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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sustainable Tourism Development in India: A Critical Review of Policy-Practice Disconnects

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** Tourism serves as a significant contributor to India's economy, generating employment, fostering cultural exchange, and promoting regional development. However, unchecked tourism growth precipitates environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and economic disparities.

**Methods:** This paper provides a critical examination of sustainable tourism development in India through the lens of sustainable development theory. It analyses the growth and expansion of India's tourism industry over the past three decades, assesses current policy frameworks and sustainable development strategies, evaluates environmental sustainability laws, and examines the role of promotional events. The study critically evaluates policy initiatives, eco-friendly tourism concepts, and community involvement. By integrating theoretical perspectives, recent empirical evidence (2022–2026), and comparative international case studies, the study examines sustainable tourism development in India.

**Results:** This review reveals that while India has developed a comprehensive sustainable tourism policy architecture, enforcement mechanisms, community participation frameworks, and monitoring systems remain critically underdeveloped. The findings identify substantial discrepancies between policy commitments and actual implementation, indicating that implementation deficits continue to hinder the achievement of sustainable tourism goals.

**Conclusion:** Without addressing implementation deficits, sustainable tourism in India will remain an aspirational concept rather than an operational reality. This paper concludes with prioritized, phased recommendations and identifies critical avenues for future research.

### KEYWORDS

Sustainable Development, Sustainable Tourism, India, Tourism Policy, Ecotourism, Community Participation, Policy Implementation, Environmental Sustainability

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism represents a vital sector of India's economy, serving as a significant driver of economic growth, employment generation, and foreign exchange earnings. India's diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and historical monuments attract millions of domestic and international tourists annually, positioning the country as one of the fastest-growing tourism destinations globally. The sector contributes approximately 5.22% to India's GDP and supports 46.5 million jobs, equivalent to roughly 13.34% of total national employment (Ministry of Tourism, 2026). In the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Development Index, India holds a commendable 39th rank out of 119 countries, demonstrating marked improvement from previous years.

Approximately 9.5 million foreign visitors visited India in 2024–2025, with foreign exchange earnings reaching \$28 billion, nearly exceeding pre-pandemic levels (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly decreased arrivals to 6.19 million in 2021, the sector has demonstrated robust recovery. Projections indicate that India's tourism sector will grow at a compound

annual growth rate of 7–9% over the coming decade. By 2030, the sector is estimated to contribute \$250 billion to GDP, generate \$56 billion in foreign exchange earnings, attract 25 million foreign arrivals, and create 137 million jobs.

However, the rapid expansion of tourism has raised serious concerns about environmental degradation, overcrowding, cultural commodification, and social disruption. The tourism sector's strong backward and forward linkages with hospitality, civil aviation, transportation, and handicraft sectors amplify both its economic benefits and environmental footprints. In recent years, public awareness of green products has increased, emphasizing the need for sustainable development (Niñerola et al., 2019). Current economic policies at both international and national levels prioritize environmental sustainability, highlighting the importance of balancing economic development with environmental stewardship (Ayamba et al., 2019).

This study addresses a critical gap in the sustainable tourism literature by providing a comprehensive, theoretically-grounded analysis of the implementation gap between policy commitments and ground-level

execution in India. While existing research has examined either policy frameworks or environmental impacts in isolation, this review integrates multiple analytical dimensions—policy analysis, environmental impact assessment, community participation evaluation, and implementation monitoring—to provide a holistic understanding of sustainable tourism development challenges in India.

The specific research questions guiding this study are:

- What are the key policy frameworks and strategies governing sustainable tourism development in India, and how do they align with sustainable development theory?
- What is the nature and magnitude of environmental impacts associated with tourism development across different regions of India?
- What are the primary factors contributing to the implementation gap between sustainable tourism policies and their actual execution?
- How do community participation mechanisms function in practice, and what barriers hinder effective local engagement?
- What international best practices can inform improvements in India's sustainable tourism governance?

Building on these research questions, this review extends beyond descriptive policy analysis to critically examine implementation mechanisms, quantify the policy-practice gap using recent empirical data, integrate postcolonial perspectives on tourism governance, and develop a phased, prioritized framework for sustainable tourism development in India.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM

### 2.1 The Three Pillars of Sustainability

Sustainable development rests on three interconnected pillars: economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Lozano, 2008; Mori & Christodoulou, 2012). These dimensions are often represented as overlapping circles, highlighting their interdependence. In the context of tourism, this translates to:

**Economic Sustainability:** Ensuring that tourism generates economic benefits for host communities, provides stable employment, and supports local businesses through fair wages, local sourcing, and revenue sharing. Economic sustainability also involves diversifying tourism products and markets to reduce dependence on single revenue sources.

**Social Sustainability:** Respecting and preserving the cultural heritage of host communities, promoting cultural exchange, and ensuring that tourism does not lead to social disruption or exploitation. This involves community participation in tourism planning, protection of cultural sites, and promotion of local arts and crafts. Social sustainability also addresses issues such as child labour, human trafficking, and gender-based exploitation in the tourism industry.

**Environmental Sustainability:** Minimizing the negative environmental impacts of tourism, conserving natural resources, and protecting biodiversity. This includes reducing pollution, conserving water and energy, protecting wildlife habitats, and promoting responsible waste management. Environmental sustainability also involves mitigating climate change impacts on tourism destinations and promoting eco-friendly tourism practices.

### 2.2 The Brundtland Report and Its Relevance

The Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), officially known as "Our Common Future," defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition is particularly relevant to tourism, as the long-term viability of the industry depends on the preservation of natural and cultural resources that attract tourists. The Brundtland Report emphasized the need for integrated planning and decision-making to

address the complex challenges of sustainable development.

### 2.3 Postcolonial Perspectives on Tourism Governance

Applying postcolonial theory to sustainable tourism in India reveals important power dynamics that shape policy implementation. Postcolonial perspectives highlight how tourism governance often reflects colonial patterns of resource extraction, where benefits flow disproportionately to metropolitan centres and international corporations while local communities bear environmental and social costs (Hollinshead, 1998; Hall & Tucker, 2004). In the Indian context, this manifests through:

- Elite capture of tourism benefits by urban-based businesses and politicians;
- Marginalization of indigenous communities in decision-making processes;
- External imposition of sustainability standards without local consultation;
- Economic leakage where tourism revenues leave local economies;
- Cultural commodification that reduces living traditions to spectacles for foreign consumption.

These dynamics are critical for understanding why community participation mechanisms often fail despite policy commitments, and why benefit-sharing arrangements frequently favour already-privileged groups.

### 2.4 Challenges in Applying Sustainable Development Theory to Tourism

While the theoretical framework of sustainable development provides a useful guide, its application to tourism is often complex and challenging. Key challenges include:

**Conflicting Interests:** Balancing the economic interests of tourism businesses with the social and environmental needs of host communities involves difficult trade-offs between economic growth and environmental protection.

**Lack of Clear Metrics:** Measuring tourism sustainability is challenging, as there are no universally agreed-upon metrics or indicators. Developing appropriate indicators to assess economic, social, and environmental impacts is essential for monitoring progress.

**Enforcement Issues:** Enforcing sustainable tourism practices is difficult, particularly in developing countries with limited resources and weak governance. Effective enforcement requires strong regulatory frameworks, adequate monitoring, inspection, and penalties for non-compliance.

**Greenwashing:** The practice of "greenwashing," where tourism businesses falsely claim to be sustainable, undermines genuine efforts to promote sustainability. Transparency and accountability are essential to prevent greenwashing.

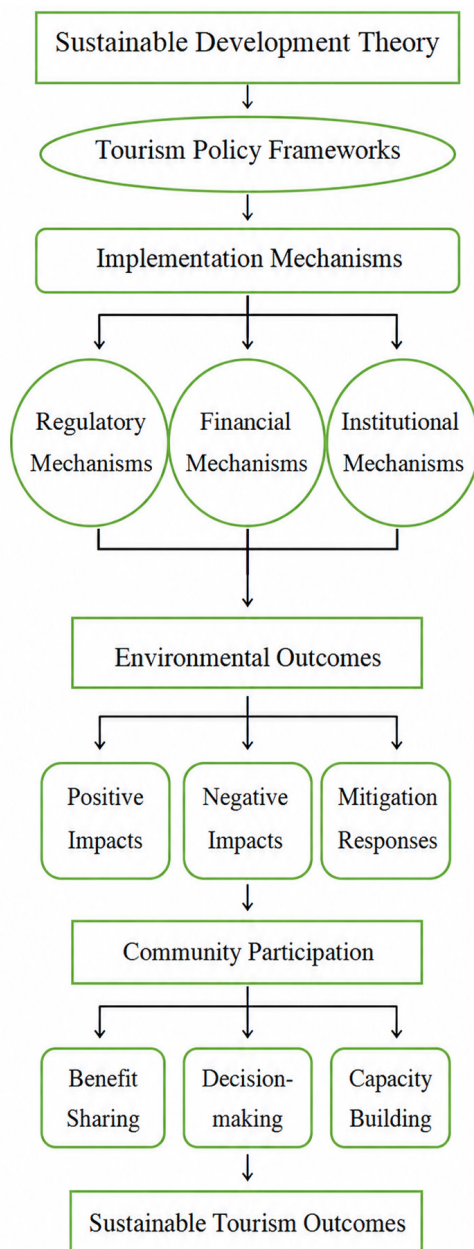
### 2.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study integrates sustainable development theory, policy analysis, implementation mechanisms, and environmental outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 1.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Tourism and Economic Development Nexus

Several studies have examined the relationship between tourism and economic development, proposing different philosophical positions. These include the tourism-led economic development approach, which prioritizes tourism as the primary driver of economic growth; the conservation philosophy, which emphasizes economic development



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development in India

to promote tourism growth; the feedback philosophy, highlighting the two-way causal relationship between economic and tourism development; and the neutrality philosophy, suggesting no significant causal relationship.

Chou (2013) revealed that various governments have prioritized tourism development to achieve economic growth. Developing countries, in particular, have shown interest in shifting away from heavy reliance on exports, viewing tourism development as a viable alternative. Tosun (2000) supported this notion, emphasizing tourism's potential to contribute to economic growth in developing countries.

### 3.2 Environmental Impacts of Tourism Development

Kumar and Debajit (2012) conducted a study on coastal tourism in Kovalam, India, finding that environmental preservation and community advancement were not prioritized for tourism improvement. Increasing conflicts between existing environmental and tourism development policies threatened the industry's potential success by contributing to ecological degradation. Similarly, Kalidas et al. (1998) emphasized

tourism growth's effects on marine life, coastal land, and the environment in Goa's coastal zone, identifying issues including mangrove depletion, decline in fish populations, coastal erosion, sanitation problems, and water resource challenges.

Joshi and Dhyani (2009) analysed tourism's influence on the Sikkim Himalayas, highlighting that while Sikkim has significant tourism potential, its development threatens protected areas. Their recommendation emphasized implementing sustainable tourism planning. Patil and Patil (2008) studied environmental consequences of tourism development in Maharashtra, finding that 89% of surveyed individuals believed tourism development would significantly negatively impact the environment, with anticipated forest degradation due to hotel and restaurant encroachment.

Madan and Rawat (2000) researched environmental impact in Mussoorie, Garhwal Himalaya, finding that significant tourist numbers led to high demand for accommodation, infrastructure, and amenities, putting immense pressure on the natural environment.

### 3.3 Sustainable Tourism Policy and Governance Perspectives

Recent research has examined policy frameworks for sustainable tourism. The National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2022) identifies seven strategic pillars: environmental sustainability, biodiversity, economic and socio-cultural sustainability, certification, information and education, capacity building, and governance systems. However, implementation challenges persist. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2023) found that only 25% of approved projects included quantifiable community engagement measures, and 40% of projects under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme experienced major delays in fund release.

### 3.4 Community Participation and Benefit-Sharing in Tourism

Community participation in tourism governance remains a critical challenge. Studies have documented significant gaps between policy commitments and ground-level implementation. In Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, only 42% of community-based tourism projects had meaningful local community involvement in decision-making, with 35% exhibiting 'elite capture' (Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management, 2024). Gender disparities persist, with Sikkim's tourism committees having only 30% women's representation. The Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission, despite its success, faces challenges with equitable benefit distribution across different caste and gender groups.

### 3.5 International Perspectives on Sustainable Tourism

Comparing India's sustainable tourism governance with international best practices reveals important lessons:

**Costa Rica:** The country's Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program provides a model for comprehensive sustainability assessment, covering physical-biological, service, and socio-economic dimensions. Costa Rica has successfully integrated conservation with tourism, with over 25% of land area protected.

**Bhutan:** The high value, low impact policy, combined with a sustainable development fee, demonstrates how revenue mechanisms can fund conservation and community development while managing visitor numbers.

**New Zealand:** The Tiaki Promise programme engages tourists as guardians of the environment, effectively communicating sustainability expectations through partnerships with indigenous Māori communities.

**Australia:** The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's zoning and permit system provides a model for managing visitor impacts in sensitive ecosystems through scientific assessment and adaptive management.

These international examples highlight the importance of strong enforcement mechanisms, tourist education, community benefit-sharing, and adaptive management—areas where India's implementation remains weak.

**Table 1** Summary of Key Studies on Sustainable Tourism in India

| Author(s)                          | Year | Study area                  | Method              | Major findings                                                                | Research gap identified                           |
|------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Chou, M.C.                         | 2013 | Transition countries        | Panel data analysis | Tourism promotes economic growth in developing countries                      | Limited environmental impact analysis             |
| Kumar & Debajit                    | 2012 | Kovalam, kerala             | Community survey    | Environmental preservation not prioritized, policy conflicts threaten success | Lack of longitudinal data                         |
| Joshi & Dhyani                     | 2009 | Sikkim himalayas            | Case study          | Tourism threatens protected areas, need for sustainable planning              | Limited quantitative data                         |
| Patil & Patil                      | 2008 | Maharashtra                 | Perception survey   | 89% anticipate negative environmental impacts                                 | Focus on perceptions rather than measured impacts |
| Madan & Rawat                      | 2000 | Mussoorie, garhwal himalaya | Case study          | Overcrowding pressures natural environment                                    | Dated analysis, lacks recent data                 |
| Kalidas et al.                     | 1998 | Goa coastal zone            | Case study          | Tourism impacts marine life, coastal land, environment                        | Limited policy analysis                           |
| CAG Report                         | 2023 | India                       | Performance audit   | Only 25% projects have quantifiable community engagement, 40% project delays  | Limited to Swadesh Darshan Scheme                 |
| Centre for Science and Environment | 2024 | India                       | Assessment          | Only 12% tourist destinations have formal carrying capacity assessments       | Lacks implementation strategies                   |

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

This study employs a critical review methodology, integrating narrative and integrative review approaches to examine sustainable tourism development in India. The critical review approach enables systematic evaluation of existing literature, identification of gaps, and synthesis of evidence to generate new insights.

### 4.2 Search Strategy and Data Sources

**Databases:** Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and PubMed were systematically searched.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism India, tourism policy India, ecotourism India, community participation tourism, environmental impact tourism, sustainable development tourism, and responsible tourism India.

**Inclusion Criteria:** Peer-reviewed articles and government reports, Studies published between 1998 and 2026, Studies focused on India's tourism sector, Articles addressing policy, environmental impact, or community participation, English-language publications.

**Exclusion Criteria:** Non-peer-reviewed conference proceedings, Studies focused exclusively on global tourism without India-specific analysis, Articles published before 1998 (except foundational theoretical works), Studies without relevance to sustainability dimensions.

**Document Selection Process:** The initial search identified 487 potential sources. After removing duplicates (n=132), titles and abstracts were screened (n=355). Full-text review was conducted for 128 sources, with 89 ultimately included in the review. This included 56 peer-reviewed journal articles, 18 government reports, 10 Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) publications, and 5 international organization reports.

### 4.3 Data Analysis Approach

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes identified deductively based on the research questions and inductively from the literature. Key themes included policy frameworks, environmental impacts, community participation, implementation gaps, and international comparisons. Observational analysis of government reports and contemporary publications provided additional contextual understanding.

### 4.4 Study Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may contain inaccuracies or reflect institutional biases. The government reports used may present favourable assessments of policy implementation. Additionally, the study cannot capture ground-level implementation realities not documented in published sources. The rapid pace of policy changes in India means some analysis may require updating. Future research should complement secondary analysis with primary data collection.

## 5. CRITICAL GAP BETWEEN POLICY PROMISES AND EXECUTION

A significant disconnect exists between government policy promises and actual implementation. The Centre for Science and Environment (2024) found that only 12% of popular tourist destinations have official carrying capacity assessments. Similarly, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2023) discovered that only 25% of approved projects under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme included quantifiable community engagement measures, with 40% experiencing major delays in fund release.

This gap between policy and practice demands critical assessment of government activities and undermines the theoretical principles of sustainable development. Enforcement of environmental laws remains weak, with only 35% of environmental impact assessment (EIA) for new tourism developments found to be 100% compliant (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2024).

## 6. EVOLUTION OF TOURISM POLICY AND SUSTAINABILITY GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

### 6.1 Historical Development of Tourism Policies in India

India's tourism destination strategies have evolved through three phases since the first tourism policy in 1982, followed by the second National Tourism Policy in 1992, and the third National Policy emphasizing public-private partnerships in 2002. Through the five-year plans, the Seventh Plan focused on increasing domestic travel, the Eighth Plan emphasized private sector roles, the Ninth Plan focused on rural pilgrimage tourism, and the Twelfth Plan finally emphasized pro-poor tourism opportunities.

### 6.2 Current Policy Framework and Sustainable Development Strategies

**National Tourism Policy 2022:** Promotes green tourism, carrying capacity management, accommodation provider accreditation, and aims to achieve \$1 trillion contribution to GDP by 2047.

**National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (2022):** Identifies seven pillars: environmental sustainability, biodiversity, economic and socio-cultural sustainability, certification, information and education, capacity building, and governance systems, with synergy across sixteen ministries.

**National Strategy for Ecotourism (2022):** Aims to create favourable environment for ecotourism by promoting collaboration between eight ministries, state governments, panchayati raj institutions, NGOs, and the private sector.

**Travel for LiFE Campaign (2021):** Aims to raise awareness among 300 million domestic visitors and encourage responsible behaviour and mindful resource use.

**Swadesh Darshan Scheme 2.0:** Focuses on developing sustainable destinations, enhancing local economic contributions through self-employment opportunities, and preserving cultural and natural resources.

**Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India:** Provides benchmarks for accommodation and tour operators regarding sustainable practices, including sustainable management, heritage protection, community benefit-sharing, environmental conservation, and carrying capacity compliance.

**State-Level Policies:** Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Himachal Pradesh have enacted sustainable tourism policies, providing leadership in biodiversity protection while promoting sustainable tourism.

## 7. ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF TOURISM

## DEVELOPMENT

### 7.1 Positive Environmental Impacts

#### 7.1.1 Direct Financial Contributions

Tourism provides direct financial contributions to conservation of sensitive areas and habitats. Revenue from park-entrance fees and similar sources can be allocated specifically for protection and management of environmentally sensitive areas.

#### 7.1.2 Contributions to Government Revenues

The Indian government collects revenue in various indirect ways not linked to specific parks or conservation areas. User fees, income taxes, taxes on sales or rental of recreation equipment, and license fees for activities such as rafting and fishing provide funds for natural resource management.

#### 7.1.3 Improved Environmental Management and Planning

Sound environmental management of tourism facilities, particularly hotels, can increase benefits to the natural environment. In Udaipur, hotels utilizing rainwater harvesting and greywater recycling cut total water usage by 40%. However, only 12% of hotels have implemented these systems without government financial assistance (Grand Hotelier, 2025).

#### 7.1.4 Raising Environmental Awareness

Tourism has potential to increase public appreciation of the environment and spread awareness of environmental problems by bringing people into closer contact with nature.

#### 7.1.5 Protection and Preservation of the Environment

Tourism can significantly contribute to environmental protection, conservation, restoration of biological diversity, and sustainable use of natural resources. In India, new laws and regulations have been enacted to preserve forests and protect native species.

### 7.2 Negative Environmental Impacts

#### 7.2.1 Depletion of Natural Resources

**Water resources:** Tourism often overuses water resources for hotels, swimming pools, golf courses, and personal use, resulting in water shortages and degradation of water supplies. In dry regions like Rajasthan, water scarcity is particularly concerning.

**Local resources:** Tourism creates pressure on local resources like energy, food, and other raw materials already in short supply. The seasonal character of tourism means many destinations have ten times more inhabitants in high season than low season.

**Land degradation:** Increased construction of tourism and recreational facilities has increased pressure on land resources, including minerals, fossil fuels, fertile soil, forests, wetlands, and wildlife.

#### 7.2.2 Pollution

**Air and Noise Pollution:** Transport by air, road, and rail increases in response to rising tourist activities. Air pollution from tourist transportation impacts global climate change and contributes to severe local air pollution. Noise pollution from aeroplanes, cars, buses, and recreational vehicles is an ever-growing problem.

**Solid Waste and Littering:** In areas with high concentrations of tourist activities and attractive natural attractions, waste disposal is a serious problem. Improper disposal can be a major despoiler of the natural environment.

**Sewage:** Construction of hotels and facilities often leads to increased

sewage pollution. Wastewater pollutes seas and lakes surrounding tourist attractions, damaging flora and fauna. Sewage runoff causes serious damage to coral reefs by stimulating algae growth that covers filter-feeding corals.

### 7.2.3 Destruction and Alteration of Ecosystems

Attractive landscape sites such as sandy beaches, lakes, riversides, and mountain tops are often transitional zones characterized by species-rich ecosystems. Habitat degradation occurs through tourism leisure activities such as wildlife viewing, which brings stress to animals and alters natural behaviour when tourists come too close.

## 8. CASE STUDIES OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INITIATIVES IN INDIA

### 8.1 Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission

Launched in 2008, the Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission engages over twenty-five thousand families in responsible tourism initiatives. The community tourism initiative in Kumarakom reported annual revenue growth of Rs 85,000,000 (approximately \$1 million), with visitor numbers growing from 250,000 in 2019 to 380,000 in 2024 (Kerala Tourism Statistics, 2025). Success includes 35% reduction in single-use plastics in participating communities. Challenges include resistance from hotels to responsible tourism concepts, lack of equitable benefit-sharing across caste and gender groups, and dramatic decline in tourist participation during COVID-19 lockdowns (estimated at over 20%). Inconsistencies exist between monitoring community benefit-sharing activities.

### 8.2 Sikkim Ecotourism Model

Sikkim implemented a ban on disposable plastics (1998) and declared all land within the state organic (2016). Approximately 40% of waste was eliminated from Sikkim's national parks and protected areas, including Khangchendzonga National Park. Visitors grew from 1.2 million in 2015 to approximately 1.8 million in 2023, often exceeding maximum capacity during peak tourist season (October–December). Sikkim benefited from annual ecotourism fees accumulating from ₹3 crore (2015) to ₹12 crore (2024). Challenges include limited local citizen involvement in decision-making (approximately 30% of village tourism committees have women) and increasing human-wildlife conflict from visitors in protected areas.

### 8.3 CBT in Ladakh

CBT projects in Hemis and Nubra Valley brought between 50,000 and 70,000 tourists annually prior to 2020. Homestay income per family averaged ₹120,000 (\$1,450) per tourist season. Challenges include limited water availability (40% reduction in tourist season) and difficulty managing tourist numbers despite voluntary codes of conduct. A 2022 survey indicated approximately 45% of homestay businesses reported difficulties with tourists not following proper waste segregation methods (Ladakh Ecological Development Group, 2023).

### 8.4 Wildlife Tourism in National Parks and Sanctuaries

Ranthambore National Park earned ₹50 million in gate revenue from tiger tourism in 2023–2024. A 25% decrease in night safaris allowed and 30% cap on vehicle entry reduced noise pollution by 20 decibels on average during breeding times (Wildlife Institute of India, 2024). Enforcement remains weak, with approximately 15% of safari vehicles exceeding posted speeds, and only 40% of generated revenue returning to local communities.

## 9. OVERTOURISM AND CARRYING CAPACITY MANAGEMENT

Overtourism has emerged as a critical challenge in many Indian destinations. Carrying capacity—the maximum number of visitors a destination can host before negative effects occur—remains under-

assessed and poorly managed. Only 12% of popular tourist destinations have official carrying capacity assessments (Centre for Science and Environment, 2024). The key manifestations of overtourism include:

**Destination Degradation:** The Taj Mahal, despite bans on plastic water bottles, still sees 15% of visitors littering and not obeying waste segregation rules (Archaeological Survey of India, 2024). The monument faces significant pressure from overcrowding, with air pollution contributing to discoloration of marble surfaces.

**Overcrowding:** Sikkim's national parks regularly exceed maximum capacity during peak seasons. Visitor numbers grew from 1.2 million in 2015 to 1.8 million in 2023, placing severe pressure on protected ecosystems.

**Carrying Capacity Management:** The government aims to keep visitor pressure within carrying capacity to protect natural and cultural resources. However, achieving this requires not only policy but also strict enforcement and ongoing monitoring. The disparity between the 30% vehicle cap in Ranthambore and actual compliance rates illustrates these enforcement challenges.

**Visitor Management:** Difficulties in managing tourist numbers persist despite voluntary codes of conduct. Tourist adherence to sustainable practices remains low (30–60% compliance) for most major destinations.

## 10. DIGITAL TOURISM AND TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Technology offers significant opportunities for enhancing sustainable tourism management in India:

**Smart Tourism Initiatives:** Implementation of smart tourism systems using Artificial Intelligence (AI), Geographic Information System (GIS), and Internet of Things (IoT) can enable real-time monitoring of visitor flows and environmental impacts.

**Digital Monitoring:** Technology can track carrying capacity in real-time, enabling adaptive visitor management. Waste-processing systems can be optimized through digital monitoring.

**Current Implementation:** However, technology adoption remains limited. The Wildlife Institute of India's (2024) monitoring in Ranthambore demonstrates potential, but similar systems are not widely deployed.

**Recommendations:** Support adoption of technological advances that allow for environmental impact monitoring, real-time carrying capacity tracking, and waste-processing optimization.

## 11. STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM GOVERNANCE

### 11.1 Government Roles

The Government of India, through the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, develops policy frameworks, allocates funding, and establishes regulations. Implementation occurs through state governments, tourism development corporations, and local authorities. Key challenges include bureaucratic delays (average 14 months for ecotourism project approval), inter-ministerial coordination failures, and weak enforcement capacity.

### 11.2 Private Sector

Tourism businesses including hotels, tour operators, transport providers, and hospitality services constitute the private sector. While many recognize sustainability benefits, barriers include limited access to financial resources (only 12% of Rajasthan hotels implemented water-saving measures without external funding), greenwashing practices, and resistance to sustainable practices (evident in Kerala's hotel resistance to responsible tourism).

11.3 Local Communities

Communities are the primary stakeholders in sustainable tourism outcomes. Challenges include elite capture (35% of CBT projects in Himachal and Uttarakhand), limited decision-making participation (only 42% with meaningful involvement), gender disparities, and cultural commodification. Successful community engagement correlates with benefit-sharing agreements and local ownership.

11.4 NGOs and Civil Society

Organizations such as the Ladakh Ecological Development Group and Wildlife Institute of India play crucial roles in monitoring, advocacy, and capacity building. NGOs often bridge gaps between government policy and ground-level implementation, though resource limitations constrain their reach.

11.5 Tourists

Tourist behaviour significantly impacts sustainability outcomes. Adherence to sustainable practices ranges from 30–60% across major destinations, indicating substantial room for improvement. Educational campaigns like Travel for LiFE aim to raise awareness, but effectiveness remains limited.

12. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) MAP-  
PING

Table 2 illustrates the relationship between the SDGs and tourism impacts in India. It highlights tourism’s contributions to economic development, social inclusion, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability, while also identifying challenges such as limited community participation, gender equality, environmental pressures, and governance gaps.

13. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAIN-  
ABLE TOURISM IN INDIA

13.1 Key Challenges

**Lack of Understanding and Knowledge:** Tourists and operators often fail to prioritize sustainable tourism. At the Taj Mahal, despite a ban on plastic water bottles, 15% of visitors still litter and disobey waste segregation rules (Archaeological Survey of India, 2024).

**Limited Access to Financial Resources:** Many businesses, especially small and medium enterprises, lack funds to invest in sustainable tourism practices. Only 12% of hotels in Rajasthan implemented water-

Table 2 SDGs and Tourism Impacts in India

| SDG                             | Target       | Tourism relevance                         | India status                                  |
|---------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| SDG 1: No poverty               | 1.2, 1.4     | Pro-poor tourism, livelihoods             | Community engagement low, 35% elite capture   |
| SDG 5: Gender equality          | 5.5, 5.a     | Women’s participation, empowerment        | Only 30% women in tourism committees (Sikkim) |
| SDG 8: Decent work              | 8.5, 8.9     | Job creation, sustainable tourism         | 46.5 million jobs, \$28 billion forex         |
| SDG 11: Sustainable cities      | 11.4, 11.a   | Cultural heritage, destination management | 12% carrying capacity assessments             |
| SDG 12: Responsible consumption | 12.8, 12.b   | Sustainable tourism practices             | 30-60% compliance with sustainable practices  |
| SDG 13: Climate action          | 13.1, 13.3   | Mitigation, adaptation                    | High emissions from transportation            |
| SDG 14: Life below water        | 14.1, 14.2   | Coastal tourism management                | Coastal erosion, sewage impacts               |
| SDG 15: Life on Land            | 15.1, 15.5   | Protected areas, biodiversity             | Human-wildlife conflict increasing            |
| SDG 16: Peace, justice          | 16.6, 16.7   | Governance, participation                 | Weak enforcement, 35% EIA compliance          |
| SDG 17: Partnerships            | 17.14, 17.17 | Multi-stakeholder collaboration           | 16 ministries involved; coordination gaps     |

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1). New York: United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

Note: a refers to SDG goals addresses a specific global challenge. b refers to specific targets under each SDG.

saving measures without external financial support (Rajasthan State Pollution Control Board, 2025).

**Weak Enforcement of Environmental Laws:** Enforcement remains very weak, with only 35% of EIA for new tourism developments found to be 100% compliant (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2024).

**Lack of Coordination Between Government Bodies:** Conflicting views between the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Environment contribute to delays in ecotourism project approvals. The average wait for ecotourism project approval is 14 months (Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2023).

**Conflicting Interests Between Tourism Industry and Local Communities:** In 50 community-based tourism projects in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, only 42% had meaningful involvement of local communities in decision-making, and 35% exhibited 'elite capture' (Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management, 2024).

**Difficulty in Tourist Compliance:** Adherence to sustainable tourism practices remains low (30–60% compliance) for most major destinations.

**Governance and Political Issues:** Inter-ministerial coordination failures, political interference in enforcement, and competing development priorities undermine sustainable tourism implementation.

**Funding and Resource Constraints:** Limited budget allocations for sustainability monitoring and enforcement constrain implementation. The gap between policy commitments and financial allocations remains significant.

### 13.2 Opportunities for Sustainable Transformation

**Youth Interest:** Young people increasingly seek sustainable tourism products and services, creating market demand for sustainable offerings.

**Environmental Awareness:** The general population has become more aware of environmental concerns, creating supportive public opinion for sustainable tourism initiatives.

**Government Support:** The government has expressed support for

sustainable tourism through supportive policies and financial incentives, creating a foundation for sustainability promotion.

**Community Benefit Potential:** Local communities can benefit from tourism through community-based tourism initiatives, creating economic opportunities while preserving cultural and natural resources.

**Technology Integration:** Advances in AI, GIS, and IoT enable real-time environmental monitoring and visitor management, offering tools to address enforcement challenges.

## 14. INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Table 3 presents international best practices in sustainable tourism governance and their potential relevance to India. It highlights how countries have adopted certification systems, carrying capacity management, visitor education, scientific planning, and multi-stakeholder governance to promote sustainable tourism. These approaches provide valuable lessons for India in strengthening tourism policies, improving resource management, and enhancing coordination among stakeholders.

## 15. RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made, organized by priority and timeframe. In the short term, enforcement must be significantly strengthened by increasing environmental monitoring capacity by fifty percent at high-traffic and sensitive sites, implementing stricter penalties with public violation reporting, and establishing independent inspection bodies with statutory authority to conduct unannounced audits. Mandatory annual public disclosure of EIA compliance should be required, alongside digital platforms for real-time environmental reporting and whistleblower protection mechanisms. Tourist orientation programs must be introduced at major destinations through hotels, tour operators, and entry points, complemented by pre-arrival online campaigns and multilingual guidelines covering waste, water, wildlife, and cultural sensitivity, with mobile applications enabling sustainable choices and violation reporting.

**Table 3** International Comparison of Sustainable Tourism Governance

| Country     | Key initiative                                         | Mechanism                                  | Outcome                                              | Relevance to India                                      |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Costa Rica  | CST                                                    | Voluntary certification with incentives    | 400+ businesses certified, biodiversity conservation | India could adopt similar certification with incentives |
| Bhutan      | High value, low impact policy                          | Sustainable development fee (\$200/day)    | Low-volume, high-value tourism, conservation funded  | Carrying capacity management model                      |
| New Zealand | Tiaki promise                                          | Tourist commitment programme               | Enhanced visitor behaviour, cultural respect         | Tourist education programme model                       |
| Australia   | Great barrier reef marine park authority zoning system | Scientific assessment, adaptive management | Ecosystem protection; visitor management             | Model for protected area management                     |
| Scotland    | Tourism sustainability group                           | Multi-stakeholder governance               | Coordinated sustainability action                    | Inter-ministerial coordination model                    |

Table 4 Recommendation Prioritization Matrix

| Recommendation            | Feasibility | Expected impact | Implementation cost | Priority |
|---------------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------|
| Strengthen enforcement    | Medium      | High            | Medium              | High     |
| Tourist education         | High        | Medium          | Low                 | High     |
| Financial incentives      | Medium      | High            | High                | Medium   |
| Technology integration    | Medium      | High            | High                | Medium   |
| Community benefit-sharing | Low         | High            | High                | Medium   |
| Policy reform             | Low         | High            | Medium              | Low      |

For medium-term, policy frameworks should incorporate measurable targets, timelines, and explicit penalties, with independent monitors verifying implementation and formal inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms established. Ecotourism project approvals must be streamlined from fourteen to six months, while government budgets for sustainable tourism should increase with funding tied to quantifiable outcomes and green incentives expanded beyond the current twelve percent of Rajasthan hotels to include green financing for small enterprises. Legally binding benefit-sharing agreements must mandate minimum community shares, transparency, and dispute resolution, requiring at least twenty percent of tourism revenue for community development and conservation, alongside capacity-building programs in business management, monitoring, and preservation. Real-time carrying capacity tracking systems using GIS and smart technologies like AI and IoT sensors should be deployed in major destinations, given that only twelve percent currently have formal assessments.

Over the long term, India must benchmark its sustainable tourism standards against international best practices from Costa Rica, Bhutan, and New Zealand through knowledge exchange, develop internationally recognized certification, and actively participate in UNWTO and Global Sustainable Tourism Council governance. Closing the policy-practice gap requires continuous improvement processes, integration of sustainability objectives across all ministries, and a shift from voluntary to mandatory compliance for all tourism businesses, with institutional cultures rewarding sustainability outcomes and holding officials accountable. Investment in research on carrying capacity methodologies, climate impacts, and community participation must be prioritized, along with comprehensive monitoring systems tracking environmental, social, and economic indicators, while knowledge-sharing platforms and centres of excellence provide research, training, and technical assistance capacity.

15.1 Prioritization Framework

Table 4 shows a prioritization framework for sustainable tourism recommendations in India based on feasibility, expected impact, and implementation cost. It identifies strengthening enforcement and tourist education as high-priority actions due to their potential impact and practical feasibility, while other measures, such as technology integration, financial incentives, and community benefit-sharing, require longer-term investment and policy support.

15.2 Implementation Challenges

**Funding Constraints:** Implementation of these recommendations requires significant financial investment. Government budget allocations for sustainable tourism remain limited, requiring creative financing mechanisms and public-private partnerships.

**Governance Issues:** Weak institutional coordination and political interference undermine policy implementation. Addressing these challenges requires structural reforms and political commitment.

**Stakeholder Conflicts:** Competing interests between tourism businesses, local communities, and government agencies create resistance to sustainability measures. Dialogue mechanisms and benefit-sharing arrangements can help resolve conflicts.

**Capacity Limitations:** Limited technical and institutional capacity constrains enforcement and monitoring. Capacity building programmes and technology transfer can address these limitations.

**Awareness Gaps:** Low awareness among tourists and businesses limits adoption of sustainable practices. Educational campaigns can raise awareness and change behaviour.

16. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research are identified.

**Primary Data Collection:** The future research should complement secondary analysis with primary data collection through surveys, interviews, and field observations to capture ground-level implementation realities.

**Longitudinal Studies:** Long-term studies tracking sustainability implementation over time would provide insights into policy effectiveness and identify successful strategies.

**Comparative State-Level Analysis:** Comparative studies across Indian states with different tourism governance models would identify best practices and contextual factors.

**Technology Impact Studies:** Research on the effectiveness of smart tourism technologies in improving sustainability outcomes is needed.

**Gender and Social Justice Dimensions:** More research is needed on gender disparities in tourism participation and benefit-sharing, and strategies to address inequalities.

**Climate Change Impacts:** Studies on tourism's contribution to climate change and vulnerability of destinations to climate impacts are urgently needed.

**Post-Pandemic Recovery:** Research on sustainable tourism recovery strategies following COVID-19 would inform future crisis management.

**Overtourism Management:** Studies on carrying capacity assessment methodologies and visitor management strategies appropriate for Indian contexts are needed.

## 17. CONCLUSION

The Indian tourism sector possesses significant potential to contribute to economic growth, employment generation, and cultural preservation through its interconnected industries, including hospitality, transportation, and handicrafts. The Government of India has recognized tourism as an important driver of development and has introduced various policy initiatives to promote sustainable tourism while aiming for ambitious growth targets.

However, this review demonstrates that a substantial policy-practice disconnect persists in India's sustainable tourism development. Although comprehensive policy frameworks have been established, challenges remain in implementation, including limited carrying capacity management, insufficient community participation, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Addressing these implementation deficits is essential to ensure that tourism growth aligns with environmental protection, social equity, and long-term sustainability objectives.

Based on these findings, this study highlights several important implications for theory, policy, and practice, while also identifying future directions for sustainable tourism development in India.

**Theoretical Implications:** This study demonstrates that sustainable development theory provides an important conceptual foundation for tourism governance but requires adaptation to specific local institutional and socio-economic contexts. The persistent policy-practice gap reflects tensions between sustainability principles and political-economic priorities that often favour short-term development objectives over long-term sustainability.

**Policy Implications:** Sustainable tourism policies should move beyond voluntary and aspirational frameworks toward enforceable mechanisms supported by measurable targets, independent monitoring, adequate financial resources, and stronger institutional coordination. Effective policy implementation requires sustained political commitment and improved governance capacity.

**Practical Implications:** For tourism businesses, sustainability should become an integral component of operational strategies rather than an optional practice. Meaningful community participation, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, responsible tourist behaviour, and effective technology integration are essential for achieving sustainable tourism outcomes. Strengthening implementation mechanisms and monitoring systems will be critical to transforming sustainable tourism from a policy aspiration into operational practice.

**Future Outlook:** India's sustainable tourism future depends on successfully bridging the policy-practice divide. Through continued investment in enforcement capacity, community engagement, technological innovation, and stakeholder collaboration, India can develop a tourism sector that generates economic benefits while protecting cultural and natural heritage for future generations. Achieving this transformation requires sustained commitment from government institutions, industry stakeholders, local communities, and tourists.

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