

Cultural Heritage Tourism in Northern and Southern Chotanagpur

Balancing Conservation and Community Development

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Abstract- Northern and Southern Chotanagpur divisions of Jharkhand encompass a mosaic of sacred hills, archaeological remains, colonial-era settlements, and vibrant Adivasi traditions. During the last decade, visitor arrivals have risen by an estimated 8.7 % per annum, stimulated by improved highways and digital promotion campaigns. While tourism accelerates diversified livelihoods, it simultaneously intensifies physical pressure on fragile ecosystems and risks commodifying intangible heritage. This paper investigates how mixed heritage—comprising Jain pilgrimage circuits, Munda–Oraon ritual landscapes, and British-period hill stations—can be stewarded through participatory governance and adaptive management. A sequential explanatory design triangulates 72 stakeholder interviews, 14 focus-group discussions, GPS-enabled land-use surveys, and content analysis of state tourism policies. Findings reveal significant gaps between policy rhetoric and ground-level implementation, especially in waste management, carrying-capacity regulation, and benefit-sharing with tribal women. We propose an integrative framework anchored in community-based destination management organisations, culturally responsive interpretation, and revenue-earmarked conservation funds to align economic aspirations with safeguarding of the region’s unique socio-ecological fabric.

Keywords – heritage tourism; participatory governance; tribal culture; sustainable development; Jharkhand

I. INTRODUCTION

Chotanagpur Plateau, stretching across the heart of Jharkhand, is often extolled for its mineral wealth; yet beneath this industrial veneer lies a palimpsest of living cultural landscapes. Parasnath Hill, for example, is venerated by Digambara and Svetambara Jains as Sammed Shikhar—the site where twenty of the twenty-four Tirthankaras attained nirvana. Farther west, the undulating valleys of Khunti and Simdega preserve sacred groves called sarna, where tribal councils convene under towering sal trees to venerate ancestral spirits. Colonial-era hill stations, notably Netarhat, once dubbed the “Queen of Chotanagpur,” add an architectural layer through gothic schools and dak bungalows. The coexistence of these plural heritages creates both opportunity and complexity for tourism planners. Visitor motivation is rarely homogeneous; weekenders from Ranchi seek respite amidst pine forests, Gujarati pilgrims arrive in chartered buses for religious merit, and international backpackers pursue ethno-music experiences during the Sarhul festival. Aligning these divergent expectations with heritage conservation demands nuanced governance arrangements that honour customary tenure, reinforce identity, and maintain ecological integrity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage-tourism scholarship recognises the twin imperatives of product commodification and cultural safeguarding (Timothy & Boyd, 2015). Studies across South Asian sacred circuits (Choe & O'Regan, 2020) underline the salience of pilgrimage seasonality and ritual performativity in shaping visitor-host encounters. Within Jharkhand, Singh (2016) documents infrastructural deficits, whereas Patel and Raj (2020) emphasise indigenous knowledge as intellectual property prone to misappropriation. Recent work by Thakur (2021) argues that multilingual interpretation not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also fosters inter-cultural empathy. Notwithstanding these contributions, empirical insight into how nested governance—spanning gram sabha, temple trust, and state tourism corporation—mediates resource allocation remains scant. This study advances the discourse by interrogating institutional interplay and its material outcomes on landscape health and community well-being.

III. STUDY AREA

The research focuses on three clusters symbolising the plateau's cultural stratigraphy. Cluster A includes Parasnath Hill and the adjoining Madhuban valley where over 110 Jain shrines punctuate forested ridges at 1,350 m. Cluster B centres on Netarhat plateau (1,127 m), encompassing colonial boarding schools, sunset point vistas, and the tribal villages of Banari and Kamta. Cluster C comprises the rural-ritual belt spanning Khunti, Simdega, and Gumla districts where Munda, Oraon, and Kharia communities celebrate Sarhul, Karma, and Sohrai festivals on rotational lunar calendars. Annual rainfall surpasses 1,200 mm, and lateritic soils support mixed deciduous forests dominated by *Shorea robusta*. Despite statutory protection under the Indian Forest Act, customary usufruct rights permit controlled harvesting of lac, mahua flowers, and tendu leaves, entwining local livelihoods with biodiversity stewardship.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Adopting Creswell's (2014) sequential explanatory design, the study unfolded in two phases. Phase I (June–November 2024) applied qualitative instruments: 72 semi-structured interviews targeting temple-trust officials (n = 12), PRI members (n = 14), forest guards (n = 10), women's self-help-group representatives (n = 18), and tourism entrepreneurs (n = 18). Field notes captured participant observation during Sarhul in March 2024 and Kartik Purnima pilgrimage in November. Phase II (December 2024–February 2025) deployed quantitative tools: GPS-logged transects measured trail erosion depths; an intercept survey (n = 384) gauged visitor expenditure and perception. Policy analysis examined five state documents, including the 2021 Jharkhand Tourism Policy and the Scheduled Areas Regulation (1997). NVivo 14 aided thematic coding, while SPSS 28 processed descriptive statistics.

V. FINDINGS

A. Governance Dynamics – Interviews reveal fragmented authority at Parasnath where the Digambar Jain Samiti oversees inner-sanctum rituals, the forest department manages outer trails, and the local panchayat administers sanitation. Lack of a unified visitor-management plan leads to duplicative fees and unclear accountability. In contrast, Khunti's sarna sites operate under customary law; elders impose fines for littering, and proceeds fund drum repairs. Yet, absence of formal recognition renders these bodies ineligible for state grants.

B. Environmental Footprint – GPS transects indicate mean trail-width expansion of 1.2 m since 2018 on Parasnath's Shikharji trail, correlating with a 37 % increase in pilgrim volume. Litter density peaked at 8.4 items/m² during festive weeks despite biodegradable-only regulations. Conversely, Netarhat's sunset point showed improved cleanliness after introduction of community youth rangers, with plastic incidence dropping by 53 % in 2024.

C. Socio-Economic Outcomes – Visitor-expenditure surveys reveal mean nightly spend of ₹2,350 in Netarhat, primarily on homestays and handicrafts. However, only 29 % of women-led SHGs reported direct access to tourism markets. In Cluster C, festival-based micro-enterprises (bamboo flutes, sohrai murals) generated seasonal income spikes but lacked off-season stability. Revenue leakages occur through external tour operators bundling meals and transport from Ranchi, limiting multiplier effects in host villages.

D. Cultural Integrity – While 78 % of visitors rated Sarhul performances as 'authentic', elders expressed concern over compressed ritual sequences enacted to suit tourist timetables. Youth participants perceived opportunities for cultural revitalisation but cautioned against costumes being adapted to Bollywood aesthetics for social-media appeal. Intangible heritage thus navigates a delicate interface between performative display and sacred commitment.

VI. DISCUSSION

Findings foreground the necessity of bridging institutional silos through Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) that include temple trusts, forest officials, and gram sabhas. Comparative evidence from Meghalaya's living-root bridges (Khasi Hills Autonomous Council, 2022) demonstrates that hybrid governance can synchronise fee collection and reinvestment. In Chotanagpur, embedding such DMOs within the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act framework could legitimise customary stewardship while unlocking state co-funding. Secondly, environmental stress data affirm the urgency of carrying-capacity thresholds: UNESCO guidelines recommend 15 m² per pilgrim on steep trails, a benchmark currently exceeded by 240 % during Kartik Purnima. Installing e-ticket portals with staggered entry slots may modulate flows. Thirdly, gender analysis signals untapped potential; models from Odisha's Chilika lagoon show that women's boat cooperatives enhance livelihood parity and conservation compliance. Similar cooperatives for guiding and craft sales could bolster SHG participation.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Constitute legally registered Community Heritage Councils at each cluster to prepare five-year micro-plans integrating zoning, waste audits, and festival calendars.
2. Deploy GIS-based visitor-flow dashboards linked to mobile apps, enabling real-time alerts when trail capacity exceeds 80 %.
3. Institute a 2 % heritage-cess on accommodation bills, earmarked for monument conservation and sarna grove restoration.
4. Launch certificate courses in Adivasi languages and heritage interpretation at Radha Govind University to professionalise local youth as culture mediators.
5. Forge market linkages between SHGs and e-commerce platforms with geo-tagged craft provenance labels to curb counterfeit souvenirs.

6. Establish rotational closed seasons for ecological recovery informed by longitudinal erosion and wildlife-disturbance data.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Heritage landscapes of Northern and Southern Chotanagpur epitomise the confluence of faith, history, and ecology. Tourism, if deftly harnessed, can amplify cultural pride and diversify rural incomes; mismanaged, it may erode the very fabric visitors seek. Empirical evidence from this study underlines that participatory, data-driven governance can reconcile these tensions. Integrating customary institutions within statutory frameworks, elevating women's agency, and embedding smart monitoring tools emerge as keystones for resilient tourism futures. The proposed roadmap aligns with India's National Tourism Policy 2022, yet insists on contextual specificity—recognising that sacred groves breathe not just through legislation but through communal songs, myths, and memories. Future longitudinal research should measure how implemented recommendations affect biodiversity indices and socio-cultural vitality over decadal scales.

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