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“Sustainable Development of Indian Rural Heritage”

For Faculty Development Program on Heritage Management

Amity Institute of Travel and Tourism, Amity University

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Members of the Faculty and Friends.

I am delighted to be here with you this morning. Amity Institute of Travel and Tourism has already acquired an enviable reputation for its studies on Tourism related subjects, and the recognition by UN WTO is another feather in your cap. Striking a personal note, I may mention that I was on the Executive Committee of this organisation for a number of years and would have headed the organisation if my Government had agreed to release me for the assignment.

I am glad that the subject of today’s talk is “Sustainable Development of Indian Rural Heritage.” Rural India has an abundance of undiscovered treasures of both tangible and intangible heritage - historical buildings and monuments, beautiful and unique vernacular architecture, exquisite craftsmanship carried forward from one generation to another, rich musical traditions in both classical and folk genres, dance forms with amazing variety from region to region, unwritten oral traditions (stories, myths and legends), natural heritage in its various forms, unique cuisines, water and resource management, agricultural wisdom, rural sports, and many others.

Historic buildings or monuments can also have stories attached to them which add to their meaning and appeal. I am reminded of one such case which I personally experienced. In the State of Himachal Pradesh there is a village Pragpur, with heritage as its main attraction. On the banks of river Beas in this village stands a Shiva temple said to be several centuries old which attracts thousands of devotees. The story, as it goes, is that Ravana visited the temple and sought audience with Lord Shiva inviting him to Sri Lanka to inaugurate a Shiva temple which Ravana was planning to set up. Lord Shiva accepted the invitation and handed over a

big Shiva Ling to be installed In the temple. There was, however one condition. The Shiva Ling was not to be put on the ground till it reached its destination. Thanking Lord Shiva profusely, Ravana decided to freshen up before proceeding on his homeward journey. So, putting the Shiva Ling near the temple, he went for a dip in the river. Feeling rejuvenated and fresh, Ravana then went to pick up the holy treasure but to his great surprise and consternation the more he tried to lift it, the more it sank into the ground till it was no longer visible. The story goes that this temple is the only one in the world where the Shiva Ling is not above the surface. This makes a charming story and adds to the draw factor of the temple.

Many of the treasures of our rural heritage and tradition have over the years suffered neglect. Much has already been lost, but what remains is crying for attention and must be saved.

I am reminded of the poet who could not have expressed the situation better than in these words:

“Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness in the desert air
Full many a gem of pure ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.”

Tourism, as you all would know, can be a powerful engine of development and income generation. In India, the focus so far, for a variety of reasons, has been on tourist destinations primarily in the urban areas. The Golden Triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur is perhaps the best example. That was one of the main preferred destinations, so it was vigorously promoted. The same has been true of heritage. ASI and INTACH, both charged with the responsibility of preserving heritage, focused their energies on heritage in cities and towns. Perhaps this was because they provided greater visibility, perhaps just because the endangered heritage assets in these areas were more visible and more apparently in need of intervention. Whatever the reasons, our rural heritage was by and large neglected.

With the current growing emphasis on rural development, the time has come to accept that rural tourism can be a positive factor in not only accelerating the implementation of development activities in the villages, but at the same time can help ensure the sustainability of rural heritage.

I have always believed that when the time is right, circumstances fall into place, seemingly by coincidence. Thus, it was at dinner during his son's wedding in 2010 that Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur (known to all of us as Bapji) and I discussed the need for an organisation that would not only focus on preserving our rich rural heritage, but that would regard the heritage assets as a resource for sustainable rural development. In this way, we felt, the support and involvement of the local communities would be secured, and sustainability made possible. We began discussing the idea with other colleagues, who responded with interest and enthusiasm, and the result was the establishment of a new NGO, ITRHD (the Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development) in 2011.

Our goals were two-fold:

1. To address the challenges of preserving India's tangible and intangible rural heritage, for its intrinsic meaning and value; and
2. To connect the preservation and enhancement of this heritage with economic development, livelihood enhancement, and general improvement in the quality of rural life.

We recently celebrated our 10th Anniversary, and what we have managed to accomplish so far has more than justified our original optimism.

From the beginning, we realized that Rural Tourism could be a powerful tool for ensuring sustainability of rural heritage. But we also realized that we needed to approach the goals methodically.

First of all, our existing rural heritage needs to be discovered and documented to ensure that it does not disappear. A basic step, therefore, is to conduct detailed documentation of

built heritage in different parts of the country, and for this professionals need to be engaged. Documentation is essential for determining priorities, and for developing plans for conservation and preservation. It needs to include, at minimum: photographic recording; detailed description of architecture and construction techniques and materials; its heritage value and significance (to the local community and also in historical/architectural contexts); the present condition and state of maintenance; and ownership.

This is a momentous and ongoing task, but a start needs to be made. In ITRHD, along with our other activities, we have taken the initiative, by entering into partnership with the UP Government. Teams will soon be going to the state's villages, to begin meticulous documentation. Another venture was carried out in Kerala, in partnership with KITTS (the Kerala Institute of Tourism and Travel Studies). Here we carried out a detailed "Plan for Rural Tourism with Documentation of Heritage" in the Anjunad region near Munnar. (The full report of this study can be accessed on our website, www.itrhd.com).

Discovery and documentation of built heritage needs to be followed by its conservation, in some cases involving adaptive re-use of the structures for the use of the community, and in others as focus points for rural tourism. The sustainable survival of the heritage really depends on the extent to which the local community realizes that the heritage is an asset – one that can be a big blessing, acting as a catalyst for general development. Our ITRHD built heritage conservation projects, in addition to saving the structures, have enabled us to encompass infrastructural development, women's empowerment, skill development programmes, youth involvement, training programmes, village cleanliness, solid waste management, boosting cultural and craft traditions, developing amenities for tourists, and providing greater employment opportunities. Rural Development a result of Heritage acting as a driving force paves the ground for tourism.

It needs to be ensured therefore that for Tourism to become a significant factor in the village economy, adequate and detailed planning is done. Premature steps may well be counterproductive.

Heritage is no doubt an important factor for developing rural tourism, but it is not the only factor, particularly where foreign tourists are concerned. Many foreigners visiting India are desirous of experiencing the (quote unquote) “real India” which resides in villages, where the heart and soul of India live. And moving from one 5- or 4-Star hotel to another is not a particularly satisfying experience. One important factor in drawing them to rural areas, however, is ease of access. If a heritage village is in close proximity to a popular tourist destination, the chances of success are enhanced. An example would be the village of Raghurajpur in Odisha, just off the highway to the temple town of Jagannath Puri, which attracts thousands of visitors every year.

Raghurajpur is a delightful little village with a long-standing tradition of the *patrachitra* style of painting, along with the unique *Gotipua* dance performed by young boys dressed as girls. As Chairman INTACH several years back, on my way to Puri, I decided to take a short detour of less than a kilometer, and what I saw opened my eyes to the potential for harnessing rural heritage for the benefit of tourism. We adopted the village, developed amenities for tourists that were lacking (such as night stays, neat and clean eating place, trained guides), and we began helping the local craftspersons in marketing their products. All these steps gave a further boost to tourism with the village being recognized as the most successful example of rural tourism.

Another example relates to 3 villages in Azamgarh district of UP, in close proximity to each other. Each has a unique heritage – one a 400-year-old tradition in craftsmanship of black pottery, one an extremely old reputation for weaving of fine silk saris, and a classical music tradition in the third. ITRHD took these villages on as a “Creative Cluster” project, and we have developed numerous initiatives designed for the specific needs and circumstances of each village. However, as a whole, the potential for rural tourism is tremendous. These villages are at a distance of less than 80 kms from Varanasi, a historic city bursting with tourists from different parts of the world. And the type of tourists who are drawn to Varanasi are perhaps more interested than many others in discovering authentic Indian experiences. Sometime back I spoke to several local hoteliers in Varanasi, asking whether they could organise day visits to the villages. They were delighted at the idea, as tourists

would not mind staying over extra for day or two to include a village visit in the itinerary. The factor of accessibility therefore is of utmost importance. Development of the village with its existing assets then follows to ensure that the visitor does not get a culture shock and goes back happy and satisfied promising to come again after telling of his experiences to friends and acquaintances. Word of mouth publicity is generally very effective. Now that we have addressed some basic needs in the three villages, our Rural Tourism Task Force is exploring the next steps.

Another ITRHD project in Jharkhand has focused on conserving and restoring a large number of very beautiful old terra-cotta temples in an extremely impoverished village. The State Government, which supported this work, has been sufficiently impressed with the results and the resulting tourism potential to fund and install major new infrastructure and facilities. Residents are being trained to manage these and to handle pilgrimage and cultural tourism. The village's proximity to another major pilgrimage site provides easy access, and we are confident of success. Not only will an important heritage site be preserved, but an impoverished rural community will have learned how to successfully manage a previously unrecognized heritage resource, in the process achieving self-sufficiency, improved living conditions, and a new sense of pride as owners of this most precious resource.

These experiences have made us realize that there are a very large number of villages all over the country, rich in heritage both tangible and intangible, and just waiting to be discovered. The potential is truly enormous.

As I mentioned earlier, in 2011 ITRHD (the Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development) came into existence with the twin objectives of ensuring sustainable survival for heritage assets in rural areas, and using it as a resource for general rural development and community involvement. A resultant by-product would be the influx of visitors seeking to get a different tourist experience.

The basic objectives of the Trust, apart from others that are interconnected, are as follows:

- I. To identify those areas of tradition and heritage in rural and tribal India whose value in historical, cultural, spiritual, or economic terms is intrinsic to the identity of the residents of those areas and whose preservation and conservation can play a substantial role in enhancing the quality of life.
- II. To identify and document the built, natural, living and intangible heritage assets throughout rural and tribal India, including those represented in urban areas, in a systematic manner and to maintain a permanent record of all such documentation.
- III. To take steps for the preservation and conservation of heritage assets in rural areas, and of those assets in non-rural areas that represent linkage with rural origin, in full cooperation with local communities and stake holders. “

Apart from these basic objectives, two very important ones read:

- I. “To work in close coordination with the tourism industry in relation to the development and enhancement of rural heritage tourism and its impact on the local community, and
- II. “To work in close the coordination with NGOs, national and international organisations, and local, regional and national government bodies “

On June 23rd, ITRHD completed ten years as an NGO. Starting with no resources at all, except for a team of dedicated persons, we have taken on projects in 8 States -- UP, Jharkhand, Telangana, Nagaland, Haryana, Punjab, Kerala, and Rajasthan. Successful conservation of Architectural Heritage and promotion of development schemes established our credentials with several State Governments and with the Government of India, and has secured us some funding by the corporate sector under their CSR responsibilities. In brief summary:

- Regarding built heritage, in Jharkhand two conservation projects ---a historic Jail in Ranchi and the 62 terracotta temples in Maluti village mentioned earlier were entrusted to us, involving an expenditure of Rs 18 crores. In Haryana, a 700 year-old Dargah was successfully conserved, and a historic and formerly beautiful water body

complex is being revived. The expertise developed by ITRHD in these and other projects led the XVth Finance Commission to recommend certain projects in Punjab and Haryana, totaling Rs 37 crores, to be implemented by ITRHD.

- Projects relating to living intangible heritage have involved revival and sustainable preservation of crafts and musical traditions in Telangana, UP, and Rajasthan, and developing a plan for a living cultural heritage museum in Nagaland.
- Development activities in project villages have included setting up of a primary school that provides free quality education, skill development programmes aimed at women's empowerment, involvement of youth, skill training in various professions, and design and installation of a complete waste management system.

One of the main interests of the Trust is the promotion of rural tourism. Initially the focus was on creating awareness through discussions, seminars, lectures and presentations. A recent decision has been to now focus on this, and to initiate activities relating to promotion of tourism in those areas where we already have a presence, particularly in two regions of UP, (Azamgarh and Shivpuri), in Rajasthan's Barmer, in Rajnagar (near Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh) and in Maluti village and neighboring areas of Jharkhand.

One major fact that we have kept in mind is that tourism and rural development go hand in hand. Sustained activities in each lead to the development of the other and consequently to the economic betterment of the community.

Successful promotion of tourism, particularly where it relates to rural areas, however, requires very careful planning. Some attempts by the Government in the past, in fact, were not particularly successful because of faulty planning.

There are two categories of tourists, for each of whom the approach has to be a little different. Foreign tourists, and particularly repeat visitors, would like to experience the authentic India which can be found in a rural setting. But as the time available is limited, they would prefer to tag on to an existing destination, which can be included in the trip by spending just a couple of days extra. Domestic tourists, often residents of urban areas who

want to expose themselves and their children to their rural roots, or those on religious pilgrimage travel, have a different time frame and a different set of requirements. Both these groups and their interests and needs must be kept in mind.

As I mentioned earlier, ITRHD is involved with a “Creative Cluster” of three unique villages in UP’s Azamgarh District, near to each other and to Varanasi. We are working on developing tourism facilities for this area. However, here, as elsewhere, before finalizing a circuit it is absolutely necessary to ensure that the visitor’s experience is pleasant. This may lead to a repeat visit, and, even more importantly, valuable word-of-mouth (and these days, word by social media) publicity. Detailed planning needs to include:

- Basic infra structure development;
- preparing the local community to receive visitors and ensuring their willingness to do so;
- adequate training in different fields, particularly as guides in various languages;
- home stays with proper facilities;
- promotion of local crafts and other cultural activities;
- attention to local cuisine;
- ensuring that visitors are aware of and can comfortably participate in activities relating to fairs, festivals, local sports, agriculture, etc.;
- clean surroundings with adequate attention to sanitary facilities and disposal of solid waste.

These are just a few of the basic requirements. In addition, banking institutions and government agencies should be fully involved in ensuring the funds necessary for various activities and facility/infrastructure development. Tie-ups with travel organisations and adequate publicity would accelerate the achievement of the desired results.

The challenge before us, and the basic theme of this Conference, is how to ensure sustainable development of Indian rural heritage. It was to meet this very challenge that ITRHD was set up. As I mentioned earlier, documentation of rural heritage resources is a basic need. Given the scope of the resources, completion of any comprehensive

documentation is a monumental challenge. At ITRHD, we had made a detailed presentation to the XVTH Finance Commission, requesting that they recommend to the Govt of India funding for such a programme. In the meantime, we are approaching State Governments to partner with us, so that we can at least begin implementation. The UP Govt has already agreed and work will start in some districts as soon as the covid situation permits. It may be worthwhile for your students or even Faculty to join our teams, so as to get a first-hand idea of the nature of heritage, its relevance, and its importance to the local community. Periodic visits to villages as interns, as part of the curriculum, would help to broaden students' vision and understanding not only of heritage but other issues as well.

Documentation of heritage resources enables us to determine priorities in selection of projects for intervention, and decisions and recommendations on the potential for regeneration, preservation, and adaptive re-use for tourism purposes and/or to meet the needs of the community. For in the ultimate analysis, for rural heritage to survive and have a lasting impact, support of the local community and a feeling that it benefits them, along with opening its doors to tourists, are the requirements for sustainability.

And the residents of our rural areas should be made aware that their heritage is not found only in built structures and monuments, but in their living traditions, arts, crafts, skills, talents, surroundings, folklore, myths, legends, and wisdom – in fact, all those things that have traditionally provided sustenance to the community and made life worth living and worth sharing.

In this regard, I would add one final note about museums. In India we have not yet understood the role that museums can play in sustaining our heritage and keeping it alive, rather than serving just as repositories for objects from the past. It is possible, however, for museums to play a lively and pro-active role.

Along with an experienced professional from the Philippines, ITRHD developed a plan for the Nagaland Government to set up a living cultural heritage museum as part of their tourism promotion policy. The plan took note of the fact that in December every year a

mammoth cultural event, known as the Hornbill Festival, is held in Kohima for a week. During this time, each of the 17 Naga tribes showcase their martial traditions, music, dance, crafts, cuisine, and varied vernacular architecture styles. As the infrastructural facilities for this week are massive, and lie unutilized for the rest of the year, we made recommendations for their fuller use. In addition, we proposed setting up a museum near the existing site where the culture of each tribe could be experienced through photographs, art objects, and other material. Arranging for visits to two neighboring villages was recommended, as there visitors could directly experience in authentic surroundings the life style of the people, their craftsmanship, and the architecture of their houses, while joining in the local dances, enjoying the music, and, indeed, taking part in the remarkable zest for life that one observes in these villages. Kohima already has a museum, but it needs an overhaul to bring it up to modern standards of acceptability and appeal. Nagaland abounds in natural heritage, and as part of a living experience the tourist can be taken to nearby areas that are rich in wild life, with rare species of bird life and flora, and with terraced paddy fields. Local hospitality can be experienced with pleasant home stays in the midst of nature. The area is also steeped in history, and the local community is fully involved in ensuring that natural beauty remains preserved. Museums do not need to be grand edifices, in villages that receive tourist visitors, small local museums depicting living culture can be very popular. In the case of Nagaland, we await the decision of the State Government to begin implementing these plans.

Having had the good fortune of being involved in heritage directly and indirectly throughout my career, I have had ample opportunity to witness the profound role our heritage plays in building our confidence, in ensuring our emotional well-being, and in cementing our sense of identity. I have also seen how it can serve as both an asset and a resource for income generation and overall development.

With little access to the world's technology, the rural villages of India have, nevertheless, developed the means to cope. The knowledge and skill developed over centuries represent a storehouse of wisdom and practical expertise that we cannot afford to lose, for once they are gone, they will be gone forever.

I am very pleased that Amity has recognized the need for sustaining this rural heritage, and look forward to working together in the future.
