

Medical Tourism in India- Problems and Future Prospects

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Abstract:

In recent year tourism as an industry has probably achieved a higher profile in the public consciousness all over the world. Tourism related business around the world experienced a profound shift in consumer confidence. It is not only a good industry in the field of economic development but it is equally an important medium for international socio-cultural links. Tourism industry as a whole is a direct source of foreign exchange earning in an economy and thus must be well managed and administered by the governments and administrative authorities. Tourist have a number of reasons to visit any specific tourist destination such as natural beauty, architectural monuments, the historical importance of the place, education and knowledge hub, technological nucleus, pilgrimage centre, adventurous spot etc. The health tourism has been the latest phenomenon in tourism industry as seen in India now most hunted and preferred choice of the tourists for the medical or healthcare services. This present study reviews some key issues, challenges and future prospects to promote the health tourism in India ?

Keywords Health, Tourism, education, challenges and Ayurveda

1.Introduction

Tourism is the aggregate of all businesses that directly provide goods and services to facilitate business, pleasure and leisure activities away from the home. It is said that tourism is the one industry where consumer goes to the door steps of the product, unlike in other industries, where the product is delivered at the consumers doorsteps. Tourism takes a wide variety activity in response to diverse motivations including religious, educational, pleasure, romance, business, health, social status, self-discovery and more. It is a multi-faceted economic asset. Tourism attraction is a good economic resource gifted to the people either by nature or by forefathers. The income and employment generating capacity of this sector is immense. The investment in tourism sector generates more employment and income than those generated by the same investment in the important sectors of the economy. India's ranking in the global Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) is 54 in 2021. The Second Tourism Satellite Account of India (TSA), travel and tourism created 70.04 million (direct + indirect) jobs in the year 2021–2022. In terms of GDP, during 2021–2022, tourism contributed 1.77 percent (direct + indirect). Also, tourism benefits are conferred on all classes, sections and regions. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), capital investment in the India tourism sector is expected to touch the \$523 billion mark in 2022. This will be about 7.8 per cent of the total investment received by the country in this year. India has great prospects in the field of Medical Tourism by its core competence developed in cardiovascular surgery and organ transplant/surgery etc, along with low cost option and great reputation. Apart from generating employment opportunities, it will also increase our foreign exchange reserve and cause socio-development, strengthening our country's economy. Apart from the treatment by allopathic system, other Indian systems of medicines, i.e. Ayurveda, Yoga, Panchakarma, Rejuvenation Therapy and Naturopathy etc. also have gained great popularity in recent years. The Govt also

has taken several initiatives through Ministry of Tourism to promote India as a Medical and Health Tourism Destination. Special provisions have been made for the foreign visitors coming to India for their treatment, issuing them a new category of visa "Medical Visa" for the purpose. Apart from the Government initiatives, most of the private hospitals are also investing heavily, giving a facelift to their medical facilities, realizing the potential for Medical Tourism in India, in order to make them visible to not only to local elite but also to overseas clients too. (Revath,2008)

Health Tourism is the concept of traveling to a particular destination to avail the opportunity of the world class healthcare services offered by the best experienced healthcare professionals at the technologically most advanced medical facilities in complete privacy and for affordable costs. The healthcare procedure is usually combined with a family vacation. The concept of health Tourism is not a new one. The first recorded instance of health tourism dates back thousands of years ago when Greek pilgrims traveled from all over the Mediterranean to the small territory in the Saronic Gulf called Epidauria. This territory was the sanctuary of the healing god Asklepios. Epidauria became the original travel destination for health tourism. In the recent past patients from underdeveloped countries used to travel to the advanced industrialized developed countries to take the benefit of advanced medical health care in the hospitals, but recently the trend is reversing. The Indian health tourism industry, growing at an annual rate of 30 percent, caters to patients chiefly from the US, Europe, West Asia and Africa. The Indian system of medicine, which incorporates ayurveda, yoga, sidha, unani, naturopathy and other traditional healing treatments, is very unique and exotic. This medical expertise coupled with allopathic and other modern methods become our new focus segment to project India as a Global Healing Destination. As more and more patients from Europe, North America and other affluent nations with very high medical costs and long wait lists look for effective options of immediate, low-cost, affordable treatments. The fast-growing Indian corporate health sector is fully geared to meet the growing need. Health tourism to India is not just cost savings or the high standard of medical care facilities, but also the waiting time for medical surgery treatment procedures in India is much lower than in any other country. India offers a growing number of private centers of excellence where the quality of care is as good as or better than that of big-city hospitals in the United States or Europe. The medical care sector in India has witnessed an enormous growth in infrastructure in the private and voluntary sectors. The private sector, which was very modest in the early stages, is now becoming a flourishing industry equipped with the most modern state-of-the-art technology. It is estimated that the private sector now provides 75% of healthcare services and investments in India. Health and medical tourism is perceived as one of the fastest-growing segments in India today. India could earn \$2 billion annually and create 60 million new jobs by subcontracting work from the British National Health to the Confederation of Indian Industry, India has the potential to attract 2 million tourists per annum which could contribute to \$ 5 billion to the economy. India must leverage its competitive cost advantage edge. It is only one-fifth of the cost in the West. India enjoys a unique position as it offers holistic medicinal services. With yoga, meditation, ayurveda, allopathic and other systems of medicines, India offers a unique basket of services to an individual that is difficult to match by other countries. Also clinical outcomes in india are at par with the world best centers besides having internationally qualified and experienced specialists. India promotes first- world treatment at third- world prices. (Jaya,2008 and Shibu, 2010)

2. Objectives of the Study

Following are the objectives of the study.

1. To explore the Key issues advantageous health tourism in India like cost competitiveness and other favorable factors making India as a hub for health industry.
2. To study the Economic support from health tourism sector to India.

3. Research Methodology

Research methodology is blend of descriptive, exploratory and casual design. The data and information has been collected with the help of Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Research Articles, Research Journals, E-Journals, WTO Report, Ministry of Tourism, World Travel and Tourism Council reports and the websites.

4. Origin and Evolution of Health Tourism

Health tourism is thousands of years old. In ancient Greece, pilgrims and patients came from all over the Mediterranean to the sanctuary of the healing god, Asklepios, at Epidaurus. In Roman Britain, patients took the waters at a shrine at Bath, a practice that continued for 2,000 years. From the 18th century wealthy Europeans traveled to spas from Germany to the Nile. Since the early nineteenth century, when there were no restrictions on travel in Europe, people visited neighboring countries to improve their health. At first, mere traveling was considered to be a good therapy for mental and physical well-being. In the 21st century, relatively low-cost jet travel has taken the industry beyond the wealthy and desperate. Later, mostly wealthy people began traveling to tourist destinations like the Swiss lakes, the Alps and special tuberculosis sanatoriums, where professional and often specialized medical care was offered. In this century, however, medical tourism expanded to a much larger scale. Thailand, followed by India, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Cuba and others quickly became the most popular destinations for medical tourists. Complicated surgeries and dental works, kidney dialysis, organ transplantation and sex changes, topped the list of the most popular procedures. Today we have reached the era where Hospitals are more like Spas and Spas more like hospital. (Vitthal,2015)

5. Cost Competitiveness of Medical Treatments (US\$)

There are 63 NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals) approved hospitals in India and 395 hospitals have also applied for NABA accreditation. Majority of population speak English. Most of doctors and medical staff have world-class exposure and fluency in English. Language being one of the major barriers in other countries gives India a competitive edge over those nations. While India has some of the best (world class) medical procedures, it offers a whole lot of natural solutions to health Ayurveda, Sidha, Unani, Yoga, Acupuncture, Homeopathy, Naturopathy, Aroma therapy, Herbal Oil massage, etc. India offers significant savings to the foreign patients. For almost all treatments, India has cost advantages. Its price is the lowest among any nation in the world

Table-1 shows that India has significant cost advantages in several health procedures making it a preferred destination.

Many of the Indian hospitals, serving international patients, have state-of-art infrastructure, highly professional doctors and top-notch services. The figure on that once tag is a fraction of what it would be in developed countries.

Table-1 Cost Competitiveness of Medical Treatments (US\$)

Procedures	USA	India	Thailand	Singapore	Malaysia	South Korea	Mexico	Costarica	UAE
Heart Bypass	133000	7000	22000	16300	12000	31700	27000	24100	40900
Heart valve replacement	140000	9500	25000	22000	13400	42000	30000	30000	50600

Hip Replacement	57000	7020	12700	1200	7500	10600	13900	11400	46000
Knee Replacement	53000	9200	11500	9600	12000	11800	14900	10700	40200
Face Lift	16000	4800	5000	7500	6400	6600	11300	4900	NA
Lap. Gastric Bypass	52000	9300	13000	16500	12700	9300	11000	NA	Na

Source: Health statistics 2024

6. Other Favorable Factors

Timeliness and Quality Health care:

The another advantage is the possibility of getting immediate medical attention. There are no waiting lists or delays to content with, due to insurance issues or unavailability of doctors etc. In addition to the increasingly top class medical care, a big draw for foreign patients is also the very minimal or hardly any waitlist as is common in European or American hospitals. Hospitals now are starting to attract foreign patients from industrialized countries, and especially from Britain, U.S.A and Canada, where patients are becoming fed up with long waits for elective surgery under overstretched government health plans. Besides Indian doctors and paramedics are well trained and are one of the best in the world. Many professionals, at most of the lead hospitals in the country, have been trained abroad prior to working to India. It is relatively easy to find quality personalized care for critically ill or aged patients.(Kumar,2010)

Facilitation by the Government: The Government of India has recognized the economic potential of medical tourism. It has facilitated travel by introducing a special visa category knows as Medical visa for patients as well as introduced tax incentives for hospitals.

Ease of Travel and Communication: Travel in India has become easier and much faster due to introduction of private airlines. Access to Internet in India is considered to be one of the cheapest in the world and communication facilities well established. Travel agencies have a great online presence and can offer the package deals that include travel costs, boarding as well as treatment costs.

Tourism Potential: People who come for relatively simple, but important procedures, can consider packing in some travel too with their doctors permission. This is an added advantage, every part of the country is rich in history and diverse in geography. India has a 5000 year old civilization and is known for its cultural and religious diversity with diverse geographical land marks. The traditional arts and crafts add to its appeal as a tourist favorite. Along with this, Indians enjoy freedom, vibrant democracy and women empowerment.

Range of Services and Easy availability of medicine and drugs: India has number of hospitals offering world class treatments in nearly every medical sector such as cardiology and cardiothoracic surgery, joint replacement, orthopedic surgery, gastroenterology, ophthalmology, transplants and urology to name a few. The various specialties covered are Neurology, Neurosurgery, Oncology, Ophthalmology, Rheumatology, Endocrinology, ENT, Pediatrics, Pediatric Surgery, Pediatric Neurology, Urology, Nephrology, Dermatology, Dentistry, Plastic Surgery, Gynecology, Pulmonologist, Psychiatry, General Medicine & General Surgery. For its quality of services and the infrastructure available, India is attracting a vast pool of tourists from the middle east, Africa etc. As Indian corporate hospitals like Apollo, Max HealthCare, Fortis etc. are on par with the best hospitals in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore there is scope for improvement, and the country is becoming a preferred medical destination. Certified drugs and medicines are easily available in India, at comparatively lesser prices.

Manpower: India has a large pool of doctors, nurses and paramedics with required specialization and expertise and the language advantage (English speaking skills). The medical education system caters to the ever increasing demand for the delivery of the quality health care services all over the country.

No language barrier: Language plays an important role to attract tourists. Even though India has many different languages, English is widely spoken. All hospitals have excellent English speaking staff or communication is very easy. The Hospital Industries are also arranging translator for better communication.

Alternative Therapy: India offers not just treatment but spiritual and mental healing as well. India needs to club together a couple of 'therapy' because it has a very strong base of alternative healing therapies like yoga, naturopathy, ayurveda, health retreats, etc.

States Promoting Health Tourism: The Indian Ministry of Tourism has announced a number of incentives to give a fillip to the sector. It has identified 31 villages across the country to be developed as tourism hubs. The states in which these villages have been identified include Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Assam, Sikkim, Rajasthan and West Bengal

Table 2: Status of health tourist in 10 states of India

Name of the state	Tourism (in Lakhs)	Percentage of health tourist
Maharashtra	6.4	28.5
Tamilnadu	3.5	15.7
Delhi	2.4	10.6
Uttar Pradesh	2.1	9.4
Rajastan	1.6	7.2
West Bengal	1.5	6.7
Keraka	0.8	3.7
Bihar	0.8	3.6
Himachal Pradesh	0.6	2.5
Goa	0.6	2.5
Top ten States	20.3	90.3
Others	2.3	9.7
Total	22.6	100.00

Source: - Surgery Assistance India 2024

Economic support from Health Tourism Medical tourism is a growing sector in India. India's medical tourism sector is expected to experience an annual growth rate of 30 per cent, making it a \$4 billion industry by 2017. Indian Medical Tourism to touch Rs 10,500 Crore by 2017. The medical tourism industry in India has a potential to contribute around 25 per cent to the country's gross domestic product over the next five years if fully-tapped,

7. Medical Tourism in India: Challenges And Issues

1. The challenges facing Indian medical tourism industry are as follows:
2. No strong Government support/initiative to promote medical tourism.
3. Lack of coordination among various players in the industry-airline operators, hotels and hospitals.
4. The negative perceptions about India with regard to public sanitation/ hygiene

standards or prevalence of contagious diseases.

5. No proper accreditation and regulation system for hospitals.
6. Lack of uniform pricing policy across hospitals.
7. Strong competitions from many other players.
8. Lack of insurance policies for this sector.
9. Low investments in health infrastructure.
10. Growth generates healthcare challenges in booming India. The country graduates 27,000 doctors each year but most want to work in cities. But millions must walk miles to see a physician.
11. Inequalities in healthcare access between private and public systems may increase xi. This may induce domestic brain drain from public to private sector.
12. Indian Government's campaign to make India a primary medical tourism destination may divert attention from primary healthcare and other sectors.

Availability of hotel rooms in India is considered to be more difficult as compared to other countries. In addition, the cost of accommodation is another hindrance to middle-level international travelers visiting India.

Public-private partnership is required to provide quality services to attract potential healthcare seekers from various countries.

8. Concluding Remarks

The medical tourism is an outsourcing of medical services primarily expensive surgery to low cost countries. It offers financial value for growing burden of the costs in matured markets like USA. It also provides an alternative for millions of uninsured people to receive affordable and accessible medical services from developing countries. India is an important player in this industry as it has many advantages. Its cost is the lowest in the world. It has many internationally accredited hospitals. Most of its doctors and medical staff have world class exposure and fluency in English. In addition, it is rich in cultural heritage and has innumerable tourist attractions. It also offers a wide variety of alternative medicines. In 2010, 7,50,000 medical tourists have come to India. The foreign exchange earnings from this sector is around US \$ 1068 million. This sector is expected to grow exponentially due to external as well as internal factors. The external forces are: soaring medical costs, high insurance premiums, long waiting lists, large number of uninsured/under insured and insured in many advance nations. The internal factors are: availability of high quality medical professionals and medical staff, large number of world class hospitals and infrastructure, government promotion, tax concession etc. Estimates indicate that the number of medical tourists in India will increase to 2.8 million and the exchange earnings will rise to US \$ 3964 million in 2015. Lack of regulation in the healthcare system, lack of coordination among various players in the industry (airline operators, hotels and hospitals), unethical profession behavior, competitions from many other players, low investments in health infrastructure, increasing inequalities in healthcare access between private and public systems, and domestic brain drain from public to private sector are the major challenges facing this sector

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