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PROSPECTS OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN INDIA

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Prospects of Accessible Tourism in India

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Abstract – Factors like age, sex, literacy level, marital status are some important attributes that play a major role in travel process. After analysing those attributes mentioned above, it was found that their profiles are more or less similar to general tourists in India. For instance, age profile, sex, marriage status can be seen following the established pattern of general tourists. In terms of education, a healthy trend is that a good chunk of them are well educated and possess graduation degree or above, whereas, illiterates are generally very negligible in numbers. This, in turn, is reflected in their employment status as well with 60% of respondents stating to be in some form of jobs. The private sector emerges to be largest employer followed by public sector. Interestingly, as many as one-third of the domestic respondents are found engaged in some form of self-employment activities. Again, among those employed, nearly 33% of domestic ones work at officer/executive levels, but, corresponding proportion for foreign tourists is about 50%. It further shows the proportion of support staff more in the sample of domestic tourists. Indeed, better employment profile was reflected in their income status, with over 34% of households reportedly earn more than Rs 40000/- per month and another 22% earn in the range of Rs 20001 to Rs 40000/-. However, households of Problems and Prospects of Accessible Tourism in India 133 foreign respondents earning more than one lakh rupees in a month are almost half of the sample. The income pattern thus emerges is a clear indication of their purchasing power as well the market potential.

Key Words : Tourists, Foreign, Purchase

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INTRODUCTION

One of the approaches to understand accessible tourism environment is to decipher the facilitation mechanisms and legal and regulatory provisioning. In recent years, some laws have been enacted to provide a better living environment for disabled citizens. But, knowledge of those laws and availing the benefits embedded in various provisions thereof by the beneficiaries is central to an effective framework. Conclusions derived from this study indicate that respondents are generally aware of disability laws and understandably, foreigners are more knowledgeable on those. Encouraging enough is that a majority of those knew of different provisions under laws have been availing many benefits enshrined in, whose proportion among foreigners is as high as 96 %. The membership pattern of respondents in different disability-specific organisations is found to be not very encouraging. A low membership rate could be attributable to either lack of awareness of these organisations and the benefit of such memberships, lack of interest or disclosure of the same by the respondent. It was further found that some charitable organisations active in this domain do conduct tours for their members.

Attitude of people working in tourism establishments is often reported as a major factor in determining travel propensity of tourists with disabilities /reduced mobility. It is encouraging to find from this study that attitude of

employees working in tourism industry in general are supportive. However, attitudinal problems still persist irrespective of some positive orientations in recent years, thereby calling due attention of the stakeholders, especially in moulding positive attitude towards the needs of tourists with disabilities. This conclusion stems from the analysis of major barriers being encountered by them at different facets of travel.

There are certain reasons for unfavourable attitude towards them, which according to respondents, can be attributable to need of extra-time and poor understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities figure prominently. Few tourists even have the opinion that attitude is very favourable towards them.

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.

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.

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. Even though 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.

➤ To minimise the difficulties of old-age and other travellers with reduced mobility at the railway stations, sudden change of platforms for designated trains can be avoided. Railway stations should be made accessible by providing access to all platforms through lifts (wherever possible), facilities like toilets, drinking water, cafeterias and other public places.

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.

CONCLUSION :

The developing countries must first develop the human resources in order to develop the Tourism institutional structure in which technological innovation can occur on a large scale. Economic development can succeed only when the environment as a whole is conducive to change and innovation at all levels and on all fronts especially in Tourism Industry. This will require educated masses, literate and national masses.

The strategies supported to achieve the goal of human resources development in Tourism Industry include more open government, more transparent and accountable public administration and development of energetic entrepreneurship in developing countries and further liberalization of markets and goods, capital, technology and tourism products. This would require joint action programmes. A new vision for global co-operation for the next century is needed.

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