

Sri Lanka's tourism and India's quantum leap

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Among the country's priority areas, tourism is given prominence as a dependable source of income which could be activated promptly to resolve the current foreign exchange crisis. However, amid the present chaotic situation where some essentials are in short supply while the others are unavailable, the tourism industry is one among the worst hit within the country's industrial realm.

According to leading Sri Lankan hoteliers, many tourist bookings for the oncoming season have been cancelled. This is a pathetic situation, particularly when viewed in relation to the country's potential to rise as a global tourism hub, which could dominate the international tourism arena.

Sri Lanka's natural resources alone are sufficient to enrich the country's tourism base. Those natural resources need no further expensive modifications or alterations to qualify as factors appealing to tourists seeking unique experiences in their globetrotting endeavours.

The country has enough sanctuaries and other wildlife parks comprising a wide range of species in the fauna and flora realm. The island's territorial waters not affected by cold climate during any part of the year offer ample opportunities for elevating the local tourism industry to great heights. That assortment of sanctuaries, parks and oceanic sites along with other resources enriching the local tourism arena could be used as bases for eco-tourism, water sports, under-sea expeditions and various other exploratory and adventure oriented pursuits.

Seasonal influences

These are components which could be activated throughout the year without interferences from seasonal influences. But the situation is different in other regions of the global tourism sphere. Most destinations recognised as leading tourism bases are subject to seasonal influences. France, Spain, the USA, China, Italy, Turkey and Mexico are typical examples.

Amid this analysis oriented in examining the potential present in Sri Lanka to qualify as a tourism hub, let us take a look at the prevailing situation here. The decline in the trade, as prevailing circumstances manifest, is at an all-time low. This is the result of several adverse influences, main among which are the Covid-19 pandemic and the country's economic crisis.

Tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka, when compared to neighbouring India have been very low. In 2019, prior to the advent of the Covid pandemic, the tourist arrivals in India stood at 10.93 million. Out of this, 6.87 million visited the Tamil Nadu State which is the Indian State closest to Sri Lanka. But the total arrivals in Sri Lanka during the same year were 1.9 million.

This situation is an eye opener for the local tourism sector. The question we have to ask upon being confronted with these facts is as to why Sri Lanka is in such a dire state, falling far behind even the Tamil Nadu State of India, in spite of the country being an attractive destination in the world tourism realm, possessing almost every conceivable qualification to be among the top.

Tourists from far away destinations such as Europe and the American region do not come to Sri Lanka in search of comforts in luxury hotels or opportunities to participate in pastimes such as gambling. An in depth search into their motives in visiting countries such as Sri Lanka, India and other South Asian nations would reveal that they come to these warmer regions of the globe to experience the unique situations and phenomena present there.

Warmer regions

These unique situations and phenomena attractive to those tourists are present in almost every facet of the country's tourism industry. Tourists from the North American and other cold regions where the temperature reaches sub zero levels during winter are eager to visit the warmer regions of the globe when the climate is inhospitable there. Thus, Sri Lanka, India and other neighbouring countries are havens for them particularly during the cold seasons in their homelands.

When looking at tourism related activities in the warmer regions of the globe, it becomes evident that a major portion of them are linked to the eco-tourism sector. According to a recent report, 7 percent of global tourism activities are concerned with wild life. In Africa, this is 70-80 percent with most international visitors from Europe and the United States.

A recent study on global tourism has revealed that in 2020, the global eco-tourism market sector was US\$ 176.03 billion which was expected to expand at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 10.3 percent from 2021 to 2028.

In the Sri Lankan context, the total earnings from all sectors of the tourism industry stood at US\$ 1.08 billion in 2020. This is 0.61 percent of the global eco-tourism earnings. The figure would have been much lower when compared to the earnings on all sectors of the global tourism trade. The travel and tourism sectors' direct contribution to the global GDP in 2020 was around US\$ 4.7 trillion. Apparently, this estimate has taken into account the full global expenditure on the movement of people between different destinations.

The estimated earnings in the global tourism sector for 2020 were US\$ 396.37 billion which was a decrease of 42.1 percent from the previous year, caused by the Covid pandemic. Thus, the earnings in 2019 have stood at US\$ 684.57 billion.

However, the originally forecasted income in the global tourism sector for 2020, prior to the impact of the Covid pandemic was US\$ 712 billion. Sri Lanka's earnings of US\$ 1.08 billion on tourism in 2020, as a percentage of the forecasted global earnings were 0.1516 percent. Had Sri Lanka been able to clinch a 1 percent share of this, the earnings on tourism in 2020 would have stood at US\$ 7.12 billion.

Here we have to acknowledge the fact that the Covid pandemic upset all plans in the global tourism sector in 2020-2021. Sri Lanka was no exception and had to face the same fate as other nations.

Income

But take a look at the 2019 figures. The income in the global tourism sec-



tor in 2019 was US\$ 684.57 billion. Sri Lanka's earnings for 2019 stood at US\$ 3.592 billion. This is 0.52 percent of the global earnings. In this scenario, it seems advisable to investigate into this contrast and see why Sri Lanka is in such a poor state while possessing all the resources to be among the leading countries in the global tourism arena.

Let us compare ourselves with India. In 2020, the travel and tour Industry's contribution to the Indian GDP was US\$ 121.9 billion. Sri Lanka's earnings during 2020 stood at US\$ 1.08 billion and were 0.88 percent of India's for the period.

In comparing the potential present in India and Sri Lanka for recognition as leading global tourism venues, we must first take into account the sizes of the two lands. India is 50 times the size of Sri Lanka. Much travelling is involved in visiting the tourist sites if tourists arriving in India wish to see the whole assortment of attractions present there. But in Sri Lanka, the travelling involved is minimal as the distance between the Southern and Northern points of the country is about 400 k.m.

In this space between the country's Southern and Northern tips are found almost every attribute having a significant influence on the tourist psyche. Also, there is hardly any difference between these attributes when Sri Lanka and India are viewed together. Then why is Sri Lanka lagging behind India in the tourism realm? It is due to the superiority of the Indian strategy in tourism development.

In building a model for developing Sri Lanka's tourism sector, it is necessary to take into account the fact that there is hardly any difference between India and Sri Lanka as far as the range of tourist attractions is concerned. The cultures, landscapes and other attributes of the two countries are almost the same when it comes to a matter of tourist attractions.

Promotional campaign

The climatic conditions are somewhat better in Sri Lanka for tourists seeking experiences in warmer climates. The seas around the two countries are also similar. What is the secret behind India's enormous success in the tourism arena? The answer is visible in the aggressiveness of the Indian

tourism promotional campaign. For 2022, India has planned several travel fairs i.e. SATTE Travel Expo, Mumbai, Travel and Tourism Fair, Poon, India International Travel Mart, New Delhi, Travel and Tourism Fair, Mumbai and the OTM, Mumbai.

But Sri Lanka hasn't launched a comprehensive campaign to orient the local tourism sector in a progressive path since 2009. True, we have participated in many travel fairs at various destinations during different times. But no effective mega campaigns ori-

belonging to different eras have been discovered in the Sri Lankan territorial waters. It is assumed that the actual number of such hidden wrecks could even be around 200. Probably, such an assumption is based on the availability of evidence to establish that there is a vast underwater void within the Sri Lankan territorial waters, that has still not been explored.

Archaeological expeditions

According to records, the late Sir Arthur C. Clarke was the first to have delved seriously into the underwater archaeological treasure hidden within the Sri Lankan territorial waters. In an article titled "Ceylon and the underwater archaeologist", he said, "Ceylon where I have lived since 1956, is almost a virgin territory for underwater archaeological expeditions." Clarke had contributed this article to the Expedition Magazine of the Penn Museum in 1964.

A search into Sri Lanka's subsequent endeavours towards underwater expeditions has not revealed any attempts by the local authorities to conduct further investigations into these 'hidden treasures' which are part of the country's resource base.

However, the situation in India is quite the contrary. The Indian view according to published sources is that the country's underwater heritage in the form of submerged cities and sunken ships spans a period of around 4,000 years or more. This conviction shows that India has paid due attention to the value of her hidden treasures protected by her 7,517 km long coastline.

In another article the title "Marine Archeology in India", by the Marine Archeology Centre, Goa, it is said that in a span of two decades, marine archaeological explorations and excavations have been carried out in Dwarka, Bet Dwarka, Somnath, Vijaydurg, Malwan, Goa, Lakshadweep Islands, Poompuhar and Mahabalipuram waters. The article confirms India's belief that those submerged ports and shipwreck sites could be promoted for tourism.

Besides underwater archaeological explorations, there is much scope in Sri Lanka for water sports which are much popular in the tourism realm. It is a fact that Sri Lanka and India are ideal venues for a wide range of water sports such as White Water Rafting, Scuba Diving, Snorkelling, Surfing, Lagoon Canoeing, Kayaking, Jet Skiing, Water Skiing, Wind Surfing, Banana and Tube Rides, Speed Boat Rides, Kite Surfing, Sea Plane Rides, Boat trips in rivers, Duck Paddle Boating and Wake Boarding.

Water sports

India is set to host the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Youth Water Sports in November with the participation of Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Bangkok, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India. India has entered a new phase in her international water sports promotion endeavours. This is a harbinger of India's entry into the international water sports arena in a big way in the near future.

Turning towards India's 40 World Heritage Sites and Sri Lanka's eight such locations, one could judge the importance of this island within the Indian Ocean, as a unique base in the global tourism arena. Sri Lanka is holding a leading position in the heritage sites list.

Although India is the birthplace of Theravada Buddhism, Sri Lanka is its seat today. Many Sri Lankan Buddhists and other devotees flock to India on pilgrimage annually. However, the Buddhist pilgrims' principal motive in visiting India is worshipping Buddhagaya and other Holy sites trodden by the Buddha. Pilgrimage is a ritualistic practice separate from the intellectual phase of Buddhism. That intellectual phase is not an integral part of pilgrimage. The intellectual phase or deeper doctrinal phases of Buddhism are well preserved in Sri Lanka.

The fact that Quantum Physics and the Buddhist doctrine go hand in hand has been exposed beyond doubt now. This would be interesting to those visitors who come to India and Sri Lanka on spiritual tourism. They can be encouraged to visit the many research centres scattered about Sri Lanka to delve deeply into the scientific aspects embedded in the Buddhist doctrine.

This would be an eye opener to those spiritually oriented tourists for the advancement of their intellects. This situation could positively influence Sri Lanka's tourism industry by attracting more religious tourists with research instincts. Giving more publicity to opportunities present in Sri Lanka's tourism realm is the need of the day, particularly at this moment the country is in the grip of an unprecedented foreign exchange crisis.

There are 18 modes of tourism in the global tourism arena i.e. domestic tourism, international tourism, outbound tourism, business tourism, adventure tourism, wildlife tourism, medical tourism, wellness tourism, pilgrimage and spiritual tourism, cultural tourism, dark tourism, culinary tourism, celebrity or film tourism, education tourism, cruise tourism, rural tourism, beach tourism and space tourism. Sri Lanka has the potential, ability and tact to promote most of these modes through a more aggressive campaign which the authorities concerned should launch forthwith.

