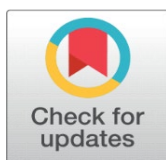
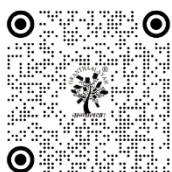


THE INTERSECTION OF TRIBAL ARTS AND ECOTOURISM: A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the strategic role played by indigenous art forms in supporting the ecotourism value proposition in respect of the State of Kerala in India. It focuses on zones with high-biodiversity like Vazhachal, Wayanad, Idukki, Parambikulam etc. Using mixed-methods approach it analyses how tribal dance, rituals, handicrafts, etc. play a key role in sustainable regional economic development. Though the expansion of ecotourism could offer significant socio-economic benefits, which include a 32 percent rise in seasonal household earning for the respective artisans who participate in such activities, it could also pose 'staged authenticity' of cultural commodification. The study thus introduces a framework viz. Cultural Sustainability Index (CSI) and accordingly suggests a decentralized, ICT-integrated 'Direct-to-Consumer' model for the mitigation of economic leakage and preservation of the sanctity of tribal heritage.

Keywords: Tribal Arts, Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Triple Bottom Line, CSI, ICT

1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, often projected as 'God's Own Country' in the tourism parlance, has pioneered the concept of Responsible Tourism (RT) in India. A Responsible Tourism Mission (RTM) under the Govt. of Kerala (GOK) has been active since 2017. Kerala is aggressively promoting ecotourism too. One vital, yet under-researched, pillar of Kerala's tourism strategy is 'cultural landscape' of Kerala's indigenous tribes (Adivasis), particularly those residing in the Western Ghats which in turn is a UNESCO's World Heritage site and one of the world's eight 'hottest hotspots' in respect of biodiversity. In fact,

the Western Ghats could provide much more than simply ecological services as these ghats denote the ancestral home to about 36 tribal groups. These tribal communities have their own unique arts, customs, rituals, practices, and indigenous knowledge; all these being inextricably connected to their respective forest habitats or forest ecosystems. Tribal arts denote a key catalyst for tourism, particularly in the tourist hotspots at Wayanad, Vazhachal, Idukki, and Parambikulam. Tribal art forms can lure 'new tourists' – i.e. today's tourists who seek existential authenticity (Wang, 1999) and organic experiences which contrast with today's sterile urban life environments. In fact, tribal arts serve as a powerful catalyst for tourism in Kerala, particularly in ecotourism hotspots. Such art forms can bridge the natural environment and the indigenous cultural heritage that attract travellers who seek 'authentic' as well as 'organic' experiences. They lure tourists by transforming a passive visit into an immersive cultural exchange. They include (i) the visual and performative spectacle like the art forms like Gaddika and Kambala Nrutham (Adiya community) which provide a sensory experience that contrasts with urban lifestyles; (ii) unique handicrafts like the traditional crafts like the Kannadippaya (mirror-sheen bamboo mats from Idukki) serve as high-value souvenirs and tangible links to tribal ingenuity; (iii) living history whereby the tourists are drawn to the 'authentic way of living' wherein rituals and art are not simply performances rather expressions that portray their centuries-old beliefs and traditions.

In Kerala, tribal arts are rarely promoted in isolation, and are integrated into 'eco' experience. There is immense scope in integrating various tribal arts with tourism spots, especially the ecotourism destinations. Accordingly, there is scope for promoting: (i) community-based tourism (CBT) projects like the constructed tribal hamlets in Wayanad allow the tourists to see replicas of traditional living spaces while witnessing live demonstrations of tribal crafts and dance also; (ii) participatory governance, like, the model used in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve wherein EDCs (eco-development committees) constituted by the local tribal people form the stakeholders, whereby indigenous knowledge and arts are integral to the 'interpretive' tourism offered to the visitors; (iii) sustainable livelihoods, whereby various tribal arts act as non-extractive ways to create revenue by cutting short the dependency of tribal people on forest resources, mining etc. The ICT's vast influence gives another dimension to the issue of leveraging tribal arts for tourism development in Kerala. Also, for sustaining the growth of tourism through tribal arts, creation of a pool of trained manpower is significant. So, design of tourism courses with due regard to tribal arts is relevant in this NEP era in Kerala.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

In spite of Kerala's huge wealth of tribal heritage, many tribal communities in this State of India is still in peripheral poverty. So, the core research problem that is sought to be explored in this study is the paradox of 'Staged Authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973): How can the tribal arts be leveraged to attract high-value tourists without diluting their ritual sanctity (i.e. by duly preserving their cultural integrity) by the State of Kerala in India in this ICT era? Given the vital tourism potential of Kerala and its vast ICT infrastructure, the objective of this study is to answer the above research question with a focus on the main ecotourism locations in the State. As a supplementary or allied objective this study seeks to explore how tribal arts be integrated into the academic curriculum as a specialised course in the current regime of NEP in Kerala.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017)- an approach that allowed the simultaneous use of both quantitative and qualitative data. Thus, a more holistic understanding as to how tribal arts influence tourism was sought to be obtained.

Quantitative Phase: A structured survey was administered to 200 domestic and international tourists visiting Kerala's ecotourism circuits. The survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale to measure 'Cultural Attraction Impact'.

Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 key stakeholders, including members of the Paniya and Mullin Kuruma tribes, local tour operators, and officials of the Responsible Tourism Mission (RTM) under the GOK. Byju (2026)

3.2. SAMPLING STRATEGY

The study utilized a purposive sampling method to select 'information-rich' cases. Participants (200 Nos) were hand-picked based on their direct association with tribal arts, 50 each from ecotourism hotspots viz. Wayanad, Vazhachal, Idukki, and Parambikulam. So, those directly involved in any sort of tribal art or craft production alone were selected for the present study.

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

- Quantitative: Data was analysed using descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) to identify trends in tourist spending on tribal crafts.
- Qualitative: Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. Following the framework by Braun and Clarke (2006), codes were created to identify various recurring themes like 'economic dependency', 'loss of ritual Sanctity', 'youth empowerment', etc.

3.4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN TRIBAL RESEARCH

Research involving indigenous communities requires a higher level of ethical vigilance than standard consumer research. So, following the guidelines set by KIRTADS and international ethnographic standards, this study had fully adhered to the principles given below:

- **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC):** Advance consent was not just obtained as a signed form. Rather, in respect of many tribal elders, oral consent in the presence of the Ooru Mooppan (Chieftain) too was obtained. Participants were informed that their narratives would be utilized to influence tourism policy and also that they had the right to withdraw any 'sacred' information from the final draft.
- **Avoidance of 'Extractive' Research:** A common critique regarding tribal studies is that researchers simply 'extract' knowledge without returning anything back. To minimise this drawback, the findings of the study, especially the policy suggestions were shared with local tribal cooperatives to guide in their future negotiations.
- **Anonymity and Sensitivity:** In view of the sensitive nature of discussing earnings from 'staged rituals' the individual respondents were anonymized (as Respondents A, B, etc.). Further, photographs of various rituals were taken only after getting their explicit permissions, with due regard to the sanctity of non-public functions.
- **Cultural Representation:** Efforts were made to ascertain that for the interpretation of art forms like Gaddika due cross-verifications with the respective community members were obtained so as to obviate 'academic colonialization' – one wherein outside views of a researcher would override the community's lived meanings.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

4.1. THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE (TBL) IN THE CONTEXT OF ECOTOURISM

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model (Elkington, 1997) posits that sustainable development should balance economic viability, social responsibility, and environmental integrity. In the specific case of Kerala, tribal arts denote the 'Social Responsibility' pillar. Sans the active participation of the Ooru (tribal hamlet), ecotourism risks turning into an extractive model that simply protects the trees while marginalizing the local people who guarded them for millennia.

4.2. INTERNATIONAL VS. DOMESTIC VIEWS ON ETHNO-TOURISM

Indigenous tourism projects like one among the Maori (New Zealand), the Sami (Scandinavia) etc. reveal that cultural pride acts as a driver of economic sovereignty (Hinch & Butler, 2007). In the Kerala context, tribal arts are often unique as they are 'place-bound' (Rathna, 2015). For instance, the nomadic history of the Malapandaram tribe in Idukki is obvious from ephemeral art forms which cannot at all be replicated in urban settings in a way that provides Kerala with a USP (unique selling proposition), points out Buhalis (2000).

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The integration of culture into ecotourism is popularly called 'Ethno-tourism'. According to Buhalis (2000), the competitiveness of a tourist destination depends on its ability to offer unique, non-replicable experiences. In Kerala, tribal arts provide this 'unique selling proposition' (USP). Tourists in the 21st century growingly seek 'existential authenticity' (Wang, 1999) which is a shift in the 21st century from 'desiring real objects' to 'desiring real personal experience'. This shift towards 'experience' stresses an internal and personal feeling of being true to oneself, instead of verifying the originality of the culture or artifacts relating to a tourism destination. In the context of Kerala, this is found in the Gaddika performances of the Adiya tribe, which have transitioned from private healing rituals to public cultural displays. Many tourism studies have noted the relevance of allied sectors (like, housing and real estate) in tourism promotion and vice-versa because of linkage (multiplier) effects, need for innovative approaches and products (like, the use of ICT and AI, including AR, VR etc.) in the tourism sector; for the acceleration of the growth of the respective sectors and thus the overall economic growth. Many studies have noted the imminent need to promote tourism and real estate (housing) sectors together for the holistic economic growth, especially using Kerala's immense tourism potential. Manoj (2013) 'Prospects and Challenges of Green Buildings and Green Affordable Homes: A Study with Reference to Ernakulam, Kerala' has noted the vital need for eco-friendly housing; like ecotourism ensures sustained tourism development and thus overall economic growth also.

The key positive role of ICT is noted extensively in domestic (Indian) as well as international studies. For instance, an international study by Pickens (2009) 'Window on the Unbanked: Mobile Money in the Philippines' clearly establishes as to how ICT-adoption and that too with a very simple ICT device (mobile phone) has played a crucial role in digitally empowering the rural people especially the women in the context of Philippines. Manoj (2010) 'Impact of technology on the efficiency and risk management of old private sector banks in India: Evidence from banks based in Kerala' has noted that ICT adoption has improved the efficiency of commercial banks. Lakshmi and Manoj (2017) 'Service quality in rural banking in north Kerala: A comparative study of Kannur district co-operative bank and Kerala Gramin bank' observe that greater ICT-adoption by KGB (an RRB in Kerala) has made KGB's performance superior to that of KDCB, a Kerala-based co-operative bank. Lakshmi and Manoj (2017) 'Rural Customers and ICT-based Bank Products A Study with a Focus on Kannur District Co-operative Bank and Kerala Gramin Bank' have noted that better customer acceptance for the ICT-integrated products of KGB than KDCB's traditional products. Thus, the vital need for ICT adoption in banking, rural tourism, etc. is obvious in research studies.

The interface between tribal arts, ecotourism, and sustainable economic growth could growingly attract scholarly attention across disciplines like tourism, development economics, anthropology, etc. Dean MacCannell (1973) and Ning Wang (1999) provide foundational theoretical insights into motivation for tourism and authenticity; and argue that modern tourists need 'authentic' cultural experience, often leading to commodification of indigenous practices. MacCannell's concept of 'staged authenticity' underlines how cultural performances could be changed for tourist consumption; as Wang expands this claim citing 'existential authenticity' whereby tourists derive meaning from personal engagement instead of objective authenticity. Such theoretical models are very relevant in learning the dynamics of tribal art performances in the ecotourism context of Kerala. A significant body of literature has studied the role of ecotourism as a weapon for sustainable development. Martha Honey (2008) defines ecotourism as responsible travel that conserves the environment and aids the well-being of local populace, stresses community participation and cultural preservation. Similarly, David A. Fennell (2020) highlights the ethical issues behind ecotourism, and includes due regard to indigenous cultures and biodiversity conservation. Megan Epler Wood (2002) and Ross K. Dowling (2013) also suggest that ecotourism can create alternative livelihoods for marginalized groups, given that governance structures guarantee equitable benefit-sharing and minimize environmental harm. In the Indian context, especially that of Kerala, tourism promotion has been keenly connected with the paradigms of sustainability. Responsible Tourism Mission (RTM) in Kerala has been widely studied as a model that integrates local people into tourism value chains. Various studies like Manoj (2016) and others confirm that Kerala's community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives could enhance rural livelihoods while promoting cultural heritage. Also, K. K. Mishra (2010) and Ranjan Bandyopadhyay (2008) assert that indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices can greatly enrich tourist experiences, particularly in ecologically sensitive zones.

Scholars have also delved into the economic impact of integrating tribal arts into tourism. Erik Cohen (1988) observes that commodification of culture provides economic opportunities for the indigenous populace, even though it

risks diluting cultural meanings. Empirical studies by Geoffrey Wall and C. Michael Hall (2008) show that tourism-driven handicraft markets greatly enhance household earnings. But, Valene Smith (1989) cautions that commercialization often results in cultural erosion if not managed sustainably. In the parlance of tribal handicrafts, studies indicate that direct market access and fair-trade mechanisms improve artisans' income while preserving traditional skills (UNWTO, 2018). The concept of community engagement has been widely acknowledged as a hallmark of tourism sustainability. Shalini Singh (2003) stresses that involvement of local people in decision-making process can ensure the long-term viability of tourism initiatives.

Likewise, Harold Goodwin (2011) claims that RT must focus on local ownership and equitable distribution of benefits. Kerala-based case studies, especially in Wayanad and Parambikulam, show that eco-development committees (EDCs) successfully integrate tribal community to tourism governance by fostering socio-economic empowerment (Kokkranikal & Morrison, 2011). Cultural sustainability has arisen as a key dimension of the broader sustainability dialogue. Dallen J. Timothy (2011) stresses the need for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, including rituals, oral traditions, performances etc. within tourism models. The UNESCO (2012) guidelines on cultural heritage management also highlight the need for preserving authenticity while at the same time facilitating their adaptive reuse. In this context, using CSI (Cultural Sustainability Index) this study seeks to align with global initiatives to quantify and control cultural impacts of tourism; including role of ICT in cost savings, service quality etc. Joju, et. al. (2017) 'Future of brick and mortar banking in Kerala: Relevance of branch banking in the digital era' has noted that a 'human touch' as prevalent in 'brick and mortar' banking is vital in today's virtual banking too. Joju, et. al. (2017) 'Financial technology and service quality in banks: Some empirical evidence from the old private sector banks based in Kerala, India' observe that fin-techs greatly raise service quality.

ICT integration into tourism has opened new opportunities for promoting indigenous arts. Dimitrios Buhalis (2003) observes that online platforms raise market access of local artisans, enabling direct-to-consumer models which minimise intermediaries and economic leakages. Manoj (2017) 'Construction costs in affordable housing in Kerala: Relative significance of the various elements of costs of affordable housing projects' has noted the cost elements based on their priority so as to enable selective cost control, wherein ICT plays a key role. Manoj (2017) 'Cost management in the construction of affordable housing units in Kerala: A case study of the relevance of earned value analysis (EVA) approach' has noted that proper use of EVA can effectively manage costs. Joju et. al. (2017) 'Electronic CRM & ICT-based banking services: An empirical study of the attitude of customers in Kerala, India' has noted the crucial role of digital E-CRM to provide banking services more efficiently and competitively. Manoj (2018) 'CRM in old private sector banks and new generation private sector banks in Kerala: A comparison' has noted that Kerala's NPBs (New Private sector Banks) outperform its OPBs (Old Private sector Banks) through CRM-adoption and high-tech services. Manoj (2019) 'Social banking in India in the reforms era and the case of financial inclusion: Relevance of ICT-based policy options' has put forth a few ICT-based strategies to provide effective social banking in today's ICT era. Manoj (2019) 'Dynamics of human resource management in banks in the ICT era: A study with a focus on Kerala based old private sector banks' observes that ICT-enabled HRM policies ensure better competitiveness. Manoj (2019) 'Competitiveness of manufacturing industry in India: need for flexible manufacturing systems' has observed the vital need for ICT-integrated systems like FMS (flexible manufacturing systems) for higher manufacturing competitiveness. Joju and Manoj (2019) 'Digital Kerala: A study of the ICT Initiatives in Kerala state' have dealt in detail the vast ICT-enabled developmental projects in Kerala and suggested steps for the better utilization of ICT. Joju and Manoj (2019) 'Banking Technology and Service Quality: Evidence from Private Sector Banks in Kerala' have noted ICT adoption can raise service quality and it must be promoted. Ali and Manoj (2020) 'Impact of Falling Price of Rubber-A Case Study of Kothamangalam Taluk in Ernakulam District' observe that rampant price falls affect the basic livelihood means of the rubber cultivators; so suggest measures such as governmental actions like MSP (minimum support price). Manoj, P.K. (2015) 'Housing Microfinance: A Study on Quality, Cost and Default Rate with Respect to Bhavanashree in Kerala' observes that Housing Micro Finance (HMF) has lowered asset quality and it has higher transaction costs. Saritha and Manoj (2023), 'Social inequalities in IT sector: Evidence from Kerala State in India' points out the prevalence of inequality in the IT sector in Kerala and the utmost need to reduce this for fast and equitable economic growth.

Sarojkumari, et al. (2023) 'Health Monitoring Based Cognitive IOT Using Fast Machine Learning Technique' have noted the need for ICT-based scientific health management in this ICT era. Manoj (2023) 'Affordable Healthcare and Affordable Housing: Need for an Integrative Approach for the Holistic Growth of the Digital Economy of Kerala, India' has noted that in the knowledge society of Kerala, housing and healthcare sectors must work in an integrative manner. Manoj (2023) 'Health Expenditure in Covid-19 Times and the Need for Affordable Houses that Nurture Healthy Citizens:

A Roadmap for Digital Economy of Kerala' has noted that by learning from its experience in Covid, Kerala must focus on homes that really consider the 'health' aspect and hence improve the social value of houses. Manoj, P.K. (2023) 'ICT for Sustained Community Development in India in the 5G Era' has observed the vital need for ICT-based high-tech resources which ensure greater internet connectivity for fast and equitable economic growth. A study by Rao et.al. (2025), 'Community Resilience and Urban Planning: Integrating Social Capital and Infrastructure Strategies' has noted ICT as a vital tool for development of housing, tourism, urban planning etc. in an environment-friendly style. So, it follows that community resilience to sustainable and eco-friendly growth is vital today.

Gretzel et al. 2015) could establish how smart tourism technologies facilitate immersive cultural experiences via virtual storytelling and online marketing e.g. RTM-enabled tourism projects in Kerala have enabled tribal artisans to tap global markets that guarantee the stability in their earnings. Another key strand of literature emphasises the challenges connected with tourism-driven cultural commodification. Edward Bruner (2005) has pointed out that the performances that are tailored to tourists often convert living traditions into staged spectacles. The above concern is echoed by Greenwood (1989), who associates the 'cultural bankruptcy' risk since various traditions might forego their own intrinsic meanings. Studies done in the Western Ghats area show that some tribal rituals have been changed to suit tourist expectations, thus raising the issue of the loss of ritual sanctity (Kurien, 2010). The key role of education and capacity-building in sustaining tribal arts, of late, has been stressed in recent tourism studies. Philip Kotler (2017), the marketing guru, underlines the significance of skill development and branding in improving the marketability of cultural products. In Indian scenario, the integration of traditional knowledge systems into formal education, as envisaged in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has been noted by many scholars (Tilak, 2021). Such academic initiatives create awareness on tribal arts in young minds and thus ensure sustained tribal livelihood too.

So, a review of the literature exposes a complex interplay between tourism development, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation. While ecotourism offers key avenues for leveraging tribal arts as catalysts for sustainable economic development, it poses challenges too in the form of authenticity, equitable benefit-sharing, commodification, etc. This study explores into these insights using tools like CSI, suggests a context-specific model for Kerala that balances economic benefits with cultural integrity, and leverages the huge potential of ICT.

6. ANALYSIS OF DATA AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The empirical findings emerging from both the quantitative survey (N = 200) and qualitative interviews provide a nuanced understanding of how tribal arts intersect with ecotourism in Kerala. The results reveal a dual dynamic: while tribal arts function as a powerful aesthetic attractor within ecotourism circuits, their deeper cultural and participatory dimensions remain under-leveraged. This section interprets the statistical trends alongside stakeholder narratives to unpack key themes such as the 'spectator gap' commodification, and the latent potential for immersive cultural engagement.

6.1. TOURIST PERCEPTION OF TRIBAL ART COMPONENTS

In fact, 'Visual Appeal of Tribal Dance' has the highest mean score (M = 4.78, SD = 0.42), which is the only attribute in the 'Very High' category based on the impact level. This in turn suggests that performative elements (like, traditional dances, costumes, and ritualistic expressions) are the key drivers of tourist interest. (Table I).

Table 1

Table 1 Tourist Perception of Tribal Art Components (N=200)			
Attribute	Mean Score (1-5)	Std. Devn. (SD)	Impact Level
Visual Appeal of Tribal Dance	4.78	0.42	Very High
Authenticity of Handicrafts	4.42	0.55	High
Educational Value of Rituals	4.1	0.82	High
Direct Interaction with Artisans	3.65	1.15	Moderate

Source: Field Survey.

Respondents often term such performances as ‘captivating’, ‘vibrant’ and ‘authentically different’ from urban cultural experiences. The relatively low SD (0.42) further shows strong consensus among respondents, implying that visual spectacle is universally appreciated across different tourist segments (domestic and international alike). This aligns with the broader experiential tourism literature, where aesthetic consumption often serves as the entry point for cultural engagement. However, this high valuation also signals a critical concern. The consumption of tribal arts appears to be largely passive, reinforcing what may be termed as the “commodity of the exotic” phenomenon. Tourists engage with tribal performances primarily as spectators, appreciating their novelty without necessarily understanding their deeper socio-cultural or spiritual significance. This observation resonates with the concept of “staged authenticity,” wherein cultural expressions are curated for external consumption, sometimes at the cost of their original meaning. (Table I).

6.2. PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY AND TANGIBLE CULTURAL PRODUCTS

The second-highest rated attribute, ‘Authenticity of Handicrafts’ (M = 4.42, SD = 0.55), underscores the importance of tangible cultural artefacts in shaping tourist experiences. Items such as bamboo crafts, traditional mats, and forest-based artefacts are perceived not merely as souvenirs but as embodiments of indigenous knowledge systems. The relatively high mean score shows that tourists accord high level of trust in the authenticity of products. Interviews with artisans revealed that many crafts are still produced using traditional techniques passed down through generations, thereby reinforcing their cultural value; but expressed concerns too regarding growing market pressures to modify designs for commercial appeal that could slowly dilute traditional aesthetics. From an economic view, handicrafts denote a key revenue stream for tribal communities. Survey revealed that tourists were willing to pay premium prices for ‘authentic’ products, if accompanied by narratives stating their origin and cultural significance. This fact highlights the potential for value-added storytelling as a growth strategy. (Table I).

6.3. EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF RITUALS: A LATENT OPPORTUNITY

The high mean score for ‘Educational Value of Rituals’ attribute (M = 4.10, SD = 0.82) shows that tourists recognize and appreciate the knowledge embedded in tribal rituals. The relatively higher SD (0.82), however, shows variability in perception is likely due to differences in the quality and depth of interpretive services available across locations. Qualitative interviews revealed that in destinations like Wayanad and Parambikulam, rituals are occasionally explained through guided tours or interpretive sessions conducted by local community members. Tourists who participated in such sessions reported a deeper emotional and intellectual connection with the experience. Conversely, in locations where interpretive frameworks are absent, rituals are often perceived as mere performances, limiting their educational impact. This finding points to a missed opportunity. Tribal rituals possess immense pedagogical value, offering insights into ecological sustainability, spiritual ecology, and community cohesion. With structured interpretation, possibly supported by ICT tools such as mobile applications or augmented reality, these rituals could be transformed into powerful educational experiences that go beyond visual consumption. (Table I).

6.4. THE ‘SPECTATOR GAP’: LIMITS OF DIRECT INTERACTION

The most critical finding emerges from the relatively lower score for ‘direct interaction with artisans’ (M = 3.65, SD = 1.15), grouped as ‘moderate’. This shows a significant gap between observation and participation in the tourist experience. The high SD (1.15) shows inconsistent opportunities for interaction, with some tourists reporting meaningful engagement while others experienced none. This gap cited above as ‘spectator gap’ highlights a structural limitation within Kerala’s current ecotourism framework. While tourists are highly motivated by the visual and cultural richness of tribal arts, the infrastructure required for immersive engagement remains underdeveloped. Activities such as learning traditional weaving techniques, participatory dance workshops, or co-creation of handicrafts are either limited or absent in many ecotourism sites. Stakeholders identified several barriers to deeper interaction: (i) Lack of formal training among tribal artisans to engage with tourists in a pedagogical manner, (ii) Time constraints within standard tourism itineraries, (iii) Concerns over cultural intrusion, particularly in the case of sacred rituals, (iv) Absence of institutional support for designing and managing interactive experiences. Despite these challenges, both tourists and community members expressed interest in more participatory models. (Table I).

6.5. THEMATIC INSIGHTS FROM QUALITATIVE DATA

The four major that emerged from thematic analysis of interview transcripts are given below:

- **Economic Empowerment with Uneven Distribution:** While tribal arts contribute to higher seasonal income (as noted in the abstract), the benefits are not uniformly distributed. Artisans directly involved in tourism activities gain significantly, whereas others remain marginalized. This situation in turn warrants more inclusive models of participation.
- **Cultural Erosion versus Cultural Revival:** A paradox emerges simultaneously with tourism and acts as a force for cultural preservation and transformation. Added visibility prompts tribal communities to sustain their traditions, the pressure to perform the same for tourists can lead to simplification or alteration of their rituals.
- **Youth Engagement and Aspirational Shifts:** Though youngsters in communities' view tourism as a viable livelihood option they seek modernization and ICT integration, thus showing a shift in desires. This aligns with the suggested ICT-based model by the study.
- **Governance and Institutional Gaps:** While EDCs (Eco-Development Committees) and such other initiatives do exist, the stakeholders demand the need for better coordination, capacity-building, and policy support to scale up successful models.

7. DISCUSSION: THE 'KERALA MODEL' OF CULTURAL ECOTOURISM

The findings of this study point toward the emergence of a distinctive 'Kerala Model' of Cultural Ecotourism, wherein tribal arts, ecological consciousness, and community-based tourism intersect to generate both opportunities and contradictions. While the integration of indigenous cultural expressions into ecotourism circuits has demonstrably enhanced livelihood prospects, it simultaneously exposes structural inefficiencies and ethical dilemmas. This section critically examines these dynamics by focusing on economic leakages, commodification, and the transformative role of art in environmental advocacy, with special reference to Wayanad as a microcosm of this evolving model.

7.1. ECONOMIC IMPACT AND THE MIDDLEMAN PROBLEM

One of the most tangible benefits of integrating tribal arts into ecotourism is the seasonal increase in household income. Data from artisan cooperatives in Wayanad indicate that households engaged in art performances and craft production earn approximately 32 percent more during peak tourism seasons compared to those relying solely on forest-based livelihoods. This income diversification is particularly significant in reducing dependence on extractive activities such as minor forest produce collection, thereby aligning with the principles of sustainable development. However, this positive trend is undermined by a persistent structural issue—namely, the “middleman problem”. Qualitative insights reveal that 55 percent to 60 percent of the final retail price of products such as the traditional Kannadippaya mat is captured by intermediaries, including resort operators and distributors. This disproportionate value capture highlights a classic case of the “Leakage Effect,” where economic gains generated through tourism fail to circulate within the local community. The poignant remark by an artisan from Idukki, ‘My children cannot eat branding’ captures the essence of this imbalance. While branding, packaging, and market access add value to the product, the primary producers remain marginalized in the value chain. This not only limits the economic empowerment of tribal communities but also risks perpetuating existing inequalities under the guise of sustainable tourism. From a policy perspective, this finding underscores the urgent need for disintermediation strategies, such as ICT-enabled Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) platforms, cooperative marketing models, and fair-trade certification systems. By enabling artisans to directly access markets, such interventions can enhance income retention and strengthen the local economic multiplier effect.

7.2. THE PARADOX OF COMMODIFICATION

A central theme emerging from this study is the paradox of commodification, particularly evident in the transformation of ritualistic art forms into staged performances for tourism consumption. For instance, the traditional healing ritual Gaddika, once deeply embedded in the spiritual and medicinal practices of tribal communities, is now often presented as a scheduled evening performance in resorts. This transition illustrates the tension between cultural

preservation and commercial viability. On one hand, performers receive monetary compensation (approximately ₹1,500 per show), which contributes to livelihood security. On the other hand, community elders express concern over the gradual “museumification” of culture—a process whereby living traditions are reduced to static displays for external audiences. Yet, the findings of this study suggest that this transformation is not entirely detrimental. Drawing on the concept of “emergent authenticity” (Cohen, 1988), it can be argued that staged performances may acquire new meanings and functions within contemporary contexts. For younger generations, participation in such performances fosters a sense of pride and identity, serving as a counterforce against cultural erosion. Thus, commodification in the Kerala context appears to be ambivalent rather than purely exploitative. The key lies in ensuring that communities retain agency over how their cultural expressions are represented and that performances are contextualized with appropriate narratives to preserve their original significance.

7.3. ART AS ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

A particularly novel insight from this research is the role of tribal arts as vehicles for environmental advocacy. In regions such as Idukki, performances often incorporate symbolic representations of local biodiversity. For example, tribal dancers emulate the movements of the Great Indian Hornbill, a flagship species of the Western Ghats ecosystem. Such performances function as ‘interpretive tools’, translating complex ecological concepts into emotionally engaging experiences for tourists. By witnessing these artistic representations, visitors develop a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of culture and nature. This emotional engagement, in turn, can influence pro-environmental behaviour, such as supporting conservation initiatives or adopting sustainable travel practices. This finding reinforces the idea that cultural ecotourism can transcend its economic function to become a platform for ecological education and advocacy. Integrating structured interpretive elements, like guided storytelling, multimedia presentations, or interactive workshops, can further raise this potential.

8. CASE STUDY: WAYANAD – THE EPICENTRE OF CULTURAL ECOTOURISM

The district of Wayanad emerges as a ‘living laboratory’ for the Kerala Model of Cultural Ecotourism. With the highest concentration of tribal communities in the state, Wayanad exemplifies the convergence of policy initiatives, cultural heritage, and tourism dynamics. The simultaneous implementation of the LIFE Mission (focused on housing) and the Responsible Tourism Mission (focused on livelihoods) creates a unique ecosystem where social welfare and economic development intersect. Tribal arts play a central role in this ecosystem, serving as both cultural assets and economic resources.

8.1. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRIBAL CRAFTS IN WAYANAD

The diversity of tribal crafts in ecotourism destinations widely vary and this reflects the rich and vast cultural fabric of these communities. (Table II).

Table 2

Table 2 Types of Tribal Crafts - A Comparative Perspective			
Craft Type	Raw Material	Community	Market Value (tourists)
Bamboo Flutes	Forest Bamboo	Paniya	Upto 3 times mark-up (tourists)
Earthen Pottery	Local Clay	Kuruma	High demand for Organic type
Jewellery items	Seeds, Wood, Beads	Various	Export demand (DPIIT approved)

Source: Field Survey

The following comparative insights underline the economic and material dimensions of the various craft forms of tribal communities in Kerala:

- **Bamboo Flute (Paniya Community):** Crafted from locally sourced forest bamboo, these flutes are emblematic of the community’s musical traditions. However, they experience a markup of up to 3 times in urban and tourist hubs, again pointing to the issue of value appropriation by intermediaries.

- **Earthen Pottery (Kuruma Community):** Produced using locally available clay, these items benefit from growing demand for “organic” and eco-friendly products. This trend aligns well with global sustainability narratives, offering scope for niche market positioning.
- **Tribal Jewellery (Various Communities):** Made from seeds, wood, and other natural materials, these artefacts possess significant potential for formal recognition and branding, including possibilities for support under national initiatives such as DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade).

These craft forms illustrate the interplay between traditional knowledge and market dynamics. While demand for such products is increasing, the benefits remain unevenly distributed due to structural inefficiencies in the supply chain.

8.2. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS: TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL ECONOMY IN KERALA

The findings collectively suggest that tribal arts in Kerala’s ecotourism landscape are currently positioned at the intersection of aesthetic consumption and economic opportunity, but have not yet fully evolved into immersive, knowledge-rich experiences. The dominance of visual appeal, coupled with limited interaction, underscores the need to transition from a spectator-centric to a participatory tourism model. The identified ‘spectator gap’ serves as a critical entry point for policy and practice. Bridging this gap could enhance tourist satisfaction, deepen cultural understanding, and generate more sustainable livelihoods for tribal communities. Furthermore, the relatively high appreciation for authenticity and educational value indicates a receptive market for more meaningful engagement. Besides, the empirical results provide a foundation for executing the proposed CSI. Indicators like depth of interaction, authenticity preservation, community participation, and economic equity can be numerically measured and integrated into the CSI framework. This enables policymakers and practitioners to monitor and also improve the cultural sustainability of ecotourism initiatives in Kerala. So, the analysis shows that while tribal arts greatly raise the attractiveness of Kerala’s ecotourism initiatives, their transformative power remains underutilized. Solving the structural and institutional barriers to immersive engagement can unlock a more balanced and sustainable model of tourism – one that respects cultural integrity while maximizing socio-economic benefits.

9. POLICY SUGGESTIONS

The analysis and discussion underscore that while tribal arts significantly enhance Kerala’s ecotourism appeal, structural inefficiencies, particularly economic leakage, weak intellectual property protection, and limited participatory engagement, must be addressed through targeted policy interventions. The following suggestions aim to operationalize a more equitable, culturally sensitive, and technologically enabled model for sustainable development.

9.1. ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRIBAL ARTS INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY (IP) CELL

A critical first step is the creation of a dedicated Tribal Arts Intellectual Property (IP) Cell under the Government of Kerala. This institutional mechanism should prioritize the fast-tracking of Geographical Indication (GI) tags for unique tribal products such as Wayanad Bamboo Flutes and Idukki Grass Mats (Kannadippaya). GI recognition would legally safeguard these crafts from industrial-scale imitation and unauthorized commercialization, thereby preserving their cultural authenticity and enhancing their market value. Beyond GI registration, the IP Cell should also facilitate collective trademarks, documentation of traditional knowledge, and legal literacy among tribal artisans. By formalizing ownership over cultural expressions, the state can ensure that economic benefits accrue primarily to the originating communities rather than external entities. This initiative aligns with broader global efforts to protect indigenous cultural heritage within intellectual property regimes.

9.2. INSTITUTIONALIZING THE “ARTISAN-IN-RESIDENCE” PROGRAMME

The current model of “one-off” performances in resorts contributes to the commodification and superficial consumption of tribal arts. To address this, the introduction of a structured “Artisan-in-Residence” (AiR) Programme is recommended across ecotourism destinations, particularly in high-density tribal regions such as Wayanad and Idukki. Under this programme, tribal artists and craftspeople’s would be engaged for extended residencies within eco-resorts and community tourism centres. This would ensure: (i) Stable and predictable income streams for artisans, (ii)

Opportunities for deeper cultural exchange between tourists and communities, and (iii) Development of immersive learning experiences, such as workshops on weaving, music, and dance. Such residencies would transform tourism from a passive, spectator-driven activity into an interactive and educational experience, thereby bridging the “spectator gap” identified in the study. Additionally, the presence of artisans on-site would enable real-time storytelling and contextualization of cultural practices, preserving their meaning and significance.

9.3. DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL “DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER” (D2C) HUBS

To counter the “middleman problem” and associated leakage effects, it is imperative to leverage Kerala’s robust ICT infrastructure for the creation of Digital Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) Hubs. These platforms would enable tribal artisans to directly market and sell their products to global consumers through e-commerce channels and social media. Key elements of this initiative include: (i) Capacity-building programmes for tribal youth in digital literacy, branding, and online marketing; (ii) Partnerships with platforms such as Etsy and region-specific e-commerce portals; (iii) Development of localized digital marketplaces managed by cooperatives or Ooru Kootams (tribal councils); and (iv) Integration of storytelling elements (videos, narratives, virtual tours) to enhance product value. By empowering tribal youth as digital entrepreneurs, this strategy not only reduces dependency on intermediaries but also fosters intergenerational continuity in cultural practices. Moreover, it aligns with the broader vision of inclusive digital growth under India’s ICT-driven development paradigm.

9.4. CREATION OF A TRIBAL ART PRESERVATION FUND

To ensure sustained financial support for cultural preservation, the establishment of a Tribal Art Preservation Fund is proposed. This fund can be operationalized through a mandatory 2 percent ‘Culture Fee’ levied on trekking permits, eco-resort bookings, and other tourism-related services in ecologically sensitive zones. The proceeds from this fee should be directly transferred to Ooru Kootams, thereby strengthening community-led governance and decision-making. The fund can be used for: (i) preservation and documentation of endangered art forms, (ii) events on community festivals and intergenerational knowledge transfer programmes, (iii) infrastructure development for craft production and performance spaces, (iv) welfare measures for elderly artisans and cultural custodians. Such a decentralized funding mechanism would ensure that tourism revenues are reinvested into the very communities that sustain the cultural ecosystem, thereby enhancing both economic equity and cultural resilience.

9.5. INTEGRATING TRIBAL ARTS INTO EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In line with the National Education Policy (NEP), there is scope for integrating tribal arts into formal and informal education. Specialized courses, certificate programmes, vocational training modules focusing on indigenous arts can be launched in universities and tourism institutes across Kerala. This would, (i) create a skilled workforce for cultural tourism, (ii) enhance academic recognition of tribal knowledge systems, (iii) encourage research and documentation of indigenous practices. Such integration would support tourism development and also contribute to the broader objective of cultural democratization and inclusivity.

10. CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms that tribal arts constitute the core of Kerala’s authentic ecotourism experience, providing a vital human dimension to its rich natural landscapes. Unlike conventional tourism models that prioritize scenic beauty alone, the Kerala model integrates culture, ecology, and community, thereby offering a more holistic and meaningful experience to visitors. The findings clearly demonstrate that tribal arts serve as powerful economic enablers, contributing to increased household incomes and diversified livelihoods. At the same time, they function as repositories of indigenous knowledge, embodying sustainable practices and ecological wisdom that are highly relevant in the contemporary context of environmental crises. However, the study also highlights critical challenges. The persistence of the “Leakage Effect”, the risks associated with cultural commodification, and the limited scope for interactive engagement underscore the need for a more balanced and inclusive approach. Without appropriate safeguards, there is a danger that tribal communities may be reduced to passive participants—or worse, mere exhibits—within the tourism value chain. The proposed policy interventions emphasize the importance of community empowerment, technological integration, and

institutional support. By securing intellectual property rights, promoting direct market access through ICT, and ensuring fair revenue distribution, Kerala can strengthen the economic foundations of its tribal communities. Simultaneously, initiatives such as the Artisan-in-Residence programme and cultural preservation funds can help maintain the spiritual and symbolic integrity of tribal art forms. Ultimately, the success of the “Kerala Model” will depend on its ability to reconcile tradition with modernity. Tribal arts must not be viewed merely as commodities for tourist consumption but as living expressions of identity and resilience. Empowering tribal youth, fostering participatory governance, and embedding cultural values within development strategies are essential to achieving this balance. In conclusion, Kerala stands at a critical juncture where it can redefine the contours of sustainable tourism. By positioning its indigenous communities as equal partners in development rather than peripheral beneficiaries, the state can create a model that is not only economically viable but also socially just and culturally enriching.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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