

To Bring the World, Sell India Better

- *Amitabh Kant**

The ongoing Middle East conflict has disrupted global supply chains, driven up energy prices, and intensified pressure on India's current account. Tourism is the fastest way to earn foreign exchange and create jobs at scale. At a time when global uncertainty, energy price volatility, supply chain disruptions, and geopolitical shocks can put pressure on the current account, tourism acts as an automatic stabiliser for the economy.

A foreign visitor brings dollars directly into the economy. Visitors spend on hospitality, transport, destinations, souvenirs, cultural experiences, and cuisine. Each of these areas is a powerful creator of self-employment and jobs in its own right. And every direct job in tourism creates thirteen indirect jobs. Servers, chefs, drivers, guides, artisans, performers, homestay owners, digital marketers, and thousands of small local enterprises are just some examples. Manufacturing-led FDI, the preferred long-term solution, takes years to materialise and even longer to generate foreign exchange at a meaningful scale. Tourism, by contrast, converts a visitor's decision into dollars within months.

India's airlines have placed orders for over 2000 new aircraft, with deliveries accelerating over the next several years. This is, on its face, a story of aviation ambition. But without a corresponding effort to fill those planes with inbound foreign travellers, the expansion of capacity will do something perverse: it will make it easier and cheaper for Indians to fly abroad, draining precious foreign exchange at a greater scale, while doing nothing to attract the compensatory inflow that tourism marketing would generate.

Over the last four years, India's overseas tourism marketing budget has been cut to near zero. The result has been precisely as predictable as it sounds. In 2024, India recorded just 9.9 million international tourist arrivals — still roughly 10% below its pre-pandemic peak. While every major competitor has stormed back past 2019 levels, India is still looking for the exit. The sharp reduction in India's overseas tourism marketing budget is therefore surprising. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has long understood the power of tourism. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, he successfully promoted and marketed the state as a tourist destination. As Prime Minister, he has remained one of India's strongest advocates for tourism, repeatedly stressing its economic significance, employment potential, and role in showcasing India to the world.

The economics of tourism marketing are not subtle. A foreign tourist contributes \$3,000 to India's GDP per visit against just \$75 from a domestic traveller — a 40-fold difference. An investment of \$200 million in overseas marketing will attract 1 million additional foreign tourists, generating \$3.6 billion

in economic value, \$400 million in GST receipts, and 2.83 lakh new jobs. That is an 18x return on every marketing dollar deployed. And for the sceptical: a mere 55,000 additional tourists — 0.5% of India's current visitor base — would fully recover the marketing outlay. These are not projections. They are what the original Incredible India campaign demonstrably delivered.

The data from peer countries makes the case with even greater force. Malaysia spent \$70 million on tourism marketing in FY2024 and saw international arrivals grow 31% to 27.3 million, with tourism revenue rising 37.5% to \$22 billion. Thailand spent \$120 million and delivered 26% growth in arrivals to 35.5 million visitors, with revenues up 34% to \$48 billion. Brazil spent \$90 million and grew arrivals 22%. Saudi Arabia, investing at scale, welcomed 30 million tourists and generated \$41 billion in tourism revenues. The United States, spending \$240 million through Brand USA, with 90% directed to digital channels, reports a \$25 return for every dollar invested. Singapore channelled \$230 million into a dedicated Tourism Development Fund.

The transformation of global travel is being driven by digital technology, and this is precisely where India's absence is most costly. Today, 78% of all tourism sales happen online, 70% of bookings are completed on mobile devices, and 45% flow through online travel agencies. The battlefield has shifted to YouTube pre-rolls, social media algorithms, programmatic display, and influencer networks — channels where spend is measurable, targeting is precise, and ROI is trackable in near real-time.

India has the raw infrastructure, but has failed to activate it. Incredible India's social media presence — 1.9 million Facebook followers, 785,000 on Instagram — generates embarrassingly low engagement relative to peers. Saudi Arabia, with a similar follower count, generated 27 million content views in a single month, compared with India's 388,000. The platform exists. India is completely absent in global marketing for almost a decade. This is costing India's tourism heavily. The content pipeline of India in the sphere of tourism is empty.

Marketing alone will not be enough. India must also deregulate tourism in a mission mode. Hotels, restaurants, homestays, transport operators, and adventure providers face multiple overlapping licences, renewals, and inspections. Projects that can be completed in 18 months in competing Asian destinations often take much longer in India, raising capital costs and reducing competitiveness. Unified licenses, risk-based compliance, digitisation, and automatic renewals must be instituted.

India's tourism challenge is not a shortage of attractions. Every State of India must champion tourism. should identify 15 anchor destinations and develop them into complete tourism ecosystems that encompass access, accommodation, experiences, events, safety, cleanliness, local enterprise, and marketing.

A destination is not ready merely because it has attractions, roads, hotels, or signage. It is demand-ready when a traveller can discover what is distinctive about it, evaluate its credibility, identify bookable experiences, transact easily, and trust that the experience will meet expectations. Tourism competitiveness will increasingly depend on whether destinations are creator-friendly, searchable, transaction-ready, and trusted online. India must also embrace the creator economy as a strategic tourism asset. Official campaigns create awareness, but creators create trust. A well-made video by a credible traveller can do what a brochure cannot.

India's tourism proposition has never been stronger or more differentiated. India does not need to discover its tourism potential; it needs to unleash it. Tourism is its greatest asset and is the fastest way to create large-scale, distributed, dignified employment. It brings foreign exchange without tariffs, trade disputes, or long gestation periods. It supports MSMEs, women, artisans, farmers, transporters, and young entrepreneurs. It strengthens the rupee, widens the tax base, and showcases India to the world.

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