

The Brhama, the Osho and the Dalai Lama – Reorienting the Orient as a spiritual destination

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Issues Discussed

The following Issues have been considered and analysed in the research paper:-

- What has been the impact of the “principle of specialty” and diversification of tourism on destination India?
- What are the indicators that must be factored in to pre-empt the challenges coming up in the sector?
- Why is there a need to reassess and reinvent the notion of the Orient?
- What should be the vehicle as well as the target audience for promoting the new brand of the Orient?

Introduction – The Conceptual Framework

“The land that continues to mesmerize with its larger than life image” – this description seeking to encapsulate India’s grandeur serves as the preamble to the tourism campaign titled “Incredible India”¹. The description in referring to an image of India throws up the following questions:-

- a) Firstly, what is the temporal context of this larger than life image that is being referred to?
- b) Secondly, what are the implications of this imagery for the tourism sector?

a) Temporal Context -:

It is important to realize that India’s tourism campaign is interwoven around the magnificence of its past which lends attractiveness to its present. This form of promotion would necessarily entail highlighting some periods of history above the rest and within those periods, accentuating certain aspects without touching upon others. The first step towards analyzing the choice of the aforementioned aspects must be the identification of the temporal context of the imagery. If one is to understand from the obvious connotations of the campaign, its images, their captions and descriptions, the context seems to be the closing of the pre-colonial era, the India of the time when the British set foot on its lands. The jewel in the crown of the British Empire always held her conqueror’s fancy through mystic appearances and visions. The manifestation of this perceived mystical element can be amply seen in the notions associated with India, none more so than the land of the tiger, the elephant and the snake charmers².

The pre-colonial India, with all its myths, mythologies, theologies, customs and rituals invoked a sense of awe mixed with fear. India was the land of imagination, and the image it inspired in minds was way larger than life. This is the image that the campaign seeks to captivate and market to gravitate international tourists towards our country.

B) Implications -:

This image of pre-colonial India, competes with other images from a definitional viewpoint. For example, the image of India in recent years has been as a progressing economic powerhouse, or an IT giant, or an outsourcing destination. The selection of the picture of India to be painted abroad must essentially depend upon the attractiveness of its appeal. The aim should be to avoid a choice, which although plausibly appealing to one generation or nationality, is out of tune with the ethos and sensibilities of another set of people. This can be elaborated upon with the help of certain statistics. The Lion’s share of tourist inflow to India is attributable to America and Britain.³ This could evoke two possible policy responses- either a) to cater primarily to this market and design the campaign to appeal to this cross-section, or b) to modify the campaign in terms of its content and appeal to popularize destination India with other nationalities.

It can be argued that the current tourism strategy has adopted the first of the aforementioned preferences. The elaboration of this point requires an insight into the Indian freedom struggle. The nationalist historians and leaders of the movement for independence sought to expose the power-domination and the hegemony

¹ “India Tourism in 2005”, http://www.incredibleindia.org/india_tourism_05_06.pdf, p.2.

² Shashi Tharoor, “The Elephant, The Tiger and The Cell Phone”, 2007, Arcade Publishing, pp. 31-39.

³ Supra n.1 at p. 9.

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of the British empire, in their attempt to produce a class of Indians initiated into the British way of life and loyal to the empire. The process of de-hegemonisation challenged the expression and portrayal of the Orient in the West, and inspired Indians to take pride in their history by refuting the sham that Indian civilization was decadent and lying in the doldrums of mysticism and superstition.⁴

However, the Indian tourism sector has chosen to take a different route by cultivating the picture of Incredibility⁵ and reviving the aura of mysticism associated with the sub-continent. It has chosen to cultivate the “Oriental Image” to portray India as a land of exotic beasts and incredible experiences.

The obvious merit of the approach is that it is easier for the Britishers, the nationality constituting the single largest group of tourists to India, to identify with such an image of India because the same has been inculcated into the way the perception of India constructed through centuries of British documentation of Indian historical evolution and social dynamics. The counterpoint, however, is that Britishers are bound to India by a sense of History and would continue to visit India, regardless of the efficacy of the tourism strategy followed.

Spiritual Tourism – Umbrella Concept

Principle of Specialty:

The world has shrunk. A popular television commercial recently pictured this reality when a foreign traveler coolly explains that the purpose of his visit is to get a haircut. The commercial also points towards another reality. Tourism is rapidly diversifying, and there are more reasons than ever before for traveling to new destinations. The understanding that specific schemes need to be devised to address these specialized fields is paramount, as it would no longer suffice to operate with a one-dimensional tourism strategy.

The genesis of the latest avatar of tourism can be traced to the corporate world. Diversification is the mantra being chanted by most of the MNCs and global giants in the corporate arena. Diversification comes with the obvious advantage of risk spreading and lets the entrepreneur streamline his/her enterprise and develop focused strategies for each individual unit of the conglomerate.⁶ This is the essence of the principle of specialty. The line of reasoning behind the setting up of specialized faculties dealing with specific areas of business, with little or no dependence between two units, is that the specific advantage/disadvantage scenario for each sub-set stands on a different footing from the rest. Therefore, it would not suffice to run all these smaller sub-sets based on the same policy decisions. For example, a policy of ‘no mergers’ might succeed in a smaller business but could be a regressive decision when concerned with an industry like mining or aviation, where economies of scale is the order of the day.

The principle of specialty and the benefits of diversification find similar application in the tourism sector. The recent decades have seen the world of tourism been taken by storm by the winds of change whereby diversification has emerged as a global phenomenon. In a fast globalizing world, it was inevitable that the tremors of global restructuring would be felt in India as well.⁷ As expected, the stimulus shook up the sector and a response was drafted to bring India in line with the world order. The principle of specialty was embraced and made the focal point for future strategizing and planning in the industry.⁸

The campaign of the tourism ministry, although largely appreciated, has also received criticism in some circles. The criticism has been aimed at the mechanism of policymaking for tourism. For example, there has to be a distinction between visionary planning and reactionary planning. The very fact that steps taken towards policymaking are a reaction to the global transformations imposes a limitation upon their efficacy. This is because their scope is limited to the circumscribed boundaries of the example being emulated. Therefore, the contention is that the decisions and strategies need to be more proactive to gain a bigger share of the worldwide tourism sector.

Notwithstanding the criticisms, the practice of diversification is here to stay. The business of tourism is expanding at the rate of knots with new and previously unheard fields of tourism cropping up. The endeavor has been to categorize the various possible fields, identify the specific

⁴ Bipan Chandra, “India’s Struggle for Independence”, 1989, Penguin Books India, pp. 89-103.

⁵ The use of the word incredible has been criticized by G.S.Murari, Director, Fidelis Advertising and Marketing Pvt. Ltd, <http://www.icmrindia.org/casestudies/catalogue/Marketing/The%20Incredible%20India%20Campaign%20-%20Marketing%20Case.htm#...And%20Brickbats>.

⁶ Chris Bastian & Larry Held, “Enterprise Diversification”, <http://agecon.uwoy.edu/RnRinAg/RnR%20Section%202/Enterprise%20Diversification.pdf>.

⁷ C Pandurang Bhatta, “Tourism Product Development: Idea Generation for Commercial Ventures”, http://www.iimcal.ac.in/imz/imz-archive/article.asp?id=bhatt_tourism.

⁸ “Seventh Five Year Plan”, <http://www.education.nic.in/cd50years/15/8P/84/8P840806.htm>.

features/challenges/merits/demerits of each of these fields, and finally to ascertain the precise peculiarities of our country and how these fit into the profile requirements of each of the different fields of tourism. For example, if we are talking about Medical Tourism, our country boasts of a highly talented pool of medical professionals, state of the art medical facilities, provision for cheaper treatment, thus making it a lucrative option for foreigners.⁹ However, we also need to dispel any notion that seeks to diminish this competitive advantage that we enjoy, such as why should we be preferred over countries like China, the insufficient recourses for medical negligence, in the light of the low damages awarded in tort litigation in India, etc.

Challenges for Spiritual Tourism

The drafting of any policy for the tourism sector has to take into account and counter the following two challenges:-

- a) To develop a focused strategy for spiritual tourism.
- b) To filter and extract those features capable of being replicated and molded into successful campaigns for other specialized branches.

Spiritual Tourism

Although the idea of developing Spiritual Tourism as a specialized branch grew out of the movement towards diversification, this term itself encapsulates a plethora of concepts and notions. It can best be understood as an umbrella concept that hold many other forms of tourism such as meditation tourism, pilgrimage tourism, yoga tourism, Ngo tourism, Buddhist tourism, Osho brand of spirituality and Sanskrit scholarship.

The first thing regarding the aforementioned cataloging that merits consideration is the fact that there exists diversity within diversity, which puts spiritual tourism in a special position. The planning of any focused strategy for spiritual tourism would firstly have to get past the obvious difficulty of whether to market these sub-sets individually or as being constituents of the whole.

There are arguments in favour of both the approaches. The advantage of marketing the sub-sets individually is that it gives an opportunity to portray the destination as better suited to the preferences of the target audience. For example, recently when the Indian government opened tourism office in Beijing, the focus was upon presenting India as the land of major Buddhist religious sites.¹⁰ Therefore, the focus was not upon spirituality as such but a sub-set of the same that would appeal to the local inhabitants. The same approach could be adopted with some of the other eastern countries such as Thailand or Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, there are advantages to marketing the sub-sets as constituents of a whole. They could be promoted not in isolation but as units complementing each other. The possibility of success of such a strategy is based on a variation of the trial and error method. If you provide a prospective visitor with ten reasons to visit India en route to satisfying his/her spiritual quest, chances are that he/she would find at least one of those reasons exciting, or if none of the reasons were individually persuasive, they could become compelling when their forces are added up. For example, a Bulgarian tourist might be better convinced to visit Leh on learning that it offers excellent meditation facilities in addition to being a center of Buddhist civilization and way of life.

Pilgrimage Tourism

This is one of the most popular forms of tourism in India. For centuries, people have been traveling to religious sites for pilgrimage. This has been one of the biggest grosser of tourism earnings, as far as intra-national tourism is concerned. As far as international appeal is concerned, there are apprehensions regarding the efficacy of this form because of the a) scarcity of Hindu population living outside India and b) relatively few associated attractions of religious shrines other than their ascribed holiness, in contrast to some of the shrines abroad e.g. Angkorvat temple in Cambodia. However, a caveat must be added to each of the aforementioned two points. There is a strong presence of NRIs and PIOs living abroad and they feel an extremely strong pull towards the country including its cultural and religious heritage.

As far as potential is concerned, There is no dearth of sacred places in India. India's rich pantheon of Gods and goddesses has ensured a multitude of holy shrines. Starting from "chaar dhaam ki yatra" to brindavan

⁹ <http://www.fiercehealthcare.com/story/critics-won-over-by-medical-tourism-options/2007-07-05>.

¹⁰ "India Opens First Tourism Office in China", <http://www.tribuneonline.com/tourism.htm>.

to tirupati to vaishno devi, the list is not just long but endless.¹¹ But the shrines must not be presented as mere artifacts or seats of holiness. Their beauty exists in their vitality and must be presented as such. For example, the “aarti” at the banks of River Ganga, a sight of the valley of flowers or a day at the Kumbh Mela are potentially overwhelming experiences. These experiences could appeal to sentiments as wide-ranging as spirit of adventure¹², love for temple architecture or amazement at witnessing a sea of humanity soaked in devotion.

Infact, the detailing and communication of these aspects is going to be the difference separating a mediocre campaign from a defining one. For example, seeing the shrine at Amarnath is only half the experience, the other half consists in the picturesque trek. Another example could be combining the appeal of Meenakshi temple and its beautiful architecture.

Ngo Tourism

This form of tourism is not an automatic fit within the umbrella of spiritual tourism and can also come within the ambit of rural tourism, or as an independent head. However, with the increasing reach of spirituality and the expanding connotations of the term, it could be a source of spiritual upliftment as well. A lot of Ngos have mushroomed in India in the past decade or so. Some of these have been working at the grass roots and doing a lot to make a difference to the lives of people. Also, this form of tourism must be distinguished and kept separate from slum tourism.¹³

This could be the USP for this form of tourism. A lot of people in the West yearn to contribute and make a change to the lives of the deprived millions. This form reaches out to those people and its attraction lies in the fact that it gives an opportunity to be the change that people often want to see in the world. Ngo tourism appeals to the moral righteousness and charitable spirit of individuals.

This form of tourism must involve a bilateral understanding between the volunteering individual and the Ngo concerned. The government could prepare a list of some prominent Non-governmental organizations, providing information about the nature of organization, the kind of work that they do, their leadership, future plans, et. al, helping the tourist make his choice. The success of this form of tourism is based on the age old adage that the greatest enjoyment is to be found in sacrifices made for another’s sake. The satisfaction gained by the knowledge of having contributed towards making a difference to someone’s life is the equivalent of the greatest spiritual upliftment.

Osho Brand of Spirituality

This form of tourism is not yet popular in the country. However, it could be the direction of the future. However, the critical question regarding this form of tourism is not how to develop and tap this form of tourism, but should we encourage such forms of tourism. There are situations where economic expediency has to give in to political expediency. This could be one of those situations.

The argument in favour of exploiting this form is that if the people want and are ready to pay for the Oshos of this world, then it is not our place in market economics to question the validity of such choices. The demand is there and the demand will stay regardless of whether we cater to it or not. The obvious counter-argument takes recourse to the Solzheiten’s principle – “Let the wrong come into this world if it must, but not through me”. Therefore, this might be just another aspect of tourism but it bears huge implications and is politically contentious like baby tourism.¹⁴

But if we are going to market this form, then we must go about doing it the right way. This would mean that the brand of spirituality must be based on solid philosophical founding, for example, “depriving the body can never satisfy the soul”. Also, this brand could be marketed with a connected strain, which is of pleasing divinity and oneself simultaneously. An example of this model of worshipping could be ISKON.

¹¹ Bobby John Varkey, “Exotica on your Platter”, http://www.financialexpress.com/old/fe_full_story.php?content_id=140641.

¹² S P Gupta and K S Mehra, “ Indo-US Trade and Economic Co-operation – Optimizing Relations”, 1995, Allied Publishers, p.49.

¹³ Eric Weiner, “Slum Visits – Tourism or Voyeurism”,

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/travel/09heads.html?_r=1&ei=5087&em=&en=7179a33360e6b2ee&ex=1205640000&adxnlnl=1&adxnlnlx=1210274894-60y+r9HZGpVWomvtc4VWvA&oref=slogin.

¹⁴ Ashling O’Connor, “White Parents, Indian Baby and The New 3 Billion Pound Fertility Tourism”, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/article1356033.ece>.

Meditation Tourism

The speciality of this form of tourism lies in its universal appeal. The people interested in pilgrimage tourism, or Ngo tourism, or Osho spirituality would always remain only a fraction of those who intend to practice spirituality. Therefore, there are added incentives for tapping this potentially huge market.

This is a field that requires substantial restructuring. The first essential is to create an Indian brand to attract customers. For example, the mere popularization of Yoga would not suffice unless the brand is associated with India, the perfection of which can truly be learnt and perfected in India, much like the association of Kung Fu with China. Another example can be to develop some place, maybe Kerala, as a center for meditation and rejuvenation, which is identified as such by a global target audience. Also, travelers coming in search of meditation facilities or rejuvenation therapies expect brilliant infrastructural support. This is critical as lack of infrastructure like deficiency of spas, health clubs etc, or improper hygiene could serve as the source of tourists' repugnance.

Sanskrit Scholarship

There are numerous Sanskrit enthusiasts around the world. The Indian tourism industry would do well to attract these scholars to India. Although at first glance, these people by themselves, would not seem to be sizeable enough to constitute a significant factor accounting for policy decisions and planning. However, the impact of these people resonates through their academic literature and words. For example, Max Mueller might never have become such a fierce advocate of Indian culture if he had not been to India and derived his knowledge only from secondary sources.

The first step towards attracting these people would be to prop up the existing centers of learning and revamp their Sanskrit department, which is presently in the doldrums in most places. We should do our best to reach out to those who register for such courses in Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard, and bring India on their destination map. It is critical for us to do so because to do otherwise is going to cost India many potential future ambassadors.

Reorienting the Orient

After a discussion of the various constituent aspects of Spirituality Tourism, it is necessary to take a look at the larger picture. The image of spirituality sought to be communicated through these campaigns depends on the creation of a strong brand India for its sustenance. The branding of India for the purposes of tourism would necessarily entail reorienting the traditional notion of the Orient in the western world. India needs to be presented not merely as the land of exotic beasts and mystic charmers, but as a modern nation, an economic powerhouse, making giant leaps in technology, which is also aware of, bound by and proud of its spiritual and cultural traditions.

Next, there needs to be identification of the target audience intended to be the primary recipients of the campaign. This target audience must be identified using a two-pronged approach:-

- a) Target NRIs and PIOs because they already experience a pull towards the country of their origin, which could become compelling if the campaign provides them with good reasons.¹⁵
- b) Use the NRIs and PIOs as Brand Ambassadors to make the campaign more effective vis-à-vis other foreigners.

The use of PIOs as Brand Ambassadors would have the following benefits and advantages:-

- a) Foreigner more likely to get influenced by the views of a second or third generation citizen of his country.
- b) Sheer size of the community makes the capability of influencing westerners more pronounced.
- c) Many Indians living abroad are relatively well off. Their circle would include people who have the economic capacity to undertake a spiritual tour.

¹⁵ "Hospitality and Tourism- Branding Strategies for India", <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/ch14.pdf>.

Conclusion

The major challenge that needs to be overcome arises from the fact that Spirituality, in one form or another, has been around for centuries. Therefore, The attractiveness of the concept has to be structured in a manner so as to ensure that it does not seem to be merely a case of “putting old wine in new bottle”. The Orient needs to be re-oriented to portray a modern scientific nation, which along with making giant leaps forward in technology is inextricably bound to its roots and spiritual traditions. Both of these aspects must feed into the packaging of spiritual tourism to demonstrating India’s capability to deliver on a promised projection of “Everything under one roof” vis-à-vis spiritual tourism.

We must follow the Chinese model and invest heavily in spirituality. We must imitate them in treating spirituality like a capital asset where investment is bound to reap fruitful rewards. Also, Spiritual tourism is better suited to the Indian context because of its relatively lesser dependence on infrastructure. Although infrastructural support is invaluable for tourism and is an essential pre-requisite in many areas¹⁶, but spiritual tourism is probably the one area which would not suffer as much as others due to deficiencies existing in infrastructure. This distinguishes spiritual tourism from some of the other forms of tourism. For example, the Kerala government wanted to increase tourist inflow by positioning itself as an attractive shopping destination. However, the attempt failed because many tourists complained that this is not possible because of the state’s crumbling civic infrastructure. Therefore, India should develop this form of tourism to the fullest extent possible so that nobody ever runs out of a reason to visit India.

¹⁶ Bobby John Varkey, “Exotica on your Platter”, http://www.financialexpress.com/old/fe_full_story.php?content_id=140641.