



Principles and Practicing Policies of Indian Tourism Industry

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *In the early days of independent India, quite rationally, the Government didn't pay much attention to tourism. Worldwide, the number of international tourists was still limited and among those tourists there were only few who considered going to faraway places like India. Moreover, the Indian Government had more urgent matters at hand. In 1982, the Indian Government presented its first tourism policy. In retrospect one could argue that the novelty of the subject, its low priority and the belief in its potential as a social engineering tool (in keeping with Indian public ideology at that time), contributed to a rather simplistic piece of work. It took the government until 2002 to present an updated policy document. Those expecting a clear line of thinking and plan must have been quite disappointed by the new policy.*

This paper starts with a brief description of the history of tourism and tourism policy development in India, which concludes with a summary of the most important objectives of the latest policy. Section two addresses the impact of the development community on the tourism policy. It focuses on the idea of tourism as a threat. Apart from analyzing the possible meaning of this concept in the context of Indian reality it briefly describes a concrete project which can be regarded as an implementation of the idea.

INTRODUCTION

We want to focus on some of the central ideas and starting points of the Indian tourism policy. We will argue that there is something fundamentally wrong with the public ideas concerning the economic (growth) potential of (international) tourism and the role of tourism as a development tool. We will also contend that, even after all these years of tourism development, very little is known on who the tourists in India actually are and what they want. Our reflections are based on our own experience as tour operators and travel guides in India as well as on our (limited) reading of public documents and research papers. As research scholars, our fields of specialization lie elsewhere. Nonetheless we think that our observations could provoke a fruitful discussion on central policy issues.

In 1982, the Indian Government presented its first tourism policy. In retrospect one could argue that the novelty of the subject, its low priority and the belief in its potential as a social engineering tool (in keeping with Indian public ideology at that time), contributed to a rather simplistic piece of work. It took the government until 2002 to present an updated policy document. Those expecting a clear line of thinking and plan must have been quite disappointed by the new policy. It is based on a number of incompatible perspectives, of which those of the international development community and the international lobby group of tourism and travel related industries (the WTTC) are the most pronounced. As a result, it starts from the idea that tourism is both a threat and an engine of growth.

WHO ARE THE TOURISTS

There are a number of problems concerning tourism statistics. The first problem is essential and by no means is confined to India. It centers on the definition of tourism. The second problem concerns the poor quality of both the Indian data and the analysis.

DEFINITION OF TOURISM

In the early 1980s, Gantzer and Gantzer, wrote about an

increasing awareness among government officials of the need to redefine tourism in order to make a clear distinction between... 'the functional business of travel and the essential escapism of tourism' (1983:125). Regrettably, this increasing awareness didn't lead to a change in definitions. Both on an international and national level, relatively straightforward all-travel-inclusive definitions have become the general norm.

The U.N. World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) define tourists as people who 'travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for more than twenty-four hours and not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited'. The Indian Department of Tourism's definition is almost the same. It explicitly includes people traveling for the following reasons: leisure - recreation, holiday, health, study, religion, sport, business, family mission and meeting (GOI, 2008:257-260).

These all-inclusive definitions hardly serve to express meaning. They obfuscate rather than clarify things and seem to have been contrived primarily to allow for easy data collection. In addition, the great numbers of 'tourists' that is the obvious results of using these definitions help to further the interests of the organizations which created them (see below).

In our everyday discourse, tourism concerns a qualitatively distinct realm of escapist leisure traveling with its own inherent significance and rationality (ideas, opinions and behavioral manifestations). It does not include people visiting their friends and relatives. It neither includes students, businessmen and officials traveling professionally. While the ultimate boundaries between the categories of the tourist and the non-tourist traveler are obviously blurred and reveal some overlap, on the whole, the differences are quite clear. By and large, Indian policy documents refer to this distinct realm of leisure traveling. The statistics in the

same documents, however, embrace virtually all travelers. This results in inconsistencies and hyperbolic claims with respect to the quantitative importance of tourism.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN PRACTICE

One of the general objectives of the Indian Tourism Policy (2002) is to Substantially increase the proportion of the urban resident leisure and pilgrimage tourism to rural areas..'. It proposes the development of tourist services in villages and rural regions located off the beaten tourist tracks. To this effect, in collaboration with the UNDP, it initiated a public rural tourism program geared towards all round, instantaneous village development: the Endogenous Tourism Project / Rural Tourism Scheme (2003-2007). The project was meant to be implemented in 31 villages across 20 states. Most of these villages harbored traditional artisans (weavers, potters, sculptors, block printers and the like) who were thought to attract tourists. Local or nearby NGOs were identified as the most important implementing agents in the otherwise 'community-owned' project

TOURISM AS AN ENGINE OF GROWTH

Tourism department to depict tourism as something good and important, it is small wonder that in their plans the notion of tourism as an engine of growth is much more prominently present than the idea that tourism is a potential threat. The credibility and validity of the characterization of tourism as engine of growth and provider of meaningful 'high quality' employment and income to a significant part of the Indian population, hinges on statistics showing the quantitative significance of (the growth of) the tourism sector and consequently on the definition of tourism and tourists. In this section we will question the idea of tourism as a major engine of economic growth in India. We will start with an analysis of definitions and statistics. Subsequently, we will deal with the growth potential of tourism in India. In this latter context there is an emphasis on international tourism.

THE GROWTH POTENTIAL OF INDIAN (INTERNATIONAL) TOURISM

The Indian Government wants us to believe that this situation can be structurally and significantly altered. While it argues that the variety of tourism activities need to be differentiated and improved, and that the tourism infrastructure requires augmentation, it seems convinced of the idea that the things India has to offer, merit a much larger influx of international tourists. There is, however, no evidence to substantiate this view. In most cases it is based on some sort of nationalist conviction, which wants 'India to attain its proper place in the global tourism scene' (e.g. Ragu-ramam, 1998). It is true: India can be regarded as an old civilization, with a rich history, a number of important heritage sites, mountains, beaches, deserts and the like. But then, do other countries not claim to offer similar 'tourist products'? Isn't it rather naive to assume: (a) that India offers superior sights; and (b) tourists would be drawn to such sights if they were properly informed and seduced? We think it is naive indeed, particularly if one considers the fact that these foreign tourists are supposed to be of the high spending variety. Below we will give a number of plausible reasons to support this claim.

DOMESTIC VS INTERNATIONAL TOURISM

For long, the importance of domestic tourism was not recognized at all. In the 1970s, 80s and early 1990s the numbers of modern domestic tourists were only small. In those days, there was a great dearth of foreign currency

and international tourism was one of the major sources of this scarce asset. In combination, these factors were the most important reasons to attach considerably more value to international tourism than to domestic tourism. Over the past 15 years or so, the emergence of new (non-tourist) sources of foreign exchange has contributed to a decline in monetary importance of international tourism. In addition, with the rapid growth of domestic tourism, it was realized that, from a local or regional perspective, the money spent by Indian tourists is no different from that expended by foreigners.

POLICIES OF INDIAN TOURISM DEPARTMENT

The first significant policy initiatives were forged in the early 1980s. With the prospect of hosting the Asian Games of 1982, the Indian Government had to start thinking about accommodating, transporting and entertaining the large number of visitors attracted by the event. This awakened a serious public interest in tourism, which was enhanced by the fact that tourism was India's largest net earner of foreign currency. The public interest was translated into the Tourism Policy of 1982 which provided an action plan based on the development of so-called tourism circuits (Singh, 2001: 143-44).

In 1997 the department of tourism published a (new) National Tourism Action Plan. Apart from identifying a few areas for 'integrated tourism development', along the lines of the aforementioned (thematic) tourism circuits, the aim of the plan was to achieve an overall growth and improvement of the tourism sector in India, by stepping up marketing, infrastructure building and human resource development. According to some, the plan didn't present anything new. It just was phrased in a more fashionable development sector jargon (Singh, 2001:144). In the new millennium, Kerala witnessed a remarkable diversification in the supply of tourist services. As never before, the government allowed tourists to move around in rather secluded areas of natural parks and sanctuaries. Private entrepreneurs pioneered 'heritage tourism', combining stays in nicely situated heritage buildings with Ayurvedic treatment.

In 2002, when the action plan was finally translated into a tourism policy. Tourism policy officially became a joint central-state government concern. The new policy itself, however, was designed by the central government. To a large extent, it concerns old wine in new bottles. It holds the kind of goals and expectations exemplary for the first policy. To start with, the policy document attempts to establish tourism's great contribution to national development and its role as an *engine of growth*. It suggests that tourism not only generates government revenue, foreign currency, but also provides an optimal use of India's scarce resources, sustainable development, high quality employment (especially to youngsters, women and disabled people), and finally, peace, understanding, national unity and stability (GOI, 2002: 8-9). The policy starts from the idea that tourism can be used as a development tool, e.g. that it can generate high quality, mass employment and prosperity among vulnerable groups in backward areas.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we have a tourism policy document that conceives tourism both as a great boon and as a potential threat. In this latter viewpoint tourism should be publicly controlled and guided in order to prevent it from degenerating into a menace. According to the first viewpoint, however, mainstream tourism, especially of the long haul, luxury variety, is highly beneficial to start with. It concerns such

an important engine of growth and source of employment, that it merits only public facilitation. Highlighting some of the most important inconsistencies in Indian Government thinking on tourism, we attempted to provide tentative answers to some major policy questions. What is the relative growth potential of domestic and international tourism in India? Can one use tourism as a development tool? We tried to show that the dominant tourism-as-an-engine-of-growth position underlying the government policy has resulted in an inflation of the importance of international tourism and a gross overvaluation of its economic potential. We also attempted to substantiate the point of view that the 'responsible development' idea which supports some minor parts of the government policy, may lead to ideal forms of tourism on paper, but is in fact based on simplifications which tend to collude with the stubborn, harsh realities of everyday life.

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