

Reassessing Pro-Poor Tourism Through the Experiences of Marginalised Communities: Evidence from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study critically examines the relationship between tourism development and poverty reduction in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, through the lived experiences of marginalised coastal communities. Although pro-poor tourism (PPT) has been widely promoted as a strategy for addressing rural poverty in the Global South, this research argues that such approaches frequently fail to deliver meaningful benefits in contexts characterised by structural inequalities, governance limitations, and socio-environmental vulnerabilities. Adopting an interpretivist perspective and a qualitative single-case study design, the research explores the experiences of economically disadvantaged communities through focus groups and semi-structured interviews conducted across three phases. The first phase examined local understandings of poverty, revealing recurring themes of social exclusion, vulnerability, and marginalisation that extend beyond conventional income-based measurements. The second phase assessed perceived roles of tourism in poverty reduction, highlighting limited employment opportunities, weak linkages with local economies, and insufficient policy implementation. The third phase identified barriers restricting community participation in tourism, including lack of access to financial resources, training, infrastructure, and decision-making power. Thematic analysis indicates that despite visible growth in tourism infrastructure, poor communities remain systematically excluded from tourism planning and development processes. These findings challenge assumptions that tourism inherently promotes inclusive economic growth. Instead, the study suggests that in destinations such as Cox's Bazar, pro-poor tourism initiatives may inadvertently reproduce or intensify existing inequalities. The research contributes to critical tourism studies by demonstrating how tourism development can exacerbate social and economic dispossession when governance frameworks remain weak. It calls for fundamental reconsideration of tourism policy, emphasising participatory planning, community capacity-building, and grassroots empowerment as essential components for achieving sustainable and equitable poverty reduction.

Keywords: pro-poor tourism, poverty alleviation, tourism development, coastal communities, inclusive development, tourism governance, structural inequality, participatory planning, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Tourism is frequently regarded as an effective mechanism for economic development and poverty alleviation, particularly in the Global South. Governments and international organisations increasingly endorse tourism as a strategy for promoting pro-poor growth (WTO, 2015; UNWTO, 2017). However, a

persistent disconnect remains between policy rhetoric and the lived realities of low-income communities that these strategies purport to support. In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh a location abundant in natural and cultural resources yet burdened with entrenched poverty this disconnect between tourism policy and daily realities becomes particularly evident. Despite substantial expansion of tourism infrastructure in this coastal region, high levels of poverty and structural inequalities persist, suggesting that tourism's potential as a development instrument is not being realised equitably in practice.

This study addresses a significant gap in tourism and development literature: the lack of grounded, experiential accounts from impoverished communities regarding their role, agency, and access to benefits within tourism economies. Although Pro-Poor Tourism emerged as a response to criticisms of mainstream tourism development, its implementation often remains top-down, extractive, and insufficiently inclusive (Harrison, 2008; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). The conceptual basis of PPT an approach aimed at increasing net benefits for people living in poverty is frequently promoted in international development policy. Yet empirical evidence reflecting the perspectives of those experiencing poverty within these frameworks remains limited and fragmented (Ashley, Roe & Goodwin, 2001; Scheyvens, 2012).

In this critical context, the present research examines how impoverished communities in Cox's Bazar perceive the opportunities and challenges presented by tourism development. Bangladesh regards tourism as a vital sector within its Sustainable Development Goals framework (BTB, 2016). However, national strategies for poverty reduction have not adequately integrated PPT principles or mechanisms to directly involve people living in poverty in decision-making, participation in value chains, or benefit sharing (Rahman, 2010; Islam, 2012). Although international arrivals and tourism revenues in Bangladesh have risen markedly in recent decades (WTTC, 2019), the effects on socio-economically marginalised groups in destinations like Cox's Bazar remain underexplored in both policy and academic discourse.

Poverty in Cox's Bazar is complex and deeply rooted, characterised by landlessness, limited education, low incomes, and environmental vulnerabilities. Over seventy per cent of the coastal population lives below the poverty line (Paul & Rashid, 2016), and many engage in insecure, informal livelihoods such as small-scale fishing and subsistence farming. Despite being Bangladesh's premier tourism destination, local communities have largely been excluded from formal tourism development processes and benefit streams (Zahra, 2012). The ongoing marginalisation of local voices particularly those of women, ethnic minorities, and rural populations hampers the transformative potential of tourism as an inclusive development strategy.

This research adopts a phenomenological and participatory approach to examine how impoverished communities in Cox's Bazar understand their poverty, perceive tourism's role in alleviating it, and identify barriers that limit their involvement in the tourism industry. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with residents and tourism stakeholders, the study seeks to provide empirically grounded insights into how pro-poor tourism might be reimagined from the 'bottom up'.

The main aim of this study is therefore to critically analyse the perceptions of poor communities regarding the opportunities and challenges of tourism development in Cox's Bazar. This gives rise to the following research questions:

1. How is poverty defined and experienced by poor coastal communities in Cox's Bazar?
2. What are the perceptions of local stakeholders regarding tourism's contribution to poverty alleviation?
3. What barriers do poor people face in engaging with tourism development and policy frameworks?

To address these questions, the study pursues three specific objectives:

- To critically evaluate the socio-economic dimensions of poverty in coastal communities of Cox's Ba-

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- To identify both opportunities and barriers for residents seeking to benefit from tourism development
- To analyse the impact of pro-poor tourism on local livelihoods and well-being

This research makes two main contributions. First, it addresses a significant gap in development and tourism studies by focusing on the perspectives of low-income people, offering an empirically grounded, bottom-up understanding of pro-poor tourism. Second, it provides practical and policy-relevant insights into how PPT frameworks can be made more inclusive, participatory, and effective in contexts like Bangladesh, where tourism and poverty are closely interconnected.

The study is organised as follows: following this introduction, the literature review explores theoretical links between development, tourism, and poverty alleviation, critically examining the concept of pro-poor tourism, its evolution, and its criticisms. A case study of Cox's Bazar situates tourism development within broader socio-economic and cultural contexts. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative framework based on phenomenological inquiry. Subsequent chapters present research findings and discuss their implications for the study's objectives. The final chapter concludes with key findings, policy recommendations, and suggestions for future research. By exploring the real experiences of poverty in Cox's Bazar and critically evaluating the pro-poor claims of tourism development policies, this study offers a timely contribution to ongoing debates about inclusive tourism, bottom-up development, and the ethical responsibilities of tourism governance in the Global South.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Pro-Poor Tourism Perspectives from the Poor

Tourism is often portrayed as a panacea for poverty alleviation in the Global South, promoted through global policy discourses and donor agendas (UNWTO, 2017; World Bank, 2018). In response to mass tourism's exploitative legacy, the concept of Pro-Poor Tourism emerged in the late 1990s as a development approach intended to deliver net benefits to people experiencing poverty (Ashley, Roe & Goodwin, 2001). Despite its initial popularity in policy circles, a growing body of academic literature critiques PPT for its conceptual ambiguity, neoliberal bias, and limited engagement with the epistemologies and lived experiences of low-income people themselves (Bianchi, 2009; Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019). This section critically examines the evolution of PPT, interrogates theoretical assumptions underpinning its development, and highlights its operational shortcomings. The review is structured to: (i) trace the origins and policy uptake of PPT, (ii) present critiques of its implementation and knowledge production, and (iii) build a multidimensional conceptual framework grounded in Sen's Capabilities Approach, Participatory Development Theory, and Critical Tourism Studies. The aim is to reposition poor communities as central analytical agents within the pro-poor tourism discourse.

PPT emerged from DFID-funded collaborations among the Overseas Development Institute, the International Institute for Environment and Development, and the International Centre for Responsible Tourism, advocating that tourism directly contribute to poverty alleviation (Ashley et al., 2001). Rooted in alternative development theory and influenced by post-Washington Consensus ideologies, PPT sought to counterbalance inequities of mainstream tourism by integrating poverty-focused strategies across tourism sectors (Scheyvens, 2002; Goodwin, 2006). The adoption of PPT into global policy frameworks was swift. It was embedded in the UNWTO's Sustainable Tourism Eliminating Poverty initiative and endorsed as a mechanism for achieving Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (UNWTO,

2015). However, critics argue that PPT's integration into institutional policy often relied on vague notions of "benefit" and failed to challenge the structural roots of poverty (Harrison, 2008; Bianchi, 2018).

Although PPT presents an inclusive rhetoric, its core assumptions remain under-theorised. Harrison (2008) critiques PPT's reliance on a utilitarian model of development, which assumes that economic growth automatically translates into poverty alleviation. Similarly, Scheyvens (2007) highlights the risk of tokenism, whereby poor communities are included in initiatives only superficially, without real decision-making power or ownership. One of the most salient critiques concerns the phenomenon of elite capture (Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007), where local elites, NGOs, or external investors benefit disproportionately from tourism initiatives, reproducing the very inequalities that PPT seeks to dismantle. Furthermore, Briedenhann and Wickens (2004) caution against romanticising tourism as a universal solution, given its susceptibility to seasonality, price volatility, environmental degradation, and market dependence.

Empirical research reveals a methodological gap in PPT evaluations, which often favour quantitative impact assessments over qualitative understandings of poverty and empowerment (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Metrics such as job creation and income growth are frequently used to signify success, yet they obscure issues including job precarity, lack of agency, and erosion of cultural autonomy (Chok et al., 2007; Novelli, 2015). The literature consistently demonstrates a lack of engagement with low-income people as knowledge producers. Most PPT studies are based on top-down evaluations involving donor agencies, project managers, and tourism operators (Simpson, 2008; Meyer, 2010). As Chambers (1997) famously argued, poor people are too often seen but not heard objects of development rather than agents of change.

Scheyvens and Hughes (2019) emphasise the importance of repositioning low-income people not merely as beneficiaries but as epistemic agents. Without participatory research and bottom-up evaluation, PPT risks reinforcing neocolonial modes of knowledge production and development practice. This critique has renewed calls for methodological pluralism, co-produced knowledge, and reflexive positionality in tourism research (Cornwall, 2006; Snyman & Spenceley, 2012).

Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999; Schilcher, 2007): This framework shifts analysis from income-based metrics to a multidimensional understanding of human wellbeing. It prioritises people's ability to pursue lives they value, encompassing education, dignity, health, and autonomy. Within PPT, this allows for analysis of how tourism affects individuals' agency, not merely their income.

Participatory Development Theory (Chambers, 2008; Cornwall, 2006): This theory challenges technocratic development and calls for inclusive governance and bottom-up knowledge production. Applied to PPT, it insists that poor communities must be engaged at all stages design, planning, implementation, and review.

Critical Tourism Studies (Bianchi, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006): CTS interrogates the political economy of tourism and its entanglement with neoliberalism, globalisation, and postcolonial power structures. It compels researchers to ask: who benefits, who is excluded, and what ideologies underpin the design of tourism interventions?

This research proposes a framework that synthesises these three theoretical strands into a holistic model for interrogating pro-poor tourism from the perspectives of poor communities in Cox's Bazar:

Analytical Dimension	Conceptual Basis	Guiding Questions
Capabilities and Livelihoods	Sen (1999); Schilcher (2007)	How does tourism affect well-being, dignity, access to health, education, and choice?

Participation and Voice	Chambers (2008); Cornwall (2006)	Are poor communities involved in decisions, governance, and knowledge creation?
Power and Structural Inequality	Bianchi (2009); Higgins-Desbiolles (2006)	What systemic barriers affect inclusion/exclusion? Who controls tourism resources?

This integrated framework enables multi-scalar analysis of tourism's impact on poverty, moving beyond economic outcomes to include dimensions of rights, identity, and social justice. Despite widespread endorsement of PPT by multilateral institutions and donor agencies, empirical evidence on its efficacy remains inconclusive, particularly in South Asia. In Bangladesh, the dominant focus of tourism research concerns macroeconomic indicators, destination marketing, and policy frameworks (BTB, 2016; Rahman, 2010). The absence of grounded, community-based inquiry means that lived experiences, aspirations, and definitions of poverty among poor communities are often rendered invisible, highlighting the urgent need for this study.

This research addresses that void by placing poor communities in Cox's Bazar at the centre of inquiry. It adopts a qualitative, participatory methodology to capture how residents conceptualise poverty, perceive tourism, and articulate barriers to inclusion. The research makes an original contribution by shifting the analytical lens from top-down evaluations to bottom-up perspectives grounded in epistemic justice, thereby advancing a more reflexive and socially accountable model of tourism development.

2.2 Poverty in Coastal Areas of Bangladesh

Poverty in the coastal regions of Bangladesh remains a persistent and multifaceted challenge, exacerbated by both structural inequalities and environmental vulnerabilities. Despite significant national progress in reducing extreme poverty from over forty per cent in the 1990s to under twenty per cent in recent years (World Bank, 2022), coastal communities including those in and around Cox's Bazar continue to face entrenched deprivation. This spatial disparity stems from a complex interplay of historical marginalisation, inadequate infrastructure, limited livelihood diversification, and climate-induced shocks such as cyclones, salinity intrusion, and sea-level rise (Alam et al., 2020).

The rural poor in coastal belts typically depend on agriculture, fishing, or informal tourism-related services, all of which are highly sensitive to environmental degradation and seasonal volatility (Hossain & Rahman, 2021). In Cox's Bazar, the influx of tourists and growth of the tourism sector have created some employment opportunities; however, these are often precarious, informal, and unequally distributed. Employment in tourism is mainly seasonal and gendered, with men dominating public-facing roles and women often confined to underpaid or unpaid domestic and care responsibilities (Sultana & Thompson, 2019). Furthermore, limited access to credit, land, and vocational training restricts poor households' capacity to benefit from tourism-led economic growth (Islam & Hassan, 2023).

One key structural driver of poverty in coastal Bangladesh is the lack of resilient infrastructure and public services. Access to healthcare, sanitation, and education is significantly lower in coastal districts than in urban centres, creating intergenerational cycles of poverty (Ahmed et al., 2021). For instance, school dropout rates in coastal areas remain high, especially among girls, due to child marriage, insecurity, and financial constraints (UNICEF, 2022). These educational disparities limit access to formal employment in tourism and hospitality sectors, reinforcing occupational segregation and dependency on informal work. Climate change intensifies coastal poverty by exacerbating displacement, food insecurity, and asset loss. Tidal surges and saltwater intrusion diminish agricultural productivity and contaminate freshwater resources, making subsistence farming increasingly unviable (Rahman et al., 2021). Many communities in Cox's Bazar face repeated displacement, leading to social fragmentation and weakening community

resilience. While the Rohingya refugee crisis has added further demographic pressure, it has also redirected development aid and attention, often bypassing needs of poor host communities (Mahmood et al., 2022).

Critically, voices of the poor in these regions are often excluded from formal policy dialogues on tourism development, land use, and poverty reduction. Participatory planning remains limited, and top-down interventions frequently fail to address structural roots of poverty or reflect local knowledge (Chambers, 1997; Kabir et al., 2023). Pro-poor tourism strategies, though promising in theory, have yet to be fully embedded in institutional frameworks governing tourism in Cox's Bazar. Unless such strategies are grounded in equity, environmental justice, and inclusive planning, the promise of tourism as a pathway out of poverty for coastal communities in Bangladesh will remain unfulfilled.

2.3 Inequality and Marginalisation of the Poor in Tourism Planning

Despite the expanding tourism economy in Cox's Bazar, poor and marginalised communities particularly those living in coastal and peri-urban areas are largely excluded from planning and decision-making processes that shape tourism development. This exclusion is not accidental but structurally embedded within broader political and economic systems that prioritise profit, elite interests, and foreign investment over participatory and equitable development (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Tourism planning in Cox's Bazar is often guided by top-down, state-led development models that favour large-scale infrastructure, luxury accommodations, and eco-resorts initiatives that tend to displace local communities rather than empower them (Rashid, 2021). For example, government-driven projects such as the Marine Drive Road and special economic zones have led to land acquisition and resettlement without adequate compensation or consultation (Kabir et al., 2023). Residents, especially the landless poor, often lack legal literacy or institutional support needed to challenge these encroachments, leaving them vulnerable to dispossession and economic precarity (Chowdhury & Quasem, 2020).

Moreover, planning frameworks often reflect interests of national elites, private developers, and international donors, with little effort to include voices from marginalised communities. Participatory planning mechanisms remain underdeveloped in Bangladesh's tourism sector, despite policy rhetoric promoting inclusive development. In practice, town hall meetings and stakeholder consultations are either tokenistic or absent, particularly in rural and indigenous coastal areas (Hasan & Alam, 2019). Women, in particular, are doubly marginalised excluded from both formal planning processes and informal economic opportunities, mainly due to prevailing gender norms and safety concerns (Sultana & Thompson, 2019). This marginalisation is further deepened by unequal access to resources, education, and institutional power. While skilled and semi-skilled roles in tourism (e.g., hotel management, travel agencies, tour operations) are increasingly occupied by urban or non-local actors, low-income people are often relegated to low-wage, seasonal jobs such as beach vendors, rickshaw pullers, or casual labourers in construction and hospitality (Goodwin, 2008; Islam & Hassan, 2023). These roles offer little long-term security or capacity for economic mobility. Additionally, informal workers in tourism remain unregistered, unprotected, and largely invisible in official tourism statistics, limiting their ability to influence development policy (Ashley et al., 2001).

Cultural marginalisation is also a significant concern. In many cases, development models imported from international tourism markets impose aesthetic or behavioural expectations that disregard local traditions, livelihoods, and spatial practices (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Communities are often seen as passive beneficiaries or worse, as obstacles to development rather than as active participants with valuable local

knowledge and social capital. This undermines social sustainability of tourism and increases risk of conflict, resentment, and cultural alienation.

International development frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 8 and 10) and UNESCO's World Tourism Guidelines, promote inclusive and equitable tourism. However, translation of these principles into actionable, localised governance frameworks remains a significant gap in Cox's Bazar. Without intentional mechanisms for local representation, transparency, and co-creation, tourism planning risks reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to address (UNWTO, 2020; Hall, 2021).

To redress this imbalance, there is urgent need to shift from extractive and elite-centric models of tourism planning towards participatory governance frameworks that recognise people experiencing poverty not just as labourers or aid recipients, but as rights-bearing stakeholders. Approaches such as community-based tourism, pro-poor tourism, and inclusive value chains offer promising alternatives, but they must be backed by policy reforms, grassroots mobilisation, and institutional capacity-building (Tolkach & King, 2015; Scheyvens, 2002).

2.4 Key Challenges to Pro-Poor Tourism Development and Poverty Alleviation in Cox's Bazar

While pro-poor tourism offers a theoretically sound framework for addressing poverty through tourism, its practical implementation in Cox's Bazar faces numerous entrenched and emerging challenges. These challenges are not only historical but also aggravated by new and complex dynamics, including climate change, political instability, overtourism, and refugee-related pressures.

Political and Institutional Barriers

Tourism development in Cox's Bazar continues to be shaped by centralised, top-down planning, often controlled by political elites and corporate stakeholders. These political actors frequently prioritise economic returns over inclusive development, leading to elite capture of resources and limited transparency in tourism governance (Kabir et al., 2023). Local communities are rarely consulted, and land acquisition for tourism infrastructure is often carried out without their consent or fair compensation (Rashid, 2021). This has created growing discontent among marginalised groups increasingly excluded from both planning processes and resulting economic benefits.

Inclusive Tourism Branding Deficits

Despite its natural assets, Cox's Bazar lacks an inclusive tourism branding strategy. Pro-poor tourism activities such as cultural tours, community homestays, and indigenous craft initiatives remain underpromoted, overshadowed by large-scale beach tourism and luxury hospitality brands. Marketing is mainly directed toward domestic mass tourism markets, neglecting potential of ethical or sustainable tourism segments (Scheyvens, 2007). Additionally, local entrepreneurs lack access to online marketing platforms due to poor digital infrastructure and skills, further marginalising community-based tourism providers (Haque et al., 2022).

Infrastructure Weaknesses

Infrastructural weaknesses continue to obstruct scalability of pro-poor tourism. Remote villages remain disconnected from main tourist routes due to poor road conditions, and essential services such as sanitation, electricity, and waste management are severely inadequate in many rural and peri-urban zones (Rahman et al., 2021). Recent flooding and storm damage to the Cox's Bazar–Teknaf Marine Drive in 2023 exposed fragility of key infrastructure and underscored lack of disaster-resilient planning. Absence of a comprehensive master plan for tourism development further hampers coordination and equitable resource allocation (Daily Country Today, 2024).

Human Resource Constraints

There is critical shortage of skilled workers from local communities in tourism and hospitality sectors. Despite rising demand for multilingual guides, digital marketers, and hospitality staff, local population lacks access to formal training or vocational education tailored to these needs (Islam & Hassan, 2023). Government and NGO programmes often fail to reach the poorest, especially women and indigenous groups. Moreover, informal workers such as beach vendors or seasonal labourers are excluded from social protections, health insurance, and upskilling initiatives.

Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation remains one of the most visible threats to sustainability of tourism in Cox's Bazar. Rapid and unregulated tourism development has contributed to deforestation, beach erosion, biodiversity loss, and water pollution (Hassan et al., 2019). Recent studies warn that overtourism is creating irreversible pressure on natural ecosystems, including coral reefs and protected areas (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Waste mismanagement during peak tourist seasons exacerbates public health risks and diminishes destination appeal, particularly among eco-conscious tourists.

Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Since 2017, influx of over a million Rohingya refugees into southern areas of Cox's Bazar has significantly reshaped social and environmental landscape. While international humanitarian aid has focused on refugee welfare, host communities have experienced escalating food prices, increased competition for jobs, and environmental degradation from deforestation and overuse of resources (Mahmood et al., 2022). Recent landslides and flash floods in 2024 displaced thousands of refugees and residents alike, revealing compounded impact of climate risks and population pressure on tourism development (UNHCR, 2024).

Political Instability and Security Concerns

A growing concern in recent years is impact of political unrest, violence, and curfews on tourism. The 2025 attack on a military installation near the airport raised safety concerns, resulting in cancellations and heightened travel warnings (The Guardian, 2025). Likewise, a student-led protest in July 2024 led to temporary curfew and near-total halt in tourism bookings, revealing volatility of tourism-dependent economy. Unless stability, community engagement, and risk mitigation frameworks are institutionalised, such disruptions will continue to undermine confidence among investors and travellers.

Synthesis

This chapter has explored the complex context of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, highlighting deep-rooted inequalities that hinder pro-poor tourism. Rapid tourism development often excludes poor communities from its benefits due to political and institutional barriers, limited inclusive marketing, and infrastructural challenges. Lack of coordinated planning, worsened by recent natural disasters, results in fragmented and inequitable growth. Human resource development is inadequate, as skills training often fails to reach vulnerable groups, including women and informal workers. Without investment in education, economic opportunities will continue to evade those in need. Environmental degradation from overtourism and pollution threatens tourism sustainability. Additionally, ongoing issues from Rohingya refugee crisis and climate change have led to flooding and social tensions. Emerging crises, such as security threats and political unrest, further destabilise tourism economy. To unlock potential of pro-poor tourism in Cox's Bazar, a rights-based, community-led governance model is essential. Addressing these interconnected challenges through systemic reform and international cooperation is crucial for making tourism a viable tool for poverty alleviation and social justice in this vulnerable region.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Foundations

The methodological framework adopted in this study is rooted in a constructivist paradigm. It reflects epistemological commitment to understanding pro-poor tourism as a socially constructed, contextually embedded, and politically situated phenomenon. Given the nature of the research problem which involves exploring how marginalised coastal communities in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, perceive poverty and engage with tourism-led development the methodology prioritises qualitative inquiry and interpretive reasoning.

A constructivist orientation permits an ontological stance of relativism and a subjectivist epistemology, where reality is regarded as plural, negotiated, and historically contingent (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This paradigm is widely recognised in development and tourism research for its capacity to uncover silenced narratives and co-produce knowledge with socially and politically excluded groups (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001).

Contrasting with positivist epistemologies that seek to reveal universal truths through deductive logic and experimental control (Popper, 1959; Cohen et al., 2017), the constructivist paradigm foregrounds meaning-making through lived experience, dialogue, and situated knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). Whereas positivist approaches tend to isolate variables for causal testing, constructivism allows for entanglement of socio-economic, cultural, and political dynamics that shape tourism outcomes in low-income settings (Jennings, 2010; Tribe, 2001). Within this philosophical orientation, knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participant, and data are generated through dialogic and interpretive engagement (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.2 Research Design

To examine pro-poor tourism in Cox's Bazar as a developmental strategy, this study employed a single embedded case study design (Yin, 2011), drawing on multi-phase data collection that included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and secondary document analysis. Case studies are widely recognised in tourism and development research for their ability to accommodate complexity, multiplicity, and contextual nuance (Gerring, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Thomas, 2011).

Cox's Bazar was purposively selected due to its contradictory identity as both a rapidly expanding tourist destination and a region marked by acute poverty, underemployment, and environmental fragility (Islam & Carlsen, 2016; Shaw et al., 2013). The spatial and socio-economic contrasts within the region provide a fertile empirical site for exploring how tourism policy interacts with grassroots realities of poverty, exclusion, and opportunity.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

Sampling in this study was guided by non-probability strategies, specifically purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). These approaches were essential for accessing both institutional actors in tourism governance and marginalised individuals whose experiences of poverty and development often remain undocumented in policy discourse (Hall, 2009; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). Participants were drawn from three groups: poor rural and coastal residents, tourism and development stakeholders, and intermediaries including civil society actors and informal workers. The sampling logic was based on principle of maximum variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994), ensuring diversity across occupational background, gender, location, and level of engagement with tourism. Snowballing was particularly useful for identifying vulnerable and informal-sector workers, who are often absent from

official tourism registers yet constitute a significant portion of the sector's labour force (Bianchi, 2009; Scheyvens, 2011).

3.4 Data Collection Phases

Primary data collection was conducted in three phases.

Phase One: Focus Group Discussions

The first phase involved focus group discussions with six communities from Teknaf, Kutubdia, Ramu, Sonadia, Moheskhal, and Nazirar Gaat, all within Cox's Bazar district. Focus groups were selected for their capacity to generate discursive, collective reflections on poverty, livelihoods, and tourism. They allowed participants to co-construct meanings through dialogue, contestation, and affirmation (Morgan, 1997; Wilkinson, 1998). This method is particularly suited for engaging low-literate or non-literate participants, as it offers a more accessible and interactive format than individual interviews (Madriz, 2000).

Discussions revealed poverty as a multidimensional condition encompassing not only income deprivation but also food insecurity, lack of healthcare, inadequate shelter, social marginalisation, and vulnerability to environmental shocks. These understandings aligned with broader scholarly debates on limitations of income-based poverty indicators and need for more holistic, capabilities-based assessments (Sen, 1999; Chambers, 1983).

Phase Two: Stakeholder Interviews

The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with twenty tourism and development stakeholders, including government officials, private sector entrepreneurs, and representatives from civil society. The interviews were designed to capture perceptions of PPT as a strategy for livelihood improvement, as well as institutional perspectives on development planning and community engagement. Semi-structured interviews are a well-established method in qualitative research, as they strike a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling researchers to probe emergent themes while maintaining comparability across respondents (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Silverman, 2021). These conversations revealed a divergence between policy discourse and lived realities, with many institutional actors articulating support for inclusive tourism in principle but lacking mechanisms to operationalise such approaches in practice (Ashley et al., 2001; Novelli et al., 2006). Moreover, while government narratives often framed tourism as a panacea for local development, private sector actors highlighted logistical, infrastructural, and regulatory barriers to meaningful community participation.

Phase Three: Community Member Interviews

In the third phase, twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with poor rural residents, primarily those engaged in agriculture, fishing, salt production, and informal services. The purpose was to explore their understanding of tourism, perceptions of benefit distribution, and perceived obstacles to participation. These interviews underscored deep-seated structural exclusions rooted in education deficits, capital constraints, caste and ethnic hierarchies, and spatial disconnection from tourism zones. In many cases, participants expressed limited awareness of tourism beyond its visible infrastructure, such as hotels and beaches, reflecting failure of top-down development planning to engage communities in meaningful dialogue (Hampton, 2005; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

Participant Observation

In addition to interviews and focus groups, participant observation was employed to contextualise verbal data and capture non-discursive practices and social relations (Spradley, 1980; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Observations were conducted in markets, beaches, informal settlements, transport hubs, and local

businesses, allowing researcher to witness first-hand rhythms of everyday life and interaction between tourists and host communities. Observational field notes captured phenomena such as labour informality, social stratification, gendered spatial practices, and symbolic economies of poverty and modernity circulating in tourist sites (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Tucker, 2007).

Secondary Data

Secondary data sources complemented primary data and included government tourism plans, donor policy documents, NGO reports, and academic literature. These documents were analysed to trace evolution of PPT discourse in Bangladesh and to assess alignment (or lack thereof) between national strategies and local implementation (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; UNWTO, 2013).

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical technique, following framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved six stages: familiarisation with data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing. The coding process was both inductive and deductive, informed by research questions and theoretical insights from development studies, critical tourism, and poverty analysis.

Themes were organised around three overarching areas: conceptualisations of poverty, perspectives on PPT, and barriers to participation. For example, thematic categories such as "infrastructure without inclusion," "symbolic participation," and "market access constraints" emerged from recurrent narratives across stakeholder groups.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Ethical approval was secured from the University of Central Lancashire, and all participants provided informed consent, with explanations provided in Bengali to ensure clarity. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonymisation, and data were stored securely in accordance with institutional protocols.

Given vulnerability of many participants particularly women and tribal minorities special care was taken to ensure that participation was voluntary, confidential, and culturally respectful (Orb et al., 2001; Sanjari et al., 2014). The researcher, as a Bangladeshi with experience working in Cox's Bazar, maintained a reflexive posture throughout, recognising both advantages and risks of insider status. While cultural and linguistic familiarity facilitated rapport and access, it also necessitated ongoing critical reflection to avoid over-identification and bias (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Finlay, 2002).

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Issues of validity, reliability, and trustworthiness were addressed using framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation across focus groups, interviews, observation, and secondary sources. Transferability was supported through thick description, enabling readers to assess relevance of findings to other contexts. Dependability and confirmability were achieved by maintaining an audit trail of decisions, coding frameworks, and fieldwork records. Peer debriefing and regular supervisory reviews further strengthened rigour of analytical process.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

Methodological limitations were acknowledged. Bureaucratic delays constrained access to high-ranking officials, and donor agencies declined to participate. Language barriers occasionally hindered communication with tribal groups, and gender norms limited female participation in mixed-gender settings. Moreover, interpretive nature of qualitative analysis entails a degree of subjectivity, though this was mitigated through triangulation and reflexive practice (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2021).

3.9 Chapter Summary

The methodological choices made in this study reflect an effort to align research design with principles of inclusive, ethical, and socially engaged inquiry. By centring experiences and voices of those most affected by tourism policy yet often most excluded from its planning and benefits the study contributes to a growing body of critical scholarship on PPT, poverty, and participatory development (Biddulph, 2015; Scheyvens, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). The constructivist, qualitative approach adopted here not only facilitates generation of grounded, context-rich data but also challenges dominant technocratic narratives that obscure structural inequalities embedded in tourism development.

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined a coherent, theoretically grounded, and ethically robust research design suitable for studying pro-poor tourism in complex socio-political environments. By integrating multiple methods, embracing epistemic plurality, and prioritising voices from below, the research offers both methodological and substantive contributions to tourism and development studies. The findings, presented in subsequent chapters, draw directly on methodological architecture established here and illustrate how constructivist inquiry can illuminate uneven terrain of poverty, participation, and power in tourism landscapes.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings and analysis derived from qualitative data collected during three phases of fieldwork described in Chapter Three. The purpose of the research was to explore how poverty is perceived within local communities, assess potential of pro-poor tourism as a strategy for poverty alleviation, and identify barriers preventing meaningful participation of local communities in tourism development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews conducted in several coastal communities including Moheshkhali, Kutubdia, Sonadia, Teknaf, Ramu, and Nazirar Gaat. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure inclusion of individuals with relevant experiences of poverty and tourism development. Collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and underlying structural issues influencing poverty and tourism participation.

Phase	Research Objective	Data Collection Locations	Sampling Strategy	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis	Respondents
Phase 1	Explore local perceptions and causes of poverty	Moheshkhali, Kutubdia, Sonadia, Teknaf, Ramu, Nazirar Gaat	Purposive & Snowball	Focus Groups	Thematic Analysis	36
Phase 2	Examine potential of pro-poor tourism for poverty reduction	Tourism hubs in Cox's Bazar and Dhaka	Purposive & Snowball	Semi-Structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis	20

Phase 3	Identify barriers to local participation in tourism development	Moheshkhali, Kutubdia, Sonadia, Teknaf, Ramu, Nazirar Gaat	Purposive & Snowball	Semi-Structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis	25
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The findings are presented according to the three phases of research design.

4.2 Phase One Findings: Local Perceptions of Poverty

4.2.1 Understanding Poverty through Lived Experience

Participants in Phase One described poverty as a **multidimensional condition** that extends beyond limited income. Community members frequently associated poverty with restricted access to basic services such as education, healthcare, employment opportunities, land ownership, food security, and social dignity. Many participants emphasized that poverty also includes **psychological and social dimensions**, such as lack of respect, exclusion from decision-making processes, and limited opportunities for social mobility. These perceptions closely align with multidimensional approaches to poverty discussed in development literature (Sen, 1999; Alkire & Santos, 2010).

Table 4.1: Local Understandings of Poverty

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example Quote
Material deprivation	Lack of income and assets	"We work hard but still cannot afford enough food."
Livelihood insecurity	Dependence on fishing and agriculture	"We rent boats and nets but earn very little."
Infrastructure deficits	Lack of electricity, water and sanitation	"No electricity, no toilet, no clean water."
Education barriers	Limited schooling opportunities	"My family was too poor to send me to school."
Social marginalisation	Lack of social respect	"People treat us as lower class."

Participants often challenged income-based definitions of poverty, arguing that poverty is **relational and context-specific**, shaped by unequal power relations and limited participation in development processes.

4.2.2 Causes of Poverty Identified by Local Communities

Participants identified several structural causes of poverty within their communities.

Table 4.2: Community-Perceived Causes of Poverty

Theme	Sub-Theme	Illustrative Example
Livelihood instability	Seasonal income and climate shocks	"Floods destroy crops every year."
Resource limitations	Lack of land, tools and credit	"I cannot afford fertiliser or seeds."
Education gaps	Illiteracy and school dropouts	"We cannot apply for good jobs."

Infrastructure deficiencies	Lack of roads, water and electricity	"We drink water from ponds."
Weak governance support	Limited government assistance	"No one from the government comes here."

4.2.2.1 Insecure Livelihoods and Irregular Income

Livelihoods in Cox's Bazar are heavily dependent on **climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and fishing**. Environmental hazards including cyclones, floods, and coastal erosion frequently disrupt economic activities and damage productive assets. Many fishing households reported renting boats and nets from wealthier individuals, often working under exploitative arrangements that significantly reduce their income. As one fisherman from Moheshkhali explained:

"The sea gives us everything, but also takes everything. When storms come, we lose our nets, sometimes our boats. The owners still want their rent, so we borrow money at high interest. By the time we pay everyone, there is nothing left for our children's food."

4.2.2.2 Lack of Education and Skills

Educational deprivation emerged as both a **cause and consequence of poverty**. Participants highlighted how generational poverty and geographic isolation limit access to schooling. Many families cannot afford transportation, uniforms, or school materials. As a result, employment opportunities remain restricted to **informal and low-skilled labour**, reducing potential for upward mobility.

A young woman from Kutubdia reflected:

"I wanted to study nursing, but my father said there is no money for fees. Now I work in a tea stall near the beach. Sometimes foreign tourists come, but I cannot speak English, so I just serve tea and watch them talk to others."

4.2.2.3 Marginalisation in the Use of Local Resources

Participants expressed strong concerns regarding **external control over natural resources**. Coastal areas, marine resources, and hill landscapes that traditionally supported local livelihoods are increasingly managed by tourism businesses and external investors. One participant from Sonadia noted:

"Tourists come to enjoy our sea, but we get no share. The hotels bring their own food from Chittagong. They bring their own staff. We just watch from outside the gates."

Limited access to capital and tourism zones restricts ability of local residents to develop tourism-related enterprises.

4.2.2.4 Social Consequences of Poverty

Respondents frequently described poverty as **intergenerational**, where economic deprivation persists across multiple generations. Participants linked poverty with issues such as child labour, early marriage, malnutrition, and declining community cohesion. A community elder from Teknaf observed:

"Twenty years ago, we helped each other. If someone's boat was lost, neighbours contributed to buy a new one. Now everyone struggles alone. The young people leave for the hotels, but they come back with nothing because the wages are so low. Our community is breaking apart."

4.2.2.5 Limited Government Support

A common theme across focus groups was perception of **state neglect**. Participants reported minimal access to government development programmes, agricultural subsidies, or social protection initiatives. One respondent from Ramu stated:

"We hear promises before elections, but no one returns. Politicians take photos with us, then go to Dhaka and forget we exist. When we go to government offices, they say there is no budget for our area."

4.2.2.6 Infrastructure and Public Service Deficits

Participants identified severe infrastructure limitations affecting daily life and economic activity.

Poor Transport Access: Communities located in remote coastal areas face serious transportation barriers. A mother from Nazirar Gaat explained:

"During the monsoon we carry sick people for hours to reach hospitals. Last year, my neighbour's child died on the way because we could not cross the flooded road. If tourists need to go somewhere, they arrange transport quickly. For us, nothing."

Limited Electricity: Many households rely on kerosene lamps due to unreliable electricity supply. A shopkeeper noted:

"The hotels have generators and lights all night. In our village, we have electricity maybe four hours a day. How can we start a business for tourists when we cannot even keep food cold?"

Unsafe Water Sources: Broken tube wells force residents to rely on ponds and contaminated water sources. A woman collecting water from a pond shared:

"This water makes our children sick, but we have no choice. The government built a tube well two years ago, but it broke, and no one came to fix it. The hotel areas have clean water, but they will not share with us."

Limited Healthcare: Several communities lack even basic health facilities, particularly maternal healthcare services. A pregnant woman in Moheshkhali expressed fear:

"I am seven months pregnant. If something goes wrong, there is no doctor here. The nearest clinic is three hours away. Women in the city have hospitals nearby, but we have nothing."

Poor Housing Conditions: Most respondents live in fragile bamboo houses vulnerable to flooding and extreme weather. An elderly man described his situation:

"When the cyclone came last year, my house collapsed. I rebuilt with bamboo and plastic sheets, but it will not survive another storm. The hotel owners build concrete walls to protect their properties, but we are left exposed."

4.3 Phase Two Findings: Tourism and Poverty Alleviation

4.3.1 Tourism Policy and Planning

Government stakeholders emphasised strategic importance of tourism for regional development. However, participants noted that few policies explicitly address needs of low-income communities. As one policymaker explained:

"Pro-poor tourism is often discussed in meetings, but it is not clearly implemented on the ground. We have master plans focusing on infrastructure and investment attraction, but specific mechanisms to ensure benefits reach the poorest households are missing from policy documents."

This disconnect between policy rhetoric and implementation reality was acknowledged by multiple stakeholders, who attributed it to limited coordination between ministries, inadequate funding for community development components, and absence of monitoring mechanisms tracking poverty reduction outcomes.

4.3.2 Employment Opportunities

Tourism has generated informal employment opportunities including hotel work, guiding services, beach vending, and transportation services. Although these jobs provide alternative income sources, they are

typically **seasonal, low-paid, and insecure**.

A hotel cleaner from Cox's Bazar town described her experience:

"During the tourist season from October to March, I work every day and earn enough to feed my family. But in the rainy season, the hotel reduces staff, and I have no income for months. There is no contract, no holiday pay, nothing. When the hotel needs me, I work. When they don't, I stay home."

A beach vendor shared similar frustrations:

"I sell sunglasses and hats to tourists. Some days I earn 500 taka, some days nothing. The police sometimes chase us away because they say we disturb tourists. But this is my only income. If I cannot sell on the beach, my children do not eat."

4.3.3 Linkages with Agriculture and Fisheries

Tourism creates demand for local products such as fish, vegetables, and poultry. However, these supply chains are often controlled by intermediaries who capture a large share of profits. A fisherman explained: "The hotels say they want to buy fresh fish from local fishermen. But we cannot supply directly because they want regular quantities every day. Some days we catch plenty, some days nothing. So they buy from traders who bring fish from Chittagong. The trader makes profit, we get nothing."

A vegetable farmer from Ramu noted:

"I tried to sell vegetables to hotels, but they wanted me to deliver every morning at 6 am. I have no transport, so I would have to pay for a rickshaw, which costs more than I earn. The hotels end up buying from big farms in other districts. Our local produce is ignored."

4.3.4 Small Business Development

Some households have established small tourism-related enterprises including food stalls, souvenir shops, and homestays. While these initiatives demonstrate entrepreneurial potential, they face barriers including limited access to finance and seasonal tourism demand.

A woman operating a small food stall near a beach access point shared:

"I started this stall with money borrowed from a microfinance organisation. I sell tea, biscuits, and simple snacks. During peak season, I earn enough to repay the loan and save a little. But in the off-season, I struggle to repay. Last year, I had to take another loan to cover the first one."

A homestay operator from Teknaf described challenges:

"I converted two rooms in my house for tourists. Some international visitors come through word of mouth, but most tourists do not know we exist. The online booking platforms are complicated, and I do not have a smartphone. If the government promoted community homestays, maybe more tourists would come."

4.3.5 Training and Capacity-Building

NGOs and development organisations occasionally offer training programmes in hospitality, language skills, and tourism services. However, these initiatives remain limited and often fail to reach remote communities.

A young man who participated in a hospitality training programme reflected:

"I completed a fifteen-day training on hotel service organised by an NGO. They gave us a certificate, but when I applied to hotels, they said I need experience. How can I get experience if no one gives me a chance? The training was good, but without connections, the certificate means nothing."

A woman from an indigenous community expressed frustration:

"They held a training in the town centre, but it costs 200 taka each way to travel there. I cannot afford that every day. If they brought training to our village, many women would attend. But they do not come here."

4.3.6 Infrastructure Spillover Effects

Tourism development has improved roads, electricity, and communication networks in certain areas. However, infrastructure improvements are often concentrated near luxury hotels and major tourism zones, leaving many communities excluded.

A resident from a village located five kilometres from the main tourist area observed:

"We see the new road from a distance. It goes directly to the big hotels, but the road to our village remains broken. They have electricity twenty-four hours, we have four hours. Development passes us by."

4.4 Phase Three Findings: Barriers to Local Participation

4.4.1 Political Marginalisation

Participants widely believed that tourism benefits are captured by political elites and external investors. Local communities rarely participate in planning processes.

A community leader from Moheshkhali articulated:

"When they planned the new resort, no one asked us. One day, workers arrived and started clearing land. We went to the local government office, but they said the decision was made in Dhaka. We have no voice, no representation. The politicians are friends with the investors, not with us."

Another participant added:

"If you want to start a business in tourism, you need permission from local leaders. Without political connections, your application sits on someone's desk forever. Those with connections get approvals quickly. This is how the system works."

4.4.2 Limited Access to Credit

Absence of collateral and financial literacy prevents many residents from accessing loans or investment capital necessary to start tourism businesses.

A woman hoping to expand her food stall explained:

"I need 50,000 taka to build a proper structure and buy a refrigerator. The bank says I need land documents as collateral. I live on government land, so I have no documents. Microfinance organisations charge high interest, and I am afraid I cannot repay. So I stay small."

A fisherman who wanted to start a boat rental service for tourists shared:

"Tourists pay good money for boat rides, but I cannot afford a second boat. The one I have is for fishing. If I could get a loan to buy a proper tourist boat with life jackets and comfortable seats, I could earn more. But without collateral, no bank will lend to me."

4.4.3 Skills Mismatch

Tourism employers frequently require language skills and formal training that many local residents lack.

A hotel manager acknowledged this challenge:

"We would like to hire local people, but our guests expect staff who speak English, understand hygiene standards, and know how to handle complaints. Most local applicants have none of these skills. We cannot compromise on service quality."

A young job seeker responded to this perspective:

"How can we learn English when our schools have no teachers? How can we learn hotel service when no hotel trains us? They say we lack skills, but they never help us develop those skills. They prefer to bring workers from other districts who already have experience."

4.4.4 Restricted Access to Natural Resources

Tourism development has limited access to traditional fishing grounds and coastal areas, affecting livel-

ihoods.

A fisherman from Sonadia described changes:

"We used to fish in certain areas near the beach. Now those areas are reserved for tourist boats and water sports. If we go there, security guards chase us away. The sea belongs to everyone, but now it feels like it belongs to the hotels."

Another participant added:

"The hotel guests want privacy, so they restrict access to the beach in front of their properties. We cannot even walk there anymore. This was our beach for generations, now it is private."

4.4.5 Cultural and Social Barriers

Women and indigenous groups face social restrictions limiting their participation in tourism employment.

A young woman explained:

"My family does not allow me to work in hotels. They say it is not respectable for women to interact with strangers, especially foreign tourists. I could work in a shop or homestay, but those opportunities are limited. Most jobs for women are cleaning or cooking, which pay very little."

An indigenous participant shared:

"People from our community face discrimination. When we apply for jobs, they see our ethnicity and assume we are uneducated or unclean. Even when we have qualifications, we do not get hired. The tourism industry does not represent our community."

4.4.6 Uneven Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure investment remains uneven across region, with marginalised communities often located far from tourism development zones.

A teacher from a remote village observed:

"Our students see the tourist areas on television the lights, the hotels, the activities. But they cannot access any of it because there is no road, no transport. The government builds infrastructure for tourists, not for us. We remain invisible."

4.5 Chapter Summary

The findings demonstrate that poverty in Cox's Bazar is **multidimensional and structurally embedded**. Although tourism offers limited economic opportunities, its potential as a poverty alleviation strategy remains constrained by structural inequalities, governance challenges, and limited community participation.

Participants consistently described poverty extending beyond income deprivation to encompass social exclusion, political marginalisation, and limited agency. Tourism development has generated some employment and enterprise opportunities, but these remain unevenly distributed, with poor communities systematically excluded from meaningful participation. Structural barriers including political marginalisation, limited credit access, skills mismatches, resource restrictions, cultural constraints, and uneven infrastructure combine to reinforce existing inequalities rather than ameliorate them.

Addressing these issues requires a more inclusive and participatory approach to tourism planning that prioritises community empowerment and equitable distribution of benefits. The following chapter interprets these findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and policy debates surrounding pro-poor tourism and sustainable development.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a critical analysis and synthesis of research findings in relation to theoretical and policy frameworks surrounding pro-poor tourism. Building on empirical evidence outlined in Chapter Four, the discussion examines multidimensional nature of poverty in Cox's Bazar and evaluates both potential and limitations of tourism as a mechanism for poverty reduction. Drawing on three-phase research design, the chapter integrates community perspectives with broader academic debates on tourism and development.

5.2 The Multidimensional Nature of Poverty

Findings reveal that poverty, as articulated by participants, extends far beyond economic deprivation and includes dimensions of exclusion, marginalisation, and limited political agency. Participants consistently described poverty as a condition shaped by spatial inequality, gendered vulnerability, and intergenerational disadvantage. Their narratives illustrate how poverty is reinforced by inadequate infrastructure, environmental instability, limited access to education and healthcare, and social stigma.

These observations correspond with multidimensional poverty framework developed by Sen (1999) and later expanded by Alkire and Foster (2011), which emphasises interconnected nature of economic, social, and institutional disadvantages. In the context of Cox's Bazar, poverty cannot be understood solely in terms of income but must be viewed as a structural phenomenon embedded in governance systems, resource distribution, and development planning.

The finding that participants emphasised social dignity and respect as components of wellbeing supports Sen's (1999) argument that development should be understood as freedom the expansion of capabilities enabling people to lead lives they value. When participants described being treated as "lower class" or excluded from decision-making, they articulated capability deprivations that income-based poverty metrics fail to capture. This has important implications for pro-poor tourism: if PPT interventions focus exclusively on income generation while ignoring social recognition and political participation, they address symptoms rather than causes of poverty.

5.3 Tourism's Limited Contribution to Poverty Alleviation

Findings from Phase Two suggest that tourism can generate economic opportunities for low-income households, though these opportunities remain limited and highly uneven. Participants reported that tourism has created new income sources through informal employment such as hotel work, guiding services, food vending, and transportation services. Although these roles are typically seasonal and poorly paid, they nonetheless provide an alternative to traditional livelihoods such as subsistence agriculture or small-scale fishing. For landless or displaced families, these opportunities can represent an important, albeit unstable, source of income.

However, precarious nature of informal tourism employment underscores limited capacity of tourism alone to provide long-term economic security. This finding aligns with critiques of PPT that question assumptions about tourism's poverty-reducing potential (Harrison, 2008; Chok et al., 2007). The seasonality of tourism employment means that income is concentrated in specific months, leaving workers without earnings during off-seasons. The absence of formal contracts, social protections, or career progression pathways means that tourism employment does not necessarily enable upward mobility.

The emergence of small-scale tourism-related enterprises also represents a potential pathway for local economic participation. Several participants described operating small tea stalls, souvenir shops, handicraft businesses, or informal guiding services aimed at tourists. These microenterprises demonstrate

local entrepreneurial initiative and highlight capacity of communities to adapt to emerging economic opportunities. Nevertheless, these businesses often struggle to expand due to barriers such as limited start-up capital, bureaucratic licensing requirements, and unstable tourism demand. Because most operate informally, they remain excluded from formal financial systems, professional training programmes, and tourism promotion networks.

5.4 Weak Economic Linkages

The study also identified important economic linkages between tourism and existing local industries such as agriculture, fisheries, and handicraft production. Hotels and restaurants occasionally source fish, vegetables, and other products from local producers, creating what development scholars describe as "backward linkages." These connections offer promising opportunities for integrating tourism with broader local economic systems.

However, the research found that such linkages remain inconsistent and poorly institutionalised. Producers frequently rely on middlemen who capture substantial shares of profits, while small farmers and fishers lack organisational structures necessary to negotiate directly with tourism businesses. Without coordinated support from government agencies or cooperatives, potential benefits of these linkages remain underutilised. This finding supports arguments by Mitchell and Ashley (2010) that tourism's poverty-reducing potential depends not merely on tourism growth but on strength of linkages between tourism and local economies.

5.5 Capacity-Building Limitations

Several capacity-building initiatives aimed at supporting community participation in tourism were also identified during research. NGOs, donor organisations, and occasionally government agencies have implemented programmes focused on hospitality training, language education, and microfinance. While these initiatives demonstrate awareness of importance of skill development, they remain fragmented and short-term in nature.

There is little strategic coordination linking training programmes to actual employment opportunities within tourism sector. Furthermore, many programmes are implemented in urban centres rather than rural communities, limiting accessibility for most marginalised populations. As a result, long-term impact of such initiatives on poverty reduction remains limited. This finding resonates with critiques of development interventions that assume skills training alone can address structural barriers to economic participation (Cornwall, 2006).

5.6 Exclusionary Planning and Governance

Tourism planning in Cox's Bazar was widely perceived by participants as top-down and exclusionary. Despite policy rhetoric promoting community-based tourism and local participation, most respondents reported minimal involvement in decision-making processes. Development strategies are frequently shaped by government agencies and private investors, with little meaningful consultation with local communities.

This lack of participation often leads to outcomes that prioritise commercial interests over social equity and environmental sustainability. Participants reported cases of land acquisition, environmental degradation, and cultural displacement linked to tourism expansion. These concerns reflect broader critiques within tourism scholarship highlighting risks of tourism-led development when governance systems fail to ensure accountability and inclusivity (Bianchi, 2009; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

The finding that participants felt excluded from decisions affecting their lives and resources illustrates what Chambers (1997) described as the "exclusion of the poor" from development processes. Despite

rhetoric of participation, power remains concentrated among political elites and commercial interests. This concentration of decision-making authority undermines potential for tourism to contribute to inclusive development.

5.7 Structural Barriers to Participation

Phase Three of research revealed several structural barriers restricting ability of low-income communities to participate effectively in tourism economy.

Political Exclusion: Participants frequently expressed view that local governance structures are dominated by political elites and influential investors. Planning decisions are often made without grassroots consultation, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation and mistrust among local residents. Even when tourism development brings infrastructure improvements and investment to region, these benefits frequently bypass communities most affected by poverty. This finding aligns with literature on elite capture in tourism development (Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007).

Financial Exclusion: Limited access to financial resources represents another major constraint. Many participants reported inability to secure loans or financial assistance due to lack of collateral, limited financial literacy, or absence of banking services in rural areas. Although microfinance institutions operate in parts of Bangladesh, their services are often directed towards households with greater financial stability. For poorest families, high interest rates and repayment pressures can make borrowing impractical or risky.

Educational and Skills Barriers: Educational and training barriers further restrict local participation in tourism. Many tourism businesses require employees with language skills, formal education, or professional training. However, low-income households often prioritise immediate income generation over long-term educational investment due to financial necessity. As a result, many community members remain excluded from higher-value employment opportunities within tourism sector.

Resource Access Restrictions: Access to productive resources such as land, water, and forests has become increasingly contested as tourism expands. Participants reported cases where resort developments restricted access to fishing grounds, beaches, or forest areas that previously supported traditional livelihoods. In some instances, local communities have been displaced or prevented from using resources historically central to their survival. Such processes contribute to broader sense of dispossession and undermine trust in government institutions responsible for regulating development.

Social Capital Deficits: The research further highlights importance of social capital in shaping development outcomes. Individuals with stronger networks, language abilities, or relationships with local authorities and tourism operators were more likely to access employment or business opportunities. Conversely, those lacking such connections often remained excluded from emerging economic benefits. This finding aligns with broader development literature emphasising role of social networks and institutional trust in facilitating economic participation (Granovetter, 1985; Woolcock, 1998).

Infrastructural Inequality: Finally, infrastructural inequality continues to limit participation in tourism-related activities. Many marginalised communities remain geographically isolated from major tourism zones and lack access to reliable electricity, paved roads, and internet connectivity. These infrastructural gaps hinder their ability to establish businesses, access markets, or participate in training programmes. While tourism development has improved infrastructure in selected areas, investments are often concentrated around luxury hotels and major transport routes, reinforcing spatial disparities within region.

5.8 Theoretical Implications

Findings from this study contribute to theoretical debates in several ways. First, they demonstrate importance of adopting multidimensional, capability-based approaches to understanding poverty in

tourism contexts. Income-focused evaluations of PPT miss crucial dimensions of poverty including social exclusion, political marginalisation, and limited agency. By foregrounding lived experiences of poor communities, this research reveals how tourism development can affect wellbeing in ways not captured by economic metrics alone.

Second, findings highlight limitations of participation as conceptualised within mainstream development discourse. Despite rhetorical commitment to participation, actual decision-making power remains concentrated among elites. This suggests need for more critical approaches to participation that attend to power relations and structural inequalities (Cornwall, 2006). Participation that fails to redistribute decision-making authority may simply legitimise predetermined outcomes rather than enabling genuine community control.

Third, research demonstrates relevance of critical tourism studies for understanding tourism-poverty dynamics in contexts like Bangladesh. By attending to political economy of tourism development who benefits, who is excluded, how power operates this study reveals how tourism can reproduce rather than reduce inequality. This supports arguments by Bianchi (2009) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) that tourism scholarship must engage with structural analysis rather than assuming tourism inherently contributes to development.

5.9 Chapter Summary

In summary, analysis indicates that tourism can contribute to poverty alleviation, but only under specific conditions. Its effectiveness depends on inclusive governance structures, equitable policy frameworks, and strong linkages with broader development strategies. Without systemic reforms addressing issues such as political exclusion, financial access, and infrastructural inequality, tourism will remain a partial and uneven development tool. Although it may provide short-term economic opportunities, it is unlikely to address deeper structural drivers of poverty.

The following chapter concludes the study by summarising key findings, offering policy recommendations, and suggesting directions for future research.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by summarising its key findings, evaluating potential of pro-poor tourism in contributing to poverty alleviation in Cox's Bazar, and offering policy implications, research contributions, and recommendations for future studies. It reflects critically on challenges, achievements, and constraints identified throughout research process.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The research reaffirms that poverty in Cox's Bazar is complex and multidimensional deeply rooted in social exclusion, lack of infrastructure, environmental vulnerability, and systemic inequality. While tourism development has expanded significantly, it has failed to reach poorest segments of society in any meaningful or sustained way.

Phase One findings revealed that local communities understand poverty in multidimensional terms extending beyond income deprivation. Participants emphasised social marginalisation, political exclusion, limited access to services, and intergenerational disadvantage as central to their experiences of poverty. These understandings challenge narrow economic definitions and suggest need for comprehensive approaches to poverty reduction.

Phase Two findings demonstrated that tourism generates some economic opportunities but in ways that

are highly uneven. Employment is predominantly informal, seasonal, and poorly compensated. Linkages between tourism and local economies remain weak, with benefits captured by intermediaries rather than reaching producers. Capacity-building initiatives exist but are fragmented and fail to reach most marginalised populations.

Phase Three findings identified persistent structural barriers restricting community participation: political marginalisation, limited credit access, skills mismatches, restricted resource access, cultural constraints, and uneven infrastructure development. These barriers combine to exclude poor communities from tourism benefits while exposing them to costs including displacement and environmental degradation.

6.3 Evaluation of Pro-Poor Tourism Potential

Evaluation of potential for pro-poor tourism reveals that, under right conditions, tourism can contribute to poverty alleviation. Where linkages to agriculture, fisheries, and handicrafts exist, and where skills development initiatives are targeted and accessible, tangible benefits are possible. Community members can generate income through informal businesses, cultural tourism, and employment in seasonal hospitality roles.

However, these outcomes remain marginal without strong enabling environment. Key challenges persist, including lack of inclusive governance, political elitism, limited access to credit, education, and productive resources, and unequal distribution of tourism infrastructure. Pro-poor tourism as currently conceptualised and implemented in Cox's Bazar fails to address structural drivers of poverty, instead offering superficial benefits that leave underlying inequalities intact.

6.4 Policy Implications

Policy implications are clear: tourism development must shift from growth-driven, top-down model to participatory and redistributive framework. Policy must integrate local communities into planning processes, ensure transparent benefit-sharing, and promote infrastructure serving both tourists and residents. Tourism authorities must engage in inter-ministerial collaboration with rural development, education, and environment sectors to embed pro-poor strategies in national and regional development plans.

Specific policy recommendations include:

1. **Establish participatory planning mechanisms** at local level ensuring community representation in tourism decision-making. These mechanisms should include marginalised groups women, indigenous peoples, landless households and possess genuine authority rather than tokenistic consultation.
2. **Develop inclusive tourism value chains** by strengthening linkages between tourism enterprises and local producers. This could involve facilitating direct contracting between hotels and farmers/fishers, supporting producer cooperatives, and ensuring fair pricing mechanisms.
3. **Targeted skills development programmes** designed for and delivered in marginalised communities, with attention to language training, hospitality skills, and business management. Programmes should be accessible to women and include childcare provisions, flexible timing, and local delivery.
4. **Access to finance initiatives** tailored to needs of poor households, including microfinance products with appropriate repayment structures, grants for business start-up, and simplified lending criteria not requiring land collateral.
5. **Infrastructure investment** directed toward marginalised communities rather than concentrated in tourism zones. This includes roads, electricity, water supply, and internet connectivity enabling participation in tourism economy.

6. **Secure resource access rights** for local communities, protecting traditional fishing grounds, forest areas, and coastal access from displacement by tourism development. This requires legal recognition of customary tenure and community consent for tourism projects affecting resource access.
7. **Gender-responsive tourism policies** addressing barriers faced by women, including safe transport, protection from harassment, childcare support, and equal employment opportunities.
8. **Monitoring and accountability mechanisms** tracking distribution of tourism benefits across socio-economic groups, with particular attention to poorest households. This requires disaggregated data collection and transparent reporting.

6.5 Research Contributions

This study contributes to academic discussions on tourism and development by providing empirical evidence from one of South Asia's most complex coastal tourism destinations. By combining qualitative insights with critical analytical framework, research offers deeper understanding of how tourism development interacts with poverty and inequality. It contributes new knowledge to fields of poverty studies, tourism policy, and participatory planning by foregrounding lived experiences and perspectives of marginalised coastal communities.

Methodologically, the study also adds value through its multi-phase, community-based research design, which highlights gap between tourism policy narratives and everyday realities experienced by local populations. The focus on epistemic justice positioning poor communities as knowledge producers rather than research objects offers model for future research seeking to understand development from below.

The study makes several specific contributions:

- It provides empirical evidence challenging assumptions that tourism growth automatically reduces poverty
- It demonstrates applicability of capabilities approach to tourism contexts
- It reveals mechanisms through which tourism can reproduce inequality
- It centres voices typically absent from tourism development debates
- It offers contextually grounded policy recommendations

6.6 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths: One of the key strengths of this research lies in its grounded approach and deliberate engagement with marginalised voices often absent from tourism development debates. The three-phase methodology enabled triangulation and validation of insights across both individual interviews and group discussions, strengthening credibility of findings. Furthermore, study's emphasis on local agency alongside structural critique enhances its relevance for scholars seeking to understand tourism development as well as policymakers concerned with designing more inclusive and equitable tourism policies.

The research benefited from researcher's insider status as Bangladeshi with experience in Cox's Bazar, facilitating rapport, access, and cultural interpretation. Extended fieldwork period enabled deep engagement with communities and development of trust necessary for candid discussion of sensitive topics including political marginalisation and resource conflicts.

Limitations: Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted within a specific geographic location and reflects a time-bound context, which may limit generalisability of its findings to other tourism destinations. While Cox's Bazar shares characteristics with other coastal tourism areas, each context has unique features requiring context-specific analysis.

The study did not incorporate quantitative economic indicators such as income changes, employment statistics, or asset accumulation, which could have complemented qualitative insights and provided more comprehensive evaluation of tourism's economic impacts. Resource constraints limited ability to conduct longitudinal research tracking changes over time.

Bureaucratic delays constrained access to high-ranking officials, and donor agencies declined to participate, potentially limiting perspectives captured from institutional actors. Language barriers occasionally hindered communication with tribal groups, and gender norms limited female participation in mixed-gender settings, though efforts were made to conduct separate women's focus groups.

Interpretive nature of qualitative analysis entails degree of subjectivity, though this was mitigated through triangulation, reflexive practice, and peer debriefing.

6.7 Directions for Future Research

Future research could build on these findings in several ways.

Comparative studies could expand geographical scope to include other coastal tourism regions in Bangladesh or across South Asia, enabling broader assessment of pro-poor tourism initiatives. Comparison across contexts with different governance arrangements, tourism market segments, and community characteristics would illuminate conditions under which PPT succeeds or fails.

Longitudinal research would be valuable for examining how pro-poor tourism interventions evolve over time and whether they generate sustainable benefits for local communities. Tracking same communities over extended period would reveal whether initial benefits are maintained, whether households can build on tourism participation to achieve upward mobility, and how external shocks (climate events, political instability, pandemics) affect tourism-dependent livelihoods.

Quantitative approaches integrating economic measurement could complement qualitative insights by quantifying income changes, employment patterns, and asset development linked to tourism participation. Mixed-methods designs combining survey data with in-depth qualitative inquiry would provide comprehensive understanding of tourism's poverty impacts.

Gendered experiences merit further investigation, as research revealed women face distinct barriers to tourism participation. Future studies should explore how gender norms, household dynamics, and employment structures shape women's experiences of tourism development and identify strategies for promoting gender-equitable outcomes.

Intersectional analysis examining how multiple forms of marginalisation gender, ethnicity, class, location interact to shape tourism participation would deepen understanding of inequality in tourism contexts. Research should attend to experiences of indigenous communities, religious minorities, and other marginalised groups often overlooked in tourism studies.

Post-pandemic transformations in tourism demand and development strategies provide opportunities for examining how more inclusive and resilient tourism models might emerge. Research could explore whether crises create opportunities for restructuring tourism along more equitable lines or whether they reinforce existing inequalities.

Governance and power deserve continued attention. Future research should examine decision-making processes in tourism planning, mechanisms of elite capture, and strategies for promoting accountability and transparency. Understanding how power operates in tourism governance is essential for designing effective interventions.

6.8 Concluding Reflections

In conclusion, findings of this study suggest that while tourism can contribute to poverty reduction in ce-

tain circumstances, it cannot serve as standalone solution. Meaningful progress requires redesign of tourism systems to prioritise justice, equity, and sustainability. Achieving transformative change demands more than economic investment; it requires fundamental reforms in governance structures, participatory decision-making processes, and underlying values shaping tourism development.

The voices of marginalised communities in Cox's Bazar articulate clearly what is needed: recognition, respect, and genuine inclusion in decisions affecting their lives and resources. They seek not charity but opportunity the chance to participate in tourism economy on fair terms, to benefit from resources they have stewarded for generations, and to shape development trajectories affecting their communities.

For pro-poor tourism to realise its promise, it must move beyond narrow focus on economic benefits to address deeper questions of power, rights, and justice. This requires commitment from governments, donors, private sector, and civil society to fundamental transformation rather than superficial adjustment. It requires willingness to challenge entrenched interests and redistribute decision-making authority. And it requires humility to learn from those with deepest understanding of poverty and development: poor communities themselves.

Only through such changes can tourism shift from extractive economic activity to genuinely inclusive driver of community empowerment and long-term resilience. The evidence from Cox's Bazar demonstrates both urgency of this task and possibility of achieving it. With political will, institutional reform, and sustained commitment to inclusive development, tourism can contribute to poverty reduction in ways that respect dignity, promote agency, and advance social justice.

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