

The Indian tourism sector must focus on sustainable sanitation

With India chasing a target of 20 million FTAs by 2020, the need for a Swachh Bharat increases

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The hygiene standards of a hotel in Egypt came under fire when a British couple travelling in the country died in August this year. According to Wesgro, the Western Cape's tourism, trade and investment promotion agency, the number of reservations at hotels in Cape Town for the period between April and September 2018 were 50% lower than last year, as its water woes trended on the web, creating a frightening scenario of there being no water to flush toilets, wash hands and clean public spaces.

"Virtual travel studios" are springing up across the world with simulated experiences that allow armchair travellers to see the world virtually, without navigating crowds, suffering stinking toilets, ingesting bacteria-infested food and breathing polluted air.

While these might not be immediate threats to the booming tourism industry, they point towards the link between a country's sanitation standards and its tourist inflows.

Most global lists now cite sanitation as the top criterion to assess a country's tourist-friendliness. While countries in the overpopulated developing world have more to worry about, even the West sees deteriorating levels of sanitation as a cause for concern.

With India chasing an ambitious target of 20 million Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) by 2020, the need to build a Swachh Bharat is more than ever.

The country's attempts to address the sanitation challenge go back to pre-Independence

when Mahatma Gandhi called upon fellow Indians to view sanitation through the lens of national pride. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) launched in 2014, translated that clarion call into a nationwide campaign for cleanliness.

The efforts of the last four years under the prime minister's personal supervision are now showing dramatic results with success stories emerging from the remotest parts of the country. International development agencies have acknowledged India's SBM as the biggest sanitation movement in the world.

From being a government-driven programme, it is fast turning into a people's movement with the private sector, community, social activists, entertainment industry and celebrities joining to make sanitation a priority.

A massive push is being given to address the sanitation woes of our country. From over 60% of rural population not having access to a toilet at home in 2014 to SBM Grameen achieving a rural sanitation coverage of 95% with 507,369 villages achieving an open defecation free status in 2018, we have come a long way.

According to national data, urban toilet coverage is now 87% and nearly three-fourths of the wards in the country have door-to-door collection of municipal waste.

Not resting on its laurels, the government is working with agencies to conduct a close audit of the outcomes of these initiatives. Simultaneously, efforts are intensifying to eliminate manual scavenging and manual cleaning of septic tanks, and looking into safety protocols, safety gear and rehabilitation.

The issue of waste collection-disposal-recycling is being taken up on a war footing. Inter-departmental coordination is being seen in areas of infrastructure development that can support these announcements. But greater efforts have to be made at city and Panchayat level to deal with garbage.



Heaps of garbage lying on the road in Gurugram. Our cities are not exactly the epitome of cleanliness. If Indore could do it, why can't others? Local bodies need to take greater responsibility.

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Globally, tourism-related economic losses from inadequate sanitation are estimated to be US\$ 266 million. Even as India records remarkable successes in the field of sanitation, we have to move towards "sustainable sanitation" in tourism by creating zero emission tourist lodges and facilities, using native flora and fauna for toiletries, recycling waste to create toilet paper and attaching sprinklers to public taps to save water.

Each country must do its bit to step up awareness around sustainable sanitation and reward good Samaritans who lead the charge. Research shows a rising number of travellers today wanting to give back to the

countries and communities they visit and reduce their impact on the environment.

Campaigns like 'Travel. Enjoy. Respect.' are amplifying the potential of tourism while minimising damage to the environment, traditions, culture, heritage and local communities.

While these may still be small steps, they are nonetheless heralding a culture of cleanliness. The Indian tourism sector, too, needs to focus on sustainable sanitation on both the demand and supply side.

This will encourage more travellers to go clean and green as they play their part in being part of the Incredible India experience.

KJ Alphons is minister of state for tourism, and a former bureaucrat. The views expressed are personal.