased literacy

Because of the growth in tourism activities, the people in the Valley are motivated to pursue higher education as it will help them to obtain new jobs, and it thus also increases the literacy rate. Many of the homestay owners are using computers and are aware of social media. They are using these tools to spread awareness about their products and services. The locals are also aware about the eco-friendly practices and responsible tourism. They know the fact that to make the Valley sustain in the coming future they have to be responsible hosts and also teach the visitors about the responsible tourism practices.

Survival of traditions

The local community achieves a sense of pride and connects more to their culture, lifestyle and nature because of the homestay programme. They get an opportunity to have an interaction with people from various cultures and ethnicity. This helps in survival of traditions and culture. The research indicated that homestay tourism is an experience-based phenomenon that is directly linked with the lifestyle of the local people and is also geared towards protecting the local culture, heritage and traditions.

Capacity building

There are many organizations, NGOs and self help groups which are working really hard towards enhancing the skills and are organizing capacity building programs in the Valley. These programmes are very important for the hosts and the local people, as they have to be aware of the recent developments and aim to provide best possible services to tourists. These programs help the locals in enhancing their leadership skills, develop management mechanism and increased confidence. Cross-cultural training is also organized in the Valley.

Conclusions

After the analysis of all the interviews the outcome indicated that the locals were pleased by the tourism activities happening in the Valley. The Valley is receiving both domestic and international visitors. The locals were of the opinion that tourism inflow had increased manifolds after the declaration of GHNP as a natural world heritage site in the year 2015. The visitors have become aware of the natural treasures in the Valley and the conservation area and hence more and more tourists are coming every year. These visitors are coming to the Valley for variety of reasons including nature, adventure, leisure, research, bird watching, trekking and camping, etc. The locals now believe that tourism activities have become a tool towards rise in the level of income, enhanced their standard of living and created more job opportunities. Tourism activities have made the valley more popular in both the national and international arenas and are helping in publicizing the natural and cultural assets of the area. It was observed that the majority of population who have participated in the tourism facilities have greatly benefitted from the industry. It was observed that both the people who are involved in tourism activities and

those who have no role in tourism activities in the Valley support the tourism activities in the Valley as it benefits the population in one or the other way. Since most of the people are attached to the natural assets of the area, apparently the most important factor for them is nature itself and then the financial gains. Because of this reason the locals have preserved their nature along with the culture of the Valley and are more motivated to remain in traditional ways, build traditional houses and celebrate local festivals rather than leave it for the sake of a modern lifestyle. Income generated from homestay business was enough to manage the daily household expenditure, health and education of their children. The motive of providing alternative employment to the villagers was successfully achieved. Homestays have also provided the villagers an opportunity to market the locally produced goods like honey, woolen clothes, wooden products, edibles, etc.

Unfortunately, it is also concluded that there is a lack of supervision and coordination on the part of the local authorities. Some infrastructural facilities are still lacking in the Valley like parking areas, proper medical services and higher education system. Also, because of the greater inflow of tourists in certain months local youths are attracted towards the western culture that may effect to run homestay for long term.

The homestay owner wished to get more support from the government authorities so that more facilities could be generated to expand his homestay program. It was also clear that there is an urgent need for supervision in this area that must include generation of awareness amongst tourist so that they can act responsibly, solid waste management, and broadening of roads. Cooperation between locals and authorities is also required so that the tourism industry can be managed in a right direction and avoid stagnation and over-tourism.

Research Implications

This study offers several implications for the success of the homestay lodging industry. First, this study contributes to the theoretical literature on homestay tourism from the perspectives of the local population. Second, the current study contributes to the research by exploring various criteria on which economic benefits can be explored. Third, the study also has practical implications for the policymakers and the practitioners as they can utilize the study for destination planning and development.

Limitations and Scope for future research

The study presents some limitations, which provide the opportunity for further research. The paper has limited the analysis to one particular area of the state of Himachal Pradesh and that indicates the generalization issue. Future researches can include more villages and also a comparative analysis can be done.

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