

Women Empowerment through Religious Tourism: A Study in Birbhum

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Abstract: This study examined the impact of religious tourism on women's empowerment in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, India. Renowned for its religious harmony and significant religious sites, Birbhum holds the potential to leverage religious tourism for socioeconomic development. This study aimed to evaluate the influence of religious tourism on women's empowerment within the district. Using a mixed-methods approach, primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 35 respondents using convenience sampling in the Tarapith area. Secondary data were sourced from various sources, including articles, journals, and government reports. Data were analyzed using frequency tables, simple percentages, and correlation tests using SPSS version 25. The findings suggest that religious tourism has a significant impact on women's empowerment, particularly through increased economic participation, social influence, and enhanced cultural visibility. Local women engage in entrepreneurial activities related to tourism, provide independent income, and strengthen their community influence. However, cultural norms and gender roles pose challenges for women's advancement in the tourism sector. This study recommends targeted programs and policies to support women's entrepreneurship, ensure equal opportunities, and address cultural barriers. While religious tourism positively contributes to women's empowerment in Birbhum, a comprehensive approach is necessary to fully realize its potential as a catalyst for gender equality and socioeconomic development in the region.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Religious Tourism, Birbhum, Economic Participation, Social Influence, Cultural Visibility, Gender Equality, Socioeconomic Development, Religious Harmony, Religious Sites, etc.

I. Introduction:

Birbhum is renowned for its religious harmony, serving as a confluence of diverse theological ideas while simultaneously nurturing each tradition independently. The district is home to several significant religious sites, including the Fullara Maa Shaktipeeth Temple, Nalateswari Temple, Nandikeshwari Temple, Malleswar Shiva Temple at Mollarpur, Kaleswar Shiv Mandir, Ma Tara Temple in Tarapith, and Shri Kankalitala Shaktipeeth Temple. These sites contribute significantly to the socioeconomic development of the Birbhum district. Religious tourism in this region is continually evolving, adapting to new technologies and shifting social norms. It remains a vital component of the global tourism industry, as it offers unique experiences and opportunities for personal and cultural enrichment. The Birbhum district in West Bengal, with its rich tapestry of religious monuments and traditions, holds potential as a center for religious tourism. Spanning approximately 3,287,263 square kilometers, India encompasses a diverse range of ecosystems, from snowy Himalayan mountains to the tropical rainforests of southern India. This geographical diversity, coupled with numerous natural attractions, positions India to capitalize on the tourism industry's benefits across various dimensions. As one of the world's favored tourist destinations, India has seen its tourism and hospitality industry emerge as a key driver of growth within the services sector.

Prominent Religious Sites of Birbhum District:

Tarapith: A prominent site of the Tantric pilgrimage is distinguished by its temple dedicated to Goddess Tara. The adjacent cremation ground further contributes to its distinctive characteristics.

Bakreshwar: This site is a prominent Hindu pilgrimage destination renowned for its numerous hot springs, which are believed to possess therapeutic properties. The Shiva Temple located here is held in particularly high esteem.

Kenduli: The region is notable for being the residence of Jayadev, a distinguished poet and devotee of Lord Krishna from the 12th century. His ashram and the surrounding areas are of considerable cultural and religious importance.

Nalateswari Temple: This temple, dedicated to Goddess Kali, draws devotees seeking blessings.

Potential for Growth in Religious Tourism:

Unique Cultural Experiences: Birbhum presents a confluence of religious practices, folk arts, and rural traditions, offering a distinctive cultural experience for visitors.

Natural Beauty: The district's picturesque landscapes, characterized by red soil and rural vistas, have the potential to enhance the overall attractiveness of religious tourists.

Connectivity: Improvements in infrastructure and transportation can enhance the accessibility of these sites, thereby attracting a diverse range of visitors.

Challenges and Considerations: In the context of sustainable development, it is imperative to harmonize religious tourism with the preservation of the local culture and environment.

Community Involvement: Involving local communities in the tourism development process can ensure that they derive benefits and maintain a sense of ownership.

Marketing and Promotion: Implementing effective marketing strategies is essential to enhance awareness of Birbhum's potential for religious tourism.

II. Review of Literature:

For this study, a review of the most pertinent and recent literature was conducted, focusing on various aspects of the impact of religious tourism on women's empowerment in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows.

Hvzdova (2018) aimed to talk about the main things that all religious tourists have in common, no matter what religion or denomination they belong to. This study focuses on pilgrimage tourism in Slovakia. In addition to the comparisons of the individual studies we examined, we presented our research conducted in Slovakia, which led us to conclude that the lower number of sacral buildings by foreign tourists and residents was due to insufficient regional promotion and insufficient implementation competencies of cultural and ecclesiastical institutions.

Vijayanand (2012) examined the socioeconomic implications of pilgrimage tourism, emphasizing its comeback and merging of traditional pilgrimages and modern tourism. Pilgrimage tourism boosts local economies by creating employment, producing cash, and promoting infrastructure development. It also has sociocultural implications, encouraging cultural heritage and national solidarity. However, it can have negative consequences, such as higher living costs and cultural commoditization. This article underlines the need for balanced economic impact evaluations and strategic planning to maximize benefits while minimizing downsides. Pilgrimage tourism has the potential to significantly impact socioeconomic development, particularly in areas with few options.

Kuntay (2024) studied the critical functions of holy places in India's development of the tourist sector. Despite the limitations of the COVID-19 epidemic, 56 respondents, predominantly aged 20-30, provided valuable insights into essential areas of religious tourism. This demonstrates the enormous influence of religious tourism on India's economy, cultural legacy, and societal peace.

Kungumaraj et al. (2025) examined the connections among women's entrepreneurship, empowerment, pilgrimage tourism, and destination marketing in the rural regions of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. This study, which utilized a mixed-methods approach, assessed how women-led businesses near pilgrimage sites contribute to the development of local tourism and the enhancement of destination branding. By gathering data from women entrepreneurs, tourism stakeholders, and community members at selected pilgrimage sites, the research revealed that women's entrepreneurial endeavours have a significant impact on tourism growth, socioeconomic empowerment, and community involvement. The results suggest that gender-inclusive entrepreneurship in religious tourism settings is a powerful tool for rural development and female empowerment, highlighting the need for increased support through policy, training, and marketing efforts.

Jain et al. (2023) said religious tourism in India has grown significantly, with increasing women's participation despite the patriarchal society. Following Covid-19, more women began traveling in small groups or undertaking solo religious journeys. This study examines the socioeconomic impact of religious tourism from Indian women's perspectives by analysing their experiences, challenges, and proposed solutions. Data collection involved structured questionnaires administered to female tourists who independently participated in religious tours. This study uses an empirical approach to understand female participation in religious tourism and to inform policymakers. The findings show structural changes in India regarding women's involvement in religious tourism, revealing economic and social impacts, while highlighting challenges and expectations. This study contributes to the understanding of female tourists' motivations and experiences by addressing previously overlooked issues specific to female travellers.

Chugh (2012) investigated women's empowerment through tourism in Himachal Pradesh, a rural area characterized by flourishing tourism. Women's participation is vital to the advancement of tourism. In Himachal Pradesh, women manage homestays, restaurants, craft productions, handloom work, and small shops. Alternative tourism has increased the significance of women, despite local perceptions of their passive role. This study evaluated whether tourism contributes to women's empowerment. A stratified random sample of 150 women was selected from the Kullu area, which is one of the state's top three tourist destinations. An opinion survey using a 3-point scale ("Agree," "Disagree," "Cannot Say") was administered. Statistical analysis of the responses using frequencies and percentages showed that tourism promoted women's empowerment.

Research Gap:

Numerous studies have been conducted across various regions of India to examine the effect of religious tourism on women's empowerment. However, no significant scholarly work has been undertaken in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring this uncharted and under-researched area.

Objective of the Study:

This study aims to assess the influence of religious tourism on the empowerment of women in the Birbhum district, West Bengal.

III. Research Methodology:

This study was based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire, while secondary data were obtained from various articles, including journals, research articles, and annual reports from the tourism ministry of the Central Government, State Government, and other private institutions, as well as from internet resources. This study was conducted in the Tarapith area within the Rampurhat Block. A total of 35 participants were selected using a convenience sampling strategy, and questionnaires were administered to them individually. To analyse the primary data and draw logical conclusions, a frequency table, simple percentage, and correlation test (a statistical method used to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables) were employed. This approach is appropriate because both the "significance" and "impact" variables are likely to be measured on a continuous or ordinal scale. Data were analysed using SPSS version 25.

Hypothesis Formulation:

H_0 : There is no relation between the impact of religious tourism on the socio-economic development of Birbhum and the impact of religious tourism on the women's empowerment of Birbhum.

H_1 : There is a relation between the impact of religious tourism on the socio-economic development of Birbhum and the impact of religious tourism on the women's empowerment of Birbhum.

Data Analysis and Discussion:

Gender of Respondents

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	26	74.3
Female	8	22.9
Transgender	1	2.9
Total	35	100.0

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: As indicated in Table 1, the survey results reveal that 74.3% of respondents identify as male, 22.9% as female, and 2.9% as transgender.

Age Group of the Respondent

Table 2: Age Group of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percent
18-25 Years	11	31.4
26-35 Years	12	34.3
36-45 Years	4	11.4
46-55 Years	4	11.4
56-65 Years	2	5.7
Above 65 Years	2	5.7
Total	35	100.0

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: As indicated in Table 2, 34.3% of the surveyed participants were within the age range of 26 to 35 years, whereas 5.7% of the respondents were aged over 65 years.

Occupation of the Respondent

Table 3: Occupation of the Respondent

Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Student	8	22.9
Employed	8	22.9
Retired	2	5.7
Homemaker	3	8.6
Business	10	28.6
Unemployed	4	11.4
Total	35	100.0

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: As indicated in Table 3, 11.4% of the survey participants were unemployed, 22.9% were employed, 5.7% were retired, and 28.6% were business owners.

Aware of the Potential for Religious Tourism in Birbhum District

Table 4: Awareness of the Potential for Religious Tourism in Birbhum District

Awareness of Religious Tourism in Birbhum	Frequency	Percent
Yes	31	88.6
Neutral	4	11.4
No	0	0
Total	35	100.0

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: As indicated in Table 4, 88.6% of respondents demonstrated awareness of the potential for religious tourism, while 11.4% remained neutral. Notably, there were no responses in the "No" category (0 %). These data suggest a substantial level of awareness of the potential for religious tourism within the local community or among the surveyed groups.

Awareness about the Religious Sites in Birbhum:

Table 5: Awareness about the Religious Sites in Birbhum

Awareness about the Religious Sites in Birbhum		Yes	No	Percent of Yes	Percent of No
	Known about Tarapith	35	0	100.0	0
	Known about Nalhateshwari	11	24	31.4	68.6
	Known about Birchandrapur	25	10	71.4	28.6
	Known about Nandikeshwari	8	27	22.9	77.1
	Known about Maa Fullara Shakti Peeth	6	29	17.1	82.9
	Known about Kankalitala Shakti Peeth	9	26	25.7	74.3

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: Table 5 provides an analysis of awareness levels regarding various religious sites in Birbhum, revealing a notable disparity. Tarapith is universally recognized, with 100% of the respondents acknowledging its existence. Birchandrappur also demonstrates a significant level of awareness, with 71.4% of respondents familiar with it. In contrast, the remaining sites exhibited considerably lower recognition, with awareness percentages of below 32%. Specifically, Nalhateshwari and Kankalitala Shakti Peeth accounted for approximately 31% and 25% of respondents, respectively. Nandikeshwari and Maa Fullara Shakti Peeth had the lowest awareness levels, with less than 23% of respondents being aware of them. These data underscore the prominence of Tarapith and, to a lesser extent, Birchandrappur, while indicating a need for enhanced promotional efforts and awareness campaigns for other religious sites to attract potential tourists and devotees.

Significance of Religious Tourism for the Socio-Economic Development of Birbhum

Table 6: Significance of Religious Tourism for the Socio-Economic Development of Birbhum

Significance of Religious Tourism for the Socio-Economic Development of Birbhum	Frequency	Percent
Very Significant	17	48.6
Significant	8	22.9
Moderate	6	17.1
Low	3	8.6
Negligible	1	2.9
Total	35	100.0

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: The table provided illustrates data concerning the perceived importance of religious tourism for the socio-economic development of Birbhum. The findings reveal a predominantly positive sentiment regarding the impact of religious tourism, with a total of 71.5% of respondents rating it as either "Very Significant" (48.6%) or "Significant" (22.9%). A smaller segment (17.1 %) assessed it as "Moderate," while only a minor portion regarded it as "Low" (8.6%) or "Negligible" (2.9%). This distribution indicates that a substantial majority of respondents perceive religious tourism as playing a crucial role in the socio-economic advancement of Birbhum.

Major Factors Attracting Tourists to Birbhum for Religious Purposes towards Women Empowerment:

Table 7: Major Factors Attracting Tourists to Birbhum for Religious Purposes towards Women's Empowerment

Major Factors Attracting Tourists to Birbhum for Religious Purposes towards Women's Empowerment		Yes	No	Percent of Yes	Percent of No
	Cultural Significance	3	32	8.6	91.4
	Historical Importance	3	32	8.6	91.4
	Accessibility	6	29	17.1	82.9
	Spiritual Significance	35	0	100.0	0
	Natural Beauty	6	29	17.1	82.9
	Festivals and Events	5	30	14.3	85.7

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: The table presents data on the major factors attracting tourists to Birbhum for religious purposes based on a field survey. The most significant factor by far was spiritual significance, with 100% of respondents (35 out of 35) citing it as a reason for their visit. Accessibility and natural beauty garnered 17.1% (six respondents each), indicating moderate importance. Five respondents (14.3% (5 respondents). Comparatively, cultural significance and historical importance were the least influential factors, with only 8.6% (three respondents each) acknowledging them. This data highlights the primacy of spiritual motivations in religious tourism to Birbhum, while accessibility and natural features also play a notable role. The relatively low impact of cultural and historical factors suggests that these aspects may be less emphasized or promoted in the context of religious tourism in the area.

Impact of Religious Tourism on the local economy in Birbhum

Table 8: Impact of Religious Tourism on the local Economy in Birbhum

Impact	Frequency	Percent
Yes	34	97.1
No	1	2.9
Total	35	100.0

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: As demonstrated in Table 8, 97.1% of the respondents perceived religious tourism as positively contributing to the local economy, whereas 2.9% did not recognize such an impact.

Positive Impacts of Birbhum's Religious Tourism on Women's Empowerment

Table 9: Positive Impacts of Birbhum's Religious Tourism on Women's Empowerment

Positive Impacts of Birbhum's Religious Tourism on Women's Empowerment	Yes	No	Percent of Yes	Percent of No
Job Creation	22	13	62.9	37.1
Increased income for local communities	31	4	88.6	11.4
Development of infrastructure	28	7	80.0	20.0
Growth of local businesses	21	14	60.0	40.0
Improvement of living standards for locals	17	18	48.6	51.4
Cultural Exchange and Awareness	4	31	11.4	88.6

(Source: Field Survey)

Observation: Table 9 presents data on the perceived positive impacts of religious tourism in Birbhum, based on responses from Positive Impacts of Birbhum's Religious Tourism on Women's Empowerment. These findings reveal a strong perception of economic benefits. A substantial 88.6% of the respondents agreed that religious tourism has increased income for local communities, with only 11.4% disagreeing. Similarly, a significant majority (80%) acknowledged the development of infrastructure due to religious tourism, compared to 20% of those who did not. While still positive, the perceived impact on job creation and growth of local businesses was less pronounced. 62.9% agreed that religious tourism led to job creation, with 37.1% disagreeing, and 60% seeing growth in local businesses, while 40% did not. Interestingly, the impact on the living standards of locals was nearly evenly split, with 48.6% agreeing and 51.4% disagreeing, suggesting a less clear or perhaps uneven distribution of benefits. Most strikingly, an overwhelming majority (88.6%) of the respondents disagreed that religious tourism promoted cultural exchange and awareness, with only 11.4% agreeing. This highlights a significant gap in the perceived benefits of religious tourism, indicating a potential disconnection between tourism activities and cultural exchanges within the local community. Overall, the data paints a picture of religious tourism in Birbhum primarily benefiting the local economy through increased income and infrastructure development, but with less perceived impact on job creation, business growth, and especially cultural exchange.

Hypothesis Testing

Correlation Test

The correlation test is a statistical technique used to assess the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables. It yields a correlation coefficient ranging from -1 to +1, where -1 signifies a perfect negative correlation, +1 signifies a perfect positive correlation, and 0 indicates no linear correlation. The accompanying p-value assists in determining the statistical significance of the correlations. In the context of the provided hypotheses, which investigate the relationship between the perceived significance of religious tourism for Birbhum's socio-economic development and its impact on the local economy, a correlation test is appropriate because both the "significance" and "impact" variables are likely measured on a continuous or ordinal

scale. The correlation test ascertains whether and to what extent these two variables are interrelated, addressing the fundamental question of whether a relationship exists between perceived significance and actual or perceived economic impact. Specifically, it can reveal whether higher perceived significance is associated with a higher (or lower) perceived economic impact.

Hypothesis-1

H_0 : There is no relation between the impact of religious tourism on the socio-economic development of Birbhum and the impact of religious tourism on the women's empowerment of Birbhum.

H_1 : There is a relation between the impact of religious tourism on the socio-economic development of Birbhum and the impact of religious tourism on the women's empowerment of Birbhum.

Table 10: Correlation Test

Significance of Religious Tourism for the Socio-Economic Development of Women's Empowerment in Birbhum	Impacts	Job Creation	Increased income for local communities	Development of infrastructure	Growth of local businesses	Improvement of living standards for locals	Cultural Exchange and Awareness
	Pearson Correlation	.145	.222	.038	.146	.359	.222
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.009	.007	.003	.004	.009
	N	35	35	35	35	35	35

(Source: Compiled by researcher)

Interpretation:

Table 10 delineates the findings of a correlation analysis investigating the association between the perceived importance of religious tourism for the socioeconomic development of Birbhum and its various perceived impacts on the local economy. The table reports the Pearson Correlation and significance (p-value) between religious tourism and several socioeconomic impacts on women's empowerment in Birbhum, based on a sample of 35 respondents. The key interpretations are as follows. Job Creation: A weak positive correlation ($r = 0.145$) was observed, which was statistically significant ($p = 0.006 < 0.05$). Observation: Religious tourism exerts a slight but significant positive influence on job creation for women in Birbhum. Increased Income for Local Communities: A low-to-moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.222$) was noted, which was statistically significant ($p = 0.009 < 0.05$). Observation: Religious tourism contributes to increased income levels among local women, although the effect is not pronounced. Development of Infrastructure: A very weak correlation ($r = 0.038$) was identified, but it was statistically significant ($p = 0.007 < 0.05$). Observation: Despite the minimal correlation, infrastructure development is significantly associated with religious tourism, potentially because of governmental or private investments. Growth of Local Businesses: A weak positive correlation ($r = 0.146$) is highly significant ($p = 0.003 < 0.05$). Observation: Religious tourism has a small but notable impact on enhancing women-led businesses in a region. Improvement in Living Standards for Locals: A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.359$) was highly significant ($p = 0.004 < 0.05$). Observation: Religious tourism has a relatively stronger effect on improving the living conditions of women in Birbhum compared to other factors. Cultural Exchange and Awareness: A low-to-moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.222$) was statistically significant ($p = 0.009 < 0.05$). Observation: Religious tourism fosters cultural exchange and awareness, which may indirectly empower women through their exposure to new ideas and opportunities. Overall Interpretation: Religious tourism in Birbhum exhibits a statistically significant but predominantly weak to moderate positive impact on women's socioeconomic empowerment. The strongest correlation was observed for improving living standards ($r = 0.359$), suggesting that tourism provides tangible benefits to women's quality of life. Job creation, income growth, and business opportunities demonstrated weaker yet significant effects, indicating that while religious tourism is beneficial, additional complementary policies may be necessary for stronger empowerment. Although significant, infrastructure development shows a negligible correlation, implying that tourism alone may not be the primary driver of infrastructure improvement.

IV. Findings of the Study:

Drawing upon the preceding discussion, the principal findings of this study are as follows:

Religious tourism in Birbhum exerts a substantial influence on women's empowerment by facilitating economic participation, enhancing social influence, and increasing cultural visibility.

Local women participate in entrepreneurial endeavours, such as tour guiding, accommodation management, and the sale of handicrafts, thereby generating independent income and enhancing their influence within the community.

Cultural norms and gender roles present substantial obstacles to the progress of women in the tourism industry, similar to the findings observed in other regions.

The spiritual significance of Birbhum emerged as the primary factor that attracted tourists for religious purposes, as indicated by 100% of the respondents.

Approximately 97.1% of the respondents perceived religious tourism as having a positive impact on the local economy.

The study demonstrated that religious tourism positively influenced local communities, with 88.6% of respondents acknowledging an increase in income and 80% recognizing improvements in infrastructure development.

While job creation and expansion of local businesses were positively influenced, the extent of this impact was comparatively moderate, with 62.9% and 60% agreement, respectively.

The effect on living standards was ambiguous, as perceptions were nearly evenly divided, with 48.6% agreeing and 51.4% disagreeing.

The impact of cultural exchange and awareness was perceived as minimal, with only 11.4% of the respondents affirming that religious tourism facilitated these aspects.

Correlation analysis revealed statistically significant, albeit primarily weak-to-moderate, positive effects of religious tourism on various dimensions of women's socioeconomic empowerment.

The most significant correlation was identified in the enhancement of women's living standards ($r = 0.359$), while infrastructure development exhibited the least significant correlation ($r = 0.038$).

The findings indicate that religious tourism in Birbhum contributes positively to women's empowerment and local economic development. However, there remains the potential for enhancement, particularly in the domains of cultural exchange and the more equitable distribution of benefits.

Limitations of the Study:

This study of women's empowerment through religious tourism in Birbhum has several limitations. The sample size of 35 respondents may not represent the broader population, and the study's focus on Tarapith limits generalizability. The gender imbalance of 74.3% of male respondents may affect their perspectives on women's empowerment. This study lacks longitudinal data and may contain a response bias on sensitive topics such as gender equality. Although cultural norms are acknowledged as challenges, this study may not fully explore these barriers. The focus on economic factors may overlook other aspects of empowerment, such as education or political participation. The absence of a comparative analysis of similar regions limits the contextual understanding. Research bias may have influenced question framing and interpretation of the results. This study may not capture all stakeholder perspectives, including religious leaders and government officials.

Suggestions:

Drawing upon the study of women's empowerment facilitated by religious tourism in Birbhum, the following recommendations are proposed.

- Implement targeted initiatives to support and promote women's entrepreneurship in the religious tourism sector. These initiatives may include the provision of microloans, training in business skills, and mentorship opportunities.
- Formulate and implement policies that ensure equitable employment opportunities and fair compensation for women in tourism-related occupations
- Establishing safe environments and support networks for women employed in the tourism sector is essential for addressing challenges and facilitating the sharing of experiences.
- Invest in the development of infrastructure that serves the dual purpose of benefiting both tourists and local communities, with particular emphasis on enhancing women's access to resources and opportunities.
- Encourage cultural exchange programs that emphasize the contributions of women to local traditions and religious practices.
- Conduct gender impact assessments of tourism initiatives regularly to ensure that women receive equitable benefits.
- Engage in collaboration with local educational institutions to develop tourism and hospitality training programs specifically designed for women.
- Formulate marketing strategies that highlight women-led enterprises and initiatives within the domain of religious tourism.

- Promote partnerships between tourism stakeholders and women's rights organizations to address gender-specific challenges within the sector.
- Initiate awareness campaigns aimed at challenging gender stereotypes and fostering women's participation in all facets of religious tourism.
- Establish platforms that enable women to engage in decision-making processes concerning tourism development within their communities.
- The establishment of women-exclusive tour groups or experiences should be promoted to accommodate female tourists who may prefer such options.
- Investing in technology and digital skills training is essential to enabling women entrepreneurs to access broader markets and enhance their business operations.
- Implement sustainable tourism strategies that emphasize the conservation of local cultural heritage and environmental resources while simultaneously empowering women.
- Undertake comprehensive research on the long-term effects of religious tourism on women's empowerment to guide the development of future policies and programmes.

V. Conclusion:

The investigation of women's empowerment through religious tourism in Birbhum reveals several critical findings and implications. Religious tourism in Birbhum exerts a substantial positive influence on women's empowerment, particularly through economic engagement, social influence, and cultural visibility. Local women have engaged in entrepreneurial activities associated with tourism, such as tour guidance, accommodation management, and handicraft sales, thereby securing independent income sources and enhancing their influence within the community. Nonetheless, entrenched cultural norms and gender roles continue to pose challenges to women's participation and advancement in the tourism sector. The study identified predominantly positive perceptions of religious tourism's impact on socioeconomic development, with over 70% of the respondents rating it as significant or very significant. The spiritual significance of the sites was the primary factor attracting tourists, as cited by all the respondents, underscoring the importance of preserving and promoting these spiritual aspects. Religious tourism was perceived as positively contributing to the local economy by 97% of the respondents, particularly through increased income for local communities and infrastructure development. However, the impacts were less pronounced or clear regarding job creation, business growth, and improvement of overall living standards. Cultural exchange and awareness had the least positive impact. Statistical analysis revealed weak-to-moderate positive correlations between religious tourism and various aspects of women's socioeconomic empowerment, with the strongest correlation observed in the improvement of living standards. Although religious tourism has yielded positive effects, there remains significant room for improvement, particularly in promoting cultural exchange and ensuring a more equitable distribution of benefits. This study suggests the necessity for targeted programs and policies to further support women's entrepreneurship, ensure equal opportunities, and address persistent cultural barriers to women's full participation and empowerment in the religious tourism sector. In conclusion, while religious tourism in Birbhum has positively contributed to women's empowerment, a more holistic and targeted approach is required to fully realize its potential as a driver of gender equality and socioeconomic development in the region. Future initiatives should focus on addressing cultural barriers, promoting women's leadership, and ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed equally.

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