

## Rural Tourism: A Consumer Perspective

Mohd Irfan Rais<sup>a\*</sup>, Mohd Altaf Khan<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a&b</sup>Department of Commerce & Business Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India  
E-mail: irfanrais919@gmail.com<sup>a</sup>

### Abstract

India is home to several tourist destinations from North to South and East to West. With Himalayas in the north to beautiful and stunning beaches in the south and famous Goa in the west to beautiful north east, India has many tourist spots attracting tourists from all over the world. India is blessed with pilgrimage, historical as well as natural tourist spots. The foot fall of tourists have been increasing every year making the already famous tourist spots very congested. Urban tourism has reached its full potential and is overcrowded. The tourists are now looking for exciting alternatives away from the stress of crowded cities where they can relax, experience the nature, learn history and heritage, understand production systems and get access to fresh farm food. Rural tourism offers such experience to tourists who want to spend quality time away from the cities. Rural tourism provides consumer free access to natural environment. Rural tourism may comprise components like rural territory, rural heritage, rural life and rural activities. Each of these components has their sub components. Rural tourism is still in nascent stage in India. Rural tourism can prove to be a potential source of economic growth, if developed through proper planning and strategies. Planning requires research based solutions of both demand and supply side factors. To fulfill this objective, this study is carried out among tourists to know their preferences towards rural tourism. Although a number of research on rural tourism have been conducted in the past, no literature on demand side determinants is now available. The present study intends to identify the factors that attract the tourists' towards rural tourism. The data for this study was gathered through a standardised questionnaire sent via email and personal interviews. A sample size of 100 has been taken for the study using convenience sampling technique. Four components of rural tourism as given by World Tourism Organisation have been taken for this study to analyse the factors that are important for tourists. Appropriate statistical tools have been used to analyse the data along with descriptive statistics.

**Key Words:** Indian Tourism, Rural Tourism, Demand, Consumer Preferences.

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\*Corresponding Author

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

India is home to a number of diversified tourist destinations attracting tourists from all over the world. India is blessed with rich history. The rulers of India have left behind rich religious and cultural legacy. Several rulers have contributed their own distinctive architectural styles, in the form of famous monuments. In addition to the rich past, India is also blessed with scenic natural Himalayas and a number of beaches. Himalayas in the north, Kerala, popularly called as God's own Country in the South, Stunning beaches of Goa in the West, the Darjeeling and the Beautiful North Eastern states in the East makes India one of the most sought after tourist destinations in the World.

Tourism, along with the oil and jewellery industries, is presently one of the fastest expanding industries in the world. Tourism is predicted to play a significant role in a variety of industries in the coming decades, including human resource development, country economic growth, and increased wealth and productivity.

Tourism not only accelerates the growth of a nation, it is also one of the largest employment providing sectors. The tourist industry has the potential to generate huge amounts of direct and indirect employment for a wide range of people, from highly skilled to low-skilled workers. According to the UN's World Tourism Organization, the tourism sector directly employs 6-7 percent of the global workforce and indirectly employs millions more through the multiplier effect (UNWTO). To emphasise the importance of tourism as a job creator, it is worth noting that in India, every one million spent in tourism directly creates 47.5 jobs and roughly 85-90 jobs indirectly. Agriculture, in contrast to tourism, generates only 44.6 employment and manufacturing only 12.6. After diamonds and jewellery and readymade clothing, tourism is the third greatest foreign exchange earner. (Nagaraju, 2014)

Keeping in view the fierce competition from other major tourist destinations, it becomes essential that India must strengthen its marketing and promotional efforts and chalk out an effective marketing strategy to maintain and improve its existing market share.

## **2. RURAL TOURISM**

The concept of rural tourism is new and emerging. Rural tourism is an exciting alternative to other tried and tested forms of tourism. Rural tourism is based in small areas which are sparsely populated and located away from the cities. Rural tourism provides calm and peaceful atmosphere and attracts tourists who want to experience a new kind of tourism where they can relax and spend quality time away from the cities.

Rural tourism has been defined in many ways. There has been intense debate on what actually should be the definition of rural tourism. The literature on rural tourism has so far not arrived on consensus.

Defining rural tourism becomes difficult because no single criterion has been used by different nations on components of rural tourism. The difficulty in arriving at a consensus on rural tourism becomes difficult because of the fact that not all the tourism that takes place in rural areas represents rural life; they may have tourism in urban form, though they are located in rural areas. Every village offering tourism has its own rural characteristics making it difficult to find characteristics that are common to all regions. Another factor is the globalisation and its impact on villages. The villages are fast adapting themselves to the global markets. Majority of the rural

inhabitants have access to sophisticated forms of communications and telecommunications. Due to the above mentioned factors it becomes difficult to arrive at a single definition of rural tourism. Many authors have given their own definitions, which are discussed below.

Rural tourism, according to Hill et al, is "natural life tourism, in which the consumer can access the natural environment rather than commercially produced tourist activities and destinations." To fulfil travellers seeking healthy, energetic, relaxing, and culturally valid experiences while escaping urban crowds and hectic workplaces, rural tourism was established (D. Hill, 1996). Rural tourism, according to Lane (2009), is defined as tourism that takes place in rural areas.(Lane, 2009).

***According to Lane, a rural tourist place should essentially have following features:***

(1) They should be located in the rural areas, (2) The tourist places should have rural tourism's features, (3) The buildings and settlements of the rural tourist places should be on a small scale, (4) Local people and their families must be tied to the locations., (5)The locations must be in small towns and villages., (6) Complex economic, environmental, and historical patterns must be represented in the communities. (Lane, 2009).

According to Lane (2009) the OECD incorporated some of the features that best describes rural tourism. The OECD identified some of the features and classified rural tourism in to three broad areas. The classification adopted by OECD is based on the proximity of the village to a city.

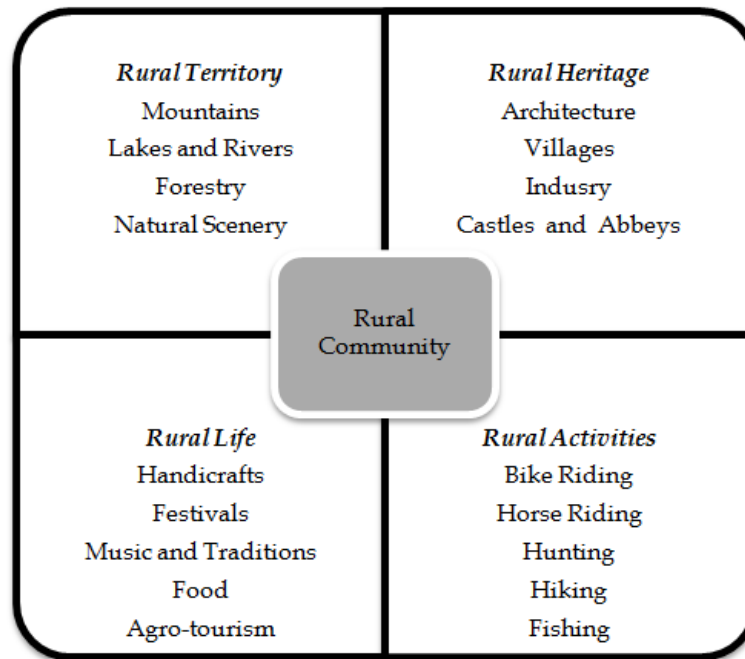
***Economically Integrated Areas:*** These areas are rural in nature yet they are located very close to the cities. These areas cater to the daily visits of the tourists from the urban areas. The economy of an economically integrated village is based on the daily visits from urban areas. These villages have higher pressure on natural, cultural and landscape conversation.

***Intermediate Areas:*** These areas are located relatively far from cities. These areas are suitable for overnight stays. These villages are often located in protected regions; they are rich in culture and heritage. These villages offer special attractions such as bird watching. These rural areas have good road and rail connectivity.

***Remote Areas:*** Remote rural areas are located far from the urban areas. These areas are characterised by thick villages. The remote areas have low quality of amenities. These areas are most suitable for tourists who want to escape from daily stress of city life. (Lane, 2009)

Though it is difficult to arrive at a precise and single definition of rural tourism, an attempt is made to broadly describe rural tourism. Rural tourism refers to any type of tourism that showcases rural life, art, culture, and tradition in rural areas, with the potential to help local residents economically and socially. Rural tourism also allows tourists and people to interact, resulting in a more rewarding tourism experience. The majority of rural tourism must take place in a village. Farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, natural tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism are all examples of multi-faceted tourism. Rural tourism differs from other types of tourism in that it is focused on the experience, the areas are sparsely inhabited, it is primarily in a natural setting, it aligns with seasons and local events, and it is built on the preservation of culture, heritage, and traditions.(Frederick, 1992)

The World Tourism Organisation of United Nations has given a model that best describes the components of rural tourism. According to WTO, the rural tourism has four main components namely rural territory, rural life, rural heritage and rural activity. These components are further divide into sub components. Rural territory consists of mountains, lakes and rivers, natural scenery, forestry. Rural life has handicrafts, traditions and music, festivals, food and agro tourism. The Rural heritage has industries, castles and abbeys and architecture and rural activity has hunting, hiking, bike riding, fishing, horse riding. (V. Sanagustin-Fons, 2018)



*Adapted from (V. Sanagustin-Fons, 2018)*

### 3. RURAL TOURISM AND CONSUMER PREFERENCES

Consumer behaviour is a very complex phenomenon. Consumers have their own perceptions about a particular product or service. Their perceptions shape their preferences. Proper understanding of perceptions and identification on preferences is an important step. Several studies have been conducted in this aspect and the reviews of authors are presented below.

It's crucial to figure out how clients determine the standards and factors that will be used in their evaluation. Farmers are not only hosts, but also interpreters and guides to a foreign culture (Pearce, 2012). Satisfying customers' expectations will go a long way in reimagining, or giving rural areas a favourable image. It will also help people understand farmers, who have made significant contributions to regional economies in Australia through their work and lifestyle. (Lim, 2004)

The customers of rural tourism are more likely to extend their stay if sufficient information is provided to them regarding the destination and rural activity. (Ray & Das, 2011). To attract customers towards rural tourism, it is essential that the tourists must have something to see

which may be sightseeing, animals and birds, traditions and culture of the village, something to do which includes activities like hiking, hunting, fishing etc. and something to buy like handicrafts, woven dress material, farm fresh unprocessed, semi processed or processed food. (Gopal, 2008)

According to Sharpley & Roberts (2004), the tourists visit the villages with the motivation of experiencing the rural environment. The attractive features of the rural tourism are associated with higher demand. (R. Sharpley, 2004)

The hosts of the villages (organisers) must recognize the rural destination's products (resources) and also learn how the resources can be utilised to meet customers' needs while promoting the destination (Lo, Mohamad, Songan, & Yeo, 2012)

Rid *et al.* (2014) reported that tourists interested in rural tourism have four major motivations. One type of group is motivated by heritage and nature. One group is motivated by the authentic rural experience staying among local people. The third group is motivated by their interest in local languages and handicraft. The last group is interested in nature, rivers, sea etc. (Rid, Ezeuduji, & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014)

Consumers may be drawn to agro tourism for a variety of reasons, including the chance to see the countryside, fresh food products that aren't always available in cities, and leisure activities that allow parents to teach their children about food production. (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, April 9-11, 2006)

Motivations for a tourist to visit villages include support to local farmers, followed by spending time with family, consuming fresh food product, adventure, undertake outdoor activities, relax, learn how products are made etc. (Brown & Hershey, 2012)

#### **4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Rural tourism is expected to have an immense impact on economy because Indian villages have great potential. This is due to the fact that each town is distinct, with its own traditions, culinary habits, history, and legacy, among other things. With working people from overcrowded cities showing keen interest in spending holiday in nature, in the tourism industry rural tourism has a one of the attractions. But the Indian rural tourism is still evolving. The potential of villages in is yet to be utilised fully. A number of factors like language problem, lack of business planning skills, inadequate physical infrastructure, and lack of trained manpower can be attributed to the low utilisation of villages as tourist hubs. These factors have contributed to tourists preferring urban tourism which has resulted in overcrowding of urban tourism places. Lack of other tourism places has resulted in congestion of urban, religious and historical tourist spots. For instance famous tourist places like Goa and Simla have already reached their potential and cannot offer anything new. Consumers now are more demanding. Tourist places which can offer natural and refreshing experience where the tourists can relax and learn about the production systems is the need of the hour. Recognising its importance Government of India is encouraging rural tourism and several projects have been sanctioned. Yet the rural tourism is yet to develop on par with its potential. Development of successful rural tourism requires proper planning along with proper assessment of both demand and supply side requirements and marketing solutions based on ground level research. This paper attempts to analyse the demand side requirements so that policy makers and the organisers of the rural tourism get a deeper understanding on the

requirements of rural tourism. A proper planning by taking into account both demand and supply side requirements will go a long way in establishing rural tourism as an alternative to the already crowded urban tourism.

## 5. RESEARCH GAP

As discussed earlier In India, rural tourism is still in its infancy. Rural tourism as a subject of study came into light in the past few years. Researchers have conducted the studies on agro tourism as well as rural tourism in areas of economic importance, socio-economic impact, service quality and marketing strategies. All the past studies focus on demand side factors and does not take the views of consumers. As consumers are varied and have different needs and requirements, a proper study on rural tourism from the demand side is the need of the hour. The present study is expected to fulfil the gap by studying consumer preferences so that marketers can project their tourism as per the preferences of the consumers.

## 6. OBJECTIVES

- [i] To understand the concept and components of rural tourism.
- [ii] To identify consumer preferences with respect to rural tourism.
- [iii] To analyse the nature of relationship between the frequency of tours and interest in rural tourism.
- [iv] To analyse the nature of relationship between the level of awareness of rural tourism and interest in rural tourism.

## 7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- a) **Sources of Data:** Primary data.
- b) **Sample size:** 100 respondents.
- c) **Sampling Method:** Convenience Sampling.
- d) **Tool:** Structured questionnaire through Personal interviews and e mail.
- e) **Procedure:** For the collection of data, a survey was carried out through a structured questionnaire. A pilot study was carried out initially among 20 respondents. The questionnaire was modified after the pilot survey. A sample size of 100 was taken and data was collected through personal interviews as well as e-mail. A total of 93 responses were received including personal interviews. Convenience sampling method was adopted for collection of data. The questionnaire has three parts. The first part has questions related to personal profile of the respondents. The second part has questions related to awareness and frequency of tourism and the last part has questions on preferences of tourists towards rural tourism. Initially the questionnaire had 26 items, five items were deleted after the pilot survey and the final questionnaire has 22 items. The respondents were asked to rate their level of awareness on rural tourism on a scale of five, where 1= very low level of awareness, 2=low awareness, 3=moderate awareness, 4=high level of awareness and 5=very high level of awareness, similarly average frequency of tours in a year is taken on a sale of 1 to 5. The preferences towards rural tourism has four different components namely, rural life, rural heritage, rural activities and rural territory. The rural life has 5 variables, rural heritage has 2 variables, rural activity has 4 variables and rural territory has 4 variables. The preferences of tourists is measured in five point



scale starting from strongly disagree to strongly agree, where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. The mean is calculated for all variables and overall ranking for each variable is given in the results. Correlation analysis has been used to test the relationship between independent variables (awareness and frequency) and dependant variables (rural life, rural territory, rural heritage, and rural activities). The data is analyzed using MS Excel and SPSS software.

## **8. HYPOTHESES**

- H01.1** There is no positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural territory
- Ha1.1** There is positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural territory
- H01.2** There is no positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural life
- Ha1.2** There is positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural life
- H01.3** There is no positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural heritage
- Ha1.3** There is positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural heritage
- H01.4** There is no positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural activities
- Ha1.4** There is positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural activities
- H02.1** There is no positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural territory
- Ha2.1** There is positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural territory
- H02.2** There is no positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural life
- Ha2.2** There is positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural life
- H02.3** There is no positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural heritage
- Ha2.3** There is positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural heritage
- H02.4** There is no positive correlation between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural activities
- Ha2.4** There is positive link between awareness level of rural tourism and interest in rural activities

## **9. RESULTS AND TESTING OF HYPOTHESES**

Majority of the respondents in the sample are in the age group of 21-30 i.e., 45.2% of the respondents fall under this age group. 18.3 percent of respondents are between the ages of 31 and 40, 16.1 percent are between the ages of 20 and 20, 11.8 percent are between the ages of 41 and 50, and only 8.6 percent are beyond 50. In terms of gender, the majority of respondents (59.1%) are male and 40.9 percent are female. Most of the respondents are well educated. 40.9% of the respondents are graduates, 34.4% of the respondents are post graduates, 16.1% of the respondents

have educational qualification of 12<sup>th</sup> and 8.6% of the respondents are doctorates. In the category of occupation, 36.6% of the respondents are students, 31.2% of the respondents are private employees, 20.4% of the respondents are self employed, 9.7% of the respondents are government employees and 2.2% of the respondents are house wives. In terms of income, 36.6 percent of respondents have a monthly income of less than \$10,000, 24.7 percent have a monthly income of \$10,000 to \$20,000, 18.3 percent have a monthly income of more than \$50,000, 12.9 percent have a monthly income of \$40,000 to \$50,000, and 7.5 percent have a monthly income of \$30,000 to \$50,000.

**Table 1: Preferences of Tourists towards Rural Tourism**

		Mean	Standard Deviation	Overall Ranking
	<b>Rural Territory</b>			
1	Mountains	3.98	.77312	3
2	Rivers and Lakes	3.88	.89503	4
3	Natural Sceneries	4.21	.65689	1
4	Forestry	3.78	.80554	6
	<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.96</b>		
	<b>Rural Life</b>			
5	Handicrafts	3.54	.91504	7
6	Festivals	3.51	.89215	9
7	Traditions	3.27	.68919	11
8	Food	3.87	1.01324	5
9	Agro tourism	4.12	.87509	2
	<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.66</b>		
	<b>Rural Heritage</b>			
10	Village Architecture	3.53	1.01738	8
11	Village and Cottage industries	3.33	.952	10
	<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.43</b>		
	<b>Rural Activity</b>			
12	Horse riding	2.70	.99543	14
13	Hunting	2.63	1.09132	15
14	Hiking	2.83	.98124	13
15	Fishing	3.23	1.02573	12
	<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>2.84</b>		

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 shows that most preferred category among the consumers is the rural territory followed by Rural life, Rural Heritage and Rural Activities. The consumers have shown highest preference



for natural sceneries, followed by agro tourism. Mountains, Rivers and lakes and Village food have an overall ranking of third, fourth and fifth respectively in consumer preferences. Forestry, handicrafts, village architecture, festivals and village industries have sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth overall rank respectively. Consumers have shown relatively less preference for traditions which has overall rank of eleventh. The consumers have shown relatively very less preference for rural activities. Fishing, Hiking, Horse riding and Hunting have an overall ranking of twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth respectively.

**Table 2: Testing of Hypothesis- Correlation between Frequency of Tours and Consumer Preferences**

		<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	<b>P value</b>	<b>Inference</b>
<b>H01.1</b>	Rural Territory	-.158	.132	Null Hypothesis is accepted
<b>H01.2</b>	Rural Life	.388**	.000	Null Hypothesis is rejected
<b>H01.3</b>	Rural Heritage	.302**	.003	Null Hypothesis is rejected
<b>H01.4</b>	Rural Activity	.818**	.000	Null Hypothesis is rejected

Source: Author's Calculations\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This table represents the relationship between the frequency of tours and preferences towards rural tourism. The table shows that frequency of tours and interest in rural territory has negative correlation. With increase in frequency of tours taken, interest in rural territory which includes mountains, rivers and lakes, natural sceneries and forestry declines. Rural life has a positive correlation with the frequency of tours. As frequency of tours increases, consumers tend to incline towards rural life which includes agro-tourism, village food, handicrafts, festivals and traditions. Rural heritage also has a positive correlation with frequency of tours. The interest of tourists towards village industries and village architecture increases with the frequency of tours. Rural activity has a strong correlation with frequency of tours. Tourists who travel frequently seems to have great interest in activities like hunting, hiking, horse riding and fishing.

**Table 3: Testing of Hypothesis- Correlation between Level of Awareness of Rural Tourism and Consumer Preferences**

		<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	<b>P value</b>	<b>Inference</b>
<b>H02.1</b>	Rural Territory	.028	.791	Null Hypothesis is accepted
<b>H02.2</b>	Rural Life	.776**	.000	Null Hypothesis is rejected
<b>H02.3</b>	Rural Heritage	.743**	.000	Null Hypothesis is rejected
<b>H02.4</b>	Rural Activity	.196	.060	Null Hypothesis is accepted

Source: Author's Calculations\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table 3 represents the relationship between the level of awareness of rural tourism and preferences of tourists towards rural tourism. As shown in the table, the value of the Pearson correlation for level of awareness and interest in rural territory is 0.28 which means there is no correlation between the interest in rural territory and level of awareness. The tourist whose level of awareness is high does not seem to prefer components of rural territory. There is a strong link between awareness of rural living and interest in it. As the awareness of rural tourism increases

among the tourist, interest in rural life also increases. Rural heritage also has a strong correlation with level of awareness. Tourists with high level of awareness have high interest in village architecture and village industries. Rural activities have very weak correlation with awareness.

## **10. SUMMARY**

The most preferred component of rural tourism among the tourists is the rural territory. Natural sceneries are most preferred by tourists followed by agro tourism which includes attractive crops, trees and lush green landscapes. Mountains and rivers and lakes are next preferred components of rural tourism. The least preferred components are the rural activities which includes hiking, hunting, fishing and horse riding. There is negative correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural territory and there is no link between awareness of rural tourism and a desire to visit rural areas. There is positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural life and there is a substantial link between awareness of rural tourism and interest in rural life. Similarly there is positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural heritage and strong positive link between level of awareness of rural tourism and interest in rural heritage. There is strong positive correlation between frequency of tours and interest in rural activities and very weak correlation between level of awareness of rural tourism and interest in rural activities.

## **11. CONCLUSIONS**

Natural sceneries, lakes and mountains are among the most preferred components. The marketers of rural tourism must develop tourism around the places of natural sceneries, where lakes can be beautified. The frequent tourists have shown preference for rural activities. As the frequency of tours increase, the interest of the tourist shifts from enjoying natural sceneries to adventure. The frequent tourists seem more interested in adventures like hiking, hunting, fishing and horse riding. The marketers of rural tourism must attract frequent tourists by developing proper adventure spots. People who are aware of rural tourism seem more inclined towards rural life and rural heritage. The people whose level of awareness on rural tourism is high are aware of diverse things that rural tourism offers. These people seem more interested in experiencing a pure village life. To attract these tourists, the marketers must promote their tourist destinations as hub of village industries, heritage centres, and handicraft centre. Further attractive crops and trees must be developed and festivals be organised where traditional village food is served. The village people must be trained for this purpose and they must be provided employment in the form of hosts and guides.

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