

## An 'incredible' path to employment and growth

The road north from Bengaluru towards Hyderabad slopes gently downwards from the top of the Deccan plateau. Lush green grape vines in the Nandi Hills area give way to the arid brush of Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh. A little off the highway, about 2 hours north of the airport, lies the town of Lepakshi, with the largest monolithic stone Nandi (bull) in India. The bull and the nearby Veerabhadra temple were built in the early 16th century during the Vijayanagara empire. The temple is stunning because it is built both by adding stone (sculpture) and subtracting stone (in-situ carving) and sits atop a "tortoise-mound" hillock. The natural dye paintings on the ceiling and the columnar patterns on the pillars have inspired weavers from the surrounding areas of Hindupur and Dharmavaram to incorporate them in the design of their woven cotton and silk saris.

Alas, few tourists know about this well-preserved Vijayanagara temple and fewer still visit. The town, unlike the temple, is poorly maintained. While local foods (try the chilli fritters) and produce abound, they are not sold in hygienic conditions. The weaving village would be a tourism wonder in any other country. If you wanted to spend a day or two reading the *hale* Kannada inscriptions or writing a story about the women weavers, you would have to drive from accommodations to Puttaparathi, the Sai Baba town, about 60km to the north.

It is the same story for numerous famous and less-known historical and tourist sites in India—incredible historical temples, paintings, frescoes, inscriptions and the like, little known and marketed, and served by poor infrastructure and even poorer imagination.

Bhimbetka (Paleolithic wall paintings) and Sanchi (a 2,000-year-old Buddhist complex) in Madhya Pradesh, Badami and Pattadakal (to me, more magnificent than Angkor Wat) in Karnataka, Darasuram and Gangaikonda Cholapuram (Chola architecture at its best) in Tamil Nadu, Muziris (of Ptolemy fame) and Bekal Fort (did you know of a dynasty called Ikkeri?) in Kerala, the Bibi Ka Maqbara and Bhaje caves in Maharashtra and similar remarkable sites exist in each state.

This is not to speak of wildlife, cultural carnivals, music gatherings, food festivals and outdoor activities. And yet fewer tourists (not counting Indian-origin returnees) visit India than they do the Louvre Museum in Paris.

India records about 15 million total visitors a year. It ranks eighth in Asia, with a mere quarter of the visitors to China and half of those to Thailand. India's tourism receipts, at about \$22 billion a year, are less than that for the city of Hong Kong and a tenth of what the US receives. No Indian city is in the top 20 most visited cities in the world, a list topped by Hong Kong, London, Bangkok and Singapore.

Why are there so few tourists to India? Is this something we should focus on?

The universal answer to these two questions is that a litany of factors ails tourism. It is, however, absolutely worth focusing on because we start with such rich raw material, with unparalleled authenticity, and because it can provide jobs to millions. The most commonly cited factors are—difficulty of obtaining visas (time, procedure and cost), shortage of accommodation at different budget levels, poor infrastructure and connections, filth on the roads and in public places, lack of clean toilets during travel, unhygienic food, and safety of female tourists.

On the push side, while the occasional project like *Incredible India* has been successful, there is little sustained marketing to tourism channels and on digital platforms.

In the last few years, much work has been done to meet some of these challenges. The game-

changing electronic visa regime (which allows a 60-day stay) has now been extended to 161 countries and is valid for entry at five seaports and 25 international airports (from Kozhikode in the south to Amritsar in the north). Many tour operators now offer curated trips to suit your interest and budget. Magic tours of India, for instance, offers bazaar, food and art walks in many cities, shore excursions for cruise-ship tourists and home visits. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's use of the bully pulpit for Swachh Bharat has had the indirect impact of dramatically improving toilet facilities on many highways in India. The central government's recent plan to increase air capacity to a billion trips (a fivefold increase) and deepen regional air penetration through the Udan programme will likely serve as another force multiplier.

But general cleanliness, functional and tidy budget accommodation, food hygiene and safety of women remain major challenges. The accountability to accomplish this lies mostly with the weakest link in our governance chain, the municipalities. Municipalities are under-resourced, cesspools of corruption that keep our cities filthy and unsafe. And so it is here that we must turn to make an impact on Indian tourism. Perhaps a few modest-sized cities can be identified to become clean, tourism-friendly cities (they don't have to be very smart, just clean and safe)—Jaisalmer, Aurangabad, Somnath and Gaya, for instance. With demonstration, perhaps, other cities will follow. Tourism is an incredible way to showcase India's rich and magnificent history, culture and diversity and simultaneously employ millions.

P.S.: "The journey is the reward," said Steve Jobs.

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