

## COUNTRY PROFILE

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### SOCIAL TOURISM: AN INDIAN PROFILE

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#### Introduction

It is generally accepted that 'Social Tourism' aims to guarantee the right to holidays and access to tourism for all social classes, particularly those who have limited resources. Various programs are devised by the public, private and civil society organizations to facilitate social tourism.

However, in the Asian context, it is generally seen that the governments do not have definite policies related to social tourism. This clearly shows lack of awareness, although some initiatives have definitely emerged in this field.

In India, tourism accounts for 6.8 % of the GDP, and is the third largest foreign exchange earner of the country. India ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> in the United Nations World Tourism organisation (UNWTO) rankings for foreign tourist arrivals. Domestic tourism contributes to three-fourth of the tourism economy. India offers geographical diversity, attractive beaches, 30 World Heritage Sites and 25 bio-graphic zones. India has also a diverse portfolio of niche tourism products-cruises, adventure, medical, wellness, sports, MICE, eco-tourism, etc.

A historical evolution of tourism development in the country shows that social tourism has been grossly neglected in the tourism policies of the country. The development of tourism facilities was taken up in a planned manner in 1956 coinciding with the "Second Five Year Plan". The tourism activities gained momentum only when a National Policy on Tourism was announced in 1982. Thereafter, Tourism Policy, in 2002 laid emphasis on tourism as an engine of economic growth, and positioned India as a global brand.

A pro-poor tourism policy, as per the working strategy for "12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan" for poverty-reduction, marked a radical shift in tourism policies. The emphasis here was on participation of rural poor in rural tourism projects which would enhance their income levels. Doing something concrete based on social tourism paradigm i.e. devising policies so that rural poor could enjoy holidays, was still absent.

## **Tourism stakeholders and their actions**

Various stakeholders such as the government, public & private sector, NGOs, etc. are involved in tourism promotion. At the Government level, the Ministry of Tourism is responsible for formulation and implementation of policies and programs for the development of tourism within the country. The other important bodies are: Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management, National Council for Hotel Management and Catering Technology, India Tourism Development Corporation, Ltd. The NGO's have become more active in the various areas of tourism like sustainable tourism, eco tourism, cooperative tourism, etc. For example, STEP (Social Tourism Empowers People) is an NGO working in the field of volunteer tourism, in Rajasthan.

In India, tourism employment is very important. Its impact on social transformation can be enormous, and India with a strong youth population, is a good platform for this. 'Hunarse Rojgar' Programme was launched in 2009 for the creation of employable skills among youth belonging to weaker sections of the society in the age group of 18-25 years. The programme offers short duration courses of 6 to 8 weeks which are fully funded by the Ministry of Tourism.

The role of government/private sector in providing concessions/fiscal incentives/benefits so that people are able to exercise their right to travel is very important as far as social tourism is concerned. In India, there are certain trends indicating this phenomenon, but at a deeper level, much needs to be done. The Government provides "Leave Travel Concession" to the employees working in the public sector departments so that they enjoy travel vacations with their family. Rail/air travel expenditure is met according to the rank of the employees/officials. This social tourism initiative aims to give fiscal incentive to the employees to enjoy their holidays. The scheme is mainly for domestic tourism circuit.

The employees are given free tickets or holiday packages to selected few destinations all paid by the company. The executives also get holidays on company account and sometimes it is given for the whole family with attractive packages including shopping vouchers.

## **Community-based tourism**

Community-based tourism has a strong component of social tourism. Rural tourism in India has got due priority in this regard, as it showcases rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations and interactions with the tourists benefit the local community, economically and socially. The Ministry of Tourism has joined hands with the UNDP for capacity-building. Around 153 rural tourism projects have been sanctioned in 28 states/union territories including 36 rural sites where UNDP offers support in capacity-building. The government also encourages eco-tourism, cruise tourism, adventure tourism, religious tourism, etc. Religious tourism has emerged as having immense significance, and it is acquiring the nature

of a mass tourism, which has easy access to all, the poor workers and rich. This is another potential area of social tourism.

### Senior, youth & accessible tourism

Devising tourism policies for the senior citizens of a country is very important as the world-wide trends clearly indicate. In India, the senior citizens are valued, because of the strong cultural legacy. As per government rule, male senior citizens of minimum 60 years and female senior citizens of minimum 58 years are granted concessions in the fares of all classes of rail/expressway/rajdhani/shatabdi/janshabdi/doronto group of trains. The element of concession is 40% of men and 50% of women. Similarly, some airlines like Air India provide 50% of basic fare of normal economy fare to the senior citizens. India has a strong youth population, but there are few definite social tourism policies to give a boost to youth travel. There are many youth organizations, but there are few fiscal concessions to promote youth travel, and in the case of important tourism events, students discounts are few. Recently however, a good number of budget youth hostels have mushroomed in India, but they are more needed considering the burgeoning population of youth.

Accessible tourism is an important part of social tourism. Devising conducive policy for the disabled section of the society, as well as creating the right infrastructure is a big challenge. While there has been some progress made in metros/cities, the condition of accessible facilities in rural areas is poor. For example, “Delhi Haat” is a good example of accessible tourism, as accessible features include ramps railings, accessible toilets, etc. are available.

### Challenges

- India is a democratic country, but the right to travel has been ignored, and is low on the agenda. The problems of poverty, and unemployment are linked to tourism, and, tourism is thought to be a magic wand which can remove these problems, which are however, deep-rooted.
- There is lack of awareness of even the basic policies related to social tourism, given by the government. The department too does not encourage employees to use their facilities.
- The tourism policies & programs in the country are still dictated by the luxury class. A pro-middle, or poor class tilt is not noticeable, due to which the basic tenets of social tourism are not able to develop in a natural way. For example, good budget tour packages for middle class section of the society need to be more in number. There should also be more travel discounts. It can be a good challenge through social tourism to devise low-cost packages so that city people visit rural areas for their recreation, rather than going to shopping malls.

- Promoting fair tourism practices is also a big challenge for a successful social tourism initiative. The exploitative practices by unscrupulous people at the tourism sites should be curbed by effective social tourism interventions, which are very few, and non-existent.
- Social tourism in India can be meaningless, if the rural poor are not offered easy facilities/concessions to travel. At present, the initiatives in this regard are almost non-existent. Tour packages must be designed so that the poor can visit important places in the country.
- Effective communication strategies are needed to create a strong climate of social tourism. Strong advocacy, research and lobbying is required, and for this the civil society organizations including cooperatives must come up rapidly.