



Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism: A Study of Indian Knowledge System of East India

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Abstract

India is known for its rich cultural heritage and sustainable tourism practices in all historical texts and recordings. One of the significant parts of this practice has been the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), which is considered as an indispensable part of the ethos of Indian civilisation. It has enabled the sustenance of cultural heritage and tourism in the country. Under this backdrop, the paper aims to study the intersection of cultural heritage and sustainable tourism. It has to be accomplished through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the Eastern region of India with a particular focus on the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. In order to remain focused and produce significant results, we are focusing on the selected states or regions. Perhaps, that is the limitation of this study as well. It is often argued that the IKS is rooted in ancient philosophies, indigenous Indian practices and bio-cultural traditions. It offers a framework of understanding for tourism development with heritage preservation in the selected region. Therefore, the paper aims to assess how traditional knowledge (e.g. ecological wisdom from tribal communities) can promote generative tourism models that minimize environmental impact, thereby empowering the local economies at the same time. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, we aim to deploy a mixed-methods approach that combines ethnographic data as primary source and other existing literature as secondary sources. Moreover, the paper makes an attempt to fathom the role of IKS in encouraging eco-friendly practices in the region, which are a significant part of Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. The indigenous knowledge is considered ancestral and ancient and that has been passed down from one generation to the next generation. This knowledge can be adequately integrated with ease into tourism practices of the region. In fact, it is already in use. Hence, we attempt

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to examine how concepts of traditional resource management, sacred geography and community-based ethics can guide and promote responsible and ethical tourism in the region. Irrespective of the existing practices and knowledge, the region does not lack contemporary challenges. For this reason, we argue that the IKS in East India can be utilized to make a case study for sustainable tourism. Some of the critical questions that we would like to ask are: How can we ensure a symbiotic relationship between tourism and cultural preservation? Can we be the pioneers to introduce a novel tourism paradigm that provides deeper and more authentic experiences to tourists, while also providing collective benefits to the communities? Thus, we aim to contribute to the realm of academic discussions and policy-formulation in regard to a more balanced and sustainable tourism in the region.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Tourism, Indian Knowledge System, East India

1. Introduction

India has been a storehouse of a rich cultural heritage since ancient times and has remained a stronghold for spiritual and intellectual interactions for millenia. In East India, our focus is on the four prominent states, like West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha; these states signify the distinct points of convergence for ancient philosophical systems, ecologies and intangible cultural heritage. The Indian Knowledge of System (IKS) signifies the identity for the practices in the states. The IKS is a transdisciplinary approach that integrates science, philosophy, ethics and sustainability practices in a holistic paradigm, which is inclusive in nature and exists in a holistic manner. The current models of development treat the traditional systems as adverse, antithetical and obsolete according to the demands of the modern paradigm. In contrast, the IKS signifies the interconnectedness and holistic nature of all that exists, and it also implies the pursuit of human well-being in harmony with nature (Xess & Nayyar, 2025).

In the recent developmental goals of the United Nations and countries world across, the interface between indigenous knowledge, culture and tourism has emerged as one of the prominent domains to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The indigenous knowledge has the potential to promote and develop sustainable models of tourism. The expertise on environmental management is very natural to indigenous communities. While

we focus on the IKS of East India, we would primarily focus on the selected states of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. The region has various important places of IKS. For instance, the holy sites ranging from the Bodh Gaya, where the stage of enlightenment of Lord Buddha was achieved, to the terracotta wonders of Bilaspur and the holy groves of the state of Jharkhand, the indigenous knowledge systems of these regions overlap and share commonalities and at the same time possess diversity and distinction from each other in various respects and aspects. For example, the state of Bihar is the primary and foremost destination for the pilgrim tour related to the Buddhist and Jain faiths and traditions. Similarly, the state of Jharkhand possesses the unique and indigenous system of managing the resources through the indigenous ethnic people of this state (Kumar et al., 2025; Sawu & Ridla, 2024).

2. Methodology of the Study

The paper uses a comprehensive mixed method wherein it uses secondary literature and sources analysis along with ethnographic data to cover the mentioned region and states. It also deployed digital ethnography to ensure a thorough coverage and understanding of the IKS and sustainable tourism practices in East India and with special reference to four states—Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar. The policy analysis and reports analysis have been given due importance, given the importance and sensitivity of the research areas and domain.

3. The Ancient Origins: Vedas, Puranas and the Concept of the Sacred Guest

The spirit of hospitality along with the slogan of *Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam*, meaning “*The world is our family*,” is deeply rooted in ancient Indian scriptures like *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Dharma Sutras*, and so forth. This ancient wisdom is the foundation of holistic social, cultural and spiritual frameworks of *Atithi Devo Bhava* or “The Guest is God”. Such a practice makes the visit a sacred experience, which is very close to nature as well as local culture. This gives a social as well as spiritual awakening to tourists. When it comes to sustainable tourism, it is a foundation of inclusive service that is beyond socio-economic factors, and that imbibes deep respect of the host towards tourists (Chirmulay & Chirmulay, 2025). Incorporating IKS into hospitality education and industrial practices can provide a comprehensive learning module that combines ethical service with sustainable tourism practices. Today, the ancient wisdom and practices of Yoga and other spiritual

practices are in great demand to international tourists to manage stress and health as well as overall wellness (Jadhav & Peshave, 2025).

Our *Puranas* have played a significant role in enriching the organized system of tourism practices in India; in that, they provide an explicit mapping of the holy sites through mythological stories that are present in society. Also, *Ayurveda* as an *Upa Veda*, suggests a holistic development of body, mind and environment. It promotes contemporary wellness tourism, preventive healthcare tourism, sustainable farm-to-fork practice and organic living in true spirit. Put together, these scriptures demonstrate that contemporary tourism and its principles are not new inventions; they are very much rooted in the ancient indigenous knowledge systems. The IKS does not see knowledge as an isolated entity, but it is treated as an interconnected web that links natural phenomenon, human behaviour and social well-being together. East India can offer a great human-centric and sustainable hospitality model by revising these ancient and indigenous practices. Such a shift in tourism promotes a return to the personalised service, cultural immersion and traditional protocols such as *Arti* and *Tikak* that the local identity of the destination (Xess & Nayyar, 2025; Chirmulay & Chirmulay, 2025).

4. Ecological Wisdom of Tribal Communities in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha

The Eastern region of the country is home to diverse tribal groups such as the Santhal, Munda, Ho, Oraon (Kurukh), Bhumij and Kharia. Their livelihoods, belief systems and cultural practices are intertwined with forests, rivers, land and biodiversity. Their ecological wisdom is often considered as part of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) that represents a cumulative knowledge that has been developed through centuries of observation, adaptation and lived experience. Unlike modern methods, tribal ecological practices put emphasis on reciprocity, restraint and sustainability. It offers valuable insights for environmental conservation and climate resilience in modern times (Kumar et al., 2025).

The indigenous communities of Jharkhand and West Bengal and other eastern states, primarily the Santhal, Munda Oraon and Ho tribes, have developed a sustainable knowledge system that is far more primitive and ancient; they have evolved over millennia with trial and error and long-term observation by the indigenous people. The *Sarna* or sacred grove system is common among Munda and Oraon. They are virgin forests kept

aside as the abode of deities and ancestral spirit. Any kind of extraction is prohibited in these groves under customary law. They act as microhabitats that maintain local biodiversity and regulate water regimes that preserve rare medicinal plants. In order to maintain sustainable tourism, these groves act as a model for community conserved areas, where conservation is driven by cultural reverence (Gope et al., 2025).

The 3J model of the Santhal tribe dates back to ancient times, that is, Jal, Jangal and Jamin. This is because the community believes that the integrated and holy management of water, forests, and land is the essence of their living. On the same note, the Ho tribe follows a different ecological tradition that supports the aspects of sustainability through their rich ethno-botanical knowledge that systematically categorizes forest flora with the purpose of applying the same to medicinal use. The Oraon tribe follows the seasonal agrarian festivities of *Sarhul* and *Karma*. This agrarian tradition follows the natural and ecological rhythms of nature (Kumar et al., 2025). The native techniques adopted by the communities for seed conservation and soil management do not involve the use of chemical pesticides or artificial fertilizer; hence, it serves as a model for the organic agritourism of the region (Gope et al., 2025). The *Ahar-Pyne* method is the ancient irrigation method that is practiced by the communities of the semi-arid region of South Bihar and Jharkhand that helps to control the runoff process of water and improves soil saturation for better yield. Similarly, the *Johads* or the rainwater harvesting systems of the region illustrate the fact that the community maintained a long tradition of managing the water scarcity of the arid region of the region (Jadhav & Peshave, 2025).

5. Indigenous Worldviews and Ecological Ethics

The basic concept of tribal wisdom related to ecology is that Nature is a living entity. Nature deserves equal respect as is accorded to any living human being on this planet. The planet earth is known as *Dharti Mata* or Mother Earth. The forests, rivers and mountains are inhabited by the noble spirit and ancestors. This worldview of the indigenous people establishes a moral framework that handles the human-nature relationship delicately (Dey, 2015). The Munda and Oraon communities follow animistic tradition of religion in which natural entities such as trees, animals and water bodies are worshipped (Hemrom, 2018). Such indigenous beliefs function as informal but powerful regulatory mechanisms. It is very much regulated by the fear of spiritual sanctions that include misfortune, illness or social disapproval. They act as a deterrent against destructive environmental practices in society (Mazzocchi, 2020).

6. Sacred Groves and Biodiversity Conservation in the Region

The conservation and preservation of sacred groves is one of the best practices of indigenous wisdom by the tribal groups. These practices are locally known by different names such as *Sarna*, *Jaher* or *Gram Devta Van* and known for their religious and cultural reasons; they are found across Jharkhand, Odisha and parts of West Bengal. These groves are considered as the resting and dwelling places of the designated local deities and resemble the ancestral spirits. For this very reason, there are strict taboos about cutting trees, hunting animals and conservation of land and the local topography (Krishna, 2020). The sacred groves function as biodiversity hotspots that cover the native flora and fauna; they maintain genetic diversity and support ecosystem services such as soil and land conservation and promotion of groundwater and aquifer recharge

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(Kujur et al., 2025). Therefore, the indigenous knowledge systems accommodate and integrate cultural practices and ecology together.

7. The Ethnobotany and Indigenous Healthcare Practices

Another major aspect of the ecological knowledge of the tribal communities is their ethnobotany. The tribal communities in these areas have in-depth knowledge about medicinal plants, their properties, and their preparation and utilization. The *Vaids* or *Pahans* are the local indigenous healers in these areas. Their major source of treatment is the forest-based pharmacopoeia, and their treatment methods involve curing diseases like digestive disorders, bone fractures and mental illnesses (Sharma et al., 2022). The medicinal plants like *neem*, *ashwagandha*, *brahmi*, and '*Hadjod*' are essential to these indigenous health practices. These healing practices also involve spiritual practices and rituals, and these practices show a complete and comprehensive understanding of health, encompassing the aspects of the physical, mental, and ecological well-being of a person (Asokan, 2015). These practices also help in maintaining the health and wellness of the communities, as well as in the preservation of plants in the region. Such practices, in turn, invite tourists from across the places to explore the indigenous medicine.

8. Sacred Geography, Pilgrimage Landscapes and Tourism

There is a stark similarity between Indian religious geography and ecological landscapes. The notion of "Sacred Geography" denotes that the physical landscape such as rivers,

mountains and forests hold spiritual and religious significance. This is particularly visible in pilgrimage circuits of Eastern Indian states like Bihar and Odisha. The Bodh Gaya in Bihar and Puri in Odisha are such prominent examples. They attract a huge number of tourists for scenic visits to caves and temples. Conventionally, pilgrimage in India has been linked with sustainable tourism that encourages local benefits to people, social enhancement of the guest and host and a deep respect for the environment among these visitors (Pulipaka et al., 2025; Shinde, 2007). The model for this purpose is “Sacred–Ecology–Tourism” (SET) that offers a conceptual and foundational framework for managing these sacred landscapes in the region. This model puts emphasis on the use of ritual calendars to make people aware about the degradation and actual carrying capacity of these ecological landscapes. In Puri Jagannath Temple, Odisha, we see the intersection of temple and Chilika lake during the massive *Rath Yatra* every year. With deployment of the SET model, the local authorities can manage and handle festive season beach carrying capacity limits to avoid any environmental hazard or loss. This model has ensured that sanctity and integrity of the religious site remain intact and can handle the pressure of modern travel. The extension of the SET model is seen during Chhath Puja in Bihar, which demonstrates how visitor numbers can be anticipated and managed through culturally embedded time management practices (Shinde, 2007; KPMG in India & PHDCCI, 2024). This model promotes faith-based norms that encourages environmentally responsible behaviour by framing restrictions on plastic use and natural resource extraction as religious obligations. Thus, the model is in sync with sustainability and green tourism, which is the need of the hour.

These days, the rapid commercialisation of tourism and pilgrimage has led to significant ecological degradation and stress. The public bathing events, festivals and other sacred congregations can contribute towards accumulation of non-biodegradable waste, polluted water and disrupted wildlife. The model of Green Pilgrimage addresses these challenges by utilising faith-based messaging to bring change in pilgrim behaviour. For instance, religious leaders have the aura and potential to galvanise followers to protect the fragile habitats as a matter of religious accountability and responsibility. The Buddhist ethos teaches us non-harm and promotes low-impact behavior and celebrations of festivals with zero-waste (Menon, 2023, September 5).

9. Intangible Heritage, Socio-Economic Regeneration and Tourism

The Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) represents the vibrant and rich traditions of these indigenous communities. The rituals, artistic expressions and other creative practices are

transferred from generation to generation. In the East Indian region, ICH is a prime mover of sustainable tourism. This is something that modern travellers are looking for, that is, authentic and realistic experiences. For instance, the village of Raghurajpur in Odisha signifies the “Artisan Heritage Village” model; here every family is involved in visual or performing arts. The art form of this region is *Pattachitra* and it is rooted in the Jagannath cult and sustainable in nature and production. In the process of making these products, artists primarily deploy natural extracts such as powdered conch shells for white, lamp soot for black and different types of stones for yellow, red and blue pigments (Kumar, 2015; Gaatha, n.d.). The existence of tangible and intangible heritage is quite significant in Indian art history and literature. Generally, a temple without intricate art and ritual practice is often considered a flawed inheritance. The *Odissi* dance form is not only a secular performance, rather it has a component of sacred offering that codifies sculptural forms of Odissan temples and gives them motion or movements. By bringing in these art forms into tourism as lived tradition, communities have the potential to revive and revitalise the endangered practices, thereby generating sustainable income for the local communities (MeMeraki, n.d.; Cardinale, 2015; Songklin, 2025).

10. Architecture, *Vastu Shastra* and Sustainable Design of Tourism

The infrastructure and architecture of tourism in this region has been inspired by the *Vastu Shastra*. It relies on the Indian science of architecture and spatial planning. The *Vastu* puts emphasis on the use of natural materials, proper orientation for ventilation and lighting and a deep respect for the sacred places and their topography. In the domain of modern hospitality, these principles can be applied to sustain eco-friendly resorts, hotels and tourist places that are in sync with ecological carrying capacity of the regional ecology and topography. The famous terracotta temples of Bishnupur, West Bengal, use their local clay and laterite. They serve as historical precedents for sustainable architecture that can withstand regional climate challenges (Xess & Nayyar, 2025, October; Shekhawat, 2023, October 17). The hotel design as per the contemporary demands and as per the *Vastu Shastra* do not only fulfill aesthetic appeal, but also serve the psychological well-being of the people. The objectives of harmony and prosperity via spatial planning is achieved with the use of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) in this region. This aligns with the wellness-centred and sustainability driven modern travelers. Moreover, the regional and vernacular architectures such as mud-thatched houses with baked tiles and other material decoration, which are quite popular in Jharkhand. They can be adopted for the eco-friendly homestays that offer authentic and realistic cultural experiences without the environmental degradation (Gope et al., 2025).

11. The Transition towards Regenerative Tourism Policy

The tourism in the region has gone beyond the established notion of sustainable tourism. The sustainable tourism movies on the aspects of minimising damage and conserving resources. Whereas, regenerative tourism focuses on the aspects of “rejuvenating people, places and nature.” They are based on the complex adaptive systems that moves away from the individualism and commercialisation associated with traditional indigenous thinking, which is based on scientific practice. Regenerative tourism is deeply rooted in the indigenous ways of thinking and worldview, where the goal is to “give back to community and ecology” more than what is taken (Sawu & Ridla, 2024; Maligi & Choudhary, 2025).

In order to develop the concept of tourism, which is dependent on the principles of IKS and sustainability, a strong and comprehensive policy is needed that can incorporate interventions and structural innovations. Currently, we have some very interesting schemes such as “Swadesh Darshan” and “National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism,” and these schemes form a strong foundation for the development of tourism in the region. We need a robust and strategic blueprint for destination development (Kumar, 2023; Dkhar & Biswas, 2025). Any policy shall take into account providing training in hospitality and digital storytelling that are rooted in tribal heritage. Moreover, these policies should support the transition from the low pricing that attracts more volume to a model that puts emphasis on the high quality, sustainability and higher returns for local stakeholders. The policy makers shall ensure that these policies are aligned with tourism development of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12 with focus on Responsible Consumption, SDG 13 with focus on Climate Action. The East Indian region can benefit immensely from a global model for responsible travel (CSIR-NISTADS, 2017; Xess & Nayyar, 2025, October).

12. Contemporary Challenges: Climate Change, Urbanization and Tourism

The East Indian region has developed profound insights on the IKS due to its evolution over millenia. However, the region faces the threats from modern day challenges such as urbanization, climate change and cultural commodification in these states. For instance, in Bihar, yearly flooding disturbs the connectivity and damages the heritage infrastructure in the state; in hill cities like Darjeeling and Kalimpong, a culture of instant consumption and processed food has led to the increasing landfills of plastic that is threatening fragile ecosystems. Such modern challenges require a synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern

science (Kumar, 2023; Dash, 2025, December 16). Unchecked urbanisation has led to the marginalisation of the indigenous knowledge in formal education. It has made it difficult for the younger generation to realise the importance of their heritage and cultural knowledge. Also, the sudden imposition of several rules on these indigenous practices is often seen as barriers; it highlights the need for participatory management. In order to counter these cultural dilution, it is important that communities remain in the total control of their traditions and can decide what elements are to be shared with the world and what should remain sacred and protected with privacy (Menon, 2023, September 5). A robust response to climate change can be augmented by IKS-based solutions in different domains of the emerging challenges. For instance, the traditional *transhumance* of Oraon tribals can be promoted to rejuvenate the degrading grasslands. These scenic grasslands can be best utilized as tourism destinations in these regions. Likewise, the use of *Vrikshayurveda* for organic soil rejuvenation can counter the impacts of soil degradation. Thus, policies must safeguard the “autonomy over traditional territories” to ensure that indigenous communities can continue to practice the IKS that has sustained and carried forward the region for millennia (Guru P R, 2025, October 16).

13. Conclusion and Way Forward

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) of East India has the potential to provide a timeless roadmap for a tourism industry that is only sustainable but can actively regenerate the degrading ecosystems. Through the use of ancient philosophies and practices of the land, the East Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Jharkhand can move away from the present exploitative system of tourism that produces non-sustainable trash and waste as by-product. This system emphasizes the harmonious blend of preservation and development in the region. This rich heritage is in the hands of the native population themselves—whether it is the Santhal healers, Pattachitra artists, or the temple priests. They are the important stakeholders in the success of any tourism development project that is symbiotic in nature. In order to achieve this goal, it requires a departure from “scientific reductionism” towards a holistic understanding of the landscape as a spiritual and ecological continuum. It requires a total dedication towards “Vocal for Local” initiatives that prioritise the agency of the community, equitable benefit-sharing and protection of both the tangible and intangible assets in the region. Staying in tune with IKS can offer the world a profound form of travel model that provides visitors with authentic cultural and spiritual experiences, which ensures the resilience and prosperity for the communities.

The way forwards for the IKS-fused tourism in the East Indian region shall be ensured through the implementation of the “SET model” to manage pilgrimage flows in Bihar and Odisha. In order to promote artists and their crafts, the “Heritage Village” model of Raghurajpur can be extended to other artisan clusters in the region. To protect and preserve these sensitive cultural regions, a mandatory “Cultural Sensitivity” shall be imparted to tourists and visitors. Further, it can be blended with our ancient welcome etiquette, *Atithi Devo Bhava*. In addition, the development of the state-backed seed bank and organic farming in the region can help contribute immensely to the development of the scope and magnitude of agro-tourism in the region. Such developments and initiatives can help ensure that East India becomes a shining beacon in the global world of sustainable tourism, which has the potential to offer the wisdom of the past, which can guide generations for the most effective guide for a balanced and harmonious future.

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