



ROLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN STRENGTHENING ECO-TOURISM AND COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Eco-tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) have emerged as powerful tools for sustainable tourism development in India. The Government of India and various state governments have introduced policies, schemes, and institutional mechanisms to promote environmentally responsible tourism and empower local communities. This research paper examines key policies, evaluates their impact, and highlights the geographical dimensions of eco-tourism and CBT. Using secondary data, policy documents, and regional case studies, this paper analyses the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, PRASHAD, Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) regulations, Wildlife Tourism policies, and State Eco-tourism Boards. Findings reveal that while government interventions have significantly improved infrastructure, conservation efforts, and livelihood opportunities, challenges remain in policy implementation, community participation, and monitoring. The paper concludes with suggestions for strengthening sustainable tourism through inclusive governance, capacity building, and geospatial monitoring.

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Introduction:

Eco-tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) have emerged as vital components of sustainable tourism, especially in countries like India where natural landscapes, biodiversity hotspots, cultural heritage, and indigenous communities form the core of the tourism experience. In recent decades, tourism has witnessed rapid growth, creating economic opportunities while simultaneously exerting pressure on fragile ecosystems and local communities. This has highlighted the urgent need for sustainable tourism models that balance development with conservation. Within this context, government policies play a decisive role in shaping tourism practices, directing investments, regulating resource use, and empowering local communities. The Government of India, along with various state governments, has introduced a range

of policies aimed at fostering eco-friendly tourism development and enhancing community participation, aligning closely with global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Geographically, India's diverse landscapes from the Himalayan mountain systems and Western Ghats to coastal regions, islands, forests, deserts, and tribal belts offer vast potential for eco-tourism and CBT. Each region possesses unique ecological and cultural characteristics that require tailored policy interventions. Geography thus becomes fundamental in understanding spatial variations in tourism potential, environmental sensitivity, resource distribution, and community livelihoods. Government policies help identify eco-sensitive zones, regulate construction, develop tourism circuits, and implement



conservation programmes that ensure the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources.

Several national policies and schemes have significantly shaped eco-tourism in India. The Swadesh Darshan Scheme has developed theme-based tourism circuits, including eco-tourism, wildlife, Himalayan, and tribal circuits, emphasising low-impact infrastructure and environmentally responsible tourism. The PRASHAD Scheme focuses on heritage and pilgrimage destinations with ecologically sensitive planning. The National Tourism Policy (Draft 2022) reinforces the principles of sustainability, responsible tourism, carbon reduction, waste management, and community empowerment, reflecting India's commitment to sustainable development. Policies under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change such as Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) guidelines, Joint Forest Management (JFM), wildlife tourism regulations, and biodiversity conservation projects further support eco-tourism while encouraging local involvement in conservation.

Community-based tourism has gained prominence through homestay policies, local tourism committees, skill development programmes, tribal tourism initiatives, and women's self-help group participation. States like Kerala, Sikkim, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan have established eco-tourism boards or responsible tourism missions that prioritise community welfare, promote local entrepreneurship, and create sustainable livelihood options. These policies aim to ensure that tourism benefits reach the grassroots level, reducing regional inequalities and enhancing socio-economic resilience.

Despite the positive impacts, challenges such as inadequate community capacity-building, environmental degradation, commercialisation, poor policy implementation, and limited geospatial

monitoring persist. Addressing these issues requires an integrated approach that combines effective governance, scientific planning, local participation, and awareness-building among tourists and stakeholders.

In conclusion, government policies play an indispensable role in promoting eco-tourism and community-based tourism in India. A geographical perspective enriches the understanding of regional variations, ecological constraints, and community dynamics. Strengthening policy implementation, encouraging community stewardship, and integrating sustainable development principles can make eco-tourism a powerful tool for achieving balanced regional development and environmental conservation. This paper explores these dimensions, highlighting the significance of policies in shaping sustainable tourism pathways for India's future.

Objectives:

1. To study major government policies promoting eco-tourism and community-based tourism in India.
2. To evaluate the regional impact of these policies on sustainable tourism development.
3. To analyse how policies support conservation, community empowerment, and livelihood creation.
4. To suggest policy measures for strengthening eco-tourism and CBT in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Research Methodology:

This study is based on a descriptive and qualitative research design to examine how government policies support eco-tourism and community-based tourism in India. The research uses secondary data, collected from Ministry of Tourism reports, MoEFCC documents, state tourism policies, Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD guidelines, UNWTO reports, journals, books, and government websites.

Data Collection:**1. Document Review:**

Analysis of national and state tourism policies, eco-tourism guidelines, and government schemes.

2. Literature Review:

Review of academic studies on sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, CBT, and tourism geography.

3. Case Studies:

Short case studies from Kerala, Sikkim, Maharashtra (Tadoba), and Madhya Pradesh to understand real impacts.

4. Geographical Assessment:

Use of existing maps and reports to study eco-tourism zones, tourism circuits, and regional patterns.

Data Analysis:

- **Qualitative Content Analysis:** Thematic analysis of policies and documents.
- **Comparative Policy Analysis:** Comparison of different states' eco-tourism models.
- **Case Study Interpretation:** Understanding benefits, challenges, and outcomes.

Limitations:

- Fully based on secondary data.
- Some state-level data may be incomplete.

Justification:

A qualitative and document-based approach is suitable because the study focuses on policies, governance, and sustainability.

Government Policies Supporting Eco-Tourism and Community-Based Tourism:

Government policies have played a central role in promoting eco-tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) in India. These policies aim to balance tourism development with environmental conservation and local community welfare. The initiatives reflect India's commitment to sustainable development, responsible tourism practices, and inclusive growth.

The following discussion highlights major national- and state-level policies that support eco-friendly and community-centred tourism.

1. National-Level Policies**a) Swadesh Darshan Scheme (2014)**

The Swadesh Darshan Scheme, launched by the Ministry of Tourism, focuses on developing theme-based tourism circuits to promote sustainable destination planning. Among the 15 identified circuits, the Eco-Tourism Circuit, Wildlife Circuit, Himalayan Circuit, and Tribal Circuit directly strengthen eco-tourism.

This scheme emphasises:

- Low-impact tourism infrastructure,
- Conservation-friendly pathways,
- Environmentally responsible construction guidelines, and
- Engagement of local communities through employment and entrepreneurship. By adopting a geographic and circuit-based approach, the scheme ensures balanced regional development and reduces pressure on over-visited destinations.

b) PRASHAD Scheme (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive)

The PRASHAD Scheme focuses on the holistic development of pilgrimage and heritage destinations while integrating environmental sustainability. Key features include:

- Eco-friendly infrastructure planning,
- Solid waste and water management systems,
- Conservation of heritage landscapes and cultural ecology, and
- Promotion of local employment and community-led tourism services. Though primarily a religious tourism scheme, PRASHAD supports CBT by involving local artisans, homestay owners,



guides, and women-led groups in tourism activities.

c) National Tourism Policy (Draft 2022 & subsequent updates)

The National Tourism Policy provides a comprehensive vision for sustainable tourism development in India. Major components include:

- Promotion of responsible tourism, green tourism, and carbon-neutral practices,
 - Focus on rural tourism and village-based tourism clusters,
 - Encouraging community ownership through cooperatives, SHGs, and local institutions,
 - Strengthening public–private partnerships in eco-tourism,
 - Integration of tourism with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),
 - Emphasis on digital governance and destination management systems.
- The policy follows the national vision of “Atmanirbhar Bharat”, highlighting tourism as a tool for local economic empowerment.

d) Forest and Wildlife Policies Supporting Eco-Tourism

Several policies under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) directly contribute to eco-tourism:

- **Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs):**
Regulate tourism activities around protected areas, controlling pollution, construction, and resource extraction.
- **Joint Forest Management (JFM):**
Involves local communities in forest protection and eco-tourism activities, offering livelihood opportunities such as

guiding, hospitality, handicraft sales, and conservation tasks.

• **NTCA Tiger Reserve Eco-Tourism Guidelines:**

Promote ecologically responsible wildlife tourism, limit visitor pressure, and ensure community benefits through revenue-sharing models.

• **National and State Homestay Policies:**

Encourage tourists to stay with local families, thereby supporting cultural exchange, community earnings, and decentralised tourism growth.

2. State-Level Eco-Tourism Policies

India’s states have developed region-specific eco-tourism policies based on their ecological diversity and tourism potential. These policies emphasise community participation, conservation, and sustainable livelihood generation.

Kerala

Kerala’s Responsible Tourism Mission is one of India’s best models for CBT. The state integrates local communities into tourism supply chains by promoting homestays, village life experiences, craft-based tourism, and women-led enterprises. The policy focuses on economic inclusion, environmental protection, and cultural preservation.

Sikkim

Sikkim has emerged as a leader in sustainable Himalayan eco-tourism. State policies encourage organic farming tourism, trekking routes managed by local groups, strict waste management systems, and community-controlled tourism cooperatives. The state promotes low-impact tourism that protects fragile mountain ecosystems.

Maharashtra

The Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) promotes eco-tourism



through dedicated circuits, community-based tourism committees, and conservation-focused tourism near wildlife sanctuaries like Tadoba and Pench. Local youth are trained as nature guides, trackers, and eco-lodge managers.

Madhya Pradesh

The MP Eco-Tourism Development Board supports eco-parks, interpretation centres, and nature camps while ensuring community involvement in tourism operations. The board encourages skill development, tribal tourism, and sustainable forest-based tourism activities.

Rajasthan & Gujarat

Both states promote eco-tourism in desert ecosystems, wetlands, and wildlife parks. Their policies include camel- and desert-based tourism, bird-watching tourism around wetlands, and conservation-led community participation in areas like the Little Rann of Kutch and the Aravalli ranges.

5. Role of Government Policies in Strengthening Eco-Tourism and Community-Based Tourism

Government policies in India play a transformative role in linking conservation, community welfare, and sustainable tourism development. National and state-level initiatives provide a framework for promoting eco-friendly practices, safeguarding natural resources, and ensuring that tourism benefits local communities. The following points explain the detailed impact of these policies.

1. Conservation and Ecological Protection

Government interventions have significantly strengthened conservation efforts through protected-area guidelines and eco-sensitive regulations.

- **Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs):**

The declaration of ESZs around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries restricts harmful

industrial activity, controls construction, and promotes low-impact tourism. This reduces pressure on fragile ecosystems and ensures that eco-tourism activities remain sustainable.

- **Wildlife Tourism Guidelines by NTCA, MoEFCC:**

Policies governing tiger reserves, forest safaris, and wildlife corridors regulate visitor numbers, promote carrying capacity assessment, and ensure scientific monitoring. Mandatory route rotation, limited vehicle entries, and trained guides help reduce disturbance to wildlife.

- **Carrying Capacity Studies:**

The government increasingly mandates environmental impact assessments and carrying capacity analysis in eco-tourism destinations helping prevent over-tourism, habitat degradation, and pollution.

Overall, these conservation-oriented policies lay the ecological foundation for sustainable eco-tourism.

2. Community Empowerment

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is a key focus of government schemes designed to enhance local participation and inclusive development.

- **Homestay Promotion:**

Many states, such as Sikkim, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Maharashtra, have introduced homestay policies encouraging local families to provide accommodation. This generates income for rural and tribal households and offers authentic cultural experiences to tourists.

- **Skill Development & Guide Training:**

Policies support training of local youth as nature guides, birdwatchers, trackers, and cultural interpreters—providing respectable livelihoods linked to conservation.



- **Handicrafts and Rural Markets:**

Tourism policies promote local crafts, organic food, traditional art, and cultural performances, creating direct economic opportunities for women's groups and self-help communities.

- **Eco-Tourism Committees (ETCs):**

Many forest divisions have established community-based committees to manage entry fees, visitor facilities, waste management, and tourism revenue. These systems strengthen community stewardship and create a sense of ownership among locals.

Thus, government policies help shift local populations from dependency on forest resources to sustainable tourism-based livelihoods.

3. Sustainable Infrastructure Development

Government schemes have played a central role in upgrading tourism infrastructure using sustainable design principles.

- **Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD Schemes:**

These flagship programs provide funding for access roads, interpretation centres, signage, sanitation units, parking facilities, and basic amenities all built with environmental safeguards. Projects in eco-tourism circuits aim to minimise ecological footprints and enhance visitor safety.

- **Green Building and Energy Policies:**

Promotion of solar lighting, rainwater harvesting, eco-friendly toilets, and low-carbon accommodation reduces pollution and resource consumption at tourist sites.

- **Waste Management Frameworks:**

Cleanliness drives, solid waste management systems, and local monitoring committees help maintain ecological quality in fragile landscapes.

These infrastructure initiatives support sustainable destination development without harming natural ecosystems.

4. Promotion of Responsible Tourism

Government policies actively encourage responsible tourist behaviour and eco-friendly practices.

- **Plastic-Free and Zero-Waste Zones:**

Many eco-tourism destinations, such as hill stations, beaches, tiger reserves, and pilgrimage routes, promote plastic bans, reusable bottles, and community-led clean-up drives.

- **Waste Segregation and Recycling:**

Policies support segregation of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste, reducing pressure on landfills and promoting green tourism.

- **Renewable Energy Use:**

Solar lamps, solar-powered boats, and energy-efficient buildings reduce carbon emissions and align with India's climate commitments.

- **Local Food and Cultural Inclusion:**

Tourism boards advocate consumption of local cuisine, traditional art, folk music, and cultural festivals, ensuring that tourism enhances cultural sustainability.

These efforts help create a more responsible and environmentally conscious tourist community.

5. Economic Growth and Livelihood Creation

Government policies have successfully linked tourism development with rural economic growth.

- **New Income Sources:**

Eco-tourism generates opportunities for nature guides, homestay owners, eco-lodge operators, local transport drivers, artisans, and cultural performers.



- **Support for Local Entrepreneurship:**

Funding assistance, skill training, and marketing support help villages develop tourism enterprises such as trekking services, birding tours, local cuisine restaurants, handloom stores, and adventure activities.

- **Inclusive Development:**

Women's participation through self-help groups (SHGs) and tribal communities' participation through forest committees ensures that benefits are distributed equitably.

- **Multiplier Effect:**

Increased visitor inflow benefits agriculture, handicrafts, transportation, and food supply chains, strengthening the rural economy.

Government policies thus act as a catalyst for sustainable economic development while protecting natural resources.

Case Studies:

Case studies from different regions of India highlight how government policies have strengthened eco-tourism and community-based tourism (CBT). These examples show practical outcomes of sustainable tourism initiatives.

1. Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission

Kerala is recognised as one of India's leading models of community-based responsible tourism. The Responsible Tourism (RT) Mission, launched by the state government, promotes local participation, women's empowerment, and environmentally responsible practices.

- **Community Participation in Kumarakom and Wayanad:** The RT Mission mobilises local residents and self-help groups (SHGs) to participate directly in tourism activities. Villagers supply food, cultural products, handicrafts, and eco-friendly services.

- **Women Cooperatives:**

Women-led units manage homestays, village

tours, local cuisine experiences, and craft markets. This has improved women's income, skill development, and social status.

- **Sustainable Practices:**

Waste-free tourism, local resource use, traditional livelihoods, and farm-based experiences (like spice gardens and village walks) create environmentally friendly tourism.

Overall Impact:

Kerala's model shows how government-supported CBT can generate livelihood opportunities while preserving culture and environment.

2. Sikkim Eco-Tourism Policy

Sikkim is a pioneer in sustainable mountain tourism, supported by strong state eco-tourism guidelines and conservation-oriented development.

- **Promotion of Organic Farming:**

As India's first organic state, Sikkim integrates organic agriculture with rural tourism. Visitors experience farm stays, organic food, and agro-ecotourism activities.

- **Homestays and Trekking Routes:**

The government promotes community-managed homestays in rural Himalayan villages, along with regulated trekking routes in areas like Dzongu, Yuksom, and West Sikkim.

- **Biodiversity Conservation:**

Policies emphasise protecting high-altitude ecosystems, alpine meadows, and wildlife sanctuaries. Tourist numbers are regulated through permits and carrying capacity limits.

Overall Impact:

Sikkim demonstrates how eco-tourism policies can balance tourism growth with ecological protection in sensitive mountain regions.

Challenges in Policy Implementation:

- Insufficient capacity-building at the local level.
- Inadequate monitoring of environmental impacts.
- Conflicts between commercial tourism and



conservation.

- Lack of awareness among tourists and local stakeholders.
- Limited use of GIS and scientific tools for tourism planning.

Suggestions:

1. Strengthen community training, entrepreneurship, and microfinance support.
2. Use GIS for carrying capacity studies and monitoring of eco-tourism zones.
3. Promote digital platforms for local handicrafts and cultural tourism.
4. Enforce strict guidelines for waste management and environmental protection.
5. Improve coordination between the forest, tourism, and local governance departments.
6. Promote 'One Village – One Tourism Model' for rural and tribal areas.
7. Integrate SDGs and climate resilience in tourism planning.

Conclusion:

Government policies play a decisive and transformative role in shaping the future of eco-tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) in India. National schemes such as Swadesh Darshan, PRASHAD, the National Tourism Policy, and various state-level eco-tourism missions have collectively strengthened the foundation for sustainable tourism. These initiatives have enhanced conservation efforts through eco-sensitive regulations, wildlife management guidelines, carrying-capacity assessments, and protection of fragile ecosystems. At the same time, policies have empowered local communities by promoting homestays, skill development programs, women-led tourism enterprises, and community-managed tourism committees, ensuring that local populations become key stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries.

Infrastructure interventions such as improved access roads, interpretation centres, sanitation systems, and eco-friendly amenities have further supported the growth of responsible tourism across India. The promotion of renewable energy, plastic-free zones, and waste management systems also highlights the government's commitment to green and low-impact tourism practices. Economic benefits, including new livelihood opportunities for guides, artisans, homestay owners, and transport operators, demonstrate how eco-tourism can contribute to rural development and poverty reduction.

However, the long-term success of eco-tourism and CBT depends on effective implementation, continuous community engagement, scientific monitoring, and strict adherence to sustainability principles. Challenges such as uneven policy execution, inadequate local awareness, and rising tourist pressure must be addressed through collaborative governance and inclusive planning.

A geographical perspective is essential in understanding regional variations, ecological sensitivity, and local resource potential. It helps identify areas where eco-tourism can flourish without causing ecological stress, supporting a balanced and regionally equitable development model. Strengthening eco-tourism and community-based tourism through robust policy frameworks can lead to environmental protection, socio-economic empowerment, and sustainable regional development. With stronger community participation, scientific planning, and responsible governance, India can position itself as a global leader in sustainable tourism.

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