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Innovative Tribal Tourism in Madhya Pradesh: Possibilities and Challenges

Pushpendra Kumar Shah¹, Prashant Kumar Chaurasiya²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Sanjay Gandhi Smriti Government College, Sidhi (M.P.)

Email: pushpendra.bhu46@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Economics Government Girls College, Sidhi (M.P.)

Email: prashantrewaindia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Madhya Pradesh, with a tribal population of over 15 million (21% of its population), offers immense potential for innovative tribal tourism. This study examines how tribal tourism can promote sustainable economic growth while preserving cultural heritage, emphasizing opportunities such as cultural festivals, homestays, eco-tourism, digital platforms, and rural cultural centres. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study identifies potential socio-economic benefits but notes challenges like poor infrastructure, cultural commodification, and limited marketing. A ₹610 crore action plan (2025–2027) focusing on infrastructure, skills, sustainability, and global promotion could reduce tribal poverty by 20%, safeguard traditions, and position Madhya Pradesh as a model for sustainable tribal tourism.

Introduction

Madhya Pradesh, often celebrated as the “Heart of India” due to its central geographic position, is a land of extraordinary diversity and cultural richness. Its vast expanse of dense forests, protected wildlife reserves, ancient monuments, and deeply rooted tribal traditions form a unique cultural and ecological tapestry that distinguishes it from other states in India. Among its most valuable social and cultural assets are its indigenous communities, which number more than 15 million people—constituting around 21 percent of the state’s total population and representing the largest tribal demographic in the country. These communities, including the Gond, Bhil, Baiga, Korku, Sahariya, and many others, have preserved for generations a wealth of unique art forms, music, folklore, festivals, traditional healing practices, and intricate ecological knowledge that are integral to sustainable living.

The distinctiveness of these tribal cultures not only enriches the cultural identity of Madhya Pradesh but also holds immense potential for tourism-based economic development. Globally, tribal and cultural tourism have emerged as powerful drivers for inclusive growth, providing opportunities for marginalized communities to participate in and benefit from the formal economy while simultaneously promoting heritage conservation. In the context of Madhya Pradesh, tribal tourism can serve as a transformative tool, capable of generating employment, reducing poverty, and enhancing infrastructure in remote areas, while offering travelers authentic cultural experiences rooted in tradition and harmony with nature.

However, the pursuit of tribal tourism in Madhya Pradesh is not without challenges. Issues such as inadequate infrastructure, cultural commodification, socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation, and insufficient awareness of sustainable tourism practices threaten to undermine both the communities and their natural environment. Balancing the commercialization of tribal culture with the preservation of its authenticity, ensuring fair revenue distribution, and protecting vulnerable ecosystems remain critical concerns.

Literature Review

Tribal tourism, a subset of cultural and sustainable tourism, has gained global traction as travelers seek authentic experiences with indigenous communities. In Madhya Pradesh, home to India’s largest tribal population, this form of tourism offers significant potential for economic growth, cultural preservation, and social inclusion. This review synthesizes research on tribal tourism, drawing on global case studies, economic frameworks, and MP-specific studies to frame the possibilities and challenges.

Tribal Tourism: Conceptual Framework and Global Context

Tribal tourism engages visitors with indigenous cultures, traditions, and lifestyles, often in ecologically sensitive regions. It aligns with experiential tourism, prioritizing authenticity and sustainability (Butler & Hinch, 2007). Globally, successful models offer lessons for MP:

- **Maori Tourism in New Zealand:** Maori cultural performances and eco-tourism generate substantial revenue, with community-led enterprises like Tamaki Maori Village reinvesting profits locally (McIntosh, 2004). This emphasizes community ownership, applicable to MP's homestays and festivals.
- **Aboriginal Tourism in Australia:** Storytelling and art workshops support thousands of jobs, but cultural commodification risks highlight the need for sensitivity (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016), a concern for MP's tribal heritage.
- **Sámi Tourism in Norway:** Sámi reindeer herding and crafts balance economic gains with cultural preservation through community guidelines (Viken & Müller, 2017), suggesting regulatory frameworks for MP.

These cases underscore tribal tourism's economic potential while highlighting challenges like cultural authenticity and equitable benefits, relevant to MP's diverse tribal landscape.

Economic Frameworks in Tribal Tourism

Economic concepts provide a lens for analyzing tribal tourism:

- **Sustainable Development:** The Brundtland Report (1987) emphasizes meeting present needs without compromising future generations. Smith and Eadington (1997) advocate community involvement to prevent exploitation, critical for MP's tribal regions like Kanha National Park.
- **Game Theory for Stakeholder Collaboration:** Game theory analyzes stakeholder interactions (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). Cooperative models, as seen in Fiji's indigenous tourism (Gössling et al., 2017), align incentives among tribes, operators, and governments. MP could use profit-sharing to foster collaboration, avoiding conflicts over cultural exploitation.

Studies on Madhya Pradesh's Tourism

MP-specific research highlights tourism's potential and challenges. Pandey et al. (2014) note tourism's significant contribution to GSDP and employment but flag infrastructure deficits in tribal districts like Dindori. Gohil (n.d.) advocates community-led tourism for the Gond tribe, emphasizing sustainable planning for festivals like Karma. Tiwari (2019) underscores handicraft markets and homestays as tools for economic self-reliance, cautioning against cultural commodification in urban markets. MP Tourism (2023) data shows 112.1 million tourist arrivals, with rural and tribal tourism growing due to initiatives like the Tribal Circuit. However, Chaudhuri and Ghosh (2024) highlight socio-economic barriers, such as low literacy (59% in tribal areas) and landlessness, limiting participation.

Research Gaps and Contributions

Gaps include limited research on innovative models like digital platforms, insufficient focus on stakeholder dynamics, and lack of contextualization for MP's tribal diversity. This study addresses these by exploring tailored tourism products, applying game theory for collaboration, and integrating global lessons with MP-specific insights.

Possibilities

Madhya Pradesh's tribal heritage, encompassing over 15 million people from tribes like the Gond, Bhil, Baiga, and Korku, offers a foundation for transformative tourism. This section outlines five opportunities—cultural festivals, homestays, digital tourism, eco-tourism, and cultural centers—supported by hypothetical stakeholder insights and business models to ensure economic viability and community empowerment.

Historical Context of Tourism in Madhya Pradesh

MP's tourism legacy spans centuries, from ancient trade routes to modern attractions. Sites like Sanchi, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, drew Buddhist pilgrims as early as the 3rd century BCE. Medieval forts in Gwalior and Mandu, alongside the Khajuraho temples, attracted scholars and travelers. Organized tourism emerged post-independence, particularly after MP's reorganization in 1956. The Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (MPSTDC), established in 1978, promoted heritage and wildlife tourism, with national parks like Kanha, Bandhavgarh, and Pench gaining global fame for tiger safaris. In 2023, MP recorded 112.1 million tourist arrivals, reflecting a strong post-COVID recovery (IBEF, 2024). Yet, tribal tourism remained underexplored until recent years, when global demand for experiential tourism spurred initiatives like the Swadesh Darshan Scheme's Tribal Circuit, targeting districts like Jhabua and Alirajpur. The Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum in Bhopal, opened in 2013, further highlighted tribal heritage, drawing diverse visitors.

Recent policies emphasize diversification, with tribal tourism as a key focus. Programs promoting homestays, cultural festivals, and handicraft markets, supported by digital infrastructure, have gained momentum. Events like the Bhil's Bhagoria festival and Gond's Karma dance showcase community-based tourism potential. However, challenges such as poor infrastructure, cultural commodification, and socio-economic disparities require strategic solutions to unlock tribal tourism's full promise.

Research Objectives

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of tribal tourism in MP, focusing on its social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The objectives are:

1. **Identify Innovative Opportunities:** Explore novel tourism models, including festivals, homestays, digital platforms, and eco-tourism, to enhance MP's tourism portfolio and benefit tribal communities.
2. **Examine Development Barriers:** Investigate challenges like infrastructure gaps, cultural commodification, socio-economic exclusion, and environmental concerns to propose equitable solutions.
3. **Propose Sustainable Strategies:** Recommend actionable plans to balance economic growth with cultural and environmental preservation, emphasizing community empowerment.
4. **Inform Policy and Scholarship:** Offer evidence-based insights to shape MP's tourism policy and contribute to academic discourse on tribal tourism.

Scope and Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating secondary data from government reports, academic journals, and industry sources with qualitative insights from hypothetical stakeholder interviews representing tribal communities, tour operators, and officials. The scope focuses on MP, particularly tribal-dominated districts like Mandla, Dindori, and Jhabua. Recommendations are tailored to MP's socio-cultural and economic context, drawing on global trends for inspiration.

Cultural Festivals and Events

Tribal festivals like the Bhil's Bhagoria and Gond's Karma are vibrant showcases of music, dance, and traditions, ideal for tourism. Modeled after Nagaland's Hornbill Festival, these events can attract visitors and generate revenue through tickets, vendor sales, and hospitality.

Primary Data Insights: A hypothetical survey of 50 Bhil community members in Jhabua showed 78% support for tourism-focused festivals, provided tribal councils control planning to preserve authenticity. However, 62% feared cultural commodification, citing urban fairs where dances were commercialized without consent.

Business Model:

- **Product:** Annual "Tribal Utsav" in Jhabua and Mandla, featuring 5-day celebrations of Bhagoria and Karma with dance, craft markets, and tribal cuisine.
- **Target Market:** Domestic budget travelers and international cultural enthusiasts, especially millennials.
- **Revenue Streams:** Ticket sales (₹500–1,000, targeting 50,000 visitors: ₹2.5–5 crore); vendor fees (₹2,000 per stall for 200 vendors: ₹4 lakh); sponsorships (₹50 lakh).
- **Cost Structure:** Infrastructure (stages, seating): ₹50 lakh; marketing: ₹30 lakh; community training: ₹20 lakh.
- **Stakeholders:** Tribal councils ensure cultural integrity; MP Tourism provides funding and marketing.

Sustainability Measures: Limit commercialization by prioritizing community-led events and reinvesting 50% of profits into cultural preservation.

Homestays with Tribal Families

Homestays with Gond and Baiga families offer immersive experiences, empowering households and reducing urban migration. Early success in Kanha National Park suggests scalability.

Primary Data Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 30 Baiga families in Mandla showed 85% interest in hosting, citing ₹20,000–30,000 annual income potential. However, 70% lacked infrastructure (guest rooms, sanitation), and 55% needed hospitality training.

Business Model:

- **Product:** "Tribal Homestay Network" across 10 districts, offering 2–3-night stays with Gond art workshops and Baiga herbal tours.
- **Target Market:** Domestic families and international cultural tourists from Europe and North America.
- **Revenue Streams:** Homestay tariffs (₹2,000/night/guest, 1,000 homestays, 50 guests annually: ₹1 crore); activity fees (₹500/guest: ₹25 lakh).
- **Cost Structure:** Infrastructure upgrades (₹50,000/homestay: ₹5 crore); training: ₹10 lakh; booking platform: ₹20 lakh.
- **Stakeholders:** Tribal families as hosts; MPSTDC for subsidies; NGOs for training.

Sustainability Measures: Cap homestays at 10 per village and implement waste management training.

Digital Cultural Tourism

Digital platforms can globalize MP's tribal heritage through virtual tours and online handicraft markets. The Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum's virtual tours in 2021 attracted 10,000 visitors, signaling demand.

Primary Data Insights: A hypothetical survey of 40 Gond artisans in Dindori found 65% eager to sell online but lacking digital literacy. 80% supported virtual village tours with fair compensation.

Business Model:

- **Product:** "MP Tribal Digital Hub" with virtual tours, live-streamed events, and e-commerce for Gond paintings and Bhil jewelry.
- **Target Market:** Global tourists, urban youth, and art collectors.
- **Revenue Streams:** Virtual tour tickets (₹200, 50,000 users: ₹1 crore); e-commerce sales (10,000 units at ₹1,000, 20% commission: ₹2 crore); ad revenue (₹50 lakh).
- **Cost Structure:** Platform development: ₹50 lakh; digital training: ₹20 lakh; marketing: ₹30 lakh.
- **Stakeholders:** Artisans as creators; tech startups for platform; MP Tourism for funding.

Sustainability Measures: Ensure 70% of e-commerce profits go to artisans and use eco-friendly packaging.

Eco-Tourism and Adventure Tourism

MP's biodiversity-rich tribal regions, like Satpura and Amarkantak, are ideal for eco-tourism and adventure activities, enhanced by tribal ecological knowledge.

Primary Data Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 25 Baiga guides in Satpura showed 90% willingness to lead tours, citing ₹15,000 monthly earnings. However, 75% noted inadequate training, and 60% feared environmental degradation.

Business Model:

- **Product:** "Tribal Eco-Adventure Trails" with 3-day trekking and Baiga-led herbal walks.
- **Target Market:** Domestic adventure seekers (18–35) and international eco-tourists.
- **Revenue Streams:** Tour packages (₹10,000/person, 5,000 tourists: ₹5 crore); equipment rentals (₹500/tourist: ₹25 lakh).
- **Cost Structure:** Guide training: ₹30 lakh; trail development: ₹50 lakh; marketing: ₹20 lakh.
- **Stakeholders:** Tribal guides; Forest Department for compliance; tour operators for logistics.

Sustainability Measures: Limit groups to 10 tourists and reinvest 20% of profits in conservation.

Tribal Museums and Cultural Centers

The Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum in Bhopal attracts 50,000 visitors annually. Rural cultural centers can decentralize benefits, offering spaces for exhibitions and workshops.

Primary Data Insights: A hypothetical survey of 35 Korku members in Betul found 82% support for local centers, citing income and preservation benefits. 68% noted funding and expertise shortages.

Business Model:

- **Product:** "Tribal Cultural Hubs" in 5 districts with exhibitions and workshops.
- **Target Market:** Domestic tourists, school groups, and researchers.
- **Revenue Streams:** Entry fees (₹100, 20,000 visitors/hub: ₹1 crore); workshop fees (₹500, 5,000 participants: ₹25 lakh).
- **Cost Structure:** Hub construction (₹2 crore/hub: ₹10 crore); maintenance: ₹50 lakh; marketing: ₹20 lakh.
- **Stakeholders:** Artisans for workshops; MP Tourism for funding; NGOs for engagement.

Sustainability Measures: Use eco-friendly materials and allocate 25% of profits to preservation.

Challenges

Despite its potential, tribal tourism in MP faces significant hurdles that could undermine sustainability and equity. This section examines five key challenges—infrastructure deficits, cultural commodification, socio-economic marginalization, environmental sustainability, and ineffective marketing—supported by hypothetical stakeholder insights and environmental assessments.

Infrastructure Deficits

Poor road connectivity and limited public transport in tribal areas deter tourists. Only 42% of Adivasi villages have public transport access, compared to 65% statewide (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023).

Stakeholder Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 10 Mandla tribal leaders revealed 80% frustration over inaccessible villages, with a Gond leader noting monsoon-impassable roads. A Bhopal tour operator cited 60% tour cancellations due to logistics, while an MP Tourism official admitted rural areas receive only 15% of infrastructure budgets.

Analysis: Infrastructure gaps limit tourism's economic benefits, raising opportunity costs as funds for roads may divert from health or education. Rural road projects and public-private partnerships are needed.

Cultural Commodification

Over-commercialization risks reducing tribal traditions to tourist spectacles, as seen in urban fairs featuring out-of-context Gond dances (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016).

Stakeholder Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 15 Bhil artisans in Jhabua showed 70% pressure to simplify crafts for tourists. A tribal leader advocated community-led festivals, while a tour operator noted tourist demand for "packaged" experiences. An MP Tourism official cited budget constraints for community consultations.

Analysis: Commodification threatens social sustainability, potentially alienating tribes. Cooperative game theory suggests negotiated guidelines to balance authenticity and profitability.

Socio-Economic Marginalization

Low literacy (59%), landlessness, and malnutrition limit tribal participation, relegating many to low-paying roles (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2024).

Stakeholder Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 20 Baiga women in Kanha showed 85% inability to start homestays due to capital shortages. An NGO noted only 10% of training targets women, while a tour operator lamented the lack of trained guides. An MP Tourism official cited insufficient skill development funding.

Analysis: Marginalization undermines inclusive growth. Skill training investments could yield significant community income but require addressing structural issues like education.

Environmental Sustainability

Eco-tourism in biodiversity-rich areas like Satpura risks deforestation and pollution from unregulated tourist inflows (Drishti IAS, 2024).

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA): A hypothetical EIA for a Satpura eco-tourism project (5,000 tourists annually) identified:

- **Positive Impacts:** ₹5 crore for conservation; 100 Baiga guide jobs.
- **Negative Impacts:** 5 tons of plastic waste; habitat disturbance; 10,000 liters daily water usage.
- **Mitigation:** Cap tourists at 20/day; enforce zero-waste policies; use solar power.

Stakeholder Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 10 Baiga guides showed 90% support for eco-tourism but concerns over litter. A forest official noted only 5% of revenue supports conservation, while a tour operator suggested eco-certifications.

Analysis: Degradation threatens eco-tourism's viability. Cooperative models sharing conservation costs are essential.

Ineffective Marketing and Awareness

Limited global awareness restricts foreign tourist arrivals, with only 0.41 million in 2021 versus 255.54 million domestic visitors (MP Tourism, 2023).

Stakeholder Insights: Hypothetical interviews with 12 Dindori artisans showed 75% belief in global demand for Gond art with better marketing. A tour operator noted only 10% of the marketing budget targets tribal tourism, while an MP Tourism official cited limited international partnerships.

Analysis: Poor marketing limits tourist inflows, reducing economic benefits. Global digital campaigns and partnerships with platforms like TripAdvisor could enhance visibility.

Recommendations and Action Plan

To address challenges and maximize tribal tourism's potential, the following action plan, with ₹610 crore in investments from 2025–2027, is proposed:

Enhance Infrastructure in Tribal Areas

- **Action:** Build all-weather roads and transport hubs in Mandla, Jhabua, and Dindori, alongside sanitation and solar-powered amenities for homestays.
- **Timeline:** Q2 2025–Q4 2026: 500 km roads, 10 hubs; Q1 2026–Q2 2027: amenities for 1,000 homestays.
- **Funding:** ₹500 crore (₹400 crore roads/hubs, ₹100 crore amenities).
- **Stakeholders:** MP Public Works Department (lead), MP Tourism (funding), tribal councils (site selection).
- **Impact:** 20% increase in tourist arrivals, boosting economic activity by ₹1,000 crore by 2028.

Empower Tribal Communities through Skill Development

- **Action:** Train 10,000 tribal youth and women in hospitality, guiding, and digital literacy, with NGO partnerships for gender-inclusive programs.
- **Timeline:** Q3 2025–Q2 2026: 5,000 in hospitality; Q3 2026–Q2 2027: 5,000 in e-commerce.
- **Funding:** ₹50 crore (₹5,000/trainee).
- **Stakeholders:** MP Tourism (funding), NGOs like PRADAN (training), tribal councils (selection).
- **Impact:** 15% increase in tribal income, reducing poverty.

Implement Sustainable Tourism Practices

- **Action:** Enforce carrying capacity limits (20 tourists/eco-tour) in Satpura and mandate zero-waste policies and eco-certifications.
- **Timeline:** Q2 2025: Develop guidelines; Q3 2025–Q4 2026: Certify 50 operators.
- **Funding:** ₹20 crore (₹10 crore EIAs, ₹10 crore monitoring).
- **Stakeholders:** Forest Department (regulation), tour operators (compliance), tribes (monitoring).
- **Impact:** Sustains ₹500 crore in eco-tourism revenue by 2030.

Launch Global Digital Marketing Campaigns

- **Action:** Develop “Tribal Trails of MP” campaign with virtual tours and partnerships with TripAdvisor, targeting Europe, Australia, and domestic markets.
- **Timeline:** Q1 2025–Q4 2025: Content development; Q1 2026–Q4 2027: Promotions.
- **Funding:** ₹30 crore (₹15 crore content, ₹15 crore ads).
- **Stakeholders:** MP Tourism (funding), tech firms (platform), artisans (content).
- **Impact:** 10% increase in international arrivals, adding ₹200 crore by 2028.

Strengthen Policy and Monitoring Frameworks

- **Action:** Integrate tribal tourism into MP's Tourism Policy with tax incentives and establish a monitoring body for socio-economic and environmental impacts.
- **Timeline:** Q2 2025: Policy amendments; Q3 2025–Q4 2027: Monitor 50 projects.
- **Funding:** ₹10 crore (₹5 crore policy, ₹5 crore monitoring).
- **Stakeholders:** MP Tourism (policy), tribal councils (feedback), private sector (investment).

- **Impact:** Ensures 30% of profits benefit tribes.

Conclusion

Innovative tribal tourism in Madhya Pradesh offers a transformative opportunity to leverage the cultural and ecological richness of its 15 million tribal people, including the Gond, Bhil, and Baiga, for inclusive development. Opportunities like cultural festivals, homestays, digital platforms, eco-tourism, and cultural centers can empower communities and enhance MP's global tourism profile. However, challenges—infrastructure gaps, cultural commodification, socio-economic exclusion, environmental risks, and poor marketing—require strategic solutions. Stakeholder insights and environmental assessments emphasize community-led models and sustainability. The proposed ₹610 crore action plan for 2025–2027 provides a roadmap for implementation, potentially reducing tribal poverty by 20% and preserving heritage. Sustained policy support and monitoring are essential to balance economic gains with cultural and environmental integrity, positioning MP as a global leader in sustainable tourism and offering a model for other tribal regions.

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