



Rural Tourism in Asia and Pacific

Concept, Practices and Opportunities



Editors

P. Chandra Shekara
D. Puthira Prathap

Associate Editors

Hurain Jannat
F.A.M Zakirul Huq



CIRDAP

Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP)

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Rural Tourism in Asia and Pacific: Concept, Practices and Opportunities
Edited by P. Chandra Shekara and D. Puthira Prathap

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Preface

Rural Tourism has emerged as a powerful driver of sustainable development, offering meaningful opportunities for economic growth, cultural preservation, and community empowerment in rural areas. By emphasizing sustainable practices and encouraging active community participation, it closely aligns with the principles of **Ecotourism**. Rural tourism supports the economic and social development of rural communities by generating income, creating employment, and promoting local products, crafts, and cultural traditions.

In the **Asia-Pacific region**, where rural landscapes are rich in diversity and heritage, the potential for rural tourism remains vast and largely untapped. This book, ***Rural Tourism in Asia and the Pacific: Concept, Practice and Opportunities***, aims to promote rural tourism by sharing best practices, case studies, policy briefs and strategic insights that can inspire and guide stakeholders and policy makers across the region.

The idea for this publication was born from the ‘***CIRDAP-INFRA International Training Programme on Rural Tourism towards Integrated Rural Development***’ organized by the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) in collaboration with Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) of Malaysia from 9-17 October 2024 in **Penang, Malaysia**. The training brought together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and development professionals from the CIRDAP member countries (CMCs) to exchange knowledge, experiences, and innovative models of rural tourism.

The book is intended for a broad audience including policymakers, researchers, rural development practitioners, tourism professionals, and others who are interested in advancing rural tourism as a tool for inclusive and sustainable development. It provides a conceptual framework, practical approaches, and real-world examples that can be adapted and replicated across various contexts.

CIRDAP gratefully acknowledge the valuable contributions of the training participants, CIRDAP experts, and other collaborators who enriched this publication with their insights and experiences. **This book contains 10 articles written by 19 authors representing 5 Asia Pacific countries.** The lead article provides an overview of Rural Tourism in Asia and Pacific countries. The dedication and engagement of authors and Editorial team have made this book a comprehensive and meaningful resource for promoting rural tourism in

We hope this book will serve as a catalyst for informed dialogue, innovative action, and policy formulation in the realm of rural tourism, contributing to the broader goals of rural transformation and sustainable development **benefiting the RURAL COMMUNITIES.**

- **Dr. P Chandra Shekara,**
Director General (DG) and
Editorial Team.

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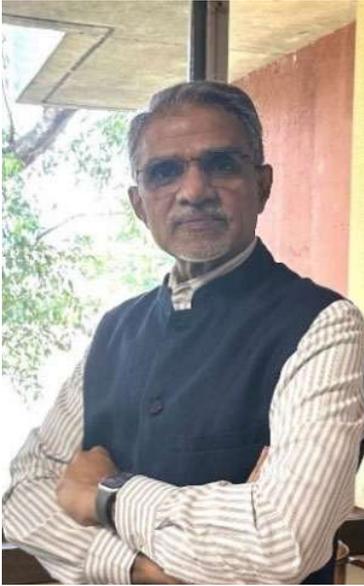
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Pioneering Agritourism in Rural India: The Case of Saguna Baug

Chandrashekhar H. Bhadsavle¹

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the journey of Saguna Baug, from a traditional farm to a vibrant Agri-rural tourism center in Neral, Maharashtra, India, highlighting its innovative practices, including the Saguna Regenerative Technique (SRT), aquaculture, and immersive guest experiences like the Water Buffalo (WB) ride. It delves into the socio-economic upliftment brought by Saguna Baug, including employment opportunities for local villagers, preservation of Maharashtrian culture, and fostering respect for rural lifestyles among urban visitors. By addressing challenges such as balancing tourism with farming and maintaining authenticity, Saguna Baug has evolved into a globally relevant model for rural tourism. It aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting education, environmental sustainability, and rural prosperity. The chapter showcases how agritourism can address rural challenges such as poverty, youth migration, and environmental degradation, while simultaneously creating a bridge between rural and urban communities and provides actionable insights for replicating the Saguna Baug model in rural communities worldwide, emphasizing the power of rural tourism as a tool for sustainable development.

Keywords: Rural tourism; Sustainable Development Goal; Socio-economic upliftment; Saguna Baug; India

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where cities are expanding rapidly, swallowing up open spaces, driving families into smaller, more disconnected lives. At the same time, rural India struggles to hold on to its youth, its traditions, its sense of place. Agriculture, the country's lifeblood for millennia, is seen less as a calling and more as a symbol of hardship. *Saguna Baug*, located in Neral, Maharashtra, India is one of those rare places where these threads intertwine—a working

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farm that's also a retreat, a hub for innovation in farming techniques, and a classroom for city dwellers looking to reconnect with something real.

Saguna Baug is the brainchild of the Bhadsavle family, who took their own frustrations with agriculture's limitations and turned them into a vision for agritourism. A family farm was transformed into a model for something larger than agriculture, larger even than tourism it's a place where the divide between city and village dissolves. They began small inviting visitors to see how their rice was grown, taste the simplicity of meals cooked over a wood fire, and sleep in eco-friendly cottages surrounded by water buffalo and aquaculture ponds. From these modest beginnings, they built a model for what rural tourism can be: not just a business, but a bridge.

The story of *Saguna Baug* is the story of balance: between progress and tradition, rest and work, visitor and farmer. It invites us to imagine a world where rural life isn't a relic to be mourned but a resource to be celebrated, nurtured, and shared.

This chapter explores the philosophy and practices behind *Saguna Baug's* success, the ways it has reshaped its community, and what it can teach us about rural revival not just in India, but anywhere people feel a yearning for a simpler, more connected way of life.

Origins of Saguna Baug

Every great idea begins as a response to a problem. For *Saguna Baug*, the spark came from the combined forces of history, necessity, and an unyielding hope for the future. Its story begins with Shri Haribhau Bhadsavle, a freedom fighter who believed in India not as an abstraction, but as a collection of villages and farms where true freedom could only be found in self-reliance. His ideals were carried forward by his son, Chandrashekhar Bhadsavle, who turned a quiet piece of land at the foothills of Matheran in Maharashtra, India, into a movement.



Figure 6.1 A view of Saguna Baug.

Chandrashekhar Bhadsavle, much like his father, wasn't content to accept the way things were. He grew up on a farm, immersed in the rhythms of rural life, but he also saw its fragility. Traditional farming, for all its romance, was proving inadequate to meet the economic challenges of the modern world. Youth were leaving the villages in droves, chasing dreams of stability in cities where the cost of ambition often outweighed its rewards. Farmers, meanwhile, were left behind, struggling with outdated methods, volatile markets, and an eroding sense of dignity.

It was from this dual crisis urban overreach and rural despair—that *Saguna Baug* was born. Chandrashekhar Bhadsavle didn't just want to preserve his family farm; he wanted to reinvent what a farm could be. His vision was deceptively simple: a place where farming wasn't merely an act of survival but an experience of shared joy. He imagined a space where visitors could witness the miracle of cultivation, learn about sustainable practices, and reconnect with the roots they had long forgotten.

But the transition from a traditional farm to an agritourism center wasn't easy. *Saguna Baug* had to overcome the skepticism of both urban visitors and rural neighbors. There was resistance to the idea that a farm could serve as both a producer of food and a destination for leisure. Poverty in the surrounding areas compounded the challenge; Chandrashekhar knew that if *Saguna Baug* didn't uplift its local community, the project would never be sustainable.

And yet, persistence prevailed. The farm became a living testament to the idea that agriculture, tourism, and rural development could not only coexist but thrive together. Every step of the journey—whether it was introducing *the Saguna Rice Technique* to improve yields or building eco-friendly accommodations to host guests—was guided by the mission to restore pride and prosperity to rural life.

Saguna Baug's Agri-Rural Tourism Model

The allure of *Saguna Baug* lies not just in its idyllic setting or unique activities, but in its philosophy—a belief that farming and tourism can coexist, each enhancing the other. This isn't tourism in the conventional sense; it's not about curated experiences or luxury indulgence. Instead, *Saguna Baug* offers something far more profound: a chance to experience farming as a craft, nature as a collaborator, and the farmer as a steward of both. At its heart, the model is built on dignity—dignity for the farmer, for the land, and for the visitor. Central to *Saguna Baug's* approach is the seamless integration of agricultural operations with tourism. Guests are not passive observers; they are invited to be part of the process, to engage with the rhythms of farm life. From planting paddy fields using the revolutionary Saguna Rice Technique (SRT) to participating in aquaculture demonstrations, every activity is designed to bridge the gap between urban and rural worlds. For the Bhadsavle family, this isn't

just about entertainment it's about education, empathy, and empowerment. Take the iconic Water Buffalo (WB) ride, for instance. On the surface, it's a quirky, fun experience for visitors. But as they ride these gentle giants through the farm's waterlogged fields, they gain a visceral understanding of the labor-intensive nature of traditional farming. Similarly, aquaculture ponds double as both a source of fish and an opportunity for visitors to learn about sustainable water management. Farming workshops, meanwhile, introduce guests to innovative practices like the SRT, which reduces water consumption while increasing yield a small revolution.

The farm's accommodations reflect its ethos of sustainability and simplicity. The Pond Houses, built on stilts over aquaculture ponds, offer a unique blend of rustic charm and eco-conscious design. Mud Houses, with their earthy textures and natural cooling properties, echo the traditional architecture of Indian villages. Hospitality at *Saguna Baug* begins with the farm's emphasis on cleanliness and comfort.

What truly sets *Saguna Baug* apart is its ability to blend tourism with hands-on learning. Visitors don't just see farming; they live it. They don't just hear about sustainable practices; they practice them. Every activity, from composting workshops to bird-watching trails, is designed to leave guests with a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of nature and agriculture. It's not uncommon for urban visitors to leave with muddy hands and lighter hearts, carrying back not just memories, but a renewed sense of purpose. At its core, *Saguna Baug* isn't just a place—it's a philosophy. It reimagines tourism as a medium for connection, education, and transformation. By integrating the dignity of farming with the curiosity of visitors, it has created a model that goes beyond the transactional and ventures into the transformative.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Impact

The economic story of *Saguna Baug* is one of empowerment. For years, rural poverty and underemployment have been the twin curses of India's villages. By integrating tourism into its agricultural operations, *Saguna Baug* has created a new kind of economic ecosystem. Villagers who once struggled to find stable work now have steady employment in roles ranging from hospitality to aquaculture management. Women, often excluded from formal labor markets, are finding opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their households. For many, this isn't just a job—it's a lifeline. Tourism, of course, brings in income, but the farm's influence goes deeper. Visitors often leave with more than just memories—they purchase farm products, from organically grown rice to freshly caught fish, directly supporting the local economy. This direct-to-consumer model ensures that farmers retain a larger share of their profits, breaking free from exploitative middlemen. *Saguna Baug*, in this sense, is not

just a business; it's an economic model that offers rural communities a blueprint for resilience.

Culturally, *Saguna Baug* is a preservationist's dream. In an age where globalization often erases local traditions, the farm serves as a living museum of Maharashtrian heritage. Traditional meals are prepared with love and authenticity, allowing visitors to taste the region's culinary legacy. Folk arts, customs, and rituals that once seemed destined for obscurity find new audiences here. It's a subtle revival, but one with significant consequences: visitors leave with a newfound respect for rural life, and villagers rediscover pride in their roots.



Figure 6.2 Guided farm tour at Saguna Baug.

At *Saguna Baug*, children from the city learn how rice is grown, marvel at the ingenuity of composting, and return home with a deeper connection to the land. These are not fleeting experiences; they plant seeds of understanding that grow long after the visit ends. For the local community, this exchange is just as valuable. Youth who might otherwise migrate to cities are staying back; drawn by the farm's innovative programs and the opportunities they provide. Skills training for women and young people has become a cornerstone of *Saguna Baug*'s mission, equipping the next generation with tools for a future that doesn't require abandoning their heritage. It's a quiet but powerful counter-narrative to the story of urban migration: progress can be built at home. *Saguna Baug*'s greatest achievement is its ability to transform relationships—between people and land, between urban and rural, and between tradition and modernity. It challenges the narrative that villages are relics of the past, instead presenting them as crucibles of innovation and community. In doing so, it offers not just a glimpse of what rural India could be, but a vision of what it should be.

Environmental Sustainability

In an era when the word “sustainability” is often reduced to corporate buzzwords and hollow pledges, *Saguna Baug* stands as a quiet yet compelling rebuttal. Here, sustainability isn’t a marketing strategy—it’s a way of life, deeply rooted in the farm’s ethos and daily practices. Every aspect of its operation is a testament to the belief that prosperity and ecological harmony are not mutually exclusive but inherently intertwined.

At the heart of the farm’s environmental philosophy is its commitment to working with, rather than against, nature. Rainwater harvesting isn’t just an add-on feature it’s the lifeblood of its operations. Every drop of monsoon rain is meticulously captured and stored, feeding aquaculture ponds that teem with life. These ponds don’t merely serve as a source of fish; they are microcosms of a larger ecosystem, supporting biodiversity while demonstrating the circularity of sustainable water use.

The farm’s energy practices echo the same ethos. Renewable energy sources power much of its operations, reinforcing the idea that modern innovation can coalesce seamlessly with traditional wisdom. Organic farming methods are not just a choice but a declaration: chemical-laden practices might promise short-term gains, but they impoverish the soil and the soul of the land. *Saguna Baug*’s commitment to organic methods ensures that its soil remains fertile, its crops nourishing, and its impact regenerative.

Perhaps most striking is the farm’s devotion to biodiversity. Where monoculture has become a global agricultural default, *Saguna Baug*’s landscape bursts with variety—agroforestry practices integrate fruit trees, flowering plants, and food crops in a symphony of coexistence. This isn’t merely aesthetic; it’s ecological insurance, creating habitats for birds, insects, and other wildlife while mitigating the risks of climate volatility. Visitors are invited to witness this diversity firsthand, their awe a subtle reminder of what’s at stake in preserving the planet’s fragile balance.

In *Saguna Baug*, we see the contours of a possible future—one where rural communities don’t just survive but thrive, in harmony with nature’s rhythms. It is a reminder that the most profound solutions to our environmental crises are often the simplest: conserve water, enrich the soil, honor biodiversity, and share the wisdom of these practices with others. *Saguna Baug* doesn’t shout its philosophy from the rooftops; it whispers it through the rustle of leaves, the ripple of pond water, and the hum of life in its fields.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Every visionary project begins with a quiet act of rebellion against the status quo. For *Saguna Baug*, this rebellion came in the form of challenging entrenched notions of what farming and tourism could be. But like all journeys

of transformation, it was far from smooth. *Saguna Baug*'s story is one of navigating skepticism, compromise, and constant learning an odyssey that holds lessons for anyone daring enough to chart new territory. The first challenge was cultural. When Chandrashekhhar Bhadsavle began his experiment with agritourism, locals were wary. The idea of welcoming strangers into the heart of one's farm seemed like an intrusion into a deeply personal space. Many questioned whether city dwellers, often seen as detached from the realities of rural life, would respect the sanctity of agricultural work. Winning over the community required patience, dialogue, and a demonstration of mutual respect convincing them that this wasn't about exploitation but about shared growth.

Then came the balancing act, a tightrope walks between tourism and farming. Farming is, at its core, a full-time commitment, with its own rhythms dictated by the seasons and the whims of nature. Tourism, on the other hand, operates on human timelines, with visitors arriving on weekends or holidays, expecting curated experiences. Striking a balance meant ensuring that tourism complemented, rather than disrupted, farming operations. Fields became classrooms, aquaculture ponds became sources of both produce and wonder, and every corner of *Saguna Baug* was reimagined as a dual-purpose space. Environmental risks presented their own challenges. Increased footfall brought the inevitability of waste—plastic wrappers, food remnants, and pollutants that threatened the very ecosystem the farm sought to preserve. Implementing strict waste management protocols and educating visitors about eco-conscious practices became non-negotiable. It was a reminder that sustainability is not just a philosophy but a discipline requiring vigilance and constant adaptation.

Yet, from these challenges emerged lessons that would define *Saguna Baug*'s success and offer a roadmap for others. The first was humility: start small. Instead of building grand infrastructure or chasing quick profits, *Saguna Baug* focused on authenticity—allowing visitors to experience the farm as it was, in all its rustic charm. This authenticity became its greatest asset, drawing visitors who craved genuine encounters with nature and rural life. Another lesson was the power of word-of-mouth. While modern tourism often relies on glossy advertisements and social media campaigns, *Saguna Baug* chose a different path. It focused on creating unforgettable experiences that guests would eagerly share with friends and family. This organic approach to publicity not only built trust but ensured that its growth was sustainable and grounded. Perhaps the most profound takeaway, however, was the importance of relationships. At *Saguna Baug*, guests are not treated as customers but as family. This ethos extends to the community as well—engaging local villagers as employees, collaborators, and stakeholders in the project's success. It's this emphasis on connection that has turned *Saguna Baug* from a farm into a movement, one that bridges the urban-rural divide with grace and warmth. In the challenges *Saguna Baug* faced and the lessons it learned, there is a universal

truth: the best ideas are not the ones that promise easy success but the ones that endure the trials of skepticism, compromise, and failure. *Saguna Baug's* journey reminds us that innovation often begins at the crossroads of tradition and disruption, and that the most enduring legacies are built on the strength of relationships and the courage to dream.

Relevance of Saguna Baug in the Global Rural Tourism Context

The transformation of a family farm into a thriving hub of agritourism echoes the aspirations of farmers in Australia, Tuscany, or even the American Midwest places where agriculture, community, and ingenuity converge. What makes *Saguna Baug* remarkable is not just its success but its relevance as a replicable model for rural renewal worldwide.

Consider, for instance, Australia's robust agritourism industry. Over decades, Australian farmers have reimagined their sprawling landscapes as destinations for wine-tasting tours, sheep-shearing demonstrations, and outback adventures. *Saguna Baug* operates on a different scale but with a strikingly similar ethos. Like its Australian counterparts, it integrates tourism into the rhythms of rural life, offering visitors an authentic, unvarnished connection to the land. Its activities from water buffalo rides to sustainable rice farming demonstrations embody the same philosophy: tourism as a bridge, not an imposition.



Figure 6.3 Water buffalo ride at Saguna Baug.



Figure 6.4 Live Fish show at the pond for the guests..

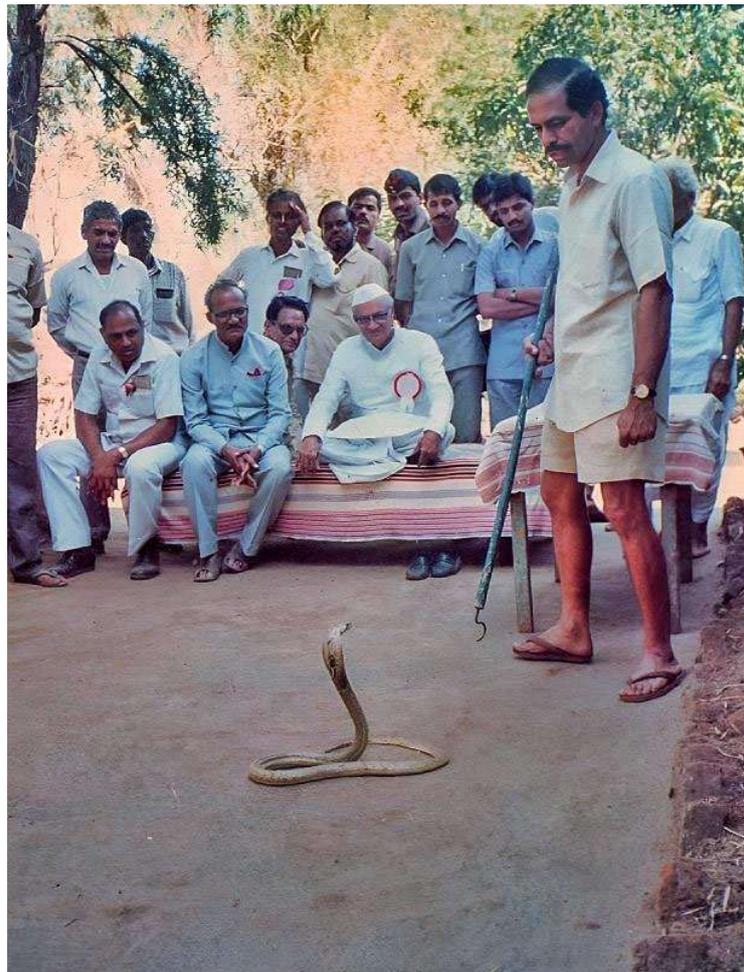


Figure 6.5 Removal of misconceptions about snakes through live demonstrations at the farm.



Figure 6.6 Mallakhamb (wrestling on a pole) show to visiting students as part of Agri tourism activity.

Yet where *Saguna Baug* truly stands out is in its scalability. Unlike high-investment agritourism ventures that require expansive vineyards or lavish accommodations, *Saguna Baug*'s model thrives on simplicity and resourcefulness. Its foundational principles community involvement, sustainable practices, and authentic guest experiences can be adapted to rural areas across the globe, regardless of geography or economic conditions. It's a model that doesn't demand grandeur but rather ingenuity, proving that rural tourism need not be a luxury product; it can be a tool for empowerment. This scalability is more than theoretical; it ties directly to the world's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *Saguna Baug* addresses several of these global priorities with quiet efficiency. By generating income through tourism, it combats rural poverty, offering villagers not just jobs but dignity and purpose. Through its educational initiatives, both for urban visitors and rural youth, it fosters awareness and respect for sustainable farming practices—an essential step toward achieving quality education and environmental sustainability. Its rainwater harvesting, organic farming, and biodiversity efforts exemplify the SDG commitment to responsible consumption and production.

What makes *Saguna Baug* relevant is the growing global appetite for meaningful, ethical travel. In a world increasingly disillusioned with mass tourism and over-commercialization, *Saguna Baug* offers a compelling alternative: tourism that enriches not just the traveler but also the host community. Its success is a gentle rebuttal to the idea that progress must come at the expense of tradition or that rural life must be abandoned for urban

opportunities. It reminds us that solutions to some of our most pressing challenges—climate change, social inequity, cultural disconnection—might already exist in the fertile soil of a farm like *Saguna Baug*. In the broader context of global agritourism, *Saguna Baug* is both a model and a mirror, reflecting the universal human desire to connect with the land and with one another. Its story underscores a profound truth: that the path to progress often winds through the fields, where the seeds of sustainability, community, and shared purpose are sown.

Policy Implications and Future Scope

Saguna Baug stands as a case study in how rural spaces can be revitalized, not abandoned, by rethinking their role in the modern economy. For policymakers, the lesson is clear: rural entrepreneurship thrives when it is nurtured. Grants, training programs, and financial incentives targeted at agritourism ventures can empower farmers to follow in *Saguna Baug*'s footsteps. These are not handouts; they are investments in a future where villages are not emptied by migration but invigorated by opportunity. Imagine a network of agritourism centers across India, each rooted in its local landscape and traditions, offering travelers a mosaic of rural experiences while creating jobs and boosting incomes.

NGOs have a crucial role to play here, bridging the gap between government resources and grassroots initiatives. Training programs in hospitality, sustainable farming, and small-business management can equip farmers to succeed in this unique hybrid of agriculture and tourism. Meanwhile, NGOs can act as conveners, connecting rural entrepreneurs to one another and fostering collaboration. A simple network—an online platform or regional cooperative—could amplify the visibility of places like *Saguna Baug*, creating a collective force for rural tourism. What *Saguna Baug* demonstrates is that agritourism is not a niche endeavor; it is scalable and replicable. Maharashtra's success in embracing this model should serve as an inspiration to other Indian states. In Kerala, with its rich traditions of spice farming, or Punjab, with its vibrant agricultural heritage, the potential for agritourism is immense. What's needed is not just policy support but a shift in perception—a recognition that the village is not a relic of the past but a laboratory for the future.

Saguna Baug's own path forward offers a roadmap. Scaling up doesn't mean abandoning its roots; it means extending them. Imagine *Saguna Baug* as a hub, training other local farmers to open their lands to visitors. Picture a cooperative where small farms pool resources to create shared attractions, each maintaining its identity but benefiting from collective strength. This is not just about tourism; it is about building a rural economy that is resilient, dignified, and inclusive.

The broader implication is this: places like *Saguna Baug* hold the key to a more balanced India. They remind us that development does not have to flow

in one direction from village to city, from agriculture to industry. It can be cyclical, enriching both. When a government grant helps a farmer build a pond house, when a village child learns the value of her heritage from urban visitors, when an NGO connects rural artisans with global markets—these are not isolated acts. They are steps toward a future where rural India is not left behind but leads the way.

And perhaps that is the most important lesson of *Saguna Baug*: it is not just a story of success but a call to action. A reminder that with the right policies, partnerships, and imagination, the possibilities for rural revitalization are as boundless as the fields themselves.

CONCLUSION

Saguna Baug has shown us that agritourism is not merely an economic endeavor; it is a transformative movement that dignifies rural life, nurtures the land, and fosters a deeper connection between urban and rural India. *Saguna Baug*'s success story is, at its heart, a story of balance. It bridges the rural-urban divide by offering urban visitors an authentic glimpse into village life while empowering rural communities to reclaim their economic agency. Its model of sustainable farming, eco-conscious tourism, and heartfelt hospitality has demonstrated that progress and tradition can coexist harmoniously. By weaving together economic opportunity, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship, *Saguna Baug* has crafted a vision of rural development that feels as inspiring as it is achievable. The lessons here extend far beyond the lush fields of *Saguna Baug*. As India and the world grapple with the twin crises of environmental degradation and rural depopulation, initiatives like this illuminate a path forward. They remind us that the answers to our most pressing challenges often lie in the roots of our most enduring traditions. *Saguna Baug* is a proof point that with innovation and determination, the rural economy can not only survive but thrive.

But this success cannot remain an isolated phenomenon. Governments must take note and actively support agritourism through grants, training programs, and infrastructure investments. NGOs should channel their resources into creating networks of rural entrepreneurs who can learn from each other and share their stories with the world. And individuals whether urbanites seeking respite from city life or advocates for sustainable development can play their part by choosing to visit, support, and amplify such initiatives.

The call to action is clear: let *Saguna Baug* inspire us to imagine a different kind of development one where prosperity flows in all directions, where villages are not left behind but celebrated as hubs of innovation and culture. Let us champion agritourism not just as a niche industry but as a movement that uplifts communities, preserves our planet, and rekindles our shared humanity.