

Women's Role in Indian Rural Tourism: Towards a Social-Infrastructure Model for Rural Development

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Abstract

As the world is changing and making progress in this contemporary age of globalization, the disappointment is that women in rural areas throughout the Asia Pacific Region are still leading a life of dependency that does not allow them to achieve positive economic and social status. Given this background, this study examines the situation of rural women in *tourism*, a new industry in many rural areas. Rural women and rural tourism is a more recent form of research than that of research about women and tourism in general. This study explores the rural situation for women in two states of India, Kerala and Rajasthan. The results show that rural tourism can be used as a tool to bring socioeconomic change in the lives of the people of the developing regions, but also that if rural tourism is to be successful in developing areas, the governments of those regions must actively facilitate the expansion of women's role in an institutional and systematic manner rather than in an opportunistic and fortuitous one.

Introduction¹

Rabindranath Tagore, arguably India's greatest poet, expressed the anguish and frustration of women in male dominated societies more than three quarters of a century ago (quoted by Hemrajani, 2004):

“O Lord
Why have you not given woman the right to conquer her destiny?
Why does she have to wait head bowed?
By the roadside, waiting with tired patience,
Hoping for a miracle in the morrow?”

Hemrajani (2004: 1) goes on to say that “[i]f one looks at the history of the struggle for women's rights both in India and the world, it is this short span of the last four

¹ This paper is based on fieldwork undertaken for Ms Ahuja's Master's Degree in Asia Pacific Studies (ICP Major) 2004-5, and revised and recently updated.

decades of the 20th Century that has been the most eventful in terms of both bringing about necessary shifts in thinking, and in the achievement of practical policy changes with specific references to women. From the passionate Feminism of the Sixties to the introspection on the status of women in the Seventies, to women-in-development debates in the Eighties and to focusing on gender issues in the Nineties, forty years has been a short but nonetheless earth-shattering evolution. We have traveled from women problems to women issues, to women perspectives and finally to women studies, reshaping whole paradigms of development along the way”.

But has this evolution favorably affected *rural* women, especially those in developing countries of the Asia Pacific? As the world is changing and making progress in this contemporary age of globalization, the disappointment is that women in rural areas in many countries are still leading a life of dependency that does not facilitate their aim to achieve positive identification and self-worth by contributing to economic society on their own terms. In fact, irrational male dominated *ideologies* limit rural women’s ability to partake in economic development, which in turn weakens the foundations of human resource development on the one hand and delays socioeconomic induced change in the status of women on the other. Moreover, violence towards rural women is continuing at many social, economic and political levels, particularly in India and other developing countries of the Asia Pacific. The disenchantment that this situation brings suddenly came into focus when the authors of this paper asked rural villagers in India if women ought to participate in the development of local tourism; some people chuckled, whereas others look shocked. Aren’t women in the villages *supposed* to be staying at home, covering their heads when they go out, and never engaging in commercial life?

Rural women in rural tourism are a more recent research interest in the tourism literature than that of research about women and tourism in general. This paper looks at the situation in India as a case study in order to examine the situation and contribution of women in the tourism industries that are developing in the rural areas of many countries. Female participation in tourism *per se* is not a prevalent trend, even after 40 years of emancipation in developed countries. Thus this study will help to fill a significant literature gap. The results show that if tourism is to be successful in developing rural areas while at the same time assisting in the empowerment of rural women, the governments of those regions must actively facilitate the expansion of women’s role in an institutional and systematic manner rather than in an opportunistic and fortuitous one. Therefore, the association between economic, cultural, political, and gender issues must be thoroughly understood.

In this wider sense, there is a need for an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the relationship of women to rural development, and the capacity of reforms accomplished elsewhere to penetrate into the most traditional (generally rural) centers of society. In comparison to the lives of urban women, rural women enjoy very much lower living standards, freedom, and socioeconomic efficiency. The main reason to discuss the concept of women and tourism is therefore to highlight the importance of women’s participation in rural tourism development in India, as it could lead to national, regional and local development for the whole country. Regionally speaking, rural women’s participation in developing tourism may bring promised adjustment in socioeconomic growth if they the women be empowered and facilitated with education and various other training programs. The aim is to provide opportunities to women on equal grounds. This research offers the solution of empowerment through education.

As Devi (1993) noted, in order to create a sense of community among men and women at home and at work as fellow and equal human beings capable of playing many roles, many of them shared and interchangeable, women must be educated and allowed to participate in all activities.

The extremely sociable nature and sensitivity of rural women are authentic characteristics that could be used as an important skill base for developing rural tourism (Ahuja 2005). However, their situation varies from country to country. For example, some women are socially restricted from working outside the home by family stage or status, some are traditionally isolated, and some are physically restricted from effective involvement in the workplace by members of their family and/or caste (class). Hence, to develop rural tourism by empowering women will be a complicated task. As a guide to initiating a fruitful discussion in this complex field of study, this paper will develop the following three assertions:

- 1) Social infrastructure development is the key to bringing women into the tourism development process even though they face social and gender problems in many areas. Women's empowerment through education would be beneficial for the development of rural tourism. At this point, the research develops a link between education and social infrastructure development that is necessary to be achieved for the creation of self-sustaining rural tourism destinations.
- 2) Rural tourism cannot be developed until and unless women contribute to it. In the case of India, women constitute a large portion of the population and play a vital role in the development of the family, the community and the nation as a whole. Thus, women's potential must be recognized in a positive manner for the transformation and economic development of rural areas. To accelerate the growth and prosperity of a nation, it is very important to create opportunities of socio-economic development for women in rural areas.
- 3) Integrating gender perceptions is particularly important as the tourism industry is one of the major employers of women, offering opportunities for independent income-generating activities which affect women's lives in destination communities. That is why local community awareness and participation is important, societal change is needed, the role of the public-private sector in empowering women is significant, and why a gender equality approach needs to be adopted.

Based on these concepts, the present study was carried out during 2004 and 2005 in order to identify how communities might maximize human resources in rural tourism, while maintaining their social foundation and revitalizing local economies with the full involvement of women.

Rural Tourism and Rural Women

The study areas of rural tourism, women and tourism, and rural women and rural tourism are new research fields and lack a deep theoretical background. According to Page and Getz (1997) rural tourism as a whole has continued to suffer from neglect among tourism researchers, leaving the available literature very limited. In the same way, in contrast to the rich literature on women and development as a whole, the international

English literature on the role of women and tourism is limited as acknowledged by Apostolopoulos, Sonmez & Timothy (2001: 3-15). Under these circumstances, the partial existing literature limits extensive background discussion in this paper. Page and Getz (1997) make clear that the literature on rural tourism is very sparse and conceptual models and theories are also lacking:

“Rural tourism is often being subsumed under or confused with recreation and leisure activities, since many studies assume that rural tourism equates with simple concepts such as ‘the countryside’. The neglect of tourism as a rural business activity has also been compounded by the absence of any theoretical research published in mainstream tourism journals. As a result, much of the research on rural tourism has, with a number of exceptions, failed to contribute to a growing awareness of its role, value and significance in the wider development of tourism studies and its importance as a mainstay of many rural economies” (Page and Getz 1997: 3-12).

This means that there is a lack of theory and models placing rural tourism in the wider conceptual framework regarding the position of women in rural societies. Nonetheless, empirical research regarding rural tourism has been accomplished. The available literature suggests that there are a variety of terms used to describe tourism activity in rural areas: agri-tourism, farm tourism, rural tourism, soft tourism, alternative tourism and many others which can have different meanings from one country to another. Thus, while rural tourism has remained peripheral to the main foci of tourism research, and poorly defined, it continues to be a general term which encapsulates a wide range of interest groups not only from tourism studies, but also from economics, planning, anthropology, geography, sociology and business studies. There has also been a lack of integration between each of these interest groups, each cultivating its own view and approach to rural tourism. As a result, few researchers have attempted to define rural tourism closely (Page and Getz 1997).

For the purposes of this study Rural Tourism involves tourists witnessing or participating in activities that form the core of country life such as farming (synonyms: farm tourism, agrotourism). Loosely defined it can encompass any tourist activity that takes place in a non-urban, populated area. It is characterized by: integration in the local social and economic environments, complementarities to the main economic activities of the area, utilization of local products and participation in local activities (e.g. open-air activities, local cuisine, etc). An alternative way to define this field might be to list what is included in rural tourism activities in various countries such as 1) Finland, for example, where it usually means renting out cottages to visitors or providing catering services in the countryside; 2) in Hungary, where a special term of “village tourism” exists, indicating that only activities and services provided in villages are included in this kind of tourism (here, though, village tourism typically covers low-priced accommodation – involvement in agricultural or other local activities is not common); 3) in Slovenia, where the most important form of rural tourism is tourism on family farms, where guests stay either with the farm family or in a guesthouse, but visiting farms to have a meal and explore the farmyard is also popular; 4) in the Netherlands, where the rural tourist product means especially camping on the farm, with most farm services being linked to route-bound activities such as cycling, walking or horse riding;

and 5) in Greece, where the main provision of rural tourism product is bed and breakfast accommodation in traditionally furnished rooms and with traditional breakfasts often based on homemade products. More generally, according to Lobo (2007), rural tourism is a recreational experience involving visits to rural settings or rural environments for the purpose of participating in or experiencing activities, events or attractions not readily available in urbanized areas, but these do not have to be agricultural in nature.

These are *tourist* oriented definitions however; to understand the impact of rural tourism as an industry on the position of rural women we need also to consider whether it can serve as a development agent in terms of reducing rural poverty, uplifting the status of rural women by adding to or becoming more important than their agriculture-related skills, and/or promoting the many other changes that are needed so that rural uplift for women can be accomplished. Shri P.R. Kyndiah, the Indian Minister for Development of North Eastern Region & Tribal affairs, when speaking at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry Conference on International Eco and Rural Tourism Marketing (FICCI 2004) was quite clear about this: “only where tourism is able to show-case life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the *local community economically and socially* as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can it be termed *rural tourism*”.

Rural tourism is therefore a niche tourism market that can provide supplemental income to farmers or other rural dwellers, and in some cases can become a full time enterprise for rural communities. This means rural tourism involving women could be of assistance to developing countries such as India as this country is largely dependent on agriculture, which is turn an industry which is mainly supported by women in the rural workforce. If rural women can participate in this process and can also utilize their agriculture-related skills, then remarkable contributions could be made to the rural economy in the long run for these regions. The Indian Travel Business Magazine (2004) acknowledged that the success of the rural tourism sector will lie in its ability to change the lives of the rural poor, its strengths in generating employment, particularly in the rural regions, and its commitment towards harnessing economic muscle for the betterment of disadvantaged. It is also acknowledged that it is a labor intensive industry and is thus able to provide extensive forward and backward economic linkages to build income and employment especially for women.

Other countries in Asia are accepting the importance of rural tourism development and are already enthusiastically practicing certain measures to implement it. Kasman-Entus (2003) observed that in 2001, rural tourism provided direct employment to 38 per cent of Bali's workforce and contributed 51 per cent of Bali's income by generating local employment opportunities, with a central role played by women through developing homestay programs and also cultural immersion programs to introduce visitors to their architecture, cooking, rituals, music and farming practices. Oppermann and Chon (1997) recognized the importance of tourism as an ideal economic alternative to more traditional primary and secondary sector activities. In supporting this idea, Wahab & Cooper (2001: 19) noted that in the age of globalization, tourism is both part of the search for identity for both visitor and host communities and a desire for more effective economic positioning in contemporary globalization. Consequently, as far as rural tourism is concerned, these observations point to the need to integrate the desires of rural women to change their identity and economic positioning

by inaugurating and/or controlling rural tourism in their communities. Thus, this study explores the importance of rural tourism to rural women and demonstrates the need to develop it for the underdeveloped regions of India and the world, since it has the potential to achieve greater socioeconomic strength for rural communities in the future.

Issues in developing Rural Tourism

This section deals with the literature that identifies complexities in putting rural tourism into practice, as its significance is not yet realized worldwide. Several other factors were also discussed in the main study that helped to reveal the complexities and circumstances in the manner of its development (Ahuja 2005: 18-48). For reasons of length and depth of coverage in this short paper, these have been omitted. Hall and Jenkins (1998: 19-41) stated that rural areas are economically, physically, socially and politically diverse, and suffer from varying interpretations and a lack of integrated planning and policymaking. Piplani (2001) noted that rural tourism started developing in India in the 1970s, but was not then part of a fully articulated rural tourism policy (affirmed by Shrivastava and Thakur (2003). Research on Thailand in 1997 revealed the fact that legislative organizations in that country restrict rural tourism development and that their decisions are influenced by political interference (Rattanasuwongchai, 1998). Another major constraint is the conflict between government organizations, each of which is usually trying to protect its own dignity and authority.

These observations confirm that in most countries rural tourism suffers from a lack of integrated planning and institutional arrangements that generally become the cause of policy failures. In addition, the parent study shows that limited participation by the local community can also be considered as an important factor in the failure of rural tourism development (Ahuja 2005). This discussion shows that although rural tourism is a clean concept and consists of various unique characteristics, it is not easy to develop it. There are some other problems in the pattern of rural tourism development that are neither noticed nor much publicized, such as the minor role of rural women in the forms of tourism development that are basically linked to rural development (Kinnaird and Hall 1994; Sinclair 1997:1-15). This gendered situation shows that bringing rural women into the tourism development process is a difficult task as the world system against women is structured in a way that suppresses them through gender related ideologies. Thus, opportunities for employment in tourism are imbued with the traditional social practices shaping men and women's roles in society.

Rural Women and Rural Tourism - India

This research is focused on the relationship between rural women and rural tourism in India. One important factor to mention at the outset is that women's participation in tourism is more prevalent in other countries of Asia than in India, largely because of those traditional social practices mentioned above. Thus, the literature regarding Indian women's tourism participation is very scant and consequently this study lacks a wide theoretical background. Apostolopoulos, Sonmez and Timothy (2001) confirm the earlier discussion in this paper that women, especially in developing regions, are likely to experience tourism differently due to their positions in their respective socio-cultural and socioeconomic environments. They argue that women are exploited by global

capitalism's patriarchal drive and also that tourism producers and consumers alike live in a gendered world where specific gendered contexts cause different tourism impacts. At the same time, they note that a better understanding is needed about whether tourism enhances or diminishes women's status and whether it has different consequences for social and domestic lives of women compared to those of men. Consequently, there are visible differences in how women and men are involved in the production of tourism. Just as particular stereotypes and hierarchies shape tourism in those societies where modernization and global capitalism converge with religion, culture, and history, gender realities influence tourism, marketing travelers, and the actions of the host community.

Low-skilled jobs are often viewed as good work opportunities for women and ethnic minorities. It is also acknowledged, however, that while employment in multinational organizations may sometimes give women access to above-average wages and better working conditions, such employment is often accompanied by exploitation in a labor market based on patriarchal relations (Apostolopoulos, Sonmez and Timothy 2001). For this reason, women's tourism employment is often compared to a pyramid, with many women working in seasonal, part-time, low-skilled, and non-managerial positions at the bottom and few in well paid, skilled, and managerial positions at the top, with a much greater proportion of men at this latter level.

However, in order to understand the condition of women in tourism in India, we must first look at the key facts of women's condition in Indian society in general. Nath and Rustagi (2003) discuss factors such as:

- a) Low female literacy levels (in spite of improvements in female literacy rates during the last decades, substantial gender gaps still exist);
- b) Women's contribution to production / reproduction that is not adequately recognized;
- c) Non-recognition of women's work;
- d) Lack or poor levels of skill / training for women workers;
- e) Poor health conditions and poverty (inequality, disempowerment, lack of opportunity and poor access in different spheres);
- f) Absence of social security measures for women workers and unequal wages;
- g) The gender dimensions of child labor;
- h) Poor access to resources/ land / property (the issue of property rights, access and use of common property resources, etc).

Williams (2004) has acknowledged that as in all other forms of employment in India, access to tourism-related employment is gender based. Men tend to predominate in the formal sector of tourism in India. Women contribute just a small percentage (2.98 percent) of employment in tourism. This scenario paints a clear picture of the treatment women receive in the tourism sector. The question is how to empower women and bring them to equality with men in the mainstream. Some achievements have been made recently. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (NPEW) declared in 2001 that India must be a country that grants equality to women and also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women (Williams 2004). The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women, by focusing on the access of women to the economy, particularly those belonging to weaker sections in the rural areas and in the informal,

unorganized sectors. However, in the equally important fields of education and health, among others, the position of women is still inadequately supported.

It is also a fact that land and other resources in the rural areas, which are the primary sources of food for India, are being privatized and commercialized for profit. Thus rural women have a step further to take: they not only have to struggle against cultural and political discrimination, but also against an economic system that renders them with less property and less opportunity, even as they are given a greater role in society through their struggles. The Rural Development Institute (RDI 2007) stated that rural women in India feel the crippling pressure of poverty the most. Females are more likely than males to die as infants and children. More than six out of ten women in India are illiterate – almost double the male rate. Most significantly, Indian women rarely have legal rights to land, despite the fact that they are often more engaged in agriculture than men. Statistics from the RDI show that 86.1 percent of females are engaged in agriculture, compared to 74 percent of males. But there are hardly any special programs for enhancing women’s agricultural skills. While 7.1 percent of rural females are engaged in manufacturing, the percentage for rural males is 7, i.e. less than that of females. Despite this fact, most of the training programs in rural industries also have hardly any female participation. And while rural males have opportunities in construction, trade, transport, storage, and services, these are mostly denied to rural females, as is rural tourism.

Methodology and Results

Given the factors outlined in the above discussion, the main research questions for this study are:

1. To what extent are non-domestic economic opportunities accessible to rural Indian women? If there are accessible opportunities, then what kind of work are they involved in? Or if not, then what kinds of problems restrict their participation?
2. To what extent is social infrastructure developed in the rural areas of India? Or if there is a lack, then how does this hamper the rural tourism development process?
3. To what extent is education an essential element to activate rural tourism in developing regions of India?

The study was conducted in the two Indian States of Rajasthan and Kerala, focusing on certain villages that have very different approaches in granting liberation to rural women. By studying rural women’s quality of life in these States, the differences in the degree of satisfaction that women gain from traditional roles in the household and community can be observed, while the desire to change these through participation in rural tourism can be assessed. The sites for research were as follows.

Chokidhani Village, Rajasthan

In order to understand the general pattern of rural tourism in these parts of India, Chokidhani village, located in the vicinity of Jaipur, the Capital of Rajasthan was chosen. Rajasthan is a Northwestern State of India. This is a *recreated* village (essentially a theme park) mainly based on tourism, so it was a useful benchmarking opportunity for