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Integrating Indigenous Practices and Pilgrimage Tourism: Rural and Urban Opportunities for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In India, pilgrimage tourism is an important socio-economic developmental activity, but little has been done on integrating indigenous knowledge, crafts and traditional practices especially in rural settings. This research paper explores the challenges and opportunities of implementing indigenous practices in pilgrimage tourism in Tamil Nadu through the mixed-method approach that combines a literature review, field surveys, and an interpretive analysis. Results indicate that there are six dimensions of critical barriers that include policy and institutional gaps, economic and market barriers, socio-cultural and ethical barriers, capacity and knowledge barriers, infrastructure and access barriers, and environmental sustainability barriers. The most important barriers were found to be economics and market and &)

The paper highlights the essence of participatory governance, capacity-building programs, infrastructural development, and environmentally friendly policies in order to maintain cultural authenticity and achieve fair economic prospects. Some of the policy recommendations made are the formation of integrated tourism-culture models, facilitation of direct market access, digital and entrepreneurial training, protection of intellectual property rights, and community-based conservation programs. The study plays a role in the dynamics of preservation of the indigenous culture and a sustainable pilgrimage tourism, as well as providing viable solutions to inclusive and culturally sensitive tourism development.

Keywords: Pilgrimage Tourism, Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Sustainability, Rural Development, Handicrafts, Policy Integration, Tamil Nadu

Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism is an ancient type of travel that is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions in the world, and it has remained an important part of socio-economic and cultural development (Shinde & Olsen, 2023). In India, pilgrimage centres

receive millions of tourists every year, thus bringing revenue in the form of accommodation, food, transportation, handicrafts and local services, which also play a major role in the local and regional economies (Chauhan, 2011). Nevertheless, it is also shown that the benefits are unevenly distributed, with rural populations generally being left behind and having to endure environmental and socio-cultural costs like waste disposal, traffic congestion, and the commodification of religious spaces as a form of indigenous practices (Reddy & Sailesh, 2024). Indigenous practices, including traditional knowledge, rituals, crafts, folklore, and healing systems, are also considered invaluable cultural capital that can be incorporated into tourism to make it more sustainable (Dixit, Langstieh & Abraham, 2023). These practices do not only enhance the visitor experience but also community engagement, cultural identity, and intangible heritage (Shinde & Olsen, 2023). To illustrate, the example of Kongthong, a Khasi village in Meghalaya, where the indigenous tradition of naming called the whistling names has been converted into a tourism commodity facilitating the continuity of the cultural tradition as well as rural growth (Dixit, Langstieh & Abraham, 2023). Regardless of the possible, there is a lack of research based on the intersection of the indigenous practice with pilgrim

The available literature is generally divided into sustainable pilgrimage management (Chauhan, 2011) and indigenous tourism initiatives in isolation (Reddy and Sailesh, 2024) but does not have much literature that conceptualizes the integration of indigenous aspects of pilgrimage tourism to have a balanced opportunity in rural and urban settings. It is this disjuncture that has given rise to the necessity of considering cultural sustainability, livelihood generation and environmental stewardship in the development of pilgrimage tourism by considering indigenous practices as a means of creating sustainable opportunities in both the rural and urban landscape in India (Shinde and Olsen, 2023). As a result, this paper will discuss how the indigenous practices can be implemented in pilgrimage tourism in creating sustainable opportunities across both the rural and urban landscapes in India. In particular, it explores current theories of integration, determines the facilitating and disabling factors, and suggests an inclusive development based on cultural authenticity (Reddy & S

Review of Literature

Pilgrimage tourism is an ancient and one of the most important types of tourism that has strong cultural and religious roots worldwide (Shinde & Olsen, 2023).

It brings about significant socio-economic impacts like employment, local trade, and infrastructure development, and also brings some pressure like overcrowding, production of waste, and commodification of culture (Chauhan, 2011). The value of pilgrimage sites in the Indian context is bringing millions of visitors every year, but the rural society usually does not directly gain from the tourism value chain (Reddy & Sailesh, 2024). Rural communities are also becoming increasingly aware of their cultural capital, which includes rituals, crafts, folklore, and traditional ecological knowledge, as the source of sustainable tourism (Scheyvens, 2021). Their incorporation into tourism aids in the preservation of intangible heritage as well as increasing visitor experiences and developing a more inclusive tourism (Shinde and Olsen, 2023). The evidence provided by Case in Kongthong village, Meghalaya, indicates how the tradition of whistling-names used by indigenous people has been turned into a tourism asset, which contributes to livelihoods and cultural identity (Dixit, Langstieh & Abraham, 2023). Although these opportunities exist, researchers warn of the dangers of cosmetic commodification when indigenous traditions are commodified with the main purpose of providing tourists with entertainment but without significantly engaging the community (Scheyvens, 2021).

It has been shown that to assure genuine and fair integration, it is essential that the local control, profit sharing, and governance structures be balanced in conservation and commercialization (Chauhan, 2011).

Examples of how spiritual practices can be applied in conservation are also given as sacred groves and indigenous custodianship of natural places, which are associated with pilgrimage tourism (KPMG, 2024). Literary pilgrimage centres and localized peripheral societies tend to be unequally captured in value: urban centres enjoy a disproportionate share of hotels, transport, and market, and rural artisans and farmers do not participate in the process (Shinde & Olsen, 2023).

Researchers propose policy interventions and co-management frameworks that can address this urban-rural dichotomy and make indigenous communities enjoy the benefits of both pilgrimage circulation and the preservation of the heritage (Reddy & Sailesh, 2024). In general, the body of literature on pilgrimage tourism and indigenous practices is abundant, but limited studies have been conducted on how the two intersect under rural and urban backgrounds. This side reveals the necessity of comparative, empirical studies in order to develop strategies regarding sustainable, inclusive tourism based on the cultural values of indigenous populations (Scheyvens, 2021).

Research Gap

The pilgrimage tourism is regarded as one of the earliest and the most important types of travel and its fusion with indigenous practices yet has not been fully explored in the modern tourism studies (Shinde & Olsen, 2023). The extant literature has largely considered the socio-economic advantages of pilgrimage tourism like job creation, stimulation of trade and the development of infrastructures but it has also highlighted the negative impacts of pilgrimage tourism including congestion, production of wastes, and commercialisation of the culture (Chauhan, 2011). Nevertheless, not much has been done to analyze how indigenous practices, including rituals, crafts, folklore, and traditional ecological knowledge, can be systematically incorporated into pilgrimage tourism to serve to increase sustainability and inclusivity (Scheyvens, 2021).

Despite recent discoveries in some areas, like the Kongthong village of Meghalaya, where indigenous traditions can be used to facilitate livelihood diversification and cultural identity (Dixit, Langstieh, and Abraham, 2023), the majority of studies are still local and descriptive but not comparative or model. More so, the literature indicates that there exists a strong urban-rural disparity in the distribution of tourism benefits, where urban areas usually earn most tourism benefits, and rural artisans and indigenous groups earn low amounts (Reddy and Sailesh, 2024; Shinde and Olsen, 2023). This imbalance highlights the absence of proper policy structures and co-management systems that will guarantee equal involvement and benefits sharing among the indigenous communities in the pilgrimage tourism value chain. Therefore, there is evident gap in research to formulate an integrated, empirical insight in terms of incorporating indigenous practices into pilgrimage tourism in both rural and urban settings. It is necessary to bridge this gap in order to frame sustainable tourism strategies to ensure inclusive social-economic development and

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the problems and challenges of the process of introducing the indigenous knowledge, crafts, and traditions into the pilgrimage tourism system.
2. A Circumvention of Obstacles to Cultural Sustainability: Integration of Indigenous management of Pilgrimage Tourism in Tamil Nadu.

Also, the pilgrimage tourism should include the indigenous knowledge, crafts, and traditional practices to enhance the cultural sustainability, empower the locals, and enhance the authenticity

of the visitors (UNESCO, 2018). There are however, complex predicaments that prevail and they make their way to hamper effective integration, particularly when one takes into consideration the span of developing environment as India.

Possible Political and Institutional Barriers

Due to the tendency of dealing with tourism and cultural heritage industries differently, there is a dismantling of the institutional functions and lack of coordination in planning (UNWTO, 2012). Unavailability of participative and inclusive systems hinder the entrenching of indigenous population in the real-life decision-making process in tourism (Singh and Mishra, 2020). Among the impacts of this model of policy-making that is top-down, there is marginalization of traditional custodians, in addition to weakening sustainable cultural relationships between pilgrimage locations and the local crafts (Aukland, 2017).

Economic and Market Limitations

The knowledge laborers and artisans have low access to the tourism markets, low bargaining power and exploitation by the middlemen (Khan et al., 2022). The demand in the craft is extremely cyclical, and livelihoods are not stable as pilgrimage tourism is more or less a seasonal business (Das and Mohanty, 2021). Other reasons that discourage competitiveness in the local and international tourism market are ineffective branding, lack of finances, and lack of entrepreneurship training (Gupta and Sharma, 2022).

Socio-Cultural/Ethical Iss(s)

In the case of commercialization of sacred practices often lead to commodification, loss of authenticity, and loss of meaning of rituals due to the activities associated with tourists (Ranwa, 2022). Performing traditions to people who have not been granted by the community introduces them into an unwilling displacement of a process that replaces the strength and spiritual intent of their owners (Smith and Robinson, 2020). There also exist prejudices in the gender relationships, with women artisans, who are the primary transmitters of cultural legacy, having a hard time accessing market grounds and making decisions (Kumar & Thomas, 2021).

Capacity and Knowledge Gaps

This is because bad managerial, digital and marketing capacities of the indigenous producers reduce their opportunities of exploiting the tourism (Patel and Yadav, 2020). Many training programs remain urban based and they fail to incorporate the rural artisans in the capacity-building programmes (Nair, 2022). Moreover, the lack of protection of intellectual property would render it hostile when the communities share culturally significant knowledge in the open (UNESCO, 2018).

Problems of Infrastructure and Accessibility

Most pilgrimage sites are isolated and transport, exhibition and sanitation facilities are not well developed (Sarkar, 2019). These limitations of the tourist experience of genuine crafts and the limitation on the involvement of artisans in tourism supply chains (Gupta and Sharma, 2022).

Environmental and Sustainability Problems

Uncontrolled pilgrimage tourism and over-commercialization have undermined natural resources such as plant-based dyes, fibers, and wood which are critical in traditional crafts (Das and Mohanty, 2021). All these barriers are an appeal to the necessity to introduce integrated governance,

equal benefits distribution, and capacity-building approaches that will enable the formation of sustainable pilgrimage tourism and will not undermine cultural authenticity (UNWTO, 2012).

Table 1 Mean Scores and Interpretation of Barriers to the Inclusion of the Indigenous Knowledge, Crafts and Traditions in the Pilgrimage Tourism

Barrier Dimension	Average Mean Score (1 to 5 scale)	Interpretation
Policy & Institutional Barriers	4.12	High
Economic & Market Constraints	4.17	Very High
Socio-Cultural & Ethical Barriers	4.05	High
Capacity & Knowledge Gaps	4.06	High
Infrastructure & Accessibility Barriers	4.07	High
Environmental & Sustainability issues	4.09	High

Policy and Institutional Barriers (Mean = 4.12, SD = 0.77 - High Barrier) The respondents were in a great agreement that one of the worst barriers is policy and institutional gaps. The most rated (Mean = 4.35) indicator that emphasizes the fragmentation of the government agencies is poor interdepartmental coordination which is the highest rated item. The policy recognition (Mean = 4.21) and community participation (Mean = 4.10) is also missing and this implies that, the indigenous stakeholders are not part of the decision-making process. This is evidenced by weak IPR protection in poor institutional protection of the traditional forms of culture (Mean = 3.89).

Interpretation: The findings are consistent with those of UNWTO (2021) and Singh and Mishra (2020), who also highlighted a lack of integration of policies and a fragile governance system as the factors that marginalize the indigenous population in the tourism system. The necessary step to close this gap is to strengthen institutional connections and the incorporation of participatory policy-making.

Economic and Market Constraints (Mean = 4.17, SD = 0.77 - Very High Barrier) Economic and market factors scored the highest overall mean, and ascertained as the dominating factor as a constraint to integration. The most serious ones were seasonal income instability (Mean = 4.40), lack of access to the market (Mean = 4.32), and the exploitation by middlemen (Mean = 4.10). These concerns echo with the economic marginalization of artisans as discussed by Bhatia (2019) and Das and Mohanty (2021) who discovered that indigenous producers are not visible, branded, and do not have a chance to be fairly traded.

Interpretation: The market distortion and financial exclusion prevents scale production of artisans and their access to tourism markets. Specific microcredit programs, marketing services and direct trade systems may increase the involvement of artisans in pilgrimage based economies.

Socio-Cultural and Ethical Challenges (Mean = 4.05, SD = 0.77 - High Barrier) Socio-cultural barriers, though a bit lower than the economic ones, nonetheless are important. The most critical issue was seen to be commercialization affects authenticity” (Mean = 4.28), which indicated the problems of cultural commodification. There are ethical tensions related to tourism commercialization and cultural preservation in terms of cultural dilution (4.10) and inability to consult with the locals (4.05). The structural imbalance in craft production and marketing is also exhibited through gender barriers (3.97).

Interpretation: The results support Chhabra (2018) and Smith and Robinson (2020), who observed that sacred traditions are likely to be distorted by tourism unless administered in an inclusive manner. The planning of ethical tourism should not ignore the cultural integrity and

gender inclusion in order to guarantee the equitable representation of indigenous voices.

Capacity and Knowledge Gaps (Mean = 4.06, SD = 0.77 - High Barrier) Respondents identified significant levels of technical and managerial deficiencies. The most significant barriers were low digital literacy (4.28) and lack of marketing skills (4.12), which agreed with Patel and Yadav (2020). Low awareness of IPR (3.96) and low access to training (4.08) also further limit the chances of artisans to compete in digital tourism markets.

Interpretation: These results support the fact that capacity-building among rural artisans is still underdeveloped as was reported by UNESCO (2018). Digital training, marketing education and community-based entrepreneurship program involvements can enable inclusion to be more effective in pilgrimage tourism.

Infrastructure and Accessibility Barriers (Mean = 4.07, SD = 0.77 - High Barrier) Problems with infrastructure were referred to as high barriers by many. The highest priorities were poor connectivity (Mean = 4.25) and insufficient amenities (4.18). Artisans are not visible due to lack of market spaces (4.12) and lack of exhibition/ storage facilities (3.94).

Interpretation: Following Sarkar (2019), the infrastructural insufficiency in pilgrimage places hinders the movement of tourists and the development of the local business. Integrated infrastructure planning must come under policy focus - enhancement of transport, market place facilities, and environmentally friendly facilities to boost the local economies.

The other high barrier occurred in terms of Environmental and Sustainability Concerns (Mean = 4.09, SD = 0.73 - High Barrier). The highest rank on this dimension was over-tourism and environmental degradation (Mean = 4.30), then there was pollution (4.18), and unsustainable resource extraction (4.05). Other areas that were reported are lack of awareness and local involvement in conservation.

Interpretation: These findings are consistent with Das and Mohanty (2021) and UNWTO (2021), who observed that the unequal increase in pilgrimage activities harms the local ecosystems that play a significant role in the production of traditional crafts. Pilgrimage tourism policies should incorporate community-led conservation and sustainable management of the resources.

Discussion

The results of the research indicate that various systemic and interrelated obstacles inhibit the successful policies of introducing indigenous practices and crafts into the system of pilgrimage tourism in Tamil Nadu. Economic and market constraints achieved the greatest mean score (4.17) of all dimensions, with the prevalence of the financial exclusion, seasonal income instability, and exploitative value chains. These cannot be described other than the long-standing marginalization of indigenous producers in the tourism economy (Bhatia, 2019; Das and Mohanty, 2021). Although the policy and institutional barriers (Mean = 4.12) are also important, they are reinforced by low interdepartmental coordination and participatory governance mechanisms (UNWTO, 2021; Singh and Mishra, 2020).

Cultural preservation and commercialization of tourism are incompatible; hence, the tension is seen in socio-cultural and ethical issues (Mean = 4.05). The results support Chhabra (2018) and Smith and Robinson (2020), as they make it clear that the commodification of the sacred traditions negatively affects authenticity and reduces trust in the community. Additionally, gender-based limitations demonstrate a poorly explored aspect in the craft economies associated with pilgrimage, as women artisans have no access to value-adding and leadership activities (Kumar and Thomas, 2021).

Gap in capacity and knowledge (Mean = 4.06) indicates that indigenous artisans do not have the marketing, managerial and digital literacy skills required to compete adequately. These findings are similar to those of UNESCO (2018), which also noted a lack of proper capacity-building structures

as one of the key weaknesses of community tourism participation. Poor connectivity, market spaces and visitor amenities still impede tourism-craft linkages through infrastructure and barriers to accessibility (Mean = 4.07). Correspondingly, the prescriptions related to the environmental and sustainability (Mean = 4.09) also determine that the ecologically conscious tourism governance is in urgent need because of the reliance of traditional crafts on the local natural resources.

Generally, the research confirms that the need to incorporate the indigenous knowledge systems in pilgrimage tourism requires multi-dimensional interventions. These need to be an institutional change, a fair economic inclusion, and empowering capacity, and a culturally sensitive policy ecosystem.

Conclusion

This paper has come up with the conclusion that cross-cutting barriers between institutional, economic, socio-cultural, infrastructural and environmental levels are the major limiting parameters of cultural sustainability in pilgrimage tourism in Tamil Nadu. Even with the policies that encourage heritage-based tourism, there is still marginalization of the indigenous communities when it comes to decision-making (Singh and Mishra, 2020; UNWTO, 2021). The superiority of economic and market barriers emphasizes that the local producers and artisans cannot access fair trade networks or have equal opportunities of enjoying the benefits of tourism value chains (Khan et al., 2022; Gupta and Sharma, 2022).

The results support the idea that sustainable pilgrimage tourism is impossible without empowering local stakeholders with the help of participatory governance and fair distribution of benefits (UNESCO, 2018; Ranwa, 2022). The key steps to maintain the authenticity and continuity of traditional knowledge systems include strengthening institutional coordination, offering specific capacity-building programs, and environmental protection (Patel and Yadav, 2020; Das and Mohanty, 2021). The research, therefore, proposes the use of a holistic form of governance, which incorporates cultural preservation, economic integration, and ecological sustainability as its main pillars in pilgrimage tourism development (Aukland, 2017; Chhabra, 2018).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research and the interpretive study, the following recommendations of the policies and strategic plans can be made to enhance the process of incorporating the indigenous knowledge and practices in pilgrimage tourism in Tamil Nadu.

Participatory Governance and Institutional Integration

There is, thus, a necessity to establish an Integrated Tourism-Culture Coordination Framework of tourism, rural development, and handicraft organizations to reduce the role division within the institutions (UNWTO, 2021). This is well practiced by adopting participatory policy whereby the indigenous leaders and women artisans are in a position to be represented in the decision making councils and this has the advantage of providing equitable representation and enhancing the level of local ownership (Singh and Mishra, 2020; UNESCO, 2018).

Economic Empowerment and Access to the Markets

Direct market relations of artisans and pilgrimage centres can be improved by establishing direct trade through government-sponsored trade fairs and online markets (Gupta and Sharma, 2022). The microcredit and cooperative financing systems reduce the dependency of the artisans on their intermediaries and introduce inclusive entrepreneurship (Khan et al., 2022; Patel and Yadav, 2020).

Branding of local crafts which are associated to pilgrimage sites as ethical enhances the authenticity and competitive edge in both the local and international markets (Chhabra, 2018).

Transferral of Knowledge and Capacity Building

Developing self-reliance and innovation requires initiating community-based digital and entrepreneurial training, in particular, of women and the younger generation (Nair, 2022; Patel and Yadav, 2020). Increment in the rights to intellectual property (IPR) and the encouragement of the registration of Geographical Indication (GI) of the local crafts can help in the protection of ownership of culture and in the promotion of identity of the product (UNESCO, 2018).

Infrastructure Access and Development

It is possible to enhance transport, sanitation, and other ecological infrastructure to have a better experience of the pilgrimage site and the locals (Sarkar, 2019). Permanent craft exhibition centers and year-round eco-markets are also important to enable the indigenous products to be visible throughout the year and is also a step to diversify livelihood in a sustainable way (Das & Mohanty, 2021).

Sustainable Environmental and Cultural

Eco-tourism should be encouraged through the promotion of pilgrimage destinations as a way of promoting responsible tourism (Ranwa, 2022). Integrating community-based conservation assists in conserving sacred natural ecosystems and promoting cultural continuity (UNESCO, 2018). More rigorous control over over-tourism, pollution and unsustainable extraction needs to be in place to maintain ecological integrity and the conservation of sacred places (Aukland, 2017; UNWTO, 2021).

Research and Policy Survey

Ensuring that there is a promotion of the use of impact assessment research in order to deal with indigenous involvement in tourism will aid in making evidence-based policies (Singh and Mishra, 2020). This can be achieved through the development of longitudinal monitoring system that will assist in determining socio-economic and sustainability outcomes of heritage based tourism projects in the long run (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; UNWTO, 2021).

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