

Tourism Sector In Kerala In The Post-Flood Scenario: Strategies For Its Sustainable Growth With A Focus on Responsible Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Kerala is often referred to as 'God's own Country' because of its enviable natural beauty. Kerala has one of the best resources in the whole of India that are conducive for the growth of tourism. Its features like unique natural endowments, special geographical location, vast coastal areas and better physical infrastructure make it one of the topmost tourism destinations in India and also the whole world. However, Kerala was late in recognizing its huge tourism potential and hence it could not effectively utilize its vast resources for the development of tourism and hence the economy as a whole. The flood that occurred in Kerala in August 2018 has been one of the deadliest the state has witnessed ever since the one in 1924. The flood has adversely affected all facets of Kerala economy including the tourism sector which accounts for about 12 percent of the state's GDP. In this context, this paper has made a closer look into the problems and prospects of Kerala tourism, the impact of the flood havoc on tourism, and its current status. Thus the paper suggests strategies for the sustained growth of Kerala tourism and hence the Kerala economy as a whole, with a focus on the Responsible Tourism (RT) and its variants like Ecotourism. It is noted that despite the adverse effects of the flood, Kerala tourism could exhibit high level of resilience, has gradually picked up and has got bright growth prospects.

Keywords: Employment generation, Tourism earnings, Foreign exchange, Responsible Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that tourism offers excellent potential for employment generation and economic development. So, tourism is promoted actively by nations, particularly the developing nations like India. In fact, at the global level tourism is ranked second highest in terms of income generation and is second only to the oil industry. Tourism has emerged as one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the whole world. The combined effect of enlarged leisure and better purchasing power makes tourism affordable to more people. Every country can play a decisive role in tourism and tourism industry is reckoned as very valuable, particularly for the development of global transportation and communication. Of late, this industry is receiving good attention as a foreign exchange earner and in most parts of the world it is aggressively promoted primarily for attracting more foreign exchange. The huge amounts spent by foreign tourists for accommodation, food, transport, recreation, etc. have got linkage effects resulting in overall economic development of the host countries. In India, after the independence of the country in 1948, the focus of attention of the Government was on the development of sectors like agriculture, industry, infrastructure etc. Tourism sector in India was never considered as a sector with high growth potential and it had been growing at slow pace during the early years of the country's independence. So, Indian tourism could not exploit its vast potential during those years. But, since the last two decades or more, there has been a concerted effort to aggressively promote tourism by the Government of India. Quite similar to the poor tourism performance of Indian tourism among comparable world nations, the relative performance of Kerala tourism in India has been very poor vis-a-vis other states in India. Despite the enviable tourism resources in Kerala, the state is lagging far behind most of the other states in India, notwithstanding the fact that those states have lower tourism potential, i.e. the performance of Kerala tourism has been lower vis-a-vis its vast potential.

As India has been showing the best way to strategize sustainable tourism is by way of encouraging the pursuit of tourism in a responsible manner. It is about sensitizing tourists on the need for conserving and

maintaining the natural wealth and cultural heritage of a nation. It is observed that through hospitality entrepreneur's rural resources, wild-life and adventure, cultural, health, farm tourism. It should be possible to conserve natural resources as well as increase greater monetary benefits to the people at the local level. In the above context, environment-friendly tourism models, particularly the Responsible tourism (RT) model, has assumed tremendous significance in states like Kerala in India. Of late, the Government of Kerala has been giving focused attention on RT, though allied models like ecotourism, rural tourism etc. are also being accorded high priority. RT seeks to measure the effects of tourism on the well being of the host community, their art and culture, by products, hereditary values and knowledge, as well as on local environment. RT tourism envisages minimum negative effect on the culture of the indigenous society, and on the environment. So, RT ensures environmental sustainability besides magnifying host culture. Though RT and its variants like ecotourism have immense growth potential in Kerala because of the huge demand from foreign tourists, these models are yet to pick up adequate growth momentum in the state.

The flood that has occurred in Kerala in August 2018 has adversely affected all industries in the state, particularly the tourism industry. So, the recent flood has given another dimension to the constraints and limitations of Kerala tourism. Suitable remedial measures need to be taken to bring back the flood-hit tourism back to its normalcy.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

The industry report by World Economic Forum (WEF) (2015) [29] 'The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report' has done a detailed study of the competitiveness of various countries of the world, in the travel and tourism front. Competitiveness of nations at the regional and global levels based a number of well-defined parameters is dealt in the WEF report. As per WEF report, the global competitiveness of Indian tourism is only 52 as against 17 in respect of China. This indicates a huge performance gap between the two comparable (and neighbouring) nations of the developing world. At the regional (Asia Pacific region) level too, there is a huge gap in the competitiveness, as India is in the 12th position whereas China is ranked in the 6th position. WTTC (2015) [32] in its latest report, 'Economic Impact of Travel & Tourism 2015 – Annual Update' has made an elaborate account of the relative performance of various countries of the world in the tourism front, including region-wise performance and future projections. WTTC has reported that South Asia, led by India and the Middle East, is globally the fastest growing region in terms of the total contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP. Accordingly, India is one among the bigger, fast growth markets along with China, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey. Besides, WTTC has reported that South Asia will be the fastest growing sub-region for total Travel & Tourism GDP long-run growth to 2025 (7.0 percent) as India outpaces China. Empirical studies on ecotourism in the Indian context, particularly in the context of Kerala state in the Indian union are rather rare. Some relevant studies are briefly discussed here. Kumar, Yathish (2007) [12] has noted that the aim of tourism is to improve the quality of life of people, provide a good experience to the tourists, and maintain the environmental quality which is vital for both the tourists and the local populace. A macro level study done in the Kerala context by Manoj P K (2008) [16], 'Sustainable Tourism in India: A Study from a Global Perspective with Focus on Tourism Prospects of Kerala' points out the vast growth prospects of sustainable tourism in Kerala from a global perspective. The author has suggested some strategies for the faster growth of sustainable tourism with special reference to the Kerala state in India. In another Kerala-based study, Oommen M. A. (2008) [23] warned about the danger of overlooking the environmental sustainability in development activities in the state. While referring to the growing environmental issues in Kerala from the perspective of the state's economic development model viz. 'Kerala model of development' the author has pointed out in detail the environmental and ecological issues that the state faces at present; the current scenario being critically referred to as one of 'Ecological Overkill' in his paper. The day by day worsening situation of the natural environment in Kerala and its adverse impact on the long-term sustainability of tourism has been noted by many researchers, pointing out the need for environment-friendly (nature-friendly) tourism models like ecotourism and its variants like rural tourism, responsible tourism etc. Notably, the macro level study by Manoj P K (2009) [17], 'Environment Friendly Tourism for Sustainable Economic Development in India', for instance, underscores the cardinal significance of tourism in India for its rapid economic development; and at the same time point out the need for

promoting environment-friendly (and hence sustainable) tourism models. The author, thus, makes a few strategies for development of environment-friendly tourism in India. In his book on 'Ecotourism Development Management', Singh, Sarvjeet (2009) [25] has stated that ecotourism is entirely a new approach in tourism and it provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful displays of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity, conservation and local cultures. It focuses on volunteering, personal growth and finding innovative means to live on the earth. It involves travels towards locations wherein flora, fauna, cultural heritage etc. are the main attractions. It encourages the active participation by the local population in the conservation and education dimensions of tourism development process.

In a research article by Manoj P K (2010) [18], 'Tourism in Kerala: A Study of the Imperatives and Impediments with Focus on Ecotourism', the tourism sector in Kerala state in India is analysed in detail using the SWOT model. Accordingly, strategies are suggested for the faster and sustainable development of tourism in Kerala. Sudheer, B (2015) [26] in his research report submitted to University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi titled 'Economic and Cultural Impact of Responsible Tourism Initiative in Kerala – A Case Study of Kumarakom Panchayath' has highlighted the need for alternative and innovative practices like Responsible Tourism (RT) to minimise the negative effects of tourism on environment and to make it sustainable in the long-term. With respect to RT at Kumarakom in Kerala, the positive effects like employment to the local people, empowerment of women through RT-related activities (like, providing vegetables, fish, meat etc. often procured locally), positive linkage effects on the locality (like, earnings arising from the purchases made by tourists) etc. have been pointed out. An empirical study by Manoj P K (2015) (a) [19], 'Prospects of Responsible Tourism in Kerala: Evidence from Kumarakom in Kottayam District' focuses on ecotourism in Kerala and based on the findings of his study makes some suggestions for sustainable ecotourism development in the state. Another empirical study by Manoj P. K (2015) (b) [20], 'Employment Generation from Rural Tourism: A Field Study of the Local Community at Kumbalangi, Kerala' is based on the feedback obtained from the local community about their perceptions on the employment prospects of rural tourism, their expectations about the required Governmental interventions etc. The high prospects of employment generation and economic development on the one hand, and the need for enhanced tourism infrastructure, primarily through Government initiatives, on the other hand, are noted. Another study by Manoj P K (2016) [21], "Impact of Rural Tourism on the Environment and Society: Evidence from Kumbalangi in Kerala, India" has pointed out the obvious positive effects of rural tourism but warned about the urgent need to preserve the environmental purity through managing the inflow of tourism, controlling the use of non-degradable wastes like plastics, better thrust on maintaining the cleanliness etc. A study by Manoj P K (2017) [22], "Segmentation Strategy for Promotion of Ecotourism Products: Evidence from Thenmala Ecotourism", has studied as to whether the socio-economic factors have influenced the decisions of tourists and suggested the segmentation strategy for tourists.

Though there are many studies on tourism in India, including a few studies done in the Kerala context, studies focusing on Kerala tourism in the post-flood scenario are very scarce. So, this paper seeks to bridge this research gap and analyses the post-flood Kerala tourism.

RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The concept of inclusive growth is of utmost significance in India in the contemporary centrality, particularly for a state like Kerala which has got enviable tourism potential. Though tourism is being aggressively promoted by the Government of Kerala, particularly the Responsible Tourism (RT) model (including its variants like ecotourism, rural tourism etc.), tourism is yet to pick up growth momentum in the state. The flood havoc that took place in Kerala in August 2018 has adversely affected all industries, particularly the tourism sector. In the above context, it is relevant to make a focused study of the impact of flood on Kerala tourism with a view to suggest remedial measures, notwithstanding the fact that Kerala tourism has is fast approaching normalcy after the flood havoc. So, this paper analyses the post-flood scenario of Kerala tourism and accordingly suggests suitable remedial strategies.

OBJECTIVES

- (i) To study the prospects and problems of Kerala tourism, in terms of foreign exchange earnings, foreign tourist arrivals etc., with a focus on responsible tourism (RT);

- (ii) To study the impact of flood havoc on Kerala tourism and its current status; and
- (iii) To suggest strategies for the growth of Kerala tourism and hence the Kerala economy.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study is descriptive-analytical and exploratory in nature. Both primary and secondary data are used for this study. Primary data are collected by means of sample survey using an Interview Schedule. Secondary data are collected from the publications of United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), Kerala State Planning Board, tourism statistics of the tourism departments of Governments of Kerala and India, reports on tourism industry by agencies like FICCI, IBEF etc. Popular statistical tools are used for data analysis.

PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS OF TOURISM IN KERALA

In fact, way back in 2000 Kerala had drafted a comprehensive tourism policy viz. *Vision 2020* that had given due consideration to the sustainability aspects of tourism growth along with its economic and feasibility aspects. This policy sought to make tourism one of the core competencies of Kerala and to regulate the tourism initiatives properly taking into account the broader and long-term interests of Kerala, like, environmental conservation, protection of heritage and culture, development of tourism infrastructure, quality standards etc. In short, it aims at using a sustainable and integrated approach to tourism promotion in Kerala. The performance of Kerala tourism has been impressive, both in absolute and relative terms. There has been an increasing trend in respect of foreign tourist arrivals to Kerala over the years and also in the share of Kerala in the tourism revenue for the whole of India.

Despite the good growth prospects for Kerala tourism, there is scope for further improvement in view of its enviable tourism potential as the “God’s own country”. It is noted there are a few areas wherein Kerala has a comparative edge over the rest of India and also other countries of the world. Its unique socio-economic and geographic profile has added significantly towards making it one of the sought-after tourist destinations of the world. The lengthy coastal belt, peculiar geographical location, lush backwaters, a large number of beaches, serene hillocks, moderate climate throughout the year, highly literate populace etc. are some of the factors. It is noted that there has been a growing trend in respect of foreign tourists and domestic tourists to Kerala over the 18 years’ period, 2000 to 2018. Despite the flood havoc, Kerala tourism registered positive growth in tourist arrivals in 2018. (Table I).

Table-I: Trends in Domestic and Foreign Tourist Arrivals into Kerala (2000-2018)

Year	Domestic Tourists	Percentage Change	Foreign Tourists	Percentage Change
2000	5013221	2.6	209533	3.8
2001	5239692	4.5	208830	-0.5
2002	5568256	6.3	232564	11.3
2003	5871228	5.4	294621	26.7
2004	5972182	1.7	345546	17.3
2005	5946423	-4.3	346499	.27
2006	6271724	5.47	428534	23.7
2007	6642941	5.92	515808	20.37
2008	7591250	14.28	598928	16.11
2009	7913537	4.25	557258	-6.96
2010	8595075	8.61	659265	18.31
2011	9381455	9.15	732985	11.18
2012	10076854	7.41	793696	8.28
2013	10857811	7.75	858143	8.12
2014	11695411	7.71	923366	7.60
2015	12465571	6.59	977479	5.86
2016	13172535	5.67	1038419	6.23
2017	14673520	11.39	1091870	5.15

2018	15604661	06.35	1096407	0.42
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Source: Govt. of Kerala (2019), *Economic Survey & Kerala Tourism, Tourism statistics 2018*.

The Dept. of Tourism (DoT) of Kerala state has framed a three-pronged strategy to maintain and further improve the superior image of Kerala tourism in the global tourism map; these three broad strategies being: (i) Product Innovation, (ii) Innovative Marketing, and (iii) Strategic alliance with the Govt. of Rajasthan. Besides, efforts are made in the direction of obtaining the benefits of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for tourism, so that SEZs for tourism could be established meaningfully. The recently drawn up ‘Kerala Tourism Policy 2017’ has been providing a boost to RT initiatives in Kerala, and Responsible Tourism Mission (RT Mission) has been set up to systematically promote RT in Kerala state.

IMPACT OF FLOOD ON KERALA TOURISM AND THE PRESENT STATUS OF KERALA TOURISM

As noted earlier, Kerala tourism could register some positive growth even in 2018 in spite of the adverse impact of the devastating flood that occurred in Kerala in Aug. 2018. In fact, there has been slight growth rate in 2018 (of 0.42 percent, as against 5 to 8 percent in the earlier years till 2017) in the number of foreign tourist arrivals, and reasonably good growth rate (of 6.35 percent, as against 5 to 11 percent in the earlier years till 2017). (Table I).

Year	Foreign Exchange Earnings	Growth in Percentage	Earnings from Domestic Tourists	Total Revenue (Direct & Indirect)	Growth in Percentage
2014	6398.93	15.07	12981.91	24885.44	12.11
2015	6949.88	08.61	13836.78	26689.63	07.25
2016	7749.51	11.51	15348.64	29658.56	11.12
2017	8392.11	08.29	17608.22	33383.68	12.56
2018	8764.46	04.44	19474.62	36258.01	08.61

Source: Govt. of Kerala (2019), *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2018*.

Flood has caused irreparable damage to Kerala economy, particularly Kerala’s tourism sector. The flood that occurred in August 2018 was one of the deadliest that Kerala has ever witnessed since the one in 1924. The flood adversely affected all facets of Kerala economy, particularly the tourism sector which accounts for about 12 percent of the GDP of the state. The post-flood recovery costs, assessed by the UN team in October 2018, are as follows:

Sectors	Recovery Cost
Housing & Land Settlements	Rs. 5659 Cr.
Cultural Heritage	Rs. 73 Cr.
Employment & Livelihood including Tourism	Rs. 3903 Cr.
Environment & Climate change	Rs. 148 Cr.
Agriculture, Fisheries & Livestock	Rs. 4499 Cr.
Health & Nutrition	Rs. 567 Cr.
Education	Rs. 214 Cr.
Water, Sanitation & Hygiene	Rs. 1331 Cr.
Transportation	Rs. 8554 Cr.
Grand Total of Recovery cost (including the above)	Rs.26,985 Cr

Besides the growth in tourist arrivals in the food-hit 2018, there has been reasonably good growth in respect of foreign exchange earnings (of 4.44 percent). In respect of earnings from domestic tourists also, there has been a growth rate of 8.61 percent in 2018 which is quite commendable in view of the odds created because of the flood havoc. (Table II). Thus, in spite of the temporary issues because of the flood havoc, because of

the pro-active steps taken by the Government of Kerala, particularly the Tourism Department of the Government, the tourism industry in Kerala has gradually attained normalcy. The adverse impact of the floods has almost vanished and more tourists are expected in the future. The growth prospects of Kerala tourism is still very bright, provided suitable strategies are adopted to fully recover the flood-hit tourism sector of the state and also to rejuvenate the same to lure more tourists.

In the Kerala scenario, Responsible Tourism (RT) and its variants like Ecotourism, Rural (Farm) Tourism offers excellent growth prospects. The RT experience at Kumarakom in Kottayam district of Kerala has been a role model for the whole nation, and so also is the success of Thenmala Ecotourism in Kollam district and Kumbalangi Rural tourism in Ernakulam district. All these environment-friendly tourism models need to be replicated in other promising tourism destinations. The less known tourism destinations be focused so that the issue of 'over exploitation' of reputed destinations (like, Kumarakom) can be minimised.

SUGGESTIONS BASED ON THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- Kerala has already formed the Responsible Tourism Mission (RTM) in 2007. Responsible Tourism (RT) deserved special attention in Kerala. RT ensures balanced development, particularly the development of the local community. RT models like the one in Kumarakom in Kottayam is a role model for the whole nation. The Kumarakom model needs to be replicated in other destinations too, but considering the local conditions also and hence 'tailor-making' the tourism products on the offer accordingly.
- Events like Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) need to be arranged periodically so as to promote tourism in Kerala in a greater way.
- Remedial measures are required to counter the negative impact of tourism, particularly mass tourism. The environmental degradation because of plastic littering, imbalance in bio-diversity, pollution of water bodies and streams etc., as observed in many ecotourism destinations (like, Thenmala, in Kollam district) needs to be controlled. Mass tourism should give way to 'class tourism' so as to ensure the sustainability and environmental purity. Control is required on the number of tourists in busy destinations.
- Less known destinations have to be promoted so as to reduce the intensity of tourists in well known destinations. This is because of the fact that in many reputed tourism spots the tourist arrivals are more than the carrying capacity of the destination, and this in turn affects the long term sustainability of the respective tourism spots.
- Diverse tourism models, including newer and less common ones like Cruise tourism, adventure tourism etc. can be successfully implemented in Kerala, given the unique geographic advantages of the state, like the vast coastal areas, serene hillocks etc.
- The problems of lack of hygiene and exploitation of tourists are two worst problems. Efforts are required to get rid of these evils from the tourism products on the offer.
- Many tourists are interested in healthcare tourism, and some are interested in studying about traditional products like those based on Ayurveda (Ayurveda tourism). Hence, the Government and other stake holders should provide facilities to encourage such tourists, including those interested in such studies. This would enhance the image of the sector.
- Concerted efforts towards aggressive promotion of Kerala tourism. Given the immense potential of information and communication technology (ICT), the same has to be used not only for tourism promotion but also as a vital element that is embedded in all tourism products and services. ICT is an enabler of superior tourism products and services and also enhanced productivity, and hence ICT adoption needs to be nurtured.
- Special thrust is required on Human Resource Development (HRD) in the tourism sector, particularly with the help of modern ICT-based tools. Only highly skilled and techno-savvy professionals can

provide the kind of service that is expected by the growingly discerning tourists from advanced nations of the world, like the US or UK. Extensive use of ICT in all facets of the delivery of tourism products and services is an imperative for the growth of the sector in Kerala, as is the case elsewhere in the world. Special training be provided to tourist guides on ICT-based tools and applications.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In spite of the adverse impact of flood on Kerala tourism, it is fast picking up in the state. By way of concerned action Kerala can definitely attain complete normalcy in its tourism within a few months. The indications have so far been positive and let us hope that Kerala tourism will attain laurels in the near future itself, say, Dec. 2020.

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