



Perception of Tour Guides Towards Heritage Tourism: A Qualitative Study of Rajasthan (India)

**Zaneera Shabnum
Zeenat Nazir
Priya Singh**

Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of tour guides towards heritage tourism in Rajasthan (India), with a specific focus on three dimensions: the role of tour guides in heritage promotion, their perspectives on conservation and preservation of heritage sites, and their professional satisfaction. Using a qualitative, interpretivist approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 respondents across Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar. Thematic analysis revealed that tour guides perceive themselves as cultural ambassadors and storytellers who transform monuments into living experiences. Guides actively function as informal conservation advocates, though structural barriers limit their formal input into heritage management. Professional satisfaction is high intrinsically but tempered by economic instability and, for female guides, significant gender-based challenges, including harassment, unequal access to work, and social stigma. The study concludes with policy recommendations for government tourism authorities, heritage management bodies, and tourism institutions to better support the guiding profession and leverage guides' knowledge for sustainable heritage tourism.

Keywords: *Heritage Tourism, Tour Guides, Rajasthan - India, Conservation, Professional Satisfaction*

Introduction

Heritage tourism has emerged as one of the most significant and rapidly growing segments of the global tourism industry. It encompasses travel to sites of historical, cultural, and natural significance, including monuments, archaeological sites, museums, and intangible cultural practices such as folklore, traditions, and festivals (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). As a destination of extraordinary historical richness, Rajasthan, known as the 'Land of Kings', represents one of India's foremost heritage tourism regions, drawing millions of domestic and international visitors annually to its forts, palaces, temples, and living cultural traditions.

Central to the heritage tourism experience are tour guides, who serve as critical mediators between tourists and heritage resources. Beyond providing factual information, guides function as cultural ambassadors who interpret the historical and social significance of sites, shape visitor perceptions, and facilitate authentic cultural encounters (Cohen, 1985; Weiler & Ham, 2002). Yet, despite their pivotal role, the perceptions, attitudes, and professional experiences of tour guides have received comparatively limited scholarly attention, particularly in the Indian context.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the perceptions of tour guides towards heritage tourism in Rajasthan (India). It focuses on three interconnected dimensions: (1) the role of tour guides in heritage tourism promotion, (2) their perspectives on conservation and preservation of heritage sites, and (3) their levels of professional satisfaction. By capturing the lived experiences of guides operating across key heritage cities - Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar - the study aims to generate insights that are practically relevant for tourism policymakers, heritage managers, and the broader academic community.

Review of Literature

Heritage tourism has been broadly defined as travel motivated by an interest in historic places, cultural traditions, and natural heritage (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). It encompasses both tangible forms of heritage, including monuments, forts, temples, and archaeological sites, and intangible heritage, such as traditions, folklore, customs, and festivals. Scholars have long recognised the dual role of heritage tourism as an economic driver and a mechanism for cultural conservation and identity reinforcement.

Tour guides occupy a pivotal position within this landscape. Cohen (1985) identified four principal roles performed by guides: leader, information provider, organisational resource, and cultural interpreter. In the context of heritage tourism, interpretation assumes particular significance. Weiler and Ham (2002) define interpretation as the process of communicating to visitors the meaning and significance of heritage resources, arguing that skilled interpretation can deepen understanding, stimulate emotional engagement, and foster support for conservation efforts.

The perceptions of tour guides towards their professional roles have been explored from multiple angles. Black and Ham (2005) demonstrated that guides with positive orientations towards heritage tourism are more likely to encourage tourists to appreciate and protect cultural resources. Ap and Wong (2001) found that guides serve as cultural mediators, bridging the gap between tourists and host communities through their interpretive and communicative functions.

Research also highlights the challenges confronting guides in heritage settings. Mak, Wong and Chang (2011) identified the management of diverse tourist expectations, cross-cultural communication difficulties, and the tension between entertainment and educational responsibilities as perennial challenges. Garrod and Fyall (2000) warned that excessive commercialisation of heritage sites can undermine authenticity and damage the long-term sustainability of heritage tourism, placing guides in a difficult position between visitor satisfaction and conservation imperatives.

Professional training and education are recognised as important determinants of guide quality and performance. Holloway (1981) argued that

formally trained guides make a substantially greater contribution to the tourist experience, while ongoing professional development is crucial for maintaining interpretive standards and promoting sustainable practices. Despite this recognition, the literature reveals significant gaps in formal support structures for guides in many developing tourism contexts. A notable gap in the existing literature concerns the experiences of female guides in heritage destinations, particularly in patriarchal social contexts. Although women are increasingly entering the guiding profession globally, research documents persistent gender-based barriers, including harassment, unequal access to employment, and social stigma (Price, 2024). The Rajasthan context, with its deep-rooted gender hierarchies, provides a particularly instructive setting for examining these dynamics.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism holds that social realities are shaped by the subjective perceptions and experiences of those involved (Hillman & Radel, 2018). This epistemological stance is well-suited to the study’s focus on guides’ perceptions of their roles, their engagement with conservation, and their professional satisfaction, which are inherently inherently subjective, contextually situated, and resistant to quantification (Dada, Najar, & Gupta, 2022). The study employs a descriptive-interpretive multiple case study design, treating the three principal heritage cities (Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar) as comparative cases. The study was conducted across three heritage tourism destinations in Rajasthan, selected for their diversity of heritage types and tourism contexts:

City	Heritage Significance	Rationale
Jaipur (Pink City)	UNESCO World Heritage City; Amer Fort, City Palace, Hawa Mahal	High tourist volume; documented female guides; established heritage infrastructure
Ajmer	Spiritual pilgrimage heritage and culture	High tourist footfall; strong heritage tourism economy
Pushkar	Premier pilgrimage site dedicated to Lord Brahma	Annual largest camel fair; unique heritage context

Data Collection

The primary data collection method was the semi-structured, in-depth interview, a technique widely recognised as appropriate for exploring guides’ subjective experiences and perceptions in qualitative tourism research (Hillman & Radel, 2018). Interviews were conducted in Hindi and English, audio-recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed and analysed. An interview guide was developed covering guides’ roles, conservation perspectives, and professional experiences, while allowing

flexibility for respondents to elaborate on themes organically (Najar & Bukhari, 2017).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select guides with a range of experiences, genders, and city contexts. Snowball sampling was used to access additional participants, particularly female guides who are underrepresented in the profession (Najar & Saini, 2018). The target sample was 20 tour guides, though the data analysis chapter draws on a broader participant pool of 34 guides across the four cities.

Table 1: Details of Interviewees and Interviews

City	Participant ID	Gender	Experience	Duration (min)
Jaipur	JAF-04	Female	12 years	58
Jaipur	JPM-03	Male	18 years	45
Jaipur	JPF-02	Female	8 years	52
Ajmer	AJM-01	Male	10 years	47
Ajmer	AJF-05	Female	6 years	43
Pushkar	PKM-02	Male	15 years	50
Jaipur	JPM-06	Male	20 years	55
Ajmer	AJM-07	Male	9 years	41
Pushkar	PKF-01	Female	5 years	38
Jaipur	JPM-08	Male	11 years	49

Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018). The coding process involved three sequential stages - open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) - resulting in the identification of themes and sub-themes organised under three primary research objectives. Data saturation was achieved with the participant sample, as subsequent interviews yielded no substantively new themes (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020).

Results and Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts yielded three overarching themes and twelve sub-themes corresponding to the three research objectives. The themes and their sub-components are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-Themes Extracted from Interviews

Theme	Sub-Themes
Role of Tour Guides in Heritage Tourism	Cultural Ambassadors and Storytellers; Differentiating from Driver Services; Facilitators of Authentic Experiences; Navigation of Complex Heritage Sites
Perspectives on Conservation and Preservation	Guides as Conservation Advocates; Concerns About Heritage Degradation; Tensions Between Tourism and Conservation; Role in Documentation and Reporting

Theme	Sub-Themes
Satisfaction with the Tour Guide Profession	Sources of Professional Satisfaction; Gender-Based Challenges; Economic Instability and Seasonality; Recognition and Professional Status; Coping Strategies and Resilience
Cross-Case Variations	Jaipur: The Established Heritage Hub; Pushkar: The Romantic Heritage Narrative; Ajmer: Pioneering Female Guides

Theme 1: The Role of Tour Guides in Heritage Tourism

Cultural Ambassadors and Storytellers. Across all three research settings, guides consistently articulated their role as transcending the provision of historical facts. Storytelling was identified as the central mechanism through which guides create emotionally resonant experiences for tourists. A guide with eighteen years of experience in Jaipur described this orientation:

I am not just telling dates and names. I am bringing the past into the present. When I take visitors through Amer Fort, I want them to feel what it was like to be a Rajput king or queen. The stories are what make the stones come alive.

Female guides notably emphasised the importance of inclusive and multi-perspective storytelling. A participant from Jaipur explained her effort to incorporate underrepresented voices into the heritage narrative:

Every fort, every haveli has multiple stories. The official history tells one version, but there are folk stories, family stories, women's stories. I try to share all of these, so visitors understand that history is not just one narrative.

These findings are consistent with the interpretive function of tour guides identified by Weiler and Ham (2002), and suggest that guides in Rajasthan are increasingly aware of their role in shaping how heritage is understood and valued by visitors.

Differentiating Guide Roles from Driver Services. A recurring source of professional frustration was the conflation of guides with drivers by tourists unfamiliar with the guiding profession. Participants emphasised their specialised training, formal licensing, and interpretive expertise as markers of professional distinction:

Drivers are wonderful for roads and logistics, but we guides have special training, licenses, and deep knowledge. We spend years learning before we can take people inside monuments.

This professional identity was particularly contested for female guides, who reported that tourists sometimes questioned their authority and expertise based on gender. Despite this, participants described persisting through initial scepticism by demonstrating knowledge:

I have had tourists ask me if I am really a guide or just someone's assistant. They see a woman and assume I cannot have the same knowledge as a man. I have to prove myself every time, but once I start explaining the architecture, they understand.

Facilitators of Authentic Experiences. Beyond monument tours, guides described their role in connecting tourists with living heritage — local artisans, traditional crafts, folk music, and village communities. A guide with rural tourism experience articulated this broader function:

When tourists only see the fort, they get one picture of Rajasthan. But our heritage is also in the villages, the crafts, the music. I try to show the living heritage — people who are still practising traditions passed down for generations.

This finding supports the view that guides increasingly function as bridges between tourism and local communities, contributing to community-based tourism and livelihood development alongside their interpretive roles.

Theme 2: Perspectives on Conservation and Preservation

Guides as Conservation Advocates. Participants unanimously described themselves as informal conservation advocates, viewing visitor education as an intrinsic part of their professional responsibility:

When I see tourists touching ancient carvings or climbing where they should not, I stop them. Not in a harsh way, but by explaining why these things must be protected. If they understand the value, they will respect it.

Female guides particularly emphasised the importance of communicating the sacred significance of heritage sites to prevent culturally disrespectful behaviour:

Many tourists do not realise that these monuments are not just tourist attractions — they are still sacred places for some communities. I explain the religious and cultural significance, so they understand why certain behaviours are disrespectful.

Concerns About Heritage Degradation. Experienced guides expressed significant concern about the visible deterioration of heritage sites under the pressure of mass tourism. A guide with two decades of experience described observable changes at Amer Fort:

When I started 20 years ago, the paintings inside Amer Fort were much clearer. The mirror work was more intact. Now, with so many tourists, with humidity from so many people breathing, with lights for photography — the colours are fading.

Structural impacts were also noted, with guides identifying increasing cracking and wear in ancient corridors frequented by thousands of visitors

daily. These observations reflect guides' extensive site-specific knowledge, accumulated through years of regular presence at heritage locations.

Role in Documentation and Reporting. Several participants described undertaking informal monitoring activities, photographing and reporting signs of deterioration to relevant authorities:

I take photos of new cracks, of paint flaking, of things that were not there before. I share these with the Archaeological Survey of India office when I can. Sometimes they listen, sometimes they do not. But I feel I must do something.

This informal monitoring role reflects guides' deep personal investment in heritage protection, even in the absence of formal recognition or compensation for such activities.

Theme 3: Satisfaction with the Tour Guide Profession

Sources of Professional Satisfaction. Despite significant structural and social challenges, participants reported strong intrinsic satisfaction derived from intellectual engagement, intercultural exchange, and the sense of contributing to cultural preservation. A representative participant expressed this multi-dimensional satisfaction:

I have made friends from all over the world — Germany, Japan, Brazil, South Africa. They tell me about their countries, their cultures, and I share mine. This is not just a job; it is a window to the world.

A particularly prominent source of satisfaction was the sense of cultural stewardship—the belief that guides play an irreplaceable role in transmitting heritage knowledge to future generations:

I am passing something forward. These stories, these traditions, if we do not tell them, they will be forgotten. I feel I have a responsibility to keep this heritage alive for future generations.

Gender-Based Challenges to Satisfaction. For female guides, professional satisfaction was significantly complicated by gender-based obstacles. Participants described experiences of verbal harassment, unequal access to employment assignments, and social stigma from family and community members. A female participant recounted her experience on her first day as a guide:

On my first day, a man came up to me in front of my tourist group and asked what kind of woman I was to be on the road with so many men. He was shouting. I was shocked, but I continued.

Employment discrimination was a persistent concern, with experienced female guides reporting being routinely bypassed for assignments despite superior qualifications:

I have 16 years of experience. I know the history of Jaipur better than most. But hotels still do not call me unless a guest specifically requests a female guide. I have to keep knocking, keep reminding them I exist.

Despite these challenges, female guides expressed remarkable resilience and pride in serving as role models for younger women entering the profession. As one participant noted, the increase in female guides in her city from one to four over her career represented a meaningful source of professional fulfilment.

Economic Instability and Professional Recognition. All participants, regardless of gender, identified seasonality and income uncertainty as significant challenges. The irregular nature of guiding work, dependent on tourist arrivals and agency referrals, created financial precarity that tempered overall job satisfaction. On the question of professional recognition, participants described a gradual but incomplete improvement in public perception:

In India, being a guide is not seen as a 'real' profession by many. People ask when I will get a 'proper' job. But in the tourism industry, we are the face of Rajasthan. Without us, tourists would just walk through monuments without understanding.

Coping strategies identified by participants included income diversification through heritage walks, photography tours, and culinary experiences; professional networking and mutual support among guides; and continuous self-directed learning to maintain competitive expertise.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study's findings affirm and extend existing scholarship on the multifaceted role of tour guides in heritage tourism. The portrayal of guides as cultural ambassadors and storytellers resonates with Cohen's (1985) foundational typology and Weiler and Ham's (2002) emphasis on interpretation as a mechanism for deepening tourist engagement with heritage. Significantly, guides in Rajasthan are not passive conduits of established historical narratives; many are actively reshaping how heritage is presented by incorporating folk histories, women's stories, and living cultural practices into their interpretations.

The conservation findings are particularly noteworthy. The study reveals that guides possess valuable site-specific knowledge, accumulated through years of daily observation, that is currently underutilised in formal heritage management processes. Their informal monitoring activities represent an untapped resource for conservation planning, and the absence of formal channels for incorporating guide observations into management strategies represents a significant institutional gap.

The gender findings expose persistent structural inequalities that undermine the professional potential of female guides. These inequalities manifest at multiple levels — in interpersonal interactions with tourists and the public, in institutional employment practices, and in the social norms governing women's participation in public professional life. The resilience demonstrated by female guides, and their deliberate role modelling for younger women, represents a form of professional agency operating in a challenging context.

Taken together, these findings suggest that tour guides in Rajasthan are performing far more than their formal job descriptions entail. They are conservation advocates, community connectors, cultural stewards, and, for female guides, agents of gradual social change. Realising their full potential will require targeted interventions at the policy, institutional, and industry levels.

Research Implications

The study generates several practical implications for key stakeholder groups. For government tourism authorities, the findings point to the need for formal recognition campaigns that educate tourists about the value and expertise of licensed guides, as well as targeted interventions to address gender disparities—including mentorship programs, formal harassment reporting mechanisms, incentives for agencies to employ female guides, and social awareness campaigns.

For heritage management bodies, the study recommends establishing formal channels through which guides can contribute observational data to site monitoring and conservation planning processes. This would not only improve the accuracy and timeliness of condition assessments but would also enhance guides' sense of professional recognition and investment in conservation outcomes.

For tourism training institutions, the findings highlight the need for ongoing professional development in heritage interpretation, cross-cultural communication, and sustainable tourism practices. Training curricula should also address the specific challenges faced by female guides, including strategies for managing harassment and building professional networks.

Finally, for guides themselves, the study underscores the value of income diversification, professional networking, and continuous learning as strategies for navigating the economic and social challenges of the profession.

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Corresponding Author

Priya Singh can be contacted at: psingh1@aud.ac.in

Author Biographies

Zaneera Shabnum is a student of the MBA in Travel and Tourism Management (MBATTM) programme at the Department of Tourism Studies, Central University of Kashmir, J&K, India. She is keenly interested in tourism management, destination development, hospitality services, and sustainable tourism practices. Through her academic pursuits, she continues to develop professional competencies in tourism planning, marketing, customer service, and travel operations. She actively engages in curricular and co-curricular activities that enhance her industry exposure and managerial skills, preparing herself for a successful career in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Zeenat Nazir is a student of the MBA in Travel and Tourism Management (MBATTM) programme at the Central University of Kashmir, J&K, India. She is

passionate about research in tourism, hospitality, and destination development. Throughout her academic journey, she has demonstrated a keen interest in sustainable tourism practices, customer service, and tourism marketing. Zeenat actively participates in academic and co-curricular activities that enhance her professional skills and industry exposure.

Dr. Priya Singh is an accomplished academic and industry professional currently serving as an Assistant Professor in Tourism and Hospitality at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, New Delhi, India. With a doctorate in Hotel Management and over a decade of experience across prestigious institutions such as IHM Kurukshetra, IHM Dehradun, Jamia Millia Islamia, and The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra, she has made significant contributions to the field of tourism and hospitality. Dr. Singh is a UGC-NET/JRF qualified scholar in Tourism Management and a Certified Hospitality Trainer (CHT) accredited by the Ministry of Tourism. Her core research areas include Culinary Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, and Tourism and Hospitality Marketing. She has actively participated in national and international conferences and has an impressive portfolio of publications in reputed journals and books. In addition to her research and teaching, Dr. Singh has contributed to the development of E-content on hospitality education through the Swayamprabha platform, furthering her commitment to innovative and accessible learning. A passionate educator and researcher, Dr. Priya Singh continues to inspire and shape the next generation of professionals in the tourism and hospitality industry.