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Cultural resilience and economic shifts: A case study of the Sahariya tribe through Sitabari fair in Rajasthan

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Abstract

Tourism has emerged as a powerful agent of socio-cultural and economic change, particularly in contexts involving marginalized indigenous groups. In India, tribal fairs represent both a developmental opportunity and a site of cultural negotiation. This study examines the Sitabari Fair in Rajasthan to analyze its influence on the Sahariya tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), across three dimensions: cultural transformation, economic shifts, and potential negative impacts. Employing a mixed-methods case study design, the research integrates surveys, interviews, ethnographic observations, and secondary data, analyzed through statistical and thematic techniques. Findings reveal a dual trajectory. On the one hand, the fair reinforces cultural pride, enhances intergenerational transmission of traditions, and stimulates entrepreneurship and household reinvestment in education, nutrition, and housing. On the other, it risks commodifying sacred rituals, creating economic disparities, and straining ecological systems through waste and seasonal dependency. Regression analysis identifies tourism exposure, marketing innovation, and product novelty as key predictors of income growth, though inequitable benefit distribution persists. The study concludes that while Sitabari Fair acts as a platform for cultural resilience and livelihood diversification, sustainable outcomes will depend on community-led safeguards, cooperative marketing structures, fair-trade mechanisms, and ecological management. Beyond this case, the findings highlight tribal fairs as critical laboratories for rethinking inclusive and culturally sensitive tourism models in India and similar indigenous contexts.

Keywords: Sahariya tribe, Sitabari fair, tribal tourism, cultural resilience, economic shifts, sustainable development, Rajasthan

Introduction

Tourism is globally acknowledged as one of the fastest-growing industries, contributing significantly to cultural exchange, social cohesion, and economic development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2024) ^[41], the sector accounts for nearly 10% of global GDP and has a major role in sustainable community development. Within the vast landscape of tourism, cultural and tribal tourism has emerged as a niche segment that not only offers visitors an authentic experience but also provides indigenous groups an opportunity for socio-economic advancement. In India, a country with more than 700 Scheduled Tribes, including 75 classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), the scope of tribal tourism is immense. Tribal fairs and festivals form a crucial part of this ecosystem, functioning as platforms for cultural preservation, social interaction, and livelihood generation. They bring together rituals, folk traditions, handicrafts, and trade practices, thereby creating a space where indigenous communities engage with wider society. The Sahariya tribe of Rajasthan, mainly residing in Baran and Shahabad regions, is one such community whose life is deeply intertwined with traditional fairs. Known as one of the most marginalized PVTGs in India, the Sahariyas face acute poverty, malnutrition, and social exclusion. However, their cultural identity, oral traditions, and socio-religious practices continue to be preserved and expressed, particularly through fairs and festivals. These events are vital not only for their cultural continuity but also for their economic survival.



The Sitabari Fair, held annually in the Kelwara region of Baran district, Rajasthan, is one of the most significant tribal fairs of North India. Rooted in the mythological association with Sita from the Ramayana, the fair is simultaneously a pilgrimage site, cattle-trading hub, and cultural gathering. It attracts a large number of visitors, including tribal groups, rural traders, artisans, and tourists.



For the Sahariya community, Sitabari Fair serves multiple roles: It is a cultural arena, where traditions such as folk music, dance, and rituals are showcased. It acts as an economic platform, where Sahariyas participate in livestock trading, handicraft sales, and small-scale commerce. It provides social visibility, allowing the community to engage with mainstream society and state-led tourism initiatives. Given its cultural depth and economic significance, Sitabari Fair represents an ideal case study to explore how tribal fairs influence both cultural resilience and economic shifts in marginalized communities such as the Sahariyas.

Despite the growing recognition of tribal tourism, academic scholarship often overlooks the dual nature of such fairs. On the one hand, they offer opportunities for economic upliftment and cultural preservation. On the other, they pose risks of commodification, cultural dilution, and socio-economic dependency. For the Sahariya tribe, who already face structural disadvantages, the stakes are particularly high. The research problem addressed in this study is:

- To what extent does the Sitabari Fair contribute to the cultural transformation and economic well-being of the Sahariya tribe?

- What negative implications might arise from their participation in such fairs?

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge academic inquiry with policy relevance. By highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with tribal fairs, it provides actionable insights for sustainable tribal tourism planning in Rajasthan and beyond.

The present study seeks to address the following objectives:

- To comprehend the cultural transformation of the Sahariya tribe in Rajasthan through the Sitabari Fair.
- To comprehend the economic transformation of the Sahariya tribe in Rajasthan through the Sitabari Fair.
- To identify the potential negative impacts of the Sitabari Fair on the Sahariya tribe.

Correspondingly, the research is guided by the following questions:

- What is the present status of Sitabari Fair in the cultural transformation of the Sahariya tribe?
- What is the present status of Sitabari Fair in the economic transformation of the Sahariya tribe?
- What are the potential negative impacts of tribal fairs on the Sahariya tribe?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2: Review of Literature and Research Gap - Provides a critical review of existing studies on tribal tourism, cultural transformation, and economic development of indigenous groups, identifying the knowledge gap. Section 3: Research Methodology - Outlines the case study design, sampling framework, data collection techniques (interviews, surveys, observation), and methods of analysis. Section 4: Analysis, Findings and Discussion - Presents and interprets the findings on cultural and economic transformations as well as negative impacts of the Sitabari Fair. Section 5: Conclusion and Recommendations - Summarizes the findings, discusses implications for policy and practice.

Review of Literature

Tribal tourism has emerged globally as an important tool for cultural preservation, identity assertion, and economic development. International studies from Africa, Latin America, Canada, and Southeast Asia highlight how indigenous communities use festivals, rituals, and fairs to showcase their traditions while also generating livelihood opportunities (Smith & Richards, 2021; Hall, 2022) ^[37, 21]. For instance, indigenous tourism in Canada and New Zealand has helped promote cultural performances, handicrafts, and eco-tourism, though often raising debates on cultural commodification (Carr, 2021) ^[45]. Similarly, in

Latin America, indigenous festivals are integrated into tourism circuits, though scholars caution that commercialization risks altering their authenticity. In the Indian context, tribal tourism has gained attention as states like Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Nagaland, and Rajasthan promote tribal fairs and festivals as unique attractions. Research shows that such events foster socio-cultural interaction and provide economic opportunities for marginalized groups (Singh, 2024) ^[36]. The Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, for example, has been widely studied for its dual role in preserving Naga traditions while also reshaping them for tourist audiences. However, as Das and Mishra (2021) ^[32] argue, the commercialization of tribal culture sometimes leads to misrepresentation and over-simplification of complex identities.

Tourism and fairs have long been associated with cultural transformation among indigenous groups. While fairs preserve traditional practices such as music, dance, and folklore, they simultaneously expose these practices to outside influences. Scholars like argue that tourism often results in both cultural resilience—where communities consciously protect and celebrate traditions—and cultural commodification—where rituals and symbols are adapted to suit tourist expectations. Globally, studies from Australia, Mexico, and Peru illustrate how indigenous communities experience cultural adaptation when their festivals are packaged for tourism markets. In India, tribal fairs not only sustain rituals and oral traditions but also introduce modern elements such as stage performances, food stalls, and digital promotions that influence community identity (Meena, 2022) ^[26]. The Hornbill Festival, the Bastar Dussehra, and the Baneshwar Fair highlight how tourism can simultaneously preserve heritage while modifying it to attract visitors. These insights underline that cultural transformation is a dynamic process, shaped by interactions between local communities and external stakeholders such as tourists, governments, and NGOs.

The economic impact of fairs is widely documented, with most studies pointing to their role as alternative livelihood sources for marginalized communities. Globally, indigenous festivals in New Zealand, Canada, and Kenya have demonstrated how tourism contributes to local entrepreneurship, infrastructure, and employment opportunities (Hinch & Butler, 2007) ^[44]. However, scholars also caution that economic gains are unevenly distributed, often benefitting organizers, intermediaries, or elites more than the most vulnerable groups (Carr, 2021) ^[45]. In India, fairs and festivals have traditionally acted as marketplaces for agricultural exchange, craft sales, and labor opportunities. Studies in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan reveal that fairs not only generate income but also enhance visibility for tribal art, dance, and craft (Meena, 2022) ^[26]. For instance, Baneshwar Fair in Dungarpur is both a religious gathering and a platform for Bhil tribes to engage in trade. Similar dynamics apply to Sitabari Fair, which combines religious significance with opportunities for Sahariya and other tribes to engage in cultural and economic exchanges. However, very few empirical studies assess the direct benefits of such fairs on income levels, livelihood security, or long-term economic empowerment.

Government initiatives play a vital role in promoting tribal fairs and safeguarding indigenous heritage. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) and Ministry of Tourism have

introduced schemes like “Tribes India” outlets, “Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat,” and digital platforms to market tribal art and culture. Rajasthan’s tourism policies also emphasize tribal fairs such as Sitabari, Baneshwar, and Beneshwar Dham as heritage events of cultural and religious value (Rajasthan Tourism Board, 2023). However, despite such efforts, gaps remain in infrastructure, marketing, and community participation. Many government-led initiatives prioritize tourist attraction over community benefit, leading to tensions between economic development and cultural preservation. Comparative experiences from Australia and Canada suggest that community-driven tourism models are more sustainable and empowering than top-down policy approaches. In the Indian context, greater emphasis on participatory planning, skill development, and inclusive tourism strategies could ensure that fairs like Sitabari contribute more directly to tribal empowerment.

Research Gap: Although the existing literature offers valuable insights on tribal tourism, cultural transformation, and economic impacts, several gaps remain: Specific focus on Sahariya Tribe is lacking: Most studies on Rajasthan’s tribal tourism discuss Bhils, Minas, and Garasias, while the Sahariya tribe—classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG)—has received minimal academic attention. Sitabari Fair remains underexplored: Despite being one of Rajasthan’s prominent tribal-religious fairs, Sitabari has rarely been examined in academic research, especially in terms of its dual role in cultural preservation and economic transformation. Fragmented analysis of impacts: Prior research often isolates either the economic benefits or the cultural transformations, without integrating both dimensions into a holistic framework. Lack of empirical, field-based studies: Much of the available work remains descriptive or policy-oriented, with very few employing in-depth qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the lived realities of tribal participation in fairs. Policy-practice disconnect: While government programs highlight empowerment through fairs, little research critically evaluates whether these policies translate into tangible benefits for marginalized groups like the Sahariyas.

Research Methodology

This study employs a case study design with a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and ethnographic observation. Such triangulation enables both statistical generalization and contextual depth (Yin, 2021) ^[43]. The Sitabari Fair, an annual cultural event in Baran district (Rajasthan), was chosen as a bounded system for exploring the Sahariya tribe’s cultural resilience and economic transformation.

The fair attracts diverse stakeholders, but the Sahariya tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), formed the primary population. Secondary respondents included officials, organizers, and tourists for cross-verification of perspectives. A purposive-stratified sample of ~120 participants was drawn:

- **Sahariyas (n=80):** stratified by age, gender, and economic activity.
- **Officials/organizers (n=11):** tourism officers, local administrators.
- **Tourists (n=29):** visitors.



Data were gathered through

- **Surveys:** Structured questionnaires quantified changes in cultural pride, income, marketing, innovation, and perceived tourism impacts.
- **In-depth Interviews (IDIs):** Semi-structured interviews with artisans, elders, and officials explored cultural continuity and adaptation.
- **FGDs:** Small-group discussions (6-10 participants) captured collective views on challenges and opportunities.
- **Observation:** Rituals, performances, and trade were observed to contextualize cultural dynamics.
- **Secondary Sources:** Policy reports and archival studies provided background.
- The Study employed the Qualitative and Quantitative techniques both for analysis.
- **Qualitative analysis:** Interview/FGD transcripts were coded in NVivo using thematic analysis (Flick, 2023). Triangulation across methods ensured validity.
- **Quantitative analysis:** Descriptive statistics and OLS regression (SPSS) examined determinants of income change, with predictors including tourism exposure, marketing method, and product innovation.

Data Analysis and Findings

Objective 1 explored how participating in the Sitabari Fair has affected the cultural life of the Sahariya tribe. Given the nuanced nature of cultural change, qualitative methods were emphasized. We conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with tribal elders, youth, and performers. Their narratives were coded in NVivo to identify recurring themes (e.g., pride in culture, cultural dilution, innovation in traditions). Additionally, the tribal survey included specific statements on cultural impacts (e.g., "Tourism has helped expand tribal culture") with Yes/No responses. We quantified the agreement levels for these statements to gauge community sentiment, and visualized them using simple descriptive statistics (SPSS) and charts.

The Sahariya community's engagement with tourism through the fair appears to be a double-edged sword, bringing a revival and pride in culture on one hand, and concerns about commercialization on the other. On the positive side, the majority of Sahariya respondents feel that the fair has *expanded the reach of their culture* and given them new motivation to preserve and showcase their traditions. Quantitatively, we see high agreement rates on multiple cultural dimensions, as summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: Sahariya Perceptions of Cultural Impact of Sitabari Fair

Cultural Impact Dimension	% of Tribal Respondents Agreeing
Tourism has expanded the reach of our tribal culture	68%
Feel motivated to perform/continue traditions due to tourist appreciation	71%
Feel more globally connected (exposure to outside cultures)	64%
Intend to participate in the fair throughout life (lifelong commitment)	69%

Source: SPSS.

These figures paint an encouraging picture: roughly two-thirds or more of Sahariyas acknowledge positive cultural

effects from the fair. Specifically, 71% say that interactions with tourists and the appreciation received have motivated

them to continue or even revive cultural practices. For instance, young performers mentioned learning traditional dances from elders *“so we can perform well at the fair,”* suggesting an intergenerational transmission of culture spurred by external interest. Similarly, 68% believe that tourism has helped expand their culture’s reach beyond their community. This speaks to the pride in seeing their dances, songs, and crafts showcased to a wider audience. One middle-aged artisan said, *“Earlier, our songs were just in our hamlet. Now people from Jaipur, Delhi also hear them at the fair. It makes me proud.”*

Furthermore, nearly 2/3rds (64%) feel a sense of global connectedness that they attribute to meeting visitors from

other regions/countries. This is a profound change for a once-isolated tribal group; exposure to different languages, fashion, and ideas via tourists has made them feel part of a larger world. Some youths expressed that they made Facebook friends with visitors and exchanged cultural knowledge online after the fair, illustrating new networks formed through cultural exchange.

Perhaps most telling is that 69% intend to keep participating in the fair for life. This strong commitment indicates that the fair is not seen as a one-off economic venture but as an event deeply tied to their identity and way of life. In discussions, elders emphasized that *“Our children have seen how important this fair is - they will carry it on.”*

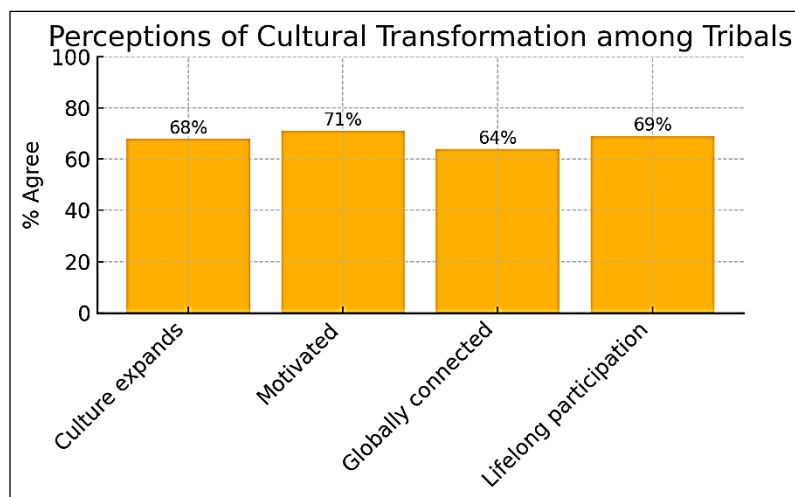


Fig 1: Tribal Agreement on Cultural Transformation Indicators.

The bar chart (Figure 1) shows strong agreement with positive cultural impacts: 71% felt motivated by tourists, 69% committed to lifelong participation, 68% agreed tourism expands culture, and 64% felt globally connected. These figures reflect broadly positive cultural experiences, though the slightly lower score on connectedness suggests some are still adjusting to external influences.

Qualitative insights reinforce this optimism

- **Cultural Pride & Continuity:** Youth are increasingly embracing traditional attire, music, and dance, encouraged by tourist admiration. Elders feel reassured seeing younger members carry forward folk arts.
- **Innovation within Tradition:** Tribals are blending modern elements into crafts and performances (e.g., shorter song versions, craft adaptations) to engage tourists—changes driven internally, not imposed.

Concerns remain

- **Cultural Dilution:** Elders fear repeated modifications for tourist appeal could erode authenticity over time.
- **Commercial Pressure:** Some artisans worry income motives may overshadow tradition, though most balance market needs with cultural integrity.

In sum, Objective 1 shows that the Sitabari Fair has been a cultural boon, reviving pride, continuity, and global recognition. While risks of dilution exist, the dominant trend is positive transformation—Sahariyas are not passively losing culture but actively reshaping and sharing it in ways that sustain their heritage.

Objective 2 explored the drivers of income growth and economic behavior shifts among the Sahariyas. We employed an OLS regression (SPSS) with income increase (₹) as the dependent variable. Key predictors included: (a) tourism exposure index, (b) marketing method (traditional vs. modern), and (c) product innovation (new vs. traditional products). Results highlighted which factors most strongly explained income gains. Complementing this, interview data coded in NVivo revealed changes in economic behavior—such as altered spending priorities, higher savings, and reinvestment in business—demonstrating that the fair’s impact extends beyond immediate earnings to long-term financial practices.

The economic transformation is not uniform across the community - certain strategies and attributes lead to significantly better outcomes. The regression analysis provides statistical evidence of what distinguishes higher-gain households from others. Table 2 displays the regression coefficients:

Table 2: OLS Regression - Predictors of Income Change (₹ per month)

Predictor Variable	Coefficient (₹)	t-value	p-value
Tourism Exposure Index (per unit)	+5,210	6.32	0.000 **
Marketing Method (Modern vs. Traditional)	+1,120	2.10	0.037 *
Product Novelty (Introduced new product)	+960	1.98	0.049 *
Constant and model details omitted for brevity.			

* ($p < 0.01$ =, $p < 0.05$ =) **Source:** SPSS

Regression results identified three key drivers of income gains among the Sahariyas.

- Tourism Exposure emerged as the strongest predictor, with each unit rise on the exposure index linked to an additional ₹5,210/month income. This finding ($t=6.32$, $p<0.001$) underscores the importance of direct tourist interaction as the main pathway to earnings.
- Modern Marketing (e.g., digital payments, WhatsApp promotion, banners) contributed an average ₹1,120/month higher income compared to traditional selling, significant at the 0.05 level. Professional presentation and accessibility were particularly valued by tourists.
- Product Innovation added about ₹960/month, marginally significant ($p\approx0.049$). Novelty items faced less competition and fetched premium prices, offering modest but meaningful returns.

Together, these factors highlight that households adopting exposure, modernization, and innovation strategies reap the highest benefits, widening economic differentials within the tribe. Qualitative insights confirmed these trends. Many Sahariyas now view the fair as a business enterprise, preparing year-round, experimenting with new crafts, and reinvesting earnings in tools and training. Households reported better nutrition, improved housing, and education spending—clear signs of improved living standards. At the same time, middlemen have begun engaging, presenting both opportunities and risks.

However, challenges remain. Seasonality limits income to the fair period, leaving gaps in the off-season. Moreover, uneven gains have emerged: resourceful, innovative households prosper more, while conservative or poorer families lag behind. This growing disparity suggests the need for peer learning and support mechanisms to ensure broader community benefit. Tourism-driven economic change among the Sahariyas is evident but uneven. Adaptive households leveraging exposure, modern marketing, and product innovation enjoy higher income gains, while those sticking to traditional methods benefit less. The community is shifting from subsistence to a market-oriented, micro-entrepreneurial economy—a significant transformation. For sustainability and inclusiveness, support in marketing skills, product development, and year-round tourist engagement (e.g., online platforms, events) is essential.

Objective 3 sought to examine the adverse effects of tourism and the Sitabari Fair on the Sahariya community. A problem-ranking survey was conducted where respondents rated potential issues—such as price exploitation, waste mismanagement, cultural dilution, alcoholism, traffic congestion, and seasonal income dependency—on a severity scale of 1 (Not a problem) to 5 (Serious problem). Mean

severity scores were calculated to prioritize concerns, while qualitative insights from FGDs and interviews (analyzed in NVivo) enriched the interpretation.

Findings reveal that although the fair is largely beneficial, negative externalities persist. The most severe problems identified were economic exploitation and environmental challenges, followed by cultural and social concerns. Table 3 summarizes the mean severity scores reported by the Sahariya participants.

Table 3: Perceived Negative Impacts of the Fair on Sahariya Community

Issue	Mean Severity Score
Price exploitation by buyers/intermediaries	3.9
Waste management & littering at fair	3.7
Cultural dilution/commodification	3.5
Alcoholism and substance use during fair	3.2
Traffic congestion & disturbances	3.1
Seasonal income dependency/risk	2.9

Source: Self Compilation

The community identified Price Exploitation as the most pressing issue (mean score 3.9/5). Respondents reported unfair bargaining by tourists and resellers, with artisans often pressured to sell goods cheaply—especially at closing hours or to middlemen who later resell at higher margins. This creates a sense of undervaluation despite overall income gains. The findings highlight the need for measures such as cooperative pricing, price awareness campaigns, or fair-trade mechanisms.

Waste Management (3.7) emerged as the second major concern. The fair generates heavy litter—plastic bottles, wrappers, and food waste—around the sacred lake and temple area. Community members criticized inadequate government cleanup efforts, noting overflowing bins and lack of systematic disposal. This threatens both the ecological and cultural sanctity of Sitabari. Cultural Dilution (3.5) was also noted, with elders expressing unease about rituals being shortened or altered for tourist appeal. While exposure is welcomed, authenticity is perceived to be eroding. Alcoholism (3.2) was flagged as a social side-effect, with illegal alcohol sales near the fair leading to excess consumption among youth and visitors. This not only risks disturbances but also contradicts the Sahariya tradition of abstinence during religious festivities. Traffic Congestion (3.1) was seen as a nuisance caused by the influx of vehicles, creating mobility challenges and raising concerns over emergency access. Finally, Seasonal Income Dependency (2.9) reflects economic vulnerability: many Sahariyas rely heavily on fair earnings, leaving them exposed to risks from disruptions such as weather shocks or epidemics.

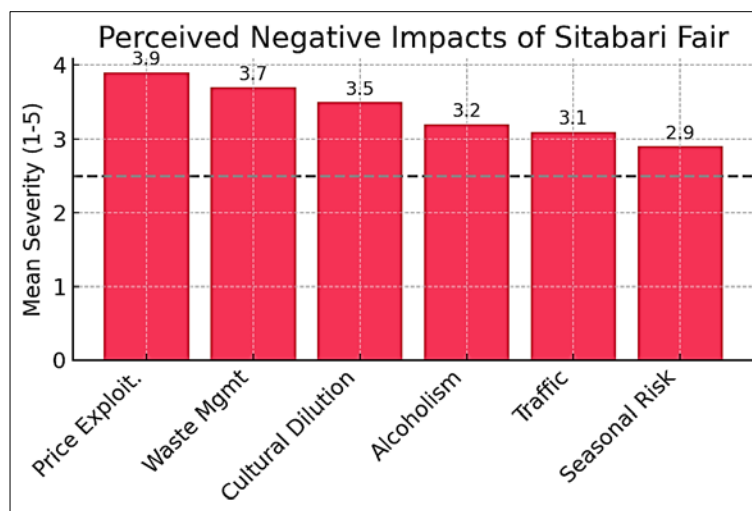


Fig 2: Severity of Reported Negative Impacts (Higher = Worse).

The bar chart above ranks the issues by mean severity. Price exploitation (3.9) and waste management (3.7) stand out above the midpoint of the scale, indicating clearly felt problems. Cultural dilution (3.5) is also above neutral, showing a notable level of concern. The remaining issues (alcoholism, traffic, seasonal risk) hover closer to the midline. This visual prioritization helps stakeholders focus on what needs urgent attention (the first two or three issues) versus what needs monitoring and moderate intervention.

The qualitative feedback provides context: - On price exploitation, tribals voiced a desire for price regulation or guidance. Some suggested having a display of recommended prices for certain crafts (so tourists know the fair price). Others wished for a cooperative where they could collectively bargain or refuse low offers, rather than competing with each other to sell off goods cheap at day-end. - On waste, many tribals were dismayed that an event held on sacred ground gets left messy. They suggested simple measures: placing more bins, signs urging cleanliness in local language and English, and volunteers (maybe tribal youth) to manage waste during and after the fair. A few even mentioned the idea of “plastic-free fair” - banning single-use plastics at the event, which would need enforcement. - On cultural dilution, stories included how some dance rituals now allow tourists to join in for fun, which was unthinkable traditionally. While it’s nice to share, elders feel outsiders dancing without knowing the meaning can strip the ritual of meaning. They called for preserving at least parts of the rituals exclusively for community observance. - On alcohol and traffic, the solutions seem more straightforward: better law enforcement (local police to curb alcohol sales and manage traffic). Tribals themselves can do little here beyond requesting officials to take action.

While the Sitabari Fair drives positive change, it also brings challenges—most notably economic exploitation, waste, and risks to cultural integrity. Left unchecked, these could erode the fair’s long-term benefits. However, the issues are both visible and solvable through fair-trade policies, waste management, and community-led cultural safeguards.

Discussion

This study reveals that the Sitabari Fair operates as both a space of empowerment and a site of vulnerability for the Sahariya tribe. Culturally, the fair has enhanced visibility

and reinforced pride, particularly by encouraging younger generations to learn traditional practices under the gaze of tourists. This reflects scholarship that positions tourism as a cultural reinforcement mechanism, where external validation revitalizes marginalized traditions (Nair & George, 2022; Smith & Richards, 2021) [30, 37]. Yet, the same exposure has fueled concerns of dilution, as sacred rituals are increasingly reshaped to suit entertainment demands—a phenomenon well-documented in debates around staged authenticity (Cohen, 2020; Salazar, 2023) [10, 34]. The findings underscore culture’s dual nature: adaptability ensures continuity, but unchecked commodification risks eroding meaning.

Economically, the fair has generated new income streams and encouraged entrepreneurial behavior, with households reinvesting in education, housing, and nutrition. These gains align with tourism studies that highlight livelihood diversification and entrepreneurial opportunity as key benefits of cultural fairs (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Bhat & Sharma, 2023) [23, 7]. However, disparities persist: proactive families often benefit disproportionately, while conservative households remain marginalized, and the growing influence of middlemen risks deepening inequities. Such patterns resonate with critiques of tourism-led development, which warn that uneven benefit distribution undermines social cohesion and fosters dependency (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2020; Gössling & Hall, 2022) [39, 17].

Challenges are equally pronounced. Price exploitation, waste mismanagement, and seasonal dependency emerged as significant risks. The ecological strain and social pressures echo wider concerns that unchecked tourism contributes to environmental degradation and community stress (Nepal *et al.*, 2021; UNEP, 2023) [31, 40]. Taken together, the findings demonstrate a delicate balance—where cultural resilience and economic advancement exist alongside exploitation and erosion risks—positioning the Sitabari Fair as a transitional space requiring careful governance.

Conclusion

The Sitabari Fair exemplifies tourism’s paradox for indigenous communities: it is simultaneously a mechanism of cultural revival and economic advancement, and a source of vulnerability. The fair has strengthened pride and intergenerational learning, stimulated entrepreneurial

adaptation, and improved living conditions. Yet, unresolved tensions around authenticity, inequitable benefit distribution, and environmental strain highlight that progress remains fragile. Rather than representing unqualified success or failure, the fair should be understood as a liminal moment where opportunities and risks intersect. Sustainable outcomes will depend on institutional support and community agency that balance cultural preservation with modernization, ensuring that the Sahariya tribe benefits without compromising its identity or ecological foundation.

Suggestions

Moving forward, targeted interventions can enhance positive transformations while addressing emerging risks. Culturally, protocols distinguishing sacred rituals from staged performances, along with visitor awareness initiatives, can safeguard authenticity. Economically, building artisan capacity in marketing, digital skills, and product innovation—coupled with cooperative models—would strengthen bargaining power and reduce reliance on exploitative middlemen. To broaden inclusivity, year-round linkages through exhibitions, e-commerce, and microfinance could support households currently left behind. Equally important are ecological safeguards: robust waste management, recycling, and infrastructure upgrades must accompany growing tourist flows to prevent environmental degradation. Finally, institutional support through transparent pricing, fair-trade mechanisms, and participatory monitoring bodies would ensure accountability and equity. By integrating these strategies, the Sitabari Fair can evolve into a sustainable model of cultural resilience and economic empowerment.

Future Implications

The findings carry several implications for research, policy, and practice. For research, they highlight the need for longitudinal studies that track how cultural and economic dynamics evolve as tourism expands, particularly in understudied tribal contexts (Singh & Reisinger, 2024) [36]. For policy, the study suggests the importance of integrating indigenous voices into tourism planning to ensure authenticity and equity, echoing calls for participatory governance in sustainable tourism (Hall, 2022) [21]. Practically, the case demonstrates the potential of fairs to act as laboratories for sustainable tourism models that balance livelihood creation with cultural preservation. Future initiatives could explore digital platforms, fair-trade certifications, and eco-tourism linkages as tools for scaling benefits while protecting cultural and ecological assets. If replicated thoughtfully, the Sitabari model could inform broader strategies for tribal and rural tourism across India and beyond.

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