

Rethinking Community-Based Tourism for Sustainable Development: Evidence from Jaflong, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the potential of community-based tourism (CBT) as a pathway to sustainable development in Jaflong, Bangladesh, an ecologically sensitive and culturally diverse destination, where the uneven participation of different community groups remains insufficiently examined. It critically investigates how community participation, empowerment, and governance structures shape tourism development outcomes, with a particular focus on the disparities between the general population and the indigenous Khasia community. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating thematic analysis of 30 stakeholder interviews with descriptive analysis of survey data from 160 judgementally selected community members, comprising 80 respondents from the general community and 80 from the Khasia community. Findings reveal a general willingness to engage in tourism, but highlight stark inequalities in participation, benefit-sharing, and decision-making. The Khasia community remains largely excluded from economic and political empowerment, despite experiencing some psychological gains. Governance challenges, including fragmented planning, weak coordination, and unregulated resource extraction, further hinder sustainability. Drawing on Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Scheyvens' empowerment framework, and the collaborative planning framework of Getz and Jamal, the study proposes a context-specific CBT framework to promote equitable development. This research contributes to the tourism and development literature by showing that CBT's sustainability depends not only on community involvement, but also on inclusive power-sharing, institutional support, and long-term governance reform. The proposed framework offers practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote more inclusive and sustainable tourism development in culturally and environmentally sensitive destinations.

KEYWORDS: Community-Based Tourism; Community Participation; Community Empowerment; Sustainable Development; Destination Governance; Stakeholder Collaboration; Jaflong

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a development approach that aims to fulfil people's current needs without affecting the ability of future generations to fulfil theirs. Sustainable development is grounded in the principles of intergenerational fairness, protecting environmental and socio-cultural fabrics, ensuring social equity and equitable distribution of resources and benefits, and long-term economic viability (United Nations, 1993, 2015; World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). From a tourism destination context, sustainable development means a balanced approach that maximises stakeholders' economic benefits while preserving and protecting the destination's environmental resources and socio-cultural integrity (Swarbrooke, 2010; World Tourism Organization, 2007). Community-based tourism (CBT) is widely regarded as a viable pathway for achieving destination sustainability, especially for ecologically and culturally rich and sensitive destinations (Warnholtz et al., 2022).

CBT means the active participation of communities in the tourism planning, development, management, and sharing of the benefits of tourism to enable and encourage sustainable utilisation of tourism resources (Quang et al., 2023; Sofield, 2003; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Tasci et al., 2013). CBT has been recognised as a means of poverty reduction and empowerment of local communities, particularly in developing nations (Pookaiyaudom, 2013). In CBT, tourism resources and activities are owned, controlled and managed by local communities. This approach empowers local communities to manage and safeguard their own natural and cultural resources and thus ensures long-term sustainability (Scheyvens, 2002). Besides, CBT diversifies local economies by creating new employment opportunities, encouraging entrepreneurship, and responsible consumption (Elkington, 1997; Manyara & Jones, 2007). In this regard, with the participation of local communities, CBT through its principles, practices, and frameworks assists in developing and managing sustainability in a tourism destination.

Jaflong, once one of the top visited destinations in Bangladesh, is a destination where natural and cultural resources serve as the primary motivators for attracting domestic tourists. Tourism attractions of Jaflong include hills, mountains, water streams, shallow rivers with crystal-clear water, tea gardens, waterfalls (Hossain & Nahar, 2014) and settlements of the indigenous Khasia community (Hoque & Aktar, 2022). However, tourism in Jaflong has not evolved in a planned way. One of the key environmental threats to Jaflong's ecological stability is uncontrolled stone quarrying and sand mining, which not only poses a continuous threat to its environment (Ahmed et al., 2020), but also undermines tourists' visiting intention and satisfaction levels. In addition, like other tourism destinations in Bangladesh, inadequate tourism infrastructure, limited capacity-building programmes for locals, and persistent safety and security concerns continue to constrain sustainable destination development (Ahmed et al., 2012; Amin, 2018; Islam et al., 2023; Jahan & Amin, 2014). Insufficient food and accommodation services, language barriers and lack of participation of the indigenous Khasia community have further limited Jaflong as a viable tourism destination for a long time.

Although Jaflong has good potential for sustainable development through CBT programmes, at the governance level it remains underdeveloped due to lack of strategic planning, public-private partnerships, and policy-level attention from the national and regional levels (Amin, 2018; Jahan & Amin, 2014). The current destination development and management practices also demonstrate limited structured planning and local community involvement. Existing studies on Jaflong have primarily focused on the economic and aesthetic dimensions (e.g., Khatun et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2023), while little attention has been paid to community empowerment and participatory sustainable tourism development approaches. In particular, from a tourism perspective, the unequal participation and benefit distribution between the non-indigenous (general Bengali population) and the indigenous Khasia community remain largely underexplored in the tourism literature. This creates an important research gap in understanding how CBT can be designed not only as a community involvement mechanism, but also as a governance and empowerment framework for socially differentiated and ecologically sensitive destinations.

The study responds directly to the need for a structured CBT framework that can lead to the promotion of sustainable tourism development while empowering the local community and maintaining the ecological and socio-cultural integrity of the region. To do this, the primary goal of this study is to examine the potential advantage of structured, community-based tourism in enhancing local economic and socio-cultural well-being while safeguarding the environment. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: how can a structured CBT framework support more inclusive and sustainable tourism development in Jaflong, particularly in relation to community participation, empowerment, stakeholder collaboration, and benefit-sharing between the general and Khasia communities? This study particularly aims to: analyse the current situation of tourism at Jaflong through a destination audit; evaluate stakeholders' roles in tourism planning, development, and management; assess the opportunity and scope of community participation and community empowerment through CBT; and suggest priority areas for sustainable tourism development through a context-sensitive CBT framework.

The proposed CBT framework of this study provides a practical way to address existing challenges and supports more inclusive and sustainable tourism development in Jaflong. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in combining 'ladder of citizen participation', 'community empowerment' and 'stakeholder collaboration' frameworks together to develop a CBT framework to ensure sustainable development, suitable for naturally and culturally rich tourism destinations. The study further advances a scalable CBT framework of rural sustainable tourism development in the Global South by showing how CBT could substitute destructive practices with sustainable livelihoods and cultural preservation, which would support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) 8, 10, and 15 (United Nations, 2025) and inform future policies in South Asia and other developing countries. The proposed framework may also provide useful policy insights for other ecologically sensitive and ethnically diverse tourism destinations across the Global South facing similar governance and participation challenges.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Conceptual Foundations and Principles of Community-Based Tourism*

The concept of community can be explained from multiple disciplines, such as administrative, social, economic, and geographical levels (Suansri, 2003). When it comes to CBT, a community is generally perceived as a group of people living in a certain locality, sharing identity, values, and goals, and also actively involved in and enjoying tourism development (Tolkach & King, 2015; Yanes et al., 2019). Community-based tourism is a means of empowering local communities by improving their economic, social, and cultural welfare (Swarbrooke, 2010; Tasci et al., 2013). The essence of CBT is that benefit sharing, tourism planning, development, and management place communities at the central point (Jackson, 2025).

Taking a systems approach to tourism development and management, Murphy (1985) argued that the community is not limited by geographical frames but encompasses the social and cultural makeup of a destination. Murphy's (1985) work also stressed that tourism should bring about an appreciative interaction between the visitors, locals, and the surrounding environment (Sosa, 2023). According to United Nations Tourism (earlier known as World Tourism Organization), community-based tourism is a model that actively involves the local community in the tourism planning, development, and management (World Tourism Organization, 2007). CBT is consistent with other alternative tourism development paradigms and enhances values like empowerment, self-reliance, and sustainability (Yanes et al., 2019; Zapata et al., 2011). Mitchell and Muckosy (2008) argue that while conventional tourism adversely affects marginalised groups, CBT, with its collective ownership and decision-making guiding principles, provides a possible solution to this problem.

Burgos and Mertens (2017) highlighted that sustainable CBT development requires engaging local communities at every level, i.e. from planning to implementation to evaluation. They define CBT as tourism initiatives or projects that are planned, developed, owned, and managed at the local level. They further argue that CBT should focus on joint decision-making, sharing responsibility, equitable access to resources, and sharing ownership and benefits (Giampiccoli et al., 2022; Tasci et al., 2013). While their definition highlights the importance of CBT in assigning empowerment and providing communities with the capacity to actively manage tourism resources, this also indicates the necessity of relevant capabilities of local communities, collaboration and teamwork with relevant stakeholders (Sofield, 2003).

According to some well-known frameworks, such as Suansri's (2003) and ASEAN CBT Standard (2016), some of the major CBT principles are community empowerment, stakeholder collaboration, cultural exchange, and sustainable practices (ASEAN, 2016; Suansri, 2003). Ashley and Garland (1994) introduced operational models of CBT initiatives that imply different levels of community ownership and participation. These models show the full spectrum of potential community involvement governance, from complete community ownership to external partnerships. However, CBT, despite its potential, has a number of operational, structural, and cultural limitations, especially when it is intended to be implemented in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas

(Scheyvens, 2002). Besides, CBT in developing countries faces weak coordination, lack of resources, corruption, financial constraints, lack of awareness within communities, and lack of equal distribution of benefits (Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008; Zielinski et al., 2021), which restrain the related stakeholders from grasping the full benefits of CBT. Therefore, a context-specific, structured, and planned framework is needed that can realise the full potential of CBT (World Tourism Organization, 2007).

In Bangladesh, recent research findings demonstrate the beneficial effect of CBT. In Sajek, Lusai Palli (village), particularly the Lusai community, owns resorts and homestays. This was an alternative livelihood initiative for the Lusai community after shifting their dependency from agriculture. This shifting has greatly enhanced the Lusai community members' living conditions, their education levels, and overall community pride (Ahmed et al., 2023). Tourists are welcome to engage in their traditional activities, trekking, contribute towards waste management, consume locally produced and sourced food, and use environmentally friendly modes of transport. Hence, the project was a successful example of CBT that helps in preserving cultural and social integrity while upholding environmental characteristics.

In South Asia, there are many success stories of CBT initiatives. In Sri Lanka, the Kitulgala Adventure Base Camp and the Udawalawe National Park Elephant-watching programme make a link between community income and environmental protection and conservation (Gayathri et al., 2024; Perera, 2023). These projects were designed to empower locals while promoting responsible tourism practices. In Maldives, guesthouses were developed in local islands under CBT initiatives which shift conventional tourism demand away from exclusive, chain resorts and ensure sharing of economic benefits with locals (Nazim, 2021). The Annapurna Conservation Area Project and the Sirubari Homestay are both long-standing successful examples of CBT where the importance of local ownership and capacity building is persistently highlighted (Regmi, 2016). Under eco-tourism policies and CBT initiatives, the Sikkim region in India has developed a strong community homestay network (Demkova et al., 2022; Gurung et al., 2025; Sowards & Banerjee, 2021). In Pakistan, Kalash Valley homestays focus on cultural preservation through locally led eco-tourism efforts (Khan et al., 2025). These examples demonstrate the effectiveness of CBT by ensuring community participation, socio-cultural protection, environmental sustainability, and enabling local communities and their institutions. These examples offer valuable foundation lessons which can be taken forward to other places such as Jafong, by showing not only what is possible, but also how CBT can be a driver of meaningful sustainable transformation of a tourism destination.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Community participation, collaboration, and empowerment are the three key founding principles of CBT (Fiorello & Bo, 2012). Sewell and Phillips (1979) argued that the effectiveness of community participation can be examined by assessing the level of participation of the community members. The ladder of citizen participation framework (see Figure 1) developed by Arnstein (1969) is a useful framework for understanding how communities can transition from being passive consumers to active drivers of the tourism development process. Since its introduction, Arnstein's (1969)

framework has been used in tourism to determine the extent of community engagement in destination planning and management (Contreras, 2019; Reid, 2003). This framework places community participation on a power continuum, ranging from non-participation to genuine citizen control. The framework has three levels. At its lowest level, the framework includes different types of non-participation, such as manipulation and therapy, where the community contribution is mostly shallow or even manipulated to appease instead of empowering. The degree of tokenism is in the mid-level of the framework, which involves informing and consultation, where community members are listened to, but can hardly make a difference. The top level is real citizen power, which includes partnership, delegated power, and full citizen control. These three levels, along with their associated stages, show that effective community participation involves more than obtaining opinions and that it involves a change of decision-making authority (Segota et al., 2017).

8	Citizen control	Degrees of citizen power
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	Degrees of Tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-participation
1	Manipulation	

Figure 1: Ladder of Citizen Participation (Adapted from Arnstein, 1969)

Within collaborative planning theory, Getz and Jamal (1994), followed by Jamal and Getz (1995) proposed a three-stage (problem setting, direction setting, and structuring/implementation) stakeholder collaboration process model (see Figure 2) for tourism destinations. They describe tourism planning as a process where various stakeholders, such as community groups, government agencies, and individual operators, work together to solve problems and make decisions openly and in an inclusive manner. The key aspect here is inclusiveness, collaboration, teamwork, and collective action. Hence, these must be planned and organised in a holistic manner. However, the open discussion, understanding stakeholder interests, and trust-building among participants are key to strong collaboration (Wondirad et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to create a framework that guarantees mutual benefits, enhances cooperation, and achieves consensus. Besides, Multiple actors, such as NGO staff, consultants, or government officials play an important role in these local people empowering process and promoting respectful relations between all parties (Wondirad et al., 2020).

CBT is rooted in local empowerment and has the potential to transform residents' lives (Manyara & Jones, 2007). Four interlinked forms of empowerment were proposed by the Scheyvens's (1999) framework (see Figure 3). Economic empowerment, one of its types, ensures that communities benefit from tourism through jobs, local businesses, participation in the tourism supply chain, and doing reinvestment in services (Sofield, 2003). The core idea is retaining income and wealth locally, i.e., increasing economic linkages and reducing leakages. Social empowerment preserves cultural identity, fosters knowledge exchange across generations, and strengthens community pride and unity (Scheyvens, 1999; Wondirad et al., 2020). Psychological empowerment is the process of personal transformation associated with successful tourism projects. Once the communities have confidence as their cultural heritage is respected and their traditions honoured, self-esteem is built, and identity is affirmed, especially in historically marginalised communities (Jackson, 2025; Jamal & Getz, 1995). Lastly, political empowerment is making sure that the community is not merely consulted but is a powerful stakeholder in the tourism decision-making and management process (Sofield, 2003; Tasci et al., 2013). When these four dimensions are in line, CBT is not only acting as a developmental tool, but also a route to the real transformation of community and sustainability in the long term.

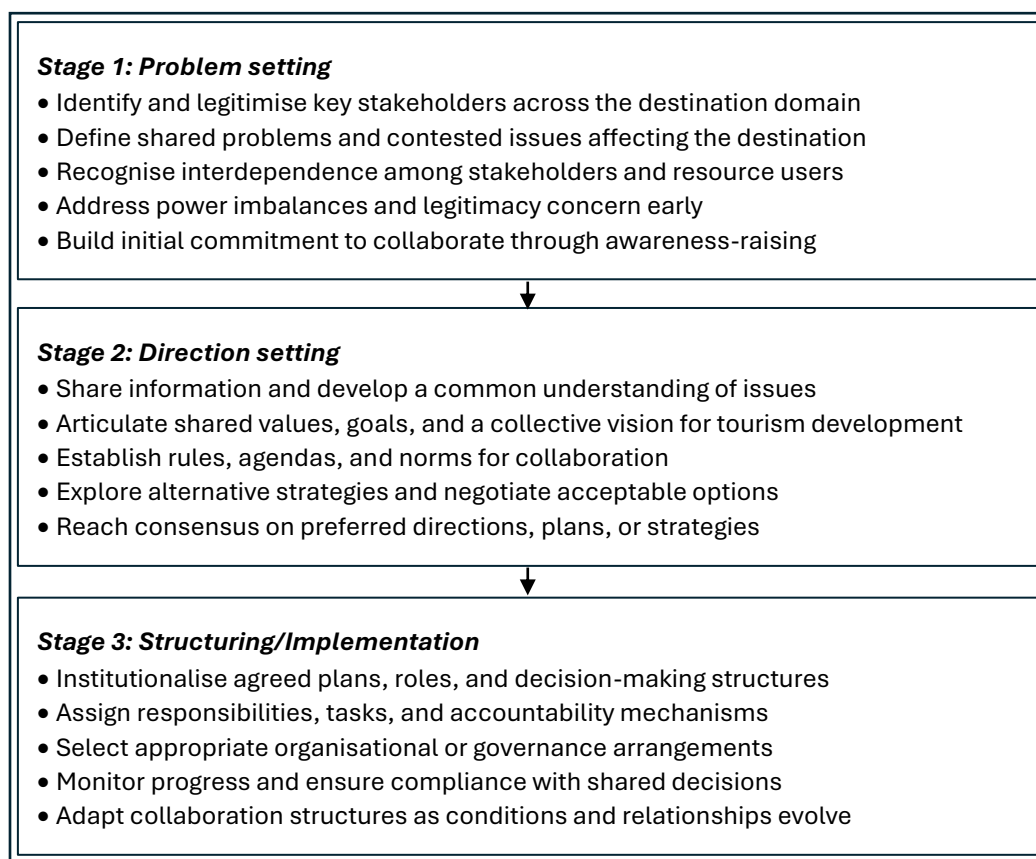


Figure 2: Three-stage Stakeholder Collaboration Process Model (Adapted from Getz & Jamal, 1994; Jamal & Getz, 1995)

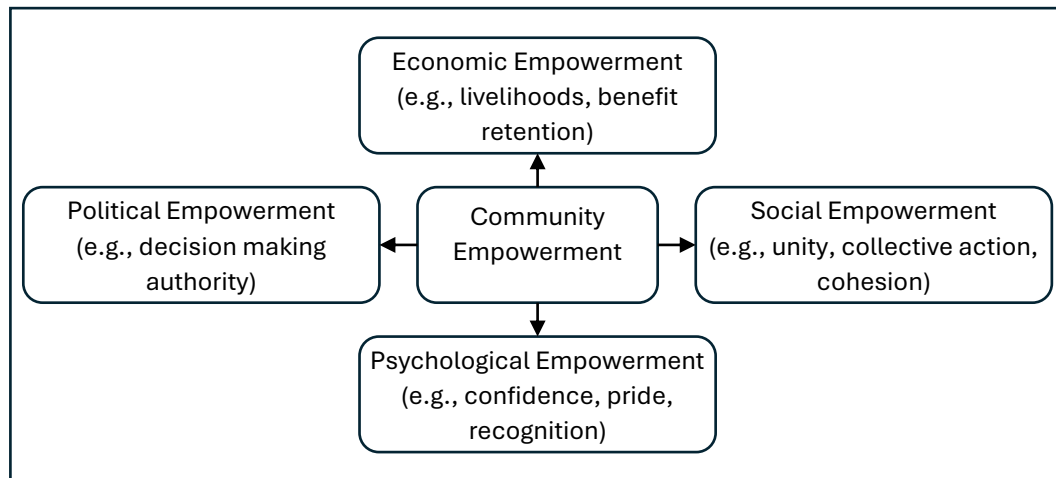


Figure 3: Community Empowerment Framework (Adapted from Scheyvens, 1999)

Figure 4 shows the interactions and interdependence of these aforementioned theories, models, and frameworks: participation, collaboration, and empowerment, and how they form the core foundation for sustainable CBT development. Community participation is needed for ensuring effective collaboration. Besides, community participation and collaboration together set the platform for community empowerment. Together, these three frameworks ensure a solid foundation for the development of a sustainable CBT framework. Hence, the theories and concepts linked to these three frameworks inform the analytical framework of this research through which the tourism practices of Jafong can be examined. In addition, this analytical framework provides the basis for developing the qualitative inquiry protocol and survey instrument and subsequently their analyses and ensures that the study is consistent with relevant theories. Such theory-practice synthesis makes the study more relevant by facilitating the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical policy implications.

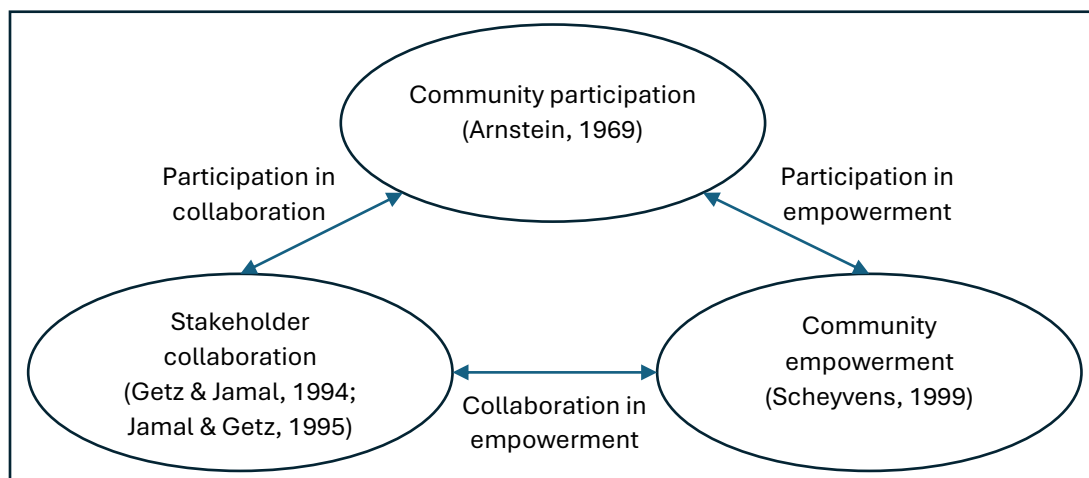


Figure 4: Theoretical Integration for Sustainable CBT Development

The literature review determines a critical gap that will be addressed by this research. Firstly, there is no apparent contextual overlap, as recent studies rarely concentrate on CBT in the context of protected or ecologically sensitive locations in Bangladesh, particularly in culturally diversified regions such as Jaflong. Though Ahmed et al.'s (2023) study partially touches on these issues in their Lusai Palli, Sajek study, they did not analyse them in a critical way that can explain their scalability or constraints. Second, an organisational gap was identified by the study because most studies have examined culturally homogeneous communities. On the contrary, studies that focus on how CBT could be modelled to fit an ethnically diverse and socially stratified community, such as Jaflong, where the Bengali and indigenous populations coexist, are virtually missing. Finally, there is a theoretical gap because of limited integration of the main concepts of CBT, which include: empowerment, participation, collaboration, and sustainability, which have usually been considered independently in previous studies (Gayathri et al., 2024; Jackson, 2025; Khan et al., 2025; Wondirad et al., 2020). Therefore, the necessity of the current study lies not simply in applying CBT to another destination, but in examining how participation, empowerment, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainability can be integrated in an ethnically diverse and ecologically sensitive setting where tourism benefits and decision-making authority are unevenly distributed. This paper addresses these identified gaps by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework (see Figure 4) that connects these dimensions in a holistic manner to form a more comprehensive and sustainable CBT framework (see Figure 7), which is not only applicable to the complexity of Jaflong, but also to similar destinations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research adopted interpretivism as its philosophical stance and retroduction as its research approach. Interpretivism was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand the current status, perceptions, and experiences of different stakeholder groups involved in the tourism development and management process, rather than to test predefined hypotheses (Saunders et al., 2015). To uncover complex social phenomena, such as CBT and sustainable development in an ecologically sensitive area, the retroduction approach was found appropriate (Jonsson & Goicolea, 2020; The RAMESSES II Project, 2017). Hence, empirical evidence and theoretical concepts were iteratively used as part of this approach to address the phenomenon of interest.

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design. Scholars (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Molina-Azorín & Font, 2016) argue that mixed-methods research is particularly useful in recent tourism studies where the aim is to uncover complex tourism problems in context-sensitive settings. In addition, mixed-methods has the ability to contextualise and generate deeper insights into complex social phenomena such as the foci of this study: sustainable tourism development and community participation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Molina-Azorín & Font, 2016). Therefore, both qualitative (in-depth interview) and quantitative (survey) data were used in a reiterative manner to address the aim and objectives of this study.

The qualitative phase was used to explore stakeholder perceptions and contextual issues related to CBT development in Jaflong. The insights generated from this phase not only informed the development of the quantitative survey instrument but also helped to develop a deeper understanding of the survey findings. The quantitative phase enabled the deeper assessment of patterns, themes, and sub-themes found with regard to CBT development (stakeholder role and collaboration, community engagement, and community empowerment) in the qualitative phase and strengthened the findings. By integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence iteratively, the study aimed to ensure data triangulation and enhance the robustness of the findings (Jonsson & Goicolea, 2020; The RAMESES II Project, 2017) and capture both depth and breadth in understanding CBT and sustainable development in Jaflong.

3.2 Study Area

The study area (see Figure 5), Jaflong, is located in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh in the Sylhet district and is inhabited by both the general Bengali and indigenous Khasia communities. There are five villages inhabited by the Khasia community (i.e., Khasia Punjee), namely Balla Punjee, Sangram Punjee, Nakshiar Punjee, Lama Punjee, and Protappur Punjee, along with 39 general community villages within the Jaflong area. The presence of both indigenous and non-indigenous communities makes Jaflong a socially and culturally diverse tourism destination.

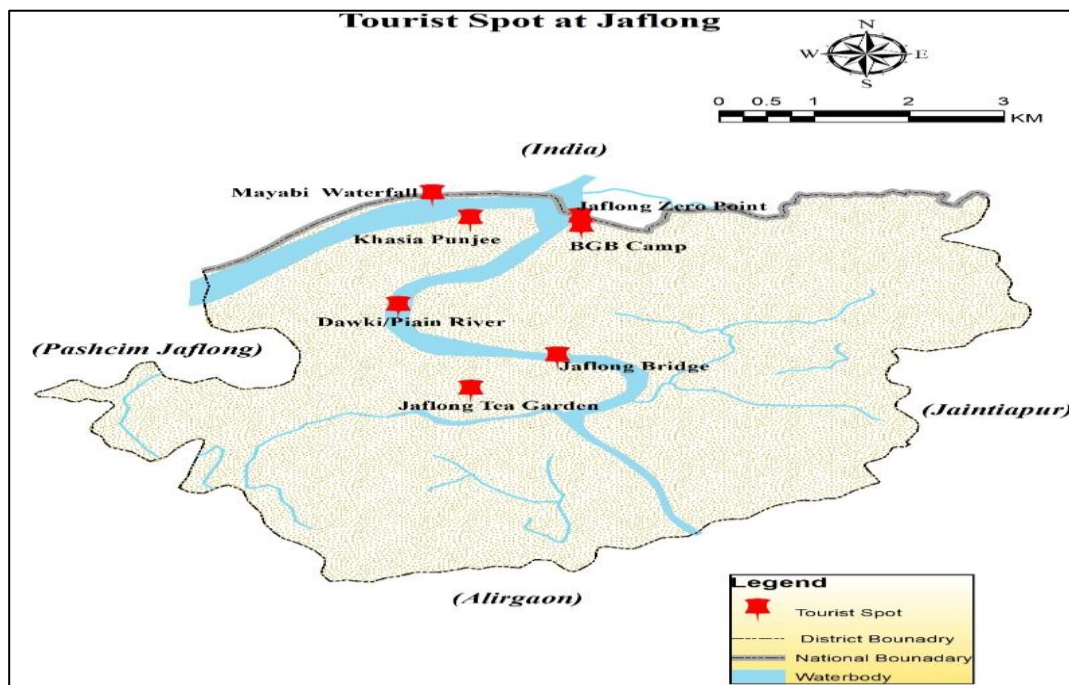


Figure 5: Location of the Study Area.

Source: Bangladesh Parjatan (Tourism) Corporation

The East Jaflong Union, commonly referred to as Jaflong by the wider community, covers an area of approximately 48 square kilometres, with a total population of around 58,320. Jaflong is a scenic hill

destination located along the border between Bangladesh and the Indian state of Meghalaya, and is characterised by subtropical and tropical rainforest, rivers, and hills and mountains. The area is widely recognised for its natural scenery and cross-border landscape features, which attract large numbers of domestic tourists.

Historically, greater Jaflong was a forest area owned and ruled for thousands of years by the Khasia–Jaintia kings, a system that came to an end in 1954. The economic development of the area began with stone quarrying from riverbeds and the expansion of stone trading activities. New settlements gradually started to emerge as a result of the expansion of stone trading and other economic activities in the area. A road connection of approximately 55 kilometres between Jaflong and Sylhet city (one of the metropolitan and district cities of Bangladesh) was developed in the 1980s, which initiated further infrastructure development and improved accessibility to the area. Since then, Jaflong has emerged as a popular tourist destination for both domestic and international visitors.

3.3 Data Collection

Destination stakeholders' understanding, perceptions, and values about sustainability and a specific resource direct their actions and the pathways that they think are appropriate to attain destination sustainability (Amin, 2018; Bramwell, 2007; Sharpley, 2020). Sharpley and Telfer (2014) argue that it is essential to involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., local community, local government, tourists) in the same study to explore complex phenomena that are linked to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics of a tourism destination. Multiple stakeholders were considered as the target population of this study, such as tourists, the local community (both general and Khasia communities), and the tourism supply side industry stakeholders, such as tour guides, tour operators, transportation and accommodation providers, and personalised service providers. In this study, any single group or organisation that influences or is influenced by tourism development in Jaflong is deemed a tourism stakeholder (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from these target populations using in-depth interviews and administering structured survey questionnaires, respectively. Data were collected between July and October 2025. This approach to data collection fits with the suggestion recommended by several scholars (Asker et al., 2010; Quang et al., 2023; Warnholtz et al., 2022) in their CBT study.

The qualitative data were collected from 30 key informants through in-depth interviews. The participants' cohort included tourists, local government, tour guides, community leaders, community members, managers of the hospitality establishments, travel agencies, transportation service providers, and academics (see Table 1). Face-to-face, email, and telephone communications were used to reach and recruit key informants (Hawkins, 2018). The key focus of the key informant recruitment was gathering detailed specialised knowledge and insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Su et al., 2019) with regard to sustainable tourism development through CBT in Jaflong. The interviews generally lasted around 60-70 minutes, depending on participant availability and stakeholder category. The findings of the key informant interviews not only enhanced understanding of current tourism conditions but also informed the development of the survey questionnaire at a later stage.

Survey data were collected from 160 sample respondents comprised of 80 general and 80 Khasia community members. The survey used a non-probabilistic judgemental sampling technique, which is appropriate when an exploratory study is conducted to get preliminary information and in-depth insights into the problem at hand (Malhotra, 2010; Saunders et al., 2012). Respondents were selected judgementally from key tourist spots at Jaflong (see Figure 5). Two inclusion criteria were used during respondent selection: i) they needed to be local community members (i.e., either from the general or Khasia community), and ii) they needed to be aged a minimum of 18 years. The survey instruments were adapted from Su and Swanson (2020), where the key focus was to gather data on four key aspects: tourism activities and resources, tourism impacts (environmental, economic, and socio-cultural), community involvement and community empowerment, and community satisfaction level with tourism. In relation to the analytical framework, community participation was assessed through items on involvement in tourism activities, awareness of tourism benefits, and participation in tourism planning and decision-making. Community empowerment was assessed through items reflecting economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment, while stakeholder collaboration was explored mainly through interview evidence on coordination, planning, institutional roles, and stakeholder relationships. A five-point Likert scale, i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree, was used to collect data for these key aspects. Where necessary, local language support and clarification were used during interactions with Khasia participants to improve communication accuracy and participant understanding.

Table 1: Key-informant Types

Key informants	Number
Tour guide	05
Community members	04
Local government higher official	01
Local governance	01
Community leader	03
Managers of the hospitality businesses	04
Managers of transportation businesses	06
Managers of travel agencies	02
Tourist	03
Academic	01
Total	30

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify a detailed and rich picture of the qualitative data. Thematic analysis ensured the systematic gathering, grouping, outlining, exploring, and synthesising

information patterns to enrich the comprehension of the phenomenon of interest, which increases the practical relevance of the study (Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The thematic analysis followed the six-step guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This research followed an inductive approach while conducting the thematic analysis and involved three coding techniques, namely, open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), which were used during the coding and theme development stages of the six-step process. Open coding determined the essential concepts, axial coding grouped similar ideas into categories and examined the relationships, and finally, selective coding synthesised and refined the categories into themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A total of 22 sub-themes (See Appendix 1 in the appendix) were grouped into 8 main themes considering the study aims and objectives, which further helped to categorise and characterise the findings. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentage were primarily used to analyse the quantitative data to identify patterns, which were further investigated with the qualitative data findings. The descriptive results are reported in the findings through percentages and mean scores, with detailed survey results presented in the appendix tables. These results were used to compare patterns between the general and Khasia communities and to support the interpretation of the qualitative themes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation in both qualitative and quantitative phases of the study was voluntary for participants, and all interview and survey participants' identifiable information was anonymised in the data cleaning and preparation stage to ensure confidentiality and to maintain ethical standards. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before data collection, and their participation was based on consent.

4. Findings

4.1 Destination Audit

Jaflong has experienced modest growth in terms of the establishment of hotels and resorts in recent years (Jahan & Amin, 2014). However, there are only four low-cost government guest houses, one motel owned and operated by Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC), 12 privately owned hotels and resorts, and a good number of restaurants. On the contrary, from the ownership point, Khasia Punjees have four tourist accommodations and do not have any restaurants. This indicates a clear service and facility gap between the main Jaflong area and Khasia Punjees. However, the facilities and services of these establishments are very basic.

Most of the tourists who visit Jaflong are domestic. Tourists primarily visit Jaflong for leisure and recreation purposes, where experiencing the natural beauty is the main motivational factor (Hossain & Nahar, 2014). The national trend of domestic tourists and leisure and recreation as the key travel motivations supports earlier study findings (Amin, 2017) on popular tourism destinations of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, like other tourism destinations in Bangladesh, Jaflong also experiences high influx of tourists during different occasions and public holidays, when the local businesses and community receive maximum benefits from tourism. Qualitative data highlight this trend. One key

informant noted that “...there are not many foreigners who come to visit here, mainly domestic people come. We see many tourists during holidays, festivals, and occasions, we like that because we can earn some money”.

Even though accommodation facilities are available in the area to some extent, most of the tourists come to visit Jaflong for a daytrip. Qualitative data support that one of the key reasons for tourists’ short stay is inadequate infrastructure and entertainment facilities in Jaflong. One tour operator noted that “people come in the morning, see the river, hills, Khasia villages, and leave before evening because there is nothing planned for them to stay longer.” Qualitative data further highlight that the availability of multiple low-cost transportation facilities from Sylhet city and its adjacent area to Jaflong is another reason for the short length of stay by tourists. A tour operator explained that by highlighting, “You can come to Jaflong from anywhere... do not need to pay too much... transportations are always available”. There are some safety concerns present in Jaflong, which also influence tourists’ length of stay and dissatisfaction, especially in boating and river cruising in Dawki River, which is one of the most popular activities while visiting Jaflong. Due to a lack of safety practice and equipment in the boats, Jaflong experiences a couple of incidents and fatal accidents each year. Key informants repeatedly raised concerns about safety equipment and enforcement, particularly for boating activities.

4.2 Stakeholder Roles

It is evident from the destination audit that the government has developed some infrastructure, such as roads, highways, and accommodation, taking into consideration tourism development in Jaflong. However, qualitative data highlight that, although Jaflong is being promoted through Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) and National Tourism Organisations’ websites, the stakeholders are disappointed because the government is not providing appropriate support similar to other industries (e.g., tax holidays, flexible loans). This was highlighted by one interviewee, “...tourism is advertised everywhere, ...but when it comes to loans, training, help, or tax support, ...we are always left on our own.”

The local governance actors (e.g., the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO), BGB, tourist police), with the participation and support from community, have made efforts to protect the environment and provide better safety and security to tourists in Jaflong. However, the local government also highlighted current mismanagement and lack of coordination among stakeholders. One of the top local government officers stated, “...we have recognised the current mismanagement in tourism in Jaflong and are actively engaged in implementing solutions for proper management, as this is a process that will take time.” Other stakeholders pointed out that tourism businesses in Jaflong do not run under any unified regulation or official body to manage the industry. Hence, poor management of tourism services is inevitable.

The initiative from the private sector towards tourism development and management is also not sufficient in Jaflong. Although there are some privately owned hotels, resorts, and restaurants that help provide tourism services to tourists, the overall scale and coordination remain inadequate.

There is no collective role that the private sector is currently playing for the development of tourism in Jaflong. At the time of the interview, one key informant mentioned that a project named 'OTITHI' (meaning guest in English) by BRAC—the largest NGO and international development organisation in the world—was being carried out in Jaflong due to the high potential for developing community-based, eco-friendly tourism. Other private initiatives include volunteer activities such as the 'Hossain Committee', which is a small voluntary organisation involved in cleaning activities in key tourism spots in Jaflong.

Despite the presence of private organisations and businesses serving tourism in Jaflong, it is evident from the interview data that tourism businesses lack cooperation. Several key informants highlighted that the absence of recognised and formal platforms is a major obstacle to uniform communication and coordinated planning among stakeholders. Furthermore, differing priorities and goals, contradictory understandings of success, disagreements between management actors, unequal power relations, and lack of clear policies hinder successful collaboration. Most importantly, rivalry among local tourism stakeholders' limits efforts to develop cooperation. These findings support the earlier findings on the key challenges in sustainable tourism development (Reed & Curzon, 2015; Timur & Getz, 2008; World Tourism Organization, 2007). Although the local government has attempted to address this challenge by holding meetings between stakeholders to arrange coordination and planning, the lack of commitment and willingness to take responsibility hinders these initiatives from producing fruitful results. Hence, solitary action by the local government is not sufficient for effective cooperation. Conflicts should be addressed through inclusive decision-making, clear sustainability-oriented policies, and mutual respect, ensuring that stakeholders are engaged in a win-win situation (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Reed & Curzon, 2015; Timur & Getz, 2008; Warnholtz et al., 2022).

4.3 Community Engagement

The local community people in Jaflong are still in the initial phases of awareness regarding tourism benefits, which are mostly observational and unstructured. The majority of the Khasia people cannot speak or properly understand conventional Bengali language. Tourists also have limited cultural knowledge and often fail to show proper respect to the local ethnic community's daily life. The majority of visitors come to Khasia Punjee with the aim of visiting tea plantations and the Mayabi Waterfall. However, this visitation seriously hampers the daily life and privacy of the Khasia community people. Members of the Khasia community reported that tourism activities frequently disturb daily routines without providing meaningful involvement, stating "they (tourists) come, take our pictures without asking us, they roam here and there without our permission...our families live here, we do not feel good always."

Tourism development in Jaflong is encountering a unique challenge that is largely absent in many comparable destinations. There is a large economic activity of stone and sand mining in Jaflong, which not only compromises the natural landscape but also has adverse effects on Jaflong's natural resources and scenic beauty, which are one of the key reasons for visiting Jaflong. In addition, the coexistence of mining workers and tourists in the same spaces also adversely affects tourist

satisfaction. Furthermore, illegal miners extract sand, stone, and sandstone rather than focusing on the implied long-term economic benefits of tourism, further worsening the situation. Survey data found that around 62.5% of respondents from the general community and only 10% of respondents from the Khasia community are aware of the long-term benefits of tourism (see Appendix 2 in the appendix). However, due to the lack of alternative livelihood opportunities or lack of sufficient income from tourism activities, they are not able to overcome the destructive practice of stone and sand mining. Local stakeholders described mining as a survival-based livelihood choice in the absence of viable tourism alternatives, highlighting “Income from tourism is not enough, or well distributed here. A large proportion of the local people are working directly or indirectly in sand and stone mining here, without this, how will they survive?”

Furthermore, survey data found differences in participation and involvement in tourism activities between the general community and the Khasia community people as presented in Table 2. The general community shows a comparatively high rate of participation in different tourism activities. The highest percentage (33.75%) of respondents from the general community was found involved in retail businesses, such as small food courts and local crafts, followed by involvement in restaurant business (22.5%), transportation services (15%), and accommodation services (12.5%). A few community people are also involved in other tourism-related activities such as tour guide and cameraman. By contrast, the Khasia community's participation level in tourism activities was found to be much lower. Although their participation is highest in transportation (25%), followed by retail businesses (11.25%), most of them (58.75%) are involved in farming, such as betel leaf cultivation and working in tea estate or collecting resources from forest.

Table 2: Distribution of Community Participation in Economic Activities Related to Tourism by Community Group, % (n)

Category	General Community	Khasia Community
Accommodation	12.5 (10)	0 (0)
Transportation	15 (12)	25 (20)
Restaurant	22.5 (18)	0 (0)
Tour Guide	2.5 (2)	1.25 (1)
Retail business	33.75 (27)	11.25 (9)
Cameramen	7.5 (6)	3.75 (3)
Non-tourism activities	6.25 (5)	58.75 (47)

Although the government agencies must take the final decisions and are responsible for the implementation of any project related to tourism development, the community exercised some bargaining power because the area is under their ownership. This study found evidence of local community participation in meetings and discussions, primarily with local governance, BGB, tourist police, village and community leaders, elders, and tourism stakeholders. To carry out tourism development projects effectively, the local people representatives and leaders consistently attempt to put forth the community's demands in the meetings. However, there is a discrepancy in

participation level between general and Khasia community people in tourism planning, development, and management process. Survey data found that 62.5% of respondents from the general community participated in these processes, compared with only 18.75% of respondents from the Khasia community. In addition, interview data further highlighted the symbolic engagement of community members in tourism planning and decision-making processes. Community representatives reported that participation in meetings rarely translated into influence over final decisions. One of the community leaders highlighted this, stating: "...we talked in the meeting, we raised our worry and concern, unfortunately, it is not reflected in final decision most of the time."

4.4 Community Empowerment

This study examines the extent of community empowerment within the current tourism sector, using Scheyvens's (1999) four-dimensional (economic, social, psychological, and political) empowerment framework. The results, presented in Appendix 3 in the appendix, indicate limited economic empowerment among local communities, particularly the Khasia community. Income generation acts as a reflection of economic empowerment. Quantitative evidence (survey data) suggests that the general community mostly agrees that tourism contributes to their income generation (mean score 4.00). However, the Khasia community expresses strong disagreement (mean score only 1.60) regarding the economic contribution to their community resulting from tourism. Qualitative evidence further reinforces this difference. Several interview respondents from the Khasia community highlighted that tourism activities rarely translate into direct income or empowerment opportunities within their community, and these benefits mostly remain in passive form. One Khasia member highlighted this stating, "...you know, tourists come, but they do not generally buy from us or stay with us... We watch tourism happen, many tourists come... but it does not help our families...". This suggests that although tourism in Jaflong generates economic benefits and empowerment opportunities, they mostly remain spatially and socially concentrated among the general community. These qualitative and quantitative findings together highlight and reinforce the existing livelihood inequalities currently present in Jaflong.

The general community has a higher mean score (4.25) than the Khasia community (mean score 2.78) in terms of control over key services. The overall general community's mean score of 3.93 shows moderate motivation to participate in tourism activities. However, it was much lower among the Khasia community (mean score 2.05). This inter-community difference is probably due to most Khasia respondents being engaged in farming and forestry as their main livelihood. However, there is less consensus among both groups (mean scores 2.00 and 2.18 for the general and Khasia communities, respectively) suggesting that there is an economic leakage issue and that the extent of the integration of local supply chains within the tourism economy is limited. For instance, one of the interviewees noted, "...most tourism businesses are operated by Bengali people, and there is no direct linkage between tourism supplies and Khasia households." These results suggest structural barriers as well as lower reported willingness to participate in tourism among the Khasia community. The findings are also consistent with previous evidence on the uneven distribution of economic empowerment due to tourism.

There is mixed perception by the community regarding social empowerment in Jaflong. Both the general and Khasia communities (4.10 and 4.73, respectively) agree that natural resources have been conserved because of tourism growth. These scores reflect respondents' perceptions rather than measured environmental outcomes. Nevertheless, environmental degradation from stone and sand mining remains a concern in Jaflong. However, agreement in the Khasia community regarding the preservation of local traditions and culture because of tourism is low (mean score 2.13) compared to the general community (mean score 4.00), reinforcing the Khasia community's negative perception towards tourism development. Nevertheless, both communities disagree with the fact that tourism improves social cohesion (mean score 2.53 and 2.21 for general and Khasia community, respectively), reinforcing the negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism on the local community.

The findings suggest some degree of psychological empowerment among local communities in relation to tourism. The general (mean score 4.10) and Khasia community (mean score 4.20) have agreed that they feel proud when outsiders (i.e., tourists) recognise their culture and tradition. This validation by others reinforces their self-identity, which enhances their motivation and confidence to get involved in tourism activities. However, this confidence does not necessarily translate into greater influence over tourism decision-making, as reflected in the limited political empowerment reported below. Community members described this recognition as an important source of confidence, even in the absence of strong economic returns. A Khasia elder reflected, "When outsiders respect our land and culture, we feel proud, even if we do not earn much from tourism." However, this symbolic recognition does not translate into stronger social cohesion, as both communities disagree that tourism has improved community unity (means below 3.00). This disconnection highlights that psychological empowerment alone is insufficient without accompanying social and economic inclusion.

The results indicate that there is limited political empowerment in the local communities. The general and Khasia communities both disagree that they have equal opportunities to participate in decision making in tourism development (mean score 2.13 and 2.08 respectively). Additionally, low mean scores of 'community's opinions are incorporated in all tourism development planning decisions' (2.00 for general community members and 1.90 for Khasia community members) emphasise power imbalance and suggest that decisions are made based on and rely on outsiders or few influencers. The general community has a mean score of 3.25 indicating moderate motivation to involve in tourism decision making to address their needs while in the Khasia community, the score is 2.78 which indicates that they are comparatively more reluctant. Key informants called for more inclusive platforms that enable communities to have more meaningful input into tourism planning, beyond consultation. One community member said, "...we have meetings, but decisions have been made already, we are just for show..." These findings validate the position of both the general and Khasia communities at the 'Tokenism' tier but at different levels, i.e., placation for the general community and consultation for the Khasia community, with regard to Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Community participation and power relations

The findings point to a structurally uneven participation landscape in Jaflong, where the general community and the indigenous Khasia community occupy different positions in terms of engagement, access to benefits, and influence over tourism decisions. Seen through Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, this split is not a minor participation gap but a power relation that shapes how tourism is governed and who can convert tourism growth into meaningful livelihood gains. Figure 6 therefore summarises two qualitatively different forms of participation, rather than two degrees of the same practice. For the general community, relatively high involvement in tourism activities and a moderately higher presence in planning forums align with a Placation position, where people can speak and negotiate but do not consistently hold authority over final decisions. Participation is therefore partly substantive yet remains vulnerable to being reduced to procedural consultation when decisions are pre-shaped elsewhere. For the Khasia community, low engagement in tourism activities and minimal representation in decision processes correspond more closely to consultation within Arnstein's tokenism level. Here, being invited to meetings does not translate into agenda-setting power, and the ability to protect everyday life, privacy, and cultural boundaries remains limited.

8	Citizen control	Degrees of citizen power	General community
7	Delegated power		
6	Partnership		
5	Placation	Degrees of Tokenism	
4	Consultation		
3	Informing		
2	Therapy	Non-participation	
1	Manipulation		

Figure 6: Community Participation Level Based on Arnstein's Citizen Participation Ladder.

This differentiated positioning helps clarify why empowerment outcomes are fragmented across the two groups. When participation is distributed unevenly, benefit-sharing follows the same pattern, and tourism becomes a mechanism through which existing inequalities are reproduced rather than corrected. In this respect, the marginalisation of the Khasia community is not only a social equity issue but also a governance problem for CBT itself, because CBT depends on shared legitimacy, locally anchored decision-making, and negotiated rules of access and behaviour. Without more inclusive power-sharing arrangements, the destination remains locked into a model where some actors extract value from tourism while others bear its social and cultural costs. This aligns with the argument that inclusive governance and equitable power distribution are preconditions for sustainable destination development, particularly where multiple stakeholders must coordinate around contested resources and differing priorities (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Reed & Curzon, 2015; Timur & Getz, 2008; Warnholtz et al., 2022). From this perspective, minimising the participation gap between the general and the Khasia communities is not only an ethical aspiration, but also a practical requirement for institutionalising CBT in Jaflong.

5.2 Integrating Participation, Planning, and Impacts: A Sustainable CBT Model for Jaflong

Figure 7 synthesises the empirical findings into a conceptual model for sustainable community-based tourism development in Jaflong, structured around three interdependent dimensions: integration, planning, and sustainability impacts. Rather than treating CBT as a standalone intervention, the model reflects established arguments that sustainable tourism outcomes emerge through the interaction of participation, empowerment, and governance arrangements (Getz & Jamal, 1994; Scheyvens, 1999; Wondirad et al., 2020). The model is grounded in the findings of this study, which demonstrate that fragmented planning, uneven participation, and weak institutional coordination currently prevent CBT in Jaflong from moving beyond symbolic engagement towards substantive sustainability outcomes.

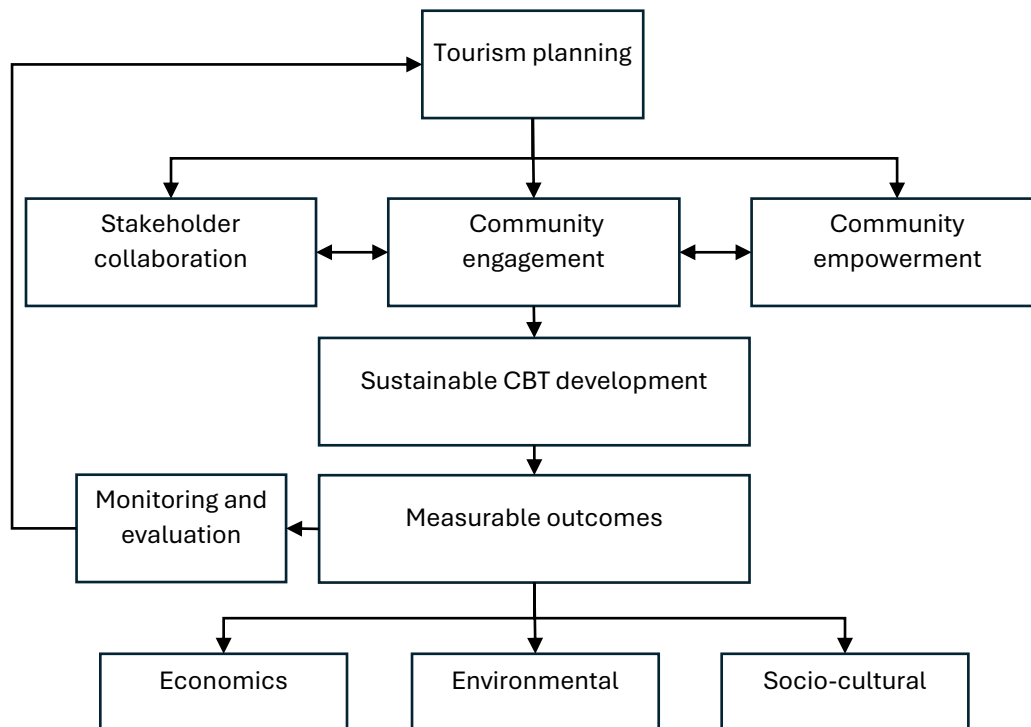


Figure 7: Model of Sustainable CBT Development in Jaflong.

From a planning and governance perspective, the absence of formalised and inclusive tourism planning mechanisms in Jaflong constrains the operationalisation of CBT. The findings show that tourism development is characterised by weak cooperation between government agencies, private actors, NGOs, and community groups, a pattern frequently identified as a barrier to sustainable destination governance (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Timur & Getz, 2008). Consistent with collaborative planning theory, effective CBT requires structured platforms for dialogue, repeated interaction, and negotiated decision-making, allowing stakeholder interests to be aligned over time rather than addressed through ad-hoc consultation (Getz & Jamal, 1994; Wondirad et al., 2020). In this respect, the model emphasises integration across public institutions, community organisations, and intermediary actors such as NGOs as a necessary condition for overcoming the power asymmetries and coordination failures identified in Jaflong. The findings therefore indicate several priority areas for sustainable CBT development: establishing an inclusive stakeholder platform, increasing the representation of the Khasia community in planning and benefit-sharing, developing community-owned tourism enterprises, improving safety and basic visitor services, reducing dependence on unregulated stone quarrying and sand extraction, and introducing monitoring mechanisms for economic, socio-cultural, and environmental outcomes.

Within this integrated planning environment, community engagement and empowerment function as central enabling mechanisms. Drawing on the study's findings and recent empowerment

scholarship, the model highlights awareness (conscientisation), unity (solidarity), and control (power) as key internal variables shaping community capacity to engage meaningfully with CBT initiatives (Williamson et al., 2024). While the findings indicate the presence of psychological empowerment through cultural recognition, economic and political empowerment remain limited, particularly for the Khasia community, echoing concerns raised in earlier CBT studies in marginalised settings (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Scheyvens, 1999). This suggests that empowerment strategies must extend beyond skills training to include community-owned enterprises, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, and institutionalised roles in tourism decision-making. In Arnstein's (1969) terms, the model points towards a gradual transition from consultation and placation towards partnership and greater citizen control, contingent on both internal capacity development and sustained external support.

The final component of the model concerns measurable sustainability impacts. The findings suggest that participation and planning are relevant to economic, socio-cultural, and environmental outcomes. Where participation remains uneven, economic benefits are unequally distributed, social cohesion weakens, and environmental pressures persist, a pattern widely noted in CBT and pro-poor tourism literature (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Accordingly, the model aligns sustainability assessment with indicators related to livelihood diversification, equity in income distribution, cultural preservation, and ecological integrity (Jackson, 2025; Scheyvens, 1999). By explicitly linking sustainability impacts to governance and empowerment processes, the model reframes sustainability not as a by-product of tourism growth, but as an outcome of how tourism is planned, controlled, and monitored.

Overall, the proposed CBT model contributes to existing literature by demonstrating how sustainable tourism development in ethnically diverse and ecologically sensitive destinations depends on the integration of participation, empowerment, and collaborative planning, rather than on community involvement alone. In the context of Jaflong, CBT offers a pathway to reduce dependence on extractive livelihoods such as unregulated stone and sand mining, strengthen cultural stewardship, and enhance community well-being. However, this potential can only be realised through deliberate institutional design, negotiated power-sharing, and continuous evaluation, reinforcing the argument that CBT is not inherently sustainable but becomes so through governance choices and sustained collective action (Scheyvens, 2002; Williamson et al., 2024; Wondirad et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion, implications, and limitations

6.1 Conclusion

Bangladesh Tourism Board has developed community-based tourism guidelines (2021) and a CBT training module to make the country a sustainable destination (Islam et al., 2024). Yet, there are no particular tourism strategies to develop sustainable CBT in Jaflong. This study explores the tourism sector of Jaflong and how it can be sustainable through developing CBT. Findings of this study suggest that, in Jaflong, community-based tourism can be used to boost the level of local

communities' participation, particularly the ethnic community, in sustainable development (Jamal & Getz, 1995). The study suggests that CBT in Jaflong could help to regenerate and differentiate culture-based sites, adding value to tourism products and services (Duxbury et al., 2021; Qu & Zollet, 2023). However, the tourism industry in Jaflong does not have any planned development programmes, particularly for the Khasia community. The opportunities and challenges presented in the research include the enthusiasm of the community and challenges of low service quality and lack of proper planning. The study highlights the significance of true empowerment of the community, inclusive governance, and capacity building using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation theory. Finally, with appropriate implementation of the proposed model, CBT in Jaflong can be a replicable model of sustainable tourism development across rural parts of Bangladesh.

The findings of this study suggest that there are inequalities in terms of community participation where the general community stands in the Placation stage, and the Khasia community stands under the Consultation stage in Arnstein's Ladder of Participation. The Khasia community is still limited in its empowerment, particularly in the economic aspect. Psychological advantages exist, particularly in terms of cultural pride; however, perceived cultural preservation, social cohesion, and political empowerment remain limited. Competing priorities, power asymmetry, and ambiguous policies complicate the cooperation among stakeholders. More context-specific sustainable tourism policies and training programmes can boost local empowerment, safety, and tourist satisfaction, ensuring long-term gains for all stakeholders on the pathway to sustainable tourism development in Jaflong. A framework, such as the one proposed in this study, that promotes a shared vision, inclusive decision-making, and working towards sustainability among the stakeholders is recommended for establishing sustainable CBT in Jaflong. Hence, in addition to community participation, sustained institutional coordination, inclusive governance, and continuous stakeholder collaboration are key criteria for ensuring long-term success of CBT in Jaflong.

6.2 Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

The study contributes to the academic community, policymakers, and other stakeholders. In terms of theoretical implications, the study contributes to the theoretical discussion of community-based tourism by incorporating Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Getz and Jamal's stakeholder collaboration, and Scheyvens's empowerment frameworks into a single holistic framework. In terms of practical and policy implications, the proposed sustainable CBT framework can be utilised as an efficient guideline for systematic tourism planning in Jaflong, indicating the distinctive features of inclusive governance, transparent decisions, and equitable distribution of benefits. The research points to several viable solutions, such as training the local population, environmentally friendly and culturally suitable housing, and enhanced collaboration with stakeholders whose assistance is needed for a sustainable CBT development model. These reinforce the theoretical connections between sustainable development goals 8, 10, and 15 and community engagement, making CBT a model of inclusive rural tourism development in the Global South (Jackson, 2025). Finally, the results will inform policymakers and stakeholders in developing sustainable tourism strategies in Jaflong and other similar destinations, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations linked to this research. Firstly, the case-specific nature of the research is acknowledged. Although the research provides an analytically transferable CBT framework for sustainable development, the coverage of only one destination limits the research findings' generalisability. Secondly, both the qualitative and quantitative data captured the self-reported perceptions of the participants. Therefore, the findings reflect the perceptions of the respondents, which are analytically important but not enough to establish causal claims. Thirdly, the research captures the tourism governance and community engagement for a specific timeframe (cross-sectional data collection); hence, it lacks the ability to capture how community dynamics and their participation, collaboration, or empowerment evolve over time. Finally, the research also acknowledges challenges linked to resources, such as limited data availability, time restrictions, and challenges in data collection due to language barriers, particularly for the Khasia community. Future research should consider these and test the proposed framework in other CBT potential destinations, especially those that are ethnically, socially, and ecologically diverse and rich in resources.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1: Themes and sub-themes of thematic analysis

Themes	Sub-themes
Economic Impact of Tourism	Increased community income. Diversification of local employment opportunities.
Community Participation and Attitudes	Direct local involvement in tourism activities. Supportive attitude towards tourism development. Desire for government support and proper planning to develop tourism.
Tourism Management and Governance	Role of local authorities (UNO, BGB, Police) along with local communities. Lack of comprehensive tourism planning and framework for tourism development. Lack of stakeholder collaboration.
Capacity Building and Skill Development	Absence of community capacity-building programmes. Need for language training (Bangla) for the Khasia community. Requirements for professional training.
Infrastructure and Facilities	Lack of accommodation and dining options for tourists in Khasia Punjee.
Environmental and Cultural Preservation	Punishment, e.g., fines. Boundaries and protective barriers. Efforts to minimise the negative impacts of tourism by local stakeholders. Tourist awareness creation.
Sustainable Tourism Development	Community suggestions for sustainable tourism growth with the inclusion of the community. Need for government funding and proper planning.
Tourist Motivations and Experiences	Low interest in Khasia culture and lifestyle. Attraction to natural beauty and agricultural practices. Complaints about overcharging for tourism services and a lack of facilities. Suggestions for improving the quality of services, increasing the safety system, and standardising pricing.

Appendix 2: Awareness of the long-term benefits of tourism among local communities

Awareness	General Community (%)	Khasia Community (%)
Aware	62.50	10
Not aware	37.50	90

Appendix 3: Community perceptions of empowerment, mean (SD)

Sign of empowerment	Mean and Standard Deviation (SD)	
	General Community	Khasia Community
The tourism sector is a means of income for many households in my community.	4.00 (0.81)	1.60 (0.67)
Most tourism services (accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, and tour operations) are provided by the community.	4.25 (0.72)	2.78 (0.95)
I would like to be involved or to get more involved in tourism businesses in my communities.	3.93 (0.84)	2.05 (0.78)
I need more training in tourism-related skills to get involved in the tourism related ventures.	3.35 (0.94)	3.00 (1.01)
Products produced by community people are used in tourism-related business ventures.	2.00 (0.76)	2.18 (0.82)
Natural resources have been conserved properly as a result of tourism growth.	4.10 (0.79)	4.73 (0.48)
Local traditions and culture have been reinforced and maintained by tourism development	4.00 (0.80)	2.13 (0.79)
Community members have enjoyed living in greater social cohesion and integrity as a result of the tourism development	2.53 (0.93)	2.21 (0.87)
Local people in my community are proud of the outside recognition of the value of their culture and motherland.	4.10 (0.76)	4.20 (0.72)
Many community members have increased confidence to be involved in tourism activities for tourism development.	3.75 (0.85)	3.58 (0.90)
All community members have equal opportunities to express opinions and ideas on tourism development.	2.13 (0.82)	2.08 (0.78)
The community's opinions are incorporated in all tourism development planning decisions.	2.00 (0.75)	1.90 (0.74)
Local people are motivated to decide on tourism development, incorporating their needs and interests.	3.25 (0.97)	2.78 (0.95)