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Tourism Industry in India: A Systematic Review of Potential and Performance

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Abstract

The Indian tourism sector has emerged as a crucial driver of economic growth, making a substantial contribution to the national gross domestic product and functioning as a major source of employment, supporting approximately 85 million jobs. This study, titled Tourism Industry in India: A Systematic Review of Potential and Performance, offers a thorough assessment of the sector's inherent potential in comparison with its actual performance from 1990 to 2023. Employing a qualitative and descriptive Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, the research aggregates authoritative secondary data from national bodies such as the Ministry of Tourism and from peer-reviewed publications. The review concentrates on five key impediments to the Tourism industry's development:Infrastructure Bottlenecks and Poor Connectivity, Environmental Degradation and Inadequate Waste Management, Socio-Cultural Disruptions and Safety Concerns Seasonality and Economic Volatility, Technological Barriers and Human Resource Gaps, The findings indicate that while digital transformation and government initiatives have spurred growth, a notable paradox of performance persists, whereby rapid modernization often clashes with social and environmental capital. The study concludes that, to achieve the goal of a $5 trillion economy by 2030, India's tourism sector must transition from a volume-driven, mass-consumption model to a value-based, sustainable performance framework. This necessitates coordinated strategic planning, the integration of Smart Tourism ecosystems, and the adoption of circular economy practices to ensure inclusive and resilient growth.

Keywords: Tourism Industry, Systematic Literature Review, Infrastructure, Major Issue in Indian Tourism, Sociocultural Disruption.

1. Introduction

Tourism constitutes one of the most rapidly expanding sectors within the global economy and has emerged as a transformation catalyst for economic development, cultural exchange, and social cohesion. For a nation as diverse and culturally rich as India, tourism extends beyond mere recreation; it functions as a strategic tool for poverty reduction, regional advancement, and foreign exchange earnings. The Indian subcontinent, endowed with an unparalleled mosaic of landscapes, civilizations, spiritual heritage, and biodiversity, possesses one of the most formidable natural and cultural tourism assets in the world. (Suryanarayana, 2019).

Tourism is a cultural, social, and economic activity that involves travel within or beyond one's usual surroundings for business or personal purposes. It encompasses time spent away from home to seek entertainment, relaxation, and happiness, while benefiting from the services provided by various businesses. (Singh, 2014).

Tourism as an industry is recognized as one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, operating as a multifaceted, service-oriented field. It is not defined by a single product but by a constellation of activities, services, and industries—including transportation, accommodation, food and beverage establishments, retail, and entertainment—that collectively deliver a travel experience. (Sai, 2021)

Notwithstanding this vast potential, India's share of global international tourist arrivals has remained disproportionately small relative to comparable countries. In 2019, India attracted approximately 10.93 million international tourist arrivals, compared to France's 90 million and China's 65.7 million, highlighting a central paradox: a nation well endowed with potential continues to underperform in global tourism relative to its capabilities. (Godara et al., 2020)

The period from 1990 to 2023 has seen substantial transformations in India's tourism sector. Government initiatives such as the Incredible India campaign, the e-Tourist Visa (e-TV) scheme, PRASAD, HRIDAY, and the Swadesh Darshan scheme have collectively spurred growth and modernization. Concurrently, digital platforms, the sharing economy, and enhanced aviation connectivity have broadened access to Indian tourism destinations. (Vasantha Arockiaselvi, 2021)

Nevertheless, structural vulnerabilities—including inadequate infrastructure, environmental degradation, socio-cultural disruptions, seasonal demand fluctuations, and notable human resource gaps—have consistently constrained the sector's ability to translate latent potential into sustained, high-quality performance. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these weaknesses, triggering a severe contraction from which the sector is still recovering. (Dogra, 2021)

This study undertakes a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to critically examine and synthesize the evidence base regarding the Indian tourism industry's potential and performance over the period 1990–2023. By mapping five prominent thematic issues identified across the reviewed literature, the paper seeks to provide policy-relevant insights to guide India toward realizing its aspiration of becoming a world-class tourism destination and contributing to the $5 trillion economy target by 2030. (Agrawal, 2021).

1.1. Overview of the Indian Tourism Industry

Historical Evolution (1990–2023)

India's engagement with contemporary tourism can be categorized into four developmental phases. The first phase, 1990–2000, featured gradual liberalization following the 1991 economic reforms, which opened avenues for foreign direct investment in hospitality, aviation, and related sectors. The second phase, 2000–2010, saw the 2002 launch of the Incredible India campaign, significantly enhancing India's brand visibility in international markets (Nakajo, 2018).

The third phase, 2010–2019, was characterized by digital disruption, infrastructure investment, and policy innovation. The 2014 introduction of the e-Tourist Visa, expanded to 169 countries by 2019, marked a milestone in simplifying entry procedures and contributed to a rise in inbound arrivals. The PRASAD and HRIDAY schemes directed public investment toward pilgrimage and heritage sites. During this period, international tourist arrivals increased from 5.78 million in 2010 to 10.93 million in 2019, an 89% rise (Saqib & Satar, 2018).

The fourth phase, 2020–2023, was dominated by the existential shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. International arrivals fell by nearly 75% in 2020, and domestic tourism—serving as a crucial buffer—also contracted sharply due to mobility restrictions. The sector lost an estimated 38 million jobs during

the pandemic, and the subsequent recovery has been gradual and uneven, with activity not yet fully returning to pre-pandemic levels (Dogra, 2021).

2. Major Issues in Indian Tourism.

A substantial corpus of scholarly work has explored the Indian tourism industry from varied theoretical and regional standpoints. The following sections synthesize key insights organized around the five principal issue domains that form the analytical core of this study. Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates that India's tourism sector holds a paradox: immense latent potential constrained by deeply rooted structural challenges. Thematic analysis was utilized to organize and synthesize the reviewed literature into five key issue areas. Each area was scrutinized in terms of challenges, causes, consequences, and potential strategic responses, using evidence from multiple regions to develop findings that can be generalized to India's tourism policy framework.

a) Infrastructure Bottlenecks and Poor Connectivity

Infrastructure shortcomings constitute the most pervasive and systemic obstacle confronting Indian tourism. The problem manifests across several levels: national-level connectivity (air, rail, and highway networks linking states and regions); regional-level connectivity (roads, waterways, and local transport systems serving tourist zones); and destination-level amenities (the quality of roads within tourist areas, sanitation facilities, signage, and last-mile transportation options). (Phukon et al., 2021; Hussain & Shivashanmugam, 2020; Bindu Nair et al., 2020)

Although India's airport infrastructure has significantly improved due to privatization and modernization of major airports, it remains insufficient in second- and third-tier cities that function as gateways to substantial cultural and natural destinations. Rail connectivity, while extensive, is marked by poor punctuality and limited direct links between tourist destinations and major urban centers. In the North Eastern states, Jammu & Kashmir, and remote Himalayan and island regions, the infrastructure challenge is particularly severe, effectively creating a dual tourism economy. (Phukon et al., 2021; Hussain & Shivashanmugam, 2020; Sarkar, 2020)

The deficiency in high-quality sanitation infrastructure warrants particular attention. Various studies and visitor surveys have identified inadequate toilet facilities—especially for female travelers—as a significant deterrent to both domestic and international tourism. This issue is especially pronounced at pilgrimage sites, natural parks, and rural tourism circuits where large numbers of visitors arrive without commensurate sanitary infrastructure. (Bindu Nair et al., 2020; Mahalakshmi & Raj, 2020; Laskar, 2020)

b) Environmental Degradation and Inadequate Waste Management

The environmental footprint of tourism in India has reached crisis levels in several prominent destinations. The paradox of tourism-driven environmental decline is notably evident in ecologically sensitive areas: Himalayan hill stations, valued for their pristine natural beauty, are themselves being degraded by the tourism activities they generate. The accumulation of plastic waste along trekking routes, within river systems, and on beaches has become a defining and profoundly problematic characteristic of the Indian tourism landscape. (Gurung et al., 2022; Mahalakshmi & Raj, 2020; Bindu Nair et al., 2020)

India's rapid growth in domestic tourism since 2015, propelled by rising middle-class incomes and enhanced domestic air connectivity, has exerted unprecedented pressure on destinations that lack carrying capacity management to regulate visitor flows. The absence of robust environmental impact

assessment frameworks for new tourism infrastructure, coupled with insufficient waste management funding for local municipalities in tourist areas, has resulted in a systemic failure to internalize the environmental costs associated with tourism expansion. (Sarkar & Chaudhury, 2020; Patale & Tank, 2020)

Coastal destinations—such as Goa, the Andaman Islands, and Kerala's backwaters—face multiple environmental threats, including water pollution from inadequately treated waste water, degradation of coral reefs, and loss of mangrove cover. Hill stations contend with solid waste accumulation, depletion of water resources, and land degradation due to construction activity. Sacred river systems confront severe pollution challenges intensified by pilgrimage tourism. (Sarkar & Chaudhury, 2020; Patale & Tank, 2020; Gurung et al., 2022)

c) Socio-Cultural Disruptions and Safety Concerns

India's tourism-related socio-cultural impacts are intricate and hotly debated. On the affirmative side, tourism can function as a robust mechanism for preserving and commercializing indigenous arts, crafts, performing arts, and culinary traditions. Conversely, unregulated mass tourism risks commodifying and distorting cultural practices, displacing local communities from economically valuable lands, and fostering social tensions between host communities and visitors. (Sarkar & Chaudhury, 2020; Mahalakshmi & Raj, 2020; Phukon et al., 2021)

Safety constitutes a particularly critical factor in India's international tourism competitiveness. Notable incidents of crime against travelers, especially against female foreign visitors, have attracted extensive negative international media attention and have adversely affected India's destination image in key source markets such as Europe, North America, and East Asia. Government measures like the Tourist Police program have offered partial remedies, yet comprehensive improvements in law enforcement, judicial accountability, and public awareness campaigns are required. (Nair et al., 2020; Sarkar & Chaudhury, 2020; Hussain & Shivashanmugam, 2020)

Equitable distribution of tourism's economic benefits represents a vital aspect of sustainable tourism that is often overlooked in Indian policy formation. When the majority of tourism revenue accrues to large hotel chains, tour operators, and corporate entities while local artisans, farmers, and small enterprises receive only marginal gains, local communities may resist tourism development, potentially destabilizing otherwise viable tourism zones. (Mahalakshmi & Raj, 2020; Gloriana & Mishra, 2022; Bharali, 2020)

d) Seasonality and Economic Volatility

India's tourism demand exhibits pronounced seasonal fluctuations that induce structural economic instability for businesses and workers reliant on tourism. The concentration of international arrivals in the October–March interval, driven by the subtropical climate, results in hotels, restaurants, transport providers, and retail establishments in beach and cultural destinations experiencing six months of strong demand followed by six months of markedly reduced activity. (Devi et al., 2019; Bindu Nair et al., 2020; Kamashetty & Gadad, 2019)

Economic volatility disproportionately affects the sizable informal workforce associated with tourism-related sectors—such as handicraft vendors, street food vendors, taxi drivers, and local guides—who lack contractual protections, savings buffers, or access to credit to manage seasonal income variations. This fragility was exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the complete halt of tourism left tens of millions of informal workers without income or social protection. (Dogra, 2021; Gloriana & Mishra, 2022; Bharali, 2020)

Strategic responses to seasonality require a multifaceted approach: developing monsoon and winter tourism offerings that exploit India's diverse climatic zones; investing in conference and MICE tourism to reduce seasonal constraints; promoting year-round pilgrimage tourism circuits; and creating agritourism, wellness tourism, and industrial tourism products that are calibrated to maintain demand throughout the year. (Pavlakovič & Turnšek, 2021; Jansirani & Mangai, 2019; Chenglin, 2022)

e) Technological Barriers and Human Resource Gaps

India's tourism sector exhibits a divided digital ecosystem. Enterprises in metropolitan and resort destinations have broadly embraced digital marketing, online booking platforms, property management systems, and customer relationship management tools. By contrast, a large portion of India's expansive tourism milieu—comprising small guesthouses, heritage properties, rural home stays, and local service providers—remains digitally marginalized and unable to participate in the global online tourism marketplace. (Bekele & Raj, 2023; Chavda & Fattania, 2021)

The human resources challenge is multifaceted. At the macro level, India confronts a quantitative shortfall of trained tourism and hospitality professionals relative to the sector's scale, a gap expected to widen as the industry recovers and expands. At the qualitative level, a mismatch exists between the skills supplied by current training institutions and the evolving needs of the industry, which diminishes workforce productivity and service quality. (Sonawane, 2022; Basumatary & Sarma, 2022; Dogra, 2021)

Gender considerations within the human resources challenge are particularly salient. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within the tourism and hospitality sector, even though they form a substantial portion of the front line workforce in accommodation and food services. The integration of artificial intelligence and automation into tourism operations risks aggravating this gender disparity if reskill programs are not explicitly designed to be inclusive and accessible. (Basumatary & Sarma, 2022; Gloriana & Mishra, 2022).

3. Objectives of the Study

This study is directed by the following specific goals:

1. To systematically pinpoint and evaluate the five primary structural challenges hindering the growth of tourism in India: infrastructure shortcomings, environmental harm, socio-cultural disturbances, economic seasonality, and gaps in technology and human resources.
2. To critically integrate region-specific and sector-specific insights from existing literature to derive broad policy recommendations.

4. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative and descriptive Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The sources include government and institutional reports from the Ministry of Tourism (Government of India), the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), peer-reviewed academic journals; empirical research papers, conference proceedings.

5. Detailed Observation

5.1 Infrastructure and Connectivity

Create specialized funds for tourism infrastructure investments aimed at enhancing last-mile connectivity, with a focus on North Eastern India, the Himalayan areas, and rural heritage routes. Speed

up the development of airports in secondary tourism gateway cities through collaborations between the public and private sectors, to lessen reliance on a few overcrowded hub airports. Execute plans for National Tourism Corridor development that incorporate multi-modal transport solutions — including buses, trains, and waterways — alongside tourist destination management.

5.2 Environmental Sustainability

Require Environmental Carrying Capacity evaluations for all significant tourist spots and introduce dynamic visitor management systems to uphold these limits. Implement circular economy models for waste management in tourist areas, with obligatory commitments to reduce plastic usage by hospitality businesses and tourist vehicle operators. Set up Ecotourism Certification Standards with financial incentives for businesses that can prove their adherence to environmental regulations.

5.3 Safety and Socio-Cultural Protection

Greatly expand the Tourist Police initiative with specialized training in cultural sensitivity, language skills, and gender-responsive law enforcement. Create inclusive frameworks for sharing tourism benefits, ensuring a specified minimum portion of tourism income is directed to local community development funds. Initiate targeted international communication campaigns highlighting improvements in India's safety record, featuring verified testimonials from visitors in key source markets.

5.4 Seasonality and Economic Resilience

Invest in developing tourism products that are viable year-round, including monsoon tourism, winter tourism in southern areas, MICE tourism, agritourism, and industrial tourism. Set up dedicated MSME Tourism Support Funds that offer working capital facilities tailored to the seasonal cash flow patterns of small tourism businesses. Formulate comprehensive social protection systems for informal tourism workers, including contributory insurance plans that cover income loss during off-peak seasons and crisis times.

5.5 Technology and Human Resources

Develop a National Smart Tourism Digital Infrastructure Program to extend broadband access, digital payment systems, and tourism management platforms to rural and heritage sites. Establish Public-Private Tourism Training Institutes in underrepresented areas, with curricula co-created by industry stakeholders to ensure they meet evolving market needs. Design gender-responsive reskilling programs that prioritize enhancing the digital, managerial, and entrepreneurial skills of female tourism workers.

6. Discussion

The synthesis of the reviewed literature uncovers a fundamental paradox at the core of India's tourism development. India has the foundation elements for world-class tourism — a remarkable concentration of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, an exceptionally diverse natural environment, a 5,000-year-old civilization heritage, a rapidly growing middle class, and a youthful, entrepreneurial population. However, in every aspect examined, a consistent pattern is evident: the potential significantly surpasses the actual performance. (Agrawal, 2021)

This paradox cannot be pinned down to a single policy misstep or structural flaw. Instead, it arises from a complex mix of institutional fragmentation, persistent under funding, weak regulatory enforcement, and a lack of a long-term strategic vision needed to transform India's tourism assets into globally competitive offerings. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating, it has also acted as a catalyst for introspection and reform, opening up political and institutional opportunities for transformative policy changes. (Dogra, 2021)

Research consistently highlights a crucial turning point: India's tourism industry must decisively shift from a model focused on volume and mass consumption to one centered on value and sustainability. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of the core metrics used to assess the sector's performance — moving beyond mere arrival numbers and foreign exchange earnings to include visitor satisfaction, community benefits, environmental health, and workforce quality. (Sarkar & Chaudhury, 2020)

The idea of Smart Tourism — which involves the integration of IoT technologies, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and seamless digital connectivity into the tourist experience and destination management — presents a compelling framework for India's next stage of development. Smart Tourism ecosystems can tackle multiple challenges at once: real-time crowd management, digital payment systems for informal operators, AI-driven marketing platforms, and data-based monitoring of carrying capacity to safeguard environmental resources. (Bekele & Raj, 2023)

7. Key Findings

The comprehensive review of literature reveals the following summarized insights:

- Despite having exceptional heritage sites, India's tourism sector performs below its potential, attracting only a minor portion of global international tourists.
- Initiatives by the government, such as the Incredible India campaign, relaxed visa regulations (e-TV), and specific infrastructure programs (PRASAD, HRIDAY, Swadesh Darshan), have been beneficial but inadequate to overcome significant structural challenges.
- The most widespread obstacle to tourism expansion in all examined regions is infrastructure limitations, including issues like last-mile connectivity, airport capacity in smaller cities, and the quality of amenities in tourist areas.
- Environmental issues, especially the failure in waste management at hill stations and coastal areas, threaten the ecological resources that drive tourist interest at India's most popular natural attractions.
- Concerns about safety, particularly regarding personal security for female and international visitors, significantly harm India's reputation, reducing potential tourist numbers from valuable source markets.
- The pronounced seasonality of tourism leads to ongoing economic instability for businesses and informal workers in the sector, highlighting structural weaknesses that were severely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A digital gap between urban and rural tourism businesses creates systemic inequality in accessing the global tourism market, restricting the spread of tourism's economic advantages.
- Shortages in human resources, both in quantity and quality, hinder service standards and limit the industry's ability to innovate and grow sustainability.

8. Conclusion

The Indian tourism sector is at a pivotal moment. The intersection of post-pandemic recovery, rapid digital transformation, a youthful and ambitious domestic travel market, and increasing global interest in India's cultural and natural assets presents a truly historic opportunity. To capitalize on this, India must effectively tackle the structural obstacles thoroughly documented in the academic literature reviewed in this study.

The five primary challenges identified — infrastructure bottlenecks, environmental degradation, sociocultural disruptions, economic seasonality, and technological and human resource gaps — are

deeply intertwined structural issues that necessitate integrated, cross-bencher, and muti-stakeholder solutions. Infrastructure investments without environmental protections will exacerbate degradation; digital transformation without inclusive human capital development will widen inequality; safety improvements without community benefit-sharing will not secure lasting social acceptance for tourism development.

A fundamental shift in approach is needed, moving from quantity to quality — from counting arrivals to assessing value; from maximizing volume to optimizing sustainability; from celebrating growth to ensuring resilience. India's goal to become a world-class tourism destination worthy of its remarkable resources requires nothing less than a comprehensive re-imagining of how tourism is planned, managed, promoted, and evaluated.

If India can make this transition by anchoring its tourism strategy in sustainable performance, digital innovation, inclusive growth, and rigorous environmental stewardship, the sector has the potential not only to contribute to the $5 trillion economy target by 2030 but also to serve as a global model for how tourism can be leveraged as a tool for equitable, sustainable, and culturally respectful development.

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