

Chapter 10

Empowering Women Through the Lost Art of Thangka Painting and Cultural Tourism in Sikkim, India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the intersection of cultural tourism and traditional arts in empowering women through Thangka painting in Sikkim, India. It delves into how Thangka painting, a vital aspect of Tibetan Buddhist art, not only contributes to cultural preservation but also provides significant entrepreneurial opportunities for women in rural areas. By examining the socio-economic impacts, challenges, and opportunities faced by women Thangka painters, the chapter aims to highlight the role of traditional arts in promoting sustainable development and gender empowerment in rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of women's empowerment is one of the most widely accepted topics and it is vitally important for women to come out of the old traditional form of restrictions to do certain activities which can be the source of income for any woman. Gender equality brings economic development and also added benefits to society, there's a need for the acceptance of women into the workforce without being gender biased and gender equality is a continuous effort to bring a better society Duflo, (2012). However, many countries have allowed uplifting women to be a multidimensional process and support like self-help groups to enhance their skills and bring their entrepreneurship development to enhance income and bring awareness Akter, (2018). Women's empowerment has become a crucial issue affecting their status.

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It involves gaining control over material and intellectual resources, allowing women to make decisions within families and communities. Bano et al. (2014) further stated that the small-scale industry is vital for women's employment and empowers them to provide a platform to generate income a small-scale industry, can accommodate both skills and unskilled women and provide them with guidance and training they have been able to contribute towards their family status. A small-scale industry that provides a platform for women for small scale industry, like the Thangka painting Dorji (2003) illustrates Thangka meaning is a seal, which talks about the life of Buddha and the teachings of Buddha and it's a symbol of spirituality. Thangka has been used for meditation purposes for the transformation of the practitioner and to develop inner strength. Thangka paintings are a very important part of Buddhism and its practice as it is considered an integral part of Buddhism. Leoshko (1998) further added the history of thangka paintings, emphasizing their primary purpose for meditation. Recognized as a Buddhist art form, thangka paintings have been integral to the Buddhist community, passed down through generations to preserve their authenticity. Traditionally, these paintings were created for religious purposes, depicting various deities. Over time, thangka styles have evolved, with Dhar (2011) identifying different varieties influenced by the skill development of artists. This evolution reflects changes in painting styles and the deities represented. The growth of thangka painting has occurred in distinct phases, with each phase showing unique characteristics. Dellois (2003) further noted that mandalas are a specific type of thangka, constructed according to principles of center, symmetry, and cardinal points, as taught by masters in the tradition. However, it was restricted to women making this art or learning this art form because Thangka painting, a traditional Tibetan Buddhist art form, represents a significant aspect of cultural preservation. Traditionally passed down through generations, this art form has been a source of cultural identity and spiritual significance for the local communities. In recent years, Thangka painting has also become a vital component of cultural tourism in Sikkim, attracting tourists and generating economic opportunities for the local population. Kreijger, (1999). Anywhere that we find that embodiment of the soul in communication with other souls we find art. As such, we may also think of both cultural and religious expression as a form of art Tarlow, (2011) Thangka is a beautiful wall hanging that is further decorated with gold, silk, and wood Thangka paintings are usually very stimulating, and usually used for depicting the life of Buddha. The most common shape in which a Thangka painting is done is the upright rectangular form. Buddhist people have always considered Thangka a treasure of tremendous value. The origin and basic development of the original Thangka in the form of paintings is still in dilemma the paintings belong to which region and the influences on the paintings from whereas many different artists have a different view on the origin part of these paintings. Thangka painting is considered as the traditional art by the painters and the locals who are based on the culture art of the locals. The development of the concept called cultural tourism and the demand for it have influenced many tourists' interests. (Bhutia & Sharma, 2018) Moreover, the perception of tourists has changed and the thangka painters with the highly skilled have understood the importance of their art and how it attracts tourists, and they appreciate the artwork of different thangka paintings. Art and craft, which are deeply rooted in traditional thought, reflect unique creativity shaped by religious, social, and economic influences.

In the Sub-Himalayan region, the relative seclusion of valleys surrounded by towering mountains has allowed a rich diversity of cultures to thrive. Each culture boasts its distinctive arts, architecture, and ways of life. One striking feature of this region's traditional arts is their realism, which reveals the fine artistic sensibilities of the people. These artworks not only express community attitudes but also tell a story about their journey from the past to the present. Traditional art has played a vital role in the societal changes that accompanied economic restructuring in the Sub-Himalayan area. Institutions like

Buddhist monasteries and trade guilds significantly shaped this evolution. (Rajbhandari, 2023) However, the work of Nepali women artists through the lens of Feminist theory tells that the rapid development of Nepali art today has been attributed to globalization and education, with the rise in consciousness towards education and enhancement of female artists who play a significant role. These artists have demonstrated unique vision and creativity, steering the entire genre toward a brighter future. Their work is exhibited in national and international art galleries, collected by international museums, and is increasingly attracting the art market as well as critical acclaim and showcasing their art and culture at the same time being independent. (Shivakoti, 2022) further, the contribution of women in the tourism and hospitality industry in Bhaktapur has been a source of income and its aspects have been explored such as women employed in various hospitality and tourism sectors, which contribute to their socio-economical upliftment, but still, women's involvement in this business has been underrated. However, gender bias has been a source of issues sometimes, but women have shown their importance in creating jobs and society upliftment, even a small business-like cotton canvas art and mostly have in thangka painting as this art was considered to be drawn by the specific gender for some religious reasons, which eventually losing the essence as there is growing competition around the world of art and culture as well, but as generation passes the women took this art as their skills to enhance their lifestyle and as a result, more women are involved in this art form, creating more employment opportunities and more income to support their family. (Xue, 2024) stated that the skilled and being part of the painter's group of thangka art have supported her family in terms of income and employment opportunities and at the same time she started feeling confident and empowered. These skills give more opportunities to the other Tibetan women to start their businesses and make earnings from them. It has crossed the boundaries between the gender-biased to make it available to get themselves involved in learning these skills as well. Historically, Thangka painting has been a male-dominated field. However, recent initiatives have encouraged women's participation, providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to become proficient artists. These initiatives include training programs and workshops aimed at teaching women the intricate techniques of Thangka painting, thereby empowering them to contribute to their household economies and gain financial independence (Bhutia et al., 2018). The conservation of thangkas involves challenges due to their diverse materials, including cloth, wood, and metal, and requires an understanding of their original cultural context, so having a deep knowledge is also important to become a thangka artist so that the artist has the proper knowledge in terms of its preservation and its importance.

Background of the Study

Thangka painting, a revered and mystic art form in Buddhism, has historically been restricted to men. The term "thangka" literally means a written record, and these paintings are significant in Buddhist religious practices (Agarwal, 2016). The spread of Thangka painting from India to other South Asian countries highlights its cultural importance (Miller, 2016). Thangka art serves as a crucial element of Buddhist traditions, reflecting the spiritual and cultural heritage of communities (Leoshko, 1998). Bendor (1993) explored the historical and cultural backgrounds of Tibetan Thangka paintings in the Kathmandu Valley, emphasizing their commercialization and religious value. Differences between Newari and Tibetan Thangka paintings and their marketing perspectives were also noted. Maki et al. (2011) stressed the importance of iconography in understanding Thangka paintings' cultural context, increasing awareness among non-Buddhists. Buckingham (2009) studied the properties of Thangka paintings, such as the Medicine Buddha, while Loh (2002) highlighted their spiritual significance. Dorje (2000) explored Thangka art's

role in meditation and its various subjects. Jackson (2012) noted the use of Thangka paintings as teaching tools for Buddhism, aiding their spread across regions. Straub (2011) detailed the unique methods and natural colors used in Thangka painting. The importance of understanding Thangka art's true meaning and color processing was emphasized. Maki et al. (2011) and fellow scholars highlighted the need to study Thangka art's iconography to grasp its underlying purposes. Bhatta (2016) focused on art's role in tourism industry development and its impact on local communities. Vukovic et al. (2021) further, studied that women empowerment through local tourism stakeholders is the goal for many establishments to make them self-employed through the small business opportunity. Malema et al., (2017) studied that women are involved in the arts and crafts of the community which brings them a certain type of income which means economic development which resulted in positive contributions to the local women, but women require more support and contribution to so that they can participate and open doors to them to enhance their skills. But sometimes due to cultural and religious set rules also setbacks, women came forward as thangka paintings are part of a small-scale industry that has an important role to play in the lives of locals as it is been regarded as a religious art and it has a great influence on the local people and it is been a great attraction to the tourists as well.

Previous studies have extensively covered the Thangka painting's origins and methods, recognizing its importance in cultural tourism for Sikkim. However, there is a gap in understanding Thangka painters' perceptions regarding the art form's role in cultural tourism. This study also aims to explore these perceptions, particularly focusing on women's involvement in Thangka painting. Women Thangka painters in Sikkim have significantly contributed to the local economy by creating and selling their artwork to tourists. Sikkim is one the most popular tourist destinations in India the Government of Sikkim has realized the immense potential of local artifacts for economic development and employment generation, including women empowerment. Firstly, local artifacts have been recognized as very effective tools for improving tourism and creating more jobs. Secondly, and probably more significantly, they have been recognized as a means for greatly enhancing the standard of living of the people. Over the years, the promotion of local artifacts in enhancing the tourism sector has proved to be quite responsive. Besides, these initiatives have been successful in offering a transparent administration that can facilitate the empowerment of people and satisfy their cultural aspirations. The specific advantages of the state of Sikkim in embracing the promotion of local artifacts in comparison with developing nations in general and other states of the Indian Union, in particular, are as follows:

Among the local artifacts, thangka stands out as one of the most important items. Thangka, a traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting on cotton or silk appliqué, is not only a significant cultural symbol but also a source of income for many local artisans. This economic empowerment has had substantial social impacts, including increased confidence, independence, and a greater role in decision-making within their communities. The sale of Thangka paintings has opened new markets and created a sustainable source of income for many families, thereby improving their overall quality of life. Abou-Shouk, Mannaa, & Elbaz (2021) further discussed women's empowerment is crucial in sustainable tourism development in tourist destinations to bring more stable income as well as to bring more awareness among the tourists. Bedigen, (2022) further studied that women empowerment brings out further confidence in women to make a decision and its benefits and brings out development, but it has been sustained by locals' Indigenous institutions and it can be changed but if maintain the norms based on the Indigenous planning and to sustain their culture and authenticity.

This chapter seeks to understand how empowering women through Thangka painting can contribute to their socio-economic status and enhance cultural tourism in Sikkim. The study examines the perspectives of women Thangka painters, their involvement in painting practices, and their efforts to achieve optimal outcomes. By addressing this gap, the research aims to highlight the potential of Thangka painting as a tool for women's empowerment and cultural tourism development.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was applied to acquire the purposes of this study. Qualitative research generally focuses on studying the behavior of the people and the phenomena associated with it, thereby acquiring the study participants' perspectives of such an experience. This type of research adopts an ethnographic approach to examine a certain phenomenon. (Walker, 1987) and (Creswell, 2013) discussed the strategies associated with qualitative research, including Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Case Studies, Phenomenological Research, Narrative Research, and Art Practice Research. (Harrington, 2003) described ethnography as "the process by which researchers gather data via interpersonal relationships with participants" (p.593). Hence, the ethnographer's most important function is to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships in the field. (Creswell, 2013, pp. 14–15), further, the ethnographer of this study needs to establish solid relationships in the field, sometimes this is referred to as an insider position (Loftland, 1995). On the contrary, it's often argued that the researcher's position of power equates to a cultural difference between the researcher and participants and requires cultural sensitivity and a process of mutual negotiation. In this research, the ethnographer participated in Thangka painting learning by involving in the community to understand insight and the basics of learning or understanding such arts, which uplifted the experience and knowledge of the researcher.

The area of this study was Sikkim, India as the context where a few highly skilled painters provided information about the Thangka painting and women's involvement in this art tourism, as they are the main people who can give the important details of the art. Acknowledging Sikkim as the vital context for this study and based on its vast influence on Thangka paintings, the methodology of Art Practice as Research is an especially valuable strategy for research projects targeting to describe, explore, or discover a phenomenon (Leavy, 2009). A study on works of art shares new perceptions of how objects carry meaning regarding ideas, themes, and issues. As an object of research, an artwork is an independently and ethnically created form and therefore, be regarded as a mine of knowledge (Sullivan, 2010). Methodologically, this approach frequently analyzes the available arts and the style of these Thangka paintings that were painted by the painters. Qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the painters were employed to understand their perspective and insights on how the paintings have become part of their culture and tradition 18 skilled Thangka painters were interviewed and each painter was asked the research questions and through voice recording and later transcribed the data into coding and developed a theme according to the research questions given. In this research, non-probability purposive (judgmental) sampling was applied during the sample selection process. This type of sampling obtains information from a specific target group that can give the desired data based on the criteria set by the researchers. Judgment sampling aims to approach the subjects of this study who can provide the required information based on the objectives of the study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). This sampling was employed in this research as the data must be obtained from the target group i.e. the Thangka painters to get in-depth details about the paintings and their relationship with culture tourism. Based on the criteria of data

saturation of qualitative information “isomorphs” the interviewer preceded for transcripts coding after 18 interviews and the data collected for this investigation were analyzed based on the qualitative style.

The current study applied a thematic analysis technique to analyze the data. This practice is defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis grants an accessible and theoretically resourceful approach, through which to analyze qualitative data. Using this technique, interview transcriptions were studied to obtain the essence and extract the content, and the entire data set was then coded systematically as per the research questions, further reported in the findings section.

Analysis and Findings

According to the Thangka painters interviewed in this study, Thangka painting plays a crucial role in Sikkim's cultural tourism, a role they have observed and participated in over many years. The thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts from semi-structured interviews with 18 skilled Thangka painters identified several key themes. These artisans, who have been practicing this art for decades, noted that Thangka paintings have become a significant aspect of cultural tourism in Sikkim, driven by the development of tourism in the region. The painters highlighted that tourists find Thangka art distinctive and captivating, often engaging deeply with the artists to learn about the painting process and cultural significance.

They are the ones who direct contact with tourists for years and in their opinion the tourists find this art very different and attractive than a usual painting, and they this art represents the culture of the Sikkimese people. The interest and attitude of tourists have become one of the sources of motivation for the painters, for many years even for the locals to preserve this art as their culture and tradition have become a must. The painters also observed that tourists' curiosity and appreciation for Thangka art have become a source of motivation for them to preserve and innovate within their craft. This interest has spurred local communities, including women artisans, to sustain and promote this traditional art form as part of their cultural heritage. The demand for Thangka paintings has led to the integration of this art style into various aspects of Sikkim's cultural landscape, making it a key attraction for visitors. The curiosity and demand for Thangka paintings always showed way to involve this art style in every corner of Sikkim and even to make this art more known to the people visiting over there has become an important task for the painters and even the government too. It also has been observed that the tourists come with many doubts regarding Thangka paintings they ask questions about how long it takes to learn this art and sometimes they want to sit with painters and want to see the making of the art. However, these are small activities shown by tourists but for the painters, it's more than anything else because that makes them motivated to do something new creatively. The beauty of Thangka paintings has captured the attention of tourists coming to visit, though they consider it as decorative items and buy the art they always appreciate the work of painters and value them as well, which is again a very good part of the painters, the important part according to the painters this art has its grace to attract people and this is part of the culture tourism of Sikkim and it is pushing the painters to make this art more available to the tourists so that later on the tourists understand the value of this art as the part of Sikkim's culture. The research explored the contributions of Thangka paintings to the development of Sikkim's cultural tourism through a series of interview questions aimed at understanding the perspectives of the Thangka painters. The interviews revealed that tourists are highly interested in Thangka paintings, often asking detailed questions about the art form and its creation. This interest not only validates the painters' efforts but also enhances the visibility and appreciation of Sikkim's cultural heritage. One of the research questions was: “How does

empowering women through Thangka painting impact cultural tourism in Sikkim?” This research question was explored by questioning the respondents in three different phases. Previous literature has often overlooked the importance of Thangka paintings in the development of tourism, focusing mainly on their religious aspects. This study, however, focused on the contributions and involvement of women in these paintings, enhancing their skills to meet the demands and breaking cultural stereotypes regarding Thangka paintings. The study further explored the understanding of Thangka painters’ perspectives on the development of Sikkim’s cultural tourism.

This research question has been enquired through questioning the respondents in three different phases. (RP) is “respondent” The previous literature has lacked in explaining of the importance Thangka paintings in the development of tourism, many scholars have studied its characteristics and value from its religious aspect. The current study has focused on the contribution’s involvement of women in these paintings to enhance their skills to meet the demands and to break the stereotype cultural regarding making thangka paintings and its contributions to tourism in Sikkim and further explored the understanding of Thangka painters’ perspectives on its development of Sikkim cultural tourism. Five semi-structured interview questions were asked, (i) Do you see that tourists are interested in these paintings? (ii) How are the Thangka paintings perceived by the tourists? (iii) How many tourists find this painting interesting? (iv) How women are involved in this painting? What is your experience with it? (v) In your opinion how do these Thangka paintings help in empowering women and building cultural tourism in Sikkim? Interview question was asked to the painters, where the researcher of this study tried to explore their understanding of the contributions of the Thangka paintings. The previous gaps within the literature, identified by many scholars have encouraged future researchers to explore such understanding through the medium of practitioners within this field of paintings.

The respondents of this study answered/explained their understanding of the contributions of tourists in Thangka paintings in Sikkim tourism. The analysis of the verbatim transcripts has identified major themes through the process of coding (thematic coding) and according to painters as they are the ones who are in frequent contact with tourists and what they have observed over the years that the tourists are very much interested in Thangka paintings, they are the one who directly contacts with tourists for years and as per their opinion the tourists finds this art very different and attractive than a usual painting. The attitude of tourists has become the source of motivation for the painters for many years, their curiosity towards this art always showed the way to make more innovation in their present work to make it more beautiful. It also has been observed that the tourists come with many doubts regarding Thangka paintings. They ask questions about how long it takes to learn this art and sometimes they want to sit with painters and want to see the making of the art. Though these are small activities shown by tourists for the painters it’s more than anything else because they make, them motivated to do something new creatively. The beauty of Thangka paintings has captured the attention of tourists coming to visit, though they consider them as decorative items and buy the arts they always appreciate the work of painters and value them as well, which is again a very good part of the painters, so the bottom line is tourists are very much interested in this paintings though they have very little knowledge about this art form but still all tourists they always have value to this art according to the painters.

RP.1...Some tourists find it very interesting they just sit back and see how we are drawing, and they try to understand what exactly we are trying to convey through this art...

RP. 2 Yes, there are lots of tourists who get attracted to the thangka paintings, they come and see these paintings and ask us so many questions like how you draw these paintings and how long it will take stuff like that.

RP. 3 Yes, most of them are interested in these paintings. Every tourist asks the same question how to learn this art and how long you have been learning this art.

RP.7...When they see the paintings a kind of curiosity comes into them about how these paintings are doing, and they will be very much get attracted. Live demonstration makes them attractive...

This art has been appreciated by all the tourists coming to visit this place and as mentioned by the painters that it has been seen they are very much interested in this art. The beauty of Thangka paintings has given many opportunities to the locals as well as to painters and this has become a great path to show their talents to the rest of the world. Not only that this has helped them to showcase their art and culture to the other side of the world, Every years lakhs of tourists visit this place and according to the painters it is observed that most of the tourists like this art and find this art is a unique piece, which attracts attention of the tourists because of the color combination and the way of displaying of this art and the way it comes in the finished work it catches the attention of the people who are looking into it. Everything contributes to making this art look more attractive and unique from other art that can be available in the market. The interest level of the tourists and their queries regarding Thangka paintings are much more than the information provider, it shows that they are very interested in this beautiful art of a small state of India, Sikkim.

With the increasing number of tourists inflow every year the painters have observed that nearly almost every one of the total tourists who are coming like this beautiful art, as responded that they are very much attracted towards this art, unless if it's a kind. Most interesting is that almost most of the tourists from international they have knowledge about this art and even they know about the usage of the paintings too. At the same time, the domestic tourists don't have deep knowledge, but they have a great respect for this art and most of them found this art unique and attractive.

Looking at their curiosity about this art has shown their level of interest in this art and their desire to get the details of it, looking at all this one can say that they have been liking this art and they want to know even more.

RP. 1...In overall tourists coming to Sikkim, I would say 80 percent of the tourists get attracted by these paintings and find this is an interesting art and it generate the curiosity to know more details about the paintings...

RE.6. I think most of the tourists are really interested in the painting because they show their curiosity about the paintings and most of the tourists had lots of queries about the paintings.

RE.7. If you ask me, I would most tourists that like its kind of 100% of the total tourist they get attracted to the paintings.

RE.9. These paintings have always had a great influence on it. It is one of the attractions for people who are very interested in the arts and tradition of someone's culture and tradition.

RE.17. Almost all the tourists are very much interested in this art unless it's kids because they don't have any idea about it.

Since they have learned this beautiful art, they have realized that they can do something in their life, this art not only supports them but to be part of this art they feel lucky themselves and they want to make this art popular as much as they can and now even women started to get involved in this art skill. In olden times women were forbidden to draw Thangka paintings as they used to be drawn by the only designated monk but with time the concept has changed, and these days women have been doing great in learning this skill and they can support their families as well. Every year they witness a gradually increasing number of tourists coming to Sikkim. They have seen that the tourists like this place a lot because the tourists feel here very peaceful and calm and in that calm environment when they this mystical art they

want to know about it more so they start asking about the details of this beautiful art. Since large numbers of tourists have been coming to visit this place, this place is one of the most famous among domestic as well as international tourists. The painters meet up with many tourists every year and they believe that whenever they visit this Thangka painting in the market or monasteries, they are amazed at this painting because of the beautiful color combination they have in it, and the looks more traditional art than fancy art that's they this art makes them more curious about to know it more in details.

According to the painters, this painting is a very important part of their culture and to preserve this art it has become an important aspect for them even the government of Sikkim has given lots of opportunities to locals to learn this art so that they can preserve this culture and tradition. The government had opened an institute to learn this mystical art not only for locals but even people from outside people who are interested in this beautiful art and every year it has been seen that lot of many people come to Sikkim to learn about this painting thus making this art more popular in every possible way.

This painting is very important for the locals and even for painters because it has become every painter is preserving this art style and at the same time making this art popular so, that interested candidates can come and learn this art and tourists can see of painting live. Even local feels that to learn this art means they are passing their culture from one generation to another and they have been doing this for years after years it is a very important part of their culture and tradition which is very important to make it possible for everyone that people visiting there, they will have some knowledge about this art which is again very important for cultural tourism of Sikkim. Their cultural art has become one of the important aspects of tourism in Sikkim which is very good in terms of employment as well as in terms of cultural tourism involving women in this platform will bring opportunities to them and at, the same time the skill to make this art will not be remaining to the certain categories rather it will gain many ways to preserve the essence of this art. The involvement of women brings confidence in them, and they have a second source of income which upgrades the society's conditions as well.

These paintings have done great for the people who are directly or indirectly linked with it because for painters it's employment as well respect for them and for tourists it a very immense pleasure for them to see this and to know about this art in detail. These paintings have made an identity in the market for Sikkim cultural tourism; it's good for the Sikkimese local painters and it's doing great for them. They have been asked many tourists many times but still, they believe that providing information about this art itself is a great satisfaction for them which not only gives them opportunities but people from around the world would come to know about the existence of this art which itself in its great achievement in it. Now basically Thangka has become an important style of art for the tourists visiting because of many factors including their liking towards this art, curiosity about this art, the importance of this art, and even the usage of this art. This art-making skill has been considered as a meditation by painters because they felt that while making this art of God and goddess, so even for this painting is to make people relax and concentrate so that they would be able to get the fulfillment of what they have been doing. This art is an important part of the local community and for painters, it's a pride to have the knowledge of this art they want to make it popular as much as they can even though sometimes they get distracted by the same questions but still all the painters they believe that providing information about the Thangka painting is like doing their part because they feel to provide tourists with the more information regarding about the paintings and even the benefits as well.

This beautiful art of Sikkim has been liked by everyone who so ever is meeting it and has been appreciated by all the people the way it looks. This art has become one of the important aspects of Sikkim tourism as it has been one of identity whenever tourists see this kind of art in part of the world this will

surely remind them of Sikkim. The increasing demands for this art have given opportunities for small-scale industry too and making your culture too as your cultural tourism is always very fruitful for the locals. Even painters feel that this art is a treasure for Sikkim tourism because in all ways tourists are clicked by this art and always gets the attention of the people who are associated with it. The interest of tourists has shown the way to develop this art for the tourist display which helped it and this art has become important for the culture and tradition of Sikkim tourism which is very important for the painters who all are associated with the development of this art because they must look into it this matter and need to start developing it more as they feel.

With the increasing number of tourists, their liking for this art has always given them a good opportunity but only the matter of concern is to have a good painter who can be able to produce quality Thangka for the tourists. These paintings undoubtedly have touched the hearts of tourists nationally and internationally and their increasing demand for good quality Thangka has increased the institute has to have good painters as well and for the existing good painters they believe that there should be an increase in the institute and so that they can have an ample number of painters to fulfill the upcoming demand of the paintings shortly. Whenever tourists visit Sikkim, they should feel that the quality of Thangka paintings has upgraded keeping the originality, and undoubtedly it has been doing it for the development of the tourism business and Thangka is an important part of the cultural tourism of Sikkim. So, every year tourists visit this place and come across Thangka paintings, and they take this mystical art along with them as a memento which is helping very much in terms of the development of Thangka tourism.

RE.1. yes, there is lot of opportunity since then we started involving women also in this art from so that they can be independent and can support their family. these paintings in tourism because this is considered as the one the most important art of Sikkimese art and if the government project these paintings as one of aspects for Sikkim's tourism it going to help in promotion of Sikkim tourism.

RE.2.) Yes, it does because when tourists come, they see this art and they are also getting knowledge about the form of art that exists in Sikkim and this art belongs to Sikkim.

RE.4.) Yes, a lot of tourists show their interest that means it's helping in our promotion of tourism too because these people will spread the information to other people. say for example if one tourist is buying the thangka and he takes it along with them and will hang it their home or office, so other people will ask them and what they will reply oh this is the Sikkimese art, so it helps in promoting our Sikkimese culture to the rest of the world.

RP.5...And for tourism I would say Thangka always have given a good sign because tourists really like this art, and they regard this art as well. And this art will going to help them because it can help them to generate employment and it can be used as a Sikkimese art for the promotion and it can helpful for the cultural tourism and through this we can get recognition in the paintings part too, and by this way we will preserve our culture and we will not going to have a shortage of teacher in the coming days...

RP.7...this is traditional art, and it is projecting Sikkim culture so I think these paints can really help in the promotion of the tourism...

RP.8...so far it has always allowed the tourism sector the promoting the art and culture of Sikkim and as we know this painting is unique have always attracted lot of tourist eyes...

RE.10. yes, thangka can help in promoting Sikkim. The reason is that this painting is very different and unique. These paintings have always attracted the tourist as far as I am concerned. The tourists have an interest in the paintings to know them in more detail.

This way they are not just providing the information to the tourists, but they are making them familiar with the tradition and culture of Sikkim, which is a very important part of tourism. It is observed that the Thangka has become an important part of Sikkim's tourism, and it is contributing to the development of Sikkim culture and traditional image nationally and internationally, which is a great part of tourism, and at the same time the interest of tourists has always given great source for the development of this art. The paintings of the beautiful art of Sikkim have been highly regarded by the locals and tourists for their originality and the way they look, the beautiful carving done by this art has given an identity in the eyes of the people and the beautiful vibrant color combination had always been a great influence for the tourists. For tourists to see this art is a kind of mediation that speaks about their culture and their identity in front of tourists and visitors and somehow this art has become the culture of the people living over there and they have high regard for these beautiful paintings, as for them this is not just a simple art this the art and tradition that have been carrying over the generation to generation to showcase their culture and identity and at the time of tourism, this traditional art has become one of the important aspects for the development of Sikkim culture tourism to represent their culture and tradition and which is appreciated by all people coming over there.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to understand the importance of Thangka paintings in Sikkim's cultural tourism from the perspective of the artists, with a specific focus on how empowering women through this art form impacts tourism. The study revealed that Thangka painters, who are highly skilled, have noticed a growing appreciation for their artwork among tourists visiting Sikkim's historical and sacred sites. While previous research primarily focused on the creation process of these paintings, this study highlights their cultural significance and the artists' perspectives. The research findings indicate that tourists are highly interested in Thangka paintings, often finding them more attractive than other forms of art. This interest serves as a source of motivation for painters to be more creative and innovative and it brought the lost identity of thangka paintings to life through cultural tourism. Tourists, despite often lacking in-depth knowledge about Thangka paintings, show great curiosity and appreciation for their beauty and craftsmanship. International tourists demonstrate a deeper understanding and respect for art, often seeking to learn more about its historical and mythological significance.

Empowering women through Thangka painting not only enhances their skills but also contributes significantly to cultural tourism in Sikkim. The involvement of women in this art form breaks cultural stereotypes and adds a new dimension to the traditional practice of Thangka painting. As these women artists gain recognition and appreciation from tourists, their empowerment becomes evident. They are inspired to create majestic artworks that attract more international tourists, who, in turn, gain a deeper understanding of Sikkim's traditional values and cultural ethics through these paintings. Xue, (2023) further added, that the Thangka paintings were mostly male-dominated art forms, and women were not allowed to be part of this art form due to some narrative set for the female which is now mastered by the female Tibetan painter, who faced many challenges to master on these skills and to break through all the difficulties for the female to be part of the painter and as well as to be self-employed. The interesting part women have always shown that they can do everything and with this attitude she is now is famous for her artwork, even though Thangka paintings are mainly mastered by males only she took this challenge and performed well. Shivakoti, (2022) further added that women have been contributing to society in

many ways even though there were many hurdles they faced to support their families and the researcher found that the women from Bhaktapur had faced many challenges even though they were capable of doing things and to be thangka painter they had to go through a hard time to convince that they can be a good thangka painter as during that time it used to be believed that Thangka painting is the religious and need a certain discipline which only can be followed by the males but now women have involved themselves in this art form as well to break that stereotype was very difficult and now in Bhaktapur local area only they have shops which are mostly handle by the women.

One of the significant contributions of this study is its focus on the involvement of women in Thangka painting, a topic that has been largely overlooked in previous research. Traditionally, Thangka painting has been dominated by men, but this study highlights how women are increasingly breaking these cultural stereotypes. By learning and mastering this intricate art form, women are not only preserving a vital aspect of their cultural heritage but also gaining economic independence and social recognition. Rajbhandar,(2023) however, the female voice needs to be heard it not only motivates other women but it conveys a strong message to other women to be independent in whatever skill they have and that they need to come out of the society-made stereotype. Their work talks about the various challenges faced by women in the patriarchal society of Nepal and aims to bring positive changes such as equal space and freedom from social barriers. Konar et al, (2025) that digital platforms also have contributed in terms of tourists' preferences giving an idea about the places and their cultural feedback. Tourists would play an important role in the upliftment of women artists as they can reach them these says and through social media these days the artists can showcase their work. The empowerment of women through Thangka painting has a multifaceted impact on cultural tourism in Sikkim even though it is very difficult to change the minds of certain groups of people, the changes need to be done for the upliftment of the society. The benefits of bringing Thangka painting skills to the female are firstly, it enhances the diversity and richness of the art form, as women bring new perspectives and creativity to Thangka painting. Their contributions help to innovate and evolve traditional practices, making art more vibrant and appealing to a broader audience. Secondly, the involvement of women in Thangka painting serves as an inspirational story for tourists, who often appreciate the resilience and dedication of these artists. This narrative of empowerment adds depth to the cultural experience of visitors, making their engagement with Thangka paintings more meaningful. The study also highlights the economic benefits of empowering women through Thangka painting. As these women gain recognition for their work, they also attract more business opportunities. Tourists are more likely to purchase Thangka paintings as souvenirs, appreciating them not only as decorative items but also as symbols of Sikkim's rich cultural heritage. This increased demand contributes to the artists' livelihoods and encourages more women to take up Thangka painting as a profession.

During the interview one of the respondents talked about how their Institute called D.H.H (Department of Handicrafts and Handlooms) previously never gave admission to female students but with time things have changed and the increasing demand the female students also got admission to contribute to this loss art form. Women are not allowed for many reasons and one of the reasons is they were considered not pure by many old painters' teachers to break that narrative was very difficult and even society's acceptance was also very hard. But now many successful thangka artists are female and some are doing so well in some parts of Europe as per the artists from D.H.H. and they even feel proud that their art is being accepted by all and it providing the right information as well.

In conclusion, the empowerment of women through Thangka painting has a significant and positive impact on Sikkim's cultural tourism. The involvement of women in this traditional art form enriches the cultural experience of tourists and promotes a deeper understanding and appreciation of Sikkim's heritage. The recognition and respect from tourists provide women artists with the motivation and confidence to continue their work, breaking cultural stereotypes and contributing to their economic independence. The study underscores the importance of supporting and promoting women's participation in cultural heritage practices to enhance cultural tourism and empower local communities. The distinctiveness of Thangka paintings and the empowerment of women artists collectively contribute to the richness, diversity, and sustainability of Sikkim's cultural tourism, making it a compelling and enriching experience for visitors from around the world.

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