



Women entrepreneurship and empowerment in Pilgrimage Tourism: A comparative study of rural destination marketing in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

This study examines the interconnection between women entrepreneurship, empowerment, pilgrimage tourism, and destination marketing in rural regions of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Through a mixed-methods approach, the research investigates how women-led enterprises near pilgrimage destinations contribute to local tourism development and enhance destination branding. Drawing on data from women entrepreneurs, tourism stakeholders, and community members in selected pilgrimage sites, the study reveals that women's entrepreneurial activities significantly impact tourism growth, socio-economic empowerment, and community participation. Findings suggest that gender-inclusive entrepreneurship in religious tourism settings serves as a powerful tool for both rural development and female empowerment, warranting greater support through policy, training, and marketing initiatives.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurship, empowerment, pilgrimage tourism, destination marketing, rural development, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, gender-inclusive tourism, South India

Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism in India holds immense cultural, spiritual, and economic significance, especially in rural regions where sacred sites attract large numbers of devotees. Alongside this growth, women entrepreneurs are increasingly participating in tourism-related activities such as accommodation services, local crafts, food stalls, and tour guiding. This entrepreneurial engagement not only contributes to the local economy but also fosters personal empowerment and social transformation. However, the intersection of gender, religion, and tourism remains underexplored, especially in South Indian states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where rural sacred landscapes offer unique opportunities for both pilgrimage and economic innovation. This study investigates how women entrepreneurship drives pilgrimage tourism and destination marketing in selected rural sites, offering a comparative analysis across two culturally rich states.

Review of Literature

Several scholars have highlighted the role of entrepreneurship in enhancing tourism and promoting local economies (Shaw & Williams, 2004) ^[1]. In the context of pilgrimage tourism, enterprises built around religious travel can foster regional development (Rinschede, 1992) ^[2]. Women entrepreneurship, especially in developing nations, is linked with empowerment, improved decision-making, and increased household income (Tambunan, 2009; Roomi & Parrott, 2008) ^[3, 4].

In India, studies have shown that rural women face structural barriers—such as lack of capital, limited access to training, and societal norms—but when empowered, they act as key enablers of change (Sarfaraz *et al.*, 2014) ^[5]. Few

studies, however, focus specifically on how such empowerment interacts with religious tourism or how women shape destination image through their participation in tourism ecosystems. The gap in literature lies in the intersectional analysis of gender, entrepreneurship, and sacred tourism in rural South India.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the role of women entrepreneurs in rural pilgrimage tourism.
2. To assess how entrepreneurship influences women's empowerment.
3. To compare the impact of women-led tourism enterprises on destination marketing in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.
4. To identify key barriers and facilitators affecting women's participation in tourism entrepreneurship.

Conceptual Framework

The study adopts a model where women entrepreneurship leads to empowerment, which in turn influences pilgrimage tourism growth and destination marketing success. Regional and socio-cultural variables act as moderators, and access to training, financial support, or social capital serve as mediators.

Methodology

A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys. The study was conducted in two key rural pilgrimage sites: Penchalakona in Nellore (Andhra Pradesh) and Palani in Tamil Nadu. A total of 250 women entrepreneurs were surveyed using a structured questionnaire focusing on

income levels, business impact, empowerment scales, and tourism visibility. Additionally, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including temple board officials, local NGOs, and tourists. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to identify correlations and regressions between variables. Qualitative data were coded thematically to extract regional narratives and identify common empowerment indicators.

Findings and Discussion

1. Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Empowerment

Women reported increased control over financial decisions, improved social status, and active participation in community events. Tamil Nadu respondents highlighted stronger family support, while in Andhra Pradesh, state-level women empowerment schemes played a larger role.

2. Impact on Pilgrimage Tourism

The presence of women-led stalls, lodges, and guide services enriched the visitor experience, increased stay duration, and indirectly boosted local economic circulation. Palani's digital engagement through women's collectives was more visible than in Penchalakona.

3. Destination Marketing Contributions

Women entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu used Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and temple blogs to attract visitors. In contrast, entrepreneurs in Nellore relied more on traditional promotion and word-of-mouth. Local language skills and personalized service delivery were critical factors in both regions.

4. Barriers and Challenges

Common barriers included lack of startup capital, social stigma, and absence of childcare support. Infrastructure deficiencies in Andhra Pradesh pilgrimage sites also limited tourism potential compared to Tamil Nadu.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Training programs in digital marketing and tourism management should be localized and female-centric.
2. Micro-financing initiatives and women-specific tourism loans can foster more entrepreneurial ventures.
3. Public-private partnerships must support infrastructure development in emerging pilgrimage sites.
4. Recognition of women's roles through awards and community-level branding can motivate others.
5. Inter-state policy learning should be encouraged between Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh on tourism and gender development.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that women entrepreneurship in rural pilgrimage contexts is a potent driver of not just tourism development but also empowerment and social innovation. Both Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu present unique cultural and policy environments that shape these outcomes. By understanding and supporting this dynamic, policymakers and tourism stakeholders can harness the full potential of gender-inclusive tourism to promote sustainable rural development in India.

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