

# Rural Homestay as a Driver of Community Development and Ecological Sustainability, A Case Study of Buxa Tiger Reserve Forest, West Bengal, India

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## **Abstract:**

The homestay concept is relatively a new aspect of the tourism industry, which represents the indigenous culture, customs, lifestyle, heritage, and local resources to attract visitors. The ecological systems of any nature-based tourism activity have recently been irreversibly harmed by mass tourism, and therefore homestay is the only alternative. Homestay extends local community engagement towards the tourism sector and encourages them to get benefits from it. The present research work examined the impacts of homestay on the rural community in terms of socio-economic and environmental aspects. The study also analyses how rural homestay impacts the local community and the host to uplift their living standard and economic stability. A total 12 villages were selected to collect primary data, and the Census method was used for the homestay owners. Data has been analysed with qualitative along with content analysis methods. The study explained and brought the facts of homestay growth into the glare and people participation which is absolutely significant. There are three tier impacts on homestay tourism that have been analysed, and prospects of the region have been elucidated.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Ecological, Mass Tourism, Community, Content analysis,

## **Introduction:**

The perception of homestay is as simple as staying in the houses of some locals or a family utilising the space for the purpose. Here the owner themselves-operates the entire business with their active participation representing the community. Homestay guests usually stay in a home-like setting with shared living areas, amenities, and conveniences (Sheela Yadav, Gupta, & Lama, 2018). In developed regions where local economies remain closely aligned with environment and culture, homestay in this context has recently emerged as the most feasible alternative to 'hard tourism.' Implementation of sustainable environment-friendly homestay is one of the most achieving business practices concerning low carbon emission and affable nature accommodation with minimal costing, which are also affordable to even underprivileged. As a result, homestay tourism is seen as a pro-poor tourism product that may improve the lives of ordinary people[1]. In community-based ecotourism is another connection concerning skill development, an alternative to livelihoods, shared entrepreneurship, and community empowerment; hence, a homestay becomes an obvious choice. Therefore, homestay or community-based tourism refers to the cooperative types of ownership where both stakeholders share the liability and profits in the business.

The homestay programme in the tourism sector seems to boost the country's economy, helping locals directly to extend the tourism industry. Simultaneously it appears to improve their socio-economic position. Traditional Rural tourism has positive effects on the socio-demographic of the rural community. It has a more remarkable aspect in job opportunities, enhances income, improves the quality of livelihood, infrastructure, and provides excellent entrepreneurship supports. Further, to preserve the cultural heritage of almost-sinking traditional communities, its existing values can be practised in the countryside concept based business, ensuring its effectiveness and revitalising the local ethics in which they are proud of their own customs and come forward openly to display and narrate the values associated with their community to visitors. Promoting homestay in rural areas is seen to have a positive impact on the community as it provides opportunities for the locals to generate income for them self as well as for the neighbourhood. However, the boondocks community has also understood its better effects on their socio-economic progress through these programmes.

Today, homestay programmes have stretched into a new dimension that offers a majestic experience to strangers. The concept in which travellers who visit the homestay live with the host and every activity held at the stay site gives an imperial experience. Tourists will certainly have the chance to interact with the villagers, have the opportunity to learn different kinds of customs linked to the life of the local community while enjoying the rich atmosphere, a unique style and valuable cultural inheritance. In addition, it also provides the platform where one happens to understand the cultural values of our countryside communities which have been retained for generations.

## **Concept of Homestay:**

The notion of homestay has grown in popularity among travellers worldwide in recent years. The term "Home-Stay" is a combination of the words "home" and "stay," and it refers to living as a paid guest at someone's home or renting a space for a period of the tour. This form of tourism offers an exceptional prospect to the travellers to experience the rural life and their indigenous and traditional socio-cultural setting,[2]. Basically, the concept of homestay is like paying guests who can stay at someone's house for a couple of days with minimal charges. Moreover, in the homestay, travellers can reside with the host's family and interact with the fascinating surroundings of the community. Educational opportunities, entertainment facilities, food availability, suitable lodging arrangements, and hospitality are all vital components for a successful homestay business[3]. On the other hand in homestay tourism, visitors get ample chance to spend quality time with the local family examining their customs, learning the values and observing their ways of life, which is an outstanding opportunity to feel the taste of rural life[4].

## **Literature Review:**

Several research works have been conducted by distinguished scholars worldwide. Most of the studies revealed the role of rural homestay in terms of economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability in the local community is exceptionally incredible. Homestay also preserved the traditional culture, food habits, heritage and indigenous livelihood in Malaysian rural communities [5]. There is an enhancement of socio-economic prosperity and financial stability through homestay operators in Terengganu State of Malaysia [6]. The local people are keen to participate in tourism-related activities. Most local rural people want to be entrepreneurs and have employed many at all levels. So the success of the homestay programme depends on the motivation of the local community, and there is an urgent need to convey the message to the residents that participation in the homestay programme would sure have an opportunity for socio-economic benefits which will inspire them to incline towards the programme [7]. Sustainable homestay tourism and the visitors' satisfaction are related to each other. The future of homestay in Darjeeling Himalayas, which has a bright future in terms of job creation, economic growth and socio-culture benefit [8]. The environmental surroundings along with connected ethnicity are inseparable in this tourism business. The market value of this homestay business has grown up with the demand of visitors[9]. In addition, this business offers financial rewards and monetary support to the local community for restoring, protecting and conserving the environment and their aboriginal traditions. The Community Based Tourism (CBT) creates direct employment opportunities as well as enhances the income levels reducing the graph level of poverty in rural sectors[10].The concept of community relationships between the stakeholders, namely tourism, sites and communities, which supports the typology of participation. Firstly, under a Win-Win-Win scenario, all three players mutually benefit from tourism activities. The interactions with the tourist seem very beneficial with good prospects for inter-cultural exchanges. Secondly, under the Win-Win-Lose scenario - at the same time, tourism benefits local communities. Still, on the contrary, the tourist sites also suffer from this type of tourism, which may significantly impact the environment. Thirdly under the Lose-Lose-Lose scenario - All three stakeholders are badly affected. In this situation, environmental condition degrades, tourists are discouraged from visiting the sites, and local communities do not get any business. On the other hand, when the community looks at its benefit and gets involved seriously, their commitment will undoubtedly strengthen the set project. Hence, community involvement in Homestay programmes is essential to ensure the business's sustainability and success[11].

## **Objective of the Study:**

The role of homestay for community development and ecological sustainability has been a unique exercise in recent years. The main objective of the present work is to find out the growth of homestay in various tourist destinations in BTR and also to find out the involvement of local people for the betterment of sustainable livelihood through homestay tourism. It also examines the socio-economic impact of the local community and the homestay operators. The perception of environmental sustainability and the role of homestay have been analysed.

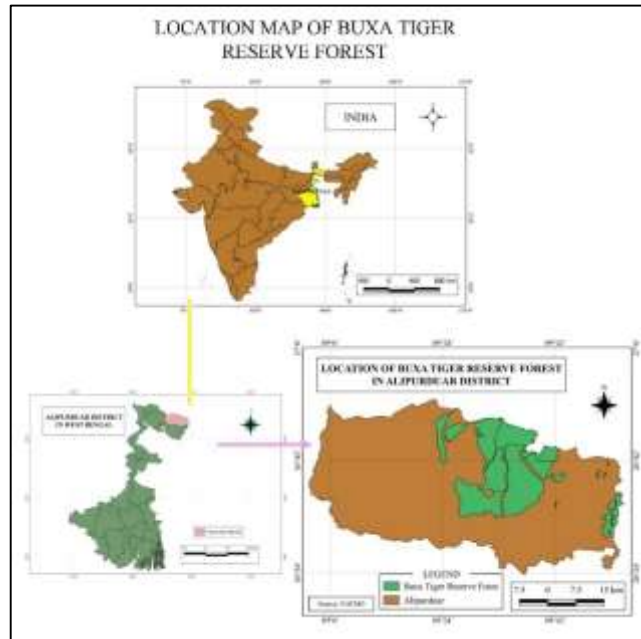
## **Research Design and Methodology:**

The current research study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The structural interview is used for a qualitative and appropriate survey having questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to collect primary data from the respondents. The data was collected from the visitors, stakeholders, local people and local panchayat after in depth-interview and first-hand observation visiting 12 villages in and around BTR in the year 2021 from January to April. The existing situation needs to be analysed and find out the challenging aspects for local community's participation to thrive homestay tourism in BTR. 50 homestay entrepreneurs, 100 local people, and five Gram panchayat from 12 selected destinations were surveyed. During the field visit, we conducted a transect walk to examine all homestays and sampled neighbourhood households to learn more about homestay management and its influence on the local environment.

Additionally, secondary data were also collected from various governmental and non-governmental sources like census of India, WBDC, Ministry of Tourism Govt. of India, Journals, News Papers, Articles and Forest department (BTR) etc.

All the qualitative data gathered from the field survey was analysed by applying suitable statistical techniques in SPSS 20 software. The results have been critically studied and interpreted in-depth to understand the present phenomena.

**Study Area:** Buxa Tiger Reserve Forest (BTR) is one of the most extensive reserve forests in West Bengal, situated at the foothills of the Himalayas in the Indo-Bhutan border (fig. 1), covering an area of 760 sq. km of Alipurduar district. In 1983 government of India has declared Buxa Tiger Reserve as the 15th tiger reserve of India. Several wild animals (Indian leopards, Sambar deer, Gaur, Asian elephant, One horn Rhino and Bison); around 300 bird species exist in this reserve forest. Very recently, after 23 years, 11th of December 2021 Royal Bengal Tiger was spotted in the woods. However, the tiger population is gradually decreasing, but it is noticed that there is a tremendous growth rate of tourist flow in the destination. Homestay is the only single form of accommodation provided to the visitors. Tourism activity in BTR forest plays a significant role in the economic growth of the local community. Every year, more than 2 lakhs tourists from various parts of the country and foreigners take part to visit this reserve forest. There is a high demand for accommodation during peak season, and most tourists are trying to spend their leisure time in a homestay accommodation which is not sufficient right now. The demand and the supply of accommodation/housing are proportionally inverse to each other. But gradually the number of homestays increasing and people of the place are highly involved in this sector. There is a high opportunity for rural tourism development alongside homestay accommodation in the Present study area.



**Fig. 1.**Location of the study area.

## Results and Analysis:

### Role of Homestay Stakeholder towards Community Development:

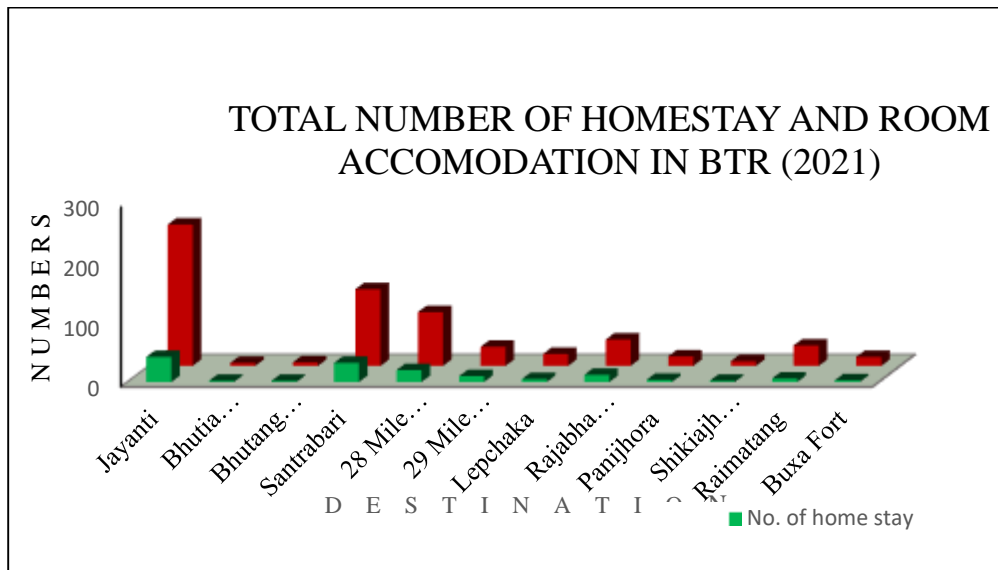
There is an interlink relation between homestay and community base tourism. To conserve ethnicity, socio-culture and improving livelihood community base tourism (CBT) is one of the significant alternative. Home stay tourism practice now extremely popular among the visitors who could have an opportunity to explore or get to know about the lifestyle of the rural community[12]. The present study area (BTR) is exceptionally popular among the tourists in terms of home stay amenities or other way this place is occupied with 100% home stay accommodation for the travellers. The BTR forest policy is clearly stated that no stakeholder will be construct any other forms of accommodation, except home stay which will have maximum 6 rooms in each property.

**Table 1:** Major home stay destinations in and around BTR.

Sl. No	Name of the place	No. of home stay	Total Room
1	Jayanti	42	236
2	BhutiaBasti	2	5
3	Bhutanghat	2	6
4	Santrabari	32	128
5	28 Mile Basti	20	90
6	29 Mile Basti	10	32
7	Lepchaka	5	20
8	Rajabhakhawa	12	44
9	Panijhora	4	16
10	Shikiajhora	2	8
11	Raimatang	6	34
12	Buxa Fort	3	15

**Source:** Based on Primary Data (2021).

The number of visitors gradually increasing in BTR forest so there is an essential needs of sufficient accommodation for the guest. The increasing number of tourists and encourage of the government local people are very much attract towards home stay service. The entire region had only 2 home stay in the year of 1999 with 4 rooms at Jayanti but at present it has 42 home stay with 236 rooms.



**Fig. 2.** Destination-wise Distribution of Homestay.

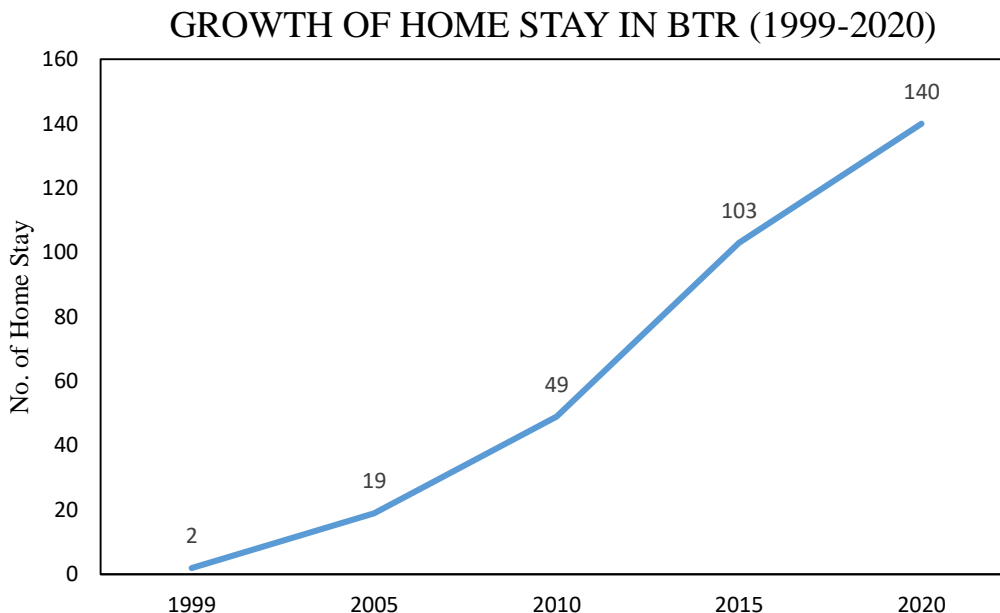
Santrabari is the second highest in terms of number of home stay (32) with 128 rooms followed by 28<sup>th</sup> Mile Basti (20) with 90 rooms. Both the places are situated in the West BTR forest division. Lepchaka is one of mesmerising destination which is also known as “Queen of Doors” to the strangers especially for the adventurous activities. Trekking is the only way to reach this place and it has 8kms in length trek route through high elevated terrains along dense forest. Lepchaka have 5 homestay having altogether 20 rooms with camping facilities where tourists can have splendid experience of overnight sleep under the open sky. On the way to Lepchaka, Buxa fort is an another destination where the British held Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose captive (according to the locals). Recently the government officials restricted the movements into the premises for ongoing maintenance task. At present it has 3 homestay with 20 rooms accommodation. Raimatang is another off-beat destination which has tremendous opportunity for the growth of tourism and an additional destination for homestay business. At present the demand for the tourists and accommodation at the place is not sufficient, as it has only 6 homestay with 34 rooms’ facilities. Panijhora, Bhutiabasti, Bhutan ghat, Rajabhatkhawa and Shikijahora are the upcoming destinations in the recent years where the natural beauty of the place is a major attraction for the tourists.



**Fig. 3.** Major Homestay Destination in BTR.

There is a growing number of visitors in the BTR forest, and there is an essential need for sufficient accommodation for the guest. With the increasing number of tourists and government encouragement, local people are attracted to homestay services. The entire region had only 2 homestays in 1999 with 4 rooms at Jayanti, but it has 42 homestays with 236 rooms at present. Santrabari is the second highest in terms of the number of homestays (32) with 128 rooms, followed by 28th-mile Basti (20) with as many as 90 rooms. Both the place is situated in the West BTR forest division.

There is a gradual increase in the number of homestay in the region fig. 4. As in 1999 there were only 2 homestay at Jayanti but in 2005 the numbers increased to 19. Unexpectedly, the growth rate tremendously increased from 2010 onward. The study data revealed that in last 10 years the number of homestay increased from 49 (2010) to 140 (2020) which is quite significant.



**Fig. 4.** Year-wise Growth of Homestay in BTR.

#### Socio-Environmental Perspective to the Surveyed People:

According to previous study it has been pointed out that homestay lodging provides lots of benefits to the hosts and the rural community as well in terms of socio-environmental aspects[13]. The survey results has proved that there is a wonderful impacts on the rural community for the effectiveness of homestay business in terms of socio-culture and environmental development[14]. To identify the socio-environmental impacts due to the home stay service 5 variable has been considered in sample survey questionnaire table 2. The variable are measured in a Likert scale used range from 1-5. Where 1 represent “strongly disagree” and 5 indicate “strongly agree”.

**Table: 2** Opinion the respondents towards socio-environmental aspects.

Variables	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
V1. There is a reduction of Forest degradation.		1%		4%	95%
V2. Environmental awareness increased.	1%	3%		18%	78%
V3. change on Sanitation and cleanliness	23%	9%		61%	7%
V4. Improved on the economic stability.	2%	11%	5%	43%	39%
V5. Home stay change on the livelihood	7%	21%	4%	37%	31%

**Source:** Based on field survey (2021)

Table 2 shows the local community's perception and homestay owners towards socio-environmental impacts of homestay practices. In the first variable (V1) most of the respondents (95%) strongly agreed that there is a decrease in deforestation in the BTR division. In total (18%+78%) 96% of respondents strongly agree that environmental awareness (V2) has been tremendously increasing due to homestay business. On the other hand, there are different opinions on the sanitation and cleanliness variable (V3). 61% of respondents agree, and 23% strongly disagree on it. Regarding economic stability (V4), 82% of respondents

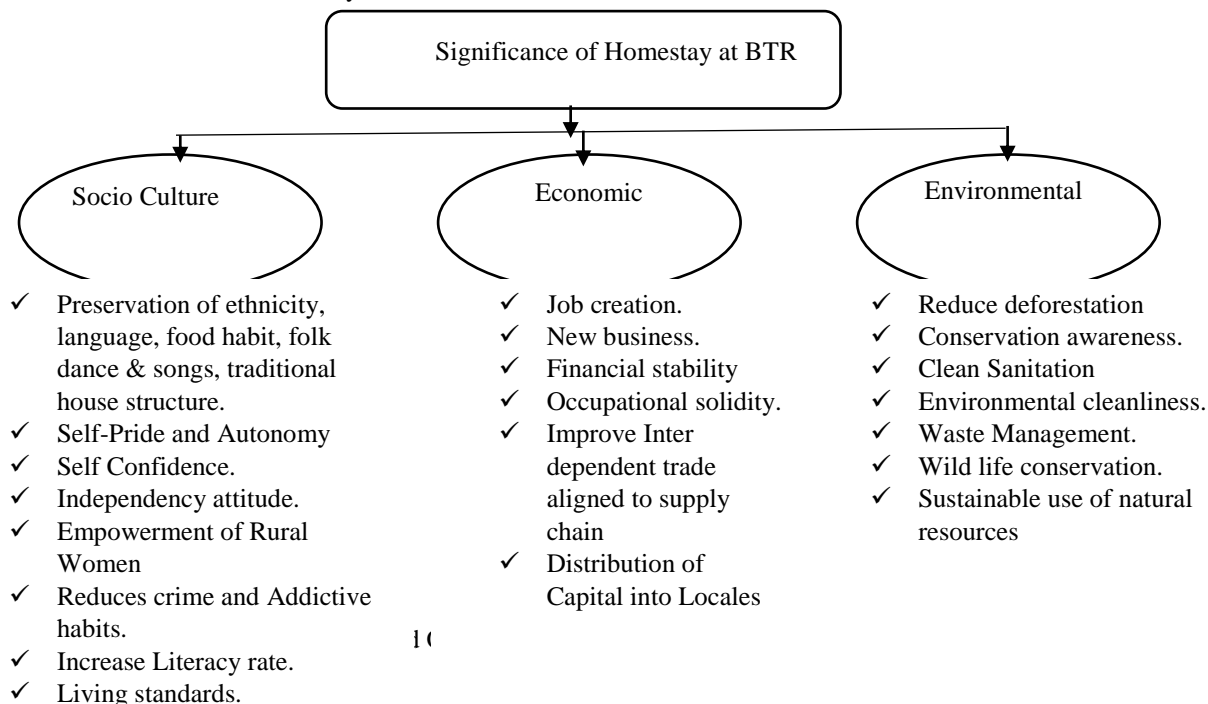
agree/strongly agree, whereas a very negligible percentage of respondents (13%) strongly disagrees. According to 68% of respondents believe that homestay has changed their livelihood.

**Discussion:**

**Role of Homestay Stakeholder towards Community Development:**

There is an interlink relation between homestay and community-based tourism. To conserve ethnicity, socio-culture and improve livelihood, community-based tourism (CBT) is one of the significant alternatives. Homestay tourism practice is now prevalent among the visitors who could have an opportunity to explore or get to know about the lifestyle of the rural community [12] The present study area (BTR) is exceptionally popular among the tourists in terms of home stay amenities. In another way this place is occupied with 100% homestay accommodation for the travellers. The BTR forest policy clearly states that no stakeholder will construct any other forms of housing, except homestay, which will have a maximum of 6 rooms in each property.

**Table 3.** Three tier role of homestay at BTR.



The sociocultural perspective in Homestay seeks to understand the local community's behaviour and their critical steps in preserving ethnicity (Tribals, Nepalese & Rajbanshi), food habits, traditions, customs and their age-old edifices. Certainly, such development by examining the tools that empower each gender without discrimination reduces the illiteracy rate, drops the scale of crime rates, and controls addictions significantly among the group. But, unfortunately, these advantages of rural business often remained hidden earlier at BTR that directs a person's actions and improves the life.

For any community to survive, its citizens must have employment opportunities, and its government must be able to generate revenue to provide services. Economic development, if done effectively, in this community-based tourism, would work, and underprivileged and unemployed youths in rural areas will undoubtedly grow and expand. Resources and capital will retain and boost trade within a community. Likewise it is true in the case of youths; women & olds are now engaged in various home based tourism sectors at BTR. And these are the factor that has influenced the economic growth in days and in a time to come and eliminate the remaining least job opportunities at BTR.

The natural environment directly influences the well-being of businesses by playing significant roles in the community's health. To focus on the importance of sustainable development, awareness amongst the community is a must regarding clean water and sanitation, conservation of surrounding vegetation, judicious use of locally available natural resources, and effective waste management. To prevent degradation of the environment and to emphasize protecting the environment through various small mechanism and awareness drive is significantly essential. It has been seen, earlier local groups involved in deforestation activities for their living has evolved through this homestay typeset business and now keenly initiates plantation tasks in the BTR forest. It is therefore, a healthy natural environment is the foundation of successful long-term development in any business.

## Findings & Conclusion:

This paper attempts to find out the role of the homestay in community development and its impacts on the environment and socio-culture of the local people. Homestay is not only the leading practice in the marked areas of study but also numerous other activities that boost sustainable rural tourism in the study area. The study explored the spatial distribution of homestay in the region and peoples involvement in homestay business. The locals are much interested in participating in rural tourism activities nowadays. They have changed their occupation patterns in the region due to homestay business. There is a lot of environmental awareness among the people. It is also revealed that many people agree undoubtedly that homestay plays a significant role in the socio-culture and ecological well-being of the region. But there are numerous concerns about the homestay too, like proper training to the host, guide, and exponent that requires to be improved. However, the government of West Bengal has came-up with a funding scheme to homestay stakeholders providing them with 2.5 lakhs financial support, which is known as “Blue Homestay Project”. However, a lot of work needs to be done to promote homestay as it has enormous potential to flourish sustainable homestay community-based tourism. The tourists’ satisfaction and the present existing problems faced by the stakeholders are other area of concerns that need to be studied.

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