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## WOMEN-CENTRIC SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF KONKAN REGION: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT:

The Konkan region of Maharashtra symbolises one of India's most environmentally subtle coastal belts, meticulously connected to the Western Ghats biodiversity hotspot. Historically dependent on fishing, agriculture, horticulture, and household-based micro-enterprises, Konkan's development route has been formed by ecological conditions and socio-cultural practices. In recent decades, the niche of tourism has emerged as a significant sector offering economic opportunities; however, unregulated industrialisation and unsustainable tourism models pose serious threats to the fragile coastal ecosystem. This paper argues that women-centric sustainable tourism offers a viable and balanced way for Konkan's development. By historically tracing tourism evolution in the region and examining the increasing participation of women in homestays, local cuisine enterprises, eco-tourism initiatives, and community-based conservation projects, the study demonstrates that women function not merely as participants but as mainly central representatives of sustainable development. Through historical and analytical methods, the paper evaluates policy interventions, environmental regulations, and grassroots models such as the Velas Turtle Festival and women-led homestays in Sindhudurg. It concludes that reinforcing women's leadership in tourism, coupled with strict ecological safeguards and supportive government policies, can ensure long-term sustainable socio-economic stability while protecting Konkan's biodiversity.

### INTRODUCTION:

The Konkan region stretches along Maharashtra's western coastline, bordered by the Arabian Sea on one side and the Western Ghats on the other. This geographical position gives the region extraordinary ecological richness. The Western Ghats are internationally recognised as a global biodiversity hotspot with high endemism and ecological significance<sup>1</sup>. Rivers, estuaries, mangroves, lateritic plateaus, beaches, and forested hills form a unified ecological network that supports fisheries, agriculture, and rural livelihoods.

However, ecological richness also implies vulnerability. Coastal ecosystems are sensitive to pollution, over-construction, habitat fragmentation, and waste accumulation. Studies on tourism and environmental sustainability show that rapid tourism expansion without planning increases pressure on water resources, energy consumption, and waste production<sup>2</sup>. In such ecologically fragile regions, industrial activities such as pharmaceuticals, chemical processing, and paint manufacturing pose additional environmental risks due to effluent discharge and hazardous waste generation.

Against this background, women's role in Konkan's socio-economic structure becomes crucial. Women have historically contributed to fishing-related processing activities, agricultural labour, food

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production, and small-scale enterprises. Despite this, their economic role has often remained under-recognised. This paper argues that women-centric sustainable tourism can provide a development pathway that aligns economic growth with ecological protection and gender empowerment.

### **Historical Evolution of Tourism in Konkan:**

Tourism in Konkan did not originate as a structured commercial industry; rather, it evolved gradually through layered historical processes shaped by geography, mobility patterns, socio-economic transitions, and changing state policies. The transformation from traditional hospitality practices to organised tourism reflects broader shifts in regional development priorities, infrastructure expansion, market integration, and gender roles.

Konkan's geographical location, a narrow coastal strip bordered by the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, has historically shaped patterns of movement and economic activity. The Western Ghats are internationally recognised as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots due to their high endemism and ecological sensitivity. This ecological context has deeply influenced livelihood structures, limiting heavy industrial penetration while encouraging fishing, horticulture, and traditional community-based occupations.

### **Pre-Colonial Period: Community Hospitality Traditions:**

In the pre-colonial era, mobility in the Konkan region was closely connected to pilgrimage circuits, maritime trade networks, temple festivals, and seasonal cultural gatherings. Movement occurred primarily for religious, commercial, and cultural purposes rather than leisure tourism in the modern sense<sup>3</sup>. Historical records indicate that coastal trade routes connected the Konkan coast with western Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and other parts of India, generating periodic flows of merchants, pilgrims, and travellers along the western seaboard of India<sup>4</sup>.

Hospitality during this period was embedded within household traditions and social customs. Travellers were generally accommodated by local families, religious institutions, and community networks rather than commercial establishments<sup>5</sup>. Women played central roles in preparing food, maintaining accommodation spaces, and organising ritual hospitality practices associated with pilgrimage and guest reception. Although this labour remained largely unpaid and informal, it constituted an essential social infrastructure supporting early forms of hospitality within coastal communities<sup>6</sup>.

From a historical perspective, this period established what may be termed a form of proto-community tourism. While travel was not monetised as modern tourism, these practices created long-standing traditions of local hosting that later evolved into contemporary homestay-based tourism models in coastal Maharashtra. Women's domestic expertise in food preparation, household management, and cultural hospitality gradually transformed into valuable socio-cultural capital that present-day tourism economies increasingly recognise and monetise<sup>7</sup>.

### **Colonial Period: Elite-Oriented and Extractive Mobility:**

During the colonial period, maritime administration and port connectivity improved significantly. However, tourism remained limited to colonial officials, traders, and elite travellers. Economic benefits were concentrated within colonial administrative and commercial networks, and rural communities did not substantially benefit. This phase illustrates that mobility alone does not generate inclusive tourism. Without community integration, travel becomes extractive rather than developmental. Colonial economic priorities emphasised revenue extraction and administrative control rather than rural livelihood diversification<sup>8</sup>.

### **Post-Independence Phase (1950–1990): Slow and Peripheral Expansion:**

After independence, India's development planning emphasised industrialisation and urban growth. Konkan's challenging terrain, limited connectivity, and migration patterns slowed tourism expansion between 1950 and 1990. Infrastructure such as roads, hotels, and organised tourism services

remained underdeveloped. During this period, women's participation remained concentrated in unpaid domestic labour and agricultural work. Although women were central to fish processing, rice cultivation, and horticulture, their contribution was not integrated into formal tourism planning. The absence of a strong tourism policy direction during this period kept Konkan peripheral to mainstream tourism circuits.

### **Post-Liberalisation Era (After 1991): Structural Transformation:**

Economic liberalisation after 1991 marked a decisive shift in Konkan's tourism trajectory. Improved road connectivity, private investment, rising middle-class income, and domestic travel growth expanded tourism opportunities. National tourism policies increasingly promoted destination development and private participation. Homestay tourism emerged as a decentralised model requiring minimal capital investment. This feature was significant because it lowered barriers for rural households, particularly women. Women who had historically managed domestic hospitality roles began converting these skills into income-generating enterprises.

Global tourism studies have observed that tourism can become an instrument of women's empowerment when women transition from informal labour to entrepreneurship and decision-making roles<sup>9</sup>. In Konkan, this transformation marked a shift from invisible domestic labour to recognised economic contribution.

### **Challenges to sustainable tourism:**

Hazard of Conventional Polluting Industries in Ecologically Fragile Konkan:

Konkan's ecological sensitivity makes it unsuitable for large-scale polluting industries such as pharmaceuticals, chemical manufacturing, and paint industries. These industries generate hazardous effluents and chemical waste that contaminate water bodies and coastal ecosystems.

Land-based industrial pollution is a major contributor to marine degradation globally. In coastal regions like Konkan, pollutants travel through river systems and estuaries, affecting fisheries and mangrove ecosystems. Mangroves function as natural coastal buffers and breeding grounds for fish; damage to these ecosystems directly affects local livelihoods. Additionally, tourism expansion without environmental management increases resource use, energy demand, and waste generation. If industrial pollution and unregulated tourism occur simultaneously, ecological stress multiplies. The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) framework was introduced to regulate activities in sensitive coastal zones and protect ecological balance. However, policy effectiveness depends on strict enforcement and community participation<sup>10</sup>.

From a sustainable development perspective, Konkan's comparative advantage lies in biodiversity, fisheries, agro-based livelihoods, and cultural heritage. High-pollution industrial models contradict this ecological sense. Sustainable tourism, particularly women-led community models, aligns more closely with environmental preservation and long-term livelihood security.

### **Analytical Interpretation:**

Historically, Konkan's tourism evolution reflects three structural transitions:

1. From cultural hospitality to commercial tourism.
2. From elite-controlled mobility to decentralised participation.
3. From unpaid female domestic labour to women-led entrepreneurship.

Women-centric tourism models are consistent with global sustainable development frameworks, emphasising gender equality and community-based growth<sup>11</sup>. By linking livelihood incentives with ecological protection, such models reduce the contradiction between development and conservation.

In contrast, heavy industrialisation risks undermining ecological stability and long-term tourism potential. Therefore, policy priorities must shift toward low-impact sectors, strengthened coastal regulation, and women-centred entrepreneurship.

### Emergence of Women-Centric Tourism Practices:

Women's participation expanded significantly in the early 2000s with the rise of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance initiatives. These programs enabled women to convert household skills into tourism assets <sup>12</sup>.

Women began managing homestays, preparing traditional Konkani cuisine, organising cultural performances, and selling handicrafts. Research shows that women entrepreneurs reinvest earnings into family welfare and community development, thereby strengthening sustainability outcomes <sup>13</sup>.

### Recent tourism reports indicate strong female participation:

Sector	Women Participation (%)
Homestays	62%
Local Food Services	71%
Handicrafts & Souvenirs	65%
Eco-tourism Activities	48%

### Case Studies:

#### Velas Turtle Festival (Ratnagiri):

The Velas Turtle Festival, organised annually in Velas village of Ratnagiri district, has emerged as a prominent example of conservation-linked tourism in coastal Maharashtra. The initiative was originally undertaken to protect the endangered Olive Ridley sea turtles whose eggs were frequently harvested for consumption or sale. With support from environmental groups and local community organisations, the village adopted a conservation-based model that replaced egg harvesting with monitored protection, incubation, and controlled hatchling release events. Over time, this ecological initiative evolved into a structured eco-tourism model. Visitors now travel to Velas during the hatching season to witness the release of turtle hatchlings into the Arabian Sea. Importantly, women from the village play a central role in managing the tourism dimension of the festival. They operate homestays, provide traditional Konkani meals prepared from locally sourced ingredients, maintain hygiene standards, and interact with tourists by explaining the conservation process and village traditions.

This model illustrates how biodiversity conservation and livelihood generation can coexist in mutually reinforcing ways. Income generated from homestays and food services provides financial incentives for protecting turtle nests rather than exploiting them. Consequently, conservation becomes economically viable for local households. The Velas model demonstrates that women-led hospitality can transform environmental protection into a sustainable rural enterprise while strengthening community solidarity and ecological awareness <sup>14</sup>.

#### Women-Led Homestays in Sindhudurg:

Sindhudurg district presents another strong example of women-centred tourism development. In several coastal and inland villages, homestay operations are led predominantly by women who manage booking systems, meal preparation, housekeeping, and guest engagement. Unlike commercial hotels, these homestays offer experiential tourism, where visitors participate in agricultural activities, traditional cooking sessions, local fishing routines, and village festivals.

Women entrepreneurs in Sindhudurg consciously incorporate sustainable practices into their operations. Many households emphasise reduced plastic usage, promote reusable materials, and source food directly from local farms and home gardens. By minimising external procurement and encouraging farm-to-table experiences, these homestays reduce carbon footprints and strengthen the local supply chain. The emphasis on local produce, such as rice, mango, cashew, kokum, and seafood, not only enhances authenticity but also aligns with principles of responsible and sustainable tourism.

Through such initiatives, women are not merely service providers; they become cultural custodians who preserve culinary traditions, folklore, and indigenous knowledge systems. The Sindhudurg experience demonstrates that decentralised, women-led hospitality enterprises can enhance rural resilience while maintaining ecological balance<sup>15</sup>.

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## **Socio-Economic and Environmental Impacts:**

### **Economic Impact:**

Women-centric tourism contributes significantly to income diversification in coastal Konkan. Traditionally, many families depended on seasonal agriculture, fishing, or remittances from migration to urban centres. Tourism provides an alternative and supplementary source of revenue that reduces economic vulnerability. Earnings generated from homestays, catering, handicrafts, and guiding services support children's education, healthcare expenses, housing improvements, and financial savings. By generating local employment opportunities, women-led tourism also helps reduce distress migration, particularly among youth. Stable local income aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), as it enhances women's financial independence and promotes inclusive economic development<sup>16</sup>.

### **Environmental Impact:**

Communities that derive income directly from tourism linked to natural resources often develop a strong incentive to conserve those resources. In regions such as Velas and Sindhudurg, ecological preservation is no longer viewed as a regulatory burden but as an economic necessity. Practices such as waste segregation, limited plastic use, controlled visitor numbers, and reliance on local produce reduce environmental degradation.

Furthermore, tourism that is dependent on beaches, biodiversity, and scenic landscapes encourages community vigilance against environmental threats. Sustainable sourcing and waste management reduce ecological pressure, ensuring the long-term viability of tourism resources<sup>17</sup>.

### **Social Impact:**

Women's active participation in tourism enterprises enhances their leadership roles within households and village governance structures. Economic contribution strengthens their bargaining power in family decision-making processes. Exposure to visitors from diverse regions also broadens social awareness and confidence.

Inter-generational impact is equally significant. Young girls who witness their mothers or older women managing businesses develop new aspirations regarding education, entrepreneurship, and public engagement. Thus, women-centric tourism contributes not only to economic growth but also to social transformation and empowerment<sup>18</sup>.

### **Policy Review:**

The Maharashtra Tourism Policy (2016) promotes theme-based tourism, including eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and coastal tourism, and recognises the importance of supporting women entrepreneurs. At the national level, initiatives such as Swadesh Darshan 2.0 focus on sustainable and responsible destination development, integrating environmental safeguards with tourism infrastructure expansion. However, policy frameworks require stronger integration of gender-focused entrepreneurship with environmental accountability. While policy documents recognise sustainability, effective implementation at the grassroots level remains uneven. Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules are critical for preventing ecological degradation in sensitive coastal regions, yet enforcement mechanisms need strengthening to prevent unplanned construction and resource exploitation. A comprehensive policy approach should therefore combine support for women's entrepreneurship, skill development, financial access, digital connectivity, and strict environmental regulation to ensure balanced development<sup>19</sup>.

### **Suggested Initiatives:**

To further strengthen women-centric sustainable tourism in Konkan, the following initiatives may be considered:

1. Establishment of women-led homestay clusters with structured training, certification, and quality standards to enhance market credibility.

2. Promotion of agro-tourism models centred on region-specific crops such as mango, cashew, and kokum, integrating farm visits and processing demonstrations.
3. Development of waste-free coastal tourism models that mandate eco-friendly practices and community-based monitoring systems.
4. Creation of community eco-guiding programmes where trained women act as biodiversity interpreters and heritage guides.
5. Micro-branding and geographical indication-based promotion of Konkan food products to enhance value addition and market recognition.
6. Provision of financial literacy, digital marketing, and e-commerce training to enable women entrepreneurs to access broader markets and online booking platforms.
7. These initiatives would institutionalise women's participation while strengthening environmental safeguards.

## 9. CONCLUSION:

Konkan's ecological sensitivity demands a development strategy that carefully balances livelihood generation with environmental protection. Women-centric sustainable tourism provides a viable and contextually appropriate pathway for achieving this balance. Historically, women have been central to hospitality practices in Konkan, managing food systems, guest accommodation, and community rituals. Contemporary policy reforms and grassroots movements have enabled their transition from informal contributors to visible entrepreneurs.

By reinforcing women's leadership capacities, strengthening environmental regulations, and aligning tourism development with sustainability goals, Konkan can move toward long-term socio-economic resilience. Such a model not only protects biodiversity and coastal ecosystems but also ensures inclusive growth that empowers local communities, particularly women, as key stakeholders in regional development.

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