



**ECO-TOURISM AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRIBAL  
WOMEN: AN APPROACH TO THE CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY  
IN HARSCHANDRAGAD - KALSUBAI WILDLIFE SANCTUARY**

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**ABSTRACT:**

*Eco-tourism, a sustainable tourism model, plays a crucial role in conserving biodiversity, empowering local communities, and promoting sustainable development. This paper explores the potential of eco-tourism in the Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS), an eco-sensitive zone in the Western Ghats of India, focusing on the employment opportunities it offers to tribal women. The study investigates how eco-tourism can be leveraged to protect the biodiversity of the sanctuary while providing economic benefits to tribal communities, especially women. This research paper outlines the potential of eco-tourism as a tool for biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development, with a special focus on empowering tribal women in the Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary.*

**INTRODUCTION:**

**Ecotourism: an Approach to the Conservation of Biodiversity:**

Eco-tourism is an approach that promotes conservation while simultaneously enhancing the livelihoods of local communities. The Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS) is an ecologically significant area in the Western Ghats of India, hosting diverse flora and fauna. However, the sanctuary's biodiversity is under threat due to increasing human activities, including deforestation and overexploitation of forest resources. The indigenous tribes residing in the

region, particularly the Thakar and Mahadev-Koli tribes, traditionally rely on agriculture and forestry for their livelihoods. Eco-tourism, with its focus on sustainability, offers a promising solution to mitigate these threats while creating employment opportunities, particularly for tribal women.

The sanctuary is part of the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot, and is home to a range of endangered species. In addition to its ecological significance, this area also has the potential to become a hub for eco-tourism, which can aid in conservation efforts while providing economic

benefits to local communities. Eco-tourism is defined as environmentally responsible travel to natural areas that preserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people. Its benefits include environmental awareness, income generation, and the creation of alternative livelihoods for communities traditionally dependent on resource extraction.

**OBJECTIVES:**

1. To assess the potential of eco-tourism in protecting the biodiversity of Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary.
2. To explore the role of eco-tourism in creating employment opportunities for tribal women.
3. To suggest sustainable strategies for eco-tourism development that aligns with the conservation of the region's biodiversity.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

Present study is carried out with the help of secondary data resources and observations made in KWS during January 2024.

**Study Area: Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary:**

The Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary, situated in the Western Ghats, spans over 1,080 square kilometers and serves as a crucial habitat for various endangered species. It is a biodiversity hotspot, recognized by the Indian government for its

ecological importance. The sanctuary includes lush forests, diverse wildlife, and several natural attractions. The flora consists of medicinal herbs, tropical trees, and shrubs, while the fauna includes species such as leopards and various birds and reptiles. This region is also home to indigenous communities, notably the Mahadev-Koli and Thakar tribes, who have lived in the forests for generations.

The tribes have historically relied on forest resources for their livelihood. However, modern challenges such as deforestation and economic marginalization have affected their way of life. The Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary, as an eco-sensitive zone, provides an opportunity to protect the natural environment while fostering socio-economic development through eco-tourism, particularly for tribal women.

**Tribal Communities in the Region:**

The Mahadev-Koli and Thakar tribes, which make up nearly 48% of the local population, face socio-economic challenges. These communities traditionally depend on the forests for sustenance, engaging in agriculture, fishing, and gathering forest products. Despite the implementation of welfare policies, they continue to face issues such as limited access to education, healthcare, and financial resources. Many tribal women are excluded from mainstream economic activities, but eco-tourism presents a significant

opportunity for empowerment. The Mahadev-Koli and Thakar tribes have rich cultural traditions, including traditional dances, songs, and agricultural practices. The introduction of eco-tourism could offer opportunities to integrate tribal women into the workforce, enhancing their economic standing and preserving their cultural heritage.

### **Insights into the Traditional customs, Beliefs, and Socio-political Transformations of Tribes:**

The Mahadev Koli tribe, a subgroup of the broader Koli community, is known for its patrilineal kinship system, agricultural lifestyle, and deep connection to forests. Their religious practices blend Hinduism and animism, with a focus on worshipping deities like Mahadev (Shiva) and Bhairav, as well as practicing ancestor worship. Cultural expressions such as traditional dances, songs, and marriage rituals play an essential role in maintaining their social fabric.

Similarly, the Thakar tribe follows a patrilineal social structure and is primarily involved in agriculture and forest-based activities. They too maintain a strong religious connection to Shiva and Bhavani, incorporating animistic beliefs and ancestor worship into their rituals. The Thakars are also skilled in weaving, basket-making, and pottery, and their folk dances remain central to cultural life.

The tribes have faced significant historical challenges, particularly during the British colonial era, which introduced exploitative land policies and forest laws, leading to land alienation and economic hardship. Post-independence, government welfare programs did not fully address the unique needs of the tribes, further disrupting their traditional way of life and leading to migration for economic opportunities.

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 was a significant development for both tribes, as it granted them legal recognition of their forest land rights, though implementation challenges continue. Despite these difficulties, the Mahadev Koli and Thakar tribes have managed to preserve their cultural identity while adapting to modern pressures such as market-oriented agriculture and urban migration. Today, they continue to balance cultural preservation with modern development efforts. The Mahadev Koli and Thakar tribes represent resilient cultures that have navigated complex historical and socio-economic changes. Their efforts to preserve their traditions amidst modernization emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting their cultural heritage.

### **THE ROLE OF ECO-TOURISM IN BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION:**

Eco-tourism can contribute to biodiversity conservation by:

1. **Promoting Environmental Awareness:** Visitors learn about the region's unique flora and fauna, fostering support for conservation efforts.
2. **Funding Conservation Projects:** Entrance fees and eco-tourism activities can provide critical funding for wildlife protection, habitat restoration, and anti-poaching efforts.
3. **Reducing Deforestation:** By creating alternative livelihoods, eco-tourism can reduce dependence on deforestation-causing activities like illegal logging.

**EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRIBAL WOMEN:**

Eco-tourism can create various employment opportunities for tribal women, including:

1. **Community-Based Tourism Initiatives:** Women can be trained as local guides, sharing knowledge of traditional medicinal plants, wildlife, and cultural practices.
2. **Handicrafts and Cultural Tourism:** Women can create and sell traditional handicrafts such as bamboo products, jewelry, and textiles.
3. **Hospitality and Services:** Women can manage homestays, food stalls, and local shops, providing tourists with an immersive cultural experience.

4. **Environmental Education:** Women can participate in organizing workshops, cultural events, and conservation campaigns.

**CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING ECO-TOURISM:**

1. **Balancing Conservation and Development:** Eco-tourism must be carefully managed to avoid overexploitation of the sanctuary's natural resources.
2. **Sustainability Issues:** Ensuring the long-term sustainability of eco-tourism requires investment in training and continuous community participation.
3. **Social and Cultural Impact:** The introduction of eco-tourism could disrupt traditional lifestyles and introduce challenges in adapting to new forms of employment.

**STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE ECO-TOURISM:**

1. **Community Involvement:** Local tribal communities should actively participate in decision-making, tour planning, and revenue-sharing models.
2. **Training and Capacity Building:** Tribal women should receive regular training in hospitality, guiding, and conservation.
3. **Eco-Friendly Infrastructure:** Infrastructure should prioritize sustainability, such as solar-

powered facilities and low-impact accommodations.

- 4. Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regular assessments will help ensure that eco-tourism remains environmentally sustainable.

#### ENTREPRENEURSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRIBAL WOMEN:

Beyond employment, eco-tourism offers entrepreneurial opportunities, such as:

- 1. Handicraft Production:** Women can engage in the production and marketing of Warli art, bamboo crafts, and textiles.
- 2. Eco-Friendly Products:** Women can produce and sell eco-friendly products like natural soaps and cosmetics.
- 3. Agro-Tourism:** Tribal women can participate in organic farming and offer farm stays to tourists.

#### CHALLENGES IN EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

- 1. Access to Capital:** Tribal women often lack access to credit to start their businesses. Microfinance or government grants can provide the necessary support.
- 2. Skills and Training:** Formal education and training programs are needed to build the skills necessary for success in eco-tourism and entrepreneurship.

- 3. Cultural Barriers:** Social norms may restrict women's participation in public life, requiring community support for their involvement.

#### CONCLUSION:

The Harschandragad - Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary holds significant potential for eco-tourism to contribute to biodiversity conservation and provide sustainable livelihoods for tribal women. By carefully balancing conservation goals with community development, eco-tourism can offer significant ecological and economic benefits. Success in this endeavor will require comprehensive planning, community engagement, and a commitment to sustainability. Through eco-tourism, the sanctuary can protect its natural heritage while empowering the indigenous women who call it home.

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