GES1006/GESS1004

Research Essay

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(Tutorial E1)
Word Count: 1992

Bridging Cultures, Boosting Economies: The Dynamic Role of Tourism in India-Singapore Relations

Introduction:

India and Singapore have enjoyed a robust and multifaceted relationship that traces back to the Cholas who are credited with naming the island and establishing a permanent settlement. In the 19th century, Sir Stamford Raffles established a trading station in Singapore to protect British East India Company ships travelling between India and China (Ministery Of External Affairs, India, 2014). This solidified Singapore's strategic location for the British Empire in India. Over the years, we developed a very strong strategic partnership, which covers a whole gamut of areas of cooperation including trade, tourism, security and defence (Shekhar, 2007).

One of the key pillars of the India-Singapore relationship has been the tourism sector, which has acted as a political, economic and cultural bridge between the two nations and it cannot be overstated. Singapore, renowned for its modern infrastructure, diverse attractions, and cultural affinities, has long enticed Indian tourists. Conversely, India, with its rich tapestry of heritage, vibrant culture, and natural splendour, has drawn a substantial number of Singaporean visitors each year.

Tourism promotes economic prosperity and people-to-people contacts, facilitating better understanding and cooperation between governments and businesses. It enables the exchange of cultural heritage, ideas, knowledge, practices, traditions, and values, fostering mutual respect and appreciation, promoting cross-cultural understanding further deepening bilateral ties.

This essay seeks to explore the contribution of Tourism in enhancing the ties between Singapore and India. Particularly, diving into the trends and strategies employed by both countries regarding tourism, along with their effects on various levels and further analysis of the challenges and the solutions beneficial for both nations.

Overview of Tourism Trends and Strategies

In the early years after Singapore's independence in the 1960s, the two nations began collaborating to promote tourism and cultural exchanges. Singapore leveraged its position as a safe, efficient, and business-friendly destination and India's "Incredible India" campaign launched in 2002 helped raise awareness of India's diverse tourism offerings. In recent years, both countries have experienced a surge in visitor arrivals, underscoring the importance of tourism as a key driver of bilateral cooperation and economic growth.

In 2023, Singapore saw a substantial 115% increase in overall visitor numbers, reaching 13.6 million from 6.3 million in 2022 (TravelBizMonitor, 2024). Singapore received 1.1 million Indian tourists in 2023, with India becoming its 5th tourism-generating market and expecting over 1.5 million Indian tourists in 2024. India's inbound tourism sector has witnessed remarkable growth, with foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) surging by 64% in 2023 compared to

the previous year reaching 9.2 million visitors (TheHinduBusinessLine, 2024). The contribution of Singaporean tourists in the total FTA was only 1.8% in 2022 (Statista, 2023) which is very low as compared to Indian tourists coming to Singapore.

India and Singapore have implemented strategies to boost tourism, including enhanced connectivity with direct flights and streamlined visa processes. Singapore offers e-visa facilities and visa-free transit for Indians, with a quick processing time. The sizable Indian diaspora in Singapore fosters a sense of familiarity for Indian travellers, highlighting the country's diverse attractions. Singapore's well-maintained infrastructure and efficient public transportation system ensure visitors' security and convenience. Collaborations with digital platforms and campaigns like "Singapore Reimagine Reopening" and "#SingaporeInspired" promote the nation's safety and cultural richness. Additionally, Singapore's pro-business environment attracts business tourism, leveraging its efficient regulatory framework and ease of doing business.

India has implemented schemes such as Swadesh Darshan 2.0 and PRASHAD to bolster tourism infrastructure and develop religious sites. Collaboration with central agencies supports nationwide infrastructure enhancement efforts (PIB Delhi, 2023). India offers e-visa facilities and 'Tourist Visa-on-Arrival' at select airports for Singaporean tourists. Initiatives like the Pan-India Incredible India Tourist Facilitator Certification Program and Capacity Building for Service Providers aim to train citizens as tourism facilitators, enhancing India's allure as a tourist destination.

Furthermore, both countries have actively engaged in government initiatives and agreements to boost tourism cooperation. The Air Services Agreement governs air travel, while the Joint Action Plan, MoU with ASEAN nations and MoU with the state of Rajasthan facilitate joint marketing, promotional activities, and business collaborations in the tourism sector.

Strengthening Political Ties through Tourism:

Tourism promotion and the resulting people-to-people exchanges play a crucial role in strengthening political relations between India and Singapore. As citizens of both countries engage in travel and cultural exchanges, it fosters greater understanding, trust, and goodwill, which can positively influence diplomatic relations.

Tourism has been a part of high-level diplomatic engagements and used as a tool for public diplomacy. For instance, the Joint Action Plan and Air Services Agreement between India and Singapore encourages reciprocal visits of media representatives, travel agents, and tourism operators, aiming to create awareness about tourist attractions in each other's countries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Such initiatives contribute to building stronger ties between the governments and fostering a positive perception of each nation among their respective citizens.

The growing political and economic engagement between India and Singapore is evident from the increasing number of high-level visits and agreements. In recent years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Singaporean counterparts have made multiple reciprocal visits, discussing cooperation in areas such as vocational education, skills training, and tourism. For instance, Singapore set up a Skills Centre in Delhi and planned a Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality in Udaipur, Rajasthan, to train Indian youth, further strengthening the people-to-people linkages (The StraitsTimes, 2016).

A robust tourism industry fosters cultural diplomacy, facilitating the exchange of ideas and traditions between India and Singapore. Tourism serves as soft power, with tourists acting as unofficial ambassadors who shape public perceptions through word-of-mouth recommendations and shared travel experiences. Positive interactions contribute to greater understanding and goodwill between nations, strengthening political relationships at the grassroots level. Direct interactions and connections between the citizens of both countries can break down stereotypes, promote intercultural dialogue, and create personal networks and relationships. As tourists immerse themselves in the local culture, customs, and way of life, they develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the host country and its people. This first-hand experience can challenge preconceived notions and foster greater empathy and respect.

For example, before visiting Singapore, my family perceived it as a glamorous city known for opulent living, but with a limited understanding of its lifestyle and diverse populace. Similarly, I initially assumed it was predominantly Chinese, with little Tamilian presence. However, my visit unveiled Singapore's rich history of Tamilian migration and its vibrant multicultural society. This experience broadened my understanding and sparked a desire to share it with others. As I shared my insights, my family's curiosity was piqued, leading them to plan their visits. This highlights tourism's role in dispelling stereotypes, fostering cultural appreciation, and stimulating curiosity about diverse destinations like Singapore.

Enhancing Economic Ties through Tourism:

Tourism promotion has significant economic implications for both India and Singapore. The tourism sector contributes approximately 4% to Singapore's GDP and 5.9% to India's GDP, showcasing its substantial impact on the respective economies. Singapore's tourism receipts reached $20.1 billion between January to September 2023 (Singapore Tourism Board, 2024). India's financial earnings from expenditure (FEEs), stood at ₹2,31,927 crore or $28.077 billion during the same period (TheHinduBusinessLine, 2024).

Beyond these direct contributions, the tourism industry generates numerous business opportunities, investments, and collaborations. STB and MakeMyTrip collaborated on joint activations and campaigns aimed at increasing inbound travel to Singapore. With two offices in Mumbai and Delhi, STB promotes Singapore attractions as a holiday destination aggressively in India (The Economic Times, 2024)This not only creates economic value but also fosters knowledge about the place, further strengthening economic ties.

Furthermore, the influx of tourists from both countries generates foreign exchange earnings and supports employment in various sectors, including transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, and retail. This economic impact can foster greater interdependence and incentivize both countries to strengthen their economic cooperation.

Strengthening Cultural Ties through Tourism:

Tourism serves as a powerful medium for showcasing and preserving the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and diversity of both India and Singapore. Through cultural tourism initiatives, visitors can experience and appreciate the unique art, cuisine, festivals, and architectural marvels of each country, fostering cross-cultural understanding and respect.

For instance, India's diverse cultural attractions, including ancient monuments like the Taj Mahal, spiritual destinations like Varanasi, vibrant festivals such as Diwali and Holi, and rich culinary traditions, draw a substantial number of Singaporean tourists. Conversely, Singapore's blend of modern and traditional elements, such as its skylines, hawker centres, and ethnic enclaves, fascinate Indian visitors.

Singapore's premier cultural diplomacy platform, Spotlight Singapore, has engaged in programs in Delhi, fostering mutual understanding and business exchange. Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association (LISHA) Collaboration agreed to collaborate to raise awareness of Singaporean Indian culture through events and community outreach programs. The Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS) signed a MoU with Delhi University to promote collaboration in the development of Indian art forms. This initiative fosters cultural exchange through education and artistic expression. By facilitating these cultural collaborations, Singapore is not only promoting greater understanding between the two countries but also helping to preserve and celebrate invaluable cultural heritage, further strengthening the ties between Singapore and India.

Addressing Challenges, Opportunities, Future Prospects and Recommendations:

While promoting tourism between Singapore and India holds immense potential, it is crucial to address the challenges and capitalise on opportunities for mutual benefit.

Indian tourists face several challenges when visiting Singapore, including budget constraints due to the high cost of living, limited room availability, high hotel rates, and a shortage of manpower, impacting service quality and meeting demand. Additionally, there are undiscovered facets of Singapore that Indian travellers may not be aware of. To tackle these issues, the Singaporean government can promote budget-friendly experiences, such as hawker centres, public transportation, and free attractions. They can also offer value-for-money tour packages and highlight affordable accommodation options like hostels and guesthouses. Leveraging digital marketing channels can help showcase lesser-known areas like Little India and its historical significance, as well as specific shops or streets that offer unique experiences not commonly explored by tourists.

India has issues like a lack of proper infrastructure, insufficient human resources, high taxation, health and hygiene and security issues and negative perceptions. To tackle these issues, the Indian Government can prioritize infrastructure development in tourist destinations, focus on improving sanitation standards, increase tourist police forces in key tourist areas educate tourists about potential safety concerns and provide safety tips for navigating unfamiliar areas. Furthermore, they should run targeted marketing campaigns in Singapore showcasing the diverse offerings of India create positive content and change the perception of people.

Furthermore, there is immense potential for further growth and collaboration in tourism promotion between Singapore and India. This could involve joint marketing campaigns, cultural exchange programs, and facilitation of business partnerships in the tourism sector. Policymakers, tourism agencies, and stakeholders should prioritize initiatives that leverage the strengths of both countries and address existing challenges.

Conclusion:

Tourism has played a pivotal role in strengthening the multifaceted relationship between India and Singapore. The thriving tourism industry has fostered political, economic, and cultural ties between the two nations. Through increased people-to-people exchanges, tourism has built trust, understanding, and goodwill, positively influencing diplomatic relations. Economically, the tourism sector generates substantial revenue, employment, and business opportunities, reinforcing the interdependence between the two countries. Culturally, tourism has served as a medium for showcasing and preserving the rich heritage and diversity of India and Singapore, deepening mutual appreciation and respect.

While challenges such as cost of living, infrastructure gaps, and negative perceptions exist, the immense potential for further growth and collaboration in tourism promotion remains. By addressing these issues through joint initiatives, targeted marketing campaigns, and policy support, India and Singapore can harness the power of tourism to strengthen their strategic partnership and create a more prosperous future for their citizens. The future of tourism cooperation between Singapore and India looks promising, with immense potential for joint marketing campaigns, cultural exchange programs, and facilitation of business partnerships in the sector.

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