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# WHITE PAPER

**Title:** White paper on Rural Tourism Prospects in West Bengal Province, India

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### Summary:

Rural tourism or tourism in rural areas is a new form of activity that can bring economic and social benefits to the society. In Asia, especially in India, rural tourism in its true form is relatively new. This study identifies West Bengal, a Province in Eastern India; to explore the possibilities of the growth of rural tourism that could play an important role in sustainable development of rural societies. The paper discusses on the socio-economic condition in rural West Bengal with special reference to south western parts of West Bengal and throws light on a few potential rural tourism sites in this part of the state. The rationale behind selection of these potential rural tourism sites has been explained through brief descriptions of each of those sites. Projects carried out on rural/endogenous tourism in India by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India jointly with the UNDP as well as plans of the provincial government in West Bengal on rural tourism, have been discussed in the paper. The approaches and methods followed in the projects on rural tourism as well as comprehensive reports available from conference proceedings on rural tourism at the national level have also been discussed. Keeping in line with the issues of sustainability, capacity building, infrastructure, technology (ICT and telecommunications), monitoring and rural heritage, arts and culture, recommendations/ways have been suggested to establish an effective framework to develop rural tourism in a responsible manner.

### • Introduction:

Over the last two decades the concept of sustainable tourism has become one of the issues of pivotal importance in modern tourism. Nature-based tourism is one of main facets of sustainable tourism. Nature Tourism is the travel through and enjoyment of the natural world, its seasonal cycles and events, carried out in a manner that promotes the protection of natural and human communities and consideration for those who will inherit our world. A sustainable nature tourism industry is directly related to the type, amount and quality of natural capital in community. Natural capital of any given area provides valuable ecosystem services such as flood control, airflow and quality, soil fertility, biological diversity, aesthetics and recreation potential(WDFW,2009).

Nature-based tourism encompasses areas like ecotourism, agro-tourism, rural and community-based which are again forms of sustainable tourism. Rural tourism is a phenomenon becoming increasingly important in the new era of tourism. The **WTO (World Tourism Organization)** seminar held in June, 2003 at Kielce, Poland, defined Rural tourism in the following way – “Rural Tourism is engaged in by tourists seeking rural peace; it is tourism away from the mainstream tourism activity. Visitors who wish to interact with the rural environment and the host community, in a meaningful and authentic way, engages it in”.

### • Rural Tourism in India

The basic concept of rural tourism is to benefit the local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, conservation and development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage (**Mishra, 2001**). In Asia, especially in India, rural tourism in its true form is relatively new. The potential for rural tourism to be a major force in rural economic development resulting in poverty alleviation is yet to be realised to the fullest extent. In the Indian context, the concept of rural tourism should be taking place by considering a lot of sensitive issues

in relation with socio-cultural impacts on the rural societies. Some of these issues may be empowerment to rural womenfolk, distribution value chain and income generation for rural community, commercialization of rural tourism sites and socio-cultural conflict etc.

The development of a strong platform around the concept of rural tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 74% of the population resides in its 7 million villages (**Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2009**). The rich diversity and variety that India has in terms of different cultures in each province, the customs and traditions, colourful festivals, folk arts and handicrafts as well as performing arts and historical heritage make many rural areas in India as potential rural tourism sites. In the Tenth 5 year Plan of the Government of India, tourism has been identified as one of the major sources for generating employment and promoting sustainable livelihoods. The Union Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with UNDP launched the Endogenous Tourism Project linked to the existing rural tourism scheme of the government in 2004. The UNDP committed \$ 2.5 million for the project. According to the project plan, the UNDP will help in areas of capacity building, involvement of NGOs, local communities and artisans forge strong community-private and public sector partnerships. The government decided to develop necessary infrastructure for facilitating rural tourism (**Financial Express, 2004**).

The pilot project on endogenous tourism was rightly conceived with the involvement of central and state governments and all stakeholders. Concerned district administration and the local NGOs are partners. The central government pledged assistance to the states amounting to Rs 0.5 million for developing a site for rural tourism. The project conceives to establish common facility centres for craft persons and village 'Kala Kendras' (arts & craft centres) to showcase the arts and crafts, history and culture, nature and heritage of the identified sites. The project was to facilitate construction of 'Vishram Sthals' (rest houses for tourists). These 'Vishram Sthals' will be made using locally available materials and traditional skills and knowledge of building and construction. With a view to provide services of global standards, local communities will be trained in different aspects of hospitality, lodging and cuisine. (**Financial Express, 2004**).

As mentioned earlier, rural tourism in India should be developed considering a lot of sensitive issues that may have considerable significance on the socio-cultural aspects of rural communities. For example while developing rural tourism, it must be borne in mind that not all communities may be interested in such activity or within a community not all individuals may like to be associated with it. Any form of tourism activity may be not be possible at a rural tourism site or not all rural areas may be suitable for tourism due to security and other related reasons. Therefore while developing a rural tourism destination; emphasis should be given to conserve the natural and cultural assets of the location, to capitalize on the position of heritage, culture and tradition and to be in line with the increasing demand for ecotourism (**A F Ferguson & Co, 2001**).

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, with the help of State tourism departments has identified 31 villages across the country as tourist spots and providing Rs.50.00 lakh as financial assistance for each project. Besides, an additional amount of Rs 20 lakh would be provided for developing logistic facilities and starting community participation centers through self-help groups. Till June2007 only 25 projects have been successfully completed or are in the verge of completion in the 16 states. The remaining projects are either not completed or have been recently sanctioned. The implementation of this scheme has been done through a convergence committee

set up under the district collector. There are many other spots of potential tourist interest where adequate infrastructure needs to be developed. In the Annual plan 2006-2007, an amount of Rs.439.00 crore has been allocated for the purpose against Rs. 369.00 crore allocated in 2005-06 **(Ramakumar and Shinde, 2008)**.

**Rural Tourism Scheme, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India:**

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India implemented Rural Tourism Scheme to promote village tourism as the primary tourism product to spread tourism and its socio-economic benefits to rural and its new geographic regions in India. The primary beneficiaries are rural communities (especially women and unemployed youth), PRI representatives, tourists etc. The implementation is done through a Convergence Committee headed by the District Collector/ District Magistrate. To achieve rural tourism objectives, various hardware and software activities were coordinated with key identified project partners/implementing agencies. Under the 10th Five Year Plan, thrust has been given to promote village tourism as the primary tourism product to spread tourism and its socio-economic benefits to rural and its new geographic regions. The States/UT Governments submitted proposals for promotion of rural tourism in their respective states. After short listing of the proposals, the State/UT Governments were requested to draw up a detailed plan of action. For creation or improvement of infrastructure at the selected site, various activities have been undertaken, viz, improvement of surroundings of the village which include landscaping, development of parks, fencing, compound wall etc; improvements of roads within the Panchayat limits; illumination in the village; provision for improvement in solid waste management and sewerage management; procurement of equipments directly related to tourism, like water sports, adventure sports, eco-friendly modes of transport for moving within the tourism zone; refurbishment of the monuments; signages; reception centres; tourist accommodation and other work/activities directly related to tourism Further to build capacity and enhance the participation of local community, various software activities are undertaken by implementing agencies like Non Government Organisations (NGO) / Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI)/ etc. The objectives of the software activities is to develop a sustainable Rural Tourism product, convergence with the Ministry's Rural Tourism Scheme (Hardware) through tourism awareness, capacity building for tourism/hospitality services, gender equity, creation of Gurukul, environment care and marketing of traditional art and folk forms. Various activities at the selected sites that have been undertaken include the baseline survey of the site; enhancing local community awareness of the tourism process; gender sensitization; capacity building/design inputs related to art & craft skills, cultural & natural heritage; Gurukul process; capacity building for various aspects of visitor handling; convergence with other yojanas/schemes in the site; environment care and access to cleaner technology with local material, local skills and local traditional styles; marketing convergence including the travel trade for domestic and international visitors. Based on the Tenth Five Year Plan goals of the Government of India, and on the United Nations Development assistance Framework priorities of strengthening decentralization and promoting gender equality, Government of India- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Country Programme (2003-2007) has been initiated. UNDP has committed funding support to the Government of India (Ministry of Tourism) for the Endogenous Tourism Project initiative. The Project seeks to promote local culture and craft based eco-tourism for sustainable livelihoods and integrated rural development during the 10th Five Year Plan. The primary facilitation of the Endogenous Tourism Project is for capacity building/direct training; thereby enabling low-income village communities create and articulate their skills from within.

<b>Table 1</b>				
<b>Statewise Rural Tourism Projects Completed/About to be completed as of 2007</b>				
Sr. NO	States	Projects Completed	Projects about to be completed	Total
1	Andhra Pradesh	4	0	4
2	Chhattisgarh	0	1	1
3	Gujarat	1	0	1
4	Haryana	0	1	1
5	Himachal Pradesh	0	2	2
6	Karnataka	2	1	3
7	Kerala	1	0	1
8	Madhya Pradesh	1	1	2
9	Maharashtra	1	0	1
10	Nagaland	1	0	1
11	Orissa	1	0	1
12	Rajasthan	1	0	1
13	Sikkim	1	0	1
14	Tamil Nadu	1	1	2
15	Uttaranchal	1	1	2
16	West Bengal	0	1	1
	Total		9	25

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

- **West Bengal Province**

West Bengal is a province in Eastern India that abounds bounties of lush green countryside. The vast expanse of greenery of rural Bengal had been an element of admiration as well as source of inspiration for poets, authors and writers of Bengal. In other words, it may be said that the richness in Bengali literature which has helped it acquire international acclaim owes a lot to rural Bengal as many of the literary works has been written in the backdrop of it. Geographically speaking, the plains of Bengal along the Ganges, the western fringes of the province, which is an extension of the Chottanagpur Plateau as well as the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas or the 'Dooars', in North Bengal, all when put together unfolds a diverse picture of topography and culture.

As per the 2001 census, the rural population of West Bengal constitutes 72 % of the total population. As per the same census, 7.3 % of the state population is tribal. The total area covered by forests is 12425.28 sqkms, 14 % of the total area of the state. The total number of villages in the province is 40,783 and 8571 villages have forests (**State Census Report 2001**). The rural communities encompass the tribes or the adivasis(including Santals and Kol) in the South

Western parts to the Rajbangshis in the Dooars, Gorkhas in Darjeeling ,the communities of Sherpas and ethnic Tibetans, all in North Bengal and last but not the least the rural Bengalis.

The Tourism sector in West Bengal has recently got some attention towards development. Though still not among the leading performers in the country, the state tourism has been able to woo some tourists largely because of the Darjeeling hills and the Sunderbans. Historical/heritage towns like Murshidabad and Bishnupur are slowly becoming known to tourists.

#### STATEMENT OF TOURIST INFLOW INTO WEST BENGAL

YEAR	DOMESTIC TOURISTS	FOREIGN TOURISTS	TOTAL
1999	47,02,735	1,98,713	49,01,448
2000	47,37,112	1,97,061	49,31,173
2001	49,43,097	2,84,092	52,27,189
2002	88,44,232	5,29,366	93,73,598
2003	1,13,00,763	7,05,457	1,20,06,220
2004	1,23,80,000	7,60,000	1,31,40,000
2005	N.A	8,95,639	N.A
2006-2007	1,55,00,000	10,25,000	1,65,25,000

Source: Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, \* N.A- Not available

In the area of rural tourism, some manifestations of development have been felt. Ballavpur Danga in Birbhum district and Mukutmonipur in Bankura district, have been included as potential rural tourism sites in the Endogenous Tourism Project taken up jointly by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, UNDP and the Women's Interlink Foundation (WIF). Besides, tourism festivals like Poush Mela, Vishnupur Festival and the Dooars Utsav have been primarily aimed towards showcasing the rural heritage of the state.

The heritage of Bengal includes both Hindu and Islamic monuments, dances like the Purulia Chau, folk music like the Baul, Bhaitali and Kirtanas, classical music like the Bishnupur Gharana, several folklores and legends, and a variety of handicrafts like the brassworks, ivoryworks, caneworks, silktextiles, embroidery, cotton textile and last but not the least, Terracotta, craft made from burnt clay, which has been the hallmark of Bengal's heritage. Rural Fairs and festival also form a part of Bengal's rural culture like the Joydev-Kenduli Mela, Jagadhatri Puja, Bon Bibir Puja etc. All these put together have made West Bengal a highly potential area for rural or ethnic or endogenous tourism.

#### • Prospects of Rural Tourism in West Bengal

The rural economy of West Bengal has improved especially in terms of agricultural production largely due to the effective functioning of the Panchayat system (Rural/village administrative system in India). The most remarkable acceleration of growth occurred in agriculture. Crop output in West Bengal was the most rapidly expanding in India since the 1980s as a whole. (West Bengal Human Development report 2004). However, there are certain parts in the state where we find extreme situations in terms of poor economic conditions and low agricultural output. The south western part of the state which comprises the districts of Purulia, Bankura,

West Midnapur, Western part of Burdwan, and Birbhum, is one of the three sub-regions in the state which faces problems of development in terms of infrastructure and human development indicators. The Paschimanchal region in the west of the state spans all the blocks of Birbhum and Purulia, and some blocks of Bankura, Medinipur and Bardhaman. These blocks are relatively isolated, with poor transport infrastructure, and therefore tend to be backward (**West Bengal Human Development report 2004**). Low agricultural output is caused due to poor soil quality and low rainfall in this area. Poor soil quality results from the presence of mostly the residual type and red laterite soil in this region, both having low moisture retention capacity and low fertility (due to presence of little organic matter). This makes the area unfit for cultivation. Hence agriculture, like elsewhere in the state, does not turn out to be one of the main means of livelihood for the locals. Besides the government has also not done enough to improve the infrastructure of these areas. Education and health, the two primary elements for social/human development today are also very much in a state of neglect.

This region also abounds considerable pockets of dense forestlands comprising of species like Sal, Mahua, Mahogany, Teak etc., These forestlands are not always concentrated in one area but are scattered at different places flanked by villages belonging primarily to tribal communities like Santals, Kols, Mundas etc. Creation of opportunities for rural tourism at these pockets of forests would facilitate new means of livelihood for the tribal folk. The districts in this region as mentioned earlier have already been established as centers of ecotourism in West Bengal. Destinations like Sutan, Jhillimilli, Ayodhya hills, Kakrojore, Duarsini, Koro Hill, Chenchuria, Susunia hill, Maithan, Joypur forest, Amarkanan, Ambikanagar, etc., are all ecotourism hotspots. Controlled tourism through sustainable means in these rural forested tracts of South-Western Bengal can raise the economic standards of the local populace and help them to project their indigenous culture to the world. Infact the two rural tourism sites in West Bengal, Ballavpur Danga in Birbhum district and Mukutmonipur in Bankura district, included in the Endogenous Tourism Project, are located in this part of the state.

Rural economy in West Bengal also includes the handicraft sector. This is a sector to which the south western part of West Bengal contributes significantly. Places like Panchmura, Sonamukhi and Sankra in Bankura district are examples of unique handicraft villages contributing to the list of magnificent handicraft products of the province. Terracotta, a popular folk art of Bengal, is produced in Panchmura and Bishnupur, both in Bankura district. Stone carving is famous in Susunia village, Bankura district.

There are a few successful cases of government initiatives and NGOs in developing and promoting sustainable rural tourism in West Bengal. Help Tourism, the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation (WBFDC) and some other nature-based SMTEs have contributed significantly towards the growth of responsible nature-based tourism in the state. Recently the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, has taken a plan to start a new tourism initiative to develop Bishnupur, the temple town in Bankura District and Panchmundi, both in South West Bengal, as rural tourism circuits (**MSN INDIA, September, 2007**). An innovative rural tourism initiative has been taken up through a community based tourism project called eco-friendly –family centric tourism in Dooars and Cooch Behar region in North Bengal by the State tourism department in association with an NGO called National People’s democratic Centre. In 2003, a rural tourism project at micro-level was taken up on Antpur, a village in Hooghly district to promote the rural artisans of the village and to uplift their economic condition

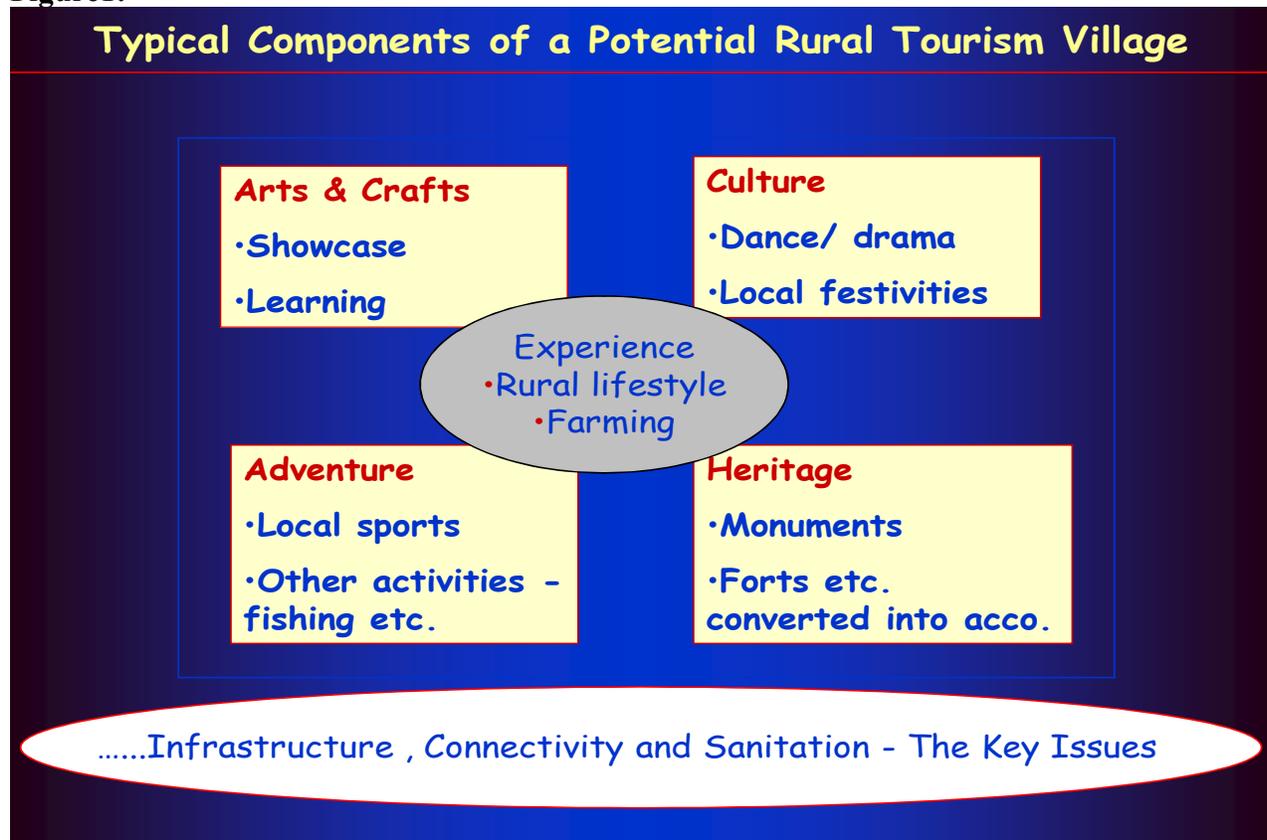
(Documentation of Best Practices Adopted by the State Government for the Development of Tourism, States profile and Tourism Development- Final Report Volume II, November 2005).

Aspects like rural sanitation and crime rate in West Bengal are some of the strengths of the province towards development of rural tourism. West Bengal has achieved a milestone by the UNICEF announcing the state as a model for sustainable rural sanitation. This aspect will boost rural tourism from the tourist’s point of view. (Business Line, 2004). The crime rate in the state is 82.6 per 100,000, which was half of the national average. This is the fourth-lowest crime rate among the 28 states and union territories of India. (State Census 2001).

• **Cases of Potential Rural Tourism Opportunities**

As mentioned earlier, there are also many other potential rural tourism sites in India and West Bengal besides the ones already included in the scheme. There are many other spots of potential tourist interest other than the 31 spots included in the rural tourism project where adequate infrastructure needs to be developed (Financial Express, 2004). Below are some of those potential spots of rural tourism in South Western Bengal based on the elements as per the Model below:

**Figure1:**



**Model of Typical Components of a Potential Rural Tourism Village by A F Ferguson & Co, 2001**

The descriptions on each of the potential spots below provide the rationale for their selection.

### **Pathra and Md. Yasin Pathan**

**Pathra** is a village situated 7kms from Mednipur, the district headquarters of West Midnapur, and on the left bank of the Kangsabati River. The village abound some of Bengal's famous and finest 19<sup>th</sup> century brick built Hindu terracotta temples. The center of attraction is one named **Mohammed Yasin Pathan**, who contributed immensely through his sincere efforts and dedication in saving about 34 of these Hindu temples from dilapidation. A peon at a local school, Pathan went through a painful journey for decades since 1971 to bring these temples under restoration. Being a Muslim, Pathan took an extremely courageous step to protect the temples inspite of stiff opposition from Hindus and fellow Muslims. With his small salary and deep affection for heritage, Pathan ignoring all hostilities went ahead in saving the monuments. He formed an NGO, Pathra Archaeological Preservation Committee in 1990 by uniting local Hindus and Muslims. The committee provided a forum for close interaction between people of the two communities and laid the foundation for friendship and understanding. After a lot of attempts, Pathan was successful in drawing the attention of the Planning Commission under Pranab Mukherjee which sanctioned an amount of Rs20 Lakhs for restoration work. Subsequently, The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) took over restoration work in 2003 and now 20 out of 34 temples have been fully restored. The ASI further plans to acquire 9.3 acres of land around the temples for preservation and landscaping. With Pathan's efforts, a road, a telephone exchange, power and other facilities have now been provided in Pathra. This case not only unfolds a story of an ordinary man with his extraordinary passion for heritage that made him restore many Hindu temples to their former glory, but also his ability to forge a concrete bond between Hindus and Muslims in a poverty-ridden, backward area. Pathan hopes that Pathra will become a tourist spot with all amenities and that gives the opportunity to consider this village as a potential site for the development of Rural/Endogenous tourism.

### **Terracotta, The Folk Art of Bengal**

**Panchmura** is a handicraft village located in the district of Bankura, 20kms from Bishnupur, the centre of Bengal's terracotta temple heritage. It is one of the principal centers for the production of one of the major handicrafts of Bengal, terracotta works. The world famous 'Bankura Horse' is produced here. The long necked Panchmura style 'Bankura Horse' is made hollow with some circular vents to facilitate uniform firing in the country kilns. The horse stands on its four legs with the neck held high; the ears and tails erect. The Bankura Horse is widely recognized as a symbol of matchless rural handicrafts of India. Besides, exotic terracotta panels and plaques are also produced here. The Panchmura handicrafts are mainly used for ritualistic purposes. The rituals are almost all exclusively associated with local village gods and folk-festivals in the worship of various kinds of tribal, semi-tribal and folk deities. The Panchmura-style of pottery is the best and the finest among all terracotta crafts producing centres in West Bengal. The symmetry of shape, the rhythm of the rounded curves of the body, especially of the horse, has lent a dignity and charm to its form which is incomparable. Simplicity and dynamism are the chief components of Panchmura-style. Terracotta red color is obtained by letting out the smoke, while black color is obtained by blocking the outlet of the

smoke.

Panchmura village is a neighborhood of potters who have acquired international acclaim for their extraordinary craftsmanship and skills reflected in the variety of burnt clay crafts produced by them. Every local in Panchmura is employed with this cottage industry. Be it women or children besides men folk, everyone participates in the work process. There is no alternative/additional source of income for these villagers. Though noted celebrity artists in India like M.F.Hussain have adopted the Bankura horse and made it famous, desirable encouragement and patronage of the Panchmura handicrafts is not occurring. Sustainable rural tourism could be a way to bring the desired recognition of this unique and unmatched folk art of Bengal produced by the poor villagers of Panchmura who lament to have toiled for generations without significant returns.

### **Ayodhya Hills, Purulia District: A Hotspot in Bengal's Tribal Culture**

**Ayodhya hills**, located in the district of Purulia, are an extension of the Chottanagpur Plateau of neighbouring Jharkhand province. Covered with dense forests of Sal and Piyal, the area is a home of a number of tribal communities like the Santals, Kols, Mundas etc, making it a unique bio-diversity area. The place is a centre for the famous Purulia Chau, one of the oldest performing arts of India. In the backdrop of the tiny rain-fed cascades or full moon light in Ayodhya hills, the Chau dancers with their masks and costumes exhibit great skills.

A lot of archaeological remains like the stone images of the Jaina Thirtanakaras, Hindu gods and goddesses unearthed from the area, are now worshipped by the local tribal. The tribal villages in Ayodhya hills are also worth a visit. The colours used in designing the walls and floors of their homes, made from red earth and stones, provide a unique sight.

The festivals celebrated in the area by the tribal are also very alluring. The 'Shikar Utsab' or the Hunting festival held in the summer months involves the gathering of a large number of people from within the village and other nearby villages. Another major festival in the Ayodhya hills is the *Bandhna* festival or the festival of cattle. Celebrated during the harvesting season in Bengal i.e. October-end, every home in the villages of the hills get a new look. They are decorated with attractive floor paintings or '*Alponas*' and with lighted earthen lamps. A popular custom followed in this festival is to awaken the cattle through songs and music at early morning hours.

### **Susunia Hill: A Melting pot of Nature, History, Craftsmanship and Adventure**

Located in the district of Bankura and 22kms from the district headquarters, Bankura, is **Susunia Hill or *Susunia Pahar*** (*Pahar denoting hill*) that rises to a height of 450 metres. Lying beside the Gandheswari River, the hill is unlike the other uplands in the area. Instead of being barren, the hill is covered with considerable tracts of forests. Besides there is a hot spring known for its curative powers.

Closeby the hill is the village of stone sculptors called *Susunia Village*. Images of Hindu gods and goddesses, stone jewelry, showpieces, stone toys etc, are some of the works of art produced by these stone craftsmen. Some of these craftsmen are internationally acclaimed.

Another element of attraction is the historical significance of the Susunia hill. An ancient ruler,

King Chandraverma, is believed to have built a fort here about 1600 years ago. Rock edicts belonging to that period, which are also the oldest ones found in West Bengal, have been unearthed from this area. The site is also one of the main centres for adventure sports like rock-climbing and trekking in West Bengal.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. Homestay Programmes and Rural Experience:**

Homestay Programmes in rural tourism sites should be developed to provide an everlasting experience to the tourist on one hand and on the other hand, to bring about substantial increase in the incomes of the locals and conserving the local culture and natural heritage at the same time. The *Gurukul* concept may be introduced in places like Panchmura and Susunia Village where skilled craftsmen and specialists are available in areas like terracotta works, stone carving and cotton weaving. Instructional stays can be organized involving learning programmes of varied levels for tourists. In addition to homestays, accommodation to tourists may be provided in the form of tourist huts built with an ethnic/local design and managed by local communities at the sites with assistance in technical areas from tourism authorities. Professional Training agencies like private and government food craft and catering institutes should play an active role in meeting the training needs required by local community.

- 2. Role of Technology : ICT and Telecommunication:**

Each Rural tourism site should be promoted with minimum involvement of middleman like tour operators/intermediaries who dictate tour itineraries and financial returns. Village authorities like the Panchayats or associations formed by local communities should be engaged in preparing tours and promotion and marketing in consultation with the provincial and Federal tourism departments). ICT applications in Tourism now encompass areas like community-based tourism and rural tourism. The internet may come of a lot of use as creation of innovative websites could provide the opportunity to the local communities to market their attractions directly online to potential customers. The concept of *e-Community Based Tourism* may be introduced at rural tourism sites. e-CBT or electronic community-based tourism is a concept where local communities at destination are able to mobilize themselves towards CBT (community-based Tourism) and with access to internet can theoretically engage directly with global tourism markets, bypass the intermediary information-handlers to attract visitors and retain a larger proportion of tourism receipts(Harris.R and Vogel.D, 2006). Therefore rural tourism communities could make use of e-commerce applications or e-Tourism in fostering their CBT operations (Harris, 2003). Websites can enable rural tourism lodgings to access markets quickly and to become international (Vrana,V. and Zafiropoulos,K, 2009).

A website is an important tool for marketing strategy for any state. It is a part of branding initiative to educate consumers on the culture, people and experiences unique to that particular state. An interactive website increases visitation (Government of India, Ministry of Tourism, 2005). A better infrastructure for *ICT (Information and Communication Technology)* in rural Bengal is hence required. Establishment of sustainable Rural Multipurpose Community Telecentres will be the first step towards promoting *e- CBT*. The e- CBT concept may well fit in Pathra which already has a telephone exchange and power

facility. Rural NGOs, IT related government departments, the telecommunications department as well as private sector IT companies will have to play an important role in this respect. Private participation in this area will be required not only in installation and maintenance aspects but also for training and skill development in IT. Leading private IT training and educational institutes of India like the NIIT and Aptech Computer Education can play a major role in e-rural tourism projects by imparting IT education to stakeholders especially the local community members.

### **3. Compatible Public – Private Sector Partnership:**

Selling and distribution channels of rural tourism sites as well as conduction of rural tourism activity should be streamlined. There should be three channels of distribution. Firstly, through West Bengal Tourism and Indian Tourism, selling rural tourism tour packages or tour packages including rural tourism sites. Secondly, by governmental and non-governmental organizations like WBFDC (West Bengal Forest Development Corporation) and Help Tourism etc, which have proven track record in sustainable tourism in the state. Thirdly, the local community associations through their websites or their websites accessible as links through major tourism portals like [incredibleindia.org](http://incredibleindia.org), [exploreruralindia.org](http://exploreruralindia.org) and website of West Bengal Tourism as well as websites of organizations like WBFDC or Help Tourism.

Conduction of rural tourism activities at these potential sites should preferably be done only by West Bengal Tourism, Indian Tourism, WBFDC or non-governmental organizations/private operators only with a proven track record of carrying out sustainable tourism in the state or country like Help Tourism. Private tour operators with no track record in the related area may be restricted only to certain activities that will not dictate and divest financial returns from local communities. It is recommended that NGO's and private parties having presence across the state, relevant experience in project implementation and community mobilisation for atleast 5-10years should only be selected(**Ministry of Tourism, Government of India,2007**).

### **4. Training needs of rural womenfolk on Entrepreneurial Opportunities:**

Rural tourism must involve active participation of women in matters of decision – making as the womenfolk are one of the stakeholders in any developmental activity. One of the main aims of such kind of tourism activity should be to bring benefits to the womenfolk economically by means of providing them entrepreneurial opportunities. This will raise their standards of living. Upliftment of the economic standards of the women will in turn help them in having good health facilities and education. Rural tourism projects needs to be considered as rural self-employment generation schemes especially for the womenfolk. Rural self-employment generation schemes for women require to be supported by banks in rural areas like NABARD, urban service providers and by local self-help groups.

### **5. Rural Infrastructure:**

Rural infrastructure like well – built village roads, sanitation and high standards of hygiene, wayside amenities, use of renewable energy sources, electrification, telecentres and provision of adequate security, is essential. Governmental authorities like West Bengal Tourism or the State Department of Tourism along with the local panchayats should take a

leading role in infrastructure development. As rural tourism requires relatively less infrastructure and therefore low investment, it will turn out to be a feasible option for the state government authorities to develop these sites with existing and additional funds from the federal government. Private participation needs to be encouraged at a small scale in building infrastructure.

#### **6. Accreditation and Certification:**

An accreditation / certification system for rural tourism sites should be in place that will frequently assess measure and monitor the performance of rural tourism sites in terms of tourist experience and quality services to tourists as well as conservation of local culture, heritage, environment and ecology and socio-economic benefits/development of the local communities. The departments of tourism under the state and federal ministries of tourism along with the state Forest departments, local administrations (Gram Panchayat), international bodies on environment and tourism should form a strong and an effective committee of experts and consultants to monitor the standards of rural tourism sites through continuous assessment to ensure that things are carried out along the lines of sustainability. LAC (Limit of Acceptable Change) issues needs to be addressed in order to measure the acceptable and achievable resource and social conditions at rural tourism sites and for analyzing and establishing the relationship between existing conditions and those judged acceptable. The focus of LAC is on defining desired outcomes and managing recreation use impacts to maintain desired resource and social conditions. Innovative tools for attaining or maintaining desired conditions can be explored through LAC (eg. timing or season of use, geographic spacing, and behaviour of users, kind or level of management).

#### **7. Financial Support and Capacity Building:**

In addition to providing support to rural womenfolk in entrepreneurship, loans and other financial support should be made available to local communities in general. Tax concessions and other incentives should also be extended to them. Rural developments banks like the NABARD, UBI, BIRD, tourism development-related financial institutions like the TFCI (Tourism Finance Corporation of India) as well as private financial agencies, banks and companies like HDFC will all need to play a major role in financing rural tourism entrepreneurial initiatives.

Training on catering and housekeeping services, soft skills, tour guiding skills, hygiene and sanitation etc, needs to be provided. Private and public food craft institutes, travel and tourism training institutes, catering colleges are required to provide necessary support to build skilled and trained workforce in rural areas. The departments of tourism, private tour operators having a proven track record in sustainable tourism, tourism NGOs and other authorities should actively take part in meeting the training needs in rural tourism through workshops, training programmes and exhibitions.

The concept of self-sustainability should be instilled among the local community through effective mobilization and capacity building. The local communities need to be equipped and trained to manage the rural tourism site all by their own. A village coordination committee has to be set up which will ensure active participation of both genders especially women, disadvantaged groups and unemployed youth in bringing effective community participation, monitoring of all activities and maintenance of the tourism sites. It should be

also be remembered that local community members in rural areas exposed to tourism do not become entirely dependent economically on tourism but it should come as an additional/supplementary means of income generation. In other words, indigenous/traditional means of livelihood like agriculture/farming, dairy, pottery etc should not be replaced by tourism activities. This is an aspect, which needs to be addressed, as the issue of sustainability should be of pivotal importance in rural tourism.

#### **8. Promotion and Sustainability Issues:**

A network of organizations should be established to promote and develop rural tourism in the most sustainable way. The network may be set up involving the state tourism department/ West Bengal tourism in association with the Department of Tourism, Government of India, the WIF (Women's Interlink Foundation), the UN (United Nations through UNDP) and local organizations engaged in sustainable tourism like the Help tourism and West Bengal Forest Development Corporation (WBFDC) along with other interested parties like state and National level NGOs and self-help groups. The prime responsibility of this network is to ensure that rural tourism sites do not reach a stage of 'Commodification' where aspects such as tranquility, pastoral idle, rural way of life and rural arts and crafts become victims of commercialization and hence leading to unsustainable growth of rural tourism. The network has to carry out event-based promotion and facilitate experiences that results in favourable word-of-mouth promotion. This network shall also require to work closely with the suggested committee on accreditation and certification of rural tourism sites.

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