

**Review Article 03**

## **Who Benefits from Indigenous Tourism? A Critical Review on Intersectionality, Intra Community Dynamics and Poverty Implications in Sri Lanka**

**A.C.I.D. Karunaratne<sup>1,2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Tourism Studies, Faculty of Management, Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka*

<sup>2</sup>*Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka*  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7387-3350>

### **Abstract**

Indigenous tourism is globally endorsed as a catalyst for poverty alleviation, cultural revitalization, and inclusive rural development. It is also recognized as a powerful source for positive synergy that offers a comprehensive model for meaningful and sustainable development. However, the issue of uneven distribution of tourism benefits has become a central issue in the literature. Hence, this paper critically reviews who benefits from Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka by analyzing intra-community dynamics through an intersectional lens and assessing the implications for poverty reduction. The critical narrative review was adopted in the study and academic books, peer-reviewed journal papers, and institutional reports published in international scientific venues, with a focus on the indigenous community and particularly the Vedda community, which were reviewed, drawing on intersectionality theory, empowerment theory, and Indigenous tourism scholarship. Sources were first read to identify key arguments, conceptual frameworks, and empirical findings related to Indigenous tourism, poverty, empowerment, and community dynamics. These insights were then grouped into thematic categories, including gender, generational dynamics, socio-economic stratification, geographic inequality, governance, and benefit distribution. The analysis shows that selective rather than inclusive benefits are produced by indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka. Moreover, intersectional factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, location and internal power dynamics strongly mediate who benefits, who holds the leadership, who participate and who accesses tourism activities. Women, the elderly, households with lower incomes, and geographically remote communities often continue to be marginalized, even though some households and individuals benefit from increased visibility and income. As a result, while tourism may benefit some, it may also exacerbate multidimensional poverty in others. This paper contributes to the Indigenous tourism scholarship by clearly connecting poverty outcomes and intersectional intra-community dynamics in the Sri Lankan context, focusing on the Vedda community. It goes beyond stereotyped depictions of Indigenous communities and offers a critical viewpoint pertinent to discussions about tourism, development, and policy in the Global South.

**Keywords:** Indigenous tourism, intersectionality, intra-community dynamics, poverty, Vedda, Sri Lanka

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Corresponding Author: A.C.I.D. Karunaratne – [chandi@uwu.ac.lk](mailto:chandi@uwu.ac.lk)

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## **Introduction**

Indigenous tourism is acknowledged as an emerging niche tourism segment in many countries in the world (Butler and Hinch, 2007; Ruhanen and Whitford, 2019) that offers unique cultural experiences for the visitors. It also empowers indigenous communities marginalized historically and economically offering sustainable livelihood opportunities, and contributes cultural preservation. Their distinct traditional knowledge and cultural values are promoted by national governments and international development organisations as a development intervention that can strengthen cultural identities, diversify livelihoods, and generate revenue, particularly in rural and remote communities.

Despite its growing popularity, the access for tourism benefits is not even for all the community members. As argued by critical tourism scholars, benefits of tourism are influenced by social structures, governance arrangements, and power dynamics within communities (Scheyvens, 1999; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Even though the communities are frequently viewed as homogeneous entities in tourism planning and administration, scholars have revealed complicated internal disparities within the community based on social status, gender, age, class, and location (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Thus, the participation of community members in tourism activities may controlled by such intra community disparities that regulate who engages in tourism, who makes decisions, and who ultimately gains the benefits from resources produced by tourism.

In this global setting, Vedda community, the Indigenous population in Sri Lanka with a long history, is an illuminating example of how tourism syndicates with bigger sociopolitical and historical trends. According to Sumanapala and Wolf (2023) these community groups are currently residing in several rural villages across the Uva, Eastern, North-Central, and Northern provinces exhibiting a notable ethnic diversity. As many other countries, they constitute highly vulnerable and poorest in the society and many of them are with very less literacy level. Some of the indigenous community members have become increasingly visible in tourism narratives through cultural performances, heritage museums, guided forest experiences, and craft sales within last few decades (Blundell, 2012; De Silva, 2011). These tourism development activities have also significantly contributed in poverty alleviation and cultural preservation of indigenous community. However, empirical and anthropological researches indicate that the benefits of tourism are not uniformly dispersed among and within Vedda villages and it has led further issues within the community (Blundell, 2012; Amilathissa and Ranasinghe, 2019). This reveals a concealed reality of indigenous tourism development that the tourism does not affect all Indigenous people in the same way and that benefits are often unevenly shared. By focusing on everyday experiences and differences within communities, it challenges the idea that Indigenous tourism is always empowering. Instead, it highlights the need for development approaches that are more sensitive to local contexts and more focused on fairness and inclusion.

Thus, this review uses an intersectional lens to understand the actual depiction of Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka, examining how tourism can simultaneously create opportunities and deepen existing inequalities, depending on who controls resources, whose voices are heard, and how benefits are distributed. This contributes to strengthen the indigenous tourism literature with a broader conversation on Indigenous tourism development, and inequality in the Global South connected with the case of Sri Lankan

## **Research Methodology**

This review primarily attempted to understand whether tourism development initiatives contribute to equitable benefit sharing within Indigenous communities, and how intersectional intra-community dynamics shape participation and access to benefits among different groups within the same community focusing on the Sri Lankan Vedda indigenous community. For this purpose, critical narrative review method was adopted to synthesize literature on Indigenous tourism, intra-community dynamics, and poverty outcomes in Sri Lanka. Narrative reviews are particularly suitable for exploring complex, multidimensional phenomena, integrating insights from empirical studies, policy reports, and theoretical scholarship (Green et al., 2006; Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Mainly focusing on the indigenous tourism, intersectional impacts and intra-community inequalities, a systematic search and purposive selection were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 1990 to 2025. The intersections of Indigenous tourism, intra-community dynamics, and poverty were used as key search terms. The review included empirical and theoretical studies on Indigenous communities, research on intersectionality and multidimensional poverty, and work relevant to Sri Lanka, especially the Vedda community. However, only the publications in English language were used in this review. Other than that, purely descriptive tourism accounts, and research from outside the Global South unless conceptually relevant also were excluded.

Accordingly, data on community characteristics, tourism activities, participation and benefit distribution, and poverty outcomes were gathered in this review and analyzed using thematic analysis. Mainly, the study attempted to examine how gender, age, socioeconomic status, and geographic location of the indigenous community members affect on the participation and benefits distribution through an intersectional lens and a multidimensional poverty approach. This review, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, is based on inconsistent empirical data and secondary sources. Despite these drawbacks, it provides a theory-based synthesis that emphasizes benefit-sharing strategies, structural influences, inclusion and exclusion patterns, and avenues for more equitable Indigenous tourism development.

## **Results and Interpretations**

### **Indigenous Tourism and Poverty**

According to the statistics, around five per cent of global population is acknowledged as indigenous people representing over 5,000 different Indigenous groups scattered across more than 70 countries (Butler, 2021; ILO, 2021). In spite of their contributions to culture and the environment, they are disproportionately over-represented among the world's poor, making up a far higher percentage of extreme poverty than their population size would indicate (United Nations, 2017; World Bank, 2016). Indigenous poverty is not only about low income. It is a multidimensional issue that includes limited access to land and natural resources, exclusion from political decision-making, cultural marginalization, and loss of self-determination (Stevenson, 2025). These problems are resulted from long rooted histories of colonization, dispossession, and unequal development and continue even in present-day development initiatives (Stevenson, 2025).

Tourism development (in many countries) focused on marginalized areas has a great potential to decrease socio-economic, political, ethnic, and gender disparities while diminishing cultural authenticity (Hoque, Lovelock & Carr, 2020). Yap and Watane (2019) discussed deeply on the importance of prioritizing indigenous people (who are marginalized in different contexts) in tourism development attempts. They highlighted three important facts to stress

this opportunity; the need to prioritize marginalized groups confirming human rights of ensuring no one is left behind, allowing a participatory approach for everyone to take part in the development process, and offering a space for indigenous peoples' desires and anticipations for a secured future.

Further, Kessy (2017) have note that the indigenous communities are self-motivated to initiate their conservation efforts as they have realized the importance of tourism, and how beneficial it is to them. However, there are imbalances of benefits sharing within the community, often poor Indigenous communities lack power and, in many cases, do not have legitimate relationships with other stakeholders (Zeppel, 2006). It is inferred that private tourism organisations may not consider these poor communities as stakeholders as they are mostly focus on profit-making (Scheyvens, & van der Watt, 2021). Furthermore, governments in developing countries, due to their various limitations (e.g. resources, capacity) may pay little attention to the development of these marginal communities.

However, tourism has gained the attention as an important strategy in poverty elevation due to its potential to generate employment, support micro-enterprises, and valorize Indigenous culture and knowledge within global markets (Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019). Empirical evidence from Latin America, Africa, Oceania, and Asia, suggests that Indigenous tourism can contribute to livelihood diversification, enhanced community pride, and social cohesion, particularly where Indigenous communities retain meaningful control over governance structures and benefit-sharing arrangements (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Spenceley et al., 2017).

Considering the Sri Lankan Vedda community context, Indigenous tourism is commonly promoted as an instrument to address the poverty issue that contributes local economies through income generation, livelihood support, and the strengthening of cultural identity. It is often presented as a way to improve daily living conditions while allowing Indigenous communities to share their culture and traditions on their own terms (Amilatissa & Ranasinghe, 2019). At the national policy level, Indigenous tourism is also framed as a strategy for reducing rural poverty, creating employment, and contributing to economic growth, while simultaneously preserving Indigenous cultures and heritage (SLTDA, 2019).

### **Intersectionality and Intra-Community Dynamics**

The concept of intersectionality was initially introduced by Crenshaw (1989) to explain how different social identities and power structures combine to shape people's everyday experiences of inequality. Accordingly, the factors such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, and place were introduced as factors that interact with one another to create different opportunities and constraints for different people rather than acting them separately (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Inequality is not simply the result of one disadvantage added to another. It is formed through long-standing systems of power, including patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and state control. These intersecting structures are attempted to shape the access to resources while influencing participation in decision-making, social recognition, and the ability of individuals to reach out to benefits from growth interventions, including tourism.

In Indigenous settings, intersectionality draws attention to the frequent assumption that "*the Indigenous community*" is a single, homogeneous entity. Such simple depictions frequently conceal underlying disparities and power dynamics, resulting in tourism and development policies that favour some communities while excluding others (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

Individuals' roles within communities, such as whether they are men or women, young or old, wealthy or poor, well-connected or isolated, can influence who participates in tourism, who benefits monetarily, and whose cultural expertise is documented or abandoned. For example, better-educated or politically connected persons may dominate leadership roles in tourism efforts, while women, seniors, and marginalized households may be relegated to peripheral or symbolic roles. Geographic factors also influence social and economic status, as households near tourist routes frequently have better access to markets and infrastructure than those in isolated areas.

Consequently, the concept of intersectionality allows to understand why tourism impacts are uneven and why some members of Indigenous communities may be empowered while others remain marginalized with a critical lens. It stresses the fact that tourism development cannot be understood only at the community level, rather, it needs to scrutinize various, overlapping kinds of disparity that influence access, participation, and rewards. This viewpoint is critical for developing more equitable policies and practices in tourism arena allowing diversity within Indigenous communities and seek to equitably distribute opportunities and resources.

Wellnigh, benefits of tourism do not apportioned equality to every individual in the community, thus do not contribute reducing poverty in the same way for everyone within Indigenous communities. These gains are often uneven and shaped by various factors such as local social and economic conditions. Tourism usually works in ways that benefit people who already have advantages, such as money, education, language skills, and political or business connections. This means that individuals and households who are relatively better off are have more opportunities and capabilities in starting businesses, interacting with tourists, or connecting with external actors, while poorer or incapable families may have limited or no access to low-paid, informal, or occasional roles (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). It does not mean that their access is restricted, but they are incapable or incompetent of yielding from the available opportunities. The critical fact is that tourism can reinforce or even deepen existing inequalities rather than genuinely reduce poverty when there is a weak local governance, limited community ownership over the resources, and there are no clear ways to share benefits fairly (Scheyvens, 2002).

In this backdrop, intersectionality is becoming increasingly important in tourism literature as scholars strive to move beyond unitary ideas of community participation and empowerment. Gender norms, educational accomplishment, language competence, age-based authority, socioeconomic status, and spatial location are all factors that influence tourist participation (Hutchings et al., 2020; Chambers, 2021). These factors have become critical in determining who has access to tourism opportunities, who controls resources, who makes decisions, and whose viewpoints are validated when dealing with external stakeholders such as tour operators, state agencies, and non-governmental organisations.

Besides, an intersectional perspective elaborates why Indigenous tourism can benefit only some part of the community while leaving others behind. For instances, men who are formally educated and have outside connections often gain more by leading, advising, or owning tourism businesses. Women, elders, and poorer families, on the other hand, are more likely to participate informally or symbolically, with fewer tangible rewards (Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019). As a result, factors such as age, gender, and class influence who has power and who participates. Elders may possess valuable cultural information, but they frequently lack the economic or political power required in tourism decision-making. Similarly, the location of living matters significantly whereas families near tourist routes typically have better access to

visitors, markets, and infrastructure than those in more distant areas, exacerbating disparities within the same community (Zeppel, 2006).

The concept of intersectionality also describes another complicated and significant perspective on poverty within Indigenous communities. Even though poverty is interpreted merely in terms of income deprivation in general terms, an intersectional perspective allows to understand how economic, cultural, political, and spatial aspects of poverty intersect and reinforce one another. For instances, women in physically isolated Indigenous communities may face additional disadvantages as a result of limited market access, mobility restrictions, and isolation from decision-making processes. Hence, the tourism solutions or development initiatives that fail to recognize these intersecting disadvantages may risk prolonging present power relations and contribute in deepening multidimensional poverty (Scheyvens, 2002; Goodwin and Santilli, 2009).

Adopting the intersectional approach for Sri Lankan context, which is undermined in tourism literature is particularly incomprehensible as Indigenous peoples have long been marginalized through land loss, conservation policies, and development projects that displaced communities. If intensely investigate, Vedda communities living across multiple settlements today are not homogeneous, they clearly demonstrate comprehensive intra community dynamics such as gender, age, livelihood background, location of settlement, and how closely they are connected to state systems (Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019; Aslam, 2018). These community dynamics and disparities shape how different members understand and experience tourism in their everyday lives. They influence what tourism means to them, whether it is seen as an opportunity, a burden, or something in between, as well as how and to what extent they are able to participate in tourism-related activities. As a result, the benefits and costs of tourism are not experienced equally. Some individuals and households gain income, recognition, or influence, while others face increased workloads, cultural pressures, or continued exclusion (Hoque, Lovelock & Carr, 2020). Accordingly, Indigenous tourism should not be understood as a single or uniformly empowering pathway, but rather as a contested space where opportunities and disadvantages are distributed unevenly across the community.

Thus, the intersectionality suggests a more meaningful lens to unfold these internal community dynamics and describe whether tourism helps Indigenous communities to stimulate their participation while revealing ultimately who benefits, who is left out, and why. This amplification is crucial for understanding how Indigenous tourism affects poverty in Sri Lanka and navigating tourism policies and practices more fair, inclusive, and sensitive to community realities.

### **Indigenous Tourism in Sri Lanka: The Vedda Context**

The Vedda (also spelled Veddah) are recognized as the oldest known Indigenous community group in South Asia, with ancestral links to prehistoric human remains found at Batadombalena dating back 31,000 - 13,000 B.C. (Blundell, 2003). Over time, especially after the arrival of Indo-Aryans, some Vedda communities left forest areas and settled in villages, while others continued their forest-based lifestyles (Gunawardana, 1981). In the 1980s, government policies further reshaped Vedda life through restrictions on hunting and forced resettlement under the Mahaweli development scheme, leading to the creation of Maduru Oya National Park (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2023). Although some Vedda groups accepted resettlement, others resisted and maintained traditional ways of life (Ranasinghe & Cheng, 2017). However, they started to continue with agrarian and wage-based economic models that

conflicted with Indigenous lifeways, while simultaneously subjecting the Vedda to assimilationist pressures and bureaucratic governance structures (Ranasinghe & Cheng, 2017).

As Silva and Athukorala (1991) highlighted, present day Vedda life cannot be understood through income-based measures alone, as it has historically prolonged relational connections to land, autonomy over resources, and cultural continuity. As a result, present day Vedda communities are not homogeneous. They carry noticeable diversities in ethnicity, livelihood strategies, settlement patterns, and degrees of integration into state systems across the regions they live such as Uva, Eastern, North-Central, and Northern provinces (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2023). It also has generated a significant internal difference among the community due to historical displacement, uneven access to land titles, welfare schemes, and disparities in education producing new socio-economic hierarchies within and between various Vedda settlements (Amilathissa and Ranasinghe, 2019). These dynamics are critical for understanding how tourism benefits are distributed among the community members across regions.

Tourism began to be used as a development approach for Vedda communities in the late twentieth century, mainly to support culture, generate income, and connect communities with the national economy and activities such as cultural shows, heritage displays, forest tours, and handicraft sales became the main forms of Indigenous tourism (Blundell, 2012; De Silva, 2011). Dambana, in particular, was transformed into the symbolic centre of Vedda tourism, as well as the community representation with leadership, receiving sustained attention from state agencies, private tour operators, and national media narratives that positioned it as the authentic representation of Indigenous community in Sri Lanka. In contrast, Rathugala, located near Gal Oya National Park, has engaged with tourism later and are still struggling to maintain strong ties to ancestral lands and traditional governance structures. (Silva & Athukorala, 1991; Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019). Tourism initiatives in these villages are tightly regulated by community leadership, emphasizing cultural visits and heritage-based eco-tourism, while private tourism operators lead the tourist flow and income generation through tourism activities. While this approach preserves cultural integrity, access to economic benefits is highly stratified within the community, often concentrated among older male leaders, while women, youth, and geographically peripheral households have limited participation (Semasinghe, 2021).

However, literature suggests that tourism development and its benefits distribution are uneven across places and social groups. For instances, while Dambana and, to a lesser extent, Rathugala have gained visibility and modest economic benefits, other Vedda communities, such as Henanigala and Pollebedda, many established through forced relocations under the Mahaweli Development Scheme, remain largely excluded from tourism circuits (Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019; Blundell, 2012). These communities often face minimal tourist visitation, weak infrastructure, and limited institutional support, leading to widespread frustration that Vedda identity is mobilized symbolically in national tourism promotion without tangible benefits accruing to local households (Herath et al., 2015; Weerasekara, 2020).

Tourism has also reshaped intra-community dynamics across Vedda settlements. Leadership roles and economic opportunities associated with tourism are frequently captured by individuals, predominantly men, with higher levels of formal education, language skills, and external networks linking them to tour operators and government institutions (Semasinghe,

2021). Women, elders, and poorer households often participate in peripheral roles, such as craft production, food preparation, or ritual performance, with limited influence over decision-making or benefit-sharing. In Rathugala, these intersectional inequalities are particularly visible: the community's cautious engagement with tourism preserves cultural autonomy but concentrates material benefits among a small subset of households, illustrating that even culturally resilient settlements are not immune to intra-community stratification.

Overall, Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka has evolved within a socio-political landscape shaped by historical dispossession, uneven development, and internal differentiation among Vedda communities. Rather than reducing poverty for everyone, tourism has mainly benefited certain groups and locations, while leaving others behind and creating new forms of exclusion. To understand these outcomes, it is important to consider historical experiences, geographic differences, and unequal power relations within communities. The narratives across different indigenous tourism villages show that empowerment and cultural protection depend strongly on how communities govern tourism and on wider social and policy conditions. This highlights the need for tourism approaches that support Indigenous self-determination, fairness in benefit sharing, and long-term livelihood security.

### **Who Benefits from Indigenous Tourism?**

This review demonstrates that Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka produces highly uneven outcomes shaped by intersectional intra-community dynamics rather than delivering uniform poverty alleviation. By synthesizing global Indigenous tourism scholarship with Sri Lankan evidence, particularly from the Vedda context, this discussion critically unpacks how tourism intersects with economic, cultural, political, and spatial dimensions of poverty. It also emphasizes that tourism outcomes can only be fully understood by examining power relations both within Indigenous communities and between Indigenous peoples and external actors, including the state, private businesses, and tourism intermediaries.

### *Gendered Pathways of Benefit and Poverty Reproduction*

A consistent finding across Indigenous tourism literature is that women play central yet undervalued roles in tourism economies. Studies from reputed scholars show that women are disproportionately engaged in low-paid, informal, and invisible tourism labour, including craft production, food preparation, cleaning, and cultural maintenance (Durán-Díaz et al., 2020; Ruhanen and Whitford, 2019; Lenao and Basupi, 2016). While tourism is often celebrated for creating income opportunities for Indigenous women, intersectional analyses reveal that these opportunities rarely translate into structural empowerment.

In the Sri Lankan Vedda context, gendered divisions of labour mirror global patterns. Men are more likely to occupy visible and monetized roles such as guiding, performing, and negotiating with tour operators, while women's labour remains confined to supplementary activities with limited income and decision-making power (Hettiarachchi, 2015; Amilathissa and Ranasinghe, 2019). From a poverty perspective, this results in gendered economic poverty, where women experience lower and more insecure incomes, and political poverty, where they have limited influence over tourism governance. Cultural expectations and patriarchal norms further restrict women's mobility and leadership, particularly for older women and those in remote settlements.

According to the literature, emphasizes that without deliberate gender-inclusive governance mechanisms, tourism may intensify women's workloads while offering minimal poverty reduction (Chambers, 2021; Chambwe and Saayman, 2025). Thus, Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka risks reproducing gendered poverty unless women's roles are formally recognized, fairly remunerated, and embedded in decision-making structures.

### *Generational Dynamics, Knowledge Hierarchies, and Cultural Poverty*

Age and generational position strongly mediate who benefits from Indigenous tourism. Younger Indigenous individuals often engage more readily with tourism markets due to language skills, education, and openness to commercialization, while elders prioritize cultural continuity, spiritual values, and stewardship of ancestral lands (Butler and Hinch, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2025). This divergence creates intergenerational tensions over tourism direction, governance, and acceptable forms of cultural representation.

In Vedda communities, elders are frequently positioned as symbolic custodians of tradition, yet they may receive limited material benefits from tourism activities that rely heavily on their knowledge, stories, and rituals (Nawarathna and Jayawickrama, 2024). This dynamic reflects what scholars describe as cultural poverty, where cultural knowledge is extracted and commodified without corresponding economic or political recognition (Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021). Younger individuals, by contrast, may capture disproportionate economic benefits, particularly if they act as intermediaries between tourists and the community. The literature suggests that these patterns can weaken trust between generations and threaten the long-term sustainability of Indigenous cultures (Canosa et al., 2017). From an intersectional poverty perspective, tourism may improve income opportunities for younger community members while deepening cultural and social disadvantages for elders.

### *Socio-Economic Stratification and Class Based Poverty Outcomes*

Socio-economic status is one of the most important factors determining who benefits from tourism. Empirical research from Africa, Asia, and Latin America consistently shows that households with greater financial resources, higher levels of education, land ownership, and extensive social networks are far better positioned to invest in tourism enterprises, access markets, and capture economic benefits (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). In contrast, households lacking these resources often face barriers to entry, including limited capital, insufficient skills, and restricted social connections. As a result, rather than serving as a tool for equitable development, Indigenous tourism can unintentionally reinforce existing social hierarchies and economic inequalities within communities.

Within the Vedda community, historical and structural factors have shaped clear socio-economic divisions. Historical resettlement policies, differential access to state welfare programs, and varying degrees of cultural assimilation have created stratification in wealth, education, and access to economic opportunities (Ranasinghe & Cheng, 2017). Tourism development tends to favor households that are already integrated into the cash economy and are located near tourist infrastructure, while more marginalized households remain confined to subsistence livelihoods. Poorer Vedda families, who often lack capital, education, or proximity to tourism hubs, are thus largely excluded from the financial gains generated by tourism activities.

This pattern aligns with critiques from the broader “pro-poor tourism” literature, which emphasizes that tourism rarely reaches the poorest segments of society unless interventions are intentionally designed to do so (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Without targeted measures to address inequality, tourism may deepen class-based poverty outcomes, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and limiting opportunities for economic mobility among the most marginalized members of Indigenous communities. Consequently, understanding the role of socio-economic stratification is essential for developing tourism policies and practices that aim to be truly inclusive and equitable.

### *Geographic Location, Spatial Marginalization, and Poverty Traps*

Spatial inequality is a critical yet underexplored dimension of Indigenous tourism outcomes. Researchers highlight how proximity to tourist routes, infrastructure, and markets shapes participation and benefit distribution (Zeppel, 2019; Gorbuntsova et al, 2019). Remote Indigenous communities often face structural barriers, including poor transport, limited marketing access, and weak institutional support.

In Sri Lanka, Vedda settlements such as Dambana have benefited disproportionately from tourism investment and visibility, while communities in Henanigala, Pollebedda, and Dalukana remain marginal despite their Indigenous status (Herath et al., 2015; Weerasekara, 2020). This produces spatial poverty, where geographic isolation intersects with socio-economic disadvantage to limit tourism participation. Spatial inequality thus reinforces multi-layered poverty traps within Indigenous populations.

### *Multidimensional Poverty and Indigenous Tourism*

Building on the multidimensional poverty framework advanced by Sen (1999) and operationalized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2019), this review conceptualizes poverty as encompassing economic, cultural, political, and spatial dimensions. Such a framework recognizes that wellbeing extends beyond income to include access to resources, social recognition, political voice, and equitable opportunities across space and place. Within Sri Lankan Indigenous tourism, these dimensions are closely interconnected, showing that tourism can both mitigate and reinforce forms of deprivation.

Economic poverty persists within Vedda communities due to uneven benefit distribution, limited integration into tourism value chains, and barriers to market participation. While settlements such as Dambana and, to a limited extent, Rathugala receive modest economic gains from tourism activities, other communities like Henanigala and Pollebedda remain largely excluded due to weak infrastructure, low tourist visitation, and minimal institutional support (Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019; Herath et al., 2015; Weerasekara, 2020). Even within communities benefiting from tourism, economic advantages are often captured by older, male household heads, leaving women, youth, and poorer households marginalized (Semasinghe, 2021).

Cultural poverty emerges when Indigenous identity is commodified in tourism representations without meaningful control by the community. Vedda culture is frequently framed in static, romanticized terms whereas rituals, dress, and forest knowledge are showcased for visitor consumption, while the nuanced, evolving practices and agency of community members are sidelined (Blundell, 2012; Watson & Kopachevsky, 1994; Scheyvens, 2002). Rathugala demonstrates a more cautious approach, regulating tourism to safeguard cultural integrity, yet

even here, economic benefits are unevenly distributed, highlighting the tension between cultural preservation and material wellbeing (Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019).

Political poverty is evident in the exclusion of Vedda communities from decision-making in tourism governance, policy formulation, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Even when community-based tourism initiatives exist, leadership positions and opportunities to negotiate with tour operators or state agencies are dominated by individuals with formal education, language skills, or external networks (Semasinghe, 2021). Women, elders, and geographically peripheral households have limited agency, reinforcing hierarchies within settlements and curtailing collective empowerment.

Spatial poverty reflects the geographic marginalization of Vedda settlements, particularly those affected by historical displacement. Communities like Henanigala and Pollebedda, established through the Mahaweli Development Programme, experience minimal tourist flows, poor infrastructure, and limited access to tourism networks, exacerbating their socio-economic exclusion (Herath et al., 2015; Weerasekara, 2020). In contrast, Dambana's centrality in tourism circuits affords it visibility and limited economic benefits, while Rathugala occupies an intermediate position engaged with tourism but highly selective in participation.

Adopting an intersectional perspective reveals how these dimensions of poverty overlap and compound disadvantage. Women in remote households experience both economic exclusion and limited political voice; elders may retain cultural authority but face economic precarity; youth may have higher education or skills yet remain excluded from governance structures and decision-making spaces. Geographic marginalization intersects with internal social hierarchies to produce multi-layered vulnerabilities, illustrating that tourism's developmental impacts are neither uniform nor universally empowering across Vedda settlements (Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019; Semasinghe, 2021; Weerasekara, 2020).

Understanding multidimensional poverty in Indigenous tourism thus requires attention to historical dispossession, socio-political marginalization, and intra-community differentiation. Tourism interventions that focus narrowly on income generation risk overlooking cultural, political, and spatial inequities, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than promoting holistic wellbeing and empowerment for Vedda communities.

## **Regenerative Tourism and the Potential for Transformative Poverty Reduction**

Recent scholarship argues that conventional approaches like sustainable tourism or pro-poor tourism have not done enough to tackle the complex, multi-layered nature of poverty in Indigenous communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Scheyvens, 2002). In response, regenerative tourism has emerged as a new approach that goes beyond simply reducing harm. Instead, it focuses on restoring and strengthening social, cultural, ecological, and economic systems (Bellato et al., 2023; Bellato et al., 2022; Cave & Dredge, 2020). Rather than asking how tourism can do less damage, regenerative tourism asks deeper questions: Who holds power?, whose values shape development?, and how can tourism contribute to long-term wellbeing for communities?

In recent literature, regenerative tourism is described as a place-based and relational approach. It emphasizes community-led governance, passing knowledge between generations, caring for the environment, and focusing on shared prosperity instead of short-term profits (Cave &

Dredge, 2020; Bellato et al., 2023). This approach is particularly relevant for Indigenous communities, where wellbeing is closely tied to land, culture, and self-determination, not just income (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021).

From a poverty perspective, regenerative tourism can help address multiple forms of deprivation at once. Economically, it encourages locally owned businesses, cooperative structures, and ways to share income fairly rather than concentrating wealth in the hands of a few (Clinebell et al., 2023). This is important in Indigenous contexts, where traditional tourism often favors those with money, education, or external connections (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). By putting ownership and decision-making back in the hands of communities, regenerative tourism can reduce class-based inequalities.

Culturally, regenerative tourism rejects exploitative or commodified portrayals of Indigenous identity. It promotes cultural revival through Indigenous-led storytelling, protection of sacred knowledge, and respect for traditions about what can be shared with visitors (Bellato et al., 2023; Whyte, 2018). Elders and cultural custodians are not just performers but respected knowledge holders whose guidance shapes tourism practices (Cave & Dredge, 2020). This helps address cultural poverty, where Indigenous knowledge is recognized symbolically but often undervalued economically and politically.

Politically, regenerative tourism centers on self-determination and inclusive governance. Tourism cannot reduce poverty if Indigenous communities have no control over planning, resources, or representation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Scheyvens, 2002). Regenerative approaches encourage participatory decision-making that includes women, youth, elders, and marginalized households, helping address political exclusion and hierarchies that influence who benefits from tourism (Chambers, 2021).

Spatially, regenerative tourism can counter geographic concentration of benefits. Supporting decentralized tourism networks, community-to-community collaboration, and place-based experiences allows more equitable participation across scattered settlements (Dredge, 2022; Zeppel, 2019). For the Vedda, where tourism is mainly focused in Dambana, regenerative strategies could extend opportunities to smaller communities like Henanigala and Pollebedda, if infrastructure and support align with Indigenous priorities.

For the Vedda in Sri Lanka, regenerative tourism holds strong conceptual promise but has not yet been widely explored. Current tourism mainly follows conventional cultural tourism models shaped by state and market interests (Blundell, 2012; Amilathissa & Ranasinghe, 2019). While such tourism brings some income and visibility, it does not fundamentally change power relations or address inequalities within and between Vedda communities. Implementing regenerative tourism would require major changes in governance, including recognition of Indigenous land rights, cultural authority, and decision-making power to address the issues that remain sensitive and institutionally constrained in Sri Lanka. The lack of empirical research on regenerative Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka shows a clear gap. Future studies should examine how regenerative principles can be applied in practice, how intersectional inequalities can be addressed through inclusive leadership, and how tourism can support long-term community wellbeing rather than just short-term income. Participatory action research, Indigenous-led methodologies, and long-term studies are especially useful for capturing these transformative processes (Smith, 2012; Scheyvens et al., 2021).

## **Implications for Poverty Reduction**

The evidence synthesized in this review demonstrates that Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka has generated selective rather than inclusive poverty reduction. While tourism has provided income opportunities and enhanced visibility for certain Vedda households and individuals, these benefits are unevenly distributed and mediated by entrenched intra-community power relations. As a result, tourism frequently fails to address the structural and intersectional determinants of poverty, including gender inequality, generational hierarchies, socio-economic stratification, and spatial marginalization.

From an economic poverty perspective, tourism-generated income remains concentrated among households with advantageous positions within local hierarchies, such as proximity to tourist sites, leadership roles, education, and external networks. This mirrors broader findings in Indigenous and pro-poor tourism research, which show that tourism rarely reaches the poorest without deliberate redistributive mechanisms (Scheyvens, 2002; Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). In the Vedda context, tourism has supplemented livelihoods for some but has not substantially altered structural dependency on state welfare, wage labour, or intermediaries. Consequently, tourism often functions as an income buffer rather than a transformative pathway out of poverty.

The review also highlights significant implications for cultural poverty stirring beyond the income. While Vedda identity has become increasingly visible in tourism marketing and national heritage narratives, this visibility does not necessarily translate into cultural autonomy or material wellbeing. Cultural knowledge, rituals, and symbols are frequently commodified through performances and exhibitions shaped by external expectations, resulting in what scholars describe as symbolic inclusion without substantive empowerment (Watson & Kopachevsky, 1994; Blundell, 2012; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). Elders and cultural custodians may gain recognition while remaining economically insecure and politically marginalized, reinforcing a form of cultural poverty rooted in the extraction rather than revitalization of Indigenous knowledge systems.

The implications for political poverty are equally significant. Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka largely operates within governance frameworks dominated by state institutions, private tour operators, and development agencies, with limited meaningful participation by Indigenous communities in decision-making processes. Within Vedda communities, leadership in tourism initiatives is often captured by socially and economically advantaged individuals, and it has led marginalizing women, elders, youth, and poorer households. This exclusion undermines collective agency and reinforces political poverty, defined by limited influence over decisions affecting livelihoods, land, and cultural representation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Chambers, 2021). Without inclusive governance structures, tourism risks reproducing internal hierarchies rather than democratizing opportunity.

Spatial poverty further constrains the poverty-reducing potential of Indigenous tourism. Tourism development in Sri Lanka has been geographically concentrated in highly visible sites such as Dambana, leaving other Vedda settlements largely excluded from tourism flows, infrastructure investment, and institutional support (Herath et al., 2015; Weerasekara, 2020). This spatial concentration reinforces uneven development patterns and creates poverty traps for geographically isolated communities. Spatial marginalization intersects with gender, age, and class to compound disadvantage, particularly for women and elders in remote settlements with limited mobility and market access.

Importantly, the review also identifies new vulnerabilities created by Indigenous tourism. Increased reliance on tourism income can heighten economic insecurity due to seasonality, market volatility, and external shocks. Dependence on intermediaries and external actors may further erode autonomy and reinforce asymmetrical power relations. Additionally, the framing of tourism as a primary poverty alleviation strategy may risk diverting attention from broader structural issues, including land rights, access to education, health services, and political recognition. These factors are central to Indigenous wellbeing but lie beyond the tourism sector alone (Sen, 1999; United Nations, 2017).

Taken together, these findings suggest that Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka should not be assumed to be inherently pro-poor. Its poverty impacts are contingent upon how tourism is governed, who controls resources, and whether intersectional inequalities are actively addressed. Poverty reduction through tourism requires moving beyond narrow income-based metrics toward a multidimensional and intersectional understanding of deprivation, one that recognizes economic security, cultural integrity, political agency, and spatial justice as interconnected dimensions of Indigenous wellbeing.

These findings underscore the need of tourist strategies that go beyond symbolic inclusion and promote really inclusive Indigenous government. Policy frameworks should provide meaningful participation of Indigenous communities in decision-making through specific processes that include women, youth, elders, and geographically marginalized families. To minimize elite capture and reduce economic and political inequality, explicit benefit-sharing agreements and support for community or cooperative ownership are required.

At the practice level, tourism programs should employ place-based and intersectional tactics that consider the diversity of the local population. Under-represented communities must be offered leadership and capacity-building chances, while cultural authority and norms are upheld. Encouraging decentralized and community-driven tourism in lesser-known Vedda communities can help to alleviate spatial inequalities and enable tourism to promote long-term, more equitable poverty reduction efforts.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This review has examined who benefits from Indigenous tourism in Sri Lanka, using an intersectional lens to explore the diverse experiences and outcomes within communities. The analysis reveals that Indigenous tourism is not inherently pro-poor or equitable. Instead, its impacts are shaped by existing social hierarchies, power relations, and intra-community differences, meaning that some groups gain disproportionately while others are marginalized or excluded.

In the case of the Vedda Indigenous community in Sri Lanka, tourism has created a measure of visibility and generated limited economic opportunities. However, these benefits are unevenly distributed, reinforcing internal inequalities along lines of age, gender, geography, and social status. Some members, particularly younger intermediaries or those with better access to tourist networks, capture a larger share of tourism income, while elders, women, and more remote households often remain on the margins. Moreover, spatial disparities in access to tourism markets highlight how geography intersects with social dynamics to shape who benefits and who does not.

These findings suggest that addressing Indigenous poverty through tourism requires moving beyond simplistic, homogenized portrayals of communities. Policy, planning, and practice should prioritize intersectional, community-led approaches that give all members a voice, recognize their agency, and foster equitable participation. Such approaches should not only focus on income generation but also on cultural preservation, social cohesion, and long-term wellbeing, ensuring that tourism contributes positively to both material and non-material aspects of community life.

Ultimately, this review highlights that Indigenous tourism can be a tool for empowerment, but only when it is carefully designed, contextually sensitive, and attentive to the multiple layers of inequality within communities. By foregrounding equity, agency, and sustainability, tourism can move beyond superficial economic gains to support meaningful, inclusive development for Indigenous peoples in Sri Lanka.

### **Originality and Contribution**

This review contributes to our understanding of Indigenous tourism and Sri Lankan tourism in four important ways. First, it brings together intersectionality and multidimensional poverty, moving past the usual focus on income alone that dominates most studies in Sri Lanka. This approach helps reveal how economic, social, cultural, and spatial factors interact to shape Indigenous experiences in tourism. Second, instead of asking only whether tourism “empowers” communities, it asks who really benefits, who is left out, and why, highlighting the uneven distribution of opportunities and outcomes. Third, it connects Sri Lankan Indigenous tourism to global debates, drawing on scholarship from renowned literature to identify broader structural patterns rather than focusing on isolated examples. Finally, it introduces regenerative tourism as a practical, context-sensitive framework for addressing Indigenous poverty, supporting more equitable and sustainable tourism practices.

Overall, this paper goes beyond simply describing Vedda tourism. It provides a critical, theory-informed perspective that can guide policy, planning, and future research, offering insights for both scholars and practitioners who want tourism to benefit Indigenous communities more fairly

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