Community Cultural Tourism — Designing for Equity, Not Spectacle

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B practice-note Culture & Heritage

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This note is about doing better than that. The evidence exists on what works. The design principles are clear. Applying them requires more patience and more genuine partnership than most tourism development projects are structured to allow.

The Two Models: Spectacle vs. Partnership

Community-based tourism in tribal contexts consistently splits into two models in practice, regardless of what the programme documents say.

The spectacle model: An outside operator — a travel company, an NGO, a government tourism department — designs a tourism product around tribal culture, brings tourists to tribal communities, creates an experience for the tourists, and distributes a small fraction of the revenue to community members as performance fees or hospitality payments. The community has minimal control over which aspects of their culture are shown, which tourists come and how many, what the rules of engagement are, or how revenue is distributed. The benefit is real but small; the cultural control is essentially absent.

This model is common because it is easier to implement. The outside operator has the market relationships, the marketing capacity, and the tourism infrastructure. Communities provide the cultural authenticity.

The partnership model: Community institutions — traditional governance bodies, SHG federations, or a specifically constituted tourism committee — make the decisions: which tourists come, in what numbers, at what times, seeing what. Community members are the primary beneficiaries — as guides, hosts, food providers, cultural demonstrators — rather than as performers paid by an outside operator. Revenue flows primarily to community institutions and is distributed according to community-determined rules. The outside organisation (NGO, tour operator, government tourism) provides market access, marketing, and logistics — not cultural control.

The partnership model requires more time, more trust, and more genuine transfer of control than most tourism development programmes are designed for. It produces better cultural outcomes, better long-term economic outcomes, and more durable community-tourism relationships.

The systematic literature review of 131 studies on Indigenous tourism (ScienceDirect, 2025) found that Indigenous tourism plays a crucial role in sustainable development, cultural heritage preservation, and social equity when properly designed — but that the integration of genuine innovation and equity remains fragmented and underexplored in most implementations. The MDPI 2025 study on community-based tourism and SDGs found that governance gaps and elite capture consistently undermine equitable benefit-sharing — specifically that without explicit governance structures, benefits accrue to a small number of community members (typically those with better education, language skills, and social connections) rather than to the community broadly.

Eight Design Principles for Equity

Principle 1: Community decision-making precedes product design

The community — through its legitimate governance institution — must decide, before any tourism product is designed, whether it wants to host tourists at all. This sounds obvious. In practice, it is routinely inverted: a tourism product is designed by an outside organisation, and community members are then consulted on implementation details after the core decisions have been made.

The consent conversation must include: what aspects of community life can tourists see? Which spaces, ceremonies, or practices are restricted from outside presence? What maximum number of visitors per day or month does the community want? What are the rules tourists must follow? How will revenue be distributed?

These decisions should be made at a community meeting — ideally a gram sabha meeting where the decisions are formally recorded — not at a meeting with only community leaders or selected individuals.

The Bonda example: The Bonda in Malkangiri are one of Odisha's most photographed PVTG communities. They have historically had minimal control over who visits or photographs them. Any tourism initiative involving the Bonda must begin with the Bonda's own decision — through their traditional governance institution — about whether they want tourism engagement at all and on precisely what terms. If the answer is no, or not now, that answer must be respected. No tourism programme that begins with an outside organisation's decision that "the Bonda would benefit from tourism" is designed correctly.

Principle 2: Community members are the primary employees, not paid performers

The economic case for community tourism is strongest when community members fill the highest-value roles — as guides, interpreters, naturalists, cooks, accommodation

hosts — not as cultural performers paid per performance by an outside operator. The distinction matters economically (higher and more regular income for more community members) and culturally (being a guide is a skilled profession; being a performer is a commodified role).

A community guide who earns ₹800–1,200 per tour day from regular tourism is building a livelihood. A community member who receives ₹200 for posing in traditional dress for a tourist photograph is not.

Principle 3: Explicit governance for revenue distribution

The single most documented cause of community tourism failure is elite capture of benefits — the pattern where tourism income flows to the community leader, the person with the most education, or the person who has the best relationship with the outside tourism operator, rather than to the community broadly.

Preventing this requires explicit, pre-agreed governance: a written revenue distribution plan (what percentage goes to individual guides and hosts; what percentage goes to a community development fund; what percentage covers operational costs) adopted formally at a community meeting before the first tourist arrives.

The community development fund component is important: it transforms tourism from an individual income opportunity into a community institution-building tool. A village that has accumulated ₹50,000 in a community tourism fund can fund a water source repair, a school supply purchase, or emergency support for a community member — creating collective benefits that sustain community-wide support for tourism even among households that aren't directly employed as guides.

Principle 4: Number limits protect cultural integrity

Unlimited tourist access to tribal communities produces the degradation of cultural practice that has been documented repeatedly in indigenous tourism contexts globally. When a village becomes a tourist destination visited daily by multiple groups,

the cultural practice being showcased gradually adapts to tourist expectations — simplified, shortened, made more visually dramatic — and loses the depth that made it meaningful.

Number limits — maximum visitors per day, maximum group size, minimum intervals between visits to specific cultural events — are not restrictions that reduce the tourism product's value. They are protections that maintain its authenticity, which is precisely what premium tourism markets pay for.

The Olive Ridley turtle-watching programme at Odisha's Gahirmatha and Rushikulya beaches — where strict number controls and community management protocols have produced both conservation outcomes and viable community income — is a direct model for this principle in a coastal Odisha context.

Principle 5: What is and is not shared is community-decided

Not all cultural practices are appropriate for outside observation. Sacred ceremonies, certain ritual spaces, gender-restricted knowledge, and practices whose transmission is specifically oral and limited — all of these categories exist in every tribal community in Odisha and must be protected from tourist access.

The written community agreement (Principle 1) must include an explicit list: what tourists may see and participate in; what they may see but not photograph; what they may not approach or witness at all. These limits are non-negotiable for all visitors and should be communicated to visitors clearly before their visit.

Principle 6: Cultural exchange, not cultural performance

The tourism experiences that produce the best outcomes — for both communities and visitors — are exchanges, not performances. A tourist who spends two hours cooking a traditional meal with a community woman learns something about food, about the forest ingredients, about the relationship between the community and its landscape. A tourist who watches a "cultural show" arranged for their consumption learns less and pays less for the experience.

Tourism products built around doing — cooking together, farming together, harvesting together, craft-making together — produce more authentic experience, higher visitor satisfaction, and more genuine economic inclusion of diverse community members than performance-based products.

Principle 7: Honest marketing that values the real thing

Premium cultural tourists — the visitors most likely to pay prices that genuinely benefit communities — are motivated by authenticity. They are researching before they travel. They notice when marketing is performative. They notice when something has been staged for their benefit.

Marketing community cultural tourism honestly — describing what tourists will actually experience, including the physical difficulty of reaching remote communities, the linguistic difference, and the genuine learning required to engage respectfully — attracts visitors who are appropriate for the community and willing to pay for genuine engagement. It deters visitors seeking spectacle, who will be disappointed and leave negative reviews when they find something real.

Principle 8: Community exit rights

The community must have the right to pause or end tourism activity without penalty — if a family emergency, a conflict, a harvest season, or simply a collective decision to take a break makes that necessary. Tourism operators who build community tourism into their product catalogue without building in community exit rights are creating exactly the kind of dependency that erodes the community's ability to make genuine choices about their own lives.

Any agreement between an NGO or tourism operator and a community tourism committee should include: a notice period for either party to pause or end the arrangement; no financial penalties for the community pausing or ending; and the community's retention of all assets (trained guides, governance structures, cultural protocols) regardless of whether the partnership continues.

Odisha's Specific Tourism Contexts

Chilika Lake: The dolphin-watching and migratory bird tourism already has a community participation model — fishing communities serving as boat operators and guides for dolphin-watching tours. This model works reasonably well but has the elite capture problem: boat ownership is not evenly distributed, so income from tourism accrues to boat-owning families rather than to the broader fishing community. NGO facilitation that helps fishing communities collectively structure their tourism operations — pooling boat access, distributing guide roles, creating a community tourism fund — would improve equity.

Raghurajpur: The Pattachitra village is already a cultural tourism destination with significant visitor traffic. The problem is market structure: most economic benefit flows to traders and souvenir sellers rather than to the Chitrakaras who produce the art. Tourism that brings visitors directly into the studios of Chitrakara families — watching work in progress, understanding the tradition, purchasing directly from producers — produces dramatically better income for artists than the current craft-shop model.

Bhitarkanika: Wildlife tourism is extensive but community economic participation is limited. The model that would work: trained tribal community members from forest-adjacent villages as naturalist guides for wildlife walks and boat tours, with explicit training in both ecological knowledge and interpretation, and community governance over guide scheduling and revenue distribution.

PVTG communities: The universal principle here is consent first, product second. No tourism initiative involving PVTG communities should be designed without direct, unhurried engagement with the community's own governance institution — and a genuine willingness to accept that the answer may be no.

What NGOs Should Not Do

Do not facilitate tourism for communities that have not specifically requested it. The "tourist interest" in a community's culture is not grounds for a

tourism programme. Community interest and consent is.

Do not share community locations, photographs, or cultural details on social media without explicit community permission. The Instagram post that generates interest in a tribal community among outsiders is not free marketing for community tourism — it is a potential violation of privacy and cultural sovereignty if done without the community's consent.

Do not design tourism products that primarily benefit the NGO's own visibility and CSR credibility. A documentary-style visit to a tribal village that generates compelling photographs for a funder's annual report, with minimal actual community benefit, is not community tourism. It is institutional appropriation.

Do not promise tourism income before the market is established. Raising community expectations of tourism income, then failing to deliver visitor numbers, damages the NGO's relationship and the community's economic planning.

Related Knowledge Commons content: Culture & Heritage Sector Primer (Sector 05) · Practice Note: Oral Tradition Documentation — community-owned cultural records · Practice Note: Artisan Market Development — direct-to-consumer models for craft producers

Evidence Grade: B — Multi-study. This Practice Note draws on the MDPI community-based tourism and SDGs study (February 2025), the ScienceDirect systematic review of indigenous tourism innovations (May 2025), the Frontiers cultural tourism and SDGs study (January 2024), and the Brookings/Odisha eco-tourism analysis included in the Blue Economy Skills Practice Note. Last reviewed: April 2026.

Questions or corrections: knowledge@jabasu.org