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Rural Tourism Through the Community Participation and Sustainable Development: An Empirical Study from Silk Route, East Sikkim

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Abstract: ***Tourism destinations often are dependent on natural and cultural/heritage resources to form their attractions bases, which are linked to the economic vitality of local communities. Tourism industry can generate income and holistic development of a region. Rural tourism provides an economic incentive to the local people who are residing in these regions. It also adds an ethnic flavor to the consumer's (tourist) taste. Silk Route in Sikkim is popularly known as 'Silk Route" in Sikkim tourism map. It is one of the best rural tourist destinations of Sikkim. The silk route is very popular among the tourists. The landscape is beautiful and wonderfully thrilling. The lush greenery, panoramic view of hills and the simplicity of the indigenous inhabitants attracts the urban tourists to this place. The paper attempts an empirical presentation addressing the concept of rural tourism, which is an emerging perception on tourism introduced recently into the Indian tourism sector. This paper try to explore the potentiality as a rural tourist destination, and how such rural or Ecotourism can be an instrument to empower indigenous communities in a particular area and provide community development through economic and social benefits to the local communities for their well-being. This finding can be exemplified elsewhere as an approach on sustainable development of rural tourism through the community participation and management practiced at village level.***
Keywords: Rural tourism, silk route, sustainable development

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the collection of activities, services and industries that delivers a travel experience, including transportation, accommodation, eating and drinking establishments, retail shops, entertainment business and other hospitality services provided for individuals or groups travelling away from home. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defined sustainable tourism development as "that which meets the needs of present tourist and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future". Sustainable tourism or Ecotourism is as an instrument to empower indigenous communities in a particular area (Sofield, 2003). Its goal is to achieve conservation and community development through the provision of economic and social benefits to the local communities for their well-being (Chapman, 2003). This is a contemporary global –national-regional-local issue with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, to which India too is committed. Rural tourism is one of the aspects of ecotourism that endeavors to conserve the natural, cultural, and built environment; preventing rural-urban migration by providing economic, environment and social benefits to local residents and provides a high-quality experience for the guests. Developing approaches that are able to touch upon each of these areas can ensure the long-term success of the community. Community based ecotourism through the home-stay model is one of the top activities promoted in society to reduce the incidence of rural poverty (Leksakundilok, 2004). In India, there are tremendous tourism opportunities with both cultural and natural resources and it offers vast sprawling natural beauty, seasonal diversities, cultural richness, ethnicity, and hospitality of local communities. "India truly lives in Village" – rural environment has many cultures having different fairs and festivals to show-off. In rural tourism, visitors get a chance to spend time with the rural family by observing their customs, values and culture, which gives them the taste of rural life (Devkota, 2010). Present study explore the Silk-Route of eastern Sikkim as rural tourism destination, which is a part of ancient trade route that begun in Lhasa, through Chumbi Valley, preceded via Nathula Pass, and ultimately took the port at Tamralipta (present Tamluk in West Bengal). This route is now open is popularly known as 'Silk Route" in Sikkim tourism map.

This rural tourism sector is the harmony of nature with its unexplored untapped forest, biodiversity and the serene Kanchenjunga within the lap of the mighty Himalayas. The lush greenery, panoramic view of hills and the simplicity of the indigenous inhabitants attracts the urban tourists to this place.

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A. *The Rural Tourism*

Rural tourism or tourism sector related with rural area is a relatively new practice of movement that can bring economic and socio-cultural benefit of the rural society. Eco-tourism or rural tourism that reveals the rural life style, culture, art and heritage at the rural areas, by that means benefits the people both socially and economically (Ahamed, M.2017).

Rural tourism can aim to maximize tourism resources in rural areas to regulate and improve rural small scale industrial structures, spread the agricultural industrial chain, promote non-agricultural employment, develop rural tourism services, boost up farmers' and rural people's income, and create a better economic foundation for advanced rural infrastructural development (Getz & page,2015). Rural tourism has the potential to influence our society in a variety of ways. Rural communities have the opportunity and capacity to provide a very pleasurable and stimulating alternative to traditional tourism, which tourists are finding dull and have thus begun investigating new panoramas of adventure and acquiring knowledge. Internal and external difficulties confront rural tourism. This study examines the positive effects of rural tourism as a driver for socioeconomic development. This part of Sikkim is relatively offbeat to travelers. There is actually no major town located in the silk route circuit. Home stays are available throughout the silk route that provides basic amenities to the tourists. This study covers the positive impacts of the rural tourism and those impacts act as medium for socio-economic development of the rural communities of Sikkim.

B. *The Historical Perspectives*

There is a huge popular fascination with the silk routes of economic and cultural exchange across Eurasia. The eastern part of ancient trade route that begun in Lhasa, through Chumbi Valley, preceded via Nathula Pass, and ultimately took the port at Tamralipta (present Tamluk in West Bengal), gave rise to the Silk Route in Sikkim is popularly known as ‘Silk Route” in Sikkim tourism map. The route is available for visitors to come and observe. The landscape is gorgeous and wonderfully exciting, which start from "Rongli" on the borders of Sikkim and West Bengal and up to "Nathu La," The role this region deserves in Sikkim's usually spectacular tourism landscape is progressively being given to it. Fortunately, though, the lack of any significant towns along the way keeps it a "off-beat" destination (Shankar, 1997). Initially going through the lush greenery at first, then ascending via glacier lakes and freezing mountain passes. The landscapes along this path, which meander by mountain streams, military bases, small mountain towns, waterfalls, and viewpoints, are, to be precise and spectacular.

C. *Trajectory of Tourism in India*

In the arena of international cooperation, India participated in meets of Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in several sessions of UNWTO Executive Council and in several other related events of T-20, G-20 to name a few. The Government’s role in tourism development has been redefined from a regulator to a catalyst. Apart from marketing and promotion, the focus of tourism development plans is now on integrated development of enabling infrastructure through effective partnership with various stakeholders. As part of its domestic and global publicity and marketing strategy to promote tourism and create social awareness through the print and electronic media, the Ministry of Tourism launched campaigns on “Clean India”, “Atithi Devo Bhava” (Guest is God) and “Hunar Se Rozgaar” through radio channels;“Incredible India” branding on TV in addition to campaigns highlighting the tourism potential of various parts of the country through Doordarshan. In order to promote India more effectively as a convention destination, the travel industry had, under the patronage of the Ministry of Tourism, set up the India Convention Promotion Bureau (ICPB) in 1988, a non-profit organization, with members comprising of national airlines, hotels, travel agents, tour operators, tourist transport operators, conference organizers, etc. At the core of the National Tourism Policy of 2002 is outlined the seven pillars of tourism, Swagat (Welcome), Soochana (Information), Suvidha (Facilitation), Suraksha (Safety), Sahyog (Cooperation), Samrachanam (Infrastructure Development) and Safai (cleanliness**).** The Government of India called for effective coordination of public and private participation (PPP) to achieve synergy in the development of tourism through the policy measures of the Tourism Policy 1982, Tourism Plan of Action 1992 and Tourism Policy 1997.

D. *Contextualizing the Research*

India is in the list of "rising stars" or the countries that are likely to become major tourist destinations. Tourism contributes to overall socio-economic development through the provision of roads, telephones, and electricity, piped and treated water supplies, waste disposal and recycling and sewage treatment. Domestic tourism market in India is mostly local or regional in nature and hence leisure and recreation facilities can be enhanced particularly in rural areas as India has an increasing share of the prospective urbanites (Basu, 2013). However the low priority been given to the tourism sector has culminated in a marginal role being played by it in the development of the country which includes the poor infrastructure (in comparison to international standards).

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India has a variety of traditional cuisine which is increasingly becoming popular worldwide. Since tourism is a multi-dimensional activity, and basically a service industry, it would be necessary that all wings of the Central and State governments, private sector and voluntary organizations become active partners in the endeavor to attain sustainable growth in tourism if India is to become a world player in the tourist industry. Rural-eco- Tourism in India is still at a very nascent stage and hence a great potentiality in future lies ahead of us. Various literature, documents, study reports, and policies have been thoroughly reviewed to get conceptual ideas about the topic. There are two elements in all tourism: the journey to the destination and the stay including activities at the destination. The journey and the stay take place outside the usual place of residence and work, so that tourism gives rise to activities, which are distinct from those of the resident and the working population of the places, through which the tourist travels and in which they stay. The movement to destinations is of temporary, short-term character, with the intention of returning to the usual environment generally within a few days Wilson and Tisdell (2001) highlighted that rural tourism could develop easily with local community and played a significant role on rural economic development. Singh and Dwivedi (2002) focused on Rural Himalayan tourism, defining rural and home-stay tourism with three main key elements of nature, eco-friendly tourists and involvement of local people. According to Biju (2003) eco-tourism as well as home-stay tourism are both nature- based and ecologically sustainable. He also added that this type of tourism produces minimum impact on environment compared to conventional tourism. Caprihan and Shivakumar (2004) emphasized on four features of home-stay i.e. preservation, supportiveness, involvement and empowerment for providing more livelihood opportunities to local community. Bhuiyan.et.al. (2011) studied about the potentialities of rural tourism for eco-tourism, and how rural tourism created alternative accommodation opportunities. Lama (2013) tried to analyze and explore the contribution of rural tourism as well as home-stay policy for sustainable tourism development in Nepal.

E. Significance of the Study

The present study would help to recognize the potentiality of rural tourism phenomenon in ecotourism sector based on Wall and Long (2016). Tourism is a social activity; it is about interaction between different communities—hosts and guests—and encounter between different cultures. This approach studies social classes, habits and customs of both hosts and guests in terms of tourism behaviour of individuals or groups of people and the impact of rural tourism on rural socio-economic scenario. It is a great tool for sustainable development of tourism through the community participation at the village level. It promotes small-scale entrepreneurship and micro finance at the village level and creates opportunities of inter culture living experiences among the host and guest or tourist. It also helps to understand the role, functions and contributions of the rural tourism operators besides understanding the requirements of their customers. The suggestion and recommendation through the study can help in making home stay better in the very near future. The study tries to explore importance, potentialities and challenges of rural tourism in eastern Sikkim.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN OR METHODOLOGY

Method is a technique for gathering evidence, while methodology is a theory of how research should proceed through its various stages and phases, discussing the philosophical approach to the work. Research design or methodology is an essential component of any research work. Systematic research design helps the researcher to get the best result (Freudenberger, 1999). This integrated approach results in a new style of social research called multi-method research which has been applied for this study. Besides this a mixed method approach has also been adopted by quantifying some data to justify the research outcome. Participatory information gathering: It is a very good way to get additional general socio-economic information about the local residents (Felsing and Haylor, 1998). The local communities can uncover invaluable information on the local potentialities and shortcomings, particularly if the researcher is passive observer. In this present study, researchers stayed in a home-stay thus taking the opportunity of interacting with the local people and collected primary level data from the local people and tourists. Through informal observation and field notes: Thorough observation of the study area and taking field note or observation, notes help the researchers to get complete assessment of the area (Laurier, 2010). Observation (of people and places), visual Imagery/photography or Sketching: Visual methods and sketching of a built environment is an effective way in social research (Banks, 2001). Researchers captured photographs of surrounding environment including the natural, cultural and social aspects.

A. The Study Area

Silk route of east Sikkim is one of the most famous tourist destinations. It was once an important part of old silk route. The route starts from Rongli at south and end to Gangtok at north, the capital of Sikkim. The tourist places started from south to north are Aritar, Ichhe Gaon, Sillery gaon, Lightam, Padamchen, Zuluk, Old Baba Temple, Kupup Lake, Nathula, Tsongmo lake and Gangtok (table-3 showing the tourism potentiality of the destinations).

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Rongli is a small hilltop town with full of amazing natural beauty on the foothills of the great Himalayan mountain ranges. The town situated in the eastern part of Sikkim, Rongli is one of the ancient towns in the silk route circuit.

III. FINDINGS& DISCUSSION

Sustainable tourism or eco-friendly village tourism not only conserves the resources and the environment but also creates lots of potentialities to the local communities through different socio-economic activities (Yassin *et. al.* 2010) In the present study area ecotourism through home stay has opened up various opportunities to the local people particularly the young generation. The matrix in table -1 & 3, show the potentialities of social, economic, environmental, tourism and infrastructural aspects in Silk route.

Table No. 1: Matrix showing the Potentialities of rural tourism

Potentialities/Opportunities	Detail aspects	Applied in present study
Social Potentialities/ Opportunities	Scope for cross culture exchange, involving youth in local opportunities.	Yes youth are involving in the business in the study area.
Economic Potentialities/ Opportunities	Creating economic and employment opportunities	Local community economically benefitted and overcoming the uncertainty of agriculture
Environmental Potentialities/ Opportunities	Eco friendly sustainable tourism, less devastation of nature and environment, conservation of biodiversity, increasing awareness among the host	In present study area eco friendly construction seen for accommodation in rural tourism using the sustainable perceptions by the local community, they use rainwater in a very nice and indigenous way.
Tourism Potentialities/ Opportunities	Creating chances to witness natural and cultural diversity, increasing tourism awareness	Giving the opportunities to see the 180° view of Kanchenjunga and bio diversity of Neora Valley and simplicity of local people.
Infrastructural Potentialities/ Opportunities	Increasing accommodation and quality of accessibility to the village	Home stay accommodation are growing along with conventionalaccommodation, and roads are developing to connect the village. Equipped with electricity, television.

Concept derived from Budhathoki (2013)

1) *Best Time To Visit The Place And Tourist Inflow:* The peak season for tourism is from October to May session mostly crowded with the guests not only from different parts of India but abroad also. Summer time is April to middle of June when the temperature varies from 10^0C to a maximum of 20^0C. This is the best time as the temperature is mild; Rhododendrons and orchids are in full bloom, clear sky and wonderful view of the snow clad mountain peaks. Winter time (December to February) is very cold and temperature varies between 0^0 C to 6^0 C. According to the local people foreigners generally prefer the winter season. It is better to avoid the rainy season as landslides are common phenomenon at that time. Tourists come here from different parts of India and as well as outside of India.
2) *Accommodation for Guests:* Primary level survey reveals that home stays are the main accommodation facilities provided to the tourist. Beside that hotels are also present in the circuit. The destinations like Rishikhola, Padamchen, Ichhe Gaon, Sillery gaon, Lightam, Zuluk provide only home stays for tourists. The home stays not only endow with amazing experiencing of rural Himalayan life but also serve local cuisine. Each of the home stay has been built with traditional knowledge and eco-friendly materials.

Table 2.Seasonal Occupancy of Tourist in Home Stay

Seasons	Months in the season	Total days	Occupancy days	Average Occupancy
Peak Season	October, November & February to April	150 Days	92 Days	61.33%
Moderate Season	December, January, May& June	120 Days	46 Days	38.34%
Off/Lean Season	July to September	90 Days	25 Days	27.78%

Source: Primary Level Survey

Table No. 3: Matrix showing the tourist destination and tourism potentialities of Silk-Route

Destination	Distance from Siliguri	Tourism potentiality
Rongli		First place from where silk route tour can be started. This place is also very important as to keep the ILP (Inner Line Permit)
Reshikhola	20 kms south of Rongli	It is situated at an altitude of 2000ft, on the bank of river Reshi. This place becoming popular for its evergreen forests and charming river as an eco-rural tourism destination.
Aritrar	20 kms from Rongli at around 4000 ft. altitude	This place also slowly become popular for its hilltop view point offering majestic view of Kanchenjunga, the Aritrar lake, British Dak Bunglow etc.
Lingtam	14 km from Rongli and 8 kms from Padamchen.	Another important check-post in silk route. This place also very preferable place to stay during silk route tour. Few home stays are established here to accommodate the tourist.
Padamchen	It is situated on a hill slope at 8000 ft just 14 km from Rongli 4 kms from Zuluk and 8 kms from Lingtam.	Padamchen is a small village on the silk route circuit. The village is popularly known for its beautiful sunrise, excellent view, winding roads and valleys and bird watching.
Zuluk	At an altitude of 10000 ft. and 10 kms from Padamchen	Probably most popular place in silk route. Electrifying view point, the snow-clad mountain and handful of home stays are always ready to welcome tourists.
Kupup Lake	33 kms from Zuluk	Very popular lake with Elephant like shape. This lake locally known as Bitan Cho is one of the most sacred lake of Sikkim surrounded by high mountains and valleys.

Compiled by researcher

3) *Changing Life Style:* The changing life scenario has been witnessed by Interaction with the local community. Individual as well as family income level has increased, life style is improving. They are slowly overcoming the uncertainly of agriculture sector as all the villagers having very small pieces of land, and is mainly practiced as terraced or stepped cultivation on the hill slope with a thin soil layer the agricultural productivity is thus very limited. This grave problem has been coped up through this new sustainable strategy. Their children are now getting education and money is kept for crisis time. Local youth are involving in the business in study area, mixing of different culture especially languages are seen.
4) *Challenges and Future Opportunities:* Water crisis during the months of winter and summer is very much acute. Roads are closed during the winter season due to heavy rainfall, at that time dearth of tourist creates economic hardship. Public transport systems are also very inadequate. Local people have to depend on tourist car or bus for travelling outside their village. There is no public bus or any other vehicle service for the local people after Rongli.

IV. CONCLUSION

Tourism destinations are geographically diverse in nature (Basu, 2013). There are different geographical sites like beaches, mountains and urban attractions and holidaymakers can be encouraged to travel further, beyond established destinations, which can enhance and diversify their experience of particular environmental, cultural or natural heritage attractions thus spreading the benefits of tourism geographically. Land forms like hills and mountains, gorges and canyons, coral reefs, cliffs; water forms like rivers, waterfalls, geysers, glaciers, lakes; flora and fauna; **c**ultural events like trade fairs, exhibitions, arts and music festivals, games; traditional arts and handicrafts, folklore, study of native life and their customs, etc to name a few are a geographer's interest. A tourist's destination covers one or some of these combined features.

In the 21st century the global economy will be driven by three major service industries – Technology, Telecommunications and Tourism. The Internet has fuelled the growth of the travel industry by providing online booking facilities, giving opportunity to people to explore destinations from their home personal computers and finalizing travel plans after being fully informed. With its immense information resources, the Internet allows tourists to scrutinize hotels, check weather forecasts, read up on local food and also talk to other tourists around the world about their travel experiences for a chosen destination. Hence digital technology requires to be integrated with all the subsystems of the tourism system. To promote tourism into the future, greater efforts to implement environmentally sustainable tourist policies and programs are required

The study reveals that there is scope for further development in accordance with the sustainable development principles. In India the local community must be convinced of the need to support regulations in the interest of long term sustainability. There is an urgent need for understanding basics of tourism, development of personality and communication skills particularly in English and Hindi; need for basic computer knowledge; successful imparting of tourism education in the curriculum; more of local community participation and direct involvement (Sarkar, 2021).The Indian tourism market is huge and limitless. It has tremendous potentiality for reviving the local economy. Tourism can be instrumental in alleviating poverty by helping the people residing in remote tourist destination. This concept of micro-level tourism entrepreneurship is newly adopted in India. Developing a home stay program is directly linked to the principles of ecotourism. Concept of rural tourism is not only effective to revive the local economy and empower the local community but also preserve its natural and cultural heritage and testimony. It also diverts international tourists to the rural Indian destination. It is beneficial to generate a rural tourism environment and facilitate both the local stakeholders, communities and as well as private sectors to carry out the business. Tourism as the labor intensive sector can potentially generate employment, bettering the quality of life in rural India, Initially yet there are innumerable temporary challenges and limitations which should be resolved with suitable strategies and careful planning and policy.

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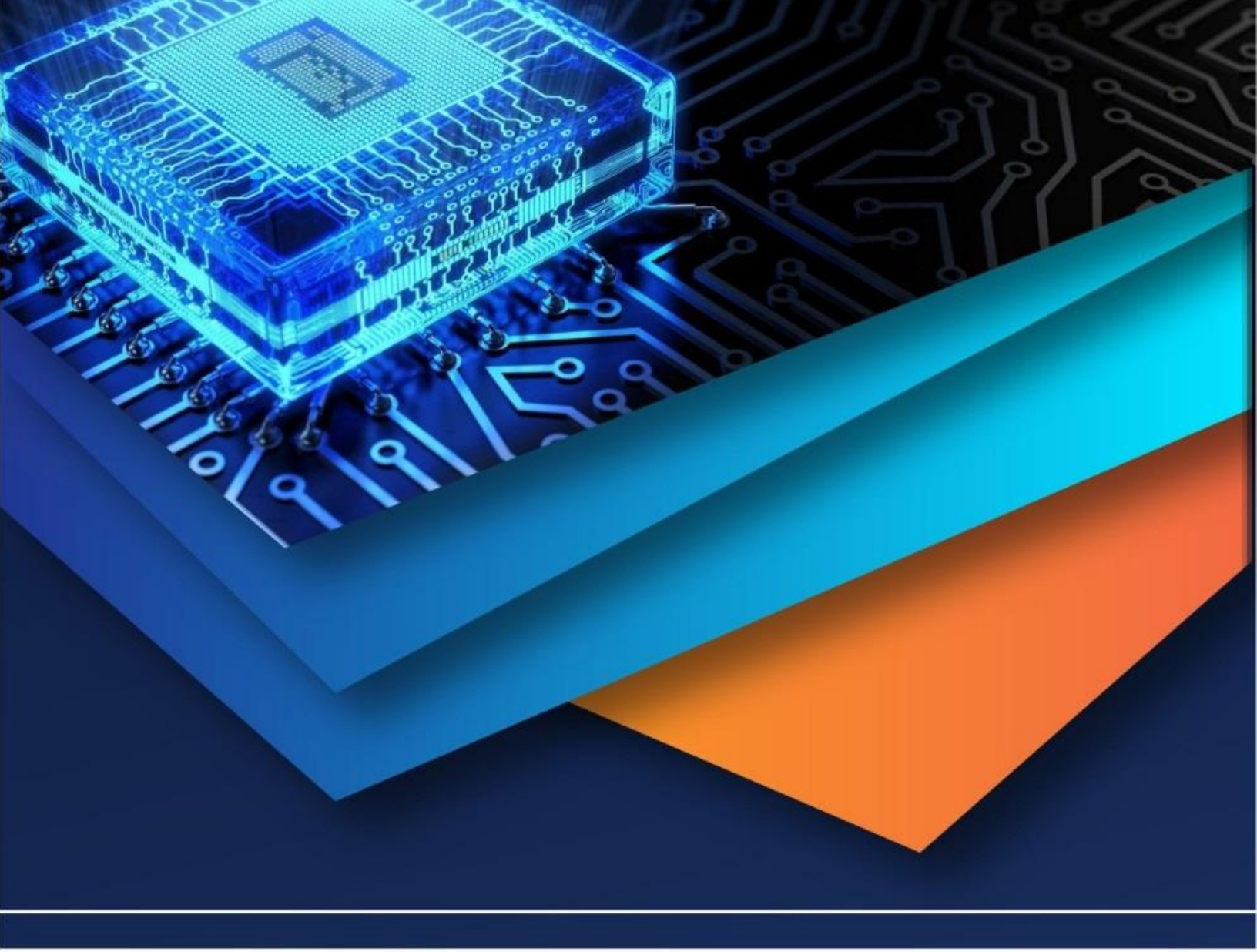
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