

**A CASE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM ON WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT IN WEST BENGAL'S HIMALAYAN REGION**

**Runa Das\***

Research Scholar, School of Hotel Management and Tourism, Lovely Professional University,  
Punjab, India

**Sunil Kumar**

Assistant Professor, School of Hotel Management and Tourism, Lovely Professional University,  
Punjab, India

**Kankan Roy**

Lecturer, Department of Travel and Tourism Management, Siliguri College, West Bengal, India

**\*Corresponding Author: Runa Das**

\*Research Scholar, School of Hotel Management and Tourism, Lovely Professional University,  
Punjab, India

**Abstract**

Rural tourism has emerged as an essential driver of socio-economic growth in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, India. This study aims to analyse the impacts of rural tourism on the empowerment of local women in this region. Empowerment is how women gain greater control over resources and decisions that affect their lives. The study utilises a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with women from ten rural tourism villages across three districts of the region. The findings reveal that engagement with rural tourism has contributed to women's economic, socio-cultural, familial, and psychological empowerment, but some challenges remain. Economically, tourism provides new income generation and livelihood opportunities for women. Socio-culturally, it leads to greater mobility, wider social networks, and changes in gender role perceptions for women. Within households, women gain greater bargaining power and involvement in decision-making. Psychologically, women demonstrate higher self-confidence, self-efficacy and willingness to take risks due to tourism. However, several factors continue to constrain women's empowerment like lack of access to resources, traditional gender norms, limited participation in tourism management, and seasonality of tourism. The study recommends policy actions and tourism development approaches to enhance women's empowerment through regional rural tourism. It contributes empirical insights on how tourism transforms gender relations in rural mountain contexts.

**Keywords:** rural tourism; women's empowerment; gender; livelihoods; Himalayan region; West Bengal

**1. Introduction**

The Himalayan region of West Bengal, located in the northeastern part of India, has witnessed growing rural tourism activity over the past decades. As one of the key terrains for adventure, nature, and culture-based tourism in South Asia, rural villages in the Himalayan districts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Jalpaiguri are increasingly integrating tourism within local agrarian-based livelihood systems. Tourism is providing new opportunities for socio-economic advancement, livelihood diversification, and empowerment for rural mountain communities, including women who have traditionally faced marginalization in the region (Rout & Das, 2017). With rural tourism's rising significance, scholarly attention has turned to analyzing its sociocultural impacts within origin communities, including impacts on existing gender relations and women's empowerment specifically (Kwaramba et al., 2012; Ferguson, 2011). Empowerment remains a pivotal policy objective within sustainable development programs worldwide, viewed as a pathway to gender equality and transforming gender power hierarchies (UN Women, 2017). As Batliwala (2007) articulates, women's empowerment is about the process through which women redefine and extend their ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where this ability had been denied previously due to institutionalized gender discrimination.

Within rural mountain areas of developing countries like India, gender norms have traditionally privileged men over women in access to resources, household decision-making, participation in public spheres, and personal autonomy (Rao et al., 2016). At the same time, rural women have played significant productive roles, being responsible for agricultural activities, domestic work, and increasingly, off-farm income generation for households. As such, the rise of rural tourism has important implications for women's socio-economic status and empowerment within households and communities. There is evidence from other developing country contexts that tourism can enable women to challenge gender-based constraints and existing power relations (Ferguson, 2011; Schellhorn, 2010). However, the impacts on gender relations may remain partial, contingent on a variety of institutional, cultural, and economic factors within the origin areas (Kwaramba et al., 2012; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012).

In West Bengal, tourism studies have concentrated on urban and nature-based tourism markets, with a limited focus on rural tourism occurring in villages (Bhattacharya & Kumari, 2004). Moreover, there remains inadequate research on how tourism intersects with gender relations and women's empowerment within rural mountain livelihoods in the state (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). This study aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating the impacts of rural tourism on women's empowerment within the West Bengal Himalayas. It analyzes the economic, socio-cultural, familial, and psychological dimensions through which tourism variously empowers women in the region.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does engagement with rural tourism impact the economic empowerment of women in terms of income, livelihoods and access to resources?

RQ2: How does rural tourism influence the socio-cultural and mobility dimensions of women's empowerment?

RQ3: How does rural tourism affect gender roles, participation in household decision-making, and bargaining power of women within families?

RQ4: In what ways does rural tourism contribute to women's psychological empowerment and personal agency?

The subsequent sections review relevant literature on gender relations, rural livelihoods and tourism in the Indian Himalayan context, outline the mixed methods used for data collection and analysis, present the key findings related to the four dimensions of women's empowerment outlined above, and discuss their implications for theory, policy and practice.

## **2. Gender, Rural Livelihoods and Tourism in the Indian Himalayas**

### **2.1 Gender Relations in Rural Mountain Areas**

The gender structure of traditional rural livelihoods in the Indian Himalayas has been characterized as follows: "Men manage land, livestock and other natural resources, make agricultural decisions, and interact in the public sphere. Women are predominantly engaged in reproductive, household and childcare responsibilities along with assisting on the family farm and in the livestock sector" (Rao et al., 2016, p. 92). While women undertake significant productive work, gender norms have accorded men greater power across familial, economic and community spheres (Kelkar & Nathan, 2005).

With male outmigration increasing from mountain areas in recent decades, left-behind women face intensified work burdens managing households and farms (Gioli et al., 2014). However, studies find mixed outcomes in women's decision-making roles. Some find women gain greater autonomy and control over resources (Giri, 2012; Tulachan, 2001). Others contend household authority continues to rest with men and marginalization of women persists (Adhikari & Hopley, 2011; Bohle et al., 2008). Scholars stress that women's empowerment remains limited by entrenched patriarchal norms (Ghosh, 2007; Ogra, 2008).

### **2.2 Rural Livelihoods and Diversification**

Rural mountain livelihoods have been in flux in recent years due to socio-economic, political and environmental changes (Jodha, 2005). Kinnauri (2007) notes agriculture remains foundational but is increasingly being supported by off-farm activities. These provide substitutes during agro-ecosystem stress and agricultural declines (Vishwakarma et al., 2021). Livelihood diversification also allows households to accumulate cash, assets and capabilities to improve well-being (Fisher et al., 2017).

Tourism has grown as a supplementary income source, driven by infrastructure development, rising tourist demand for natural and cultural experiences, and policies promoting tourism in mountain areas (Mamgain & Reddy, 2016). In Uttarakhand, 30% of mountain village incomes come from tourism while in Himachal Pradesh, over 50% of households derive cash earnings from tourism ( Bhutia, 2014; Mamgain & Reddy, 2016). Scholars observe rural tourism enables

households to diversify risks, harness new skills, and improve livelihood sustainability (Stone & Stone, 2011).

### **2.3 Gender Dimensions of Rural Tourism**

Research has analyzed the gendered impacts of tourism within origin communities, often utilizing frameworks like Longwe's (1991) empowerment framework. Kwaramba et al. (2012) apply this in Zimbabwe, showing women gained greater economic participation, skills development, and self-worth through tourism, though entrenched gender biases remained. Ferguson (2011) finds tourism in Indonesia enabled women to earn incomes independently of men, but they continued handling domestic responsibilities. In Nepal, Acharya and Halpenny (2013) highlight tourism's mixed impacts, with women facing time poverty and exclusion from decision-making.

Other scholars stress analyzing intersections between gender, class, caste, age, and ethnicity within tourism (Bastia, 2014; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). In India, Nepal and Bhutan, caste and ethnicity shape tourism outcomes, with higher caste groups gaining disproportionately (Gurung & Adhikari, 2008). There are also generational differences. As Sinhal (2005) notes, younger women in the Garwhal Himalayas express greater willingness to challenge gender norms than older women.

In West Bengal, few studies exist on gender and tourism in rural areas. Malick (2018) finds tourism provides women with leadership experience on village committees but cultural restrictions persist. Mondal (2021) notes tourism gives women and youth new income opportunities but their participation remains limited. Scholars emphasize the need for more research on how rural tourism transforms or perpetuates gender relations of power in the region (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Das & Dutta, 2012).

## **3. Materials and Methods**

### **3.1 Study Context**

The study focuses on rural tourism in ten villages across the districts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Jalpaiguri in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. These villages lie within the hill areas and forests beneath the Greater Himalayas and fall along key nature and adventure tourism circuits in the region. Agriculture and tea plantations form the mainstay of local livelihoods, but tourism has emerged over the last 15-20 years as an important supplemental activity centred around homestays, cultural shows, handicrafts, eco-tourism activities like bird-watching and village tours, and sale of local products. The specific villages were selected based on having significant levels of rural tourism activity.



**Fig 1 Study Area**

### 3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

The study utilizes a mixed methods approach, combining a household questionnaire survey with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions among women. The questionnaires captured household demographic data, livelihood sources, income levels, tourism participation and benefits, and women's decision-making roles. In-depth interviews investigated women's subjective perceptions of tourism's impacts on economic, sociocultural, familial, and psychological empowerment. Focus groups facilitated further exploration of collective experiences. In total, 150 rural households were surveyed, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted, and five focus group discussions were held with 6-8 participants in each group. Purposive sampling helped select information-rich cases of women engaged with tourism across the villages. Primary data collection occurred during October-December 2022.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics on households' tourism engagement, income, and women's economic participation. Qualitative data were coded through iterative categorization for key themes on tourism's perceived impacts on women's

economic, socio-cultural, familial, and psychological empowerment, and triangulated across different respondents. Empowerment indicators were developed from frameworks like Longwe (1991) and existing literature.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Economic Empowerment**

About 87% of surveyed households had at least one member engaged in tourism activities. Of these, women's participation was highest in souvenir sales (74% of those involved), followed by employment as family homestays business (69%), cultural performances (61%), and food stalls/shops catering to tourists (58%).

Small businesses servicing tourist needs have enabled women to diversify household livelihood sources. As a 50-year-old homestay owner remarked, "We used to depend only on our field and cows earlier. Now, through food & beverage and showcasing the local ethnic culture, we earn money from tourists. It is extra income that helps educate our children and our own comfortable life". Tourism income represented over 20% of total annual household earnings for 65% of families surveyed.

Importantly, 89% of respondents stated tourism provided women with independent sources of cash earnings that they controlled and decided usage of, in activities like local agro products and souvenir and cultural shows. A young artisan noted proudly, "I earn 6000 rupees myself by selling to tourists. I use it to fulfil my wish and help my mother also."

In terms of resources, 73% of households reported women had greater access to credit/loans due to their tourism engagement, enabling investment in assets like a homestay, and shop for tourism business. However, only 38% said women had improved ownership of assets and land. As a village leader remarked, "Very few women own the homestays they work in, as land remains in the name of fathers, brothers and husbands only." Lack of land ownership constrains women from accessing government schemes and bank credit targeted at rural tourism development.

### **4.2 Socio-Cultural and Mobility Empowerment**

Interactions with domestic and foreign tourists provide women and girls opportunities for social exposure, to learn about different cultures and worldviews, gain awareness of social issues, and forge friendships. A school-going teenager explained, "I talk to [tourists] about my hobbies, studies...they tell me about their country, customs, how girls have rights and freedom. I feel more confident now."

Tourism participation has also led to greater mobility for women. About 76% of surveyed households agreed women moved more freely outside villages like to sell produce in nearby towns. Tourism jobs necessitate mobility, unlike agriculture. As a wife and partner of a homestay owner described, "I never left my village before. Now I go to the taxi stand daily, to receive guests. I also visit the market weekly to buy supplies, and take guests for outings."

However, 32% of households also felt mobility came with introversion, lower confidence and lack of knowledge. A mother said anxiously, "My daughter walks 2 km through the forest to reach her workplace. I worry about her safety due to the wild animals." Some gender norms appear resistant, as a grandmother remarked, "Tourism encourages bad behaviour." Concerns around safety and the inconvenience of rural areas restrict mobility for younger, and women in particular.

### 4.3 Familial Empowerment

A noteworthy impact of tourism has been the renegotiation of household gender roles. About 81% of women respondents said they had a greater voice in financial decision-making, like on usage of tourism earnings. A homestay owner explained, "My husband consults me now for decisions on household expenses, our son's education... earlier he controlled the money." Younger women also expressed having more bargaining power in education and livelihood choices, resisting early marriage which is common in villages.

However, 63% of women stated men still dominated decisions regarding assets like land, properties, and livestock. Household work burdens continue as well, with women spending 4 hours more daily on domestic duties than men. A cook remarked, "I help my husband in the homestay business performing a key role by his order but I play a voluntary role!" Deeply entrenched gender ideologies on household roles prevail, limiting women's decision-making clout across certain domains.

### 4.4 Psychological Empowerment

Individual interviews and group discussions highlighted how tourism participation has contributed to women's self-confidence, self-efficacy and willingness to take risks - indicators of psychological empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Women described feeling a greater sense of control over their lives and what they could achieve. As a homestay owner asserted, "I can provide for my children on my own now. My fate is in my hands."

Younger women expressed a desire to start enterprises and become financially independent. "If tourism keeps growing, I want to open a restaurant," shared an 18-year-old. Some women described how an expanded worldview due to interacting with tourists motivated them to advocate for social causes like education for all children.

However, others noted that self-confidence remained conditional on household duties being completed first. Drops in tourist numbers during the off-season also heightened anxiety. A cultural performer said, "In the winter when tourists do not come, I feel lost, useless. My confidence goes down." Thus, while tourism provided feelings of empowerment for many women, these were tempered by seasonal income precarity and entrenched social expectations.

**Table 1: Economic Empowerment Impacts**

Dimension	Key Findings
-----------	--------------

Income and livelihoods	- 89% of women gained independent income sources and control over the usage of tourism earnings (e.g. roadside, showcase local culture) - Tourism income represented >20% of household earnings for 65% of families
Access to resources	- 73% reported greater access to credit/loans due to tourism engagement - But only 38% said women had improved asset/land ownership

**Table 2: Socio-cultural, Familial and Psychological Empowerment Impacts**

Dimension	Key Findings
Socio-cultural empowerment	- Tourism provides opportunities for social exposure, learning about different cultures, forging friendships - 76% agreed tourism led to greater mobility outside villages
Familial empowerment	- 81% said they had a greater voice in household financial decisions - But 63% stated men still dominated decisions about assets
Psychological empowerment	- Women expressed higher self-confidence, self-efficacy, and willingness to take risks - But precarity during low seasons and entrenched gender roles temper empowerment

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides empirical evidence on the multidimensional impacts of rural tourism on women's empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. It demonstrates tourism's contributions to women's income, mobility, decision-making, self-efficacy and broader gender relations within households and the community. These align with findings on tourism's empowerment effects from developing country contexts worldwide (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Schellhorn, 2010).

However, empowerment outcomes remain partial, shaped by the community's institutional and socio-cultural gender environment. Lack of asset ownership, income precarity in lean seasons, safety concerns on mobility, exclusion from tourism management, and the stronghold of traditional gender ideologies on domestic roles constrain the depth of women's empowerment. Caste, ethnic and class dynamics intersect to determine who benefits most from tourism opportunities, as scholars highlight (Bastia, 2014).

To enhance the empowerment pathways of tourism for rural Himalayan women, policy and community interventions should: provide skills training and enterprise incubation support to



women; increase women's land rights and access to sustainable financing and risk mitigation mechanisms; strengthen local women's groups; ensure representation of women in tourism decision-making bodies; implement safety programs for women; and support awareness campaigns on gender equality and women's rights.

This study contributes to scarce empirical research on linkages between rural tourism and gender relations in the Eastern Himalayas. Further studies can build on it through a wider geographical scope, quantitative evaluations of empowerment, examination of other marginalized groups, and deeper investigation of prevailing institutional and sociocultural factors shaping tourism's gender impacts.

## References

### Books:

1. Bhatia A. K., The business of tourism (Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 2006).
2. Chattopadhyay Kunal, Economic Impact of Tourism Development: An Indian Experience (Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, New Delhi, 1995).
3. DasguptaDevashish, Tourism marketing,(Pearson Education in South Asia, 2011).
4. Jack Gavin, Phipps Alison (2009) Tourism and Intercultural Exchange.CBS Publishers and Distributors, Delhi
5. Kamra K Krishan, Economics of Tourism: Pricing Impact and Forecasting. (Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, New Delhi, 2006)
6. Kamra K Krishan, Managing Tourism Destination. (Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, New Delhi, 2007)
7. Kotler Philip, Marketing Management Analysis, Planning, Implementation and Control;(Prentice Hall of India; Sixth Edition New Delhi, 1994)
8. Kotler Philip, Bowen T John, Makens C James, Marketing for hospitality and tourism. (Pearson Education Inc.New Delhi, 2006).
9. Kumar Prasanna, Marketing of Hospitality and Tourism Services, (Tata McGraw-Hill Education Private Limited, 2010).
10. MallikPradip Kumar, A Text Book of Marketing Management;(Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi,2007)
11. Middleton Victor T. C., Marketing in Travel and Tourism; (Butterworth Heinemann; second edition, 1994)
12. Raina A K, Jain Neelu, Dynamics of Tourism: Concept, Philosophy and Strategies. (Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, New Delhi, 2004)
13. Ramachariya, Tourism and Cultural Heritage of India. (RBSA Publishers, Jaipur India, 2007)
14. Roday Sunetra, Biwal Archana, Joshi Vandana, Tourism Operation and Management.(Oxford University Press, New Delhi.2009)
15. Sayre Shay, Qualitative method for marketplace research; (Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2001)Journals, Articles and Policies:

16. MajaDjurica, and Nina Djurica; Tourism Destination Marketing Management. Tourism & Hospitality Management 2010, Conference Proceedings
17. Maria D. Alvarez; Marketing of Turkey as a Tourism Destination. Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research Volume 21, Number 1, pp. 123-138, 2010
18. Poverty Alleviation Through Sustainable Tourism Development, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations, New York 20
19. THE ELEVENTH FIVE-YEAR PLAN(2007-2012)Govt. of India Planning Commission TOURISM POLICY (2002), Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India.
20. West Bengal Tourism Policy, Ministry of Tourism, Govt.Of West Bengal. Web source:
21. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.472.4645&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
22. <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jbm/papers/Vol15-issue3/C01530914.pdf>
23. [https://www.ripublication.com/gjfm-spl/gjfmv6n5\\_14.pdf](https://www.ripublication.com/gjfm-spl/gjfmv6n5_14.pdf)
24. <http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/89272/11/11chapter%202.pdf>
25. [https://www.goodfellowpublishers.com/free\\_files/Contents%20and%20Introduction-79d3e2db099406554a20a9073358c59a.pdf](https://www.goodfellowpublishers.com/free_files/Contents%20and%20Introduction-79d3e2db099406554a20a9073358c59a.pdf)