

Homestay Tourism And Livelihood In The Darjeeling And Kalimpong Himalayan Region

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Abstract:

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and generates significant economic revenue. Presently, in India, homestays are emerging as establishments that are catering to a large volume of national and international tourists that visit the country. The advantages of these establishments are numerous spanning from economic, environmental to socio-cultural, extending even beyond the individual business and towards the community in more general. However, the development of homestay tourism comes with its own set of challenges. The aim of this study was to assess the viability of homestay as a livelihood strategy for the local people in Darjeeling and Kalimpong Himalayan region of West Bengal and the sustainability of such an endeavour. Employing a mixed methods approach and taking 50 homestays as the sample of the study, this study attempted to understand the nature of infrastructural provisions in the homestays, assess the impact of homestays on the local economy and the sustainability of homestays to the local community. Homestays in the study region do provide a potential livelihood strategy considering its geographical uniqueness and historical significance. However, the internal and external challenges are equally numerous that hinder the sustainability of this livelihood strategy.

Key Words: Homestay, Tourism, Livelihood, Darjeeling, Kalimpong

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I. Introduction

A homestay functions as a form of tourism related endeavour, which provides a 'home' for paid guest/s, for a limited time period, depending on certain conditions. In the homestays, tourists come from different socio-economic backgrounds and cultural orientations. Primarily, homestay was usually operative to attract visitors from over populated urban areas to the countryside. Homestays, develop avenues for cultural exchange, increasing awareness and understanding of local cultures and lifestyles. Nowadays, in India, homestays are catering to a large volume of national and international tourists that visit the country. It has become one of the most important livelihood strategies, especially for rural households. Homestays have been defined as a type of accommodation where the tourists reside in the 'home' of the host family, interact with them and together share a communal space. The advantages of these establishments are numerous, spanning from economic to socio-cultural. Augmented tourist interest in the local culture can fortify a community's sense of identity. Furthermore, homestays have also been found to benefit in conservation of natural resources. The advantages of homestays extend even beyond the homestays either as a primary or a secondary livelihood strategy, form of formal and/or informal individual business and towards the community in more general.

This paper attempts to assess the viability of homestay as a livelihood strategy for the local people in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong Himalayan region of the state of West Bengal, India and the sustainability of such an endeavour.

II. Review Of Literature

Homestays have been defined as a type of accommodation where the tourists reside in the 'home' of the host family, interact with them and together share a communal space (Lynch, 2005). The advantages of these establishments are numerous spanning from economic to socio cultural. Homestays ameliorate access to economic activities (Lama, 2013). The flow of cash income provides rural families with food security (Ashley, 2000), especially during crisis like drought or floods, when the income from such activities could be utilised to purchase necessities (Mbaiwa, 2011). Such operations also improve other long-term livelihood opportunities such as health care, education (Shukor et al., 2014). The advantages of homestays extend even beyond the individual business and towards the community in more general. Homestays, develop avenues for cultural exchange, whereby also increasing their awareness and understanding of local cultures and lifestyles (Leh and

Hamzah, 2012). Furthermore, augmented tourist interest in the local culture can fortify a community's sense of identity. Homestays have also been found to benefit in conservation of natural resources (Kayat, 2010; Shukor et al., 2014). However, the challenges to homestays should also be brought into limelight. Operating a homestay is time-consuming as members require considerable time and skills to organise and sustain the homestay, that could lead to conflict with other livelihood activities (Ashley, 2000; Tosun, 2001). Homestays provide an attractive alternative tourism avenue to portray sustain themselves through multiple livelihood activities rather than a single job, and tourism is generally considered as a supplementary rather than a core livelihood activity (Tao & Wall, 2009). Both intra and inter community conflicts can arise over sharing and use of the same limited resources (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015).

Homestays provide social, economic and environmental benefits and therefore empowering local communities, promoting rural development and cultural heritage preservation in India (Sanyal et al., 2023). The establishment encourages the thriving of various forms of tourism like ethnic tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism, pilgrim tourism, adventure tourism, agro-tourism etc. (Sanyal et al., 2023). In India, homestays can be promoted as a part of cultural tourism, contributing to the economic and political security and stability of the country (Chakrobarty, 2020). Homestays tend to create demand for allied businesses as well like local guides, drivers, cultural activities, local shops etc., that enhances a tourist's experience in the area (IAMAI, 2021). Homestays provide an attractive alternative tourism avenue to portray the cultural richness in India, appealing to those searching for local lifestyle experience, novelty, personalized service and authentic social interactions. Digitization has led to significant impact on the enhancement of homestays in India through revenue generation, outreach, increasing guest diversity and overall business management (IAMAI, 2021).

However, the development of homestays has its own set of challenges like limitations of host communities, safety concerns of tourists in remote places, cultural differences, lack of accommodation and hospitality skills (Sanyal et al., 2023). Most of the homestays in India are a seasonal livelihood generation activity where owners reported that they experienced distinct peak and lean seasons, which affects their annual revenue streams and creates uncertainties (IAMAI, 2021).

III. Methodology

The objectives of this study were – (i) to understand the nature and type of infrastructural provisions in the homestays; (ii) to assess the impact of homestays on the local economy and (iii) to assess the sustainability of homestays to the local community. This research was based on utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data. The study adopted a mixed methods approach, utilising both quantitative descriptive analysis and qualitative interview-based insights. The primary data was collected through the method of interview, utilizing a semi-structured interview schedule as the tool for data collection. The unit of analysis of this study were homestays located in the study area of Darjeeling and Kalimpong Himalayan region of the state of West Bengal. Face to face interviews were conducted with the respondents, who were mainly the homestay owners or were staff of the establishment, representing the homestay. A total of 50 homestays were interviewed for this study, selected through the non-probability sampling technique of Purposive sampling. The secondary sources of data included chapters from books, articles from peer-reviewed journals, government and non-governmental reports, etc. The data has been analysed using quantitative techniques of simple frequency percentage calculations, often depicted through diagrams like pie-chart, bar-graph and histogram. Along with this, narratives of the respondents have also been analysed to add more profundity to the responses provided.

IV. Theoretical Framework

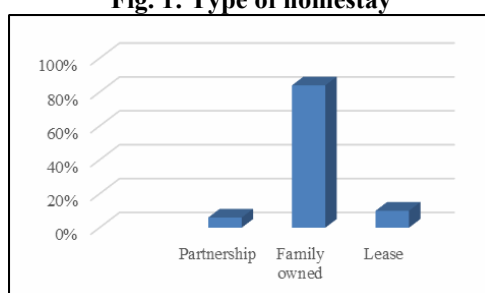
According to Robert Chambers and Gordon R. Conway, livelihood comprises of the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living (Chambers & Conway, 1991). This livelihood is “*sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base.*” (DFID, 2000, p.1) The dimensions of livelihood are extensive and can extend from economic to social such as identity and dignity or the non-economic level. However, the ability to access the basic necessities are varied, depending on where the individual or households lie within the socio-economic spectrum. Chambers and Conway (1991) further propounded the concept of Sustainable Livelihood. According to Chambers and Conway (op.cit.), livelihood should be environmentally and socially sustainable as well as complementary to each other. Sustainable livelihood then combines the aspects of capability, equity and sustainability. This livelihoods approach is flexible, can be adapted to specific local contexts or specified objectives, in a participatory manner. The concept of sustainable livelihood was later expanded to make it more application oriented, and renamed as the Sustainable livelihood framework (SLF) as developed by Ian Scoones (1998). This framework then takes into consideration five key interrelated elements – context, livelihood resources, livelihood strategies, institutional processes and sustainable outcomes.

V. Findings And Discussion

The study region is the rural and urban areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts. These two districts are located in the picturesque part of Eastern Himalayan region, under the administrative boundary of the state of West Bengal in India. As a result of being situated within the Himalayan region, these two districts attract significant volume of local, national and international tourists, throughout the year, to enjoy the beautiful scenery of Himalayan peaks, pleasant weather and the mountain environment. While the region possesses a range of conventional accommodations like hotels, guest houses, newer alternative forms of tourist lodgings are steadily emerging to cater to the increasing influx of tourists. One such establishment is the homestay. In this type of accommodation, guests stay in the homes of local residents or ‘hosts’ and often participate in their day-to-day activities, now commonly referred to as a homestay.

Nature and type of infrastructural provisions in the homestays

Fig. 1: Type of homestay



Source: Primary survey, 2025

On the basis of the above Fig. 1, it can be seen that out of the 50 homestays in the study area, most of the homestays (84%) are family owned. Hence the structure, function and process of operation of homestays are completely linked with the family authority. Internal family members are the principal decision makers as well as workforce here. Few of the homestays are linked to what can be referred to as the lease system. Therefore, there is a system of informal management of homestays in this region.

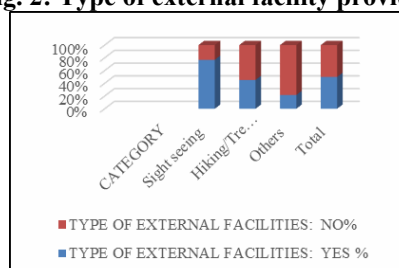
Table. 1: Type of internal facilities

OPINION / CATEGORY	YES %	NO%
Room	24.45%	-
Toilet	23.91%	2.43%
Food	23.91%	2.43%
Open space	21.73%	12.19%
Cultural programmes and recreation	5.97%	82.92%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Primary survey, 2025

According to Table. 1, it can be observed that provisions of facilities like room, toilet, food and space utilization etc., are mostly available in these homestays. However, when it came to the question of arrangement of cultural programmes and recreational facilities, it was observed that about 82.92% homestays were unable to do so. Tourism, nowadays has become increasingly experiential, therefore tourists these days are more interested in observing local cultural programmes or experiencing first-hand the cultural practices of day-to-day life in the region. The arrangement of such programmes by the homestays, is highly recommended towards attracting tourists.

Fig. 2: Type of external facility provided

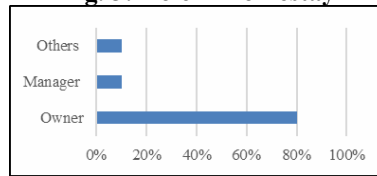


Source: Primary survey, 2025

In the above Fig. 2, it is clear that as an external facility provided by the homestays, sightseeing (57.4%) is the most common one. Furthermore, some of the homestays were also able to arrange the facilities of hiking or trekking (29.62%), in the nearby local areas.

Impact of homestays on the local economy

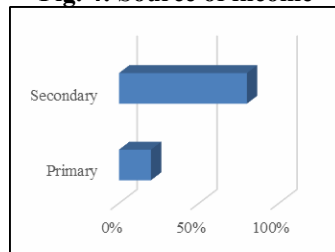
Fig. 3: Role in homestay



Source: Primary survey, 2025

The above Fig. 3, captures the role of varied employees in the homestay. This reveals a diverse picture. The major economic involvement with homestays is depicted in the ownership of the homestays. About 80% of the respondents were owners of the family-oriented homestays in this selected region; 10% of the related individuals worked as managers. Thus, the most important economic attachment could be linked with ownership and managerial role.

Fig. 4: Source of income



Source: Primary survey, 2025

On the basis of collected data (Fig.4), it was evident that the income from the homestays was secondary for most of the cases (80%). Only for 20% of the total respondents, it was a primary source of income. Principally, homestay played the role of secondary source of income. This then influences the importance of homestay as a livelihood strategy and further its sustainability for the individual as well as the community.

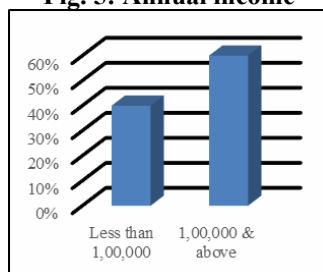
Table. 2: Gender of employee

GENDER OF THE EMPLOYEE	%
Male	53.06%
Female	46.94%
Others	-
Total	100

Source: Primary survey, 2025

In the above Table.2., it can be observed that in the homestays interviewed, about 53.06% were male workers and 46.94% female. Although there appears to be a slightly higher male workforce employed in the homestays, than compared to the female, however the gender division is not as stark. Furthermore, it was also observed that there was no gender differentiation in the type of work within the homestay.

Fig. 5: Annual income

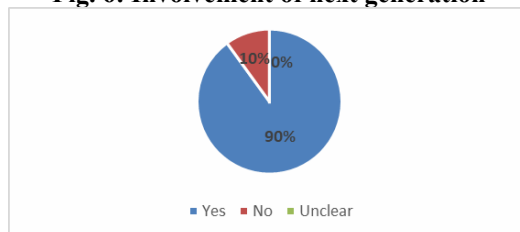


Source: Primary survey, 2025

Fig. 5., provides a portrayal of the income distribution of the respondents. The income distribution revealed that 60% of the respondents had the income level of Rs1,00,000 & above, while the remaining 40% had the income level of less than Rs 1,00,000.

Sustainability of homestays for the local community

Fig. 6: Involvement of next generation



Source: Primary survey, 2025

All of the respondents were of the opinion that homestays generate employability at the local and regional level. Furthermore, about 90% of the respondents revealed that there is an active involvement of the next generation in the homestay business. However, about 10% still had their apprehensions (Fig.6) The metropolitan cities of India offer significant ‘pull factors’ such as better education and diverse employment opportunities, amongst others, which encourages the younger generation to migrate to these cities. As such, the respondents believe that managing a homestay may not hold much appeal as a livelihood strategy for the said generation.

The study region provides an excellent locale for the establishment of homestays, however, there are still major challenges that hinder the region from reaching their full potential. In this study, the major challenges that the respondents highlighted were infrequent power cuts and electricity issues, lack of adequate transport facilities especially during the rainy seasons, continuous supply of water. The three most essentialities required for effectively running the homestay. Other issues were also mentioned like unpredictable weather conditions and cultural issues. Environmental issues have also been highlighted due to the demanding influx of tourists and also the disorderly urbanisation process that has been witnessed in the region. Most of the homestays in the study area mentioned that they have received some form of support, mainly financial from the state government in establishing their business. This form of support undoubtedly provides encouragement to the local population to either make prior business better or set up new ones. However, homestays in the region are observed to be more of an individual business venture rather than a community enterprise.

Data suggests the social-cultural implications of homestay tourism for local communities are largely positive, but certain challenges and negative implications persist. The increase in homestay tourism has generated employment opportunities for a greater number of people who would otherwise be unemployed. Homestay tourism has sourced out a huge number of direct and indirect employment possibilities, strengthening the socio-economic condition of locals, which further assists in the growth of rural livelihoods. Today, local women associated with this sector are able to venture various income streams, which helps them improve their financial independence, raise household earnings and improve their social standing in society. Although homestay tourism has provided women with new income-generating opportunities, it is equally important to further examine the nature of this empowerment. In a given context of policies, history, socio-economic and ecological setting, a household/community utilises varied livelihood resources or capitals, leading to specific livelihood strategies that bring about varied known and unknown outcomes. Thus, homestays have emerged as an important livelihood strategy in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong Himalayan region. However, the benefits are largely concentrated at the individual household level, while numerous challenges persist, thereby hindering its sustainability outcome.

VI. Conclusion

The research on homestay should focus on it as a form of alternative tourism, medium to alleviate poverty and as a sustainable livelihood strategy. Apart from the geographical advantage in fostering tourism, the selected study areas are well endowed with cultural diversity and heritage. As such, homestays can be promoted as an alternative to conventional forms of tourism through provision of avenues for cultural promotion and preservation. Homestays can also be avenues for diversifying the trajectories of mainstream tourist locations and further dispersion of economic advantages across the region. Homestays are more environmentally responsible and sustainable than larger tourist accommodation places. The advantages of digitization could also be utilised by the people market promotion and management of the establishments. The policies emphasise on eligibility, registration process, infrastructure requirements and development, code of conduct of homestay owners, with minimal or negligible focus on the monitoring and outcome of such establishments. Collaborations

and partnerships with government, non-government and other private bodies for management, guidance, training and development can ensure a fruitful system. Regular monitoring, government or non-government incentives for best practices can ensure a robustness. The thriving of homestays tourism requires the development of human resource and skill development of not just the identified respondents but also the local community at large that would be willing to engage in homestay related activities.

Homestays can stimulate tourism in lesser-known or rural areas, diversifying tourism benefits beyond conventional destinations and furthering local economies. Homestays can attract tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences and engagement in local lifestyles. Homestays should be promoted in such a manner that aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism, where environmental impacts are minimised, cultural heritage is preserved, and safeguards equitable distribution of tourism benefits among local communities. The outcomes of this research can inform policymakers about the potential of homestays as a sustainable livelihood strategy, which can then lead to supportive policies, incentives, and infrastructure development to facilitate the growth of homestay tourism in the region, state as well as the country.

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