

Challenges and Opportunities: Reinvigorating Tourism Cooperation Between India and Thailand in the Post Covid-19 Landscape

Manisha Sharma

PhD Scholar, University of Delhi

Abstract:

India and Thailand have long-standing historical and cultural links that promote strong bilateral relations. Tourism has played a key role in strengthening these connections, with frequent travel between the two countries. However, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected air travel, causing a sharp decline in tourism, and affecting the larger range of bilateral relations. This paper examines the evolution of India-Thailand relations post- pandemic, focusing on the recovery of tourism and its implications for bilateral cooperation. The purpose is to analyze the impact of Covid-19 on India-Thailand tourism and assess the prospects for future bilateral cooperation in the tourism sector. By looking at these elements, this study aims to advance the knowledge of the changing dynamics of tourism between India and Thailand and inform future strategies for sustainable tourism development in both countries. The following research questions guide this paper: -

1. What was the impact of Covid-19 on tourism flows between India and Thailand?
2. How did both the countries respond to revive tourism?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities for enhancing tourism cooperation between India and Thailand in the post-pandemic era?

Keywords: India-Thailand relations, Bilateral cooperation, Tourism, Covid-19 pandemic, Post pandemic recovery

Introduction

India and Thailand have a long history together, and Buddhism is a fundamental aspect of their shared culture. This centuries-old relationship has developed into a solid, multifaceted collaboration in the present day. Both countries have strong trade and investment flows, making them important commercial partners. In addition to conducting joint military drills, they work closely together in regional forums such as ASEAN. Thailand is a favorite tourist destination for Indians because of its lively culture. This relationship between both the countries is further enhanced by the strong people-to-people ties, which promote more understanding and collaboration.

There are three sections in this study. The first section examines the partnership between India and Thailand. The second section examines the relationship between India and Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemic. The third section looks at how their relationships have changed since the outbreak and how both the countries have grown together.

India-Thailand Tourism Partnership: A Strategic Analysis

Thailand and India share a rich cultural heritage and a long history of cultural relations. When Ashoka travelled to Suvarnabhumi to spread the teachings of Buddha almost two millennia ago, the connection between India and Thailand was established. Buddhism forges a close bond between the two countries. The doctrines of Theravada Buddhism are adhered to by about 95% of Thai citizens. There are several Thai words that have Pali or Sanskrit origins. India is Thailand's fifth largest trading partner, behind Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. The Andaman Sea serves as a shared marine border between both the countries. Pearls, stones, organic and inorganic chemicals, marine products, pharmaceutical formulations, biological and electronic commodities, and so on are examples of items that have travelled from India to Thailand. On the other hand, Thailand supplies India with nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, mechanical appliances, electronic parts, raw materials for plastic, and organic compounds (Ghosh, 2015).

On August 1, 1947, the two nations established diplomatic ties. Nonetheless, the Thai Honorary Consulate General was already in place in Bombay in 1872 and Calcutta in 1879. The number of visits and exchanges between the two nations has been enormous. Additionally, both nations have had regular ministerial visits. The Thai Royal Family has a lengthy history of travelling to India. On the other hand, the first Indian prime minister to travel to Thailand was Rajiv Gandhi in 1982. Additionally, there are cultural and economic ties between the two nations. Free trade has been successful. Economic collaboration has focused on the pharmaceutical and manufacturing services industries. Combined military and air force exercises have been conducted on a regular basis. The economy of Thailand is the second largest in ASEAN. India joined ASEAN as a dialogue partner in 1993, and in 1995, it was granted full dialogue status. India is also a part of ASEAN Regional Forum. In the Mekong Ganga Cooperation, BIMSTEC, East Asia Summit, and Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Thailand and India work closely together. On the other hand, Exercise Maitree (Army), Exercise SIAM Bharat (Air Force), and India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Navy) are examples of defensive drills between the two nations (Sajjanhar, 2023).

India is one of Thailand's most important travel destinations. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, prior to Covid-19, a record of 1,961,069 Indian tourists visited Thailand in 2019, bringing approximately 80 billion Baht. The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant harm. By 2023, the number of Indian tourists had risen significantly to 1,628,542 generating 61.9 million Baht. Thailand is a year-round destination for Indian tourists, including well-known locations like Bangkok, Phuket, Chon Buri, Krabi, and Phang-nga as well as newer locations like Surat Thani and Kanchanaburi. Enjoying Thai food, taking in the lively nightlife, lounging on gorgeous beaches, getting massages and spa treatments, and touring historical sites are some of the favorite activities. This expansion has been greatly aided by Thailand's excellent aviation connectivity with India. Travel has become even more convenient because of Thailand's visa exemption policy, which permits Indian visitors to remain for up to 60 days (Singh, 2007).

India & Thailand: A Pandemic Partnership

Thailand's tourism industry was completely affected from the Covid-19 pandemic. Arrivals slowed to almost a halt as a result of the harsh border restrictions that shattered the tourism dependent economy. The Kingdom saw just over 106,000 foreign visitors when gates opened in 2021, down from 6.7 million in 2020. Thailand demonstrated its intention to establish a stronger partnership with India in order to recover from the pandemic by waiving Indian visas in the year 2021. In 2020, Thailand's GDP shrank by 6.1

percent, the most since the Asian financial crisis. Thailand experienced the largest GDP decline since the Asian financial crisis in 2020, with a 6.1% decline. The tourism sector, which accounts for 20% of the jobs and 5% of GDP, was particularly impacted by a decline in travel. Thailand began screening tourists for infected individuals at the beginning of 2020 (Banerjee, 2023).

Despite the fact that Covid-19 temporarily hindered the economy, Thailand did not wait for the virus to subside. Thailand used the lack of tourists as an opportunity to enhance the standard of tourism services by creating cutting-edge technology and growing e-commerce applications. Bangkok's Don Mueang International Airport had renovations as well. On the other hand, the invention of medical assistant robots to assist physicians and nurses in patient care is one example of how Thailand advanced science and technology for local solutions.

In the beginning of the pandemic, consumption remained weak as long as household debt was high. The Thai government soon realized that household's capacity to consume would eventually be limited since they would have to reduce their spending in order to repay their debt if their income didn't increase rapidly enough. The return of the foreign tourists, who made up over 20% of domestic spending in 2019, should have increased consumption. Despite the continuous threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, this was undoubtedly one of the reasons the Thai government was working to quickly reopen the nation to tourists (Puttasri, 2021).

In an effort to compensate for the decrease in international travel, the government launched many initiatives. The Rao Tiew Duay Gun (We Travel Together) program received \$640 million from the Thai government in August 2020 in an attempt to boost domestic travel. A total of six million hotel stays were subsidized by the government at 40% of standard room prices. Many operators seized this chance, turned their attention to the domestic market, and drew in local tourists by advertising flights and lodging in conjunction with the We Travel Together initiative. More local tourists were welcomed by places that previously served mostly to foreign tourists.

In 2022, Thailand's GDP in real terms rose by 2.6%, a rather moderate rate of economic recovery from the decline brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thailand's growth rate in 2022 was very moderate when compared to other major ASEAN nations like Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which reported incredibly high growth rates as they recovered from the pandemic (World Bank Group, 2021). Early in 2022, when the country was gradually reopening to tourists and exports were increasing due to economic recoveries in the US and Europe, things were beginning to look a little better when the Russia-Ukraine war started. While neither nation is a significant trading partner, Thailand is heavily reliant on imports of natural gas, oil, and chemical fertilizers, all of which suffered price increases due to the conflict. Following the gradual relaxation of Covid-19 border controls in Thailand and several of its key travel source nations, international tourism saw a considerable improvement in the second half of 2022. The number of international visitors increased from 430,000 in 2021 to 11.15 million in 2022 (Thaicharoen et al., 2023). Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi spoke on the phone to then Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha on May 1, 2020, a few months into the Covid-19 pandemic. The two leaders discussed how best to handle the Covid-19 pandemic and decided to work together on medical sciences research and development as well as vaccine creation. In August 2022, the two parties subsequently signed a Memorandum of Understanding in this respect. Additionally, two Memorandums of Understanding were also signed. One of these was a MoU on health and medical research cooperation between the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Department of Medical Sciences in Thailand. The broadcasting partnership between Prasar Bharati and the Thai Public Broadcasting Service was strengthened by the second Memorandum of Understandi-

ng.

It is important to note that Thailand received vital vaccination help from India during the economic crisis that occurred due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Laskar, 2022). According to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, on April 21, 2022, in Bangkok, a shipment of 200,000 doses of Made in India Covovax vaccinations was delivered to H.E. Mr. Anutin Charnvirakul, Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health, as part of the Quad's flagship Vaccine Partnership. The Ambassador of Japan, H.E. Mr. Nashida Kazuya, the Ambassador of Australia, H.E. Mr. Allan McKinnon, the Ambassador of India, H.E. Ms. Suchitra Durai, and the Chargé d'Affaires of the United States of America, H.E. Mr. James Wayman, all participate in the vaccine handover. During the Quad leaders' Summit in September 2021 in Washington, DC, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi agreed to supply 500,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines to Indo-Pacific countries as part of the Quad Vaccine Partnership. On March 12, 2021, the Quad leaders launched the Quad Vaccine Partnership at their first summit, with the goal of utilizing the Quad's combined strength to guarantee fair access to vaccines that are safe, and of high quality.

Reshaping India-Thailand Ties: Post-Pandemic Opportunities

On April 21, 2022, in New Delhi, Secretary (East) Mr. Saurabh Kumar and Thai Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs Mr. Thani Thongphakdi co-chaired the sixth round of India-Thailand Foreign Office Consultations. Both parties talked about post Covid-19 recovery as well as bilateral, regional, and international challenges. Both states have advanced disruptive technology techniques in the post pandemic world and have made more investments in this direction to lessen inequality and bring the rich and poor close together. Thailand's post-pandemic tourism presented an opportunity for wellness-related cooperation with India (Sanglee, 2022). To achieve this, the Andaman coast's tourist provinces would be grouped into a 'wellness corridor' and a 'wellness single license' that will allow enterprises to offer a range of health services such as e-health, and traditional medicines. India, the home of Ayurvedic medicine with a sizable and growing healthcare industry of its own, would certainly prove to be a useful ally in this respect (Bhowmick, 2023). On December 16, 2024, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) commemorated a major milestone as the 2,000,000th Indian visitor arrived at Suvarnabhumi Airport. This accomplishment highlights how important India is to Thailand's booming tourism sector as a source market.

The bilateral partnership has also seen certain difficulties. Stronger collaboration between the two countries and the region at large depends on improved transportation and communication systems. However, this sector has faced significant obstacles in the form of infrastructure project delays. Political events in Myanmar have caused a delay in the construction of the 1360 km trilateral highway that connects India, Myanmar, and Thailand. This is a serious obstacle to achieve better physical connectivity between the regions and aim to connect the land transportation between South and Southeast Asia (Singh, 2023).

Conclusion

India-Thailand connections are long-lasting and intricate, with a strong cultural and historical basis. Even while the Covid-19 pandemic brought about a lot of difficulties, it also created new avenues for partnership, especially in the fields of tourism and healthcare. The strategic partnership was further strengthened by India's support with vaccines throughout the crisis. The revival of tourism, which is a major contributor to Thailand's economic growth, shows how strong bilateral relations are. There are still

challenges, though, such as the delays in infrastructure construction, specifically with regard to the trilateral highway project (Banerjee, 2024). In order to further enhance the India-Thailand collaboration in the post-pandemic era, it is important to address these issues and take advantage of industries such as wellness tourism and digital technology.

References

1. Brief on India-Thailand Relations. (2022, June). Ministry of External Affairs. https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_Thailand_2022.pdf
2. Ghosh, L. (2015). Sectional President's Address: India-Thailand relations in the era of colonial encroachment. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 76, 609–619. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44156628>
3. Singh, Y. (2007). India Thailand Relations: In Search of New Horizons. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09287>
4. Sajjanhar, A. (2023, December 4). India-Thailand Relations: A 70-year partnership. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-thailand-relations-a-70-year-partnership>
5. Banerjee, S. (2023, December 4). Thailand: Protests and political headwinds amidst a pandemic. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/thailand-protests-and-political-headwinds-amidst-a-pandemic>
6. Puttasri, S. (2021). The failure of vaccine policy pushed Thailand from the best recovering country to the worst. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/failure-of-vaccine-policy-pushed-thailand>
7. Thailand gets India-made covid-19 vaccines under Quad Initiative. Money control. (2022, April 21). <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/thailand-gets-india-made-covid-19-vaccines-under-quad-initiative-8388851.html>
8. Laskar, R. H. (2022, April 21). Quad partners deliver 200,000 India-made covid-19 vaccines to Thailand. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/quad-partners-deliver-200-000-india-made-covid-19-vaccines-to-thailand-101650554386699.html>
9. World Bank Group. (2021, November 29). Monitoring the impact of covid-19 in Thailand. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/publication/monitoring-the-impact-of-covid-19-in-thailand>
10. Thaicharoen, S., Meunrat, S., Leng-Ee, W., Koyadun, S., Ronnasiri, N., Iamsirithaworn, S., Chaifoo, W., Tulalamba, W., & Viprakasit, V. (2023, September 5). How Thailand's tourism industry coped with covid-19 pandemics: A Lesson from the pilot Phuket Tourism Sandbox Project. Journal of travel medicine. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10481414/>
11. Embassy of India Bangkok Thailand. Welcome to Embassy of India, Bangkok - Thailand. (n.d.). https://embassyofindiabangkok.gov.in/eoibk_pages/MTM1
12. Ani. (2022, May 24). Japanese PM Kishida praises India's vaccine help to Cambodia, Thailand under Quad Vaccine Initiative. The Print. <https://theprint.in/world/japanese-pm-kishida-praises-indias-vaccine-help-to-cambodia-thailand-under-quad-vaccine-initiative/968604/>
13. Desk, O. W., Priyadarshini, A., Saraswat, R., Desk, O. W., Desk, O. W., Mahanand, J., Makhija, M., Jana, R., Nandy, A., Guha, S., Bose, R., Singh, P., Kumar, A., Singh, S., Ram, R., Desai, S., Makhija, M., Teltumbde, A., Saraswat, R., ... Sharma, A. (n.d.). India's Best Magazine: Find Latest News, top

- headlines, live updates. Outlook India. <https://www.outlookindia.com/newsscroll/quads-commitment-to-provide-a-billion-vaccines-to-people-in-southeast-asia-is-on-track-wh-official/2098599>
14. Sanglee, T. (2022, June 2). India is the key to boosting Thailand's post-pandemic recovery. – The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/india-is-the-key-to-boosting-thailands-post-pandemic-recovery/>
 15. Exploring India Thailand Trade and Economic Relations: IBEF. India Brand Equity Foundation. (n.d.). <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/india-thailand-trade>
 16. Bhowmick, S. (2023, March 15). Reimagining India-Thailand Partnerships. Asia Times. <https://asiatimes.com/2023/03/reimagining-india-thailand-partnerships/>
 17. Singh, A. (2023b, December 4). What China's coercion at sea means for India. orfonline.org.
 18. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/what-chinas-coercion-at-sea-means-for-india-61152>
 19. Bhowmick, S. (2024, August 8). Trilateral highway is the road to Regional Economic Connectivity. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/trilateral-highway-is-the-road-to-regional-economic-connectivity>
 20. Mitra, S., & Mukherjee, K. (2013). Mekong-Ganga dialogue: Learning to manage river basins. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/mekong-ganga-dialogue-learning-to-manage-river-basins>
 21. Banerjee, S. (2024, May 15). Bringing India and Thailand closer via the Trilateral Highway through Myanmar. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bringing-india-and-thailand-closer-via-the-trilateral-highway-through-myanmar>
 22. <https://mea.gov.in/>