

**Patients without Boundaries:  
A Sociological Inquiry into Medical Tourism in India**

**ABSTRACT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Medical tourism, broadly speaking, is related with health and wellness industry in which people from across the globe travel to other countries in order to get best and affordable medical care. At the same time, the tourists experience and visit the local attractions of that country along with medical treatment. India has witnessed an exponential growth in medical tourism in the past few years and is all set to become the major earner of foreign exchange in near future. There are a number of reasons that has led to the promotion of medical tourism in India. Emergence of world class private medical hospitals equipped with latest machines and trained multitasking staff offering world class treatments and best post-operative care in one third of the cost of developed countries has increased the potential for India to develop as a leading Medical Tourism destination. Major private players such as Apollo Hospitals, Tata, Fortis, Max, Escorts and Wockhardt hospitals have made investments to build world class and modern hospitals that have changed Indian medical and hospital industry landscape completely and made it much attractive to everyone including the tourists visiting from abroad.

With the latest techniques in medical science and hi-tech machines imported from the developed world and our doctors who were trained in best of medical colleges and universities in India and across the world are second to none when it comes to medical treatment. India's strong brand presence in pharmaceutical industry, cheap international travel, and quality health care offering are increasingly turning India a preferred tourist destination. It attracts more than a million tourists from countries such as the US, UK, and Canada in addition to visitors from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and China. Medical tourism is set to flourish and attract foreign investment and employment. Patients from abroad are wooed not only by the low cost factor but also by the exceptional hospitality offered by the Indian healthcare centres. In a nutshell, one is not only cured but also cared is becoming an integral part of Indian medical tourism. Indian healthcare facilities are in no way inferior to their foreign competitors in the medical

tourism industry like Singapore, Thailand, Australia, and Malaysia and so on. Medical tourism in India is soaring upwards and estimated that it can alone generate additional revenues of around 9,000 crore by 2017. Medical tourism in India has been successful in arousing the interests of Indian government also with its promise to bring in more revenue by luring people over the world to travel and cure themselves at the same time.

Medical tourism is not a new phenomenon and in practice since ages. It is generally referred to the increase of travel offshore to receive healthcare and rejuvenation. Major advantage of medical tourism is that the patient can travel to any destination of the world to get the best and the most cost effective health care and treatment. Moreover, individuals with nationalised healthcare services like the United Kingdom and Canada who don't want to wait for medical treatment can avoid the long queues in the relatively developing nations like India that offer world class treatment at an affordable cost with no or less waiting time. Besides patients those involved in medical tourism industry also benefit at large because healthcare providers from other countries give many incentives and best of class hospitality services to offshore patients. Foreign patients also enjoy tourist spots of the country and ultimately help the local country generating foreign exchange and more revenues along with direct and indirect employment to the locals. In the background the dissertation tries to examine the role of medical tourism on society in India with respect to two aspects, mainly socio-cultural and economic. Chapter-1, focuses on both the positive and the negative impacts medical tourism has on the society and the cultural setup; while other focuses on economic development of the country. The chapter underlines that medical tourism in India has grown rapidly in the recent years. The objective of the dissertation was to understand the concept and issues related to tourism and medical tourism and to understand social economic impacts of medical tourism due to arrival of tourist in India. The dissertation tries to estimate the availability of infrastructure and Technical competence and analyses the policies to promote medical tourism in India. Chapter 2 discusses the social cultural and economic impacts of medical tourism. It tries to focus on the positive and negative

impacts of medical tourism on society, culture and economy. The chapter highlights that medical tourism in India is bringing about socio-cultural and economic change, affecting the lives of both the host and the tourist. There is a large scale development in the economy due to foreign exchange earnings. Due this economic development social structure of population is evident. Chapter 3 consists of details on infrastructure availability and technically skilled manpower availability for medical tourism and the government policies and initiatives taken towards growth of this industry. the last chapter concludes the present status of the medical tourism industry and have suggested the recommendation towards the major thrust areas for promotion and growth of the industry in India.

### **Lack of a National Health Insurance or Universal Healthcare System:**

Many people are unaware of the risk they are exposed to if they are exposed to if they do not take health insurance. Though there has been a rise in demand for health insurance products, India continues to have the highest levels of under- penetration in the world, with only 0.16% of the total population insured for health, as per IRDA 70% of the expenses are met from one's pocket. Mostly, people who buy health insurance only to save tax and not for the benefit it offers. The quest for tax benefits was more pronounced among female respondents, with 64% citing it as the reason for buying cover. With the emergence of insurance industry more and more patients are going for best in class treatment. The Government of India, in its National Health Policy 2002 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2002, 4.25), has indicated that special encouragement would be given to expand the market for providing health services to foreigners since such a service would be considered exports (deemed exports) that contribute to overall economic growth. However, this revenue approach limits an understanding of the full implications of medical tourism for the host economy. It gives an insufficient account of the connections between medical tourism and the domestic health sector. For example, India, which has now emerged as a major destination (U.S. Senate 2006), lacks universal health coverage for its own citizens. It earned the very

low rank of 112 in the World Health Organization's (WHO 2002) survey of global health systems (the U.S. rank is 37), which ranks countries according to the availability of accessible and reliable health care for citizens. In addition, India also ranks very low in the United Nations Human Development Index, which ranks countries based on health outcomes such as life expectancy and infant mortality. A New York Times article by Somini Sengupta on June 1, 2008, evoked some of the paradoxes of this situation by comparing the five star resort style hospitals where foreign patients are treated, to the conditions at a public hospital where Indian patients die waiting for treatment. In such a scenario it is unlikely that a foreign health sector and an ailing domestic health sector can coexist without any feedback. However, the analysis of medical tourism in academic and policy literature is generally limited to two streams. Some studies, consider medical tourism from the perspective of the foreign patients (mostly from the United States), focusing particularly on issues of safety. Healthcare provider in consultation with insurance company's employers and insurance company pushes the patient to get treated abroad in famous medical tourism countries at a cheaper cost. In some countries strict drug administration laws also stop people to have access to surgical and certain procedures in their countries in the restricted category treatment. Then the foreign country and medical tourism acts as a saviour by offering the respective treatment without any hassle and in a cost effective manner along with the personal care.

Indian government has a role to play to improve the facilities and promote medical industry as a whole to boost medical tourism. However Indian government is spending a meagre portion of GDP in budget towards healthcare but more investment required. The government needs to step in and provide basic infrastructure services which will improve basic access to high quality medical facilities. The health industry major investment has been done primarily by private players in the market. However, government on its part can do away some restrictions by reducing barriers for visiting India for medical purposes: Currently, foreigners need the "M-Visa" to come to India for medical purposes. Obtaining the visa itself is a huge barrier for medical

tourists coming to India. India should proactively consider offering visa-on-arrival for medical tourists with valid reasons. Medical service providers should work with medical and Hospitals to streamline the administrative processes. Indian Medical Industry needs to raise quality standards to meet Western medical service providers. Foreign investments will certainly help to bring world class infrastructure and partnerships and such partnerships will give confidence to foreign tourists to choose India over other competitors like Singapore, Thailand & Malaysia.

### **Challenges of Medical Tourism:**

The tourism resources of any country can prove to be the growth stimulus for its economy, if used wisely and in a sustainable manner it generates significantly higher level of demand from the domestic and international markets. One of the largest industries in the world; travel and tourism is the fastest growing sector of global trade accounting for 10.4% of global GDP, 12.2% of global exports, 8.3% of global employment and 9.5% of global capital investment. Global tourism today has to deal with a series of unprecedented challenges- from natural calamities like the Pacific-wide tsunami and the nuclear crisis to geo-political upheaval including the revolutions in the Arab nations and union protests throughout the world. The demand for international travel and tourism is now bewildered and afflicted by a series of apparently never-ending problems. Compelled to generate employment for its more than a billion strong population India can ill afford to ignore the opportunity is presented by the promising prospects of the tourism industry more so by the domestic tourism industry which has witnessed and upsurge in recent years owing to the rising disposable income of nuclear families following the era of economic liberalisation and the increased exposure and influence to new lifestyle trend. According to the report jointly published by ASSOCHAM and Yes Bank the domestic travel and tourism sector is expected to be the second largest employer globally by 2019.

Even though there are numerous benefits and opportunities provided by medical tourism potential medical tourists who are looking forward to legal

aspects of patients should always want to retain the right to take legal action against medical tourism operators if patients are harmed as a result of receiving care in health-care facilities that lack international accreditation, if they are treated by health-care providers who are not licensed to provide medical care, if medical tourism companies make misleading or false claims about the effectiveness and safety of particular forms of care, and other circumstances in which patients make decisions on the basis of inaccurate, incomplete, false, or misleading information provided by medical tourism agencies. Medical coding and challenges of international accreditation along with the challenges of authorisation are amongst the various quality measures. Most patients found major difficulty in getting access to real and accurate information, value searching about various treatment options language issues and other communication problems among patients and medical tourism providers also act as measure impedance in getting the correct information. Medical providers must ensure that they provide right information to potential medical tourists another problem face by patients is the lack of vices in case something goes wrong after the patient returns home following the treatment then the patient obviously have no way out. Patients and tourists from developed countries expect world class service since they are habituated to best in class medical service. Indian Medical facility might not be at par with this is extremely difficult sometimes patience might find it difficult to get proper free and post-operative care particularly if he or she has travelled long distance. When the patient decides to return to the home country soon after the surgery then he or she may be at risk of several post-operative complications that might be triggered you too long journey like blood clots or pulmonary embolism (clot that occurs in the lungs). In addition to these complications patients suffer from swelling and ear infections exposing this to their whole body, this is a serious challenge which needs to be taken care of.

However if a patient is forced to stay for a longer period than expected for any reason then he or she will have to in increase cost of trip as the extension of the tour may lead to changing flights paying for accommodation and increase in the daily expenses among others travelling to a foreign country

for treatment or surgery. The risk of catching an infection as there might be a possibility that the patient will not have less immunity and cannot adjust to the prevailing conditions in that country making him prone to infections and allergies. It might be possible that hospitals as the healthcare providers are not able to maintain acceptable standards. Simply to gain profit without looking at the potential risk medical tourism providers go to any limit in wooing the tourists. Without getting proper information about the procedure and the expenditure of the trip tourists take into consideration the cost for treatment and do not understand the cost of travelling expenses and other hospital treatment expenses which might not be included in the package tour. They are not explained while booking a treatment about the hidden costs. It also becomes difficult to ensure reliable and authentic transfer of medical database in the home and destination country. The major concern for the potential medical tourists to check on the qualification of doctors and surgeons also becomes difficult. However till date there are no international data bases that stores information about doctors, surgeons and other medical professionals, due to this there is a lack of transparency in information. This gap needs to be filled by some agency. There are many advantages of the medical tourism for the host country. The fast growth of medical tourism worldwide helps in generating direct or indirect employment to the residential. Direct employment includes jobs, such as taxi services, hotels and restaurants. On the other side indirect employment comprises the delivery of goods and different other services required by the wellness tourism industry. Ultimately it also contributes to government revenues. Local or state governments not only obtain taxes from people employed in medical tourism industry and through direct charges, sales tax, service tax, but from various duties on goods and services offered to vacationers as well.

As international trade in services has become increasingly desirable, health services have been identified as a promising export sector by many national governments and business consultancies worldwide. Medical tourism is one form of health services export that has recently attracted considerable attention, often reported as a sector that is quickly growing and immensely

valuable. Most generally, medical tourism describes the temporary movement of a patient outside the health system of their habitual country of residence for the purpose of purchasing medical care. Here we consider medical tourism to be restricted to patients who intentionally travel to another country primarily for medical care and pay for their care privately. We impose this restriction in order to exclude 'cross-border' patients who are referred abroad by their home health systems and thereby face a different profile of health and financial risks.

The principal purpose of the dissertation was to assess some of the key claims made with regard to medical travel in the recent literatures. The available evidences leads to the conclusion that the new medical tourism is not the principal driving force of the recent growth of travel to the new medical hubs in non-western countries rather; the principle force seems to be the growth of a new middle class in non western countries. Rather than western patients, this new class provides the bulk of medical travellers to the major hubs .The available information on the composition of medical travellers to some of the most popular destination countries, such as Thailand, Singapore and India, indicates that new medical tourists, from western countries travelling specifically to receive treatment in western hubs, constitute only a small minority of the total number of foreign patients. The most significant recent change in medical travel is hence, the re- orientation of traditional western- oriented medical travel to newly emergent medical hubs in non-western world like India. Secondly, there seems to an existence of a significant difference between the kinds of treatment sought by westerners. The principal purpose of the dissertation was to assess some of the key claims made with regard to medical travel in the recent literatures. The available evidence leads to the conclusion that the new medical tourism is not the principal driving force of the recent growth of travel to the new medical hubs in non-western countries. Rather, the principle force seems to be the growth of a new middle class in non western countries. Rather than western patients, this new class provides the bulk of medical travellers to the major hubs .The available information on the composition of medical travellers to some of the most popular destination countries, such as Thailand, Singapore and India, indicates

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With the rise in standard of living coupled with increased health awareness has fuelled demand for quality healthcare services. Metros cities of the country like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and most importantly the cities of South India and, thereby, increasing the visibility of India on the global map as a medical tourism hub. India along with Singapore and Thailand are the major medical tourism places in the world. Above all good services offered by medical tourism destinations make an impact on foreign travellers and force them to visit the place again, which eventually increases the demand of the accommodation and other essential commodities enhancing the overall development of the region and country.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Strategy to improve tourism:

- Positioning and maintaining tourism development as a national priority activity.
- Enhancing and maintaining the competitiveness of India as a tourist destination.
- Improving India's existing tourism products further and expanding these to meet new market requirements.
- Creation of world-class infrastructure by taking effective steps for easier and faster availability of visas increasing air connectivity and by providing well maintained clean waiting rooms, basic amenities like drinking water, toilets, tea, coffee facilities, parking facilities for tourist vehicles at railway stations.
- Developing Strategies for sustained and effective marketing plans and programs.
- Developing human resources and capacity building of service providers.

- Improving the infrastructural facilities such as airports roads Civic amenities at the tourist destinations increasing the air seat capacity and connectivity vigorous publicity etc.
- In order to meet the requirement of growth in traffic there would be need for the creation of quality accommodation with sufficient number of rooms with 24 hrs water and electricity supply.
- New forms of tourism like rural tourism cultural tourism adventure tourism Cruise tourism, M I C E tourism and medical tourism need to be taken up with renewed zeal and efforts.
- Pilgrimage Centre may be identified and integrated with new domestic tourist circuits where in transport accommodation catering and darshan are all synergized to make pilgrimage tourism into a popular and comfortable mode.
- Large revenue projects such as setting up of hotels, convention centre, golf courses, tourist trains etc. may be created by private initiative with the government acting as a facilitator and catalyst.
- Wildlife sanctuaries and national parks also be made an integral part of the Indian tourism products.
- Making use of various technological tools including the Internet for advertising for greater and wider impact and for extending effective marketing support to SMEs it is necessary to encourage E-Commerce portals.
- The existing scheme of the train the trainer should be strengthened and implemented countrywide for boosting availability of adequate trainers for training.

- The tourism conclave organised by CII in New Delhi themed integrating tourism in too mainstream development and medical value travel focused on the significant contribution of the tourism sector and the need and ways to integrate it too mainstream development.
- To achieve these goals suitable measures undertaken include:
  - Positioning and maintaining tourism development as a national priority activity.
  - Enhancing and maintaining the competitiveness of India as a tourist destination.
  - Improving India's existing tourism products further and expanding these to meet new market requirements.
  - Creation of world class infrastructure.
  - Developing Strategies for sustained and effective marketing plans and programs. On 1st July, 2010 Ministry of Tourism and housing and urban poverty alleviation Government of India launched the code of conduct for safe and honourable tourism the first of its kind in the country the code is a collaborative initiative between the Ministry of Tourism United Nations office on drugs and crime Save the Children India and Pacific Asia tourism Association. It is a set of guidelines to be adopted voluntarily by the tourism industry and its operators to:
    - a. encourage tourism activities to be undertaken with respect for basic rights like dignity safety and freedom from exploitation of both tourist and residents.
    - b. prevent commercial sexual exploitation sex tourism and forms of sexual exploitation like assault and molestation with the view to safeguard the safety of persons especially women and children.

- c. prevent forced or involuntary drug use manipulated information social and cultural intolerance which could increase the vulnerability to crime.

The guidelines would be applicable to all the owners, suppliers, contractors and employees of the travel and tour sector including hotels, restaurants, lodge guest houses, tour agents and entertainment establishment's service provider will also come under its ambit.

It is crucial to develop human resources and capacity building for service providers. Given the low cost of employment creation in the tourism sector and the low level of exploitation of India's tourism potential the new policies should seek to expand foreign tourist arrivals and facilitate domestic tourism in a manner that is sustainable by ensuring that people adverse effects such as cultural pollution and degradation of environment are minimised.