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Paradise Contested: Tropical Tourism, Eco-landscapes, and Cultural Resistance in Goa and Kerala

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Abstract

This article examines the paradox of "paradise" in India's tropics through the cases of Goa and Kerala. These regions are central to India's tourism identity; Goa as a coastal space of leisure, festivals, and nightlife, and Kerala as a spiritual and ecological sanctuary. However, they also face growing environmental stress, cultural commodification, and social contestation. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, postcolonial tourism theory, and the concept of tropicality, the study extends Said's critique of the exotic gaze to tropical landscapes, foregrounding nature–culture entanglements and environmental imaginaries. Lévi-Strauss's reflections on the Amazon provide a historical lens for understanding how long, steady processes of tourism reshape tropical regions globally. Empirical case studies trace how colonial imaginaries persist in neoliberal branding, digital tourism promotion, and wellness commodification. In Goa, coastal erosion, waste accumulation, nightlife economies, and fisher displacement expose the costs of pleasure-oriented tourism. In Kerala, backwater pollution, houseboat expansion, and the commercialization of Ayurveda complicate the image of "God's Own Country." Recent cases from 2023–2025 highlight grassroots mobilizations, fisher protests, Responsible Tourism initiatives, and emerging debates on ecological limits and degrowth. By reframing India's tropics as contested rather than idyllic, this article contributes to critical tourism studies, tropical scholarship, and political ecology. It positions Goa and Kerala within global patterns of tropical tourism, emphasizing how power, ecology, and culture intersect across regions shaped by similar histories of extraction and mobility.

Keywords: critical tourism studies, ecological landscapes, India's tropics, cultural resistance, tropical tourism, Goa, Kerala, tropicality

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Introduction: India's Coastal Tropics and the Paradise Paradox

The idea of "paradise" has long shaped how India's tropical coastal regions are imagined and marketed. Goa's beaches and Kerala's backwaters are portrayed as idyllic worlds where leisure, nature, and cultural charm converge. Such representations draw on enduring postcolonial imaginaries of the tropics as landscapes of abundance, pleasure, and escape. Tourism is now a major driver of India's economy, and according to *India Tourism Statistics 2023*, coastal destinations form the core of national branding efforts (Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, 2023). Yet behind this appealing picture lies a paradox: the search for paradise has contributed to ecological decline and the disruption of local cultural life.

The post-pandemic surge in "revenge travel", a term used to describe rapid rebounds in leisure travel following mobility restrictions, intensified these pressures (Gössling et al., 2021). Domestic tourist numbers soared, placing additional strain on fragile coastal ecologies. The Forest Survey of India (2024) notes that unregulated construction, waste generation, and coastal erosion have accelerated in popular tropical zones. Global scholarship on over-tourism similarly warns that high visitor flows combined with uneven governance often result in long-term ecological and social harm rather than short-term congestion alone (Rijwani & Makhija, 2025). In India's West coast tropics, over-tourism is therefore not only a matter of crowding; it reflects a deeper crisis of environmental degradation, cultural displacement, and uneven development.

To understand this paradox of paradise contested, it is useful to move beyond representations of culture alone and engage with the concept of topicality, which extends Edward Said's critique of *Orientalism* (1978) into the environmental and landscape dimensions of the tropics. Tropicality foregrounds how tropical regions are imagined as lush, timeless, and naturally abundant, while masking histories of extraction, dispossession, and ecological transformation. As discussed by Lundberg, Regis, and Agbonifo (2022) in *Tropical Landscapes and Nature-Culture Entanglements: Reading Tropicality via Avatar*, tropical landscapes are produced through nature–culture entanglements in which fantasy, environment, and power intersect. This imaginary sustains global desires for tropical escape while obscuring social and ecological costs. Tourism in India's tropics operates within this regime of tropicality, where coastlines, waterscapes, and cultural practices are rendered consumable as experiential landscapes detached from local life worlds.

This framing resonates with Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1961) reflections in *Tristes Tropiques*, written in the mid-twentieth century and based on his encounters with Indigenous societies in the Amazon basin. Writing at an early moment of global modernity, Lévi-Strauss critiques the romanticization of tropical worlds as pure and unspoiled, even as they are reshaped by colonial intrusion, capitalist expansion, and cultural erosion. Although his work predates mass tourism, it captures the beginnings of a long and steady process through which tropical regions become objects of desire and consumption. Similar contradictions shape the production of paradise in India today. Goa's beaches are marketed as carefree escapes, yet research documents how mass tourism, real-estate speculation, and coastal modification have eroded dunes, displaced fisher communities, and altered traditional livelihood systems (Ferrão, 2021; Noronha, 1999). In Kerala, Ayurveda and backwater experiences are packaged as global lifestyle products, but this commodification often detaches wellness traditions from their socio-cultural roots while exacerbating pollution and resource conflict in fragile aquatic environments (Singh, 2009). The image of paradise is thus sustained through processes that are deeply uneven and ecologically costly.

These tensions are further shaped by state policy. Government frameworks present eco-tourism as a pathway to sustainable development, yet they often neglect issues of consent, community rights, and ecological thresholds (Ministry of Tourism & Government of India, 2022). National strategies prioritize global competitiveness while overlooking the unequal burdens placed on coastal villages, artisanal fishers, and other local stakeholders. As global critiques of tourism governance point out, sustainability discourse can mask extractive practices, enabling large-scale development under the language of green growth (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). India's tropics illustrate this contradiction clearly: paradise functions simultaneously as an economic aspiration and as a contested social–ecological space.

Clarifying these contradictions helps frame the central concerns of this article. Tourism does not merely represent coastal India; it reshapes it through slow, cumulative transformations. Local communities navigate complex pressures, ranging from displacement by resort development to shifts in cultural identity shaped by global tourist expectations. At the same time, activist groups, fisher organizations, and community networks continue to challenge dominant tourism policies, calling for more equitable and ecologically grounded models of development that resist the reduction of tropical landscapes to consumable spectacle.

To address these dynamics, the article asks three linked questions:

- How is tourism in India's tropical regions constructed as "paradise" in policy, media, and cultural narratives?
- What ecological and cultural consequences follow from this framing for coastal communities in Goa and Kerala?
- How do local people resist, adapt, or reimagine tourism in ways that challenge dominant models?

By raising these questions, the article situates India's tropics within the melancholic lens of *Tristes Tropiques*. It shows how the allure of paradise is inseparable from long-term histories of ecological stress, social displacement, and contested cultural meaning across tropical regions worldwide. At the same time, it foregrounds the agency of local communities who articulate alternative visions of how coastal landscapes might be lived with, rather than consumed.

The article proceeds in five parts. The first section traces colonial and contemporary imaginaries of paradise in India's coastal regions. The next examines Goa and Kerala as tropical case studies, showing how beach cultures, wellness tourism, and real-estate expansion intersect with ecological fragility. The third section turns to community resistance and local cultural futures, drawing on three case studies to highlight grassroots movements, fisher organizations, and degrowth-oriented proposals. The discussion situates India's experience within wider global debates on tropical tourism, while the conclusion calls for ecological, community-led, and decolonial approaches that move beyond the traditional model of paradise.

Colonial and Neocolonial Imaginaries of Paradise

The idea of the tropics as "paradise" has deep historical roots shaped through colonial knowledge production. During the colonial period, European travelers, missionaries, administrators, and ethnographers portrayed India's coastal tropics as zones of abundance, sensuality, and natural excess. These depictions were never neutral descriptions of place. While Edward Said, (1978) explains, colonial writing framed the non-West as exotic, passive, and available for external interpretation and control, David Arnold (2000) argues that colonial representations of the tropics were not only cultural but environmental, constructing tropical landscapes as abundant, excessive, and available for extraction. Tropicality thus brings nature and landscape into the postcolonial critique, revealing how ecological imaginaries operate alongside cultural

exoticism. Goa's coastline appeared in travel journals as a carefree, sunlit world, while Kerala's spice-rich backwaters were described as timeless, fertile, and awaiting cultivation. Such representations transformed tropical landscapes into objects of fascination and desire, legitimizing colonial intervention through aesthetics as much as through administration.

While Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains foundational, later scholarship has extended this critique through the concept of tropicality, which focuses specifically on how tropical regions are imagined through nature, climate, and landscape. Tropicality highlights how the tropics are constructed as lush, excessive, and sensorial spaces, simultaneously fragile and exploitable. Lundberg, Regis and Agbonifo (2022) observe that tropical landscapes are produced through nature–culture entanglements that blur the boundaries between environment, fantasy, and power. Within this framework, the tropics are not merely cultural "Others" but ecological spectacles shaped by colonial histories and contemporary global desires. Tourism imaginaries in India's tropics continue to operate within this regime of tropicality, where coastlines and backwaters are rendered consumable as pristine environments detached from local social realities.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1961) *Tristes Tropiques* offers an early reflection on these dynamics. Written in the mid-twentieth century and grounded in his encounters with Indigenous societies in the Amazon basin, Lévi-Strauss's work captures a moment when modernity was beginning to transform tropical worlds at an accelerated pace. He exposes the ambivalence of travel writing that simultaneously romanticizes and mourns the tropics, portraying them as beautiful yet already doomed by external intrusion. Although Lévi-Strauss was not writing about tourism as an industry, his insights illuminate the longer historical processes through which tropical regions become sites of desire, loss, and gradual erosion. This ambivalence continues to shape how India's tropics are imagined in the postcolonial present.

Even after the formal end of colonial rule, the representational structures produced under colonialism did not disappear. Gayatri Spivak (1988) demonstrates how colonial epistemologies persist through neocolonial formations, where older hierarchies are reproduced via development discourse, global capitalism, and cultural commodification. In tourism, these continuities are particularly visible. Goa and Kerala are marketed to domestic and international visitors using imagery that closely echoes colonial-era descriptions of leisure, abundance, and timelessness. Hannam and Reddy (2016) argue that much of India's ecotourism operates within a neoliberal framework in which nature and culture are transformed into marketable assets rather than protected commons.

Kerala's "God's Own Country" campaign, launched in the 1990s, illustrates this continuity. While widely praised for its branding success, the campaign relied heavily on depictions of eternal calm and unchanging landscapes, masking ecological pressures and social transformation beneath a carefully curated image of paradise (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). Similarly, Goa's global marketing frames its beaches as carefree and liberated spaces, but research shows how unregulated resort construction, coastal modification, and real-estate speculation have disrupted fisher livelihoods and accelerated shoreline erosion. In both cases, tropicality functions as a powerful aesthetic that naturalizes development while obscuring its costs.

Digital media has intensified these imaginaries further. Influencers, Instagram travelers, and platform-based tourism companies circulate simplified visions of Goa's beaches and Kerala's backwaters as spaces without conflict, caste hierarchies, economic inequality, or ecological strain. Nunes et al. (2025) note that such digital portrayals flatten local complexity and reinforce the fantasy of paradise as a pure leisure. Within these visual economies, communities appear primarily as performers of culture rather than as political actors with rights, histories, and claims to land and resources.

Critical tourism theory helps explain why these patterns persist across tropical regions. Postcolonial scholars argue that the Global South is routinely framed as a playground for tourists seeking authenticity, escape, or spiritual renewal (Hutnyk, 1996). Political ecologists show how tourism development often reproduces socio-ecological inequality by extracting value from environments that are already vulnerable to climate change and resource depletion (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Degrowth scholars extend this critique by questioning the sustainability of endless tourism expansion, particularly in tropical regions where ecological limits are already under strain (Fletcher et al., 2019). Together, these perspectives reveal tourism not as a short-term disturbance but as a long and steady process reshaping tropical landscapes worldwide.

In India, the persistence of the paradise imaginary directly influences land-use decisions, development priorities, and community participation. Goa's carnival culture, nightlife economy, and wellness retreats are marketed globally, yet these narratives conceal ongoing disputes over coastal rights and the marginalization of traditional fishing communities. Kerala's wellness and backwater industries similarly depend on images of tranquility and spiritual purity, even as pollution, waste accumulation, and over-extraction of resources generate long-term ecological vulnerability.

What emerges is a clear continuity from colonial to neoliberal times. India's tropics remain framed as consumable landscapes, open to external aesthetic and economic control. The fantasy of paradise hides the uneven burdens placed on local communities, reinforces extractive development patterns, and normalizes social and ecological inequalities. As Said (1978) and Spivak (1988) remind us, such imaginaries are not merely symbolic; they actively shape material power relations. In the Indian context, these dynamics continue to guide how Goa and Kerala are represented, developed, and contested.

Paradise Contested I: Goa

Goa is one of India's most recognizable tropical destinations. Its appeal rests on a long history of colonial representation, global countercultural tourism, and contemporary branding that celebrates sun, beaches, nightlife, and freedom (Ferrão, 2021). These narratives position Goa firmly within global imaginaries of tropical leisure. Yet behind these images lies a more complex story of ecological strain, cultural tension, and uneven development. As Lévi-Strauss observed in *Tristes Tropiques*, places framed as idyllic often conceal histories of dispossession, slow transformation, and loss beneath their surface. Goa reflects this dynamic with particular clarity.

Goa's Colonial and Postcolonial Imaginary

Goa's status as a tropical "paradise" can be traced to early colonial representation. Ruled by the Portuguese from 1510 to 1961, the region developed a distinctive Lusophone and Catholic identity that set it apart within the Indian subcontinent (Kandolkar, 2021). Colonial travel accounts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries described Goa as lush, sensual, and timeless. The *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Govt. of India, 1909), for instance, praised its "luxuriant vegetation and languid charm," reinforcing a familiar colonial trope in which the tropics appeared as spaces of ease, abundance, and natural excess. Such depictions exemplify what Said (1978) later identified as the eroticizing and aestheticizing gaze of colonial discourse, which transformed colonized regions into landscapes available for external consumption. Read through the lens of tropicality, these representations did not simply describe Goa's environment but actively produced it as a consumable tropical landscape, separating nature from history and people from place.

After Goa's integration into India, tourism expanded rapidly. The hippie trail of the 1960s and 1970s transformed the region into a global leisure destination. Travelers from

Europe and North America described Goa as a space of escape from industrial modernity, characterized by beaches, spirituality, music, and psychedelic experimentation (Gemie & Ireland, 2017). Although framed as countercultural, these narratives reproduced older colonial fantasies of tropical freedom and excess, reworking them through new cultural idioms rather than dismantling them.

Tourism, Capital, and Coastal Tension

Tourism now occupies a central position in Goa's economy, contributing over 30 percent of the state's GDP (Government of Goa, 2023). Yet postcolonial theory reminds us that spaces of consumption are never politically neutral. Spivak (1988) argues that marginalized communities are often represented within dominant narratives but rarely allowed to speak for themselves. This dynamic is evident in Goa's coastal zones, where development pressures increasingly shape everyday life.

Research shows that unregulated resort construction has accelerated shoreline erosion, particularly along beaches such as Calangute, Baga, and Candolim (Sawkar et al., 2010). Dune systems have been flattened to make way for hotels, shacks, and access roads, weakening natural coastal defenses. Fishing communities report shrinking access to traditional landing sites as private tourism infrastructure expands. Fabinyi et al. (2022) document how many fishing families face displacement or livelihood loss as coastal commons are transformed into commercial beachfronts.

A brief example illustrates these tensions. In Benaulim, fishers protested hotel expansion in 2021 after construction activities threatened pathways traditionally used to access the sea. Their petition described tourism's impact as "a paradise for visitors, but shrinking space for those who depend on the coast" (Miller, 2022). Such moments reveal how resistance emerges not from abstract opposition to tourism, but from the cumulative pressures of land conversion, restricted access, and ecological degradation.

Festivals, Nightlife, and the Politics of Excess

Goa's global popularity is further sustained through festivals, carnivals, electronic music events, and a vibrant nightlife economy. These are marketed as symbols of freedom, cosmopolitanism, and cultural openness (Ferrão, 2021). Yet such representations draw on long-standing orientalist and tropicalist fantasies. Raj & Morpeth (2015) note that international portrayals of Goa often rely on the idea of the East as a site of pleasure

without restraint, aligning closely with Said's (1978) analysis of how the non-West is framed as sensual, excessive, and available for consumption.

For local communities, the effects of this "party economy" are deeply ambivalent. While nightlife generates significant revenue, it also contributes to noise pollution, drug-related crime, and social pressures on local youth. Residents have repeatedly raised concerns about the cultural and social costs of tourism-driven excess, arguing that it marginalizes traditional livelihoods linked to fishing, agriculture, and small-scale trade. The celebratory imagery of festivals and carnivals often masks these exclusions and the uneven distribution of tourism's benefits.

Lévi-Strauss's reflections help interpret this contradiction. Writing about the Amazon, he observed how aesthetic admiration often coexists with forms of gradual destruction that are difficult to perceive in the short term. In Goa, the spectacle of carnival and nightlife overlays a quieter erosion of coastal ecologies and community life, a dynamic that Nixon (2011) conceptualizes as "slow violence." The damage accumulates incrementally, becoming visible only over time.

Climate Change and the Fragility of Paradise

The vulnerabilities of Goa's tourism model are intensified by climate change. Reports from the Ministry of Earth Sciences, Govt. of India (2025), indicate that rising sea levels and increasingly erratic monsoons are accelerating coastal erosion and threatening low-lying settlements. Tourism infrastructure built close to the shoreline is particularly exposed. Sawkar et al. (2010) found that several beach stretches lose substantial sand volume during each monsoon season, undermining both ecological stability and long-term economic viability.

This produces a striking irony. Goa continues to be branded as a timeless tropical paradise, yet climate change exposes the fragility of this image. Beaches central to the state's tourism identity are disappearing, and coastal communities face growing risks from flooding and storm surges. While the paradise imaginary persists in tourist brochures and digital media, ecological realities point toward an increasingly uncertain future. In this sense, Goa exemplifies how tropical tourism operates as a long and steady process that accumulates vulnerability even as it promises escape and abundance.

Paradise Contested II: Kerala

While Goa exemplifies a pleasure-oriented coastal paradise dominated by nightlife, festivals, and leisure consumption, Kerala offers a contrasting but equally powerful vision of tropical allure. Here, paradise is framed through wellness, spirituality, and ecological beauty, marketed globally as "God's Own Country." Examining Kerala alongside Goa reveals how different versions of tropical paradise rely on similar processes of commodification, environmental strain, and social marginalization. Although their aesthetic languages differ, both are produced within the same regime of tropicality that renders landscapes consumable while obscuring their vulnerabilities.

Branding "God's Own Country"

Kerala represents a distinct version of the tropical imaginary (Priyadharshan P., 2026). If Goa is sold as a coastal leisure zone, Kerala is positioned as a sanctuary of healing, spirituality, and environmental harmony. The state's contemporary tourism identity took shape in the 1990s, when the Tourism Department launched the "God's Own Country" campaign. Featuring lush backwaters, monsoon landscapes, Kathakali performances, Ayurveda, and rural heritage, the campaign became one of India's most successful tourism brands and helped Kerala attract international visitors during a period when many destinations in the Global South were rebranding themselves (Kerala Tourism Department, 1991; Nair & Dileep, 2021).

This branding draws on much older orientalist representations. Colonial travel accounts from the nineteenth century described Kerala as a land of fertile abundance, ancient healing traditions, and serene villages seemingly untouched by time. British administrator Francis Day wrote in 1863 of "a coastline wrapped in greenery and a people whose customs seem untouched by time", reinforcing the tropical trope of timelessness and harmony. Such representations exemplify what postcolonial scholars identify as ambivalent forms of celebration that continue to recycle colonial fantasies. Bhabha (2012) argues that postcolonial identities are often staged through images that appear affirmative while still reproducing older structures of difference.

Kerala's modern tourism branding reflects this tension. While celebrating regional culture, it also reconfigures it for global consumption. Practices such as Ayurveda, yoga, and Kathakali are packaged as wellness experiences designed for short-term tourist engagement. Singh (2009) notes that many Ayurveda packages simplify complex medical systems into standardized spa treatments. It detaches them from their

epistemological and ecological foundations. Osella & Osella (2008) similarly show how temple arts and rituals are performed in stylized formats for resort and houseboat audiences. These processes align with Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern cultures are made visible only in forms that fit dominant narratives. Local knowledge circulates, but its meaning is reshaped to meet tourist expectations.

Ecological Costs behind the Sanctuary Image

Behind Kerala's wellness-oriented image lies significant ecological strain. This is especially evident in the Vembanad backwaters; one of the states' most heavily promoted tourist landscapes. Houseboat tourism expanded rapidly after the late 1990s, marketed as environmentally friendly and culturally immersive. Environmental studies, however, reveal a contrasting reality. The Kerala State Pollution Control Board (2023) reports that untreated sewage discharge from houseboats has contributed to declining water quality. Fishing communities in Kuttanad and Kumarakom document a steady decline in fish stocks over the past two decades, attributing this to increased boat traffic, oil leakage, and effluent discharge. Mangrove habitats around Alappuzha have also diminished as tourism infrastructure expanded.

Rijwani & Makhija (2025) describe these processes as forms of "slow erosion," where wetland ecosystems degrade incrementally and often invisibly to visitors focused on surface beauty. This pattern closely echoes Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, in which environmental harm accumulates gradually rather than through dramatic events. Kerala's backwaters thus exemplify how tropical tourism reshapes ecosystems over time while sustaining the illusion of pristine nature.

Coastal tourism zones such as Kovalam and Varkala display similar contradictions. Resorts constructed close to shorelines have contributed to beach narrowing and hillside instability. Environmental assessments by the Kerala Coastal Zone Management Authority indicate that cliff erosion in Varkala has intensified as hotels expand along fragile cliff edges (The Hindu, 2024). Here again, the rhetoric of clean living and ecological harmony stands in tension with visible environmental degradation.

Green washing and Social Displacement

Kerala is frequently celebrated as a "model state" for responsible and community-based tourism. Yet scholars caution against taking such claims at face value. Büscher & Fletcher (2020) argue that nature-based tourism often relies on green washing,

deploying the language of sustainability while maintaining extractive practices. In Kerala, this contradiction is evident across both backwater and coastal tourism sectors.

Fishing communities face shrinking access to landing sites as resort zones expand, while rising land prices in backwater villages displace small farmers and long-term residents. The transformation of local arts into tourist performances generates income opportunities but also cultural distortion. Osella and Osella (2008) note that local performers frequently alter costumes, narratives and rhythms to suit tourist expectations. It gradually erodes the ritual and social meanings of these practices. These pressures recall Lévi-Strauss's observation in *Tristes Tropiques* that appearances of harmony often conceal deeper fractures. Kerala's global image of balance between humans and nature rests on processes of ecological extraction and unequal social impact.

Synthesis: Contesting Paradise in Goa and Kerala

Goa and Kerala represent two influential versions of India's tropical imaginary. Goa symbolizes pleasure, nightlife, and cosmopolitan freedom, while Kerala embodies calm, spirituality, and ecological harmony. Both versions are powerfully marketed, yet both rely on environmental strain and cultural commodification.

In Goa, coastal erosion, climate vulnerability, and displacement undermine the carefree image of leisure. In Kerala, backwaters and wellness traditions are transformed into global products even as pollution, mangrove loss, and cultural simplification intensify. In both states, neoliberal tourism reproduces colonial patterns by framing India's tropics as exotic landscapes available for external consumption (Hannam & Reddy, 2016). Lévi-Strauss's melancholic insight remains instructive: beauty and loss are deeply intertwined. Together, these cases demonstrate that paradise is not a natural condition but a contested construction shaped by power, profit, and environmental precarity. Recognizing these tensions is essential for imagining alternative tourism futures that prioritize ecological limits, social equity, and local agency within tropical regions.

Contemporary Contestations and Ecological Limits in India's Tropics

The recent surge of resistance, regulation, and contestation around tourism in India's West coast tropics offers concrete evidence that the tropical paradise imaginary is no longer uncontested. Unlike earlier phases of tourism expansion, where ecological damage and social displacement remained gradual or obscured, current conflicts make

visible the limits of treating tropical landscapes as endlessly absorbent spaces of leisure. These developments reflect what Lévi-Strauss anticipated in *Tristes Tropiques*: that the appeal of tropical beauty often precedes, and eventually exposes, the conditions of its own erosion.

Taken together, the following cases show how tourism is increasingly experienced not as an abstract economic promise but as a material pressure on land, water, and livelihoods. They illustrate nature–culture entanglements in which ecological fragility, infrastructure strain, and social resistance intersect.

Case 1: Goa's Environmental Pushbacks and Mangrove-Based Ecotourism

In 2025, the Government of Goa introduced a mangrove management plan that signals a partial shift away from unregulated coastal tourism toward ecosystem-based models. The plan emphasizes guided nature walks, bird watching, non-motorized boat travel, and mangrove restoration aimed at coastal stabilization and biodiversity protection (Shetye, 2025). This policy turn reflects growing recognition of cumulative tourism damage. Recent studies indicate that approximately 27 percent of Goa's beaches are now classified as severely eroded, with coastal construction and tourism infrastructure identified as key drivers.

What is significant here is not simply the emergence of ecotourism discourse, but the implicit admission that previous models of paradise promotion have exceeded ecological thresholds. Mangroves, once treated as expendable wetlands, are now reimagined as protective ecological infrastructure. This recalibration mirrors a broader global shift in tropical tourism, where landscapes once marketed as open and abundant are reframed as fragile systems requiring regulation. The case illustrates how environmental limits force a reworking of tropical imaginaries, even within economies heavily dependent on tourism.

Case 2: Waste, Overcrowding, and Environmental Strain in Goa

Parallel to regulatory reform is a deepening crisis of waste and infrastructure overload. A 2024–25 report estimates that Goa generates nearly 1,000 tons of solid waste per day, with roughly one quarter attributed directly to tourists (Vikram & Philip, 2024). Roads, water supply systems, and waste treatment facilities are increasingly unable to

cope with peak tourist inflows. These pressures reveal how the celebration of tropical leisure obscures the material afterlives of consumption.

Local activists and community leaders have responded by questioning the dominant metric of tourism "success." Calls for tighter zoning laws, reduced beachfront development, and a shift toward hinterland or heritage circuits reflect an effort to redefine tourism beyond sheer volume. This does not represent a rejection of tourism itself, but a demand to slow and redistribute its impacts. In Nixon's (2011) terms, what was once slow violence has become increasingly visible, producing friction between global leisure demand and local ecological capacity.

Case 3: Kerala's Pushback against the Seaplane Project

In November 2025, fishing unions in Kerala organized large-scale protests against a proposed seaplane network connecting major backwaters and inland water bodies. The project would restrict fishing within a 2.5-kilometer radius of takeoff and landing zones, directly threatening livelihoods in regions such as Ashtamudi and Vembanad. The conflict highlights a recurring tension in tropical tourism: the prioritization of speed, spectacle, and elite mobility over long-standing ecological practices.

What is striking in this case is the nature of resistance. Fishers did not merely seek compensation or technical mitigation but demanded consultation, recognition of customary rights, and reconsideration of the project itself. This insistence on inclusion, challenges tourism models that treat water bodies as neutral transit spaces rather than lived environments. The struggle foregrounds how nature and culture cannot be separated in tropical contexts where livelihoods are embedded in ecological rhythms.

Synthesis: Ecological Limits and the Unraveling of Paradise

Across these cases, a common pattern emerges. Tourism in India's tropics is increasingly constrained by ecological stress, waste accumulation, and livelihood conflicts that can no longer be relegated to the margins. These pressures echo the broader dynamics seen in global tropical regions and even in cultural texts like the film *Avatar*, where lush, living landscapes are rendered desirable precisely at the moment they become targets of extraction.

The contemporary contestations in Goa and Kerala suggest that the paradise imaginary is reaching a point of exhaustion. As ecosystems strain and communities assert their

claims over land, water, and mobility, tourism futures are being reshaped not only by markets or state branding, but by cultural resistance and ecological limits. In this sense, India's tropics exemplify a wider planetary condition: tropicality can no longer be sustained as a fantasy of abundance without confronting the material costs that such fantasies impose.

Discussion: India's *Tristes Tropiques*

To speak of India's tropics today is to confront the paradox that Claude Lévi-Strauss articulated in *Tristes Tropiques* (1961). He was reflecting on the long encounter between colonial modernity and tropical landscapes, where beauty, abundance, and cultural richness coexisted with slow erosion, displacement, and loss. His melancholic tone was not nostalgia alone but a critical response to the steady transformation of tropical worlds under external pressures. When read beyond its Amazonian context, *Tristes Tropiques* offers a powerful lens for understanding how tropical regions across the globe, including India's coastal tropics, are shaped by prolonged processes of extraction, representation, and mobility.

In India, Goa's beaches and Kerala's backwaters reproduce this paradox clearly. Tourism frames these landscapes as consumable spaces of leisure, wellness, and spiritual retreat. Yet environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and local resistance reveal the fragility beneath the paradisiacal veneer. The tropics emerge not as timeless Edens but as historically layered, politically charged, and ecologically vulnerable spaces.

Subverting the Exotic Gaze through Tropicality

Goa and Kerala illustrate the persistence of the "exotic gaze" in shaping tropical imaginaries. Beaches, backwaters, and wellness retreats are packaged as timeless spectacles, awaiting discovery and enjoyment. As Said (1978) demonstrated in *Orientalism*, such representations are never neutral; they are embedded in power relations that position the non-West as passive, aesthetic, and available. However, when applied to tropical regions, Orientalism alone is insufficient. As Arnold (2000) argues through the concept of tropicality**,** the tropics are not only culturally exoticized but environmentally imagined as zones of excess, fragility, abundance, and risk. Tropicality extends Said's critique by foregrounding landscapes, climates, and non-human nature as central to colonial and postcolonial imaginaries.

This extension is crucial for understanding tourism in India's tropics. Branding campaigns like Kerala's "God's Own Country" and India's broader "Incredible India" initiative sustain sanitized visions of paradise while erasing histories of fisher displacement, coastal erosion, caste hierarchies, and ecological stress (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Nair & Dileep, 2021). The tropical landscape itself becomes an aesthetic object, separated from the social and ecological relations that sustain it. Recent work on tropical landscapes emphasizes these nature–culture entanglements. As discussed by Lundberg, Regis, and Agbonifa (2022), tropical environments are frequently imagined as pristine, self-regenerating, and spiritually charged, masking the violence involved in making them available for consumption. Goa's beaches and Kerala's backwaters function in similar ways: visually celebrated while structurally strained.

Digital media intensifies these imaginaries. Instagram travel influencers, YouTube vlogs, and curated wellness experiences circulate global images of Kerala's waterways or Goa's nightlife, often stripped of social and ecological context (Mukherjee, 2024; Nunes et al., 2025). Paradise becomes a consumable spectacle. Locals are marginalized, ecosystems stressed, and traditional practices simplified. Political ecology scholarship demonstrates that this is not incidental but structural, as tourism development routinely externalizes environmental and social costs while presenting growth as benign (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018; Wani et al., 2023).

India's Tropics as a Microcosm of Global Tropical Tourism

The dynamics observed in Goa and Kerala resonate strongly with patterns across tropical regions worldwide. From Southeast Asia to the Caribbean and Pacific islands, tourism promises development while often producing ecological precarity and social inequality (Minca, 2025). Biodiversity becomes economic capital, Indigenous and local knowledge is selectively commodified, and sustainability rhetoric frequently masks extractive practices.

India's tropics exemplify these long and steady global processes. Rather than exceptional cases, Goa and Kerala function as microcosms of tropical tourism under neoliberal capitalism (Vaishnav, 2025). The concept of "over tourism" is instructive here. It captures not only excessive visitor numbers but qualitative breakdowns in host–guest–ecosystem relations (Milano et al., 2022). In Goa, unregulated hotel expansion, festivals, and nightlife intensify coastal erosion and marginalize fishing communities. In

Kerala, houseboat tourism and wellness branding strain backwaters, mangroves, and traditional livelihoods.

These patterns echo Lévi-Strauss's concern that tropical landscapes become sites of cumulative loss rather than sudden collapse. The slow degradation of water quality, shoreline stability, and cultural meaning reflects what Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence," a process particularly acute in tropical environments where damage unfolds incrementally.

Melancholy, Fragility, and Contestation

India's tropical tourism embodies the melancholia described in *Tristes Tropiques*: paradise is alluring yet impermanent. Beach erosion, wetland degradation, and cultural commodification demonstrate that beauty is inseparable from fragility. Yet Lévi-Strauss's melancholy was never purely fatalistic. It was also an act of witnessing, a recognition that loss carries ethical weight.

This is evident in contemporary resistance. Fisher protests in Goa, homestay initiatives and cooperative tourism in Kerala, and campaigns against infrastructure projects illustrate active contestation (Wani et al., 2023). These struggles show that paradise is not universal or a fixed condition but a contested construction. It is shaped by negotiation, power, and agency. Communities challenge not tourism per se, but the terms under which it operates.

Theoretical Reflection: Tropical Fragility, Agency, and Tourism Futures

Revisiting Lévi-Strauss through the lens of tropicality deepens the analysis. Paradise is not simply an aesthetic fantasy; it is a fragile socio-ecological equilibrium, easily destabilized by capital flows, infrastructural expansion, and accelerated mobility. Yet fragility can also generate resistance and re-imagination.

Degrowth tourism scholarship argues for models that respect ecological limits, cultural diversity, and social justice. Fletcher et al. (2019) show that slowing tourist flows, decentralizing control, and prioritizing community-led initiatives can offer viable alternatives. The 2025 Kerala seaplane protests exemplify this shift by resisting modernization projects that privilege tourist convenience over livelihood security and ecological balance (The Hindu Bureau, 2025). Similarly, Goa's mangrove restoration plan and growing demands for accountability align with global debates on regenerative

tourism, emphasizing restoration, participation, and long-term resilience rather than short-term profit.

Salazar's (2012) concept of tourism imaginaries helps explain how inherited colonial scripts persist through contemporary media and marketing, while Cheong & Miller (2000) focus on negotiation and agency captures the micro-politics evident in local resistance. Representation, therefore, is neither static nor uncontested; it is continually reshaped through struggle.

Reflexive Futures

The challenge is not only to critique the exotic gaze but to imagine alternative tourism futures grounded in tropical realities. Can tourism operate without commodifying culture and nature? Can communities shape how their landscapes are represented and governed? Evidence from Goa and Kerala suggests that ecological stewardship, community-led initiatives, and ethical, low-impact travels are possible, even within growth-oriented economies (Fletcher et al., 2019; Research & Market, 2025).

Seen through *Tristes Tropiques* and the framework of tropicality, India's tropics emerge as spaces where colonial histories, environmental imaginaries, fragile ecologies, and local agency intersect. They are not merely destinations but living terrains of contradiction, where desire meets displacement, beauty meets erosion, and leisure coexists with slow violence. Critique, resistance, and imagination together point toward futures in which paradise is not consumed but negotiated, sustained, and shared.

Conclusion

India's tropical West coast, as seen through the cases of Goa and Kerala, illustrates the central paradox of tropical tourism. Landscapes celebrated as paradise are simultaneously fragile, contested, and deeply political. "Paradise" is neither natural nor neutral. It is produced through global imaginaries, state branding, and neoliberal tourism economies that commodity land, culture, and ecology. In this sense, India's tropics reflect what Lévi-Strauss (1961) described in *Tristes Tropiques*: beauty and loss are inseparable, and tropical landscapes carry the sedimented histories of colonialism, extraction, and modern mobility alongside their allure.

Extending Said's critique of the exotic gaze through the lens of tropicality helps clarify this condition. As Arnold's framework suggests, the tropics have long been imagined not

only as culturally exotic but as environmentally abundant, fragile, and available. Tourism reproduces these imaginaries by presenting beaches, backwaters, and wellness spaces as self-renewing environments, detached from the social and ecological relations that sustain them. Reading India's tropics through tropicality foregrounds nature–culture entanglements, revealing how landscapes themselves become central actors in tourism economies and sites of slow ecological transformation.

Moving beyond romanticized images of beaches, backwaters, and wellness retreats reveals grounded struggles over access, livelihood, and ecological survival. In Goa, fisher communities face displacement, erosion of coastal commons, and shrinking access to the sea due to resort expansion, nightlife infrastructure, and casino tourism. In Kerala, houseboat tourism, wellness resorts, and the global commodification of Ayurveda place sustained pressure on backwaters, mangroves, and inland fisheries. These cases demonstrate that tourism is not simply a leisure industry but a force entangled with sovereignty, environmental justice, and everyday survival.

At the same time, the article shows that tropical tourism is not uncontested. Responsible tourism initiatives, community-led homestays, fisher protests, and degrowth-oriented debates reveal emerging efforts to rework tourism from within. These practices challenge growth-driven models and point toward alternatives that emphasize ecological limits, local consent, and long-term stewardship. Such interventions resonate with global calls for regenerative and community-centered tourism, particularly in tropical regions facing climate vulnerability and environmental stress.

This study contributes to critical tourism studies, tropical scholarship, and political ecology by situating India's coastal tropics within longer histories of representation, extraction, and resistance. Rather than treating the tropics as peripheral or consumable spaces, the article frames them as central sites where power, identity, and ecology intersect. India's experience highlights the urgency of decolonial, Indigenous-centered, and ecologically responsible futures. It challenges the conventional notion of paradise and calls for approaches grounded in inhabitation, care, and reciprocity, where tropical landscapes are not consumed but lived with, sustained, and defended.

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