INFORMED LOCAL COMMUNITIES ACT AS CATALYSTS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM RURAL INDIA

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Abstract

Purpose – The level of tourism development in any destination is directly related to the cooperation of the local community, and this is especially true in rural areas in many parts of the world. Many governments initiate development programs related to tourism in rural areas to provide new opportunities for local communities. However, most local communities are unaware of these opportunities. This study therefore examined how tourism forums influence awareness and perceptions of tourism development.

Design/Methodology – Data were collected from local tourism entrepreneurs using a structured questionnaire. Tourism entrepreneurs in this study include host families, hotels, gift stores, and transportation entrepreneurs from the rural region.

Findings – The results indicate that there are significant differences in perceptions of tourism development between those who attend the forum(s) and those who do not. Furthermore, these differences vary between different types of tourism service providers. Perceptions of tourism service providers are influenced by their knowledge of tourism programs and their participation in public forums.

Originality – All respondents in this study were first generation entrepreneurs, which in itself makes this study unique. The fact that tourism forum(s) act as a platform to eliminate misunderstandings between authorities and local communities has not been highlighted and distinguished in previous studies, which makes this study an original contribution.

Keywords Tourism Development, Forum, Local Community

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism development in a destination can be multiplied by integrating locals and their resources into tourism products and services; such an approach contributes to the representation of locals, the creation of job opportunities, and infrastructural development, and these perks lend satisfaction to locals (Mitchell & Eagles, 2001; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002). Integration brings collaboration with other sectors for better economic linkages. Often, the integration of local community members in tourism development is associated with sustainable tourism initiatives. Likewise, the involvement of locals in tourism development has become a crucial part of any tourism project (Aref, 2011; Mak et al., 2017). For instance, Malek and Costa (2015) claimed integration of the local community in planning endorses sustainable development. The perks of tourism development can also come with uncertain conflicts and damage to locals for various reasons. For example, Eshliki and Kaboudi (2012) observed that Ramsar's community in Iran faced distortion of natural resources after tourists left the host destinations. In such a case, integration has become an essential step in creating formal structures for broader economic development (Oliver & Jenkins, 2003; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008; Van Niekerk, 2014; Rahman et al., 2022).

The integration of locals usually brings a substantial change to the local economy through various livelihood opportunities in tourist destinations. However, many local tourism service providers and entrepreneurs do not get information regarding benefits and schemes initiated by various organizations. This happens because of a lack of information about initiatives or because the right information does not reach interested local members or promising entrepreneurs. This problem can be solved by conducting tourism forums that act as a bridge to connect policymakers and receivers of schemes and projects. "Tourism forum" in this study means any public meeting or assembly related to tourism development for an open discussion among participants, experts, and the organizing team with certain aim(s) or objective(s) related to tourism and allied services. In this regard, research on the effect of participation in tourism forums is rare in the existing literature. So, this study is an attempt to find out how local tourism entrepreneurs' views change when they take part in public forums about tourism development. In other words, to explore the effectiveness of the forum(s) and how it changes communities' perceptions about tourism development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Local tourism entrepreneurs often face challenges due to changing demand and the skills required in tourism (Nair & Hamzah, 2015). For example, Luo and Lee (2017) found that aboriginal people in Taiwan lack decision-making skills and confidence during various meetings related to tourism. When local communities are involved in tourism development, the process creates other business opportunities in the destinations (Saarinen & Lenao, 2014). However, the lack of a coordinated approach in policymaking is one of the reasons for inadequately addressing the indigenous local community and their views, and these factors limit the participation of locals in tourism development (Saxena & Ilbery, 2008). Nair and Hamzah (2015) stressed the importance of an elaborate and systematic strategy to prepare the community for tourism development by giving training on the required skills.

The involvement of locals in development paves the way to accommodate their needs and avoid future economic conflicts between external entities and local tourism entrepreneurs (Keller, 1987). The participation of locals in tourism development can maintain holistic growth and extract benefits from the tourism industry for locals and their well-being in the process. Therefore, integration of the opinions of local communities is necessary to maintain a cordial environment for development and peace in the host destination. However, many locals do not participate in a tourism-related business venture due to a lack of awareness, inadequate skills, limited opportunities, and socio-cultural barriers. These reasons limit the opportunities and stunt the growth of local tourism entrepreneurs. This is the point where the public forum comes in and plays a role as a bridge for information and awareness.

Seeking or giving a training module for locals also requires an active discussion forum where opinions on any tourism development plans are put forward, which is one of the most conventional techniques for developing tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas. The local communities seek assistance from outside sources to help them hone essential skills in order to meet market demand for tourism services (Mak et al., 2017). Though locals have an abundance of indigenous customs and traditions, their capacity to integrate the contemporary demands of the industry is limited without proper consultation and training. As a result, the development of tourism products and services at the local level is hampered. And this lack of awareness is reported as a barrier to tourism development (Stone & Stone, 2011; Yaja et al., 2023a). However, questions remain on how such barriers can be removed and through what medium, as well as how to make locals understand tourism projects and plans, particularly in new tourist destinations. Kline et al. (2019) argued that building capital in tourist destinations creates entrepreneurial opportunities for local communities and also reduces economic disparity. For an inclusive approach, the integration of local opinion into tourism development is crucial to reducing poverty (Xue & Kerstetter, 2019). These studies show local communities participate in tourism development with the purpose of creating economic opportunities, as a representation of their voice in the process of development, and so on.

A significant positive transformation in the local economy is possible when the locals actively take part in tourism development. Mak et al. (2017) found that to address the increasing demand for tourism operations, the local community chooses external assistance in training programmes, technical skills, and marketing tactics. Through proper integration, indigenous cultural assets could be translated into tourism services, providing the intended advantages to the destination's residents (Alexander et al., 2018). In addition to these aspects, a study by Ali et al. (2022) claimed political instability and government policy were moderating factors for local community participation in tourism development. Government bodies' strategic planning and policies can transform an indigenous resource into a commercial asset, which is critical for many developing countries around the world.

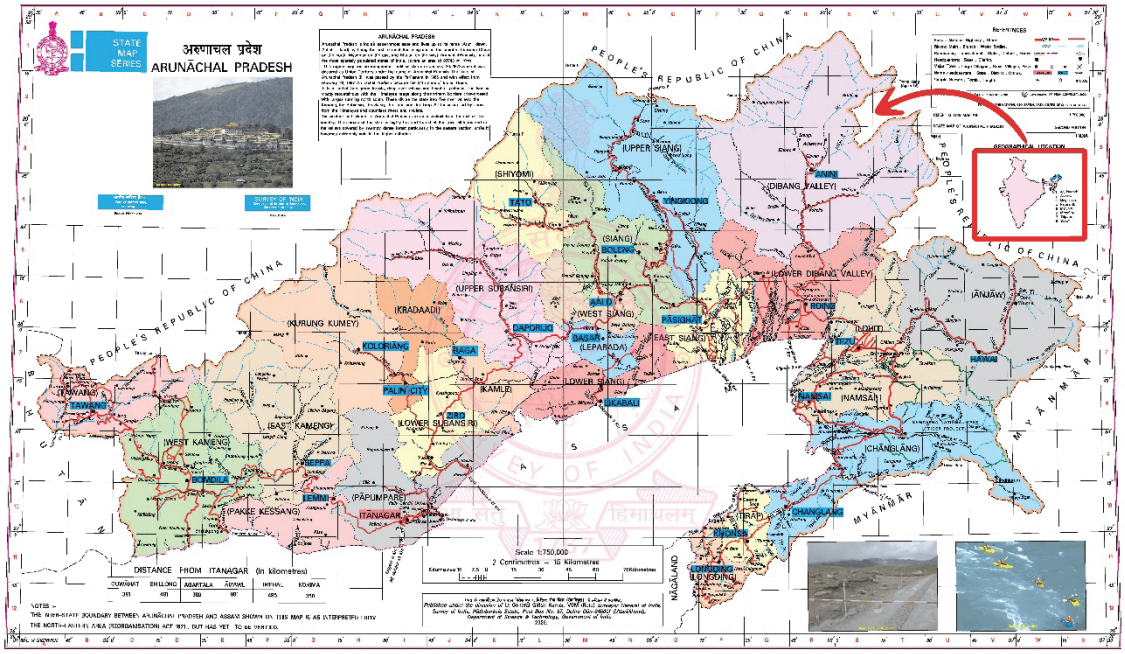
The study conducted by Panyik et al. (2011) describes the integration of the local community into tourism development as a tool to reach consensual strategies for policymakers. The basic principle that propels the rural economy into a greater orbit of socio-economic growth can be achieved by integrating local communities (Gu & Ryan, 2008). In a similar line of study, Chiutsi and Saarinen (2017) argued that the integration of local community tourism development is challenging in developing countries and that it is continually changing according to the nature of demand, destination types, and the level of participation from communities. In addition to these challenges, conservation of local resources in tourist destinations by default falls to local residents, no matter how big the issues are (Abdullah et al., 2022; Esichaikul & Chansawang, 2022). A study done on tourism SMEs in India found that the majority of tourism products and services were conceptualised by local entrepreneurs themselves without the involvement or advice of government officials or paid consultants (Yaja & Kumar, 2021). These local tourism entrepreneurs learned about commercialisation tourism products and services from their experiences travelling as guests in other states and eventually applied them to their businesses. All these studies show various dimensions and approaches taken by the local communities and governing authorities in the process of tourism development.

It is clear from the review above that local tourism entrepreneurs lacked information, which created barriers to running their businesses and prevented them from reaping the benefits of the tourism industry. The destination's cultural assets, including indigenous values, ethos, practices, and traditions, may prevent it from being commercialised or advancing economically if the indigenous population is not informed and integrated into any tourism planning. Additionally, if the local community is given opportunities to put forward their views, the entire tourism planning process will be more conducive to destination development. In these contexts, a tourism forum could act as a bridge to connect local tourism service providers and policymakers. The benefits of service providers' participation in tourism forums need to be addressed concerning awareness of schemes, aids, and projects related to tourism. Therefore, the current study sought to fill this void by investigating how participation in tourism-related public forum(s) changes perceptions of tourism service providers.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which is located in the far north-eastern corner of the country, as shown in Figure 1. The state is an emerging tourism destination in the north-eastern region of the country. Since 2015, skill development courses for local youths have been run by the Directorate of Tourism, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, under the umbrella of the "Hunar Se Rozgar Tak" Programme of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. The programme was designed to help people who had limited resources and needed to develop skills that would help them find work in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Arunachal Tourism, 2023). In order to strengthen the state's tourism infrastructure, the Directorate of Tourism, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, introduced another programme called the Credit-Linked Capital Subsidy Scheme in the years 2018–2019. Under this scheme, a 20% capital subsidy or rupees one crore, whichever is lower, is given to beneficiaries on their investment. Entrepreneurs have the opportunity to invest in tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, transportation, or institutional financing for infrastructural development. Other related schemes run by the state tourism department include free training in the development of skills in travel and tourism for an eighth-grade and 10th-grade pass for driving competence; the Chief Minister Paryatan Shiksha Yojana scheme, where local youths are given scholarships for studying courses related to tourism and hospitality; and the Chief Minister Paryatan Vikas Yojana scheme, which is currently operating in the state. Under this scheme, entrepreneurs are helped to finance food courts in tourist spots, renovations to homestays, and the procurement of adventure tourism equipment.

Figure 1: **Political Map of Arunachal Pradesh**



Source: Survey of India, 2023. https://surveyofindia.gov.in/documents/uploads/document-50780-arunachal-state-map.jpg.

Since our concern is for local tourism entrepreneurs who are native community members and are directly involved in tourism, hostility, and allied sectors, the three rural areas, namely Bomdila, Tawang, and Ziro Valley regions, are being selected from the state for data collection. These areas are selected based on the high registration of homestays and tour operators with the state tourism department, which stands out as an indicator for higher participation from local community members in tourism development. The study region is a tribal state home to 26 major tribes and 100 plus sub tribes, all with distinct dialects, dress, cultures, faiths, and value systems. Some of the tribes in the state are shown in Figure 2. There is no common local language or dialect; rather, they speak Hindi and English as common modes of communication. With these diverse tribal communities and rich cultural heritage, the state has promising potential for tourism development.

Figure 2: **Some of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh**

Apatani Tribe, Ziro Valley
Source: Koj Mama

Sherdukpen Tribe, Shergoan, Bomdila
Source: Millo Yaja

Monpa Tribe, Tawang
Source: Google Photo

The tourism industry in Arunachal Pradesh is currently in its infancy, and only a handful of locals have taken up some business activities related to tourism. To adhere to the objective of the current study or to be concise, local community members who are directly engaged in tourism and allied businesses are considered respondents. In this study, 308 local tourism entrepreneurs participated from different tourism and hospitality business units, i.e., hotel, homestay, transport service, and souvenir shop owners. The data was collected through a survey method using a purposive sampling technique. A 5-point Likert scale was used to collect responses: "strongly disagree" (1), "disagree" (2), "neutral" (3), "agree" (4), and "strongly agree" (5), and some questions in a dichotomous manner. The survey was conducted between May 2022 and August 2022. For the data analysis, descriptive tools such as frequency, mean, percentage, and standard deviation were utilised.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

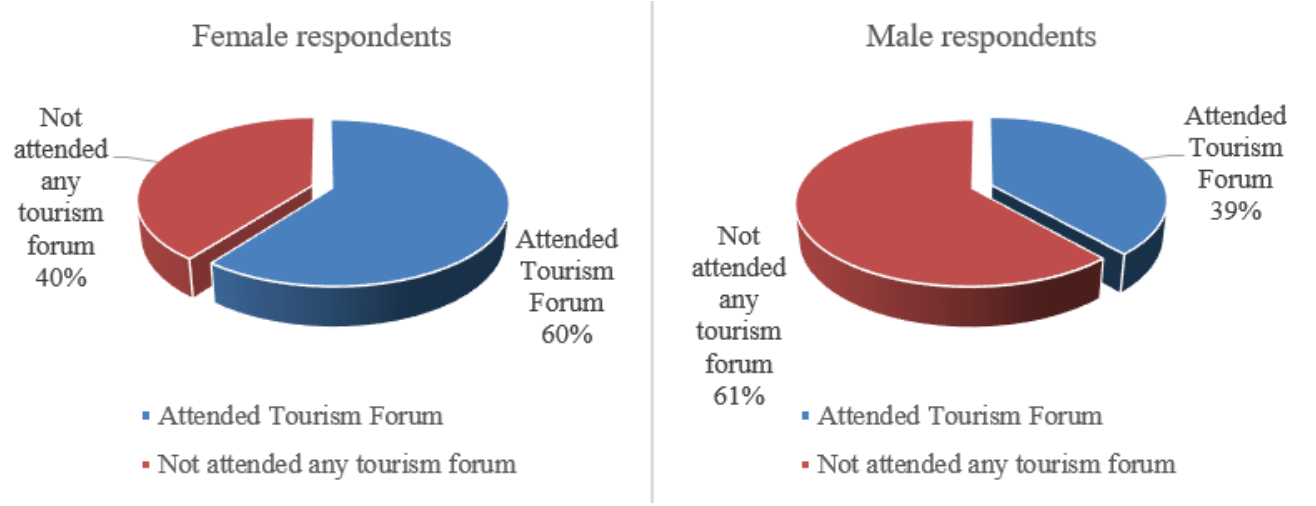
Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic profiles. From the data, we can see that 62% (n = 192) of respondents are males, which is quite higher than their female counterparts of 38% (n = 116). The highest respondents are from the age group of 18–28, followed by 29–38. Among these respondents 66% (n = 202) are married. 32% (n = 98) of respondents attended a college-level education, which is followed by the primary-level at 29% (n = 89). While 11% (n = 35) of respondents are without formal education. According to our findings, each of the respondents is a first-generation entrepreneur in tourism and related services.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of the respondents

N = 308	No. of respondents	%		No. of respondents	%
Gender			**Marital Status**		
Female	116	38	Married	202	66
Male	192	62	Unmarried	106	34
Age (Years)			**Education Qualification**		
18-28	111	36	No formal Education	35	11
29-38	98	32	Primary	89	29
39-48	48	15	Secondary	86	28
49 and above	51	17	College & above	98	32

Chart 1 shows gender-wise participation in the tourism forum(s). The respondents who have participated in any tourism forum(s) are assigned as "Attended tourism forum" and "Not attended any tourism forum" for those who did not. In Chart 1, we can see that 60% (n = 70 out of 116) of the females have participated in the forum related to tourism. While from the male respondents, only 39% (n = 74 out of 192) participated in the forum. Chart 2 shows education-wise participation in the tourism forum; more than 50% of respondents, both from the primary and secondary levels, did not attend any forum related to tourism. While there is a higher participation rate among those with no formal education and those with a college or higher educational qualification, both groups scored more than 50% participation.

Chart 1: **Participation in the Tourism forum: Gender wise**



In Chart 3, we have found a higher participation from the age group of 48 and above, which makes 69% (n = 35 out of 51). In a similar line, participation in the age group of 38–48 is slightly higher. On the other side, the age group of 18–28 has the lowest participation in the tourism forum. Chart 4 represents participation in forums from different categories of local tourism service providers, such as hotel, homestay, transport service, and souvenir shop owners. The types of tourism service providers and their participation in Chart 4 depict that 82% (n = 80 out of 97) of participation is from homestay service providers, which is the highest among all other groups. In contrast, only 8% (n = 6 out of 75) of transportation service providers attended the tourism forum, the lowest participation rate among the four categories of service providers in this study.

Chart 2: Participation in the Tourism forum: Education wise

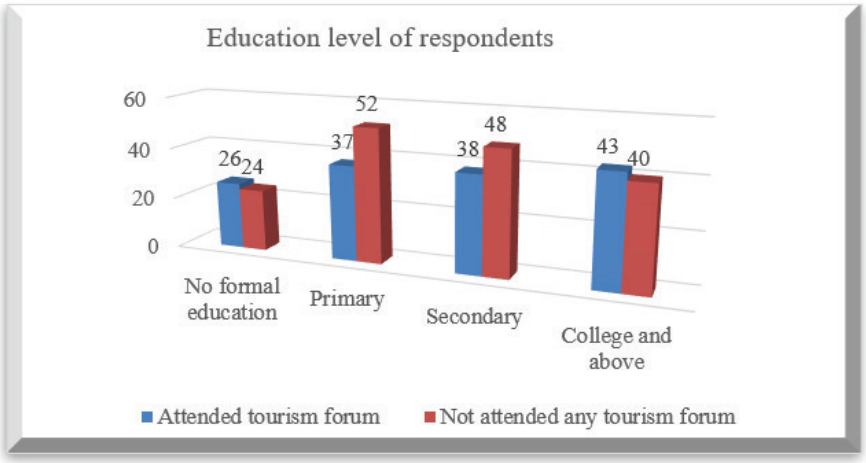


Chart 3: Participation in the Tourism forum: Gender wise

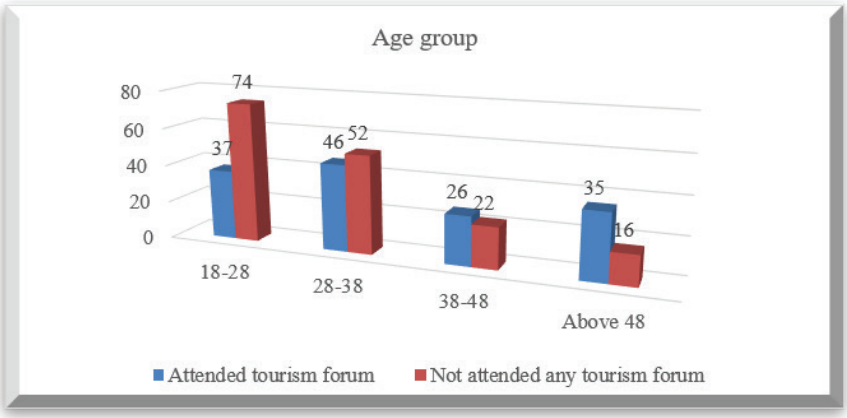


Chart 4: Participation in the Tourism forum: Tourism firm wise

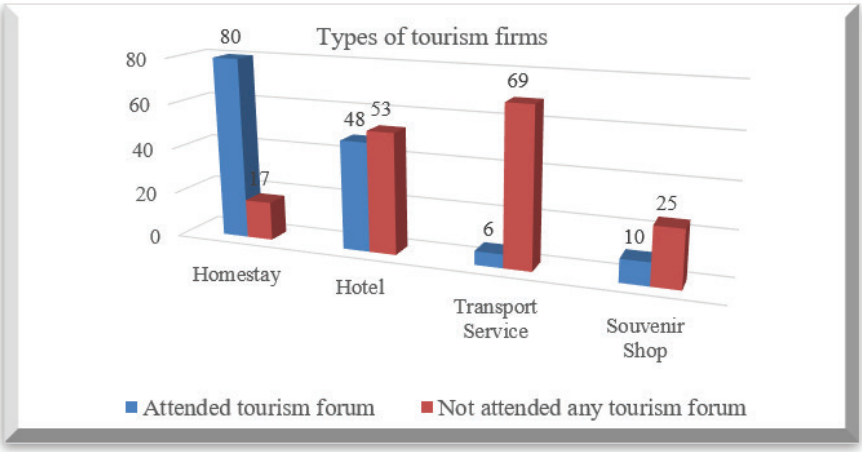


Table 2 shows responses on perceived integration for given statements. The tests are generated to find differences in responses from various types of tourism service providers. The first statement in Table 2, "awareness of the tourism projects and schemes", was scored highest by respondents from homestay service providers (M = 3.21). The same statement received the lowest score (M = 2.00) from souvenir shops. The homestay service providers scored (M = 2.81) for the "involvement of locals in the decision-making of tourism's development", and the transport service providers scored (M = 2.23) for the same statement. Again, the homestay service providers scored the highest (M = 3.04) in the "fair distribution of tourism projects and schemes in the region" and the lowest (M = 2.20) among transport service providers. However, the transport service providers scored the highest (M = 3.56) for the statement on "business opportunities being taken by outsiders," and the same statement was scored the lowest (M = 2.77) by hotel service providers. The outsiders here refer to the business units that are owned by non-residents in the study area.

Table 2: Responses to statements from different types of tourism firms

Items	Hotel (N = 101) M	Homestay (N = 97) M	Transport service (N = 75) M	Souvenir Shop (N = 35) M
I am aware of tourism projects/schemes of the region	2.51	**3.21**	2.15	<u>2.00</u>
Locals are involved in decision-making tourism development	2.74	**2.81**	<u>2.23</u>	2.48
Tourism projects/schemes are fairly distributed in the region	2.67	**3.04**	<u>2.20</u>	2.83
Outside tourism firms have taken up business opportunities	<u>2.77</u>	2.84	**3.56**	3.06

Note. The response on a 5-point Likert scale, (1) as "strongly disagree"; (2) as "disagree"; (3) as neutral; (4) as "agree" and (5) as "strongly agree," M = Mean; SD= Std. Deviation; Higher Means indicate higher the agreement with the statement. The highest Means are in bold with respect to the statement, and the lowest Means are underlined.

In Table 3, the respondents are segmented into two groups, I and II, for further analysis based on their participation in tourism forums. Group I shows results for respondents who attended or participated in tourism forums, and Group II shows results for respondents who never attended such forums. The responses show a significant difference between the two groups in their perceptions of the given statements. In response to the statement about awareness of tourism schemes, Group I scored higher (M = 2.89, SD = 1.127), which infers that those who attended the tourism forums/meetings have more awareness of the region's tourism projects/schemes. Group II, on the other hand, had the lower score (M = 2.61, SD =1.052) in the same statement, indicating that those who did not attend any forum were less aware of tourism projects/schemes. Similarly, in terms of the involvement of locals in decision-making, Group I scored a higher mean (M = 2.82, SD =1.052) than Group II (M = 2.77, SD =.834). These differences are also observed in other statements on the distribution of tourism projects/schemes and in opinions on business opportunities being taken by outsiders. Outsiders here refer to those who are not domiciled in the study area. Group I scored slightly higher (M = 2.76, SD =.865) for awareness of tourism projects/schemes, though the difference is small in Group II (M = 2.97, SD = 785). In the statement about outsiders taking advantage of business opportunities, Group I had a lower mean (M = 2.82, SD =.872) than Group II (M = 3.25, SD =.745), which is the highest of the four statements presented.

Table 3: Comparison of responses to statements between Groups I and II

Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Aware of Schemes	Group I: Attended tourism forum	144	2.89	1.127	.086
	Group II: Did not attended tourism forum	164	2.61	1.052	.090
Local involve in the decision making	Group I: Attended tourism forum	144	2.82	.866	.066
	Group II: Did not attended tourism forum	164	2.77	.834	.071
Fair distribution of projects	Group I: Attended tourism forum	144	2.76	.865	.066
	Group II: Did not attended tourism forum	164	2.97	.785	.067
Outside agencies have taken up the opportunities	Group I: Attended tourism forum	144	2.82	.872	.067
	Group II: Did not attended tourism forum	164	3.25	.745	.064

An independent sample *t* test was conducted to determine whether participation in the tourism forum changed the perceptions of the respondents based on the given statements. Table 4, presents the results for the *F* test of sample variances and independent sample *t* test. Accordingly, alternative hypotheses were also formulated for the statements.

H1: Tourism Forum change the perception with respect to the awareness of schemes
H2: Tourism Forum change the perception with respect involvement of local in decision-making.
H3: Tourism Forum changes perceptions for fair distribution of tourism projects.
H4: Tourism Forum changes perceptions on tourism opportunities being taken up by outside agencies.

Table 4: **Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Aware of Schemes	Equal variances assumed	7.392	.007	2.244	306	.026	.282	.126	.035	.529
	Equal variances not assumed			2.261	298.953	.024	.282	.125	.037	.527
Local involve in the decision making	Equal variances assumed	.270	.604	.536	306	.593	.052	.098	-.140	.244
	Equal variances not assumed			.538	295.833	.591	.052	.097	-.139	.244
Fair distribution of tourism projects	Equal variances assumed	6.697	.010	-2.211	306	.028	-.211	.095	-.398	-.023
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.235	301.199	.026	-.211	.094	-.396	-.025

Outside agencies have taken up the opportunities	Equal variances assumed	.574	.449	-4.577	306	.000	-.429	.094	-.614	-.245
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.656	304.710	.000	-.429	.092	-.611	-.248

In the Table 4, the *t* value is 2.261, and with 298.953 degrees of freedom, this gives a probability of 0.024, which is less than the significance of 0.05. Therefore, we accept the alternative hypothesis (H1). We conclude that there is a significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the result is significant enough to conclude that tourism forums change the perception with respect to the awareness of schemes. For the H2, the *t* value is.536 and, with 306 degrees of freedom, this gives a probability of 0.593, which is more than the significance of 0.05. Therefore, we fail to accept the alternative hypothesis. We conclude that there is no significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the result is not significant enough to claim that the tourism forum makes local people involved in decision-making.

For the H3, the *t* value is -2.235, and with a degree of freedom of 301.199, this gives a probability of 0.026, which is less than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore, we accept the alternative and conclude that there is a significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the result is significant enough to conclude that the tourism forum changed perceptions about the fair distribution of tourism projects. In the fourth hypothesis (H4), the *t* value is -4.577, and with 306 degrees of freedom, this gives a probability of 0.000, which is less than the significance of 0.05. Therefore, we accept the alternative. This leads us to conclude that there is a significant difference between the two groups. This infers that, the result is significant enough to conclude that the tourism forum changed perceptions about tourism opportunities being taken up by outside agencies. The information shown in Table 4, provides statistical evidence in support of alternative hypotheses, i.e., Ha1, Ha3, and Ha4. While for Ha2, we do not have enough evidence to support an alternative hypothesis. Our test scores infer that a tourism forum can be a platform to engage locals to disseminate information about tourism schemes, benefits, and aids and also to receive their views through interaction with them.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the tourism forum, local communities' voices and interests can be recognized. Participating in forums related to tourism changes the perception of service providers about tourism development. For example, the respondents who have participated in or attended forums have a greater awareness of the region's tourism schemes and projects; these respondents had different perceptions or views about tourism development than others who did not attend any such forum. On the other hand, the group that had not attended any tourism-related forums or meetings knows less about tourism projects and plans in the area, but they have a critical perception that tourism opportunities have been taken by people from outside the area.

The variation in responses shows that the feeling of integration of local tourism entrepreneurs in tourism development is perceived differently among different service providers. Furthermore, these differences can also be found in their participation in public forums related to tourism. Tourism development can be a sustainable approach if service providers are informed and aware of the various impacts (Arbolino et al., 2021). Yaja et al. (2023b) argued that when tourism businesses are handled by outside agencies or parties, there is a great risk that they may exploit the host's social capital. Outside agencies and their suggestions often appear to be extremely convincing and motivating for developing tourism businesses and may appear appealing to local government. When a business becomes successful, however, it may abandon the regulations in order to maximize its profits rather than contribute to the local economy.

An assessment of research on communities and their participation confirms that the centrality of tourism development is to reach the goal of sustainable business and livelihood (Iqbal et al., 2022). These are the facts that compelled tourism officials to include locals in the development process. Hence, the tourism forum is the key source where development plans and schemes need to be notified and discussed with the local community. The study area, Arunachal Pradesh, has a diverse socio-cultural heritage and is blessed with rich flora and fauna. These resources can be an essential source of economic livelihood if channelled adequately for tourism development. Eventually, this will lead to the creation of value for rural resources, and thereby, residents can expect optimum livelihoods (Alexander et al., 2018).

We have seen a considerable variation in responses in this study among respondents who have participated and those who have not participated in any forum(s) related to tourism. Awareness of the tourism projects or schemes is higher among the region's homestay service providers. Furthermore, the participation of homestay service providers in public forums related to tourism is also higher. One of the reasons for such results is that homestay operators are recognised by the state tourism department, and this recognition makes them aware of ongoing events and schemes related to tourism. However, in the case of other service providers like transport services, hotels, and souvenir shops, the recognition process is not a compulsion, and this makes them less informed. Homestay service providers' responses are mostly positive and have better scores in many areas (see Tables 2 and

3), which is natural because this group has better information about such events through a close connection with the department. This implies that to have an informed service provider, especially in the case of local communities, there should be a close connection with governing authorities for necessary information and updates in the industry.

From the result, we can see that the transport service providers feel strongly that outside tourism firms have taken up the region's business opportunities. In contrast, the same statement scored the lowest mean in the case of hotel service providers. Here, local transport providers are deprived of awareness of tourism schemes, which is also reflected in their perception of involving them in the decision-making process of tourism development. The recent studies also reveal opportunities to improve the social wellbeing of locals by recognising their voices (Moayerian et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022). It became critical to hold tourism public forums and make the necessary arrangements to raise awareness about initiatives, schemes, and opportunities, particularly in rural areas, in order for such benefits to reach rural communities. The voluntary approach to any information regarding schemes from locals seems low or negligible. The possible reason could be that the locals do not see the opportunity that exists in their region, or maybe they are not interested in the industry or do not find it lucrative.

Participating in tourism forums can enhance local service providers' confidence and connect them with other stakeholders in the domain. Furthermore, participation in the forum(s) can benefit local tourism entrepreneurs as well as other community members who are not directly involved with tourism. We have seen that those respondents who did not attend any tourism forum have a different opinion on the statements given, which reflect their individual perceptions, which are governed by their limited information about the schemes and opportunities that exist with the state tourism department for them. The forum serves as more than a source of information; it also acts as a platform to express opinions and connect with other stakeholders.

The development of tourism in a destination can bring a wide range of income and employment, which requires different skill sets, ranging from unskilled to semi-skilled, skilled, and highly skilled. The industry-specific skills can be highlighted and discussed in a forum. And having the required skill set can uplift the socio-economic situation to some extent with the proper integration of residents. Along with this, the distribution of projects and schemes should reach interested and genuine individuals or groups without bias. Previous studies (Moscardo et al., 2013; Lindberg et al., 2021) show that involving local tourism entrepreneurs in tourism planning creates a positive perception about the effects of tourism development. Therefore, tourism projects' officials should hold forums for both local tourism service providers and other locals who are not working or associating with tourism in order to ensure successful business execution, a better ecosystem for business, and to channel their products and services to the appropriate customers (Kibicho, 2008; Yaja & Kumar, 2021).

6. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

We have seen a difference in participation in the tourism forum(s) among service providers. The concerned or organising authority should integrate all service providers through a common platform to disseminate information about schemes and projects happening in the tourist destinations. Furthermore, decisions, opinions, feedback, and suggestions received from such forums should be used as key information for an inclusive approach to tourism development. These collective suggestions and ideas can be utilised to create a viable tourism product and service that is suitable for the destination. The local tourism government should integrate voices from locals into the planning process while initiating any projects. Bringing developmental models from forums and locals' opinions can help policymakers change or modulate schemes as needed to provide the best possible solution. Furthermore, by looking at issues and opportunities brought up in tourism forums, a model for developing tourism in a certain area can be made. Such a region-specific model can be a blueprint for tourism development.

Butler (1980) described the different stages of tourism development with a model called the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC). The TALC consists of six different stages. Stage I is exploration; Stage II is involvement; Stage III is development; Stage V is stagnation; and Stage VI is decline or rejuvenation. The findings of the current study are applicable in the exploration phase of tourism development, as described in Butler's TALC. According to Butler, the exploration stage of a tourism destination is when very few tourists visit the area; this stage also features limited infrastructure and a lack of tourist-specific facilities; very few members of the local community are interested in the tourism industry; and very few players control these business opportunities. Thus, there is a high chance of interaction between tourists and the local community. However, only a few local tourism entrepreneurs can be found, and those are not professionally trained. The locals witness the tourism development with caution, and they may not view it with much enthusiasm; however, those who participate usually control the business opportunities of the tourism industry. The study area, Arunachal Pradesh, is currently in its initial phase or exploration stage, as in Butler's TALC (1980) of tourism development. Therefore, this is the most reasonable and crucial stage to introduce tourism projects and schemes in any emerging tourism destination through a public forum for local communities, irrespective of their participation in tourism and allied businesses.

The results presented here are useful for governing bodies in tourism and related industries, especially in developing nations where tourism industries have been identified as tools for development. Although integration is a crucial element of project planning and development, it often overlaps with other limitations faced by both the authorities and local communities. These gaps can be reduced by gathering locals' perceptions of tourism development, which provides a straight opinion about projects and schemes. This process gives a general idea of how local people feel about tourism development and the people in charge. A holistic communication between locals and officials of the tourism department is needed where both parties can put forward ideas, information, and concerns.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The current study investigated how tourism forums raise awareness and shape perceptions about the integration of local tourism service providers. The findings indicate that participants in the tourism forum and non-participants have very diverse perspectives on tourism development. The perception of tourism service providers is found to be influenced by their awareness of initiatives and their participation in public forums. All respondents were found to be first-generation local tourism entrepreneurs. Therefore, the results of the study may not be generalized to other regions and states. The study can be expanded in the future to identify changes in perceived integration, if any, from pre- and post-participation in the tourism forum(s). The group that had not attended any forum(s) or meeting(s) on tourism had less knowledge of the projects and plans for tourism development in the region, but they expressed strong opinions that tourism opportunities are being taken by outside people. Therefore, more research can be conducted on this group to determine what prevents them from participating in tourism forums, why their views are as they are, and whether the region has any impediment factor(s). The business performances of groups I and II can also be taken up for an extended comparative study. In addition to these, officials coordinating tourism forums can also be taken as respondents in further studies to understand how they create awareness among local communities and entrepreneurs; further, consider preparing community members for potential entrepreneurs through the schemes and initiatives. Many of the various tourism entrepreneurs are not aware of the available opportunities and schemes; it's quite reasonable to assume the other community members who are not from this domain will surely have the bare minimum knowledge about the prospects in the industry, which indicates a call for proper dissemination of information and holds special significance to prepared local communities for any tourism development.

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