French Story of Business – Unusual:

It was year 1951. A young French Parliamentarian in his 40s, Mr Emile Aubert came up with out-of-box concept of rural lodging for the tourism purposes. The French society post-World War II, was smelling the prosperity after long duration of resistance movement and recession. The centers of prosperity were mushrooming in the urban area. The rural regions of France were being deserted. The surroundings and the abandoned houses in rural area were in danger of neglect and therefore, a risk of ruins. It was strange site to see that the rural area continued to remain devastated and the hopes were emerging in urban area.

Mr Aubert also saw that, in parallel, urban dwellers who had migrated and who had tasted rural life, were nostalgic and wanted to come back on weekends to the rural surroundings. Hence, Mr Aubert came up with the project of "Gîtes de France" literally meaning 'French (rural) shelter'. He thought that if the houses, left vacant by people migrating to cities, are converted into 'country lodges' and if the tourists are provided with local cuisine specialties, the urban tourists who had not tasted that life will get attracted and the rural folks will get employment and the business. ‘Gîtes de France’ soon became a movement of tourist accommodations at rural homes. It started with the region of Basses-Alpes in the scenic background of mountains and hills, from where the Parliamentarian was elected.

Today, approximately 47,000 rural lodges exist throughout the France with 30,000 having bed and breakfast facilities. The rural business (direct and indirect) is about Rs 8.4 billion per year. A 20 per cent of the clientele is from other countries. France became first European country to start rural lodging and boarding and it became so popular that many other countries followed the scheme set by the Parliamentarian Mr Aubert.

I stayed in France for last 20 years and I have seen the keen interest of all urbanites in Europe for ‘Gîtes de France’ and how the countryside is prospering there.

More than just the figures of improvement of business in rural area in the terms of the income, rural tourism also focuses on participating in a rural lifestyle. It can be a variant of ecotourism, i.e., tourism undertaken with care and respect for environment and ensuring that degradation of nature is avoided. Quality of life in France, irrespective of present financial crises is very high. I would venture to say that one of the contributing factors for such quality is the recognition by the French society that forests and nature provide the basic capital for the development and it is important to use it sustainably.

And now Indian story:

When Mr. Aubert initiated the idea in 1951; India had just become the largest Republic nation in the world after prolonged struggle of independence. Eighty four per cent of the population of half a billion at that time lived in rural area. There were only five Indian cities with a population greater than 1 million and only 41 cities greater than 0.1 million population. Much of India effectively lived in 5.6 lakhs (half a million) villages. The bond between nature and rural population was strong. Most of the rural population got water from near by rivers and streams. They even worshipped the rivers and its water almost every day.

Come 2011-12: Sixty eight per cent of the population i.e. more than 800 million Indians, live in rural area in 6.4 million villages. There are now three cities with population of more than 10 million and 53 cities with population of more than one million. And the huge masses of young people there in rural area – more than 80 per cent of the new borns in India take birth in rural area - are struggling to find the decent living. They finally land in cities abandoning their rural homes, heritage, nature and environment that supported their fathers, grandfathers and their grandfathers who lived with the nature for centuries.

The story is not confined to India. Today’s generation of young people – defined by the United Nations as those aged 15 to 24 — is the largest in human history. Young people have power of persistence and they are priceless resource for social progress.

The unseen opportunity: Financial, food, and fuel crisis are frustrating most of the world. Add to that crises of faith, Environmental Restoration and living with nature is turning out to be the key for reversing the trends of urban migration. The need of the hour is that youth, as entrepreneurs, service providers and wage earners should play a more active role in the sustainable development of ecosystem and the communities in rural areas. For this, a number of projects have been initiated that encourage inclusive development and provides plethora of opportunities to arrest the urban migration, observes Rajendra Shende, Chairman, TERRE and Former Director of UNEP.

BACK TO Nature...
So far, over 1,500 young apprentices have been trained, a stable, skilled workforce for Malagasy small businesses, and job opportunities for young rural workers and building up the pilot projects for reverse migration. For example, in which have no heritage, no nature as the direct backdrop, present day crisis is the result of the migration to the cities, heritage of living with the nature. Sometimes, I wonder if the potential for their families, and for their nations, its rural they move to sprawling urban areas many of them become adequate education, make a living or create a secure home, as entrepreneurs, service providers and wage earners – in the development and economic growth of their communities, in rural areas. When young rural women and men cannot get an adequate education, make a living or create a secure home, they move to sprawling urban areas many of them become mind in urban poverty. This is a tremendous loss of human potential for their families, and for their nations, its rural heritage of living with the nature. Sometimes, I wonder if the present day crisis is the result of the migration to the cities, which have no heritage, no nature as the direct backdrop and supporting foundation. Every migrant from rural region is equivalent to the suicide of a farmer. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) - Recognition of Opportunities; It has taken initiative in setting up the pilot projects for reverse migration. For example, in Madagascar, a project of FAO is providing apprenticeships and job opportunities for young rural workers and building a stable, skilled workforce for Malagasy small businesses. So far, over 1,500 young apprentices have been trained, and aim is to reach 8,000 over the next five years. The project matches young women and men to businesses of all kinds, including pottery making, tool making, weaving, shops and farms. Apprentices take their new skills home with them, teaching their parents and making their families more prosperous. There are number of projects that not only promote migration to rural area but also encourage move towards sustainable development. The project in Mauritania is an interesting example of how the nature if neglected can cause havoc. IFAD is working with smallholders there to promote sustainable solutions to combat desertification and mitigate the impact of Prosopis juliflora, an invasive tree. In India, there are similar examples of 'Subabral' planted from samplings brought from Australia. The example of policy making for the rural development in USA is worth studying. USA is still not fully out of recession and issue of 'budget-cliff' is worrying. However, the USA’s policy related to rural infrastructure and the related budgets includes: • Expanding access to broadband services by offering loans and grants to transition rural communities into the modern information economy. • Funding a variety of renewable energy programmes across the Department, including support for bio refineries to utilize advanced biomass crops, research designed to create cellulosic and advanced biofuels, and assistance to help transition fossil fuel-dependent electric utilities to renewable energy. • Advancing the climate change policy by promoting activities including carbon sequestration, renewable energy, and water conservation. In addition, the Budget supports a science-based, risk-management approach to mitigate the effects of climate change by stressing forest and watershed resiliency designed to minimize the loss of large carbon sinks. • Focus Forest Restoration Resources. Forest Service resources to support more watershed and ecosystem improvement efforts based upon a variety of actions have been prioritized. To address the need to protect forest resources and wildlife habitat in an era of global climate change, the Budget establishes a pilot program for long-term, landscape scale restoration activities that emphasize resiliency, health, and sustainable economic development. • Conserve Landscapes and Ecosystems. The government continues its commitment to acquire and conserve landscapes and ecosystems that lack adequate protection with increased funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. • Invest in Water Resources Infrastructure: The Budget continues to focus resources on improving efficiency and availability of water resources crucial to rural America. Water Conservation initiative, which assists local communities in increasing water availability by encouraging voluntary water banks, reuse of treated wastewater, and other market-based conservation measures are being executed. access to economic opportunity, and improve housing choices.

And there is considerable evidence even in India that the water harvesting techniques are recharging the groundwater. The efforts in building local micro dams have resulted in the water level rise in the wells even during the draught years. Not only does rural development in India will contribute to food security, it can help stem the flood of immigrants to cities and provide career opportunities for young people. It has become clear that agricultural growth must be ecologically sustainable and that a diverse range of species, genetic variation and ecosystems is necessary in order for the land to provide for future generations of farmers. In the years since the Asian Green Revolution, agriculture is facing the challenge of climate change and its impact on lives of farmers, particularly small farm holders. Governments have unique opportunities to devise the programme for rural youth for climate start agriculture keeping future food security aspect in mind. What is the most worrying fact is that the Indian policy makers are more worried to provide better and better infrastructure in urban areas than improving the similar possibilities in the rural area. This is like welcoming the migrant workers with better ‘host facility’ so that migration to urban areas is facilitated.

The High Powered Expert Committee (HPEC) for Estimating the Investment Requirements for Urban Infrastructure Services released in March 2011 provides the details of the needs of finances for each of the urban clusters in India. But it hardly refers to the ways to prevent the rural migration that strains the urban infrastructure, leave alone the efforts needed to reverse migration the finance experts, planning commission members and other policy makers seem to lambast the government for doing very little for urban infrastructure. The reason for this lack of recognition of rural potential seems to be that 43 per cent of the country’s wealth is generated by top 100 cities and hence the focus on urban infrastructure. Even Kelkar Committee’s report released in 2011 makes suggestions on how the huge finances needed for enhancing the Urban Infrastructure projects can be garnered. But it does not give due consideration for the need to develop the rural infrastructure which , apart fro reducing the urban
stress, will contribute to the sustainable development, nature restoration, and deployment of traditional knowledge and respect for the nature, and green economy for the prosperity.

There is need to think on the lines of ‘Rural Cities’, ‘Rural Suburbs’ and ‘Rural Malls’. One cannot think how the farmer will reach its produce to the market without rural infrastructure like roads, cold storages, market-education, internet access for social networks among the farmers and rural youths. And if the produce does not reach the market, farmers will resign to depend on the survival farming there by creating food crisis in urban area.

Western Ghats - Outstanding opportunity to reverse the rural migration: In July 2012, 39 sites in the Western Ghats of India were inscribed as World Natural Heritage Sites by UNESCO. I see such inscription as unique opportunity to reverse the migration of rural youth from cities back to their roots in rural Western Ghats.

Older than the Himalaya, the mountain chain of the Western Ghats represents geomorphic features of immense importance with outstanding universal value. Moderating the tropical climate of the region, the site presents one of the best examples of the monsoon system on the planet. About 300 million people from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu are dependent on the nature’s diverse capital of Western Ghats. However the local youths from Western Ghats’ rural area migrate to the cities thereby abandoning their homes and nature.

I was recently in the village Kaas near one of the 39 World Heritage Sites in the Northern Western Ghats. This habitat of about 400 people on records has in reality only about 100 people living there as all others particularly the youth have migrated to cities like Mumbai and Pune. If the management plan based on several examples given above, including the sustainable tourism and the schemes like ‘Gîtes de France’ is set up to benefit the local communities, World Heritage inscription could be leveraged for the sustainable development of the local communities and strengthening the rural infrastructure. It will be sure way to get those youth back in Kaas. It is not only the youth would return, but the Indian tradition of living with the nature that made Indians prosper in the past can also return.

NRIs participating in PBD in Kochi, quite close to Western Ghats, could get engaged in such projects by bringing their expertise and financial resources to develop models that could be scalable and replicable.