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Rural Tourism: India an Incredible Tourism Destination

Why You Should Know?

- India is one of the world's oldest civilisations which offers a kaleidoscope of cultural experiences. The country has a rich heritage and numerous attractions.
- It stretches from the snow-capped Himalayan peaks to the tropical rain forests of the south, covering 32,872,263 square kilometres .
- It is the world's seventh-largest country, distinguished from the rest of Asia by mountains and the sea which gives the country a distinct geographical identity.
- It is a remarkable tourism destination that provides visitors with diverse experiences.
- India showcases a variety of heritage resources crafted hundreds of years ago, from huge heritage sites to pristine sea beaches in Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep.
- Tourism contributes to substantial economic, social, cultural, educational, and political development.
- The tourism industry generates both direct and indirect employment. With its rapid growth, new opportunities have increased, ranging from highly skilled and trained managers in high-end tourist hotels to semi-skilled workers.
- Tourism has become one of the most important economic sectors in countries like India, producing significant national income and creating high employment opportunities.
- It has become the country's fastest-growing service industry with excellent potential for expansion and diversification.

Tourism- A Catalyst to Economic Growth

- Under the Swadesh Darshan scheme, the Ministry of Tourism is developing thematic circuits in the country in a planned and prioritised manner.
- Under the scheme 15 thematic circuits have been identified for development; namely, North-East Circuit, Buddhist circuit, Himalayan Circuit, Coastal circuit, Krishna Circuit, Desert Circuit, Tribal Circuit, Wildlife Circuit, Rural Circuit, Spiritual Circuit, Ramayana Circuit, Heritage Circuit, Sufi Circuit, and Tirthankara Circuit.

- The Ministry of Tourism has taken several steps to promote tourism in a sustainable way. It has launched the Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD schemes to improve its tourism infrastructure.
- By collaborating with various Central Ministries/ Departments, State Governments, and Urban Local Bodies, 17 iconic sites in the country have been identified for development.
- It has also launched the "Adopt a Heritage Apni Dharohar Apni Pehchan" project, aiming to improve and maintain visitor facilities at heritage sites, monuments, and other tourist attractions.
- Another significant milestone was the provision of e-Visas for nationals of 170 countries in five subcategories be. Tourist visas, e-Business visas, e-Medical visas-Medical Attendant visas, and e-Conference visas.
- NITI Aayog has taken up the holistic development of a few identified islands in the country. The final Site Potential Development Report has been prepared for four islands in Andaman and Nicobar (A&N), namely Smith, Ross, Long, and Aves Islands; and five islands in Lakshadweep, namely Minicoy, Bangaram, Thinnakara, Cheriya, and Suheli Islands.
- Tourism based projects have been identified in Long, Aves, Smith, and Neil Islands of A&N and Minicoy, Kadamat, and Suheli Islands of Lakshadweep. Development of Coastal Circuit (Long Island-Ross Smith Island - Neil island-Havelock island-Baratang Island-Port Blair) in Andaman and Nicobar under the Coastal thematic circuit of Swadesh Darshan Scheme is implemented for the development of island tourism in the country.
- Given Lakshadweep's enormous ecotourism and fisheries potential, India can become a role model for ecotourism and sustainable fisheries without jeopardising the fragile and sensitive biodiversity of the region.
- Various initiatives, such as undersea optical fiber connectivity, airport expansion, infrastructure upgrading, and a plan to build water villas on (Taj Mahal)
- several islands, are examples of commendable efforts. Large-scale seaweed cultivation attempts to modernise the fisheries sector, and steps to increase production of organic coconut oil and coir are also being pursued.
- National parks form the cornerstone of biodiversity and are important for supporting ecosystems and the flora that live within them. National Parks provide a major boost to the Indian economy, with wildlife and nature-based tourism.
- In addition to the economic benefits, tourism has promoted cultural interaction between Indian citizens and people of other countries and fostered regional cooperation. The sector has also played a pivotal role in enhancing India's soft power.
- The travel and tourism Industry is one of the fastest growing industries globally, with a growth rate of 3.5 percent vis-à-vis a global economic growth rate of 2.5 percent in 2019.

- The sector contributed around 10.4 percent to global GDP, generated 330 million employees worldwide, and accounted for 27.4 percent of global services exports.
- However, COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on the travel industry worldwide, with the sector's contribution to global GDP and employment declining by 49 percent and 19 percent, respectively.
- The tourism sector contributes immensely to foreign exchange reserves in the country and provides employment opportunities, both in the formal and informal sectors.
- In 2019, the sector accounted for 8.8 percent of the total employment, 5.8 percent of the total exports, and 6.9 percent of GDP.
- However, the sector now contributes only 4.7 percent to GDP, 7.3 percent to total employment, and 2.5 percent to total exports. The fact that the Services sector contributes 55 percent to the Indian economy, makes the tourism industry even more crucial for the country's overall economic growth.
- Despite having a diverse culture and rich architectural heritage, India holds only a 1.2 percent share of the international tourism market (2019) as against Spain (5.7 percent), the USA (5.4 percent), China (4.5 percent), the UK (2.7 percent) and Thailand (2.7 percent).
- Countries like the UK and USA have only 34 and 24 World Heritage sites, respectively, but their foreign exchange earnings from Tourism are much higher than India, which has 40 World Heritage sites.
- Against this backdrop, India must adopt innovative approaches to boost and promote different tourism segments such as niche tourism, wellness tourism, adventure tourism, and spiritual tourism.
- Given that India has been recognised as a destination for spiritual tourism for ages for both domestic and international tourists, we must unleash the potential of spiritual tourism.

Importance of Tourism

- In most places of the world, tourism is a significant source of economic growth. Several countries have revolutionised their economies by entirely utilising tourism's potential.
- Tourism has the potential to generate large-scale productive employment that is multifaceted in nature, ranging from highly skilled to semi-skilled.
- Tourism has grown and diversified over the decades to become one of the fastest-growing economic sectors.
- Contemporary tourism is intricately related to economic growth and socio economic development. Presently, tourism also has a commercial volume that rivals or exceeds oil exports, food items, and automobiles. Tourism has grown to be one of the essential participants in
- international trade and one of the primary sources of income for many developing countries.

- This expansion is accompanied by increased destination diversification and competitiveness. The tourism industry's growing importance as an economic engine and its potential as a development tool is undeniable.
- It not only drives growth, but also improves people's lives by generating large-scale employment in a variety of fields. It promotes a rich cultural legacy, environmental sustainability, and international peace.
- In India, tourism has mostly been constrained to a few traditional cities and towns of historical, architectural, and cultural interest.
- Due to a lack of infrastructure and communication many magnificent sites remain unknown or underexplored. Almost every region in India has its own stunning locations that need to be developed and promoted for tourism.
- This necessitates a holistic strategy and consistent policy execution across the country. Furthermore, we require planning and financial support from both the States and the Centre in order to develop all of these areas in a systematic manner.
- There arises the need to focus on rural tourism, which is the future of driving the tourism sector ahead.

A Special Focus on Rural Tourism

- With the phenomenal rise of the tourism industry worldwide, the Government of India has implemented several policy initiative to boost tourism.
- To make "Incredible India" an attractive tourist destination globally new tourism goods and packages such as business tourism health tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism/adventure tourism, pilgrimage tourism, adventure tourism, and sustainable tourism are being developed.
- India's rural heartland is an unexplored treasure with its different lifestyles focusing on art and crafts, culture, and natural heritage. Over the past few decades, the country's tourism industry has grown exponentially, but rural tourism has never been given full attention.
- India's rural areas have a lot to offer to the rest of the world. Rural India, which is rich in arts, crafts, and culture, has the potential to become a tourist hotspot.
- If the concept of rural tourism is well-marketed, those in the developed world, particularly millennials who are fascinated by traditional ways of life, arts, and crafts will be drawn to visit rural India.
- The Ministry of Tourism has designated rural tourism as one of the Niche Tourism sectors for growth in the country.
- The Ministry has developed a Draft National Strategy and Roadmap for Rural Tourism, which focuses on developing and promoting local products through tourism.

- As a result, this leads to the generation of income and employment in rural areas and empowers local communities, youth, and women to realise Aatma Nirbhar Bharat's vision.
- Recognising the potential of rural tourism in the country, the Ministry of Tourism has designated the Rural Circuit as one of the fifteen thematic circuits for development under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme.
- The intention was to use tourism as a force multiplier to revitalise the rural economy and provide domestic and international tourists a glimpse of the country's rural aspects.
- The details of the projects sanctioned by the Ministry of Tourism under the Rural Circuit theme of the swadesh darshan in the country are Development of Gandhi Circuit: Bhitiharwa Chandrahia- TuBaulia (Bihar and development of Malanad Malabak Cruise Tourism Project (Kerala)".

• **The National and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism in India - An initiative towards Aatma Nirbhar Bharat - focuses on the following key pillars:**

1. Model policies and best practices for rural tourism

2. Digital technologies and platforms for rural tourism

3. Developing clusters for rural tourism

4. Marketing support for rural tourism Capacity building of stakeholders

5. Governance and institutional framework

- The Ministry has now revamped the Swadesh Darshan scheme with a destination and tourist centric approach to develop responsible and sustainable destinations.
- The government needs to focus on handholding with states based on a few significant parameters in rural India for tourism development:
 - I. Air/Rail/Road Connectivity-For last-mile connectivity
 - II. Infrastructure development-modern buses and stations at reliable frequency, taxi/ shared mobility - App-based integration of guides, parking/charging/refueling, sign Boards and Information Kiosks
 - III. Identifying and linking heritage spots in the given destinations
 - IV. Facilities like signage in English and other foreign languages
 - V. Tax issues-One India, one tax system for tourist vehicles, protects the tourists from facing multiple taxations
 - VI. Promotion of homestays and high ended branded hotel rooms in resorts to fulfill the interest of staycations and workcations
 - VII. Connectivity to promote local tourism products, arts, and crafts to a national and global audience Focus on digital media (social media platforms, social messaging) for promotional activities
- With a special focus on rural tourism in India, a few highlights need to be significantly noted:

- I. Creation of jobs, retention of jobs, and new business opportunities
 - II. Focus on heritage and monuments
 - III. Culture and festivals
 - IV. Nature and ecotourism
 - V. Promoting agri-tourism
 - VI. Promoting leisure tourism
 - VII. Promoting marine tourism
 - VIII. Promoting adventure-tourism
 - IX. Wellness and Ayurveda
 - X. Tribal food and cuisines
 - XI. Birdwatching and wildlife
 - XII. Religion and mythology
 - XIII. Sustainable exploitation of untapped rural culture and heritage offerings
 - XIV. Rural tourism can lead the way for sustainable and responsible tourism
- The National Plan and Roadmap for Rural Tourism Development strive to prioritise rural tourism at the national level. It also intends to bring together diverse programs for tackling issues like poverty, women empowerment, and improving the economic position of rural people.
 - The plan is built around the overarching subject of sustainable and responsible tourism, which is backed by the strategic pillars that are benchmarking state policies and best practices, digital technologies, and platforms for rural tourism, developing clusters for rural tourism, marketing support for rural tourism, capacity building of stakeholders, governance, and institutional framework.
 - Consumers have global access to digital technologies and platforms, which allows service providers to enhance the tourist sector's development and competitive standards.
 - Digital technologies and platforms provide new opportunities for rural entrepreneurs to improve their market access and financial inclusion. Efforts should be taken to improve the understanding of how to leverage digital tools to grow rural tourism.
 - By harnessing the power of the internet, cloud computing, social media, and other digital technologies, rural businesses can overcome geographic obstacles and a lack of alternative marketing channels.
 - Villages house the country's culture, customs, crafts, legacy, and agricultural traditions. Developing and promoting these indigenous products through tourism can produce revenue and employment in rural regions and empower local communities, youth, and women, allowing Aatma Nirbhar Bharat to realise its mission.
 - It will help reduce the migration from rural areas, prevent poverty and promote sustainable development.

Way Forward

- Along with its compatibility with other economic activities, contribution to GDP, job creation, rural tourism has a significant potential to drive local economic development and social change.
- The government should acknowledge the importance of the rural tourism in India and provide stakeholders with a sustainable environment.
- Profession training should be imparted to the eligible people with the aim of making them duly qualified and competent with the requisite professional skills and help them to take up jobs as heritage tour guides in the tourism industry.
- A certified guide license will further increase the credibility of a tourist guide in the eyes of the tourists, enhance the overall experience of tourists who visit the country, and generate employment opportunities in the tourism industry.
- Furthermore, the government should provide appropriate funding and cost-effective infrastructure to encourage the growth of rural tourism.
- Tourism in rural regions can only be maintained if a comprehensive, inclusive planning strategy based on a multi-action, multi stakeholder participatory approach is adopted and implemented.



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Development of Rural Tourism

Why You Should Know?

- India is a kaleidoscope of ancient heritage, culture, diverse landscapes, and a great variety of biodiversity.
- India is enwrapped with the Mighty Himalayas in the North, the Indian Ocean in the South, the coastline of the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal on the western and eastern shores.
- Privileged with extraordinary climatic conditions and a plethora of cultures surviving and evolving over millennia, the land of India has a wide spectrum of communities celebrating unity in diversity.
- India is endowed with diverse tourist attractions and each State/ Union Territory has its distinct features.
- The unique geography of India combined with its connectivity and adequate infrastructure offers a huge assortment of destinations, experiences, and activities for tourists from all walks of life.
- Tourist destinations experience range from the shopping experience in its bustling bazaars to serene natural retreats around protected areas, from exhilarating adventure sports to equanimous yoga wellness centers, from modern metropolitans to rural and tribal stories.
- It is an odyssey of joy and discovery travelling through the country. The natural beauty of the Indian subcontinent is unparalleled with beautiful snowy peaks, dense forests, pristine beaches, crystal clear lakes, golden deserts and vast green valleys.
- The landscapes are further enhanced by the contrast evident across the regions between the cold deserts of Leh to the sun-drenched desert dunes in Rajasthan.
- Starting from the snow-capped Himalayas in the north, traversing the deserts of Rajasthan, crossing the lush forests of Madhya Pradesh and the sailing into the expansive backwaters of Kerala, and finally diving into the pristine waters of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the journey is full of adventurous highlands and serene plains and lowlands.

- A land boasting a diverse variety of flora and fauna, India is also home to many national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, tiger reserves and biosphere reserves, which offer enchanting wildlife sightings.
- Ministry of Tourism promotes India as a holistic 360 degrees destination on different experiential themes like rural, wellness, and culinary amongst others.
- Rural Tourism is one of the Niche Tourism products promoted by the Ministry of Tourism. The promotion are undertaken through Ministry's official website www.incredibleindia.org and various social media platforms to have a conversation with travellers and build a bond beyond the marketing of the destination in both domestic and overseas markets.
- Information on different destinations in India including rural tourism destinations is shared through the official website.
- Promotions are also undertaken through two social media handles of the Ministry on different themes.
- 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 enable interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Rural Tourism focuses on the visitor actively participating in a rural lifestyle.
- The tourist travels to a rural location and experiences life while taking part in the daily activities of the village. The tourist also gets a chance to imbibe the traditions and culture of the area.
- Rural tourism may also include an overnight stay in which the visitor also gets to know the unique lifestyle of the village at much closer quarters.
- Rural Tourism is an opportunity to promote sustainable and responsible tourism. Considering that the majority of the country's population still resides in rural areas, the potential to create mutually enriching experiences benefitting local communities as well as tourists is substantial.

• **Rural tourism is multi faceted and entails agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure and ecotourism, which are all closely aligned. Each of the 600,000+ villages has its unique story, heritage, and culture to share with the tourist.**

• **The Ministry of Tourism supports the development of tourism infrastructure by its various schemes and initiatives, which currently include the Swadesh Darshan Scheme and the PRASHAD Scheme.**

• **India's rich cultural, historical, religious and natural heritage provides a huge potential for the development of tourism and job creation in the country.**

- There is a great scope and need to develop tourist circuits on specific themes to attract tourists and create employment and livelihood opportunities for local communities.
- This can be achieved through the development of thematic circuits and destinations which are unique to the region in terms of theme and cultural backdrop.
- Such thematic tourist circuits and destinations need to be developed in a manner that supports communities, provides employment, and fosters social integration responsibly and sustainably.
- In due recognition of this the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) had launched the Swadesh Darshan Scheme (Central Sector Scheme), for the integrated development of theme-based tourist circuits in the country in 2014-15.
- This scheme is envisioned to synergise with other Government of India schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Skill India, Make in India, etc. with the idea of positioning the tourism sector as a major engine for job creation, the driving force for economic growth, building synergy with various sectors to enable tourism to realise its potential.
- Recognising the potential of Rural Tourism in the country, Rural Circuit has been recognised as one of the 13 thematic circuits to offer an exclusive experience to tourists and alongside develop lesser-known destinations located in remote parts of the country.
- Among the 16 themes identified under the Swadesh Darshan scheme, 76 projects have been completed / inprogress across the various States / UTs of India which include 02 rural circuits, 10 North-East circuits, 07 Himalayan circuits, 10 coastal circuits, 01 desert circuit, 04 tribal circuits, 06 eco-circuits, 02 wildlife circuits, and 10 heritage circuits, sanctioned for a total of Rs 3,994.92 crore.
- The development of Bhitiharwa, Chandrahia and Turkaulia in Bihar and the Malanad Malabar Cruise Tourism Project in Kerala has been undertaken under the Rural Circuit theme.
- This shall help in generating employment through active involvement of local communities and following community-based development and a pro-poor tourism approach.
- The Government of India launched the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) scheme in the year 2014-2015 under the Ministry of Tourism.
- This scheme focuses on developing and identifying pilgrimage sites across India for enriching the religious tourism experience. It aims to integrate pilgrimage destinations

in a prioritised, planned and sustainable manner to provide a complete religious tourism experience. The growth of domestic tourism hugely depends on pilgrimage tourism.

- Pilgrimage and Rural tourism are inter linked owing to the presence of major pilgrimage centres in close vicinity to rural areas leading to employment generation and development of peripheral infrastructure, thus, benefitting both tourists and locals alike.
- Development of tourism including tourism in rural areas and the setting up of Rural Tourism Parks, is the primary responsibility of the State Governments/UT Administrations.
- However, the Ministry of Tourism has formulated a Strategy and Roadmap for Rural tourism which, inter alia, focuses on developing and promoting local products through tourism subsequently, resulting in the generation of income and jobs in rural areas and empowering local communities, youth, and women, fulfilling the vision of Aatma Nirbhar Bharat.
- Recognising the immense potential of rural tourism in India and prioritising rural tourism at the national level, the Ministry of Tourism has formulated a National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism in the Country.
- National Strategy of Rural Tourism aims at creating income and job opportunities in rural areas and empowering local communities fulfilling the vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister for Aatma Nirbhar Bharat.
- The Strategy aims at the convergence of various schemes addressing issues such as poverty, empowerment of women, and strengthening the economic status of the rural people.
- The Strategy suggests identifying clusters of villages having high potential for tourism development in different parts of the country.
- The themes for rural tourism can include local crafts and cuisines, folk music, shows, dramas, agri tourism, organic farming, yoga and meditation centres, lakes, wetlands and eco-zones, rural sports, cultural events, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and unique tribal culture proximity to existing tourism circuits.
- The National strategy and Roadmap for Development Rural Tourism is based on an overarching/theme of sustainable and responsible tourism, which will be supported by six strategic pillars namely model policies and best practices for rural tourism digital technologies for rural tourism, development of rural tourism clusters, marketing support for rural tourism, capacity building, Governance, and institutional support.
- The Ministry of Rural Development (MORD) launched Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission on 21 February 2016 in an attempt to make the selected rural areas in form of the cluster, socially, economically, and physically sustainable regions by providing economic, social, and infrastructure amenities, thus leading to sustainable and balanced regional development in the country.
- Three Hundred Rurban Clusters with thematic economic growth points were proposed to be developed across the country under this innovative Mission.

- To ensure an optimum level of development, twenty-one components have been suggested as desirable for the Cluster development. Tourism Promotion is one of the twenty-one components.
- This year, the National Tourism Day (NTD), on 25 January 2022 was celebrated on the theme of Rural and Community Centric Tourism.
- This was done given the recent recognition of Pochampally Village from Telangana by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as the Best Tourism Village.
- The Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO initiative was launched to advance the role of tourism in safeguarding rural villages, along with their landscapes, natural and cultural diversity, and their local values and activities, including local gastronomy.
- India had nominated a few other villages as well for the UNWTO entries as the Best Tourism Villages 2021 including kongthong in Meghalaya, Chitrakoot in Chhattisgarh, and Kevdi in Gujarat, Khonoma in Nagaland, and Kumarakom in Kerala.
- Given the significance of Rural Tourism as a unique tourism product, Ministry had developed promotional creatives highlighting India's entries to UNWTO best tourism villages.
- Rural Tourism is an opportunity to promote sustainable and responsible tourism. Considering that the majority of the country's population still resides in rural areas, the potential to create mutually enriching experiences benefitting local communities as well as tourists is substantial.



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Rural Tourism-Culture and Heritage

Why You Should Know?

- India has always been proud of its rich and varied culture. As a soft power, India has always used culture to call for the betterment of humanity. The culture of India qualifies as a diverse demographic heritage in ways of living and human values.
- It is an unquestioned truth that 68.84 percent of India's population located in rural areas. According to Census 2011 data, approximately 450 million of India's total population migrated within the country.
- Around 8 Million or 15.6 percent of all fairly domestic migrants resettled from rural to urban areas. This may not look that serious at first glance. But remember that India is the second-most populous country in the world, which is actually quite significant.
- The number of internally migrated people in India alone is quite more than the total population of the USA, the third-most populous country in the world.
- India is a conglomeration of cultures, and we are proud of the diversity we have. Cultural confluences occur as a result of migrations, which accommodate, assimilate, and acculturate, resulting in the formation of new cultural identities that lead to the emergence of a diaspora.
- The evolution of culture is integral to the onward progress of humanity. And, the culture of today's India is a product of years of cultural metamorphosis and the melting of cultures.
- While documenting our various histories, we do arrive at a conclusive clarity about our heritage that needs to be preserved at all costs.
- There are several ways and means to achieve this, the foremost being by tracing the path back to the origins of our culture.
- It is in this context, rural tourism can give a tremendous fillip to economic, political, and cultural benefits as a larger part of India is rural. Hence, there is a clamouring need to analyse the concept of "rural tourism" through the lenses of culture and heritage.
- India is one of the oldest civilisations in the world. Since its inception, humanity has undergone multiple evolutions. Religion has been a very vital social construct that has evolved all along and has been critical in shaping the course of humanity.

- Pilgrimages were the first forms of tourism mobility to emerge thousands of years ago. Even today, a lot of tourism-related development in India revolves around pilgrimages, amongst other factors of interest. Soon, economic and cultural factors joined hands with religious factors to convert pilgrimage tourism into a prototype of what we see today as tourism. Thus, temples became breeding grounds for art and culture.
- Many of the music and dance forms of today have evolved from temple traditions. It is interesting that, despite the busy urban lives of today, there is a trend where people visit their roots to attend cultural festivities in rural areas.
- This stems from nostalgia. But the percentage is not very large or significant. Studies show that the decreasing attendance emanates from the lack of interest of the succeeding generations because of multiple factors, including altered cultural identities and a lack of tourism-ready developments in the rural areas.
- Culture not only helps people go back to their roots but also attracts the world beyond to come looking for it in the place of its origin.

Rural Tourism in India: A Reality Check

- **Rural India has so much to offer to the rest of the world. It is rich in arts, crafts, religion, rituals, and culture and has tremendous potential to become a tourist hotspot.**
- **Rural tourism stimulates the rural economy, creates job opportunities, and promotes infrastructure development in related areas.**
- **Furthermore, it has the potential to revitalise local arts and crafts while preventing viable traditional occupations from being displaced. From the perspective of the culture and heritage of India, this is very critical.**
- **The National Tourism Policy of India recognises that rural tourism (where significant amounts of our cultural and natural wealth exist) should be given special attention.**
- **Rural tourism is also on the rise as a result of the 'experiential tourism' culture among tourists. Rural tourism may be both populist and alternative in nature.**
- **Although rural tourism has enormous potential in India, it has been hampered by a number of issues including a lack of perception, a lack of opportunities to draw investments, obsolete management practices, and poor infrastructure, including connectivity and communication.**

- A set of preconceived notions, backed by fear of intrusion into socially constructed barriers that once protected rural lives from cultural erosion, and the clash between the "host culture" and the "visitor culture" add fuel to the flame.
- The fear that development would cause rural gentrification also gives second thoughts to people in rural areas which cause a diluted willingness to cooperate and open their spaces and communities to the world beyond theirs.
- But rural tourism development adds to the societal benefits. These benefits are more than one. It leads to the upkeep and support of public transportation.
- This causes increased social interaction. Increased social interaction creates chances for cultural exchanges, increased awareness, and revitalisation of local customs, crafts and cultural identities.
- It can also help to dissuade the youth of rural towns from migrating to metropolitan areas since they are exposed to a variety of other sources of income through tourism.
- Tourist amenities may benefit people in terms of improved infrastructure, health, and cleanliness of public places. As a result, the rural community's standard of living rises, creating an ideal 'Rurban' community.
- The concept of rural tourism is hardly a new thought. Most of what we see today under the umbrella of "rural tourism" has been something that already existed under different other headings.
- The only thing that has changed is that we now have a name for it. Rural tourism as a concept was launched 2002. In the tenth five-year plan (2002–07), UNDE (United Nations Development Programme) launched a pilot initiative to develop rural tourist in India through the Planning Commission.
- Rural tourism was one of the key concerns throughout the 11th five-year plan (2007-12), with 69 rural tourist projects sanctioned during this time period.

- According to the report of the working group on tourism (2011), the 12th five-year plan envisioned the development of 70 rural tourist clusters across the country, with an annual budget of Rs 770 crore.
- But like mentioned earlier on, rural tourism existed in many forms for a very long time before it was formalised as a concept. Let us now analyse how rural tourism has evolved in India over the years.

Cultural Interpretation of National Tourism Policy through the Years

- The Government of India announced its first tourism policy in November 1982. The first tourism policy's mission was to promote sustainable tourism as a means of economic growth and social integration, as well as to give an impression of India overseas as a country with a rich heritage, a dynamic present, and a promising future.
- This coincided with the sixth five-year plan that was launched in the year 1980. The sixth five-year plan placed a strong emphasis on ensuring investments in the hospitality sector.
- While taking initiatives to strengthen tourism in the country, it was vital to guarantee that the development would indeed be sustainable and that there would be no detrimental effects on the environment or, for that matter, on the traditional milieu of the land in question.
- As a first step towards sensitisation, subjects on traditional art and culture were given emphasis in the education sector, encouraging thoughts to sustain and take them forward in the years that followed, paving the foundation for "Edu-tourism".
- Prior to this, in 1963, the Ad hoc committee on tourism in its elaborate report acknowledged the need to understand and foreground the folklore of the land and the names of many sites of prominence like Tanjore, the area around the River Periyar, Banaras, Mandu, etc., along with the then cities like Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad, Mysore, and Madras. Almost 10 years after the first tourism policy was released in 1982, a National Action Plan for Tourism was launched in 1992.
- The action plan pledged that tourism would be developed in a manner that preserves the cultural expression and heritage of India in all its manifestations, including support for arts and culture.
- Preservation and enrichment of the environment formed an integral part of tourism development under the action plan. A proposal was made to convert a large number of Havelis (that were otherwise in a state of disrepair) into hotels that would render assistance in the preservation of the national heritage, and this was done by retaining their original identity on a hundred percent basis.

- Following the success of the Surajkund Crafts Fair, Faridabad and Shilpgram, Udaipur, it was further recommended to identify similar sites where traditional art and crafts in the region could be preserved and promoted.
- Traditional fairs like Pushkar Mela, Sonapur Cattle Mela, and Alleppey Boat Race were given liberal financial assistance for further development. Though not in an explicit manner, these were perfect examples of how they were merged under rural tourism.
- As discussed earlier, rural tourism as a concept was initiated through the National Tourism Policy in India in 2002.
- The National Tourism Policy of 2002 coincided with the commencement of the 10th five-year plan. Under the policy, seven key areas (7S) were identified: Swagat (welcome), Suchana (information), Suvidha (facilitation), Suraksha (safety), Sahyog (cooperation), Samrachana (infrastructure development), and Safai (cleanliness).
- It called for the expansion of cultural tourism and the active promotion of rural tourism.
- The policy identified Uttarakhand (then Uttaranchal), Rajasthan, Ladakh, Kutch, Chattisgarh, the North Eastern States, and the plantation regions as optimum locations for the promotion of endemic tourism.
- A national register of key cultural sites was to be maintained. The phrase "incredible India" was adopted under this policy to create an international brand position for India.
- The Ministry of Tourism launched an initiative in 2008 to teach the local populace about appropriate behaviour and etiquette when dealing with foreign visitors.
- The campaign was dubbed Atithi Devo Bhava, taken from Shikshavalli of the Taittiriya Upanishad, which translates to "Guests are like God" in English.
- The objectives of this campaign are twofold: the first is to ensure that the rural citizenry are all well informed and educated of the need to preserve India's priceless heritage and culture, and maintain cleanliness at home while extending hospitality and a warm welcome to visitors and tourists.
- The second and more crucial objective of the Atithi Devo Bhava campaign is to stall negative and unfriendly practices in existence; like the display of resentment towards tourists and the unchecked and endless looting of visitors (especially those from abroad).
- Such practices only become counter-productive to the readiness, enthusiasm and willingness to receive tourists and treat them with warmth and with friendship.
- In 2015, coinciding with the timeline of the Draft National Tourism Policy 2015, the Swadesh Darshan Scheme was launched.
- Under the scheme, fifteen thematic circuits were identified: Buddhist Circuit, Coastal Circuit, Desert Circuit, Eco Circuit, Heritage Circuit, Himalayan Circuit, Krishna Circuit, North East Circuit, Ramayana Circuit, Rural Circuit, Spiritual Circuit, Sufi Circuit, Tirthankar Circuit, Tribal Circuit, Wildlife Circuit. In 2017, the Ministry of Culture launched the National Mission on Cultural Mapping.

- Under this scheme, the cultural mapping of India is done via a running nationwide cultural awareness program called Hamari Sanskriti Hamari Pehchan Abhiyan for the development of all art forms and artists.
- This is a useful exercise, as it will enable policymakers to make quick yet informed policy decisions in the future.
- In 2020, the Government of India launched Dekho Apna Desh, a scheme that encourages Indians to travel across the length and breadth of India.
- To encourage this scheme, a Poryatan Parv was launched with the added intent of spreading the message of "Tourism for All".
- About a year ago, in June, the Ministry of Tourism released a Draft National Strategy and Roadmap for the Development of Rural Tourism in India.
- The draft identifies rural tourism as a means of fulfilling the vision of Aatma Nirbhar Bharat. It aims to prioritise rural tourism at a National level.
- The strategy is based upon six strategic pillars which include benchmarking state policies and best practices and building a government and institutional framework.
- The draft acknowledges the local community as a key stakeholder and aims at involving them with the help of other stakeholders, including NGOs, which can play a critical role in forging community linkages.
- There is a need of clusters for rural tourism. This helps facilitate groups of villages holding activities together. These clusters are called "Rurban clusters."

Education: A Catalyst for the Promotion of Rural Tourism

- In November 2021, the Draft National Tourism Policy 2021 was made available to the public. The policy has joined hands with about 20 ministries and departments to identify areas of cooperation and collaboration.
- As far as culture and heritage are concerned, the Ministry of Tourism is planning to effectively coordinate with the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Department of School Education and Department of Higher Education to identify areas of concern for the effective promotion of culture and heritage through rural tourism. It is noteworthy that the National Education Policy 2020 takes a formidable step in the promotion of experiential education and vocational internships.
- This will encourage students, who are the future of tomorrow, to sensitise them and the people around them about the pressing need to promote and preserve our cultural heritage.
- This will also lead to Edu-Tourism and join Rural Tourism as a tributary. It mentions "Unique Village Life Experience" packages that will help revive traditional activities in rural India.

- According to the draft National Tourism Policy 2021, creating experiences around our heritage sites and monuments with interpretation facilities, souvenir shops, restaurants, and other amenities will enhance the entire experience of any tourist.
- A strong public-private-people partnership to restore and transform our historical and cultural heritage into tourism products will help preserve not only our tangible legacy but also our intangible resources.
- In this context, the contribution by non-governmental organisations including SPIC MACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth) to the promotion and preservation of the tangible and intangible culture and heritage of India and its folk arts, dance forms, theatre, crafts, heritage sites, and so on has been very pertinent.
- The sustained development of rural tourism holds the key to India's occupancy of a prime spot in the list of countries with a treasure trove of rich and diverse cultural heritage.
- If this industry of rural tourism grows rapidly, it will not only boost India's economy; it will also whet the appetites of tourists to experience the magic of India's rural grandeur.
- Let us all, as custodians of our vibrant culture, pledge to support and actively take part in all endeavours to bring rural tourism to the forefront while the world around us celebrates our heritage.

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North-eastern India- A Tourism Paradise

Why You Should Know?

- India's North-eastern region is a paradise for tourists from all over the world. The seven sister states are full of beautiful places that attract tourists during any time of the year.
- It is particularly noteworthy that several popular tourist destinations of the region are primarily located in rural settings, thus offering the visitor a different kind of experience of rural India.
- These destinations also provide great relief to large number of tourists looking for a break from the humdrum of the cities. The following are brief introductions to some of the popular rural tourist destinations of the Northeast.

Assam: Sualkuchi, Hajo, Mayong, Jatinga

- In less than one hour's drive outside Guwahati are three popular rural destinations - Sualkuchi, Hajo and Mayong.
- Of them Sualkuchi and Hajo are in fact a twin destination just about 20 km west of Guwahati, each offering a different ambience altogether for the visitors to carry home. Hajo is a village of five religious shrines; four are Hindu temples, one a Sufi shrine.
- One of the Hindu temples is also an important place for Buddhist pilgrims. The Hayagriva-Madhava temple atop the Manikut hill is a Vishnu shrine built in the 10th century, with the Kalika Purana providing a great glorification of it.
- The present structure was built during the reign of Koch king Raghudeva Narayana of Kamarupa in 1583 A.D. after the older temple was destroyed by Kalapahar, a Muslim invader from Bengal in 1564 AD.
- The relief works in the architectural ruins of Hayagriva-Madhava temple has a number of dandog Female figures. These suggest that the Devadasi dance form had once thrived in the Hajo teroples.
- Originally believed to be of Tibet, the Devadasi tradition base/travelled to other temples of India from Ass after Vasistha muni had brought it to the temples of Kamarupa.
- The other Hindu temples in Hajo are the Kedar and Kamaleswar temples atop the Madanachal hill, and the Kameswar temple atop the Gokarna Hill, the deity in all three being Shiva.
- There are also a few smaller shrines around - including the Ganeswar temple on the way to Kedar, and the Apunarbhava kunda.

- Hajo also happens to be a centre of attraction for Buddhists. A section of the Lamas of Bhutan and Tibet believe that Lord Buddha had attained maha-parinirvana at Hajo.
- But the stronger likelihood is of Padma-Sambhava, great founder of Lamaism, breathing his last atop the Manikut hill. Buddhist pilgrims who visit Hajo in January February, consider the deity inside Hayagriva Madhava temple as Mahamuni.
- On the Garudachal hill, not far away from the Hayagriva-Madhava temple is Poa-Mecca, a Muslim shrine established by a group of Auliyas (saints) led by Ghasziddin Adliya in the 16th century.
- While asuddin deg here and the shrine was developed around his dargah, it is believed that Ghlasuddin had brought with him a poa (one-fourth weight) of earth from Mecca to set up the shrine, from which the name Poa-Mecca was derived. Poa Mecca, however, is revered by both Muslims and Hindus.
- Hardly eleven km from Hajo is Sualkuchi, a village where several thousand men and women work round the clock on their looms to produce amazing fabrics in muga - the exclusive golden silk-yarn available only in Assam, and paat silk.
- Visitors buying some of the best Assam Silk fabrics directly from the producers at Sualkuchi can also see the weavers work magic on their looms.
- While sericulture is said to have flourished here as early as in the 4th century BC in the place then known as Swarnakuchi (Golden Zone), it was around 1650 AD that Momai Tamuli Barbarua, an influential officer of the Ahom kingdom, had developed Sualkuchi into a vibrant silk industry village. Often referred to as the Manchester of the East, it was during a visit to this silk village on the bank of the
- Brahmaputra in 1946 that Mahatma Gandhi had remarked that "Assamese women weave dreams on their looms."
- Also close to Guwahati, some 35 km to the east is Mayong- a village where people, till about a century ago, mostly used to practise magic and occult.
- Though such wizardry was earlier used for curing various ailments, scaring off ghosts, curing persons possessed by evil spirits and overcoming misfortune, there are still a few dozen wizards in Mayong today who continue to practise the magic art for various purposes.
- During a day-long trip to Mayong, visitors can not only watch a couple of such magic presentations, but also visit four temples around the place - Kechaikhaiti temple at Burha Mayong, Ganesh temple at Hatimuria, Narasimha temple at Hilaikhunda, and Shiva temple at Kachashila.
- An hour-long visit to the Mayong Village Museum and Research Centre on the other hand provides a glimpse to the past of the area.
- For those interested in nature, Jatinga is a village near Haflong, which is about 300 km from Guwahati. Inhabited by the matrilineal Jaintia tribe, Jatinga is famous for several things, the most important being the bird suicide mystery.

- Every year a large number of birds are found dead at this place during the foggy and cloudy weather at the end of the monsoon months.
- While scientists are yet to unravel the mystery, legendary birdman Dr Salim Ali had once wondered why so many species of diurnal resident birds should be on the move at a time when they should be fast asleep.
- Hundreds of visitors flock to the village between September to November every year to witness the mysterious phenomenon during the dark moonless nights.
- With a literacy rate of 83.91 percent, Jatinga has a number of home-stay facilities; one can also visit a number of other colourful tribal villages around Haflong, Assam's only hill station.

Meghalaya: Mawlynnong

- About 72 km away from Shillong, the Meghalaya capital, is situated Mawlynnong - a beautiful village inhabited by the Khasi tribe, which has earned global fame as being one of the cleanest villages of the world.
- Locally referred to as "God's Own Garden", it is also one of the finest examples of community-based eco-tourism initiative in India.
- While every villager considers it his or her sacred duty to promote cleanliness, Mawlynnong's dainty lanes are dotted with bamboo garbage bins for people to dump waste.
- The village has pits where the waste is turned into manure, and visitors can also buy packets of organic manure from there. Plastic, polythene and smoking are strictly prohibited here.
- Every Mawlynnong household also practises rainwater harvesting. Visitors can also have a bird's eye view of Bangladesh from the village perched on the southern edge of the Shillong plateau.
- The single decker Nohwet Living Root Bridge is yet another unique attraction of Mawlynnong.

Arunachal Pradesh: Ziro Valley

- About 110 km from Itanagar is Ziro-a popular destination for those looking at spending a few days in a perfect rural setting in Arunachal Pradesh. While Ziro is a small district town, the Ziro Valley itself is a wonderful rural setting perched in the Eastern Himalayas, and offering an entirely different experience to the visitors.
- Situated on the banks of the Pange river, Ziro is a musical valley comprising of several ancient villages like Hong, Hari, Hija, Bula, Baro, and Siiro.
- A visit to any of these villages, and more particularly to Hong and Hari - the two larger villages - one gets a feeling of travelling through a living anthropological museum, with older women wearing facial tattoos and large nose-rings.

- Being home to several colourful Himalayan bird species nesting amid tall pine trees and wild flowering shrubs, Ziro Valley is also a bird-watchers' paradise.
- Moreover, visitors are also amazed with how inhabitants of Apatani village rear fish in their paddy fields, a rare farming practice in the world. While Dolo Mando is a popular hiking destination nearby, one can also trek to the Kile Pakho ridge to have a panoramic view of the Ziro Valley on one side and the lofty Himalayas on the other.
- There are also two ancient temples nearby-the Meghna Cave Temple and Sidheshwar Nath Shivalinga. Most tourists carry home colourful fabrics woven by the Apatani women, as also beautiful cane and bamboo baskets made by the men.
- Ziro also figures in India's Tentative List for UNESCO's World Heritage Site, seeking global recognition for the distinct Apatani civilization with systematic land use practices and rich traditional ecological knowledge of natural resources management and conservation, acquired over the centuries through informal experimentation.
- Intricate handloom designs, traditional cane and bamboo crafts, and vibrant traditional village councils called Bulyan have made Ziro Valley an interesting example of a living cultural landscape where man and environment have harmoniously co-existed through changing times.
- The best time to visit Ziro is in January when the Apatanis observe the Murung rituals, or in July when they celebrate the Dree Festival. The younger generation has, eight years ago started the Ziro Music Festival, a four-day extravaganza which attracts music lovers from all over the country.

Manipur: Andro

- About 25 km outside Imphat, is Andro-a beautiful village tucked away in the forest foothills of the Nongmaiching hills, which has several reasons to attract tourists interested in seeing rural Manipur.
- Local lore says that Andro is home to Manipur's first settlers, and that the name is derived from 'handro' - meaning "village of the people who came back." The villagers who belong to the Loi community, had apparently returned here after they had tried to shift to another place, but were driven back.
- The local residents are excellent potters and their pottery products have attracted worldwide attention. Andro also has a cultural complex and museum which has artefacts collected from various tribal communities of Manipur as well as other states of the North-east.
- These include fabrics, musical instruments, pottery, jewellerys, wood carving, basketries, bell metals, rare coins, rare manuscripts, paintings, dolls, etc.
- Visitors also offer prayers to Panam Ningthou, the village deity at Mei Mutaba, an ancient temple which has a sacred fire that is believed to have been burning since time immemorial. Households maintain the fire by turn with two households looking after it every day.

Nagaland: Khonoma

- One of Nagaland's most historic villages, Khonoma is hardly 20 km from Kohima, the state capital. Inhabited by people of the Angami tribe, one of the 18 tribes of the hill state, Khonoma, a 400-year old village, was the scene of a series of fierce resistances against the British.
- Memories of two major battles in 1850 and 1879 respectively - in which scores of Angami men had laid down their lives to protect their land - continue to remain popular, having been passed down through 'word of mouth' from one generation to another.
- Local residents guide tourists through stone pathways that wind through the village, showing spots where their ancestors fought bloody battles with the British.
- They take particular pride in showing the traditional forts called Khuda - meaning "place of defense" - built of stones which are preserved with care.
- The typical Khonoma forts had provision for rolling down rocks and boulders through openings in the walls to resist the enemy.
- Another interesting feature of Khonoma is the kharu - traditional gates leading to the localities inhabited by the different khel (clans).
- The gates have wonderful artwork, mostly in rocks and wood, which also represent the various taboos and beliefs of the respective khels.
- Khonoma has very good home-stay facilities, with host families offering exotic Naga cuisine.
- Different varieties of natural fruits, vegetables and herbs, as also insects, find way into the Khonoma cuisine, while the local residents weave colourful traditional shawls, produce exquisitely woven cane and bamboo basketry and ethnic ornaments.
- Often described as Asia's first green village, the people of Khonoma had in 1998 declared 96 sq km of the village forest as a sacred sanctuary to protect all wildlife in general and the Blythe's Tragopan, an endangered pheasant and the State Bird of Nagaland in particular.
- While the sanctuary is an ideal place for trekking, Khonoma also offers walks through some legendary trails which make one recall the days of head-hunting and the time when man and spirits were believed to have lived closely.
- Among these, the Chada-Cha trail, with 12 legendary spots, is the most popular. The best time to visit the village is the Angami month of Kezie (February) when it celebrates the Sekrenyi festival for ten days.

Mizoram: Thenzawl

- Thenzawl is located about 90 km from Aizawl, the Mizoram capital. The Tropic of Cancer runs through this picturesque village, which is an important centre of traditional Mizo handloom industry and produces rich and colourful varieties of handloom fabrics.

- The drive on the winding mountain road to Thenzawl is amazing, providing spectacular views of clouds floating below it over rolling green hills.
- Thenzawl has several historical sites, as also nature parks and waterfalls. The health-conscious visitors can also visit the state's only golf course here, as also a wellness spa equipped with state-of-the-art facilities
- Thenzawl also has a deer park, which is a mini zoo and the only park of its kind in the state, which particularly conserves the highly endangered Sambar Deer.
- There is also a pony riding facility, while boat riding on a beautiful lake is another activity that visitors enjoy.
- There are 30 log-huts to accommodate tourists at Thenzawl, apart from a food court and an open-air theatre.
- Close by is Hmuifang-a traditional Mizo village preserved particularly for giving a taste of typical Mizo rural life, culture and traditional food to the visitor.
- There are also a number of mini tree-houses around. Close to Thenzawl are two waterfalls, the Tuirihiau Fall and Vantawng Fall, both of which empty the gurgling water to the Vanva river.
- One can step inside from behind the Tuirihiau Fall as it caves like an arc to literally have an inside view of the waterfall. On the outskirts of the village is the Chawngchilhi Cave.
- Local people believe that this cave is the original location of a Mizo folk story in which a lady falls in love with a snake.

Tripura: Matabari

- A visit to Tripura remains incomplete if one does not pay a visit to the Tripura Sundari Temple, located about 55 km outside Agartala, the state capital. Set in a rural ambience at Matabari, the temple is one of the 51 holy shaktipeeths (shrine of the goddess of Shakti) in India as per Hindu mythology.
- According to Hindu mythology, Lord Vishnu had cut off the body of Mata Sati, after her death, with a Sudarshan Chakra.
- Fifty-one different pieces of her body fell at different places throughout the country which came to be known as Shaktipeeths. At Matabari in Tripura fell the right foot of Mata Sati.
- Here goddess Kali is worshipped in her Shoroshi - 16-year-old girl - incarnation, while a smaller idol of Maa Kali or Chotto Maa stands beside the presiding deity. Constructed in 1501 AD by the then Tripura Maharaja Dhanya Manikya, it has the beautiful Kalyan Sagar lake.

Conclusion

- In addition to the above mentioned destinations, there are several other rural destinations spread in the North-eastern Region waiting to be explored by visitors from outside.

- Those willing to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, however, have to procure Inner Line Permits (NP) which can be obtained online by going to the official websites of the respective state governments.



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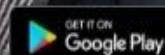
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