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Exploring **Community Engagement, Gender** and **Sustainability** among Tourist Destinations in India

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Abstract | This paper aims to explore the dimensions of community engagement (CE) strategies and their impact on destination competitiveness, while also examining gender differences in CE across tourist destinations in India. Employing an exploratory sequential methodology, the study collected primary data through focus group discussions and expert interviews in the qualitative phase, followed by a structured questionnaire in the descriptive phase. Factor analysis and t-tests were utilized for data analysis. The findings identify 16 CE strategies grouped into three key dimensions: governance, stewardship, and empowerment. Additionally, the study found no significant gender differences in the adoption of CE practices and processes that contribute to grass-roots sustainability in community-based tourism (CBT) destinations. By moving beyond the conventional CE framework, this study offers a comprehensive view of local empowerment, stewardship, and governance in tourism resource management, providing valuable insights for policymaking. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of reinforcing local sustainability in tourism operations while considering potential gender dynamics in resource appropriation.

Keywords | Gender, community engagement, local sustainability, tourism

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1. Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) can empower the community, enhancing its involvement in decision-making (Mwesiumo., Halfdanarson & Shlopak, 2022). CBT involves community engagement. Community engagement (CE) is a strategy for community members to occupy the public space while appropriating the resources, thus supporting local sustainability (Pesch, Spekkink & Quist, 2019). Community engagement has dimensions like institutional, organizational, individual, community, and process (Satar, 2019). Community engagement prevails in almost all types of CBT operations. In tourism, community engagement is regarded as one of the most effective strategies for leveraging local endowments and environmental assets.

Since the community is integral to tourism activities, owning a significant share of cultural and social assets that are highly attractive and in demand (Havadi Nagy & Espinosa Segui, 2020), their direct participation and involvement are essential (Iqbal & Ahmed, 2022). According to Hes (2017), increased community engagement is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); more importantly, SDG 5.5- Community participation and gender equity.

Traditionally, the word sustainability has been attributed to economic, socio-cultural, and ecological aspects of development. But the primary area without which the entire element of sustainability becomes irrelevant is the participative dimension of sustainability, particularly in the context of CBT. In an anthropocentric development arena, this aspect plays a vital role. The assumption is that the participant role of the community could bring all other dimensions of sustainability. In other words, without community participation, engagement, or intervention, the other objectives of CBT become futile. However, the developmental discourse gives minimal emphasis to these directions/dimensions. As Hall (1994) has pointed out, the political dimension of tourism has not been addressed the way it deserves to be. Extending sustainability's political or participative dimension in sustainable development is the need of the hour (Mihalič., Žabkar., & Knezević Cvelbar, 2016), and such a linkage is essential for fulfilling the objective of destination governance (Beritelli, 2012). Such extension is also necessary for implementing sustainable strategies with local support (Mihalic, Segota, Cvelbar & Kuscer, 2016).

Today, meeting sustainability is the focal point of the tourism development agenda globally. Empirical evidence indicates that the current top-down approach to resource appropriation has failed to achieve this fundamental objective, despite tourism planning occurring at both national and local levels. Policymakers and social scientists demand a bottom-up approach that integrates all tourism programs to expedite the sustainable development process (Baromey, 2008). Increased community engagement in tourism development leads to higher community support for tourism (Zee, 2013). Such engagement becomes more meaningful if the policy and implementation are gender-neutral.

Further, the fulfillment of the sustainability mandate depends on absolute gender equality in the project outcome (Figueroa-Domecq & Segovia-Perez, 2020). In other words, a gender-neutral outcome is a prerequisite for local sustainability. Such grass-roots-level initiatives could strengthen SDG 5, gender equality (Daniel-Vasconcelos, Ribeiro & Crisóstomo, 2022). Currently, understanding the grass-root level CE practices become inevitable as most of the local community considers CBT in their area as the primary means of development. This raises several critical research questions: What are the CE strategies among tourist destinations? Is there any gender difference in CE strategies? Accordingly, investigate the CE strategies of CBT and its latent dimensions. Further, identify the gender difference in CE among destination community mem-

bers. Hence, study tests the following hypothesis:

1. There are distinct dimensions of CE in CBT destinations in India.

2. There are gender differences in the CE processes and practices of CBT destinations in India.

The study conducted at four Protected Area (PA) based tourism destinations of Kerala, India; Periyar, Thenmala, Wayanad, and Parambikulam. The study assumes significance in addressing sustainability initiatives by considering CE, particularly gender-neutral engagement in developmental programs vital for meeting the SDGs at the grassroots level.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Community engagement

Community-based tourism (CBT) is conceived as a form of tourism where the local community has substantial control in developing and managing tourism resources and activities and thereby gains benefits (Meera & Vinodan, 2022). In this context, Cater (1994) highlighted the need for local community involvement in planning and managing tourism, particularly in developing countries. The study further described the process of 'involvement' and 'participation' simultaneously in CBT; involvement is the process of gaining the cooperation of local people to enhance the feasibility of the implementation of plans or, more often, rather than merely ensuring that local people are provided with alternative means of employment. However, participation is a greater level of collaboration in the decision-making processes by which tourism planning and management take place.

Discussions on community engagement and sustainability are advancing, as this approach enables the use and preservation of resources, means, and outcomes for both current and future generations (Pesch, Spekkink & Quist, 2019; Salvador & Kastenholz, 2024). According to Hart (1999), sustainability balances ecological, economic, and social values. Sustainability is frequently applied to communities, development, and natural resources management. It has been applied to tourism as an element of development (Cole, 2006). Though the initial reference to sustainability has been confined to the natural environment (Ceballos-Lascuraín, 1988), the community-based approach paved the way for other dimensions such as social, cultural, economic (Vinodan, Meera & Manalel, 2022) as well as community control and empowerment (Havadi Nagy & Espinosa Sengui, 2020).

Although the political environment is not explicitly highlighted in development discussions, it is intrinsically intertwined with the sociocultural, natural, and economic dimensions of development (Hall, 2008). There is a strong need for establishing governance strategies and local-level sustainability (Mihalic et al., 2012). It is also found that the political environment pillars of sustainability, in the existence of coordination and cooperation among various actors, help develop policies, which is the prerequisite for governance (Mihalic et al., 2016). The linkage between CE and local sustainability is considered an essential element of destination governance, and most often, destination governance becomes a component of the CE framework of CBT destinations (Vinodan & Manalel, 2018).

CBT ensures that the local community members have a high degree of control over resource appropriation over the activities taking place; thereby, a significant proportion of the benefits accrue to them (Scheyvens, 2002). The intervention should go beyond revenue sharing and involve communities actively in tourism through regular consultations, continued economic activity orientation and involvement, and partial or full ownership of tourism products or projects (Kiss, 2004). Accor-

ding to Gartner (2005), community involvement can be considered part of public life's inexorable 'democratization,' including tourism resource appropriation. Many studies consider democratic representation in tourism as an indicator of sustainable tourism (Simpson, 2008).

The democratization of development interference in tourism should be started from the grassroot level. Since locally initiated planning and management are often critical factors for tourism success (Ross & Wall, 1999), the absence of grassroots level consultation may lead to social unrest (Mbaiwa, 2004). UNWTO (2007) stated that CBT could increase women's participation in resource management. Studies by Scheyvens (2000) and Barry (2012) also called for the involvement of women in tourism and stated that women could bring more sustainable practices to destinations.

As mentioned, various aspects of community engagement exist among destination communities, and it has been observed that these alone could address the diverse sustainable development needs at the grass-roots level. This is more important where the communities have limited development options like protected areas (PAs). There is a need to understand CE strategies practiced at the grass-root level to march towards local sustainability targets and an inclusive society.

2.2. Gender in community engagement

Gender mainstreaming is a crucial element for the sustainability of tourism. Without it, meaningful opportunities for gender equity and empowerment through tourism will be significantly limited (Ferguson & Alarcon, 2015). Gender-neutral access and control of destination resources among destination communities are essential for attaining CBT objectives (Trans & Walter, 2014). Gender neutral approach to resource management could enhance the quality of the development process to a more considerable extent.

According Walter (2011), power relations surrounding tourism development processes should inter alia discuss the politics of gender relations. There is a need for a gender-aware framework that helps to reveal the importance of understanding gender roles and relations in tourism development. Since there exists gender disparity in the development process at different levels and magnitudes (Currie & Vernooy 2010), there is a need to transform gender relations to increase women's participation and the accrued benefits from the development. In the SDG era, this is even more important to meet the UN Agenda of Sustainable Development; the gender equality (SDG 5.5) at the grassroot level resource appropriation.

The research on community engagement and gender in light of the destination's sustainability is limited (Moreno Alarcón and Cole, 2019). There is a need to investigate grass-root level community engagement focusing on gender in the sustainability context to understand how such initiatives are operated at the local level. As it is almost impossible to measure sustainability precisely (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006, Tsaur, Lin & Lin, 2006; UNWTO, 2006) in the present study, it is proposed to understand relative sustainability (Huang & Coelho, 2017), based on local-specific CE indicators through consultation and participation as a part of the study methodology. Accordingly, the study investigates the CE practices in tourism and examines whether there is any gender difference in these CE practices between destination communities in India.

3. Community Trust in Smart Technology

The current study employed a sequential mixed-method approach, involving the systematic collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a defined sequence, where one phase builds upon the findings of the previ-

ous (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003). Specifically, the results from the first stage were utilized to design the measurement instrument for the second stage. The choice of this approach was well-suited to the research objective, as it aimed to identify community engagement factors and their dimensional orientations, which were previously unknown, locally specific, and unexplored in earlier studies.

3.1. Qualitative study

Data were collected from four PAs of Kerala, i.e., Thenmala, Periyar, Parambikulam, and Wayanad; these selections were made based on purposive sampling, which is justified on the following grounds: it helps the researcher use discretion to select respondents to get the best samples to meet the purpose of the study; purposive sampling is widely used in mixed-method research (Maxwell and Loomis, 2002); the sampling frame was judgmental, combining the researcher's judgment with expert opinion.

Multiple data collection techniques were applied in this stage: focus groups and in-depth expert interviews. The output of this stage was analyzed, and the results, along with the existing literature, were considered for instrument development in the descriptive stage. Focus group discussion (FGD) with Tourism Ecodevelopment Committee (TEDC) office-bearers to identify various CE indicators, followed by (b) expert interviews with researchers and educators in tourism to discuss and finalize CE variables. A semi-structured interview outline was used in both the qualitative research methods: focus groups and in-depth expert interviews. Each question was carefully and deliberately designed based on the methodology suggested by Thomas (2003).

Respondent's criteria of the qualitative study:

1. Respondents with 4-7 years of experience as TEDC members as well as those holding the post of president/vice president.

2. Educators and researchers with a minimum of five years of experience in the field of tourism.

As a part of the mixed method, the present study used the focus group to increase the validity of findings (Kitzinger, 1995). It tried to capture various intervention strategies of destination communities in tourism to explore the depth and nuances of opinions about such strategies.

Focus group discussions were organized at all four locations with TEDC office bearers, present as well as past. The chain referral sampling method (Sarstedt et al., 2017) was followed to identify past Presidents and Vice Presidents. TEDC office bearers were considered reliable sources of information about various managerial aspects of community intervention. They were acting as an interlocutor between the community and various government departments. So, it is understood that they can give more clarity about CE in tourism.

According to Kitzinger (1995) and Krueger and Casey (2009), six participants in a group are considered adequate to gather information. As the number of office bearers (present as well as former) was below that FGD had to be conducted even with fewer numbers than the stipulated limit in some cases, i.e., only four each at Thenmala and Wayanad were available during the study period. Face-to-face meetings were organized, and open-ended questions were used to get in-depth responses based on the content guide. The duration of each session varied from 60 to 90 minutes. Twenty-three members participated in FGDs.

Subsequently, expert interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions allowing the respondents to express their points of view and describe situations, events, and experiences (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Torabi Farsani & Toghraee, 2024) regarding CE in the destinations under study. Expert interviews with educators and

researchers in tourism were organized during the same period of FGD. This method was introduced to examine topics that remained unexplored in the focus groups and get an external opinion on the subject matter. Based on the previously mentioned eligibility criteria, eleven educators and five researchers from social science and management backgrounds at prestigious universities and research institutions were selected.

The interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes each and were conducted exclusively in the experts' chamber . Eighteen variables relating to CE were presented. Experts had identified a few redundant variables and suggested removing them to comprehensively view CE across the destinations. A few items were reworded to get a holistic perspective, and thus 16 variables were finalized for CE.

As far as women's engagement in tourism operations is concerned, the study extended to examine if there were any differences in gender in the process and practice of community engagement in tourism destination management. In this direction, as mentioned above, the study sought expert opinions on various parameters supporting the political intervention of women in tourism. The experts suggested eight variables that can give a holistic idea to understand the factors to explore the gender difference in CE. Accordingly, eight variables were finalized.

Assessing the reliability and validity of the variables mentioned in the study, the Trochim (2006) criteria have been adopted. These are credibility (based on criteria and informal conversations with community leaders), transferability (replicability in similar or identical community-based tourism cases), dependability (methodological consistency), and conformability (since all respondents are from similar settings, conformity can be established). Credibility and transferability correspond to the internal and external validity of qualitative research. Creditability seeks to ensure that their study measures or tests what is intended. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also stated that ensuring credibility is one of the essential factors in establishing trustworthiness.

3.2. Qualitative study

The second stage of the present study was descriptive research. The study was planned based on primary knowledge of the subject matter obtained from the qualitative stage. As Jick (1983) has suggested, a survey is also one of the primary methods of data collection used in descriptive research that contributes to greater confidence in the generalisability of the study results.

3.2.1. Scale development

Developing a scale to measure CE was complex because every case is unique due to locations, situations, operational diversity, and diversified perceptions of individuals, cultures, and characteristics. The scale development was based on Churchill's (1979) guidelines, and content validity was ensured based on the C-OAR-SE procedure (Rossiter, 2002). A 5-point Likert agreement scale was designed to understand CE. Based on expert advice, a short and simplified questionnaire with pretested items has been used.

3.2.2. Sampling technique

Convenience sampling was used to select the sample units based on the following respondent criteria:

1. All respondents have membership in Tourism eco-development committees (TEDCs)
2. All respondents have experience in different capabilities involved in tourism activities

Since the respondents' socio-economic background is similar, convenience sampling can be considered. Moreover, convenience sampling is the

only feasible way to proceed while learning about groups whose spatial representation is more comprehensive. The samples were selected based on the availability or presence of community members understudy without any prejudice for considering or rejecting a particular respondent. The selection of the respondents at the time of the visit was purely by chance.

3.2.3. Data Collection and Verification

Destination-wise data collection was conducted personally by meeting the respondents. The structured questionnaire (Appendix 1) was distributed to respondents, and the purpose of the study was explained. The questionnaire was administered using a direct face-to-face survey methodology because of its strength in achieving high response rates. Samples of 405 were collected, and after data quality assessment, 350 responses were identified for analysis, i.e., 86%. There is no specific method to determine the sample size required for EFA. Young and Pearce (2013) recommend a minimum of 300 sample sizes. In other words, certain threshold limits were followed in statistical analysis. Though the threshold ratio recommended range is between 4:1 to 10:1 (Comrey & Lee, 1992), the present study had an item ratio of 21:1, which indicates a very high acceptance ratio. Based on the Young and Pearce (2013) criteria, the following procedures were adopted for assessing data quality:

a) Identification of missing values: a frequency test was done to identify the missing variable. There were 55 missing responses among community members' responses. After removing these missing responses, 350 usable responses were finalized (Appendix 2)

b) Identification of Outliers: Grubbs' test was followed to address univariate outliers in the present study. The test shows that there were no outliers in this data. Multivariate outliers were checked through squared Mahalanobis distance (D2). The AMOS output showed that there is no significant extreme score. Accordingly, no deletions were made from the data.

c) Analysis of Normality: To correct the data's non-normality, the present study adopted Maximum likelihood estimation with Bollen-Stine bootstrap (with 1000 samples). Based on the above procedure, all data collected for the study from community members to identify CE were considered normal.

d) Verification of Multi-collinearity and singularity: Squared multiple correlations of variables in the data set to fall between 0.438 and 0.776 indicates that no variable has singularity issues (i.e., SMC close to 0) and multicollinearity (SMC close to 1.0).

3.2.4. Exploratory Factor Analysis

The role of factor analysis is to identify the underlying structures derived from a set of variables (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2006). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify the underlying factors and test whether the extracted factors were similar to the dimensions proposed in the study. The initial 16 scale items were used to measure CE. EFA with varimax rotation to identify the number of factors with maximum explanations (Hair et al., 2006). A higher factor loading is considered better. Loadings above 0.71 are excellent, 0.63 very good, 0.55 good, 0.45 fair, and 0.32 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Items that load higher than 0.5 were retained in the study.

3.2.5. Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) has been conducted to test the unidimensionality, conver-

gent validity, and discriminant validity of the scale developed for the study. Analysis of moment structures (AMOS) 16.0 was performed in this study. The goodness of fit indices was used to assess the unidimensionality of the model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

3.3. Study area

The present study has identified four Protected Area (PA) based tourism destinations of Kerala; Periyar, Thenmala, Wayanad, and Parambikulam. Community engagement in these PAs was institutionalized through Eco-development Committees (EDCs). Most of the destination community members were, in one way or another, engaged in tourism and related activities of these PAs. The Department of Forest and Wildlife (DFW) reported that community-specific representation in tourism activities was ensured across destinations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 | Profile of the Study Area

Study Area	Area in Sq. Km	Community profile (85\% are Scheduled Tribes)	Community Members in Ecotourism
Parambikulam (Tiger Reserve)	265	Kadar, Malasar, Muduvar and Malamalasar,	503
Periyar (Tiger Reserve)	777	Mannan, Paliya, Urali, Mala-araya, Malampandaram.	540
Senduruny (Wildlife Sanctuary)	172	Kanikkar, Malayarayar, Malaipandaram, Malavedan, Ulladan	175
Wayanad (Wildlife Sanctuary)	344	Paniyas, Adiyas, Kattunayakan, Kurichiyans, Urali Kurubas, Mulla Kurubas and Jen Kurubas.	125

Source: Primary data

4. Result

4.1. Outcome of FDG

Based on the FDG, the following notable responses elicited inter alia, that could supplement the construct development of this study through qualitative triangulation.

(a) "Members of our TEDC get the opportunity to take part in decision making in all meetings conducted by the forest department"- President of TEDC from Parambikulam Tiger Reserve.

(b) According to the president of TEDC from Periyar Tiger Reserve, "In our committee, only a few women are represented in tourism-related work as most of the jobs offered by tourism require travel and accompanying tourists for long working hours."

(c) Vice President of TEDC from Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary says, "Committee members can suggest new plans and programs which are appropriate to their regions, and the committees will decide the viability and feasibility in consultation with the forest department."

(d) "Committee facilitates various capacity building programs of the forest department, NGOs, and other government departments in this area," the president of TEDC from Senduruny Wildlife Sanctuary stated.

4.1.1. Qualitative Triangulation Results

The qualitative triangulation results were drawn from an in-depth analysis of community engagement (CE) strategies at grass-roots levels in tourism destinations. Table 2 outlines the key variables identified under three primary categories: governance, empowerment, and stewardship strategies, which are crucial for assessing CE practices. These strategies were further examined in terms of their inclusivity and sustainability, especially regarding the involvement of women and indigenous communities, resource appropriation, and decision-making processes. Additionally, the table highlights the importance of integrating local voices in tourism governance, capacity-building initiatives, and ethical resource management. Gender neutra-

lity was also assessed through various dimensions, such as women's involvement in tourism planning and decision-making, access to livelihood opportunities, and skill enhancement programs, which play a significant role in ensuring equitable participation and representation at these destinations. The findings emphasize the need for community-driven approaches that address both local empowerment and gender inclusivity to achieve sustainable development in tourism.

Table 2 | Qualitative triangulation result

Variables to assess grass root level CE strategies		
Governance	**Empowerment strategy**	**Stewardship strategy**
Inclusion of women: inclusion of women in participation in tourism and related resource appropriation	Two-way communication: the developmental matters and conservation programs should follow two communications	Resource appropriation policy: Evidence of involving local people in resource appropriation
Inclusion of indigenous communities: inclusion of indigenous communities in participation in tourism and related resource appropriation	Community input for decision making: The local community input should be considered for decision making	Integrated master plan: opportunities for partaking in developing locally initiated an integrated master plan
Representation of eligible communities: provision for equal opportunities for all eligible communities belongs to PAs in tourism and related activities	Capacity building: develop capacity and skill of local communities to strengthen to appropriate resources and reduce the leakages	Evaluative role: Provision for evaluating the projects and programs introduced at destinations
Downward shift in decision making: the decision making at the destination by the local people	Membership in Destination Management Organization (DMO): the communities' members should be DMOs of the respective PAs	Ethical practices: Policy for ethics, rules, and regulations that are according to local customs and practices and ecosystem.
Stakeholder collaboration: Possibilities for local community members to collaborate with other tourism stakeholders		Community centred resource management: the resource approbation as per the local needs and community aspirations
Engagement: Participation of local people in the planning process related to destination activities		Advisory role: opportunity for local people to play advisory role in matter relating to their life, ecosystem and livelihood
Variables to assess the presence of gender neutrality at destinations		
Membership in TEDC: women should have enough opportunity to be part of EDC of the area	Freedom of expression: Opportunity to extend opinion in the meeting	Decision making: Opportunity in attending the meeting and take part in decision making
Involvement in planning: Opportunity to participate in the destination planning process	Skill enhancement: Opportunity for capacity and skill building programs to take up tourism jobs	
Livelihood opportunities: Equal access to the livelihood opportunities in tourism	Conscientization: existence of programs/efforts directed to reduce the gender gap in all developmental activities of the area	Equal access: Equal access to tourism products and related services

4.2. Qualitative triangulation Discussion

Drawing upon the literature on community-based tourism (CBT) (Tsaur, Lin, & Lin, 2006; UNWTO, 2006), focus group discussions, and expert recommendations, the present study categorizes 16 variables that support community engagement (CE) and local-level sustainability into three distinct strategies. Below, we elaborate on the identified indicators and their associated latent variables.

4.2.1 Empowerment strategy

Empowerment, as defined by Scheyvens (1999), involves enhancing the capacity of local communities to exert control over and share the benefits derived from tourism initiatives within their areas. This empowerment is crucial for communities to determine the methods and forms of resource appropriation in tourism (Oliveira et al., 2024). Bunly (2011) indicates that indigenous communities' empowerment strategies helped raise their living standards and quality of life. Based on the site-specific investigation, this study defines the empowerment strategy as the initiative and process of bolstering a community's ability to identify, manage, and benefit from appropriate resources. Consequently, four essential variables have been identified as integral components of community empowerment in CBT destinations (Table 2).

4.2.2 Governance strategy

Governance encompasses multiple levels, from state institutions to local communities and households (DFID, 2007; Krasniqi et al., 2024). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012) classifies governance into four dimensions, including the political system, public administration, social governance, and market governance. Upon examination, many of these variables are relevant to CBT, as community interventions aim to enhance conservation and livelihood objectives through the exercise of community power and authority. Generally, governance based on democratic principles in CBT encompasses a democratic representation, provision for decision-making, engaging the community as an intermediary, and community as a consultant in local specific matters. Accordingly, the present study defined governance strategy as opportunities or provisions for the local community to ensure their representation in a democratic way to execute resource appropriation strategies. In this regard, six key variables have been identified to illustrate the governance strategy within the CBT context (Table 2).

4.2.3 Stewardship strategy

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) posits that destination stewardship involves the active engagement of local communities and stakeholders in preserving the cultural, environmental, economic, and aesthetic integrity of their regions (GSTC, 2011). It is considered an essential pillar of sustainability commitment, crucial for the destinations' long-term viability, managing growth and ensuring competitiveness. To guard the gains of CBT, effective community stewardship is vital (Flores & Sipaseuth, 2002). Thus, a comprehensive approach to policy-level interventions within destination communities is essential for ensuring the stewardship of tourism resources. The present study conceptualizes stewardship strategy as the policy-level appropriation of community tourism resources through engagement in various aspects of tourism activities. As indicated in Table 2, the study has identified six domains of policy-level interventions that contribute to stewardship in CBT.

4.2.4 Gender in Community engagement

Leach (2003) asserts that addressing strategic

and pragmatic gender needs involves ensuring control, participation, and opportunities to promote gender neutrality in development. This study examines the dimension of gender neutrality based on Leach's observations. Through contextual investigation and expert interviews, eight variables have been identified to assess the practices and processes of women's engagement in CE, aiming to determine gender neutrality within the studied destinations. Specifically, the first five variables are categorized as practices due to their recurring nature, while the remaining three are classified as processes, reflecting distinct yet significant aspects of gender dynamics in tourism destination management (Table 2).

Generally, local communities are considered a stockholder of tourism as their endowments are construed as the most important tourism product of the destinations in the anthropocentric development perspective (Olya., Shahmirzdi & Alipour,2019). Often, this perspective supports the idea of monetizing their entitlements through tourism-related activities. In this direction, the study's first objective was to understand the various community engagement strategies that strengthen the local-level sustainability of the destinations.

As mentioned, the results of the qualitative study consist of; focus group discussion and expert interview, which shows that sixteen CE strategies strengthening the perceived CE dimensions of sustainability of tourism destinations. Identification of CE variables at CBT destinations in the study confirms the arguments of Hall (1994) that progress toward sustainable development is possible if the power distribution and political system are robust. In other words, including CE in the sustainable development agenda is a measure to address the exclusion of local communities from the purview of tourism development (Hart, 1998). This observation is imperative for residents' improved quality of life as the state, or other influencing groups control most of the tourism projects, and residents are often excluded from the decision-making process. To address such a development deficit and create strong governance at the grassroot level, as Havadi Nagy and Espinosa Segui, (2020) stated, CE variables need to be examined across destinations.

Moreover, the development of CE variables in the community development program also strengthens stakeholders' collaboration and community participation. The external control on tourism resource appropriation can be minimized, and community leadership and local-specific regulation can be adhered to (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). Hence, a system of resource appropriation mechanism leading to the overall sustainability of the destination can be ensured (Havadi Nagy and Espinosa Segui, 2020).

4.3. Descriptive study result

4.3.1. Profile of the community

As indicated in Table 3, tourism activities' average monthly income per person came to Rs. 4000-5000. The average number of members in the family was six. It was found that 12 % of members were below 25 years, 40 % were in the age group of 25-40, 30% were between 40-55, and 18% were above 55 years. Therefore, the average age of the respondents is 40. Gender-wise representation of community members shows that 72.4% were involved in tourism and related operations were males. Regarding qualification, nearly 58% of the members were below matriculation, including illiterates, while 33% had completed higher secondary and only eight percent were graduates or diploma holders. The study also indicates the average number of family members engaged in tourism was two, and the average years of experience in tourism activities were six years.

Table 3 | Demographic and Tourism related variables of Community members

Variables		**Status in average /percentages**
Income		4800 (Average)
Number of family members		06 (Average)
Age of the respondents	Below 25	12%
	25-39	40%
	40-54	30%
	55 & Above	18%
Gender in ecotourism	Male	68.6%
	Female	31.4%
Education	Below matriculation	58%
	Higher secondary	33%
	Graduates/Diploma	08%
No. of family members engaged in ecotourism		02 (Average)
Experience in ecotourism		06 Years (Average)

Source: Primary data

4.3.2. Dimension identification

The result showed that the EFA identified three latent constructs, i.e., Governance strategy (GS), Stewardship strategy (SS), and Empowerment strategy (ES) from the CE construct. The identified factors of all these constructs with an eigenvalue greater than one explained over 60.44 % of CE variance. Hence, it was assumed that the model represents the data. There were no significant cross-loadings between items in this analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.862 for CE. The Bartlett Test of Sphericity was significant ($p<0.001$) with a Chi-Square value of 2675.0 with 120 degrees of freedom for CE, considered appropriate for factorization. Commonalities between measured items loaded on the EFA model varied from 0.719 for the GS.3 to 0.840 for SS.2 of CE and the reliability test for the scale is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 | Factor loadings of CE construct (Rotated)

Variable	**Coding**	**Indicator**	**Factor Loadings**	**Cronbach Alpha**	**Cumulative variance in Percentage**
1.	GS.1	Participation of women	0.746	0.818	27.624
2.	GS.2	Participation of indigenous communities	0.823		
3.	GS.3	Representation of eligible communities	0.719		
4.	GS.4	Downward shift in decision making	0.796		
5.	GS.5	Participation in planning process	0.807		
6.	GS.6	Stakeholder collaboration possibilities	0.793		
7.	GS.7	Advisory for planning destination activities	0.747		
8.	SS.1	Community centred resource management	0.748	0.864	47.240
9.	SS.2	Resource appropriation policy	0.840		
10.	SS.3	Locally initiated integrated master plan	0.722		
11.	SS.4	Provision for evaluation of implementation	0.795		
12.	SS.5	Policy for ethics, rules and regulations	0.744		
13.	ES.1	Two-way communication	0.743	0.843	63.158
14.	ES.2	Capacity building	0.790		
15.	ES.3	Membership in Destination Management Organisation	0.781		
16.	ES.4	Community input for decision making	0.768		

Source: Primary data

The rotated component matrix (Table 4) showed each measured item's loadings on each of CE's three latent factors identified (GS, SS, and ES). It indicated that the measured items have significantly high loadings on their hypothesized constructs and the cross-loadings between them and other factors are lower than the minimum criteria of 0.5. Accordingly, the convergent and divergent reliabilities of the constructs and their measured items have been confirmed. It was seen that EFA does not show any diversion from the existing hypothesized dimension of the construct. So, all those identified three latent factors were retained; henceforth, those identified constructs are called latent constructs.

As shown in Table 5, the CFA result provides an adequate fit to indicate that the proposed model fits well with the data. Two important considerations are used to test the statistical significance using AMOS. Firstly, the critical ratio (C.R.) represents the parameter estimate divided by its standard error based on a probability level of 0.05. The critical ratios are to be $> \pm 1.96$ for statistical significance. Secondly, the standard residual covariance should be less than the threshold limit of 2.58 to conclude statistically significant covariance between two variables (Byrne, 2010). In the present model, the critical ratio of all the measurement items was more than 1.96 (Appendix 3). The standard residual covariance variables were within the threshold limit, i.e., 2.58 (Appendix 4). Accordingly, the model can be considered a good fitting model by considering empirical reasoning and its appropriateness. Further, validation is required to establish the strength of the model. Other validation criteria are as follows:

Common methods variance (CMV): CMV can be verified based on the presence of a single factor from unrotated factor solutions and if the first factor explains more than 50% of the variance. (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Three distinct factors emerged with an Eigenvalue above 1. The first factor accounted for 27.63% of the variance, and all three factors together explained 63.16%, indicating that there is no CMV in this study.

Convergent validity: As mentioned above, the critical ratio of all measurement items was more than 1.96; hence, convergent validity is satisfied (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). According to Spector (2006), the composite reliability is considered high if squared multiple correlation R2 ("SMC") is greater than 0.5, moderate if between 0.3 and 0.5, and poor if less than 0.3. The result shows that the value of SMC of indicators under analysis is between 0.46 to 0.72. Further, the standardized regression weights should be more than 0.5 or ideally exceeding 0.7 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). The resultant value was 0.6, which indicates sound standardized regression weight. Moreover, the factor loadings were also above 0.5 to establish convergent validity.

Discriminant validity: According to Anderson & Gerbing (1988), the correlation between construct and squared inter-construct correlations (SIC) measures discriminant validity. As none of the correlation among variables was above 0.85 (i. e 0.402, 0.207, 0.330) and also the average variance extracted (AVE) shows a higher value than SIC (Appendix 5), discriminant validity can be established.

Nomological validity: According to Carmines and Zeller (1979), the Construct covariance is used to assess the Nomological validity. As the covariance among the constructs was positive and significant, nomological validity can be established. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the scale developed for identifying community engagement in PA-based tourism destinations has good psychometric soundness.

Table 5 | Goodness fit statistics of the measurement model

Fit measures	Indicators	Value obtained	Acceptable value
Model test statistic	CMIN/DF	2.837	<3
Approximate fit indexes	RMSEA	0.073	<0.08
	SRMR	0.064	<0.08
	CFI	0.929	>.90
Parsimony fit measures	AGFI	0.869	.05-1

Note: GFI: goodness of fit; CMIN/DF: Minimum discrepancy, divided by its degrees of freedom; SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual; RMSEA: Root mean square error of approximation, CFI: Comparative fit index
Source: Author analysis

T-tests for the equality of mean in gender difference in CE: Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference among men and women in perceiving various practices and processes of CE. SPSS 16 was used for analysis. Table 6 shows no significant differences in various practices and processes of CE consisting of eight items among men and women members of destination communities (p values > .05). Hence, gender neutrality exists in tourism operations of destinations under study.

Table 6 | Independent t-Tests on Community engagement by Gender

Variables	Men		Women		t statistic
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Opportunity to become the member of TEDC	3.570	1.256	3.243	1.249	0.008
Opportunity to participate in destination planning process	3.400	1.257	3.386	1.254	0.093
Opportunity in attending meeting	3.360	1.118	3.413	1.239	0.007
Opportunity in presenting opinion in meeting	2.660	1.175	2.793	1.230	0.080
Opportunity for capacity building programmes	3.630	1.253	3.320	1.247	0.001
Conscientization to reduce the gender gap	3.910	1.111	3.460	1.134	0.002
Equal access to tourism products and related services	3.630	1.273	3.613	1.149	0.004
Equal access to the livelihood opportunities in tourism	3.486	1.234	3.713	1.172	0.006

Source: Author analysis

5. Descriptive study - Discussion

The descriptive analysis of the study identifies the underlying dimensions of CE of CBT destinations. The exploratory factor analysis shows that three distinct latent constructs, governance, stewardship, and empowerment, explain the CE construct. Accordingly, it has been concluded that the CE of CBT destinations has a dimensional orientation. The result indicates that all three factorial structures or dimensions define the perceived CE in tourism destinations. Accordingly, the study's second objective has been fulfilled in the context of CBT destinations.

The result reiterates the observations of Ross and Wall (1999) that organized intervention of communities or locally initiated planning and management of destinations is inevitable for a wider

reach and meeting development objectives. Through participatory planning, such locally-driven resource management strategies could generate direct economic benefits for the community concerned (Hes, 2017). In other words, CE indicators show that the local community members can strengthen their entitlement through a higher degree of local control over the activities to channelize a significant proportion of the benefits of tourism activities accrued to them (Scheyvens, 2002). As far as the identified dimensional strategies are considered, every governance, stewardship, and empowerment strategy indicator require special attention. It encompasses most of the sustainable development provisions at the grass-roots level (Matarrita-Cascante, 2010; Boley, McGehee, Perdue., & long, 2014). The study on the dimension of CE in tourism destinations has a significant influence in bringing more inclusive and sustainable resource management practices, which can, in turn, support policymaking at the state or regional level and implement the same at the destination level. In practice, all these identified constructs of the CE can be used to strengthen the local level sustainability of community development initiatives as these constructs are essential for enhancing other dimensions of sustainability.

Concerning the third objective of the study, which examines the gender difference, if any, on various practices and processes of CE variables, the study revealed that male and female members of the community did not differ significantly in the process and practices of CE in tourism destinations. This finding refutes other observations as there is a gender difference in CE in various tourism-related processes and practices at the destination level, where most often, the men get the upper hand in resource appropriation (Walter, 2011). This situation is more evident in the decision-making process, access, and opportunities for capacity building. Despite these arguments, the present study states that gender is not a significant factor in the tourism destination management process and practices. This result indicates the need for further examination in other destinations or development contexts.

6. Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Insights

The integration of qualitative and quantitative analyses in this study underscores the pivotal role of community engagement (CE) strategies in enhancing the sustainability of community-based tourism (CBT) destinations. The qualitative findings, derived from focus group discussions and expert interviews, identified sixteen CE strategies that reinforce the perceived dimensions of sustainability within these tourism settings. This insight aligns with the increasing emphasis on dynamic capabilities in collaborative management, which fosters sustainable practices in tourism settings (Kismartini & Pujiyono, 2023). Effective CE strategies mitigate the exclusion of local communities from tourism development processes, ensuring that stakeholders collaborate effectively while maximizing local benefits (Giampiccoli et al., 2023). This is crucial for enhancing the community's leadership role in resource appropriation and solidifying a regulatory framework tailored to local needs.

Complementing these insights, the quantitative analysis delineates three key dimensions of CE—governance, stewardship, and empowerment—each playing a crucial role in defining the overall CE construct at CBT destinations. This finding supports the need for community-driven planning and management as a means to meet sustainable development objectives (Fernandes, Brandão, & Costa, 2017). The study illustrates that local community members are better positioned to enhance their entitlements and direct economic benefits through a participatory approach, thereby facilitating a more inclusive and sustainable resource management paradigm. As indicated in

recent studies, these dimensions significantly influence policymaking at both state and regional levels, promoting the practical implementation of sustainable development initiatives at the grassroots level (Oliveira, Nôbrega, & Sonaglio, 2017; Wirahayu et al., 2022).

Notably, the study's exploration of gender dynamics revealed no significant differences in CE practices between male and female community members. This challenges existing narratives that often portray a male-dominated landscape in tourism resource management and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in various tourism contexts. Further investigation into these complexities can enrich the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism development and ensure that CE strategies are inclusive and equitable, as demonstrated in community-based tourism case studies (Mercado et al., 2023).

7. Implications

The theoretical implications of the present study go beyond the conventional framework of CE. The study states that CE is one of the critical aspects of destination-level sustainability as the other dimension of sustainability, one way or another, depends on local empowerment, stewardship, and governance. The methodology and practices in exploring CE factors and their latent dimensions can be employed in similar contexts with minor destination-level modification to understand local-level sustainability, as sustainability is always destination specific. The study could supplement gender construction theories that call for equal opportunities and women's empowerment through development agenda. Since gender equality is the primary indicator of sustainable tourism (Kabil, Ali, Marzouk & Dávid 2022), more inclusive tourism theories can be explored.

At the operational level, the study throws light on various CE processes and practices, which support identifying local-level sustainability of tourism, hitherto unexplored in tourism in general, CBT in particular. The identified indicators and their latent dimensions are expected to contribute towards a more proactive community intervention to strengthen the destination's sustainability, which helps improve the quality of tourism services and various other destination-specific benefits. The study gives tourism authorities and stakeholders of similar destinations insight into exploring such practices to strengthen community intervention.

At the policy level, the identification of CE variables and latent dimensions can support the program for redesigning or fine-tuning the existing framework to meet the developmental aspirations and the community's environmental and social concerns. The measurement of the outcome of the development programs was made based on indicators developed across the globe. The study outcome can create a base for developing CE variables for development initiatives at the national level for developing and developed countries. At the local level, the DMO can frame locally specific indicators to measure the extent of CE while appropriating resources to contribute to the destination's sustainable development. As the study signifies the contribution of women in tourism resource appropriation, further emphasis is required to ensure gender-neutral development in other tourism destination planning and community-oriented development programs. In this direction, the study throws light on the importance of gender-neutral local community-oriented development initiatives to meet various SDGs in the years to come.

8. Conclusion

The study's objective was to understand various indicators and latent structures of CE to

strengthen the grass-root level sustainability of tourism destinations through enhanced participation, decision-making, and implementation through the democratic representation of community members. Through the exploratory sequential method, the study identified 16 indicators with three latent dimensions, i.e., empowerment, governance, and stewardship strategies contributing towards CE in tourism destinations under investigation. The study further tried to examine the dimensional orientations of CE to strengthen the local level sustainability of the destination. The statistical analysis shows three distinct latent dimensions evolved from the CE of CBT destinations. This indicates that emphasis on these three dimensions of CE could create better co-management of natural resources by exploring tourism potential, keeping human beings as a centre of development discourse and resource appropriation.

In the decentralized, bottom-up, inclusive, and sustainable development arena, this study assumes significance as it attempts to examine various CE indicators perceived at the grass-roots level in Indian tourism destinations, which support the conceptualization and strengthening of destination-specific CE indicators of CBT programs at the local level. The study enables the policymakers, local communities, and other stakeholders to better understand the present CE strategies and design alternative strategies or strengthen the existing community-level practices to ensure community-centred development for quality destinations. Besides, in an equitable, inclusive, and democratic arena, the study extends the need for gender neutrality in resource appropriation practices at the local level to strengthen SDGs.

9. Limitations and Future research directions

The study focuses on CE practices among tourism destinations. The study respondents are TEDC office bearers and members of the tourism destinations. The study's perceived limitations include its focus on understanding community engagement in protected area-based tourism destinations. Only certain dimensions of the community engagement variable, which contribute to the local-level sustainability of tourism destinations, were considered for the study. Intra-destination variations are not considered in the study as the study is required to get an overall scenario of the topic under discussion.

This study extends the further scope for assessing the relationship between CE and local development, destination sustainability, and quality of life of host communities of PA-based tourism destinations while achieving the destination's sustainability. The study also paves the way for identifying the individual contribution of the three dimensions of CE on various other tourism programs under different destination profiles in the inclusive and sustainable development arena.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 | Questionnaire

Variables	Men		Women		t statistic
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Opportunity to become the member of TEDC	3.570	1.256	3.243	1.249	0.008
Opportunity to participate in destination planning process	3.400	1.257	3.386	1.254	0.093
Opportunity in attending meeting	3.360	1.118	3.413	1.239	0.007
Opportunity in presenting opinion in meeting	2.660	1.175	2.793	1.230	0.080
Opportunity for capacity building programmes	3.630	1.253	3.320	1.247	0.001
Conscientization to reduce the gender gap	3.910	1.111	3.460	1.134	0.002
Equal access to tourism products and related services	3.630	1.273	3.613	1.149	0.004
Equal access to the livelihood opportunities in tourism	3.486	1.234	3.713	1.172	0.006

Appendix 2 | Frequency test for missing values

Statistics

		N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	N7	N8	N9	N10	N11	N12	N13	N14	N15	N16
N	Valid	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350	350
	Missing	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55	55

Appendix 3 | Critical Ratio

Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
N5	<---	SS	1.000				
N4	<---	SS	.722	.075	9.594	***	par_1
N3	<---	SS	1.126	.077	14.594	***	par_2
N2	<---	SS	.822	.073	11.338	***	par_3
N1	<---	SS	.854	.077	11.037	***	par_4
N11	<---	DS	1.000				
N10	<---	DS	.946	.059	15.979	***	par_5
N9	<---	DS	1.005	.063	15.840	***	par_6
N8	<---	DS	.830	.065	12.784	***	par_7
N7	<---	DS	.924	.058	16.034	***	par_8
N6	<---	DS	.980	.071	13.859	***	par_9
N16	<---	ES	1.173	.105	11.129	***	par_10
N15	<---	ES	1.000				
N14	<---	ES	1.201	.105	11.481	***	par_11
N13	<---	ES	.793	.085	9.327	***	par_12
N12	<---	DS	.771	.055	13.941	***	par_16

Appendix 4 | Covariance Matrix
Implied (for all variables) Covariances (Group number 1 - Default model)

	ES	DS	SS	N12	N13	N14	N15	N16	N6	N7	N8	N9	N10	N11	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5
ES	.440																		
DS	.177	.655																	
SS	.107	.255	.614																
N12	.137	.505	.196	.770															
N13	.349	.141	.085	.108	.807														
N14	.528	.213	.129	.164	.419	1.046													
N15	.440	.177	.107	.137	.349	.528	.905												
N16	.516	.208	.126	.160	.409	.619	.516	1.135											
N6	.174	.642	.250	.495	.138	.209	.174	.204	1.257										
N7	.164	.605	.235	.466	.130	.197	.164	.192	.593	.881									
N8	.147	.544	.211	.419	.117	.177	.147	.173	.533	.502	1.033								
N9	.178	.658	.256	.507	.141	.214	.178	.209	.645	.608	.546	1.063							
N10	.168	.619	.241	.477	.133	.201	.168	.197	.607	.572	.514	.622	.928						
N11	.177	.655	.255	.505	.141	.213	.177	.208	.642	.605	.544	.658	.619	1.046					
N1	.092	.218	.524	.168	.073	.110	.092	.108	.213	.201	.181	.219	.206	.218	1.207				
N2	.088	.209	.504	.161	.070	.106	.088	.104	.205	.193	.174	.210	.198	.209	.431	1.062			
N3	.121	.287	.691	.221	.096	.145	.121	.142	.281	.265	.238	.288	.271	.287	.590	.568	1.138		
N4	.078	.184	.443	.142	.062	.093	.078	.091	.180	.170	.153	.185	.174	.184	.379	.763	.499	1.105	
N5	.107	.255	.614	.196	.085	.129	.107	.126	.250	.235	.211	.256	.241	.255	.524	.504	.691	.443	.927

Appendix 5 | SIC & AVE

Sl.No.	Construct	SIC	AVE
1.	Endowment strategy	0.402	597
2.	Governance strategy	0.207	721
3.	Stewardship strategy	0.330	656