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An emerging and novel approach toward Pro-poor tourism: a study of homestays in Sittong, Darjeeling, India

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Introduction: Tourism has an important influence on shaping the development trajectory of communities, particularly in developing countries. Given its economic significance and social implications, tourism constitutes an integral part of the development intervention of government and other agencies. This research examines homestays in Sittong, Darjeeling Himalaya, India, through the lens of Pro-poor tourism. The study looks at the impact of homestay tourism on rural mountain communities vis-à-vis livelihoods and environmental sustainability, with a focus on how tourism benefits are distributed or shared among different socio-economic groups.

Methods: The study is based on the interpretivist paradigm. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with homestay owners, helpers, nature guides, local community members, and public officials. A total of fifteen locally owned homestays were surveyed, including thirty personal interviews and one FGD. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data.

Results: Homestays are rapidly changing the contours of rural livelihoods in Sittong by producing significant economic benefits for various socio-economic groups, enhancing community engagement, and strengthening the Pro-poor tourism strategy. However, challenges such as bureaucratic barriers, government apathy, non-local ownership of homestays, and environmental degradation impede progress toward pro-poor goals and sustainable tourism.

Discussion: This research emphasizes the significance of inclusive decision-making, capacity building, financial support, and sustainable practices in addressing livelihood issues and environmental sustainability in rural mountain communities. The study calls for a balanced approach that integrates economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability to ensure the long-term success of homestay tourism in the Darjeeling Himalaya and other similar settings.

KEYWORDS

Darjeeling Himalaya, Pro-poor tourism, homestay tourism, livelihood opportunities, environmental sustainability, mountain tourism

1 Introduction

Homestay tourism has witnessed exponential growth in recent years. As an alternative tourism product (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013), homestays are considered an important means of generating livelihoods for local communities while offering a distinctive tourist experience (Kulshreshtha and Kulshrestha, 2019). Homestay tourism involves sharing residential space and interacting with the host families to “experience their lifestyle” (Kulshreshtha and Kulshrestha, 2019, p. 459). Such interaction enables tourists to

understand the local culture, tradition, and lifestyles of the communities (Leh and Hamzah, 2012), which helps promote cross-cultural learning, enhance mutual understanding among diverse communities, and play a crucial role in safeguarding indigenous practices and customs (Anand et al., 2012). Homestays, however, go beyond their socio-cultural value and perform certain other important functions as well. Studies on homestays in various countries, particularly in Asia, suggest that they contribute to local communities' economic growth while also facilitating environmentally sustainable practices (Long et al., 2018).

Homestays, particularly in rural contexts, significantly impact the local communities (Long et al., 2018; Patwal et al., 2023). They encourage people, including women, to participate and reap benefits from tourism activities (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015) by providing new sources of income (Patwal et al., 2023). Homestays, thus, create opportunities to diversify income sources and lessen dependence on agriculture and livestock among the rural populace (Leh and Hamzah, 2012; Bhusal et al., 2016). Moreover, homestay programs also support the development of public facilities and infrastructure (Salleh et al., 2014; Pasanchay and Schott, 2021). Homestays, in other words, promote the overall economic growth of rural communities and strengthen efforts to eradicate poverty (Patwal et al., 2023), while simultaneously preventing rural migration (Bhalla et al., 2016). Homestays also seemingly have limited environmental impacts (Bhuiyan et al., 2011) and provide a platform to pursue community development that caters to the sustainability of the environment and ecosystem (Koiwanit and Filimonau, 2021; Bhakuni and Kumar, 2020).

In the context of mountain regions, homestays, as a form of "soft tourism," are considered a substitute for mass tourism (Bhakuni and Kumar, 2020), which is often associated with environmental degradation, waste generation, pollution, and deterioration of tourism services (Bhutia, 2015; Baloch et al., 2022). Although tourism is considered an important source of livelihood for mountain communities (Pickering and Barros, 2013; Jeelani et al., 2022), mountain tourism is an equally challenging task. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), mountain tourism includes "tourism activity which takes place in a defined and limited geographical space such as Himalaya or mountains with distinctive characteristics and attributes that are inherent to a specific landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity (flora and fauna) and local community" (UNWTO, quoted in Romeo et al., 2021, p. 8). Macek (2012, p. 9) defines mountain tourism as encompassing "those geographies that tend to be remote and harder to access than conventional tourism destinations." While mountains attract visitors of all kinds (Pickering and Barros, 2013) on account of their diversity, niche, and aesthetics (Nepal and Chipeniuk, 2005), mountain tourism encounters such challenges as difficult terrain, unpredictable weather patterns, limited accessibility, and scarce resources (Macek, 2012). The mountain ecosystem also faces constant threats of glacier melting, soil degradation, and climate-related risks and vulnerabilities (Bhusal et al., 2016) which render the mountain tourism industry susceptible to climate and geological hazards (Steiger et al., 2022; Regmi et al., 2023).

Besides the fragility of the physical environment, mountain communities are deprived of decision-making authority and

seemingly marginalized by political and economic structures, placing them among the world's poorest groups (Messerli and Ives, 1997, as cited in Nepal and Chipeniuk, 2005). Homestay tourism, in such cases, can offer a sustainable form of tourism that is specifically designed to meet the needs and capabilities of mountain communities. Homestay tourism, admittedly, aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically Target 8.9, which seeks to "promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products." The UNWTO defines sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, 2005, p. 12). Sustainable tourism encompasses responsible utilization of environmental resources, preserving the cultural authenticity of host communities, promoting intercultural understanding, ensuring economic viability for all stakeholders, and improving practices to balance environmental, economic, and socio-cultural factors (United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, 2005). Homestays in the mountains, to be sure, have been found to help drive green tourism (Anand et al., 2012; Adhikari and Adhikari, 2021) by addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges (Azam and Sarker, 2011). They also encourage environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation (Bhuiyan et al., 2011; Karki et al., 2019). Moreover, homestay tourism has been demonstrated to contribute to multiple SDGs, including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) (Pasanchay and Schott, 2021).

Given such developmental impacts and socio-economic implications, homestays are increasingly being recognized as a potential conduit for Pro-poor tourism (PPT), a concept that emerged in response to ethical concerns about the role of tourism in developing countries. As an approach, PPT seeks to enhance opportunities and generate net benefits for the poor within the tourism industry (Ashley et al., 2000). It is anchored around the belief that the tourism sector has the potential to create economic opportunities for the poor, especially in developing countries that have limited paths to economic growth and development, thereby aiding in the fight against poverty (World Tourism Organization, 2005; Yang, 2015). The critics, however, argue that despite the best efforts of governments and international organizations to align tourism with the goal of poverty reduction, PPT has not resulted in significant poverty reduction among the poor (Hall, 2007; Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2009; Sharpley, 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Scheyvens and Russell, 2012). They contend that structural inequities, limited capacity-building initiatives, and the profit-driven character of the tourism industry (Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2009) perpetuate unequal benefit distribution, constrain marginalized communities' participation, and prioritize financial gains over social impacts, thereby impeding poverty reduction efforts (Taylor, 2001; Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens and Russell, 2012).

In light of the ongoing debate and contestation, this paper examines and unravels the prospects and challenges of homestays

as a PPT strategy in mountain settings, focusing on Sittong in the Eastern Himalayas of Darjeeling, India. In doing so, this paper seeks to enhance the existing literature on pro-poor mountain tourism, a subject that has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent times (see, for example, [Apollo et al., 2024](#)). Despite the abundance of research on tourism in the Darjeeling Himalaya, most studies, if not all, are bereft of the social, political, and economic context of tourism engagement. Consequently, the opportunities and constraints of tourism, including homestays, are misunderstood or exaggerated. The research conducted on the economic impact of tourism on the Darjeeling Himalaya, for instance, underscores its contribution to the local communities' employment opportunities and revenue generation ([Sharma, 2012](#); [Bhutia, 2014, 2015](#)). These studies, however, do not examine how the economic gains of tourism are distributed across different socio-economic groups. In other words, they overlook the uneven distribution of tourism benefits between non-local or external business entities, which mostly control tourism-related businesses, and local marginalized communities, such as Gorkhas, Bhutias, and Lepchas, who are largely excluded or receive little benefit on account of such factors as low wages and high competition among local for jobs in the hospitality sector ([Dey, 2024](#)). [Rawat \(2020\)](#) and [Sharma and Chettri \(2023\)](#) similarly emphasize the financial significance of homestays for their operators. From a PPT perspective, the scholarship on tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya neglects to address whether the apparent economic benefits of tourism are reaching the poor and low-income groups of society and the extent to which they benefit from tourism activities, including homestays. Moreover, current research on homestay tourism in Darjeeling predominantly focuses on tourists' perceptions, encounters, and preferences ([Paul, 2014](#); [Pradhan, 2021](#); [Basak et al., 2021](#); [Bhattacharya et al., 2023](#); [Dutta and Mukhopadhyay, 2023, 2024](#)), overlooking the experiences and perspectives of local communities who are directly impacted by tourism. These omissions result in a superficial understanding of the role of tourism in the socio-economic development of Darjeeling, as the complexities that are inherent in the practice of tourism engagement are overlooked. However, as [Sharpley \(2002, p. 2\)](#) argues, *"The developmental role of tourism cannot, or should not, be extolled... the achievement of development in any one country may be dependent upon a particular combination of economic, social and political conditions and processes which may or may not be satisfied by tourism."*

The present study investigates the role of homestays in the economic lives of rural mountain communities by situating them within broader social, political, and economic contexts of tourism engagement. In doing so, the paper analyzes the social implications of homestay tourism from the PPT perspective. Drawing on evidence from the mountainous region of Sittong in Darjeeling Himalaya, India, which has increasingly adopted and experimented with homestay tourism, the study examines (1) the impact of homestays on the livelihoods of the local communities, and (2) the relationship between homestays and environmental sustainability. The study specifically analyzes the economic benefits of homestays and how these benefits are shared or distributed among different socio-economic groups. It addresses the issues of participation of local communities in homestay tourism, the challenges and barriers they encounter, and the benefits accruing to marginalized and low-income groups. Using a thematic research approach grounded

in interpretivism, the study seeks to understand and amplify the voices and perspectives of marginalized mountain communities by providing nuanced insights into the impact of homestay tourism based on their experiences, expectations, and apprehensions.

2 Literature review

2.1 Pro-poor tourism

Although the benefits and disadvantages of tourism have been widely debated and researched, the relationship between economic development and tourism has been largely overlooked in the past ([Telfer, 2002](#); [Holden, 2013](#)). Awareness of the development potential of tourism began to gain momentum in the late 1950's when international organizations such as the World Bank realized its importance in driving economic growth, particularly in developing countries ([Srisang, 1991](#), as cited in [Holden, 2013](#)). The beginning of the new millennium witnessed re-engagement with old concerns, albeit with a new emphasis and vigor, as academia and donor agencies began to investigate the relationship between economic development and tourism, particularly the role of tourism in poverty reduction in developing countries. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) new lending strategy, namely Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS), in this respect, rekindled interest in reimagining tourism as an instrument for poverty reduction ([Holden, 2013](#)). Emanating largely from changes in development discourse, the concept of Pro-poor growth (PPG) became a buzzword and popular intervention mechanism among donor institutions, national governments, and international organizations. Despite its ambiguity, PPG was considered a means to address the problems inherent in *"trickle-down"* thinking that seemingly ignored the poor and placed them at the lower rung of the development ladder. PPG, on the other hand, prioritized the poor by ensuring *"economic growth leads to increased welfare for the less well-off in a society"* ([Pattillo et al., 2005](#), p. 34). In other words, PPG enabled *"the poor to actively participate in and significantly benefit from economic activity"* ([Kakwani and Pernia, 2000](#), p. 3).

Inspired by the ethical contours of the PPG paradigm, the concept of PPT became its logical corollary in the field of tourism. Although the role of tourism in fostering development in developing countries is now acknowledged, particularly in generating investment and revenue and creating job opportunities ([Holden, 2013](#)), few studies explored the links between tourism and poverty reduction ([Zhao and Ritchie, 2007](#); [Goodwin, 2007](#)). PPT sought to fill this gap by focusing on the poor within tourism and aligning tourism activities with poverty reduction.

The faith in tourism to help address the challenges of poverty is couched in the belief that *"tourism can and should contribute to pro-poor economic growth"* ([Chok et al., 2007](#), p. 147, emphasis in original). Tourism has a significant impact on the poor, particularly in developing countries, which have a considerable presence of poor rural populations with limited development options ([World Tourism Organization, 2005](#); [Yang, 2015](#)). As a diverse and labor-intensive industry, tourism encourages wide participation, including in informal sectors and among women ([Roe and Urquhart, 2001](#)). Unlike other industries, tourism allows

the poor to participate in a wide range of economic activities and pursue their livelihoods (Ashley et al., 2001). Tourism also provides opportunities for marginalized groups, such as indigenous communities, to engage and negotiate with powerful interests, exercise power, and secure revenues and financial advantage (Goodwin, 2007). It is argued that with the right strategies, tourism could be chiseled into a “powerful weapon to attack poverty” (Zhao and Ritchie, 2007, p. 9) and help unlock “opportunities for the poor within tourism” (Roe and Urquhart, 2001, p. 2). PPT, in this sense, is quintessentially an approach aimed at expanding opportunities and finding net benefits for the poor in the tourism sector (Ashley et al., 2000; Roe and Urquhart, 2001, 2004). Some of the core principles of PPT include involving the poor in tourism decision-making to prioritize their livelihoods; adopting a holistic livelihood approach that considers economic, social, and environmental concerns; analyzing and distributing costs and benefits; maintaining flexibility in strategies and context; ensuring commercial feasibility and viability, and promoting interdisciplinary learning (Ashley et al., 2000). Roe and Urquhart (2004) define the PPT framework as consisting of three main areas of focus: enhancing economic benefits by expanding business opportunities, creating jobs, and generating collective advantages; improving non-economic impacts by building capacity to reduce environmental, social, and cultural effects; and implementing policy and process reforms, such as establishing supportive policies, promoting the involvement of impoverished individuals, and fostering pro-poor partnerships.

The proliferation of PPT interventions since the publication of the Department for International Development’s report on “tourism for poor” (Wang et al., 2023) suggests its growing popularity. Over the years, research investigating the relationship between tourism and poverty reduction has revealed myriad connections (Wang et al., 2023). Studies indicating a positive correlation between the two link tourism with, among others, employment and livelihood opportunities for the poor (Ashley et al., 2001; Lepp, 2007; Harrison and Schipani, 2008; Croes, 2014; Llorca-Rodríguez et al., 2017; Yusuf and Ali, 2018), reduced job barriers (Lepp, 2007; Njoya and Seetaram, 2018), increased income (Ashley et al., 2001; Njoya and Seetaram, 2018; Hugo and Nyaupane, 2016; Riyanto et al., 2020), and improved living standards (Yang, 2015).

Despite its moral overtones, some scholars have contested the notion of PPT and its claim to reorient and fine-tune tourism to the needs and concerns of the poor. They claim that despite the endeavors of governmental institutions and international organizations to synchronize tourism with poverty reduction, PPT has not yielded significant outcomes in terms of poverty alleviation among the poor (Hall, 2007; Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2009; Sharpley, 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Scheyvens and Russell, 2012). Structural inequities, limited capacity-building initiatives, and profit-driven motives of the tourism industry (Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2009) have been cited as major challenges to poverty alleviation goals. Such factors perpetuate the unequal distribution of benefits, limit marginalized communities’ opportunities for meaningful participation, and prioritize financial gains over social impacts (Taylor, 2001; Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens and Russell, 2012). The critics argue that PPT, notwithstanding its pro-poor

inclinations, is prone to be captured by the rich, benefiting them more than the poor (Taylor, 2001; Sharpley, 2009; Scheyvens and Russell, 2012). The PPT initiatives in Gambia, for instance, primarily favored the wealthy due to their ownership of larger tourism businesses, their ability to access resources to capitalize on these opportunities, and their higher level of skills and education that made them eligible for better-paying jobs in the tourism industry (Sharpley, 2009). In contrast, individuals with low socio-economic status were engaged in low-skilled and low-paying jobs and faced structural barriers to economic growth (Sharpley, 2009). At its core, critics contend that PPT, like other similar manifestations, is part of a larger neoliberal project based on profit-making and market-driven intervention that has little to offer real benefits to the poor (Scheyvens, 2009). PPT consequently has the potential to perpetuate economic imperialism by extending neoliberal practices, while failing to address the root causes of poverty (Hall, 2007).

Amidst various claims, contestations, and skepticism surrounding the concept of PPT, homestays are emerging as a novel, alternative approach that has the potential to replenish and revitalize the PPT strategy by actively contributing to the goal of poverty alleviation and strengthening global efforts to promote sustainable tourism practices.

2.2 Pro-poor tourism in mountains

The study of PPT within mountain tourism broadly explores the potential of tourism in mountainous regions to alleviate poverty and inequality in these regions (Apollo et al., 2024). As noted earlier, beyond the physical vulnerabilities posed by the natural environment, including climate change (Steiger et al., 2022; Regmi et al., 2023), mountain communities encounter substantial societal challenges, such as poverty and economic marginalization (Mutana and Mukwada, 2020; Wengel et al., 2024). Mountain tourism in developing countries faces significant challenges, including resource depletion, poverty, unequal wealth distribution, competition from large corporations, alienation of local communities, inadequate integration with local economies, and low retention of tourism benefits (Nepal, 2002). These factors hinder sustainable development and efforts aimed at poverty alleviation (Nepal, 2002).

The pro-poor approach to mountain tourism aims to address the poverty challenges by leveraging tourism activities to generate net benefits for marginalized mountain communities (Apollo et al., 2024). Toward this end, the PPT strategies in mountain regions prioritize generating income and employment, developing local capacities, involving communities in tourism development, ensuring environmental sustainability, preserving culture, supporting policy frameworks, and developing market links to improve the livelihoods of local poor communities (Saville, 2001). To be sure, mountains offer significant opportunities for various tourism activities, such as, among others, mountaineering, religious and spiritual tourism, adventure and sports activities, rural tourism, natural and cultural heritage tourism, and ecotourism (Beedie and Hudson, 2003; Pickering and Barros, 2013; Sati, 2015; Apollo, 2017; Apollo et al., 2020; Apollo and Wengel, 2021; Romeo et al.,

2021; Apollo and Andreychouk, 2022). Consequently, tourism in mountain regions can significantly influence the socio-economic development of local communities by creating job opportunities, generating income, developing infrastructure, and facilitating cultural exchange (Apollo and Andreychouk, 2022; Wengel et al., 2024). Schänzel and Apollo (2023) argue that mountain tourism can be a key factor in the development, prosperity, and wellbeing of all stakeholders, including marginalized mountain communities.

Research on the PPT in mountain tourism underscores its importance in creating economic opportunities and promoting economic growth for marginalized mountain communities. The PPT initiative in Humla, Nepal, for instance, indicates significant infrastructure improvements, enhanced sanitation, social mobilization, development of small enterprises, community benefits, capacity building, and policy influence, thus fostering sustainable economic opportunities for local communities (Saville, 2001). The research conducted by Karim et al. (2020) on PPT initiatives in the Hunza Valley of Northern Pakistan, similarly, demonstrates that PPT serves as an effective mechanism for poverty alleviation and sustainable development in mountainous regions. This is achieved by generating economic opportunities, empowering marginalized groups, safeguarding cultural and environmental assets, and adapting to market changes (Karim et al., 2020). In a similar vein, the Korzok homestay initiative in Ladakh, India, generated supplementary income, created employment opportunities, empowered women, enhanced skills, preserved cultural heritage, promoted environmental conservation, and facilitated equitable community management, thereby significantly improving the livelihoods of the poor and marginalized mountain community (Anand et al., 2012). Other studies (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013; Lama, 2013; Patwal et al., 2023) reaffirm the positive impact of tourism on the poor and marginalized communities in mountainous areas. While tourism generally contributes positively to pro-poor growth in mountain regions, significant challenges persist. These include difficult access and inadequate infrastructure (Saville, 2001), economic difficulties (Ezaz, 2024), environmental issues (Anand et al., 2012; Qiao et al., 2024), social and cultural barriers (Hillman, 2024), excessive regulation and bureaucratic hurdles (Saville, 2001), insufficient government and institutional support (Eborka et al., 2024), and the effects of climate change (Salim and Kebir, 2024).

2.3 Homestay tourism

The concept of homestay tourism involves transforming homes into commercial spaces for financial purposes (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). Homestays are classified as micro or small-scale businesses based on the number of guests they can accommodate (Patwal et al., 2023). Tourists, within the context of homestay tourism, typically reside with host families (Chin et al., 2014; Basak et al., 2021) and have the opportunity to “experience their lifestyle” (Kulshreshtha and Kulshreshtha, 2019, p. 459). Consequently, homestay tourism fosters active interactions with local communities (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015), providing insight into local customs and traditions while enriching travel experiences through a cultural exchange (Leh and Hamzah, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, homestays have a significant impact on the economic prospects of host families and local communities (Pasanchay and Schott, 2021). In rural areas that are seemingly constrained by limited livelihood opportunities, homestays serve as an important source of income for local communities (Chin et al., 2014), assisting them in diversifying their livelihoods and reducing their reliance on agriculture and livestock (Leh and Hamzah, 2012). Tourism in rural areas, to be sure, enhances economic growth by creating jobs, increasing local income, and fostering investment and entrepreneurial opportunities, ultimately improving overall economic resilience (Liu et al., 2023). The UNWTO defines rural tourism as an activity in which visitors interact with rural cultures, agriculture, natural activities, and ways of life (World Tourism Organization, 2023). Rural tourism is conducted in non-urban environments characterized by traditional social structures, low population density, and agricultural and forestry-dominated landscapes (World Tourism Organization, 2023). Rural tourism is often credited with promoting economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability (Liu et al., 2023). Research on the livelihood potential of homestays in rural settings points to an increase in household income and improved economic status of host families, primarily on account of extending such provisions as lodging, meals, and ancillary services (Leh and Hamzah, 2012; Acharya and Halpenny, 2013; Kannegieser, 2015; Kimaiga and Kihima, 2018).

In addition to benefiting homestay operators, homestays also contribute to the economic growth of rural communities by offering supplementary sources of income (Lama, 2013). Local communities have been found to participate in a variety of income-generating activities related to homestays, including selling souvenirs and agricultural products (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013), managing lodging, planning cultural events, and offering hospitality services (Bhuiyan et al., 2011), selling locally produced goods and providing services like transportation and guiding (Lama, 2013; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015), and supporting local businesses like taxi services, retail stores, and restaurants (Kannegieser, 2015). Besides promoting and stimulating the local economy (Patwal et al., 2023), homestay tourism seemingly appears to have fewer instances of economic leakage. In contrast to mass tourism, which is replete with economic leakage at various levels (Jönsson, 2015), studies by Acharya and Halpenny (2013) and Kannegieser (2015) demonstrate that homestays help to lessen and mitigate the incidences of economic leakage by offering more opportunities for earning and sharing income within the local community.

Homestays are also perceived as a crucial means for advancing environmental sustainability (Bhuiyan et al., 2011), biodiversity conservation (Karki et al., 2019), and the promotion of environmental practices and attitudes (Anand et al., 2012; Yusuf et al., 2021). The concept of environmental sustainability is defined as “a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity” (Morelli, 2011, p. 5). The basic underlying principles of environmental sustainability include meeting societal needs, preserving biodiversity, regenerating capacities, developing

recycling and reusing practices, and limiting non-renewable resources and waste generation (Morelli, 2011). Homestays have fewer environmental impacts (Bhuiyan et al., 2011) and provide an environment-sensitive platform for community development that seemingly has a low carbon footprint on the natural environment and ecosystem (Koiwanit and Filimonau, 2021; Bhakuni and Kumar, 2020). Moreover, they contribute to educating and raising awareness among tourists about the environmental aspects of destinations, thus fostering an appreciation for eco-friendly development (Kumar et al., 2023). Studies conducted by Anand et al. (2012), Shukor et al. (2014), Karki et al. (2019), Dahal et al. (2020), and Roy (2022) have noted that homestays facilitate improved livelihoods, utilization of renewable energy sources, waste management strategies, water conservation, environmental awareness and conservation, and decreased dependence on forests and other natural resources. Other studies (Shukor et al., 2014; Bhatia et al., 2022; Jasrotia and Kour, 2022; Dutta and Mukhopadhyay, 2024), however, present contradictory results, suggesting instances of land degradation, pollution, unsustainable waste management methods, and inadequate water and energy preservation, among other issues, attributed to homestays.

The outcomes of homestay tourism are determined by various factors. Research by Zulkefli et al. (2021), Al-Laymoun et al. (2020), Sawatsuk et al. (2018), Basak et al. (2021), Dahal et al. (2020), and Acharya and Halpenny (2013) highlights the importance of amenities and services, socio-cultural resilience, planning and management, promotional and marketing strategies, infrastructure development, training and capacity building, and the integration of marginalized communities in the success of homestay programs. Besides, governance and collaboration among stakeholders, including local community members, government agencies, and private entities decide the fate of homestay programs (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013; Hamzah, 2014; Dahal et al., 2020; Balasingam, 2022). Government agencies are instrumental in supporting, training, and regulating the programs (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013; Truong, 2013), while the private sector extends these initiatives by way of financing, market access, building skills, and long-term sustainability (Hamzah, 2014). Community participation in tourism development is critical for sustainable growth and helps in the effective management of tourism infrastructure, resources, and strategies (Nagarjuna, 2015; Sood et al., 2017; Kala and Bagri, 2018; Roy and Saxena, 2020). Community participation is defined as the individual's willingness to engage and contribute to decision-making processes and activities (Til, 1984, as cited in Amin and Ibrahim, 2015). Community participation in homestays promotes economic development (Riyanto et al., 2023), cultural and natural heritage preservation (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013), and social development through cultural exchange and mutual understanding (Anand et al., 2012). Involving community members in decision-making processes and activities fosters ownership and commitment (Pusiran and Xiao, 2013), distributes benefits among the local community (Kampetch and Jitpakdee, 2019), enhances the sustainability of homestays (Amin and Ibrahim, 2015; Balasingam, 2022; Dahal et al., 2020), and boosts tourism destinations and competitiveness (Riyanto et al., 2023).

3 Methodology and limitations

3.1 Research methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to explain the outcomes of homestay tourism in Sittong (Mahoney and Goertz, 2006). The qualitative approach is adopted to enhance our understanding of PPT and homestays by examining individuals' experiences and perspectives (Aspers and Corte, 2019). The research is based on interpretivism, which seeks to understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants such as host families, homestay assistants, nature guides, and public officials in order to capture the complexities and contexts of their perspectives (Schwandt, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 2005). This methodology provides nuanced insights into homestay tourism, focusing on individual interpretations and social interactions (Crotty, 1998).

The study drew upon both primary and secondary sources of data. The secondary sources included official documents, reports, books, journal articles, and online sources (Mikkelsen, 2005), while primary data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). A total of 15 homestays were surveyed for the study—five in each division of Sittong. The selection of these homestays was based on their ownership, specifically focusing on homestays that are owned and operated by local households. Of these, 10 homestays were created by modifying existing houses, while the remaining were newly constructed. Interestingly, none of the surveyed homestays had any prior experience or expertise in the hospitality industry. The participants included homestay owners, helpers, nature guides, local community members, and public officials (Mikkelsen, 2005). In total, 30 in-depth personal interviews and one FGD were conducted. The duration of interviews varied from one individual to another and lasted approximately half an hour to 45 min. The FGD, on the other hand, took a considerable amount of time—approximately 2 hours—and included around 10 participants, including office bearers of local homestay associations and homestay owners. The verbal consent was obtained from all of the participants before conducting interviews. To ensure confidentiality, the identities of the participants have been anonymized.

The study included open-ended and semi-structured interviews which enabled the researcher to gather information on a wide array of experiences (Longhurst, 2009). Two sets of interview schedules were prepared—one each for households and public officials. The interviews and FGD were primarily centered around exploring participants' perspectives on the issues, benefits, and concerns related to homestay tourism. The participants, particularly homestay owners, helpers, and nature guides were asked about their homestay experience, financial benefits and economic prospects, costs of providing amenities and services such as helpers, food, and electricity, waste management, challenges, and so on. Public officials, on the other, were asked about the government's homestay tourism strategy, registration process, homestay identification and certification, government financial assistance, and matters related to homestays. Interaction with a diverse range of participants facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the complexities

and varied perspectives surrounding homestay tourism in Sittong. More importantly, employing multiple data collection methods and sources helped in data corroboration and triangulation. Triangulation is regarded as one of the key techniques that help to improve the accuracy and reliability of the findings in social sciences research (Patton, 1999). Triangulation is the method of examining a phenomenon by using multiple sources of data (Decrop, 1999). The present study employed triangulation to analyze, verify, and validate data and information collected from various sources which helped gain insights into the research problem and develop a comprehensive understanding of homestay tourism in Sittong (Patton, 1999; Decrop, 1999).

3.2 Data analysis

The study analyzed the data using thematic analysis, which broadly consisted of four stages or phases. The first stage involved familiarizing oneself with the data, which included reading and understanding the content of the transcribed interviews and conversations. Since the researcher conducted the interviews, he had a general understanding of the participants' perspectives, particularly those of homestay owners, public officials, homestay helpers, and nature guides. However, the data was carefully examined to uncover its meanings, themes, patterns, similarities, and ambiguities. This necessitated going over the data multiple times to “uncover meanings in data and reveal hidden complexities” (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019, p. 7). The second stage involved the coding process. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 88) define codes as “a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst.” Swain (2018) explains that a code can be described as something that captures the researchers' interest and is considered to help address their research question or problem. This can be a “word, phrase, sentence, or even a paragraph that relates to a phenomenon...” (Swain, 2018, p. 6). According to Swain (2018), two types of codes are commonly employed in research. Before conducting the research, *a priori codes* are formulated, whereas *a posteriori codes* are generated after reading and analyzing the interview transcripts (Swain, 2018). Both types of codes were utilized in this study. The *a priori codes* were developed before the analysis based on specific research needs. These codes included details about the participants, such as their gender, age, education level, and job profiles, among others. The other codes called *a posteriori codes*, were developed during the subsequent analysis of data (Swain, 2018). The *a posteriori* coding resulted in the development of approximately 15 codes and covered various aspects such as incomes, assets, financial security, employment opportunities, lifestyle standards, household expenses, bureaucratic challenges, pollution, biodiversity, and so on. The researcher organized the data by coding the data extracts and then collating them based on the generated codes, ensuring that no important information was lost or overlooked. This resulted in more precise and meaningful insights. The third stage focused on developing themes. This was accomplished by categorizing codes into potential themes and collecting data extracts that fit within each theme. Consequently, various codes were organized into two major themes: livelihood opportunities and environmental sustainability.

The fourth stage entailed final analysis, which included interpreting and presenting the data. In line with other studies which employ thematic analysis, the participants' responses are quoted verbatim. The goal was to provide, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 93) argue, “a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell.”

3.3 Limitations of the study

The study focuses only on homestays in Sittong, which may not provide a comprehensive understanding of homestay tourism in other regions, including other parts of Darjeeling Himalaya. Given time and other constraints, the study is restricted to a small sample size of 15 homestays, which may not adequately represent the diversity of experiences and practices in the region. In addition, the analysis excludes the perspectives of stakeholders such as non-local business entities and local elites, who could provide a nuanced understanding of the homestay tourism phenomenon. Expanding the present study's geographical scope and sample size would add value by providing a more detailed understanding of the impact of homestay tourism on local communities. The study would also benefit from examining the perspectives of other stakeholders to gain a better understanding of homestay tourism practices.

4 Tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya

4.1 Tourism potentials of Darjeeling Himalaya

Darjeeling is among India's most renowned hill stations located in the Eastern Himalayas. Home to the “Champagne of Teas” and the World Heritage-listed Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, it is also acknowledged as a “biodiversity hotspot” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Originally conceived and developed as a health sanatorium to provide a swift retreat for British soldiers and officers from the severe tropical climate of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and elsewhere, the British East India Company soon realized the significance of the place from both economic and security perspectives. Economically, the place provided favorable climatic conditions and a source of cheap labor for the development of the tea and cinchona industries, while also providing a strategic foothold for the British Empire to pursue its imperialistic ambitions in the Eastern Himalayas, including Nepal. These factors, combined with the picturesque landscape characterized by overlapping mountains and the presence of Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain, established Darjeeling's reputation as the “Queen of Hill Stations” and a base for exploring the Eastern Himalayas (Kannegieser, 2015).

Given its strategic location bordering Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet (China), and Bangladesh, along with its rich natural and economic resources, the tourism sector in Darjeeling has witnessed substantial growth over the years. A tourism survey in West Bengal indicates that Darjeeling is the most favored destination for foreign tourists and the second most favored for domestic tourists (Government of India, 2014). The West Bengal Interim Report suggests that Darjeeling attracts, on average, more than 500,000

domestic and 50,000 international visitors each year (Kannegieser, 2015, p. 5). Consequently, tourism has emerged as the mainstay of the regional economy and a significant source of income and employment. Approximately 38 percent of the local populace depends on tourism for economic support, making it the second largest service sector in the region, following the tea industry (Sharma, 2012).

4.2 Tourism challenges in Darjeeling Himalaya

Despite their significance, tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya faces three major challenges. First, the growth of the tourism industry has not been complemented by the development of local infrastructure and amenities, leading to changes in land-use patterns, over-tourism, and environmental degradation (Dey, 2024). The unchecked growth of hotels to accommodate the growing volume of tourists has severely strained local infrastructure (Giri, 2020) and the carrying capacity of Darjeeling town (Pradhan, 2008). Infrastructural facilities and services have been observed to fall far short, especially during peak season, leading to a lack of drinking water, power outages, congestion, and the deterioration of basic public services (Bhutia, 2015). Changes in land-use patterns, population growth, urbanization, and a lack of environmental planning all contribute to serious environmental hazards, including landslides (Pradhan and Sharma, 2022). A recent report cautions that the unregulated influx of tourists, coupled with unplanned urbanization and land use, may render Darjeeling “one of the most polluted cities of West Bengal” (Singh, 2023).

Second, the growth of tourism in Darjeeling has primarily benefited wealthy local elites and external businesses, with little impact on the economic prospects of the vast majority of local communities. While tourism development is often linked to economic growth and infrastructure development, economic leakages endanger the financial sustainability of local communities (Supradist, 2004). The majority of the local populace working in the tourism industry in Darjeeling is often employed in low-wage jobs such as taxi drivers, security guards, and helpers, with few or no upward mobility opportunities (Dey, 2024). Moreover, individuals working in the hospitality industry face limitations in terms of entitlements and influence over property, which limits their ability to obtain loans and insurance and make decisions about their living conditions (Dey, 2024). The seemingly conventional nature of Darjeeling’s tourism industry has implied that the majority of hotels operate solely for profit, with little social responsibility or economic incentives for local communities. Underdevelopment of allied industries and sectors like construction and agriculture, low economic diversification with tea plantations and tourism steering the economy, external ownership of the tourism industry such as hotels and travel agencies, and a weak government tourism regime have all contributed to economic leakages that are difficult to detect and contain (Supradist, 2004). Thus, although the thriving tourism industry in Darjeeling Himalaya offers increased employment opportunities, it has not contributed to the economic sustainability of local communities. The current tourism practice in Darjeeling Himalaya exemplifies Val Plumwood’s idea of “shadow places”

which are defined as places that are “materially and imaginatively oriented to the sustenance and the enjoyment of others” (Plumwood, 2008, as quoted in Besky, 2017, p. 19).

Third, the political conflict between the indigenous ethnic communities such as Gorkha, Bhutia, and Lepcha and the West Bengal government has led to decades of economic stagnation and undermined the development of the region’s tourism sector. At the heart of the conflict is a sense of deprivation, exploitation, and marginalization among these groups who accuse the government of systematic suppression and denial of their political and economic rights (Ganguly, 2005). Historically a part of Sikkim, Darjeeling was acquired by the British East India Company in 1835 and subsequently merged with the West Bengal state in post-independent India without any autonomy or decision-making powers. Consequently, various ethnic groups in Darjeeling Himalaya have long resented and demanded autonomy—in the form of a separate Gorkhaland state within the Indian federation—to safeguard their cultural interests and articulate their development aspirations. Such a political project has strained the relationship between the Bengal government and the people of Darjeeling Himalaya, often resulting in violent conflicts. The apparent hostility between the two sides has adversely affected tourism in the region on, at least, three levels. First, there is a decline in the volume of tourists on account of the fragile political environment, particularly following violent conflicts (Sharma, 2012). Second, the confrontation between the security forces and indigenous political groups has caused enormous loss and damage to tourism assets, including heritage buildings, railway stations, and bungalows, thereby undermining the aesthetic value of Darjeeling (Zhang et al., 2023). Third, underdevelopment, poor governance, and political instability have resulted in the economic marginalization of local communities and an economy that is characterized by poverty and a lack of investment in important sectors, including tourism (Ganguly, 2005). In such a context, homestay tourism is emerging as a viable alternative that has the potential to transform the existing approach to tourism practice in Darjeeling Himalaya.

4.3 Homestays in Sittong

The study was conducted in Sittong, located approximately 55 km away from the town of Darjeeling. A fairly large cluster of villages, Sittong is governed by the Kurseong Sub-Divisional Office. The place is divided into three divisions, viz., Sittong 1, Sittong 2, and Sittong 3, due to its size. The divisions are characterized by different categories of land, namely *Khasmal* (government-leased land), cinchona plantation, and reserve forest (under the Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary). These land categories have a substantial influence on the level and contours of livelihood activities, including tourism. Sittong 1 and Sittong 2 are predominantly *Khasmal*, whereas Sittong 3 is a blend of all three land types. Consequently, Sittong 1 and 2 are characterized by extensive agricultural areas, which include orange orchards. Sittong 3, conversely, mainly serves cinchona plantations with comparatively fewer agricultural areas. More importantly, Sittong 1 and 2 can engage in homestay tourism with a greater

degree of autonomy than Sittong 3, which is restricted in its access to land resources by the protected reserve forest cover and cinchona plantations because of its lack of land ownership rights. It is important to stress that quinine factories have been shut down because of financial losses, bureaucratic red tape, and mismanagement (Pradhan, 2020). However, workers continue to work in cinchona plantations, while the government is progressively exploring ways to redistribute land designated for cinchona to horticulture.

A remote mountain destination, Sittong was oblivious to tourism, with only a few visitors drawn to the area for its birding opportunities. However, tourists' preference for the countryside, combined with the government's effort to rejuvenate the tourism industry, has shifted attention to rural areas of Darjeeling, including Sittong, which has emerged as a popular tourist destination. According to data from the West Bengal Tourism Department, rural and adventure tourism accounts for 42% of all visitors to the Darjeeling Himalaya (Basak et al., 2021, p. 3). To encourage homestay tourism in local communities, the West Bengal government has implemented the Homestay Tourism Policy 2022, which provides a financial incentive of Indian Rupee (INR) 1 lakh, disbursed in two equal installments to registered homestays while ensuring hygiene and service standards are met (West Bengal Government, 2022). In terms of tourist attractions, Sittong is popular for its pristine mountains and orange orchards. Sittong 3, in particular, is regarded as a birdwatcher's paradise with approximately 240 bird species, including endangered species such as the Rufous Necked Hornbill and Himalayan Salamander (Gorkhaland Territorial Administration). These factors have contributed to Sittong's popularity as a tourist destination. The absence of tourist infrastructure and services, including lodging facilities, has prompted local communities to participate in tourism within their capabilities and the constraints of the local environment.

4.3.1 Homestays and livelihood opportunities

The first homestay in Sittong came about in Sittong 1 in 2009, followed by others that arose intermittently. The burgeoning economic opportunities surrounding homestay tourism encouraged others to join and start their homestays. Consequently, the number of homestays has increased significantly over time. According to the Kurseong Block Development Office, there are approximately 160 homestays distributed throughout Sittong. The flourishing homestays reflect the enormous economic benefits they provide to the local communities. The following section discusses the economic potential of homestays through an analysis of the relationship between homestays and livelihood opportunities, including the challenges. Since homestays benefit both homestay operators and the community (Pasanchay and Schott, 2021), the impact of homestays on livelihood opportunities is examined at two levels. The first level examines the impacts on the homestay operators, while the second level investigates the broader implications for the community as a whole.

At the ownership level, homestays have proven to be an important economic asset that is associated with increased income and financial security. It is important to emphasize that, as

previously stated, all of the homestays in this research were owned and operated by local households who lacked previous experience in the hospitality sector. Most of these households were either from the middle-income or lower-middle-income groups and worked in agriculture, the Indian Army, cinchona plantations, schools, or as small business owners. In contrast, the homestay helpers mostly came from lower-income households, working as cinchona plantation workers, taxi drivers, or day laborers. Youth from both income groups were primarily engaged in outdoor activities. While agriculture is mostly subsistence, orange cultivation has suffered due to a lack of scientific management, training and awareness programs, and capacity building (Tarafder et al., 2019). Cinchona plantation workers and day laborers, on the other hand, earn only a subsistence wage that barely meets their necessities. Consequently, they encounter major challenges to sustainable livelihoods (Scoones, 1998). Homestays, under such circumstances, have emerged as a novel source of livelihood and income generation. While a few households built new homestays, the majority modified their homes to accommodate visitors. The homestays generally have three to six rooms that can accommodate 6 to 12 guests and usually charge between Indian Rupee (INR) 1,000 to 1,200 per person.

The homestay operators at all three locations stated that the homestay improved their financial situation by supplementing their existing income. They acknowledged that starting a homestay has helped them earn better, improve their income levels, and meet their household requirements more effectively. The owner of a homestay in Latpanchar (Sittong 3) narrated the financial gains he made from his homestay: "We earn decently from our homestay to meet our household expenses, while also saving a part of it for future exigencies. We started our homestay with two rooms that could accommodate three guests and have since grown to five rooms with a capacity of nine all through our earnings from the homestay. Before starting our homestay, we relied solely on my earnings from my taxi. If I took a break for a few days due to illness or other commitments, we would be put in a tight spot financially. Homestay has improved our financial situation as we can earn more now and meet our family needs and also make other financial choices without much worry." Other respondents expressed similar views regarding the improvement in their income level and greater financial security on account of homestays.

Although tourism is seasonal, with a peak in the spring and autumn, households reported that they received visitors regularly and earned an adequate income to sustain their household requirements and upgrade and maintain their homestay. Since most of the homestays belong to individual households, the majority of tasks related to the functioning of a homestay are carried out by family members. However, it emerged that most homestays relied on other members of the local community for help and support to enable them to cater to the increasing number of visitors, especially during peak periods. In fact, all homestay operators admitted to hiring people, particularly for kitchen tasks such as cooking, to help with their respective homestays. The standard remuneration given to such a worker was normally in the range of INR 500 per day. Some homestays also operate shops selling items of daily needs, souvenirs, handicrafts, and local beverages, allowing them to generate additional income.

Additionally, a few homestays offer activities like camping, visits to orange orchards, and honey making, among others, which have become valuable sources of income. Investing in homestays and related economic activities represents the livelihood strategies of “stepping up” and “stepping out” (Dorward et al., 2009, p. 242), where homestay hosts increase their entrepreneurial activities or amenities to increase income (stepping up) and diversify their income by expanding into related activities, such as the ones above, to generate additional income and strengthen their financial stability (stepping out).

Besides their owners, homestays have two major impacts on communities: they create job opportunities and support local businesses and the economy (Kannegieser, 2015). Since most homestays require personnel to cater to the demands of increased tourists, they often, as noted above, rely on their neighbors and other community members to help with their homestay chores. This creates opportunities for the locals to participate in homestay tourism in various roles, such as cooks, helpers, and nature guides. Notably, women across homestays in Sittong were found to be more active in homestay activities, including ownership, than their male counterparts, allowing them to participate in tourism. Before the emergence of homestays in Sittong, women mainly focused on their household responsibilities. However, the opportunity to work in homestays has enabled them to participate in tourism and pursue economically productive activities. A woman who helps with a homestay in Sittong explained her role and how it has impacted her life: “I work as a cook here. Previously, I spent my time taking care of my family, such as preparing meals, getting my children ready for school, and running other household errands. My husband is a daily wage earner, working in agriculture, construction, or wherever there is work. When he was laid off, we struggled to manage our money. Working in a homestay allows me to pay kids’ school and tuition fees, buy groceries, and other household expenses. I do not have to turn to my husband for money. Working in a homestay helps me to earn and support myself and my family.” Other women who worked in homestays in various capacities supported her claim that homestays improved their economic and social lives (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013).

Interestingly, villagers can readily find jobs because no special skills or qualifications are required to work in homestays. Some people also work both at homestays and elsewhere to supplement their earnings. Several women in Sittong, for instance, work in agriculture and chinchona plantations while also engaged in homestays in different roles.

In addition to direct employment, homestays also create other livelihood opportunities. Since Sittong has several natural attractions, homestays often employ local youths to organize outdoor activities such as camping and hiking. The participants indeed revealed that there is a significant demand for nature guides in Sittong 3 because of its reputation as a bird sanctuary. Consequently, birding has developed into a distinct profession for many youths. Since locals are aware of the forests and places frequented by birds, tourists often hire them for their service and usually pay INR 1,500 per day. Respondents working as nature guides claimed that homestays have opened new job opportunities by connecting them with nature enthusiasts and other visitors. A local youth in Latapanchar in Sittong 3 who works as a nature guide provided his perspective on his new career: “Homestays have

given me new opportunities to earn money. I was introduced to birdwatching by a friend who owns a homestay. Occasionally, he would ask me to help guests explore the forest and set up birdwatching spots. With time, I honed my birding skills. Now, homestays hire me as an ‘expert’ to guide birdwatchers. Birding demands patience, but the rewards, including money, are worth it. This passion led me to build a bird feeder in my backyard and create a bird-friendly environment. Consequently, my place has become popular with tourists, and I offer personalized birdwatching experiences for a fee ranging from INR 1,000 to 500 per person.”

Homestays in Sittong also support local entrepreneurs and businesses. Given Sittong’s location and limited access to market facilities, homestays have relied on local enterprises to meet their requirements. Consequently, homestays have increased demand for local vegetables, poultry, fruits, wood, and other agricultural products. The increasing influx of visitors has also encouraged the local inhabitants to establish shops, restaurants, and other small businesses. The increase in the number of local taxis is indicative of how homestays are impacting the rural economy of Sittong. An official responsible for maintaining homestay records at the Kurseong Block Development Office observed: “Homestays have transformed the economic scenario of Sittong. Until recently, people would leave Sittong searching for jobs in cities and elsewhere. Homestays have greatly reduced this trend. Many young people, upon completing their studies, now choose to stay in Sittong and help their families run homestays due to the financial benefits it offers. Even those without homestays actively seek jobs as nature or travel guides. Homestays are a thriving business that provides good economic incentives. As a result, people from outside the region are keen on purchasing land in Sittong to build, rent, or buy a homestay.”

4.3.2 Challenges of homestay tourism

Despite its economic success in enhancing livelihood prospects, homestay tourism in Sittong faces numerous challenges. One commonly identified challenge was the difficulty of starting and operating a homestay, which included construction costs and government regulations. The homestay operators claimed that building or renovating a homestay is a costly endeavor due to geographical constraints. The majority of construction materials are unavailable locally and must be shipped from Siliguri, making them expensive. On the other hand, increased government regulations and interventions have demoralized them, as many government norms on homestays appear arbitrary and seemingly indifferent to their constraints and needs (Kala and Bagri, 2018; Roy and Saxena, 2020). The protracted process of homestay registration, which includes obtaining a homestay license, inspection by officials, verification, and periodic renewals, among others, has discouraged many homestays from registering with the government and receiving financial assistance. While the government’s homestay regulations were deemed cumbersome, time-consuming, and financially burdensome, participants, particularly homestay operators, also stated that they had not been informed or consulted about homestay policies, indicating a manifest lack of participation in tourism planning and development. An office bearer of a local homestay owners association in Sittong 1 expressed dissatisfaction with the government’s regulations on homestays as follows: “Although the

government offers a financial amount to assist homestay operators, it is difficult to access them because the documentation process involves a lot of complexity such as detailed expenditure plans, invoices, inspection visits by officials, and so on. Funds will be released once CCTVs, furniture, and other amenities have been installed. How can we transform our home into a homestay if we spend money on such items? Moreover, we must visit Kurseong and Darjeeling towns to complete the formalities of homestay registration, which can take weeks and months... We learned about homestay financial assistance much later. When we expressed our concerns about the arbitrary nature of homestay regulations and our difficulties in complying with them, nobody listened to us. They simply asked us to follow rules if we wanted to receive financial assistance and register our homestays." Consequently, only 44 of Sittong's 160 homestays are formally registered with the government, while the remainder operate independently, without the necessary government registration or financial assistance that comes with homestay registration. Prospective homestay operators in Sittong 3 face similar challenges in obtaining administrative approval from the Directorate of Cinchona, located in faraway Kolkata, to convert their homes into homestays.

An even more persistent issue is the rising number of non-local investors and wealthy local elites investing in homestays. The overwhelming number of visitors to Sittong, combined with expanding business opportunities in rural tourism, has prompted these players to invest in homestays in Sittong and other parts of Darjeeling. Consequently, homestay tourism in Sittong is seeing an increase in the number of non-local business entities taking ownership or control of homestays through construction, purchase, or rental. Many households in Sittong are also leasing or selling their homestays for quick returns. This has created competition among homestay operators. Non-local businesses outperform local homestay operators in terms of financial resources, business acumen, communication skills, and networking capabilities, enabling them to attract more tourists than local entrepreneurs who lack these resources. Consequently, local homestays' tourist turnover is declining, and they are making lower profits, if not losses, than before. Because the external operators of the tourism business are solely motivated by financial gains (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019), they hire low-wage workers from outside the region and rely on external markets for supplies. Consequently, non-local workers are displacing local residents, and local traditional cuisines are giving way to mainstream dishes. Small entrepreneurs and local businesses, including farmers, are also losing market share as a result of external investments in homestays. Such practices appear to have a negative impact on Sittong's economy, as money flows from the host destination to external markets, resulting in economic leakages. The West Bengal government's initiative to encourage homestays among local communities through financial incentives has failed to counteract the trend of non-local investments due to significant opportunity costs, as previously stated. The homestay operators and other locals are manifestly dissatisfied with the growing presence of non-local businesses in Sittong. A shop owner in Sittong 1 reflected on the situation: "An outsider now owns every alternate homestay in Sittong. They either buy the land and build a homestay or rent it from a local who wants to lease it for quick money. They run their homestays with their own staff and get their supplies from Siliguri

and other markets. Outsiders own the vast majority of Sittong's upcoming homestays. If this trend continues, they may outnumber us in our own place." The growing number of non-local homestays not only threatens Sittong's unique identity as a remote, picturesque mountain community, but it also fosters a sense of alienation among residents, potentially leading to feelings of marginalization within their own communities.

4.3.3 Homestay and environmental sustainability

Homestays in Sittong share a close relationship with the natural environment. As noted previously, Sittong is a popular destination for nature enthusiasts due to its rich forest and thriving biodiversity. The close interaction with visitors, including ornithologists, has greatly enhanced the locals' understanding and appreciation of Sittong's diverse and unique biodiversity. The increased awareness has had two effects. On the one hand, it has altered human-wildlife interactions as the locals, particularly young individuals, have become sensitive to the physical environment and local ecosystem and shifted from using "catapults (to kill birds) to cameras (to shoot birds)." On the other, the villagers have become aware of the economic importance of the place's biodiversity as they witness a rise in the number of visitors. The apparent shift in the local's attitude vis-à-vis the environment is also visible in their practice of expanding birds' habitats by planting trees and flowers and setting up feeders for birds in their backyards.

Despite such promising trends, the current homestay practices are seemingly in contravention of the principles of environmental sustainability. The expansion of homestay tourism has led to land degradation, posing a threat to the ecosystem. The unregulated expansion of homestays has resulted in a shift in land-use patterns, with homestays taking over agricultural lands and other vacant spaces, thereby threatening the ecological balance and biodiversity of Sittong. This alteration in land resources also threatens the habitat and survival of various species. The declining population of Himalayan Salamanders at Namthing Lake in Sittong 3 is evidence of growing human encroachment on wildlife habitats. Moreover, homestays have not yet implemented environmentally sustainable practices. While some homestay activities are based on eco-friendly methods, such as composting organic waste and utilizing electricity and LPG cylinders, there are other practices, like burning solid waste in landfills and the use of plastics, that contribute to environmental pollution. The absence of an effective waste management system and inadequate infrastructure and services, such as water drainage systems, waste disposal bins, and waste pick-up vehicles have accelerated the process of environmental degradation.

5 Discussion

The emergence of homestay tourism is rapidly transforming the contours of economic activities in Sittong and refashioning livelihoods dramatically (Scoones, 2015). The manifest economic benefits of homestays, along with the rising number of tourists visiting Sittong, have inspired local households to embark on a hitherto unexplored entrepreneurial journey in the hospitality industry and capitalize on opportunities by converting their homes

into commercial assets (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). Besides providing lodging services, homestays help to develop additional sources of income by encouraging other economic activities such as grocery stores, honey production, and outdoor activities like camping and bird watching, all of which have increased the financial benefits for host families and local communities. Consequently, homestays have provided significant benefits to the communities in Sittong, including increased income, improved financial security, diverse livelihoods, employment opportunities, increased participation of marginalized groups, and strengthened economic and social ties within the community. This is consistent with the fundamental principles of PPT, which seeks to generate net benefits for the poor and ensure equitable opportunities and distribution of benefits from tourism endeavors (Ashley et al., 2000, 2001; Roe and Urquhart, 2001).

The findings also align with previous research (Leh and Hamzah, 2012; Lama, 2013; Acharya and Halpenny, 2013; Kannegieser, 2015; Kimaiga and Kihima, 2018) which indicates that homestays provide income-generating opportunities and help improve the financial status and living standards of local communities. In contrast to the research conducted by Patwal et al. (2023), Dahal et al. (2020), and Anand et al. (2012), which demonstrated a noticeable enhancement in infrastructure development due to homestays, this research, however, did not find a similar improvement. The apparent poor state of infrastructure in Darjeeling, particularly in rural areas, is due to neglect by the West Bengal government, economic constraints, environmental degradation, a lack of industrial development, deforestation, and governance inefficiencies (Khawas, 2002; Ganguly, 2005). This reinforces the findings of Truong (2013) and Acharya and Halpenny (2013), who contended that government support is essential for advancing tourism initiatives, particularly PPT. Additionally, unlike the studies conducted by Acharya and Halpenny (2013) and Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2015), which identified biases based on gender, caste, and social status about homestay benefits and operation, this study did not find any indications of such biases. On the contrary, homestays in Sittong have been proven to enhance social cohesion, as evidenced by the support and cooperation among local communities. This phenomenon can be attributed to the strong ethnic ties among the people of Darjeeling (Tamang, 2022). Such ethnic ties promote interpersonal relationships, networks, community support, mutual assistance, shared goals, reciprocity, and a supportive environment that bolsters minority ethnic communities, particularly in the contexts of self-employment and community advancement (Anthias and Cederberg, 2009).

The manifest participatory nature of homestays in Sittong has significant social implications, ensuring economic participation, particularly among socio-economically marginalized groups (Ashley et al., 2000). Involving local community members in homestay management has diversified their income sources, reducing their reliance on seemingly fragile livelihoods and low-paying jobs and alternatively providing them with relatively more lucrative job opportunities in homestay tourism. Diversifying income-generating activities boosts economic resilience, food security, and innovative and adaptive behavior in rural communities, making them stronger and more sustainable (Scoones, 1998). Homestays are also emerging as a financial

anchor for women and poorer households. Homestays help women become financially self-reliant, support their families, break down gender barriers, and engage in income-generating activities. The results are consistent with the studies conducted by Kannegieser (2015) and Acharya and Halpenny (2013), which suggest that homestays contribute to women's empowerment by providing financial autonomy, challenging traditional gender roles, increasing social upliftment, and serving as a catalyst for socio-economic improvements in their communities.

The growing number of tourists visiting the Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary has also opened up new career opportunities and pathways for local youth, particularly as nature guides and birding experts. Consequently, homestays aid in retaining the local populace and help prevent rural migration by offering attractive alternative income prospects locally (Bhalla et al., 2016). Furthermore, homestays in Sittong, unlike formal sector tourism enterprises that utilize external labor and goods, resulting in economic leakage, rely on local goods and services, establishing and strengthening economic links within the community (Ashley et al., 2000; Roe and Urquhart, 2001). The local labor force and farmers have benefited from the apparent multiplier effect of homestays, which has created and increased the demand for their services and products, and stimulated economic growth through local ownership of businesses. Homestays have also provided financial benefits to other locals who have opened shops, restaurants, and small businesses to capitalize on Sittong's growing tourism industry. The findings correspond with the research conducted by Acharya and Halpenny (2013) and Kannegieser (2015), which asserted that homestays effectively address the problem of economic leakage by offering opportunities for local community members to earn and distribute income. The PPT framework is further reinforced by all of these dynamics, which underscore the importance of tourism initiatives in generating broad economic benefits rather than concentrating wealth among a select few (Ashley et al., 2000).

Although homestay tourism in Sittong has greatly benefited owners and local communities, it faces several challenges that threaten its sustainability. First, the apparent high cost of construction, renovation, and maintenance of homestays and a lack of supportive financial assistance discourage prospective households from investing and participating in homestay tourism (Sood et al., 2017). Second, the homestay operators face institutional barriers that limit local community participation in tourism development (Kala and Bagri, 2018). The seemingly cumbersome homestay registration process has compelled many households to forgo government financial assistance aimed at promoting rural and homestay tourism among local communities. Instead, they choose to run their homestays independently, without government support or supervision. Those who opt for government incentives may have to navigate bureaucratic hurdles that may prevent or hinder tourism growth by creating barriers for stakeholders (Roy and Saxena, 2020). Joshi and Bahuguna (2023) observed similar challenges in Uttarakhand, India, where homestay owners faced limited financial access, difficulties accessing program benefits, complex documentation requirements, insufficient incentive programs, infrastructure constraints, and so on. Furthermore, developing homestay tourism policies without the involvement of local stakeholders, such as homestay

operators, fails to represent local communities' needs, interests, and constraints, discouraging them from participating in tourism development. These findings correspond with the observations of Sood et al. (2017), Kala and Bagri (2018), Roy and Saxena (2020), and Reindrawati (2023), who noted that the seemingly top-down approach creates operational, structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that may impede community participation, resulting in financial losses, inefficient resource management, exclusion from decision-making processes, and challenges in managing tourism facilities and infrastructures. This necessitates recognizing and encouraging active community participation in tourism decision-making processes through a bottom-up approach that prioritizes community empowerment (Fraser et al., 2006).

Third, the growing competition from non-local businesses and wealthy local elites threatens the economic sustainability of local homestays. Since non-local investors are motivated solely by commercial interests, they prioritize profit accumulation over equitable benefit distribution, engage in exploitative practices, exploit resources without fair compensation, and culturally displace local inhabitants, resulting in the erosion of local traditions and culture (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). The acquisition of homestays by non-local businesses has a negative impact on local communities' lifestyles, demographics, and livelihoods. Similarly, the transfer of homestay ownership to non-local businesses harms Sittong's economy because they procure supplies and services from outside sources, resulting in economic leakages. The findings are consistent with the study of Bwalya-Umar and Mubanga (2018), who found that economic leakage was caused by the dominance of tourism activities by external businesses and wealthy elites, which hindered local economic growth. Consequently, the benefits of rural and homestay tourism may not reach their intended audience. Furthermore, non-local investors prioritize commercially feasible alternatives, potentially jeopardizing the economic viability of local homestays. These concerns are echoed in previous research (Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008; Praptiwi et al., 2021), which demonstrates the unequal distribution of economic benefits from tourism, as well as the fact that larger businesses, including local elites, in the hospitality industry benefit more than local households or marginalized groups. The assumption of homestay ownership by non-local commercial businesses goes against the core tenets of PPT, which seeks to enhance economic benefits for marginalized communities by increasing business opportunities, creating employment prospects, and generating collective benefits (Roe and Urquhart, 2004).

The relationship between homestay tourism and environmental sustainability in Sittong reveals two contradictory patterns, presenting both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, homestays can encourage environmental awareness and promote sustainable practices among local communities and tourists, as noted by Karki et al. (2019) and Roy (2022), who found that community-based tourism, such as homestays, can promote biodiversity conservation and resource management. Unregulated homestay expansion and lack of waste management, among others, on the other, has resulted in land degradation, habitat destruction, and pollution, posing a threat to local ecosystems, as indicated by Shukor et al. (2014), Bhutia et al. (2022), Jasrotia and Kour (2022), and Dutta and Mukhopadhyay (2024) who emphasize the need

for effective management strategies and sustainable practices to mitigate these negative impacts.

In conclusion, the study found that homestay tourism significantly contributes to PPT by creating livelihood and other economic opportunities for rural mountain communities, including women and the poor. The research provides empirical evidence to substantiate the claim that local engagement and equitable benefit-sharing are critical for poverty alleviation through tourism, thereby supporting existing frameworks on PPT (Scheyvens, 2002). The study also challenges the oversimplified narrative in tourism literature that suggests tourism always empowers the marginalized by emphasizing the need to analyze how economic benefits are shared or distributed across different socio-economic groups (Ashley et al., 2001; Lepp, 2007). Besides, the research stresses the potential environmental impacts of homestay growth and the need for sustainable practices that balance economic viability with social equity and environmental sustainability, in line with calls for a more holistic approach to sustainable development (Basiago, 1999).

6 Conclusion

Homestay tourism in Sittong exhibits an immense potential to stimulate and achieve the goals of Pro-poor tourism (PPT). A predominantly agricultural economy, communities in Sittong lack land ownership rights, practice subsistence farming, and earn meager wages by working in agriculture, cinchona plantations, or as daily laborers. Homestays, in such circumstances, offer local communities to explore alternative livelihoods. This study demonstrates that homestays provide income, financial security, job opportunities, and economic growth to local communities, including marginalized groups such as women and low-income households. The findings suggest that homestays help achieve SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The research also recognizes the possibility of marginalization and unequal benefit distribution due to increasing non-local homestay ownership and government policies. Besides, the study found a manifest discrepancy between environmental sustainability and homestays, largely on account of their widespread growth and unsustainable practices. If the homestays are to continue to contribute to PPT, the tourism development strategy in Darjeeling Himalaya should support and empower local communities, enhance their capabilities, and promote intersectoral linkages between tourism and other sectors. This task could be accomplished within the framework Basiago (1999) proposed, which aims to balance economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability. First, prioritizing community participation in tourism decision-making processes is a prerequisite for sustainable tourism. Such engagement facilitates government-citizen communication, raises awareness of sustainable practices, and empowers citizens to voice their concerns. Second, homestay tourism needs financial aid and community capacity-building. All such initiatives should identify local communities' needs and constraints to improve their capability and skills, including financial assistance, with a focus on marginalized groups like the poor and women. The government must explore ways to recognize the rights of

the cinchona land inhabitants and grant them greater freedom to practice homestay tourism. Third, tourism must be linked to other sectors, particularly infrastructure development and waste management. This will also help to promote a tourism framework that encourages collaboration among government agencies, private sector players, and local communities, as well as responsible tourism by prioritizing environmental conservation and the protection of local ecosystems to ensure the sustainability of homestay initiatives. Future research could investigate the interrelationships between politics and tourism in Darjeeling, focusing on the extent of economic leakages and strategies for addressing them and promoting a PPT regime.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research and Ethics Committee, Sarojini Naidu College for Women, Kolkata, India. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants and the integrity of the research.

Author contributions

SP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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