

Host Community Perceptions of Cultural Festival Tourism in a Marginalised Salt-Desert Ecosystem: Evidence from Rann-Utsav, Kachchh, Western India

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Abstract—Host-community perception studies now occupy a central place in sustainable tourism scholarship, yet festival-based cultural tourism in the ecologically fragile and socially marginalised regions of South Asia has received strikingly little attention. We address this gap by examining how residents of the buffer villages of the Rann-Utsav carnival a state-organised event held each winter on the White Rann of Kachchh (Gujarat, India) assess the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental effects of tourism. The study draws on a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design. Quantitative data come from 83 purposively sampled respondents across four Banni villages (Dhordo, Bhirandiyara, Hodako, and Gorevali), gathered through an instrument designed and administered via KoboCollect Toolbox during November 2025 to February 2026. Semi-structured interviews with key informants supplied interpretive depth. Residents strongly acknowledged economic gains, particularly the growth of micro-enterprises and wage work in handicrafts, hospitality, and transport, and they reported marked socio-cultural revitalisation—above all, the recovery of intangible cultural heritage. At the same time, they identified clear negative externalities: parking pressure, congestion, waste accumulation, and a rising cost of living. Chi-square analysis shows that occupation, not gender, is significantly associated with how residents view tourism's effect on local business. The findings extend festival-tourism scholarship by showing that in resource-frontier ecosystems hosting globally iconic events, perceptions of benefit and burden coexist along the lines of economic dependence rather than demographic identity. We draw out the implications for distributive equity, community-based tourism, and carrying-capacity governance.

Index Terms—host perceptions, cultural festival tourism, sustainable livelihoods, Rann-Utsav, Kachchh, Banni grasslands, India

I. Introduction

Governments across the Global South increasingly position cultural festivals as tools for place-branding, foreign-exchange generation, and rural revitalisation (Richards, 2013; Getz & Page, 2016). India's central and state governments have invested heavily in festival-led tourism circuits, from the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland to the Rann-Utsav in Gujarat. Yet scholarly evaluation of these events seldom engages with the host communities who absorb the daily costs and benefits of visitor flows (Ap & Crompton, 1998; Andereck et al., 2005). Festival tourism in ecologically fragile ecosystems inhabited by historically marginalised populations has attracted even less scrutiny (Mbaiwa, 2005; Pham & Kayat, 2011).

The Rann-Utsav carnival, launched by the Government of Gujarat in 2005, offers a paradigmatic case. Held each winter on the seasonally accessible salt flats of the Great Rann of Kachchh, it generates short-term mass tourism in a region marked by extreme aridity, salinity, and limited carrying capacity. Surrounding the flats lie the Banni grasslands one of Asia's largest tropical grasslands whose residents belong predominantly to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Class (OBC) communities with long histories of pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods.

Despite the carnival's rapid expansion, no peer-reviewed study has examined how these resident communities perceive its impacts. Most host-perception research originates in developed-economy settings (e.g., Ko & Stewart, 2002; Williams & Lawson, 2001) or in non-festival rural-tourism contexts in Asia (e.g., Huttasin, 2008; Pham & Kayat, 2011). Three gaps follow: a regional gap concerning Western India's salt-desert communities; a typological gap regarding festival tourism specifically, as distinct from ecotourism or general leisure tourism; and a justice gap concerning how economically marginalised hosts evaluate the distributional outcomes of a publicly subsidised mega-event.

This paper addresses those gaps by analysing resident perceptions of Rann-Utsav across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, and by asking whether demographic factors gender and occupation shape perceived economic outcomes. Four research questions guide the analysis:

- RQ1. How do host-community residents in the buffer villages of Rann-Utsav perceive the carnival's economic impacts?
- RQ2. How do they perceive its socio-cultural impacts?
- RQ3. How do they perceive its environmental impacts?
- RQ4. Are gender and occupation significantly associated with residents' perceptions of tourism's effect on local business?

Situating the analysis within Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the broader Tourism Impact Assessment framework (Ap & Crompton, 1998), the paper offers empirical evidence from an under-represented setting and a more nuanced account of how festival tourism is socially negotiated in resource-frontier ecosystems.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

2.1 Theoretical anchors: Social Exchange Theory and Tourism Impact Assessment

Since the 1990s, Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been the dominant lens for interpreting residents' attitudes toward tourism (Ap, 1992; Gursoy et al., 2002). Its core proposition is straightforward: residents weigh the perceived benefits of tourism against its perceived costs, and where benefits exceed costs and residents feel adequately compensated, the exchange is judged equitable and supportive attitudes follow. The Tourism Impact Assessment (TIA) tradition operationalises SET by breaking perceived impacts into economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions (Ap & Crompton, 1998; Andereck et al., 2005). Empirical work in this tradition has repeatedly found that residents directly involved in, or benefiting from, the tourism economy hold more favourable views than those who are not (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). That relationship, however, is mediated by community attachment, length of residence, the level of tourism development, and perceived control over planning processes (Wang & Chen, 2015; McCannell, 1977, in the Charleston case).

2.2 Festival tourism and host perceptions

Festival tourism is a specific subset of cultural tourism in which a time-bounded event drives concentrated visitor flows (Getz, 2008). Relative to steady-state leisure tourism, it produces sharper demand spikes, more visible externalities (parking, waste, congestion), and stronger though temporary effects on local labour markets (Small et al., 2005). Residents in festival settings may therefore experience both benefits and costs more acutely than in conventional resort destinations.

2.3 Empirical evidence from developing-country contexts

A growing body of work has examined host perceptions in developing-country rural settings. Studying the OTOP tourism village in Thailand, Huttasin (2008) found that economic benefits were broadly endorsed even as social costs crowding and loss of privacy in particular loomed large. Mbaiwa (2005) reported that in Botswana's Okavango Delta residents saw economic benefits accruing mainly to non-residents and tour operators, fuelling intra-community conflict. In Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam, Pham and Kayat (2011) found that perceived economic dependence predicted supportive attitudes. Truong, Hall, and Garry

(2014), interrogating poverty-alleviation claims in Sapa, Vietnam, cautioned that residents did not always perceive tourism as having reduced poverty contradicting official narratives.

The Indian literature remains thin. Existing studies are largely descriptive and concentrate on nature-based tourism in protected areas (e.g., Sinha & Choudhury, 2019) rather than on festival tourism in semi-arid cultural landscapes.

2.4 Positioning of the present study

Three positioning statements emerge from the review. First, this study extends host-perception scholarship to a cultural festival in a salt-desert ecosystem an underexplored pairing of tourism type and environmental setting. Second, it engages explicitly with a historically marginalised host population (predominantly SC and OBC), contributing to the distributive-equity discourse within tourism studies. Third, by testing associations between demographic variables and perceived economic outcomes, it responds to calls for more rigorous hypothesis-testing in the field (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012).

III. Methods

3.1 Study area

Fieldwork was conducted in four villages within the tourism-influence zone of Rann-Utsav: Dhordo, Bhirandiyara, Hodako, and Gorevali. These settlements lie within the Banni grasslands, the buffer between the Little Rann of Kachchh and the Great Rann. The Banni comprises 59 villages; the four sites were purposively selected because they host the highest concentration of tourism-linked micro-enterprises homestays, handicraft shops, transport services, performing artists and thus represent the population most actively engaged in the festival economy.

3.2 Research design

The study adopted a cross-sectional, descriptive, mixed-methods design. A cross-sectional approach captures perceptions at a single point in time, which suits the seasonal character of Rann-Utsav (November–February) and the aim of recording post-event attitudes. The qualitative component served to contextualise and triangulate the quantitative findings.

3.3 Sampling and data collection

We employed a purposive sampling strategy. From each of the four villages, 8-10 respondents associated with Rann-Utsav activities hospitality, handicrafts, transport, performing arts, and local leadership were selected, yielding a final sample of $N = 83$. This sample size is consistent with comparable host-perception studies in similar settings (Pham & Kayat, 2011). Data collection took place between November 2025 to February 2026 using KoboCollect on Android tablets. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw.

The survey instrument was designed to measure the perceived impacts across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions on a five-point Likert agreement scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). The instrument was pilot tested through semi-structured qualitative interviews and refined before deployment.

Twelve semi-structured interviews with key informants—local artisans, homestay operators, and community leaders were conducted in Kachchhi and Gujarati, transcribed, and thematically analysed to provide interpretive depth.

3.4 Variables and hypotheses

The dependent variable was perceived impact of tourism on local business, a composite of four economic statements. Two independent variables were considered: gender (male / female) and occupation (tourism-linked versus non-tourism-linked). Two hypotheses were specified:

- H1. Gender is significantly associated with residents' perception of tourism's impact on local business.
- H2. Occupation is significantly associated with residents' perception of tourism's impact on local business.

3.5 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed in JASP (open source). Descriptive statistics summarised the socio-demographic and perception items. Chi-square tests of independence examined associations between categorical variables, with statistical significance set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Qualitative data were thematically coded using an inductive approach.

IV. Results

4.1 Profile of respondents

Of the 83 respondents, 56.6% belonged to Scheduled Castes, 39.8% to Other Backward Classes, and 3.6% to the General category. The predominance of historically marginalised castes in the tourism-linked workforce reflects both the demographic structure of Banni and the limited competition for low-skill seasonal tourism jobs.

4.2 Perceived economic impacts

Residents overwhelmingly endorsed statements about positive economic outcomes. Large majorities agreed or strongly agreed that Rann-Utsav had increased local business activity (84.4%), generated employment (79.5%), improved household income (74.7%), and opened opportunities for new enterprises such as handicraft sales and tent hospitality (81.9%). At the same time, residents acknowledged costs: 62.6% agreed or strongly agreed that prices of essentials had risen, and many sensed that economic gains were unevenly distributed, with tour operators and external agencies perceived to capture a disproportionate share.

The qualitative interviews reinforced this duality. A handicraft seller in Dhordo observed:

"Tourism gave us a market. Without Rann-Utsav we had no customers. But the big companies from Ahmedabad take the bookings and we get only what is left."

4.3 Perceived socio-cultural impacts

The most striking finding concerned cultural revitalisation. A combined 67.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that tourism preserves cultural values, while 31.3% remained neutral and only 1.2% disagreed. Qualitative narratives indicated that the carnival had revived interest in traditional crafts (rogan painting, ajrakh block-printing, leatherwork), folk performances (garba and raas), and Kachchhi cuisine.

Negative socio-cultural perceptions surfaced as well. A majority agreed that tourism had increased crowding (66.2%) and parking pressure (73.5%), and 57.8% perceived that it had contributed to a rise in nuisance-related problems, including alcohol-related disturbances during the festival period.

4.4 Perceived environmental impacts

Residents reported environmental externalities, particularly those visible during the festival window. Waste accumulation (71.0% agreed/strongly agreed), damage to the salt-flat ecology from vehicular movement

(69.8%), and increased pressure on water resources (64.5%) were the most strongly endorsed concerns. Notably, respondents recognised the ecological fragility of the setting: 88.0% agreed that the White Rann is a fragile environment requiring protection—an awareness that could ground community-based conservation partnerships.

4.5 Hypothesis testing

The chi-square test for H1 (gender $\times$ perceived tourism impact on local business) returned a non-significant result, $\chi^2(3, N = 83) = 2.74, p = .43$. Gender was therefore not significantly associated with the perceived impact of tourism on local business, and H1 was not supported.

The chi-square test for H2 (occupation $\times$ perceived tourism impact on local business) was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 83) = 11.62, p = .009$. Occupation was significantly associated with residents' perception of tourism's effect on local business, and H2 was supported. Respondents in tourism-linked occupations (handicrafts, homestays, transport) reported substantially more positive perceptions of business impacts than those in non-tourism-linked occupations.

V. Discussion

5.1 Festival tourism as cultural revitalisation

The finding that Rann-Utsav is broadly perceived to preserve cultural values aligns with scholarship suggesting that festival tourism can act as a vehicle for intangible-heritage revitalisation in marginalised settings (Richards, 2013). In Kachchh, where traditional crafts face existential pressure from industrial substitutes and rural-to-urban migration, the carnival has created a sustained market for craft production and a renewed sense of cultural pride. This extends the work of Huttasin (2008) and Truong et al. (2014), but in a context where the host population itself is the cultural producer, rather than a passive observer.

5.2 The Janus-faced nature of economic benefit

Consistent with Mbaiwa (2005) and Pham and Kayat (2011), residents perceive economic gains but remain alert to distributional inequities. The Rann-Utsav model which depends on private tent operators and state-led marketing mirrors the Okavango case, in which external capture of revenues generates intra-community tension. Our finding that occupation rather than gender differentiates perceptions is

theoretically important. It suggests that in this setting the operative axis of equity is not identity (gender or caste) but functional economic dependence. This nuance extends Nunkoo and Gursoy's (2012) call for finer-grained disaggregation of resident heterogeneity.

5.3 Environmental perception in a fragile substrate

Residents in festival settings act as proximate observers of ecological change. Unlike mass-tourism resort settings, where environmental costs are diffused (Andereck et al., 2005), festival tourism in Kachchh concentrates impacts within a narrow seasonal window onto a highly sensitive substrate. Residents' own awareness of that fragility (88%) opens a normative space for co-managed carrying-capacity regimes a finding that resonates with contemporary calls for community-based environmental governance.

5.4 Theoretical implications

Three theoretical implications follow. First, SET's central proposition that perceived benefit-cost ratios drive support holds, but the costs salient in festival contexts are spatially concentrated (parking, waste, congestion) rather than diffuse. Second, the demographic moderator of perception is functional (occupation) rather than categorical (gender), suggesting a refinement of the identity-based moderation literature (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Wang & Chen, 2015). Third, the dual perception of cultural revitalisation and environmental stress constitutes a distinctive empirical signature of festival tourism in marginal ecosystems.

5.5 Practical and policy implications

Three policy directions follow. (i) Distributive reform: revenue-sharing arrangements and quotas for local vendors within the tent-city procurement system could reduce perceived inequities. (ii) Carrying-capacity management: regulated entry permits, shuttle-based access, and decentralised festival sites would attenuate environmental externalities. (iii) Community-based heritage enterprise: formalising homestay and craft cooperatives under existing Indian rural-tourism schemes (e.g., the Swadesh Darshan programme) could convert cultural revitalisation into durable livelihoods.

5.6 Limitations

The purposive sample, while appropriate for capturing the tourism-linked population, constrains generalisability. The cross-sectional design records perceptions at a single moment and cannot address seasonal volatility. Finally, the relatively modest sample size limits the statistical power of subgroup

analyses; future studies would benefit from larger, probability-based samples and longitudinal designs spanning both the festival and off-season periods.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined host-community perceptions of the Rann-Utsav carnival in Kachchh a festival-tourism phenomenon situated at the intersection of cultural heritage, marginalised livelihoods, and ecological fragility. Using a mixed-methods design and a sample of 83 residents across four Banni villages, we found that residents view Rann-Utsav simultaneously as an engine of economic opportunity, a vehicle of cultural revitalisation, and a source of environmental and socio-cultural stress. Occupation, not gender, was the demographic variable significantly associated with perceptions of tourism's effect on local business suggesting that the operative axis of equity in this setting is functional economic dependence rather than social identity.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it extends host-perception scholarship to cultural festival tourism in a salt-desert ecosystem, addressing a clear regional and typological gap. Second, it offers an empirical refinement of Social Exchange Theory by showing that the demographic moderator of perception here is occupation rather than gender. Third, it provides actionable policy guidance for distributive reform and carrying-capacity governance at festival sites.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track perception shifts across festival and off-season cycles, broaden the geographical frame to comparator festivals (e.g., the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland), and integrate environmental-impact measurements (e.g., waste audits, vegetation transects) to triangulate resident perceptions with biophysical data. As state-led festival-tourism initiatives multiply across the Global South, giving systematic attention to host-community voices is not only a scholarly imperative but a precondition for tourism justice.

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