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Healing in the Lap of Nature-exploring Medical Tourism Potential of Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Medical tourism is a fast-growing industry at the global level with South-East Asian countries receiving the bulk of tourists seeking medical or other wellness benefits. The paper highlights the special positioning of India in the area of medical tourism. There is tremendous scope in Kashmir for medical tourism to achieve new highs. Kashmir has potential to market the health and wellness services at comparatively cost-effective prices than Western, European and other South-East Asian countries. Kashmir is blessed with an unexplored natural beauty which is a basic condition for tourism. There is abundant number of attractions in the shape of hill resorts, pristine clear water bodies, world famous lakes, hot springs, and other places which can revitalize the body and the spirit. However, to realize this potential a lot of effort is needed including adequate infrastructure and marketing to Middle-Eastern, European and other national tourists. Further, an effort and willingness are required on the part of government and entrepreneurs to build world class infrastructure and other facilities.

Keywords: Tourist, Medical Tourism, Wellness Centre.

INTRODUCTION

Tourist is one who has been in travel for more than 24 hours or more from home environment, thereby availing the accommodation and food in another environment. Travel is a unique experience of a visitor who is exposed to physical and psychological challenges in an unknown territory (Freeman et al., 1999). Nowadays tourism is an important component of one's distributive income. Tourism has become a part of one's life just like other activities family, work, and friends. The tours of other countries are held for different purposes with medical treatments increasingly one of the reasons. Medical tourism is the travel planned and held through international borders for medical treatment purposes. Medical travelers are motivated to seek care outside of their area of residence by many factors, including more advanced technology, quicker access, higher quality of care, or lower costs for care in the destination locality (Guevara and Mango, 2008). The travel is for surgeries, genetic disorders, fertility, spiritual, traditional and other treatments & cure.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), medical tourism is defined as tourism associated with travel to health spas or resort destinations, where the primary purpose is to improve travellers' physical well-being through a process comprising physical exercises and therapy, dietary control, and medical services relevant to health maintenance.



Source: TRAM 2006

Bookman & Bookman (2007) defines medical tourism as travel to another destination with the objective of one's health improvement, an economic activity in services representing two areas - medicine & tourism. Monica (2007) defines medical tourism as travel where international patients go over borders for their healthcare & medical requirements. Medical tourism is comprehensive including classifications like wellness tourism, Spiritual tourism, and health tourism. Previously, the travel for medical treatments and services were held from third world countries to developed countries where such treatments are available. Now, since the technological advancement and free movement of nearly everything, there are tours held by citizens of developed countries toward other countries for treatment at affordable prices and traditional ways of cure. The two factors which have shifted the citizens of developed nations to overseas nations (developing countries) are the high costs of medical services and long waiting time stretching at times for months (Connell, 2006).

The study is a conceptual one revolving around medical tourism growth and potential for the valley of Kashmir. The use of words as medical tourism and health tourism has been used interchangeably. The following sections include deliberation on the global level growth of medical tourism. Special focus is given on India with a huge rise in health-related services to domestic and foreign tourists. Kashmir as a potential hub for tourists seeking health and wellness benefits is stressed. Some suggestions are put forward for developing medical tourism. The objectives of the paper are:

1. To study the growth of medical tourism at global level
2. To study the potential & hindrances of Kashmir in developing medical tourism destination
3. To present suggestion for developing medical tourism

The Growth of Medical Tourism

Medical tourism has grown at a fast rate at the turn of 20th century. At a global level, Asian countries especially Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and India have created special positioning in the field of medical treatments. The tourists from various advanced countries are planning their visits to these countries for availing cost benefits which their home countries do not provide. Normally, the majority of medical tourists come from the industrialized countries of the world especially Europe, the UK, Middle East, Japan, U.S. and Canada where the cost of medical treatment is very expensive and there are often long waiting times for treatments. There is a special class of tourists who desire a change in lifestyle, cut-off from the buzz of their area, living in the lap of nature. It has been identified that various factors play a vital role in the evolution of health tourism. These are:

- 1) Getting rid of long waiting lists
- 2) Getting more qualified treatments in shorter time periods
- 3) Treatments that require high reach of health technology
- 4) Reducing the health care costs
- 5) The need for different environments for chronic, disabled and elder patients.

Rosenweig (2007) have identified the following countries as being medical tourism destination: China, India, Israel, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico, United States, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, South Africa and Australia.

Medical Tourism in India

India is one of the fast evolving brand names in the area of medical tourism. The country has been successful in creating a positioning at the global level on basis of cost and natural methods of treatment. The reward for medical tourists visiting India is benefiting from latest medical treatments at an economical price. There are twenty-three joint commission international (JCI) accredited and Sixty-three National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH) accredited healthcare providers in India. Yoga is a globally acknowledged natural way to maintain a healthy physical and mental body. Visitors from all around the world have been attracted by Yoga which has been introduced as a stress reliever in many organizations. Apart from it, other natural treatments include Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, and Naturopathy. There are various medicinal Himalayan herbs which have healing benefits.

Medical tourism is a growing sector in India. In October 2015, India's medical tourism sector was estimated to be worth US\$3 billion. It is projected to grow to \$7-8 billion by 2020 (Grant Thornton report 2015). The medical Tourism Market Report (2015) found that India was one of the lowest cost and highest quality of all medical tourism destinations, it offers a wide variety of procedures at about one-tenth the cost of similar procedures in the United States. Traditionally, the United States and the United Kingdom have been the largest source countries for medical tourism to India.

Potential of Medical Tourism in Kashmir

Health tourism is fast increasing at the global level as a major emerging phenomenon. India has made healthy strides at the global level in creating a niche in this industry. Various Indian cities/states have excelled in providing quality health benefits to foreign or local tourists. Kashmir is best suited for post-operative care owing to soothing environment. Kashmir is blessed with a raw unexplored natural beauty which is a necessary initial condition for tourism. There is an abundant number of attractions in the shape of hill resorts, pristine clear water bodies, world famous lakes, Himalayan herbs, hot springs, and other less renowned places which can revitalize the body and the spirit.

Tourism is one of the important contributors to the economic prosperity of Kashmir. Kashmir is tourist's paradise owing to breath-taking natural scenery and rich cultural heritage. The valley of Kashmir is tourist's dream as there are tremendous spots for adventure sports like trekking, water sports, and other outdoor sports. For those class of tourists local or foreign caught up in daily boring chores, Kashmir presents a chance to revitalize energy by living closer to nature. Kashmir is best suited for those tourists who require post-operative care.

Kashmir has all basic resources in the shape of natural surroundings to attract tourist be it, scenic lover or health-conscious visitor. Kashmir although a highly suited destination for health tourism, has much to be desired in this specialized area of tourism. It has various infrastructural deficiencies yet to be plugged to attract tourist who looks for health treatments. Saba Nazir et al., (2014) study has put low infrastructural facilities and security concerns as one of the important factors for health tourism not reaching its potential in Kashmir. A world class health resorts, spas, and other wellness centers at tourist destinations will attract tourists. The government of J&K is making huge efforts to develop the state as a medical tourism hub. The Govt. of J&K has started to realize the potential of health tourism for Kashmir. Efforts have been made to bring low-cost medical services and highly qualified local professionals. But, there is much to be developed to give Kashmir a cutting edge in the area of medical tourism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The health tourism has upscaled in the recent decade at a colossal rate. Many countries have excelled in this specialized area of tourism with South-East Asian giants i.e. Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, India, and others leading the way.

India has specially carved a niche in medical tourism as a low-cost service provider with high technological equipment. Of all the potential that Kashmir has got to turn into a prime destination for medical tourism, there are many loopholes to be plugged. The first and most important being inadequacy of infrastructure in the shape of health clubs, Message centre, Unani centres, Spa and others. The second is proper and adequate qualified human resources. The third is the appropriate world class accommodation facilities which present a bigger challenge at the global level to comply with. The last one is the natural one of proper security measures which are the long-term problem and threat for tourists planning their visit to Kashmir. Although, the situation has changed swiftly with Kashmir moves forward with modernization and its youth highly participating in career building jobs. A proper promotional campaign has to be run where x-visitors of Kashmir foreign and local share their experiences. This will be more impactful for visitors who are susceptible to security concerns while planning their visit to Kashmir. Kashmir has potential to be the prime destination of a visit to travellers inclined for wellness from refreshing air and weather. In India, Karnataka & Kerala excel in wellness tourism due to Ayurveda treatment, scenic scenes, spas and others. Kashmir titled as paradise on earth can allure tourists and will be their first choice provided proper infrastructure is developed. Many world famous hill stations like Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Yousmarg, and many others will provide a unique experience to health tourists by creating health club, message centres, and others wellness centres. This will attract tourists to enjoy health treatment in the lap of pristine nature.

SUGGESTIONS

To catch and garner the limitless potential of medical tourism in Kashmir, the state Govt. has to play an active role to bring Kashmir as a global health destination. The various measures expected which can facilitate the aim of bringing Kashmir as the most popular destination for medical tourism is:

- I) A cost-effective aviation journey of tourists coming to Kashmir for medical healing.
- II) Inviting and attracting the local entrepreneurs to invest in infrastructure related to the development of medical tourism in Kashmir. Provide easy financial and other documental formalities facilitates to entrepreneurs interested in investment in wellness infrastructures like spa, message centres, traditional ways of cure, and others.
- III) The foreign players have to be encouraged to invest in medical tourism in Kashmir. Specifically, the Middle East rich investors are a high expected lot for investing in Kashmir. They can greatly provide the financial trust to build world class infrastructure in medical tourism.
- IV) It is the responsibility of the department directly related to tourism to plan and run effective promotional campaigns and other programmes to promote wellness tourism not only in India but in major foreign nations. This will promote Kashmir as a tourist destination in a quite unique way. Various international platforms as in London, Berlin, Dubai, and others will greatly enhance the image of Kashmir. Roadshows too are nowadays an important promotional tool very much in vogue.

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