



MICE Tourism in India: Powerhouse of a New Era

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ABSTRACT

MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) tourism is among the key revenue spinners of hospitality and tourism industry in the contemporary world. Apart from bringing together different facets of tourism into one comprehensive body it also allows the economy of a nation to develop progressively. According to statistics released by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), there will be 1000 crore travellers worldwide by the end of 2020 and it is assumed that travel due to business will contribute nearly 14% of all international movement. The estimated market size of MICE in India is Rs 37,576 crores and its contribution to the global MICE industry stands at 0.96%. The paper highlights the evolution of MICE tourism and investigates its future prospects in India. The present research also enumerates the efforts being made by the Central and State governments to promote key destinations as future brand ambassadors for MICE tourism in the country that could place India formidably in the map of MICE tourism.

Keywords: Meetings; Incentives; Conferences; Exhibition; MICE; Tourism; India.

1.0 Introduction

MICE, a subset of business travel, has become the buzzword in the travel industry. MICE segment is a niche market that has tremendous prospects and is getting popularity across the globe on account of the expansion of business travel. The acronym 'MICE' stands for meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions and is recognized as a significant market segment of the tourist industry at large (Astroff *et al.*, 2006; Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001 and Kim *et al.*, 2003). As reported by UIA, Union of International Associations or Union Association Internationale, there were 467,528 meetings held globally in 2016.

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Consequently, MICE segment, with high returns and better average daily expenditure per visitors, is regarded as core sectors of development for the tourism industry across the world. Dwyer *et al.*, (1996) and Shone (1998) stated that over the last decade there has been substantial development in convention and meeting industries, and countries have responded by expanding the provision of facilities and infrastructure as a means to attract this lucrative share of the tourism market.

Astroff *et al.*, (2006) and Fenich (2005) highlighted that the industry consists of multiple hospitality service sectors including lodging, food and beverage, catering, convention services, convention facility rentals, transportation, tourism, retail, and entertainment and thus bears great importance for the local economy of a destination (Yang and Gu, 2012). There are several bodies such as Conventions and Visitor Bureau (CVB), India Convention Promotion Bureau (ICPB), Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), Network of Indian MICE Agents (NIMA), International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), International Association of Convention and Visitors' Bureau (IACVB), MICE India and Luxury Travel Congress (MILT), etc. which are working for the promotion of MICE in India (Gade *et al.*, 2016). MICE industries also share several common characteristics with hospitality service sectors, such as inseparability of production and consumption, perishability, and seasonality. Whilst several nations have started reaping the financial returns connected with MICE business, they have targeted Asia region, where commercial operations and transactions witness accelerated growth.

MICE tourism has expanded globally in the past several years (UNWTO, 2014) and has been a major revenue-generating segment of the tourism business (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012). It has contributed to income, employment, and investment (UNWTO, 2014).

Nations across the globe today are making valiant efforts to strengthen the MICE business with an aim to fostering their economy (Yang and Gu, 2012). As a result, it comes as no surprise that the countries are looking forward to expanding their tourism infrastructure and to stand out themselves from rival nations, partially, by focusing on MICE segment travelers (UNWTO, 2014). From a nations' outlook, MICE business helps in reducing seasonal variations and fluctuations, generates greater revenue, and builds brand image and visibility (UNWTO, 2014).

India has enormous prospects and opportunities as MICE destination owing to its diverse topography ranging from coastal regions to picturesque hill stations, from vibrant cities to widespread desert areas, there is something for every type of business travel planners. The robust and dynamic surge in the tourism industry coupled with the support from central and state government bodies and private stakeholders to enhance

tourism infrastructure will definitely support India to become the most sought-after MICE-destination. The aviation sector is unlocking new avenues, incorporating new destinations, making travel affordable and convenient with shorter time duration. The overseas India tourism offices are also putting greater emphasis to promote the MICE segment over leisure and entertainment, as this activity ensures volume and increased revenue for the country.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

The study is proposed with the following objectives:

- To discuss the potential of India as a MICE destination
- To provide suggestions in order to improve the visibility and competitiveness of India as a MICE destination
- To enumerate the efforts being made by the Central & State Governments that could place India formidably in the map of MICE tourism.

3.0 Research Methodology

The data were collected from secondary sources to achieve the aim and objectives of this study. It is based on the secondary data which has been collected from the website of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), UNWTO and World Tourism Organization. Various annual reports, journals, newspapers, magazines, books, web pages, blogs and other published data are also referred to. The collected data is analysed to reach conclusions regarding the various aspects of MICE tourism in India.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 MICE as a segment of business tourism

Business tourism comprises of all tours and visits related to the travel of employees or business interests and is considered as a highly profitable segment of the tourism industry (Haven-Tang *et al.* 2007). It includes meetings, conventions, convocation, conferences, seminars, conclave, incentives, exhibitions, summit, trade shows, symposium, incentive travel, networking events and corporate hospitality (BTP, 2005). The MICE industry has matured significantly in the last several years. It has witnessed significant growth in the tourism industry (Dwyer and Forsyth, 1997; Hing *et al.* 1998). Characterized as a multi-dimensional industry (Dwyer and Mistilis, 2000), the

MICE acronym stands for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (Dwyer and Mistilis, 2000; Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008; Getz, 2008; McCartney, 2008; Priporas, 2005; Rogerson, 2012; Gibson *et al.* 2012), which in most countries fall within the scope of events industry (Getz, 2008).

The UNWTO describes the meeting as a systematic and organized event that brings people formally to discuss a topic of mutual interest (CIC, 2011). Meetings can be conducted for a business or non-business purposes but are mostly generated by the corporates as its higher return, with a great number of meetings held across the world every day (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008). Of late, meetings are largely conducted away from the site of the organization running it (Davidson, 1994). The term meetings can also be used to encompass a broad range of activities such as conferences, conventions, conclaves, symposiums, and seminars (Seekings and Farrer, 1999; Fenich, 2005).

Incentive travel is a managerial tool, used globally, that involves a remarkable traveling experience to honor employees for their outstanding achievements in the interest of organizational objectives (Site International Foundation and IMEX Group Joint Study, 2013). Incentive travel may be described as an all-expenses-paid trip (Rogers, 2003) that is practiced by business enterprises as a driver to induce the productive capacity and efficiency of its staff members in achieving the expected results of the establishment in terms of turnover and profitability (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008).

Conferences are described as participatory meetings principally designed for discourse, fact-finding, resolving issues, deliberation, exchange of information and consultation, with a specific goal in consideration. Conferences are professionally organized and they take place over day or a few days. Conferences can be defined as an event involving like-minded people that are usually held outside the organizations' premises (CIC, 2011). Major motivating factor for attending conferences is the content/information that is being shared and networking with like-minded people.

Exhibitions bring manufacturers and retailers of goods and services together with potential buyer, typically for a specific industry (Allen *et al.* 2002). These are also referred to as expositions, as they bring together several vendors and suppliers in a set up where they can showcase and push their range of goods and services on a large scale. The central purpose of exhibitions is the business-to-business connection (Fenich, 2005) for either promoting innovative merchandise or winning out new buyers and customers (Jurisevic, 2002).

4.2 Evolution of the concept of MICE tourism in India

MICE tourism has been existing in India since time immemorial. The kings and the emperors used to host lavish gatherings at their palaces for a long time. This accentuated in the British era and further shaped up in the post-independence era, with the advent of the 5-star accommodation units across the country. Hosting of large scale sporting events like the World Cup Cricket in 1987, 1996 and 2011, Asian Games in 1951 and 1982 and the Commonwealth Games in 2010 further showcased India's ability to successfully host events like this. With the formation of ICPB in 1988, further momentum was received for this segment of the industry. With the MICE industry entering a maturing phase and the focus shifting from Europe to Asia Pacific region, India is on the cusp of a major breakthrough, an advantage to become a leader in MICE tourism in the Asia – Pacific region.

4.3 India's position in the MICE map of the world

MICE industries play an important role in India's tourism sector. Already recognized as a prime tourist destination, India has been developing itself into an increasingly popular location to hold international events, both product marketing and corporate seminars. Consequently, India's MICE sector has seen strong growth in recent years. The Union Government has set an ambitious target for MICE INDIA to achieve 2% of the global MICE market share by 2025, from an insignificant current share of 0.96%. As stated by Economic Times, India is estimated to generate over 20 lakh outbound luxury and MICE tourists annually by 2020, reinforcing the country's influence as a key source market for MICE and luxury travel. As per the data published by MICE India and Luxury Travel (MILT) Congress, India's outbound MICE tourism market is anticipated to touch US\$ 9 billion by 2025. According to the estimates published by the Indian Express, the size of Indian MICE industry is pinned at 250 billion, rising at an annual rate of about 8 per cent. With the expansion of existing sites being carried out and adding up more than 12 new MICE venues in different parts of the country, space is set to triple over the next four years. Indian MICE industry, at present, possesses an aggregated area of nearly 5,00,000 sq. metres. In addition, 12 new sites like the projected exhibition cum convention centre at Dwarka, New Delhi and extension of present-day venues at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Pune, Noida, Greater Noida, Mumbai, Chennai, etc. shall guarantee that the total surface area for MICE business in the country would exceed an area of 15,00,000 sq. meters in the next couple of years. Once it becomes reality, the industry's growth rate will double from the prevailing 8 per cent to 16 per cent. As the configuration of new MICE sites is taking place rapidly across the country, the MICE segment is confident to grow

significantly in the subsequent years. Central, as well as State governments, have also been actively seeking out to establish new MICE venues to entice business as well as leisure travellers, helping the MICE industry grow.

India witnessed a balanced MICE business in 2019 with the country reconciling with the repercussions of demonetization and GST effect annulment. With the large multinational companies offering meetings and incentives programs, the MICE segment though at a nascent stage in India, is anticipated to show substantial growth in the near future. The government is prepared to put forward strategic changes in its policies that would make India one of the most favourite MICE destinations across the globe.

4.4 Competitive advantage of brand India MICE

- An array of exquisite destinations
- Old world tradition mixed with cosmopolitan sophistication
- Exotic accommodation and conference infrastructure
- Elaborate internal Surface transport and communication network
- Better connectivity with the world
- Treaties with the developed countries to developing its tourism sector
- Evolving and maturing business scenario
- Educated and skilled manpower
- Availability of relatively cheap labour
- Make in India, Start-Up India, Tax reforms to spruce up investment scenario
- Government focus on ease of business and promotion of tourism
- MICE Tourism worldwide trends showing India as preferred destination

4.5 Prospects and challenges: Global scenario

A country and its tourism industry get significantly benefitted by business tourism. The financial implications of MICE tourism, particularly events segment has been discussed by several academicians and researchers in the domain (Gartrell, 1991; Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999, 2000; Sherwood *et al*, 2005; Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008; Getz, 2008; McCartney, 2008; Ford, 2011; Li Ting, and Zheng 2011; Gibson *et al.*, 2012; Rogerson, 2012). MICE tourism is interpreted as comprising the ‘Three Highs’ – development prospects, additional advantage and innovativeness and modernization. In addition, it delivers ‘Three Larges’ – high yield, job prospects and professional and trade associations; and ‘Three Advantages’ – an edge over competitors in the workforce, core competencies and leveraging of means (Janakiraman, 2012). Participants of MICE tourism are known as spendthrifts, as they have the tendency of spending more on

accommodation and dining outlets, sight-seeing, leisure activities, etc. thus fulfilling the requirements of revenue powered tourism approach (Braun, 1992; Clark, 2004). In fact, this segment of travellers has been identified as paying out thrice more than an average leisure traveler (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008). This in return generates foreign exchanges and creates job opportunities (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999; Bowdin *et al.*, 2001; Page, 2003).

MICE tourism gets the endorsement from the governments of respective nations owing to its financial implications (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999; Dwyer *et al.*, 2000) resulting in generating higher returns to local economies, both directly and indirectly (Davidson, 1992; Bowdin *et al.*, 2001; Lawrence and McCabe, 2001; Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008). The cascading effect of MICE industry makes it a more profitable business. Yet, researches have indicated that governments can also facilitate MICE sector by means of treasury loans, financial rewards, tax relaxations, talent development programs, and promotional and advertising activities (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999). Nations like Dubai, Singapore, Las Vegas, and Australia have developed exceptional infrastructure owing to the support from their governmental authorities in several aspects (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999). Furthermore, authorities have a significant role in supporting talent development and certification systems (Dwyer and Mistilis, 2000). Conversely, the challenge for the nation is that their governments are not inclined to MICE segment as it requires huge investments. The government of different countries prefers to invest on issues such as education, health, etc. as the MICE sector is not always on their priority list. The infrastructural development for MICE industry requires meticulous planning and implementation so that it can reap economic benefits to the nation and support the ever-increasing demands of the industry (Ranchold, 2004). Infrastructural development is of vital importance as the segment is experiencing huge growth in demand (Getz, 2008).

Several countries' financial and human capital advancement is connected to possibilities in generating employment and its talent development that the MICE industry provides (Hiller, 2000) which in turn helps the governments with respect to combating poverty while providing job prospects to the native population. Competencies can be developed through expertise for the service sector; advertising and branding and sustainable development (Solberg and Preuss, 2005). In order to survive in this age of cut-throat competition, these competencies need to be utilized optimally (McCartney, 2008). The industry needs to consider its manpower as human capital in order to gain an edge over the others (Weber and Ladkin, 2003). Regions like Asia Pacific are considered to be lacking in the skills related to business management, finance, and marketing (Dwyer

and Mistilis, 1999) however the process of talent development in these regions have been progressing steadily.

One major challenge being faced by the MICE industry is to retain employees as establishments do not consider their staff as human assets (Hiller, 2000). The hospitality and tourism industry is a people industry and requires a large number of manpower to perform operations at different levels. These tasks are the essential elements of world-class service and enhanced guest satisfaction (Torraco and Swanson, 1995). The dynamic nature of the MICE industry provides an array of career avenues that helps in increasing the rate of employment (Hobson, 1996). Nevertheless, the tourism industry must incorporate a code of conduct so that it is in accordance with the employment legislation (Dwyer and Mistilis, 1999). The destination needs to propose exclusive packages which no one has experienced before and constantly surpass itself to create a *waow* factor or unique experience, mixing business and pleasure (Davidson, 2003). In fact, events can provide an opportunity to enhance social relationships, for reinforcing abilities to know each other and for community well-being (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2005). Linkages with local stakeholders can be fruitful in contributing to local development by incorporating small suppliers into corporate supply chains (Mitchell and Ashley, 2010; Scheyvens, 2011).

4.6 Prospects and challenges: Indian context

MICE segment undoubtedly tastes some success in the Indian market. Nevertheless, many developments and transformations are yet to take place. One of the significant milestones in this direction would be the introduction of an e-tourist visa for MICE travellers. The MICE industry in the country is of fragmented nature and at nascent stages, the sector is making a steady comeback owing to infrastructural developments taking place in India. The connectivity, rail as well as air, to Tier II and III cities are another grey area that needs to be bridged. With the introduction of low-cost carriers on the domestic routes, improved transportation system, coming up of new exhibition cum convention centres, presence of more national and international hotel chains, India is now a preferred MICE destination. Being one of the fastest-growing economies in past few years, India has price-competitive offerings and the country can boast of having 31 international airports, 5 cruise ports in addition to one of the largest rail and road networks globally.

Still, India needs to upgrade and develop its infrastructural framework, have more unparalleled exhibition cum convention facilities besides embracing an integrated perspective to encourage MICE industry. To lure travellers from different parts of the

world, we need tourism conducive strategy and approach, destination awareness merchandizing, and above all, we need to brand India as a safe and hygienic destination.

As the MICE sector is anticipated to witness substantial growth in the coming years, hotels are also expected to see a rise in demand for rooms. In order to increase their share in the MICE market, hotels need to embrace the new meeting formats and technology and adapt to the latest trends for enhanced guest satisfaction. Talent development and retention of highly competent staff is another challenge that needs immediate attention as MICE is a very specialized and niche segment of the tourism industry which requires highly skilled staff.

MICE tourists, national as well as global, have a specific set of requirements as they come from different backgrounds. With an aim to making their stay and events at the hotel a memorable and error-free experience, it requires a pool of skilled staff who are proactive and possess an array of competence. The country has numerous hotels of national and international repute with world-class services and facilities to hosts events, conferences, meetings, and incentives. The MICE segment in the tourism sector is expanding rapidly in the country, but still, much work remains to be done.

5.0 Findings and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to elaborate on the characteristics of MICE tourism and to investigate the prospects and challenges of MICE tourism in India. India is poised positively on the MICE path. According to statistics published by International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), India has strengthened its ranking significantly in the past few years by hosting 175 meetings in 2017 as compared to 143 in the year 2016, thus leaping and improving its rank by seven positions. A detailed study of the last five-year data revealed the country has regained its ranking, which it enjoyed in the year 2013. India still is lagging behind in terms of the number of meetings it organizes in spite of having sufficient MICE infrastructure across the 12 major destinations.

There is tremendous potential for MICE segment to grow in the country, but it is under-performing on account of inadequate advertising and merchandising campaign which requires to be re-structured as there is a strong need for proper co-ordination and cohesiveness across different stakeholders for seamless implementation. The good news is that India is exploring and developing new venues wherein MICE events can be organized, thus enabling to pep up the economy of the particular location. What needs to be done is to improve upon the last mile connectivity, upgrade people skills, empower organizations at the micro-level and develop the eco-system in a holistic manner.

It is recommended that the concept of sustainable and exclusive MICE tourism be adopted and practiced. It is imperative to comprehend the situational analysis through various case studies from across the globe to make it immensely successful. Introduction of customized travel experiences, luxury spa sessions, rare animal sanctuaries, religious pilgrimage tours, archaeological sites, etc. is what the foreign tourists interested in. There is ample opportunity for medical, wellness, rural and spiritual tourism in the country. MICE destinations should be encouraged as tourism for the purpose of Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions are no longer limited to big cities. Major markets of inbound tourism should be targeted for this exercise.

As far as the constraints faced in Indian MICE industry are concerned, lack of well-defined policies, the structure of the promotion bureau, lack of government support in the pre/ post-event area are the major bones of contention. Specific guidelines need to be drafted specifically for MICE and to be included in the National Tourism Policy.

New tourist destinations may be explored and further developed for offering innovative tourism products or experiences. MICE tourism can be used as an appropriate tool to make India an attractive destination so that foreign tourists keep coming back to the country.

In nutshell, India is flexing its muscles in the MICE sector both as a market (domestic and outbound) and as a destination (inbound). The Indian MICE market is growing rapidly with a strong domestic sector and a booming outbound traffic. At the same time, with the country's efforts to increase its inbound corporate travel, hotels, and convention centres are witnessing massive expansion programs to make India into a leading corporate meeting destination and hub. While foreign NTOs are making an aggressive bid for the Indian MICE traffic; state tourism boards, travel agencies, hotel chains, MICE operators, and other stakeholders are also not far behind in growth plans to capture the maximum share.

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