

Chapter 6


Homestay Tourism in Indian Himalayas: Progress, Participant Experiences, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In the growing concerns of overcrowding and overtourism at urban destinations, homestays in the hills of India have been a favoured choice for those seeking to experience nature, tranquillity, and authenticity. The popularity of this trend surged during and post-coronavirus manifold, positioning it as a great tool for community engagement and sustainable tourism. Despite its potential and myriad opportunities for the locals, several challenges prevail which are needed to improve the longevity of the phenomenon. The investigation of the challenges in the context of the Indian Himalayas is scarce, especially after the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, the present study tracks the progress of homestay research in the context of the Indian Himalayas and also examines the impediments faced by the participants (i.e., the homestay operators). Various challenges in the way of homestay participants entail short stays, dominance of established circuits, absence of promotion, connectivity, accessibility, and seasonality.

INTRODUCTION

Mountains, encompassing 24% of the total land surface (United Nations Environment Programme, 2007) and hosting 15% of the global population (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023) have

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perennially enticed travellers as being highly desired destinations. Offering a plethora of motivations including seeking adventure, performing pilgrimage, experiencing tranquillity, seeking rejuvenation or simply being alone with nature are attributes which position mountains as every traveller's choice. Food and Agriculture Organization, reports that mountain tourism constituted around 9 to 16% of the total international arrivals of tourists in 2019 (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2023), a trend that extends to the world's youngest range, the Himalayas. Standing as one of the high-altitude areas of the world, the range is spread across eight countries. In India, the Himalayas designated as the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) stretches over 2,400 km and is home to the most popular hill stations (NITI Aayog, 2018) thereby solidifying tourism as a significant economic cornerstone for the region (Thakur et al., 2023). However, the ranges are regarded as one of the most "rapidly urbanizing" mountain regions characterized by unplanned and unregulated growth (Tiwari & Joshi, 2020), with the proliferation of tourism being one of the significant attributes resulting in the accelerated urbanization of the Himalayas (Tiwari & Joshi, 2020) and other environmental concerns (Sundriyal et al., 2018). The Himalayan destinations are grappling with waste management and garbage concerns, such as Mt. Everest (Neupane, 2023), Nainital (Sundriyal et al., 2018), and Ladakh (Jamphel, 2023) to mention a few. With overcrowding extending to the pinnacle of the world, the National Geographic Society (n.d.) highlights that with approximately one lakh visitors annually at Mount Everest, there has been an accumulation of unaccounted garbage, resulting in water contamination and other concerns to the vulnerable ecosystem.

With varied apprehension, plaguing mountain destinations, homestays emerged as a promising solution for engaging the community as well as alleviating the infrastructure burden in these fragile environments. Redirecting the interest of travellers to the lesser-known rural hamlets will not only enhance rural tourism but also alleviate congestion at overcrowded destinations. Literature (such as Singh et al. 2022; Yigit, 2023) notes an evolving demand for experiential tourism, with travellers looking for immersive and authentic experiences. The concept of a homestay, is based on opening homes for guests (Bhattacharya et al., 2023) and adding authentic richness and value to the experience of the tourists (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). Homestays not only embody the components of community-based tourism but also contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage (Global Himalayan Expedition, 2022; Yaja et al., 2023). The establishment of homestays not only enhances livelihood prospects for rural communities but also has the potential to curb rural migration (Salleh, 2014) as well as reduce gender disparities (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013).

Additionally, Salleh et al. (2014) observed that community involvement in homestays resulted in heightened purchasing power, improved standards of living and quality of life of the participants. Similarly, above economic empowerment, the homestays have resulted in the development of local goods production, and handicraft souvenirs (Patwal et al., 2023). With rural communities having limited livelihood opportunities (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013), the proliferation of homestays can add new ways of livelihood for the rural populace. Also, tourism in the Himalayas has resulted in rapid unplanned and unregulated urbanization (Tiwari & Joshi, 2020). These repercussions have led to a rethinking of diversifying and modifying existing tourism practices. The present chapter attempts to examine the challenges related to homestay tourism in the Indian Himalayan region after the coronavirus. Also, as the pandemic halted the entire tourism industry, it is vital to look for ways to regenerate the homestay industry with desirable changes.

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