Build liveable India to realise the Incredible India potential

- ***Amitabh Kant****

I have long believed that India's tourism potential is one of the country's great unfinished opportunities. We possess the history, culture, biodiversity, cuisine and living traditions that travellers search for across the world. Tourism can create work across the country and bring foreign exchange into local economies. It can also carry India's story, values and way of life to people who may never have visited us before.

Over the past few years, Indians have rediscovered their own country in unprecedented numbers. Ministry of Tourism data show that domestic tourist visits, meaning trips made within India, reached 2,509.63 million in 2023, compared with 1,731.01 million in 2022. The next task is to make the country ready to receive the world. That opportunity has become more urgent as India's aviation market expands. Boeing forecasts that airlines in India and South Asia will need 2,835 new commercial aircraft between 2024 and 2043. Airbus expects India's commercial fleet in service to triple to about 2,250 aircraft by 2035. Much of this expansion will serve domestic and outbound travel. India must ensure that it also creates a stronger market for inbound tourism.

There is nothing wrong with Indians travelling abroad. A confident country should welcome that freedom. But the same aircraft, airports and air routes can serve another purpose. They can bring more international visitors to India, if our destinations are ready to receive them. Otherwise, India risks building the connectivity to carry Indian spending overseas without capturing a proportionate share of international spending at home.

The biggest case for boosting international tourism is employment. Official estimates based on the Periodic Labour Force Survey and the Tourism Satellite Account suggest that tourism supported about 84.63 million direct and indirect jobs in 2023–24. Provisional estimates put tourism's contribution at 5.22 percent of GDP and 13.34 percent of total employment. Put simply, tourism supports close to one in eight jobs in India.

The importance of these jobs lies in where they are created. Tourism can take employment beyond the largest metropolitan centres and connect local businesses to a much wider market. A visitor's spending reaches hotels and restaurants, but it also supports taxi operators, food producers, artisans, guides, homestays and small retailers. The World Bank estimates that small and medium-sized enterprises account for around 80 percent of licensed tourism and tourism-related businesses globally. A heritage town, a coastal village, a forest landscape or a craft tradition can therefore become the basis for local employment if it is connected to markets and managed well. Tourism gives states an economic use for assets that cannot be relocated.

The sector can also provide an important entry point for young people into the formal economy. Work in hospitality, food services, guiding and visitor management builds skills in customer service, languages, digital tools and operations that can be used across the wider services economy. The Tourism and Hospitality Skill Council estimates that the sector will require around 3 million additional workers between 2022 and 2028, creating a substantial opportunity for youth skilling.

This is why the Economic Survey described tourism as a relatively low-hanging fruit for job creation at a time when technology is reshaping services and protectionism is making manufacturing more difficult. But the opportunity will not be realised automatically. States will need to align training with actual demand, improve working conditions and help local enterprises connect to hotels, travel companies and destination circuits. They must treat tourism as a jobs strategy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day address from the Red Fort placed this opportunity in the right context. Identifying India's soft power as the seventh stream of the country's development strategy, he said: "The potential is immense, but we have fallen short when it comes to attracting foreign tourists. We have an opportunity to use our soft power to attract tourists from across the world to Bharat. We must showcase our potential to the world." Promoting India abroad is therefore not simply an advertising exercise. It is one of the most effective ways to build soft power because visitors encounter India through its people, its heritage, its landscapes and its living culture. Those experiences travel back with them through conversation, media and memory.

That message now needs to be matched by a serious promotional effort. In the Union Budget for 2026–27, the allocation under Overseas Promotion and Publicity, including Market Development Assistance, was Rs 3.5 crore. A Parliamentary Standing Committee has noted that the entire amount is effectively committed to India's mandatory contributions to international organisations, leaving no meaningful allocation for international marketing. It described the absence of a dedicated promotional budget as a "serious deficiency". The Ministry of Tourism has reportedly sought Rs 265 crore from the Ministry of Finance for promotional activities. The appropriate institutional home for this request is the Ministry of Finance, not the Ministry of Defence. The issue is not defence spending. It is whether the government will provide the Ministry of Tourism with predictable, multi-year resources to promote India in international markets.

The Union government should create a ring-fenced promotional fund for international tourism, with resources large enough to support sustained campaigns in priority markets. Advertising and branding cannot be treated as an afterthought once infrastructure has been built. A destination has to be visible before a traveller considers visiting it. The campaign should be based on clear market research and should sell distinct experiences rather than repeat a general slogan. India's embassies, airlines, airports, cultural institutions and private tourism companies should be part of the effort.

The states must carry a substantial part of this responsibility. India is not one tourism product. Rajasthan, Kerala, Goa, the north-east, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and the

Himalayan states each offer different reasons to visit. State governments are closest to these destinations and are responsible for many of the services that determine whether the visitor experience is good. They must promote their regions in overseas markets, build strong destination brands and commit their own resources to destination management. A state cannot expect the Union government to advertise a destination that it has not made easy to reach, safe to navigate and pleasant to experience. International promotion will work only when it is tied to better public spaces, reliable transport, clean surroundings, trained guides, honest pricing and well-managed heritage sites.

Incredible India needs a Liveable India

This is where Incredible India needs to become Liveable India. A traveller does not encounter the country through a campaign slogan. India is judged at the airport, on the road to the hotel, while looking for a public toilet, at a heritage site and during an evening walk through a city. Clean streets, reliable transport, clear information and safe public spaces determine whether a visitor feels comfortable extending a stay or travelling beyond the main attraction.

These are also the conditions that residents need. A city that is easier for a foreign visitor to navigate is usually easier for its own citizens to live in. Waste collection, functioning public transport, walkable streets and well-maintained public spaces improve daily life and help local businesses attract customers. Tourism gives city governments a direct economic reason to improve basic services because the quality of those services affects where visitors go, how long they stay and what they spend.

India should begin with a limited number of high-potential circuits and take responsibility for the full visitor journey. Delhi–Agra–Jaipur, Mumbai–Goa–Hampi and Kochi–Munnar–Thekkady already have the visibility to attract international visitors. Nature and culture trails in the north-east have similar potential. The aim should be to improve the entire journey, including arrival, local transport, public spaces, interpretation, accommodation and departure. The Union government can provide funding and coordination, but the states must lead on execution and promotion.

Foreign tourism complements India's strong domestic travel market. Domestic travel provides the volume and resilience that sustain the sector through the year. Inbound tourism adds foreign-exchange earnings and access to international demand. The aim should be to grow both markets without allowing India's expanding aviation and travel economy to become primarily an engine for outbound spending.

India has already demonstrated that its people want to travel. The next task is to make the country ready to receive the world. Tourism can create millions of jobs, but those jobs will materialise only when visitors reach destinations, spend locally and find reasons to stay longer. That requires the Union government to provide the resources for global promotion and the states to take ownership of the destinations they represent.

If India treats tourism as a jobs strategy, a services export and a soft-power instrument, it can move from being a country that travels to being a country that is truly travelled to.

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