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Research Paper

Sustainable Livelihood through Ecotourism and Changing Cultural Behavior in Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

Uttarakhand, recognized globally as *Devbhoomi*, possesses exceptional tourism potential owing to its Himalayan landscapes, rich cultural heritage, pilgrimage centres, and biodiversity. Despite this endowment, the state continues to face persistent socio-economic challenges including rural poverty, unemployment, and large-scale outmigration. While tourism contributes approximately 4.4–5.83% to Uttara hand's Gross State Domestic Product, its development has remained disproportionately concentrated in religious and pilgrimage-based activities, leaving ecotourism, adventure, and community-based forms significantly underutilized. This paper examines the potential of homestay-based ecotourism as a sustainable livelihood strategy for local communities, with particular focus on Tiwargaon village in the Tehri Garhwal district. The study documents a community-led intervention in which skill development programs in water sports, guiding, tour operations, and traditional food preparation were organized to equip local residents — particularly unemployed youth and women — with tourism-related capacities. The outcomes demonstrate that homestay-based ecotourism can generate direct and indirect employment, reverse outmigration, and catalyse broader socio-cultural transformation. Within the study period, 52 families engaged in homestay tourism, 14 youth secured employment in motorboat operations, and women actively participated in cultural programming for visitors. Tiwargaon has since been designated an official tourist village by the Government of Uttarakhand. The study further proposes an integrated framework combining road-trip circuits, community-based tourism, biodiversity conservation, and indigenous cultural promotion. The findings offer policy-relevant insights for government agencies, tourism planners, and rural development stakeholders seeking to align tourism growth with inclusive and environmentally sustainable regional development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Uttarakhand is a paradise for the natural, adventure, cultural, religious and wildlife tourism. There is huge space for further development of tourism sector. Uttarakhand, established as a separate state on 9 November 2000, is renowned for its abundant natural resources, breathtaking landscapes, and rich historical and cultural legacy. The majestic snow-clad Himalayan peaks that encircle the state leave a lasting impression on visitors, creating a deep sense of connection with its serene and captivating natural beauty. Uttarakhand is endowed with a wide range of historical and cultural landmarks distributed across the state, reflecting its rich historical legacy, cultural pride, and architectural significance. This diverse heritage forms the foundation of heritage tourism, which involves travel undertaken to explore and experience places, traditions, and artifacts that authentically represent the cultural narratives and lifestyles of both past and present societies. Such tourism provides opportunities to deepen knowledge and appreciation of history, art, architecture, and traditional values while fostering cultural awareness and preservation. Owing to its exceptional blend of historical monuments and natural landscapes, Uttarakhand holds immense potential as a prominent heritage tourism destination. The state offers a unique assemblage of ancient temples, historic forts, museums, art galleries, landscaped gardens, traditional rural and urban settlements, wildlife habitats, and diverse floral and faunal wealth. These resources collectively represent valuable heritage assets; however, their sustainable conservation and effective management are essential for preserving their historical authenticity and enhancing their contribution to regional tourism and cultural continuity. However, the state is developing steadily its various economic sectors. Tourism sector is emerging as a key generator of revenue for the state. Being a paradise for the natural, cultural, religious, adventure, wellness and wildlife tourism and proved to be best venue for enriching knowledge through its historical and cultural heritage sites and historical mythologies. But here is another matter of concern is deteriorating the natural beauty of the state due to its visionless capitalist development and unplanned tourists' products development. There are very few and selected areas that converted and propagated as pilgrimage spots for tourists with vast historical places neglected and deprived beside being rich in heritage aspect. Hence it burdened the few places that resulting into crowd and chaos. So, it is the need of the hour to reconstruct and plan the Tourism industry that has immense potential to flourish as a key revenue generator sector of the state.

The tourism industry is emerging as one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors globally, making significant contributions to economic development across nations. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Tourism Highlights (2013), the tourism sector contributed approximately 9% to global GDP. The Asia-Pacific region recorded the highest growth in international tourist arrivals in 2012, registering an increase of 7%, followed by Africa with a growth rate of 6%. Furthermore, these regions were projected to maintain strong growth trajectories, with expected annual growth

rates of approximately 5% and 5.7%, respectively, highlighting the expanding significance of tourism in the global economy respectively by 2030 as compared to Europe and America of 2.5% and 2.2% respectively. In the present economic context, the tourism industry occupies a significant position in the Indian economy and contributes substantially to national socio-economic development and GDP growth. According to the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2013), India ranked 11th in the Asia-Pacific region and 65th globally among 140 economies assessed on the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index. This ranking reflects the country's growing potential in the global tourism sector. Over the past decade, India has witnessed consistent growth in tourism, supported by increasing domestic and international travel demand. Foreign tourist arrivals showed a notable rise, increasing from 69.68 lakh to 77.03 lakh and registering an annual growth rate of 10.6%, which highlights the sector's expanding role as a key driver of economic progress, employment generation, and regional development. During 2014, foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) accounted Rs 1, 20,089 Crores with a growth of 11.5%. Tourism is considered to be the third largest revenue earner after oil and automobile industry. Tourism industries is a renewable resource income generation activity unlike oil, coal or any other natural resources, hence it is continued to generate income for the better socio- economy of any Nation if managed and planned in sustainable ways. Tourism industry has a highly multiplier effect which benefits a huge mass and contributes greatly to the Gross National Product (GNP). Most importantly it is significantly relied on the local resources, indigenous knowledge of culture, food, arts and crafts and benefitted the host native people in a great prospective. India is blessed with its diverse culture of food, arts, crafts, folk arts and many classically popularize arts with its popular rich historical-cultural traditions. Its unique natural landscape with geographical peculiarity attracts visitors to have a glimpse of the whole world here. The great cultural festival like Kumbha Mela, Puskar Mela, desert festival and many cultural festivals of different local attract tourism of different countries. As it is renowned as land of all seasons, and its every state has many unique tourism products (rich in historical and cultural heritage) to offer. Tourism plays a vital role in Uttara hand's economy, contributing significantly to revenue generation, employment opportunities, and overall regional development. The sector serves as a key driver of economic growth by supporting livelihoods, promoting local businesses, and enhancing the socio-economic well-being of communities across the state. The different forms of tourism activities in Uttarakhand like adventure river rafting, bungee jumping, tracking and skiing, ice skating and various fairs and festival of cultural rituals occasions at Haridwar, *Char Dham Yatra*, Yoga festival, Adventure activities, winter game etc. attracts many tourists to the state and it boost economy of locals. Tourism contributes approximately 4.4% to Uttara hand's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), highlighting its significant role as a key economic sector that supports the state's revenue generation, employment opportunities, and broader socio-economic

development. When indirect effects are included, the contribution increases to 5.83%. Tourism represents one of the most rapidly expanding economic sectors in Uttarakhand and serves as an important source of income generation and employment creation across the state. The sector encompasses diverse forms of tourism, including religious, ecological, adventure, and heritage tourism, each contributing to the state's economic growth. Tourism statistics indicate that Uttarakhand attracted a substantial number of visitors, with domestic tourist arrivals significantly exceeding foreign tourist inflows. However, while absolute tourist numbers have shown growth over time, the state's relative share in national tourist arrivals has demonstrated fluctuations, particularly in the foreign tourist segment where a gradual decline has been observed. This trend suggests that despite its considerable tourism potential, Uttarakhand has faced challenges in sustaining competitiveness within the broader national tourism landscape. Comparative growth analyses further reveal that the state's tourism growth rates have remained below national averages in both domestic and international categories, indicating the need for strategic interventions to strengthen tourism infrastructure, improve destination management, and enhance service quality. Tourism currently contributes approximately 4.4% to Uttarakhand's Gross State Domestic Product and supports a significant proportion of employment, directly and indirectly, through its linkages with hospitality, transport, local enterprises, and allied service sectors. Given the dominance of the service sector in the state economy, tourism holds substantial potential for accelerating regional development; however, sustained growth will depend on effective policy planning, improved marketing strategies, and the adoption of sustainable tourism practices to preserve the state's ecological and cultural resources.

Socio-cultural Aspect

The socio-cultural aspect of tourism cannot be ignored as in the present scenario the communities are progressing towards the liberal lifestyle which favors the growth and development of Travel and Tourism industry. These days' special interest groups travel in another segment which are growing in importance. Tours are arranged for these interested groups of their choice and convenience vocational purpose such as architectural, historical, educational, medical vacation, yogic satisfaction etc. These days Women's group, social group, Youth group, Alumni and Professional societies are in trend and having trips independently. Therefore, following are some of the social and cultural advantages of Tourism.

1. Facilities preservation of many vanishing sites and local arts.
2. Attract visitors to historical and holy places
3. Preserve ancient monuments and heritage sites.
4. Helps in exchange of tradition and cultural peculiarities.
5. Enrich knowledge regarding architectural traditions, regional features and ancestral heritage.
6. Facilities universal brotherhood, international co-operation and Global peace.
7. Leisure and recreational activities create social mobility of people.

Economic Aspect

Tourism is also considered as a key for economic development of any nation. Travel and Tourism Industry generate the following economic benefits: -

- Helps in improving per capita income and living standard of local people.
- Promotes subsidiary industries such as handicrafts, bamboo products, agro and forest-based industries (Juice, pickles, etc.).
- The highly labor-intensive tourism industry creates immense employment opportunities.
- Tourism brings immense foreign exchange earnings without exporting anything tangible.
- Helps in checking regional imbalances in employment and income.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (1988) defines sustainable tourism as the effective management of resources in a manner that fulfills economic, social, and cultural needs while safeguarding cultural integrity, maintaining essential ecological processes, conserving biodiversity, and sustaining life-support systems for present and future generations.

Tourism is recognized as one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the global economy, exerting substantial influence on environmental, cultural, social, and economic systems. While it offers significant opportunities for economic growth, employment generation, and cultural exchange, unplanned tourism development can also exert pressure on natural resources, local traditions, and ecological balance. In this context, the present study aims to develop an integrated tourist circuit, promote eco-tourism and village-based tourism, and formulate a strategic framework to address the key challenges associated with sustainable tourism development in Uttarakhand. The study seeks to identify practical solutions that balance tourism growth with environmental conservation and socio-cultural sustainability. Along with this, to maintain and promote local customs, culture, traditional foods, handicrafts, folklore, and architectural heritage, which have proper importance in the communities but they have to be given importance on the global stage. Sustainable tourism can be interpreted through multiple dimensions, including socio-economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, long-term viability of tourism development from both ecological and economic perspectives, and the recognition of tourism as an integral component of broader sustainable development. These dimensions emphasize the need to balance economic benefits with environmental conservation and social well-being. In this context, the primary objective of the present study is to develop an integrated framework and innovative strategies for promoting the sustainable development of eco-tourism in Uttarakhand, ensuring that tourism growth is aligned with ecological preservation and long-term regional sustainability.

The present study focuses on promoting homestay-based ecotourism integrated with spiritual, rural, adventure, and community-based tourism models. This integrated approach is designed to diversify livelihood opportunities for local communities beyond traditional agriculture and animal

husbandry, thereby enhancing income generation and reducing rural poverty. Furthermore, by creating sustainable employment at the local level, it has the potential to address the growing challenge of outmigration while supporting balanced socio-economic development in the region. Uttarakhand is known as *Devbhoomi* across the world as various pilgrimage centers for Hindus and other religions as well as its natural scenic beauty with great Himalayan snow-clad Mountain ranges, rivers with deep valleys, gorges with various land scape natural panoramic tourist destinations for various activities like honey moon destination, adventure, bird watching and nature interpretation etc.

Despite possessing immense tourism potential, Uttarakhand continues to face significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and large-scale outmigration from rural areas to the plains. The state offers exceptional opportunities for diverse tourism segments such as ecotourism, pilgrimage tourism, nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and community-oriented tourism. Although tourism contributes substantially to the state's economy, its development remains predominantly concentrated around religious and pilgrimage-based activities. Other promising tourism forms, including adventure, rural, and ecotourism, remain insufficiently developed and underutilized in terms of attracting a broader range of visitors. In particular, community-based tourism remains largely unexplored despite its strong potential as a sustainable development strategy. By directly involving local communities in tourism planning and management, community-based tourism can generate alternative livelihood opportunities, strengthen local economies, reduce poverty, and serve as an effective mechanism to address rural migration while promoting inclusive and sustainable regional development. Special emphasis must be placed on rural communities, which continue to experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, and large-scale outmigration. In this context, community-based tourism offers a viable pathway for sustainable rural development. By integrating indigenous healthcare practices, traditional food systems, local crafts, and cultural heritage with ecotourism initiatives, community-based tourism can create meaningful livelihood opportunities for local residents. Such an approach not only enhances income generation and economic self-reliance among native communities but also supports cultural preservation and strengthens the overall sustainability of tourism development in the region.

Keeping this in mind, home stay-based tourism established can be an enormous opportunity for underdeveloped tourist destination in the state. Exploring various options of tourism which can fulfill sustainable livelihood like home stay based eco-tourism for the people of the area. The newly developing tourism destination in Tehri Dam as a new tourist destination for various forms of water-related adventure sports and sports tourism.

Tehri Dam is one of Asia's largest high-altitude dams, covering an approximate surface area of 42 square kilometers and possessing a water storage capacity with a height of about 830 meters, making it a significant hydropower and water resource infrastructure in Uttarakhand, directly or indirectly affecting a population of 3.13 lakh. Due to the dam, 27 villages became

victims of landslides and a population of 851 lost socio-cultural and various livelihood related activities. There was no proper access from the dam to the villages and people had to travel long distances to their homes. Furthermore, the dam did not provide any employment opportunities for all the affected people although the seriously affected villagers were displaced from their lands and other properties with fair compensation. For the rest of the surrounding villages, the dams are the main attraction of Tehri Garhwal which could have been developed as an eco-tourism hub. Natives have given income opportunities in home stay, fishing, and boating, camping, rafting, paragliding in the dam through eco-tourism.

Biodiversity can be enhanced through bird watching, trekking along the dam site, nature interpretation centers etc. Eco-tourism has a wide scope in the villages near the dam site. Therefore, keeping all these in mind, a common village was discovered on both sides of the dam from Rajakhet to Madanegi, Rellakote villages of Pratapnagar and from Pipaldalli to Tipri, Koti Colony, Tiwargaon, Moroda, Dobra-Chati. After three days of survey one village Tiwargaon village was taken as a pilot village for eco-tourism development. The picturesque geographical location of the village besides the dam, triangular geographical picturesque location about 200 meters above the dam (water level) with population size of 558 in 96 houses, makes it a better site for eco-tourism destination. Its geographical location is 30°32'1989' North 79°19'5412' east.

In India, homestay-based tourism relatively recent concept and has emerged as an innovative approach within the tourism sector. It has gained increasing recognition as a sustainable tourism model that promotes authentic cultural experiences, encourages local community participation, and creates alternative livelihood opportunities while preserving traditional lifestyles and regional heritage. The homestay-based tourism with its number of social, economic and environmental benefits increasing gradually among the local and various state also providing many incentives to boost home stay tourism. The present study evaluates the social, economic, and environmental dimensions associated with homestay-based tourism in Tiwargaon, located in the Tehri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand. It critically examines the viability, safety, and sustainability of homestay tourism for both host communities and visiting tourists. The study highlights the socio-economic potential of homestay tourism as an alternative livelihood strategy capable of generating income, enhancing local employment, and supporting rural development. At the same time, it identifies key challenges faced by homestay entrepreneurs, including limited infrastructure, inadequate skill development, insufficient market access, and lack of institutional support. To address these constraints, the study proposes targeted interventions focused on skill enhancement, capacity building, and knowledge transfer through established homestay practitioners. Furthermore, it emphasizes the integration of homestay tourism with sustainable development objectives by promoting biodiversity conservation through the plantation of medicinal, aromatic, and horticultural species around homestay sites. The findings of this study are expected to generate valuable insights, facilitate knowledge exchange, and inform policy

formulation for government agencies, environmental planners, academicians, rural youth, and tourism stakeholders. More importantly, the study underscores the role of homestay tourism in empowering local and rural communities, preserving the cultural heritage of the Indian Himalayan Region, and promoting environmentally responsible tourism practices for long-term regional sustainability.

Road travel has emerged as an increasingly popular form of tourism, offering travelers flexible and immersive opportunities to explore destinations through self-guided journeys along preferred routes. Uttarakhand, with its diverse landscapes comprising rivers, forests, mountains, and rich cultural heritage, presents exceptional potential for road-based tourism experiences. Journeys across the state are characterized by continuously changing natural scenery, where river valleys, dense green forests, and majestic mountain vistas create a visually engaging travel experience. Extensive field reconnaissance conducted across the project area, supported by navigation tools such as digital mapping platforms, route-planning applications, and local knowledge systems, facilitated the identification of optimal travel routes. The analysis further assessed road infrastructure, accessibility, and the availability of essential services along major travel corridors connecting key destinations. Based on these assessments, a series of proposed road-trip circuits have been designed to connect multiple destinations through scenic and strategically significant routes. These circuits are intended to serve as ideal travel corridors for diverse tourist groups, including families, adventure riders, weekend travelers, and general holiday seekers. The sub-circuits have been carefully planned to cater to varied traveler interests, including hill destinations, rural tourism experiences, and urban cultural attractions, thereby enhancing destination accessibility and promoting diversified tourism development across Uttarakhand.

Tiwargaon is a picturesque village situated along the banks of the Tehri Dam, encompassing a total geographical area of approximately 76.28 hectares. The village has a population of about 250 residents, comprising 131 males and 119 females, distributed across 54 households, with a sex ratio of 908 females per 1,000 males. The literacy profile indicates a relatively high level of educational attainment, with 194 literate residents compared to 56 illiterate individuals. Administratively, the village falls under the Tehri tehsil in the Tehri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand. It is located approximately 25 km from both the tehsil headquarters in Tehri and the district headquarters at New Tehri, making it reasonably accessible while retaining its rural and scenic character. With the scope of home stay based eco-tourism round of meeting and skill and capacity training program was organized to start home stay based eco-tourism in the same village, in which 130 persons participated and the concept of the project was explained to them. A committee with 10 members was formed for the purpose of home-based eco-tourism and green brigade to initiate eco-tourism activities. Young and enthusiasm unemployed youth were convinced the villagers with great for eco-tourism activities and skill development in eco-tourism were entrusted for guiding and development of entrepreneurship

through various ecotourism activities based on Tehri dam. These youth of the village actively participated in the capacity building program and they were linked to various line department for various logistic support to start eco-tourism based activities. In the first meeting at least 36 men including the village head (*Pradhan*) and senior members of the village were present for encouragement. Representatives of the Tourism Department of Uttarakhand Government, District Magistrate, Tehri and employees of various nationalized banks were present in the meeting and provided information related various scheme of tourism entrepreneurship. In the meeting, bank staff explained the benefits of home stay based eco-tourism as a means for sustainable livelihood, loan facility for home stay and eco-tourism. The enthusiasm youth were also imparted skill development training on water sport activities in course of time with motors boat, Jet Ski, water biking, paragliding training and mode of operate for getting employment through tourism activities. After the skill development training, 14 youth are engaged direct employment in Tehri Lake for operating motor boats, 5 youth by Jet Ski, 9 youth by paragliding, 15 youth for guiding, 20 youth for tour operator and 60 house for operating home stay. Besides these trainings, other trainings were also given to women for running home stay and preparation of traditional food and other products for tourist so that they can get self-employment and promote tourism in the region. Initially two home stays started in the traditional houses in the villages. After the successful of two home stays other persons are also motivate to start home stay based tourism activities in the village and during the study conducted there are 52 families benefited by the home stay facility in the Tiwargaon village, at least 06 families are successfully developing nature-based cottages to attract tourist. Along with this, unprecedented success was also achieved in the activities taking place in the lake due to which hundreds of families are currently getting livelihood directly and indirectly with home stays with enormous economic benefits.

Cultural Changes

At present the village Tiwargaon is a popular destination for tourist. Those are coming to Tehri dam during summery for various water sport activities they used to stay in the village at Homestays. The government of Uttarakhand declare the village as tourist village and the economics of the people changed in many folds. Those families were out migrated from the village for different livelihood related purposes now returned to their native village and actively participating in various tourism activities. The educated youth of the villages now engaged at village with various capacities to get their livelihood. The women in village Tiwargaon organizing traditional food preparation and also traditional folk song for the tourist and getting incentives. Many homestays are coming up now in the villages and nearby areas and at present the area is a popular destination for home stay-based destination and the village is popularly known as tourist village in the regions because of mass tourist and success of home stays with economic boost and the socio-economy with cultural changes happening in the village and people getting direct benefits from various forms of tourism activities in the area.

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