



## **JOURNAL OF EVENT, TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY STUDIES**

<https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jeth>

How to cite this article:

Ahmed, S., Rahman, M. Z., & Shamsuzzoha, A. T. M. (2025). Economic, Political, and Cultural Exclusion in Tourism Development: A Case Study of Sajek Valley, Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Journal of Event, Tourism and Hospitality Studies*, 5, 73 – 93. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jeth2025.5.5>

### **ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL EXCLUSION IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF SAJEK VALLEY, CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS**

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Received: 6/3/2025

Revised: 21/5/2025

Accepted: 30/7/2025

Published: 31/7/2025

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the dynamics of social exclusion within the rapidly expanding tourism sector of Sajek Valley, located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh - a region inhabited by indigenous communities and subject to post-conflict reconstruction. Development of tourism is a part of such reconstruction and peace-building efforts within the region, as well as empowering the indigenous community. However, in many cases the development of tourism lacks proper inclusivity, rather introducing exclusionary elements that hinder the sustainable peace-building and reconstruction efforts. Sajek Valley is not an exception in this case. The research focuses on three intersecting dimensions of exclusion: economic, political, and social, with a particular emphasis on the lived experiences of indigenous groups such as the Tripura and Lusai communities. This location was selected due to the expanding nature of the tourism industry here: while tourism has boomed in Sajek Valley, it has done so without adequately addressing the socio-political vulnerabilities of local populations, making it a critical site for examining exclusion within tourism development. Utilizing qualitative methods, including 20 key informant interviews, 4 in-depth interviews, and 2 focus group discussions, the study employs thematic analysis to interpret the data, allowing for in-depth exploration of recurring exclusionary patterns. Findings reveal political exclusion manifested through lack of involvement in tourism planning, forced displacement, and inadequate indigenous representation in local decision-making bodies. Relationship exclusion is evident in deteriorating inter-ethnic relations, exacerbated by unequal power dynamics and externally influenced favoritism. Economic and resource exclusion appears through severe environmental stress, including water scarcity and deforestation, disproportionately burdening indigenous residents. The study contributes to the literature by offering

grounded, context-specific insights into how tourism-driven development can reproduce inequalities in a post-conflict regions like CHT, where tourism is promoted as a tool for peacebuilding. The study underscores the urgent need for inclusive, participatory tourism planning and holistic policies that protects the rights and well-being of local communities.

**Keywords:** Social exclusion; tourism development; indigenous communities; environmental challenges; Sajek Valley.

## INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, a densely populated country with limited land and resources, is increasingly diversifying its sources of economic development and cultural diplomacy. In this context, tourism is being actively promoted as a key sector. The country offers attractions such as the world's longest sea beach at Cox's Bazar and the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, which have the potential to elevate tourism as a national strategy to generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance diplomatic capital (Siddiqui, 2023). More importantly, tourism is also emerging as a tool for post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. In this regard, tourism development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) provides a compelling case (Butler et al., 2023). Located in southeastern Bangladesh, the CHT is an ethnically diverse region inhabited by the Jumma people, a collective term for ethnic communities including the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Lusai and others, along with the Bengali population, a significant portion of whom migrated to the region after Bangladesh's independence in 1971 (Van Schendel, 1992)

After independence, the CHT experienced phases of rebellion, armed conflict, militarization, and political instability. Although the CHT Peace Accord created a foundation for reconciliation, it has only been partially implemented so far (Nibir, 2023). In this fragile post-conflict context, tourism holds potential not only for economic development but also for empowering ethnic communities and contributing to sustainable peace, but only if the development process is inclusive. If not, it may reproduce or even intensify existing tensions within the region. To prevent such negative consequences, it is crucial to identify and address the risk factors, particularly the exclusionary dynamics within tourism development. This paper examines one such development project, Sajek Valley, to assess the extent to which exclusionary elements are present and to explore their implications for peace and inclusion in the CHT.

Sajek Valley, located in the Rangamati district of the CHT, has become one of the flagship destinations in Bangladesh's domestic tourism landscape (Shachi, 2017). Known for its scenic views and temperate climate, Sajek has seen a sharp increase in tourist arrivals in the past decade, accompanied by infrastructure upgrades and market-led investments (Ahmed et al., 2023). Tourism development in Sajek is framed as a tool for post-conflict recovery, meant to promote cultural appreciation and shared prosperity between indigenous and Bengali communities (Ahmed et al., 2023; Butler et al., 2023). However, like other tourist spots in CHT, the narrative of development is not linear and the issue of inclusivity remains in question. The development boom has brought with it paved roads, electricity, new schools, and alternative livelihoods, especially through hospitality and transportation. Yet, the distribution of such benefits, as well as the side effects mentioned, should be examined rigorously to ensure sustainable development, as there are concerns such as displacement, environmental concerns, lack of involving the local community in decision-making, and environmental degradation, among others (Ahmed et al., 2023). These under-explored dynamics need to be systematically investigated and

addressed; otherwise such development models, even when well-intentioned, can trigger further inequities.

What distinguishes this study from existing literature is its effort to unpack the layered and intersectional forms of exclusion - economic, political, and social - experienced by indigenous communities within a booming tourism destination in a post-conflict setting. While prior studies have focused on tourism's contributions to local economies, fewer have interrogated how these benefits are distributed or withheld, especially in regions with complex ethno-political histories like the CHT. The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether and how elements of social exclusion are embedded in the tourism sector of Sajek Valley. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Assess the economic impacts of tourism on local indigenous communities and identify any patterns of exclusion from economic benefits.
2. Examine the political dynamics influencing tourism development in Sajek and the extent to which indigenous voices are included in policy and decision-making processes.
3. Explore the social implications of tourism on indigenous communities, including changes in cultural practices and community cohesion.

By centering the perspectives of indigenous residents in Sajek Valley, this research offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the discourse on inclusive tourism. It provides empirical evidence on how development initiatives, if not holistically planned by following inclusive principles, may inadvertently reproduce marginalization, and it offers policy insights to better align sustainable tourism growth with the goals of social justice, cultural integrity, and local empowerment. The findings of this study also contribute to the knowledge of development initiatives as a tool of peacebuilding initiatives in different parts of the world.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Tourism is viewed as a potential driver for inclusive and sustainable development, particularly in indigenous and post-conflict contexts. Around the world, initiatives led by indigenous communities themselves have demonstrated how tourism can become a vehicle for cultural revitalization, and self-determination. In sub-Arctic Canada, the establishment of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) provides an alternative to colonial conservation and industrial models. These areas, guided by indigenous priorities and knowledge, offer not only environmental protection but also opportunities for culturally grounded tourism that enhances local governance and economic autonomy (Vandermale & Mason, 2024). A similar pattern is observed in Southeast Asia, where in Vietnam, the Ta Oi community has creatively adapted traditional crafts, cuisine, and rituals into tourism offerings. This process reflects a dynamic form of cultural preservation rooted in community agency rather than external prescriptions, allowing intergenerational perspectives to shape evolving tourism practices (Nguyen et al., 2025).

However, while these cases reveal the potential of tourism to empower marginalized communities, there are other studies which highlight its opposite impact. When tourism is not inclusively planned, it can intensify existing social and spatial inequalities. Research in rural China reveals how residents situated in different areas of tourism zones perceive conflict and deprivation in spatially distinct ways, with core and peripheral residents experiencing more acute economic and cultural pressures than those in expansion zones (Li et al., 2024). Complementing this empirical insight, Abdullah, Carr, and Lee (2025)

offer a theoretical lens to understand tourism conflict, arguing that it stems from power asymmetries and governance failures that exclude marginalized groups from meaningful participation in decision-making.

Further emphasizing the risks of exclusion, Guo and Jordan (2022) show how tourism development in rural Chinese communities can marginalize residents from economic, political, and relational benefits. Their case study in Likeng Village revealed that exclusion from tourism-related decision-making, lack of community inclusion, and disconnected policy processes contributed to local conflict. They argue that meaningful resident participation is crucial to mitigate the dynamic process of exclusion and tension in tourism-dependent rural areas. These studies reinforce the importance of designing tourism with a grounded and localized approach. In South Asia, tourism development in indigenous and mountainous regions has followed similarly complex trajectories. Studies from the northwestern Himalayas in India show that while local communities often perceive tourism as a source of livelihood, they also raise concerns about environmental degradation, unregulated visitor growth, and resource strain (Wani et al., 2023). These concerns reveal a gap between the rhetoric of development and the lived realities of communities.

In Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has emerged as a prime focus of tourism policy in recent decades, envisioned as a post-conflict region ripe for tourism-led growth. Yet the literature critically interrogates this narrative, pointing to a deep entanglement between tourism expansion, state interests, and lack of indigenous agency. Chakma (2016) argues that tourism in the CHT is militarized and exclusionary, with development projects, such as resort construction, proceeding without prior, and informed consent from local indigenous communities. Sajib (2021) further explores how the commodification of nature and culture under the guise of tourism development reduces indigenous lifeways to consumable experiences, raising ethical concerns.

At the same time, research has documented some positive social impacts of tourism in CHT. Butler et al. (2023) show that tourism can contribute to community reconciliation and strengthen human, social, and cultural capital among the Jumma peoples. However, the absence of political capital remains a critical barrier to truly inclusive development. Islam and Carlsen (2016) similarly find that while tourism has the potential to alleviate poverty in rural indigenous communities, its benefits are often limited by structural exclusion and poor coordination among stakeholders. These findings converge on the view that tourism in CHT is not a neutral process, it is embedded in power hierarchies.

Despite the increasing academic interest in tourism across the CHT region, there remains a notable absence of focused, systematic research on Sajek Valley, one of the most recent and fastest-growing tourist destinations in the area. Unlike other parts of the CHT where tourism has developed over decades, Sajek's rise as a tourist hub began only in the early 2010, following the completion of army-led infrastructure projects. This rapid transformation has turned a previously remote and secluded village into a symbol of Bangladesh's highland tourism. Yet, the social, environmental, and political consequences of this transformation remain poorly understood. To date, only a handful of studies have explicitly examined tourism development in Sajek. Among them, Ahmed et al. (2023) provide an initial exploration of the area, noting the positive contributions of tourism, such as modernization, road construction, increasing harmonious relationship between Bengali and local ethnic communities, availability of electricity, education facilities, increased welfare services from the authority and new livelihood options for ethnic minority people.

The study discusses ongoing challenges related to displacement, inter-ethnic mistrust, and environmental concerns, but from a surface level. Their findings point to the potential of inclusive tourism but also signal the need for further in-depth investigation. As a newly emerging site within an ethnically diverse region, the case of Sajek valley should be analyzed so that any sign of reproduction or reconfiguration of social exclusion can be traced and addressed. This review reveals that while the broader CHT region has received growing scholarly attention, Sajek Valley itself has not been systematically studied, especially in relation to the intersecting dimensions of social exclusion. Addressing this research gap, the present study focuses on the lived experiences of local ethnic minorities in Sajek Valley to critically examine the state of tourism and understand the exclusionary aspects of such development in post-conflict, multi-ethnic contexts.

### **Analytical Framework Operationalizing Social Exclusion**

Social exclusion, in the realm of social policy, is conceptually linked with terms such as deprivation, poverty, inequality, discrimination, marginalization, and dispossession (Silver, 1995; Burchardt et al., 1999). It denotes a state of being barred from accessing essential resources or opportunities, including stable employment, financial earnings, property ownership, credit access, housing, education, skills, social welfare benefits, legal citizenship, democratic participation, public goods, social relationships, and fundamental human values like respect and fulfillment (Silver, 1995). The scholarly discourse highlights the need for careful use of the term "social exclusion" due to its complex nature (Silver, 1995; Burchardt et al., 1999; Sen, 2000). Studies have shown that social exclusion involves multiple dimensions, such as insufficient financial resources, limited employment opportunities, inadequate political involvement, and poor social integration (Aasland & Fløtten, 2001; Francis, 2001). Levitas et al. (2007) identified seven dimensions of social exclusion: economic, social, political, neighborhood, individual, spatial, and group. Meanwhile, Burchardt et al. (2002) from the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics proposed four dimensions: inadequate consumption, limited production, insufficient political engagement, and restricted social interaction.

This study adopts the analytical lens of social exclusion, drawing conceptually from the framework proposed by Guo and Jordan (2022), who identify four key dimensions of exclusion in tourism-affected host communities. These include: economic exclusion, which involves unequal access to tourism-derived benefits, limited employment - particularly for women, and the absence of skills training opportunities; political exclusion, characterized by restricted avenues for expressing community interests, lack of meaningful participation in tourism-related decision-making, and inadequate feedback mechanisms; relationship exclusion, reflected in deteriorating community cohesion, weakened interpersonal trust, and growing tensions between local residents and tourists; and cultural exclusion, where weakened cultural identity, loss of attachment to place, and the commodification or erosion of traditional values can undermine the social fabric of indigenous communities.

Building on and adapting this framework, the present study operationalizes social exclusion through four interrelated and context-specific dimensions: economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, inter-ethnic relationship exclusion, and environmental/resource deprivation (Table 1). This multidimensional approach provides a grounded understanding of how tourism development in Sajek Valley - one of the most recent and rapidly expanding destinations within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) - both reflects and reinforces historical inequalities and marginalization patterns. The framework enables a systematic analysis of the lived experiences of local ethnic communities in a post-

conflict, multi-ethnic setting, with particular attention to how exclusion operates across governance, livelihoods, social relations, and access to essential natural resources.

**Table 1**

*Analytical Framework of the study*

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Conceptual Indicators</b>
<b>Social Exclusion</b>	Economic Marginalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal access to tourism-derived benefits</li> <li>• Limited employment opportunities</li> <li>• Lack of skills training opportunities</li> <li>• Displacement from economic resources</li> </ul>
	Political Disenfranchisement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted avenues for expressing community interests</li> <li>• Limited meaningful participation in tourism decision-making processes</li> <li>• Lack of consultation and inadequate feedback mechanism</li> <li>• Marginalization in local governance structures</li> </ul>
	Inter-ethnic Relationship Exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deteriorating community cohesion and mutual trust</li> <li>• Growing tensions between different ethnic groups</li> <li>• Unequal power dynamics among ethnic communities</li> <li>• Exclusionary alliances and external influences</li> </ul>
	Environmental/Resource Deprivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depletion of essential natural resources (e.g., water scarcity)</li> <li>• Increased environmental degradation (deforestation, pollution)</li> <li>• Limited access to basic resources due to tourism infrastructure expansion</li> <li>• Lack of sustainable resource management strategies</li> </ul>

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the patterns of social exclusion related to tourism development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), with a particular focus on Sajek Valley. A qualitative method was chosen to allow an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, enabling the study to uncover complex, context-specific insights from both indigenous ethnic communities and Bengali community. Such an approach is especially suitable for examining issues of exclusion, identity, and power, where subjective narratives and place-based meanings are critical to understanding social dynamics.

Data was collected from a total of 26 participants using three tools: 20 key informant interviews (KII), 4 in-depth interviews (IDI), and 2 focus group discussions (FGDs). The use of both FGDs and interviews enabled triangulation of perspectives - interviews provided detailed individual insights, while FGDs captured collective and sometimes contested narratives within communities. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents with direct involvement or knowledge of tourism dynamics in Sajek, while convenience sampling helped access additional participants during fieldwork given logistical constraints. The data collection was conducted exclusively in Sajek Valley.

Respondents were comprised of the businessman from the local ethnic community, businessman from the Bengali community, Headman (Ethnic Community Leaders), local Political Leaders, Law enforcement agencies (Army, BGB and Police Officers), Journalists (Local newspapers), employees from Ethnic communities and employees from Bengali Community categories, ensuring representation across different stakeholder groups. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, where interview transcripts and FGD notes were coded to identify recurring patterns and categories related to economic, political, and social exclusion. Thematic coding was conducted manually, and emerging themes were compared across different respondent groups to explore convergences and divergences in experiences. Key analytical themes were refined through iterative review and triangulated with field notes to ensure reliability.

### **Study Area**

Sajek Valley, situated within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh, serves as the specific geographic focus of this study due to its unique historical, socio-political, and economic contexts. Historically, the CHT region has experienced prolonged socio-political instability, marked by ethnic conflict, insurgency, and subsequent marginalization of indigenous communities. Within this broader context, Sajek Valley emerges as a critical case to explore tourism's role in transforming local livelihoods and inter-ethnic dynamics. Surrounded by the hills of Mizoram to the east and Tripura to the north, Sajek Valley exemplifies Bangladesh's cultural diversity, being home to diverse ethnic communities, including the Lusai, Tripura, Pangkhoa, and Chakma ethnic communities (Ali, 2021). Notable attractions such as Konglak Hill, Ruilui Para, Hamari Para, and Konglak Para have made Sajek increasingly prominent on Bangladesh's tourism map.

### **Figure 1**

Sajek Valley



*Source.* The Business Standard and Bangla Tribune.

The completion of a road network by the Bangladesh Army in 2014 dramatically shifted Sajek Valley from one of the most isolated regions to a rapidly developing tourist destination (Shachi, 2017). Before this infrastructural development, the region was largely inaccessible, and residents faced significant difficulties in connectivity. Such drastic infrastructural and economic shifts underscore the critical relevance of Sajek Valley as a research site, allowing an examination of both the potentials and pitfalls of rapid tourism-driven development in historically marginalized indigenous communities. The growth trajectory of Sajek's tourism industry is evident in the dramatic increase in resorts, from just six in 2016 to 83 in 2020, as registered with the Cottage Owners Association of Sajek (COAS) (Ali, 2021). This combination of historical struggle of CHT based indigenous groups, rapid infrastructural growth, ethnic diversity, and evolving economic opportunities positions Sajek Valley as an ideal and critical location for analyzing issues of inclusion and exclusion within tourism development.

## **RESULTS**

This section of the study highlights the exclusionary impacts on the local ethnic minorities in Sajek Valley due to tourism development. Political exclusion is marked by the lack of involvement in planning, forced displacement, and inadequate representation. Relationship exclusion surfaces through inter-ethnic tensions and deteriorating neighborhood relations. Economic and resource exclusion is evident in severe environmental challenges like water scarcity and deforestation.

### **Political Exclusion**

#### ***Lack of Involvement in Planning and Development***

Despite significant economic and infrastructural growth driven by tourism in Sajek Valley, local ethnic minorities, particularly the Tripura and Lusai communities, remain largely uninvolved in this development process. The concept of "relative deprivation" describes their experience of exclusion from economic benefits. A local Tripura businessman highlighted the economic marginalization, stated:

"We did not understand what tourism would mean for us. Outsiders from the Bengali and Chakma communities, who knew tourism better and had more financial resources, became the real beneficiaries." This sentiment of being economically sidelined due to lack of prior knowledge and capital was consistently echoed by respondents from indigenous communities.

The lack of consultation and involvement in initial planning phases further intensified these issues. Another Tripura respondent elaborated on this gap:

"We were never informed about the development plans. The army built roads and resorts, forcing families to relocate without proper explanation or preparation. Had we known, we could have built or expanded our own houses to benefit economically."

These sentiments highlight a consistent theme across interviews: the absence of meaningful local involvement leading to missed economic opportunities. Respondents consistently pointed out that authorities failed to provide essential training or capacity-building measures to enable locals to effectively participate in the tourism economy. Many indigenous residents now find themselves confined to low-paying, informal employment.

A local youth leader remarked: "If locals were trained for skilled jobs instead of just menial tasks, we could be self-sufficient. Instead, most operate small shops, which aren't enough." The impact of tourism extends beyond economic exclusion, significantly affecting other essential community services like education.

A local youth emphasized declining educational standards post-tourism development:

"Teachers are irregular and politically connected, and if we complain, we face threats. Education was already poor, but it's deteriorated since tourism started."

This underscores a widespread concern among respondents that tourism-led development neglects and undermines critical community infrastructure. Political marginalization compounds these issues, particularly evident within smaller ethnic groups like the Lusiai.

The headman of Konglak Para summarized their frustration:

"We weren't consulted before tourism started. Our small population has no political power or representation. Despite our historical roots, our voices aren't heard, and our future here feels uncertain."

This lack of political voice emerged among smaller ethnic groups, highlighting broader systemic exclusion. Overall, findings across respondents point to a pattern of inadequate consultation, limited economic inclusion, declining community services, and political marginalization, limiting the benefits local ethnic communities derive from tourism development.

### ***Forced Displacement***

Forced displacement emerges as one of the most critical outcomes of tourism-driven development in Sajek Valley, impacting the local ethnic communities, especially the Tripura. It is closely linked with political exclusion, where marginalized groups lack the political influence required to resist developments threatening their homes and livelihoods. Common patterns identified across respondents include inadequate consultation, absence of compensation, and lack of transparency in tourism developments, leading to social and economic disruptions. For instance, several Tripura families were relocated to make room for tourism infrastructures like resorts and parks without proper notice.

A local Tripura member expressed their community's experience:

"Initially, we were unaware of the tourism plans. The army built roads and structures claiming it was for our benefit. Later, families near Sajek Resort and Stone Garden were forcibly relocated without consultation. Outsiders who knew tourism profited immensely, renting our houses cheaply and reselling at higher rates. We lacked training and capital, leaving us economically marginalized."

This narrative reflects a broader systemic exclusion - locals were neither informed nor prepared for tourism's economic opportunities, leaving them vulnerable and impoverished.

Displacement also affects cultural and social integrity. Many families have longstanding ties to ancestral lands, integral to their identities and livelihoods. Another Tripura youth leader highlighted the vulnerability resulting from lack of land registration knowledge:

"We have lived here for generations, unaware of formal land registration procedures. Now, powerful outsiders buy lands without our consent, pressuring us to leave without adequate compensation. Our community feels threatened and helpless, lacking the leadership to voice our rights."

This statement captures the social disenfranchisement resulting from forced displacement and inadequate governance.

Further insights indicate that displacement is not confined to ethnic minorities; even Bengali businesspeople face similar threats from powerful developers collaborating with authorities: “Influential people pressure ethnic landlords to sell lands cheaply, displacing both ethnic families and smaller Bengali businesses like mine. If my landlord is forced out, I will have no choice but to close my restaurant.”

This testimony underscores how economic interests intersect with socio-political dynamics, intensifying displacement pressures across ethnic boundaries. Traditional communal land tenure systems are increasingly disrupted by tourism development.

Land previously managed communally is now privately owned and sold to businesses, displacing indigenous communities and undermining traditional practices. A local ethnic resort owner summarized this change:

“Our traditional system of mutual land sharing ended when tourism arrived. Influential Lushai individuals secured official rights and sold communal lands to businesses, forcing Tripura families to relocate.”

Several specific incidents illustrate these dynamics. Families displaced near the army resort were unaware of plans until their relocation was enforced by military and political authority. Similar displacement occurred in the development of Stone Garden, where unregistered family lands were overtaken by tourism projects, leaving residents with limited support and compensation. Another case involved socio-political pressures from influential individuals who purchased lands indirectly, compelling longstanding residents to leave without meaningful redress.

These examples collectively highlight forced displacement as a multifaceted outcome of tourism development, deeply tied to political exclusion, economic manipulation, and social vulnerability. Local indigenous communities in Sajek experience systematic marginalization through exclusionary practices that prioritize tourism-driven development at the expense of local rights, heritage, and socio-economic stability. In sum, respondents consistently reported feelings of exclusion, lack of consultation, inadequate compensation, and erosion of community cohesion. The findings clearly demonstrate saturation across interviews, underscoring the systemic nature of forced displacement in Sajek.

### ***Security Concern***

Security concerns, like other dimensions of political exclusion, negatively impact tourism and development in Sajek Valley. According to the interviewees marginalized indigenous communities and Bengali traders face ongoing threats posed by active armed rebel groups, despite the CHT Peace Accords. Persistent fear arises from rebel groups imposing demands for monthly payments ("Chanda") on local businesses, creating economic hardship and social division. Respondents described a lack of protection from local authorities, particularly highlighting the army's apparent ineffectiveness. A Bengali businessman stated:

“Rebel groups continually demand money and cause unrest. Complaining to the army only exacerbates our problems, yet the army remains inactive, despite clearly knowing what’s happening.”

This situation illustrates the broader challenge of political exclusion, where local communities feel neglected by authorities who are either unable or unwilling to intervene effectively. This dynamic not only limits economic stability but also generates distrust and dissatisfaction towards authorities.

The rebel groups' tactics extend beyond economic extortion, actively manipulating social and ethnic divisions. Another Bengali shop owner emphasized this point:

"Rebels don't want Bengali families here. If we refuse to pay, they instruct local ethnic communities to boycott our shops, effectively isolating us economically."

Such methods intensify ethnic tensions and deepen social divisions, showcasing how political exclusion is strategically used by rebels to maintain dominance. These practices exacerbate community fragmentation and create a volatile environment detrimental to tourism.

Economic hardships due to ongoing extortion further underline the systemic nature of insecurity in Sajek. Both Bengali and indigenous business operators shared similar struggles, as highlighted by a local ethnic restaurant employee:

"Despite our financial struggles, we are compelled to pay 'chanda' annually to rebel groups."

Corroborating this sentiment, a local Tripura businessman added: "Ethnic rebel groups deliberately hinder Bengali businesses here, creating continuous economic uncertainty."

These statements demonstrate the economic vulnerability faced by local businesses due to security threats, indicating saturation in respondents' experiences.

Security concerns also manifest in the displacement of ethnic minorities. Lusai families attempting to return from India face resistance from rebel groups, as described by the headman of Konglak Para:

"Many Lusai families tried returning from India, but rebel groups opposed this return, chasing them away despite the government's assurance of support. The army couldn't intervene due to inaccessible roads." This testimony illustrates the direct impact of insecurity and political exclusion, preventing displaced communities from reclaiming their homes and hindering reconciliation efforts critical for sustainable development. Additionally, tourism expansion has introduced new insecurities, including illicit drug trade and increased incidents of ransom-seeking. In other words, security issues in Sajek Valley, driven by rebel group activities and ineffective governance, exacerbate political exclusion, ethnic tensions, and economic hardships. Findings highlight respondents' shared sense of vulnerability and frustration, demonstrating saturation across the community. Effective security and governance interventions are urgently needed to address these entrenched problems and foster inclusive and stable development.

### ***Army Control***

The tight control exercised by the army over business and daily activities in Sajek Valley contributes to political exclusion as well, marginalizing both indigenous residents and Bengali communities. The requirement to seek army approval for constructing new resorts, repairing existing infrastructure, or even performing basic home repairs imposes substantial hardship, limiting local autonomy and economic opportunities. A Bengali resort owner described the issue, emphasizing preferential treatment: "Those closely aligned with or favored by the army easily obtain permissions, while ordinary traders face prolonged delays and bureaucracy. Influential people receive priority, while the rest of us suffer economically."

This statement underscores political exclusion manifesting through biased administrative practices that favor individuals with military connections, exacerbating economic disparities and reinforcing an exclusionary power structure. Similar frustration is expressed by a resort businessman from the ethnic community, who stated briefly yet pointedly: "Army permission is needed for everything, even for locals building or repairing their own houses." This quote emphasizes the universal impact of army

control across ethnic lines, further deepening local disenfranchisement. The headman of Konglak Para adds clarity regarding practical hardships caused by these regulations: "Even minor home repairs require army permission, and approvals often take five to six months, severely disrupting our lives." This example shows how bureaucratic delays directly disrupt the daily routines and economic livelihoods of residents, reinforcing a sense of exclusion and powerlessness among local communities. In other words, army control in Sajek Valley exemplifies political exclusion by systematically privileging those with military or political connections, while imposing administrative barriers on ordinary residents. These practices create economic and social injustice, undermining local autonomy and the broader potential for inclusive community development.

## **Relationship Exclusion**

### *Inter-ethnic tensions*

Inter-ethnic tensions in Sajek Valley, although not violent, manifest passively through deteriorating neighborhood relations and lack of trust, reflecting the dynamics of relationship exclusion. Particularly pronounced between the Tripura and Lusai communities, these tensions arise from perceived injustices and power imbalances exacerbated by tourism development and external alliances. The Tripura community experiences marginalization largely due to actions attributed to the Lusai community, particularly regarding land transactions and local leadership dynamics. A Tripura resort businessman succinctly expressed this frustration: "The Lusai Headman allowed the army to select tourist spots and build resorts without consulting us, the Tripuras, who lived here. Lusai individuals then sold our land to outsiders without our knowledge, forcing many Tripuras to relocate."

This reflects the exclusionary practices undermining trust and cooperation, highlighting how unilateral decisions disrupt social harmony, fuel resentment, and displace local residents. Additionally, despite their numerical majority, the Tripuras face domination from the Lusai community, which maintains influence through alliances extending to neighboring Mizoram, a state of India. A local Tripura businessman explained briefly: "Though we Tripuras are the majority, Lusai hold more power due to their connections with Mizoram and strategic alliances. This external support means authorities favor them, reinforcing our exclusion."

This statement emphasizes how external alliances deepen internal community divisions, exacerbating feelings of marginalization and powerlessness among the Tripura. On the other hand, the Lusai community perceives pressure primarily from the Chakmas, further complicating inter-ethnic relations. The Lusai headman described these tensions:

"Chakma leaders resist our efforts to establish a trade center here, fearing increased Bengali settlement. But without Bengalis, there is no development. Chakma resistance restricts our development and limits our ties with Mizoram."

This reveals the competitive nature of ethnic relationships in Sajek Valley, where communities strategically seek external alliances to counteract local pressures, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and exclusion.

### **Cultural Challenges**

The rapid development of the tourism industry in Sajek Valley has had a profound impact on the local culture, leading to diminished cultural identity and attachment, as well as a perceived attack on traditional values. This cultural exclusion has manifested through increased contact with outsiders, economic changes, and the erosion of communal practices, all of which have disrupted the social fabric of the local ethnic communities. With the influx of tourists, local teenagers and children are increasingly coming into contact with outsiders, which has led to significant cultural shifts. The changes in economic life have fostered a rise in individualism, eroding the previously strong sense of community. A local Tripura people's representative described the cultural deterioration:

"There was a time when if the Headman and Karbari called any meeting, people from all the 40-50 families would attend. This practice is lost now. Our previous unity has been diminishing day by day. Mutual respect has lost. During the tourist season, the studies of children are hampered gravely. The children want to mingle with the tourists. Tourists often use them to bring local wine. That is why, those who can afford it, live in rented houses in Khagrachhari, Marishya, and Dighinala. This development has been related to forced displacement. Earlier, there was a hereditary division of land. Now as the people have increased after development, we are having problems within our community due to increased value of land."

This quote highlights the erosion of traditional communal practices and mutual respect, which have been replaced by individualistic pursuits driven by economic opportunities associated with tourism. The traditional role of community meetings, once central to maintaining social cohesion, has diminished, reflecting a loss of cultural identity and attachment. The local resort businessman further elaborated on the cultural challenges faced by the community:

"This was a small village before. I used to meet everyone and go to work together. Now, the increasing individualism after development causes us to lose these customs and practices. Although the area has improved a bit economically, it is suffering culturally. The festivals, the Pala Parvan, etc., lost their appeal. Again, many did not know how to keep the money preserved in their hands."

This account underscores the cultural disintegration that accompanies economic development. The loss of traditional festivals and communal activities signifies a broader cultural decline. The emphasis on individual economic gain has supplanted collective cultural practices, leading to a perceived attack on traditional values. The perceived attack on traditional values and the resulting cultural exclusion are evident in the shift from hereditary land division to market-driven land transactions. As the value of land has increased due to tourism development, internal conflicts within the community have also risen. This shift undermines the traditional cultural framework that once guided social relations and land use, further alienating the local population from their cultural heritage. The development of tourism in Sajek Valley has significantly impacted the local culture through processes of cultural exclusion. The influx of outsiders, economic changes, and the rise of individualism have eroded communal practices, diminished cultural identity, and led to a perceived attack on traditional values.

## **Economic and Resource Exclusion**

### ***Environmental Challenges and Lack of Resources***

The rapid growth of tourism in Sajek Valley has introduced environmental challenges as well, predominantly affecting local ethnic communities. These challenges highlight resource exclusion, wherein essential resources such as water have become increasingly scarce, and environmental degradation has accelerated, limiting residents' opportunities to benefit from tourism. Local residents face severe difficulties accessing clean water, as highlighted by the headman of Konglak Para:

"Water scarcity is severe. Despite government promises, nothing tangible has changed. We still travel far into the hills for water."

This statement reflects the gap between policy promises and local realities, where residents continue to endure physical hardship due to inadequate infrastructure. Tourism businesses also suffer economically from this crisis, as a Bengali resort businessman noted:

"Water accounts for 50–60% of our operating costs. With proper water infrastructure, we could significantly lower prices and offer better services to tourists."

Thus, inadequate resource management not only burdens locals but also restricts the overall potential of tourism-driven economic growth.

Deforestation further compounds resource exclusion, exacerbating environmental deterioration. A local ethnic resort official emphasized:

"Tourism has led to widespread deforestation. Loss of trees has significantly reduced water availability. Previously accessible water sources now require hours of travel."

The removal of forest cover directly impacts the land's ability to sustain water sources, deepening the resource crisis faced by local communities. Government inaction and poor public awareness further aggravate these issues. A Tripura resident noted:

"Deforestation has increased temperatures and pollution. Without government intervention, the situation worsens. No waste management facilities are provided; we manage at our own cost."

This highlights the urgent need for government-led initiatives to support sustainable environmental practices.

Finally, the Army Chief in charge of Sajek acknowledged these escalating challenges:

"The rapid growth in tourism has greatly increased waste and traffic congestion. Despite attempts to manage the situation, we face considerable difficulties without proper waste management systems and infrastructure." In sum, environmental degradation in Sajek Valley, driven by unchecked tourism, disadvantages local communities through resource exclusion. Sustainable development must address these resource inequities and environmental concerns to ensure equitable benefits for all stakeholders (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Exclusionary Elements/Factors of tourism development in Sajek Valley*



## **DISCUSSION**

This study highlights the challenges faced by local ethnic minorities in Sajek Valley due to tourism development. Despite the economic and infrastructural benefits, these communities, particularly the Tripura people, experience exclusion and marginalization. Key findings include the lack of involvement in planning and development, forced displacement, political marginalization, impact on education, environmental challenges, security concerns, army control, inter-ethnic tensions, and cultural challenges. The local communities were not adequately informed or consulted about tourism development plans. This led to economic opportunities being exploited mainly by outsiders, leaving locals sidelined and creating a sense of relative deprivation among the Tripura community. Tourism infrastructure development has frequently led to the forced displacement of local families without proper consultation or compensation, disrupting their lives and eroding their cultural and economic stability. Local ethnic communities, such as the Lusai people, feel excluded and powerless due to their lack of political representation and influence, leaving them marginalized and vulnerable.

The focus on tourism has diverted attention and resources from critical sectors like education. Political influence over educational institutions has further deteriorated the quality of education, undermining the community's future prospects. Tourism development has caused significant environmental degradation, including deforestation and water scarcity, leading to severe difficulties in accessing essential resources and exacerbating exclusion and marginalization. Armed rebel groups and extortion practices have created substantial obstacles for businesses and exacerbated ethnic tensions, hindering stability and economic progress. The pervasive control of the army over business activities has created significant hardships for residents, reinforcing economic disparities and marginalizing those without influence. Relationship exclusion is evident in the lack of mutual trust and deteriorating neighbourhood

relations between different ethnic groups, particularly between the Tripura and Lusai communities. The rapid development of tourism has eroded cultural identity and traditional values, leading to a rise in individualism and a decline in communal practices.

**Table 2**

*Summary of key findings of the study*

Variables (Dimensions)	Subthemes	Summary of Key Findings
<b>Political Exclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of involvement in planning and decision-making</li> <li>• Forced displacement</li> <li>• Security concerns- Army control and bureaucracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous communities excluded from initial tourism planning and consultation.</li> <li>• Systematic forced relocation without compensation or transparency.</li> <li>• Rebel group extortion and army inaction exacerbate insecurity.</li> <li>• Army regulations and administrative bureaucracy severely limit local autonomy and economic participation.</li> </ul>
<b>Relationship Exclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inter-ethnic tensions</li> <li>• Erosion of trust and cooperation between ethnic groups</li> <li>• Unequal power dynamics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing mistrust and resentment between Tripura, Lusai, and Chakma communities.</li> <li>• External alliances and political favoritism exacerbate ethnic divisions.</li> <li>• Deterioration of communal cohesion and traditional conflict resolution practices.</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Exclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of cultural identity and attachment to place</li> <li>• Disintegration of communal traditions and values</li> <li>• Increased individualism and erosion of traditional social practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural identity undermined by influx of tourists and economic individualism.</li> <li>• Traditional festivals and communal meetings declining significantly.</li> <li>• Rising internal conflicts due to commercialization and land commodification disrupting cultural heritage.</li> </ul>

**Economic and Resource Exclusion**

- Environmental degradation (e.g., deforestation)
- Severe water scarcity and resource depletion
- Absence of effective resource management
- Economic marginalization due to lack of skills and training
- Severe water shortages significantly impacting local livelihoods and tourism businesses.
- Rapid deforestation causing critical environmental damage and reduced resource access.
- Inadequate governmental response and infrastructure aggravate environmental crises.
- Indigenous residents confined mostly to low-skilled, low-paying jobs without necessary training.

The findings of this study reaffirm and extend existing literature on exclusion in tourism development, particularly in indigenous and post-conflict contexts. Echoing Guo and Jordan (2022), residents in Sajek Valley were excluded from economic, political, and community-level decisions, with similar consequences of resentment and conflict due to lack of meaningful participation. Forced displacement in Sajek parallels Chakma's (2016) account of militarized tourism in CHT, where indigenous communities were evicted without consent. This study further supports Butler et al. (2023), who found that a lack of political capital prevents marginalized groups from shaping tourism or accessing its benefits.

Tourism's diversion of attention from critical services like education in Sajek reflects Islam and Carlsen's (2016) concern that tourism often overlooks structural inequalities in rural indigenous areas. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2023) documented how unregulated tourism in Sajek leads to environmental degradation - findings mirrored here in the form of water scarcity, deforestation, and poor waste management. Security issues - such as extortion and ineffective military protection - align with Ahmed (2017), who critiqued the role of military presence in perpetuating fear rather than safeguarding local communities. Army control over construction and licensing in Sajek reinforces this pattern of political exclusion. Inter-ethnic tensions between Tripura and Lusai communities observed in this study are consistent with the power dynamics and mistrust described by Tripura et al. (2023). Additionally, the commercialization of culture found here echoes Sajib (2021), who warned that tourism in CHT commodifies indigenous traditions. Finally, the pattern of conflict arising from unequal power relations supports the conceptual insights of Abdullah et al. (2025), who emphasize the need for justice-based tourism development that centers local voices and values. Together, these comparisons highlight that Sajek Valley, though a relatively new tourism site, reflects long-standing patterns of exclusion identified in the literature—and urgently requires inclusive, participatory approaches to ensure just outcomes for indigenous communities.

The study's findings have several implications for tourism development in Sajek Valley and similar contexts. To address the exclusion of local communities, it is essential to involve them in planning and decision-making processes. Providing adequate information, training, and resources can enable them to benefit from tourism opportunities. Establishing proper compensation and support mechanisms for families displaced by tourism development is crucial. This includes fair compensation, relocation assistance, and opportunities for economic integration. Efforts should be made to enhance the political representation and influence of marginalized communities. Ensuring their voices are heard and needs

addressed in development initiatives is vital. The focus on tourism should not come at the expense of critical sectors like education. Prioritizing investment in education infrastructure and quality can ensure long-term development and well-being of local communities. Adopting sustainable tourism practices to mitigate environmental impacts is essential. Measures to address deforestation, water scarcity, and pollution can help ensure that local communities have access to essential resources.

Effective measures are needed to address security concerns and protect local businesses and communities from extortion and violence. Coordinated efforts between local authorities, security forces, and community leaders are necessary. Policies should ensure equitable economic opportunities for all community members. Supporting local entrepreneurs, providing training and capacity-building programs, and fostering inclusive business practices are key. Efforts must be made to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of local communities. Supporting traditional practices, festivals, and communal activities can strengthen cultural identity and social cohesion. Initiatives to foster mutual trust and cooperation between different ethnic groups are essential. Promoting dialogue, resolving conflicts, and ensuring fair and inclusive development practices can address underlying issues of exclusion and marginalization.

This study underscores the importance of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable tourism development practices. By addressing issues of exclusion, displacement, and marginalization, it is possible to create a just and beneficial tourism industry that supports the well-being and cultural heritage of local communities. The lessons from Sajek Valley offer valuable insights for similar contexts, guiding efforts to achieve balanced and inclusive development outcomes. At the same time, for future research agendas, the findings of this study have paved a path towards theme-based research initiatives on Sajek Valley, such as research on inter-ethnic relationships, research on environmental degradation, the impact of culture, and so on.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study provides a grounded analysis of the challenges faced by local ethnic minorities in Sajek Valley as a result of tourism development. Despite the economic and infrastructural advancements, the findings reveal significant socio-economic and cultural exclusion among these communities, particularly the Tripura people. The critical issues identified include the lack of involvement in planning and development, forced displacement, political marginalization, deteriorating educational standards, environmental degradation, security concerns, army control, inter-ethnic tensions, and cultural erosion. These findings underscore the pressing need for more inclusive and equitable tourism development practices. The comparison with existing literature demonstrates that the issues observed in Sajek Valley are reflective of broader trends seen in other regions where tourism development intersects with indigenous and marginalized communities. The patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and environmental degradation highlighted in this study are consistent with those identified in other contexts, as shown in the discussion section, reinforcing the necessity for a holistic and participatory approach to tourism development that prioritizes the needs and rights of local communities.

The implications of this study are multifaceted. First, it is imperative to involve local communities in the planning and decision-making processes of tourism development. This participatory approach ensures that their voices are heard and their needs are addressed, fostering a sense of ownership and

inclusion. Second, there is a critical need for adequate compensation and support mechanisms for families displaced by tourism development. This includes fair compensation, relocation assistance, and opportunities for economic integration. Third, enhancing political representation for marginalized communities is essential to ensure their influence in decision-making processes. Fourth, prioritizing investment in education is crucial to ensure the long-term development and well-being of local communities. Fifth, adopting sustainable environmental practices is necessary to mitigate the adverse impacts of tourism development. This includes measures to address deforestation, water scarcity, and pollution, ensuring that local communities have access to essential resources. Sixth, addressing security concerns through coordinated efforts between local authorities, security forces, and community leaders is vital to protect local businesses and communities from extortion and violence.

Furthermore, ensuring equitable economic opportunities for all community members is essential. This can be achieved by supporting local entrepreneurs, providing training and capacity-building programs, and fostering inclusive business practices. Additionally, preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of local communities is imperative. Supporting traditional practices, festivals, and communal activities can strengthen cultural identity and social cohesion. Finally, fostering inter-ethnic cooperation through initiatives that promote dialogue, resolve conflicts, and ensure fair and inclusive development practices is necessary to address the underlying issues of exclusion and marginalization.

This study highlights the importance of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable tourism development practices. By addressing the issues of exclusion, displacement, and marginalization, it is possible to create a tourism industry that not only drives economic growth but also promotes social equity, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. The lessons learned from Sajek Valley provide valuable insights for similar contexts globally, emphasizing the critical need for development approaches that respect and uplift local communities. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable tourism development and offer practical recommendations for policymakers, development practitioners, and stakeholders aiming to achieve balanced and inclusive development outcomes.

#### **DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT solely to enhance readability and grammatical accuracy. All research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation were conducted independently by the authors. The content was subsequently reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The research was conducted with the support of the Centennial Research Grant (CRG), University of Dhaka.

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