

An Analysis of the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25: Vision, Strategic Pillars, and Thematic Focus Areas

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25, examining its vision, objectives, strategic pillars, and thematic focus areas within the broader context of the state's tourism development trajectory. Drawing on policy documents, academic literature, and recent sectoral reports, the study explores how the policy aims to position Karnataka as a globally competitive and sustainable tourism destination through innovative approaches such as agri-tourism, rural tourism, and digital transformation. The analysis highlights the policy's ambitious targets for economic growth, employment generation, and investment attraction, as well as its commitment to inclusive and responsible tourism practices that empower local communities and promote heritage conservation. The paper also critically assesses the opportunities created by institutional mechanisms, incentives, and public-private partnerships, alongside the challenges posed by infrastructural limitations, governance complexities, and stakeholder engagement. The findings underscore that while the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 provides a robust framework for sectoral advancement, its successful implementation will depend on adaptive governance, effective stakeholder collaboration, and sustained investment in both physical and human capital.

Keywords: Agritourism, Economic development, Karnataka Tourism Policy, Policy analysis, Strategic pillars

Importance of tourism to Karnataka

Tourism plays a pivotal role in shaping Karnataka's economic landscape, serving as a substantial contributor to the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) and employment generation. In 2019, the tourism sector accounted for approximately 14.8% of Karnataka's GSDP, underscoring its significance as a key driver of economic growth and diversification (Latha & Mahesha, 2022; Vishnu, 2023). The sector not only fosters direct employment but also creates extensive indirect job opportunities, with over 3 million individuals engaged in tourism-related activities across the state (Latha & Mahesha, 2022). Furthermore, tourism acts as a catalyst for the development of ancillary industries such as hospitality, transportation, handicrafts, and trade, thereby stimulating entrepreneurship and supporting the livelihoods of youth and marginalized communities (Latha & Mahesha, 2022).

Beyond its economic impact, tourism contributes meaningfully to Karnataka's societal fabric by promoting cultural preservation, community development, and infrastructural advancement. The influx of tourists encourages the conservation of the state's rich heritage, including monuments, arts, crafts, and traditional festivals, while also fostering intercultural exchange and mutual understanding among diverse populations (Anitha & Chandrashekhara, 2018). Additionally, tourism initiatives often prioritize local participation and skill development, empowering women and marginalized groups and facilitating inclusive socio-economic progress (Latha & Mahesha, 2022). The sector's growth has also led to significant improvements in public infrastructure such as roads, airports, and hospitality facilities which benefit both visitors and local residents,

thereby elevating overall living standards and promoting socio-cultural integration (Vishnu, 2023; Anitha & Chandrashekhara, 2018).

Historical context

The historical development of tourism policy in Karnataka underscores the state's strategic recognition of its diverse natural, cultural, and historical resources as levers for economic and social advancement. In the early 2000s, Karnataka introduced its first comprehensive tourism policy (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2002-07), which focused on foundational aspects such as infrastructure development, private sector engagement, and the creation of tourism zones to optimize the utilization of regional assets. This initial framework was instrumental in promoting investment-friendly environments, encouraging the growth of home stays, and integrating emerging segments like eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and wellness tourism. The subsequent Karnataka Tourism Policy 2009-14 expanded on these priorities by introducing schemes for community involvement, diversifying tourism products, and emphasizing heritage zone development alongside integrated management plans for prominent destinations (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020).

As tourism trends evolved, Karnataka's policies adapted to address new challenges and opportunities. The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2015-20 marked a shift toward an investment-centric and decentralized governance model, aiming to accelerate private investment, foster balanced regional growth, and enhance the quality of visitor experiences (Latha & Mahesha, 2022). This policy also placed a strong emphasis on sustainable tourism and the empowerment of local communities. The latest iteration, the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25, builds upon these foundations by prioritizing heritage conservation, eco- and adventure tourism, and the adoption of digital technologies for smart tourism management. These policies collectively aim to boost tourism's contribution to the state's economy, generate employment, and promote inclusive socio-economic development, while systematically addressing infrastructure gaps and sustainability concerns (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; Vishnu, 2023).

Research Questions and Objectives

A central research question guiding this paper is How do the vision, objectives, strategic pillars, and thematic focus areas articulated in the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 collectively contribute to the advancement of sustainable, inclusive, and resilient tourism development in Karnataka? The primary objective of this research is to critically examine the vision, objectives, strategic pillars, and thematic focus areas outlined in the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25.

A second research question is: What are the key challenges and opportunities encountered in the implementation of the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25, and how do these compare with previous policy periods? This inquiry seeks to identify the practical barriers and facilitators influencing policy outcomes, such as stakeholder engagement, investment flows, and the integration of digital and sustainable practices. The corresponding objective is to provide an evidence-based assessment of policy implementation, highlighting lessons learned and offering recommendations for future policy refinement to maximize tourism's socio-economic and cultural benefits for Karnataka.

Overview of Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25

The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 represents a strategic initiative by the Government of Karnataka to revitalize and advance the state's tourism sector in the wake of contemporary challenges, notably the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy's vision is to position Karnataka as the most preferred tourism destination, offering a safe and memorable experience through diverse, high-quality tourism offerings developed in collaboration with stakeholders and local communities. Central to the policy are objectives to increase tourism's contribution to the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) from 14.8% to 20% by 2025, generate over 10 lakh jobs, and attract ₹5,000 crore in investments. The policy emphasizes inclusive socio-economic growth, sustainable development, and the creation of a robust tourism ecosystem that benefits both visitors and residents.

To achieve these aims, the policy outlines several strategic pillars, including the development of world-class tourism infrastructure, promotion of agri-tourism and rural tourism, and the conservation of heritage and natural resources. It encourages greater participation of local communities, supports entrepreneurship, and prioritizes skill development to ensure gainful employment. The policy also adopts a 360-degree marketing strategy, leveraging Karnataka's brand of "One State, Many Worlds" to enhance its visibility in domestic and international markets. Additional measures include the establishment of a Tourism Development Fund, provision of incentives and subsidies for sustainable tourism projects, and the integration of digital technologies and analytics-driven planning to improve visitor experiences and operational efficiency. Through these comprehensive strategies, the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 seeks to foster sustainable, inclusive, and resilient growth in the state's tourism sector

Vision of the policy

The vision of the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 is to position Karnataka as the most preferred tourism destination, providing a safe and memorable experience for tourists through a diverse array of high-quality tourism offerings. This vision is grounded in the principles of sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, achieved through collaborative efforts with tourism stakeholders and local communities. The mission of the policy is to ensure beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders by creating an enabling business environment, encouraging private sector participation, and fostering responsible tourism practices. The policy aims to facilitate effective inter-departmental coordination, leverage technology for data-driven planning, and promote Karnataka in both domestic and international markets. By prioritizing quality infrastructure, skill development, sustainable practices, and community engagement, the policy seeks to catalyze employment generation, economic growth, and the overall well-being of residents and visitors alike.

Karnataka's strategy for positioning itself as a preferred global tourism destination is multifaceted, emphasizing the state's unique blend of heritage, culture, natural beauty, and modern amenities. The policy leverages Karnataka's brand identity—"One State, Many Worlds"—to market its diverse tourism assets, from UNESCO World Heritage sites and vibrant festivals to eco-tourism, adventure sports, and wellness retreats. Strategic initiatives include substantial investment in infrastructure, enhanced air connectivity, and the promotion of Bengaluru as a global gateway and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) hub. The state actively participates in international tourism expos and organizes roadshows to attract travelers from key global markets, particularly Europe and South Asia. By aligning its offerings with global standards of safety, sustainability, and visitor experience, Karnataka aims to appeal to a broad spectrum of international tourists, thereby strengthening its position as a holistic and competitive tourism destination on the world stage.

Key Objectives of the policy

The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 articulates a set of ambitious objectives aimed at transforming the state's tourism sector into a dynamic engine of economic growth, employment generation, and sustainable development. A primary objective is to increase tourism's contribution to Karnataka's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) from 14.8% to 20% by 2025, thereby reinforcing tourism as a critical pillar of the state economy. The policy also sets a target to generate over 10 lakh (one million) new jobs within the sector, with a strong emphasis on inclusive growth that benefits local communities, women, and marginalized groups. In addition, the policy aspires to attract investments totaling ₹5,000 crore, fostering entrepreneurship and supporting the development of tourism-related infrastructure and services throughout the state. These objectives are underpinned by a commitment to balanced regional development, ensuring that the benefits of tourism extend to both urban and rural areas.

Another key objective of the policy is to promote Karnataka as a globally competitive and sustainable tourism destination by leveraging its diverse cultural, natural, and historical assets. The policy prioritizes the development of niche tourism segments such as agri-tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, and heritage tourism, thereby diversifying the state's tourism offerings and enhancing visitor experiences. It also emphasizes the adoption of sustainable and responsible tourism practices, including the conservation of heritage sites, protection of natural resources, and community-based tourism initiatives. Furthermore, the policy seeks to harness digital technologies and smart tourism solutions to improve marketing, visitor management, and service delivery. Through these objectives, the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 aims to foster a resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking tourism sector that contributes meaningfully to the state's socio-economic and cultural advancement.

Strategic Pillars of Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25

The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 is structured around several strategic pillars that collectively aim to drive sustainable, inclusive, and resilient growth in the state's tourism sector. Foremost among these is the development of robust tourism infrastructure, which includes improving accessibility, accommodation, amenities, and last-mile connectivity across key destinations. The policy emphasizes the creation of world-class facilities to ensure seamless and memorable experiences for both domestic and international tourists. Another central pillar is the diversification of tourism products, with a focus on agri-tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, heritage tourism, and adventure tourism, leveraging Karnataka's rich cultural and natural assets. These initiatives are complemented by a strong commitment to sustainable and responsible tourism practices, prioritizing the conservation of heritage sites and natural resources while encouraging community-based tourism models and local participation (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; Voyagers World, 2021). Equally significant is the policy's focus on inclusive socio-economic development through skill development, entrepreneurship, and community engagement. The policy seeks to empower women, youth, and marginalized groups by providing targeted training and employment opportunities within the tourism value chain. Strategic marketing and branding, including a 360-degree marketing approach and the integration of digital technologies and analytics-driven planning, are also central to positioning Karnataka as a globally competitive tourism destination. Additional pillars include the establishment of a Tourism Development Fund, attractive incentive packages for investors, and the creation of an investment facilitation cell to streamline approvals and support private sector participation. Collectively, these strategic pillars are intended to catalyze investment,

generate employment, and ensure the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of Karnataka's tourism sector (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; The New Indian Express, 2020).

Policy Components

Incentives and Subsidies: The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 offers a comprehensive package of incentives and subsidies to stimulate investment and foster sustainable growth in the tourism sector. Eligible tourism projects focusing on agritourism adventure tourism, caravan parks, hotels, houseboats, wellness centers, and wayside amenities—can access capital investment subsidies of up to 25% of the eligible project cost, subject to defined ceilings based on project type and location. Special provisions are made for projects led by women, SC/ST, and differently-abled entrepreneurs, who may receive additional subsidies. Other fiscal benefits include interest subsidies on term loans, exemptions and reimbursements on stamp duty and land conversion fees, and concessional registration charges. Marketing development assistance is also provided for promotional activities, such as participation in national and international tourism events, and the production of publicity materials. These incentives are designed to encourage private sector participation, promote regional development, and support the adoption of sustainable and responsible tourism practices.

Operational Guidelines: The operational guidelines for the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 serve as a detailed procedural framework to ensure transparent, efficient, and equitable implementation of the policy's incentives, subsidies, and concessions. These guidelines specify the eligibility criteria for tourism projects and service providers, outline the documentation and application process, and detail the procedures for approval, disbursement, and monitoring of benefits. The guidelines are organized into volumes covering subsidies, incentives, and concessions, providing clarity for government officials, investors, and entrepreneurs. They establish timelines for application submission, define project specifications, and set forth compliance requirements to ensure that projects align with policy objectives. The guidelines also facilitate coordination among various government departments and streamline processes to improve the ease of doing business in Karnataka's tourism sector.

Institutional Mechanisms: The institutional framework under the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 is designed to ensure effective governance, coordination, and oversight of policy implementation. Key bodies include the Karnataka Tourism Task Force, which provides strategic guidance and monitors progress, and the Department of Tourism, which is responsible for policy execution, investor facilitation, and inter-departmental coordination. An Investment Facilitation Cell has been established to streamline project approvals and support private investors throughout the project lifecycle. These institutions work collaboratively with other government agencies, local bodies, and stakeholders to promote integrated tourism development, address operational challenges, and ensure that policy objectives—such as sustainability, inclusivity, and competitiveness—are achieved. Regular consultations with industry stakeholders and experts further strengthen the institutional mechanisms, fostering a participatory approach to tourism governance in the state.

Thematic Focus Area: Agritourism in Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25

Agritourism is a prominent thematic focus in the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25, reflecting the state's commitment to leveraging its agricultural diversity and rural heritage for tourism-led development. The policy recognizes agritourism as a catalyst for rural empowerment, cultural preservation, and sustainable economic growth. By facilitating direct engagement between tourists and rural communities, agritourism initiatives aim to provide immersive experiences such as farm stays, participation in agricultural activities, and exposure to local cuisine and handicrafts. These initiatives are designed to foster mutual understanding between urban and rural populations while generating supplementary income for farmers and rural households. The policy places a strong emphasis on community participation and inclusivity, with special incentives for projects led by women, marginalized groups, and farmer collectives, thereby ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed across rural Karnataka (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020).

To support the development of agritourism, the policy outlines clear eligibility criteria and operational guidelines, requiring that projects be established on actively cultivated farmland and managed by farmers or farmer producer organizations. Eligible activities include horticultural tours, animal husbandry demonstrations, and the sale of local produce and handicrafts. The policy also encourages collaboration with government departments, educational institutions, and private stakeholders to build capacity, provide training, and maintain quality standards. Financial incentives such as capital investment subsidies, interest subsidies, and marketing assistance are provided to stimulate investment and ensure the sustainability of agritourism ventures. Through these comprehensive measures, the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 aims to position the state as a leading destination for experiential and sustainable tourism while enhancing rural livelihoods and economic resilience (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; Latha & Mahesha, 2022).

Analysis of Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25

The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 marks a significant departure from previous tourism policies by adopting a more integrated, inclusive, and sustainability driven approach. Unlike earlier policies that primarily

focused on infrastructure development, investment facilitation, and the promotion of select tourism products, the 2020-25 policy places strong emphasis on agri-tourism, rural tourism, and community participation to ensure socio-economic benefits reach grassroots levels. It introduces ambitious targets such as increasing tourism's contribution to GSDP from 14.8% to 20%, generating over 10 lakh jobs, and attracting ₹5,000 crore in investments while also establishing mechanisms like the Tourism Development Fund and an investment facilitation cell for streamlined governance. The policy distinguishes itself through its commitment to responsible tourism, digital transformation, and analytics-driven planning, as well as by offering enhanced incentives for projects led by women, marginalized groups, and farmer collectives. This comprehensive, stakeholder-oriented framework aims to create a resilient, competitive, and sustainable tourism sector, reflecting lessons learned from earlier policies and the evolving needs of the state.

The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 represents a comprehensive and forward-looking framework aimed at transforming the state's tourism sector into a robust driver of economic growth, employment, and sustainable development. The policy is distinguished by its multifaceted approach, emphasizing the development of world-class tourism infrastructure, diversification of tourism products, and the integration of digital technologies to enhance visitor experiences. Notably, the policy prioritizes agri-tourism and rural tourism as core themes, seeking to promote not only agricultural and farming activities but also the broader spectrum of rural life, including local cuisine, culture, and traditions. By setting ambitious targets—such as increasing tourism's contribution to the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) from 14.8% to 20% by 2025, generating over 10 lakh jobs, and attracting ₹5,000 crore in investments—the policy underscores the strategic role of tourism in Karnataka's socio-economic agenda. The establishment of a Tourism Development Fund, provision of incentives and subsidies, and the creation of an investment facilitation cell further demonstrate the state's commitment to fostering a conducive environment for private sector participation and inclusive growth (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; The New Indian Express, 2020; Chandan, 2022).

Despite its strengths, the policy also faces several challenges in implementation. While the emphasis on sustainable and responsible tourism is commendable, effective operationalization requires robust institutional mechanisms, inter-departmental coordination, and active stakeholder engagement at all levels. The policy's success is contingent upon addressing infrastructural bottlenecks, ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits, and maintaining the delicate balance between tourism growth and environmental conservation. Additionally, the policy's analytics-driven approach and adoption of digital solutions are timely, especially in the context of post-pandemic recovery; however, their impact will depend on the capacity-building efforts and technological readiness of local stakeholders. Overall, the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 demonstrates a progressive vision, but its long-term efficacy will hinge on adaptive governance, continuous stakeholder collaboration, and sustained investment in both human and physical capital (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; Voyagers World, 2021; Chandan, 2022).

Opportunities and Challenges in Implementation of Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25

Opportunities: The Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 presents substantial opportunities to transform the state's tourism sector into a dynamic engine for inclusive economic growth and sustainable development. The policy's emphasis on diversified tourism products—including agri-tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, and adventure tourism—enables the state to leverage its rich cultural and natural resources while promoting community participation and local entrepreneurship. Strategic initiatives such as the establishment of a Tourism Development Fund, attractive incentives for investors, and the creation of an investment facilitation cell are designed to attract significant private investment and foster public-private partnerships. The integration of digital technologies and analytics-driven planning further enhances marketing, visitor management, and service delivery, positioning Karnataka as a competitive tourism destination both domestically and globally. Additionally, the policy's focus on skill development, infrastructure improvement, and sustainable practices creates pathways for employment generation, regional development, and the achievement of broader socio-economic goals (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; Voyagers World, 2021; The New Indian Express, 2020).

Challenges: Despite its comprehensive framework, the implementation of the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 faces several notable challenges. Key obstacles include infrastructural bottlenecks, such as inadequate last-mile connectivity, insufficient amenities, and limited access to quality accommodations in remote destinations. procedural delays, limited financial resources, and fragmented coordination among agencies can impede the timely execution of policy initiatives. There are also persistent issues related to stakeholder engagement, particularly in ensuring active participation from local communities and private investors. Additional challenges include the need for sustained capacity building, addressing gaps in marketing and promotion, and overcoming socio-cultural barriers to entrepreneurship. The policy's success is further contingent upon effective monitoring, transparent governance, and the ability to adapt to evolving market conditions and external shocks, such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-2025, 2020; Chandan, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Karnataka Tourism Policy 2020-25 stands as a comprehensive and forward-thinking framework designed to harness the state's rich cultural, natural, and agricultural resources for sustainable and inclusive tourism development. By articulating a clear vision, ambitious objectives, and robust strategic pillars, the policy seeks to transform Karnataka into a globally competitive destination while fostering economic growth, employment, and community empowerment. Its innovative focus on thematic areas such as agritourism and rural tourism, coupled with substantial incentives and institutional support, positions the state to capitalize on emerging opportunities in the tourism sector. However, the successful realization of these goals will require overcoming persistent challenges related to infrastructure, governance, stakeholder engagement, and capacity building. Ultimately, the policy's long-term impact will depend on adaptive implementation, continuous stakeholder collaboration, and a sustained commitment to responsible and resilient tourism practices.

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