



Path Towards Sustainable Tourism

This editorial is based on "[India's path to sustainable tourism](#)" which was published in The Hindu Business Line on 15/12/2024. The article brings into picture the immense economic potential of India's tourism sector, contributing 6.8% to GDP and 9.2% to employment, while emphasizing the need for sustainable practices that balance growth with cultural and environmental preservation.

For Prelims: [India's tourism sector](#), [Sustainable tourism](#), [Foreign Exchange Earnings](#), [Swadesh Darshan](#), [UNESCO World Heritage Sites](#), [Sacred Ensembles of the Hoysalas](#), [UDAN scheme](#), [LiFE program](#), [Ayush Visa](#), [G20 Summit in 2023](#), [United Nation World Tourism Organisation](#), [National Tourism Policy 2022](#), [Incredible India](#).

For Mains: Current Status of the Tourism Sector in India, Key Issues Related to India's Tourism Sector.

[India's tourism sector](#) stands at a critical juncture, with immense economic potential **contributing 6.8% to GDP** and employing **9.2% of the workforce**, yet facing significant sustainability challenges. The path forward demands a transformative approach that **prioritizes community ownership, environmental preservation, and authentic experiences**. As the global tourism landscape evolves, India's success lies in balancing **economic growth with cultural integrity, environmental conservation and sustainable tourism**.

What is the Current Status of the Tourism Sector in India?

- **Status:** The tourism sector is witnessing strong **recovery and growth potential** post-pandemic, with domestic tourism leading the way.
 - India is ranked **10th globally in travel and tourism GDP contribution**, and international tourist arrivals are expected to reach **30.5 million by 2028**, reflecting the sector's bright future.
- **Contribution:** The **economic contribution** of the tourism sector in India is significant, with its total contribution to GDP recorded at **US\$ 199.6 billion in 2022**, projected to reach **US\$ 512 billion by 2028**.
 - The sector is growing annually at **7.1%** and is expected to generate **53 million jobs by 2029**, showcasing its role as a major employment provider.
- **Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs):** FTAs have shown robust growth, increasing to **9.24 million in 2023**, up from **6.43 million in 2022**.
 - The highest FTAs came from **Bangladesh (24.5%), USA (20.4%), and UK (6.9%)**.

What is the Significance of the Tourism Sector for India?

- **Economic Catalyst and Employment Driver:** Tourism directly contributes to economic growth

by boosting income and creating jobs across sectors such as hospitality, transport, and retail.

- It is poised to create approximately 39.5 million jobs by the end of 2024.
- **Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEE)** from tourism stood at **US\$ 28.1 billion in 2023**, highlighting the sector's role in driving foreign exchange..

- **Cultural Preservation and Global Soft Power:** Tourism ensures the preservation of cultural heritage while projecting India's soft power internationally.
 - Initiatives like **Swadesh Darshan** have revitalized circuits like the **Ramayana Circuit**.
 - India's **43 UNESCO World Heritage Sites**, including the newly added "**Sacred Ensembles of the Hoysalas**," draw millions of visitors, promoting cultural diplomacy.
- **Infrastructure and Regional Development:** Tourism accelerates infrastructure development, including roads, airports, and connectivity in underdeveloped regions.
 - The **UDAN scheme** has expanded regional airports to **148 by 2023**, making remote destinations accessible.
 - Jammu & Kashmir **recorded over 2 crore tourists in 2023**, driving regional economic growth and reducing geographic inequalities.
- **Environmental Sustainability through Ecotourism:** Ecotourism aligns tourism growth with environmental conservation, protecting biodiversity and generating sustainable livelihoods.
 - Kaziranga National Park saw revenues of **₹8.8 crore** in 2024, driven by increased ecotourism activity.
 - Programs like **The Travel for LIFE program** encourage **low-impact tourism, fostering harmony between development and ecology**.
- **Healthcare and Wellness Hub:** India's affordable and advanced healthcare system attracts global medical tourists, boosting the wellness tourism sector.
 - The **medical tourism sector reached \$9 billion in 2022**, with more than 6,50,000 medical visas issued to international patients in 2022.
 - Initiatives like the **E-Visa and Ayush Visa and Ayurveda-based conferences** strengthen India's position as a wellness and medical tourism hub.

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Strengthening India's position in global medical and wellness tourism.

- **Strengthening Diplomacy and Multilateral Engagements:** Tourism bolsters India's global image by showcasing its culture and infrastructure during international events.
 - The **G20 Summit in 2023** hosted by more than 50 cities highlighted destinations like **Guwahati, Indore, Jodhpur and Khajuraho** boosting global recognition.
 - Events like **Pravasi Bharatiya Divas** emphasize **India's commitment to leveraging tourism for diplomacy and engagement.**
- **Rural Development and Social Equity:** Tourism reduces rural-urban disparities by fostering income opportunities in remote areas and preserving local traditions.
 - **Kumbalangi, near Kochi**, was declared India's first model tourism. **LadpurKhas** village in the state of **Madhya Pradesh** was selected as the Best Tourism village by the **United Nation World Tourism Organisation.**
 - Such efforts empower rural communities while safeguarding cultural heritage.
- **Pandemic Recovery and Resilience:** Tourism has been pivotal in India's post-pandemic recovery by revitalizing domestic travel and international arrivals.
 - Domestic tourist visits across India soared to 1,731 million, a sharp rise from 677 million in 2021, reflecting resilience and adaptability.
 - Also, India saw **92 lakh foreign tourist arrivals in 2023 (Economic Survey 2023-24), boosted by campaigns like "Dekho Apna Desh" and G20 initiatives.**
- **Promotion of Startups and Entrepreneurship:** Tourism stimulates **entrepreneurship by creating demand for local services**, from homestays to guided tours, especially in emerging sectors like adventure and ecotourism.
 - The **National Tourism Policy 2022** encourages micro-enterprises, providing funding and

skill training to rural entrepreneurs.

- India has over **1,500 tourism startups** offering platforms for travel planning, booking, and facility management.
 - Increased adoption of **cloud solutions** and **SaaS technologies** is further driving innovation and growth.
- **Enhancing India's Global Competitiveness:** Tourism enhances India's global ranking in **ease of doing business by boosting ancillary industries like hospitality and logistics**.
 - India climbed to **39th position among 119 countries** in the 2024 Travel and Tourism Development Index by the [World Economic Forum](#), up from 54th in 2021.
- **Strengthening Urban Revitalization:** Urban tourism drives the revitalization of heritage cities, creating jobs and boosting local economies.
 - **Jaipur's heritage tourism model**, with over 1.5 million annual visitors, illustrates the economic benefits of urban renewal driven by tourism.
- **Contribution to Women's Empowerment:** Tourism provides women with opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, especially in rural and cultural tourism.
 - For instance, the **handloom industry in Sualkuchi, Assam**, a hub for traditional silk weaving, was integrated into tourism initiatives.
 - **Rajasthan's "Padharo Mhare Desh" campaign has increased the participation of women artisans** in tourism-driven handicraft sales.
- **Boosting Sports and Event Tourism:** India's rise as a global host for sports and events enhances its image and tourism revenue.
 - The **ICC Cricket World Cup 2023** brought **over 1 lakh international fans**, generating **₹11,637 crore in economic activity**.
 - Mega events like the **International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa** highlight India's ability to integrate event tourism into its growth strategy.

What are the Key Issues Related to India's Tourism Sector?

- **Inconsistent Tourism Infrastructure Development:** India's tourism suffers from inadequate and uneven infrastructure, which fails to meet global standards.
 - **Poor quality roads, lack of high-end accommodations, and inadequate amenities in heritage** and ecotourism sites restrict the sector's potential.
 - For instance, states like **Bihar and Jharkhand**, with **rich cultural and historical significance**, receive a fraction of tourists compared to **Rajasthan**.
 - Rapid infrastructure development can often result in catastrophic consequences, as seen in the case of [Joshimath](#).
 - Similarly, **transportation bottlenecks and insurgency issues in the Northeast remain unresolved** despite the region's tourism potential.
- **Environmental Challenges and Over-Tourism:** Popular tourist destinations in India face severe environmental degradation due to **unregulated growth and over-tourism**.
 - For example, **Shimla experienced an acute water crisis in 2018**, attributed to a tourist arrival exceeding its carrying capacity.
 - Similarly, Goa currently generates around **2700 tons per month of non-recyclable waste (plastic waste** constitutes a major part) despite clean-up campaigns, highlighting the lack of sustainable tourism practices.
- **High Dependence on Domestic Tourism:** India's reliance on domestic tourism limits foreign exchange earnings and global competitiveness.
 - Domestic visitor spending in India grew by **15% compared to 2019, reaching ₹14.64 trillion**.
 - However, international visitor spending lagged behind **2019 levels by over 14%**, with ₹0.4 trillion less spent by international tourists last year.
 - This highlights India's heavy dependence on domestic tourism, which reduces its potential for earning foreign exchange and affects its global competitiveness.
- **Safety and Security Concerns:** India's reputation as a tourist-friendly destination is **marred by rising safety issues**, especially for women and solo travelers.
 - NCRB data show that 192 offenses were reported against foreigners (**tourists and residents**) in 2022, with incidents in **Rajasthan and Goa** receiving widespread global attention.
 - Additionally, disasters like the [2023 flash floods in Himachal Pradesh](#) exposed

weaknesses in emergency response systems for tourists.

- **Lack of Skilled Workforce in the Tourism Sector:** The tourism and hospitality sector suffers from a shortage of **skilled professionals**, affecting service quality and India's ability to compete globally.
 - India's tourism and hospitality sector is going to face a **shortfall of over 3.5 million skilled workers**, particularly in areas like hotel management, culinary arts, and travel operations.
- **Insufficient Funding and Policy Fragmentation:** Tourism in India receives inadequate funding and suffers from inconsistent policy implementation.
 - The Indian government gave a boost to the tourism budget recently, but cut down the **global promotion allocation by 97%**.
 - Additionally, the **delay in finalizing the [National Tourism Policy](#)**, has led to fragmented efforts at the state and national levels.
- **Cultural Erosion and Loss of Authenticity:** Unregulated tourism often commercializes cultural experiences, eroding their authenticity.
 - For instance, **Jaipur's traditional arts and crafts** are overshadowed by mass-produced souvenirs, with artisans earning only a fraction of the tourism revenue.
 - UNESCO's warnings about "**over-commercialization**" of **India's heritage cities** further highlight the need for cultural preservation strategies.
- **Lack of Focus on Digital and Smart Tourism:** India lags in integrating technology and digital tools into tourism management and promotion.
 - While campaigns like "**Incredible India**" incorporate digital marketing, states like **Nagaland and Manipur** lack robust digital ecosystems to attract and manage tourists.
 - Globally, nations like **Singapore are leveraging AI and big data** for tourist engagement, giving them a competitive edge over India.

What Measures can be Adopted to Promote Sustainable Tourism in India?

- **Develop Sustainable Tourism Infrastructure:** India must prioritize **eco-friendly and sustainable infrastructure development**, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas.
 - **Green building practices, solar-powered accommodations, and efficient waste management systems** can reduce the environmental impact of tourism.
 - The "**Swadesh Darshan 2.0**" scheme focuses on destination development with sustainability as a core principle is a step in the right direction.
 - **Expansion of green certifications for tourism establishments** will incentivize environmentally responsible practices.



- **Promote Community-Based and Rural Tourism:** Integrating local communities into the tourism economy ensures sustainability while preserving cultural heritage.
 - Programs like the Rajasthan Rural Tourism Scheme can be expanded nationwide to promote village-based tourism that supports artisans and local entrepreneurs.
 - For instance, **Gujarat's Hodka village**, which attracts thousands of tourists annually, is a successful model of community-managed tourism.
 - Linking **local crafts to tourism circuits** can create additional revenue streams and reduce urban migration.
- **Encourage Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborations between the government and private sector can mobilize investments for sustainable tourism projects.
 - PPPs can help in developing **eco-parks, heritage site restorations, and modernizing tourism infrastructure.**
 - For example, the partnership for the **Statue of Unity project in Gujarat** created jobs while **preserving the local environment.**
 - Extending similar models to lesser-known destinations will balance tourism growth across regions.
- **Strengthen Waste Management and Pollution Control:** Tourism hubs must adopt robust **waste management systems and reduce pollution through effective policies.**
 - Initiatives like **plastic-free zones** need to be replicated across all destinations.
 - **Beach tourism** destinations like Goa and Kerala can implement marine pollution control strategies, similar to **Japan's beach cleanup campaigns.**
 - Government-led awareness campaigns under **Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment)** can educate tourists on sustainable travel behavior.



- **Leverage Technology for Smart Tourism:** India should use technology for sustainable tourism through **smart ticketing systems, AI-driven crowd management, and virtual tourism experiences.**
 - For example, **QR codes at heritage sites like the Taj Mahal** reduce paper waste and enhance visitor experiences.
 - Platforms like **Incredible India**, integrating AR/VR technologies, can promote virtual tourism to attract more tourists to India.
- **Integrate Renewable Energy Solutions:** Tourism establishments, particularly in remote and eco-sensitive areas, should adopt renewable energy sources to minimize their carbon footprint.
 - **Solar energy-based lodges in Ladakh** serve as successful examples of sustainable tourism.
 - Expanding subsidies under the [Solar Charkha Mission](#) to include tourism-linked businesses can drive this transition.
 - Incentivizing **carbon-neutral operations through tax rebates** can further encourage renewable energy adoption.
- **Implement Capacity Management at Popular Destinations:** Carrying capacity studies should guide the regulation of tourist numbers in fragile ecosystems and overcrowded destinations.
 - For instance, **Shimla and Manali**, which face over-tourism issues, can limit daily tourist inflows using online permits, as seen in **Bhutan's sustainable tourism model.**
 - Establishing such mechanisms ensures that **natural resources and infrastructure are not overwhelmed**, preserving these destinations for future generations.
- **Develop Low-Impact Transport Networks:** Promoting sustainable transport options, such as electric buses and bicycles, can reduce the carbon footprint of tourism.
 - Initiatives like **Kerala's "e-Mobility" program**, which introduced electric boats in backwaters, can be expanded to other tourist hotspots.
 - Extending the reach of the **Regional Connectivity Scheme (UDAN)** with eco-friendly aviation practices will also contribute to low-impact tourism.

- Integrating these measures can align with **India's 2070 net-zero carbon target.**
- **Establish Green Tourism Zones:** Identifying and designating specific areas as **Green Tourism Zones** can ensure sustainable practices and resource conservation.
 - States like **Uttarakhand** have pioneered such initiatives, **promoting eco-tourism** while safeguarding fragile ecosystems.
 - Linking these zones to **Swadesh Darshan and the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive scheme** can attract eco-conscious travelers.
- **Preserve Cultural Heritage and Traditional Practices:** Sustainable tourism must involve the preservation of India's cultural and historical heritage.
 - **Local cultural festivals can be integrated into tourism circuits**, emphasizing authenticity.
 - Also more tourism circuits like **Ramayana Circuits** can be developed to promote cultural tourism.
- **Foster Global Partnerships for Best Practices:** India should collaborate with countries excelling in sustainable tourism, such as **Bhutan and Costa Rica**, to adopt proven models.
 - **Bhutan's high-value, low-impact tourism model**, which charges sustainable development fees, can be adapted to certain Indian destinations.
 - Additionally, India can engage with international organizations like the **UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization)** for technical support.
 - Joint ventures in tourism development zones can promote knowledge exchange and innovation.
- **Promote Adventure and Wellness Tourism Responsibly:** Adventure and wellness tourism should be developed with sustainability at the core.
 - Adventure tourism circuits like **Andaman and Nicobar Islands** can be developed by learning from Maldives.
 - Regulating trekking and camping in eco-sensitive areas like **Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand** through permits and waste management norms is critical.
 - For wellness tourism, **linking Ayurvedic resorts to initiatives like the International Year of Millets 2023** can promote organic and sustainable practices.
 - Establishing **stricter quality standards for medical and wellness tourism** will attract more global travelers.

Conclusion:

India's tourism sector can drive sustainable growth by aligning with key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as **decent work (SDG 8), environmental sustainability (SDG 13 & SDG 12), and cultural preservation (SDG 11 & SDG 16)**. By fostering inclusive and responsible tourism, India can create jobs, protect its environment, and promote cultural heritage. This approach can position **India as a leader in sustainable tourism worldwide**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Examine the current status of the tourism sector in India. What are the challenges faced by the sector, and how can the government and private players collaborate to address them?

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)

