



Paryatan Parv: An occasion to further explore the rich diversity of India

Instead of going in for routine tourist places, it is high time Indians explored the nook and corners of our beautiful country; rather than staying at hotels, living with people to learn about the traditions and customs

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi in one of his recent 'Mann ki Baat' had urged the people to discover the wonders of #IncredibleIndia. Taking on the cue, the Ministry of Tourism has organised the 'Paryatan Parv', which is being touted as "a celebration of India's rich tourist heritage".

The Union Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with other central ministries, various state governments and stakeholders is currently organising 'Paryatan Parv' across India from October 5-25, 2017 drawing focus on the benefits of tourism, showcasing our cultural diversity and reinforcing the principle of 'Tourism for All'.

It is a wonderful coincidence that the 'Paryatan Parv', a celebration in the festival loving country such as ours, is happening during the peak festive season, also a time when many people take out time to tour various parts of India. But for various reasons, people continue to visit the more popular, more exploited sites rather than exploring newer, lesser known places. Instead of going in for routine tourist places, it is high time Indians explored the nook and corners of our beautiful country; rather than staying at hotels, living with people to learn about the traditions and customs

The 'Paryatan Parv' seems to offer this opportunity. Two things from the comprehensive government plan that stood out for me are the interstate engagement matrix under the 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' scheme and the guidelines for CBSE affiliated schools to visit heritage monuments among other programmes for getting students interested in cultural and traditional diversity of India.

The idea that school students should visit monuments is not a new one, albeit linking it with the paradigm of 'tourism and studies' gives it a new twist. Imagine a class learning about the conquest by Chhatrapati Shivaji sitting at a fort in Maharashtra? Or imagine, learning about what Akbar did sitting at the Agra fort? The heritage monuments are a treasure trove of information. They offer not just lessons in history but also in that era's architecture and traditional practices. What better way to understand it than an actual visit?

India is lucky, it is endowed with more than 3500 monuments of national importance (that are taken care of by the Archaeological Survey of India) and almost 10,000 other monuments that are taken care of by different state governments.

Similarly, imagine, people from Kerala engaging with those from Himachal Pradesh. Or for that matter, people from Madhya Pradesh meeting and seeking to know more about those from Nagaland and Manipur. What a beautiful concept, if implemented well!! After all, didn't Adi Shankaracharya formulate the concept of char dhams in four corners of India and envisaged people visiting 12 jyotirlingas in various parts of the country?

If not for pilgrimage, but for knowing the rich traditions and culture of our vast land, people should engage with those from other states, further the better. This is exactly what the Tourism Ministry through 'Paryatan Parv' can harp on - envisaging through this exchange that "the knowledge of the language, culture, traditions and practices of different states will lead to an enhanced understanding and bonding between one another, thereby strengthening the unity and integrity of India."

Rising domestic tourism:

'Namaste!' has been India's identity across the world. India has attracted tourists from all over the world and not just now but since ages. While foreign tourists' arrival brings in the much-needed foreign currency, and hence are given a priority, it is equally important to ensure domestic tourists are not neglected.

As per Tourism Ministry's Annual Report for 2016-17, domestic tourism continues to be an important contributor for the tourism sector in India. As per the data furnished by the state/UT governments and other information available with the Ministry of Tourism, the domestic tourist visits during the year 2015 were 1432 million as compared to 1282.8 million in 2014, registering a growth of 11.63% over 2014.

This is a huge number as compared to the number of foreign tourist arrival in India (8.03 million) in the same time showing annual growth rate of 4.5 % over previous year. The stakeholders, including authorities, in the tourism sector will need to understand the rising trend in case of domestic tourism.

For instance, from about 190.67 million domestic tourists in 1999 to about 1,431.97 million in 2015, the domestic tourism industry has undergone a sea change, seen a whopping 651.02% rise in just 16 years. Perhaps, keeping in mind all such things, the government has already initiated an exercise to formulate a comprehensive revised tourism policy by March 2018.

There was a time when people stepped out only for pilgrimage and tourism only meant luxury pursued by few moneyed people. Today, as more and more common men and women seek to step out and explore various parts of India, domestic tourism has spanned almost all fields beyond pilgrimages. This opens a positive opportunity for the government and all other stakeholders to further explore and exploit the rising sector.

Tourism infrastructure and livelihood

The elaborate planning by the Tourism Ministry and the complimentary programmes chalked out by other central ministries and state governments go on to show the sheer variety that is possible in tourism sector and how it can have an impact on almost all other ministries/fields - Education, Culture, Textiles, Development of North-East India, Rural Development and even Information & Broadcasting Ministry. Tourism needs stable infrastructure, tourism needs peaceful law and order situation and tourism needs an inviting host. In return, tourism gives much needed livelihood to local population and revenue to the government.

India is known world over for its hospitality and in most parts of India, law and order situation is tourist-friendly. But apart from major metro cities and few of the places on tourist map, the tourism related infrastructure needs lots of improvement. Scores of smaller places first need to be identified for promotion of tourism, the last mile connectivity needs to be ensured, infrastructure for visiting and resident tourists needs to be developed. This includes availability of decent accommodation and food services. Many potential places across India remain oblivious to tourists only because one or more of the above factors do not work in their favour.

The tourism ministry has encouraged and developed a chain of B&B (Bed and Breakfast) homes across urban centres well. But it is now time to concentrate on 'Home Stays' in rural and semi-urban areas. Only such Home Stays can bring in sustainable tourism as against the big-ticket hotel industry that often leads to draining local natural resources. Plus, Home Stays are a better way to interact directly with the local population and to know about their traditions and culture. Home Stays will also improve livelihood opportunities for the locals rather than the hotel industry where profits are pocketed by outsiders.

'Paryatan Parv' can be a good opportunity to identify these weak links. Not just for this time slot, but for a better, sustainable future in tourism.

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Views expressed in the article are author's personal.

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