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Excavating India's tourism potential

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II Year

Indian economists are trying their best to solve the BOP crisis. While they are looking for methods to attract foreign income, they have overlooked the enormous tourism potential our country holds. France, in the year 2012, had 83 million foreign tourists while USA had 67 million foreign tourists. India had only 6.6 million foreign nationals, out of which a good percentage were NRIs visiting their relatives. India has a history that predates those of European nations. We have artefacts that show great advances in human intelligence and a treasure of natural resources as well. The problem is that we are not able to market as well as develop our resources in a way that attracts tourism.

We just use our natural resources for industrial development. Our lakes and rivers simply serve as drains for industrial waste. We need to rejuvenate our resources, and make them ideal for a paradise-like holiday experience in the lap of nature, coupled with adventure sports, wildlife

safari and other such activities. Infrastructure for the same should not be massive since we don't want to disturb ecology. Rather, we should involve the local populace, who will find a new source of livelihood and thus have a vested interest in safeguarding the resources as well.

India has 30 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, with another 30 in the waitlist. UK has only 28, with tenfold number of tourists visiting them. Why? Because we lack investments in tourism infrastructure — roads and other forms of connectivity, tourism police, financial services, hotels etc. Tourist sites lack basic amenities and are situated in the middle of cities. They are places which stubbornly display all negative attributes of a problematic tour, proving the shallowness of the promise of the Government of India to provide royal treatment. If we want foreign visitors to experience India's cultural heritage, we need to maintain, restore and renovate our historic monuments. To accomplish this, government agencies should work diligently with private players, and more importantly, we should be proud of our architectural heritage and not ruin it ourselves. Indian citizens are also irresponsible and their behaviour is far from the principle of '*atithi devo bhava*'.

Another issue is that globetrotter is undercharged for sightseeing in India. The entry fee for an alien traveller at Ajanta caves is only Rs 250, which is even less than \$5. An international tourist, who has spent about a thousand dollars to visit a country, will certainly be willing to give more than what he/she spends on a chocolate sundae.

In the globalized world, technology and skyscrapers are not the only things that attract tourists; it is the distinct culture and traditions which catch their attention. Millions participate in La Tomatina in Spain

and La Carnaval in Brazil. India offers a potpourri of different cultures and traditions. We have a long list of unique festivals, which display our diversity and beliefs. India has an array of dance, food, music, lifestyle etc. What we need is extensive cultural marketing which will generate a perspective that visiting India is a unique learning experience which maximizes the value of leisure time. With increasing popularity of yoga in the contemporary world, and India being a birthplace of major religions, India has a spiritual atmosphere. Religion governs lifestyle here and tourism due to religious belief is a major source of domestic tourism. With appropriate policies, India can emerge as the yoga and spiritual capital of world. It's already the fastest growing wellness tourist destination. Westerners flock to India for life changing trips to visit meditation retreats and spiritual centres. Wellness travel represents 14 percent of all tourism spending. It's estimated to have an economic impact worth a million dollars.

Falling rupee has made India an affordable and attractive tourist destination. Increase in international demand for Indian ethnic wear and jewellery can also play a critical role in promoting tourism. With reduced costs, the availability of latest medical technology and growing compliance with international quality standards, medical tourism is a rapidly growing sector in India. It is expected to experience an annual growth rate of 30%, making it a \$2 billion industry by 2015. Advantage of a devalued currency can be extended to other sectors of tourism also.

Availability of skilled manpower is a major challenge faced by the travel and tourism industry, one of the largest employment generators in the country. To sustain growth in this industry, trained workforce is required at every level, but due to poor

supply, the industry has no alternative but to fill the void with untrained resources. Such a high proportion of untrained manpower would adversely affect the quality of services offered to tourists.

Although India is a storehouse of rich tourist locations, yet it figures near the bottom. The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2013 ranks India at 65th spot out of 144 countries. Marketing and promotion of India as a major tourist destination is critical for the industry to achieve its potential. Lack of adequate budgetary support for promotion and marketing, compared to competing tourist destinations, is a major reason for India lagging behind as a tourist destination. To use tourism as an engine of growth, we need innovative and creative marketing strategies designed specifically for different sections of visitors. Gujarat started the 'Khushboo Gujarat Ki' campaign and roped in Amitabh Bachchan as its ambassador, which increased the state's tourism revenue by 14 per cent per annum. This rate is twice that of the national growth rate of 6.7 per cent! The tourism ministry needs to create a new campaign to increase tourist inflows into the country. The 'Incredible India' campaign, which started in 2002, has lived its life and needs to be reinvented.

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Deadly Contract

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It was during the period of my research on sewer workers in Delhi that I first woke up to the irony and incongruity of the slogan of 'Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan' rolled out by our government. It is the class of these contractual sewer workers, who despite all the harassment and daily struggles of life, continuously strive to solve the sewage problems in the city. Commonly known as 'beldars', these contractual workers work for the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) without identification and also without the requisite identification cards. The rationale behind DJB and contractors not providing identification cards is that it prevents them from being accountable for any possible death or health hazard.

As I moved ahead with my survey, I found out that the beldars work on contract basis for several years, awaiting permanent jobs, which remain a farfetched dream for them. They are deprived of health benefits, despite the fact that they work in highly toxic circumstances. Even in the event of death, no compensation is received from the contractor (whom they go on without seeing for years) or from the government. Without any safety equipment, they not only face the debilitating reality of cleaning up human waste, but are also viewed with

contempt and disdain when they act on complaints of sewer jam in our neighbourhoods. They are deprived of basic equipments like litmus paper to check the toxicity of gases in sewer which is a major cause for deaths and health problems.

Apart from these, there were other much more disturbing facts that I came across, such as no provision of soaps and washrooms to take a bath in after they finish with their work. They are thus forced to walk about with the stench of sewer on them.

Most of these workers belong to the Valmiki community, of which a majority has reported problems with their eyes and skin. The test results of their lungpower and weight signalled a plethora of health problems. Also, no facility for conveyance to work leaves them without any savings, as transport facilities are expensive and they work on a meagre salary. Even though permanent sewer workers do get a salary which is three times their contractual counterparts, their predicament is no better. They have access to security equipments, but either they are faulty or at times better left in store rooms. These permanent health workers are made to undertake departmental health check-ups every six months, where each time their health reports turn out to be fine. However,, ironically, when they arrive at private clinics, they are diagnosed with various medical ailments. They shell out their salary in these clinics and no reimbursement is provided against the private treatment they are forced to undergo. Moreover, they find it difficult to avail medicines at government hospitals. Thus, even though government's antipathy makes a contractual sewer worker worse off, the permanent one is not better off either.