

We need to get our tourism game face on, especially for high-value customers, for job creation

PASSAGE THROUGH INDIA

- Amitabh Kant*

At present, the global tourism market is valued in excess of USD 5 trillion, of which India's share is less than 2%. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has on several occasions highlighted the significance and importance of tourism to drive employment, growth and prosperity. India must aim to create 25 million new jobs through tourism in the next five years. Indian states have a key role in making job creation through travel and tourism a reality.

Enhancing Tourism Infrastructure and Creating Experiences

Through the G20 presidency, all of India's states and their cultures were put on display. The involvement of over 20,000 artisans in 300+ cultural programs showcased India's rich heritage and diversity. Enthralling experiences were designed around key tourist destinations for G20 delegates. These can be replicated and scaled and states must capitalise on this impetus. Cleanliness of cities and tourist destinations must be accorded the highest priority. More ambitious air quality action plans must be drawn up.

Secondly, states must focus on improving connectivity from airports and railway stations to tourist destinations and circuits. High speed digital connectivity at these destinations must also be ensured. The development of tourism infrastructure around significant cultural and heritage circuits and destinations, in partnership with the private sector, is crucial. This includes enhancing connectivity to key Buddhist sites like Kushinagar and Bodh Gaya to attract East Asian tourists, ensuring that these destinations are accessible year-round. The development of world-class museums and creating unique experiences through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), can also serve as cultural beacons.

Focussing on the MICE Market (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Exhibitions)

India's G20 presidency has also positioned the country as a global focal point for the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) industry. Hosting over 220 meetings across 60 cities with 100,000+ participants showcases India's capability to manage large-scale international events. The creation of world class venues such as the Bharat Mandapam and Yashobhoomi have caught the world's attention. With the global MICE tourism market valued at USD 500 billion, India's share is less than 1%, a figure that underscores the immense growth potential. With the top class infrastructure now available India must aim to host every single global convention and exhibition here. Developing convention and visitors bureaus, enhancing international exhibit spaces, and improving overall destination management can serve as critical steps towards realizing India's immense potential in the MICE market.

Positioning Indian Airports as Global Hubs

India is the third largest civil aviation market. There is immense potential for our airports to become transit hubs connecting North America and Europe to South East Asia, East Africa and North East Asia. This would have huge economic benefits. Schemes such as UDAAN have considerably improved domestic air connectivity. Now is the time to boost international connectivity to key destinations. Re-evaluating air-connectivity bilateral agreements, and boosting the availability of seats with direct flights to tier 2 and tier 3 cities is critical. Indian airports must also be positioned as global hubs with direct connectivity to all major global destinations. At present a vast segment of Indians travel long haul via third country airports. India must transform its airports into global aviation hubs facilitating seamless connectivity between domestic and international airports.

Wellness and Medical Tourism in India

India's potential in health and wellness tourism is vast and largely untapped. With its ancient roots in Ayurveda, Yoga, and other traditional practices, India offers a unique proposition in the global wellness tourism sector. The country's rich heritage in natural and holistic healing, combined with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push towards promoting Ayurveda and wellness beyond mere treatment, positions India as a compelling destination for those seeking physical, mental, and spiritual rejuvenation. The introduction of AYUSH Visas is a testament to the government's commitment to making India the epicenter of global wellness tourism.

Launch a lively, vibrant, digital Incredible India campaign

The launch of a vigorous global Incredible India 2.0 campaign digitally can prove to be pivotal in promoting and marketing Indian destinations. An element in this strategy could be targeting the NRIs and PIOs, harnessing the emotional and cultural ties of this demographic, encouraging them to explore their heritage. To enhance tourism and facilitate increased international footfall, India could significantly benefit from adopting innovative visa policies, such as offering visa on arrival and visa-free travel from target nations. These measures will simplify the process for tourists to visit India, making the country more accessible and attractive as a destination.

Providing Industry Status to Tourism

Giving industry status to the tourism sector would make it more commercially viable and lead to the sector getting benefit of power tariff and other taxes at industrial rates against the present requirement of paying at much higher commercial rates. It will also enable hospitality projects to get lending at much lower interest rates. This initiative needs to be undertaken by both central and state governments.

Going Green is Good for Hospitality

According to a sustainability research by Booking.com, 87% of travellers globally want to travel sustainably and 68% of customers look for eco-friendly hotels. Hospitality sector must lead the green movement by making itself efficient in terms of energy, water waste, temperature adjustments and LED lighting. Sustainability vision must become the driving force as it will be the key to enhancing value and attracting high value customers.

The tourism sector in India is ready to pivot, with the potential to not only significantly enhance its contribution to the national GDP but also to become a major source of employment and economic empowerment across the country. Prime Minister Modi's vision of harnessing tourism as a vehicle for widespread growth is a strategic approach which can not only elevate India's position on the global tourism map but also unlock the goal of creating 25 million jobs in the next five years, catalyzing a transformative impact on the economy and society at large. The time for India to act decisively is now, to leverage our rich cultural heritage and diverse attractions and realize this vision of prosperity through tourism.

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