

Overall Development of Kerala Tourism – It's time for a Second Revolution.

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The Government of Kerala led by Honourable Chief Minister Mr. Pinarayi Vijayan has been quite successful in flattening the curve of the pandemic. It was quite endearing to see the empathy, commitment, planning and preparedness of the entire state machinery. The number of affected cases shows that the State has been able to contain the spread more effectively than developed countries like US, UK, France etc.

The Need of the Hour

The State has taken measures to control COVID-19 quite effectively, but it has severely impacted its coffers. Kerala is a welfare state, known for its investment in public systems and social democratic principles, and today it is known for high literacy rates, high standard of living and for medical care. The infrastructure was put into place by successive governments at considerable cost. Can we sustain this fiscal imbalance in the years to come? Definitely not. It is high time we started thinking seriously about boosting our economy and start reaping the benefits of the investments already made.

The question is, how? Can it be sustainable? Can we institute a structure that can be followed by the Government, citizens and administration irrespective of the regime? Yes, it is very much possible, if there is a political will, there is a possible way. All political parties need to come to a consensus on the way forward. The State doesn't have to deviate from being a welfare state.

The idea is to play to our strengths with zero or nil investment from the Government. Some of my thoughts on Kerala's future as a robust state, differentiated from the other States of India are as follows.

Kerala; the Welfare State.

Let us see what fuels the Kerala economy. It accounts for 2.8% of India's total population, but the economy contributes 4% to the national economy, and the per capita income is 60% higher than India's average. The key revenue generated to the State is from Tourism, remittances from NRI, Exports of marine products and spices, cashew, coir etc., service industries like hospitality, health care, IT development, financial services etc. and the revenue from liquor sales, fuel, and agricultural products.

We must accept the fact that the Kerala Government has a huge revenue deficit. It has become more pronounced with the recent floods and COVID-19 pandemic. We did not hold anything back in our efforts to get over the situation. Now, we need to rebuild Kerala and make it self-reliant. It calls for a huge commitment. What is listed below is our strengths from which we will rebuild Kerala with minimum investment from the Government. It will have a multiplier effect on the economy. There are ways in front of the Government to strengthen

the Kerala economy without investment. Tourism is one of the key sources which has a big role to play in this.

The Second Revolution in Kerala Tourism.

Tourism has proven to be the most inclusive form of development, which guarantees revenues across the different economic segments of the population. But we have to go forward more than what we have gone so far.

The ideal way is to make a second tourism revolution real. As for this effort, we must benchmark Kerala with Singapore. It will absolutely boost the State's economy.

Tourism is a sector that is people dependent and therefore is a key employment generator. A lot of ancillary sectors such as transport, art-forms, food, traditional medicine and hospitality are in many cases interdependent. Kerala is abundantly blessed by nature. No one State can give the experiences that we can offer like beaches, high ranges, mountains, wild life, backwaters etc. Tracking the journey cum experience of any tourist would be a good starting point: the revenue starts from the touchdown of aircraft, taxis, luxury buses, hotels, homestays, traditional art forms, guides, translators, village experiences (toddy tapping & plantation), tribal visits, local food tasting, visit to artisans and traditional industries like cashew and coir, Ayurveda etc. Kerala is blessed with people having good entrepreneurial skills, and they will latch on to any opportunity for starting a business.

As we can see, for a tourist, these multiple disparate experiences translate into the Total Kerala Experience. Build interlinkages, collaborations & connections among these diverse service providers to provide a smooth experience for tourists. Similar to the customer-need cycle in retail businesses, Kerala should tap into the tourist - experience - needs-cycle and make a holistic experience as seamless as possible.

Make Sustainable Tourism Great

Post the fallout of the pandemic, Sustainable Tourism would appeal to a large section of affluent foreign tourists and the domestic population as well. Create sustainable tourism packages by onboarding existing service providers by mapping out a tourist's journey from entry to exit. This chain of service providers could consist of taxi/tour buses, homestays, houseboats, plastic-free and unprocessed beverages & food, village experiences, tree plantation activities, visits to handicraft artisans etc. All these activities shall be arranged in conjunction with the regular sight-seeing part of the tourist itinerary.

Shows, Events, Campaigns

Link and promote tourism to large scale existing events such as the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Thrissur Pooram, Kerala Boat Race Championships, Christmas & New Year. Most of these experiences are unique to Kerala and have the potential to give booster shots to the tourist economy at regular intervals of the year. Promotional activities could be launched before these events to create that 'Fear Of Missing Out' (FOMO) state of mind amongst all sections of the tourist spectrum.

Showcase the value chain of the fisheries industry i.e. from shrimp cultivation to traditional fishing methods and how it is processed and cooked. You are not only showcasing the processes but creating a market and brand for Kerala seafood products. They can experience the high standard of hygiene we adopt. Cashew processing and coir making are other areas we can showcase. We can put to rest the wrong perception that Indian products are made in sweatshops.

Strength of Women Empowerment

We can showcase the success of 'Kudumbashree' movement in Kerala by facilitating visits. These are all examples of women empowerment and these are all great stories. Visit to 'Anganwadis' and

government girl schools, providing a window into the vegetable self-sufficiency initiative. All that I have mentioned above are possible with zero investment.

Linking Healthcare and Hospitality

Now I want to discuss the possibility of collaboration with players in hospitality and those from the healthcare industry. We must convey to the world that Kerala's health sector is one of the best as proved by the recent happenings. The next two years, we should engage in good PR, highlighting our healthcare system. Invite BBC / Nat Geo to do a documentary on how we coped up with the COVID 19. Let the hospitality and health care sector work jointly. Foreign patients & well-off domestic patients can be given the option to recuperate in the resorts after surgery, practice special diets, undergo physiotherapy, Ayurveda etc.

Acquire Skills

Many nurses have worked abroad. They can play an active role in this collaboration effort. They can bring in super skills acquired abroad and can provide training to local nurses (male and female). We are worried about the exodus of returnees from abroad, especially from the Gulf. We should do a skill mapping based on their experience abroad. We lack people with excellent managerial and technical skills, and the returnees should be seen as an asset rather than a liability to the State. As discussed above, there will be a lot of vacancies in various fields. Also, the tourism ecosystem is such that it provides any number of opportunities to start a venture of your own.

Effective Utilization of Infrastructure

Kerala has seen much investment in the realty and in the infrastructure sector. We have big projects like shopping malls, multiplexes, convention centres, metro rail, mobility hubs, seaport and airports. Are we putting them to good use? We are lucky that we have this infrastructure. What we

need now is to attract mega conventions, premium tourists, more users for the public amenities etc. Kerala should transform into a premium tourism location which will attract FIT's and also be a venue for destination weddings.

Destination for Higher Education

We should set up world-class universities in the private sector, preferably from the US, Europe and Singapore. This will attract students from all the neighbouring countries and India. Majority of affluent families send their children abroad to do their higher studies. This will undergo a sea change post the epidemic (high costs and health concerns). Kerala already has a goodwill as an education hub.

Water Sports Tourism and Entertainment

We need to establish 'Centres of Excellence' in select disciplines, especially football, volleyball and badminton. We have traditionally been good in sports and at producing world-class athletes. Let us give India the next wave of superstars. We can host prestigious water-based international events like rowing/canoeing etc. to attract tourists from abroad. Similarly surfing as a sport will attract a good number of tourists. All these have to be done in the private sector.

The role of Government is just to facilitate the transformation to the second revolution in our tourism story. Many policies hinder the progress of tourism. Kerala has been catapulted into a much desired and must-see tourist destination. The time has come to upgrade to the next level. It will call for bold actions from the Government. We must converge all the different promotions to a single goal; that is promoting tourism. We must now take advantage of the investments already made by the Government and the private sector and rise to the next level. The people from Kerala have played a significant role in transforming the Middle East and will now appreciate any opportunity to transform their own land ●