

<http://doi.org/10.22133/ijtcs.2025.500415.1193>

## Exploring Tourism's Effects on Khasia Cultural Identity: A Qualitative Assessment in Moulvibazar, Bangladesh

Samoydit Paul<sup>\*1</sup>, MD. Irfan Amin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Folklore, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh, Bangladesh  
Research Associate, Bangladesh Institute of Folklore and Community Development, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup> Undergraduate student, Department of Philosophy, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Trishal, Mymensingh, Bangladesh

### Article Info

#### Received:

2024-12-17

#### Accepted:

2025-02-06

#### Keywords:

Tourism

Khasia culture

Sustainable tourism

Cultural commodification

### Abstract

The Khasia communities living in the Moulvibazar district, which have a matriarchal family structure, famous for betel leaf farming and unique cultural heritage, has been impacted by tourism. This study explores the impacts of tourism on their cultural practices, economic conditions, and social dynamics from different aspects and identifies long-term strategies for cultural preservation. Fieldwork was conducted in four Khasia villages in Moulvibazar to collect essential data and observe the participants' reactions. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and Focus group discussions with thematic analysis using Quirkos software. Expert secondary data were used to back up the conclusions. Tourism has provided several economic opportunities like improved infrastructure and new sources of revenue; some villages are planning to use tourism to show and promote their true cultural heritage via eco-tourism and social media platforms. However, there are several challenges, and cultural commodification, environmental pollution, and social conflicts are the main concerns. Deforestation is creating a disturbance in their livelihood as they are highly dependent on nature. Some tourists also demand commercialization which is harming their cultural authenticity. Tourism presents both benefits and threats for the Khasia community. Sustainable tourism practices and community-led policies are important to strike a balance between economic benefits and cultural preservation. Long-term development can be ensured while safeguarding heritage and the environment if the Khasia people are given the power to manage their cultural representation.

#### \*Corresponding author

E-mail: [anindyapaul.019786@gmail.com](mailto:anindyapaul.019786@gmail.com)

#### How to Cite:

Paul, S., & Amin, MD. I. (2024). Exploring Tourism's Effects on Khasia Cultural Identity: A Qualitative Assessment in Moulvibazar, Bangladesh. *International Journal of Tourism, Culture and Spirituality*, 7(2), 79-93.

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, if we see through our country's economic growth, we can clearly understand that 'Tourism' sector has played its part with patience. International tourism had grown to be one of the most significant economic sectors in the world by the early 21st century, and its effects were being felt everywhere from the Arctic to Antarctica (Walton, 2024). In Bangladesh, people love to visit tourist places to enjoy their time with family, friends, and loved ones. Moulvibazar is one of the most famous tourist places in Bangladesh because this district is full of beautiful tea gardens, eco-resorts, waterfalls, haors (wetlands), historical sites, and swamp areas. Moulvibazar district is situated within the Sylhet division in the northeastern part of Bangladesh. Habiganj and Sylhet enclose Moulvibazar on the west, while the Indian states of Assam and Tripura enclose it on the east. According to the most recent census in 2022, the district has an area of around 2,799.38 square kilometers and has a population of approximately 2,123,445 people (Islam, 2024).

A variety of human races like Austriacs, Dravidians, Mongoloids, and Caucasoids have been in the South Asia region for thousands of years. From this diversity, many new cultures have been born and these cultures are being practiced like every day by different ethnic groups. Khasi people came from the Austric community (M Mostafizur, 2023). Khasia is a Mongolite and matriarchal Indigenous group from Bangladesh. Their ancestors are from the Khasi and Jaintapur hills in the Meghalaya region of India. Almost 500 years ago they came from Assam to Bangladesh's land (Banglapedia, 2024). Moulvibazar is a district where the Khasia communities live alongside mainstream people. Moulvibazar is one of the most densely tourist-oriented areas where places like 'Lauachara National Park', 'Madhabkundu Waterfall', 'Madhavpur Lake', etc attract tourists enormously. To complete the paper, fieldwork was conducted in the 'Kalenji Punjee', 'Magurchora Punjee', 'Lawachara Punjee', and 'Nirala Punjee'. Khasia people call their villages as 'Punjee'.

Cultural exchange means sharing ideas, values, beliefs, customs, and other cultural components between individuals from various ancestry. This may take place when someone is traveling across borders (Worldpackers, 2024). The main goal was to find out how the Khasia communities of the Moulvibazar district adapting the mainstream culture and to solve the question of any impacts changing their regular cultural practices. Another confusion led this paper to find out if the Khasia communities like the tourism sector in their homeland.

To complete the study some aims and objectives are essential. These are given in the following:

- ≠ To explore the impacts of tourism on the Khasia communities' cultural identity in the Moulvibazar district, focusing on both positive and negative changes.
- ≠ To find out the relationship between tourism development and cultural preservation within the Khasia communities in the Moulvibazar.

To understand the perceptions of Khasia people regarding tourism's influence on their traditional practices, values, and way of life.

## Literature Review

Tourism has been identified as a sharp-edged sword for indigenous communities, providing both economic opportunities and cultural challenges. The effects of tourism on indigenous cultures, particularly in areas like Moulvibazar, Bangladesh, have become an area of increasing social attention.

The relationship between tourism and cultural identity has been widely studied, with many scholars exploring how the arrival of tourists can alter indigenous communities' traditional ways of life. This review tried to explain existing literature to contextualize the unique bonding between tourism and cultural identity, focusing on the Khasia community in Moulvibazar, Bangladesh.

Indigenous cultural identity is deeply connected to traditions, customs, beliefs, and social structures that distinguish these communities from the mainstream people and their culture. According to Artal-Tur, (2018), tourism has dynamic opportunities to promote cultural understanding and applauds by revealing tourists to the true lifestyles of Indigenous c

ommunities. For the Khasia community, whose matriarchal society, ecological balance, and betel leaf farming are the key aspects of their identity, tourism offers a platform to preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage (Gurdon, 1914). But this preservation doesn't come easily, they come with challenges when cultural components are edited for tourist consumption.

Tourism can create a place of pride in cultural identity by making advantages for Indigenous communities to showcase their identical traditions and cultural practices. Several studies have demonstrated that tourism can help promote awareness about Indigenous cultures and provide economic benefits that support cultural preservation (Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2017). In Magurchara Punji, for example, some Khasia youth have used social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. to share their culture and customs with a broader audience, mixing technological adoption with cultural outreach (M Mostafizur, 2023). These developments mark the potential of tourism to promote cultural continuity and economic self-dependence.

While tourism can encourage cultural exchange, it also risks Indigenous cultures' turning into a commodity. Cobbinah (2015) informs that the pressure to meet tourist expectations often leads to the dilution of cultural practices, warning their authenticity. This perturbation is reverberated by participants in Kalenji, Magurchara, Lawachara, and Nirala Punjis, who addressed the commodification of their traditions as a significant issue. Examples of insensitive behavior by tourists, such as awkward and inappropriate questions about their daily cuisine, in future highlight the cultural tensions that awake when tourists interact with them (M Mostafizur, 2023).

According to Pal et al. (2017) 6.45% of Khasia respondents from his study have a satisfied socio-economic status also directing to the challenges in resource access and economic diversification. This study emphasizes the need for tailored income-generating initiatives and educational chances for the Khasia community, which sustainable tourism practices could augment.

Shikder et al. (2013) underlines in the study that deforestation and the constitutional occlusion for tourism development disrupt the ecological functions upon which indigenous livelihoods and customs depend. In Lawachara National Park, resort construction has been a threat to the forest, a crucial element of Khasia cultural identity bound to their spiritual beliefs and betel leaf farming practices (SAHA & AZAM, 2005). However, tourism's social implications, such as the growth of interaction with mainstream culture, have issued new challenges for Khasia youth. Participants from Kalenji Punji marked that these communications and interactions often weaken traditional values, as younger generations adopt external cultural influences (M Mostafizur, 2023).

While existing literature on how tourism impacts Indigenous cultural identity, there's surprisingly little that focuses specifically on the Khasia community in Moulvibazar. Most studies tend to zero in on economic or environmental aspects, leaving the cultural sides highly untouched. Addressing this gap needs a shade combination of how tourism affects the Khasia communities' self-perception and their communications with higher societal dynamics.

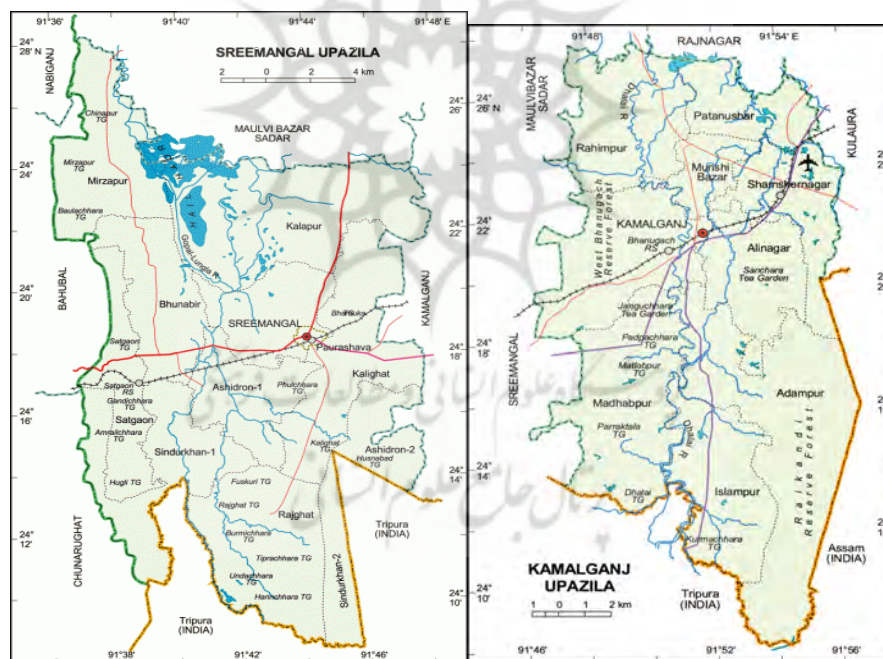
### **Study Area**

The fieldwork for this study took place in four different punjis within the Moulvibazar district of Bangladesh. Khasia communities address their villages as 'Punji (Belal Uddin, & Mukul, 2012). The selected villages are- Kalenji Punji, Magurchara Punji, Lawachara Punji, and Nirala Punji.

Kalenji Punjee is situated in Komolganj Upazilla. The actual location is 4 K.M. away from Adampur Bazar. 2<sup>nd</sup> study area was Magurchora Punjee, which was located by the Komolganj-Sreemongol highway. 3<sup>rd</sup> study area was, Lawachara Punjee, which is located in the beat of Lawachora national park. 4<sup>th</sup> and last study took place in Nirala Punjee. There is no direct or local transportation system to go to the Nirala punjee. So, we hired jeeps to go there to complete our study.



**Figure 1. Map of Moulvibazar District. Collected from:**  
<https://www.bdtradeinfo.com/district-info/moulvibazar>



**Figure 2. Maps of Sreemangal and Kamalganj upazilla Both maps are collected from:**  
<https://bangladesh-map-all.blogspot.com/2017/11/sreemangal-map.html>



## Methodology

This study included participants from four Khasia villages: Kalenji Punji, Magurchara Punji, Lawachara Punji, and Nirala Punji, located in the Moulvibazar district of Bangladesh. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the four villages including the village leaders (Mantri), farmers, youth, and tourists who visited the villages, to gather essential data and insights into their perceptions of tourism effects on their cultural identity. To complete the research, the study had to implant participant observation to directly engage with the community members to observe their daily practices, communications, and cultural expression. To gather the youth generation's statement towards tourism, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was facilitated among 15–19-year-old boys to collect their insights towards tourism. Three informal interviews were conducted among the tourists to learn about their perception of Khasia culture. Informal interviews with three tourists provided an external perspective on the interaction with Khasia culture.

Here's a demographic profile given in the following:

**Table 1. Demographic Profile**

Category	Details
Age range	15 to 68 years
Gender distributions	60% male, 40% female
Professions	Farmers (60%), Business owners (20%), Village leaders (10%), Young Entrepreneurs (10%)
Geographical Representation	Equal representation from Kalenji Punji, Magurchara Punji, Lawachara Punji, and Nirala Punji

In sample collection, purposive, snowball, and random sampling methods were employed to gather information. The Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who could provide data on the intersection of tourism and cultural identity. This method confirmed that respondents with diverse roles within the community were represented including elders, women, and young adults. The village leader speaks for the whole village, so the main center of the purpose was the leaders. Other participants were interviewed through referrals from the initial respondents to ensure authenticity and depth in data collection. That's why the snowball method was used. Some random interviews were also necessary to identify the gaps and remove confusion. So, the random sampling method was also implied.

The sample composition:

**Farmers (9 participants):** Representing the majority of the Khasia population and providing insights into the impacts of tourism on traditional livelihoods.

**Village Leaders (3 participants):** Community decision-makers who offered perspectives on challenges and opportunities at a collective level.

**Youth (Focus Group Discussion):** Three participants aged 15–19 years discussed tourism's influence on education and cultural aspirations.

**Tourists (3 informal interviews):** External perspectives on Khasia culture were gathered through interviews with visitors.

Secondary data was important to complete to fulfill the research. Secondary data were collected from various sources like academic books: journal articles, reports, and relevant web-based resources.

The data collected from interviews, and observation were analyzed by a data analyzing software called 'Quirkos'. The reason behind using 'Quirkos' was, that it is user-friendly and very simple to use for the amateurs. The software was used to analyze the data, generate codes, develop themes, and explore relationships with the data. Essential responses were generated to code to identify patterns and relationships. Then the codes were grouped into broader themes to explore the socio-economic and cultural impacts of tourism.

## Findings

Khasia communities have been living in the Moulvibazar district for many years and they are practicing their unique culture independently. 'Mother' is the head of a Khasia family, where we see most of the families are cared for by a 'Father' outside. They pass their property and family name through the female line. That means women are the main power center in their family structure. The findings of the study are organized into three major themes which were coded through the data analysis software called 'Quirkos'.

**Table 2. Generated Codes From the Interview**

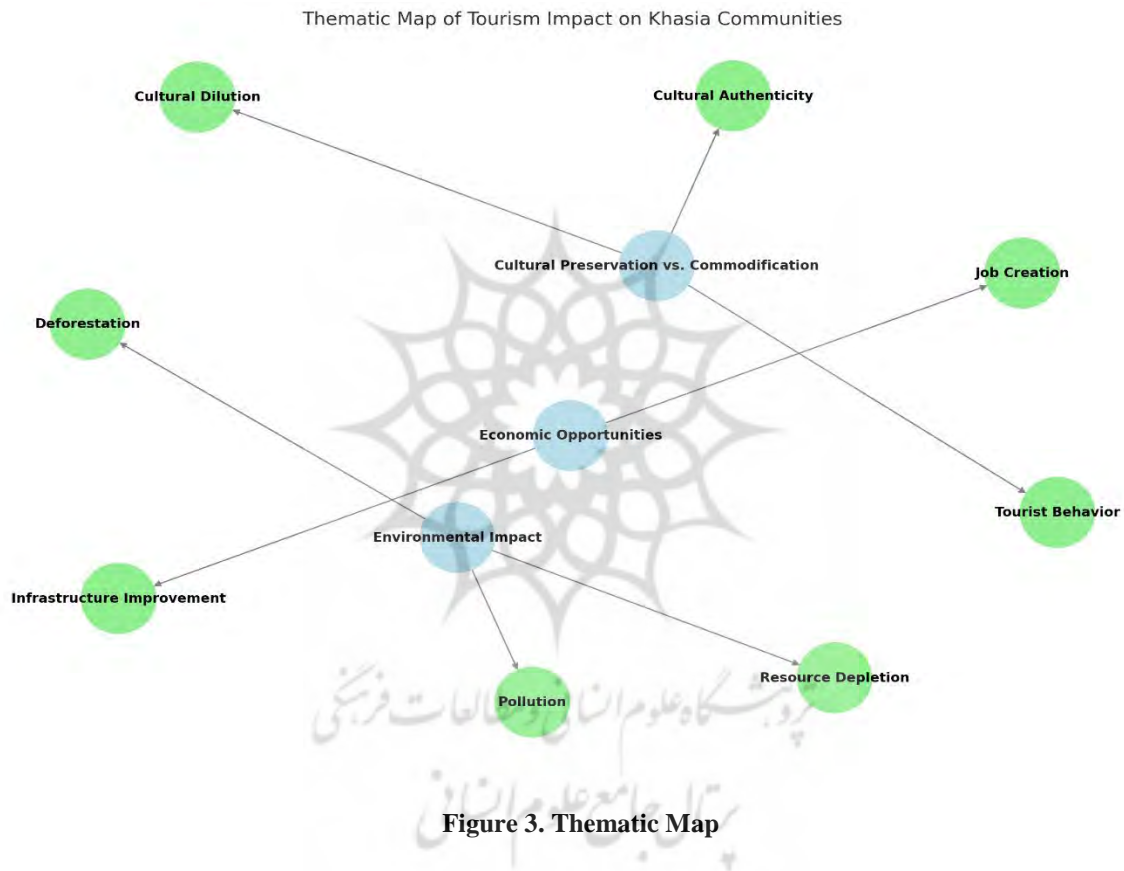
Interview (participant)	Codes Generated
1 Gender: Male Age: 43 Occupation: Farmer and Village Leader Village: Kalenji Punji	Making impacts on trading, Agreed on impacts, Creating job opportunities, Disturbance created by tourists
2 Gender: Male Age: 52 Occupation: Farmer Village: Kalenji Punji	Sure about negative impacts, Emotionally weak youth, Acknowledgement of tradition, Prioritize peaceful lifestyle, Commodification of culture
3 Gender: Male Age: 56 Occupation: Businessman (Village Leader) Village: Magurchara Punji	Ambitious about tourism, Dedicated to showcasing culture to others, Concerned about the environment, Want to make opportunities for tourism, Positive about the impacts of tourism
4 Gender: Female Age: 39 Occupation: Housewife Village: Kalenji Punji	Tourism makes a disturbance in their life, and Don't need the help of tourism to improve their livelihood, Tourism makes bad impacts on the environment and society, Anxious about family
5 Gender: Male Age: 65 Occupation: Farmer Village: Nirala Punji	Tourist-oriented places Have several opportunities for tourism, Tourists do not create much disturbance and have both negative and positive impacts on culture

6	Gender: Female Age: 19 Occupation: Student Village: Magurchara Punji	Use of social media to showcase traditions, plans for cultural centers
7	Gender: Male Age: 18 Occupation: Student Village: Magurchora Punji	Outsiders modifying traditions, praising outside's cultural influence.
8	Gender: Female Age: 47 Occupation: Farmer Village: Lawachara Punji	Past incidents leading to a more conservative approach, and afraid about their children's future.
9	Gender: Male Age: 35 Occupation: Tourist vehicle driver Village: Magurchara Punji	Trees being cut for luxury, pollution affecting farming, affecting their household, earning money, want tourists to behave in a good manner
10	Gender: Male Age: 36 Occupation: Farmer Village: Lawachara punji	Don't need the help of tourism to improve their livelihood, Tourism makes bad impacts on the environment and society, Anxious about family
11	Gender: Male Age: 29 Occupation: Farmer Village: Nirala	Don't need the help of tourism to improve their livelihood, Tourism makes bad impacts on the environment and society, Anxious about family
12	Gender: Female Age: 59 Occupation: Farmer (Village Leader) Village: Lawachora Punji	Risk of fungal infections due to increased human interaction, anxious about their corps
13	Gender: Female Age: 43 Occupation: Business Village: Nirala Punji	Creates chaos without any reason, tourism being a social problem, doesn't care about the profits
14	Gender: Male Age: 28 Occupation: Farmer Village: Nirala Punji	Anxious about their ethnicity, satisfied with the school
15	Gender: Female Age: 19 Occupation: Student Village: Magurchora Punji	Anxious about their ethnicity, satisfied with the school
16	Gender: Male Age: 39 Occupation: Govt. Job (Tourist) Dhaka, Bangladesh	Interested in Khasia culture, Might explore more
17	Gender: Female Age: 24 Occupation: Student (Tourist) Sylhet, Bangladesh	Interested in Khasia culture, Might explore more
18	Gender: Male Age: 34 Occupation: School Teacher (Tourist) Dhaka, Bangladesh	Interested in Khasia culture, Might explore more



The three major themes extracted from the codes are: **Economic Opportunities**, **Cultural Preservation vs. Commodification**, and **Environmental Impact**. These themes were identified through a detailed coding process and reflect the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of tourism in the Khasia communities. A thematic map given in the following illustrates the relationships between the primary themes and their sub-themes.

### Thematic Map



### Theme Reviews

#### Economic Impacts

Tourism has shown both positive and negative sides to the economic development of the Khasia communities living in the Moulvibazar district. The positive side is, that many community members have accepted tourism to make their lives and livelihood better. As noted by a participant from Kalenji Punji, "... Tourism has created many opportunities for us. There are 2 or 3 boys who have invested their savings to buy tourist cars (Jeep/Chander Gari) and they are doing very well now." This note highlights how tourism is creating opportunities for community members to generate a sustainable income.

These benefits are not equally distributed, though. There are minimal economic benefits for the community like Kalenji Punji, which is situated in a remote area far from the familiar tourist destination in the Moulvibazar. As Nirob Suiyam, one of the community leaders from Kalenji Punji mentioned, "...Tourists do not come here very often. We are more dependent on betel leaf cultivation." This dependence on traditional economic practices indicates a flaw in tourism's reach and its economic potential is limited in remote areas.

In addition, some punjis like Magurchara and Nirala have started to use the internet for outreach and content creation to generate profits from tourism, while others are more worried about the environment and climate. Because Khasias are more dependent on nature to generate their main livelihood. Thus, even if tourism has the potential to improve the economy, necessary actions are needed to ensure that all Khasia villages benefit equally.

Tourism has played an important role in the Punjis' infrastructure development. When Govt. saw that tourists were showing interest in the Nirala Punji, an improved road network was made to make it easier. So various types of opportunities are knocking at the punji's door. But this image is slightly different in Kalenji Punji. After asking about the infrastructure and road development, Nyth Khariyam, a participant from the kalenji punji replied, "... I don't think so. The government has already taken initiatives to construct a road direct to Adampur Bajar." That meant, the road was already under construction, tourism didn't help building the road.

But a common thing is notable in every punjis. Not all of them support tourism to make their lifestyle and livelihood easier. They are more likely into their betel leaf farming and they have a kind of superstitious that only farming and growing more crops can make them rich. That's why many of them are not interested in tourism. That's why they remain disconnected from tourism's advantages.

### **Cultural Preservation vs. Commodification**

During the study, many stories and experiences from the community helped the study to identify the social impacts caused by tourism. Tourism has been greatly influencing the social structures and cultural dynamics of host communities. Tourism often contracts cultural exchange, preserving mutual understanding and appreciation between tourists and locals. But it may also be the cause behind cultural commercialization, where cultures and legacy are forced to change their authenticity to make the guests feel comfortable (Smith, 2015).

During the study, it was found by the Village head that the young generation from Magurchora punji is using advanced technologies like the internet, social media platforms, machines, etc. to lead their regular life. They are also using social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to promote Khasia culture. He added on that topic, "...We are becoming old now, we don't know much

about modern technologies. Young boys and girls are trying to do something with their mobile phones and cameras”.

They have added their traditional music, dance, photographs, and videographs from their traditional cultural festival like Sneg-Kut Snem in their usable content, which attracts foreign tourists to experience their true customs and rituals. It is also a great thing for the country's face to the outside world. They are also showing their traditional betel leaf farming technique through various social media platforms.

In Lawachara Punji, Khasia people expressed their tensions about cultural abuse. Cultural commodification is a kind of cultural abuse. To realize the commodification of culture, it is essential to identify and examine its historical context. Rituals, cultural practices, and symbols were fundamentally rooted in local communities in pre-industrial societies and had basic importance that was highly related to social and religious rules (Easy Sociology, 2024). In Lawachara Punji, a participant shared a very inconvenient story. He shared, “... I just want to say one thing, you'll understand everything. If an outsider comes to your home then ask your children if they eat dogs or snakes, how'll you feel? That's what we are facing nowadays.” These kinds of awkward questions about their food habit and personal lives make them very uncomfortable.

Another story was shared by the village leader from Kalenji Punji, “... there have been many negative incidents that took place in our punjee because of outsiders. I'll tell you a story about that. One day a group of young boys came to make a film. They stayed here for about 15 days. Then one of the young men fled with a girl from our village. In our culture, if you are a Khasi girl, you've to marry a Khasi boy. It's our tradition. This incident has made our girls become very conservative. So we do not trust anyone easily. That's why we don't have any specific interest in tourism.” This incident had a bad impact on the community.

In punjis like Nirala and Magurchora, tourism has influenced their people to get more education. Because of visitors, many NGOs have taken proper initiatives to bring the light of education there. An NGO worker named, Fahima Begum from Lawachora Punji has informed, “... Many people come here from cities. Most of them are educated and smart. Their behavior and life style attract the local community very often.” She also added that, “... because of tourists we got to know about the community and the need for their education.” So, it was clear that tourism has played an important role make a better educational infrastructure in some Khasia Punjis.

### **Environmental Impacts**

The rapid growth of resorts, luxury accommodations, and tourist services are the main reasons behind a large scale of deforestation, especially in areas like Lawachora National Park. Participant named Nan Cio, told us, “... tourists come here and they behave in uncivilized way very often. They break trees

without any reason. For them, many companies are trying to build resorts and hotels here. We never wanted that.” The study found ecosystems that are important to the Khasia communities’ livelihood have been damaged significantly. Ecosystem-dependent tourism practice encourages the use of sustainable methods to save natural resources. Such as the concept of ecotourism highlights helping local communities harming the environment (Mowforth et al., 1996). Khasia communities living in the Moulvibazar area have a nice opportunity to make their location more useful by creating ecotourism facilities. But without Magurchora Punji, other punjis did not show any kind of ambition regarding that.

After increasing the number of tourists every year, it has brought noise, unwanted chaos, litter and other kinds of pollution along with it. It has affected the beauty of the punjis like Nirala and Lawachara. Plastic wastes and garbage left by tourists pollute the soil and water, impacting their betel leaf farming and livelihood.

On the positive side, some punjis, particularly Magurchora, have taken steps to educate tourists and local members about sustainable, nature-friendly practices. This is a unique technique for attracting and educating about the usefulness of nature. Khasias depend highly on the ecosystem because of their betel leaf farming practice. Their efforts are also added by promoting eco-friendly tourism and protecting the forest.

Competition for land, water, and forest resources has increased as tourism has been flooding this area. Villagers express anger about the unequal allocation of resources and the fact that tourism projects are often given privileges over local people’s needs.

## **Discussion**

This study found some important factors regarding tourism and community. Culture can work as a bridge between tourism and community development. There are chances and these chances should be utilized properly. Tourism has brought opportunities alongside some major challenges too; everyone has to see both sides of the coin. Tourism has opened new doors to the Khasia community members by creating new ways to earn money for their livelihood. It is true that most of them are not educated enough to understand and utilize these opportunities. However, the people and organizations from the mainstream have to come forward and take the initiative on behalf of them. It can build a bond that can easily play an impactful role in conserving and preserving our true national culture. So, the opportunities should be considered by every punji. By doing this, punjis from the study can achieve more fruits from it.

The study described the both positive and negative sides of tourism when it is a matter of social dynamics. The increasing use of social media platforms, technologies, and initiatives in villages like Magurchora to show their culture, is a footstep to enhancing cultural outreach. However, cultural

commodification is a big threat to their ethnicity. Communities should be aware when they try to showcase their true culture to outsiders.

Tourism is harming the local environment, particularly in areas like Lawachara punji and Kalenji Punji. Deforestation, pollution, and competition for resources have affected Khasia's livelihood in some unwanted ways. But the good side is, that punji like Magurchora is going to take the initiative to build an eco-tourism environment in their village. From this step, other punjis can learn the way and implant on their punjis also to create a new bridge with the mainstream people.

## Conclusion

Tourism's impact on the Khasia communities living in the Moulvibazar highlights the complex connection between opportunities and challenges. Tourism has played an important role in fostering and preserving economic growth and cultural awareness. But there are some risk factors also, which should be taken seriously. Tourism has already introduced risks like cultural commodification, environmental pollution, and social inequality. Adapting sustainable tourism plans and sensitive cultural tourism practices can solve these matters too. This study tries to highlight the need for inclusive plans that prioritize the voice of Indigenous people, ensuring that their true cultural identity and environment are preserved for future generations.

Khasia people of Moulvibazar are highly dependent on their betel leaf cultivation for their livelihood. They are very careful when it comes to their betel leaf because they believe that Khasias can farm the best betel leaf in this area. They generate a handsome amount of money from their betel leaf and they share the profit equally among themselves. However, this study found that many of them are interested in investing in the tourism sector. The reason behind that is not only money but also, they are very interested in showcasing their culture to the outside world.

But tourism is also becoming a problem from different aspects. These problems can be solved if local government and higher authorities co-operate with them and it can open a new door to improve all over country's economy. The government can take initiatives like publicity functions, seminars, and building schools and educational institutions in these areas. As a result of being a part of the remote area, these punjis have very short chances to develop in many sectors. The government can also help them to improve in these fields like education, communication, and business.

Tourists also have some responsibilities to maintain. It is highly recommended that tourists have to behave in a civilized way and don't ask personal questions to the community members if it's not necessary. They are also instructed not to pollute the environment. Because Khasia is very close to nature for their daily life.



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