



Advancing Sustainable Tourism in India

This editorial is based on “[Lessons from Turkey in sustainable tourism](#)” which was published in Hindustan Times on 27/03/2024. The article brings into picture Turkey’s balanced approach to cultural tourism, where strong institutional frameworks ensure both heritage preservation and sustainable growth.

For Prelims: [Cultural tourism](#), [Sustainable development](#), [India's travel and tourism sector](#), [Swadesh Darshan](#), [PRASHAD](#), [National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism](#), [SAATHI](#), [Incredible India](#), [Eco-tourism](#)

For Mains: Role of Tourism Sector in the Indian Economy, Key Issues Associated with Tourism in India.

Turkey's approach to [cultural tourism](#) exemplifies a holistic model of heritage preservation and [sustainable development](#). By implementing robust institutional frameworks, Turkey has successfully balanced the protection of historical sites with tourism growth, increasing archaeological excavations from **670 to 720 in recent years**. For India, this serves as a critical blueprint: **while rich in cultural heritage, India must develop more structured, community-centric approaches to cultural tourism**, investing in **institutional frameworks, professional training, and sustainable visitor management** to truly unlock its immense tourism potential.

What Role does the Tourism Sector Play in the Indian Economy?

- **Economic Engine and Employment Multiplier:** Tourism plays a crucial role in India’s service sector by generating income, jobs, and foreign exchange.
 - It has strong forward and backward linkages with sectors like hospitality, transport, handicrafts, and agriculture. **Being labor-intensive, it absorbs a wide range of skills, from informal workers to specialized professionals.**
 - Tourism also **spurs MSME and startup growth, particularly in tier-2 and tier-3 cities.**
 - [India's travel and tourism sector](#) contributed **US\$ 199.6 billion** to GDP in 2022 and is projected to reach **US\$ 512 billion by 2028**. It is expected to support **53 million jobs by 2029 (WTTC)**.
- **Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy:** Tourism is a **vital tool of soft power**, enhancing India’s image globally by **showcasing its cultural depth, spiritual diversity, and civilizational ethos**. It fosters **people-to-people contact** and builds goodwill with other countries.
 - Events, cultural festivals, and film tourism strengthen India’s diplomatic engagements. The diaspora and religious circuits act as cultural bridges.
 - In 2023, **26.52% of foreign tourists visited India for diaspora connection**. Film shoots and tourism tie-ups with countries like **UAE, Vietnam, and Kazakhstan** are growing rapidly.
- **Tool for Regional Development and Social Inclusion:** Tourism enables balanced regional

development by bringing investment and infrastructure to remote, rural, and tribal areas.

- It creates income opportunities for marginalized communities through homestays, local cuisine, and cultural crafts. Schemes like PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan help mainstream backward regions into national development narratives.
- Under [Swadesh Darshan](#) and [PRASHAD](#), **76 projects** and **46 religious sites** have been sanctioned, including projects in **northeast India** and **rural Andhra Pradesh**.
- **Catalyst for Infrastructure Development:** Tourism demand **drives improvements in roads, airports, digital connectivity, sanitation, and urban mobility**. These developments, **in turn, benefit local populations and businesses**.
 - **Private investment and PPP models** are growing in **hospitality, transport, and cultural preservation**. Iconic tourist hubs are becoming nuclei of integrated development.
 - States like **Uttarakhand** and **Ayodhya** have seen rapid tourism-driven infrastructure upgrades.
- **Driver of Innovation and Entrepreneurship:** Tourism has unlocked a surge in tech-driven startups offering **curated experiences, AI-based travel planning, and digital booking platforms**.
 - It fosters grassroots innovation in areas like eco-tourism, rural stays, and experiential travel. Youth, **especially in tier-2/3 cities**, are entering the sector through government-supported incubators and accelerators.
 - Platforms like **Villotale** and **Highway Delite** are enabling rural and highway tourism.
- **Accelerator of Sustainable Development Goals:** Tourism intersects with multiple SDGs—**poverty alleviation, gender equality, sustainable communities, and environmental conservation**.
 - It enables economic growth with low ecological footprints when planned sustainably. **Conscious luxury, eco-resorts, and community-based tourism** are on the rise.
 - The [National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism](#) and schemes like [SAATHI](#) promote eco-certification and hygiene compliance. Domestic tourist spending grew **20.4%** in 2022, reflecting green recovery.
- **Resilience and Recovery Driver Post-Pandemic:** Tourism has demonstrated adaptability **post-Covid** through **digital transformation, wellness-based travel, and rising domestic footfall**. It has supported livelihood recovery in informal sectors and revived local economies.
 - India's domestic tourism boom shows high potential for internal demand-driven growth.
 - **Domestic travel grew rapidly in 2022, with domestic visitor spending up 20.4%**. Wellness and spiritual tourism like **yoga retreats in Kerala** and **Ayodhya's hotel boom** signal resilient demand.

What are the Key Issues Associated with Tourism in India?

- **Slow Recovery in Inbound Tourism Post-Pandemic:** Despite a global rebound, **India's inbound tourism recovery has been sluggish due to health safety concerns**, complex visa rules, and lack of aggressive branding.
 - Many potential travelers shifted to destinations perceived as safer and more accessible. The **inconsistent** messaging and outdated digital visa systems added to the hesitancy.
 - This undermines India's position as a competitive global tourism hub.
 - For instance, **India's Medical Value Tourism (MVT) sector** faced a steep decline in November and December 2024, with a drop of **43%**.
 - **While Qatar, Dubai** and **Vietnam** have exceeded pre-pandemic benchmarks.
- **Weak Infrastructure and Destination Readiness:** Many tourist destinations suffer from poor physical infrastructure—**bad roads, sanitation gaps, unreliable electricity, and lack of last-mile connectivity**.
 - Even major sites often **lack tourist information centers, multilingual signage, and emergency services**. This degrades the visitor experience and disincentivizes high-value international travelers.
 - Only **48,775 accommodation units** are registered under NIDHI and **11,220** are SAATHI-certified. Infrastructure gaps persist in **rural, coastal, and northeastern circuits**,

despite potential.

- **Low Global Visibility and Ineffective Branding:** India's tourism promotion has **not kept pace with global competitors who invest heavily in aggressive marketing and destination branding**. While **'Incredible India'** remains iconic, its momentum has waned.
 - Lack of sustained digital and event-based marketing hurts India's perception as a modern, safe, and vibrant destination.
 - Nations like **Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan** have surged in popularity by using digital campaigns, easing visas, and hosting events, while India's **global marketing spend remains modest**.
- **Environmental Degradation and Over-Tourism:** Unchecked tourist flows in ecologically sensitive areas have led to **biodiversity loss, pollution, and stress on local communities**.
 - Hill stations and pilgrimage sites face water shortages and waste mismanagement. Lack of carrying capacity studies and regulatory enforcement worsens the crisis.
 - **Manali, Shimla, and Joshimath** witnessed severe pressure due to tourist influx. The **National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism** is in place, but **implementation remains patchy**.
- **Skilling Deficit and Service Quality Gaps:** The hospitality and travel workforce often lacks adequate training in languages, customer service, and tech tools. This impacts tourist satisfaction and brand India.
 - **Tourism as a profession is still informal and fragmented in many states**, with few structured skilling pipelines.
 - The **Tourism Ministry** has trained **12,187 candidates** at **145 destinations**, but demand far outpaces supply. **Tier-2 and 3** city service standards remain inconsistent, affecting repeat tourism potential.
- **Regulatory Hurdles and Lack of Ease of Doing Tourism:** Red tape in approvals, licensing, and tax policies acts as a barrier for **tourism startups, hotel chains, and foreign investors**.
 - **Complex permit systems and inter-state travel regulations** frustrate both operators and travelers. These issues weaken India's potential as a seamless travel destination.
 - **While Rs. 17.26 billion FDI flowed into the sector (2000-2024)**. Despite **ample tourism startups**, many cite **compliance issues and poor ease of doing business** in the sector.

What are the International Case Studies in Sustainable Tourism?

- **Turkey - Community-Centric Heritage Preservation**
 - Turkey has developed a **holistic cultural tourism model** by integrating heritage preservation with local community engagement.
 - Projects around Cappadocia and Ephesus involve locals in site management and offer eco-friendly tourism experiences.
 - Institutional backing has helped increase archaeological excavations and protect cultural landscapes.
- **Costa Rica - Ecotourism Pioneer**
 - Eco-lodges, community-run forest tours, and carbon-neutral travel options support both the environment and rural livelihoods. Tourism revenue is reinvested into conservation.
- **Bhutan - High Value, Low Impact Tourism**
 - Bhutan follows a **"High Value, Low Volume"** tourism strategy that limits tourist numbers through minimum daily tariffs.
 - This ensures ecological balance, cultural preservation, and equitable revenue distribution.
- **New Zealand - Maori Partnership in Sustainable Tourism**
 - New Zealand integrates **indigenous Māori values** (like kaitiakitanga or guardianship of nature) into its tourism policies.
 - Visitors are educated about respecting local culture and environment, while tribal communities co-own and co-manage ecotourism ventures.
- **Slovenia - Green Tourism Model**
 - Slovenia has positioned itself as a **"Green Destination"**, promoting slow travel, waste-free practices, and eco-certification for tourism businesses.

What Measures can India Adopt to Enhance the Sustainability of the Tourism Sector in India?

- **Develop Destination Management Plans with Carrying Capacity Norms:** India must move from site-based tourism to **destination-based planning**, focusing on environmental thresholds, local resource limits, and seasonality.
 - Integrating **carrying capacity studies**, zoning, and crowd regulation mechanisms (like timed entry or ticket capping) can prevent over-tourism.
 - Public-private partnerships can support infrastructure upgrades without ecological disruption.
 - This approach is essential for sites like **hill stations, wildlife parks, and spiritual circuits**.
- **Converge Swadesh Darshan 2.0 with National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (NSST):** **Swadesh Darshan 2.0** promotes theme-based tourism circuits while **NSST** offers a roadmap for green certifications, low-impact infrastructure, and community benefits.
 - Integrating both can ensure **eco-sensitive destination development** with a focus on **climate resilience, local livelihoods, and nature-based solutions**.
 - The **joint implementation of circuit-level planning** and national-level sustainability indicators can foster long-term ecological stewardship.
 - This will also align with **India's SDG targets and G20 sustainability goals**.
- **Promote Community-Based and Rural Experiential Tourism:** Empowering local communities as **stakeholders and beneficiaries** through training, micro-enterprise support, and participatory governance can ensure inclusive tourism.
 - **Homestays, agro-tourism, and craft-based experiences** reduce tourist pressure on urban hubs and diversify visitor options.
 - This bottom-up approach enhances ownership, reduces leakages, and encourages cultural preservation.
- **Mainstream Green Building Norms and Eco-Certification for Hospitality Units:** Mandating eco-certification standards (such as **SAATHI**) for all new tourism infrastructure can reduce energy, water, and waste footprints.
 - Government incentives like tax breaks, expedited clearances, or recognition under GRIHA norms can nudge adoption.
 - Hotels, resorts, and even government tourism facilities should be benchmarked for **sustainability indices**.
 - A push for **conscious luxury, digital detox** retreats, and **zero-waste tourism** will build a resilient and future-ready hospitality sector.
- **Leverage Digital Technology for Responsible Visitor Engagement:** Adoption of **AI-based visitor flow management, virtual tourism, contactless check-ins, and smart signage** can minimize resource usage and enable real-time monitoring. Virtual walkthroughs and app-based guided tours can also decongest peak-hour traffic.
 - Expanding the '**Dekho Apna Desh**' initiative into an immersive digital tourism ecosystem can offer low-carbon alternatives.
 - Real-time data analytics should be used for decision-making and emergency preparedness.
- **Create Sustainable Coastal and Island Tourism Models:** India's long coastline and island ecosystems require **fragile zone management** with focus on coral reef protection, plastic-free zones, and regulated cruise tourism.
 - Integrating policies under the Blue **Economy framework** with tourism planning will ensure marine ecosystem conservation.
 - Coastal states should adopt **eco-tourism codes of conduct**, community vigilance systems, and green transport options (like e-boats).
 - Island destinations like **Andaman & Lakshadweep** must prioritize **zero-waste tourism policies**.
- **Institutionalize Sustainability Training in Tourism Skill Development Missions:** Tourism sustainability must be embedded into curricula of **hospitality, tour operations, and local guide training programs**.
 - The Ministry of Tourism should partner with institutes like IHMs and private platforms to build modules on **responsible tourism, biodiversity ethics, and green practices**.

- Linking this with the **Destination-Based Skill Development Program** will make it regionally tailored and employment-relevant.

Conclusion:

India's tourism sector holds immense potential as an economic driver, cultural ambassador, and sustainability enabler. Learning from global models like **Turkey, India must integrate community participation, institutional frameworks, and sustainable planning.** By adopting innovative policies and digital solutions, India can unlock the full potential of its tourism industry while preserving its rich heritage.

Drishti Mains Question:

India has immense cultural and natural tourism potential, yet it lags behind in global tourism competitiveness. Discuss the key challenges and suggest measures for sustainable tourism growth.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q.1 How can the mountain ecosystem be restored from the negative impact of development initiatives and tourism? (2019)

Q.2 The states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand are reaching the limits of their ecological carrying capacity due to tourism. Critically evaluate. (2015)

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