

Tourism and Livelihood in Rural Areas of Kullu District, Himachal Pradesh: A Review

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Abstract

Rural tourism is becoming more popular as an alternative livelihood diversification strategy, local business growth, and rural community empowerment strategy in rural India. This review paper is based on secondary literature, which explores the interplay of rural tourism and rural livelihoods in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh in terms of social work. The findings indicate that the intensive development of homestays, eco-tourism, heritage-based tourism, transport services, handicrafts, and small hospitality businesses has generated alternative sources of income and also increased social capital due to improvement of skills, network, and market connections. Simultaneously, disparities in the access to sources, seasonality, environment-related pressures, cultural commodification, and historical gendered inequalities demonstrate substantial deficiencies. Social work approach anticipates equity, involvement, cultural conservation, and safeguarding of marginalized families beyond the economic variables. Combining the concepts of social work practice and Sustainable Livelihood Framework, the study identifies a lack of participatory planning, inclusion in governance, livelihood diversification, environmental protection, and targeted capacity building among women, youth, and socially disadvantaged populations needs to be established. The paper summarizes that rural tourism may be a source of resilience, empowerment, and well-being of communities when it is based on people-oriented, community-based strategies, but when it is poorly managed, it may also increase inequalities and destroy local ecological and cultural resources. The themes of policy directions are the community ownership, open benefit-sharing, and monitoring mechanisms to capture social, cultural and environmental benefits as well as the economic benefits.

Keywords: Rural Tourism; Rural Livelihood; District Kullu; Social Work Perspective; Sustainable Livelihoods; Community Participation; Inclusive Development; Himalayas

1. Introduction

Rural tourism has emerged as a significant strategy for diversifying rural economies, generating employment, and promoting inclusive development in many parts of the world. (Nagaraju & Chandrashekara, 2014; Bojne, 2010). In nations like India where a significant percentage of the population still relies on agriculture and livelihoods based on the use of natural resources would be considered as an additional means of generating incomes, market and community empowerment, the rural tourism sector is now being regarded as a complementary channel to achieve these three aspects (Acharya, 2006; Agarwal, 1989). The growth of homestays, eco-tourism, heritage trails, adventure tourism and community based hospitality businesses are a manifestation of wider policy directions to connect conservation, culture and development (Wani et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the scope of the rural tourism in providing sustainable and fair livelihoods is still debated, especially in vulnerable mountainous areas. The district of Kullu, situated in the middle Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh, provides a good background against which to consider this argument. Kullu is known to have striking landscapes, religious tours, apple gardens, adventure sports, and rich cultural heritage, which has made its tourism industry grow at a very fast rate in the last decades (Sah & Mazari, 2007; Prasad et al., 2016). The growth has also offered new economic potential to households in terms of accommodation, transport, guiding, handicraft, and

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food services, as well as other related sectors. Simultaneously, the rise in tourist, cultural resource commodification, land use shifts, environmental stresses, seasonal reliance and dependency have brought forth additional weaknesses and inequalities in the community (Jamal & Dredge, 2014). The classical occupations are reorganized, in some cases intensified and in others pushed aside, subsistence agriculture and horticulture.

It is on this background that a social work perspective is necessary. Social work, based on social justice, involvement, empowerment and human well-being, provides the tools of analysis to assess the beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries and the way in which communities bargain the change in the tourism-driven development (Devereux & McGregor, 2014; Stiglitz, 2002). It focuses on community organization, capacity building, rights based approaches, protection of the vulnerable groups and encouragement of resilient livelihoods. The rural tourism perspective on rural tourism is based on the approach whereby the economic indicators are put aside in favour of other social prospects including dignity, inclusion, cultural continuity, intergenerational well-being, and collective agency (Jamal & Camargo, 2023).

This review paper thus considering the relationship between rural livelihoods and tourism in rural areas in Kullu district using the lens of social work. It combines the precedent literature on the topics of tourism, livelihood diversification and community development, and frames the discussion within the particular social-cultural and environmental circumstances of Kullu. With the social work theory and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework concepts integrated, the paper aims at comprehending the impact of tourism in an attempt to influence livelihood strategies, household security, gender roles, youth aspirations, and community cohesion. The gaps in existing research and the policy and practice directions that can render rural tourism more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable are also identified in the review. Finally, the paper concludes that rural tourism with community-based social work principles can be a source of the increased income as well as empowerment, resilience, and social welfare. But unless it is carefully regulated, participatory planned, and institutionalised it is likely to exacerbate inequalities and undermine local cultural and ecological resources. This balance is an important factor to understand in the development of development paths that would be of real use to the residents of the Kullu district.

1.1. Background

The rural areas in India are experiencing a fast socio-economic transformation due to transformation in agriculture, migration, infrastructural growth and increased presence of tourism (Choithani et al., 2021; Nagaraju & Chandrashekara, 2014). The households in the rural areas are becoming more dependent on diversifying sources of income as traditional methods of livelihood that were formerly based on land are under strain due to climatic changes, market volatility, and declining farm acreage (Ellis, 2000; Ellis, 1998). In this regard, rural tourism has been encouraged as one of the development strategies capable of encouraging local economies, generating jobs, and lowering out-migration. Tourism in Himachal Pradesh has turned out to be one of the most significant fields of investments in the region in terms of revenues and job creation (Xue et al., 2017). The mountain villages have changed to become tourism centres due to scenic landscapes, beautiful climate, spiritual sites, and adventure sports (Basariya & Ahmed, 2019). Kullu district, which is characterized by the mix of religious destinations, the economy of apples, forests and adventure, can be regarded as an example of such change. Homestays, guesthouses, taxi, tour business, production of handicraft and small hospitality businesses have increased in the past twenty years (Yasami et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, tourism is also related to fragile Himalayan ecosystem and the complicated community dynamics (Anup & Fernandez, 2022). There are seasonal tourist inflows, the growth of land prices, commercialization of the traditional process, and the growth of waste and pressure on water and forest resources, which are worrying issues in terms of sustainability (Muhanna, 2006). Not every household can contribute equally to the tourism markets; availability of capital, geographical benefits, education, networks and policy assists determine the beneficiaries and the marginalized. In social work perspective, these changes are not economic only, they alter the power relations, cultural identity, gender roles, the community cohesion. The social work point of view attracts to consider the problems of equity, participation, vulnerability, and social protection (Ward, 2009). Their focus is on community-based tourism planning, an inclusive decision making process and livelihood models, which promote dignity and well-being as opposed to just maximizing income. Kullu district is a key case in this larger background to look at the impact of rural tourism on livelihood strategies and to identify the kind of support systems, which may be policy-based, institutional based, and social work intervention based, which will make tourism-based development socially just and sustainable.

2. Literature Review

Research studies on the Himalayan region indicate that tourism has been more and more placed as a complementary livelihood measure in which agriculture is no longer a complete measure on its own (Jana et al., 2022). The trend can be well traced in Kullu district, as the declining landholdings and the rising and falling incomes of horticultural farming

and agriculture have motivated the people to engage in tourism-related activities (Yu & Spencer, 2021). Growth of homestays in Naggar, Tirthan Valley, Banjar and in villages around Manali is the indication of wider results that local entrepreneurship may be fostered by rural tourism and jobs generated in the form of accommodation, food services, guiding, transport and small shops (Imran & Nguyen, 2018). As it is common in broader literature, the benefits of Kullu are disproportionately distributed though. The households that are close by roads, tour circuits and scenic routes are in a better position to exploit the tourism opportunities, whereas the remote or resource barren households are largely involved as wage labourers. Availability of credit, education and networks becomes a decisive factor of engagement and this goes in line with the results that tourism is a potential replicant of inequalities and not a diminishing factor (Holden, 2013). Seasonal reliance and fluctuation due to road closures, severe weather conditions and even country-wide shocks are also reflections of more general information that tourism is not necessarily a means to reliable livelihoods (Seddon & Hussein, 2002). The explanation of these dynamics is through literature on livelihood diversification. In Kullu, most of the households practice tourism entrepreneurship by integrating the practice of apple farming, livestock production, and paid labour with tourism ventures like homestays, taxi services and handicrafts (Niehof, 2004). This is in line with the sustainable livelihood literature that indicates that families do not tend to give up the traditional jobs; rather, tourism is one of the components of an extended livelihood investment (Tao & Wall, 2009). Diversification may also increase resilience, although when the families over depend on tourism they put themselves at risk during lean seasons and crises. The socio-cultural influences experienced in the broad literature can also be seen in Kullu. Tourism has brought the traditional crafts like the Kullu shawls weaving and local cuisine back to life and at the same time commercializing the rituals and redefining the dreams of the youth working in service sectors (Bathla et al., 2024). Women often play major roles in preparing food, washing, taking care of guests, in homestays, earning money but often they are not in the actual decision-making areas, which are indicative of gender inequalities (Quang et al., 2024). This is a very ecologically sensitive mountain area and the ecological worries that are posed by scholars are quite important in this area. The uncontrolled construction, solid waste, water scarcity and the upsurge of vehicular traffic particularly on Manali and other major valleys jeopardize the natural resources as well as sustainability of tourism (Kuniyal et al., 2003). These are some of the pressures that justify the implementation of sustainability principles and awareness campaigns about communities. Lastly, literature that leads towards social work and community development standpoints is one that is very applicable to Kullu. Efforts in panchayats, NGO, homestay training programmes, women groups and waste management awareness campaigns show some signs of new efforts towards participatory governance (Kumar, 1997). Nevertheless, their results have not been systematically recorded thus the importance of having a study that consolidates tourism, livelihoods and social work to provide directions in a socio-just and sustainable tourism development in the district.

3. Research Methodology

The research is purely based on the secondary data. It is a compilation of what has been published in research papers, scholarly books, governmental reports and valid magazine articles in an attempt to analyse trends and discussions in the context of rural tourism and livelihoods. By so doing, it will be possible to have a full picture of the impact of rural tourism to livelihoods as well as identify areas that need further empirical studies.

4. Discussions

The review shows that the rural tourism in the Kullu district reflects the paradox that is mostly presented in the world tourism literature: it not only provides actual livelihood diversification opportunities, but also generates new vulnerabilities (Sood et al. 2017; Bansal et al., 2024). Tourism has also helped households to increase incomes by homestays, guiding, handicrafts and transportation. Such activities have a contribution to local entrepreneurship and the connection of hitherto closed communities to bigger markets (Anwar et al., 2025; Bansal et al., 2024). Tourism empowers financial, human and social capitals through creation of savings, building skills and networks which are all aspects of sustainable livelihood. Nevertheless, the access to such benefits is also very uneven, which can be demonstrated by evidence (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021). Opportunities are disproportionately seized by households in a better location, connected in social networks, and having access to credit. Remote, resource-poor and socially marginalized families tend to continue to be confined in low-paid, seasonal, or informal employment. This trend supports the arguments in social work literature that development processes without mediated by participatory structures will tend to reproduce hierarchies other than to break them (Young & Goldman, 2015). The socio-cultural impacts of the tourism in Kullu also provide a good example of the interplay of opportunity and risk. As conventional crafts and cultural manifestations become more visible, commodification of rituals, evolving youthful ambitions, as well as the evolving gender roles can weaken social cohesion (Prasad et al., 2016; Bansal et al., 2024). The involvement of women in homestays, such as broadens economic space, could increase unpaid care work and leave decision-making authority in the hands of men. There is a concern over the environmental stressors, such as waste build-up, unregulated

development, congestion, and water stress which lead to unsustainability of the environment resulting in long term sustainability of tourism (Sapkota, 2020). Such results indicate that community participation, empowerment, accountability and rights-based approaches to social work should be incorporated in tourism planning. The lack of this kind of integration means that tourism-led development will only exacerbate inequality, undermine traditional safety nets and destroy the very resources which people base their livelihoods on (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). It is proposed in the review that multi-level interventions should be implemented: increased control over construction and carrying capacity; social financial and training of marginalized households; capacity building with women and young people; and institutional support of cooperatives, self-help groups, and panchayat-led initiatives. The bridging roles can be played by the social workers, NGOs, and local institutions, where they can mediate, enhance the voice of the people and make sure that the tourism development remains people-centered.

5. Conclusion

The Kullu district has an opportunity as well as a warning in rural tourism. It has become a major livelihood supplement and has provided new opportunities of earning and entrepreneurship (Kumar, 2023). However, it has also brought about cultures, social inequalities, and environmental pressures which cannot be ignored. The review shows that the contribution of tourism to the livelihoods of the rural population is situational and depends on power relations, availability of resources, and governance structures (De Haan, 2012). This social work approach helps to see that the main issue is not whether tourism brings economic benefits, but to whom, under which conditions, and on what social and ecological price it is being offered. The key aspects of the tourism policies must therefore be community participation, equitable share of benefits and protection of vulnerable groups (Jamal & Dredge, 2014). The combination of sustainable livelihood thinking and a social work approach provides an avenue through which interventions can be designed to enhance resilience, social justice and cultural and natural heritage (Wu et al., 2022; Sanmee, 2025). In the case of Kullu district, the potential future research and practice should be aimed at participatory planning, gender-sensitive programs, long-term livelihood results monitoring, and the documentation of the NGOs and panchayats involvement in tourism control. When steered by communal oriented ideals, the rural tourism can cease to just give short term income generation but develop into an instrument of inclusive and sustainable rural development.

Recommendations

The rural tourism in Kullu district is likely to enhance livelihood, cultural sustainability, and reduce vulnerability, but social responsible planning is necessary so that the benefits and the well-being of the society can be equally distributed (Thakur & Shashni, 2025). The policies must be geared towards meaningful community involvement and local ownership under Panchayats, self-help groups, youth clubs, and women associations, and cooperative and community owned business which retain profits in local homes (Srivastava, 2024). The training programs on hospitality, digital marketing, responsible guiding, waste management, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship are very essential, particularly to women, tribes, and unemployed youths (Kumar & Sharma, 2025). The growth of tourism should be based on the sustainable and low impact programs like eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and heritage based tourism with clear guidelines on building construction, carrying capacity, use of water and disposal of wastes so as to protect the environment (Khanal et al., 2024). Social protection through insurance, safety nets and micro-finance can be used in diversification of income and integration of tourism with agriculture, horticulture, handicrafts and allied activities to strengthen livelihood resilience. They should preserve local culture and indigenous knowledge by documentation, education and involving the youth and discouraging cultural commodification (Bihari, 2023). The development of infrastructure should continue with consultation of the community and social impact evaluation of infrastructure development such as roads, sanitation, connectivity, and transport to eliminate inequity or displacement. Good governance, transparency, and community-based monitoring are required to monitor the social outcomes and impose equitable distribution of benefits (Khanani et al., 2021). The social work professionals are critical in all these processes, including community mobilization, community advocacy, community collaboration, conflict resolution processes, community empowerment, and social work ethics, to make sure that the tourism development is truly people-focused.

5.1. Policy Implications

The Kullu district tourism strategy should shift towards a more market-oriented policy to a more community-driven one that would focus on the local ownership and long-term social welfare (Tiwari, 2013). The principles of social justice, gender equality and environmental sustainability should be explicitly incorporated in the planning frameworks, in such a way that tourism does not perpetuate disparities, and does not subjugate natural resources on which livelihoods rely (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Jamal & Camargo, 2014). The inclusion of participatory processes, village level tourism committees, consultations via Panchayats and the representation of women and the marginalized can also help in participative decisions concerning the local priorities and values of the culture (Kala & Bagri, 2018). Another critical thing is to develop local capabilities by training, incentivising entrepreneurship and accessing financial resources to

encourage stable and diversified livelihoods that are not solely tourism-dependent (Chiawo et al., 2023). Lastly, monitoring systems should be incorporated in the policy that goes beyond the number of visitors and incomes. Quality of employment, fair distribution of benefits, cultural maintenance, community contentment, and environmental well-being are some of the indicators which need to be tracked systematically (Michalos, 1997). These policy directions taken together provide an inclusive, sustainable and social work-centred tourism development.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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