
PROSPECTS OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Tourism has been growing fast in encompassing manner with visible socioeconomic manifestations. Its transformation process has also been equally interesting with new consumer groups of distinct travel motivations, life style patterns and travel requirements emerging in every facet. This offers both opportunities and challenges. The dialogue on inclusive tourism is not all that new. Rather, it has been integral to sustainable and responsible tourism formulations. It is an approach as well as movement aiming to provide and facilitate leisure and recreation opportunities to all those who are desirous of it. If there are barriers viz. physical, economic, societal, perceptual, and environmental; that should be mediated to foster equal participation and opportunities. To serve this, legislations and protocols are brought in at international and national levels. As for travel environment, documentations clearly suggest prevalence of many prohibitive elements for large sections of people. Among others, these include people with various disabilities and others who acquired some form of limitation in course of life. But, most affected sections are the disabled citizens and they face serious predicaments for taking vacation travel. The constitution and other provisions envisage their equal rights with fellow citizens and provide for similar benefits. These sections have special needs and catering to those would offer many business opportunities.

Key words: Opportunities, economic, societal, perceptual, and environmental

INTRODUCTION:

The volume of people with disabilities is growing fast due to an increase in the number of acquired disabilities besides congenital conditions. In addition to disabled persons, consistent increase in life expectancy of the people also results in the formation of a large pool of old-age citizens, who also encounter access constraints of varying nature. Available studies suggest that disability poses serious challenges to the normal living of people in absence of accessible environment. Thus, their options to enjoyment of equal rights in terms of opportunities particularly employment, income and holidaying get alarmingly reduced. They also have to negotiate aversive societal perceptions and taboo still persisting at large in the public domain.

However, recent years have been witness to many proactive actions from various agencies both government and non-government aimed at creating a better living environment for persons with disabilities as a right and not charity. Some specific laws have also been enacted to enable their empowerment as well as to mediate with the multifaceted problems. There are an estimated 600 million persons living with disabilities in the world today. If one includes the members of their families, there are approximately 2 billion persons who are directly affected by disability, representing almost a third of the world's population. Thus, persons with disabilities represent a significant overlooked development challenge, and ensuring equality of rights and access for these persons will have an enormous impact on the social and economic situation in countries around the world.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) advanced a resolution in 2005 supporting 'accessible tourism for all', which is recognized as a key reference document for guiding the development of the tourism sector along the path of greater accessibility. Also of importance for equal access to tourism is the UNWTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (1999), which sets a frame of reference for the responsible and sustainable development of tourism.

The premise of accessible tourism is that there exists a considerable section of the society who encounters varying degrees of access constraints, including to that of leisure and recreation opportunities. Those failing in its purview are tourists with disabilities and other reduced mobility groups. Facilitating the tourism needs of such people is essentially meant to designate accessible tourism and the very scope of it is inclusive in nature. Catering to the general and specific needs of tourists with reduced mobility groups offers economic opportunities of diverse nature, including in leisure and recreation. Indeed, facilitating the leisure and recreation needs of people with special needs is equally a legal requirement. Many country-governments and international agencies such as UNWTO, UNESCAP and European Union have already acknowledged the legal mandate as well as development opportunities. Their pro-active approach also resulted in launch of certain specific initiatives even at the international level. However, existing environment is not conducive enough to realise the potential of the tourists with reduced mobility leisure and recreation market. Major inhibiting factors to tap this potential are finance, mobility, family support, access constraints at different stages of travel process and societal perception.

DIMENSIONS OF TRAVEL PLANNING:

Main aspects being studied under this were sources of information about tourism products, travel booking process, purpose of travel and preferred attractions and travel arrangement for current trip. The results reveal that for domestic tourists; friends and relatives, people already visited the places and internet becomes major ones. Whereas, internet is the major source for foreign tourists for all main tourism products; but, tourism departments, guide books and relatives and friends are also consulted for information purposes. Analysis of booking sources for travel related products among domestic tourists show the family members or friends and caregivers to be the major ones. Against this, travel agents were found to be the major source among foreign tourists, followed by family members or friends and caregivers. Reportedly, one can find many funding sources for travel-related needs of disabled tourists, this study enables to conclude that a large chunk of tourists usually use own funds. The family and relatives are also a funding source for good chunk of respondents, especially for students and fully dependant ones. These together constitute for about 90 % of the samples meaning that other funding sources are neither available nor sought by them. Inquiry into their purpose of travel suggests it to be predominantly leisure in nature but for domestic tourists, religious and social reasons are also worth recording. This perhaps reinforces the pattern usually find among general tourists in India. Scenic places, hill stations and beaches are also major attractions these groups would like to visit.

Examination of the nature of travel arrangement reveals that both tourist groups choose to travel with some form of package tour arrangement. This trend was reinforced by a comparison of arrangements usually made by them against the one chose for the present trip. The results do not seem to suggest any noticeable differences between them. As one would have expected, independent travellers are less in proportion and that pattern is more demonstrative in the case of foreign tourists. Appreciably good number of tourists covered more than one destination as part of current itinerary. But, when it comes to frequency of tour, it is comparatively less frequent, particularly among Indian tourists. It was also observed that people accompanying them during this trip are mostly family members or friends. Also, disabled tourists taking caregivers during travel was found less prevalent, especially among Indian travellers.

Means of transport used for inter and intra-destination travel throws some interesting patterns. Foreigners mostly travel by road or air means, whereas, domestic travellers usually take the roads and then rail transport, perhaps owing to very expensive nature of air transport. Those travelling by road between destinations were found mainly use tourist coaches. Further, rail transport, rented vehicle for tourist destinations and tourist coaches are often the preferred mode of transport for both tourist segments, but, scarcity of 'accessible features' in those transport modes especially for the wheelchair users, act as discouraging element. Perhaps this seems to be one of the reasons for not finding many wheelchair users in this research study.

MAJOR BARRIERS AT DIFFERENT FACETS OF TRAVEL PROCESS:

This was indeed a major focus area of this study. As many existing studies would suggest, issues and constraints of tourists with disabilities and reduced mobility during different facets of travel are varied and some of those have enough potential to adversely influence their travel decisions and behaviour. Findings enable to conclude that tourists with disabilities face several barriers at booking stage itself. The findings point to the major ones as poor understanding of their specific problems/ requirements among the booking staff and the inhospitable attitude. And, this pattern is common to both tourist segments– domestic & foreign.

During travel stage, intra-destination travel is most difficult part indicating the lack of accessible taxis & local transport infrastructure and facilities, followed by other constraints like lack of proper information and inadequate signages while travelling. There are other noticeable constraints as well such as non-availability of personal aids/ equipments at the stations and in the vehicles, locating affordable and accessible accommodation and lack of knowledge regarding their specific problems among ground staff.

The problems being encountered at places of stay equally merit attention.

Major ones are lack of necessary facilities in the rooms meant for tourists with disabilities/reduced mobility, lack of understanding about their special needs and inappropriate location of such rooms. Absence of lift and inaccessible lobby also call for necessary actions. At tourist attractions also, there are certain barriers specific to them, viz. absence of accessible toilets or its unhygienic condition, no availability of public utilities and the like. Their easy movement inside the site is also a major problem, especially scarcity of ramps, signage or their unsuitable conditions.

PROSPECTS OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN INDIA:

Foregone discussions provide a clear perspective on various attributes of tourists with disabilities/reduced mobility and the issues and barriers they encounter during travel process. Finding emerged in this study would also be helpful in understanding the prospects of developing accessible tourism in India as potential market segment.

Tourist characteristics such as age, education, job profile and income pattern are promising in nature. They have adequate motivation and drive for holiday travel and would like to see and appreciate the natural and cultural heritage of the country. There are enough propensities for leisure travel spending by them and also have the desire to be in the company of others while travelling.

However, economic factors would be critical in their future travel plans. Specifically, reasonably priced tourism products and better income opportunities are something that the domestic tourists would look for. When it comes to foreigners, availability of safety support systems and proper information of those appear to take precedence in future travel plans. Other factors of importance are positive attitude of industry workers and the availability of accessible vehicles at places of visit. This calls for a major rethink to provide seamless chains of accessibilities, which remains interlinked throughout the tour i.e. from origin to destination and back. Thus all providers in the delivery chain like airports and airplanes, railway stations, tourist coach and smaller vehicles, tourist taxis, accommodation providers and the attraction managers become critical partners. Needless to record, accessible public conveniences and comforts would be of crucial importance.

In conclusion, it is pertinent to state that the positive trends this study could come up with would be qualified enablers in shaping the path for development of accessible tourism in India. Equally important outcome is clear tracking of various challenges and bottlenecks coming on the way in tapping the latent potential of these tourist segments. Many of those are not difficult to deal with or manage but, for which; certain degree of commitment, earnest efforts and coordination on the part of major stakeholders would be called for. But, when it comes to more complex problems involving considerable financial commitments, it would be necessary to institute suitable policy mechanisms and higher levels of inter-department coordination mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In consideration of major findings emerged from the study, a set of specific action points are proposed herewith. These are meant not only to address some of the critical barriers of this potential visitor segment but also to exploit the business opportunities that emanates for providing specific leisure and recreation products and services the mutual benefits.

TOWARDS POSITIVE ATTITUDE OF EMPLOYEES IN INDUSTRY:

- Specific programmes to adequately train the employees, especially frontline staff should be launched. Focus of such exercise should be to sensitise them on unique problems of tourists with reduced mobility and to create proper understanding the segments' development potential. A dedicated team of employees having an open mind to serve the tourists with special needs can be drawn from different departments of the establishment for suitable training. These staff should also be given refresher trainings to enhance their knowledge and skills.
- For proper awareness creation and sensitisation of the general public about travel-related problems these tourists, target-specific measures can be devised. Some effective points of campaign can be transport stations, public offices and other places of public gathering, where, both electronic and print media would be useful. Further, radio, TV and leading newspapers can also be used, especially on occasions like Disability Day, Children's Day, Parents' Day etc.
- Tourism, travel and hospitality management institutions in India should be advised to incorporate accessible tourism and disability awareness modules in their curriculum for both teaching and training purposes. Further, in those institutions where some orientations have already been provided, elaborate coverage of critical aspects related to management of these tourists should be incorporated.
- Lower to middle-level front-line officials of Central and States Tourism Departments including those posted in tourist offices abroad and usually in regular contact with the tourists should be given accessibility-specific training. The aim of such exercise would be proper sensitisation, for which, appropriate topics are potential of tourists with reduced mobility, barriers they encounter during different facets of travel, access-friendly products and destinations in India, and effective facilitation mechanisms. Gradually, Archaeological Survey of India and similar agencies dealing with/ interfacing the disabled tourists can be included to increase overall tourism propensity.

TOWARDS INFORMATION INADEQUACY:

- Many government agencies and non-governmental organisations have already begun disseminating information on accessible tourism products, critical mobility enhancement and site appreciation devices. But, that needs to be strengthened and widespread because it is not only legally binding but also makes good business sense.
- In view of the fast increasing use of electronic media, particularly internet, initiating steps for vigorous adoption of access-enabling websites based on W3C standards by tourism and travel establishments viz. hotels, travel companies and travel intermediaries are suggested.
- Thorough re-vamping of the tourism websites of Central and State Govts. Is suggested to make those attractive, user and access-friendly. Those should also have links containing information on accessibility and availability of assistive devices/ equipments/ transport with photographs so that tourists with reduced mobility would know whether the establishment facilities would meet their needs or not.
- The Ministry of Social Welfare and Empowerment took a welcome decision to make websites of over 5000 Govt. and the public institutions accessible very recently. But, ensuring continuously effectiveness of the websites should be a priority, which inter alia includes, updation of the sites and contents.
- Information on accessible tourism destinations and products in India can be collected and published in English as well as major Indian languages. For its wider dissemination, respective government agencies, disability networks and organisations etc. can be considered.

- Universal Signage is integral to make the sites duly accessible. These should be prepared at least in English, Hindi and the local language of the attraction site and installed at major points in the sites and intersections.
- Depending on foreign visitor-profile at major attractions, additional foreign languages can also be considered for display.
- The landmark attractions in the country should have readable formats for visually-challenged persons.
- All travel and tourism organisation should develop Accessible Fact-sheets and periodically submit it to the State/Central tourism departments, as the case may be. It should also be made mandatory for the registration/ classification/ renewal process and be duly rewarded.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT:

- Access Audit of major tourist attractions, transport stations, accommodation etc. should be undertaken; and wherever necessary, in collaboration with state governments. Other stakeholders including NGOs could also be associated for audit.
- Transportation is a major limiting factor. Therefore, accessible policy should be further fine-tuned to make it more specific and action oriented. It is equally important to ensure that the policies are strictly enforced by all modes of transport operators. Further, having a provision of battery-run accessible vehicles at larger attraction sites should be considered.
- Accessible taxis and tourist coaches are scant in India. To begin with, at least in the major cities, potential entrepreneurs should be identified and encouraged for operating more number of access-friendly taxis and tourist coaches. A data-base of this can then be maintained in accessible formats by tourist departments, tourism-trade, and the activists and institutions in the domain of accessibility for better dissemination. The Commonwealth Games-2010 to be held in Oct. 2010 could be an appropriate occasion for this.
- Transporting wheel-chair in airlines is a major problem and damages are quite common, but, hardly any compensation is given for damages. Eventhough allowing wheel-chairs inside the cabin may have certain security bearings, this still merits consideration. Hence, this may be taken up with Director General of Civil Aviation and airline companies for some feasible mechanisms.

PROMOTIONAL MEASURES:

- The tourist destinations/ attractions where certain accessible facilities already exist are to be identified and promoted first. In addition to further strengthening accessible facilities of those places, few more appealing destinations could be identified for accessible development and promotion. While doing so, 'prime attractions/destinations' in each region can be identified for development and promotion as model accessible tourism destinations.
- A Charter of Best Tourism practices for the stakeholders may be formulated for responsible practice of inclusive and sustainable tourism.
- As part of Commonwealth Games promotion, an inclusive tourism campaign can be launched. This would have wider reach, appeal and effectiveness.
- Many countries have already adopted specific inclusive tourism campaigns at the national-level. India could also consider a campaign like "Inclusive India" or "Incredible India: Accessible India" for launch at different levels.
- Domain and contact details of Accessible Tourist Guides and agencies can be collected and uploaded in accessible format in the websites of Indiatourism, State govt. and accessibility organisations. Since their numbers are very less, training and licensing of more guides should also be considered.

INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENT:

- Some institutional mechanisms are already available for promotion of accessibility in India. But, those are not that effective perhaps due to lack of coordination in implementation of the

programmes by different departments. Hence, a Nodal Empowered Committee for Inclusive Tourism (NeC) can be set up under the aegis of Ministry of Tourism, comprising officers not less than the rank of Joint Secretary from the Ministries of Culture, Social Welfare and Empowerment, Civil Aviation, Surface

- Transport, Urban Development and Railways as members. Like at present, representatives from institutions like NGO's working in this domain and trade bodies can also be made part of the committee. Main objective of NeC would be to formulate appropriate policies and programmes and to oversee effective implementation of those by the respective agencies. It can be brought under the purview of National Tourism Advisory Board.
- Provision of access-enabling facilities should be made mandatory for all centrally-funded tourism (CFS) schemes.
- Possibility of sponsorship from PSUs' and corporate sector could be explored for procuring and maintaining access devices for free use at major attractions and transport stations. Setting up of public comforts, utilities etc. at major tourist locations through collaboration could also be solicited.
- Tour operators can be motivated to design inclusive tourism products/packages and the promotion of those. Some special incentives, awards etc. can be considered to reward the tour operators.
- A Uniform National Standards on Accessibility should be framed for tourist destinations, transport and hospitality infrastructure and other relevant stakeholders.
- To address gross inadequacy of relevant data and information on inclusive tourism, periodic visitor survey using standard Accessible Visitor Survey (AVS) forms can be considered.

CONCLUSION:

The premise of accessible tourism is inclusive in nature. It has been conceptualised to incorporate diversity of tourists with disability & reduced mobility to form an important tourist segment with specific travel requirements. While glancing through the Census volume, one could make a guess of its volume in India. For instance, according to 2001 Census, number of disabled persons in India is about 21.91 million. If their family members/ dependents are taken together, total quantum reaches to 114.61 million (i.e. 21.91 million multiplied by average household size of 5.233 persons), or 11.41% of the total population. Further, if other potential inclusive tourism segments like those above 60 years are added, it would reach 18.11% of population in 2001. In other words, persons with reduced mobility and their dependents/ family members would together constitute nearly 186 million, which is substantial and offers potential for development of inclusive tourism in India.

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