



Promoting Tourism between ASEAN and India in Post-COVID

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With one billion people vaccinated with at least one dose, India stands tall in overcoming the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector. The ASEAN region too has begun to open its tourism sector gradually and slowly. In the third week of October 2021, Thailand released a list of countries eligible for travelling to Thailand without mandatory quarantine if they have double vaccine shots certificates and negative RT-PCR test reports. India is not mentioned in the list and that takes us to the question of existing and emerging challenges in interregional tourism between India and ASEAN. Indonesia has also welcomed in-bound foreign tourists subject to compliance to certain norms. As the world is now hopeful of leaving behind the pandemic days, ASEAN and India need to retrospect the trends in intra-regional tourism involving both the sides. In the given context, this commentary seeks to recommend few ways to improve tourism between ASEAN and India in the near future.

1. Introduction

India and Southeast Asia represent diverse, dynamic and vibrant cultures, heritages, architectures, languages and picturesque landscapes to offer to the tourists. Unfortunately, just like India, Southeast Asia too has experienced the unfavorable effects of Covid-19 on tourism sector. The total tourists received by the ASEAN region witnessed a drop to 1,521,447 in 2020 from a dynamic number of 6,157,190 in 2019.¹ Road to recovery for the tourism needs innovation and collaboration.²

This was not the first incidence when Southeast Asia had faced challenges in its tourism sector. The region had experienced drops in tourist arrivals after SARS in 2003. Later on, in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis between April 2007 and January 2009 the region faced another drop in tourists arrivals. This was only to be followed by H1N1 pandemic between January 2009 and August 2010.³ However, after 2010, tourism sector in the ASEAN region

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gained a momentum, and, in 2015, tourism receipts contributed approximately 12.4 per cent to the overall GDP in ASEAN.⁴ This was a steady growth from 8 per cent contribution to GDP in 2010.⁵ New reports have also indicated that tourism-led economic growth could create decent jobs in the services sector, not only for the locals but also for the outsiders in Southeast Asia. For instance, thousands of East Javanese people were recruited in the travel and tourism sector in Bali prior to the pandemic. Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic has again implied severe consequences on tourism in Southeast Asia. Apart from the substantial drop in the arrival of tourists as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the loss in tourism sector in Southeast Asia also means that 42.3 million people in the region who were previously employed in this sector in 2019 had to suffer from some of the financial consequences including temporary unemployment.⁶

2. Tourism in ASEAN-India Relations

ASEAN and India are on the rim of completing 30 years of partnership in 2022, and, therefore, it will be immensely beneficial to look into the matter of tourism cooperation between the two. The ASEAN-India MoU on strengthening tourism cooperation was signed in 2012 and a protocol to amend to the MoU was signed in 2013. The objectives of the MoU and the protocol have been to foster action-oriented cooperation in tourism sector. The number of Indian tourists to ASEAN countries stood at approximate 4.67 million in 2018. However, the number of tourists from ASEAN to India is insubstantial compared to the total foreign tourists received by India. Problems encountered and reported by the ASEAN tourists in India range from dearth of infrastructure and connectivity to lack of knowledge and information about popular Indian tourism destinations. The Covid-19 pandemic has just added few more challenges to the existing scenario.

A few efforts have already been taken to overcome some of the challenges. The Philippines became one of the sixth countries with whom India could sign a bilateral MoU on tourism in 2019. The other five countries were Argentina, Saudi Arabia, Croatia, Paraguay, and Finland. On 18 January 2019, the 7th ASEAN-India Tourism Ministers Meeting was organised in Ha Long City as a part of the ASEAN Tourism Forum. 2019 was declared as the ASEAN-India Tourism Year in this meeting. In November 2019, International Tourism Mart was held in Imphal, Manipur, where foreign delegates from various countries including the ASEAN member countries participated to encourage the tourism connect between Northeast India and Southeast Asia.⁷ In February 2021, the 8th ASEAN-India Tourism Ministers Meeting was conducted virtually. Elaboration on India's SAATHI (System for Assessment, Awareness, and Training for Hospitality) and Buddhist Circuit was done aiming at encouraging more ASEAN travelers to visit India for tourism purposes. The Plan of Action (PoA) to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025) focused on the private sector

participation in the tourism sector to enhance flow of tourists between Southeast Asian countries and India.

3. The Current Initiatives

ASEAN has already taken some initiatives to rejuvenate the tourism sector, both at the regional and national level. The ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), adopted in November 2020, prioritized tourism as one of the hardest hit sectors of Covid-19 pandemic and acknowledged the need for accelerated sectoral recovery of tourism in the region. The 24th Meeting of the ASEAN tourism ministers in February 2021 addressed the issue and recommended speedy implementation of the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework (ATCAF) to encourage ASEAN's brand as a single tourism market and highlighted the importance of digital tourism, cruise tourism and other luxury tourisms in the region.⁸ ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEAN TA) has advocated for phased out recovery in the tourism sector in Southeast Asia. They recommended applying the Singapore Model across the region which ensures pre-arrival negative reports of RT-PCR tests of the tourists, submission of the itinerary to the respective authorities in the destinations, use of private transport for in-destination transfers and exercising health passports and health-tracking apps. The ASEAN TA also emphasized on an integrated regional approach to tackle the further spread of Covid-19 through the tourists as well as among the tourists.⁹ Besides, as part of the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan, ASEAN will also continue to follow ASEAN Open Skies policy and Single Aviation Market agreement to persuade intra-ASEAN tourist arrivals through increasing competitiveness, affordability and accessibility of air travel. As a policy of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), ASEAN will also maintain its Low Cost Carriers (LCC) air travel system to cheer for more air travelers within the region.¹⁰ With all these policies in place, the intra-regional tourist arrivals in ASEAN are expected to grow at the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5 per cent from 2019 to 2024 with a total 56.6 million travelers in 2024.¹¹

Individual ASEAN countries have also started adopting various plans to recover from the damages caused by the pandemic on their tourism sector. For example, Thailand has taken a four-pronged strategy involving Risk Management as a key approach to look at the post-COVID tourism scenario. The four wings of the approach include Monitoring, Restoration, Recovery and Response highlighting specific areas like information dissemination, communications, stakeholder engagements and timely responses.¹²

4. Recommendations

When it comes to the intra-regional tourism scenario between ASEAN and India, both sides need to take a comprehensive approach to look forward and enhance the number of tourists to the

either side. According to some observations by The ASEAN Tourism Research Association (ATRA), the Indian travelers represent one of the largest spenders in the tourism sector world-wide and they also comprise the eighth largest business travel market. The Indian travelers are also known for their spending on shopping while on family vacations.¹³ Hence, the question is, what can be done to encourage more tourists from India and ASEAN to visit each other's countries.

Virtual Exhibitions: One way of looking at the issue involves focusing more on the similarities while overlooking some of the differences in the socio-cultural aspects of Indian and Southeast Asian lives. The similarities between Indian and Southeast Asian ways of lives include religions, food habits, cultural practices and mythologies. Demonstrations of these similarities through virtual exhibitions can be organised to create awareness about each other's lifestyle both in India and ASEAN. The museums and cultural institutions from both the regions can cooperate with other to organize such virtual exhibitions and the same can be made popular on the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

More Direct Flights: Lesser number of direct flights between India and ASEAN capitals remains as a challenge for the interregional tourism as India is connected with Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Myanmar and Singapore via direct flights. Rest of the ASEAN countries are still not directly connected with New Delhi or any other state capitals in India. Hence, tourist destinations in India need to be directly connected to the ASEAN capitals and other destination places and vice-versa. Direct flight connecting places like Siem Riep and Varanasi, or Luang Prabang and Bhubaneswar or Patna, or Imphal and Mandalay will encourage tourists to explore ancient temple architectures from both the regions.

Promote Ethnic and Traditional Tourism: Ethnic and traditional tourism has received a lot of acclamation recently due to its proximity to nature and sustainability. Ethnic and traditional tourism motivates travelers to encompass the local and traditional way of living for a few days, be responsible tourists, and, it also encourages both the hosts and guests to understand each other's ethnic-cultural traits. India and Southeast Asian countries need to think about promoting ethnic and traditional tourism involving young adults as well as professionals. Ethnic tourism in Northern Thailand is already popular among the ASEAN and non-ASEAN travelers. India may think about developing ethnic and traditional tourism to promote diverse regional and traditional ways of lifestyle and connect those with the Southeast Asian tourists. The eastern part of India would be an excellent point to begin with.

Interactions between BIMSTEC Tourism and ASEAN Tourism: Both BIMSTEC and ASEAN have tourism sector included as institutional structures. In BIMSTEC, the tourism sector is led by India and the sub-regional grouping conducts tourism ministers meeting, Tourism Working Group meetings and other mechanisms to improve the cooperation in tourism exist as

well. The institutional structure of ASEAN tourism sector is effective through tourism ministers meeting, Tourism National Organisation (NTO), Tourism Competitiveness Committee and many others. In order to promote intra-regional tourism, both BIMSTEC and ASEAN can think about a common platform to discuss about the problems and challenges in interregional tourism and recommend ways to the governments and private sector tourism enterprises to unfold some of the hidden and untapped potential in the tourism sector from both the regions. This will help in formulating policies and programmes aiming at enhanced tourist flows between ASEAN and India.

Sessions with Travel Bloggers and Professional Travelers: The India Tourism offices in Southeast Asian countries have already conducted India Tourism Reconnect sessions virtually in B2B model. While this will disseminate information about India's vaccination drive, popular travel destinations and available facilities in India to the tourism industry stakeholders including the tour operators, hoteliers and airlines, the same can be organised at more mass level (People-to-People) involving travel bloggers, adventure tourist groups, public and motivational speakers who are planning for their foreign trips next year. Online and accessible registration to such P2P sessions will attract more professional travelers to India and vice-versa to connect to the millennial generation.

Table 1: Promoting Tourism between ASEAN and India

Digital	Virtual exhibitions, online sessions with travel bloggers and professional travelers, using social media platforms to generate awareness about the travel destinations and facilities available
Institutional	More direct flights connecting the travel destinations, creation of ASEAN-BIMSTEC Tourism Forum, Institutional capacity building exercises and interactions between the tour operators and travel agencies
Socio-cultural	Promotion of ethnic and traditional tourism, e.g. Village tourism in Northeast India/North Bengal/Orissa, etc. Involving young adults and professionals through friendly competitions in photography, painting, blogs, quiz etc.

5. Conclusion

World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (2019) shows that India and Southeast Asian countries have performed relatively well with Singapore, Malaysia, and India getting scores above 4 on a scale of 1-7 (best). Therefore, a comprehensive approach and joined programmes to integrate the tourism parameters in India and Southeast Asia will be able to meet the emerging challenges in the tourism sector.¹⁴ The sharing of skills, knowledge and information will support the tourism sector both in India and ASEAN region and this will benefit

the regional economies. Tourism will also add to the image of soft power embracing diplomatic endeavors to cultivate multilateral relations in this part of the world.

Endnotes:

1. Refer, Covid-19 Effects on international Tourism in ASEAN (2020)
2. Refer, Mari Elka Pangestu (2021)
3. Refer, Stathis Polyzos et. al. (2021)
4. Refer, Hary and Soeprapto (2018)
5. Ibid.
6. Refer, Xinyi Liang-Pholsena (2021)
7. MoT (2020)
8. Refer, ASEAN Tourism Webinar (2021)
9. Ibid.
10. Refer, Paul Yong (2021)
11. Intra-regional tourism crucial for post Covid-19 ASEAN tourism revival, 2021
12. Refer, ASEAN Tourism Research Association, 2021
13. Refer, ASEAN Tourism Research Association, 2021
14. Refer, AIC-RIS (2020)

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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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