



The Promotion and Prognosis of Buddhist Tourism in India After Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

India is a secular state. The constitution of India provides all its citizen freedom of worship and respect to all the religions. This legacy is time immemorial and the strength of this country. This region abounds in Buddhist tourist resources covering India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar. Religious holidays in India have something truly meaningful at their core. The followers of Buddhism from around the world, fascinated by India's secular image and promiseness visits to the holiest places of lord Buddha and engage in contemporary sacred practices. This consolidates India's 'Act East Policy'(2014) which covers economic, political, strategic, and cultural initiatives to engage with the Asia-Pacific region. India had the second highest total tourism GDP contribution in Asia- Pacific, behind China in 2016. The industry also has a substantial effect on employment in India. Foreign Tourist Arrivals (2018) in India in 2017 was 10.04 million, which marked an annual growth rate of about 14 percent from 8.80 million in 2016. This was a large increase from the 2.65 million seen just 15 years before in 2000. Tourism is major sources of foreign exchange earnings .In 2017, India earned US\$ 27.31 billion in foreign exchange from tourism with an annual growth rate of 19.1 percent, while its share in World Tourism Receipts was 2.05 percent .The largest source market for visitors to India was the United States, followed by Bangladesh and the United Kingdom.

The Impact of Covid- 19 Pandemic

The outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020 pandemic sealed the global trade and economy. The manufacturing , Import-Export among Countries & Continents, and all other industries activities and service sector were locked. It adversely affected the entire Asia, Europe, Middle- East , America & Africa countries. Tourism was the most worst effected industry due to this pandemic as people were absolutely detained themselves in their own houses, offices and other places.. The national & international airlines and all other means of transportation stopped working and hotel advance reservation declined to almost zero globally. There remained a global lockdown in two -phases. Due to this



catastrophe, millions of people lost their life globally. The life of a common man was worst ever disturbed after World War- II. According to World Health Organization(2020), COVID-19 deaths are now exceeding 3.3 million, based on the excess mortality estimates produced for 2020, we are likely facing a significant undercount of total deaths directly and indirectly attributed to COVID-19

Meaning of Religious Tourism

The Asia-Pacific region (which includes India and the Southeast Asian countries) saw the highest growth (9 percent) in the number of International Tourist Arrivals in 2017(WTO 2017).Religious, Pilgrimage, Spiritual, or Faith Tourism defined by United Nations World Tourism Organization (1995) focuses on the individual ‘tourist’ and their motivation: Religion and pilgrimage tourism refers to all travel outside the usual environment for religious purposes, excluding travel for professional purposes (e.g. priests travelling for work). Attending wedding parties or funerals are generally classified under the heading of Visiting Friends and Relatives. However, in countries where these ceremonies have a strong religious connotation, it may be more appropriate to classify them under the heading Religion and Pilgrimages .Religious tourism is a distinct tourism product with significant cultural implications. Buddhist tourism is thriving interest into Religion, art, architecture, history and personal ancestry.

The New Opportunities & efforts of Indian Government to Promote Buddhist Tourism

Although Buddhism originated in India, it is more popular in countries outside, with the largest number of followers in China, followed by Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Taiwan. The potential of Buddhist tourism is not fully tapped by India. Despite all these advantages, India is not taking sufficient advantage of its treasure of holy sites relating to the life and times of Lord Buddha (Kant, 2009, p. 116). Cambodia has the highest proportion of followers – 13 million out of its total population of 15 millions. Buddhism, rather than just a religion, is also a philosophy where teachings and values are affecting the cultural lives of people across the world.

1.India is enhancing its image and contribution through the “vaccine diplomacy” which aims to raise India’s global acceptance & profile and counter China, which has been expanding its economic & military influence in South Asian region. India contributed of US\$ 1 million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund and encouraged India to explore cooperation with ASEAN in areas such as mutual recognition of COVID-19 vaccination certificates; production of vaccines; generic drugs and medical



technologies and treatment of COVID-19; genomics surveillance; pandemic preparedness, as well as strengthening global supply chain. “It’s about image and soft power. India’s time old philosophy and concerns about global brotherhood, tolerance & humanity welfare. India wants to be recognized as a global leader.

2. Buddhist tourism is one of the strongest USPs of India Tourism with the potential to attract a huge number of international travellers. India is attracting a miniscule number of Buddhist tourists of the total Buddhist population in the world and have not been able to harness its potential so far. Now, Indian Government is keen to lay out a network of more than 200 airports across the country and an International airport at Sarnath by the Government of India will increase the connectivity and proximity with the neighbouring countries like china ,Tibet, Bhutan, Japan, Taiwan and other Buddhist markets . Direct air connectivity to Buddhist Circuit destinations from source countries and alternatively from Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai airports to improve ease of access. Improved road and rail connectivity to all the major Buddhist destinations to enhance ease of travel for both international and domestic travellers .India has lately taken the historic step of ‘opening’ India to international travellers through its liberal ‘e-visa regime’. The Union Government and Ministry of Tourism (MoT) now need to aggressively propagate and publicise the benefits and virtues of the new policy, particularly in the source countries of Buddhist travellers

3. Buddhist tourism is one of the component of religious tourism which is time immemorial of Indian culture and civilization. India has been the centre of all leading religions of the world like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity. Sensing the prospects offered by Buddhist Tourism, (MoT)has taken a number of initiatives in the last decade. To showcase Buddhist heritage and pilgrim sites in India, the Ministry has been organising an ‘International Buddhist Conclave’ every alternate year since 2010 in collaboration with State Governments.

4. The sky is opening up for airlines and aviation sector is marching towards pre- pandemic state. The global trade and economy has started crossing the national/ international borders. To develop world class infrastructure in and around Buddhist Tourism destinations, the MoT has identified a ‘Buddhist Circuit’ as one of the thematic circuits under the Swadesh Darshan Programme. Five projects to the tune of Rs.



362 crores have been sanctioned so far under the Buddhist Circuit. The projects include Sanchi, Satna, Reva, Mandsaur and Dhar regions in Madhya Pradesh; Shravasti, Kushinagar and Kapilvastu in Uttar Pradesh; Bodh Gaya in Bihar; Junagadh, Gir, Somnath, Rajkot, Bhavnagar and Mehsana in Gujarat and Amravati and Shalinundam, Barikonda and Thotlakonda in Andhra Pradesh.

5. The New Draft National Tourism Policy also emphasises special focus on development and promotion of the Buddhist Circuit in collaboration with the State Governments and with international bodies, namely World Bank, JICA, International Finance Corporation and Asian Development Bank. The escalation of the Indian Government's 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East Policy' will also go a long way in promoting Buddhist Tourism, with a majority of ASEAN and other Asian countries being the source markets. The Buddhist tourism can be the thrust area offered to ASEAN countries in all the bilateral, regional co-operation strategic business alliances & partnerships by the Indian Government.

6. Building world class tourism infrastructure in Buddhist Circuit destinations is a major challenge where the Union Government, State Governments and private sector players have to integrate their efforts. Chaudhary(2000) concluded that India lacks a positive image on infrastructure and safety issues for which proper planning and promotions have to be deployed. Today, even Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Sanchi, which are the most visited destinations in the Buddhist Circuit, do not have adequate tourism infrastructure, particularly last mile connectivity, good accommodation, toilets, tourist facilitation centres and restaurants. For better tourist facilitation, these destinations also need foreign language guides, opening of monuments till late evening, better hygienic conditions and adequate safety for tourists

Conclusion

Global economy is now opening up after the post- pandemic period of two years and India is no exception to this change. New regional and international geo- political, economic relations are shaping up and India is positively responding to this change. After this miserable period of Pandemic, taking the economies to the zenith of pre-pandemic level is a great challenge to every nation. This is the right time to introspect the policy matters, pillars of economy, environmental concerns, and industrial priorities and bring the necessary changes in planning. Indo-China and Indo- Japan political and economic relations are touching new heights due to the mutual interaction, appreciation and understanding of inter-governmental establishments in recent years in bringing the Buddhist traveller to India .



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