

Women Entrepreneurs as Custodians of Cultural Heritage in Indian Tourism: A Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical exploration of the role of women entrepreneurs as custodians of cultural heritage in the context of Indian tourism. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the analysis integrates perspectives from feminist theory, cultural capital theory, sustainable tourism theory, and entrepreneurship theory. India provides the contextual backdrop, given its rich tapestry of cultural heritage and the growing involvement of women in tourism entrepreneurship. The paper argues that women-led ventures in tourism serve a dual purpose: they create economic opportunities and simultaneously preserve and promote traditional culture. By drawing solely on established literature and theoretical frameworks, the study delineates how women entrepreneurs leverage cultural knowledge and social capital to develop sustainable tourism businesses. Key insights highlight that these entrepreneurs often operate with an embedded social mission of cultural preservation, reflecting principles of sustainable tourism and challenging gender norms through their leadership. The discussion further examines public policy implications, suggesting that gender-responsive and culturally aware policies are crucial to support women in these roles. This theoretical analysis underscores the significance of empowering women entrepreneurs for the dual goals of heritage conservation and inclusive tourism development in India.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Women Entrepreneurship, Cultural Custodianship

Introduction

Tourism in India is one of the most visible manifestations of its cultural richness. Beyond the globally renowned monuments such as the Taj Mahal, Jaipur's palaces, or Kerala's backwaters, the essence of Indian tourism lies in its cultural heritage: festivals, folklore, performing arts, cuisines, textiles, oral traditions, and everyday practices. Cultural tourism, as defined by UNWTO, is travel motivated by an interest in learning, experiencing, and participating in the living traditions of host communities. In India, cultural tourism forms

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a significant proportion of the overall industry, attracting both domestic and international travelers who seek authentic engagement with traditions that are centuries old yet vibrantly alive.

Within this cultural tourism landscape, women are playing an increasingly central role. Globally, women constitute about 59% of the tourism workforce (UNWTO, 2019), but they are often concentrated in lower-paid or informal roles. In India, however, an emergent trend is the movement of women from wage-based positions into entrepreneurship. From running heritage homestays in Himachal Pradesh and Assam, to guiding walking tours in historic towns like Varanasi and Pondicherry, to managing handicraft cooperatives in Rajasthan, women entrepreneurs are not only contributing to the tourism economy but also sustaining cultural traditions.

This development is significant in a country that has historically grappled with gender inequality in economic participation. According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2022*, India ranks relatively low in female labour force participation. Yet tourism offers accessible entry points for women because of its community orientation, reliance on local resources, and cultural embeddedness. Women bring not just managerial skills but also intimate cultural knowledge that is invaluable in designing authentic experiences for tourists.

This paper undertakes a theoretical analysis of how women entrepreneurs in Indian tourism function as custodians of cultural heritage. It draws exclusively on literature and conceptual frameworks rather than empirical data. The goal is to synthesize insights from feminist theory, cultural capital theory, sustainable tourism theory, and entrepreneurship theory to construct an interpretive model of women's entrepreneurship in tourism as a process of cultural custodianship. The analysis explores not only the socio-economic empowerment dimension but also the broader societal implications of women preserving and transmitting cultural heritage through entrepreneurial ventures.

The structure of the paper is as follows: a review of existing literature on gender, tourism, and cultural custodianship; an elaboration of the four theoretical frameworks; an analysis of the Indian context with illustrative examples; a discussion of policy implications; and a conclusion that consolidates insights and outlines future directions.

1. Literature Review

2.1 Women in Tourism and Entrepreneurship

Research consistently demonstrates that tourism is a feminized sector in terms of labour but not leadership. Women make up a large share of the workforce, yet they are underrepresented as entrepreneurs or decision-makers (UNWTO, 2019; UNWTO, 2021). A growing body of literature has examined the shift of women into entrepreneurial roles, noting that such ventures often embed social and cultural missions.

Rosca et al. (2020) and Figueroa-Domecq et al. (2024) highlight that women-led tourism enterprises frequently prioritize cultural authenticity, community well-being, and sustainability alongside profit. These businesses reinvest in their communities, emphasize inclusive participation, and value cultural traditions. However, barriers persist: women face limited access to finance, structural discrimination in business networks, and the double burden of balancing domestic responsibilities with entrepreneurial demands (Pettersson et al., 2017).

2.2 Women as Custodians of Culture

Anthropological and cultural studies underline women's role as primary transmitters of intangible heritage oral traditions, crafts, rituals, and cuisines. This custodial function naturally extends to tourism when women build businesses rooted in cultural practices. Ojong et al. (2021) and Simba et al. (2024) document how women entrepreneurs design experiences such as cooking classes, handicraft workshops, and storytelling tours that preserve and promote traditions. Altinay et al. (2025) go further, describing women tourism entrepreneurs as "vital agents of cultural continuity."

There is caution about cultural commodification. Scholars warn that transforming heritage into a market product risk diluting meaning, oversimplifying traditions, or exploiting culture for short-term gain. Women entrepreneurs, due to their embeddedness in community, often strive to maintain authenticity, but they require institutional support to navigate these pressures.

2.3 Sustainable Tourism and Women's Empowerment

The literature on sustainable tourism emphasizes the integration of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. Cultural heritage is identified as a crucial pillar, and local stakeholder engagement is considered central (Stylianou et al., 2025). Community-based tourism initiatives that involve women have demonstrated benefits such as poverty alleviation, cultural revitalization, and gender empowerment.

Surti et al. (2024) review the role of women in culture-based creative industries, concluding that empowering women enhances both heritage conservation and economic competitiveness. However, structural barriers ranging from exclusion from decision-making to lack of resources remain widespread. The review calls for multi-stakeholder support to sustain women's cultural enterprises.

Collectively, the literature suggests that women's entrepreneurship in tourism is uniquely positioned at the intersection of economic development, cultural preservation, and gender empowerment. However, theoretical integration remains limited, particularly in the Indian context. This paper addresses that gap by applying multiple theoretical perspectives.

2. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory provides critical insights into how gender structures shape and are reshaped by women's entrepreneurial engagement in tourism. At its core, feminist analysis emphasizes power relations, gender norms, and the transformative potential of women's agency. Tourism entrepreneurship allows women to move into visible leadership roles, challenging patriarchal restrictions.

Social feminism is particularly relevant: it argues that women's approaches to entrepreneurship are shaped by their lived experiences and relational orientation. Women often prioritize cooperation, community benefits, and social equity. In cultural tourism, this is evident when female entrepreneurs design experiences that highlight collective traditions rather than individualistic consumption. Women-led enterprises thus become both sites of economic participation and platforms for negotiating gender norms.

3.2 Cultural Capital Theory

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and competencies that confer social and economic advantages (Bourdieu, 1986). Women entrepreneurs in tourism often possess deep knowledge of local languages, crafts, culinary practices, or rituals. By converting this cultural capital into entrepreneurial ventures, they transform intangible heritage into tangible economic value.

This perspective also highlights inequities: whose cultural capital is recognized and rewarded? Women from marginalized communities may possess rich traditions but struggle to access markets. When tourism validates their knowledge, it elevates both their heritage and their social status. Cultural capital theory thus illuminates the dual process of heritage valorization and social mobility.

3.3 Sustainable Tourism Theory

Sustainable tourism emphasizes balance: between economic growth, cultural preservation, and community well-being. Women entrepreneurs who embed cultural custodianship into their business models exemplify this balance. Their enterprises often involve community participation, intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and environmentally sensitive practices.

For example, when women reinvest tourism profits into cultural festivals, or invite elders to teach traditional crafts, they ensure cultural continuity. Sustainable tourism theory underscores that such practices safeguard resources not just for current use but for future generations (Stylianou et al., 2025).

3.4 Entrepreneurship Theory

Entrepreneurship theory views entrepreneurs as innovators who identify overlooked opportunities, mobilize resources, and create value. Women cultural entrepreneurs fit this description: they recognize the market potential of local traditions and creatively transform them into tourism products.

Social entrepreneurship theory is particularly pertinent. Many women-led ventures in tourism have explicit social or cultural missions in addition to profit. They seek to benefit communities, preserve traditions, and empower women. Gender-aware entrepreneurship research also notes that women often rely on relational networks and incremental growth patterns observable in many Indian tourism enterprises.

Together, these four theories provide a multi-layered lens to analyse women's role as cultural custodians in Indian tourism.

3. Indian Context and Analysis

4.1 Women-led Cultural Tourism Initiatives

India offers vivid illustrations of women entrepreneurs transforming cultural capital into sustainable tourism ventures. In Jaipur, the Pink City Rickshaw Company trains women from marginalized communities to offer heritage tours. These women guide tourists through historical neighbourhoods, combining economic empowerment with cultural storytelling.

In rural Rajasthan, initiatives like Sunder Rang in Chandelao village enable women artisans to sustain embroidery and craft traditions by selling directly to tourists. In Madhya Pradesh, government-supported

homestay programs have empowered women such as Uma Pathak in Orchha to host travelers, blending cultural immersion with women's economic autonomy.

In Kerala, women's self-help groups have developed tourism products ranging from cooking lessons to guided walks. These ventures not only generate income but also reinforce community cohesion and pride in heritage.

4.2 Impact on Gender Norms

These initiatives often disrupt conventional gender roles. In conservative areas, women stepping into public-facing roles guides, drivers, or business owners challenge long-held norms. Their success fosters community acceptance and gradually reshapes attitudes toward women's capabilities.

4.3 Persistent Challenges

Despite successes, Indian women entrepreneurs in tourism face challenges:

- I. Social resistance and patriarchal norms
- II. Safety concerns and mobility constraints
- III. Lack of training in business and foreign languages
- IV. Limited access to finance and bureaucratic hurdles

However, supportive structures are emerging. NGOs, government schemes, and international organizations are providing training, microcredit, and policy frameworks that encourage women's participation.

4.4 Opportunities in Cultural Diversity

India's vast cultural diversity offers countless opportunities for women-led cultural tourism. From the weaving traditions of the Northeast to the culinary heritage of Gujarat, women entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to present authentic experiences. The challenge lies in scaling up these ventures without compromising cultural integrity.

4. Public Policy Implications

5.1 Gender-Inclusive Tourism Planning: Integrate women's empowerment goals into tourism policies and development plans. National and state tourism strategies should include measures to increase women-

led enterprises and ensure women benefit from tourism growth (Nagar, 2023). This can include gender budgeting for tourism programs and representation of women in tourism decision-making bodies.

5.2 Capacity Building and Education: Implement training programs tailored for women in tourism – covering business skills, hospitality, language, and digital marketing. Such programs help equip women to start and manage ventures confidently. Mentorship networks and resource centers can further support aspiring women entrepreneurs.

5.3 Financial Support and Incentives: Improve women's access to credit and grants for cultural tourism projects. Policies could offer low-interest loans, microfinance schemes, or seed funding specifically for women-owned tourism businesses. Simplifying loan processes and allowing group-based lending (via women's self-help groups) can reduce financial barriers.

5.4 Safe and Enabling Infrastructure: Ensure that tourism work environments are safe and gender-friendly. This includes developing women-only or safe transportation options, adequate sanitation facilities, and anti-harassment mechanisms in tourist areas. By addressing safety and mobility concerns, policies encourage more women to participate in tourism employment and entrepreneurship.

5.5 Market Access and Partnerships: Support women entrepreneurs in reaching broader markets. Tourism boards can promote women-led enterprises in official marketing campaigns and include them in tourism circuits. Public-private partnerships can connect women's cooperatives with tour operators and hotels, integrating their services into mainstream tourism supply chains. Facilitating online platforms for women artisans and tour hosts to sell experiences can also expand their customer base.

5.6 Recognition and Monitoring: Establish awards or certification for sustainable, women-led tourism initiatives that preserve heritage, to raise their profile. Continuously monitor the participation of women in tourism and the outcomes of empowerment programs (e.g., increases in women-owned businesses, income levels, cultural heritage indicators). Using this data, refine policies to address gaps ensuring that the progress of women entrepreneurs as cultural custodians is sustained and scaled across India.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals a synergy between gender empowerment and cultural heritage preservation in the tourism domain. Viewing women's tourism entrepreneurship through multiple theoretical lenses has shown that these ventures are multifaceted in their impact. They generate economic value, advance social equity, and safeguard cultural assets, aligning with the core objectives of sustainable development. In academic

terms, this finding supports calls for a more holistic approach to tourism development – one that concurrently addresses gender, culture, and community well-being, rather than treating them as separate silos. By applying feminist theory, we see that women’s increased agency in tourism has broader implications for social change in patriarchal contexts. Cultural capital theory elucidates how local traditions and knowledge are not just cultural endowments but also economically viable resources in the entrepreneurial process. Sustainable tourism theory validates that community-led, culturally focused tourism is a resilient and responsible form of development. And classical entrepreneurship theory is enriched by these insights, suggesting that opportunity recognition in tourism often involves a social-cultural dimension (not merely a market gap but a “mission” to protect heritage). In sum, the theoretical integration affirms that empowering women as cultural custodians can create a positive feedback loop – empowered women foster sustainable cultural tourism, which in turn further empowers communities and women.

While the narrative is largely optimistic, a critical perspective is necessary to temper over-idealization. One must acknowledge that the expectation for women to be “saviors” of culture can place a heavy burden on them. Many of these entrepreneurs perform a delicate balancing act: they must satisfy tourist expectations and run viable businesses, yet also uphold authenticity and community values. Without sufficient support, this can lead to stress or compromises, such as simplifying a tradition to please tourists or overextending themselves with work and community obligations. Additionally, not all cultural practices can or should be commercialized – some heritage elements are sacred or deeply personal to communities. A feminist lens reminds us that women should have the autonomy to decide which aspects of their culture to share and which to keep within the community. Thus, stakeholders must ensure that women are not exploited or overburdened in the name of cultural tourism. Providing cooperatives, training in business management, and ensuring that tourism development is community-led (so that women have a collective voice) can mitigate these risks.

This theoretical exploration also points to avenues for further research and action. Empirical studies in India could build on these insights by examining diverse regional contexts – for example, how women-led cultural tourism plays out in northeastern tribal areas versus southern temple towns to refine our understanding. Longitudinal research might investigate how sustained involvement in tourism influences women’s status over time and whether it leads to measurable cultural preservation outcomes (such as revival of crafts or languages). From a policy and practitioner standpoint, the discussion highlights that multi-sector collaboration is key: tourism officials, gender advocacy groups, and cultural heritage organizations should work in tandem to design programs that empower women and protect heritage. In



doing so, they would operationalize the theoretical ideals presented here. So, ensuring the longevity and success of women entrepreneurs as custodians of cultural heritage will require continuous learning and adaptation – drawing on both scholarly evidence and on-the-ground feedback. The present analysis offers a conceptual foundation, and it underlines that when women thrive as cultural custodians in tourism, the benefits reverberate widely enriching the tourism experience, strengthening community fabric, and moving societies toward greater equality and sustainability.

7. Conclusion

Women entrepreneurs in Indian tourism exemplify how economic participation and cultural preservation can reinforce each other. By embedding heritage into business models, women ensure traditions remain vibrant while simultaneously advancing their socio-economic standing. Their enterprises provide living archives of culture, vehicles of gender empowerment, and models of sustainable tourism.

Realizing this potential at scale requires supportive policies, training, finance, and safe infrastructure. With such support, women entrepreneurs can continue to serve as cultural custodians whose impact extends beyond tourism to broader goals of inclusive growth and heritage conservation.

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