

**SOCIOECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN
THROUGH RURAL TOURISM IN THE HIMALAYAN
REGION OF WEST BENGAL**

Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

TOURISM MANAGEMENT

By

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LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY, PUNJAB

2026

DECLARATION

I, hereby declared that the presented work in the thesis entitled “SOCIOECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH RURAL TOURISM IN THE HIMALAYAN REGION OF WEST BENGAL” in fulfilment of degree of **Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)** is outcome of research work carried out by me under the supervision of Dr. Amrik Singh working as Professor, in the School of Hotel Management and Tourism of Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India. In keeping with the general practice of reporting scientific observations, due acknowledgements have been made whenever work described here has been based on findings of other investigators. This work has not been submitted in part or full to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree.



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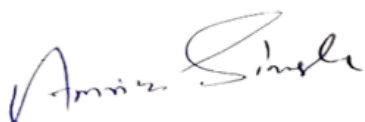
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work reported in the Ph. D. thesis entitled “SOCIOECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH RURAL TOURISM IN THE HIMALAYAN REGION OF WEST BENGAL” submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of degree of **Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)** in the School of Hotel Management and Tourism, is a research work carried out by Runa Das, Reg. No.42000569 is a bona fide record of his/her original work carried out under my supervision, and that no part of the thesis has been submitted for any other degree, diploma or equivalent course.



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Name of supervisor: Dr. Amrik Singh

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Abstract

This Research, titled “*Socioeconomic Empowerment of Women Through Rural Tourism in the Himalayan Region of West Bengal*”, investigates the relationship between rural tourism development, women’s participation, employment generation, cultural and environmental preservation, and socioeconomic empowerment in the Himalayan areas in Bengal. The focus of the study is on understanding how rural tourism acts as a sustainable livelihood tool for rural women and on examining the extent to which tourism contributes to women’s empowerment in economically and socially marginalised mountain communities. The Himalayan region of West Bengal, including Darjeeling and adjoining rural areas, possesses rich natural beauty, tea tourism potential, indigenous cultural heritage, and community-based tourism practices. However, despite the growing tourism economy, women in rural areas continue to face structural inequalities such as limited access to resources, patriarchal social norms, low ownership rights, inadequate training opportunities, and restricted participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, this research attempts to analyse whether rural tourism can become an effective mechanism for inclusive development and long-term empowerment of women in the region.

The study is theoretically grounded in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, Triple-Win development perspective, and Empowerment Theory. These theoretical perspectives explain that rural tourism can create sustainable livelihood opportunities through employment generation, entrepreneurship, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and enhanced participation of women in tourism-related activities. The study conceptualises Rural Tourism Development (RTD) as the independent construct influencing Direct Employment Generation (DEG), Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), Women’s Participation (WP), Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC), and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE). Women’s participation is further analysed as a mediating factor connecting tourism development with sustainability and empowerment outcomes.

The research adopts a quantitative and cross-sectional research design. Primary data were collected from 400 women respondents engaged in rural tourism activities through cluster sampling in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. A structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was employed to measure perceptions related to tourism participation, employment generation, sustainability, and empowerment. Data analysis was conducted using

descriptive statistics, and the proposed framework was analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Construct reliability and validity were assessed through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, AVE, factor loadings, and VIF values. The results demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity levels, while VIF scores confirmed the absence of multicollinearity issues (Koppa et al., 2026)

The demographic analysis reveals that the majority of women respondents belong to the age group of 25–40 years, representing nearly 62% of the total sample. Around 80.8% of the respondents are married, and most possess secondary or higher secondary education. Women are actively involved in homestays, food services, handicrafts, organic farming, cultural performances, tea tourism, and tourism-related family businesses. Homestay activities account for nearly 33% of the women's occupations, indicating that community-based tourism has become an important source of livelihood in the study area. The findings further indicate that tourism significantly contributes to women's income generation and financial independence, with approximately 52.8% of respondents reporting financial independence. The major motivations encouraging women's participation include enhancement of family income, livelihood improvement, and self-empowerment. Local cultural knowledge, agriculture-based skills, communication abilities, and home-management skills also emerged as major pull factors influencing participation in tourism activities.

The structural model results reveal that Rural Tourism Development has a strong positive influence on Direct Employment Generation ($\beta = 0.666$), Indirect Employment Generation ($\beta = 0.777$), and Women's Participation ($\beta = 0.778$). The findings demonstrate that tourism creates both direct employment opportunities such as homestay ownership, hospitality services, tourist guiding, and food services, as well as indirect and seasonal employment opportunities through handicrafts, agriculture supply chains, cultural performances, and local market activities. Both DEG and IEG significantly influence women's participation, with indirect employment exhibiting a comparatively stronger impact. Mediation analysis confirms that DEG and IEG partially mediate the relationship between RTD and WP, with VAF values of 34.9% and 43.2% respectively. These findings indicate that employment generation acts as a major pathway through which tourism enhances women's participation in rural economic activities.

The study also examines the role of women's participation in preserving and commercialising local culture and environmental resources. The findings reveal that RTD positively influences Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation ($\beta = 0.316$), while Women's

Participation has an even stronger effect on CEPC ($\beta = 0.472$). Women actively contribute to preserving indigenous traditions, handicrafts, local cuisine, folk culture, eco-friendly tourism practices, organic farming, waste management, and biodiversity conservation. The mediation analysis further demonstrates that women's participation significantly mediates the relationship between RTD and CEPC, with a VAF value of 53.7%, indicating that women act as central agents linking tourism development with sustainability outcomes. These findings highlight the importance of women's involvement in ensuring cultural continuity and environmental protection within rural tourism destinations.

The study further investigates the relationship between rural tourism and women's socio-economic empowerment. The results show that RTD has a significant positive effect on Socio-Economic Empowerment ($\beta = 0.60$), while Women's Participation also positively influences empowerment outcomes ($\beta = 0.30$). Tourism contributes to improved income, livelihood diversification, financial independence, self-confidence, social recognition, and partial decision-making authority among women. Women's participation partially mediates the relationship between RTD and SEE, with an indirect effect value of $\beta = 0.233$ and VAF = 27.9%. Although empowerment outcomes are positive, the comparatively lower mediating effect suggests that increased participation does not always ensure complete empowerment. Many women remain concentrated in supportive or voluntary roles with limited access to leadership positions, ownership rights, and financial control. Thus, the study identifies a gap between economic participation and transformative empowerment.

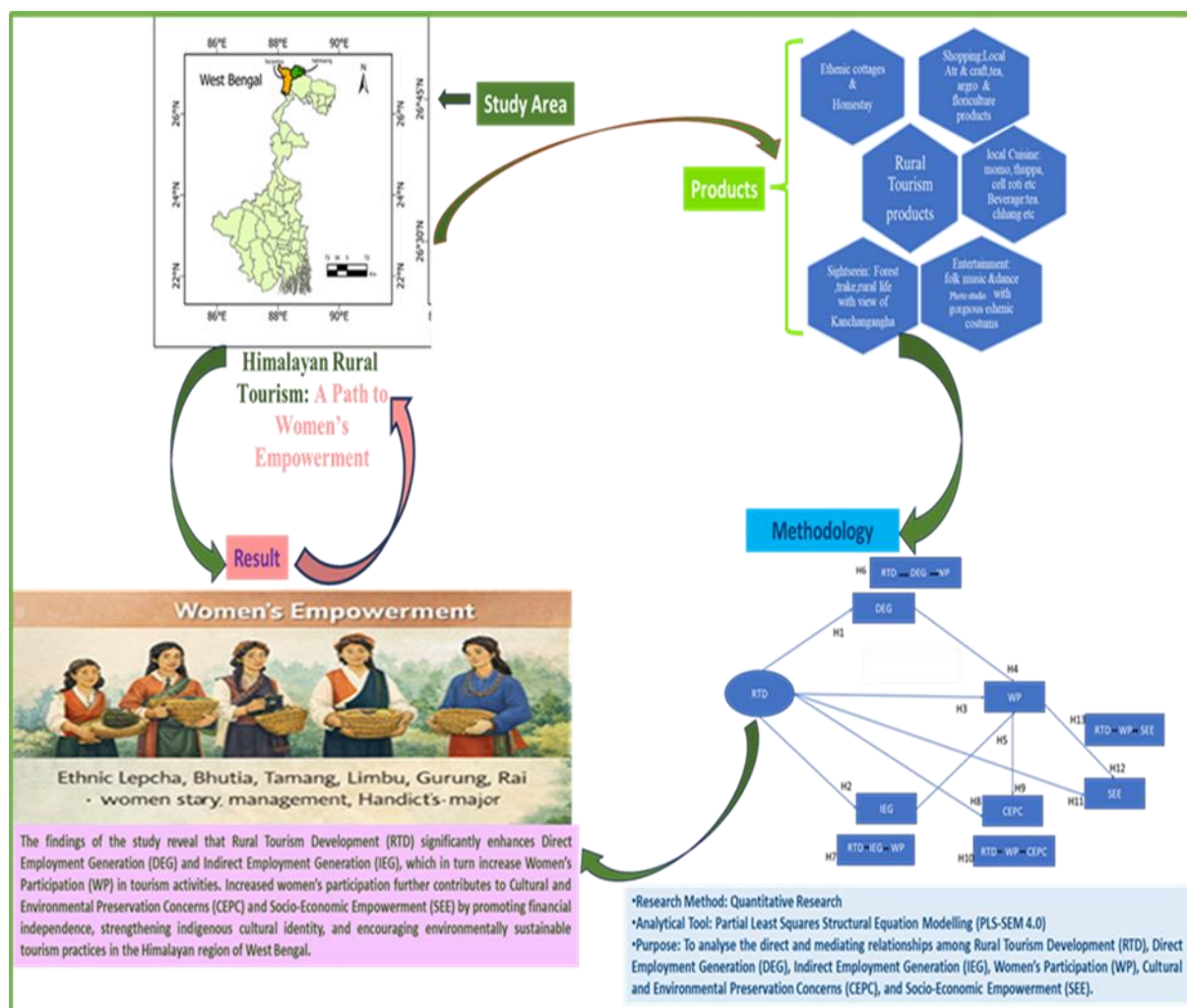
The findings also identify several challenges restricting women's full empowerment in rural tourism. These include external domination, lack of management skills, limited training opportunities, poor policy awareness, inadequate infrastructure, digital divide, weak institutional support, and patriarchal social norms. Indicators related to leadership, wealth control, ownership, and decision-making displayed weaker reliability, indicating persistent structural inequalities. Women also continue to face the double burden of household responsibilities and tourism-related work. Therefore, despite strong participation in tourism activities, women's strategic control over resources and governance remains limited.

The study concludes that rural tourism possesses significant potential to promote inclusive development and socio-economic empowerment of women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. Tourism not only creates employment and livelihood opportunities but also strengthens cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and community participation. However,

sustainable empowerment requires stronger institutional support, gender-sensitive policies, leadership opportunities, financial access, digital training, entrepreneurship development, and improved governance participation for women. The study recommends targeted capacity-building programmes, microfinance support, digital literacy training, infrastructure development, eco-tourism promotion, and women-led tourism governance initiatives to ensure long-term sustainable and equitable development in the region. Overall, the research establishes that women's participation is central to transforming rural tourism into a powerful instrument for sustainable livelihood development, cultural continuity, environmental protection, and socio-economic empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

Graphical Abstract of the Research:

Himalayan Rural Tourism: A Path to Women's Empowerment



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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Perspectives of Tourism

Hunziker and Kraft (1942) defined tourism as “the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the travel and stay of non-residents, insofar as they do not lead to permanent residence and are not connected with any earning activity” (as cited by Akoglu, T., 2015). It is acknowledged that tourism is a social, cultural, and economic activity that involves people travelling for pleasure, business, or personal reasons outside of their usual place of residence. These people are regarded as tourists, and their activities, including travel-related expenditures, form a crucial component of tourism operations (UNWTO, 2020).

John K. Walton (2009) observed that tourists generally follow “worn routes,” benefiting from established systems of provision and protection, which distinguish tourism from exploration. Tourism has a long and complex historical trajectory. Although leisure travel is a comparatively modern phenomenon, the human desire to explore new places and interact with diverse cultures has existed for centuries. Over the past three hundred years, tourism has evolved into a major global service industry with significant political, cultural, and economic importance (Jafari, 2003). Today, rural tourism is widely recognised as an important avenue for employment generation and the promotion of sustainable livelihoods. Tourist–host interactions represent a distinctive form of social exchange that differs from many other types of social relationships (Su, Wall, & Wang, 2019).

Resolution A/RES/732(XXIV) to strengthen international efforts connecting tourism with rural development and sustainability was accepted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization during its 24th General Assembly session (UNWTO, 2021). These guidelines aim to support governments, private organisations, and communities in developing tourism in rural areas in ways that contribute to inclusive, sustainable, and resilient development. Tourism generates substantial benefits for both host destinations and tourists’ countries of origin. In many developing countries, tourism is promoted as a catalyst for local and national economic development because of its expected economic contributions.

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2020) defines rural tourism as a type of tourism activity in which visitors’ experiences are linked to a variety of products generally associated with nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyles, cultural heritage, angling,

and sightseeing. In line with this definition, the UNWTO Guidelines on Tourism and Rural Development seek to assist governments, businesses, and international stakeholders in fostering tourism development in rural regions to achieve inclusive, sustainable, and resilient development outcomes (UNWTO, 2020).

Destination tourism products can contribute significantly to economic and social development by generating government revenue, creating employment opportunities, supporting the conservation of natural and historical resources, encouraging infrastructure development, strengthening local economies, and earning foreign exchange through visitor spending (World Tourism Organisation, 2012; World Bank, 2026).

The tourism industry is closely interconnected with other productive sectors of the economy and possesses significant potential to stimulate their growth. Consequently, tourism contributes to community economic development by generating employment opportunities, encouraging business expansion, and enhancing overall welfare and living standards (Amerta et al., 2018; Pratama & Mandaasari, 2020).

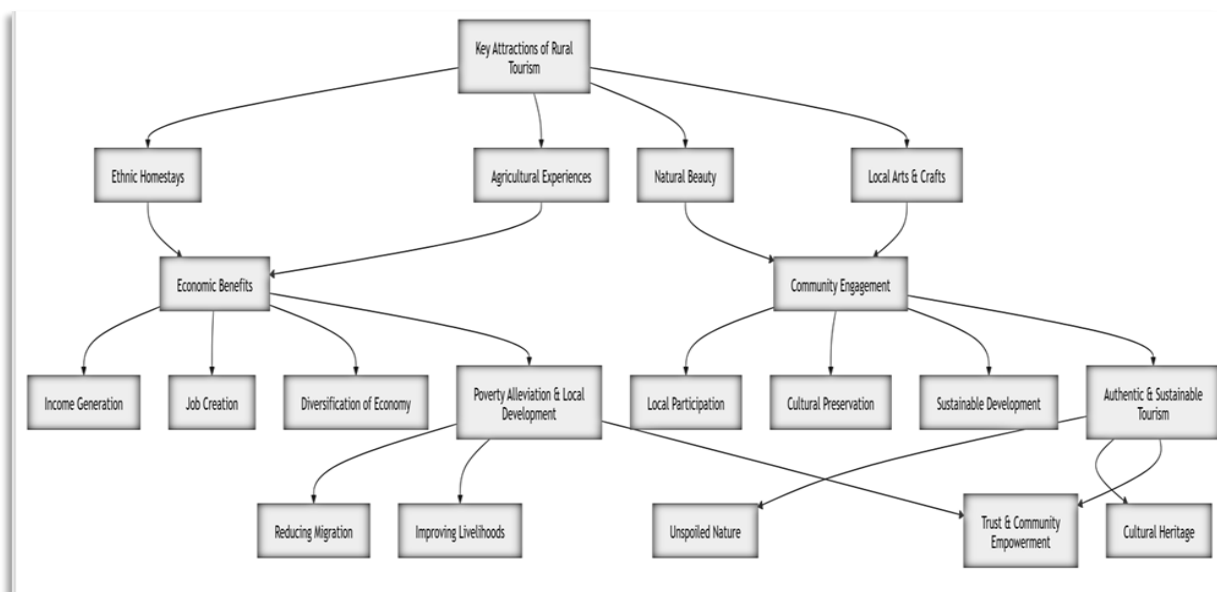


Figure 1.1 Role of Rural Tourism (Figure developed by the author based on the literature.)

1.2 Background and Context

Tourism in rural areas is significant for stimulating economic growth and social transformation at the local level due to its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to gross domestic product and employment generation, and its ability to disperse tourism demand across time (thereby reducing seasonality) and space (across wider

geographical regions). Rural tourism activities generally take place in non-urban areas characterised by low population density, landscapes dominated by agriculture and forestry, and traditional social structures and lifestyles (UNWTO, 2021).

The principal products of rural tourism include ethnic homestay accommodation, local cuisine and beverages, cultural programmes, agricultural experiences, pollution-free natural environments, and the sale of local arts and crafts. Rural tourism is a dynamic and evolving sub-sector of the tourism industry that is closely associated with natural, social, and community values, as well as with notions of rusticity and authenticity (Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaino, 2022; Arlene et al., 2021; Little, 2008; Sandoval-Quintero et al., 2017). Socio-economic backwardness in rural areas frequently intensifies migration and human trafficking, thereby highlighting the importance of sustainable livelihood opportunities (Bhutia, 2016). In this context, tourism is widely regarded as an effective instrument for rural development (Komppula, 2014). Rural tourism also contributes to the creation of diverse micro-destinations, thereby supporting localised and community-based tourism development (Alves & Campón-Cerro, 2019; Roy et al., 2020).

The image of rurality, often associated with natural living, simplicity, innocence, and authenticity, constitutes a key selling proposition for rural tourism destinations (Oppermann, 1996; Yang & Wall, 2008; Zhou, 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that rural tourism can generate substantial economic returns in poverty-stricken regions, thereby supporting income generation and poverty alleviation (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Yang & Wall, 2008).

Local community participation is widely recognised as a critical determinant of the success and sustainability of rural tourism development (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Trust also plays a vital role in the functioning of rural tourism micro-enterprises, as stakeholders rely on confidence in one another's intentions, capabilities, and behaviours within geographically remote and socially constrained rural settings (Kelliher et al., 2018). Tourists often prefer staying with local families to gain deeper insight into destinations, while long-term relationships with high-value tourists contribute to enhanced satisfaction, loyalty, and destination profitability (Alves & Campón-Cerro, 2019).

Local communities play a central role in maintaining sociocultural authenticity, environmental integrity, and community well-being in rural tourism destinations (Arlene et al., 2021; Little, 2008; Erez-Ramírez et al., 2011; Sandoval-Quintero et al., 2017). Tourism also represents a vital component of the rural economy, particularly in regions endowed with rich cultural

heritage (Uduji & Okolo-Obasi, 2019). Visitors increasingly seek meaningful experiences rooted in unspoiled natural environments and ethnic culture, reinforcing the importance of authenticity in rural tourism development (Nagy & Seguí, 2010).

a) Rural Tourism in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) Region

The Hindu Kush Himalayan Region (HKH) region spans approximately 3,500 km across several countries, including India, and has increasingly recognised rural tourism as a crucial pathway for economic growth, environmental sustainability, and socio-cultural revitalisation within fragile mountain ecosystems. In recent years, rural and village tourism initiatives have expanded across Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and the Indian Himalayas to enable remote mountain communities to benefit from tourism-led development (De, U. K., 2019; Drishti IAS, 2024). Tourism in the HKH region plays a potentially significant role in poverty reduction by generating employment, enhancing skills, and creating income opportunities for local populations. It is estimated that nearly 71.5 million tourists visit the region annually, underscoring tourism's growing economic importance (Gurung & Lama, 2017).

Despite these opportunities, entrenched gender relations and intersecting forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, caste, class, and limited capabilities continue to pose substantial barriers to the active participation of ethnic minority women in tourism and restrict their ability to derive optimal benefits from emerging tourism activities (UNWTO, 2020). The HKH mountains are endowed with abundant natural resources and unique landscapes that provide critical ecosystem goods and services, directly and indirectly supporting the livelihoods of more than 1.3 billion people. However, the region's harsh terrain, coupled with inadequate institutional frameworks and policy support, has constrained sustainable development and posed serious challenges to the long-term resilience of this vital mountain system (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD, 2012).

Gender inclusion and the empowerment of women are widely acknowledged as important global development objectives under Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which focuses on achieving equal rights and opportunities for women and girls. As the United Nations specialised agency for tourism, the UNWTO promotes tourism policies and practices that improve women's social and economic conditions. Since 2007, the organisation, through its Ethics, Culture and Social Responsibility initiatives, has worked alongside UN Women and various international organisations to integrate gender-related concerns into tourism development strategies. These initiatives encourage member states to incorporate gender

inclusion and the socio-economic advancement of women into national tourism policies while supporting inclusive tourism development practices (UNWTO, 2022; Quang et al., 2024)

Existing evidence suggests that participation in tourism can positively enhance rural women's agency, endowments, and achievements. However, these linkages remain underexplored among ethnic minority women in the HKH region, who frequently experience multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion. This highlights the need for more context-specific research to understand how rural tourism can be utilised as a transformative tool for gender-inclusive and sustainable development in mountain regions.

b) Women's Empowerment in Rural Himalayan States in India

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, defines rural tourism as a form of tourism that showcases rural life, art, culture, and heritage in rural locations, thereby generating economic and social benefits for local communities while enabling meaningful interactions between tourists and residents for a richer tourism experience (Aruljothi, 2025). Rural tourism emphasises visitors' active participation in village life, where tourists engage in everyday community activities, learn about local livelihoods, and experience indigenous customs and cultural practices. In many cases, rural tourism involves overnight stays, allowing visitors to experience village life more authentically. It also overlaps with related forms of tourism such as agri-tourism, cultural tourism, nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism, reflecting its multidimensional character.

Rural tourism provides significant opportunities to promote sustainable and responsible travel in India by highlighting the unique experiences of Indian villages and associated niche tourism segments, including eco-tourism, farm tourism, and adventure tourism. By revitalising traditional arts and crafts and supporting established rural occupations, rural tourism contributes to rural development and the regeneration of rural life. Interaction with tourists can further broaden residents' knowledge, skills, and worldviews, thereby strengthening social and cultural exchange. The national development initiative Aatmanirbhar Bharat emphasises the promotion of locally produced goods and services and is founded on five pillars: economy, systems, infrastructure, demography, and demand. Since a substantial proportion of India's population resides in rural areas, strengthening the rural economy is central to achieving the objectives of Aatmanirbhar Bharat (Government of India, 2020). Villages function as repositories of India's heritage, crafts, culture, and agricultural traditions. Promoting these local products and traditions through rural tourism stimulates local economies, generates

employment opportunities, and empowers women, youth, and community members. In this way, rural tourism contributes to sustainable development, poverty reduction, and the mitigation of rural-to-urban migration (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2023).

The Indian Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and the North Eastern states have adopted a range of innovative policy, financial, and capacity-building measures to promote sustainable rural tourism, with a strong emphasis on local area development, cultural preservation, and livelihood diversification. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, introduced rural tourism schemes to promote rural tourism as an alternative form of tourism capable of attracting both domestic and international tourists while simultaneously creating employment opportunities and improving the socio-economic conditions of rural communities (ACNielsen ORG-MARG, 2020). These initiatives are particularly relevant in mountainous regions, where limited industrial opportunities make tourism a critical driver of rural development.

India, covering approximately 3,287,263 square kilometres from the Himalayan mountain ranges in the north to the tropical rainforests in the south, is characterised by diverse ecosystems, landscapes, and a rich cultural and historical heritage. Recognising tourism as a growth-oriented sector, the Government of India has extended institutional and financial support by including tourism and hospitality stakeholders under the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) within the broader definition of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Furthermore, exhibition and convention centres have been accorded infrastructure status to strengthen tourism-related investments and regional development. In November 2021, Pochampally was recognised as one of the Best Tourism Villages by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, highlighting India's growing commitment to rural and community-based tourism development (India Brand Equity Foundation [IBEF], 2023; UNWTO, 2021).

Rural tourism holds particular significance for women's empowerment in the Himalayan and rural regions of India. Women play a central role in tourism-related activities such as homestay management, food preparation, handicrafts, cultural performances, and farm-based tourism experiences. Participation in rural tourism enhances women's access to income, decision-making power, skills development, and social recognition, thereby strengthening their agency within households and communities (Komppula, 2014; Roy et al., 2020). These outcomes align

closely with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (Je & Yang, 2023).

The Ministry of Tourism's rural tourism initiatives, combined with the national development vision of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*, emphasise the promotion of locally produced goods, traditional knowledge, and community-based enterprises. As rural areas preserve India's heritage, crafts, culture, and indigenous agricultural practices, tourism-led promotion of these assets contributes to local economic resilience, employment generation, and women's economic participation. By creating viable livelihood opportunities within villages, rural tourism also helps reduce poverty-induced migration and supports balanced regional development (ACNielsen ORG-MARG, 2020; Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2023). The pattern of visitor arrivals serves as a crucial indicator of demand conditions in rural tourism destinations. Understanding these trends is essential for assessing the sustainability, inclusiveness, and long-term development potential of rural tourism initiatives, particularly in ecologically sensitive Himalayan regions where community participation and women's empowerment are central to tourism success.

1.3 Understanding the Nexus between Women and Tourism

a) About Women's Empowerment:

In recent years, a significant global movement aimed at empowering women and advocating for their rights has emerged and continues to gain momentum. The growing recognition of observances such as International Women's Day reflects increasing global awareness of gender equality and women's rights. Women's empowerment encompasses multiple interrelated dimensions, including a sense of self-worth, the freedom to make and exercise choices, access to opportunities and resources, authority over personal and household decisions, and the capacity to influence social change (Sen et al., 2015; Bučar et al., 2024).

The empowerment and autonomy of women, together with improvements in their political, social, economic, and health status, constitute important development objectives in their own right. Moreover, women's empowerment is widely recognised as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development. Sustainable social progress requires the full participation of both men and women, including the equitable sharing of responsibilities related to child-rearing and household care (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 1994).

Women's empowerment refers to the process of equipping women with the necessary resources, capabilities, and opportunities to exercise their rights, actively participate in decision-making processes, and gain control over their own lives (Reshi & Sudha, 2022). Scholars have conceptualised women's empowerment as a process through which women acquire agency, defined as the ability to define goals and act upon them (Kordas & Murray-Kolb, 2015; Sey Sawo et al., 2023). This process also involves access to resources that enhance women's capabilities, enabling them to articulate preferences and make informed decisions aligned with their aspirations (Kabeer, 1999; Sey Sawo et al., 2023).

Empowerment further entails control over both material resources and dominant ideologies, leading to enhanced internal capabilities, increased self-confidence, and a transformation of consciousness that allows women to challenge and overcome structural barriers (Sen & Batliwala, 2000). In the Indian context, women's empowerment is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing household decision-making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, political participation, attitudes toward gender roles, exposure to mass media, access to education, and experiences of domestic violence (Mukhopadhyay, 2025).

Although the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights and opportunities for women, the realisation of these rights depends on effective policies and regulatory frameworks implemented by the state. Empowerment functions both as a means and an end. For instance, education represents an important achievement in itself while also serving as a pathway to gainful employment and enhanced decision-making power within the household and society. Ultimately, the capacity to achieve desired outcomes and exercise meaningful choice constitutes the core objective of women's empowerment (Singh & Singh, 2020).

b) Links Between Tourism, Gender, Poverty and Empowerment

Tourism scholarship has increasingly critiqued mainstream development approaches for promoting gender equality primarily through quantitative indicators such as women's employment rates and participation in microenterprise activities. Such numerical measures are argued to oversimplify deeply embedded gendered power relations and structural inequalities within social systems (Ferguson & Moreno Alarcón, 2014). In response, multidimensional frameworks have been developed to better capture tourism's transformative potential for gender relations. These frameworks emphasise economic dimensions, including income generation and asset ownership; social dimensions, such as enhanced mobility, decision-

making power, and reduced domestic workloads; psychological dimensions encompassing self-esteem, confidence, and aspirations; political dimensions involving leadership roles, networking, and participation in governance; and sociocultural dimensions related to the preservation of heritage, cuisine, crafts, customs, and indigenous identities (Boonabaana, 2014; Gentry, 2007).

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries in terms of employment creation and income generation, playing a critical role in stimulating local economic development and contributing to poverty reduction, particularly in rural and peripheral regions. To enhance tourism's developmental contributions and address structural bottlenecks, governments are encouraged to recognise tourism as a strategic development pillar, adopt pro-poor tourism strategies that directly connect tourism growth with marginalised populations, and strengthen the sector through the appointment of professionally trained tourism leaders (Fikire et al., 2022).

Gender dynamics within tourism warrant particular attention, as women are often drawn to tourism-related occupations due to the perceived flexibility of work arrangements and the sector's compatibility with prevailing gender norms that position women as primary caregivers within households. This perceived suitability enables women to engage in income-generating activities without overtly challenging traditional domestic roles (Handaragama & Kusakabe, 2021). Empirical evidence further suggests that rural tourism can enhance women's economic independence, particularly in traditionally male-dominated societies, by creating opportunities for women to earn income and gain financial autonomy. In turn, women's empowerment contributes to strengthening the overall tourism potential of rural destinations (Vukovic et al., 2023).

The interrelationship between tourism, women's empowerment, and poverty reduction necessitates a comprehensive analytical approach encompassing economic, familial, sociocultural, psychological, and political dimensions. Empowerment processes may operate through both direct and indirect pathways shaped by underlying social structures and cultural norms. This multidimensional perspective provides the conceptual foundation for the present study, which examines the complex impacts of expanding rural tourism on women from ethnic minority communities within the distinctive socio-cultural context of Eastern Himalayan villages in West Bengal.

c) Importance of Women in Rural Tourism:

Numerous European studies suggest that rural women are willing to remain within their local communities and actively participate in rural development when favourable enabling conditions are available. These conditions include access to nearby employment opportunities, including part-time work; opportunities for gaining professional experience and formal qualifications; availability of local education and training programs; business support services that encourage women-led enterprises and entrepreneurship; efficient public transportation systems; and adequate local infrastructure (Charlesworth et al., 2011; Gajić and Vukolić, 2023).

At the community level, women's participation in development initiatives contributes not only to economic advancement but also to the reinforcement of cultural pride and local identity. In many rural hamlets, women derive economic benefits while simultaneously preserving and promoting their distinctive cultural heritage. The increasing involvement of women in community-based organisations, such as Family Welfare Development Groups, reflects their expanding role in local development processes. These local non-governmental organisations encourage women's participation in decision-making and community development activities and often receive strong support from female residents, thereby fostering collective empowerment and social cohesion Suryawati et al. (2023).

d) Indian Rural Women and Tourism

Rural tourism has emerged as a rapidly growing niche within the global tourism industry. As an alternative form of tourism, it has expanded worldwide due to its potential to strengthen rural economies through tourism-led development. Rural tourism contributes significantly to economic transformation by generating employment opportunities, encouraging investment, and improving rural infrastructure. In the Indian context, where nearly 74% of the population resides in villages, rural tourism possesses substantial potential to stimulate local economic growth and improve the socio-economic conditions of rural communities. At the same time, it offers visitors a meaningful and authentic travel experience. Rural tourism introduces tourists to rural lifestyles, traditional arts and crafts, local culture, customs, folklore, cuisines, heritage, and other distinctive aspects of village life.

Furthermore, rural tourism facilitates interaction between local residents and visitors, creating mutually beneficial experiences. Through such engagement, tourists are able to experience and participate in rural life in a more authentic manner. Rural tourism also encompasses several broader developmental dimensions, including indigenous community development,

employment generation, infrastructure creation, environmental conservation, preservation of cultural traditions, and the promotion of peace and mutual understanding.

In India, rural tourism was formally recognised during the Tenth Five-Year Plan, which aimed to provide tourists with authentic offbeat experiences while simultaneously generating employment and income opportunities for local communities. In 2003, the Ministry of Tourism, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, launched an in-house initiative to promote sustainable livelihoods in rural areas through community participation and rural tourism development. Rural tourism received further emphasis during the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, under which villages were selected based on tourism potential and infrastructure development plans prepared by committees headed by district collectors (Reddy, 2025).

Subsequently, the Twelfth Five-Year Plan increasingly prioritised rural tourism through the Rural Tourism Cluster Approach, which incorporated Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), preparation of Detailed Project Reports (DPRs), and the promotion of tourism clusters comprising villages with tourism potential. By January 2012, 52 rural tourism sites had been commissioned, while 183 rural destinations with unique selling propositions had been identified. Since its introduction during the Tenth Five-Year Plan, Indian rural tourism has also gained international recognition through several awards. Notably, the villages of Hodka in the Kutch district of Gujarat and Naggar in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh received recognition from the Pacific Asia Travel Association in 2008 and 2010, respectively, for their notable contributions toward women's empowerment through rural tourism initiatives.

e) Effects of Himalayan Rural Tourism on Women:

West Bengal, located in eastern India, is a region of remarkable natural, historical, and cultural richness, characterised by beaches, mountains, forests, and vibrant traditions. Among Indian states, West Bengal is widely recognised for its cultural diversity and heritage, which position it as an important tourism destination Ahamed (2018). In recent years, tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic sectors of the state economy. In particular, many rural areas of West Bengal have been identified as promising destinations for rural tourism because of their rich traditions, crafts, heritage, and cultural expressions. The promotion of rural tourism is explicitly recognised as the third objective of the West Bengal Tourism Policy (2019).

Known as the cultural capital of India, West Bengal possesses a wide range of rural tourism destinations rooted in folklore, art, and history. Destinations such as Murshidabad and Fulia

are famous for handloom weaving, while Purulia is known for Dokra art and Midnapore for Pat Chitra. Similarly, Santiniketan and Bolpur are internationally recognised for their association with Rabindranath Tagore and the preservation of Baul music traditions. Other notable rural tourism destinations include Jhargram for tribal arts, Krishnanagar for clay art, the Sundarbans for wildlife tourism and honey collection, and Darjeeling and Kalimpong for tea tourism, ecotourism, and heritage walks (Native Planet, 2025; Bengal Tourism, 2025).

West Bengal contributes significantly to India's tourism industry, accounting for approximately 6.3% of foreign tourist arrivals and 4.8% of domestic tourism, while the tourism sector contributes nearly 6% to the state's GDP growth (India Tourism Statistics at a Glance, 2018; India Brand Equity Foundation, 2021). Rural tourism has emerged as a major segment within the state's tourism industry, particularly in culturally rich and scenic villages where ethnic and tribal communities offer visitors unique experiences related to their traditions, crafts, cuisine, and lifestyle.

In the Himalayan regions of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, rural tourism has expanded considerably over the last decade. These regions are characterised by panoramic views of the Kanchenjunga mountain range, colonial heritage, ethnic diversity, including Lepcha and Bhutia communities, and ecologically rich landscapes. Government initiatives and civil society organisations have promoted local participation in tourism through homestays, village walks, guided trekking, farm visits, handicraft marketing, and the provision of ethnic cuisine (Darjeeling District Administration, 2025; Kalimpong District Administration, 2025). These activities have created alternative livelihood opportunities, reduced poverty, and enhanced women's participation in tourism, particularly among historically marginalised ethnic communities living in remote mountain villages.

However, in many rural areas of West Bengal, intersecting factors such as restrictive gender norms, ethnic marginalisation, low literacy levels, and limited access to resources continue to constrain women's participation in tourism and their broader socio-economic empowerment. Without gender-inclusive planning and targeted policy interventions, rural tourism may unintentionally reproduce existing inequalities and patterns of exclusion. Therefore, understanding empowerment outcomes requires empirical and context-specific investigations into how tourism participation influences the perceptions, social status, and agency of ethnic minority women within these mountainous communities.

In West Bengal, rural tourism functions as an important driver of socio-economic transformation by strengthening local livelihoods, preserving socio-cultural diversity, and improving the quality of life of rural communities. The growth of rural tourism has positively influenced the rural economy, the daily lives of residents, and the socio-cultural dynamics of host communities. By promoting indigenous traditions, folk culture, handicrafts, and artisanal practices, rural tourism creates alternative income-generating opportunities while preserving local cultural heritage. Rural tourism development also contributes to infrastructure improvement and community welfare, with particular significance for women's empowerment. The utilisation of local resources such as handicrafts, folklore, and traditional music plays a crucial role in generating income and reducing rural-to-urban migration. Furthermore, rural tourism creates employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for rural youth and women, especially through small-scale enterprises supported by microfinance initiatives. Overall, rural tourism strengthens rural livelihoods and discourages out-migration by generating sustainable and locally embedded economic opportunities Ray et al. (2012).

1.4 Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

a) Role of rural tourism in women's empowerment:

Women constitute approximately 55.9% of the tourism workforce in OECD member countries, highlighting tourism as one of the sectors with the highest levels of female employment and entrepreneurship (Stacey, 2015). As a result, tourism is increasingly promoted as an important avenue for empowering rural women and enabling them to realise their socio-economic potential (UNWTO, 2019; Nordbø, 2022). Rural tourism, in particular, offers significant opportunities for women's empowerment by transforming not only women's perceptions of themselves but also societal attitudes toward women's roles. Participation in tourism activities enables women to recognise their capabilities, improve household welfare, and strengthen family financial management (Dai & Sarkar, 2019).

The importance of women's empowerment in tourism is further reinforced through Sustainable Development Goal 5, which emphasises achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (Je & Yang, 2023), women represent the majority of the global tourism workforce in both formal and informal sectors. Since 2007, UNWTO, through its Ethics, Culture and Social Responsibilities Department and in collaboration with UN Women and other international partners, has actively promoted gender equality and women's empowerment within the tourism industry by

encouraging member states to integrate gender perspectives into tourism policies (UNWTO, 2019).

Women's empowerment has become an essential prerequisite for sustainable tourism development in tourist destinations. The United Nations has identified several key targets for achieving women's empowerment, including ensuring women's full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making processes at political, economic, and public levels; providing equal access to financial resources and property rights; and implementing sound policies and enforceable legislation that promote gender equality at all levels (United Nations, 2020).

Women's empowerment encompasses several interrelated dimensions. Empowered women often develop greater self-confidence, self-reliance, and decision-making capacity. Empowerment enables women to understand their rights and responsibilities and participate actively in both private and public spheres. It also encourages women to become organised, economically independent, and capable of making autonomous decisions. Furthermore, empowerment enhances women's access to and control over economic resources, knowledge, and social opportunities while eliminating gender-based discrimination within social institutions and systems. Women's active involvement in household, community, and political decision-making processes is another important aspect of empowerment. Ultimately, empowerment supports women in achieving equal status and expanding their participation across social, psychological, political, cultural, familial, and economic domains (Shobha, 2021).

The present study identifies six major areas through which rural tourism contributes to women's empowerment: improvement in the quality of social life, economic independence, enhanced decision-making and leadership abilities, reduction of outmigration, commercialisation and preservation of ethnic culture, and conservation and commercialisation of the natural environment. These dimensions collectively contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of rural women and strengthen their participation in sustainable rural development.

b) Benefits and Challenges of Women's Empowerment:

i) Benefits:

The present study considers five major dimensions through which rural tourism contributes to women's empowerment, based on reports published by the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the Ministry of Tourism. These dimensions include quality of social life, enhanced income, preservation of local culture and environment, confidence and decision-making ability, and reduction of out-migration. Together, these factors significantly influence the socio-economic empowerment of rural women.

Quality of Social Life: Quality of social life includes aspects such as the natural and living environment, economic and physical security, healthcare, education, and material living conditions. These factors are essential for ensuring financial stability, family welfare, and personal safety. In the Darjeeling Hills, tourism serves as one of the primary livelihood sources for the local population (Rai, 2013). Similarly, Ming Wall et al. (2019) observed that both tourism-related and non-tourism-related participants recognised substantial positive economic impacts within the study area. A large proportion of respondents also perceived favourable environmental (79%) and socio-cultural (63%) impacts of tourism activities. Consequently, strong support for tourism development (97%) and optimistic perceptions regarding its future growth (88%) were identified among respondents.

Enhanced Income: Tourism functions as an important economic activity that contributes to both national and local economic growth. The tourism industry possesses strong linkages with various income-generating sectors and creates opportunities for employment, business development, and improvements in community welfare (Amerta et al., 2018; Pratama & Mandaasari, 2019). Rural tourism also provides opportunities for women's empowerment by transforming traditional mindsets among both women and men. Participation in tourism enables women to recognise their capabilities, improve household living standards, and strengthen financial management practices (Dai & Sarkar, 2019).

Preservation of Local Culture and Environment: Tourism generates significant cultural benefits through the preservation of local traditions, strengthening of community identity, revitalisation of customs, promotion of arts and crafts, and protection of cultural heritage (Pratama & Mandaasari, 2019). Cultural diversity itself acts as a major attraction for tourists in many countries. Women play a particularly important role in sustaining and promoting cultural tourism activities (Uduji et al., 2019).

Confidence, Decision-Making, and Leadership Ability: Although women leaders are often stereotyped as being less capable than men in leadership roles, women across the world have

demonstrated significant leadership abilities (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019). In one of the remote villages of Darjeeling, approximately 28.57% of homestays are owned and managed by women, reflecting a positive picture of women's empowerment in rural mountain communities. Female participation in tourism-related activities has also been observed to be higher than male participation in certain Himalayan regions of Darjeeling (Pratama & Mandaasari, 2020).

Reduction of Out-Migration: Limited employment opportunities, low wages, inadequate infrastructure, and other socio-economic challenges often contribute to rural out-migration. To diversify non-farm income sources, hilly communities in developing countries increasingly depend on tourism-related livelihoods. The peaceful natural environment, folk culture, traditions, and organic landscapes of rural regions attract urban residents seeking relief from hectic city life (Bhutia, 2016). According to the West Bengal Tourism Department (2016), many visitors to the Darjeeling Himalayas seek to experience the “rural and raw beauty” of Northeast India, with nearly 42% of tourists visiting for adventure or rural tourism purposes (Basak et al., 2021). As a service-oriented industry, tourism plays a significant role in employment generation and future livelihood opportunities (Netra, 2015; Pemayun & Maheswari, 2017; Spillane, 1994). Furthermore, rural tourism creates a wide range of micro-level economic opportunities within rural communities (Alves & Campón-Cerro, 2019).

ii) Challenges to Women's

Gender Bias and Discrimination: Women working in the tourism industry frequently encounter gender-based barriers that restrict their access to resources, employment opportunities, and leadership positions. Persistent social stereotypes and traditional cultural norms often undermine women's credibility and limit their professional advancement, particularly within male-dominated sectors of the tourism industry (Fernandez et al., 2016).

Work–Life Balance: Balancing household responsibilities with tourism-related employment presents significant challenges for many women, especially in societies where caregiving duties are traditionally assigned to women. Limited access to childcare facilities and inadequate support systems may further restrict women's full participation in tourism-related activities (Henderson, 2018).

Vulnerability to Exploitation: Women employed in informal or precarious segments of the tourism sector, such as street vending and informal accommodation services, are often vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and labour rights violations. Addressing these

vulnerabilities is essential for ensuring women's empowerment, safety, and well-being within the tourism industry (Fagertun, 2016).

Harnessing tourism as a platform for women's political and socio-economic empowerment requires coordinated efforts to reduce gender inequalities, promote women's leadership, and create enabling environments that support women's participation and advancement within the tourism sector. By utilising tourism as a catalyst for economic and social transformation, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and civil society organisations can contribute significantly to the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment at both local and global levels.

1.5 Rational Context of the Study Area:

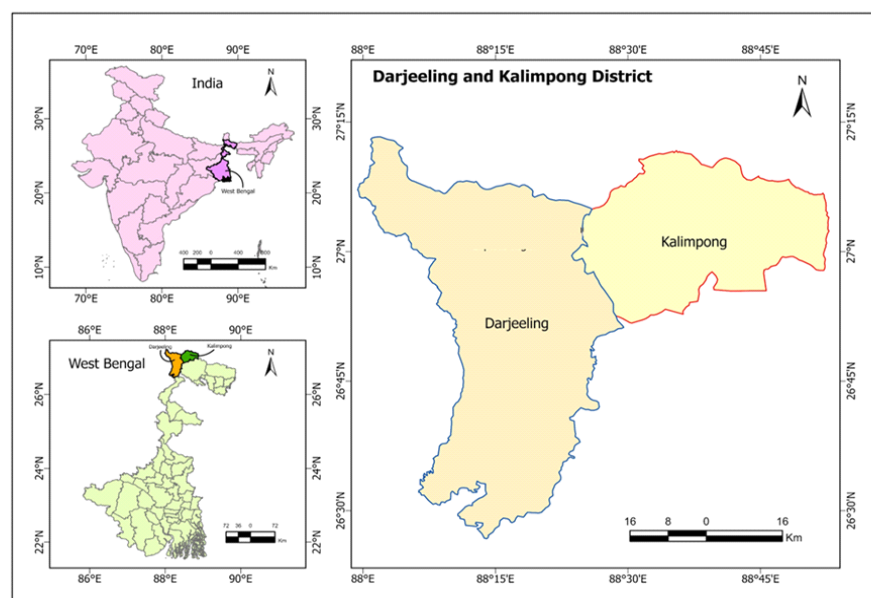


Figure 1.2: Two Districts Of Himalayan Region of West Bengal; Source: Author

a) Tourism in the Rural Himalayas

The chosen region for the study encompasses villages across Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Mirik, Kurseong, and adjoining rural belts in West Bengal, which are inhabited by indigenous ethnic minority communities such as the Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Yakthumba, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, and Rai groups (Nyaupane et al., 2022). These communities continue to maintain traditional lifestyles, religious practices, and livelihood systems that are closely associated with

land, livestock, handicrafts, traditional attire, festivals, and bio-cultural heritage. The agrarian lifestyle of these villages, combined with scenic valleys, forests, and tea estates, makes the region an attractive destination for authentic village-life tourism experiences.

Current estimates indicate that approximately 230 recognised or emerging rural tourism villages exist across Darjeeling and surrounding regions, including Kalimpong, Mirik, and Kurseong. These villages are engaged in various forms of rural tourism, such as farm-based tourism, ecotourism, ethnic tourism, and hinterland tourism. Tourism-related services include homestay accommodation, handicraft demonstrations, cultural performance events, adventure tourism activities, guided trekking, village walks, and farm visits (Government of West Bengal, 2016). The Eastern Himalayan Homestay Scheme, introduced by the State Tourism Department, represents a participatory and community-based ecotourism initiative designed to promote equitable and sustainable rural development.

The rural tourism ecosystem in these regions has encouraged the growth of eco-accommodation enterprises, restaurants, cultural performance groups, floriculture parks, trekking and paragliding services, and tribal heritage model villages, thereby generating employment opportunities and supplementary income sources, which all are demanded by tourists, especially foreign tourists. These developments are particularly important for marginalised women who frequently experience economic exclusion (Chowdhary & Prakash, 2009; Handaragama et al., 2022; Ray et al., 2026).

Ecotourism, as defined by Das (2025), refers to responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment while supporting the well-being of local communities. It promotes environmental awareness, encourages minimal ecological impact, and generates socio-economic benefits for host populations. Das, Rakshit et al.'s (2025) survey-based study further revealed that 68% of tourists in West Bengal preferred ecotourism destinations located in hilly regions. Among these respondents, 48% reported high levels of satisfaction, 53% indicated an improved understanding of human–nature relationships, and 21% expressed a preference for staying in homestay accommodations. These findings highlight the growing popularity and developmental potential of rural tourism within the state.

b) Regional Overview of the Himalayas in West Bengal

The study area comprises the Himalayan region of West Bengal, particularly the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. These two districts are situated in the Eastern Himalayas and are widely recognised for tea, tourism, and timber-based economic activities. The Himalayan hill

stations of West Bengal are often referred to as the “Queen of the Hills.” The altitude of the district headquarters is approximately 2,134 metres (7,000 feet) for Darjeeling and 1,247 metres (4,091 feet) for Kalimpong. Kalimpong became a separate district after being bifurcated from Darjeeling in 2016. The region is internationally known for its panoramic view of the Kanchenjunga mountain range, colonial-era heritage buildings, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, tea gardens, orange orchards, Ayurvedic plantations, and adventure tourism activities such as trekking, mountaineering, and white-water rafting (Adami,2020).

These districts are traditionally inhabited by indigenous communities such as the Lepchas (Rong), Limbus, and several other ethnic groups. Other long-established communities in the region include the Bahun, Kami, Damai, Tamang, Gurung, Magar, and Newar populations. Tibetan communities that migrated from Tibet during the 1950s also form an important component of the hill population. Owing to changing socio-economic conditions, many aspects of the traditional ethnic culture of the hill communities have gradually declined. Nevertheless, several rural communities continue to preserve their indigenous traditions and cultural heritage within remote Himalayan villages.

According to the Government of India Census (2011), the population of the study region is approximately 1,846,823. The region comprises 171 villages, of which nearly 25 villages have developed as recognised tourist villages. The total geographical area of the region is approximately 3,149 square kilometres, including 153.49 square kilometres of urban area and 2,995.51 square kilometres of rural area. Furthermore, approximately 60.58% of the population in the Himalayan region of West Bengal resides in rural villages (Government of India Census, 2011).

Information	Total	Male	female
Populations	1,846,823	937,259	909,564
Rural population	1,118,860	566,965	551,895
Rural literacy	736,824	81.76%	66.59%
Workers	683,726	479,586	204,140
Cultivators	51,984	41,632	10,352
Agriculture labour	32,087	23,372	8,715
Tea garden workers	52,873	20,716	32,157

1.1 Table (Source: Census 2011)

c) Background of Tourism in The Study Area

i) Past tourism scenario in the study area:

"A traditional Englishman drinks tea to the point where his blood has long-since been replaced with an infusion of Ceylon, Assam, and Darjeeling."

— Fennel Hudson, A Meaningful Life - Fennel's Journal - No. 1(August 15 2013)

Darjeeling and Kalimpong are considered among the most picturesque places in India. The British acquired the region from the king of Sikkim in 1835 to create a hill station for the British. The terms "Dorje" and "ling," which together signify land in Tibetan, are the origin of the name Darjeeling. Darjeeling's name translates to "the land of lightning. Archibald Campbell, an employee of the East India Company, planted the first *Camellia sinensis* trees (tea) in the Darjeeling region in 1841. (Darjeeling District Gazetteer,2015).The Eastern Bengal Railway (E.B.R.) agent Franklin Prestage first proposed a hill tramway in 1878 that would follow the Hill Cart Road from Siliguri to Darjeeling, called today the D.H.R. or toy train. D.H.R. was inscribed on the World Heritage List in **1999**, making it the pride of the Darjeeling Hills' people for all the world. (On December 5 1999, UNESCO declared the D.H.R. a World Heritage Site) At that time, mainly the British and the well-to-do Indian elite class were visitors to this place (Adami, 2020).

ii) Post-independent tourism in the study area:

"For the brightest gem in the eastern Himalayas for nearly two centuries, all might not be well."- (Drimi Cowdhuri 2013)

After independence, mass tourism took place in these hill stations; insufficient modern infrastructure, the crisis in the tea garden, and the political disturbance created tremendous pressure on the tourism industry, and the Queen of Hills became a faded photo of its past. According to Dromi Chowdhury, complete disrespect for building regulations, primarily created by the colonial authority, heightens the threat. The post-colonial Government was compelled to disregard building regulations and architectural principles due to the necessity for fast urbanisation and tourism. (Deccan Herald Newsletter, November 19 2018) They also express dissatisfaction at the Government's inaction and negligence, which only causes them to take notice after a disaster or fatality. The hill tourism of West Bengal is in a declining position. The World Tourism Organization defines a tourism product as "a combination of tangible and intangible elements, such as natural, cultural, and artificial resources, attractions, facilities, services and activities

around a specific centre of interest which represents the core of the destination marketing mix and creates an overall visitor experience including emotional aspects for the potential customers. A tourism product is priced and sold through distribution channels and has a life-cycle".(Product Development, www.unwto.org,2020)

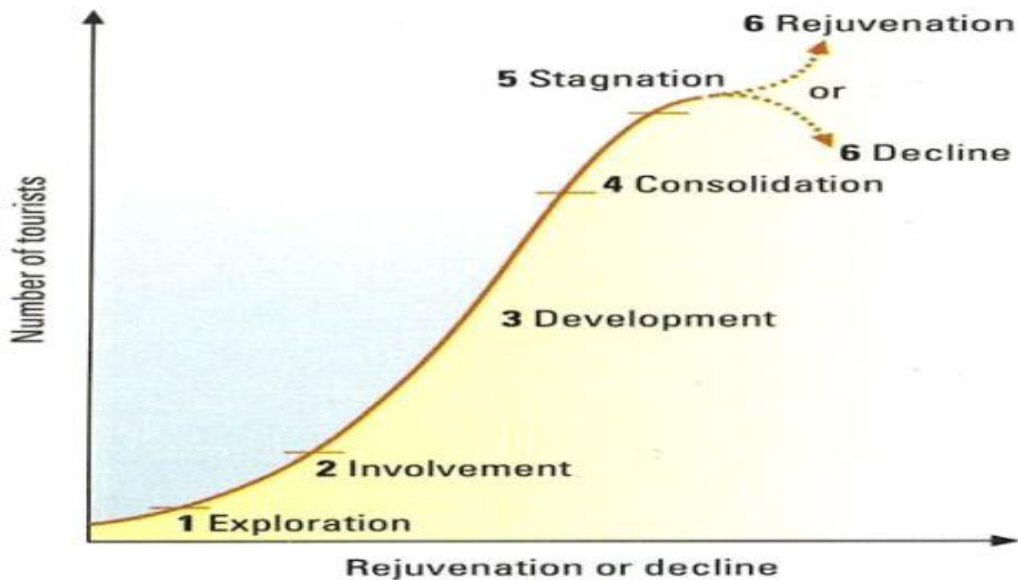


Figure1.3 Source: tourismdevelopment.weebly.com/bulters-definition-life-cycle.html

- 1) Exploration: A hidden location that needs to "go feral" and lacks facilities is found.
- 2) Involvement: A few concessions and locally operated camps are set up.
- 3) Development: By promoting the place, a clearly defined tourism business is created.
- 4) Consolidation: The local economy now heavily relies on tourism.
- 5) Stagnation: The location is no longer a new hot spot; perhaps more construction is required as tourism growth slows and carrying capacity is reached.
- 6) Decline or Rejuvenation: Rejuvenation usually necessitates drawing in a different type of visitor, whereas decline occurs as travellers seek alternative locations."When old worlds die out on the tongue,

"When old worlds die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
a new country is revealed with its wonders."

--Close Path, Rabindranath Tagore

Tourist numbers decline when they travel to other places; revitalisation usually entails luring new types of travellers. Hill tourist sector in West Bengal has adopted an unconventional tourism Concept for long-term sustainability after recognising the threat to sustaining. Rural Darjeeling and Kalimpong showcase the Himalayan region's beautiful local culture and environments. So, they embrace rural tourism as their sustainable tool.



Figure 1.4: Products of Rural Tourism in the Study Area; Source: Primary Data

d) Rural Tourism is a Tool of Empowerment:

However, socio-economic backwardness, inadequate communication infrastructure, and low remuneration for agricultural products have significantly weakened the traditional rural ethnic economy, thereby encouraging out-migration and urban migration from the rural hill regions of Bengal. On the other hand, the folk culture, peaceful natural environment, traditions, and organic vegetation of these regions continue to attract urban tourists seeking relief from hectic city life (Bhutia, 2016). Some important rural tourism destinations in the region include Latpanchar, Ahaldhara, Sittong, Mongpoo, Shivkhola, Shilari Gaon, Lepchajagat, Tobokoshi, and Rong Tong. More than 30 villages are currently attempting to establish themselves as rural tourism destinations (primary survey data collected during visits to the West Bengal Tourism Department (2016).

Rural tourism has emerged as a relatively new phenomenon in the Darjeeling Hills and has developed rapidly over the past decade by connecting urban tourists with rural communities. Rural tourism contributes to the social, cultural, and economic empowerment of rural areas (Kannegieser, 2015; Rawat, 2020). Women in rural communities are closely connected to

the natural environment because they are traditionally responsible for collecting water, fuel, fodder, and maintaining household subsistence activities. Women have historically played a central role in the biomass-based subsistence economy of rural households (Yadav, 2016). Most women in the region are engaged as tea garden labourers or agricultural workers, while relatively few participate in formal employment or small-scale businesses. The highest concentration of female labour participation is observed in tea plantations across the region. Several studies have highlighted that women working in tea plantations have long been vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse (Gurung, 2020). Although women workers constitute a major asset to the regional economy, they continue to remain socially and economically disadvantaged (Gurung & Mukherjee, 2018). Consequently, women in the region require more dignified and sustainable livelihood opportunities to achieve socio-economic development.

At present, many women in the hill regions of North Bengal have started converting parts of their homes, including kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms, into tourist accommodation facilities (Paul, 2014). Women also actively participate in cultural performances and roadside selling activities aimed at entertaining and serving tourists. Female participation in the tourism sector of the Himalayan region of West Bengal has been observed to be higher than male participation in several tourism-related activities. Rural tourism development therefore creates significant employment opportunities for rural women and local villagers (Lama, 2020). The Himalayan region of Bengal is particularly famous for tea and tourism, and the integration of tea tourism with rural tourism has the potential to enhance livelihood sustainability among rural destination communities. The natural beauty of the mountains, dense forests, waterfalls, rivers, and caves act as major pull factors for tourism, while tea gardens add additional scenic and cultural value to the landscape (Dutta, 2026). The region contains nearly 250 tea gardens, each producing tea with distinct flavours and characteristics. Many tea tourism projects allow visitors to stay within tea estates in heritage tea bungalows originally constructed during the British colonial period and influenced by Victorian and Gothic architectural styles. Currently (Akhtar et al., 2021), many tea gardens also provide homestay facilities at relatively affordable prices. In these homestays, local residents typically prepare traditional food reflecting indigenous tastes and culinary practices. Tea tourism additionally creates employment opportunities for tea garden villagers (Islam et al., 2022; Sarkar, 2019). Many scholars have identified that women play a significant role in the homestay sector in remote villages of Darjeeling and other Himalayan regions. Many studies argue that women often dominate the workforce in

homestay operations, with higher female participation than male in this segment of rural hospitality. Their involvement extends from household management and guest services to food preparation, cultural interaction, and maintenance of traditional practices, thereby contributing to both rural tourism development and women's socio-economic empowerment. A positive correlation has also been identified between the total number of family members and the number of female members involved in homestay operations, suggesting that women are more actively associated with this occupation. Tourism therefore plays a crucial role in regional development processes.

The participation of rural women in rural tourism is not free from challenges. Many rural women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal are gradually withdrawing from their traditional occupations, such as floriculture and horticulture, in order to engage in homestay businesses. However, the rapid and often unplanned growth of overcrowded homestay facilities, combined with unskilled human resources, poses serious threats to the environment and the sustainability of offbeat tourism destinations. Women continue to bear heavy workloads and extensive family responsibilities. Despite their active involvement in tourism-related activities, ownership and leadership opportunities remain limited. Consequently, nearly 70% of rural women aspire to provide higher education opportunities for their children (Mukherjee et al., 2018). At the same time, a large proportion of the younger generation seeks to migrate to cities, other states, or foreign countries in search of better opportunities.

Although rural tourism has achieved some success in improving the economic conditions of rural women, its contribution toward ensuring long-term social sustainability and empowerment remains limited. Nevertheless, rural tourism provides an important opportunity for women's empowerment and contributes toward greater gender equality. It promotes social equity by transforming the mindset of both women and men, while enabling women to recognise their capabilities and improve their family life and financial management practices (Dai & Sarkar, 2019).

1.6 Research Problem Statement

Women's involvement in rural tourism in West Bengal's Himalayan region is still understudied and underutilised, despite the growing acknowledgement of tourism as a weapon for gender equality and women's empowerment on a global scale. Although women are essential to the tourism industry, systematic gender bias, limited access to resources, and sociocultural norms frequently limit their participation. Despite the fact that programs like homestays and tea

tourism have created new opportunities for women to work and start their own businesses, little is known about how involved they are, how they affect the preservation of culture and the environment, and the wider socioeconomic effects.

Firstly, it is unclear **to what extent women are actively participating in rural tourism**, particularly in remote and economically disadvantaged Himalayan villages of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Existing literature highlights their presence in hospitality and craft-based roles, but there is a need to assess the depth and breadth of their involvement in tourism-based activities.

Secondly, while women's engagement in rural tourism is believed to support the **preservation and commercialisation of local culture and environment**, there is limited empirical evidence to confirm this relationship. The role of women as custodians of cultural heritage and natural resources requires deeper investigation to understand how their participation contributes to sustainable tourism.

Thirdly, the potential of rural tourism to promote **women's socio-economic empowerment**—through improved income, decision-making power, reduced out-migration, and leadership opportunities—needs rigorous evaluation. While anecdotal accounts and micro-level case studies suggest progress, structural challenges such as gender-based discrimination, work-life imbalance, and lack of training persist, which may hinder long-term empowerment.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill these important research gaps:

- The extent and forms of women's involvement in rural tourism activities;
- The influence of their participation on environmental and cultural sustainability; and
- The degree to which rural tourism can serve as a transformative tool for socio-economic empowerment of women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant academic and practical value as it explores the intersection of rural tourism and women's empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal—an area that remains largely underrepresented in tourism and gender-focused research.

a) Necessity of the Study

The need for this research arises from the increasing global and national emphasis on gender-inclusive development and sustainable tourism. While tourism is widely acknowledged as a tool for socio-economic upliftment, its specific role in transforming the lives of rural women—especially in geographically and economically marginalised areas like the Darjeeling and

Kalimpong districts—has not been adequately examined. Women in these regions are often limited to low-income agricultural or informal sector roles and face barriers such as gender bias, low education, minimal ownership, and restricted access to decision-making forums.

Despite policy initiatives promoting rural and community-based tourism, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on how rural tourism actually influences women's lives in terms of income, leadership, social standing, cultural participation, and environmental stewardship. This gap needs urgent attention to inform better planning, equitable participation, and long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives.

b) Novelty of the Study

This study makes a distinct contribution by offering a region-specific, gender-focused, and empirically grounded analysis of rural tourism's impact on women's empowerment. The novelty of the research lies in several aspects:

i) Geographical Uniqueness: It investigates the under-researched Himalayan villages of West Bengal, which are rich in tourism potential but have not been systematically studied for gender-based tourism impacts.

ii) Comprehensive Conceptual Framework: The study employs an integrated theoretical and Conceptual model linking **women's participation (WP)**, **rural tourism development (RTD)**, **direct and indirect employment**, **cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation (CEPC)**, and **socio-economic empowerment (SEE)**. This framework is quantitatively tested using **PLS-SEM**, enabling both direct and mediating relationship assessments.

iii) Gender-Specific Lens: Unlike general rural development studies, this research focuses specifically on **women's empowerment**, assessing multiple empowerment dimensions such as income generation, leadership, confidence, cultural involvement, and reduced out-migration.

iv) Empirical Contribution: Drawing on **primary data collected from 400 women** across various villages, the study presents rich, real-world insights into women's roles, challenges, and aspirations within rural tourism.

v) Policy and Practical Relevance: The findings offer actionable implications for **policymakers, tourism planners, NGOs, and women's welfare organisations** to develop more inclusive, supportive, and sustainable tourism models tailored to the unique needs of rural women.

In essence, this study not only fills a critical research gap but also contributes meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism, gender equity, and rural development in Eastern Himalayan India.

1.8 Conclusion of the Introductory Chapter

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the background, context, rationale, and significance of the study, focusing on the interlinkages between rural tourism and women's empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. It began with an exploration of **varied perspectives on tourism**, tracing its evolution from mass tourism to more inclusive and sustainable forms such as rural tourism. The **global and regional context** of rural tourism, particularly in the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region, India, and specifically West Bengal, established the growing importance of community-based tourism in remote and ecologically sensitive areas.

The chapter then delved into the **rationale for selecting rural tourism as a focal point**, particularly in its potential to contribute to gender equality, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development. It explored how **women's empowerment is intricately connected to tourism** through increased income, enhanced participation in public life, leadership opportunities, and the preservation of culture and environment. These discussions were reinforced with empirical evidence from national and international sources, offering insight into both the **opportunities and challenges** women face in tourism-dependent communities.

A detailed **conceptual and theoretical perspective** was introduced to provide an academic lens for understanding the dynamics between rural tourism and women's empowerment. Drawing upon global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5) and scholarly research on empowerment, the chapter presented an integrated understanding of how tourism may function as a vehicle for social transformation.

Attention was also given to the **regional context of the study area**, the Himalayan belt of West Bengal—highlighting its unique geographical, cultural, and economic characteristics. A historical analysis of tourism development in the region, from the pre-independence era to the current emergence of rural and tea tourism, illustrated how local women have gradually begun participating in tourism through homestays, handicrafts, agri-tourism, and cultural performances. Despite this progress, persistent gender-based challenges such as limited education, ownership rights, social restrictions, and exploitation in informal tourism sectors underscore the continued need for focused empowerment strategies.

The chapter then articulated a **clear research problem statement**, justifying the need to examine the extent of women's engagement, their role in cultural and environmental preservation, and the potential of tourism to foster socio-economic empowerment. This was followed by a section on the **significance and novelty** of the study, underlining its contribution to academic literature, policy discourse, and practical community development.

In conclusion, Chapter 1 has established the intellectual and contextual groundwork for the study. It demonstrates that rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal is not only a promising economic opportunity but also a potential platform for empowering women and promoting inclusive development. The next chapter will build upon this foundation by presenting a critical review of existing literature, identifying theoretical gaps, and formulating the conceptual framework that guides this research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction:

Considering the review aims, a review protocol to direct a literature search was developed. The review protocol contained data bases, search terms, and literature selection criteria. The following word schemes were used to capture studies that explored women empowerment through Rural tourism: rural tourism AND “community development” OR “women empowerment.” To understand the multidisciplinary breadth, the relevant literature was searched in tourism and hospitality’s most significant e-databases. While earlier systematic reviews mostly considered two to three databases, our study would consider six critical databases: SAGE, EMERALD, ELSEVIER, WILEY Online Library, Taylor & Francis Online and UGC Care. The search terms were examined in the study title, keywords, abstract, or text and published in English academic journals from 1999 to 2026. My review is choosing peer-reviewed scholarly journals published in the English language or translated into English.

Table 2.1 Total Number of Reviewed Literature (N=100)

Year of Publication	Type and total number (Journal/Book/Chapter)	Indexing (Scopus/SCI, etc.)	Topic of Review
2019-2023	17 Journals	Scopus	Effects of Rural Tourism
2014-2023	27 Journals	Scopus	Women in Rural Tourism
2013- 2023	11 Journals 02 Book Chapters	Scopus and Google Scholar	Women and Cultural Preservation
2003-2025	16 Journals 01 Book Chapter 03 Reports	Scopus and Google Scholar	Women and Environmental Preservation
1999-2023	15 Journals 02 Book Chapters	Scopus and Google Scholar	Socioeconomic Empowerment of

	01 Book		Women Through Rural Tourism
	05 Reports		

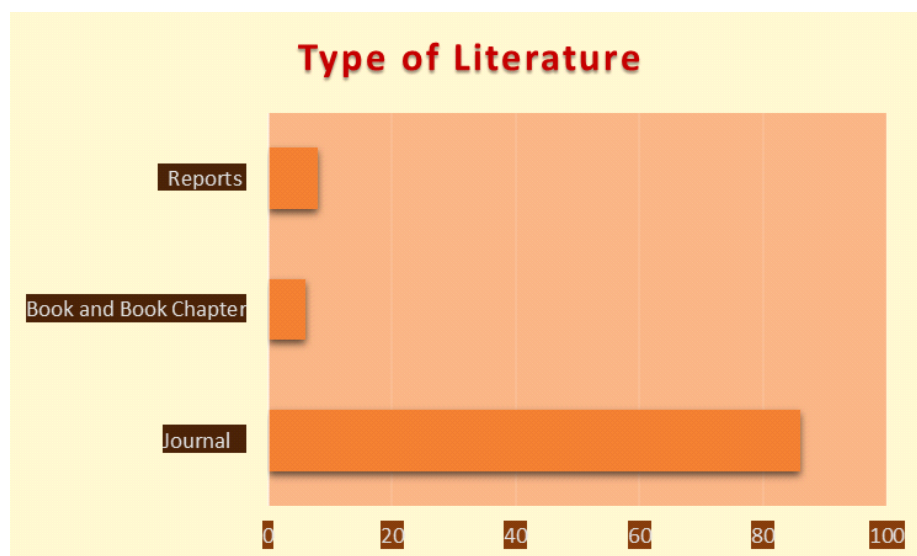


Figure 2.1

2.2 Literature Review: Effects of Rural Tourism

Rural tourism has emerged as a potent driver for rural development, offering economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits while also presenting complex challenges. This review synthesises recent scholarly contributions, organised around key themes: economic impact and employment, community participation and empowerment, environmental sustainability, entrepreneurship and development, and the integration of tea tourism as a sustainable livelihood strategy.

a) Economic Impact and Employment

Tourism in rural areas contributes significantly to job creation and income generation, both directly through tourism-related enterprises and indirectly through supporting industries (Ladkin et al., 2023; Fikire et al., 2022). Well-implemented tourism strategies can play a pro-poor role by contributing to poverty reduction in urban-adjacent rural regions (Fikire et al., 2022). However, the equitable distribution of economic benefits is crucial, as unequal access to tourism opportunities may exacerbate income disparities and social tensions (Su et al., 2019). Liu et al. (2022) advocate for advanced economic assessment techniques to better capture tourism's impact, while Gupta et al. (2021) highlight the fragility of rural livelihoods during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

b) Community Participation and Empowerment

Active involvement is essential for the community to enhance the sustainability of rural tourism initiatives. Resident participation in planning fosters a sense of ownership, improves satisfaction with tourism outcomes, and encourages environmentally responsible behaviours (Ahn & Bessiere, 2022; Nasr et al., 2022). Empowerment through participative leadership and destination social responsibility (DSR) mechanisms further supports inclusive tourism (Nasr et al., 2022). For instance, Lapuz (2023) discuss the role of digital transformation in empowering communities in the Philippines, while Maharjan et al. (2023) underscore the importance of empowering women farmers in Nepal through conservation and tourism synergies.

c) Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability remains a foundational pillar of rural tourism. Climate change poses threats to natural resource-dependent tourism, necessitating adaptive strategies and innovative products (Rotich, 2025). Resident engagement and DSR practices are shown to contribute positively to environmental stewardship (Nasr et al., 2022). Madanaguli et al. (2023) outline a stakeholder-driven framework for environmental sustainability in rural tourism, while Hussain et al. (2023) present a KPI-based approach for evaluating intelligent mobility solutions aimed at sustainability in rural tourism.

d) Entrepreneurship and Rural Development

Entrepreneurship in rural tourism is pivotal for stimulating local economies. Dwiesty et al. (2023) identify ten critical success factors in tourism village development in Indonesia, ranging from infrastructure to community leadership. Luo et al. (2022) analyze factors influencing rural household engagement in tourism in China, finding that education, landholding, and policy incentives are key determinants. These findings align with the broader call for capacity building, access to finance, and training in entrepreneurship to sustain rural tourism ventures (Jamshed et al., 2023; Janjua et al., 2026).

e) Tourist Experience, Gentrification, and Social Change

Understanding tourist experience and the social transformations driven by rural tourism is increasingly relevant. Chen et al. (2023) emphasise the multidimensionality of rural tourism experiences, while Yang and Xu (2022) critically explore the notion of "imagined rurality" and its implications for rural gentrification. Nitanan et al. (2020) warn of potential adverse effects of community-based tourism, such as ecological commodification and unequal power dynamics.

f) Homestay Tourism and Visitor Satisfaction

Homestay tourism offers a grassroots approach to sustainable rural tourism. Basak et al. (2021) find that socio-cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability directly influence visitor satisfaction in Darjeeling's homestay sector. Janjua et al. (2026) advocate for further research on branding, ICT integration, and gender impacts within homestay tourism, especially in developing countries.

g) Tea and Coffee Tourism: A Sustainable Livelihood Model

The integration of agriculture and tourism, particularly in tea and coffee-producing regions, presents unique opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. Chen et al. (2021) call for interdisciplinary approaches to study this niche, identifying fragmented literature in the field. Sita et al. (2024) propose a collaborative model integrating tea tourism with CSR and service quality improvements to create diversified income streams. Similarly, Mondal and Samaddar (2021) identify challenges in tea tourism in India, such as limited community involvement and poor planning, while also pointing to its potential. Earlier, Solak and Amin (2020) emphasized tea tourism's ability to boost employment, promote local culture, and create regional markets, advocating for robust public-private partnerships.

Yang et al. (2018) caution against over-reliance on tourism as a development pathway, showing how extensive villager involvement may erode rural character. Datta (2018) suggests blending tea tourism with forest tourism in India's Duars region to diversify offerings while preserving heritage. Gupta et al. (2021) and Sua et al. (2019) further illustrate how tea tourism enhances destination attractiveness and livelihood sustainability, particularly for lower-income groups.

h) Case Studies and Regional Insights

Numerous case studies highlight the varied impacts of rural tourism. Das (2021) presents "Sillary Gaon" in West Bengal as a successful model of ecotourism for community development. Rawat and Khyat (2020) and Rai (2020) analyse rural tourism in Darjeeling, pointing to employment generation and eco-conservation. Cáceres-Feriaand and Hernández (2021) underscore the need for integrated management strategies in Spain, while Xu et al. (2020) highlight spatial planning in China.

i) Governance, Land Use, and Resilience

Effective governance and land use planning are essential for long-term sustainability. Feng et al. (2020) show how unplanned tourism growth can lead to landscape and cultural degradation. Kaptan Ayhana et al. (2020) and Yachin & Ioannides (2020) highlight the significance of

sustainable land use and resource management by rural micro-firms. In terms of policy, Jena and Dwivedi (2021) identify inadequate government support as a major barrier to rural tourism growth in India. Passafaro and Vecchione (2022) advocate for value-based frameworks to influence tourist behaviour toward sustainability.

2.2.2 Summary

Table 2.1 provides a robust of the reviewed literature evidence that rural tourism, when thoughtfully planned and inclusively managed, can serve as a transformative force for rural areas. Empowerment—particularly of marginalised groups like women farmers—environmental stewardship, economic diversification through entrepreneurship, and innovative practices like tea tourism emerge as recurring themes. However, persistent challenges such as governance gaps, inequality, environmental pressures, and cultural commodification must be addressed through participatory planning, interdisciplinary research, and cross-sector collaboration.

Table 2.2 Summary on Literature Review of Effects of Rural Tourism

Author(s)	Type (Journal/Book/Book Chapter)	Year of Publication	Indexing (Scopus/SCI etc.)	Main Findings or Conclusion
Ahn & Bessiere	Journal	2022	Scopus	Participative leadership fosters resident empowerment and encourages sustainable tourism participation.
Alves & Campon-Cerro	Journal	2019	Scopus	Relationship quality significantly influences rural destination loyalty.
Basak et al.	Journal	2021	Scopus	Sustainability dimensions positively influence visitor satisfaction in homestays.

Chen et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Emphasizes multidimensional rural tourism experiences.
Lapuz	Journal	2023	Scopus	Digital transformation empowers local communities in rural tourism.
Fikire et al.	Journal	2022	Scopus	Pro-poor tourism policies can reduce urban poverty when implemented equitably.
Gupta et al.	Journal	2021	Scopus	Explores COVID-19's impact on rural livelihoods and resilience.
Hussain et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	KPI framework for sustainable intelligent rural mobility and tourism.
Jamshed et al.,2023; Janjua et al.	Journal	2026	Scopus	Identifies neglected areas like ICT and branding in rural homestays.
Ladkin et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Tourism creates direct and indirect economic benefits in rural areas.
Liu et al.	Journal	2022	Scopus	Calls for advanced financial techniques to measure tourism's

				economic impact.
Madanaguli et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Stakeholder framework for environmental sustainability in rural tourism.
Maharjan et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Empowering women farmers through tourism and conservation initiatives.
Mondal & Samaddar	Journal	2021	Scopus	Identifies planning and collaboration gaps in tea tourism development.
Nasr et al.	Journal	2022	Scopus	DSR enhances environmental behaviour and community involvement.
Rotich	Journal	2025	Scopus	Tourism needs adaptation to climate change for long-term sustainability.
Sita et al.	Journal	2024	Scopus	Tea-tourism integration offers diversified income and sustainable livelihoods.
Su et al.	Journal	2019	Scopus	Equity in tourism benefits prevents social disparity in rural communities.
Yang & Xu	Journal	2022	Scopus	Imagined rurality connects rural

				gentrification with tourism development.
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2.3 Literature Review: Women in Rural Tourism

Rural tourism serves as a promising platform for empowering women in underserved regions by creating economic opportunities, supporting cultural preservation, and promoting social inclusion. Tourism, as a sector with a high share of female workers and entrepreneurs, holds substantial potential for advancing gender equity in rural communities (Elshaer & Moustafa, 2021).

Tourism is increasingly recognised for its potential to alleviate rural poverty. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2021) notes tourism's contribution to global GDP and employment, and rural regions—with their rich natural and cultural resources—are uniquely positioned to benefit from tourism-driven development (Wang, Du et al., 2023).

Several studies have examined the structural factors affecting women's participation in rural tourism. Fakhrizadeh, Azizpour et al. (2022) distinguish between macro-level constraints, such as patriarchal norms and geographic isolation, and micro-level enablers, such as individual confidence, family support, financial access, and reduced role conflict. Historically, the concept of empowerment evolved from early development theories (Boserup, 2007; Freire, 1978) and has since been applied to tourism as a means of promoting equitable participation (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Sellers, Leydon et al., 2016). Dong & Khan (2023) call for a new theoretical framework combining female entrepreneurship, education, and social and human capital.

Women's roles in rural tourism are extensive, encompassing entrepreneurship, employment, and cultural heritage preservation. Their contributions enhance household incomes, support children's education and healthcare, and promote well-being (de Jong & Figueroa-Domecq, 2022; Charlesworth et al., 2011; Gajić & Vukolić, 2021). Case studies from Ningxia (China) and Timpag Village (Indonesia) show how women have turned embroidery, eco-tourism, and cultural festivals into sustainable livelihood strategies (Su, Wall et al., 2023).

Beyond economic gains, women in tourism often gain confidence, leadership capabilities, and decision-making power (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Moswete & Lacey, 2014). In South Africa, report that women's participation in tourism improves sustainability and rural resilience. However, many women remain in low-paid, low-skilled roles with limited policy influence

(Tristanti et al., 2022). Singh, Parahoo et al. (2022) outline four critical success factors in sustainable rural tourism—cultural preservation, service provider support, new technologies, and inclusive leadership. Similarly, Gerritsen (2014) documents how Mexican women have merged ecological agriculture with tourism to resist the effects of globalisation and diversify livelihoods.

This review draws on seven recent studies (2021–2023) exploring women’s evolving roles in rural tourism:

a) Empowerment and Entrepreneurship:

- Ditta-Apichai et al. (2023) show how Facebook empowers female micro-entrepreneurs through peer learning and networking.
- Yildirim et al. (2026) identify challenges faced by Turkish women in rural tourism and the need for support systems.
- Khoo et al. (2025) explore digital competency gaps among Latin American women in tourism and propose gender-sensitive digital inclusion strategies.
- Nordbø (2022) examines constraints on female entrepreneurship, including finance access and strategic limitations.

b) Feminist Perspectives and Subjectivity:

- Wang & Sun (2023) analyze the development of feminine agency through a case study of tourism-focused women in China.
- Azima & Mundler (2022) investigate Canadian women’s values of care and empowerment in food tourism.

c) Participation and Associations:

- Handaragama & Kusakabe (2021) argue that business associations in Sri Lanka can better support women entrepreneurs by addressing structural disadvantages.

d) A set of seven additional studies from 2021 reinforce the critical role rural tourism plays in fostering women’s empowerment:

- Vukovic et al. (2023) document how self-help groups enhance entrepreneurship and networking in Serbia.
- Njinyah & Pendant (2021) stress the importance of government policy awareness for Cameroonian women in tourism.

- Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaíno (2021) explore how Mexican women resist gender stereotypes using emotion and agency.
- Abou-Shouk et al. (2021) link empowerment to sustainable tourism development and SDGs, advocating policy reforms.
- Shobh (2021) highlights how rural tourism can elevate the economic and social status of Indian women.
- Ali et al. (2021) demonstrate the impact of financial literacy on women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

e) Key Themes from Broader Research :

i) Positive Impacts:

- *Economic Empowerment:* Women gain financial independence and entrepreneurship opportunities, contributing to poverty reduction (Martini et al., 2020)

ii) Challenges and Constraints:

- *Gender Inequalities:* Deep-rooted patriarchal systems restrict women's access to training and leadership (Bhadwala et al., 2019; Gurung & Mukherjee, 2018).
- *Work-Life Balance:* Dual burdens of domestic responsibilities and tourism work (Khan et al., 2021).
- *Exploitation:* Women are vulnerable to low wages and unsafe working conditions (Seyfi et al., 2020; Tucker, 2024).
- *Limited Agency:* Women often lack control over tourism income and development decisions (Khan et al., 2021).

f) Strategies for Positive Change:

- Education and vocational training (Khan et al., 2021; Uduji & Okolo-Obasi, 2019).
- Improved access to credit and digital tools (Xu et al., 2018).
- Gender-responsive tourism policies (Martini et al., 2020).
- Community-based tourism models emphasizing collective action (Martini et al., 2020).
- Ethical tourism frameworks addressing fair wages and respect for cultural traditions (Tucker, 2024).

In the Himalayan region, including Darjeeling and other parts of the Hindu Kush Himalayas, studies reaffirm the transformative potential of women's participation in tourism. Chettri (2022) highlights women's environmental roles in Chattakpur Forest Village, while Gurung & Mukherjee (2018) underscore the marginalisation of tea plantation workers. Xu et al. (2018) and Rai & Mukherjee (2018) offer empirical evidence on work participation, income diversification, and barriers faced by rural women. Women's participation in rural tourism significantly contributes to sustainable development, community resilience, and cultural continuity. To maximise these benefits, structural inequalities must be addressed through inclusive policies, capacity building, and support systems that recognise and leverage women's unique contributions to the rural tourism economy.

Table 2.3 Summary of Literature on Women in Rural Tourism

Author(s)	Type (Journal/Book/Chapter)	Year of Publication	Indexing (Scopus/SCI etc.)	Main Findings or Conclusion
Elshaer & Moustafa	Journal	2021	Scopus	Tourism enables economic empowerment for rural women through employment and entrepreneurship .
Fakhrizadeh et al.	Journal	2022	Scopus	Identifies macro and micro-level factors influencing women's participation in rural tourism.
Dong & Khan	Journal	2023	Scopus	Proposes a new framework including entrepreneurship , education, and social capital for women in tourism.

de Jong & Figueroa-Domecq	Journal	2022	Scopus	Highlights women's role in community development via entrepreneurship and cultural preservation.
Su et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Shows how rural women use cultural tourism and eco-tourism to sustain livelihoods.
Alarcón & Cole	Journal	2019	Scopus	Tourism enhances women's leadership and decision-making power.
Afenyo-Agbe & Adeola	Journal	2020	Scopus	Women's empowerment in tourism strengthens sustainability in South African rural areas.
Tristani et al.	Journal	2022	Scopus	Identifies gender inequalities in tourism employment and participation.
Gerritsen	Journal	2014	Scopus	Integration of tourism and ecological agriculture supports rural women's empowerment in Mexico.
Ditta-Apichai et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Social media supports learning and networking

				among female micro-entrepreneurs.
Yildirim et al.	Journal	2026	Scopus	Support systems are essential for rural women entrepreneurs in tourism.
Khoo et al.	Journal	2025	Scopus	Digital divide challenges women entrepreneurs in Latin America; calls for inclusive tech strategies.
Nordbø	Journal	2022	Scopus	Explores constraints on women's entrepreneurship in rural tourism.
Wang & Sun	Journal	2023	Scopus	Analyzes feminine subjectivity in tourism through the Cheongsam Sisters case study.
Azima & Mundler	Journal	2022	Scopus	Investigates women farmers' values and empowerment in food-related tourism.
Handaragama & Kusakabe	Journal	2021	Scopus	Highlights how business associations can support women in Sri Lanka's tourism sector.
Vukovic et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Self-help groups enhance

				communication and entrepreneurship for Serbian women in tourism.
Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaíno	Journal	2021	Scopus	Mexican women use emotion to challenge stereotypes and inequalities in rural tourism.
Abou-Shouk et al.	Journal	2021	Scopus	Empowerment is key to achieving sustainable tourism and SDGs.
Shobh	Journal	2021	Scopus	Rural tourism improves Indian women's economic independence and social status.
Ali et al.	Journal	2021	Scopus	Financial literacy boosts Saudi women's empowerment in tourism.
Subba	Journal	2020	Scopus	Women contribute to environmental conservation in Darjeeling's tourism-based communities.
Tucker	Journal	2024	Scopus	Critically evaluates contradictions in tourism as a tool for women's empowerment.

Uduji & Okolo-Obasi	Journal	2019	Scopus	CSR supports women's participation in cultural tourism in Nigeria.
Xu et al.	Journal	2018	Scopus	Women's tourism entrepreneurship in China aids in poverty alleviation.
Gurung & Mukherjee	Journal	2018	Scopus	Explores marginalisation of women tea plantation workers in Darjeeling.
Rai & Mukherjee	Journal	2018	Scopus	Examines economic drivers of rural female labour participation in Darjeeling.

2.4 Literature Review: Women and Cultural Preservation

Rural tourism, with its help, women are empowered and preserves culture, serves as a powerful tool for achieving inclusive and sustainable rural development. Women's participation not only enhances local economies but also contributes significantly to safeguarding cultural identities and practices.

a) Local Cultural Preservation

Women often act as custodians of culture in rural communities, using tourism as a platform to maintain and transmit indigenous knowledge. For example, **Makandwa et al. (2021; 2023)** show how women entrepreneurs in Southern Africa sustain cultural traditions such as crafts and cuisine through tourism enterprises. These initiatives contribute directly to cultural continuity by revitalising fading practices.

In Nepal, **Acharya and Halpenny (2013)** highlight the dual function of women-managed homestays, which combine economic opportunity with cultural safeguarding. Tourists

experience local architecture, cuisine, and traditions—preserved and delivered by women—making these homestays a medium for heritage conservation.

Similarly, **Su et al. (2023)** report that Hui minority women in Ningxia, China, integrate traditional embroidery into tourism offerings. This practice not only sustains livelihoods but also ensures that cultural art forms passed through generations remain alive and relevant in modern tourism economies.

The role of women in Botswana's community tourism is equally crucial. As **Moswete and Lacey (2015)** illustrate, women take on responsibilities as guides, storytellers, and craft producers, actively transmitting cultural narratives to visitors. This challenges prevailing gender stereotypes and reinforces women's identity as cultural leaders.

In **Indonesia's Timpag Village**, women participate in organising festivals and managing eco-tourism, safeguarding both natural and cultural landscapes (**Suryawati et al., 2023**). Their role enhances community pride while preserving intangible cultural heritage.

b) Economic Upliftment

Women's engagement in rural tourism significantly improves household incomes and contributes to broader economic development. According to **Dai and Sarkar (2019)**, tourism participation enhances women's financial autonomy and decision-making capacity. These changes help shift gender dynamics in rural societies and foster inclusive economic growth.

Kastenholz et al. (2018) and **Chen et al. (2023)** show that tourism products—rooted in local festivals, agriculture, and crafts—are often curated by women. These offerings attract tourists looking for authentic rural experiences and create revenue streams directly benefiting women and their communities.

In Nigeria, **Uduji, Obasi, and Asongu (2019)** argue that women dominate the cultural tourism sector, contributing to household income through the commercialization of local heritage. This trend highlights tourism's potential for poverty alleviation through gender-inclusive strategies.

Research from **Darjeeling, India** further confirms this trend. Women contribute economically through handicrafts, traditional culinary arts, and folklore performances, while simultaneously preserving cultural authenticity (Bhasin, 2011; Lama, 2016; Gurung, 2019). Their participation has been found to reduce household vulnerability and diversify income sources.

c) Gender Empowerment and Social Change

Rural tourism offers a platform for women to gain leadership skills, assert autonomy, and challenge restrictive social norms. **Makandwa et al. (2023)** emphasise that with proper training and entrepreneurial support, rural women transform into active agents of change, managing tourism enterprises while reinforcing their cultural roles.

Moswete and Lacey (2015) refute the notion that women lack leadership capabilities by documenting their success in Botswana's tourism projects. These women lead with cultural authority, offering immersive tourism experiences while asserting control over local narratives.

Dai and Sarkar (2019) and **Su et al. (2023)** further point out how tourism fosters self-esteem and social recognition. As women gain confidence, their roles expand from passive contributors to community leaders and decision-makers.

d) Sustainable Rural Development

Women's participation in rural tourism has broader implications for environmental and community sustainability. In Indonesia, women's involvement in festival planning and eco-tourism promotes environmental stewardship and reinforces community cohesion (**Suryawati et al., 2023**).

In Darjeeling and Kalimpong, tourism centered around homestays, handicrafts, and local performances provides sustainable livelihoods while preserving Himalayan culture (UNWTO, 2020). Women-led tourism also ensures the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge, promoting resilience and identity continuity (Gurung, 2019).

The literature shows that women's contributions span from the household to the marketplace, from craft tables to cultural forums. Their engagement enhances tourism's authenticity, creates economic opportunities, and preserves cultural diversity. These outcomes align with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) and underscore tourism's role as a transformative force when gender inclusion is at its core (UNWTO, 2020).

Table 2.4 Summary of Literature Review on Women's Participation in Rural Tourism and Cultural Preservation

Author(s)	Type (Journal/Book/Chapter)	Year of Publication	Indexing (Scopus/SCI etc.)	Main Findings or Conclusion
Makandwa et al.	Journal	2021, 2023	Scopus	Women preserve cultural traditions and crafts while

				managing tourism enterprises.
Moswete & Lacey	Journal	2015	Scopus	Women lead community tourism initiatives as guides and storytellers, promoting indigenous knowledge.
Acharya & Halpenny	Journal	2013	Scopus	Women-run homestays in Nepal integrate cultural authenticity into tourism.
Su et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Hui women in China sustain heritage and income through embroidery tourism.
Suryawati et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Women in Indonesia support eco-tourism and festivals, enhancing community sustainability.
Dai & Sarkar	Journal	2019	Scopus	Tourism fosters women's leadership, decision-making, and financial independence.
Kastenholz et al.	Journal	2018	Scopus	Women contribute to rural tourism via cultural and

				agricultural products.
Chen et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Women enhance the authenticity of rural tourism through cultural engagement.
Pratama & Mandaasari	Journal	2019	Scopus	Tourism revitalizes traditional arts and strengthens community ties.
Uduji et al.	Journal	2019	Scopus	Women lead cultural tourism in Nigeria, ensuring heritage sustainability.
Bhasin	Book Chapter	2011	NA	Women in Darjeeling preserve culture through crafts, cuisine, and homestays.
Lama	Book Chapter	2016	NA	Tourism facilitates inclusive development through women's cultural leadership.
Gurung	Journal	2019	Scopus	Tourism diversifies women's income and supports intergenerational knowledge transfer.

2.5 Literature Review: Women's and Environmental Preservation

The hospitality sector is responsible for approximately 5% of global CO₂ emissions, primarily driven by transportation, and is projected to consume 44,100 PJ of energy by 2050 if current consumption patterns persist (UNWTO, 2019). In response, renewable energy sources—such as solar, wind, and bioenergy—present sustainable alternatives for powering tourism infrastructure, including eco-lodges, food services, and recreational facilities. These clean energy solutions can significantly reduce environmental degradation, especially when deployed in rural areas (Ásványi et al., 2017; Frantál & Urbánková, 2015; Kabiraj & Singhal, 2023; Aguda, 2024; Nhamo & Mukonza, 2020). In the Indian context, rural tourism underpinned by renewable energy has shown potential in promoting inclusive development, particularly when supported by education, gender-sensitive governance, and effective policy frameworks (DasGupta & Shaw, 2015; Karagiorgas et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2021).

Transitioning rural households from biomass to clean energy has pronounced benefits for women, such as improved health, enhanced productivity, and greater empowerment (Narayan & Mishra, 2020; Tiwari & Das, 2019). Tourist preferences are also shifting—many now favor environmentally sustainable accommodations and are willing to pay a premium for renewable-powered services (Kang et al., 2012; Razzaq et al., 2020; Mondal et al., 2023). India's estimated renewable energy capacity of over 1,096 GW positions it as a potential leader in sustainable rural tourism (Barnes, 1995; Husein et al., 2021; Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2022).

Integrating renewable energy into rural tourism infrastructure—especially in accommodations and transport—can reduce emissions and promote gender equity. However, empowerment must go beyond access to technology; it should also address structural inequalities around decision-making, asset control, and income generation (Sharma & Das, 2021; Cecelski, 2001; Johnson et al., 2020; Adhikary, 2025). Inclusive governance, training, and institutional support, as emphasized by UNWTO (2019), are critical for gender mainstreaming in tourism development.

a) Renewable Energy as a Sustainable Tool for Himalayan Rural Women in West Bengal, India

In Himalayan regions like Darjeeling and Kalimpong, women face socio-economic challenges related to remoteness, cultural constraints, and poor infrastructure. However, renewable energy technologies such as solar panels and biogas digesters offer pathways for empowerment by enabling sustainable eco-tourism models—e.g., solar-powered homestays and wind-powered community centres (Nawaz et al., 2025; De, 2019; Calderón-Vargas et al., 2019; MNRE, 2022;

Global Wind Energy Council, 2024). These initiatives not only create income opportunities but also promote low-carbon tourism.

Reduced reliance on biomass improves women's health and increases time available for income-generating activities (Government of India, 2022; Rawat et al., 2024). Nonetheless, persistent gender barriers—limited decision-making roles, cultural norms, and lack of digital access—hamper women's full participation in sustainable tourism (Mrema, 2015; Shirodkar et al., 2023; Glazebrook et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2019; Khizar et al., 2023). Smart tourism tools can enhance market access, but gaps in technological literacy and infrastructure must be addressed (Eneida & Zayra, 2009; Aguda, 2024).

Women's traditional knowledge—such as in herbal medicine, cuisine, and sustainable agriculture—can support eco-tourism and environmental preservation. Their inclusion is essential to achieving SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 12 (Responsible Consumption), and 13 (Climate Action) (Dong & Khan, 2023). Comprehensive, gender-inclusive policies are crucial for unlocking the potential of renewable energy-driven tourism (Mamica, 2021).

b) Women's Role in Organic Farming and Sustainable Rural Tourism

Rural tourism in the Himalayan region promotes sustainable livelihoods, biodiversity conservation, and cultural preservation by engaging communities in eco-tourism, agricultural tourism, and adventure tourism (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Oppermann, 1996; Sharma, 2025). In this context, organic farming emerges as a key tool for environmental stewardship and women's empowerment. It enables rural communities to supplement their incomes while conserving biodiversity and ecological balance (Ramanjaneyulu et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021).

In states like Sikkim, integrating organic farming with agro-tourism has shown promising results—alleviating poverty, empowering women, and enhancing environmental sustainability (Chhetri, 2020). Women's participation in organic farming and tourism promotes financial independence and social inclusion, thereby challenging patriarchal norms (Dai & Sarkar, 2019; McGehee et al., 2007; Komariah et al., 2019). However, challenges such as low productivity, labour intensity, and limited access to markets persist (Jouzi et al., 2017; Sahu & Tiwari, 2024). Empowerment through organic farming is driven by access to education, training, land, and financial services. Structural changes and cultural shifts are necessary to dismantle persistent

patriarchal barriers (Nath & Athinuwat, 2021; Rosa & Arintyas, 2024). When aligned with the SDGs, organic farming supports gender equity, sustainable agriculture, and rural development.

c) Women's Participation in Waste Management in Rural Tourism

Women's involvement in rural waste management plays a pivotal role in promoting environmental sustainability. Empowered with training and resources, women can lead community-based initiatives that enhance waste segregation, recycling, and composting efforts (Bhardwaj et al., 2023). In the Himalayan region, this is particularly important due to increasing tourist inflow and the accompanying rise in solid waste.

In Darjeeling, for example, only 19% of waste is currently segregated at source, despite the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 (xbin.in, 2023). Initiatives like Project Hilldaari demonstrate how community collaboration—especially women's participation—can improve outcomes through education, advocacy, and behavioural change (PLAN Foundation; thecsr universe.com, 2023).

Women play an essential role in promoting environmentally responsible behaviour by educating families and managing household waste (Chand et al., 2014). Their efforts not only contribute to environmental preservation but also foster economic and social empowerment. Community-led waste collection and composting initiatives on trekking routes, for instance, have helped preserve fragile Himalayan ecosystems (Basak et al., 2021).

Table 2.5 Summary of Literature Review on Women's Participation in Rural Tourism and Environmental Preservation

Author(s)	Type (Journal/Book/Chapter)	Year of Publication	Indexing (Scopus/SCI etc.)	Main Findings or Conclusion
Ásványi et al.	Journal	2017	Scopus	Renewable energy helps reduce emissions in tourism infrastructure.
Frantál & Urbánková	Journal	2015	Scopus	Tourism infrastructure benefits from bioenergy and local renewables.

Kabiraj & Singhal	Journal	2023	Scopus	Clean energy enhances eco-tourism sustainability.
Narayan & Mishra	Journal	2020	Scopus	Transition from biomass improves women's health and productivity.
DasGupta & Shaw	Chapter	2015	Other	Inclusive policy and governance support gender equity in tourism.
Kang et al.	Journal	2012	Scopus	Tourists value renewable energy services and are willing to pay more.
Barnes	Report	1995	Other	India has strong potential for renewable energy in tourism.
Sharma & Das	Journal	2021	Scopus	Empowerment requires decision-making and income access.
De	Report	2019	Other	Renewables empower Himalayan women via eco-tourism.
Rawat et al.	Report	2024	Other	Clean energy enhances productivity and income.

Mrema	Journal	2015	Scopus	Cultural norms limit women's tourism participation.
Dong & Khan	Journal	2023	Scopus	Women's inclusion supports SDGs and eco-tourism success.
Chhetri	Journal	2020	Scopus	Organic farming in tourism alleviates poverty.
McGehee et al.	Journal	2007	Scopus	Tourism fosters women's leadership and income.
Nath & Athinuwat	Journal	2021	Scopus	Organic farming empowers through training and autonomy.
Jouzi et al.	Journal	2017	Scopus	Organic farming faces market and productivity challenges.
Malik et al.	Journal	2018	Scopus	Empowered women improve waste management systems.
Chowdhary et al.	Journal	2009	Scopus	Women play key roles in rural household waste management.

Sachs et al.	Journal	2003	Scopus	Composting by women aids rural environmental preservation.
Basak et al.	Journal	2021	Scopus	Homestay tourism integrates sustainability and gender roles.

2.6 Literature Review: Socioeconomic Empowerment

a) Women's engagement in tourism:

Rural tourism has emerged as a vital strategy for enhancing socioeconomic development in marginalised communities, particularly among women. By integrating local culture, agriculture, and natural landscapes into tourism offerings, rural tourism creates unique opportunities for income generation, social inclusion, and empowerment (Oppermann, 1996; Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000). Women's participation in rural tourism extends beyond economic gains to include enhanced decision-making power, leadership skills, and social mobility (McGehee et al., 2007; Komariah et al., 2019; Nath & Athinuwat, 2021).

In the Himalayan regions of West Bengal, such as Darjeeling and Kalimpong, rural tourism offers a transformative platform for women who traditionally face socio-economic and geographic marginalisation (De, 2019; Rawat et al., 2024). Engaging in homestay management, eco-tourism, and agritourism, women contribute actively to tourism services while also gaining financial independence. This involvement challenges entrenched patriarchal norms and opens pathways for women to participate in household and community-level decision-making (Dai & Sarkar, 2019; Sharma & Das, 2021).

Rural tourism not only improves income but also enhances access to education and healthcare through reinvested earnings and improved infrastructure. Organic farming, when integrated with tourism, plays a mediating role in this process. It supports sustainable livelihoods and empowers women by promoting ecological balance, cultural preservation, and economic diversification (Chhetri, 2020; Ramanjaneyulu et al., 2020). States like Sikkim have

demonstrated how agro-tourism can alleviate poverty and foster empowerment when women are included in both farming and tourism activities (Singh et al., 2021).

Homestay tourism offers significant opportunities for women in rural areas by fostering economic empowerment, financial independence, and community well-being (Yaja et al., 2023; Dong, 2020). Utilizing domestic skills, women can run manageable businesses that generate income and reduce rural-to-urban migration. This tourism model also enhances social capital by exposing women to diverse cultures, strengthening confidence, and preserving local heritage (Promburom, 2022; Karki et al., 2019). It promotes gender equality through leadership roles and decision-making participation (Xu et al., 2018; Sapkota, 2020), aligning with SDGs 1, 5, and 11 by supporting sustainable livelihoods and inclusive development (Pasanchay & Schott, 2020). With support from training, tourism cooperatives, and ICT tools, women have expanded their market access and resilience, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis (Janjua et al., 2021; Noorashid & Chin, 2021).

Renewable energy has further contributed to women's empowerment by reducing their dependence on biomass, thereby improving health and freeing up time for productive activities (Narayan & Mishra, 2020; Tiwari & Das, 2019). Solar-powered homestays and community energy solutions enable women to operate sustainable businesses, promoting low-carbon tourism while enhancing their roles in income generation and community leadership (MNRE, 2022; Aguda, 2024; De, 2019). India's vast renewable energy potential—over 1,096 GW—presents a significant opportunity for integrating clean energy into rural tourism infrastructure, especially in women-led ventures (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, 2022; Barnes, 1995).

b) Socioeconomic Benefits of Rural Tourism for Women:

The socioeconomic benefits of rural tourism also extend into environmental domains. Women play an active role in waste management in tourism areas, particularly in the Himalayas. Through practices such as segregation, composting, and recycling, women not only help maintain clean environments but also gain social recognition and economic opportunities (Bhardwaj et al., 2023). Initiatives like Project Hilldaari in Darjeeling show how women's participation in waste management is essential to both environmental sustainability and community well-being (PLAN Foundation, 2023).

International frameworks also support this trend. The UNWTO emphasises that gender equality in tourism is key to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5

(Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (UNWTO, 2019; United Nations, 2020). Empowering women in tourism must go beyond participation; it requires removing structural barriers and creating enabling environments through policy, education, and institutional support (Bučar et al., 2024; Moscardo & Hughes, 2018; Allen et al., 2019).

Rural tourism in India, and particularly in the Himalayan region, offers a powerful mechanism for the socioeconomic empowerment of women. When integrated with sustainable practices such as organic farming, renewable energy, and waste management, tourism fosters inclusive growth and environmental preservation. However, to fully realise its potential, structural barriers must be addressed through gender-sensitive governance, access to resources, and sustained community engagement.

Rural tourism has emerged as a vital tool for the socioeconomic empowerment of women, providing avenues for enhanced income, social mobility, and leadership within communities. **Socio-familial empowerment** is evident as rural tourism contributes significantly to improving villagers' quality of life by enhancing infrastructure, income, and cultural integration (Rawat & Khyat, 2020). The empowerment derived from tourism is multidimensional—encompassing gender, social, individual, and political domains (Lapuz, 2023)—and helps provide alternative livelihoods through community-based ecotourism (Nitanan et al., 2020). Feminist scholars argue that women's roles in ordering social life and engaging emotionally in tourism work can challenge patriarchal norms and redefine social positions in agrarian societies (Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaíno, 2021). In less-developed rural areas of developing countries, tourism offers a critical opportunity to generate employment, promote female social inclusion, and implement innovative strategies such as destination marketing (Dayour et al., 2024). According to The World Bank (2018) and the United Nations (2020), tourism is one of the most promising sectors for achieving gender equality and empowering women through equitable access to societal roles and economic resources.

From an **economic empowerment** perspective, tourism allows women to gain financial independence, thereby improving their status within families and communities (Gibson, 2009; Gentry, 2007). With tourism being a female-dominated sector, female entrepreneurship plays a key role in job creation and income generation (UNWTO, 2019; Khoo et al., 2025). Hospitality services, particularly Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), are recognised as catalysts for economic growth and poverty reduction (Ankomah & Crompton, 1990; Kimbu, 2020; Harilal et al., 2019; Olawale & Garwe, 2010; Dosumu et al., 2017; Jahanshahi et al.,

2011; Njinyah & Pendant, 2021). Tourism also enables women to rent out homes and generate income (S. et al., 2020), fostering self-confidence and a sense of financial security (Shobh, 2021; Ali et al., 2021). Moreover, women's empowerment through tourism has a positive effect on income generation and the reduction of multidimensional poverty in rural.

Psychological empowerment is another significant outcome, as tourism fosters self-esteem, leadership, and autonomy among rural women. Participation in tourism enhances women's agency by giving them control over both personal and economic decisions, which is essential for meaningful empowerment (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011; Kabeer, 1999; Khan et al., 2021). Economic benefits from tourism strengthen participatory leadership, increasing women's sense of empowerment (Ahn & Bessiere, 2022). Despite societal expectations that women leaders lack the toughness of their male counterparts, evidence shows women in tourism leadership are effective and widely recognised (UNWTO, 2019). As a result, rural tourism participants have reported improved self-confidence, new family dynamics, and leadership capacities (Handaragama & Kusakabe, 2021). The United Nations supports such developments by advocating for women's leadership at all levels of public and economic decision-making (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021).

Cultural empowerment through tourism allows women to preserve and showcase indigenous knowledge, customs, and environmental stewardship. In hilly and remote areas, tourism has become a viable non-farm livelihood that helps prevent youth outmigration and enhances community resilience (Rasul & Kollmair, 2010; Sarkar, 2019). Rural landscapes, folk traditions, and organic farming practices appeal to urban tourists seeking authenticity and tranquillity (Bhutia, 2016). In the Darjeeling Himalayas, rural and adventure tourism account for over 40% of visitors, indicating a strong demand for cultural tourism (D. et al., 2021). Tourism thus plays a pivotal role in creating culturally rooted micro-enterprises and employment opportunities, especially where mainstream employment is scarce (Spillane, 1994; Netra, 2015; Mandaasari, 2019; Alves et al., 2019; Vujko, 2021).

Finally, **political empowerment** is fostered when women gain visibility and voice through tourism entrepreneurship and governance. Tourism offers platforms for women to develop leadership skills and take on active roles in community development (Hall & Page, 2014). Through engagement in tourism cooperatives and local tourism boards, women can influence decisions related to gender equality, environmental protection, and sustainable development (Hernández et al., 2021). Such participation strengthens their political agency by providing

economic independence and integrating them into formal decision-making structures at multiple levels.

Nevertheless, systemic challenges persist. Women often face barriers such as limited market access, low agricultural yields, lack of training, and inadequate access to credit and land (Jouzi et al., 2017; Rosa & Arintyas, 2024). Addressing these issues requires targeted policy interventions that offer education, technical training, and access to finance (Altenbuchner et al., 2017; Nath & Athinuwat, 2021). Community support networks and NGO involvement have also proven critical in enabling women to transition from subsistence roles to entrepreneurial ones (Farnworth, 2009; Mamica, 2021).

c) SWOT Analysis: Women’s Empowerment Through Rural Tourism

The SWOT analysis of women's empowerment through rural tourism highlights several key dynamics. **Strengths** include economic independence, enhanced self-confidence, leadership opportunities, and the preservation of culture and traditions. However, **weaknesses** persist, such as limited access to financial resources, gender-based societal restrictions, and underrepresentation in leadership roles. **Opportunities** lie in aligning with global and national development goals (like the SDGs), leveraging renewable energy, digital tourism tools, and capacity-building initiatives. Yet, **threats** such as youth outmigration, environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and vulnerability to crises like pandemics can undermine progress. Addressing these challenges requires inclusive governance, targeted policy, and sustained investment in women-led rural tourism.

Table 2.6 Strengths and Weaknesses (internal issue)

Strengths	Weaknesses
✓ Economic Independence: Women gain income from homestays, SMEs, and tourism services (UNWTO, 2019).	✗ Limited Access to Resources: Many women lack land, capital, education, and market access (Altenbuchner et al., 2017).
✓ Multi-dimensional Empowerment: Supports socio-familial, economic, cultural, and political growth (Lapuz, 2023).	✗ Structural Gender Norms: Traditional societal roles restrict decision-making and mobility (Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaíno, 2021).

 Leadership and Self-confidence: Tourism enhances agency, autonomy, and community visibility (Kabeer, 1999).	 Unequal Representation: Women often underrepresented in tourism governance and leadership (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021).
 Cultural Preservation: Women promote local crafts, traditions, and eco-friendly practices (Bhutia, 2016; UNWTO, 2022).	 Dependence on Seasonality: Income from tourism can be unstable and affected by seasonality and crises.

Table 2.7 Opportunities and Threats (external issue)

Opportunities	Threats
 Policy and SDG Alignment: UN and government frameworks (SDGs 5, 8, 12) support gender-inclusive tourism (UNWTO, 2019; UN, 2020).	 Outmigration of Youth: Lack of local opportunities may lead to depopulation and talent drain (Sarkar, 2019).
 Digital and Smart Tourism: Technology can enhance market access and entrepreneurship (Handaragama & Kusakabe, 2021).	 Cultural Erosion and Commercialisation: Excessive tourism may dilute traditional values and exploit heritage.
 Renewable Energy Integration: Clean energy supports sustainable tourism models led by women (MNRE, 2022; De, 2019).	 Environmental Pressures: Waste and resource strain from tourism may harm local ecosystems if unmanaged.
 Training and Capacity Building: NGOs and state programs can offer skill development and financial inclusion (Mamica, 2021).	 Lack of Resilience: Tourism is vulnerable to global shocks like pandemics and climate change.

Table 2.8 Summary of Literature Review on Socioeconomic Empowerment of Women Through Rural Tourism

Author(s)	Type (Journal/Book/Chapter)	Year of Publication	Indexing (Scopus/SCI etc.)	Main Findings or Conclusion
Rawat & Khyat	Journal	2020	Scopus	Rural tourism improves the quality of life and infrastructure.
Roy et al.	Journal	2020	Scopus	Participation increases perceived benefits of tourism in rural areas.
Lapuz	Journal	2023	Scopus	Tourism leads to various forms of empowerment including social and gender.
Nitanan et al.	Journal	2020	Scopus	Community-based tourism provides alternative rural livelihoods.
Díaz-Carrión & Vizcaíno	Journal	2021	Scopus	Tourism contests social norms and empowers women in agrarian societies.
Dayour et al.	Journal	2024	Scopus	Tourism creates employment and socially integrates women.
The World Bank	Report	2018	Other	Tourism is a key driver of gender equality and empowerment.

Gibson	Journal	2009	Scopus	Tourism promotes economic independence of rural women.
Gentry	Journal	2007	Scopus	Tourism supports women's entrepreneurship and job creation.
Khoo et al.	Journal	2025	Scopus	Entrepreneurship in tourism empowers women economically.
UNWTO	Report	2019	Other	Tourism sector dominated by women, offers empowerment.
Kimbu	Journal	2020,2016	Scopus	Tourism helps reduce poverty and improve livelihoods.
S. et al.	Report	2020	Other	Tourism enables rural women to rent homes and earn.
Shobh	Journal	2021	Scopus	Empowerment leads to increased confidence and independence.
Ali et al.	Journal	2021	Scopus	Financial security is essential for women's empowerment.
Qian et al.	Journal	2023	Scopus	Women's empowerment reduces rural poverty.

Kabeer	Book Chapter	1999	Other	Empowerment includes control over life decisions.
Dai et al.	Journal	2019	Scopus	Rural tourism builds confidence and family relations.
Bhutia	Report	2016	Other	Culture and nature in tourism attract urban visitors.
Sarkar	Report	2019	Other	Youth outmigration impacts rural tourism sustainability.
Handaragama & Kusakabe	Journal	2021	Scopus	Tourism enhances women's leadership and market access.
Hall & Page	Book	2014	Other	Tourism builds financial independence and decision-making.
Azzali et al.	Journal	2018	Scopus	Participation fosters leadership and advocacy skills.
Cáceres-Feria & Hernández	Journal	2021	Scopus	Women influence tourism policy through governance.

2.7 Research Gaps

Rural tourism is increasingly recognised as a tool for inclusive development, cultural preservation, and women's empowerment, particularly in ecologically and culturally significant regions like the Himalayas. However, despite a growing body of global and national

literature, key research gaps persist in understanding the **specific nature, extent, and impact of women's engagement in rural tourism** in the Indian Himalayan context. These gaps justify the need for the present study and shape the three core objectives.

Firstly, while there is broad acknowledgement of women's involvement in rural tourism—particularly in roles such as homestay operators, craft producers, and cultural custodians—there is limited empirical research that systematically examines the **extent and nature of women's participation** in tourism activities in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. Studies often focus on success stories or aggregated national data, neglecting the **localised realities**, including social, cultural, and infrastructural constraints that influence women's engagement. So, some research questions are raised as follows:

RQ1: How does Rural Tourism Development (RTD) influence direct employment generation (DEG) in the Himalayan region of West Bengal?

RQ2: How does Rural Tourism Development (RTD) contribute to indirect employment generation (IEG) in rural tourism settings?

RQ3: To what extent does Rural Tourism Development (RTD) affect women's participation (WP) in rural tourism activities?

RQ4: How does direct employment generation (DEG) influence women's participation (WP) in rural tourism?

RQ5: What is the effect of indirect employment generation (IEG) on women's participation (WP)?

RQ6: Does direct employment generation (DEG) mediate the relationship between rural tourism development (RTD) and women's participation (WP)?

RQ7: Does indirect employment generation (IEG) mediate the relationship between rural tourism development (RTD) and women's participation (WP)?

This gap forms the **Objective 1: To examine the extent to which women engage in rural tourism in West Bengal's Himalayan area**. Understanding this is critical to designing targeted strategies for enhancing participation and inclusivity.

Secondly, although it is widely recognised that women play a significant role in preserving cultural and natural heritage through tourism, there is insufficient analysis of **how their participation influences the dual processes of cultural preservation and environmental commercialisation**. In regions like Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where local traditions, biodiversity, and tourism intersect, women's tourism-related activities may help safeguard

cultural practices while simultaneously commodifying them for economic purposes. However, the **tensions between preservation and commercialisation**, and their broader implications for sustainability, remain underexplored. So, some research questions are raised as follows:

RQ8: How does Rural Tourism Development (RTD) influence cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation (CEPC) in the Himalayan region?

RQ9: What role does women's participation (WP) play in shaping cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation?

RQ10: Does women's participation (WP) mediate the relationship between rural tourism development (RTD) and cultural and environmental preservation commercialisation (CEPC)?

This underscores **Objective 2: To examine how women's participation in rural tourism affects the preservation and commercialisation of the region's environment and culture.**

Thirdly, while tourism is known to create economic opportunities, its role in promoting **socioeconomic empowerment for rural women**, in terms of income, decision-making, mobility, and social recognition, has not been sufficiently explored in a Himalayan context. Many existing studies treat empowerment as a general outcome without unpacking the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that either enable or hinder it. Moreover, there is a dearth of research linking tourism-led empowerment to broader indicators such as poverty reduction, access to services, and changes in gender norms. So, some research questions are raised as follows:

RQ11: How does Rural Tourism Development (RTD) affect the socio-economic empowerment (SEE) of women?

RQ12: To what extent does women's participation (WP) contribute to socio-economic empowerment (SEE) in rural tourism contexts?

RQ13: Does women's participation (WP) mediate the relationship between rural tourism development (RTD) and socio-economic empowerment (SEE)?

Therefore, the third and final focus of this study is **Objective 3: To investigate the possibility of rural tourism promoting women's socioeconomic empowerment in West Bengal's Himalayan region.**

In sum, these gaps reflect the need for **context-specific, gender-sensitive, and multidimensional research** that not only captures the scale of women's involvement but also evaluates the deeper social, cultural, and economic impacts of rural tourism. The findings of

this study aim to fill these voids and provide evidence-based recommendations for promoting sustainable, equitable, and gender-inclusive rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

2.8 Justification of the Literature Review

This chapter has critically reviewed the existing literature on rural tourism and its multifaceted impacts on women's empowerment, cultural preservation, and sustainable development. The review underscores that rural tourism holds transformative potential for marginalized communities, particularly women, by creating opportunities for income generation, leadership, cultural revival, and environmental stewardship. Women's involvement in rural tourism, through homestays, cultural performances, agro-tourism, and waste management—has been linked to improvements in financial independence, decision-making authority, and community visibility.

However, the literature also highlights persistent challenges such as structural inequalities, limited access to education, digital tools, finance, and policy participation. While some global and national studies provide insight into these dynamics, there remains a significant research gap in context-specific investigations, particularly in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. The complexities of intersectionality, relating to caste, class, and geographic remoteness, have not been adequately explored in relation to tourism-based empowerment. Moreover, the dual role of women as both economic contributors and cultural custodians is under-theorised in the context of rural tourism development.

The chapter concludes that although the existing literature provides a strong foundation, it often lacks depth in analysing localised empowerment processes, institutional barriers, and the sustainability of women-led tourism ventures. These gaps form the basis for the current study's three objectives: to examine the extent of women's participation in rural tourism, to explore their role in environmental and cultural preservation and commercialisation, and to assess the socioeconomic empowerment enabled by tourism. The following chapter will outline the methodology adopted to address these objectives and fill the identified gaps through empirical investigation.

Chapter 3

Methodology of the Research

3.1 Introduction:

The present chapter outlines the research approach for designing the study. The research design aims to provide an appropriate framework for a survey. This chapter defines the research objectives and demonstrates how the planned research outcomes will be achieved in line with the study's aim. It details the research methodology and methods, including the study area's description, data sources such as primary and secondary data, considerations of the population, sample size determination, workplace site selection, data collection methods, and tools. Opinions from experts on content validity, the methods used for data analysis, and the software employed are discussed to meet the study's objectives. A mixed research approach is adopted. This chapter aims to offer a comprehensive and clear explanation of the research plan and targets established by the study.

The findings of the previous chapter (literature review) discuss that the ethnic culture, rural way of life, and verging environment are crucial components for developing rural tourism; all studies have noted that women have a greater possibility to empower themselves socioeconomically through rural tourism. Women are far more involved in maintaining these all-encompassing qualities. According to earlier studies, women play a crucial role in agrarian society and the economy. On the other hand, some existing tourism research regarding gender covers mainly the issue of employment related to gender segmentation and income inequalities.

This review notes that an increasing number of researchers from developing countries are working on community-based rural tourism, especially in Asia. Unfortunately, significant topics are dropped. Some research questions arise from the research gap.

By addressing the Research Gap, the research seeks to provide insights into the dynamics of female participation in rural tourism, its impact on environmental and cultural conservation, and its potential to foster women's socio-economic empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. So, the Research has adopted three objectives to conclude.

Research Objectives:

The methodology of this study is guided by the following three core research aims, aligned with the broader objectives of understanding the role of women in rural tourism development in the Himalayan region of West Bengal:

- **To examine the extent of women's engagement in rural tourism** in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, with a focus on understanding how women's participation influences direct and indirect employment opportunities and contributes to rural tourism development.
- **To explore the impact of women's participation in rural tourism** on the preservation and commercialisation of the region's cultural and environmental assets, including an assessment of whether women's involvement mediates the relationship between tourism development and sustainable cultural-environmental outcomes.
- **To investigate the role of rural tourism in promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women** in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, by analysing the causal pathways between women's participation, rural tourism development, and women's empowerment using structural equation modelling techniques.

3.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.2.1 Theoretical Framework

In alignment with the three research objectives, this doctoral study adopts three complementary theoretical and policy frameworks. The first objective is anchored in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), to examine how rural tourism development generates livelihood opportunities that enhance women's participation. The second objective is grounded in the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework to analyse the role of women's participation in advancing economic viability alongside cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation. Employment Theory informs the third objective to investigate how women's participation in rural tourism contributes to socio-economic empowerment through income generation, employment security, skill development, and improved decision-making capacity.

a) Livelihood-Based Explanation of Women's Engagement in Rural Tourism:

Guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), this study conceptualises women's engagement in rural tourism as a livelihood strategy shaped by access to assets, employment opportunities, and institutional support. Rural tourism development (RTD) and women's participation (WP) are closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), which are especially relevant in fragile Himalayan economies characterised by ecological vulnerability, limited livelihood diversification, and structural gender inequalities (United Nations, 2002; Chen et al., 2023). In India, rural tourism has emerged as an important development pathway by showcasing local life, culture, and heritage while simultaneously contributing to poverty reduction, cultural conservation, and women's economic inclusion.

From a livelihoods perspective, rural tourism enables income diversification beyond agriculture through farm stays, homestays, and agro-tourism initiatives. These activities generate alternative livelihood opportunities while sustaining traditional skills and indigenous knowledge systems (Savage et al., 2020), aligning with the broader development vision of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*. Organic farming, promoted under the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture, further complements tourism-linked livelihoods by strengthening smallholder resilience to climate shocks and market volatility. In India, organic agriculture operates under dual certification systems, NPOP for export markets and PGS-India for domestic trade (Government of India, 2020). However, despite these institutional frameworks, women's adoption of agricultural innovations such as index-based insurance and bundled credit remains limited due to constraints in access to land, finance, training, and decision-making authority (Timu et al., 2024). Research suggests that inclusive and gender-sensitive extension approaches are necessary to address these inequities and enhance women's participation in climate-smart livelihood strategies.

The integration of direct and indirect employment generation with rural tourism further expands livelihood opportunities by generating employment across agricultural production, food processing, handicrafts, and hospitality services (Sharma et al., 2024). Government programmes such as Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY) and Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North Eastern Region (MOVCDNER) support this integration by linking organic producers to value chains and tourism markets (Sarkar et al., 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that organic farming improves soil quality, crop resilience, and sustainable productivity while maintaining long-term livelihood viability (Dubey & Datt, 2014).

Nevertheless, organic farmland currently accounts for only about 2% of India's total agricultural area, highlighting structural and market-related barriers to wider adoption (Centre for Science and Environment, 2020). Recent scholarship emphasises the need to align tourism-led economic growth with sustainable value creation and revised environmental policy frameworks to support sustainability transitions (Trstenjak et al., 2025). Feminist perspectives on “new rurality” further highlight how livelihood diversification through tourism and organic farming contributes to the preservation of indigenous practices, youth engagement, and environmental stewardship in rural mountain regions (Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020). These perspectives resonate strongly with livelihood theory, which views empowerment not only in economic terms but also through enhanced agency, mobility, and social recognition.

Natarajan et al. (2022) reconceptualise the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework by replacing the static “vulnerability context” with a dynamic “livelihood context” and introducing three interrelated asset categories: financial and physical capital, relational power, and environmental–climate relations. This expanded framework is particularly relevant to rural tourism and organic farming systems, where women's empowerment extends beyond income generation to include access to technology, participation in decision-making, and negotiation of social norms (Boudalia et al., 2024; Sahu et al., 2024). Women's ecological knowledge and labour contributions position them as key agents of change in sustainable agriculture and tourism-linked livelihoods, reinforcing the importance of gender-sensitive policies and institutional support mechanisms. Within rural tourism systems, women's engagement occurs through both **direct and indirect livelihood pathways**. Direct participation refers to women's continuous involvement in core tourism activities such as homestay management, food services, guiding, organic food processing, and handicraft production. Studies indicate that direct participation strengthens livelihood security by facilitating skill development, market exposure, savings, and long-term asset formation, thereby enhancing women's agency and decision-making power (Banki & Ismail, 2014; Elshaer et al., 2021). Family-owned tourism enterprises, which are typically small-scale and home-based, are particularly accessible to women in patriarchal rural settings and enable the integration of household and enterprise responsibilities (Getz & Carlsen, 2005).

Indirect or seasonal participation, by contrast, involves women's intermittent engagement in tourism-related activities during peak tourist seasons, often in supportive roles such as housekeeping, food preparation, and cultural performances. While such participation contributes to household income diversification and local economic circulation through

multiplier effects (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010), its livelihood impact is often limited. Seasonal roles tend to be characterised by lower decision-making authority, irregular earnings, and restricted opportunities for skill accumulation, thereby constraining women's ability to translate participation into sustained socio-economic empowerment (Sellers et al., 2016). Empowerment and livelihood theories emphasise that the quality, continuity, and authority associated with participation are critical determinants of empowerment outcomes. Accordingly, women's participation in family-owned tourism enterprises is heterogeneous, varying in intensity, responsibility, and control (Wang et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2018). This study therefore, distinguishes between **direct** and **seasonal participation** to capture these livelihood variations and to assess how different forms of engagement influence women's participation outcomes under rural tourism development.

Overall, by situating women's engagement in rural tourism within the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and aligning it with SDGs 5, 8, and 12, Objective 1 conceptualises women's participation as both a livelihood strategy and a development outcome. This objective establishes how rural tourism development generates livelihood opportunities through employment and asset enhancement, thereby laying the foundation for subsequent analyses of sustainability and socio-economic empowerment outcomes.

b) The Triple-Win Development Model Theoretical Foundation for Exploring the Mediating Role of Women's Participation in Rural Tourism on the Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation:

This study investigates how and to what extent women's participation in tourism enterprises and community initiatives mediates the relationship between rural tourism development and the twin outcomes of cultural–natural commercialisation and preservation in the Darjeeling–Kalimpong Himalayan region of West Bengal. The theoretical foundation for this mediating mechanism is grounded in a **Stakeholder–Triple-Win Development Model alignment perspective** and an **Ecological Modernisation–Community-Based Tourism (EM–CBT) integration perspective**. The conceptual theory Tripel Bottom Line TBL standpoint, sustainable tourism outcomes emerge when stakeholders co-create value across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, treating cultural and natural assets as shared capital essential for long-term competitiveness and community well-being (Chen & Kamarudin, 2024; Ottaviani et al., 2024). While the Triple Bottom Line framework provides a multidimensional lens to evaluate sustainability outcomes, this model advances this perspective by emphasising the simultaneous realisation of economic, social, and environmental benefits within rural

tourism systems. The concept of the triple-win development model, rooted in the integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, has gained significant attention in recent years. According to the *United Nations Development Programme 2016*, triple-win approaches emphasise complementarities among development goals, promoting inclusive growth, environmental conservation, and social well-being simultaneously (UNIDO, 2023). This framework is particularly relevant for sustainable tourism initiatives, where multiple stakeholders and resource systems intersect. Recent empirical research further strengthens the applicability of the triple-win model. Benatia et al. (2026) demonstrate that integrated policy interventions can simultaneously reduce economic costs, enhance public well-being, and mitigate environmental impacts, highlighting the model's operational potential. Similarly, Sica et al. (2025) introduce a data-driven, input and output-based framework that incorporates sustainability performance indicators into resource allocation, emphasising adaptability and sectoral interdependence.

However, scholars such as Ellis and Tschakert (2019) critically argue that the conventional triple-win rhetoric often overlooks complex social realities and structural inequalities. They propose a “pathways approach” that integrates justice, rights, and recognition into sustainability planning, thereby ensuring more equitable and transformative outcomes. This perspective is crucial when designing methodological frameworks for culturally sensitive contexts, such as tribal communities. Despite these advancements, gaps remain in the bridge between theory and practice. A bibliometric analysis by Faisal et al. (2020) reveals that while many studies contribute conceptually, fewer adopt hybrid methodologies capable of addressing real-world complexities. This highlights the need for interdisciplinary and context-specific approaches. In the context, the triple-win model provides a robust methodological foundation. It enables economic empowerment through cultural tourism, the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, and the promotion of environmentally sustainable livelihood practices. Incorporating a pathways approach ensures that local women are not only beneficiaries but active participants in shaping sustainable development outcomes.

Rural tourism has emerged as an important development pathway for strengthening women's socio-economic empowerment while supporting cultural continuity and environmental sustainability in peripheral and mountain regions (Vujko et al., 2024). Through participation in homestays, craft enterprises, and heritage-based tourism, women access opportunities for entrepreneurship, livelihood diversification, and increased social agency (Ramos Farroñán et al., 2024; Vujko et al., 2024). At the same time, women's everyday involvement in cultural

transmission and local resource supervision positions them centrally in sustaining rural heritage and landscapes, reinforcing their role as cultural custodians in tourism systems (Altinay et al., 2026). However, the benefits of rural tourism remain uneven, as women's participation continues to be shaped by structural constraints, gendered institutions, and unequal access to resources (Nordbø, 2022; Park et al., 2024). Existing research consistently shows that women's empowerment in rural tourism is multidimensional, encompassing economic participation, social inclusion, leadership, and environmental responsibility (Ramos Farroñán et al., 2024). Although tourism development can promote market opportunities for local culture and nature, it can also intensify cultural commodification and ecological degradation if inclusive governance mechanisms are absent (Adom et al., 2025; Grillos, 2018). This body of literature suggests that women's participation should be understood not merely as an outcome of tourism development, but as a critical mechanism shaping how tourism transforms cultural and natural resources into economic and social value (Elshaer et al., 2021).

Research on sustainable destination development emphasises that tourism benefits are maximised when economic gains are balanced with socio-cultural and environmental sustainability, including the safeguarding of heritage resources and local traditions (Maheshwari & Singh, 2025). Evidence from women-managed homestays and community initiatives suggests that tourism can become a platform for preserving indigenous architecture, rituals, and oral traditions, strengthening cultural identity and continuity (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Dong, 2020). Likewise, women entrepreneurs often leverage local skills such as craftwork and embroidery to develop tourism ventures that simultaneously celebrate and commercialise heritage (Su et al., 2025). At the same time, the tourism–environment interface underscores that cultural preservation outcomes depend on how tourism is governed, the values embedded in products, and the sustainability principles guiding development (Menegaki, 2025). In the Himalayan context, women's engagement in homestays can be understood as a form of “living heritage” practice, where foodways, craft traditions, and folklore are actively displayed and transmitted through tourism encounters, supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer (Pai et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that women's participation can transform rural tourism into a mechanism for cultural continuity and community resilience (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Dong, 2020; Pai et al., 2025).

Environmental preservation represents another critical dimension of women's engagement in rural tourism, particularly in mountain ecosystems where livelihood strategies are closely linked to ecological integrity. Women's participation can enhance ecological sustainability

when tourism enterprises integrate organic farming, renewable energy, eco-technologies, and biodiversity-based homestay practices (Deka & Goswami, 2025). Eco-technological training and digital inclusion also support women's participation in climate adaptation and sustainable enterprise management (Deka & Goswami, 2025). In addition, tourism-driven land-use transitions have been shown to influence livelihood resilience through infrastructure investments and cultural land development, although benefits may vary across contexts and exhibit diminishing returns (Liu et al., 2025). Despite these opportunities, structural barriers, such as limited land rights, gendered labour burdens, and restricted market access, continue to constrain women's full participation in environmental governance (Altenbuchner et al., 2017; Holmelin, 2019). Nonetheless, evidence suggests that women's access to education, financial capital, and networks strengthens resilience to climate vulnerability and supports women's leadership in environmental management (Altenbuchner et al., 2017; Holmelin, 2019).

A defining challenge in sustainable rural tourism is balancing the commercialisation of cultural and natural resources with their long-term preservation. Women's involvement often mediates this balance by embedding heritage values and environmentally responsible practices into tourism products, reducing the risk of exploitation and degradation (Cole, 2017; Makandwa et al., 2021). Through storytelling, local cuisine, craft production, and eco-friendly operations, women can convert cultural identity and environmental resources into valuable yet sustainable tourism assets (Makandwa et al., 2021). In the Himalayan context, hybrid models linking organic agro-tourism with homestay systems illustrate how women can transform traditional livelihoods into marketable and environmentally responsible ventures (Chhetri, 2024). The literature further suggests that empowerment outcomes intensify when women organise collectively and gain voice within tourism value chains and community governance structures (Chen & Kamarudin, 2024; Mishra & Gupta, 2024). Accordingly, rural tourism can evolve into a synergistic development model, harmonising economic value creation with cultural continuity and environmental management—when women have equitable access to education, resources, and decision-making power (Chen & Kamarudin, 2024; Mishra & Gupta, 2024).

Empirical work from Himalayan and Indian contexts further indicates that inclusive tourism models can emerge from biodiversity-linked livelihoods, homestay enterprises, and traditional lifeways (Chhetri, 2024). Women's involvement in tourism enterprises and heritage-related decision-making strengthens social inclusion and cultural identity, helping ensure that commercialisation aligns with integrity and authenticity rather than extractive use (Zavaleta Cheek & Corbett, 2024).

At the same time, the EM–CBT perspective emphasises that local authority, community participation, and eco-innovation can reinforce environmental preservation, with women’s participation serving as an institutional bridge linking community norms to conservation practices (Rangkuti et al., 2025). As a participatory system, rural tourism can enable economic gains to be reinvested into cultural conservation and environmental protection when women are recognised as active stakeholders and co-producers of sustainability outcomes (World Tourism Organisation & United Nations Development Programme (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). This alignment supports key Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 11 (Sustainable Communities), and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). By empirically examining this mediating role in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, the study responds to calls for integrative models connecting tourism, gender empowerment, and conservation, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how inclusive participation can balance livelihood enhancement with cultural continuity and environmental management in line with sustainable development objectives promoted by UN Tourism (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017).

c) The Empowerment Theory Exploring the Mediating Role of Women’s Participation in Rural Tourism to Promote the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women:

Tourism has long been recognised as a driver of rural development and gender inclusion, offering women pathways to entrepreneurship, financial independence, and social recognition (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021; Dong & Khan, 2023). Evidence from eco-tourism contexts indicates that nature-based tourism can generate socio-economic benefits for women through employment opportunities, income creation, and improved local infrastructure (Abou-Shouk et al., 2021). In rural settings, women frequently serve as entrepreneurs, hosts, and cultural mediators who transform local resources into tourism products that strengthen livelihoods and resilience. Research further suggests that when supported by community media centres and gender-sensitive outreach, digital inclusion can catalyse inclusive rural development and sustained empowerment (Makandwa et al., 2023). Across diverse contexts, women’s involvement in rural tourism enhances leadership, decision-making, and collective empowerment, contributing to women’s social status and participation in community governance (Elshaer et al., 2021; Fathizadeh et al., 2022). Women play a crucial role in the tourism industry, especially in rural regions. Their entrepreneurial efforts in tourism help preserve culture, generate income, and strengthen community resilience (Alves & Campon-Cerro, 2019; Su et al., 2023). As cultural custodians- protecting crafts, cuisine, and traditional

knowledge, they enhance the attractiveness of rural destinations and support sustainable resource management (Charlesworth et al., 2011; Gajić & Vukolić, 2021). In the Himalayan villages of India, women-run homestays and eco-tourism initiatives have become essential for household income and community tourism development. Arcese et al. (2021) highlight that family businesses in tourism often focus on community wellbeing and cultural preservation rather than financial success. They also point out that these enterprises tend to have low innovation levels, a situation similarly observed by Bujan (2020) in her research on Croatian family hotels. In her study, challenges like parafiscal burdens such as ZAMP, limited financing options, and low access to education hinder their long-term sustainability.

In the Western Himalayan context, rural tourism, particularly homestay-based models, has been described as a key site of gendered development among ethnic communities (Deshmukh, 2025). Such homestays often function as both income-generating enterprises and socio-cultural institutions that can strengthen women's voices within patriarchal household structures (Basak & Chowdhury, 2023). At the same time, gender gaps remain visible in tourism labour markets; for example, bibliometric evidence from the MENA region highlights continuing gender disparities in women's representation and access within tourism employment and scholarship (Kabil et al., 2024). Overall, prior studies indicate that women's participation in tourism can build confidence, expand social capital, and improve access to education, networks, and microcredit, key determinants of empowerment outcomes (Dong & Khan, 2023; Elshaer et al., 2021). At the micro level, empowerment is reflected in greater control over financial resources and enhanced self-esteem, while at the macro level it contributes to inclusive governance and community development (Dong & Khan, 2023; Fathizadeh et al., 2022).

Empowerment theory conceptualises empowerment as a process through which individuals gain access to resources, agency, and decision-making power, enabling them to improve their socio-economic position. A central argument of the theory is that economic participation alone does not automatically result in empowerment unless it leads to changes in power relations within households and productive systems (Yudhistira et al., 2025). Women's involvement in family businesses enhances their economic independence, decision-making power, and social recognition, positioning family enterprises as important sites of women's empowerment rather than merely supportive or auxiliary roles (Bağış et al., 2023). From an empowerment perspective, although RTD creates opportunities for women's participation, the extent to which these opportunities translate into women's socio-economic empowerment depends on the nature of their involvement and the degree to which it enhances their control over resources

and decision-making within family tourism enterprises. This participation enhances women's access to income, skills, and social recognition, thereby contributing to their economic and social empowerment within households and communities (Cesaroni & Sentuti, 2014; Yoopetch, 2020). Additionally, tourism strengthens social capital, community cohesion, and collective identity by fostering cooperation, cultural pride, and local institutional engagement (Gibson, 2009; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Research on women's livelihood strategies indicates that seasonal participation primarily addresses short-term economic needs rather than long-term agency and autonomy (Hendratmi et al., 2024). As a result, seasonal participation is expected to function as a weaker mediating mechanism between RTD and SEE. Grounded in empowerment theory, the study proceeds to investigate how RTD may lead to uneven empowerment outcomes among women in rural tourism contexts.

3.2.2 Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Formulation:

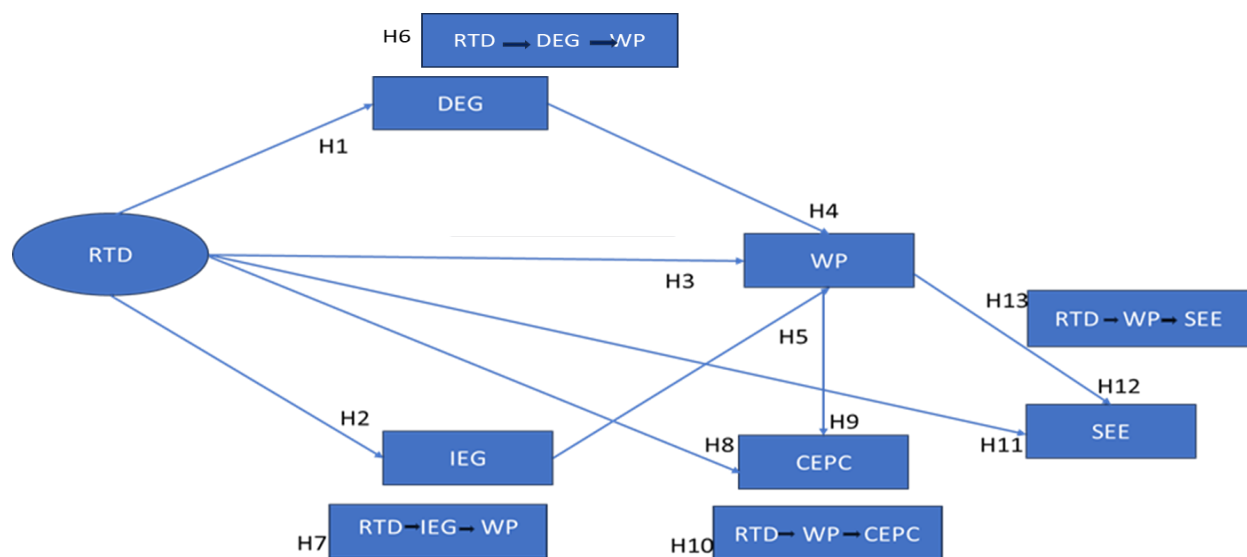


Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework with Hypothesis

a) Illustration of the Conceptual Model:

The conceptual model presented in Figure 3.1 illustrates the step-wise relationships among rural tourism development, employment generation, women's participation, and empowerment-related outcomes. The model has been developed in alignment with the study objectives and reflects a sequential analytical framework to examine both the formation of women's participation and its subsequent impacts.

In the first stage, the model explains how Rural Tourism Development (RTD) contributes to women's participation (WP) through employment creation. RTD is hypothesised to generate Direct Employment Generation (DEG) and Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), which represent primary economic mechanisms through which tourism influences local livelihoods. DEG includes direct tourism-related jobs such as homestay operations, guiding services, handicraft production, and hospitality services, whereas IEG refers to secondary and support activities such as agriculture, food supply, transport, and allied services. Both DEG and IEG are hypothesised to have a positive effect on women's participation, thereby functioning as mediating variables in the relationship between RTD and WP. In addition, a direct relationship between RTD and WP is proposed to capture the overall influence of tourism development on women's involvement in economic and social activities.

In the second stage, the model positions women's participation as a key mediating mechanism linking rural tourism development with Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC). It is proposed that while RTD may directly influence cultural and environmental outcomes, women's active participation strengthens the preservation and sustainable commercialisation of local culture, traditions, and natural resources. This stage highlights the role of women as custodians of indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, and environmentally responsible tourism activities.

In the third stage, the model examines the relationship between rural tourism development and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE), with women's participation acting as a mediator. Socio-economic empowerment is conceptualised in terms of enhanced income control, decision-making power, social recognition, and improved livelihood security. The model hypothesises that RTD contributes to SEE both directly and indirectly by enabling greater participation of women in tourism-related economic and social processes.

Although the conceptual framework is presented as an integrated model, the empirical analysis is conducted in a step-wise manner corresponding to the study objectives. The first stage establishes the economic pathways through which women's participation emerges, while the second and third stages assess the mediating role of women's participation in achieving cultural–environmental sustainability and socio-economic empowerment. This structured approach ensures analytical clarity and avoids model over-complexity while providing a comprehensive understanding of women's empowerment through rural tourism development.

b)Hypothesis formulation: The study developed fifteen hypotheses based on the conceptual and theoretical framework to identify the areas that should be focused on to achieve the

research objectives. These hypotheses will facilitate the observation and experiment, serve as the starting point of the investigation, and verify the observations. However, they also help provide a link to the underlying theory and concept.

Objective 1: To examine the extent of women's engagement in rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, the following proposed hypotheses are formulated.

H1: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Direct Employment Generation (DEG).

H2: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Indirect Employment Generation (IEG).

H3: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Women's Participation (WP).

H4: Direct Employment Generation (DEG) has **increased** Women's Participation (WP).

H5: Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) has **increased** Women's Participation (WP).

H6: Direct Employment Generation (DEG) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Women's Participation (WP).

H7: Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Women's Participation (WP).

Objective 2: To explore the impact of women's participation in rural tourism on the preservation and commercialisation of the region's cultural and environmental assets, the following proposed hypotheses are formulated.

H8: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC).

H9: Women's Participation (WP) has a **positive effect** on Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC).

H10: Women's Participation (WP) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC).

Objective 3: To investigate the role of rural tourism in promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women, the following proposed hypotheses are formulated.

H11: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE).

H12: Women's Participation (WP) has a **positive effect** on Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE).

H13: Women's Participation (WP) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE).

3.3 Methodology:

3.3.1 Study Area:

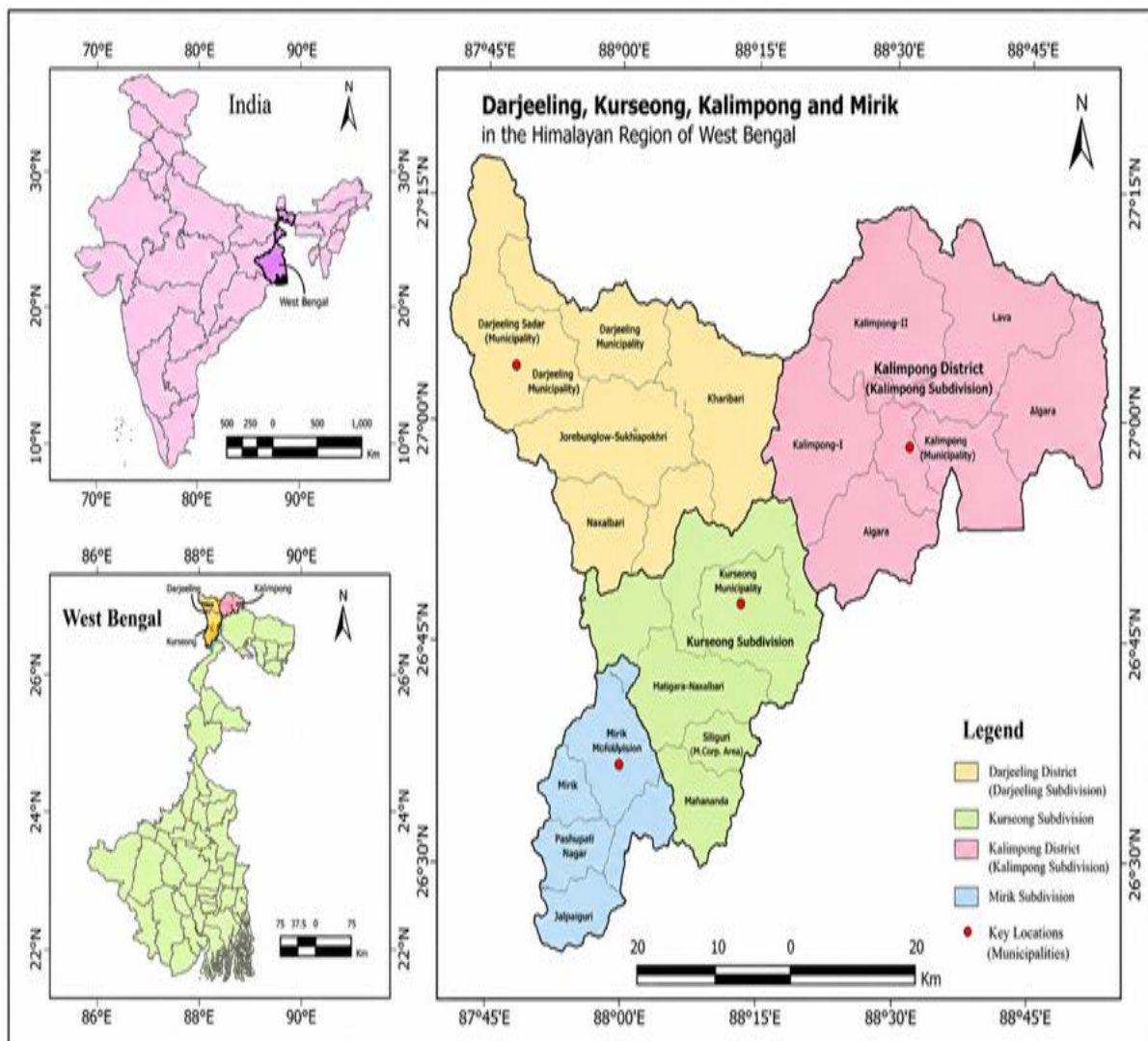


Figure 3.2: Four subdivisions of West Bengal's Himalayan Region (Source: Author)

surveyed during the primary data collection include areas such as Happy Valley, Bara Mangwa, Makaibari, Singalila, Lamahatta, Pedong, Ramdhura, Lepchajagat, Sillery Gaon, and Peshok. These villages were selected because rural tourism activities have become an important source of livelihood generation and women's participation in the local economy. The region has a unique socio-economic structure where tourism is closely linked with agriculture, tea plantations, folk cultural products, homestays, forest-based activities, and indigenous cultural practices. Women in these rural Himalayan communities actively participate in tourism-related occupations such as homestay management, food preparation, handicraft production, guiding services, organic farming, and the sale of local products. Therefore, the Himalayan region of West Bengal provides an appropriate setting to examine the relationship between rural tourism development and women's socio-economic empowerment.

The study area was purposively selected due to its increasing tourism potential, ecological significance, and the expanding role of community-based tourism initiatives. In recent years, the growth of eco-tourism, tea tourism, and village tourism has created new employment opportunities for rural households, particularly for women. At the same time, the region faces challenges related to environmental conservation, infrastructural limitations, seasonal employment, and socio-economic inequalities. These characteristics make the area highly relevant for investigating the economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of rural tourism. Primary data for the study were collected through field surveys conducted across different tourism villages and rural settlements in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. The survey focused on women respondents engaged directly or indirectly in tourism-related activities. The geographical distribution of the study area and tourism villages is presented in the study area maps.

3.3.2 Data Sampling

a) Sampling Technique: To ensure regional representativeness, a cluster sampling technique was adopted, focusing on four key rural tourism-active subdivisions in the Himalayan region of West Bengal: Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, and Mirik. These clusters were chosen based on their prominence in tourism activity and the presence of women-led or women-participatory tourism enterprises. Within each cluster, stratified random sampling was employed to capture diverse categories of tourism-related engagement. A total of 550 samples have been collected, and 400 samples are incorporated for the study. The data are cross-sectional and appropriate for both descriptive and structural equation modelling (SEM).

Table 3.1 Cluster-wise Sample Distribution (Total Sample = 400)

Subdivision (Cluster)	Rural Female Population	Ratio of Sample (%)	Sample
Darjeeling	52,072	35	140
Kalimpong	33,483	23	92
Kurseong	39,989	27	108
Mirik	22,980	15	60
Total	148,524	100	400

b) Sample Size Justification: To determine the sample size needed for a population of 551,895 using a Sample Size Calculator (<https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.htm>) typically needs to consider several factors such as:

In statistics, information is often inferred about a population by studying a finite number of individuals from that population, i.e. the population is sampled, and it is assumed that characteristics of the sample are representative of the overall population. For the following, it is assumed that there is a population of individuals where some proportion, $\mathbf{p}$, of the population, is distinguishable from the other $\mathbf{1-p}$ in some way; e.g., $\mathbf{p}$ may be the proportion of individuals who have brown hair, while the remaining $\mathbf{1-p}$ have black, blond, red, etc. Thus, to estimate $\mathbf{p}$ in the population, a sample of $\mathbf{n}$ individuals could be taken from the population, and the sample proportion, $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$, could be calculated for sampled individuals with brown hair. Unfortunately, unless the total population is sampled, the estimate $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ most likely will not equal the true value $\mathbf{p}$ since $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ suffers from sampling noise, i.e. it depends on the particular individuals that were sampled. However, sampling statistics can be used to calculate confidence intervals, which indicate how close the estimate $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ is to the actual value $\mathbf{p}$.

c) Statistics of a Random Sample: The uncertainty in a given random sample (namely, that it is expected that the proportion estimate, $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$, is a good, but not perfect, approximation for the true proportion $\mathbf{p}$) can be summarised by saying that the estimate $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ is usually distributed with

mean $\mathbf{p}$ and variance $\mathbf{p(1-p)/n}$. To explain why the sample estimate is usually distributed, study the Central Limit Theorem. As defined below, confidence level, confidence intervals, and sample sizes are all calculated concerning this sampling distribution. In short, the confidence interval gives an interval around $\mathbf{p}$ in which an estimate $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ is "likely" to be. The confidence level gives just how "likely" this is – e.g., a 95% confidence level indicates that it is expected that an estimate $\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ lies in the confidence interval for 95% of the random samples that could be taken. The confidence interval depends on the sample size, $\mathbf{n}$ (the variance of the sample distribution is inversely proportional to $\mathbf{n}$, meaning that the estimate gets closer to the proper proportion as $\mathbf{n}$ increases); thus, an acceptable error rate in the estimate can also be set, called the margin of error, $\boldsymbol{\varepsilon}$, and solved for the sample size required for the chosen confidence interval to be smaller than $\mathbf{e}$; a calculation known as "sample size calculation."

The sample size is a statistical concept that involves determining the number of observations or replicates (the repetition of an experimental condition used to estimate the variability of a phenomenon) that should be included in a statistical sample. It is an essential aspect of any empirical study, requiring that inferences be made about a population based on a sample. Essentially, sample sizes are used to represent parts of a population chosen for any given survey or experiment. To carry out this calculation, set the margin of error, $\boldsymbol{\varepsilon}$, or the maximum distance desired for the sample estimate to deviate from the actual value. To do this, use the confidence interval equation above, but set the term to the right of the $\pm$ sign equal to the margin of error, and solve for the resulting equation for sample size, $\mathbf{n}$. The equation for calculating sample size is shown below.

$$\text{Unlimited population: } n = \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\varepsilon^2}$$

$$\text{Finite population: } n' = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\varepsilon^2 N}}$$

where

$\mathbf{z}$ is the $\mathbf{z}$ score

$\boldsymbol{\varepsilon}$ is the margin of error

$\mathbf{N}$ is the population size.

$\hat{\mathbf{p}}$ is the population proportion

EX: Determine the sample size necessary to estimate the proportion of women participating at rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal who identify as socio-economically empowered with 95% confidence and a margin of error of 5%. Assume a population proportion of 0.5 and an unlimited population size. Remember that **z** for a 95% confidence level is 1.96. Refer to the table in the confidence level section for **z-scores** of a range of confidence levels.

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\epsilon^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^2} = 384.16$$

(<https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.htm>)

The ever-increasing need for a representative statistical sample in empirical research has created the demand for an effective method of determining sample size. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) developed a table for determining the sample size for a given population to address the existing gap for easy reference.

Table 3.2: Table for Determining Sample Size for a Finite Population

<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>
10	10	220	140	1200	291
15	14	230	144	1300	297
20	19	240	148	1400	302
25	24	250	152	1500	306
30	28	260	155	1600	310
35	32	270	159	1700	313
40	36	280	162	1800	317
45	40	290	165	1900	320
50	44	300	169	2000	322
55	48	320	175	2200	327
60	52	340	181	2400	331
65	56	360	186	2600	335
70	59	380	191	2800	338
75	63	400	196	3000	341
80	66	420	201	3500	346
85	70	440	205	4000	351
90	73	460	210	4500	354
95	76	480	214	5000	357
100	80	500	217	6000	361
110	86	550	226	7000	364
120	92	600	234	8000	367
130	97	650	242	9000	368
140	103	700	248	10000	370
150	108	750	254	15000	375
160	113	800	260	20000	377
170	118	850	265	30000	379
180	123	900	269	40000	380
190	127	950	274	50000	381
200	132	1000	278	75000	382
210	136	1100	285	100000	384

Note. — *N* is population size. *S* is sample size.

Source: Krejcie & Morgan, 1970

(<https://www.kenpro.org/sample-size-determination-using-krejcie-and-morgan-table>)

The region has 551,895 women. So, as per the Krejci and Mongan theory and the Data Sampling Calculator, the sample size was detected as 384 for this study. Three hundred eighty-four samples were collected from the registered women voters of tourist villages and their surrounding villages. While the total sample size of 384 may seem small for quantitative research, it can be sufficient for this specific study design.

d) Instrument Development for Data Collection: This study adopts a **quantitative research design** with a **cross-sectional survey method** to investigate the role of women in rural tourism and its impacts on employment, empowerment, and sustainable development in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. The research aims to empirically test relationships between variables using statistical tools, focusing on direct and indirect employment, cultural and environmental preservation, and socio-economic empowerment. Primary data were collected using a **structured, closed-ended questionnaire** designed to capture perceptions and experiences related to women's participation in rural tourism. The questionnaire consisted of multiple sections, each representing a construct in the study (e.g., Women's Participation, Rural Tourism Development, Employment, Empowerment, etc.), with items measured on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Trained field investigators conducted face-to-face interviews to ensure clarity and completeness of responses.

The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive literature review and expert consultation. To ensure **content validity**, the initial draft was reviewed by academic professionals and practitioners in rural tourism. A pilot study was conducted with 60 respondents, and necessary modifications were made to improve clarity and reliability. **Cronbach's alpha** values for each construct exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, confirming internal consistency.

3.3.3 Data Analysis Techniques:

To empirically examine the proposed objectives and hypotheses, a systematic and multi-stage data analysis procedure was adopted. The analysis was conducted using **Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM)**, which is particularly suitable for theory development, complex causal models, mediation analysis, and non-normal data distributions commonly observed in social science and tourism research (Hair et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2022). The analytical process comprised four major stages: (i) socio-demographic profiling of respondents, (ii) assessment of reliability and construct validity, (iii) evaluation of discriminant validity and common method bias, and (iv) structural model and hypothesis testing.

a) Socio-Demographic Insights

Descriptive statistical analysis was first employed to examine the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Variables such as age, marital status, education level, household size, income category, tourism engagement type, and duration of involvement in rural tourism activities were analysed using frequency distributions and percentages. This profiling provided contextual understanding of the sample composition and ensured alignment with the study's focus on women's participation and rural tourism development. Such socio-demographic insights also supported the interpretation of empowerment, economic gains, and sustainability outcomes within the rural Himalayan context.

b) Reliability and Construct Validity Assessment

To ensure the robustness of the measurement model, internal consistency reliability and convergent validity were assessed using established PLS-SEM criteria (Hair et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2022).

Indicator Reliability and Factor Loadings: Indicator reliability was evaluated through standardised factor loadings. Loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 were considered satisfactory, indicating that the observed indicators adequately represented their respective latent constructs.

Internal Consistency Reliability: Two measures of internal consistency reliability were employed:

- i) **Cronbach's Alpha (α), and**
- ii) **Composite Reliability (CR).**

Values above 0.70 for both statistics indicated an acceptable to high reliability of the constructs, consistent with PLS-SEM guidelines.

Convergent Validity: Convergent validity was assessed using the **Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**. An AVE value of 0.50 or higher confirmed that each construct explained more than half of the variance of its indicators, thereby establishing adequate convergent validity.

Multicollinearity Assessment: To detect potential multicollinearity issues among constructs, the **Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)** values were examined. VIF values below the threshold of 3.3 indicated the absence of critical multicollinearity and also served as a diagnostic for common method bias following the full collinearity approach proposed by Kock (2015).

c) Discriminant Validity Assessment

Discriminant validity was assessed using two complementary approaches to ensure conceptual distinctiveness among the latent constructs.

- i) **Fornell–Larcker Criterion:** Following the **Fornell–Larcker criterion** (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), discriminant validity was confirmed when the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its highest correlation with any other construct in the model. This indicated that constructs shared more variance with their own indicators than with other constructs.
- ii) **Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT):** Additionally, the **Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations** was examined as a more stringent assessment of discriminant validity. HTMT values below 0.85 indicated satisfactory discriminant validity, confirming that the constructs were empirically distinct (Henseler et al., 2022).

d) Model and Hypotheses Analysis (Structural Model)

After establishing the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to test the proposed hypotheses and mediation relationships. Following the establishment of measurement model adequacy, the structural model was assessed to test the proposed hypotheses and mediation relationships in alignment with the study's three research objectives. The evaluation of the structural model was grounded in an integrated theoretical and policy framework that combines the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework**, the **Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach**, and **Employment Theory**, alongside Women empowerment perspectives within rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

i) **Path Coefficients and Significance Testing:** Structural relationships among Rural Tourism Development (RTD), Direct Employment Generation (DEG), Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), Women's Participation (WP), Cultural and Environmental Preservation Commercialisation (CEPC), and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE) were examined using standardised path coefficients (β). Statistical significance was assessed through a bootstrapping procedure with resampling, as recommended by Hair et al. (2021).

ii) **Coefficient of Determination (R^2):** The explanatory power of the model was evaluated using **R^2 values**, indicating the proportion of variance explained in the endogenous constructs. Higher R^2 values reflected stronger predictive capability of the model in explaining women's participation, empowerment, and sustainability outcomes.

iii)Mediation Analysis: Mediation effects were tested to examine whether DEG and IEG mediated the relationship between RTD and WP, and whether WP mediated the relationships between RTD and CEPC, and RTD and SEE. The significance of indirect effects was assessed using bootstrapped confidence intervals, consistent with PLS-SEM mediation analysis guidelines.

iv)Effect Size Assessment: The magnitude of the structural relationships was further evaluated using **effect size (f^2)** measures. Effect sizes were interpreted using the guidelines proposed by Gignac and Szodorai (2016), allowing classification of effects as small, medium, or large, thereby strengthening the substantive interpretation of the results.

v)Common Method Bias Assessment: To address potential common method bias, the **full collinearity assessment approach** proposed by Kock (2015) was employed. The absence of VIF values exceeding the recommended threshold confirmed that common method variance was unlikely to bias the estimated relationships.

3.4 Conclusion:

This comprehensive data analysis framework ensured methodological rigour by integrating descriptive statistics, reliability and validity assessments, discriminant validity testing, and theory-driven structural model evaluation. The use of PLS-SEM enabled robust examination of complex mediation mechanisms linking rural tourism development, women's participation, socio-economic empowerment, and sustainability outcomes, thereby aligning the empirical analysis with the study's theoretical foundations. Overall, the methodological framework employed in this study is well-aligned with its research objectives and theoretical underpinnings. By combining traditional statistical techniques with advanced modelling approaches, the study captures the multifaceted nature of women's engagement in rural tourism. The next chapter presents the empirical results derived from the analysis, offering insights into the roles, challenges, and transformative impacts of women's participation in tourism-led rural development.

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL DATA

4.1 Introduction

This study aims to evaluate the conceptual model illustrating the interconnected relationships between Women Participation (WP), Rural Tourism Development (RTD), and the resulting socio-economic, cultural, and environmental outcomes in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. The model is structured around three main areas of investigation. First, it examines the extent of women's involvement in rural tourism and how such participation directly influences Direct Employment Generation (DEG) and Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) opportunities, as well as how DEG and IEG directly affect Women's Empowerment; also, DEG and IEG both mediate between the RTD and WP. Second, it considers the mediating role of WP in linking RTD to Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC), suggesting that increased inclusion of women in tourism activities may help sustain local culture and the environment. Third, the model explores whether WP and RTD contribute to Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE), with RTD acting as a mediating factor. The arrows in the model depict the hypothesised causal relationships examined through structural equation modelling (SEM). Green arrows represent paths originating from **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)**, while red arrows indicate the direct effects of **Women's Participation (WP)** on key outcome variables.

Overall, the model proposes step by step that **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)** influences **Women's Participation (WP)** through the mediating roles of **Direct Employment Generation (DEG)** and **Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)**. RTD creates employment opportunities within the rural tourism system, which, in turn, facilitates women's participation in tourism-related activities. The model further posits that **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)** and **Women's Participation (WP)** both exert **direct effects** on **Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC)**; in addition to these direct relationships, **Women's Participation (WP)** functions as a **mediating variable** between **RTD** and **CEPC**. Finally, the research concludes that **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)** and **Women's Participation (WP)** both exert **direct effects** on **Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE)**, and **Women's Participation (WP)** plays a **mediating role** in the **relationship between RTD and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE)**.

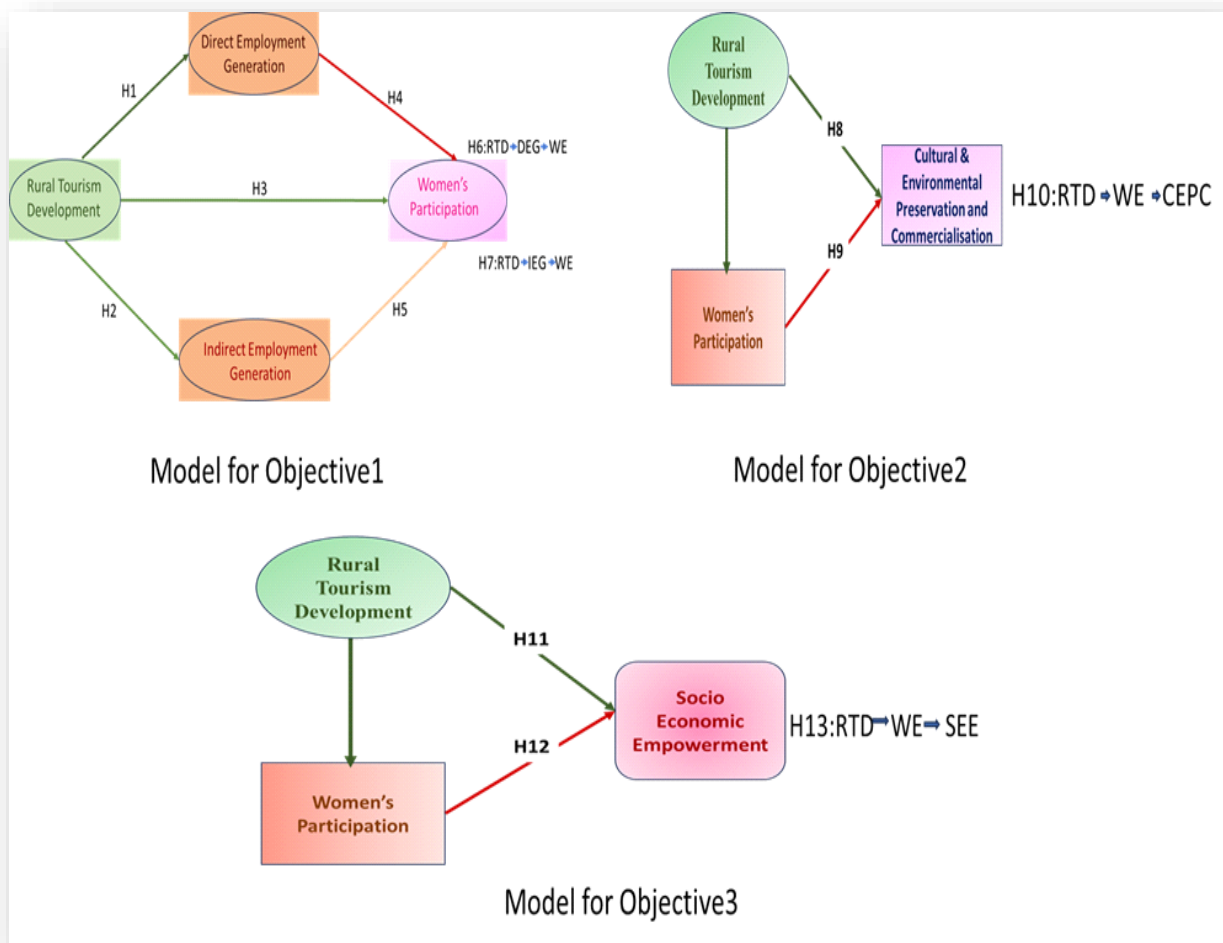


Figure 4.1: Conceptual Model

To achieve the objectives, the analysis is organised into the following four different sections:

- e) Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics
- f) Impact of women's participation on direct employment Generation (DEG), indirect employment generation (IEG), rural tourism development (RTD) and significant difference in the rural tourism development of women's participation in the three different groups of direct and indirect employment.
- g) Impact of rural tourism development on women's participation, cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation, as well as the impact of women's participation on cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation and the role of women's participation as a mediate in the relationship between rural tourism development and cultural and environmental preservation and commercialisation.
- h) Impact of women's participation on rural tourism development, and socio-economic empowerment, as well as the impact of rural tourism development on socio-economic

empowerment and the role of Rural tourism development as a mediator in the relationship between women's participation and socio-economic empowerment

4.2 Sample Characteristics (Respondents' Profile) and Descriptive Statistics:

This empirical study is predominantly based on primary data gathered through a survey of 400 women respondents from selected Himalayan villages in West Bengal's Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, India. This section presents various demographic and geographic characteristics of the sample, viz, age. The Respondents' profile is presented below:

a) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Age

Table 4.1:

Age (in years)	No. of Women Respondents	%
20-25	74	18.5
25-30	106	26.5
35-40	141	35.3
40-45	59	14.8
45 above	20	5.0
Total	400	100.0

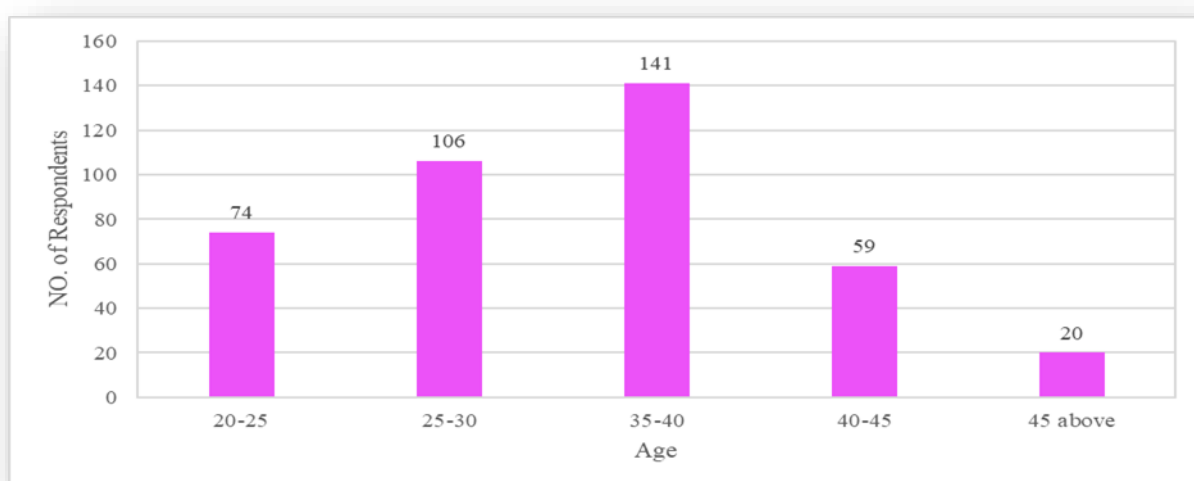


Figure 4.2:

Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1 describe the age-wise distribution of the sample respondents. Out of the total 400 respondents surveyed, the majority 141 (35.3%) belong to 35 to 40 age group. 106 (26.5%) women respondents belong to 25 to 30 years age group, 74 (18.5%) belongs to 20 to 25, 59 (14.8%) belongs to 40 to 45, and only 20 (5%) women respondents belong to above 45 years age group. A large part of the sample respondents is in the age of 25 to 40 years.

b) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Marital Status

Table 4.2:

Marital Status	No. of Respondents	%
Married	323	80.8
Unmarried	77	19.3
Total	400	100.0

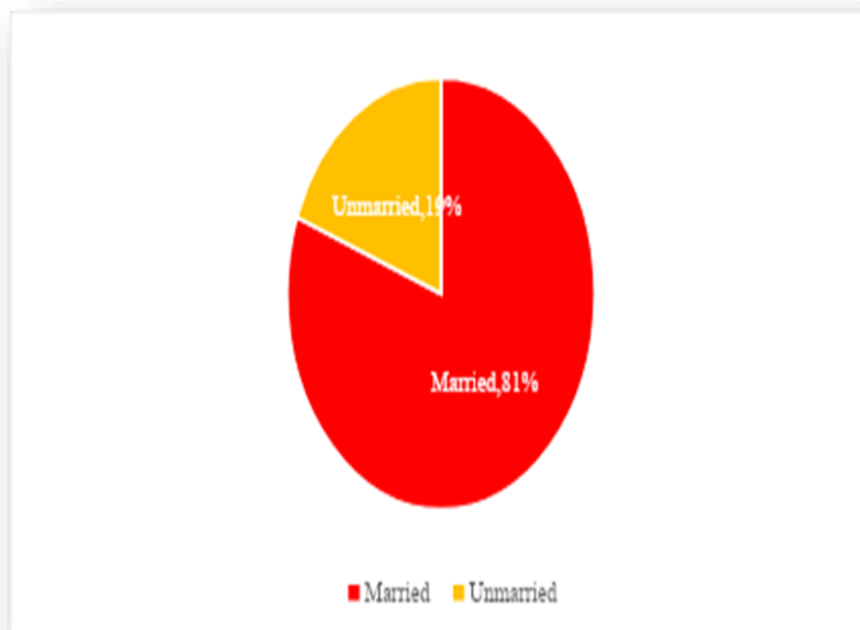


Figure 4.3:

Table 4.2 and Figure 4.2 describe the distribution of the sample respondents according to their marital status. Out of the total 400 respondents surveyed, 323 (80.8%) women are married and 77 (19.2%) are unmarried.

c) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Education

Table 4.3:

Education	No. of Respondents	%
Secondary	126	31.5
Higher Secondary	124	31.0
Graduate	59	14.8
Vocationally Trained	30	7.5
Less than Secondary	61	15.3
Total	400	100.0

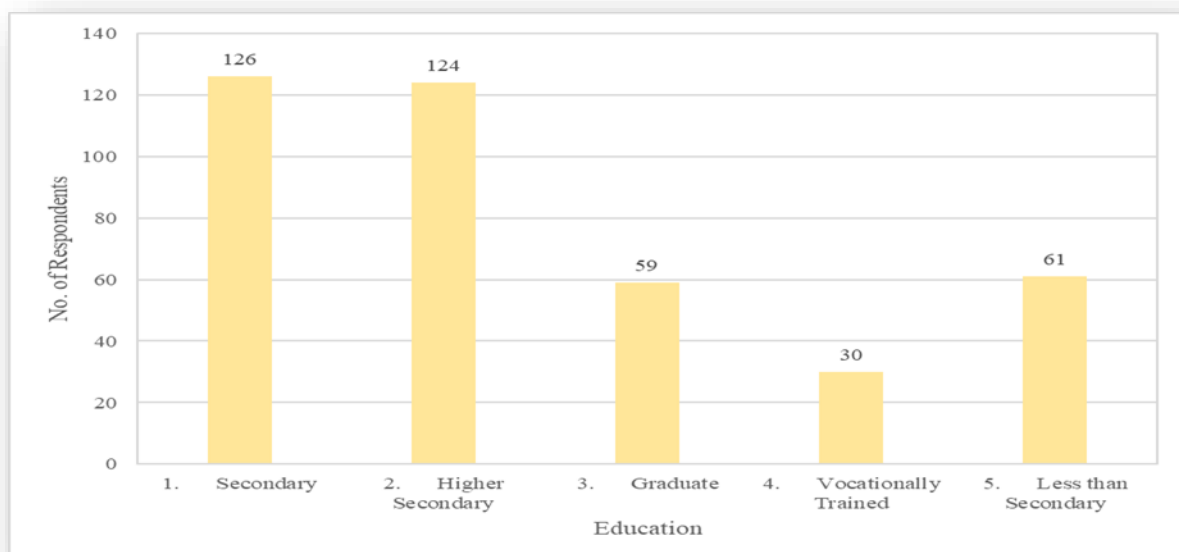


Figure 4.4:

Table 4.3 and Figure 4.4 describe the education-wise distribution of the sample respondents. Out of the total 400 respondents surveyed, the majority, 126 (31.5%%) have studied up to secondary school, 124 (31%) studied up to higher secondary school, 59 (14.8%) are graduates, 61 (15.3%) are less than secondary school qualified and only 30 (7.5%) are vocationally trained

d) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Languages known

Table 4.4:

Language known	No. of Respondents	%
Nepali & Hindi	93	23.25%
Nepali, Hindi, English	211	52.75%
Nepali, Hindi, Bengali	96	24.00%
Total	400	100

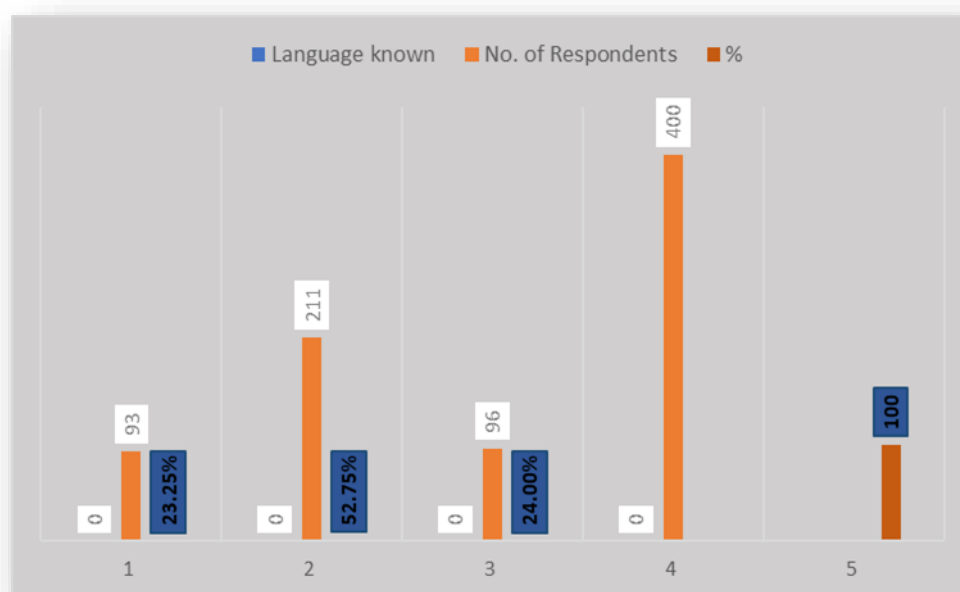


Figure 4.5:

The findings (Table 4.4 and Figure 4.5) indicate that **multilingual ability is a strong characteristic among women involved in rural tourism**. A majority of respondents (52.75%) reported proficiency in **Nepali, Hindi, and English**, suggesting that more than half of the women are well-equipped to interact with a diverse range of tourists, including domestic and international visitors. This reflects the growing importance of communication skills in enhancing service quality and tourist satisfaction. Meanwhile, **24.00% of women know Nepali, Hindi, and Bengali**, highlighting their ability to cater specifically to regional and intra-state tourists, especially from nearby areas like West Bengal and neighbouring regions. Additionally, **23.25% of respondents are familiar with Nepali and Hindi only**, indicating a segment that primarily serves local or domestic tourists but may have limited engagement with international visitors due to language constraints.

e) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Occupation

Table 4.5:

Occupation	No. of Respondents	%
Homestay	132	33.0
Travels	32	8.0
Restaurant, Souvenir shop,	46	11.5
Cultural performer	41	10.3
Service in a tourism organisation	22	5.5
Garden workers, potters, construction labourers, tailors, makeup artists	15	3.8
Family Business (home decor, daily use, medicine)	27	6.8
Farm and seasonal seller (floriculture, vegetables, tea, fruits, honey, mushrooms, etc.)	68	17
Service (police, teacher, nurse, others)	17	4.3
Total	400	100.0

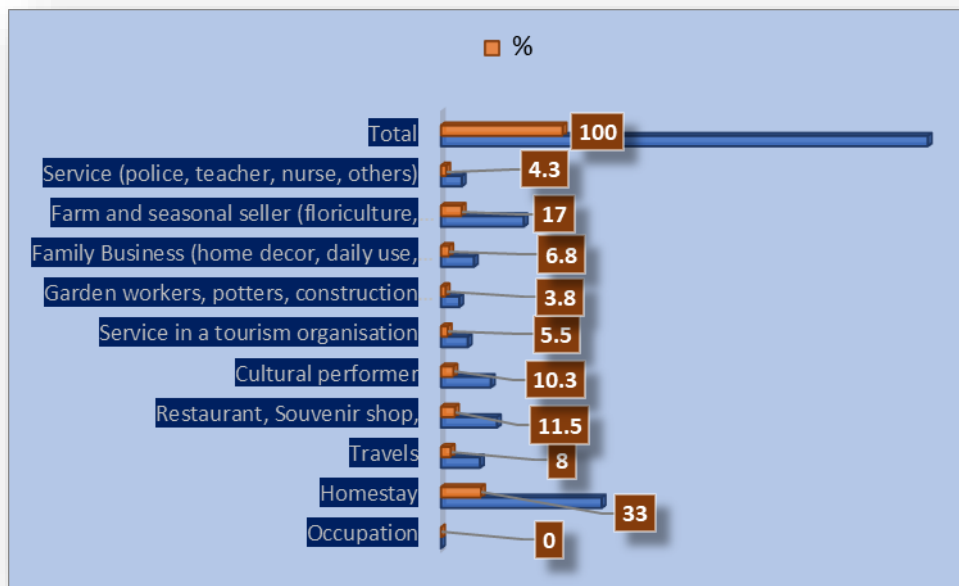


Figure 4.6:

Table 4.5 and Figure 4.6 describe the occupation-wise distribution of the sample respondents. Out of the total 400 respondents surveyed, the majority, 132 (33%), of the women are engaged in homestay activities. 27 (6.8%) women are engaged in business, 46 (11.5%) are engaged in restaurant and souvenir shop, 22 (5.5%) in farm-product selling, 17 (4.3%) seasonal tourism service, 22 (5.5%) in service in tourism, 32 (8%) in travel, 41 (10.3%) are cultural performers, 22 (5.5%) in service and 29 (7.3%) are unemployed.

f) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Monthly Income

Table 4.6:

Monthly Gross Salary	No. of Respondents	%
Less Than Rs 10000	38	9.5
Rs10000 - 20000	50	12.5
Rs 20000 - 30000	52	13.0
Rs 30000 - 40000	106	26.5
Above 40,000	154	38.5
Total	400	100

Table 4.6:



Figure 4.7:

Table 4.6 and Figure 4.7 describe the monthly salary-wise distribution of the sample respondents. Out of the total 400 respondents surveyed, the majority, 154 (38.5%) women respondents' monthly salary is above Rs 40,000. 106 (26.5%) women earn between Rs 30,000 to 40,000, 52 (13%) earn between Rs 20,000 to 30,000, 50 (12.5%) earn between Rs 40,000 to Rs 20,000, and 38 (9.5%) earn less than Rs 10,000.

g) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on their Financial Independence

Table 4.7:

Financial Independence	No. of Respondents	%
Yes	211	52.8
Partially	163	40.8
No	26	6.5
Total	400	100

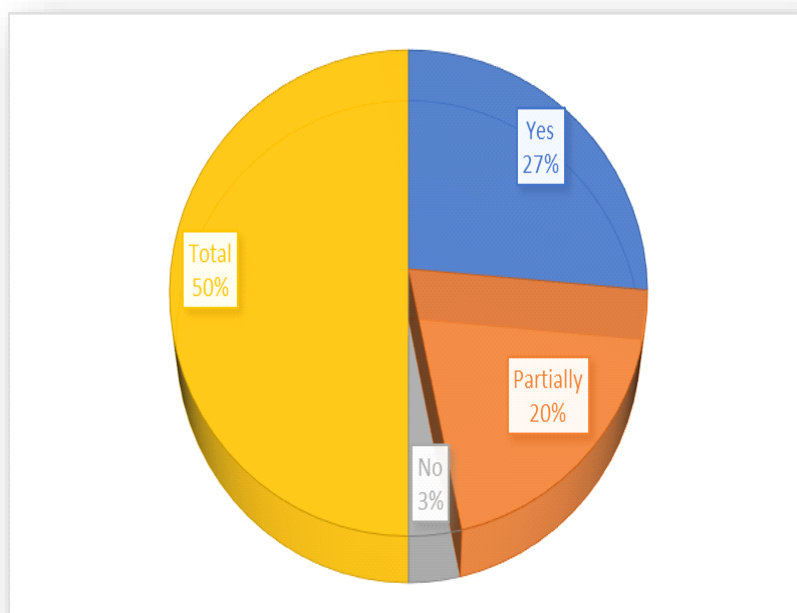


Figure 4.8:

Table 4.7 and Figure 4.8 describe the distribution of sample respondents by their financial independence status. Of the 400 respondents surveyed, 211 (52.8%) of the respondents are financially independent, and 26 (6.5%) are not. However, 163 (40.8%) women respondents are partially independent.

h) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on Push Factors of Adopting Rural Tourism

Table 4.8:

Push factors	No. of Respondents	%
Enhance family income	100	25.0
Self Empowerment	83	20.75
Crisis in a Previous Profession	80	20.0
Uplifting Livelihood and Children's Education	93	23.25
Prevent Outmigration	44	11.0
Total	400	100

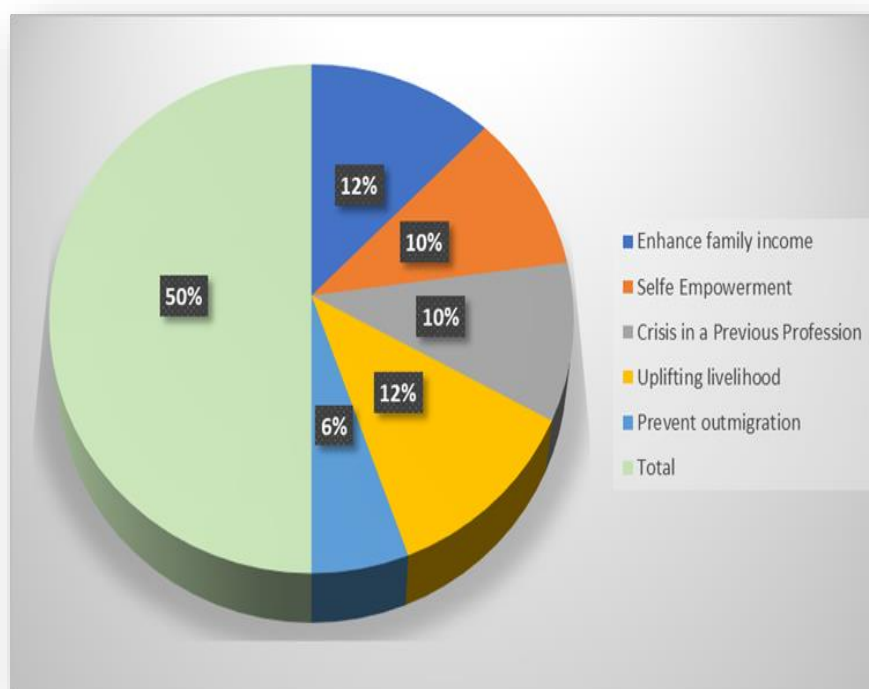


Figure 4.9:

Table 4.8 and Figure 4.9 indicate that the most significant push factor is **enhancing family income (25%)**, indicating that economic motivation is a primary driver. **Uplifting livelihood (23.25%)** and **self-empowerment (20.75%)** are also major reasons, reflecting social and personal motivations. **Preventing outmigration (11%)** is the least cited, but still notable, indicating rural tourism's role in retaining the local population.

i) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on Pull factors for adopting rural tourism

Table 4.9:

Pull factors	No. of Respondents	%
Knowledge of Local Culture and Environment	93	23.25
Expertise in Home Management	77	19.25
Expertise in Agriculture	80	20.0
Communication Skill	64	16.0

All the above	106	26.5
Total	400	100

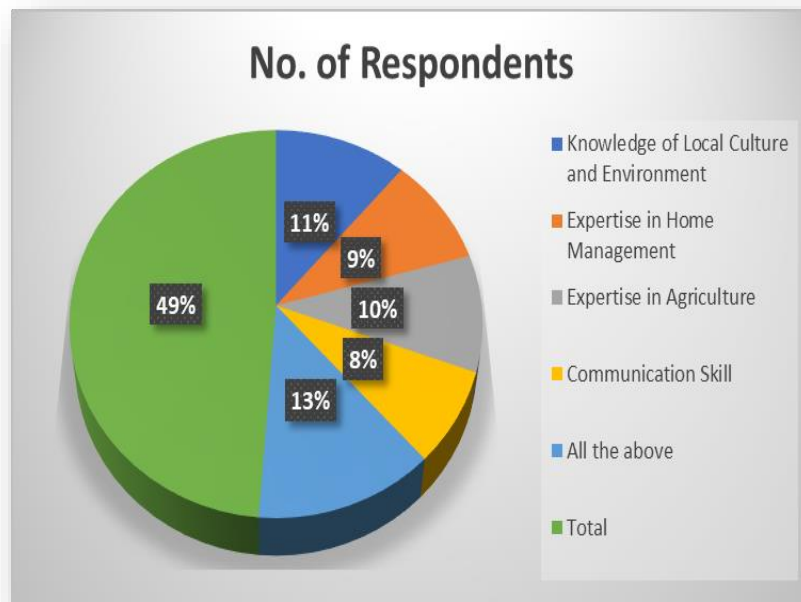


Figure 4.10:

Table 4.9 and 4.10 show that ‘All the above’ (26.5%) was the most frequently selected, indicating that a combination of local knowledge, home skills, and agriculture motivates many to adopt rural tourism. Individually, knowledge of local culture (23.25%) and agricultural expertise (20%) are important skills pulling individuals into tourism roles.

j) Respondents' Frequency Distribution based on the Challenges to Adopting Rural Tourism

k)

Table 4.10:

Challenges	No. of Respondents	%
Lack of Management Skills	93	23.25%
Low Educational Background	77	19.25%
Lack of Training	50	12.50%

Lack of knowledge on Government Policy and lack of Support	34	8.50%
Domination and Pressure from Outsiders	96	24.00%
Absence of Ownership of Property	50	12.50%
Total	400	100

Table 4.10:

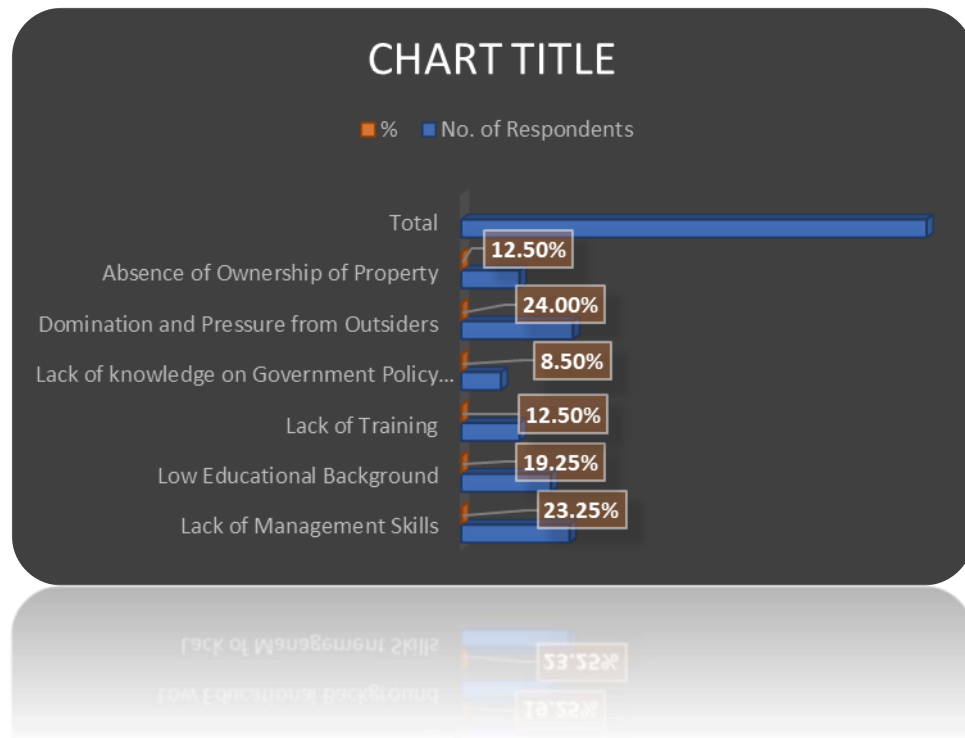


Figure 4.11:

Table 4.10 and 4.11. The data shows that the main challenges in adopting rural tourism are **domination and pressure from outsiders (24%)** and **lack of management skills (23.25%)**, indicating the need for stronger local leadership and control. Other notable issues include **low education (19.25%)**, **lack of training and property ownership (12.5% each)**, and **limited knowledge of government policies (8.5%)**. These highlight the need for **capacity building, awareness programs, and supportive policy interventions** to empower rural communities effectively.

4.3 Measurement Model Assessment:

a) Descriptive Statistics

The measurement (4.11) results indicate that rural tourism plays a significant role in enhancing women's participation in family-led businesses and employment generation, while also demonstrating satisfactory reliability and validity of the constructs. The **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)** construct exhibits strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.868$), and its moderate to high mean values reflect respondents' agreement that rural tourism has expanded family business activities, increased women's participation, and fostered entrepreneurial opportunities such as homestays, travel agencies, restaurants, and allied enterprises. The factor loadings are largely above accepted thresholds and the VIF values remain well within permissible limits, confirming adequate indicator reliability, convergent validity, and the absence of multicollinearity. Similarly, **Direct Employment Generation (DEG)** shows high reliability ($\alpha = 0.854$), with respondents strongly acknowledging increased involvement of women as hosts, owners, partners, and service providers, reinforcing the role of rural tourism as a direct source of women's employment. The **Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)** construct ($\alpha = 0.854$) further demonstrates that rural tourism creates seasonal and supportive income opportunities, enabling women to fill labour gaps, engage in auxiliary services, and extend family businesses during peak tourist seasons. Although a few indicators related to women's control over wealth and leadership roles report comparatively lower mean scores and loadings, they remain within acceptable limits, indicating emerging but still constrained dimensions of economic autonomy rather than deficiencies in measurement. Overall, the findings confirm that the constructs possess strong internal consistency, acceptable indicator reliability, and satisfactory convergent validity, thereby providing a robust foundation for subsequent structural model analysis and hypothesis testing.

The measurement results for **Women's Participation (WP)**, **Cultural & Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC)**, and **Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE)** indicate acceptable to strong reliability and satisfactory validity, while also highlighting meaningful substantive patterns. The **Women's Participation (WP)** construct shows strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.854$), with moderate to high mean values indicating broad agreement that rural tourism has substantially increased women's involvement in startups, family businesses, stable employment, and seasonal activities across homestays, organic farming, crafts, cuisine, cultural performances, and allied services. The factor loadings are predominantly above 0.70, and VIF values remain well below critical thresholds, confirming good indicator reliability, convergent validity, and the absence of multicollinearity. The **Cultural & Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC)** construct

demonstrates acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.775$), with results suggesting that women's participation in rural tourism contributes meaningfully to the preservation and commercialisation of local culture, traditions, natural habitats, and environmentally sustainable practices such as organic farming, waste management, and ecotourism. Most indicators show adequate loadings, although slightly lower values for waste management and sustainable resource use reflect that environmental leadership roles among women, while present, are still developing. The **Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE)** construct reports acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.711$), indicating that rural tourism has positively influenced women's leadership, decision-making, income generation, financial independence, and overall socio-economic status. However, comparatively lower loadings and mean values for indicators related to recognition and gender equality suggest that deeper structural empowerment outcomes are progressing more slowly than participation and income gains. Overall, the constructs exhibit acceptable reliability, adequate indicator reliability, satisfactory convergent validity, and no multicollinearity concerns, supporting their suitability for subsequent structural model analysis while also revealing a gradual transition from participation-based gains toward broader socio-economic empowerment.

b) Threshold Criteria for Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha (α)**, where values ≥ 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability, ≥ 0.80 good reliability, and ≥ 0.90 excellent reliability (Cronbach, 1951; Hair et al., 2021). In exploratory or social science research, values slightly above **0.70** are considered sufficient (Thorndike et al., 1995). **Indicator reliability** was evaluated using **outer (factor) loadings**, with values ≥ 0.70 considered ideal, indicating that more than 50% of the variance in the indicator is explained by the construct (Hair et al., 2021). However, loadings between **0.60 and 0.69** are acceptable in exploratory studies if the overall construct reliability and validity are satisfactory (Hair et al., 2017). **Convergent validity** is supported when indicators load significantly on their respective constructs and when composite measures (e.g., AVE) exceed recommended thresholds. Specifically, an **Average Variance Extracted (AVE) ≥ 0.50** indicates that a construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In PLS-SEM, acceptable indicator loadings (≥ 0.60) are also considered evidence of convergent validity when AVE values are adequate (Hair et al., 2021). **Multicollinearity** among indicators was assessed using the **Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)**. VIF values < 5.0 indicate no critical multicollinearity issues (Hair et al., 2017), while more conservative guidelines suggest **VIF < 3.3** as ideal, particularly in PLS-SEM

contexts (Kock, 2015). **Descriptive statistics** (mean and standard deviation) were interpreted using a five-point Likert scale, where mean values > **3.00** indicate agreement or positive perception toward the construct, and values closer to **4.00 or above** reflect strong agreement among respondents (Likert, 1932; Boone & Boone, 2012).

Table 4.11 Reliability, Convergent Validity, and Multicollinearity

Construct	Indicators	Mean	SD	Factor Loadings	VIF
Rural Tourism Development (RTD) ($\alpha = .868$)	RTD1: Rural tourism has significantly increased the family business	4.13	0.76	0.80	1.672
	RTD2: Rural tourism has significantly increased partnership or ownership of family-led tourism businesses.	4.05	0.69	0.78	1.776
	RTD3: Community people are involved in specifically homestay, travel, restaurant, organic farming, souvenir shop, daily use utensils shop, etc	3.53	0.75	0.74	3.193
	RTD4: Many women members of the family have participated in the tourism business with their families	3.81	0.66	0.76	3.193
	RTD5: Many women have become homestay hosts, owners of travel agencies, restaurants, souvenir shops, daily use grocery and utensils, etc	4.43	0.74	0.77	2.34
	RTD6: Rural tourism creates new opportunities for partnership and ownership of family-led businesses.	3.96	0.65	0.72	1.796
	RTD7: Family-led tourism businesses enhance the income of a family.	3.73	0.81	0.70	3.142
	RTD8: During the tourist season, many women participate in their family business.	3.96	0.81	0.68	3.142
	RTD9: Seasonal participation of women in rural tourism has boosted the economy.	3.74	0.58	0.71	2.267
	RTD10: Tourism has led to an increase in sales for regular businesses, benefiting direct and seasonal participants socio-economically.	3.62	1.15	0.712	1.543

	RTD11: Demand for rural lifestyle, food, craft, and farm products, etc., directly or seasonally helps women's scope to be empowered and preserve culture.	3.69	0.68	0.832	1.749
	RTD12: Rural tourism enhances women's leadership in family business.	2.39	1.23	✗	✗
	RTD13: The women's participation has increased their household decision-making power	3.38	1.30	✗	✗
	RTD14: The women's participation has increased their authority over the wealth.	3.71	0.93	✗	✗
	RTD15: Increasing women's participation has increased the participation of women in socio-political organisations	3.30	1.08	✗	✗
Direct Employment Generation (DGE) ($\alpha = .854$)	DEG1: Women's participation has significantly increased in the family-led tourism business.	4.14	0.77	0.72	1.336
	DEG2: The demand for a rural experience among tourists increases the demand for female hosts.	4.09	0.78	0.74	1.234
	DEG3: Women are providing authentic rural experiences to the tourists.	3.61	0.78	0.78	1.325
	DEG4: Women are involved as owners and partners in family businesses.	3.94	0.83	0.76	1.642
	DEG5: Many women members have participated in various businesses, including homestays, travel, restaurants, organic farming, souvenir shops, and shops selling daily-use utensils.	4.37	0.78	0.81	1.688
	DEG6: Women's ownership has increased in their family businesses, like groceries, medicine, garments, home decor, etc	3.99	0.68	0.78	✗
	DEG7: Many women have become homestay hosts, owners of travel agencies, restaurants, roadside shops, nurseries, and farms, among other ventures	3.82	0.87	0.76	1.986
	DEG8: Many women members from farming families have started organic farming, horticulture, floriculture and apiculture with farm stay to meet the tourists' demand.	3.66	1.15	0.73	2.038
	DEG9: Rural tourism has increased the demand for local crafts, utensils, ethnic	3.77	0.77	0.75	2.691

	handlooms, etc., creating opportunities for women to start a family business				
Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) ($\alpha = .854$)	IEG1: During the tourist season, many women work as partners of the regular family business or create temporary extensions of the family business to reduce the exes' seasonal work burden.	4.20	0.86	0.77	1.817
	IEG2: During the season, tourism as well as regular businesses come under tremendous pressure due to a lack of manpower; women are filling the vacuum for it.	3.69	0.68	0.832	1.76
	IEG3: As the demand for tailors and makeup artists has increased, women's participation has increased as direct or seasonal business.	3.63	0.82	0.72	2.516
	IEG4: Women's potter, construction labourers, and homemakers get a seasonal or regular chance for income due to tourism development.	3.28	1.04	0.74	2.516
	IEG5: Women leaders have increased in the farm lead and regular business.	3.76	1.08	0.65	2.108
Women's Participation (WP) ($\alpha = .854$)	WP1: Women's participation has increased in startups.	4.14	0.77	0.82	1.336
	WP2: Women's participation has significantly increased in family business.	4.09	0.78	0.79	1.234
	WP3: Many women members have participated in stable employment directly through homestay, farm stay, restaurant, adventure sports agencies, craft shops, etc.	3.61	0.78	0.74	1.325
	WP4: Women get a chance to be involved in diverse jobs in rural tourism.	3.94	0.83	0.77	1.642
	WP5: Many women have become organic farmers, ayurvedic planters, and floriculturists.	4.37	0.78	0.72	1.688
	WP6: local cuisine, craft, photoshoot with local costumes, etc, has created new job opportunities specifically for women homemakers and artists.	3.99	0.68	0.74	1.858
	WP7: Women are employed as travel agents, homestay business, restaurant, local agro products, and food items like pickles, honey, and wine, etc., as salespeople.	3.82	0.87	0.78	1.986
	WP8: Women showcase rural livelihoods through ethnic stays, food,	3.66	1.15	0.76	1.986

	and cultural performances to provide tourists with an authentic rural experience.				
	WP9: Many women in the community have participated in indirect or tourist seasonal activities through participating in cultural performances, roadside sales, daily family business, waste management, etc.	3.77	0.77	0.81	2.691
	WP10: Rural tourism has increased the demand for local cuisine, homestays, crafts, etc., providing jobs for women.	4.20	0.86	0.78	1.817
	WP11: Seasonal tourism has increased women's participation in selling organic agro products, crafts, etc., creating indirect jobs	4.08	0.93	0.71	1.817
	WP12: Women's participation has increased in the tailoring and makeup arts due to the demand for traditional clothing and grooming among tourists.	3.63	0.82	0.73	2.267
Cultural & Environmental Preservation & Commercialization (CEPC) ($\alpha = .775$)	CEPC1: Women's involvement in cultural and nature tourism has led to greater recognition of the stain-free natural habitat and cultural uniqueness.	3.90	0.69	0.82	2.47
	CEPC2: Cultural tourism has provided direct employment opportunities for women as performers, artisans, and guides	4.02	1.08	0.78	2.72
	CEPC3: Tourism has increased the demand for locally made products, benefiting women artisans, farmers, and cooks	3.93	0.91	0.82	1.796
	CEPC4: Local traditions and customs are maintained and showcased due to tourist services.	3.74	0.69	0.76	1.543
	CEPC5: Women have made positive contributions to the preservation of historical sites in the area through their work as tourist guides.	3.39	0.96	0.80	4.23
	CEPC6: Women's participation has raised awareness about the importance of environmental conservation in our community	3.14	1.39	0.76	4.15
	CEPC7: Women's participation has encouraged the sustainable use of natural resources in homestays.	3.47	1.08	0.66	2.34
	CEPC8: The women have adopted better waste management practices due to the influence of rural tourism	3.52	1.14	0.68	3.87

	CEPC9: Women's participation in rural tourism has helped protect local wildlife and natural habitats by promoting ecotourism, Ayurvedic plantations, and organic farming, among other initiatives.	3.88	0.90	0.76	2.267
	CEPC10: Organic farming, Ayurvedic plantation, adventure sports, and bird watching have created job opportunities for women in conservation.	4.16	0.86	0.82	3.193
	CEPC11: Women have started to receive training for conservation	3.41	0.85		
	CEPC12: Participation in cultural and eco-tourism helps to enhance skills and education	3.84	0.91		
Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE) ($\alpha = .711$)	SEE1: Rural tourism has increased the leadership roles of women in the community	4.11	0.98	0.76	1.76
	SEE2: Women's participation in decision-making processes has improved because of rural tourism	3.72	0.93	0.73	2.516
	SEE3: Employment through rural tourism has improved the overall standard of living in the community	3.99	0.85	0.75	2.516
	SEE4: Women in the community have gained more financial independence due to rural tourism	3.91	0.89	0.77	2.108
	SEE5: Rural tourism has led to increased visibility and recognition of women's contributions to the community	3.38	1.30	0.65	2.085
	SEE6: Women's participation in rural tourism has improved their socio-economic status	3.82	0.96	0.72	3.293
	SEE7: Rural tourism has enabled women to generate income for their family support	3.83	0.84	0.74	2.074
	SEE8: There is greater gender equality due to rural tourism	3.40	0.95	0.66	1.33
	SEE9: Women's participation has led to an increase in their authority over family wealth	3.82	0.96		
	SEE10: Increased women's participation has reduced their dual duties.	3.04	1.86		

					
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N=400

c) Reliability and Convergent Validity of Constructs

Table 4.12 demonstrates that all constructs in the study satisfy the recommended thresholds for **reliability and convergent validity**, confirming the robustness of the measurement model. Convergent validity is established as the **Average Variance Extracted (AVE)** values for all constructs exceed the minimum criterion of **0.50**, indicating that each construct explains more than 50% of the variance in its indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Specifically, AVE values range from **0.52** for Direct Employment Generation (DEG) and Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE) to **0.61** for Cultural & Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC), reflecting adequate to strong convergent validity. Internal consistency reliability is further supported by **Cronbach's alpha (α)** values, which are above the acceptable threshold of **0.70** for all constructs, including Rural Tourism Development (RTD: $\alpha = 0.868$), Direct Employment Generation (DEG: $\alpha = 0.854$), Indirect Employment Generation (IEG: $\alpha = 0.854$), Women's Participation (WP: $\alpha = 0.854$), and Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE: $\alpha = 0.711$), indicating satisfactory to strong reliability (Cronbach, 1951; Thorndike et al, 1994). In addition, **Composite Reliability (CR)** values for all constructs exceed the recommended minimum of **0.70**, with values ranging from **0.89 to 0.94**, signifying high internal consistency and confirming that the constructs are reliably measured (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2021). Overall, the results confirm that the constructs used in the study demonstrate adequate convergent validity and strong reliability, thereby providing a sound basis for subsequent structural model analysis and hypothesis testing.

Table 4.12 Reliability and Convergent Validity of Constructs

Construct	No. of Indicators	AVE	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)
Rural Tourism Development (RTD)	11	0.57	0.868	0.90
Direct Employment Generation (DEG)	9	0.52	0.854	0.90

Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)	5	0.60	0.854	0.94
Women's Participation (WP)	12	0.60	0.854	0.94
Cultural & Environmental Preservation & Commercialisation (CEPC)	10	0.61	0.775	0.89
Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE)	8	0.52	0.711	0.90

4.4 Examination of the objective 1 extent to which women engage in rural tourism in West Bengal's Himalayan area.

d) Research Model And Hypothesis

Figure 4.12 The model is structured around three main areas of investigation. First, it examines the extent of women's involvement in rural tourism and how such participation directly influences Direct Employment Generation (DEG) and Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) opportunities, as well as how DEG and IEG directly affect Women's Empowerment; also, DEG and IEG both mediate between the RTD and WP.

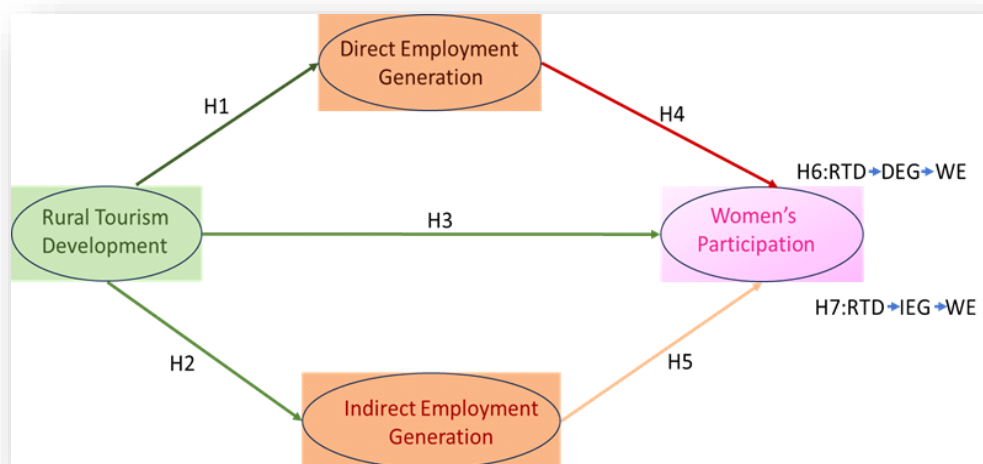


Figure 4.12 Conceptual Model

The study examines, as per the model's representation, that correlation analysis is used to understand the strength and direction of relationships between rural tourism development and women's participation with the two outcome variables. This includes testing the following hypotheses:

H1: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Direct Employment Generation (DEG).

H2: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Indirect Employment Generation (IEG).

H3: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Women's Participation (WP).

H4: Direct Employment Generation (DEG) has **increased** Women's Participation (WP).

H5: Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) has **increased** Women's Participation (WP).

H6: Direct Employment Generation (DEG) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Women's Participation (WP).

H7: Indirect Employment Generation (IEG) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Women's Participation (WP).

e) Discriminant Validity Results

Discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed using both the **Fornell–Larcker criterion** and the **Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations**, following recommended PLS-SEM guidelines. As shown in **Table 4.13**, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), presented along the diagonal (RTD = 0.741, DEG = 0.768, IEG = 0.775, WP = 0.721), are higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlations in each row and column. This indicates that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs, thereby satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion and confirming adequate discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Further support for discriminant validity is provided by the **HTMT results** reported in **Table 4.14**. All HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of **0.85**, ranging from **0.68** to **0.81**, which suggests that the constructs are empirically distinct from one another (Henseler,

Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Although the HTMT value between Direct Employment Generation and Indirect Employment Generation (HTMT = 0.81) is relatively high, it remains within acceptable limits, reflecting conceptual relatedness without indicating a lack of discriminant validity.

Overall, the results from both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio consistently confirm that **Rural Tourism Development, Direct Employment Generation, Indirect Employment Generation, and Women’s Participation are distinct constructs**, supporting the adequacy of the measurement model and justifying progression to structural model analysis.

Table 4.13 Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Constructs	RTD	DEG	IEG	WP
Rural Tourism Development (RTD)	0.741	0.66	0.62	0.58
Direct Employment Generation (DEG)	0.66	0.768	0.69	0.63
Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)	0.62	0.69	0.775	0.66
Women’s participation (WP)	0.58	0.63	0.66	0.721

Table 4.14 Discriminant Validity Table (Heterotrait - Monotrait Ratio of Correlations)

Constructs	RTD	DEG	IEG	WP
Rural Tourism Development (RTD)	-	0.74	0.72	0.68
Direct Employment Generation (DEG)	0.74	-	0.81	0.76
Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)	0.72	0.81	-	0.79
Women’s participation (WP)	0.68	0.76	0.79	-

f) **Model Fit Indices**

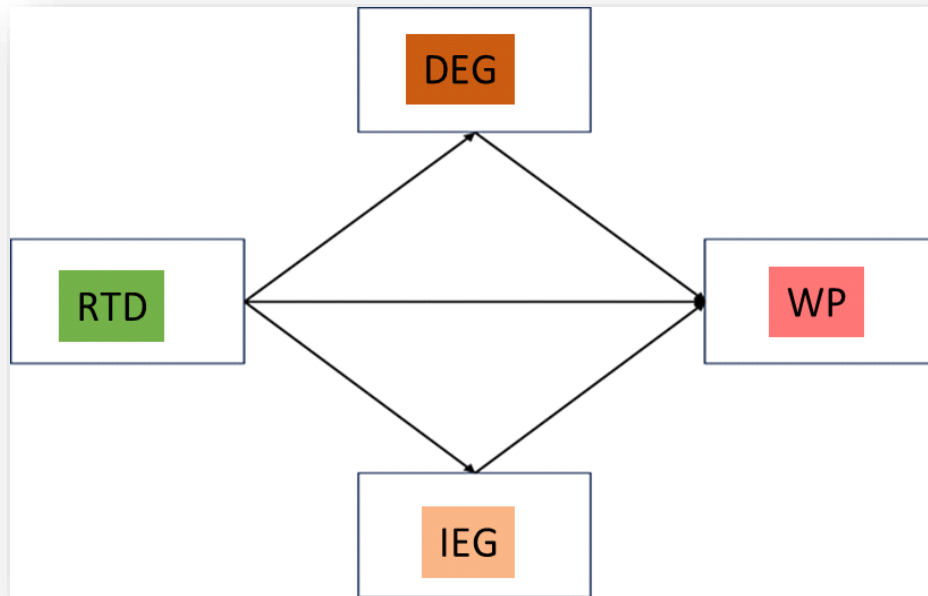


Figure 4.13 Research Model

The overall model fit (Figure 4.13 and Table 4.15) was assessed using the **Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)** and the **Normed Fit Index (NFI)**, Table 4.15 are widely recommended goodness-of-fit measures in PLS-SEM. The **SRMR value of 0.126** exceeds the recommended threshold of **< 0.10**, indicating a **marginal model fit** and suggesting a noticeable discrepancy between the observed correlations and the model-implied correlations (Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2016). This implies that the model may not fully capture all underlying relationships among the constructs. Additionally, the **NFI value of 0.871** falls slightly below the suggested cutoff of **≥ 0.90**, indicating that although the proposed model improves the fit relative to a null model, it does not achieve an ideal level of comparative fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hair et al., 2021). Taken together, these results suggest that the structural model demonstrates an **acceptable but moderate fit**, with potential scope for refinement through reassessment of theoretically justified paths or measurement specifications. Nevertheless, given that **PLS-SEM is primarily prediction-oriented rather than fit-oriented**, such marginal fit indices are considered acceptable when the measurement model exhibits satisfactory reliability and validity and when the structural relationships are theoretically meaningful (Hair et al., 2017; Sarstedt et al., 2020).

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Interpretation
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SRMR	0.126	< 0.10	Marginal fit
NFI	0.871	≥ 0.90	Below ideal

Table 4.15 Model Fit

g) Hypothesis Analysis

The structural model Table 4.16 results provide strong empirical support for all proposed hypotheses, indicating significant relationships among rural tourism development, employment generation, and women's participation. **H1** shows that **Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a strong and positive effect on Direct Employment Generation (DEG)** ($\beta = 0.666$, $t = 17.829$, $p < .001$), with a **large effect size** ($f^2 = 0.80$), suggesting that rural tourism substantially contributes to the creation of direct employment opportunities for women. Similarly, **H2** confirms a **strong positive impact of RTD on Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)** ($\beta = 0.777$, $t = 24.639$, $p < .001$), accompanied by a huge **effect size** ($f^2 = 1.53$), indicating that rural tourism significantly stimulates seasonal and auxiliary employment avenues. **H3** demonstrates that **RTD directly and positively influences Women's Participation (WP)** ($\beta = 0.778$, $t = 24.70$, $p < .001$), with an exceptionally large effect size, highlighting rural tourism as a key driver of women's engagement in economic activities. Furthermore, **H4** reveals that **Direct Employment Generation positively affects Women's Participation** ($\beta = 0.626$, $t = 16.01$, $p < .001$; $f^2 = 0.65$), while **H5** indicates an even stronger effect of **Indirect Employment Generation on Women's Participation** ($\beta = 0.762$, $t = 23.47$, $p < .001$; $f^2 = 1.39$). These findings suggest that both direct and indirect employment channels play crucial roles in enhancing women's involvement, with indirect employment exerting a comparatively stronger influence. The **coefficient of determination (R^2)** values further demonstrate the model's strong explanatory power, with RTD explaining **44.4% of the variance in DEG**, **60.4% in IEG**, and an exceptionally high **95.3% of the variance in WP**, indicating substantial predictive accuracy. Overall, the results confirm that rural tourism development significantly enhances women's participation both directly and indirectly through employment generation, with large effect sizes underscoring the practical and theoretical importance of the proposed relationships (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2021; Cohen, 1988).

Table 4.16 The Result of the Structural Model

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	(β)	SD	t-value	f^2	p-value	Result
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H1	RTD → DEG	.666	.34 .53	17.829	0.80	< 0.001	Supported
H2	RTD → IEG	.777	.34 .52	24.639	1.53	< 0.001	Supported
H3	RTD → WP	.778	.34 .38	24.70	0.74	< 0.001	Supported
H4	DEG → WP	.626	.38 .53	> 1.96	0.65	< 0.001	Supported
H5	IEG → WP	.762	.38 .52	> 1.96	1.39	< 0.001	Supported
R²	DEG	.444					
	IEG	.604					
	WP	.953					

h) Mediator Role Analysis:

Table 4.17 presents the results of the mediation analysis examining the indirect effects of **Direct Employment Generation (DEG)** and **Indirect Employment Generation (IEG)** on the relationship between **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)** and **Women's Participation (WP)**. The findings indicate that **DEG partially mediates** the relationship between RTD and WP (**H6**), as the indirect effect is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.417$, $t > 1.96$, $p < .001$). The **Variance Accounted For (VAF)** value of **34.9%** suggests **partial mediation**, implying that while RTD directly enhances women's participation, a substantial portion of its influence is transmitted through the creation of direct employment opportunities.

Similarly, **IEG also acts as a significant partial mediator** in the RTD–WP relationship (**H7**). The indirect effect of RTD on WP through IEG is strong and significant ($\beta = 0.592$, $t > 1.96$, $p < .001$), with a **VAF of 43.2%**, indicating a comparatively stronger mediating role than DEG. This result highlights that seasonal, auxiliary, and support-based employment opportunities generated by rural tourism are particularly influential in enhancing women's participation. In both mediation models, the **direct effect of RTD on WP remains significant** ($\beta = 0.778$, $p < .001$), confirming that the mediation is partial rather than full (Hair et al., 2017). The **total**

effects further demonstrate that when indirect pathways are considered, the overall influence of RTD on WP increases substantially, reinforcing the central role of rural tourism development in promoting women’s participation both directly and through employment generation. Overall, the mediation analysis confirms that **employment generation—especially indirect employment- serves as a key mechanism (VAF=43.2%)** through which rural tourism development translates into enhanced women’s participation.

Table 4.17 Mediator Model Analysis

Effect Type	Hypothesis/Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-stat	p-value	VAF
Indirect	H6: RTD → DEG → WP	0.417	> 1.96	<0.001	34.9%
Direct	RTD → WP	0.778	24.70	< 0.001	
Total Effect	RTD → WP	1.195	24.70	< 0.001	
Indirect	H7: RTD → IEG → WP	0.592	> 1.96	< 0.001	43.2%
Direct	RTD → WP	0.778	24.70	< 0.001	
Total Effect	RTD → WP	1.370	24.70	< 0.001	

4.5 Examination of objective 2: how women's participation in rural tourism affects the preservation and commercialisation of the region's environment and culture.

a) Research Model and Hypothesis

To examine the second objective—how women's participation in rural tourism influences the preservation and commercialisation of the region’s environment and culture—this study conceptualises a structural model linking key constructs: Rural Tourism Development (RTD), Women’s Participation (WP), and Cultural & Environmental Preservation & Commercialisation (CEPC). The model (Figure 4.14) tests both direct and mediating effects through a set of proposed hypotheses. Specifically, it assesses the direct influence of RTD on WP and CEPC, the impact of WP on CEPC, and the potential mediating role of WP between RTD and CEPC. This framework helps to understand whether increasing women’s involvement in tourism acts as a critical pathway through which tourism development contributes to sustainable cultural and environmental outcomes in the region. The following proposed hypotheses and conceptual Models are formulated:

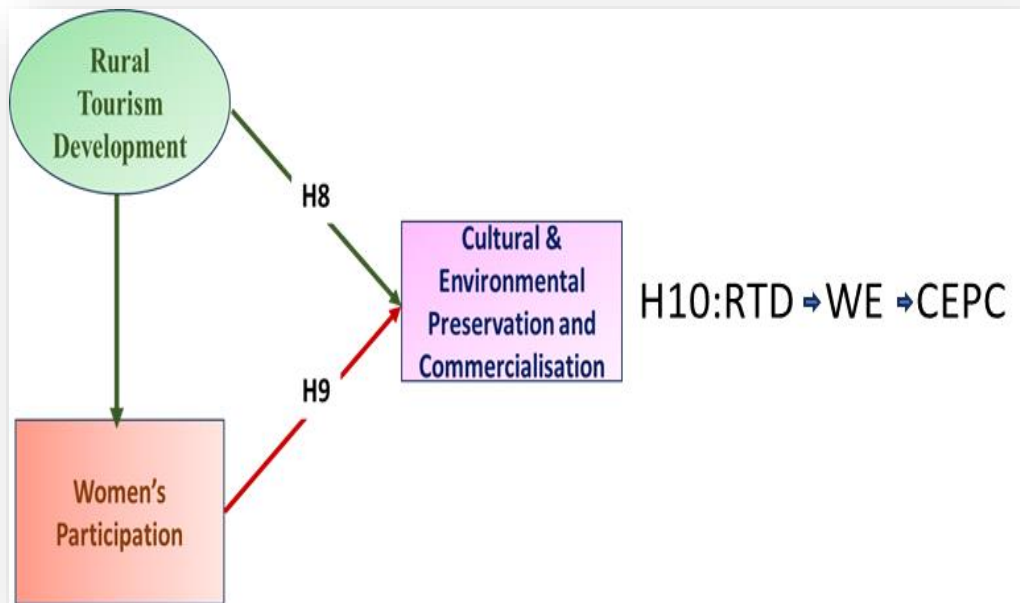


Figure 4.14 Conceptual Model

Hypotheses

H8: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC).

H9: Women's Participation (WP) has a **positive effect** on Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC).

H10: Women's Participation (WP) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC).

To investigate the relationships among the exogenous, mediating, and endogenous variables outlined in the proposed research model, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed. Given the complexity of the model, particularly the inclusion of a mediating variable (Women Participation), the Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM) approach was selected as the most suitable analytical method. PLS-SEM is well-suited for predictive and exploratory research and is composed of two key components. The first is the **measurement model** (outer model), which evaluates the reliability and validity of the indicators in representing their respective latent constructs. The second is the **structural model** (inner model), which assesses the direct, indirect, and mediating relationships among the latent variables—namely, Rural Tourism

Development, Women Participation, and Cultural & Environmental Preservation & Commercialisation. All hypotheses (H8 to H10) were tested using **SmartPLS 4.1.0.2** software, following the guidelines suggested by Hair et al. (2022).

b) Discriminant Validity Results

According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity is established when the square root of the **Average Variance Extracted (AVE)** for each construct (represented in bold on the diagonal) in Table 4.18 is **greater than its correlations with other constructs** in the model. The square root of AVE for **CEPC (0.78)** is greater than its correlations with RTD (0.65) and WP (0.58). For **RTD (0.80)**, the value is greater than its correlation with WP (0.70) and CEPC (0.65). Similarly, for **WP (0.76)**, the value is higher than its correlation with both RTD (0.70) and CEPC (0.58). All constructs satisfy the Fornell–Larcker criterion, confirming acceptable **discriminant validity**. The HTMT values provide a more stringent test of discriminant validity. A value below **0.85** (or a conservative threshold of 0.90) suggests that discriminant validity is established (Henseler et al., 2015). All HTMT (Table 4.19) values (0.68 to 0.75) are well **below 0.85**, confirming that the constructs are distinct. The HTMT criterion is also met, further supporting **discriminant validity** among the constructs.

Table 4.18 Discriminant Validity Table 13 (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	CEPC	RTD	WP
CEPC	**0.78**	0.65	0.58
RTD	0.65	**0.80**	0.70
WP	0.58	0.70	**0.76**

Table 4.19 Discriminant Validity Table 14 (HTMT Criterion)

Construct	CEPC	RTD	WP
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CEPC	-	0.72	0.68
RTD	0.72	-	0.75
WP	0.68	0.75	-

c) Model Fit Indices

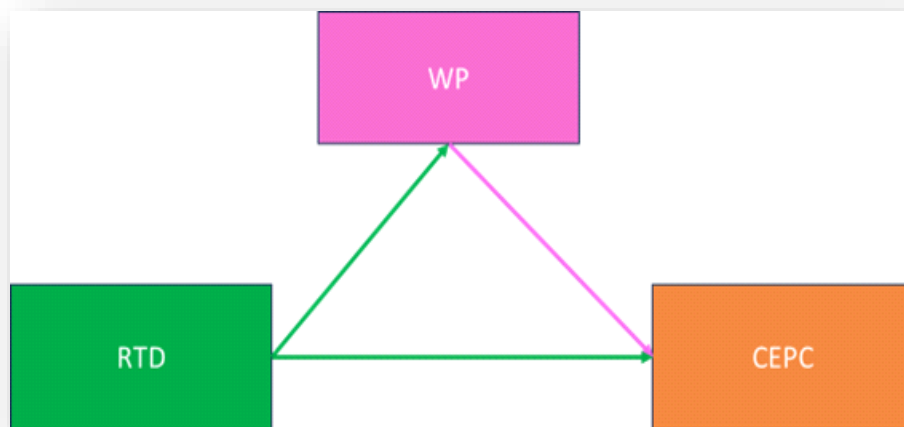


Figure 4.15 Mediator Model

The model (Figure 4.15) fit indices indicate in Table 4.20 that the measurement and structural models fit the data well:

- 5 The SRMR value of 0.072 is below the commonly accepted cutoff of 0.08, suggesting a good approximation of the model to the observed data.
- 6 The NFI value of 0.91 exceeds the 0.90 threshold, indicating a good comparative model fit relative to a null model.
- 7 The d_ULS and d_G values fall within acceptable limits, with no indication of excessive discrepancy between the empirical and model-implied correlation matrices.

Overall, these values confirm that the model has an acceptable to good fit, validating the use of the proposed structural framework for hypothesis testing and theoretical interpretation.

Table 4.20 Model Fit Criteria

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Interpretation
SRMR	0.072	< 0.08	Acceptable model fit
NFI	0.91	≥ 0.90	Good model fit

** Results are significant at a .05 significance level

The results indicate in Table 4.21 that Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a positive and statistically significant effect on Cultural and Environmental Preservation Concerns (CEPC) ($\beta = 0.316$, $t = 5.448$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H8. This suggests that the expansion of rural tourism activities contributes meaningfully to increased awareness and commitment toward cultural heritage conservation and environmental protection within the community. Furthermore, Women's Participation (WP) demonstrates a stronger positive and significant influence on CEPC ($\beta = 0.472$, $t = 7.737$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H9. The higher path coefficient indicates that women's active involvement in tourism-related activities plays a crucial role in promoting cultural continuity and environmentally responsible practices. The R^2 value of 0.57 indicates that RTD and WP together explain 57% of the variance in CEPC, reflecting substantial explanatory power of the model. Overall, the findings suggest that while rural tourism development directly enhances preservation concerns, women's participation serves as a particularly influential driver in strengthening cultural and environmental sustainability within rural tourism contexts.

Table 4.21: Structural Model Results for H8 and H9

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	f ²	Result
H8	RTD → CEPC	0.316	5.448	$p < 0.001$	0.12	Supported
H9	WP → CEPC	0.472	7.737	$p < 0.001$	0.28	Supported
R^2	CEPC	0.57				
	WP	0.46				

Figure 4.16 and Table 4.22 present the results of the mediation analysis with rural tourism development (RTD) as the predictor, women's participation (WP) as the mediator, and CEPC (CNCP) as the outcome variable. The results show that RTD has a strong and statistically significant effect on WP ($\beta = 0.778$, $t = 24.70$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that rural tourism development substantially enhances women's participation. Women's participation, in turn, has a significant positive effect on CEPC ($\beta = 0.472$, $t = 7.737$, $p < 0.001$), indicating its important role in improving community and conservation-related outcomes. RTD also maintains a significant direct effect on CEPC ($\beta = 0.316$, $t = 5.448$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of RTD on CEPC through WP is significant ($\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$), with a Variance Accounted For (VAF) value of 53.7%, indicating that more than half of the total effect is transmitted through women's participation. Since both the direct and indirect effects are significant, WP acts as a **partial mediator** in the relationship between RTD and CEPC. The total effect of RTD on CEPC is strong ($\beta = 0.683$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the combined importance of both direct and mediated pathways in explaining CEPC outcomes.

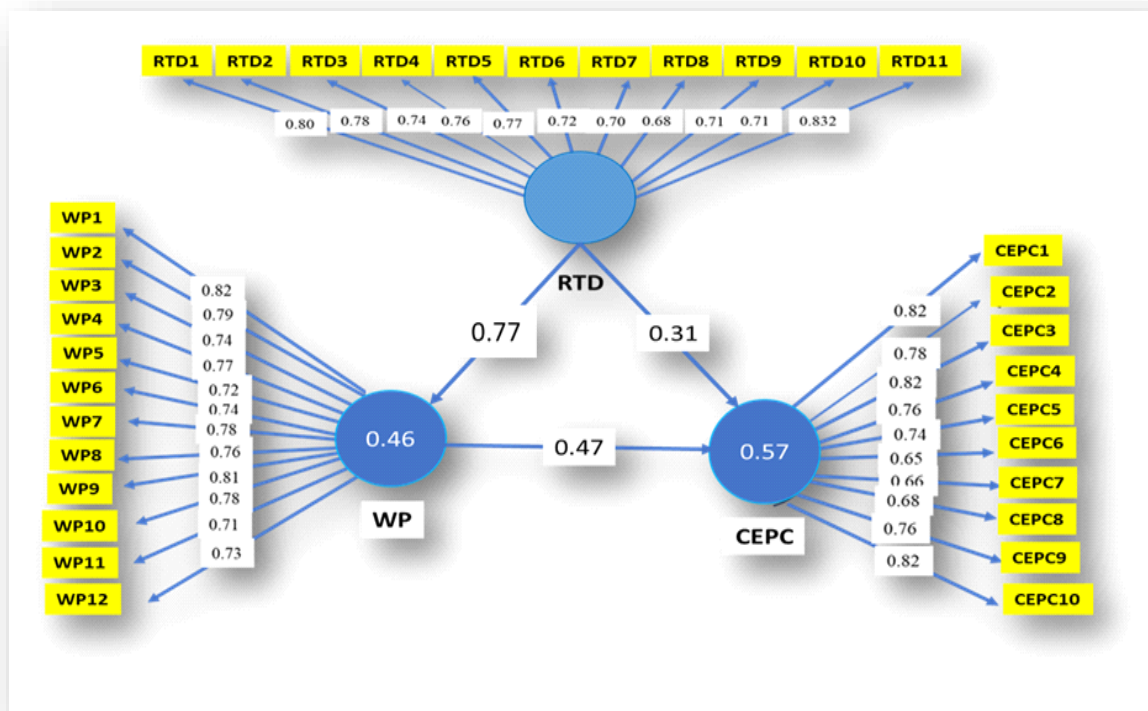


Figure 4.16 Structural Mediation Model

Table 4.22 Mediation Effect Analysis: RTD as Predictor, WP as Mediator, CEPC as Outcome

Effect Type	Hypothesis/Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-stat	p-value	VAF
Indirect	H10: RTD $\rightarrow$ WP $\rightarrow$ CCP	0.367	—	<0.001**	53.7%
Direct	RTD $\rightarrow$ WP	0.778	24.70	<0.001**	
Direct	RTD $\rightarrow$ CECP	0.316	5.44	<0.001**	
Direct	WP $\rightarrow$ CECP	0.472	7.737	<0.001**	
Total Effect	RTD $\rightarrow$ CECP	0.683	—	<0.001**	

4.6 Objective 3: The investigation of the possibility of rural tourism promoting women's socioeconomic Empowerment in West Bengal's Himalayan region.

a) Research Model and Hypotheses

The proposed research model examines the relationships between rural tourism development (RTD), women's participation (WP), and socio-economic empowerment (SEE) within rural contexts. The model is grounded in the premise that rural tourism serves as a catalyst for local development by generating employment opportunities, income diversification, and community engagement. Accordingly, RTD is hypothesised to have a direct and significant influence on socio-economic empowerment (H11), reflecting its potential to enhance livelihoods, skills, and overall well-being. The model further posits that women's participation plays a critical role in this process, as increased involvement of women in tourism-related activities contributes directly to socio-economic empowerment through improved decision-making power, income control, and social status (H12). Importantly, the model also conceptualizes women's participation as a mediating mechanism (H13), suggesting that rural tourism development enhances socio-economic empowerment not only directly but also indirectly by fostering greater participation of women. Together, these hypotheses provide a coherent framework for understanding how rural tourism initiatives translate into broader socio-economic empowerment outcomes, with women's participation acting as a key explanatory pathway.

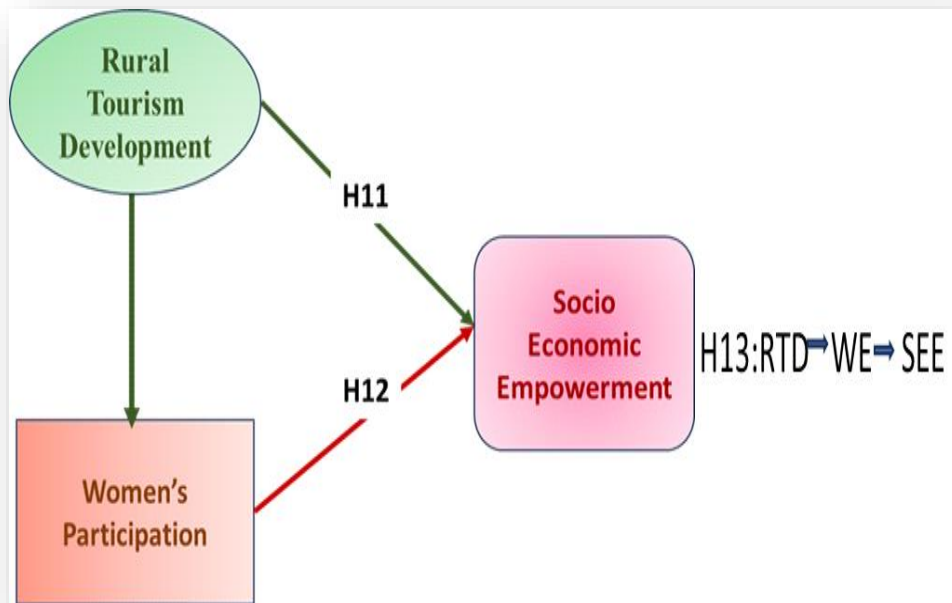


Figure 4.17 Research

The following proposed hypotheses are formulated, which are represented by the Research Model Figure 4.17:

H11: Rural Tourism Development (RTD) has a **positive effect** on Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE).

H12: Women's Participation (WP) has a **positive effect** on Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE).

H13: Women's Participation (WP) **mediates** the relationship between Rural Tourism Development (RTD) and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE).

b) Discriminant Validity

The Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied to assess discriminant validity among the constructs of the study (Table 4.23). As shown in the table, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct—Rural Tourism Development (0.741), Women's Participation (0.775), and Socio-Economic Empowerment (0.721)—is greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlation values in the same rows and columns. For instance, the square root of AVE for Rural Tourism Development (0.741) is higher than its correlations

with Women's Participation (0.62) and Socio-Economic Empowerment (0.58). Similarly, the square root of AVE for Women's Participation (0.775) exceeds its correlation with Socio-Economic Empowerment (0.66). These results confirm that each construct is conceptually distinct and shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs, thereby satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity. This supports the conclusion that the model constructs are sufficiently distinct and free from multicollinearity issues. The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) in table 4.24 is used to further assess the discriminant validity of the constructs in the model. As shown, the HTMT values for all pairs of constructs are below the conservative threshold of **0.85**, which is recommended for conceptually distinct constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). Specifically, the HTMT value between **Rural Tourism Development (RTD)** and **Women's Participation (WP)** is **0.72**, between **RTD** and **Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE)** is **0.68**, and between **WP** and **SEE** is **0.79**. Since all these values are well below the maximum acceptable limit of 0.90 (or 0.85 in stricter cases), it confirms that the constructs exhibit **strong discriminant validity**. Therefore, the constructs in the model are empirically distinct, and there is no indication of redundancy or high collinearity between them. This further validates the robustness of the measurement model.

Table 4.23 Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Constructs	Rural Tourism Development (RTD)	Women's Participation (WP)	Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE)
Rural Tourism Development (RTD)	0.741	0.62	0.58
Women's Participation (WP)	0.62	0.775	0.66
Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE)	0.58	0.66	0.721

Table 4.24. Discriminant Validity Table (Heterotrait - Monotrait Ratio of Correlations)

Constructs	RTD	WP	SEE

Rural Tourism Development (RTD)	-	0.72	0.68
Women's Participation (WP)	0.72	-	0.79
Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE)	0.68	0.79	-

Source(s): Author's Calculations

c) **Model fit:**

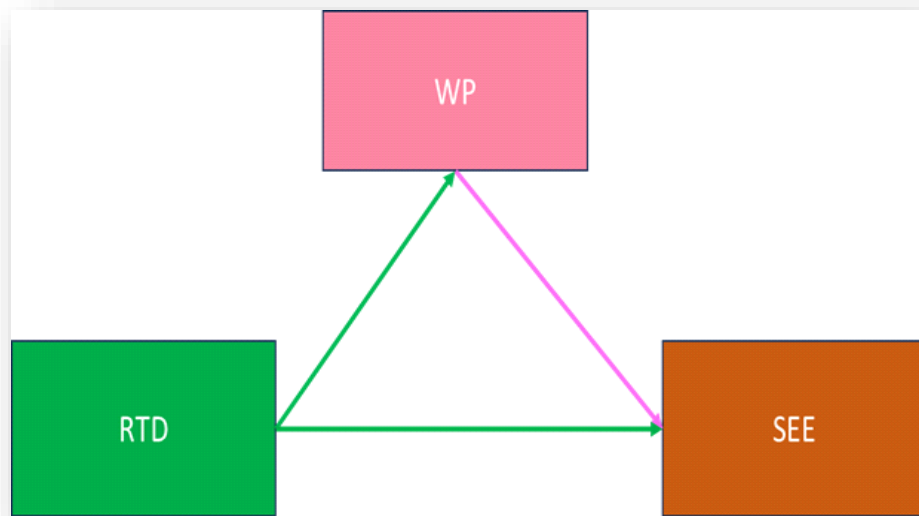


Figure 4.18 Mediator Model

Figure 4.18 presents the mediator model illustrating the structural relationships among rural tourism development, women's participation, and socio-economic empowerment. The overall adequacy of this mediator model is supported by the model fit indices reported in Table 4.25. The **Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)** value meets the recommended threshold of ≤ 0.08 , indicating a good model fit and suggesting that the discrepancies between the observed and predicted correlations are minimal. Additionally, the **Normed Fit Index (NFI)** satisfies the threshold of ≥ 0.90 , demonstrating an acceptable level of incremental fit compared to a null model. Collectively, these fit indices confirm that the proposed mediator model fits the data well and is appropriate for testing the hypothesized direct and mediating relationships among the constructs.

Table 4.25. Model Fit Criteria

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Interpretation
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SRMR	≤ 0.08	≤ 0.08	Good model fit
NFI	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	Acceptable incremental fit

d)Hypothesis Testing Results

Table 4.26 presents the results of hypothesis testing examining the effects of rural tourism development (RTD) and women's participation (WP) on socio-economic empowerment (SEE). The results show that **RTD has a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on SEE** ($\beta = 0.60$, $t = 10.00$, $p < 0.001$), with a **large effect size** ($f^2 = 0.35$), indicating that rural tourism development is a major driver of socio-economic empowerment. In addition, **women's participation also has a significant positive influence on SEE** ($\beta = 0.30$, $t = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that increased involvement of women contributes meaningfully to empowerment outcomes. The **R² value for women's participation (0.468)** indicates that 46.8% of the variance in WP is explained by its predictor(s), demonstrating moderate to substantial explanatory power. Furthermore, the **R² value for socio-economic empowerment (0.572)** shows that RTD and WP together explain 57.2% of the variance in SEE, reflecting substantial predictive accuracy of the model. Overall, these findings support both hypotheses and confirm the robustness of the structural model in explaining socio-economic empowerment through rural tourism development and women's participation.

Table 4.26 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	(β)	SD	t-value	p-value	f ²	Result
H11	RTD → SEE	0.60	0.06	10.00	< 0.001	0.35	Supported
H12	WP → SEE	0.30	0.08	3.75	< 0.001	0.15	Supported
R²	SEE	0.572					
	WP	0.468					

The mediation analysis in Table 4.27 and Figure 4.19 demonstrates that **women's participation (WP) plays a significant partial mediating role** in the relationship between **rural tourism development (RTD)** and **socio-economic empowerment (SEE)**. RTD has a strong and statistically significant direct effect on SEE ($\beta = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that rural tourism development directly enhances socio-economic empowerment. At the same time, RTD significantly influences women's participation ($\beta = 0.778$, $p < 0.001$), and women's participation, in turn, has a positive and significant effect on SEE ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of RTD on SEE through women's participation is also significant ($\beta = 0.233$), confirming the presence of mediation. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) value of 27.9% indicates **partial mediation**, meaning that socio-economic empowerment is achieved both directly through rural tourism development and indirectly through enhanced participation of women. Additionally, the R^2 values show that RTD explains 46.8% of the variance in women's participation, while RTD and WP together explain 57.2% of the variance in socio-economic empowerment, reflecting moderate to substantial explanatory power of the model.

Table 4.27 Mediation Effect Analysis: RTD as Predictor, WP as Mediator, SEE as Outcome

Effect Type	Hypothesis/Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-stat	p-value	VAF
Indirect	RTD $\rightarrow$ WP $\rightarrow$ SEE (H13)	0.233*	3.60	< 0.001	27.9%
Total Effect	RTD $\rightarrow$ SEE	0.833	10.00	< 0.001	

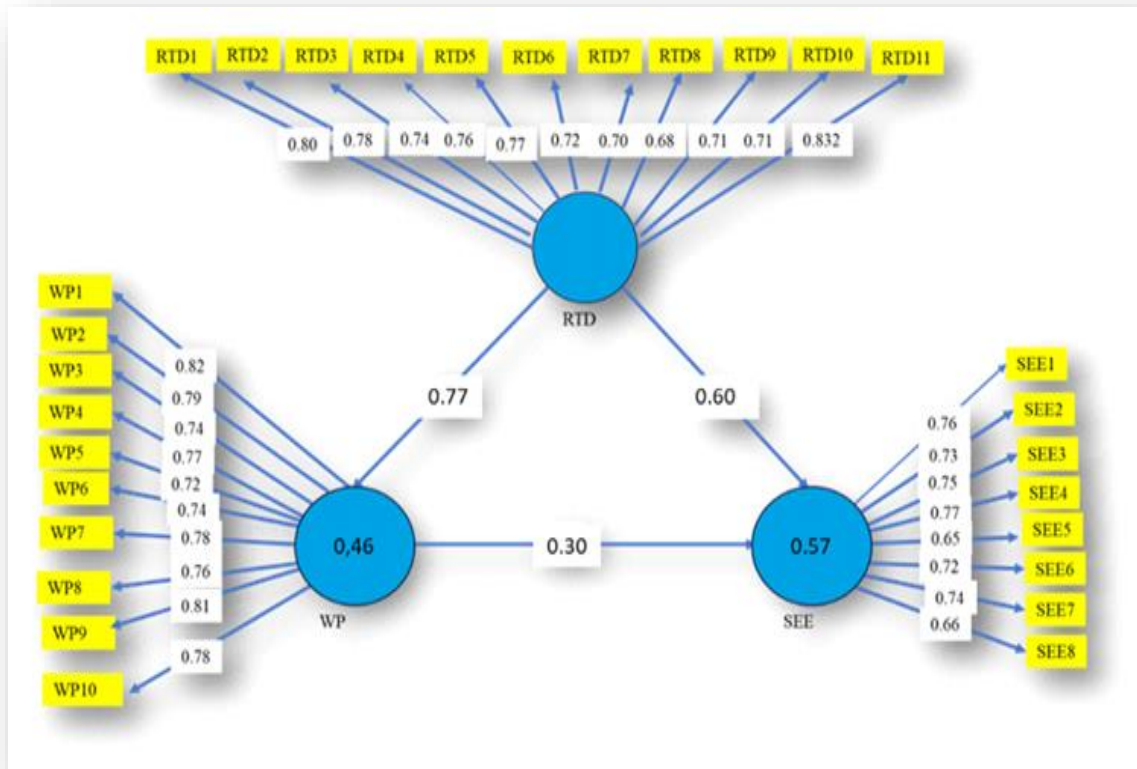


Figure 4.19 Structural Mediation Model

4.7 Overall Research Outcome

The study demonstrates that **rural tourism development (RTD) functions as a multi-layered driver of women's empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal**. First, RTD generates **direct employment** (such as homestay management, guiding, hospitality, and food services) and **indirect employment** (including handicrafts, agriculture-based supply chains, transport, and seasonal support activities), both of which significantly enhance **women's participation (WP)** in local economic and social processes. The mediation results confirm that employment generation, particularly indirect employment, acts as a crucial mechanism through which rural tourism translates into greater participation of women. Second, increased women's participation, together with RTD, significantly influences the **commercialisation and preservation of rural culture and natural heritage**, ensuring that cultural practices are not only economically viable but also sustainably maintained through women-led initiatives. Finally, the combined and individual effects of RTD and WP lead to enhanced **socio-economic**

empowerment of women (SEE), reflected in improved income security. Overall, the findings establish that **rural tourism development empowers women through a sequential pathway: employment generation → women's participation → cultural preservation and commercialisation → socio-economic empowerment—thereby positioning rural tourism as an effective strategy for inclusive and sustainable development in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.**

However, the findings of this study clearly indicate that **economic benefits generated through rural tourism alone are not sufficient to overcome deeply rooted social barriers** affecting women's empowerment. Although rural tourism development creates income and employment opportunities, the failure of several social and leadership-related indicators in the reliability and validity tests highlights the persistence of **structural and cultural constraints**, such as limited leadership roles in family businesses, restricted socio-political participation, and unequal control over strategic decision-making. These results demonstrate that **women's participation remains partially constrained by social norms and power relations**, even when economic gains are present.

The relatively **low mediating effect of women's participation between rural tourism development and socio-economic empowerment** further reinforces this conclusion. While women do participate in tourism-related activities, their participation does not fully translate into higher levels of socio-economic empowerment due to prevailing social barriers. This confirms that empowerment is not merely an economic outcome but a **socially negotiated process** influenced by gender norms, household dynamics, and institutional support systems.

Importantly, the research is successful in identifying these **hidden social barriers**, providing critical insights for policymakers. The findings suggest that for **sustainable development**, policy interventions must move beyond income generation and explicitly address social dimensions, such as promoting women's leadership, enhancing socio-political inclusion, strengthening legal and institutional support, and challenging patriarchal norms. Thus, the low mediation effect of women's participation is not a limitation of the study but a **key empirical contribution**, demonstrating why integrated, gender-sensitive rural tourism policies are essential for achieving long-term and inclusive socio-economic empowerment.

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Suggestion

5.1 Introduction

To systematically address the research objectives, this study employed a conceptual framework based on the interrelationships among Women's Participation (WP), Rural Tourism Development (RTD), Direct Employment Generation (DEG), Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC), and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE). The analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, to examine the characteristics of the sample respondents and the distribution of variables. Reliability and validity of the constructs were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and factor analysis to ensure the consistency and suitability of the measurement model.

Furthermore, the study adopted a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) approach to analyse both direct and indirect relationships among the constructs. The model examined the mediating effects of employment generation on women's participation and the subsequent influence of participation on cultural preservation and socioeconomic empowerment. The findings have been organised into four major analytical sections, providing a comprehensive understanding of how women's participation in rural tourism contributes to employment generation, cultural and environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

5.2 Discussion on Sample Characteristics

a) Discussion of Demographic Characteristics and Their Alignment with Earlier Studies:

The demographic and socio-economic profile of the respondents demonstrates that women's participation in rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal is strongly associated with livelihood diversification, financial independence, cultural preservation, and community-based entrepreneurship. The sample characteristics of this study closely align with findings from previous national and international research on women's empowerment through rural tourism. The study reveals that the majority of women respondents belong to the economically

active age group of 25–40 years, indicating that rural tourism is largely driven by productive and working-age women who actively contribute to household income and tourism-related enterprises. Similar findings were observed by Shobh (2021), who stated that rural tourism enhances women's economic participation and improves social status in rural India. The dominance of married women respondents (80.8%) further supports earlier observations that rural tourism activities such as homestays, handicrafts, food services, and agro-tourism are often family-based and household-oriented enterprises. This finding aligns with studies by Getz and Carlsen (2005), who highlighted the importance of family-owned tourism businesses in rural destinations.

The educational profile of respondents indicates that most women possess secondary and higher secondary education, suggesting that basic education plays an important role in enabling women to participate in tourism-related occupations. However, the comparatively low proportion of vocationally trained women indicates a continuing gap in skill development and professional tourism training. This supports earlier findings by Khan et al. (2021) and Tristanti et al. (2022), who identified limited training opportunities and low educational backgrounds as barriers to women's advancement in tourism sectors.

The occupational distribution shows that homestay management is the most dominant livelihood activity among women respondents, followed by farm-product selling, cultural performances, restaurant services, and tourism-related micro-businesses. These findings are strongly supported by studies conducted in Nepal, Darjeeling, and other Himalayan destinations, where women-led homestays and community tourism initiatives were identified as major tools for sustainable livelihood generation and cultural preservation. Acharya and Halpenny (2013) emphasised that women-managed homestays simultaneously generate income and preserve local traditions, cuisine, and indigenous culture. Similarly, Gurung (2019) found that women in Darjeeling tourism contribute significantly to cultural continuity and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The findings regarding monthly income and financial independence clearly indicate that rural tourism contributes positively to women's economic empowerment. More than half of the respondents reported financial independence, while a substantial proportion earned above ₹30,000 per month. These results support the empowerment framework proposed by Kabeer (1999), which conceptualises empowerment through access to resources, agency, and achievements. The findings are also consistent with studies by Elshaer and Moustafa (2021),

who argued that tourism entrepreneurship enhances women's financial autonomy and social inclusion.

The identified push factors, enhancing family income, uplifting livelihoods, children's education, and self-empowerment, demonstrate that women adopt rural tourism primarily as a livelihood survival and socio-economic improvement strategy. This aligns with the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, where tourism acts as an alternative livelihood opportunity for vulnerable rural households. Previous studies by Nitanan et al. (2020) and Rawat and Khyat (2020) similarly observed that rural tourism improves quality of life, income diversification, and community resilience in mountainous regions.

The pull factors such as knowledge of local culture, agricultural expertise, home management skills, and communication ability further confirm that women's traditional knowledge and indigenous skills are valuable assets in rural tourism development. Previous literature has emphasised that women are custodians of local culture, cuisine, handicrafts, folklore, and environmental practices. Studies by Makandwa et al. (2021; 2023) and Su et al. (2023) similarly demonstrated that women preserve cultural identity while participating in tourism enterprises.

At the same time, the challenges identified in the study, including outsider domination, lack of management skills, limited training, and low awareness of government policies, highlight that women's participation remains constrained by structural inequalities and limited institutional support. These findings strongly correspond with earlier studies by Tucker (2024), who argued that women often remain in operational rather than decision-making positions within tourism systems. Similar concerns were raised by Fakhrizadeh et al. (2022), who identified patriarchal norms, limited finance, and inadequate institutional support as major barriers to women's tourism participation.

b) Contribution of the Research

This research makes several important theoretical, empirical, regional, and policy-related contributions to the literature on women's socio-economic empowerment through rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

Regional Contribution: The study contributes significantly to the limited empirical literature on women's empowerment in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong Himalayan region. Most earlier studies focused either on general tourism development or isolated case studies, whereas this research provides a comprehensive analysis of women's participation, employment generation, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic empowerment within a Himalayan rural tourism context.

Contribution to Women Empowerment Literature: The research extends the existing understanding of women's empowerment by demonstrating how rural tourism contributes not only to income generation but also to financial independence, self-confidence, decision-making participation, and social recognition. It highlights both opportunities and contradictions of empowerment, thereby supporting and extending the empowerment framework of Kabeer (1999).

Contribution to Sustainable Livelihood and SDG Frameworks: The study shows that rural tourism functions as a sustainable livelihood strategy capable of supporting SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). The findings demonstrate that women's participation in tourism supports community resilience, environmental stewardship, and cultural sustainability in fragile Himalayan ecosystems.

Contribution to Rural Tourism and Cultural Preservation: The study empirically establishes that women play a central role in preserving local culture, traditional cuisine, indigenous knowledge, handicrafts, and community identity through tourism-related activities such as homestays, agro-tourism, and cultural performances. This contributes to the growing literature on community-based tourism and cultural sustainability in mountain destinations.

5.3 Conclusion on Reliability Analysis and Alignment with Previous Studies

a) Integrated Discussion of Rural Tourism, Women's Participation, Cultural Preservation and Empowerment

The findings of Table 4.11 demonstrate that rural tourism has contributed to women's employment, entrepreneurial participation, cultural engagement and socioeconomic advancement in the study areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. However, the results also reveal that women's increased participation in tourism does not uniformly translate into leadership, control over resources, reduced workloads or broader empowerment.

All five constructs show acceptable to good internal consistency. Rural Tourism Development (RTD) recorded the highest reliability ($\alpha = .868$), followed by Direct Employment Generation (DEG), Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), and Women's Participation (WP), each with $\alpha = .854$. Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation (CEPC) demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .775$), while Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE) showed comparatively lower but acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .711$).

The reported factor loadings generally range from .65 to .832, indicating an acceptable relationship between the indicators and their respective constructs. The reported VIF values are below 5.00, indicating the absence of severe multicollinearity. However, loadings and VIF values have not been reported for RTD12–RTD15, CEPC11–CEPC12, and SEE9–SEE10. If these indicators were excluded from the final factor model, the basis for their exclusion should be clearly reported.

Women's Participation recorded the highest overall mean ($M \approx 3.94$), closely followed by Direct Employment Generation ($M \approx 3.93$). The other constructs recorded overall means of approximately 3.70–3.71. This pattern indicates that the most visible effects of rural tourism are women's participation and employment generation, whereas its effects on leadership, household power, environmental action and the reduction of gender-based burdens are comparatively less consistent.

Effects of rural tourism development

Rural tourism has encouraged the development and diversification of family-led enterprises. Respondents strongly agreed that it increased family businesses (RTD1: $M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.76$) and strengthened partnership or ownership in family-led tourism businesses (RTD2: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.69$). It also created opportunities for new partnerships and ownership arrangements (RTD6: $M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.65$).

The highest-rated RTD indicator was women's emergence as homestay hosts and owners of travel agencies, restaurants, souvenir shops, grocery shops and related enterprises (RTD5: $M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.74$). This result reflects the structure of rural tourism in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where accommodation, food, local transport, agriculture, handicrafts and retail services are commonly organised through households and small family enterprises.

Rural tourism also improved family income (RTD7: $M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.81$) and increased sales for existing businesses (RTD10: $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.15$). Nevertheless, the relatively high variability for RTD10 suggests that tourism benefits are unevenly distributed. Enterprises located near established attractions, accessible villages and popular tourism routes may benefit more than those in remote settlements with limited transport, digital connectivity and market access.

The relatively moderate mean for community involvement in homestays, restaurants, travel services, organic farming and souvenir businesses (RTD3: $M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.75$) further suggests that tourism development has not reached all households equally. Therefore, rural tourism has produced meaningful local economic effects, but the scale of its impact depends on location, infrastructure, tourist demand, seasonality and household resources.

Direct employment generation

Direct Employment Generation recorded a high overall mean of approximately 3.93. The strongest result was women's participation in businesses such as homestays, restaurants, organic farms, souvenir shops and travel services (DEG5: $M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.78$). Women's participation in family-led tourism businesses was also strongly recognised (DEG1: $M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.77$).

The growing demand for rural experiences increased opportunities for female hosts (DEG2: $M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.78$). Women's ownership of family businesses such as grocery, medicine, garment and home-décor shops also received a positive assessment (DEG6: $M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.68$). These results show that rural tourism contributes not only to wage employment but also to self-employment, ownership and family entrepreneurship.

Women's participation in organic farming, horticulture, floriculture, apiculture and farm stays received a moderately positive mean but greater response variation (DEG8: $M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.15$). This indicates that agricultural tourism opportunities may be concentrated in particular locations or among households with access to land, capital, skills and tourism markets.

Thus, direct employment is generated through the integration of tourism with existing household resources and women's knowledge. However, these activities may remain informal, family-based or inadequately recognised as formal employment. The findings should therefore

be interpreted in terms of both employment quantity and employment quality, including wages, ownership, stability and access to social protection.

Indirect employment generation

Indirect Employment Generation recorded an overall mean of approximately 3.71. The highest-rated indicator was women's seasonal involvement as partners in regular family businesses or in temporary extensions of those businesses (IEG1: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.86$). This shows that tourism creates employment beyond businesses serving tourists directly.

During peak tourist seasons, women help address labour shortages in tourism and regular businesses (IEG2: $M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.68$). Tourism demand also creates indirect opportunities in tailoring and makeup services, especially where tourists participate in cultural programmes or wear traditional clothing (IEG3: $M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.82$).

Women's seasonal or regular income opportunities in pottery, construction and related activities received the lowest IEG score (IEG4: $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.04$). This suggests that the indirect effects of tourism differ across occupations and communities. Women in well-connected tourism locations may receive more opportunities, whereas women in remote areas or occupations weakly connected to the tourism supply chain may receive fewer benefits.

The relatively positive score for women's leadership in farm-based and regular businesses (IEG5: $M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.08$) indicates some movement beyond supporting roles. However, the high response variation shows that such leadership is not uniform. Overall, indirect employment is an important effect of rural tourism, particularly during peak seasons, but its seasonal character may limit income security.

Nature and extent of women's participation

Women's Participation recorded the highest construct mean of approximately 3.94. Respondents reported increased participation in startups (WP1: $M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.77$) and family businesses (WP2: $M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.78$). Women also received opportunities to participate in diverse rural tourism occupations (WP4: $M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.83$).

The highest-rated participation indicator concerned women's involvement as organic farmers, Ayurvedic planters and floriculturists (WP5: $M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.78$). This is particularly relevant

in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where natural landscapes, agriculture, medicinal plants and organic products constitute important components of the rural tourism experience.

Demand for local cuisine, homestays and crafts generated employment for women (WP10: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.86$). Seasonal tourism also increased women's participation in selling organic agricultural products and handicrafts (WP11: $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.93$). Local cuisine, crafts and photography in traditional costumes created opportunities for homemakers and artists (WP6: $M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.68$).

Women's participation is therefore multidimensional. It encompasses:

- Entrepreneurship through startups and family enterprises;
- Hospitality through homestays, farm stays and restaurants;
- Agriculture through organic farming, floriculture and Ayurvedic plantations;
- Cultural employment through cuisine, crafts, costumes and performances;
- Retailing through local food, honey, pickles, wine and agricultural products; and
- Seasonal employment through roadside sales, waste management and supporting services.

Nevertheless, lower means for stable employment (WP3: $M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.78$), authentic rural-experience provision (WP8: $M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.15$), and tailoring and makeup-related work (WP12: $M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.82$) show that some forms of participation are less established. The high variability for WP8 indicates differences in women's ability to participate in the presentation and management of authentic rural experiences.

A critical interpretation is that greater participation does not necessarily mean equal ownership or empowerment. Women may undertake cooking, cleaning, hosting, farming, cultural performance and product preparation while men retain control over business registration, investment, property and income. Therefore, women's participation must be evaluated according to the nature of their roles, financial returns, decision-making authority and recognition.

Women, cultural preservation and commercialisation

Cultural and Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation recorded an overall mean of approximately 3.70. Respondents agreed that cultural tourism provides direct employment for

women as performers, artisans and guides (CEPC2: $M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.08$). Tourism also increased demand for locally produced goods, benefiting women artisans, farmers and cooks (CEPC3: $M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.91$).

Women's participation in cultural and nature tourism increased recognition of the region's natural environment and cultural uniqueness (CEPC1: $M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.69$). Local traditions and customs were maintained and presented through tourism services (CEPC4: $M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.69$), while participation in cultural and ecotourism enhanced women's skills and education (CEPC12: $M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.91$).

These findings are important in the context of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where rural tourism depends heavily on local food, ethnic traditions, crafts, agricultural practices, festivals, clothing, oral knowledge and rural lifestyles. Women often possess and transmit this knowledge. Their involvement helps convert cultural knowledge into tourism services and livelihood opportunities.

RTD11 further supports this relationship. Respondents agreed that tourist demand for rural lifestyles, food, crafts and farm products creates opportunities for women's empowerment and cultural preservation ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.68$). Its strong factor loading of .832 indicates that the relationship between local culture, tourism demand and women's livelihoods is highly relevant to rural tourism development.

However, commercialisation creates both opportunities and risks. Tourism can generate income from traditional food, crafts and cultural performances, encouraging the continuation of local practices. At the same time, traditions may be simplified, modified or staged primarily for tourists. If women perform cultural work without control over its representation or financial returns, commercialisation may commodify women's knowledge without empowering them.

Accordingly, women should participate in decisions concerning how traditions are represented, priced and marketed. Community ownership, fair remuneration, authenticity guidelines and protection of traditional knowledge are necessary to ensure that commercialisation supports rather than weakens local culture.

Women's contribution to environmental preservation

The highest CEPC indicator was the creation of conservation-related employment through organic farming, Ayurvedic plantations, adventure activities and birdwatching (CEPC10: $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.86$). Women's participation in ecotourism, organic farming and Ayurvedic plantations was also perceived to contribute to the protection of wildlife and natural habitats (CEPC9: $M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.90$).

However, the environmental-management indicators were comparatively weaker. Sustainable use of natural resources in homestays recorded a mean of 3.47 ($SD = 1.08$), while improved waste-management practices recorded a mean of 3.52 ($SD = 1.14$). Women's participation in creating environmental awareness received the lowest CEPC mean (CEPC6: $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.39$). The high variability indicates substantial differences across communities.

Women's contribution to preserving historical sites through tourist guiding was also moderate (CEPC5: $M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.96$), and access to conservation training remained limited (CEPC11: $M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.85$). These results show that tourism generates nature-based employment but has not yet produced equally strong institutional participation by women in conservation planning, waste management or environmental education.

The environmental benefits may therefore remain activity-specific rather than systemic. For example, women may participate in organic farming or birdwatching-related enterprises without receiving formal conservation training or representation in local environmental bodies. Targeted training, waste-management infrastructure, renewable-energy support and participation in conservation committees would strengthen women's environmental role.

Socioeconomic empowerment of women

The overall SEE mean of approximately 3.70 indicates moderate socioeconomic empowerment. Respondents agreed that rural tourism increased women's community leadership roles (SEE1: $M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.98$), improved community living standards (SEE3: $M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.85$), and increased women's financial independence (SEE4: $M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.89$).

Rural tourism also enabled women to generate income for family support (SEE7: $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.84$), improved their socioeconomic status (SEE6: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.96$), and increased

their authority over family wealth (SEE9: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.96$). Decision-making participation received a moderately positive score (SEE2: $M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.93$).

Nevertheless, increased visibility and recognition of women's contributions received a lower score (SEE5: $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.30$), while gender equality remained moderate (SEE8: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.95$). The lowest score concerned the reduction of women's dual duties (SEE10: $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.86$). Its exceptionally high standard deviation indicates substantial disagreement among respondents.

This result suggests that tourism employment has not consistently reduced women's domestic responsibilities. Instead, women may combine tourism work with childcare, cooking, cleaning, agriculture and other household duties. Consequently, income generation may coexist with increased time pressure and a double burden of productive and reproductive work.

An apparent difference also emerges between women's community leadership (SEE1: $M = 4.11$) and leadership in family businesses (RTD12: $M = 2.39$). This should not be treated merely as a contradictory result because the items measure different contexts. Women may receive public recognition or assume community-facing roles in tourism while remaining excluded from strategic decisions within family businesses. Alternatively, respondents may perceive women as visible representatives of tourism without recognising them as business leaders. This difference demonstrates the importance of separating public participation from substantive authority within households and enterprises.

Participation–empowerment gap

The most important finding is the gap between women's high participation and their incomplete empowerment. Women's participation and direct employment recorded the highest construct means, but several indicators of substantive empowerment were weaker:

- Women's leadership in family businesses: $M = 2.39$;
- Reduction in women's dual duties: $M = 3.04$;
- Environmental-awareness contribution: $M = 3.14$;
- Socio-political participation: $M = 3.30$;
- Recognition of women's community contributions: $M = 3.38$;
- Household decision-making power: $M = 3.38$; and

- Greater gender equality: $M = 3.40$.

These findings indicate that rural tourism has been more successful in bringing women into economic activities than in transforming gender relations. Employment and participation represent important foundations of empowerment, but meaningful empowerment also requires ownership, control over income, leadership authority, recognition, mobility, decision-making power and a fair distribution of unpaid domestic work.

b) Discussion of Reliability Analysis and Its Alignment with Earlier Studies:

The construct of Rural Tourism Development ($\alpha = .868$) shows strong reliability and confirms that rural tourism significantly contributes to family-led businesses, women's employment, seasonal participation, and income generation in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. High factor loadings for indicators related to homestays, tourism entrepreneurship, local products, and seasonal participation suggest that rural tourism has become an important livelihood diversification strategy for women. These findings are strongly aligned with earlier studies by Ladkin et al. (2023), Fikire et al. (2022), who identified rural tourism as a major source of employment generation and community-based economic development.

The Direct Employment Generation construct ($\alpha = .854$) demonstrates that women are increasingly participating as homestay owners, travel operators, restaurant managers, organic farmers, artisans, and tourism entrepreneurs. The strong factor loadings confirm that tourism directly creates stable employment opportunities for rural women. These findings support previous studies by Elshaer and Moustafa (2021), who argued that tourism entrepreneurship enhances women's economic empowerment and employment opportunities in rural communities.

Similarly, the Indirect Employment Generation construct ($\alpha = .854$) indicates that rural tourism also creates seasonal and supportive employment opportunities for women through tailoring, makeup services, farming, cultural performances, handicrafts, roadside sales, and temporary business extensions. This finding aligns with studies by Mitchell and Ashley (2010), which highlighted tourism's role in creating indirect livelihood opportunities and reducing rural poverty through multiplier effects.

The Women's Participation construct ($\alpha = .854$) confirms that women are actively participating in diverse tourism activities such as startups, organic farming, local cuisine preparation,

handicrafts, agro-product selling, and cultural tourism. High factor loadings indicate that tourism has broadened women's participation in both direct and indirect economic activities. These findings are consistent with studies by de Jong and Figueroa-Domecq (2022), who emphasised that women's participation in tourism contributes to entrepreneurship, community development, and cultural preservation.

The Cultural and Environmental Preservation & Commercialisation construct ($\alpha = .775$) demonstrates that women's participation significantly contributes to preserving local culture, environmental awareness, ecotourism, organic farming, waste management, and sustainable use of natural resources. Indicators related to local traditions, cultural performances, environmental conservation, and eco-tourism recorded acceptable factor loadings, suggesting that women play a central role in promoting sustainable tourism practices. These findings support earlier studies by Chettri (2022), Makandwa et al. (2023), which found that women contribute significantly to cultural preservation and environmental stewardship in rural tourism destinations.

The Socio-Economic Empowerment construct ($\alpha = .711$) also achieved acceptable reliability, indicating that rural tourism positively influences women's leadership, financial independence, income generation, social recognition, and standard of living. The findings demonstrate that tourism participation enhances women's socio-economic status and contributes to greater gender equality in rural communities. These findings align with the empowerment framework proposed by Kabeer (1999), which conceptualises empowerment through access to resources, agency, and achievements.

However, several indicators, such as RTD12, RTD13, RTD14, RTD15, CEPC11, CEPC12, SEE9, and SEE10, showed weak or excluded loadings, particularly those associated with leadership, authority over wealth, socio-political participation, conservation training, and reduction of dual responsibilities. This suggests that although rural tourism improves women's economic participation, deeper structural empowerment remains limited. Women may still have restricted decision-making power and continue to experience traditional gender burdens. These findings strongly support earlier critical perspectives by Tucker (2024), who argued that women's empowerment through tourism often remains partial and constrained by patriarchal social structures.

c) Contribution of the Study

This study makes significant theoretical, empirical, methodological, regional, and policy contributions to the existing literature on women's socio-economic empowerment through rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. The research enriches the understanding of how rural tourism functions as a catalyst for employment generation, women's participation, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and community development in fragile mountain economies.

Theoretical Contribution: The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of women's empowerment by integrating rural tourism development with socio-economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. The findings support the empowerment framework of Kabeer (1999), which emphasizes resources, agency, and achievements as core dimensions of empowerment. The study also extends the Sustainable Livelihood Framework by demonstrating that rural tourism acts as an alternative livelihood strategy that strengthens women's economic resilience and social inclusion in Himalayan rural communities.

Empirical Contribution: The study provides strong empirical evidence from 400 women respondents across Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts regarding the role of rural tourism in empowering women socio-economically. Unlike many earlier conceptual studies, this research quantitatively examines the relationships among Rural Tourism Development (RTD), Direct Employment Generation (DEG), Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), Women's Participation (WP), Cultural & Environmental Preservation (CEPC), and Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE). The study demonstrates that rural tourism significantly enhances women's participation, income generation, financial independence, and livelihood diversification.

Contribution to Rural Tourism Literature: This research contributes to the growing body of literature on rural and community-based tourism by showing how tourism activities such as homestays, farm stays, organic farming, handicrafts, cultural performances, and agro-tourism create sustainable livelihood opportunities for women. The findings reinforce previous studies, which identified tourism as a driver of local entrepreneurship, poverty reduction, and rural development.

Contribution to Women Empowerment Studies: The study contributes specifically to gender and tourism research by revealing that rural tourism improves women's financial independence, leadership visibility, employment opportunities, and social recognition. At the

same time, the study identifies continuing barriers related to ownership, decision-making authority, socio-political participation, and dual responsibilities. Thus, the research contributes a balanced perspective by highlighting both the achievements and limitations of women's empowerment through tourism.

Contribution to Cultural and Environmental Sustainability: The study demonstrates that women are not only economic participants but also important custodians of local culture and the environment. Women's involvement in handicrafts, local cuisine, cultural performances, ecotourism, waste management, organic farming, and Ayurvedic plantations contributes significantly to preserving Himalayan cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. This research strengthens the link between women's participation and sustainable tourism development.

Regional Contribution: A major contribution of this study lies in its regional focus on the Himalayan region of West Bengal, particularly Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where limited empirical research exists on women's empowerment through rural tourism. The study provides context-specific insights into the socio-economic realities, livelihood challenges, tourism opportunities, and gender dynamics of rural Himalayan communities. This regional contribution is important because mountain economies differ significantly from other rural tourism destinations due to geographical isolation, ecological sensitivity, and dependence on seasonal tourism.

Overall, rural tourism has generated direct and indirect employment, diversified family businesses, strengthened women's entrepreneurial participation and created markets for local food, crafts, agriculture and cultural experiences. Women's knowledge and labour are central to the rural tourism industry in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. They contribute as hosts, farmers, artisans, cooks, performers, sellers, guides and custodians of cultural and environmental resources.

However, the benefits are affected by seasonality, spatial inequalities, informal employment, inadequate recognition, limited leadership, and women's ongoing domestic responsibilities. The development of rural tourism should therefore be supported through:

- Women-led tourism cooperatives and producer groups;
- Leadership and enterprise-management training;

- Access to credit, property rights and business registration;
- Direct digital-marketing and market-linkage opportunities;
- Formal recognition and fair remuneration of women's work;
- Conservation and waste-management training;
- Protection of local culture and traditional knowledge;
- Childcare and household-support mechanisms;
- Women's representation in tourism and conservation committees; and
- Initiatives that connect remote villages with established tourism circuits.

Thus, rural tourism in the study areas demonstrates considerable potential for women's employment and cultural preservation. Its transformative capacity, however, depends on whether participation is converted into secure employment, ownership, leadership, control over income and greater equality within households and communities.

5.4 Discussion on Research Objectives and Alignment with Previous Studies

a) Objective 1:

The findings of this study strongly align with previous research that identifies rural tourism as an important pathway for women's livelihood diversification, empowerment, and sustainable rural development. The significant influence of Rural Tourism Development (RTD) on both Direct Employment Generation (DEG) and Indirect Employment Generation (IEG), alongside the exceptionally high explanatory power for Women's Participation ($R^2 = 0.953$), confirms that rural tourism has become a critical livelihood mechanism for women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. These findings support the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework proposed by Natarajan et al. (2022), which emphasises that women's empowerment in rural economies depends not only on economic assets but also on relational power, environmental access, mobility, and decision-making opportunities. The present study demonstrates that rural tourism enhances women's participation through diversified employment opportunities such as homestays, handicrafts, agro-tourism, local cuisine, and seasonal tourism enterprises, thereby strengthening livelihood resilience in climate-sensitive Himalayan communities.

The findings are also consistent with Boudalia et al. (2024) and Sahu et al. (2024), who argued that gender-sensitive rural development requires improved access to resources, skills, technology, and institutional support. Similarly, the results support Vujko et al. (2024), who found that women's participation in tourism through associations, entrepreneurship, and skills

development enhances income generation, independence, and community transformation. The stronger influence of indirect employment identified in this study further aligns with Quang et al. (2023), whose research in Vietnam's Mekong Delta revealed that tourism participation improves women's income, social status, and household influence, even though traditional gender roles continue to persist.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce ecofeminist perspectives presented by Ghasemi et al. (2021), which connect women's empowerment with environmental stewardship and sustainable resource management. Women's involvement in tourism-related activities such as organic food processing, handicrafts, eco-tourism, and homestay management not only strengthens economic resilience but also contributes to environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. The present study also supports the arguments of Alarcón and Cole (2019), Alves and Campon-Cerro (2019), and Yang, Hung, and Xiao (2019), who highlighted that participation in tourism strengthens women's confidence, leadership, networking capacity, and community identity. Moreover, the findings correspond with Polukhina et al. (2021) and the UNWTO's inclusive tourism framework, which emphasise that women's participation in tourism contributes significantly to sustainable and inclusive rural development. Overall, the study confirms that rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal functions not only as an economic activity but also as a transformative mechanism for women's empowerment, livelihood resilience, and sustainable community development.

b) Objective 2:

The results strongly align with the Triple-Win Development Model, which integrates economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability into a unified framework for sustainable development. According to the United Nations Development Programme and UNIDO (2023), triple-win approaches promote complementary outcomes across social, economic, and environmental dimensions simultaneously. The present findings support this perspective by demonstrating that women's involvement in tourism enterprises enhances livelihood opportunities while simultaneously strengthening environmental stewardship and cultural preservation. Similarly, Benatia et al. (2026) argued that integrated development approaches can reduce economic vulnerabilities while improving environmental and social outcomes, whereas Sica et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of adaptive and sustainability-oriented resource systems for achieving long-term community resilience. The present study

empirically validates these theoretical assumptions within the context of rural Himalayan tourism.

The findings are also consistent with previous studies emphasising women's role as custodians of culture and environmental sustainability in rural tourism destinations. Research on community-based tourism in Nepal and Botswana demonstrated that women-managed homestays preserve indigenous architecture, rituals, folklore, and oral traditions while simultaneously generating livelihood opportunities (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). Similarly, Makandwa et al. (2023) and Su et al. (2023) found that women entrepreneurs sustain traditional crafts, cuisine, and cultural identity through tourism enterprises, thereby embedding cultural pride within local tourism value chains. In the Himalayan context, women-led homestays and agro-tourism initiatives function as "living museums" that preserve local foodways, handicrafts, and traditional ecological knowledge while commercialising these assets sustainably.

The study further supports ecofeminist perspectives advanced by Ghasemi et al. (2021), which link women's empowerment with environmental stewardship and sustainable resource management. Women's participation in biodiversity-based tourism, organic farming, eco-technologies, and environmentally responsible tourism practices contributes significantly to ecological conservation and climate resilience. The findings correspond with studies highlighting that women's access to education, financial resources, digital inclusion, and community networks strengthens their leadership in environmental governance and sustainable tourism management.

At the same time, the study acknowledges the critical concerns raised by Ellis and Tschakert (2019), who argued that conventional triple-win narratives may overlook structural inequalities and justice-related issues. Although women's participation contributes substantially to preservation and sustainability outcomes, persistent barriers such as limited land rights, restricted market access, unpaid labour burdens, and patriarchal decision-making structures continue to constrain women's full empowerment and leadership within tourism systems. These findings therefore reinforce the need for context-specific, gender-sensitive, and participatory policy frameworks capable of integrating cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and women's empowerment in a more equitable and transformative manner.

Overall, the study concludes that women's participation acts as a critical institutional and social bridge between rural tourism development and the preservation-commercialisation nexus in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. Through their involvement in tourism enterprises, women contribute not only to economic diversification but also to the safeguarding of cultural identity, ecological sustainability, and community resilience, thereby supporting broader sustainable development objectives aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production.

c) Objective 3:

The findings of this study confirm that rural tourism significantly contributes to women's socio-economic empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal and strongly align with Empowerment Theory, particularly Kabeer's (1999, 2002) framework of resources, agency, and achievements. According to Empowerment Theory, empowerment occurs when women gain access to productive resources, develop the ability to make strategic life choices, and achieve improved socio-economic outcomes. The present study reflects these dimensions through the significant positive influence of Rural Tourism Development (RTD) on Socio-Economic Empowerment (SEE) ($\beta = 0.60, p < .001$) and Women's Participation (WP) on SEE ($\beta = 0.30, p < .001$). The mediation analysis further demonstrates that women's participation partially mediates the relationship between RTD and SEE (VAF = 27.9%), indicating that empowerment outcomes are achieved both directly through tourism development and indirectly through women's active involvement in tourism enterprises and community activities. The substantial explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.572$) confirms that rural tourism functions as an important mechanism for enhancing women's socio-economic capabilities and livelihood resilience.

The findings support Kabeer's empowerment dimensions by showing that rural tourism enhances women's access to economic resources through employment generation, entrepreneurship, homestays, handicrafts, agro-tourism, and local tourism enterprises. Increased participation in tourism activities also strengthens women's agency by improving decision-making capacity, mobility, leadership roles, confidence, and social recognition within households and communities. These processes ultimately contribute to empowerment

achievements such as financial independence, livelihood diversification, improved quality of life, and enhanced community participation.

The results strongly align with previous empowerment studies in tourism contexts. de Jong and Figueroa-Domecq (2022) found that tourism participation enhances women's confidence, social inclusion, and community development, while Bučar et al. (2024) demonstrated that women's empowerment through tourism contributes significantly to multidimensional poverty reduction in rural areas. Similarly, Elshaer et al. (2021) argued that tourism involvement acts as a mediating mechanism that strengthens women's empowerment and sustainable tourism development. The findings also support the observations of Vujko et al. (2024) and Vuković et al. (2023), who concluded that women's participation in rural tourism contributes directly to inclusive rural transformation, sustainable livelihoods, and community resilience.

Within the Himalayan and agro-tourism context, the findings correspond with Chhetri (2020; 2024), who observed that organic agro-tourism strengthens women's entrepreneurship, livelihood diversification, and empowerment in mountain communities. Nath and Athinuwat (2021) similarly found that organic farming enhances women's autonomy, financial independence, and decision-making authority. The present study confirms that tourism integrated with organic farming, local culture, and eco-tourism practices creates multidimensional empowerment opportunities for women in climate-sensitive Himalayan regions. Furthermore, the findings align with Boserup's (2007) argument that women's participation in economic activities is fundamental to broader development transformation and social progress.

However, consistent with critical empowerment perspectives, the findings also reveal that empowerment remains partial and uneven due to persistent structural barriers such as unpaid labour burdens, limited ownership rights, patriarchal social norms, and restricted access to markets, technology, and financial resources. This supports the arguments of Díaz-Carrión and Vizcaíno (2021), who emphasised that gender stereotypes continue to limit women's empowerment within rural tourism systems. Similarly, an argued that participation in tourism alone does not guarantee full empowerment unless accompanied by institutional support, inclusive governance, and gender-sensitive policy interventions. The findings additionally reflect Cesaroni and Sentuti's (2014) argument that women in family-based enterprises often remain concentrated in supportive or invisible roles despite their substantial economic contributions.

Overall, the study concludes that rural tourism possesses substantial potential to function as a transformative pathway for women's socio-economic empowerment in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. Through the lens of Empowerment Theory, rural tourism enhances women's access to resources, strengthens their agency, and improves socio-economic achievements while simultaneously contributing to sustainable community development. When integrated with gender-sensitive policies, digital inclusion, eco-technological training, financial access, and participatory governance, rural tourism can further strengthen women's empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, and social equity, thereby contributing significantly toward Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production.

5.5 Socio-Economic Prospects and Structural Challenges of Women's Empowerment in Rural Tourism

a) Socio-Economic Prospects of the Research

The findings reveal several positive socio-economic prospects arising from women's participation in rural tourism and organic farming in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. Rural Tourism Development (RTD) creates direct and indirect employment opportunities through homestays, handicrafts, agritourism, ecotourism, cultural performances, restaurants, traditional cuisine, organic farming and other locally managed enterprises. These opportunities contribute to household income diversification, financial stability and livelihood resilience, particularly in mountain communities affected by agricultural decline, climate-related pressures and instability in the tea industry.

These findings align with Mukhim and Gautam (2025), who examined women's participation in rural tourism development in Mawlynnong village, Meghalaya. Their study demonstrates that nature-based and rural tourism can provide women with livelihood opportunities, income and greater involvement in community affairs. Although tourism was not the principal source of income for most respondents, women participated directly and indirectly in tourism-related activities and contributed to the conservation of local culture and the natural environment. Similarly, the present research establishes RTD as an important alternative livelihood

mechanism capable of strengthening women's socio-economic position in rural Himalayan communities.

Another important prospect is the enhancement of women's financial independence and entrepreneurial capacity. Women engaged in tourism increasingly contribute to household income, participate in family businesses and establish small enterprises using local resources and indigenous knowledge. Organic farming, traditional cuisine, handicrafts, homestays and Darjeeling tea tourism provide access to specialised markets and premium-pricing opportunities. These activities can improve economic sustainability, self-reliance and women's control over livelihood decisions.

The entrepreneurial implications of the findings are supported by Nayak and Nayak (2025), who investigated sustainable entrepreneurial intentions among 1,250 rural women in India. Their PLS-SEM results showed that perceived capability, individual competencies and social perception significantly influenced sustainable entrepreneurial intention. Social perception was the strongest direct predictor ($\beta = 0.226$), followed by perceived capability ($\beta = 0.103$) and individual competencies ($\beta = 0.052$). Perceived opportunity also mediated these relationships. These findings suggest that rural women are more likely to convert their abilities and competencies into entrepreneurial action when visible, accessible and socially supported business opportunities exist. Rural tourism and organic farming can provide precisely such opportunities in the Himalayan region.

The study also highlights the role of tourism in preserving cultural and ecological resources. Women act as custodians of traditional cuisine, folklore, handicrafts, agricultural knowledge and indigenous environmental practices. Their participation in ecotourism and organic farming contributes to biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture, waste management and environmentally responsible tourism. Mukhim and Gautam (2025) similarly found that women in Mawlynnong demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility for conserving culture and the natural environment. Women's tourism organisations also contributed to community development, cultural preservation and socioeconomic improvement.

The environmental implications are also consistent with Samal and Dash's (2024) bibliometric review of women's participation and gender equality in sustainable ecotourism. Their analysis demonstrates increasing scholarly recognition of ecotourism as a means of supporting women's participation, entrepreneurship, livelihood generation and gender equality. However, as a

bibliometric study, it maps existing research trends rather than directly measuring women's empowerment in a particular community. The present research contributes empirical and context-specific evidence from the Himalayan region of West Bengal to this developing field.

Rural tourism also encourages social inclusion, networking and community participation. Interaction with tourists, self-help groups, local institutions and tourism organisations improves women's communication abilities, social exposure, confidence and collective participation. Capacity-building programmes, digital technologies and improved access to finance can further strengthen their entrepreneurial capabilities and involvement in tourism governance.

The findings therefore demonstrate that women's participation in rural tourism can contribute to several Sustainable Development Goals:

- SDG 5: Gender Equality through women's participation, entrepreneurship and decision-making.
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth through employment and livelihood diversification.
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities through the inclusion of rural and economically marginalised women.
- SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production through organic farming and locally produced tourism products.
- SDG 13: Climate Action through environmentally responsible tourism and sustainable agricultural practices.

Rural tourism consequently represents more than an income-generating activity. It functions as a multidimensional mechanism for women's empowerment, cultural preservation, ecological sustainability and inclusive mountain development.

b) Challenges Identified in the Research

Despite these prospects, the research identifies several structural, social and institutional barriers that restrict transformative empowerment. Women's participation remains concentrated mainly in seasonal, informal, operational and relatively low-paid activities. Leadership positions, enterprise ownership and strategic decision-making are frequently controlled by male family members, community institutions or external tourism operators.

Thus, women may contribute substantial labour to tourism enterprises without obtaining corresponding authority over income, resources and long-term business decisions (Sen et al., 2015).

This pattern corresponds with Mukhim and Gautam's (2025) findings. Although women in Mawlynnong participated actively in tourism-related decisions, their participation was constrained by inadequate information, domestic responsibilities and the continuing influence of male-dominated institutions. Their study also found that 68.8% of the respondents had not received tourism or hospitality training, while only 31.3% had participated in such training. These findings underline the importance of education, leadership development, vocational training and women's representation in tourism institutions.

Patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles constitute another major challenge. Women frequently combine tourism employment with unpaid domestic work, caregiving and agricultural responsibilities, creating a dual burden. Moreover, women's tourism participation is often considered socially acceptable only when it corresponds with conventional household roles such as cooking, cleaning, hosting visitors and producing handicrafts. This restricts women's occupational mobility and entry into management, technology, transportation, marketing and other higher-value tourism activities.

Samal and Dash (2024) similarly identified gender stereotypes, conventional social norms and institutional constraints as recurring themes within women-centred ecotourism research. Although ecotourism can generate employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, women do not automatically receive equal authority, resources or benefits. The authors therefore emphasised the need for further empirical research measuring the actual economic, social and decision-making outcomes experienced by women.

Insufficient education, vocational preparation, digital literacy and business-management skills also constrain women's professional development. Many rural women lack formal training in tourism management, hospitality, digital marketing, financial management and sustainable business practices. These limitations reduce their capacity to expand enterprises, connect with wider markets and benefit from tourism technologies. Inadequate knowledge of government programmes, credit schemes and tourism policies further limits institutional access.

The findings of Nayak and Nayak (2025) help explain this problem. Although perceived capability, competencies and social approval positively influence women's entrepreneurial intentions, these qualities are more likely to produce sustainable entrepreneurship when women can identify and access realistic business opportunities. Consequently, training alone may be insufficient if women lack finance, market connections, institutional support and ownership rights.

Restricted access to land, property, formal credit and tourism resources presents an additional challenge. Financial institutions may require collateral that rural women do not possess, while limited property ownership weakens their ability to secure loans and exercise control over tourism enterprises. Poor roads, inadequate transportation, unreliable digital connectivity and limited market access further constrain women operating in remote Himalayan villages.

Environmental and cultural risks must also be considered. Unregulated tourist growth may increase waste generation, place pressure on water and biodiversity, commercialise indigenous practices and weaken cultural authenticity. Women's traditional ecological knowledge can support sustainable destination management, but their environmental leadership remains restricted when they are excluded from formal institutions and tourism-planning bodies.

Finally, the mediation results of the present study suggest that the empowerment process remains partial rather than fully transformative. Economic participation alone does not automatically generate comprehensive empowerment. Women may earn income without acquiring control over that income, ownership of productive assets, leadership authority or an equal role in community decision-making. Long-term empowerment therefore requires gender-sensitive tourism policies, accessible finance, property rights, digital inclusion, entrepreneurship education, institutional representation and participatory tourism governance.

Overall, the findings are consistent with Mukhim and Gautam (2025), Samal and Dash (2024), and Nayak and Nayak (2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that tourism and sustainable entrepreneurship offer meaningful socioeconomic opportunities for rural women. However, these opportunities will produce transformative empowerment only when economic participation is accompanied by control over resources, entrepreneurial opportunities, institutional inclusion, leadership and decision-making authority.

c) SWOT-Based Evaluation of Research Outcomes

The following SWOT analysis is based on the study's findings on women's participation, socio-economic empowerment, rural tourism development, and organic farming in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.

Table 5.1

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Strong participation of women in homestays, handicrafts, eco-tourism, and organic farming.	Limited control over financial resources and strategic decision-making.	Expansion of eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and tea tourism markets.	Over-commercialisation may threaten cultural authenticity and biodiversity.
Rural tourism generates direct and indirect employment opportunities for women.	Low vocational training, management skills, and digital literacy among women.	Government support through skill development, SHGs, and microfinance initiatives.	Climate change and environmental degradation are affecting mountain livelihoods.
Women contribute significantly to cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.	Women remain concentrated in seasonal and low-paid operational roles.	Growing demand for sustainable tourism and organic products.	Patriarchal norms restricting women's mobility, leadership, and ownership.
Tourism enhances women's confidence, financial independence, and social inclusion.	Limited access to land ownership, property rights, and institutional finance.	Digital transformation and online marketing can expand women-led enterprises.	Dependence on tourism seasonality and market fluctuations.

Table 5.1 shows a SWOT analysis of rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, which creates substantial socio-economic opportunities for women, while structural barriers

and environmental vulnerabilities continue to challenge long-term transformative empowerment.

5.6 Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several targeted suggestions and recommendations are proposed for key stakeholders—policymakers, social workers and NGOs, and tourism professionals—who play a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of rural tourism and women’s empowerment in ecologically sensitive, economically marginalised regions like the Himalayas of West Bengal.

5.6.1 Recommendations for Policymakers

a) Formulate Gender-Inclusive Tourism Policies

There is an urgent need for policies that go beyond encouraging participation to ensuring women's ownership and leadership within the rural tourism sector. This includes integrating women’s voices in the formulation, monitoring, and evaluation of tourism development programs.

b) Recognise and Secure Women’s Ownership Rights

Most women involved in rural tourism do not own land or tourism infrastructure, which limits their ability to make decisions or access credit. Policies should support joint ownership rights, simplified land titling procedures, and women’s access to homestay registration, cooperatives, and enterprise licenses.

c) Strengthen Institutional Frameworks and Incentive Mechanisms

Tourism departments and rural development authorities must coordinate to develop dedicated schemes that support women entrepreneurs through training, microfinance, digital access, and market linkage programs. Budgetary allocations should be made specifically for women-led tourism initiatives.

d) Improve Awareness and Accessibility of Government Schemes

A significant gap exists in policy awareness at the grassroots. Regular information camps, mobile outreach services, and panchayat-level support desks can help women understand and benefit from available state and central schemes in tourism, skill development, and entrepreneurship.

e) Integrate Rural Tourism into Broader Gender and Development Policies

There must be convergence between gender development, rural livelihoods, and sustainable tourism in policymaking. Women's roles in cultural preservation and ecological resilience should be recognised in both tourism and environmental conservation policies.

5.6.2 Recommendations for Social Workers and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

a) Facilitate Capacity Building and Skill Development

Training programs tailored to local contexts are crucial. Women should be equipped with skills in hospitality, cultural narration, eco-guiding, digital marketing, bookkeeping, and sustainable farming, enabling them to professionalise their tourism ventures.

b) Support Formation of Women's Collectives and Cooperatives

NGOs can support the creation of women-led cooperatives, producer groups, or self-help groups that operate collectively in craft production, organic produce sales, and eco-tourism services. These groups can enhance bargaining power, promote resource pooling, and increase economic resilience.

c) Build Leadership Capacity

Social workers must encourage women to take active roles in local governance bodies, tourism committees, and village-level planning institutions. Mentorship programs and exposure visits to successful tourism models can strengthen confidence and leadership skills.

d) Promote Awareness of Rights and Legal Entitlements

Women often lack access to information about legal protections, financial rights, and business support. NGOs should conduct regular legal literacy workshops, rights-based awareness programs, and entrepreneurial counselling.

e) Document and Disseminate Best Practices

NGOs can help scale effective models by documenting successful women-led tourism initiatives, conducting case studies, and disseminating these examples across other rural areas to inspire replication and policy interest.

5.6.3 Recommendations for Tourism Professionals and Entrepreneurs

a) Integrate Local Women into the Tourism Value Chain

Tourism businesses, both local and external, should actively involve women in multiple roles, such as homestay operators, cultural ambassadors, local guides, culinary experts, and producers of handmade goods. This ensures equitable distribution of tourism's benefits.

b) Invest in Quality Training and Service Enhancement

Professionals should support training in hospitality standards, guest management, sustainability practices, and communication skills. Partnerships with vocational institutes and tourism schools can enhance service quality and competitiveness.

c) Promote Ethical and Authentic Commercialisation

Cultural products and experiences offered by women must be respected and marketed authentically, not commodified. Women's cultural and ecological contributions should be presented as **assets**, not as entertainment, preserving dignity and heritage.

d) Foster Responsible Tourism Models

Professionals must champion tourism models that reinvest in the community. Community-based tourism, profit-sharing ventures, and public-private partnerships that include women can contribute to long-term local sustainability.

e) Build Strategic Partnerships with Local Stakeholders

Tourism ventures should build collaborations with panchayats, women's groups, academic researchers, and NGOs to create a well-rounded and inclusive tourism ecosystem that is sustainable, locally owned, and gender responsive.

These recommendations aim to strengthen the framework for gender-inclusive and sustainable rural tourism development. The empowerment of women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal is not only a matter of economic justice but also a strategic imperative for preserving cultural heritage, ensuring ecological sustainability, and achieving inclusive development goals. When properly supported, women are not just participants in tourism, they are leaders, innovators, and custodians of a more equitable and resilient rural future.

5.6.4 Gap and Future Scope of the Research:

While this study has made significant contributions to understanding the role of rural tourism in the socio-economic empowerment of women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, several important dimensions remain underexplored and offer fertile ground for future

research. These gaps are particularly critical given the evolving social, environmental, and policy landscapes in rural and ecologically fragile regions.

a) Socio-Political and Environmental Challenges to Empowerment

This research primarily focused on the economic and cultural dimensions of women's empowerment; however, the broader socio-political challenges—such as mobility restrictions, patriarchal governance structures, political representation, and gender-based violence—require deeper investigation. Additionally, the environmental vulnerabilities associated with climate change, deforestation, and resource degradation pose significant threats to the sustainability of both tourism and empowerment outcomes. Future studies must examine how these structural barriers intersect with women's roles in tourism and how resilience strategies can be embedded in empowerment initiatives.

b) Tourist Behavioural Factors and Destination Loyalty

The motivations, preferences, and satisfaction levels of tourists, especially those interested in sustainable, cultural, or eco-tourism, play a crucial role in the viability of women-led rural tourism ventures. This study did not examine tourist behaviour, perception of authenticity, or destination loyalty, which are important for understanding demand-side dynamics. Future research should analyse how tourist attitudes impact women's income stability, cultural commodification, and service quality expectations in rural destinations.

c) Linking Empowerment to Cultural and Environmental Preservation

While the current research confirms the positive role of women in preserving local culture and ecological knowledge, there is scope for quantitative and comparative studies that explicitly measure how different levels of women's participation influence tangible and intangible heritage as well as environmental stewardship. Research could explore the causal linkages between women's empowerment and long-term cultural sustainability, helping to position women not only as economic actors but also as guardians of heritage and biodiversity.

d) Community Development and Government Policy Impact

Another area requiring focused exploration is the relationship between community-wide development and the effectiveness of government policies and interventions. While this study highlighted policy gaps, it did not delve deeply into how different governance models, benefit-sharing mechanisms, or decentralised planning structures influence the success of women-led tourism. Future work could evaluate policy implementation across districts or states to identify best practices and governance bottlenecks that hinder inclusive development.

e) Human Resource Development for Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

One of the key challenges identified is the lack of capacity and skill development among rural women. The future scope of research must focus on identifying effective models of human resource development (HRD) tailored for the rural tourism sector, including vocational training, leadership mentoring, and technological empowerment. The role of educational institutions, NGOs, and public-private partnerships in building sustainable tourism capacity must be empirically studied.

f) Cross-Community and Cultural Preservation Studies

Given the diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups in the Himalayan region, future research could investigate how different communities preserve their cultural heritage through tourism. Comparative studies across tribal, scheduled caste, and minority groups would provide deeper insights into inclusive heritage preservation, intra-community dynamics, and inter-generational knowledge transfer when guided by structured tourism development.

g) Infrastructure Development through Renewable Energy Integration

This study touches on infrastructure constraints but does not fully explore the role of renewable energy in promoting sustainable tourism infrastructure. Given the ecological sensitivity of the Himalayan region, future research should examine how solar, hydro, and bio-energy systems can be integrated into homestays, community centres, and transportation systems, thereby supporting women's enterprises while reducing environmental footprints.

The research offers a robust foundation for understanding women's empowerment through rural tourism, but the interdisciplinary complexity of this field demands further inquiry. Future studies must move toward intersectional, participatory, and comparative approaches that consider the socio-political environment, infrastructure development, human capital, and market dynamics. Addressing these gaps will enable the creation of inclusive, resilient, and sustainable rural tourism models where women not only participate but thrive as cultural leaders, economic contributors, and environmental stewards.

5.7 Limitations of the Study

While this research provides valuable insights into the socio-economic empowerment of women through rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may have influenced the scope, depth, and generalizability of the findings.

a) Time Constraints

Due to the limited time available for fieldwork and data analysis, the scope of data collection had to be narrowed. The study was conducted within a defined academic timeline, which restricted extended engagement with communities and the possibility of conducting follow-up interviews or focus group discussions that could have enriched the qualitative depth of the study.

b) Educational and Technological Barriers

Many of the respondents, particularly those from remote hill communities, had limited exposure to formal education and technology. As a result, advanced methods such as online surveys, mobile-based data collection tools, or digital platforms could not be utilised. This also meant that certain questions required additional explanation, lengthening the interview process and affecting the uniformity of responses.

c) Time-Consuming Nature of Field Surveys

Given the socio-cultural setting and the need to build rapport with respondents, the field survey process was highly time-consuming. In-person interviews often required repeated visits, especially in cases where women were engaged in daily household or tourism-related tasks, further extending the data collection period.

d) Constraints on Quantitative Research Design

Due to the aforementioned challenges, the study could not fully implement a large-scale quantitative survey, which might have yielded more statistically generalizable results. Instead, a structured survey method was adopted, allowing for both closed and open-ended responses, but limiting the ability to apply certain advanced quantitative analytical techniques.

e) Limited Sample Size and Participation Willingness

While considerable effort was made to reach a representative group, not all targeted respondents were willing or available to participate in the study. Some expressed disinterest or scepticism about the research's relevance to their daily lives. Consequently, the sample size, although substantial, may not fully illustrate the diversity and complexity of women's roles and experiences across all communities in the region.

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APPENDICES

Questionnaire Introduction

Title of Study:

SocioEconomic Empowerment of Women through Rural Tourism in the Himalayan Region of West Bengal

Researcher:

Runa

Das

Doctoral

Scholar

School of Hotel Management and Tourism, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

Supervisor:

Dr. Amrik Singh

School of Hotel Management and Tourism, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

Purpose of the Study:

This research aims to explore and analyse the role of rural tourism in promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women in the Himalayan region of West Bengal. It will assess the extent to which tourism activities have enhanced women's participation in income-generating activities, decision-making, education, entrepreneurship, and community development.

ConfidentialityAssurance:

All the information provided in this questionnaire will be kept strictly confidential and used only for academic research purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous, and no personal details will be disclosed in any publication or report.

VoluntaryParticipation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any stage of the research without any consequences. Your cooperation is highly appreciated and will contribute significantly to understanding rural women's empowerment through tourism development.

Instructions to Respondents:

Please answer each question honestly based on your personal experience or opinion.

You may tick the appropriate boxes or write in the space provided.

The questionnaire is divided into the following sections:

Demographic Information

Involvement in Rural Tourism Activities

Economic Empowerment Indicators

Social and Personal Empowerment Indicators
Challenges

Consent Statement:

I have read and understood the purpose of this research study. I voluntarily agree to participate and provide my responses based on my knowledge and experience.

Signature of Respondent:

Date:

Section A: Sample Characteristics

Age (in years):

- ☐ 20–25
- ☐ 25–30
- ☐ 35–40
- ☐ 40–45
- ☐ 45 above

Marital Status:

- ☐ Married
- ☐ Unmarried

Education:

- ☐ Less than Secondary
- ☐ Secondary
- ☐ Higher Secondary
- ☐ Graduate
- ☐ Vocationally Trained

Language known:

- ☐ Nepali
- ☐ Nepali & Hindi
- ☐ Nepali, Hindi & English
- ☐ Nepali, Hindi, English and Bengali

Occupation:

- ☐ Homestay
- ☐ Travels

- ☐ Restaurant, Souvenir shop
- ☐ Cultural performer
- ☐ Service in a tourism organisation
- ☐ Garden workers, potters, construction labourers, tailors, makeup artists
- ☐ Family Business (home decor, daily use, medicine)
- ☐ Farm and seasonal seller (floriculture, vegetables, tea, fruits, honey, mushrooms, etc.)
- ☐ Service (police, teacher, nurse, others)

Monthly Gross Salary:

- ☐ Less Than Rs 10,000
- ☐ Rs 10,000– 20,000
- ☐ Rs 20,000– 30,000
- ☐ Rs 30,000– 40,000
- ☐ Above Rs 40,000

Financial Independence:

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Partially
- ☐ No

Push Factors (you may tick more than one):

- ☐ Enhance family income
- ☐ Self Empowerment
- ☐ Crisis in a Previous Profession
- ☐ Uplifting livelihood
- ☐ Prevent outmigration

Pull Factors (you may tick more than one):

- ☐ Knowledge of Local Culture and Environment
- ☐ Expertise in Home Management
- ☐ Expertise in Agriculture
- ☐ Communication Skills

Challenges (you may tick more than one):

- ☐ Lack of Management Skills
- ☐ Low Educational Background
- ☐ Lack of Training
- ☐ Lack of knowledge on Government Policy and lack of Support

☐ Domination and Pressure from Outsiders

☐ Absence of Ownership of Property

Section B: Statement

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by ticking the appropriate box:

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly Agree

Women's Participation (WP)

WP1: Women's participation has increased in starting their businesses | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP2: Women's participation has significantly increased in Rural Tourism Development | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP3: Many women members have participated in stable employment directly through rural tourism initiatives | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP4: Women are involved in diverse jobs in rural tourism | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP5: Many women have become homestay hosts, generating a stable income | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP6: Adventure tourism has created new job opportunities specifically for women | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP7: Women are employed as tour guides and hosts in tea tourism | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP8: Women are engaged in farm stays, providing tourists with authentic rural experiences | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP9: Many women in the community have participated in indirect or seasonal activities in rural tourism | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP10: Rural tourism has increased the demand for construction work, indirectly providing jobs for women | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP11: Seasonal tourism has increased women's participation in potters, and craft artists creating indirect jobs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP12: Women's participation has increased in tailors and makeup artists for demand

of traditional clothing and grooming |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP13: Women's participation has increased in the number of cultural programs, creating jobs |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP14: Women's participation in tutorial and health centers, indirectly creates jobs for Women |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

WP15: Women's involvement in cultural tourism has led to greater recognition of their cultural contributions |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

Rural Tourism Development (RTD)

RTD1: Rural tourism has increased community participation in starting their businesses|1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD2: Rural tourism has significantly increased women's participation |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD3: Many community members have participated in stable employment directly through rural tourism initiatives |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD4: Community people are involved in diverse jobs in rural tourism, specifically in the restaurant & souvenir shop |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD5: Many community members have become homestay hosts, and travel agency generating a stable income |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD6: Adventure tourism has created new job opportunities |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD7: Many are employed as tour guides and hosts in tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD8: Community people are engaged in farm stays, providing tourists with authentic rural experiences|1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD9: Indirect employment from rural tourism has boosted the income levels of the community through local businesses

RTD10: Many people in the community have participated in indirect or seasonal activities in rural tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD11: Tourism has led to an increase in sales for regular businesses, indirectly benefiting women entrepreneurs |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD12: Rural tourism has increased the demand for construction work, indirectly providing jobs |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD13: Seasonal tourism has increased the demand for potters, and craft artists creating indirect jobs for women |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD14: The seasonal influx of tourists has increased the demand for tailors and makeup artists for traditional clothing and grooming |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

RTD15: Tourism has increased the number of cultural programs, creating indirect employment for women as performers |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

Direct Employment Generation (DEG)

DEG1: Many women members have participated in stable employment directly through rural tourism initiatives |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

DEG2: Women are involved in diverse jobs in rural tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

DEG3: Many women have become homestay hosts, generating a stable income |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

DEG4: Adventure tourism has created new job opportunities specifically for women |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

DEG5: Women are employed as tour guides and hosts in tea tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

DEG6: Women are engaged in farm stays, providing tourists with authentic rural experiences |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

Indirect Employment Generation(IEG)

IEG1: Indirect employment from rural tourism has boosted the income levels of construction work, indirectly providing jobs for women |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

IEG2: Many women in the community have participated in indirect ways through private and public jobs |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

IEG3: Tourism has led to an increase in participation in nursing, language teaching, waste management etc., indirectly benefiting women entrepreneurs |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

IEG4: Seasonal tourism has increased the demand for regular family businesses and traditional clothing (tailors) and makeup artists |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

IEG5: Seasonal tourism has increased the demand for local farm products and crafts |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

IEG6: Tourism has increased the number of cultural programs, creating indirect employment for women as performers |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

IEG7: The growth of tourism has increased the demand for tutorial and health centres, indirectly creating jobs for women |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

Cultural & Environmental Preservation & Commercialization (CEPC)

CEPC1: Women's involvement in cultural tourism has led to greater recognition of their cultural contributions |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC2: Cultural tourism has provided direct employment opportunities for women as performers, artisans, and guides |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC3: Tourism has increased the demand for locally made products, benefiting women artisans, farmers, and cooks |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC4: Local traditions and customs are maintained and showcased due to rural tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC5: Rural tourism has contributed positively to the preservation of historical sites in the area |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC6: Women's participation has raised awareness about the importance of environmental conservation in our community |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC7: Women's participation has encouraged the sustainable use of natural resources in our area |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC8: The women have adopted better waste management practices due to the influence of rural tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC9: Women's participation in rural tourism has played a role in protecting local wildlife and natural habitats |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC10: Organic farming has created indirect job opportunities for women in conservation and related activities |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

CEPC11: Women have found employment in supporting roles for eco-tourism (e.g., hospitality, guiding) |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women (SEE)

SEE1: Rural tourism has increased the leadership roles of women in the community |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE2: Women's participation in decision-making processes has improved because of rural tourism|1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE3: Employment through rural tourism has improved the overall standard of living in the community |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE4: Women in the community have gained more financial independence due to rural tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE5: Rural tourism has led to increased visibility and recognition of women's contributions to the community |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE6: Women's participation in rural tourism has improved their socio-economic status |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE7: Rural tourism has enabled women to generate income for their family support |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

SEE8: There is greater gender equality due to rural tourism |1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

Thank you

List of Abbreviations

WBTDc–West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation
UNWTO–United Nations World Tourism Organisation
UNESCO–United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
CBT–Community-Based Tourism
SDG–Sustainable Development Goals
SHG–Self-Help Group
HKH’s–Hindu KushHimalayas
EBR–Eastern Bengal Railway
DHR–Darjeeling Himalayan Railway
RE–Renewable Energy
RTD–Rural Tourism Development
WP–Women’s Participation
DEG–Direct Employment Generation
IEG– Indirect Employment Generation
CEPC–Cultural & Environmental Preservation and Commercialisation
SEE–Socio-Economic Empowerment
IoT– Internet of Things

List of Publications

1. **Exploring the Mediating Role of Women's Participation in the Relationship Between Rural Tourism and the Commercialisation and Preservation of Rural Culture and Natural Beauty**
International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope (2026)
DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i01.08828
Authors: Runa Das, Amrik Singh, Harmanpreet Kaur, Narender Suhag, & Kankan Roy
2. **Women's Participation in Cultural Preservation and Commercialization of Rural Tourism: A Study on West Bengal**
In Navigating Mass Tourism to Island Destinations: Preservation and Cultural Heritage Challenges (2025)
DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9107-5.ch012
Authors: Amrik Singh & Runa Das
3. **Opportunities and Threats for Women Entrepreneurs in Remote Rural Tourism**
Book Chapter (2025)
DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-1097-8.ch003
Authors: Runa Das & Amrik Singh
4. **Homestay Initiative**
Book Chapter (2025)
DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-0427-4.ch010
Authors: Runa Das, Amrik Singh, & Kankan Roy
5. **Exploring Tourism Opportunities in the Metaverse and Technology Era**
Book Chapter (2025)
DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9005-4.ch007
Authors: Amrik Singh & Runa Das
6. **Sustainable Travel Behaviour Among Women Tourists Visiting Rural Destinations**
Book Chapter (2024)
DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9636-0.ch013
Authors: Runa Das & Amrik Singh
7. **Demographic, Economic and Psychological Drivers of Women's Participation in Rural Tourism in Darjeeling District, West Bengal, India**
Journal of Event, Tourism and Hospitality Studies (2024)
DOI: 10.32890/jeth2024.4.10
Authors: Runa Das & Kankan Roy

List of Conferences

Year	Conference / Event	Topic Presented	Organizer	Role
2022	3rd International Conference on <i>Enterprise and Entrepreneurialism in Tourism and Hospitality</i>	“Effect of Rural Tourism on Sustainable Women Empowerment – Focus on the Darjeeling District of West Bengal”	Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, <u>Jamia Millia Islamia</u> , supported by <u>Ministry of Tourism, Government of India</u>	Paper Presenter / Research Scholar
2023	4th International Conference on <i>Sustainable Developmental Goals and Management Practices (SDGMP 2023)</i>	“Sustaining Rural Tourism Development Through Women Participation: A Case Study on Two Villages in Darjeeling District in West Bengal, India”	School of Hotel Management & Tourism, <u>Lovely Professional University</u>	Paper Presenter / Research Scholar
2024	5th International Conference on <i>Sustainable Development Goals and Tourism (SDGT 2024)</i>	“Role of Rural Tourism in Facilitating Women's Empowerment in Isolated Villages of Two Districts in West Bengal, India”	School of Hotel Management and Tourism, <u>Lovely Professional University</u>	Paper Presenter / Research Scholar

List of Workshop

Year	Duration	Title	Institute
2021-2022	07/09/2021 to 11/09/2021	AICTE Training and Learning (ATAL) Academy F.D.P. on “Research Ethics”	Doctor Harassing Gourd Vishwavidyalaya Sagar
	06/12/2021 to 10/12/2021	AICTE Training and Learning (ATAL) Academy F.D.P. on “Responsible Tourism in the New Normal”	Jamia Millia Islamia
	26/08/2021, to 01/09/ 2021	Faculty Development Programme on “Research Methodology in Management, Commerce and Humanities”	Daly College of Business Management, Research Foundation India
	Workshop / Training Session	“Accepted or Rejected? Understanding the Journal Review Process”	Emerald Publishing
2022-2023	06/01/2022, to 15/01/2022	Short-Term Course on “Research Methodology and Data Analysis”	Lovely Professional University
	5/05/2023 to 6/05/2023	Short-term course: data analysis using SPSS	Rehoboth Academic Service

Photos on the Rural Tourism of the Himalayan Region in West Bengal: taken by the author during the survey

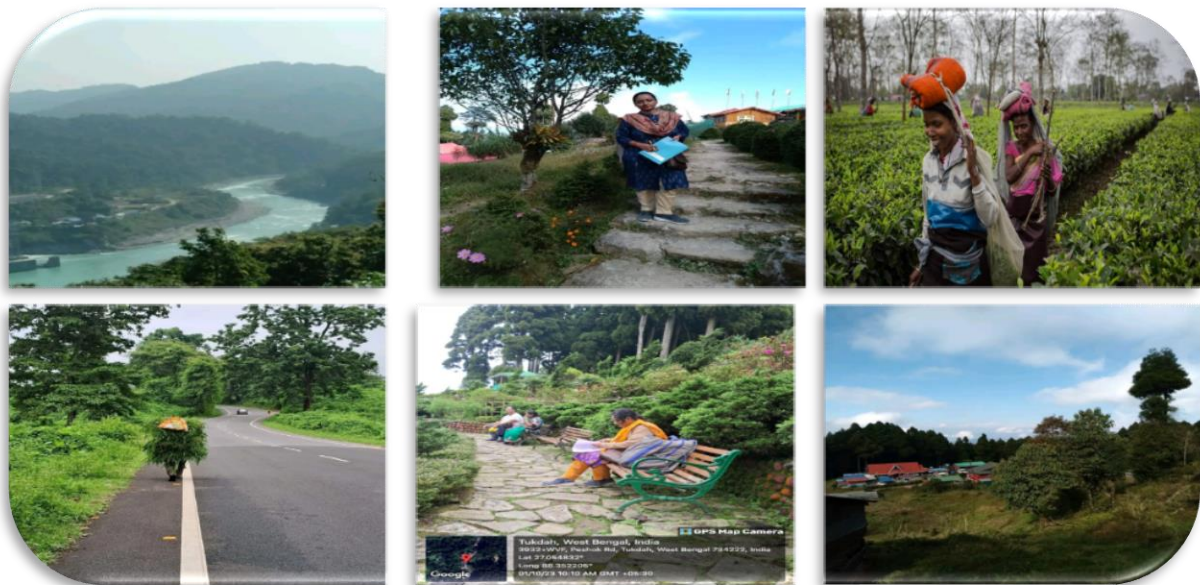


Image1

Image 1 represents popular tourist villages in Darjeeling, located within the **Senchal** and **Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuaries**, which are renowned for their farm stays and organic produce. As observed in Falk, Hagsten, and Lin (2024), villages near large forests and high mountains, such as these, exhibited greater resilience to the COVID-19 tourism shock, with effects lasting into 2021.

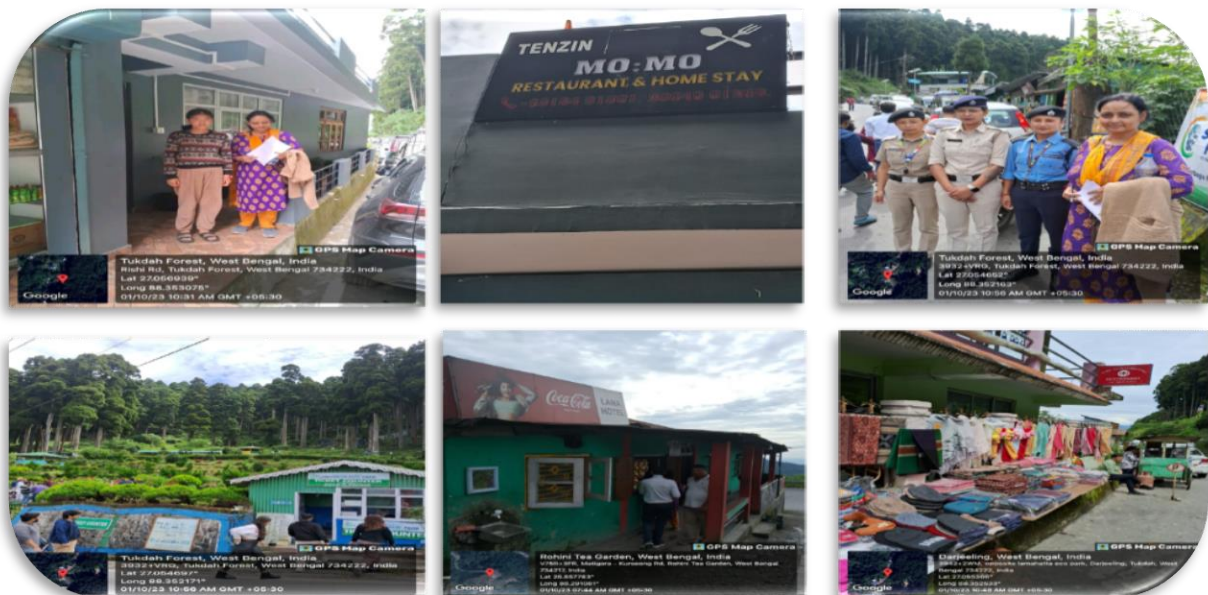


Image 2

Image 2 represents that rural tourism in the Himalayan region of West Bengal creates direct employment opportunities for local women through homestays, roadside restaurants, handicraft shops, travel services, and government tourism-related jobs such as tourist police and local tourism support services.

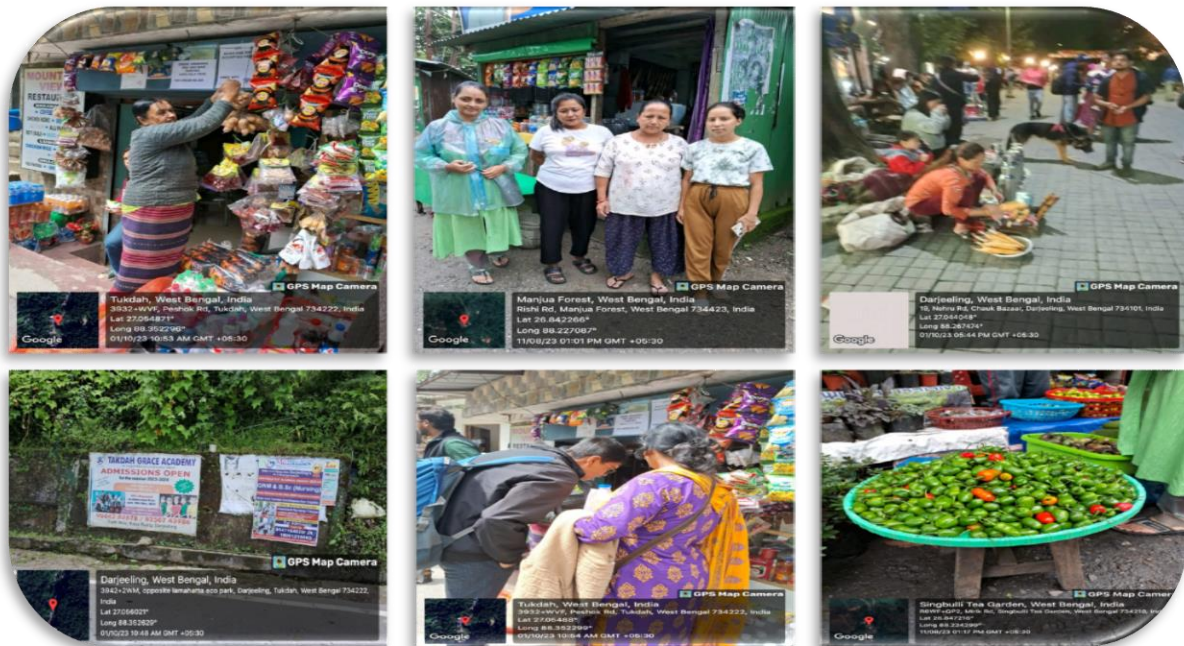


Image 3

Image 3 represents that rural tourism supports indirect and seasonal livelihood opportunities for local Women through roadside restaurants, tea stalls, small daily-use shops, paid washroom facilities, coaching centres for nursing, language learning, and hospitality management, as well as the seasonal sale of agricultural, floricultural, and local food products: street food vending and small-scale enterprises operated by self-help groups and individual entrepreneurs.

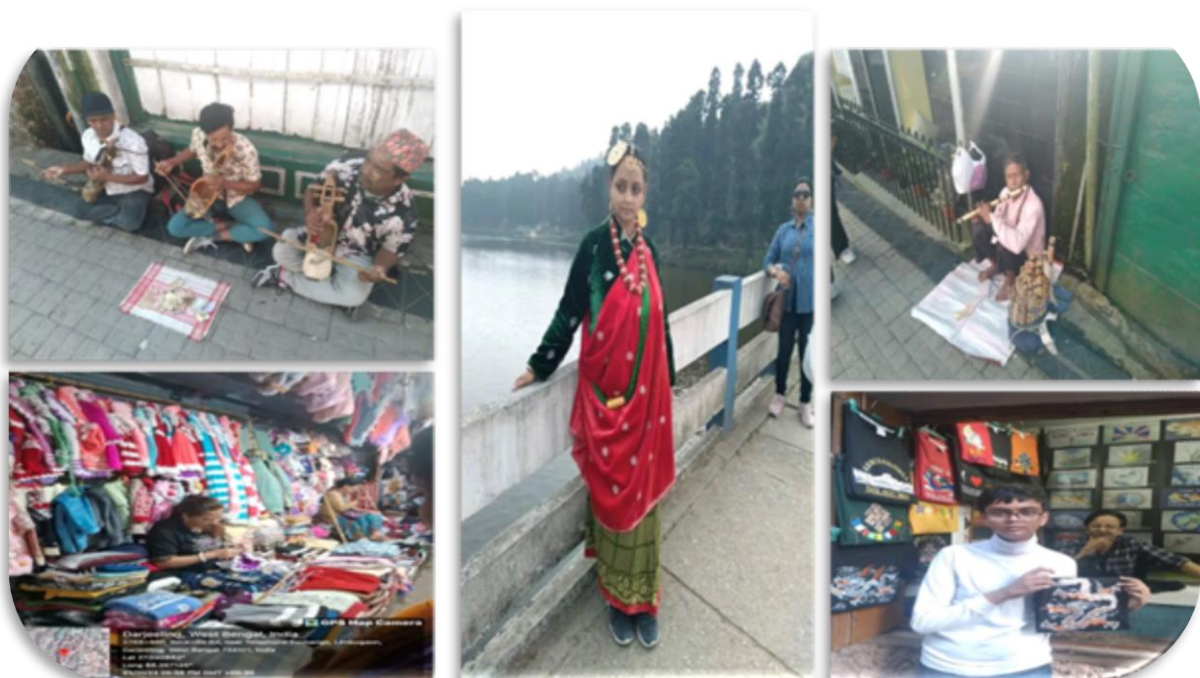


Image 4

Image 4 represents that rural tourism contributes to the preservation and commercialisation of local culture through traditional music performances, handmade woollen garments, tailoring of ethnic dresses and symbolic cultural costumes, and the hiring of traditional attire for tourist photography. These activities help sustain indigenous art, craftsmanship, and cultural identity while generating income and employment opportunities for local communities and artisans.

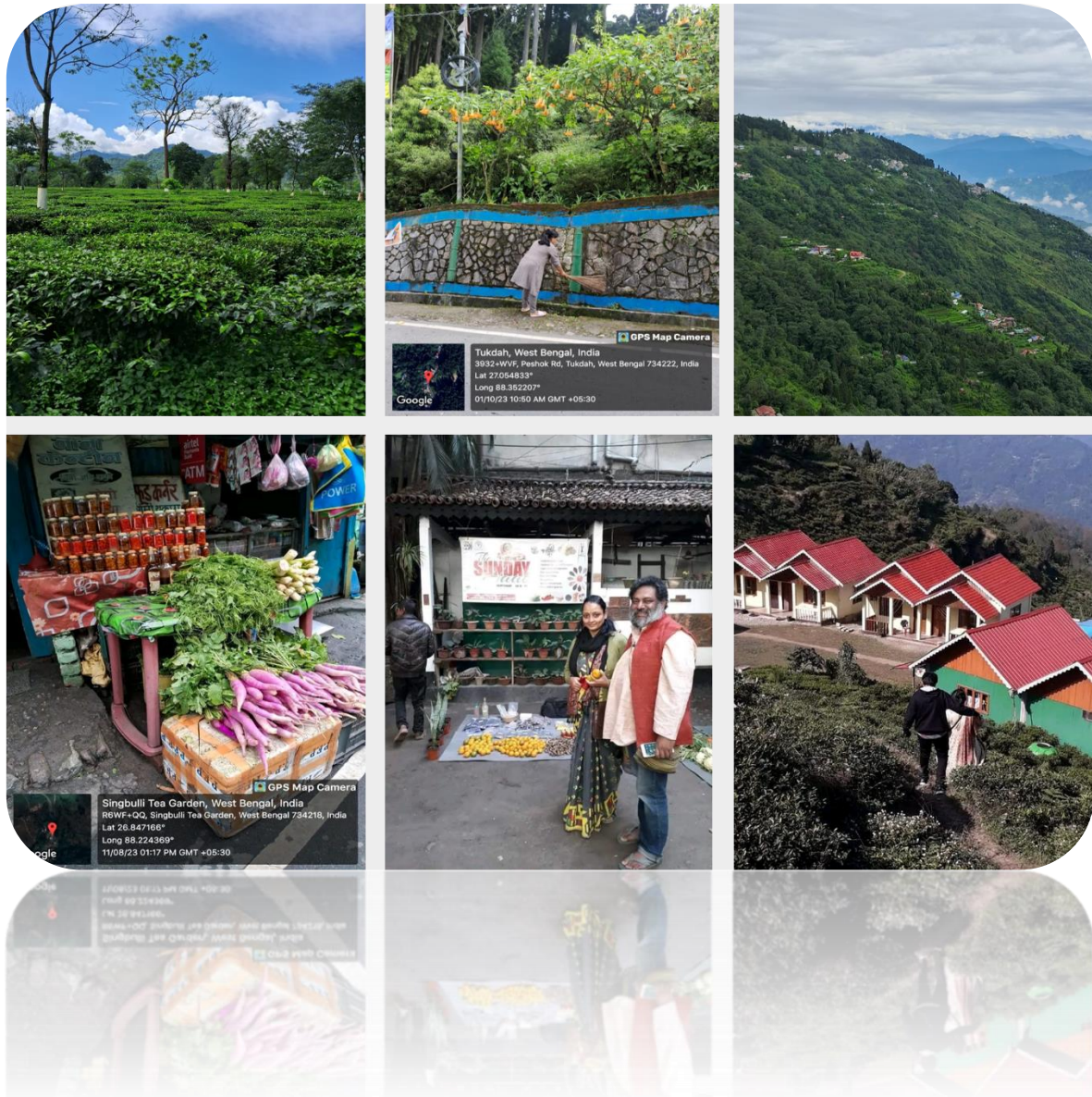


Image 5

Image 5 illustrates that women's participation in rural tourism contributes to environmental preservation and sustainable commercialisation through tea tourism, farm tourism, organic farming, local vegetable and agro-product vending, waste management activities, and eco-friendly tourism initiatives such as birdwatching centres and nature-based homestays. Women-led organisations and community groups play a significant role in promoting organic products, maintaining environmental cleanliness, conserving natural landscapes, and supporting sustainable livelihood development in the Himalayan region of West Bengal.