

## HEALTH TOURISM IN INDIA – POTENTIAL AND PROSPECTS

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### **Abstract**

*Health Tourism is emerging as a niche tourism segment in the world. Developing countries are emerging as low cost health care providers of the world due to advancement in science and technology, telecommunications and health infrastructure. India is becoming as the most sought after health tourism destination in the world with affordable world class medical care along with diversity of services such as wellness therapies, yoga, and alternative medicines. The paper looks into the opportunities and challenges of health tourism in India and suggests some policy measures that are required for the sustainable health tourism in the country.*

Key Words: Health tourism, Medical tourism, wellness, Ayurveda, Tourism.

### **1. Introduction**

India is a sub-continent with rich cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and vast reservoir of human resources with scientific knowledge. This diversity of the destination India attracts large number of tourists in to the country every year. India has a fairly well developed medical system with qualified medical and Para medical staff that attracts large number of health tourists from all over the world. India provides highly specialised medical treatments at a very affordable price on par with international standards to the foreign tourists without much delay. The uniqueness of India is the coexistence of alternate system of medicine such as Ayurveda, Unani, Homeopathy and Naturopathy which are very effective in providing curative and healing benefits to the tourists. In addition to this India has a rich tradition of yoga and meditation which provide lasting solutions to modern life style related diseases. This diversity of multiple health care systems in the country makes India a strong attractive destination for medical tourism in the world. The paper makes an attempt to understand the opportunities and challenges to health tourism in India and suggests some policy measures for the sustainable development of health tourism in the country.

Health Tourism in simple words refers to movement of people from one place to another for health

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purpose. According to World Health Organisation (WHO) 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (1946). Health tourism can be broadly classified in to medical tourism and wellness tourism. A health tourist can seek some medical procedures or seek proactive methods to preserve and protect health through indigenous system of medicine or local knowledge. Health tourism can be both curative and preventive and also can be out bound, inbound or intrabound. The growth of health tourism depends on the development of medical system in the country, its reliability, incorporating latest changes in the domain knowledge, post medical recuperation, connectivity and the availability of information and information flows. This coupled with development of traditional tourist attractions such as beach tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism etc. gives growth and sustainability to health tourism in the country.

## **2. India as an emerging medical tourism destination**

India has certain inherent advantages due to which it is fast emerging as an important medical tourism destination in the world. The costs of complicated medical procedures in India are a fraction of the cost incurred in the developed nations. The combined cost of medical expenses and tourism expenses are much lower than the medical expenses abroad and a large number of tourists visit India to take advantage of this cost difference. The recuperative therapies such as rehabilitation and rejuvenation therapies offered by alternate system of medicine provide long term solutions to the medical tourists. India has invested in the health sector and the quality of medical services is comparable to the western world. There are highly qualified doctors with foreign medical degrees and hospitals with accreditations which the foreign medical tourists are familiar with. These hospitals and doctors make use of highly advanced medical technology and procedures that are practiced in developed parts of the world. This gives a comfortable feeling and a sense of familiarity and security to the medical tourists and also gives an opportunity to continue treatments at home if the need arises. There is a long waiting period to get appointment from specialized doctors in the western countries. Patients who require urgent attention to their medical problems can easily access medical facility in India immediately. Advancement of modern telecommunication technology and cheaper international transport make international mobility easier and this is a boon for health tourists. Internet penetration helps comparison of prices and facilities prevailing in different parts of the world with quick verification of accreditation status of medical facilities and customer feedback. Language and communication plays an important role in health tourism as the patients want to express their problems and experiences to the doctors. India has natural advantage here as English language is widely used in the country and the visiting medical tourists find ease with the medical community to deal with their issues. Even for the non-English speaking patients the hospitals and medical centres employ language interpreters/translators to overcome the barrier of communication. India is traditionally known for providing world class hospitality services to the visitors as the motive is '*athithi devo bhava*'. In addition to the medical facilities, India is known for its diverse destination specialty in terms of

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natural, cultural and other health care services. Chennai is known for specialised eye care, New Delhi for complicated cardiac treatments, Kerala for its signatory service in ayurvedic wellness therapies, Yoga and meditation etc. The total satisfaction experienced by the health tourists not only depend on the health care but also the service quality provided by the various stakeholders. Health tourists visiting India can optimize their satisfaction through holistic health care along with alternate therapies such as Ayurveda, Yoga and meditations and rich diverse tourism destinations.

### 3. Foreign Tourist visits for Medical Tourism

It is very difficult to get an accurate statistics on tourist visiting for medical purpose in the country. Since tourism and medical purpose is combined by the visitors it is very difficult to find the primary purpose of visit by the tourists. Medical visa is expensive as compared to tourist visa and sometimes the tourists extend their tourist visa for medical purposes. Some register themselves as domestic patients if they have friends or relatives in the country. Like that people from neighboring countries also register as domestic nationals for availing medical facilities. NRIs and other Indian origin nationals undergo treatments once they come for holidays depending on their medical condition. Table - 1 gives nationality wise arrival of foreign tourists for medical treatment in to India for the year 2013.

**Table - 1 Nationality - wise classification of Foreign Tourists Arrivals (FTAs) According to purpose of visit - 2013**

Country of Nationalities	FTAs (In Number)	Foreign Tourists Arriving for Medical Treatment	Percentage Share
North America	1340531	4021.593 [1.70]	0.3
Central and South America	68436	273.744 [0.12]	0.4
Western Europe	1855866	5567.598 [2.35]	0.3
Eastern Europe	405083	12557.573 [5.30]	3.1
Africa	275271	39088.482 [16.50]	14.2
West Asia	343113	42202.899 [17.81]	12.3
South Asia	1215035	126363.64 [53.34]	10.4
South East Asia	630054	3780.324 [1.60]	0.6
East Asia	547305	547.305	0.1

		[0.23]	
Australasia	263574	1317.87	0.5
		[0.56]	
Not Classified Elsewhere	23333	233.33	1.0
		[0.10]	
Grand Total	6967601	236898.434	3.4
		[100.0]	

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India.

Table-1 shows that of the 69, 67,601 foreign tourists visited India for the year 2013, only 2,36, 898 (3.4 percent) came for medical purpose. In terms of the percent share of medical tourism, Africa tops the list (14.2 percent), followed by west Asia (12.3 percent) and south Asia (10.4 percent). Other geographical regions have a very small segment of their population visiting India for medical purposes. In terms of the absolute number of medical tourists visiting India, south Asia has a largest share (53.34 percent) followed by west Asia (17.81percent) and Africa (16.50 percent). This shows most of the medical tourists visiting India are from developing countries of the world and high end western tourist have a very small share in India's medical tourism. India faces stiff competition from other Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, Jordan, and Taiwan as main competitors for India's health tourism.

#### Table-2, Country-wise Number of Foreigners Arrival on Medical Attendant/ Medical Visa in India

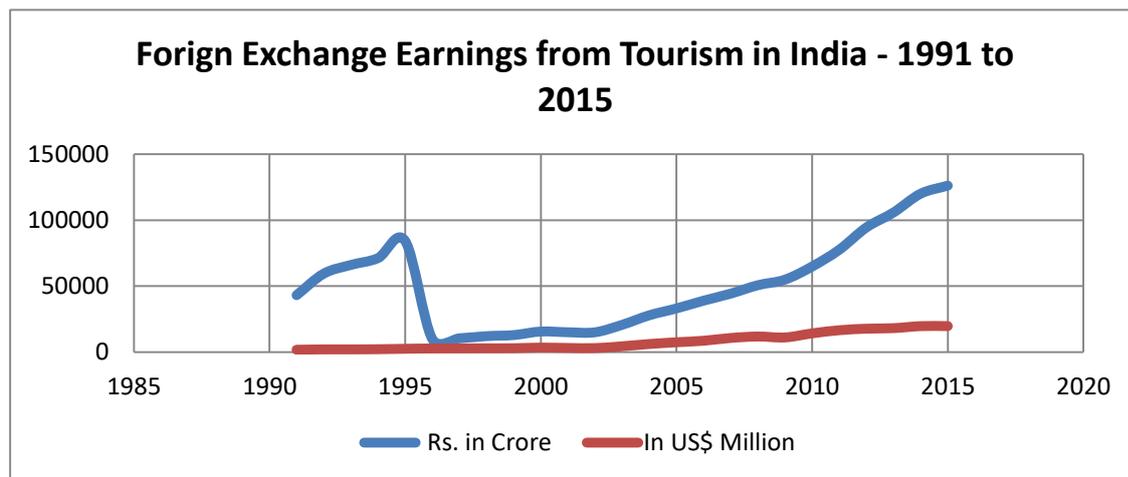
Nationality	2013		2014		2015		2016	
	Medical Attendant	Medical Visa	Medical Attendant	Medical Visa	Medical Attendant	Medical Visa	Medical Attendant	Medical Visa
Afghanistan	3523	9482	3508	7493	7861	19644	6422	15695
Bangladesh	17179	17814	28979	31313	52354	68034	36539	47991
Iraq	235	271	319	439	5722	5656	6259	6054
Kenya	1429	1371	2356	2263	3263	3137	1833	1751
Maldives	3740	6743	985	1706	704	1132	1001	1542
Nigeria	5615	7679	5805	7351	4877	5765	1939	2425
Oman	1347	1634	2390	2937	3580	4728	4810	6606
Somalia	62	129	302	680	1140	1932	797	1607
Sri Lanka	703	1105	882	1345	1096	1933	635	1084
Tanzania	1075	1341	2545	3100	2815	3352	1023	1248
Uzbekistan	814	830	2212	2354	2992	3406	1892	2288
Yemen	1725	1435	4644	3933	2741	2550	1408	1469
<b>Total</b>	<b>42017</b>	<b>56129</b>	<b>63776</b>	<b>75671</b>	<b>99574</b>	<b>134344</b>	<b>70535</b>	<b>96856</b>

Source: IndiaStat

Table-2 shows that there is an increase in medical visa from the year 2013 to 2015, that is 56129 to 134344 but it is reduced to 96856 in the year 2016. In the case of medical attendant, the increase is from 42017 in the year 2013 to 99574 in 2015 but followed by a decline in 2016. Visits by attendant dropped from 99574 in the year 2015 to 70535 and medical visa also dropped from 134344 in 2015 to 96856 in the year 2016. It is revealed from the table-2 that for the period 2013 to 2016 the demand for medical visa and medical attendant is substantially higher for Bangladesh compared to any other countries. In the year 2016 out of 70535 medical attendants arrived in India 36539 is from Bangladesh and out of 47991 medical visa out of total 96856. Other important countries from which tourists are arrived for medical tourism in India include Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Maldives, Nigeria, Oman, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

Medical tourism generates precious foreign currency earnings to the Government. Table -3 provides foreign exchange earnings from tourism in India for the period 1991 to 2016.

**Figure 1: Foreign Exchange Earnings from Tourism 1991-2015**



**Table- 3, Foreign Exchange Earnings from Tourism in India 1991-2016**

Year	Rs. in Crore	Percentage Change	In US\$ Million
1991	43180	-	1861
1995	84300	18.2	2583
2000	15626	20.7	3460
2005	33123	18.5	7493
2010#	64889	18.1	14193
2011#	77591	19.6	16564
2012#	94487	21.8	17737
2013#	105836	12.0	18133
2014	120083	11.5	19657
2015	126211	2.3	19676
2016	155650	15.1	23146*

Note: # : Advance Estimates. \* : In Billion.

Source: Ministry of Tourism Govt. of India

India's foreign exchange earnings from tourism was 1.86 billion in 1991 which has grown up substantially over the years and reached to 23.15 billion in the year 2016. The cumulative growth rate for this period was 1144 percent and average annual increase of 44 percentage. The annual percentage growth was higher for 2003-04 period when the world economy was growing at a rapid pace. But with the global economic recession the foreign exchange earnings from tourism is growing at a slower pace.

#### 4. Health Care Service Providers in India

In India there are many super speciality hospitals with advanced medical facilities compatible with international standards that cater to the medical tourists visiting the country. Major players in Indian medical tourism are the Apollo Hospitals, Escorts Hospital, Fortis Hospitals, Breach Candy, Hinduja, Mumbai's Asian Heart Institute, Arvind Eye Hospitals, Manipal Hospitals, Mallya Hospital, Sankara Netralaya etc. In terms of locations metropolitan cities like Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai cater to a large number of health tourists and are fast emerging as medical tourism hubs. Cardiac Surgery, Orthopedics, Gynecology, Cosmetic and Plastic Surgery, Obesity surgery, Ophthalmology, Dentistry, Urology is on high demand among foreign tourists.

In addition to the allopathic/English system of medicines there are many other traditional curative and preventive medical system prevailing in different parts of India. Ayurveda is very popular in India which cures many ailments without any side effects. Major authentic Ayurvedic centers are run by traditional Vaidyas who practice Ayurveda in the purest form as per the original texts. There is also large number of modern Ayurveda Centres which concentrate on wellness and rejuvenation therapies which are popular among the domestic and foreign tourists. Ayurveda is effective for

diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis Osteoarthritis, Back pain, Psoriasis, Parkinsonism, Sinusitis, Multiple sclerosis, Tennis elbow, Hypo thyroidism, PCOS, Fibromyalgia etc. There are also remedies for common problems like hair fall, fairness, dandruff, obesity, diabetes, blood pressure etc. Major traditional centers located in Kerala are Kottakkal AryaVaidyasala, Vaidyaratnam Oushadhasala, Nagarjuna, Dhanwantari Vaidyasala, Vaidyamadham Vaidyasala and Nursing Home, SNA Oushadhasala, Oushadhi, Kandamkulathy, Vaidyasala, Pankajakasthuri, Sreedhareeyam, Dhathri, Sitaram Ayurveda Pharmacy, Nupal and many more. There is widespread prevalence of other systems of medicine in India such as Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy. Indian tourism Industry can make use of this uniqueness of India and can promote health tourism which can open scope for health tourism beyond the boundary walls of English medicines.

**Table - 4, Number of (AYUSH) Hospitals and Bed under Central Government Organisations in India (As on 01.04.2016)**

Ministry/Organisations/ States/UTs	Ayurveda		Unani		Siddha		Yoga		Naturopathy		Homoeopathy		All Systems	
	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B
I. Hospitals under Research Councils (Total)	10	324	7	256	5	85	8	0	0	0	4	135	35	820
II. Hospitals under National Institutes (Total)	4	750	1	180	1	200	4	0	1	16	2	100	13	1246
III. Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) [Delhi]	1	25	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	25
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1119</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>2091</b>

Source: IndiaStat, Abbr: H: Hospitals B: Beds

Table-4 shows the availability of hospital infrastructure under Central Government Organisations in various system of medicine. Ayurveda got 16 central government hospitals and 1119 beds which is more than 50 percent of the AYUSH health infrastructure. Unani, Sidha and homeopathy institutions are also functioning under the government control. The table shows India got fairly well developed health infrastructure in the country. The total number of qualified doctors registered with Medical Council of India is also steadily increasing and shown in table-5.

**Table - 5, Number of Doctors Possessing Recognised Medical Qualifications (Under I.M.C Act. 1956) and Registered with State Medical Councils in India**

Year	Total No. of Doctors registered with MCI
2001	615801
2005	23494
2009	33767
2011	34280
2012	36322
2013	44304
2014	30134
2015	15715

Source: IndiaStat

**Table-6 Financial Assistance Granted under Market Development Assistance to Various Medical/Wellness Tourism Stakeholders in India in Rs from 2013-14 to 2016-17**

Year	Amount Reimbursed
2011-12	15,26759
2012-13	19,13018
2013-14	10,27970
2014-15-up to 30.06.2014	70,69535

Source: IndiaStat

Table-6 provides the financial assistance granted under market development assistance to various medical/wellness tourism stakeholders in India from 2013-14 to 2016-17. Even though Government is providing some financial assistance for reimbursement of money spent on market development this is not sufficient for the number of players in this segment and the potential existing in this sector. Governments both central and state should devise policies and schemes for the development of this important tourism sector.

## 5. Opportunities and Challenges of health tourism in India

In addition to the cost advantage and tourism attractions, India provides alternative medicine to modern life style related diseases. People across the world experiencing rapid rise in life style related diseases due to fast paced modern life style. Prevalence of widespread lifestyle related health problems also brings in increased awareness among tourists about this new health hazard that make them look for preemptive health care measures. Increasing per capita income, advancement in modern communication measures and widespread use of internet make information available at finger tips to the seekers that help them to identify best service provider

at least possible cost. There is good demand for Indian health services from developed countries such as US, UK, Canada for quality service at affordable cost. Tourists can optimize their travel by combining medical treatments with tourism activities as their travel becomes pleasurable, curative and improves the satisfaction for the time and money spent for this activity.

There is urgent need to improve health care infrastructure in the country to take advantage of the opportunities present today. There is a need to promote equitable growth of public and private sector hospitals for the faster growth of health tourism in the country. Hospitals like AIIMS can be focused to reap more demand for medical facilities at low costs. Government can take initiatives to improve infrastructure, quality, and efficiency by using certain percentage of profit earned by private sector hospitals that supports medical tourism. Ensuring quality standards even in public sector hospitals is an opportunity to develop Indian health services. This will result in increased revenue generation for the government and can reduce the poor working conditions and brain drain from public hospitals.

Health care services in India need to improve their standards and the regulatory agencies such as Medical Council of India and Ministry of health Government of India should evolve standards and strictly enforce them. Unregulated growth of private sector hospitals with large governmental subsidies and lower import duties for equipments and medicines is a big challenge to Indian health sector. In India 80 percent of health needs are catered by private sector hospitals and there is a wide spread disparity between public and private hospitals in terms of quality of services and infrastructural facilities. With limited health care facilities available at Government hospital and wide disparity in quality of medical services between public and private hospitals make people depend heavily on private hospitals. This leads to increasing the medical expenses in the private sector of the country. For medical tourism to thrive in the country, quality of medical services in the public hospitals should be improved to those domestic health care seekers. This leaves private sector to serve well the health tourists visiting the country.

## **6. Challenges to Indian health tourism**

1. Perception about India as an unhygienic country because of the improper garbage collection and disposal. At the same time unhygienic way of handling food stuffs creates mental block to tourists which can lead to negative impression about Indian tourism services.
2. Improvement in the present infrastructural facilities is required to facilitate smooth transportation facilities, uninterrupted power and water supply.
3. Lack of easy connectivity with origin countries where people find difficulty to travel to various destinations in India.
4. Differential pricing policies followed by different service providers and lack of industry standards divert tourists demand to other competitive destinations in the world.
5. Unfriendly business environment with cumbersome policies and procedures to invest in health care sector which prevents the development to a great extent.

6. Terrorism and communal riots also create an apprehension in the minds of tourists about their safety security.
7. Complex visa procedure and difficulty in follow up treatments.
8. Austere food habits and difficulty to undergo authentic therapies in alternative medicines as compared to the services offered in spas located in other destinations is a big challenge.
9. Lack of public support due to the belief that many Indians are not getting proper health care facilities and private sector service providers are using the facilities in an appropriate manner and charge high from the service seekers. They are flourishing at the expense of poor Indians.
10. Many a times mannerism of Indians matters. Poor hospitality among people associated with health services is a matter of concern.

### **7. Policy measures for sustainable health tourism in India**

Indian health care services will remain under utilized unless various institutions associated with health care delivery takes efforts to make it available at an affordable price. The average length of stay of health tourists is longer compared to other visitors to the country and has an opportunity to experience Indian culture, cuisine and way of life and develop a bonding with the country. This leads to repeat visit of these tourists in future for medical or other forms of tourism. A standard code of conduct should be evolved in the medical sector to ensure best services are delivered that enhances the image of the country. Also efforts should be made to tie up with international agencies and set up promotion counter to show case Indian health care services to the world. Corporate hospitals and star hotels are the main places where tourists seek medical services and accommodation. There is a vast scope in India for a tie up between hotels and hospital with wellness and medical centers that can open up our Indian traditional health practices to the modern world.

Indian medical tourists often encounter visa formalities and delay in their travel. Procedural delay can be avoided if Indian visa and documentation process are made simple. At the same time visa extension and visa on arrival can attract many tourists to visit India for health purpose. In order to promote health tourism both nationally and internationally, there is a need to promote congenial work environment among various agents such as doctors, medical staff, travel agents, tour operators and other governmental agencies. If these medical facilities are made available to local people at an affordable price it ensures societal support for this project and sustains it for the longer term. Government can be the facilitator by sharing the tax collected from these health care services to local public through the initiatives such as provision of good infrastructural facilities, water and electricity supply and other social services. Initiatives such as track the progress of the patients after treatments, accessibility to various indigenous medicines and provision of language interpreter will attract more health tourists in to the country. Facilities such as extent visa, e-ticketing, banking, insurance, currency conversion creates more convenience to health tourists. Another important requirement for health tourism is the availability of proper

accommodation facilities for the accompanying person.

The overall perception of India as an unhygienic country among many foreigners is a challenge to promote health care services. More responsible approach from citizens of India and local bodies in disposing garbage and creating civic sense among public can help to overcome this problem. At the same time there can be a network with the international embassies that can influence the government to attract medical and wellness tourists from foreign countries. Sharing of information through websites in addition to government websites, kiosks in international and domestic airports to provide a miniature replica of what services can be expected from different locations in India. Diversification of tourism product with indigenous location based specialty services which is not available in any part of the world can also attract large number of health tourists. Ayurveda is a classic example where authentic wellness services which are used to restore, rejuvenate and replenish physical and mental health in a holistic manner. For better customer satisfaction, ministry of tourism should organize more training, skill development and up gradation of these wellness centers as part of the Capacity Building for Service Providers (CBSP) scheme.

## **8. Conclusion**

India has a promising future in the health tourism industry. Even though there are many challenges confronting Indian health tourism, they can be addressed by providing adequate information about the uniqueness of Indian health care system especially the alternate medical system available in the country. Also there is a need to sensitise people about hygiene and healthy practices that are crucial for promotion of health tourism in the country. The government should ensure that the revenue generated through health tourism industry is directed towards the welfare of the local population. Creation of congenial work environment, financial and other support facilities will attract fresh talents and arrest brain drain from the industry. Even though health care starts with physical well-being, it must go deeper into mind and soul for real effectiveness.

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