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**CASE
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Policy Brief

Homestays in India: The Forgotten Purpose

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To Cite: Himansh Raj Bhatia, 2025, Homestays in India: The Forgotten Purpose, Case Study and Research Centre, Indian School of Public Policy

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Introduction

Homestays are an alternate accommodation style part of the concept of community-based tourism. Popularised in Malaysia, Tourists are invited to live with the locals within the premises of their houses. This local can be an individual or preferably a cluster of individuals within the same proximity i.e. a community. Homestays in Malaysia and Thailand have created an economic boom, where the number of homestays and inbound tourists visiting these communities have increased drastically. India saw the advent of homestays after the 2002 'Incredible India Campaign' which launched the 'Incredible India Bed and Breakfast and homestay scheme' in 2008. The guidelines mentioned in this scheme became the skeleton for all the homestay policies that followed.

The rise of the demand and supply of homestays in India have increased dramatically. However, the current regulations based on the concept of commercial hospitality standards are hampering the potential of the concept. For a homestay sector to flourish, cultural experiences and unique selling points are imperative. The limitation on creativity and cultural experiences would lead to a reduction in the tourist traffic towards homestays as well as the loss of cultural identity. In order to address these issues, the structure of regulation and standardisation has to move away from the existing amenities centric model towards an experience-led, culturally cognisant and sustainable model of homestays.

India's homestay ecosystem deals with a lot of informalities. These informalities can create nuisance and thus it is imperative that proactive action is taken for the safety and security of the guests. Regulations focus on making sure that the standards of the homestay comply with the safety, security and liveable standards set by the appropriate authorities. Despite the policies that exist in India, there are numerous homestays that operate outside the regulatory enforcements. These homestays may create an unsafe environment for the guests and the host themselves. The regulations existing in India aimed to counter these problems.



Overview of the Problem

India's homestay network has grown in all states since the campaign. The specific guidelines that regulate homestays in India are subjected to the state departments, however, the state policies follow a similar notion to the central guidelines with some minor alterations. These state-wise and central regulations that were created for the benefit of homestays became a bottleneck for the potential of the homestay concept. The demand for homestays stem from the authentic cultural experience that is provided by the hosts. The current guideline structure as envisaged by the centre and adopted by the states follow the regulations that are inspired from the regulations of the hotel industry. Hotel industry accommodation model covers all aspects for a commercial hospitality sector but are unable to capture the authentic culture that homestays require. As these regulations are enforced upon the homestay regulation process, the cultural capacity of the homestay community to provide experiences diminish.

The registration and regulation of homestays follow an amenities centric model wherein, homestays are divided in classes ranging from silver to gold depending on the amenities provided.

Drawbacks of following an Amenities-Centric Model

- Amenities centric model follows a strict schedule of uniformity, this uniformity limits the creativity of individual communities in providing authentic cultural exposure.
- It promotes luxury comfort over experiential tourism.
- It analyses homestays based on elements like lights, bed size, mattress size room length and bathroom size.
- No guidelines are enforced in order to promote culture of a community
- Standardisation leads to a similar experience of homestays to other accommodation units of 'category d'.
- The Unique Selling Point is not highlighted leading to a loss of tourist traffic.
- No capacity is targeted in promoting the cultural essence of the area or the community.

Effects of the Drawbacks on the Sector's Sustainability and Potential

Standardisation and strict hotel standard guidelines of homestays lead to a negative effect in the homestay sector. Firstly, due to heavy regulations unofficial homestays rise up in the country which lead to improper and unsafe practices. As there is a discouragement of unique characteristics of homestays and communities, potential of revisits and word of mouth advertisement of the homestay suffer. As individuality and creativity is restricted in this model, individual business models are unsuccessful in promoting themselves as unique to the others. An underlying feature of homestay is that it protects and preserves a community's culture through generations, however due to the standardisation mode, this feature remains absent.

Current Regulation Structure

As discussed, the current regulatory structure borrows its framework from the hotel standard operating procedure which is tuned down to manage small individual owned accommodation units (Refer to Annexure).

India provides limited capacity building or training programmes; however, the merit of these programmes is centred towards hospitality from the discourse of hotel management leading to a more corporate structured and transactional approach to homestays. There aren't any capacity building programmes catered to the utilisation of the unique selling point of the community or the area. As for now, the experiences that are provided by a homestay are dependent on the operator's effort, which leads to a depleted resource of experiential tourism which was the idea behind homestays and community-based tourism. Although the homestay market in India in terms of operators and consumers has seen an increase every year, if alterations are not made in order to emphasize authenticity and cultural experiences, the replication of these 'mini-hotels' will lead to a stagnant growth and eventually plateau the market. Goa and Kerala, for example, standardise the homestay by the 'idea' of comfort laid down by the hotel industry. The size of the mattress, colour of the sheets laid on them, the size of the washroom and unrealistic amenities are enforced. These compliances do not only affect the operator in terms of inconvenience but it also affects the overall potential of the sector as it takes the individuality and creativity out of the hands of the operators. Homestays are a unique segment of accommodation where the ideal set up exists outside the realm of luxury 'comfort' and more towards the overall cultural exposure and experience that is imparted with the tourist.

Policy Suggestions: Following an ASEAN/Malaysian Hybrid Model

Countries like Thailand and Malaysia which have prosperous community-led homestay programs, follow a structure that empowers cultural identity and tourist experience. This rural homestay experience involves a community packed together providing collective activities and cultural experiences. To achieve this, Association of South East Nations (ASEAN) and Malaysia's Ministry of tourism, arts and culture (MOTAC) created the registration and regulatory framework keeping the essence of the homestay in mind.

Thailand Homestay Standard	% of Grade
Accommodation	10
Food	10
Host Friendliness	10
Tour	5
Natural Resources and Environment	10
Culture	10
Value Creation and Value of Products	5
Management of Homestays	20
Public Relations	5

ASEAN Homestay Standard	% of Grade
Homestay	5
Activity	15
Management	15
Location	5
Security	10
Marketing and Public Relations	10
Sustainability	10
Accommodation	10
Hygiene and Cleanliness	15

Both the ASEAN and Thailand framework follow a subjective regulation procedure depending on the community or the region, however the merit of the homestays depend on the weightage given to each category. For example, Thailand puts a heavy weightage on the management of homestays which include the business promotion side as well as the maintenance of the quality of the homestay. ASEAN framework prioritises activities, management and hygiene, ensuring that the tourists attain a safe and culturally rich – engaging tourism experience.

Following this, India could adopt a similar approach curtailed to India's unique geography and demographic. Where the regulation and registration are not done through amenities-based approach but rather the merit of the experience that is provided to the tourists.

Standard	% of Grade
Accommodation: Sturdiness, Aesthetics of the house, Sufficient number of rooms and bathrooms	20
Hygiene: Clean bedsheets, Bathrooms, Rooms, Dishes, Common Areas	15
Food: Type of food & Raw Materials used (self-grown is preferred) Clean drinking water, Culture centric food options.	15
Safety: Fire Extinguishers; Cameras, if possible.	10
Activities: Engaging and cultural activities and practices or recommendations based on local knowledge	20
Promotion of the Unique Selling Point	10
Sustainability: Ecological; waste management, limited use of plastic.	10



Key Points for this Framework

1. **Accommodation:** For a tourist to have an enjoyable experience, it is imperative to create a space where comfort is provided without hampering the authentic and cultural expression of all hosts. Thus, there needs to be balance created based on the location of the homestay.
2. **Hygiene:** Continuing of the existing hygiene training as modelled after the hotel industry
3. **Food:** Food has the ability to express the culture of the area, therefore, having authentic homemade food with more emphasis on the location centric cultural meals is important.
4. **Safety:** Basic safety features like fire extinguishers are necessary for the wellbeing of the host and the guest.
5. **Activities:** Participating and perceiving cultural activity and practices are important for the essence of the homestay concept. Activities are not limited to external activities in farming but also shared experiences and traditional customs that can be observed.
6. **Promotion of USP:** Every location has a unique selling point, it is imperative for this to be recognized and highlighted through state intervention. Homestays need to be situated in a way that the USP of the location is taken full advantage of.
7. **Sustainability:** Homestays are also a sustainable accommodation unit; however, it is imperative that practices are mandated that focus on increasing the ecological sustainability of the concept through aspects like waste management practices.

Regulatory Procedures

The approval body of homestays which are specific to the state are required to be trained in the process of understanding the balance between the subjective understanding of the weightage framework and the regions' identity. Further, the homestay operators are required to be trained in the practice of showcasing their culture through various external and internal activities. For example, regional practices like fishing, farming, arts and crafts etc.

Implications of the Framework

The framework is designed to promote the existing regional customs and experiences, this will result in:

- 1.Higher tourist engagement
- 2.Utilization of the unique selling point of the location
- 3.Higher marketability through revisits and word of mouth advertisement
- 4.Cultural promotion
- 5.Cultural sustainability

Possible Drawbacks of the Framework

- 1.Subjective interpretation of regulation, if untrained could lead to a lapse in understanding of the homestay concept.
- 2.Uninformed homestays could be subjected to mismanagement.
- 3.Capacity building has to accompany the promotion of cultural identity
- 4.State-specific misinterpretation of the skeleton.
- 5.Burden of regulation, due to bureaucratic steps

Conclusion

The requirement of the basic skeleton framework is imperative, however, due to homestays being a state specific regulatory endeavour, the burden is on the state to ensure that state-specific policies highlight the importance of cultural experience as an ethos for the homestay programme. Tuning the capacity building towards the development of an experience-led model would lead to a sustainable and a favourable homestay model.

Endnotes

1. Community-based tourism is an alternative form of tourism where the ethos of development and control, relies with the community in order to promote an employment-led, culturally sensitive and ecologically friendly sustainable model of tourism. The salient feature of Community-based tourism lies in the authentic culture of the local individuals as experienced by the tourists.
2. Carson L. Jenkins (2015) Tourism policy and planning for developing countries: some critical issues, *Tourism Recreation Research*, 40:2, 144-156, DOI: 10.1080/02508281.2015.1045363
3. Some states like Kerala have a diamond categorization for ultra luxury while states like Uttarakhand have a bronze category for cheap and limited amenities model.
4. Category d refers to the accommodation units having 1-6 rooms. These include: homestays, guest houses, motels, small hotels and hostels.
5. Goa expects all homestay operators to provide guests with an iron board while Kerala mandates all homestays to have white linens and a hotel key fob room set up.

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