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INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS AND REGENERATIVE TOURISM IN INDIA: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Tourism development has long been the target of criticism for its extractive nature, leading to cultural commodification and environmental degradation. Both nature and culture have been seen as commodities on the market, rather than as living systems. The states in India have great potential for sustainable tourism development. However, Indigenous Ecological Systems are often overlooked in the planning and management of tourism.

The paper describes an alternative framework called regenerative tourism, which prioritizes restoring ecosystems, supporting local communities economically, and supporting cultural continuity of local peoples.

Utilizing a qualitative comparative approach, the paper draws on existing literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. The study examines Indigenous Ecological Systems within India in the following regions- Kerala, Ladakh, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Meghalaya, and Kutch. The study also compares their findings with those from Switzerland. The results show that while many of the principles associated with regenerative tourism are practiced by many communities in India, their integration into tourism governance remains fragmented and largely symbolic.

The primary obstacle to implementing regenerative tourism is not due to an absence of Indigenous ecological knowledge, but rather the absence of institutional structures that formally acknowledge and implement these systems within tourism governance.

Keywords: *Regenerative Tourism, Indigenous Ecological Systems, Sustainable Tourism Governance, Community-centred Development, Cultural and Ecological Restoration*

1. INTRODUCTION

Regenerative tourism is proposed as a new approach that restores ecosystems and brings power to the people where conventional sustainable tourism cannot address the environmental and social issues systemically. This paper looks at this regenerative tourism through the lens of political ecology, indigenous knowledge, and commons governance, and focuses on India's areas with diverse regions, which range from Kerala's sacred groves to Ladakh's traditional futures, Rajasthan's water infrastructures, Sikkim's organic initiatives, Meghalaya's living bridges, and Kutch's pastoral lands. The paper also compares these with the Swiss Alpine models to discover scalable strategies for the Beneficial tourism instead of merely reducing the impacts.

OBJECTIVES

- Consider regenerative tourism as a development of conventional sustainability through political ecology and indigenous knowledge integration for equitable, ecosystem-restoring practices in the different regions of India.
- Examine case studies from Kerala, Ladakh, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Meghalaya, and Kutch in relation to Switzerland's Alpine models to uncover common-pool-based strategies that are scalable and grounded in traditional ecological know-how.
- Tackle the theoretical gaps between literature themes and practical applications by suggesting frameworks for tourism that yield net-positive impacts for both the communities and the environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable tourism despite being a corrective approach, still faced criticism for being more impact mitigation focused rather than transformative, which resulted in allowing economic growth at the cost of social equity and ecological (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Hence, sustainability is habitually more a matter of policy rhetoric than a means for real change in the governance structure.

On the other hand, regenerative tourism has become a new paradigm to transform the situation so as to promote plant and animal life restoration, increase community happiness and bring about long-term, place-based development where Pollock (2019). It takes systems ecology as a basis for its view that instead of marketable products, destinations are living socio-ecological systems and that their success is determined by the health of the ecosystem, continuity of culture, and benefits of localized economy (Cave & Dredge, 2020). Ostrom (1990) and Berkes (2012) are among those who have shown that a community-managed resource system is often more effective in maintaining the ecological balance than a centralized government.

In India, traditional practices like sacred groves, traditional water management, agroforestry, and pastoral mobility have controlled resource use through cultural institutions (Gadgil & Guha, 1995). Nevertheless, these practices have been relegated to the periphery by the postcolonial and neoliberal development scenarios (Escobar, 1998). The studies on tourism have pointed out the frequent disconnection between the indigenous ecological systems and the tourism governance, as the areas like Kerala, Ladakh, Rajasthan, Meghalaya, and Kutch tend to treat their ecological heritage as a commodity rather than integrating it with the management frameworks.

There has been a growing and critical discussion among tourism researchers on the traditional models of tourism in relation to extraction, degradation, and so on. While sustainable tourism practices may be considered as healing measures, at the same time, they have been accused of overly relying on mitigation strategies in terms of structural transformations, thus sometimes allowing the growth to be at the cost of either the social equity or the ecological resilience (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Hence, sustainability is perceived as a political language that does not really want to implement substantial changes through governance.

Therefore, the paradigm shift to regenerative tourism, which is not limited to ecosystem restoration, has gained traction that focuses on the well-being of the community with a long-term perspective instead of a short-term one (Pollock, 2019). Grounding itself in systems ecology, it sees the tourist destination not as a sellable product but as a living system whose health is defined in biocultural terms (Cave & Dredge, 2020). The very essence of this new paradigm is community-managed systems aligned with the traditional systems of indigenous knowledge.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

The author of this study decided to use a research design that is qualitative and exploratory and based on the interpretivist paradigm which is competent for probing into the policy frameworks and complex socio-ecological systems beneath regenerative tourism. The nature of regenerative tourism is conceptual and contextual, this means place-based knowledge, governance structures, and cultural continuity.

The researcher has used a comparative case study method which allows the systematic examination of the different regional contexts in India besides extracting international insights from Switzerland as a reference model. The comparative case studies are especially useful for spotting similarities and differences, and for transferring institutional mechanisms that have been developed in one socio-ecological setting to another.

Case Selection Criteria

The selection of cases was carried out through purposive sampling on the basis of the presence of anatomically stable ecological systems having a historical evolution and relevance to the principles of regenerative tourism. The Indian regions of Kerala, Ladakh, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Meghalaya, and Kutch were selected as they met the following three important criteria:

1. The existence of indigenous ecological systems which control land, water use, or livelihood practices
2. Active or emerging tourism involvement
3. Ecological stress related to tourism development or other pressures that have been documented
4. Switzerland was selected as a comparative international case because of its successful institutionalization of traditional ecological practices within the framework of tourism governance.

Data Sources

The research depends entirely on secondary qualitative data, which were obtained from a variety of sources to guarantee thoroughness and triangulation in the analysis. The sources are:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles that are listed in the Scopus and UGC-CARE databases
- Government policy papers and tourism mission reports (both at the national and state levels)
- Reports from global organizations like the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The use of secondary data is fitting considering that the study is primarily concerned with theoretical synthesis, policy analysis, and comparative institutional frameworks rather than with primary behavioral measurement.

Analytical Framework

The analysis of the data was carried out through the application of a thematic content analysis technique. The literature and the policy documents were reviewed in a systematic manner and were coded according to the three futuristic tourism indicators that were derived from the conceptual framework:

1. Ecosystem restoration and ecological resilience
2. Community-centered economic circulation
3. Cultural continuity and governance mechanisms

Each case was examined to assess the presence, absence, or partial realization of these indicators within existing tourism frameworks. This enabled cross-case comparison and identification of structural gaps between indigenous ecological practices and formal tourism governance.

3.1 Kerala's rich indigenous practices—such as Pokkali rice–prawn farming, sacred groves (kavus), traditional nalukettu architecture, crafts, tribal eco-knowledge, and cultural forms like Theyyam and Vallam Kali—offer strong yet underutilized potential for regenerative tourism. Pokkali farming and kavus, in particular, reflect regenerative principles by sustaining biodiversity without chemical inputs. Similar heritage-based models in countries like Switzerland have strengthened rural economies.

Kerala's Responsible Tourism initiatives, including STREET zoning and Vanasree outlets, already link local crafts with tourism, enhancing women's livelihoods through SHGs. The state's backwaters, sacred groves, climate-responsive architecture, Ayurveda and wellness traditions, and agri-tourism based on spice gardens and paddy fields can all support sustainable tourism if carefully managed. Together, these resources allow tourism to protect ecology, preserve culture, and strengthen rural livelihoods.

3.2 Ladakh: Cold Desert Adapting to Climate-Compatible Tourism

Ladakh has traditionally sustained its fragile cold-desert environment through glacier-fed irrigation systems, shared water management, and climate-responsive buildings that suit extreme conditions. However, modern tourism—largely focused on adventure activities and long-distance travel—has increased environmental pressure on this sensitive ecosystem. Promoting community-run homestays, glacier conservation tourism, and monastery-guided seasonal visitor limits can support greener tourism while protecting Ladakh's ecosystem, strengthening local livelihoods, and preserving traditional community governance.

3.3 Rajasthan: Arid Zone Hydrological Heritage

The water management infrastructure of Rajasthan that is historic—stepwells (baoris), johads, and tankas—constitutes a sophisticated response to ecological conditions that are arid. These systems were integrated within social institutions, ritual calendars, and community stewardship mechanisms.

Water heritage tourism can shift the focus from monument-centric tourism to making it possible to restore the groundwater systems while at the same time decentralizing the tourism benefits. The tourism revenues that would be specifically used for water infrastructure maintenance and local employment could have a direct impact on ecological regeneration and cultural preservation.

3.4 Sikkim: Organic Agriculture and Slow Tourism

Sikkim's complete transition to being an organic state stands for an integrated method of agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and rural livelihoods. The agricultural systems of the region are in sync with the altitude ecology and the community governance structures.

The potential of regenerative tourism in Sikkim can be realized through the establishment of farm-based tourism networks, agro-ecological learning experiences, and cooperative models for revenue sharing. Such methods will help in the process of soil regeneration, rural economies will become stronger, and agro-cultural knowledge systems will be very much sustained.

3.5 Meghalaya: Living Root Bridges and Time-Based Ecology

The living root bridges of Meghalaya, which are a product of the natives' cooperation over the centuries, are a remarkable manifestation of the long-term ecological engineering practice that consists of integrating botany, hydrology, and cultural continuity. These constructions are the antithesis to the short-termism that is the hallmark of mainstream tourism development. Positive aspects of the community-controlled tourism models such as limited visitors, ecological maintenance reinvestment, and prohibition of intrusive infrastructure can turn Meghalaya into a standard for time-based regenerative tourism, where sustainability lasts for generations.

3.6 Kutch, Gujarat: Pastoral Landscapes and Commons Governance

Kutch's semi-arid region has relied upon nomadic pastoralism, rotational grazing, and seasonal migration all along its history. These activities keep the soil healthy while at the same time, preserving the cultural identity and supporting craft-based livelihoods. The synergies between regenerative tourism initiatives and pastoral cycles along with commons management can lead to the revival of grasslands, better economic conditions for the nomadic tribes, and recognition/respect of indigenous people's ecological wisdom within the formal tourism setting.

4. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: LESSONS FROM SWITZERLAND

Switzerland serves as an example of how the worldwide management of alpine commons, the usage of vernacular architecture, and traditional pastoral systems have been incorporated into tourists' policies. Very importantly, the legal acknowledgment, visitor control, and revenue reinvestment performed by Switzerland have turned the indigenous ecological practices into sustainable eco-tourism without compromising the environment. The Indian context needs regulatory translation, just like Switzerland, rather than a complete invention of sustainability practices.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The dependence on secondary data puts a limitation on the capturing of the updating community viewpoints and the dynamics of localized tourism. Furthermore, while the comparative method gives broad insights, it may still miss some variations at the micro-level within the regions.

SUGGESTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account the conceptual assessment of regenerative tourism frameworks and the comparative study of indigenous ecological systems in the selected Indian regions, the present research makes the following proposals to the policymakers, tourism planners, and academic researchers.

1. Institutional Recognition of Indigenous Ecological Systems

Instruments of tourism such as sacred groves, traditional water management systems, agro-ecological practices, and pastoral commons should be officially acknowledged as the functional rather than the symbolic heritages. These systems should be included within the planning documents, zoning regulations, and destination management plans of the statutory policies on tourism. The legal recognition would then guard against any adverse effects, would allow money to be allocated for maintenance, and would authorize community management within the tourism governance frameworks.

2. Community-Centered Tourism Governance

Regenerative tourism alongside the community must undergo this radical transformation from tourist-driven types to the adoption of community-led models. Local authorities, including village councils, pastoral groups, and cooperatives of farmers, as well as indigenous bodies should be allowed to take the decisions not only about the tourism development but also visitor management and utilization of generated revenues.

3.Integration of Carrying Capacity and Seasonal Regulation

Tourism planning, at its best, should not aim to attract more visitors, but to ensure that visitor numbers stay within what a destination can handle without harm. Indigenous communities have long shown us how to manage ecosystems wisely—by observing seasonal changes, allowing areas to rest, and using different access points to control footfall and avoid overuse. These time-tested practices now form the foundation of some of the most sustainable and profitable tourism models.

By limiting visitors, closing areas seasonally, and rotating access to sensitive sites, tourism can better align with nature's rhythms. Such approaches ease environmental pressure, give landscapes time to recover, and protect destinations from lasting damage caused by overcrowding.

4. Circular Economic Models and Revenue Reinvestment

The allocation of tourism revenue should be designed to support the local circulation of the economy and not the leakage of capital to other venues. Community-owned enterprises, cooperative homestay networks, and ecosystem maintenance funds can be the means through which tourism income is channeled into ecological restoration and livelihood security.

5. Knowledge Integration and Capacity Building

The integration of indigenous ecological knowledge into tourism education, guide training programs, and the interpretation of nature should be the priority of capacity-building initiatives. The collaboration between academic institutions, tourism departments, and community organizations can help with the documentation of knowledge while maintaining cultural sensitivity and protecting intellectual property.

6. Policy Convergence Across Sectors

Regenerative tourism policy cannot be derived from live policy only. The degrees of convergence between tourism, environment, agriculture, water resources, and rural development departments should be increased. Thus, integrated policy frameworks can support ecological and livelihood systems. Coordination mechanisms for interdepartmental communication should be established at the state and regional levels.

7. Learning from International Best Practices

The comparative evidence from countries, such as Switzerland, highlights the significance of the government of commons and ecological conservation being a part of the tourism system. Context-sensitive adaptation of international best practices can assure the juridical governance of regenerative tourism.

CONCLUSION

All these proposals together suggest that regenerative tourism in India does not require inventing new sustainability practices, but rather integrating existing ecological wisdom into institutions. By aligning tourism policy with regenerative principles, the sector can be recognized as an asset in governing indigenous ecological systems, transforming tourism from an extractive industry into a source of renewal for nature, the economy, and culture.

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