



# INTEGRATED RURAL CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM : A CASE OF KANHAKUND IN SUNDARGARH DISTRICT, ODISHA

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*Abstract:* The sustainable development of emerging tourism destination areas needs to be addressed through an integrated planning process that involves development planning not only for the tourist destination area but also for its adjoining rural settlement clusters. In many cases, the planning processes that focus on tourism are often centered on the enhancement of the tourism destination area only without proper consideration of the development needs of the adjacent rural clusters. In such cases, there are high chances of failure in achieving the intended benefits from tourism development projects since the sustainability of tourism is directly associated with the socio-economic development of the rural clusters surrounding the tourism destinations. This research paper focuses on one of the emerging tourism destinations known as Kanhakund that belongs to the Sundargarh district of Odisha. Apart from the development needs of the tourism site, there is also a requirement to provide adequate socio-economic benefits to the rural clusters around the tourism site. There should be an integration of tourism development planning and rural development planning to meet this end.

*Index Terms* - Sustainable tourism, Rural clusters, Kanhakund, Tourism Planning, Rural Development, Integrated Planning, Sundargarh, Odisha.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a recognized driver of economic change, especially in ecologically and culturally rich areas with limited formal employment. In Odisha, growing interest in offbeat travel has brought a rapid surge of visitors to Kanhakund in Sundargarh district, largely through social media, bringing with it uncontrolled vehicle access, solid waste buildup, encroachments, and the gradual erosion of the destination's natural appeal. Residents of the three neighboring villages, Ghoghar, Karubahal, and Kaintara, remain entirely excluded from the economic activity at their doorstep.

Conventional tourism planning invests at the destination but rarely addresses surrounding communities and often accelerates commercialization. This paper proposes the Village-First Tourism model, which centers the three villages as the primary tourist hub while managing Kanhakund as a vehicle-free nature sanctuary accessible only through community-operated EV shuttles.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research objectives are: (i) to examine the current status of Kanhakund as an emerging but unplanned tourism destination and the threats posed by unmanaged visitor growth; (ii) to assess the existing conditions and development potential of the adjoining villages of Ghoghar, Karubahal, and Kaintara; (iii) to conceptualize and articulate the Village-First Tourism model as an integrated framework linking destination conservation with rural community development; (iv) to detail the spatial, infrastructural, livelihood, and institutional components of the proposed model; and (v) to outline a convergence-based implementation pathway utilizing available government schemes and community institutional mechanisms.

## III. STUDY AREA AND CONTEXT

Kanhakund in Sundargarh district attracts visitors with its forests, natural water features, and unspoilt landscape, yet has no formal infrastructure, compromising visitor experience and posing environmental risks. The district's tribal communities, known for Applique textile art, Dokra metal casting, folk music, and indigenous cuisine, provide a cultural backdrop this paper seeks to integrate into the tourism strategy.

The three neighboring villages of Ghoghar, Karubahal, and Kaintara are agrarian communities with limited access to basic services and have seen no economic benefit from tourism activity at their doorstep. Yet they possess precisely what contemporary tourists seek: tribal architecture, handmade crafts, indigenous cuisine, traditional festivals, and ecological knowledge, assets that form the foundation of the Village-First Tourism model.

## IV. THE VILLAGE-FIRST TOURISM MODEL: CONCEPT AND RATIONALE

The Village-First Tourism model positions the three villages as primary destinations where tourists arrive, stay, eat, shop, and spend their time and money, rather than treating them as service providers to a natural attraction. Kanhakund becomes a carefully managed nature experience, accessible only through village-operated EV shuttles at the conclusion of a village-based itinerary.

This approach simultaneously preserves Kanhakund's ecological integrity through controlled access and ensures that all tourism revenue flows directly into the village economy. The three villages function as a unified cluster, each contributing distinct offerings while sharing facilities, together providing a complete experience spanning accommodation, cuisine, culture, craft, and nature that encourages longer stays and broader distribution of economic benefits.

## V. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT COMPONENTS

1. Sanitation: Gender-segregated, disability-accessible toilet blocks built from local materials, sited away from water bodies.
2. Drinking Water: Hydration stations along the visitor trail to reduce single-use plastic.
3. Community Food Shacks: Village-operated food stalls managed on a rotational basis among the three villages.
4. First Aid Post: Staffed by trained volunteers with referral access to formal health facilities.
5. Tourist Information Counter: Youth-run kiosk providing maps, shuttle schedules, site rules, and village experience details.
6. Two-Wheeler Parking: Private cars prohibited; visitors directed to the village EV shuttle service.
7. EV Shuttle System: Village cooperative-operated electric shuttles connecting the village cluster to Kanhakund, with fixed timetables and vehicle caps managing carrying capacity. Revenue flows entirely to the cooperative, supported through FAME India Phase II and the Odisha EV Policy.
8. Homestays and Eco Resorts: Household conversions and vernacular architecture resorts supported through PMEGP and the Odisha Livelihood Mission, offering immersive tribal experiences.
9. Food Zones: Women's SHG-managed cuisine from each village creating a distinct three-village food trail.
10. Handicraft and Appliqué Markets: Artisan-run spaces for textiles, Dokra craft, weaving, and local painting, supported by digital promotion and periodic haats.
11. Cultural Festival Spaces: Permanent venues for music, dance, storytelling, and festivals aligned with the local cultural calendar.

12. Trail Guides and Experience Hosts: Certified youth guides and village hosts offering nature trails, craft demonstrations, cooking sessions, and cultural participation with standardized pricing.
13. EV Shuttle Operators: Youth trained as drivers and technicians, with skills transferable across Odisha's EV sector.
14. Digital Infrastructure: BharatNet connectivity enabling online bookings, digital payments, and tourism promotion across all three villages.
15. Village Pathways: Lit, landscaped walking paths with multilingual signage connecting all tourism nodes within the cluster.
16. Entrepreneurship Support: Financial assistance, licensing, and mentoring through PMEGP, Odisha Livelihood Mission, and Odisha Tourism Department.

## VI. INTEGRATED SPATIAL PLANNING CONCEPT

The three villages are conceived as distinct but interconnected nodes of a tourism cluster, linked by a landscaped trail and connected to Kanhakund through the EV shuttle corridor. A common cluster gateway serves as the formal arrival point for registration, orientation, and large vehicle parking. Through participatory consultation, each village is assigned a primary thematic identity covering accommodation and cultural performance, handicrafts and artisan experiences, and culinary tourism respectively, to be refined through on-ground planning.

Kanhakund is organized into three zones: a visitor amenity zone at the entry with basic facilities, a managed trail zone with defined paths and carrying capacity limits enforced through the shuttle headcount system, and a permanently closed core natural zone covering the most ecologically sensitive areas. This zoning framework ensures that growing visitor numbers do not translate into proportional ecological damage.

## VII. IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK AND SCHEME CONVERGENCE

The model is implemented across three phases:

1. Phase One: Preparation and Institution Building covers baseline surveys of all three villages and the Kanhakund site, establishment of community tourism committees, registration of cooperative structures for EV operations, homestay networks, craft groups, and food cooperatives, and preparation of spatial and livelihood plans through participatory processes.
2. Phase Two: Infrastructure Development involves simultaneous development at both Kanhakund and the village cluster, ensuring destination readiness and community readiness progress together. EV vehicles are procured and leased to the cooperative. Training programmes are conducted for guides, EV drivers, cultural tour operators, and hospitality workers.
3. Phase Three: Launch and Monitoring sees the cluster launched as a unified tourism product through Odisha Tourism's Visit Odisha platforms, social media, travel agents, and responsible tourism certifications. A quarterly monitoring framework tracking visitor arrivals, local incomes, cooperative finances, environmental conditions, and tourist satisfaction is managed by village tourism committees and coordinated by the district administration.

Scheme Convergence:

Financial feasibility is achieved through convergence of existing government schemes: MGNREGA for pathways and site development, PMGSY for village roads, BharatNet for digital connectivity, PMEGP and Odisha Livelihood Mission for enterprise seed capital, FAME India Phase II and Odisha EV Policy for vehicle procurement, and the Odisha Tourism Infrastructure Development Programme for site amenities. A district-level project management unit coordinates convergence across all schemes.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The Village-First Tourism model offers a fundamentally different approach to developing Kanhakund by positioning Ghoghar, Karubahal, and Kaintara as primary tourism clusters with homestays, eco-resorts, food zones, handicraft markets, and cultural spaces, while restricting site access exclusively through village-operated EV shuttles. This simultaneously preserves Kanhakund's natural integrity, generates broad-based

livelihoods across all three communities, and offers tourists a richer and more authentic experience than any conventional approach can deliver.

The community, participating as guides, shuttle operators, hosts, artisans, and digital entrepreneurs, becomes the chief beneficiary of tourism rather than a bystander to it. This model offers a scalable template for emerging niche destinations across tribal and rural Odisha and comparable regions of India, where the challenge is to harness tourism growth without sacrificing the natural and cultural heritage that makes these places worth visiting.

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