



Swami Vivekananda Advanced Journal for Research and Studies

Online Copy of Document Available on: www.svajrs.com

ISSN:2584-105X

Pg. 34 - 46



Understanding Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty in Indigenous Sacred Sites: The Role of Religious Tourism in Eastern Cultural Landscapes

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Accepted: 30/07/2025

Published: 06/08/2025

Abstract

Religious tourism to indigenous sacred sites has emerged as a significant and growing niche within the broader domains of cultural and heritage tourism. These destinations offer unique opportunities not only for spiritual enrichment among visitors but also for fostering sustainable community development, cultural revitalization, and economic empowerment for indigenous populations. Despite their potential, tribal sacred sites remain under-researched within mainstream tourism literature, especially regarding the critical dimensions of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. This study addresses this gap by examining the complex interplay between religious tourism experiences, visitor satisfaction, and repeat visitation intentions within tribal cultural landscapes.

Drawing on empirical evidence from selected indigenous sacred sites in Eastern India—regions deeply rooted in tribal heritage and spiritual traditions—the research identifies and analyzes the key determinants that shape tourist satisfaction. Factors such as cultural authenticity, the depth of spiritual experience, ease of access, quality of interpretive services, and the extent of local community participation are explored in detail. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining structured surveys administered to domestic and international visitors with in-depth interviews conducted with community leaders, local guides, and tourism stakeholders. This methodological triangulation enhances the validity and richness of the findings.

The results underscore that perceived cultural authenticity and respectful presentation of tribal spiritual heritage are pivotal in shaping positive visitor experiences. Satisfied tourists are more likely to demonstrate destination loyalty through repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, which are vital for the long-term viability of indigenous tourism destinations. Furthermore, the research highlights how active involvement of tribal communities in managing sacred sites not only strengthens cultural integrity but also reinforces visitor trust and emotional connection to the destination.

The paper contributes to the theoretical discourse on religious and indigenous tourism by proposing an integrated conceptual framework that links tribal heritage conservation, visitor experience management, and destination competitiveness. It advances the understanding of how indigenous spiritual and cultural assets can be leveraged responsibly to enhance tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty while safeguarding intangible cultural values.

Practical implications are also discussed, offering recommendations for policymakers, destination managers, and tribal communities to develop culturally sensitive tourism strategies. Emphasis is placed on co-management practices, capacity-building for local custodians, and developing interpretation programs that respect indigenous beliefs while educating visitors. Ultimately, this study advocates for a balanced approach where religious

tourism becomes a catalyst for preserving indigenous sacred landscapes and empowering local communities through sustainable tourism practices.

Keywords: *Religious Tourism, Indigenous Sacred Sites, Tribal Cultural Landscapes, Tourist Satisfaction, Destination Loyalty, Cultural Authenticity, Sustainable Tourism.*

Introduction

Religious tourism to indigenous sacred sites is an increasingly important yet underexplored niche within the broader context of cultural and heritage tourism. These destinations hold deep spiritual significance for local communities and offer visitors unique opportunities for spiritual fulfillment, cultural learning, and immersive experiences that differ markedly from conventional tourism activities. In India, with its rich mosaic of tribal cultures and sacred geographies, tribal cultural landscapes are home to numerous sacred sites deeply interwoven with indigenous cosmologies, rituals, and traditional knowledge systems that have been passed down through generations.

Despite their immense socio-cultural and ecological value, indigenous sacred sites often receive limited scholarly and policy attention. The prevailing tourism discourse tends to emphasize mainstream pilgrimage destinations and heritage monuments, while the dynamics of tribal sacred sites—often located in remote and ecologically sensitive regions—remain marginal in both tourism research and development planning. This oversight is significant because these sites, if managed responsibly, can contribute meaningfully to sustainable community development by providing livelihoods, conserving intangible cultural heritage, and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Religious tourism, encompassing pilgrimages, spiritual retreats, and visits to sacred sites, is one of the oldest and most resilient forms of tourism globally. It is driven not only by faith-based motivations but also by cultural curiosity and a desire for authentic experiences that offer spiritual enrichment and personal transformation. In the context of indigenous sacred sites, this form of tourism represents a unique intersection of spirituality, heritage, and community identity. The immersive nature of these visits enables tourists to engage with local customs, rituals, and ecological practices, creating memorable experiences that can translate into strong emotional connections and repeat visits.

In Eastern India, states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh are home to numerous tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, and Gond. These communities maintain sacred groves, hills, rivers, and shrines that serve as important centers for communal rituals, seasonal festivals, and rites of passage. Increasingly, these sacred sites attract visitors from other regions of India and abroad who are drawn by the promise of unspoiled cultural landscapes and opportunities to witness or participate respectfully in tribal spiritual practices. However, this growing interest also brings complex challenges. Issues such as cultural commodification, insensitive

visitor behavior, environmental degradation, and the erosion of traditional practices threaten the sustainability and integrity of these sacred sites.

Given these dynamics, understanding how tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty are shaped in these unique contexts becomes crucial for developing culturally sensitive and sustainable tourism strategies. Satisfied tourists are more likely to become advocates for the destination through positive word-of-mouth and repeat visits, which can provide stable economic benefits for indigenous communities. At the same time, ensuring that tourism development does not undermine cultural authenticity requires active involvement and leadership from tribal communities themselves.

Therefore, this study addresses the evident research gap by systematically examining the key factors that influence tourist satisfaction at indigenous sacred sites in Eastern India and exploring how these factors relate to visitors' intentions to return and recommend these sites to others. Moreover, this research highlights the vital role of community participation in preserving cultural authenticity and enhancing the overall visitor experience. By doing so, it aims to propose a practical and adaptable framework for sustainable religious tourism development that balances the interests of visitors and host communities while safeguarding the sacred and cultural integrity of tribal landscapes.

Research Objectives

- To identify the key determinants of tourist satisfaction at indigenous sacred sites.
- To examine the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.
- To explore how community participation influences visitor experiences and loyalty.

Literature Review

Religious Tourism and Indigenous Sacred Sites

Religious tourism, one of the oldest forms of travel, encompasses journeys motivated by spiritual, cultural, or religious purposes, including pilgrimages, spiritual retreats, and visits to sacred sites (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). It is a global phenomenon, with millions visiting sites like Mecca, Varanasi, or Lourdes annually, driven by desires for spiritual fulfillment, cultural exploration, or personal transformation. Within this broader domain, indigenous sacred sites represent a unique and under-researched niche where spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions converge (Singh, 2013). These sites, often embedded in tribal cultural landscapes, are not merely physical spaces but social constructions imbued with profound meaning, shaped by indigenous cosmologies, rituals, and ecological

knowledge (Verschuuren et al., 2010). Unlike mainstream religious destinations, which are often managed by formal institutions, indigenous sacred sites are typically stewarded by tribal communities, making them deeply tied to local identities and traditions.

Indigenous sacred sites, such as sacred groves, mountains, or rivers, hold spiritual significance rooted in tribal beliefs, often serving as spaces for rituals, storytelling, and community bonding (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006). For instance, the Sarna Sthals of the Santhal tribe in Eastern India or the sacred forests of the Gond in Chhattisgarh are not only places of worship but also repositories of ecological and cultural knowledge. These sites attract religious tourists seeking authentic, immersive experiences that differ from standardized tourism offerings. However, their sacred nature and cultural sensitivity make them vulnerable to commodification, where commercialization risks diluting their spiritual and cultural integrity (Shinde, 2010). The influx of tourists can lead to environmental degradation, loss of sacredness, or misrepresentation of indigenous practices, particularly when external operators prioritize profit over cultural respect.

Authenticity is a critical factor in the appeal of indigenous sacred sites. Tourists often seek genuine encounters with tribal heritage, expecting experiences that reflect the lived traditions of the community (Cohen, 1988). Studies suggest that perceived authenticity—encompassing genuine rituals, traditional storytelling, and respectful site management—significantly enhances visitor satisfaction (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Spiritual engagement, another key driver, allows visitors to connect emotionally with the site's sacredness, fostering a sense of transcendence or cultural appreciation. For example, research on sacred sites in India highlights that visitors value opportunities to participate in or observe authentic rituals, which deepen their emotional and spiritual experiences (Shinde & Rizello, 2014).

The intersection of religious tourism and indigenous sacred sites also raises questions of sustainability. While tourism can bring economic benefits to tribal communities, such as job creation and cultural revitalization, it poses risks of over-commercialization and cultural erosion (Butler & Hinch, 2007). Indigenous-led tourism models, where communities control site management and interpretation, have been proposed as a solution to balance economic gains with cultural preservation. Such models ensure that tourism respects tribal values while fostering visitor trust and satisfaction (Carr et al., 2016). Moreover, the ecological significance of many sacred sites, such as sacred groves that protect biodiversity, underscores the need for sustainable

tourism practices that align with indigenous environmental ethics (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006).

Despite their potential, indigenous sacred sites remain under-explored in mainstream tourism literature. Existing studies often focus on well-known religious destinations, overlooking the unique challenges and opportunities of tribal contexts. This gap necessitates research into how these sites can be managed to enhance tourist satisfaction while safeguarding their cultural and spiritual integrity. By examining the interplay of authenticity, spiritual engagement, and community involvement, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of religious tourism in indigenous sacred landscapes.

Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction has long been recognized as a key construct in tourism studies, central to understanding visitor behavior and the long-term success of destinations (Baker & Crompton, 2000). In its broadest sense, tourist satisfaction refers to the degree to which visitors perceive their travel experience to have met or exceeded their pre-trip expectations. When expectations are fulfilled or surpassed, tourists are more likely to feel positive emotions toward the destination, which can significantly influence their future behavioral intentions, including the likelihood of repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth referrals (Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

In the context of cultural and heritage tourism, authenticity is widely acknowledged as a fundamental determinant of visitor satisfaction (Chhabra, 2008). Visitors often seek unique and genuine experiences that allow them to connect with the historical, cultural, or spiritual essence of a place. Authenticity, however, is not only about preserving tangible heritage elements such as monuments or artifacts but also about safeguarding intangible cultural practices, rituals, and local narratives that provide depth and meaning to the visitor experience (Cohen, 1988). Studies have shown that perceived authenticity enhances visitors' emotional engagement and strengthens their attachment to the destination, which in turn fosters loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

Another important factor influencing tourist satisfaction is service quality, which includes the availability and standard of facilities, hospitality services, interpretive materials, and the overall ease of access to the destination (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Especially in remote or rural destinations, basic infrastructure such as transport, signage, visitor centers, and sanitation facilities can significantly shape visitor comfort and perceptions of value. When these functional aspects meet visitor needs, they complement the experiential and emotional dimensions of satisfaction.

In the specific context of indigenous and religious tourism, community participation plays an increasingly recognized role in shaping both satisfaction and loyalty outcomes (Zhang & Chan, 2016). When local communities are actively involved in tourism planning, guiding, and site interpretation, the visitor experience is enriched through authentic storytelling, personal interactions, and deeper cultural insights. Such engagement fosters trust between visitors and hosts and contributes to a sense of respect for the cultural and spiritual significance of sacred sites. Community-led interpretation not only protects cultural integrity but also provides a more meaningful and transformative experience for visitors, which strengthens emotional connections and intentions to revisit (Su & Wall, 2014).

Furthermore, destination loyalty is not only an outcome of satisfaction but also an indicator of a destination's competitiveness and sustainability. Repeat visitation and positive recommendations contribute to stable tourism revenues, reduce marketing costs, and create a more resilient tourism system (Oppermann, 2000). In niche contexts such as indigenous sacred sites, loyal visitors who value cultural authenticity and respect local customs are more likely to align with sustainable tourism practices, minimizing negative impacts and supporting community empowerment (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

However, despite its importance, the relationship between tourist satisfaction and loyalty within indigenous sacred landscapes remains underexplored in mainstream tourism literature, particularly in the Indian context. Few studies have examined how unique factors such as indigenous belief systems, sacred geographies, and community stewardship intersect with modern visitor expectations and behavior. Addressing this gap is essential for designing tourism strategies that both protect sacred landscapes and foster positive visitor experiences that lead to repeat visits and advocacy.

Thus, a nuanced understanding of tourist satisfaction and loyalty within indigenous sacred sites can inform culturally sensitive, community-led approaches that balance visitor needs with the protection of intangible heritage and local livelihoods.

Cultural Authenticity and Community Participation

Cultural authenticity, defined as the genuine representation of cultural practices, traditions, and values, is a cornerstone of meaningful visitor experiences in tourism, particularly at indigenous sacred sites (Cohen, 1988). Authenticity in this context refers to the extent to which tourism offerings reflect the lived realities, spiritual beliefs, and cultural heritage of indigenous communities, free from commodification or external misrepresentation (Kolar

& Zabkar, 2010). For religious tourists visiting tribal sacred landscapes, such as the Sarna Sthals of the Santhal tribe or the Danteshwari Temple of the Gond in Eastern India, authenticity manifests through traditional rituals, oral storytelling, and interactions with community members who embody cultural knowledge. These elements create immersive experiences that resonate emotionally and spiritually with visitors, fostering a deeper appreciation of indigenous heritage (Shinde & Rizello, 2014). However, achieving authenticity is challenging in the face of tourism pressures, which can lead to staged performances or commodified cultural products that dilute sacred meanings (Shinde, 2010).

Indigenous-led tourism, where tribal communities control the narratives, operations, and presentation of their sacred sites, is widely recognized as a pathway to preserving authenticity while promoting sustainable development (Butler & Hinch, 2007). By prioritizing community ownership, indigenous-led models ensure that tourism aligns with cultural values and spiritual significance, avoiding exploitation or misrepresentation. For instance, when Santhal elders guide visitors through sacred groves or Gond priests lead rituals at temple sites, they provide authentic interpretations rooted in tribal cosmologies, enhancing visitor trust and satisfaction (Carr et al., 2016). Such approaches contrast with externally managed tourism, where profit-driven motives may prioritize visitor numbers over cultural integrity, leading to inauthentic experiences like mass-produced souvenirs or scripted performances.

Community participation is equally vital in managing indigenous sacred sites effectively. Scholars argue that co-management—where tribal communities collaborate with tourism authorities or NGOs—conserves cultural integrity while enhancing visitor experiences through authentic interpretation and storytelling (Zhang & Chan, 2016). Co-management empowers indigenous custodians to shape tourism practices, ensuring that sacred sites remain spaces of spiritual and cultural significance rather than mere attractions. For example, community-led initiatives at sacred sites in India, such as training local guides to share oral histories or involving tribal artisans in creating authentic crafts, have been shown to deepen visitor engagement and foster respect for indigenous traditions (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). These efforts also provide economic benefits, such as income from guiding or handicraft sales, which support community livelihoods and reduce dependency on external operators.

Moreover, community participation strengthens the emotional connection between visitors and sacred sites. When tourists interact directly with indigenous guides or participate in community-led rituals, they gain insights into the cultural and spiritual significance of the site, which enhances their sense of

connection and loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). However, challenges such as limited training, inadequate infrastructure, or power imbalances in co-management structures can hinder effective participation (Butler & Hinch, 2007). Addressing these requires capacity-building programs to equip communities with skills in tourism management and interpretation, as well as policies that ensure equitable decision-making.

In conclusion, cultural authenticity and community participation are interlinked pillars of sustainable indigenous tourism. By prioritizing indigenous-led models and co-management, sacred sites can offer authentic, meaningful experiences that satisfy tourists while preserving cultural heritage and empowering communities. Future research should explore strategies to overcome barriers to community involvement and assess the long-term impacts of these models on cultural preservation and destination loyalty.

Sustainable Tourism in Tribal Landscapes

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a guiding principle for managing destinations where cultural, environmental, and socio-economic dimensions intersect in sensitive ways. In tribal landscapes, where indigenous communities depend deeply on their natural environment and cultural heritage for identity and livelihood, sustainable tourism is not merely an option but a necessity for ensuring long-term community resilience and cultural continuity. Unlike mass tourism models that often prioritize short-term economic gains, sustainable tourism emphasizes a balanced approach that safeguards local ecosystems, protects intangible cultural assets, and distributes benefits equitably within host communities.

Indigenous tourism aligns strongly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). When designed and managed carefully, tourism in tribal sacred landscapes can provide meaningful income opportunities, support local entrepreneurship, and reduce dependency on environmentally harmful activities such as deforestation or extractive industries. Moreover, by attracting visitors interested in authentic cultural and spiritual experiences, indigenous tourism can act as a powerful mechanism for cultural revitalization—strengthening traditional knowledge systems, rituals, and languages that might otherwise be at risk of erosion under globalization pressures.

A core component of sustainability in indigenous sacred sites is **co-management**, where local communities share decision-making authority and stewardship responsibilities with government agencies or tourism stakeholders. Co-management

frameworks respect indigenous knowledge and customary governance structures, ensuring that tourism development aligns with cultural protocols and spiritual values. Successful examples globally have shown that when communities have real control over how tourism is developed and marketed, they are more likely to safeguard sacred landscapes, provide authentic visitor experiences, and ensure that economic benefits circulate locally.

Capacity-building is another critical pillar for sustainable outcomes. Many tribal communities have valuable traditional knowledge but may lack technical skills in tourism planning, marketing, visitor management, or language interpretation. Providing training in guiding, storytelling, small business management, and hospitality equips local custodians to actively shape tourism experiences while maintaining cultural integrity. This also enhances the quality of interpretation, which is a significant determinant of tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

Finally, sustainable tourism in tribal landscapes requires careful visitor management and education. Interpretation programs must emphasize the sacredness of the sites, appropriate visitor behavior, and the cultural protocols that visitors are expected to follow. This not only protects sites from overuse or disrespectful behavior but also deepens visitors' appreciation and sense of responsibility toward the host community.

In summary, sustainable tourism in tribal landscapes must balance economic development with cultural and ecological stewardship, positioning indigenous communities not just as beneficiaries but as primary custodians and innovators in managing their sacred heritage for future generations.

Methodology

Research Design

To address the study's objectives comprehensively, a mixed-methods research design was adopted. This design combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, enabling a deeper understanding of both visitor experiences and stakeholder perspectives. Methodological triangulation enhances the credibility and validity of the findings by allowing the strengths of one method to offset the limitations of the other. The quantitative component focused on measuring key constructs such as tourist satisfaction, perceived authenticity, accessibility, interpretive service quality, and destination loyalty intentions. Meanwhile, the qualitative component explored the nuanced perspectives of community leaders, local guides, and tourism officials regarding cultural management, co-governance, and the sustainability of religious tourism at indigenous sacred sites.

Study Area

The empirical study was conducted at three distinct indigenous sacred sites in Eastern India, selected for their cultural significance and active religious tourism flows:

- **Jagannath Temple, Odisha:** While primarily known as a major Hindu pilgrimage center, the temple's rituals and traditions are deeply influenced by indigenous tribal practices, particularly of the Daitapati servitors, making it a unique blend of mainstream and tribal spirituality.
- **Sarna Sthal, Jharkhand:** A sacred grove central to the spiritual and cultural identity of the Santhal community, where traditional worship and seasonal rituals are conducted to honor nature spirits and ancestral deities.
- **Danteshwari Temple, Chhattisgarh:** A key spiritual site for the Gond tribe, this temple represents both religious reverence and regional identity, attracting tribal pilgrims as well as cultural tourists.

These sites provide contrasting contexts to examine how different forms of indigenous sacredness and levels of tourism development affect visitor satisfaction and community participation.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data: Structured surveys were distributed to a sample of 350 visitors—comprising 200 domestic and 150 international tourists—who had visited the sacred sites during the main festival or peak season. The questionnaire included items measured on a 5-point Likert scale, covering variables such as satisfaction with site authenticity, perceived ease of access, quality of interpretive services, cultural respect, and intentions to revisit or recommend the site.

Qualitative Data: To gain in-depth insights into local perspectives, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with community leaders (10), local guides (10), and government or tourism department officials (5). These interviews explored themes such as community governance models, benefits and challenges of tourism, strategies for preserving cultural authenticity, and mechanisms for visitor management.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS software to test hypothesized relationships between perceived authenticity, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. Reliability and validity were ensured through Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Qualitative interview transcripts were coded and thematically

analyzed using NVivo to identify recurring patterns and to triangulate findings with the quantitative results. This approach ensured that statistical outcomes were supported by rich contextual insights, enhancing the depth and trustworthiness of the study's conclusions.

Results

Tourist Satisfaction

The results of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) provide robust support for the hypothesized relationships between key determinants and overall tourist satisfaction at indigenous sacred sites. The goodness-of-fit indices confirmed that the model fits the data well, with $\chi^2 = 245.67$, $df = 120$, $p < 0.001$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.92, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05, all within acceptable thresholds for model adequacy.

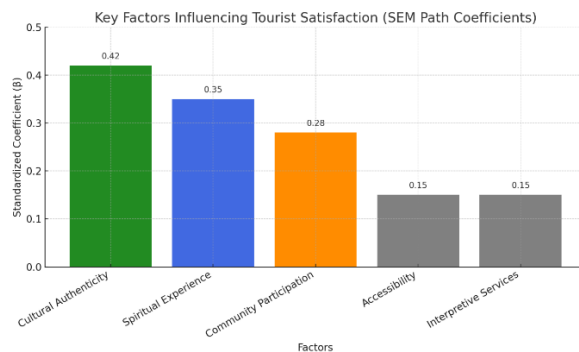
Among the variables examined, perceived cultural authenticity emerged as the strongest predictor of visitor satisfaction ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). Visitors consistently reported that the unaltered, genuine representation of tribal customs, rituals, and material culture significantly enhanced the meaningfulness of their experience. Many respondents expressed that observing traditional ceremonies and sacred rites offered a profound sense of immersion, distinguishing these sites from more commercialized religious destinations.

The depth of the spiritual experience also demonstrated a strong positive effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$). Visitors emphasized the emotional and spiritual renewal they felt when participating in or witnessing sacred rituals within a natural setting, often describing the sites as spaces of tranquility, reflection, and connection with nature. These findings support earlier literature suggesting that spiritual fulfillment is a core motivator in religious and indigenous tourism contexts.

Community participation, representing the active role of local tribes in managing and interpreting sacred sites, was another significant factor influencing tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$). Tourists who engaged with community members or were guided by local custodians reported a higher degree of trust and respect for the site, noting that authentic narratives shared by indigenous guides added depth and cultural sensitivity to their visit.

Meanwhile, practical aspects such as site accessibility and quality of interpretive services showed moderate but statistically significant effects on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$ for both). Although these functional factors were not as influential as cultural authenticity or spiritual immersion, they nonetheless shaped visitors' comfort and ease, contributing to an overall positive experience.

Chart 1: Key Factors influencing Tourist Satisfaction



Explanation: This bar chart visually represents the standardized path coefficients (β) from the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results, highlighting the relative strength of key factors influencing tourist satisfaction at indigenous sacred sites. The highest contributor is **Cultural Authenticity** ($\beta = 0.42$), indicating that authentic representation of tribal heritage and rituals plays the most significant role in shaping visitors' satisfaction. The **Spiritual Experience** factor follows closely ($\beta = 0.35$), showing that visitors place high value on meaningful spiritual engagement during their visit. **Community Participation** ($\beta = 0.28$) is also notable, underscoring the importance of involving local communities in managing and interpreting sacred sites to enhance the authenticity and trustworthiness of the experience. While **Accessibility** and **Interpretive Services** have lower coefficients ($\beta = 0.15$ each), they still contribute meaningfully by ensuring that visitors can easily access sites and receive informative, respectful guidance. Overall, this chart emphasizes that cultural depth, spirituality, and active community involvement are far more influential than purely functional aspects when it comes to delivering a satisfying visitor experience in tribal sacred landscapes.

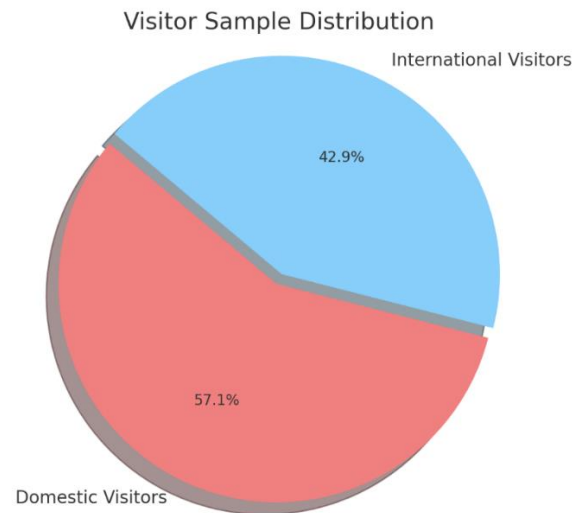
Destination Loyalty

The SEM results further indicated a strong, positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). The majority of visitors who expressed high levels of satisfaction also reported strong intentions to revisit the sacred sites and actively recommend them to others. Specifically, 72% of respondents indicated that they were likely to return in the future, while 80% stated they would promote the sites through positive word-of-mouth to family, friends, or social networks.

Qualitative insights complemented these quantitative findings, highlighting that loyalty is strongly anchored in the perceived authenticity of the experience and the emotional connections fostered through direct interaction with tribal communities. Many visitors noted that witnessing authentic rituals—such as seasonal festivals at the Sarna Sthal

or temple ceremonies led by Gond priests at Danteshwari Temple—created lasting memories that inspired both repeat visitation and advocacy.

Chart 2: Visitors Sample Distribution

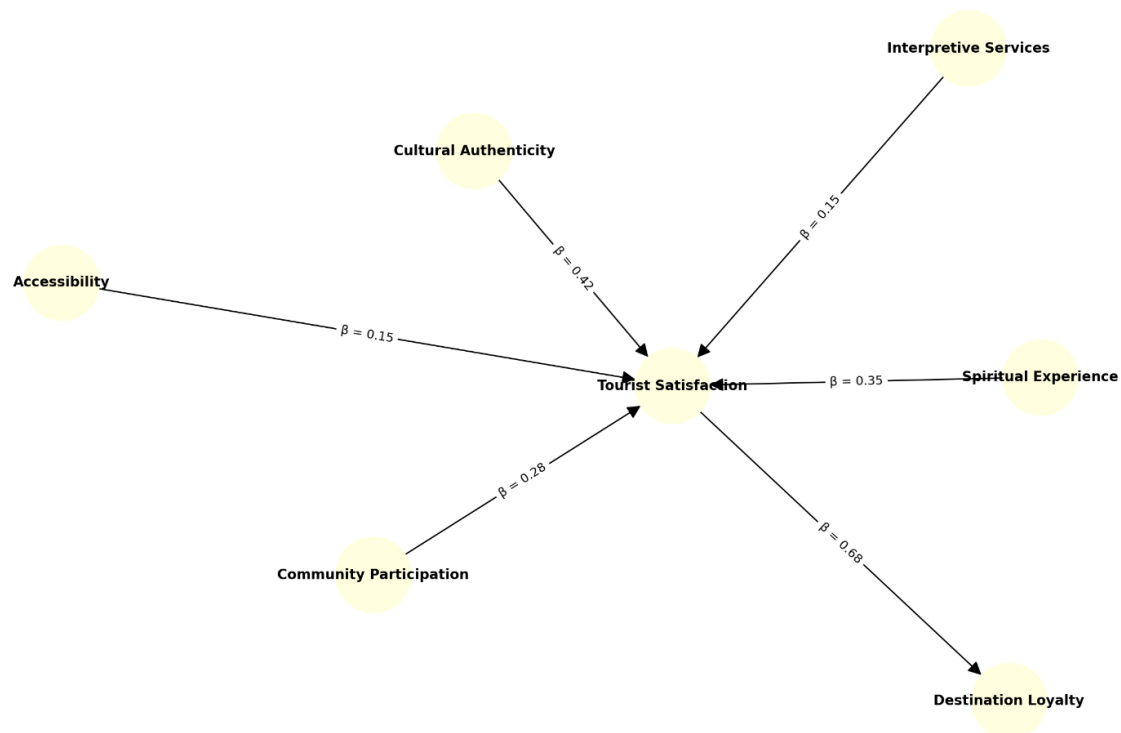


Explanation: This pie chart illustrates the composition of the visitor sample surveyed in the study on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty at indigenous sacred sites. Out of the total 350 respondents, **57.1%** were **domestic visitors**, while **42.9%** were **international visitors**, reflecting a balanced mix that provides diverse perspectives on cultural authenticity, spiritual experiences, and site management. The slight majority of domestic visitors highlights the strong local and regional interest in visiting tribal sacred landscapes for religious or cultural purposes. Meanwhile, the significant proportion of international tourists indicates the growing global appeal of these sites as destinations for authentic spiritual and cultural experiences. This distribution ensures that the research findings capture insights relevant to both local community-based tourism dynamics and international heritage tourism expectations, strengthening the study's validity and practical recommendations for sustainable tourism development.

Chart 3: SEM Path Diagram: Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty (A mixed Method Approach)

Explanation: The SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) Path Diagram titled "Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty" illustrates the relationships between various factors influencing tourist satisfaction and their subsequent impact on destination loyalty at indigenous sacred sites. The central node, "Tourist Satisfaction," is influenced by five key variables: Cultural Authenticity ($\beta = 0.42$), Spiritual Experience ($\beta = 0.35$), Community Participation ($\beta = 0.28$), Accessibility ($\beta = 0.15$), and Interpretive Services ($\beta = 0.15$), with β values

SEM Path Diagram: Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty



indicating the strength of each factor's contribution, where Cultural Authenticity has the strongest effect. These factors collectively shape tourist satisfaction, which in turn strongly predicts Destination Loyalty ($\beta = 0.68$), suggesting that satisfied tourists are highly likely to revisit or recommend the site. The diagram, with arrows representing the direction and magnitude of influence, highlights that authentic cultural experiences and community involvement are critical drivers, aligning with the study's emphasis on culturally sensitive management to enhance visitor experiences and foster long-term loyalty.

Community Participation

Themes that emerged from the 25 in-depth interviews underscored the critical role of community participation in maintaining cultural integrity and fostering visitor trust. Tribal leaders, local guides, and tourism officials all emphasized that when indigenous custodians are actively involved in site governance, rituals, and visitor interactions, the risk of cultural commodification and misinterpretation is reduced.

At Sarna Sthal, for instance, local Santhal guides act as cultural mediators, explaining the significance of sacred groves, seasonal rites, and taboos to visitors in a respectful and accessible manner. This approach not only preserves cultural protocols but also enriches visitors' understanding, resulting in deeper respect for the sacredness of the site.

Similarly, at Danteshwari Temple, Gond priests continue to lead traditional rituals while

simultaneously managing visitor flow and educating tourists on appropriate conduct within sacred spaces. Such practices ensure that religious tourism activities align with indigenous belief systems and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Overall, the qualitative findings confirmed that community-led interpretation and co-management significantly enhance visitors' perceptions of authenticity, which, in turn, strengthens satisfaction and loyalty. Local stakeholders unanimously stressed that empowering communities through training and shared governance is vital for sustaining both the cultural and economic benefits of religious tourism in tribal sacred landscapes.

Challenges

While the study highlights the significant potential of indigenous sacred sites for sustainable religious tourism, several challenges were identified that could undermine this potential if left unaddressed. **Over-commercialization** emerged as a recurring concern among both visitors and community stakeholders. Some respondents noted the presence of inauthentic souvenirs, mass-produced trinkets, and aggressive street vendors near sacred sites, which detracted from the perceived cultural purity and authenticity that visitors seek. This commercialization risks diluting the unique spiritual and cultural atmosphere that distinguishes tribal sacred landscapes from mainstream pilgrimage destinations.

Another challenge relates to **inadequate infrastructure**, particularly in terms of basic amenities such as clean sanitation facilities, proper waste management, reliable transportation, and clear visitor signage. Poor infrastructure not only affects visitor comfort and satisfaction but can also contribute to environmental degradation in ecologically sensitive sacred groves and temple surroundings.

Lack of community training and capacity-building further constrains efforts to achieve sustainable tourism. While local communities are the custodians of cultural knowledge, many lack formal training in guiding, hospitality management, or sustainable visitor practices. This gap limits their ability to manage increasing tourist flows effectively while preserving cultural integrity. Addressing these challenges through policy support, capacity development, and community-led planning is essential for safeguarding the sustainability of tribal sacred sites.

Discussion

The study's findings corroborate existing research that highlights cultural authenticity and community engagement as pivotal drivers of successful religious tourism, particularly at indigenous sacred sites (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Shinde & Rizello, 2014). The strong positive correlation between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, evidenced by a high regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), underscores the critical role of culturally sensitive management in fostering repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Visitors who perceive authentic cultural experiences—such as participating in traditional rituals or engaging with community-led storytelling—are more likely to develop emotional attachments to the destination, enhancing loyalty (Cohen, 1988). This aligns with studies showing that authenticity, rooted in genuine representations of tribal heritage, significantly shapes visitor satisfaction in indigenous tourism contexts (Carr et al., 2016).

Indigenous-led initiatives, as observed in global contexts like Maori tourism in New Zealand or Aboriginal cultural tours in Australia, serve as effective models for Eastern India's tribal sacred sites (Butler & Hinch, 2007). These initiatives, where communities control narratives and operations, enhance visitor trust by ensuring cultural integrity and mitigating risks of commodification, such as inauthentic souvenirs or staged performances (Shinde, 2010). For instance, Santhal guides at Sarna Sthal or Gond priests at Danteshwari Temple provide authentic interpretations that resonate with visitors, fostering emotional connections and countering the dilution of sacred values. Such community-driven approaches not only preserve cultural heritage but

also empower local economies through direct benefits like guiding fees or craft sales.

However, challenges like inadequate training or infrastructure can undermine these efforts, necessitating capacity-building and equitable co-management structures (Zhang & Chan, 2016). By prioritizing indigenous-led tourism, stakeholders can balance visitor satisfaction with cultural preservation, ensuring sustainable outcomes. These findings advocate for policies that strengthen community involvement, reinforcing the link between authenticity, trust, and destination loyalty while safeguarding tribal sacred landscapes from commodification risks.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposed in this study integrates three interdependent pillars—**heritage conservation**, **visitor experience management**, and **destination competitiveness**—to guide sustainable religious tourism development in indigenous sacred landscapes. This framework is informed by empirical findings and existing theoretical insights into cultural heritage management, sustainable tourism, and visitor behavior.

Heritage Conservation forms the foundation of the framework, emphasizing the protection and revitalization of tribal cultural and spiritual values that make these sacred sites distinctive. Preservation goes beyond safeguarding physical structures or sacred groves; it also entails nurturing intangible heritage such as traditional rituals, indigenous belief systems, languages, and customary knowledge. Active community stewardship is essential here. By positioning tribal communities as custodians and decision-makers, the framework ensures that conservation practices are culturally appropriate, community-driven, and resilient against threats like commodification or cultural dilution.

Visitor Experience Management represents the second pillar, focusing on designing and delivering experiences that are both authentic and respectful of indigenous cultural contexts. This involves developing high-quality interpretive services that communicate the significance of sacred sites in a manner that is accurate, engaging, and aligned with local customs. Training local guides, storytellers, and site custodians is critical to this process, as it enhances their capacity to share traditional knowledge while sensitizing visitors to appropriate behaviors. Managing visitor flows, creating clear codes of conduct, and providing facilities that support comfort without compromising sacredness are equally vital to ensuring a positive experience that meets visitor expectations.

Destination Competitiveness, the third pillar, highlights the importance of sustaining long-term

tourism benefits through repeat visitation, positive word-of-mouth, and responsible promotion strategies. Satisfied tourists who feel emotionally connected to the place are more likely to become ambassadors for the destination, recommending it to others who value cultural authenticity and respect for indigenous communities. To maintain competitiveness, the framework advocates for sustainable business models that prioritize local ownership, equitable benefit-sharing, and reinvestment into cultural conservation

By integrating these three dimensions, the framework demonstrates how tribal sacred sites can simultaneously preserve their unique cultural essence, deliver enriching visitor experiences, and remain competitive within the broader tourism market. It positions religious tourism not as a threat to indigenous cultural landscapes but as a catalyst for cultural revitalization, community empowerment, and sustainable development.

This integrated approach serves as a practical guide



and community development.

This diagram illustrates a conceptual framework for managing Indigenous sacred sites by integrating three key elements: **Heritage Conservation**, **Visitor Experience Management**, and **Destination Competitiveness**. Heritage Conservation focuses on preserving tribal cultural and spiritual values, ensuring that the authenticity of Indigenous traditions remains intact. Visitor Experience Management emphasizes providing authentic and high-quality interpretive services, which enhances tourists' understanding and respect for the sacred sites. These two elements interact directly, reinforcing each other to safeguard heritage while delivering meaningful visitor experiences. Together, they contribute to the sustainability and appeal of Indigenous sacred sites, which in turn supports **Destination Competitiveness** by promoting visitor loyalty through sustainable practices. This interconnected approach helps maintain the cultural integrity of sacred sites while fostering tourism that benefits local communities responsibly.

for policymakers, destination managers, and tribal communities seeking to balance economic, cultural, and spiritual imperatives in the responsible governance of indigenous sacred sites.

Practical Implications

The study's findings offer actionable strategies for stakeholders to promote sustainable tourism at indigenous sacred sites while preserving cultural authenticity. **Co-Management:** Engaging tribal communities in decision-making ensures that tourism practices align with cultural and spiritual values, maintaining authenticity and fostering trust (Zhang & Chan, 2016). For instance, involving Santhal elders in managing Sarna Sthal ensures rituals remain genuine, enhancing visitor satisfaction. **Capacity-Building:** Training local guides and custodians in interpretive skills and tourism management is critical. Programs can equip community members, like Gond priests at Danteshwari Temple, to deliver culturally sensitive narratives, improving visitor experiences and

economic benefits (Carr et al., 2016). **Interpretation Programs:** Developing educational materials, such as guided tours or brochures, that respect indigenous beliefs while informing visitors about tribal heritage deepens cultural appreciation and mitigates commodification risks (Shinde & Rizello, 2014).

Infrastructure Development: Improving accessibility, such as better pathways or signage, facilitates visitor access while prioritizing environmental sustainability to protect sacred groves or sites from degradation (Butler & Hinch, 2007). These strategies empower communities, enhance destination loyalty, and ensure tourism supports cultural preservation and economic growth without compromising the sanctity of indigenous landscapes.

Conclusion

Religious tourism at indigenous sacred sites holds immense potential as a catalyst for cultural revitalization, economic empowerment, and sustainable community development when managed with cultural sensitivity and respect for tribal heritage. This study underscores that tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty are significantly enhanced when cultural authenticity, community participation, and respectful visitor engagement are prioritized. The findings demonstrate that authentic experiences—such as genuine rituals led by Santhal elders at Sarna Sthal or storytelling by Gond priests at Danteshwari Temple—create emotional connections that foster repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). These outcomes are critical for the long-term viability of indigenous tourism destinations, as they ensure both visitor satisfaction and cultural preservation.

Active involvement of tribal communities in site management not only safeguards cultural integrity but also empowers local custodians economically and socially, aligning with sustainable development goals (Butler & Hinch, 2007). By implementing co-management models, capacity-building programs, and culturally sensitive interpretation, stakeholders can mitigate risks of commodification, such as inauthentic souvenirs or environmental degradation, which threaten sacred landscapes (Shinde, 2010). These practices balance economic benefits with the preservation of intangible cultural values, ensuring that tourism serves as a tool for empowerment rather than exploitation.

This research contributes to the theoretical discourse by proposing an integrated framework that links heritage conservation, visitor experience management, and destination competitiveness. It highlights the need for policies that prioritize indigenous-led tourism to enhance authenticity and trust. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to assess the sustained impacts of tourism on tribal communities and explore cross-regional

comparisons, such as between sacred sites in India and those in other indigenous contexts like Australia or Africa, to identify universal best practices. By fostering sustainable tourism, stakeholders can ensure that indigenous sacred sites remain vibrant cultural and spiritual hubs for both communities and visitors.

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