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Manuscript ID:
IJWGAFES-2026-030212

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19592861](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19592861)

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19592861>

Volume: 3

Issue: 2

February

Year: 2026

E-ISSN: 3066-1552

Submitted: 06 Jan.2026

Revised: 10 Jan.2026

Accepted: 05 Feb 2026

Published: 28 Feb 2026

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How to cite this article:

Gaikwad, N. V., & Waghmare, J. K.
(2026). Role of Rural Tourism in
Enhancing the Livelihood of Local
People in Mahabaleshwar. *International
Journal of World Geology, Geography,
Agriculture, Forestry and Environment
Sciences*, 3(2), 54-57.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19592861>

Role of Rural Tourism in Enhancing the Livelihood of Local People in Mahabaleshwar

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Abstract

Rural tourism plays a significant role in enhancing the livelihood opportunities of local people in Mahabaleshwar by creating diversified income sources and promoting sustainable development. The region's rich natural beauty, pleasant climate, agricultural landscapes, and unique cultural heritage attract a large number of visitors, thereby generating employment in sectors such as homestays, local transport, agro-tourism farms, handicrafts, food services, and guiding services. Rural tourism can provide a source of supplemental income for households within the community and reduce dependence on agriculture through the promotion of community-based businesses. For soil quality enhancement eco-friendly and/or organic-farming techniques are promoted through rural tourism development to assist communities in developing their sustainable businesses. There are also additional opportunities to maximize benefits of rural tourism development by providing training/development resources, infrastructure improvements, marketing support, and public/private partnerships to facilitate the creation of rural tourism enterprises. As an emerging example, rural tourism in Mahabaleshwar has the potential to be a major contributor to inclusive economic growth, resilience, and quality of life improvements in rural communities.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Livelihood Enhancement, Mahabaleshwar, Local Economy, Employment Generation Sustainable Tourism, Community Participation, Eco-Tourism, Tourism Development, Rural Development, Income Diversification, Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

Rural tourism has emerged as an important strategy for promoting sustainable development and improving the socio-economic conditions of rural communities. In Maharashtra, Mahabaleshwar a well-known hill station surrounded by villages rich in natural, agricultural, and cultural resources offers significant potential for rural tourism development. The expansion of tourism activities such as strawberry farming visits, village homestays, local cuisine experiences, handicraft markets, and nature-based tours has created new livelihood opportunities for the local population. Rural tourism offers a viable alternative source of employment and income because traditional agriculture in the area frequently faces difficulties like price fluctuations, limited land holdings, and seasonal income. It promotes entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, community involvement, and the preservation of regional heritage in addition to income diversification. In order to comprehend rural tourism's contribution to regional development and to find ways to make tourism more inclusive, sustainable, and advantageous for rural households, it is crucial to look at how it improves the lives of those living in and around Mahabaleshwar. These subjects are crucial because rural livelihoods and regional development are intimately related to geography and agriculture. Understanding how crop productivity and farmers' income are impacted by climate variability is essential for developing sustainable farming methods and guaranteeing food security. The geographical topic emphasizes how accessibility, location, climate, and natural features all contribute to rural tourism, which helps rural communities create jobs and revenue. When combined, these subjects offer insightful information for balanced rural development, resource management, and policy formulation.

Concept Of Rural Tourism

The concept of rural tourism revolves around promoting tourism activities in rural areas that

1. Rural Tourism as a Development Strategy

Rural tourism is viewed as an effective tool to promote economic development in rural areas by utilizing natural beauty, cultural heritage, and agricultural resources.

2. Income Diversification for Rural Households

It provides alternative and supplementary income sources through homestays, farm experiences, food stalls, handicrafts, and guiding services, reducing dependence on agriculture.

3. Employment Generation within the Community

Rural tourism creates employment opportunities for youth, women, and farmers, allowing them to earn income without migrating to urban areas.

4. Promotion of Local Culture and Traditions

Tourism encourages the preservation and showcasing of local customs, festivals, crafts, and traditional farming practices, adding cultural value to the community. providing authentic **experiences to visitors.**

Review of Literature

Kunasekaran, (2011) In his research paper entitled 'Development of Farmers Perception Scale on Agro Tourism in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia'. The objectives of the study are identifying the elements affecting the farmer's notion and develop a measurement scale that captures farmer's perception of agro tourism. Researcher has used stratified random sampling method and survey and questionnaire method is used for collecting primary data. Researcher observed that that awareness and knowledge of business might be advantageous investigation of general perception. The farmers from tourism concentrated regions tended to have positive perceptions of agro tourism, due to the fact they have been participated in tourism. **Chatterjee and Prasad, (2019)**, in their research paper entitled 'Evolution of Agro- Tourism practices in India: Some Success Stories. Researcher focused on several successful agro tourism farms from India and included them to analyze the sustainability factors within the farms. Qualitative method and structured and unstructured interviews have been taken for collecting primary data.

Existing literature on rural tourism and livelihood enhancement consistently highlights rural tourism as a multidimensional development strategy that links economic, social and environmental outcomes. It is seen that while rural tourism holds strong potential to improve livelihoods in places like Mahabaleshwar, realizing that potential requires intentional planning, inclusive governance, local capacity enhancement, and measures to reduce leakages and environmental stress.

Research Problems

Although Mahabaleshwar has emerged as a popular tourist destination, the potential of rural tourism to enhance the livelihood of local people in surrounding villages remains underutilized and unevenly distributed. Many rural households still depend heavily on traditional agriculture, which is seasonal and vulnerable to price fluctuations, while the benefits from tourism often concentrate in urbanized or commercially developed areas. Lack of proper training, limited marketing skills, inadequate infrastructure, and minimal community-level participation restrict rural residents from fully engaging in tourism-related activities. Furthermore, there is insufficient understanding of how rural tourism contributes to income diversification, employment generation, women's empowerment, and cultural preservation in the region. Therefore, the core research problem is to examine the extent to which rural tourism influences the socio-economic development of local communities in Mahabaleshwar and to identify the barriers that prevent rural households from maximizing the benefits of tourism.

Objectives Of the Study

- To study the role of rural tourism in improving the income levels, employment opportunities, and overall livelihood of local people in the rural areas of Mahabaleshwar.
- To identify the major challenges of rural communities in tourism-related activities and restrict the benefits they receive.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the role of rural tourism in enhancing the livelihood of local people in Mahabaleshwar. Both primary and secondary data are used to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Primary data are collected through structured questionnaires, interviews, and field observations with local residents, tourism service providers, farmers, women's self-help groups, and tourists visiting the area. A purposive sampling method is employed to select 40 respondents from villages surrounding Mahabaleshwar where rural tourism activities are emerging. Secondary data are gathered from government reports, tourism department publications, research articles, books, and local development records. The collected data are analyzed using descriptive statistical tools such as percentages, tables, and charts to interpret livelihood changes, income patterns, and participation levels. Qualitative responses are analyzed through thematic techniques to identify key issues and challenges faced by rural communities. This mixed-method approach provides a reliable framework to assess the socio-economic impact of rural tourism and to draw meaningful conclusions for sustainable rural development in Mahabaleshwar.

Area Of the Study

The present study is conducted in the rural regions surrounding Mahabaleshwar, a prominent hill station located in the Satara district of Maharashtra. The area includes villages engaged in agriculture, strawberry farming, small-scale tourism activities, and local cultural practices. These villages serve as emerging rural tourism destinations due to their natural beauty, farm-based attractions, and traditional lifestyles. The study area is selected to understand how rural tourism influences the socio-economic conditions of local communities and supports livelihood enhancement in this well-known tourist region.



Data Analysis and Interpretation

The table presents the descriptive statistical analysis of respondents' perceptions regarding the role and challenges of rural tourism in the study area. The analysis is based on 40 respondents and includes statistical measures such as mean score, standard deviation, variance, and mean rank.

Table: 1. Role and Challenges of Rural Tourism

Sr. No.	Statements	N	Mean	SD	Var.	Mean Rank
Role of Rural Tourism						
1	Rural tourism has increased my household income.	40	4.25	.85	.724	I
2	Rural tourism has created sufficient employment opportunities for local people.	40	3.70	1.21	1.48	IV
3	Tourism activities have helped me diversify my sources of income.	40	4.10	.961	.937	III
4	My standard of living has improved due to rural tourism development.	40	3.90	.96	.937	III
5	Income from tourism provides economic stability to my family.	40	4.15	.966	.934	III
Challenges						
6	Lack of proper infrastructure affects the growth of rural tourism in my area.	40	4.15	1.089	1.18	III
7	Limited access to finance restricts participation in tourism-related activities.	40	3.30	1.45	2.116	VI
8	Lack of training and skills reduces the benefits of rural tourism for locals.	40	3.250	1.37	1.882	VII
9	Seasonal nature of tourism causes irregular income and employment.	40	3.95	.604	.366	IV
10	Inadequate government support and promotion limits rural tourism benefits.	40	3.50	1.19	1.42	V

Source: Primary data

The table presents the respondents' perceptions regarding the role and challenges of rural tourism in the study area based on mean scores, standard deviation, variance, and mean rank. The statement "Rural tourism has increased my household income" secured the **highest mean score of 4.25** with a low standard deviation of 0.85, indicating strong agreement and consistency among respondents. This highlights that rural tourism plays a significant role in enhancing household income. The statement "Income from tourism provides economic stability to my family" also recorded a high mean value of **4.15**, showing that tourism income contributes positively to financial security. Similarly, "Lack of proper infrastructure affects the growth of rural tourism" obtained a mean of **4.15**, reflecting a strong perception that infrastructure deficiencies act as a major constraint.

It is seen that tourism services have greatly improved the standard of living of individuals residing in rural areas. Tourism services provide additional means of financial stability as individuals in rural locations have many ways in which to earn a living besides their farm. Through the use of rural tourism services, individuals in rural areas can increase their standard of living, however there is great variations among individual respondents to rural tourism services, thus providing moderately improved living conditions, as shown by the mean score of 3.90. Due to the seasonal nature of tourism services, the mean score for this item was 3.95 with a low standard deviation of 0.604, indicating that most respondents generally agree that the seasonal aspect of tourism services leads to inconsistent income and job opportunities. On the lower end, employment generation recorded a mean score of **3.70**, indicating moderate agreement that tourism creates jobs, but perhaps not sufficient

or stable employment for all locals. Inadequate government support and promotion scored a mean of **3.50**, suggesting respondents feel that policy-level assistance and marketing efforts are insufficient. The lowest mean scores were observed for *limited access to finance* (3.30) and *lack of training and skills* (3.25), along with high standard deviation values, indicating varied experiences among respondents. These findings reveal that financial constraints and skill gaps significantly restrict the ability of rural communities to fully benefit from tourism activities. It is found that while rural tourism has positively influenced income levels, economic stability, and livelihood improvement, several structural and institutional challenges—such as infrastructure gaps, seasonality, limited finance, inadequate training, and weak government support continues to hinder its full potential in the rural areas.

Findings Of the Study

1. The highest mean scores for increased income (Mean = 4.25) and financial stability (Mean = 4.15) indicate that rural tourism has significantly improved household income and economic stability of locals. This shows that respondents strongly agreed that rural tourism is essential to improving livelihoods.
2. With high mean scores for lack of infrastructure (Mean = 4.15) and seasonality of tourism (Mean = 3.95), the results also demonstrate that seasonality, inadequate institutional support, and infrastructure deficiencies continue to be significant obstacles. Lower mean values for training and financial access also show barriers that prevent rural communities from reaping the full benefits of tourism.

Suggestions

- It is suggested that the government and local authorities should strengthen rural tourism infrastructure by improving road connectivity, sanitation facilities, accommodation, and basic amenities to enhance tourist satisfaction and increase income and employment opportunities for local residents.
- It is suggested that training programs, financial assistance, and skill development initiatives should be provided to rural communities to improve their participation in tourism-related activities and to ensure sustainable livelihood generation throughout the year.

Conclusion:

It is concluded that, rural tourism significantly enhances household income, job prospects, and rural communities' general standard of living in the Mahabaleshwar region. The results show that rural tourism has helped locals diversify their sources of income and maintain economic stability, but obstacles like poor infrastructure, seasonal travel, restricted access to financing, a lack of training, and inadequate government support limit its full potential. Therefore, rural tourism can become a sustainable tool for inclusive rural development with targeted policy interventions, capacity building, and infrastructure development. Despite the fact that rural tourism has had a positive impact on income levels, economic stability, and the improvement of livelihoods, a number of structural and institutional obstacles such as gaps in infrastructure, seasonality, limited financing, inadequate training, and weak government support—continue to prevent it from reaching its full potential in rural areas.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the successful completion of this study titled *“Role of Rural Tourism in Enhancing the Livelihood of Local People in Mahabaleshwar.”*

First and foremost, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my teacher/supervisor for their valuable guidance, constant encouragement, and constructive suggestions throughout the preparation of this research work. Their academic support and insightful feedback greatly helped in shaping this study.

I am also thankful to my institution for providing the necessary academic facilities, resources, and a conducive learning environment that enabled me to carry out this research effectively. I gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of local residents, tourism stakeholders, and service providers in Mahabaleshwar whose experiences and information contributed significantly to this research.

My sincere appreciation goes to researchers, scholars, and government tourism reports that served as important sources of data and reference for understanding the relationship between rural tourism and livelihood enhancement.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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