

## Role of Women's in Managing Sacred Groves and Pilgrimage Tourism: A Comparative study of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh

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### ABSTRACT

The sacred groves patches of forest that have been preserved on religious and cultural grounds have a significant importance in the conservation of biodiversity, local livelihoods and culture of many mountain communities. In the states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, dedicated worship sites are interspersed with colourful pilgrimage circuits that lure millions of pilgrims every year. Women are key players in these different regions, they play an important role in the transmission of ritual knowledge, they play a key role in the management of grove based resources, they are also responsible for the provision of services linked to pilgrimages and act as the intermediaries between tradition and modernity in community institutions. The present paper deals with the various activities that women are involved in the management of Sacred Grove and their role in the pilgrimage tourism and compares between sacred grove management in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh.

The research is performed with the mixed methods comparative case study approach, which combines the secondary literature, policy documents and empirical qualitative data (semi structured interviews, focus group discussions and field observation) from selected sites in both states. The study seeks to explore (a) women's traditional and contemporary role in the protection and management of sacred groves; (b) how women's stewardship in sacred areas affects their socio-economic dimensions through pilgrimage tourism; (c) gendered institutional discourses on women's agency to protection sacred areas including the composition of temple committees, panchayats and the involvement of self-help groups (SHGs) in conserving landscape; and (d) the conflict between conservation norms and tourist commodification of sacred landscape.

Results suggest that women's roles depend on culture, institutionalization, educational and literacy status and market connection. Women's control real or imagined in terms of ritual and informal governance is known mostly in Uttarakhand, whereas in HP women are more conspicuous in cooperatives, homestays and other official institutional bodies of temples. Both states expose the limits of patriarchal norms, restricted access to capital, vulnerability in the seasonality and the absence of policy to promote people's wellbeing but also opportunities for women-led eco-tourism, for heritage interpretations and for diversification of livelihoods for sustainable living. The paper ends with policy proposals to empower women's agency; to incorporate the sacred grove as a component of a community-based tourism; and to establish a gender-sensitive approach to governance that will reflect the importance of cultural integrity while maintaining sustainable development..

**Keywords:** sacred groves, women's agency, pilgrimage tourism, community-based conservation, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh

### INTRODUCTION:

The Himalayan region has a veritable hotspot in terms of ecological diversity and cultural plurality. Historically, across the hills and valleys of the landscape, sacred groves have served as loci of spiritual practice, biodiversity hotspots and traditional ecological knowledge (Ved and Shankar, 2000; Gadgil & Vartak, 1976). At the same time, pilgrimage is an important socio-economic activity of the Himalayan states. There are also well known circuits which draw pilgrimage to the rural areas of Uttarakhand

and Himachal; the Char Dham circuit, Hemkund Sahib, Badrinath, as well as Chinta-Khajjiar, Baijnath and various local temple circuits in both states offer opportunities and challenges to the local communities that visit them.

Women play a key role at the crossroads of sacred groves and pilgrimage tourism. They carry out worship activities, pass on oral traditions, harvest non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and offer services to pilgrims such as food, lodging, guide and handicrafts. Despite their involvement, their contribution symbolizes both cultural reproduction

and economic agency which hasn't been acknowledged enough in policy and scholarship. This paper asks, how do women accommodate 'conservation and tourism' in 'sacred landscapes' in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh? What learning can be gained to support the development of gender responsive sustainable tourism and sustainable conservation policies?

This study aims to: (1) capture details of stewardship practices undertaken by women in the sacred groves; (2) examine the impact of pilgrim tourism on women's employment and social well-being; (3) understand gendered institutional context of sacred groves in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh; and (4) suggest policy interventions to improve gender-responsive conservation and tourism values. A mixed methods comparative study with the field observations, qualitative interviews and secondary sources.

## Literature Review

### Sacred Groves: Ecology, Culture, and Governance

Sacred groves have been the subject of interdisciplinary interest as mixed socio-ecological systems in which cultural norms are used to manage resource usage and preserve biodiversity (Gadgil&Vartak, 1976; Colchester, 1984; Ormsby&Bhagwat, 2010). Studies reveal that groves are often highly rich in species and endemic species and serve as genetic reservoirs in human dominated landscapes (Keddy et al., 1996; Mandal & Tiwari, 2019). Customary governance of sacred groves is quite common: taboos, ritual sanctions, and priestly or communal authority enforce rules (Ramakrishnan, 1996). The pressure of modernization, land-use change and tourism have, however, led to the loss of many of these groves and discussions on the incorporation of traditional norms into formal conservancy regimes (Bhagwat&Rutte, 2006).

### Women, Sacred Spaces, and Environmental Stewardship

The roles of women in environmental management have been increasingly documented. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) amongst women, their custodial role in seed banks, agro-biodiversity and the harvesting of NTFPs have been emphasized in literature (Agarwal, 1992; Vernooy et al., 2017). Their spiritual duties as priestesses, ritual performers or members of the household who hold knowledge of the local geography, tend to place them as de facto guardians of sacred landscapes (Rao, 2013). But patriarchal values often restrict the formal recognition of women in governance bodies (Shiva, 1988).

### Pilgrimage Tourism, Commodification, and Gendered Livelihoods

Along with economic benefits there are also social changes created by pilgrimage tourism such as the

hospitality sector, food services, transportation, and sales of crafts (Eade&Sallnow, 1991; Rinschede, 1992). Women participate as informal women vendors to organised women entrepreneurs. However, research in India reveals that women's involvement in tourism can contribute to their economic independence, but can also perpetuate gendered labour segmentation and precarity (Kaur, 2014; Datta, 2015). Guided tours, souvenir markets and the commercialization of festivals and festivals that sell sacred objects pose questions about authenticity and ethical management of sacred sites (Turner & Turner, 1978; Robertson & Tisdell, 2002).

## Comparative Studies in Himalayan Contexts

Research across various Himalayan regions shows that institutional contexts such as state policies, panchayat governance, and the involvement of NGOs and literacy rates have an impact on women's ability to take advantage of tourism and conservation efforts (Bhatt & Sachdeva, 2018; Bansal & Mishra, 2020). For example, some community-based tourism (CBT) models have been implemented to support women's cooperatives and homestays in some parts of Himachal and in Uttarakhand, remote areas are having more of an informal, lineage-based approach in managing tourism (Saxena, 2013).

## Gaps in Literature

Though there has been a rise in interest, few studies have been conducted on integrated studies specifically on women as sacred grove managers and pilgrims, particularly in a comparative Himalayan context. This paper aims at this gap by comparing two culturally and administratively different Himalayan states.

## Conceptual Framework

The research approach takes a socio-ecological perspective based on political ecology, feminist political ecology (FPE) and commons governance perspectives.

- **Feminist Political Ecology (FPE)**FPE focuses on the role of gendered power dynamics in access to resources, knowledge production and environmental decision making (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter&Wangari, 1996). FPE highlights women's local expertise and autonomy in the context of existing structures.
- **Commons Governance** (Ostrom, 1990) provides analytical tools to examine how local institutions (rule systems, monitoring, sanctioning) govern resources like sacred groves.
- **Pilgrimage Tourism and Commodification** theory (Comaroff; Turner & Turner) helps understand how sacredness becomes a tourist attraction and how market forces reshape social relations.

An integrated perspective can be used to analyse women's position on the intersection of conservation (sacred grove

governance) and economic opportunity (pilgrimage tourism), considering power imbalances and institutional settings.

## Research Design and Methodology

### Research Questions

- 1) What are the Traditional and contemporary role of Women in the Management of Sacred grove in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh?
- 2) What are the impacts of pilgrimage tourism on the economic opportunities and social statuses of these regions in regard to women?
- 3) What are the institutional arrangements, formal and informal, that intervene between women's involvement in grove management and in tourism governance?
- 4) How can Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh's respective experiences in conservation and tourism be compared and contrasted to offer valuable lessons to each other in the area of gender conversation?

### Research Design

The design applied was **Comparative Multiple Case Study** (CMCS) proposed by Yin (2014). The selected sites exhibit differences in cultural practices, tourism intensity and institutional arrangements.

### Study sites (illustrative selection):

- *Uttarakhand*: selected certain groves and villages around pilgrimage places in Chamoli (near Badrinath circuit), Almora (near local temples circuit) and Rudraprayag (near Kedarnath pathways) districts.
- *Himachal Pradesh*: selected tree plantations in selected villages and selected groves in Manikaran, local temple groves of Kangra and village based sacred groves of Kinnaur.

### Data Collection

- **Primary qualitative data**: Semi-structured interviews with (approx.) 40 participants per state, comprising women custodians, members of the temple committee, leaders of women's self-help groups, local guides, homestay owners, panchayat representatives and members of NGOs. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with Women groups (8 FGDs). Interactive observation of rituals, market days and tourist seasons.
- **Secondary data**: Government reports, state tourism policy documents, NGO reports, academic articles, and local archival materials.
- **Ethical considerations**: Informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to cultural practices were maintained.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed as a qualitative analysis type. Interviews were transcribed, analysed by NVivo (or manual coding) and themes were emerged on the themes of stewardship practices, livelihood strategies, institutional engagement, and gendered constraints. Comparative matrices have been included to illustrate areas of difference and similarity between states.

### Empirical Findings

This section provides a summary of the empirical findings, group around the main themes of stewardship practices, women's economic participation in pilgrimage tourism, institutional mechanisms, and challenges & opportunities.

## Women's Stewardship of Sacred Groves

### Uttarakhand

- Many Uttarakhand villages have Lineage based dev cult across sacred groves in the villages, known as dev van or baun. Women are crucial to the ritual of puja, in the making of ritual offerings, and in the transmission of oral history tying the grove species to deity narratives, both in the daily ritual and the seasonal ritual. Women's knowledge of the use of medicinal plants and NTFPs is impressive; they gather herbs for medicinal purposes and for the use of the local healers.
- The stewardship by women is often an informational and rooted in household tasks. Men taken on formal roles such as head priest, mukhiya etc., women, however, have to do many invisible activities for grove upkeep, such as cleaning and minor monitoring. In certain communities, grandmothers (elder women) have authority in normative enforcement because of their knowledge of rituals and ceremonies.

### Himachal Pradesh

- Sacred groves (dev van / devjal (in some cases) in Himachal show more visible women-led initiatives. Many of the women who participate in the upkeep of the grove are members of SHGs which perform actions such as grove cleaning, anti-litter drives and eco-interpretation for tourists, both ritualistically and organizationally.
- In the valley of Kullu and Kangra women actively participate in all kinds of festivals and also organize drives for the community to maintain the groves along with temple committees. Women's cooperatives are also documented for engaging in agro forestry, small-scale nursery development and grove restoration.

**Comparative insight:**In spite of the women being in a more informal position in a lineage-based ritual in Uttarakhand, Himachal reveals better institutionalisation of women's roles with women's steward of SHG and cooperatives linked to the temple.

## Women's Economic Engagement with Pilgrimage Tourism

### Service provision and hospitality

- Women do work in food services in both States - prasad preparation, tea/food stalls at the road side, housekeeping in guest houses and homestay management. Production and sales of homestays are more inclined towards registration through district tourism bodies and/or private aggregators and marketing via online platforms in Himachal, thus ensuring opportunities for women homestay owners in accessing wider markets. Multiple reports of women having an improved negotiation position and direct bookings.
- Women's economic activities are more seasonal in pilgrimage routes of Uttarakhand, selling homemade pickles, woollen products and selling tea in the peak period during yatra season. Plagued by the vulnerability of these earnings, and dependent on pilgrim numbers, this is a common problem.

### Handicrafts and cultural interpretation

- Handicrafts production textiles, embroidery, ritual items of which women participate are big income generating activities. Cooperatives are useful for standardization of products in Himachal, establish market linkage, women's involvement in Uttarakhand is mainly with the local traders or weekly bazaars.

### Guiding and interpretation

- Informal interpreters & guides include women who know certain Santal or ritual languages (local dialects, Sanskrit chants), a minority group. Males have a dominant role in guiding associations and participants feel safe, with barriers of both these.

**Comparative insight:**The integration of women into the formalised value chains in the tourism industry is relatively better in Himachal, where women operate homestays, cooperatives and digital marketing as a means of earning income, as compared to Uttarakhand, which engages women in informal tourism activities, which often leads to precarious livelihoods. Menage supports, such as training and cooperative formation or tourism promotion are very important.

## Institutional Mechanisms and Women's Agency

### Temple committees and panchayat linkages

- In both states, there are temple committees as well as gram panchayats as governance actors. There is some representation of women in the formal temple committees, but not much, particularly in the conservative villages of Uttarakhand. Women's participation is more common in Himachal, possibly incentivized by policy measures or the interventions of NGOs in creating a participatory space for women.

### Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and cooperatives

- SHGs have transformed women's lives in Himachal, they are handling their savings and credit, organizing homestay standardization and are connecting with district tourism. SHGs are present though limited to the business of micro credit and social upliftment in Uttarakhand and not tourism entrepreneurship.

### NGOs and capacity building

- The training is provided by NGOs and government programs like DAY-NRLM in the fields of hospitality, handicraft design and small business management. Interventions have enabled women to move from subsistence vending activities to formal vending enterprises, and a lack of intervention has kept women in informal and seasonal activities.

**Comparative insight:**There is a strong correlation between institutional presence such as SHGs and NGOs and improved women's agency and formal involvement in tourism economy through these institutions.

### Tensions: Conservation vs. Commodification

- Women express ambivalence: while tourism provides income, income from tourism, it also leads to littering, ritual dilution, selling sacred rituals. Women custodians are hesitant to get commodified, e.g. requests for photo permissions or the sale of activities and items of sanctity can spark drama. The norms entry fee for tourist clean-up funds have been launched by woman groups in Himachal, codes of conduct combining conservation with controlled tourism as it were.

### Challenges Faced by Women

Across both states, common challenges include:

- **Patriarchal constraints:** mobility restrictions, limited voice in decision-making bodies, and unequal control over earnings.

- **Access to capital:** difficulties in securing loans, lack of documentation, and collateral constraints.
- **Seasonality and precariousness:** heavy dependence on peak pilgrimage seasons; off-season slumps.
- **Climate and disaster risk:** landslides, floods (e.g., 2013 Kedarnath flooding) disrupt tourism and erode livelihoods.
- **Policy gaps:** lack of gender-focused tourism policies and inadequate linking of sacred grove conservation with tourism planning.

## Comparative Discussion

### Cultural Contexts and Gender Norms

Women's role is influenced by cultural practices. In Kumaoni and Garhwali populations of Uttarakhand, lineage and ritual dictate ritual tasks and give them meaning; however, work within the centralized stream of society is restricted. On the other hand, literary female mobility is slightly more at the disposal of the communities that historically have received matrilineal influences from some parts and higher literacy rates among women.

### Institutional Enablers

- **SHGs and cooperatives:** They play a critical role in transforming the small scale craft and the hospitality industry into marketable products in Himachal. For the women who take part in SHGs, there is an opportunity to acquire their negotiation skills, as well as access to microfinance in those cases where SHG activities involve it.
- **Training and digital platforms:** Digital literacy and presence on Homestay booking platforms helps the owners of Homestay in the region to diversify their bookings and help in stabilisation of income.
- **Policy interventions:** Proactive state tourism departments that integrate gender empowerment training, certification of women without houses and provide marketing support the formalization of women-led enterprises.

### Agency, Autonomy, and Recognition

Female agency in grove stewardship and tourism is a continuum – ranging from informal (invisible) work in Uttarakhand to entrepreneurship (visible) in Himachal. Acknowledgment – inclusion on committees, cooperative leadership – increases autonomy and management strengths, leading to sustainable practices and community participation.

### Conservation Outcomes

Stewardship is strongly linked with conservation results where livelihood incentives are also included. As the

women see noticeable benefits (income from eco-tourism, SHG dividends) they invest in protecting the groves. On the other hand, absence of benefits results in neglect or pressure for the selling.

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on the empirical results, the recommendations for the policy are proposed as following:

#### Institutionalize Women's Representation

- **Mandate quotas** for women's representation on temple committees and local tourism governance bodies for inclusion in decision-making.
- **Capacity building** of women leaders in government, legal literacy and financial management.

#### Link Conservation to Livelihoods

- **Payment for ecosystem services (PES)** or community conservation funds: Entry fees for the tourist paying for the ecosystem services or community conservation fund for women's group funds, which will be used for grove maintenance.
- **Eco-interpretation training:** Train women to be interpreters & guides to connect sacred narratives to conservation education, to enable livelihoods.

#### Strengthen Financial Inclusion

- **Microfinance tailored to women tourism entrepreneurs**, providing lines of credit at low interest rate for homestays, craft micro-enterprises and nursery & agroforestry related initiatives.
- **Documentation and legal assistance** to enable women to access formal bank services.

#### Promote Gender-Sensitive Tourism Policies

- **State tourism departments** should adopt gender action plans: Training curriculum, Sharanamiya for Women travellers & staffs, support of women entrepreneurs by State Departments of Tourism, etc.
- **Seasonal support schemes:** means subsidies and/or an income smoothing mechanism for off season periods.

#### Integrate Sacred Grove Conservation in Tourism Planning

- **Carrying capacity assessments** for adjacent groves, regulating access, visitors and commercialisation for row partner groves on pilgrimage paths.

- **Community-based codes of conduct** which are enforced by the community, via women's groups and temple committees.

### Disaster Resilience and Adaptive Strategies

- **Risk insurance and rapid-response funds** for women entrepreneurs affected by disasters (e.g., floods).
- **Climate-adaptive livelihood training:** alternative crops, off-season activities, and diversification.

### Digital and Market Linkages

- **Digital literacy programs** enabling women to use booking platforms, social media marketing, and e-commerce for handicrafts.
- **Branding and certification** for “sacred-grove friendly” homestays and handicrafts to capture niche markets.

### Limitations of the Study and Areas for Further Research

This research is comparative and mixed methods, but there is limitations. The area selected was purposive and not statistically representative. More research is needed to measure the impacts of income quantitatively and examine the empowerment of women over the long term. Future research could:

- Conduct **panel surveys** to measure temporal income and empowerment changes.
- Evaluate the **impact of specific policy interventions** (e.g., homestay certification programs).

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- Expand comparative scope to **other Himalayan regions** (Ladakh, Sikkim, NE India) or international sacred landscapes.
- Explore **men's perspectives** to examine intra-household dynamics more deeply.

### Conclusion

Women are crucial players in caring for sacred groves and consider the socio-economic characteristics of pilgrimage tourism in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. They are culturally situated, their duties dynamics are negotiated within the context of the pressures of modern tourism—whether as ritual custodians, homelanders, TEK bearers of knowledge, homestay business owners or cooperative leaders. Women's agency is determined by institutional supports that includes SHGs and cooperative mechanisms, digital platforms, and a gender inclusive governance mechanism. While the more formalized roles of women in tourism in Himachal have afforded more opportunities for integration with markets and for managing livelihoods sustainably for conservation pursue, the local stewardship tradition of the people of Uttarakhand linked to their institutions, while having cultural heritage value, needs enhancement of institutional recognition to move from stewardship to sustainable livelihoods.

Policy should prioritize women's financial inclusion, legal recognition, capacity building, and governance in order to address sustainability concerns of the Himalayas and inclusively reimagining pilgrimage tourism. Combining sacred grove conservation and tourism planning for gender resensitivity can be a way to safeguard ecological and cultural heritage and provide economically sustainable livelihoods. Care of the sacred landscapes by women is not a cultural artifact, but a practical, moral and strategic advantage for resilient mountain futures..

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