

Nature, Culture, and Commons: Tribal Pathways to Regenerative Travel in India

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Abstract

This article explores a pioneering **community-led initiative** in Mayurbhanj, Odisha, where Indigenous communities, including the Santhal, Ho, and Munda, are transforming their ancestral forest commons, **sacred groves known as Jaheras**, into **eco-cultural micro-enterprises**. These groves, among India's oldest community-conserved landscapes, are ecologically rich, spiritually significant, and governed by Indigenous knowledge systems.

To protect these biocultural sanctuaries from deforestation, infrastructure encroachment, and cultural erosion, tribal communities have developed a **replicable social enterprise model** called “**Nature, Culture, and Commons.**” This model reimagines sacred groves as **Nature-Based Solutions (NBS)** for biodiversity regeneration, climate resilience, and dignified rural livelihoods. By integrating participatory mapping, youth eco-guiding, women-led homestays and kitchens, and storytelling rooted in ritual and craft, the model facilitates immersive, low-impact travel. Visitors engage not as tourists, but as learners, nurturing intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural continuity.

Anchored in tribal governance and aligned with global frameworks such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and IPLC (Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities) rights, this model offers a scalable path to decolonial development. Jaheras, as **place-based enterprises**, demonstrate how Indigenous communities can convert cultural heritage into regenerative economies, reviving biodiversity, sustaining identity, and building community wealth.

Context and Background

Sacred Groves: India's Living Heritage

Sacred groves are ancient forest patches preserved by local communities across India through religious and cultural practices. These groves are often associated with deities, ancestral spirits, and sacred rituals, making them spiritually significant and ecologically protected. Known by different names across regions—such as Devbans in Maharashtra, Sarnas in Jharkhand, and Jaheras in Odisha—they are among India's oldest conservation practices, sustained without formal scientific intervention.

Jaheras: Ancestral Forests in Mayurbhanj

In Mayurbhanj's tribal heartland, Jaheras serve as spiritual, ecological, and cultural commons. Maintained by traditional custodians such as Naiks and Pahans, these groves are protected by taboos against logging, hunting, and encroachment. Trees like Sal, Mahua, and Kusum anchor not only local ecosystems but also rituals like Baha Parab and Mage Parab.

These sacred groves foster intergenerational learning, social cohesion, and ecological resilience, serving as both sanctuaries and classrooms of Indigenous ecological knowledge.

Growing Threats to Sacred Groves

Despite their ecological and cultural significance, sacred groves face mounting threats: Unregulated development, deforestation, youth outmigration, and the erosion of oral traditions are fragmenting these once-thriving commons.

Encroachments from infrastructure and resource extraction, combined with unwelcoming tourism models, have disrupted traditional stewardship systems. Many groves are neither officially mapped nor legally protected, making them vulnerable.

The **weakening of ritual practices and traditional community governance** has contributed to widespread **biodiversity loss and the erosion of cultural memory**. Studies show that over **50% of India's sacred groves**, once protected through customs, taboos, and rituals, are now degraded due to neglect, encroachment, and the breakdown of Indigenous ecological stewardship.

Reviving sacred groves requires reimagining them as living institutions connecting conservation with dignity and livelihoods.

Reimagining Sacred Groves through Community Ecotourism

In response, several tribal villages in Mayurbhanj have launched community-led ecotourism initiatives centered around Jaheras. These initiatives aim to revive sacred groves as eco-cultural enterprises, generating livelihoods while conserving landscapes and cultural practices.

Key Features:

- **Participatory Mapping:** Communities document Jaheras through oral histories and biodiversity surveys.
- **Youth Leadership:** Local youth are trained as eco-guides and biodiversity stewards.
- **Women's Enterprises:** Women manage forest kitchens, homestays, and crafts.
- **Eco-Sensitive Infrastructure:** Use of mud, bamboo, compost toilets, and forest trails ensures low-impact tourism.
- **Cultural Experiences:** Visitors engage in rituals, Mahua tasting, folk performances, and storytelling.

The Nature, Culture, and Commons Model: An Indigenous Innovation

Nature, Culture, and Commons is a replicable social enterprise model designed to scale place-based, community-led ecotourism in sacred sites like Jaheras. It positions Indigenous communities as entrepreneurs of regeneration, offering them tools, governance frameworks, and financial pathways to turn sacred landscapes into living economies. This model considers visitors as learners, not consumers, and builds relationships between people and places where every visit contributes to local well-being and ecological restoration.

Why Sacred Groves Matter

Sacred groves are biocultural heritage systems where ecological knowledge and spiritual belief come together to protect biodiversity, sustain local communities, and build climate resilience. Guided by customary norms and rituals, they provide locally rooted Nature-based Solutions (NbS) that continue to benefit both people and the planet.

Ecological and Cultural Contributions

Biodiversity Sanctuaries

- Home to rare, endemic, and medicinal species, sacred groves conserve genetic diversity and provide safe habitats for wildlife amid degraded surroundings.

Watershed Security

- Often situated near springs and streams, groves improve soil, reduce runoff, and **recharge aquifers**, playing a vital role in local water security.

Seed Repositories

- They act as living seed banks, safeguarding traditional, drought-resilient, and nutrient-rich plant varieties critical for food systems and agroecology.

Climate Regulation

- Dense covers serve as **carbon sinks** and help regulate local microclimates, offering natural buffers against rising temperatures and erratic weather.

Cultural Continuity and Governance

- Sacred groves preserve oral traditions, rituals, and customary laws that foster **community identity, social cohesion**, and informal ecological governance.

What Makes This Enterprise Model Unique

Unlike conventional tourism that extracts value and often excludes local voices, the *Jahera* model is rooted in community governance, ecological integrity, and cultural respect. It does not impose external aesthetics or infrastructure but builds on the lived realities and aspirations of tribal communities.

- **Community Ownership:** Decisions are made by village councils and tribal elders, ensuring that development aligns with cultural values.

- **Low Ecological Footprint:** Infrastructure is built using local materials like mud, bamboo, and thatch, avoiding concrete and heavy machinery.
- **Intergenerational Engagement:** Youth lead innovation while elders anchor cultural transmission, ensuring continuity.
- **Holistic Value Creation:** The model generates income, strengthens identity, restores ecosystems, and offers visitors deep, meaningful interactions.
- **Revenue Sharing:** Income reinvested into conservation, training, and festivals
- **Youth-Women Engagement:** Skills development and leadership pathways
- **Respectful Visitor Protocols:** Visitors engage as learners and contributors, not tourists or consumers. Cultural norms, rituals, and sacred boundaries are respected.

SWOT Analysis: Jahera-Based Ecotourism under the Nature, Culture, and Commons Model

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deep-rooted Indigenous knowledge and cultural continuity ● Community-led governance ensures local ownership ● Low ecological footprint and culturally respectful tourism ● Women and youth inclusion builds future-ready leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited access to digital marketing and tourism networks ● Inconsistent infrastructure (e.g., sanitation, transport) ● Dependence on external funding for start-up capital ● Seasonality of visitor flows may affect income stability
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rising global demand for regenerative, Indigenous-led tourism ● Access to blended finance (Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, District Mineral Foundations (DMFs), impact investing) ● Recognition through Biocultural Heritage and Indigenous Tourism Circuits ● Partnerships with researchers, ethical travel platforms, and policy actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cultural commodification through unregulated tourism ● Land grabs or ecological degradation if community rights are weakened ● Youth migration if long-term livelihood pathways falter ● Climate risks impacting biodiversity and seasonal tourism

This SWOT framework provides a strategic lens for assessing the initiative’s viability and scalability, highlighting the need for supportive ecosystems, including policy, finance, capacity-building, and ethical partnerships.

A Shift from Tourism to Learning

The Jahera model redefines tourism as a journey of cultural learning and ecological awakening. Rather than consuming experiences, visitors are invited to engage deeply with the land, with Indigenous knowledge, and with community life.

Through storytelling, rituals, forest walks, and traditional practices, visitors gain insight into place-based wisdom and ecological stewardship. The model encourages reflection on one's relationship with nature and community, turning the forest into a classroom and the community into a guide.

This is not just tourism; it is a transformative exchange that fosters respect, learning, and regenerative values rooted in Indigenous worldviews.

From Top-Down Tourism to Ground-Up Stewardship

Mainstream tourism often imposes standardized packages, damaging both ecosystems and culture. In contrast, the Nature, Culture, and Commons model reimagines sacred groves as eco-cultural micro-enterprises that generate both conservation and livelihood value. Rooted in Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLC) governance, the model leverages oral traditions, sacred sites, community volunteers, and seed funding from sources like CSR and government programs. Key activities include mapping groves, training local youth, hosting visitors, and sharing cultural narratives.

These efforts lead to tangible outputs such as trained eco-guides, documented groves with biodiversity registers and ritual calendars, and functional, visitor-ready micro-sites. As a result, communities witnessed revived local biodiversity, enhanced income, and strengthened cultural identity.

The Nature, Culture, and Commons Framework

The Nature, Culture, and Commons model offers a scalable, community-driven solution for forest-based economies. Rooted in Indigenous knowledge and stewardship, it integrates biodiversity conservation, regenerative tourism, and cultural preservation, aligning with global goals on climate action, sustainable development, and the recognition of Indigenous rights. By transforming sacred groves into eco-cultural enterprises, the framework creates pathways for both ecological renewal and local livelihood generation.

Financing Community Stewardship

Start-up capital to activate Jahera-based enterprises can be mobilized from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, District Mineral Foundations (DMFs), and Special Development Councils (SDCs), public and private mechanisms aimed at strengthening tribal development and ecosystem restoration.

Building Sustainable Sacred Grove Economies

Once operational, these enterprises generate revenue through guided forest walks, homestays, traditional craft sales, and community-hosted meals. All activities are collectively managed, with profits reinvested in youth training, grove conservation, cultural documentation, and participatory governance, ensuring long-term ecological and economic sustainability.

Investing in Culture, Nature, and Livelihoods

With a growing shift toward community-led Nature-based Solutions (NbS), Jahera-based models offer an impactful opportunity for donors, climate funds, and impact investors. By blending conservation, cultural revival, and rural entrepreneurship, this framework presents a compelling case for integrated conservation-development finance in forested and tribal regions.

Revenue generated through ecotourism is fairly distributed among local collectives and reinvested into:

- Skill-building for youth and women: Enhancing local capacity to manage tourism and biodiversity.
- Sacred grove conservation and biodiversity regeneration: Supporting ecological restoration and cultural rituals.
- Village infrastructure and cultural programming: Improving local amenities while preserving traditions.

Visitors, Values, and Village Economies

This model attracts a diverse set of travelers—eco-conscious explorers, cultural heritage tourists, academics and students, wellness seekers, and ethical tourism partners—who seek immersive, respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge and nature. By offering community-led experiences such as eco-guided walks, homestays, cultural workshops, and forest kitchens, tribal communities are able to reinforce traditional practices, promote intergenerational learning, and foster pride in cultural identity. These experiences not only deepen visitors' understanding of sacred ecology but also create dignified livelihood opportunities, particularly for youth and women. Over time, such engagements contribute to stronger village economies, social cohesion, and the long-term conservation of both natural and cultural heritage.

The Eco-Cultural Tourism Opportunity

This model responds to the growing global demand for regenerative and community-rooted tourism by offering immersive, respectful alternatives to mass tourism. Instead of commodifying Indigenous culture, it emphasizes valuing experiences such as guided forest walks, homestays with traditional meals, cultural workshops, and forest-based cuisine as opportunities for meaningful exchange. Pricing is approached thoughtfully to ensure access for visitors while providing fair compensation for local hosts and supporting conservation goals. Community

institutions play a central role in managing pricing and revenue distribution, ensuring transparency, cultural integrity, and long-term sustainability. In doing so, the model upholds a delicate balance between access, respect, and shared prosperity.

To ensure the future of India's sacred groves and the Indigenous communities who protect them, collective action is needed from:

- **Policy Makers:** Recognize sacred groves as Biocultural Heritage Sites and support tribal-led tourism under Indigenous tourism circuits.
- **CSR and Philanthropic Actors:** Direct funds into grassroots eco-tourism initiatives that prioritize community governance and biodiversity regeneration.
- **Researchers and Practitioners:** Collaborate with local communities to document, study, and amplify sacred grove models.
- **Tourists and Travelers:** Choose regenerative, respectful travel experiences that value culture and ecology over consumption.

Call to Action

By supporting models like Nature, Culture, and Commons, we invest not only in conservation but in justice, dignity, and the future of sustainable, community-driven development.

A Decolonial, Regenerative Pathway

The revival of sacred groves in Mayurbhanj is more than a tourism innovation; it is a reimagining of development itself. Rooted in Indigenous wisdom, it advances biodiversity conservation, strengthens cultural identity, and creates dignified livelihoods.

As nature, culture, and commons, Odisha's tribal communities offer a roadmap for earthly healing: a model of living heritage where forests are not exploited, but celebrated and sustained through shared care and community power.

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