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TOURISM IN ANDHRA PRADESH: POTENTIAL UNTAPPED

Andhra Pradesh, with its diverse attractions ranging from beautiful beaches and wildlife sanctuaries, as well as heritage sites in and around Hyderabad that hark back to the opulent lifestyles of the Nizams, has the scope to attract more than just the pilgrims who visit Tirupathi.



Tourism has become the world's largest industry, generating wealth and employment while opening the minds of both visitors and the visited to different ways of life. Worldwide, the industry employs around 200 million people. Tourism as an instrument of economic development will have even greater importance in the future. There are grounds for optimism about what tourism can mean for poor nations in the 21st century. The World Tourism Organisation ac-

knowledges that tourism is the fastest growing economic sector, bringing foreign exchange earnings to countries and creating jobs.

The Indian tourism industry, in tandem with global trends, is experiencing a period of strong growth, driven by the burgeoning Indian middle class, growth in high-spending foreign tourists, and coordinated government campaigns to promote 'Incredible India.' The industry is substantial and vibrant, and it is credited with contributing substantial foreign exchange to the nation.

This is illustrated by the fact that during 2010-11, India as a whole earned in excess of \$20 billion from tourists. Further, tourism has the highest employment potential as it can generate 78 jobs for an investment of Rs 1 million, while the agriculture and manufacturing sectors generate only 45 and 18 jobs, respectively, for the same investment. The industry also helps in the growth of other sectors as diverse as horticulture, handicrafts, agriculture, construction and even poultry.

Andhra Pradesh is a tourist paradise, promoted by the state's tourism department. It is rich in culture and heritage. There is a wide array of ancient sculptured temples, scenic hill ranges, unexplored forests and endless beaches. The wild life, caves and museums continue to fascinate visitors over the years. With more than 500 tourist locations, the second largest coastline in the country, historical locations that date back over a 1000 years, and pilgrimage centres of every religion of India, Andhra Pradesh is the top tourist destination in the country, followed by Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Among the most favoured tourist destinations in Andhra Pradesh are Tirupathi for devotees of Lord Venkateshwara, Visakhapatnam for its natural scenic beauty, and Hy-

derabad for medical and heritage tourism.

Pilgrimage tourism

Andhra Pradesh is home to many pilgrim centres. Among the tourists who visit the state, a major chunk head to Tirupathi for *darshan* of Lord Venkateshwara. Other Hindu pilgrim spots include the Sri Kalahasti temple, an ancient site of religious significance; the Ramappa temple and the thousand-pillared temple in Warangal, which are famous for their temple carvings; the Srirama temple in Bhadrachalam; the Kanaka Durga temple in Vijayawada; the Satyanarayana Swamy temple in Annavaram; and the Mallikarjuna Swamy, the Mahanandi, and Ahobilam temples located within the dense Nallamala forest in Kurnool district.

The state has numerous Buddhist centres at Amaravathi, Bhattiprolu and Nagarjuna Konda in Guntur district; Phanigiri and Kolanpaka in Nalgonda district; Ghantasala in Krishna district, and Nelakondapalli in Khammam district. The Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad, the Durgah in Kadapa as well as the Mary Matha Church in Vijayawada, and the Fatima church in Kazipet are the well-known Muslim and Christian pilgrim centres in the state.

Nature tourism

Wildlife is an integral part of Andhra Pradesh's tourist package. Visakhapatnam district in AP is nestled among the hills of the Eastern Ghats and faces the Bay of Bengal. The journey to Araku from Visakhapatnam through the ghats, with dense forest on either side, is picturesque. The scenic Araku valley has breathtaking waterfalls and the tribal arts enthrall the tourists. Borra caves, the one-million-old rock formations, are considered the most



Borra caves lingam, Andhra Pradesh

marvelous geological formations in Asia. The Indira Gandhi zoological park in Hyderabad, with 700 animals belonging to 89 species, is a major tourist haunt. The Maredumilli and Rampachodavaram hill stations, and the Coringa and the Papikondalu forests in East Godavari district are also favourite hotspots of tourists. Papikondalu, in particular, can rival Kerala if house boats are pressed into service, as the area is no less picturesque in comparison.

The Ali Sagar deer park, flanked by natural hillocks with attractive flower gardens, the Eturunagaram wildlife sanctuary in Warangal District, and the nearby Kinnerasani wildlife sanctuary in the Dandakaranya forest of Khammam district are also popular.

Heritage tourism

Andhra Pradesh is known for its historical monuments and Hyderabad is one of the most visited historical cities. It houses the Charminar, an Islamic structure, which is built upon four grand arches facing north, south, east and west.

The Charminar offers a panoramic view of the city from its four (Char) minarets that are about 49 metres high. Golconda, on the outskirts of Hyderabad city, is where the priceless Kohinoor diamond was found. It has a well-preserved fort which is a traveller's delight. The fort is known for the acoustics of its palaces, an ingenious water supply system, and the famous Fateh Rahben Gun—one of the cannons used in the last siege of Golconda by Aurangzeb.

Hyderabad's Falaknuma palace is designed in the shape of a scorpion by an Italian architect. It is a majestic palace which served as the imperial guest house for the rulers of Hyderabad. The Salarjung museum is a treasure house of antiques like the sword of Aurangzeb, the gem-studded daggers of the emperors of the Moghul dynasty, and thousands of other artefacts from all over the world.

Medical tourism

India has emerged as a destination for medical tourism as foreign and domestic patients prefer the

more economical and effective alternatives in New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Medical treatment costs in India are a fraction of the costs in the UK, Europe, East Asia or North America. As such, the 25 million Indians who live abroad, and also many foreigners, are keen on visiting India, especially New Delhi and Hyderabad, for the world-class and inexpensive treatment offered by the hospitals located here.

The number of foreign patients seeking treatment in Hyderabad has soared, as medical treatment costs are lower by at least 60-80 per cent than similar procedures in North America and the UK. West Asians, for example, avoid the US and Europe for medical treatment after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, opting for India instead. Also, value-added services such as transfers from the airport, special food for foreigners, and translators for patients who cannot speak English have buoyed medical tourism. Hospital groups in Hyderabad should lay emphasis on the 'treatment plus vacation' concept, just like their counterparts in New Delhi do, to promote their business.

Tourism potential

Andhra Pradesh is the fifth largest state in India, but ranks first in attracting tourists. The state attracts as many as 127 million of the 527 million domestic tourists every year, though the majority of the tourists to the state visit the Tirupathi temple in Chittoor district. Hyderabad, the state capital, is the second most-visited destination owing to its IT establishment, convention facilities, heritage and medical tourism. Less than 20 per cent of the domestic tourists visit other tourist destinations in the state despite the fascinating attractions like endless beaches, picturesque hill stations,



Charminar, Hyderabad

unexplored forests, wildlife sanctuaries, ancient sculptured temples and Buddhist centres.

The state is also lagging behind when it comes to attracting tourists from abroad and the foreign exchange they bring, compared to other states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and the neighbouring Tamil Nadu. Around 700,000 foreign tourists visit the state annually, bringing in a meager \$30 million in foreign exchange, while the country as a whole earns in excess of \$20 billion. This shows that immense potential exists for tourism in Andhra Pradesh.

Government initiatives

The Government of Andhra Pradesh has adopted a multi-pronged approach for promotion of tourism, which includes attracting investments for new tourism projects, developing irrigation projects as tourist spots, identifying and developing new tourism projects, etc. The government has succeeded in attracting investments worth Rs 17 billion for 12 projects, including five major ones, involving investments in

excess of Rs 1 billion. Mahalakshmi Indus-Parks Ltd has made a proposal for an eco-tourism project near Vikarabad with an investment of Rs 3.68 billion. Vaishnavi Infraventures and Resorts has proposed setting up of a mythology-based theme park at a project cost of Rs 3.65 billion, near Tirupathi, while Varsha Hill Fort Palace has proposed setting up of a Rs 3 billion hotel project in the city.

The government also plans to develop ten irrigation projects at locations such as Dindi, Gundlakamma and Yeleru in coastal AP; at Jurala, Kaddam, Sri Ram sagar, Cheeta Koduru and Aswaraopalli in the Telangana region; and at Brahma sagar and the Velligallu reservoirs in the Rayalaseema region, as part of new tourism policy. Already the AP Tourism Development Corporation (APTDC) has provided a 22-seat deluxe boat for trips in the Paddagadda reservoir at Parvatipuram in Srikakulam district. A project worth another Rs 500 million, including the Buddhavanam project near Nagarjuna Sagar, is in the pipeline. The government has also identified 21 new places for development of tourism including five



Chandragiri fort, Andhra Pradesh

in East Godavari district. As part of this, APTDC has proposed to develop eco-tourism at the Coringa forest area with an estimated cost of Rs 62.5 million, wherein the central government's contribution would be Rs 52.5 million, with Rs 10 million from the AP government.

Proposals have also been made for the development of a 'Fun City' at the old airport in Hyderabad, as it will add to the entertainment facilities at the High-Tech, Bio-tech and Knowledge City ventures in that area. The department is confident of making rapid strides in the sector, going by the projects it has taken up. With all these measures, the Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation has targeted a turnover of Rs 1.50 billion during 2011-12 against the Rs 1.25 billion in the previous year.

What the industry needs

Though the government has initiated a slew of measures to promote tourism, fate of some of the multi-million tourism projects is in limbo according to certain industry sources. Apprehensions are be-

ing expressed about whether these projects would take off at all, since granting of the infrastructure status to the tourism sector is still pending. The industry needs infrastructure status without which the new tourism projects mentioned earlier cannot be taken up. This is because the tourism industry is treated on par with real estate, constraining banks from giving loans beyond a certain limit. If the government grants infrastructure status, it will enable faster financial closure of the projects and will enable developers to get smoother access to loans from financial institutions, and banks in particular. The entrepreneurs who venture into the sector can avail certain tax benefits along the lines of those extended to infrastructure projects. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) is pursuing the issue with the central government, as it is imperative to give a fillip to the tourism sector, which is the highest employment generator. The CII is also pressurising the central government to make the leave travel concessions given to employees as tax deductible. This will ensure that corporate houses will be more liberal

in giving the incentive to their staff, which, in turn, will give a fillip to domestic tourism.

Besides these initiatives, new tourism circuits are to be developed on a war footing. The CII, after a thorough study of the tourism potential in Andhra Pradesh, felt the need for the development of certain tourism circuits such as Vizag-Bhimili-Araku-Borra Caves; Hyderabad-Nagarjuna Sagar-Srisailam; Vijayawada-Amaravathi-Chirala; and Rajahmundry-Papikondalu-Bhadrachalam, in view of their potential to attract significantly higher number of tourists. Above all, the AP Tourism Development Corporation, in coordination with the state government, has to organise travel and tourism expos in different parts of the country to create awareness among the general public about the various tourist destinations in AP.

The state prides itself on being one of the sought after destinations for IT and other high-technology areas like biotechnology. It, however, is faced with a paradox when it comes to tourism, where most visitors head only to Tirupathi. In order to tap the huge tourism potential in AP, the government has to lay emphasis on the following areas: large-scale involvement of the private sector at the strategic planning stage along with the public-sector and government bodies; large-scale investment in infrastructure; granting infrastructure status to tourism sector, and human resource development programmes through active participation of the private sector. Implementation of these measures will help in generating employment opportunities besides increasing the revenue to the state government considerably. The tourism tagline for Andhra Pradesh is, "The Essence of Incredible India."

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