



Delving Into The Themes Pertaining To Indian Medical Tourism: A Critical Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

People travelling across borders to seek medical, health and wellness treatment and therapies have been there for years. But, the trend of people travelling from developed countries to developing countries to obtain medical treatment has been an emerging phenomenon. Asian countries are the largest recipients of medical tourists from developed countries. India is also one of the preferred destinations for medical tourism. Hence, this paper aims to investigate the pertaining themes related to medical tourism in India. As a result, six pertaining themes could be reached using the secondary data obtained from previous studies. The study would help healthcare providers and policymakers to create a globally benchmarked healthcare ecosystem and devise corrective strategies for promoting medical tourism in India.

Keywords: Medical tourism, Health Tourism, Medical Tourism in India

INTRODUCTION

Travelling for leisure, jobs and to avail medical facilities has been there for a long time now. But, in this era of globalization where there are no boundaries and when borders have become blurred people travel across countries for better medical treatment and wellness therapies which are expensive or unavailable in their home country. This emerging phenomenon of the global voyage for treatment and healing is called "Medical Tourism". Medical tourism or Health tourism is the travel made by people from their home country to another for more than 24 hours and less than a year in search of better healthcare options to improve, maintain and retrieve mental and physical health or both (UNWTO, 2018).

Previously, people from developing or less developed countries used to travel to developed countries for medical treatments and therapies that were unavailable in their home nation. But, now things have changed and people from developed countries have started to travel to developing nations in search of affordable treatment and cure (Kashif et al., 2012). People venture across borders in search of quality healthcare at cost-effective rates. This medical and wellness travel by people is acting as an influential economic growth driver for many countries. Realizing this fact, government and private-sector players in Asia, Europe, and Latin American countries have actively started to promote their medical facilities as medical tourism destinations (Musa et al., 2012).

In recent years, India has been one of the top medical travel destinations in the world and is becoming a popular hub for travellers who are looking for affordable medical care. Indian medical tourism sector is flourishing, with its top-notch doctors, medical professionals and para-medical staff, with a high rate of recovery with high quality hospitals and healthcare facilities. The healthcare system in India is a combination of modern medicine and traditional medical practices like Ayurveda, Siddha, Yoga, etc, making it unique from other nations. India is emerging as a key hub for the medical tourism sector (Nisa & Sharma, 2023).

After the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism sector is undergoing exponential growth. People's expectations and demands have changed post-pandemic. The organizations and destination managers have to meet the expectations and requirements of their target tourists. These changes are also visible in the medical tourism sector, as now patients and tourists are opting for a destination based on different parameters and demands.

The advancement of technology and digitalization has led to telemedicine, tele-health, and other forms of consultations, which have helped patients contact medical professionals, make appointments and receive medical advice from any location in the world easily. Hence, to facilitate patients and tourists in better way Indian Medical tourism stakeholders need to adapt and diversify their tourism healthcare offerings (Thermadham & Shaheed, 2024).

This study tries to understand the pertaining themes of Indian medical tourism sector, through a considerate enquiry of existing literature and articles to suggest corrective measures and suggestions for the growth of this sector. This article begins with the methodology used in this study followed by the Literature Survey. Subsequent sections discuss the themes in the results section, challenges and recommendations. In the last section, the study lists the limitations of the research, future scope, and further the conclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Type

The study is descriptive and is based on secondary data obtained by analyzing previous research articles in the area of Medical tourism.

Research Problem

The increasing importance of health and wellbeing, the burden on healthcare facilities in developed countries and the rise of an aging population have contributed to a surge in the demand and cost for medical and healthcare services. This has resulted in the rise of the medical tourism sector globally. India has emerged as the haven for individuals seeking medical treatments around the world due to its growing reputation for high-quality healthcare services at affordable rates. Hence, this study would help in assessing the Indian medical tourism sector by identifying the themes of the medical tourism sector in India

Research Question

What are the pertinent themes concerning medical tourism sectors in India?

Objectives

1. To examine the various aspects related to medical tourism in India.
2. To identify the challenges faced by Medical tourism in India.
3. To suggest recommendations that will boost the growth of Medical tourism in Kerala.
4. To delve into the main themes of medical tourism sector in India through a systematic review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review has been conducted meticulously by analyzing the previous research articles in the Indian medical tourism sector.

Literature search

Scholarly databases namely, Google Scholar, Research Gate and ProQuest were surveyed for the previous studies on Medical tourism, using search terms like “medical tourism” or “Indian medical tourism” or “Medical tourism in India”. This was performed to ensure that all pertinent citations were searched as elaborated earlier with PRISMA technique (Anoop & Lakshmi, 2023).

The articles concerning Indian medical tourism were only included in the selection. The articles in English language were only shortlisted and articles in other languages were excluded. This process was conducted systematically and the articles were shortlisted for the study. A total of 31 articles were included in the final study.

The Literature survey is divided into 4 major headings: Medical tourism, Medical tourism vs. Wellness Tourism, Medical tourism in India and Accreditation and Certifications.

Medical Tourism

Seyda & Yeter (2018) stated that the practice of people travelling to another country for medical treatment has been in existence for quite some years now. But, it came to prominence in the late 1990s and in 2008 the University of Incarnate World started an academic centre named Centre for Medical Tourism Research (CMTR) solely for medical tourism research. Medical tourism is also referred to as Health tourism which is broadly divided into allopathy, ayurveda and other alternative systems of medicine. Health tourism is a rapidly growing sector in the world where people travel to other countries to obtain good medical care. Usually, they travel to other countries if the medical service is available at a lower cost or at a higher level of medical expertise compared to their home country (Badrabadiet al., 2022)

Medical tourism is travel done to receive medical care for health and disease, rehabilitation and recuperation. Health tourism or Medical tourism can be divided into two segments - wellness and medical. Medical tourism involves mainly diagnosis, treatment and cure, whereas wellness tourism involves well-being, prevention, enhancement, relaxation and healing treatment (Snyder & Valorie, 2010). Health tourism involves travel across international borders, tourism, physical and mental well-being, pleasure, relaxation and value addition (Johnston & Crooks, 2013). The major factors that lead people to select a country for medical tourism are cost, quality, security, international relations, language, ease of travel and visa procedures. Medical tourism is the mix of two of the world's largest sectors - medicine and tourism. The medical tourism sector is becoming very competitive day-by-day and hence there is a need to analyze and reform the medical tourism policies based on the latest trends. Countries that are ready to adapt to the changes can only prosper in the long run (Labeeba & Subramanian, 2018).

Quality of treatment, the waiting periods, cost of care and the presence of good healthcare professionals are the key driving factors for the growth of medical tourism. Other supporting driving factors are the geographical location, infrastructure facilities available, tourism and vacationing avenues, ease of reaching the destinations, visa procedures, familiarity of location and similarities in culture (Crooks et al., 2016). Florența (2017) stated that medical tourism is a 365-day open affair, as medical needs and emergencies may occur at any time and are not affected by any season. Also, the patients or medical tourists stay relatively more days compared to other tourists and patients are accompanied by 1 or more people.

The Medical Tourism Index (MTI) report 2020-21 stated that Canada, Singapore, Japan, Spain, Dubai, Costa Rica, Israel, Abu Dhabi and India are the top destinations for medical tourism. Canada ranked top in the MTI Index report 2020-21, due to its reputation for offering quality and highly-specialized medical treatments. Canada's medical expertise mainly includes orthopaedics procedures, complex heart surgeries, etc. Zarei & Maleki (2019) noted that people from European and American countries prefer Asian countries due to the availability of quality treatment at a lesser cost compared to their home country and also the low waiting period. They further noted that India, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Dubai, Turkey and Iran are a few of the prominent health tourism spots in Asia. Countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, etc, are gaining popularity for medical procedures such as bariatric surgery and stem cell therapy.

Many hospitals in the world, especially Asian hospitals have associated themselves with Harvard and Stanford for the transfer of knowledge and resources. John Hopkins Medicine International, Baltimore has started to operate its clinic in Singapore and is affiliated with Apollo Hospital chains in India. Mayo Clinic which has three centres in the US has expanded its role in other countries with more than 2000 trained alumni working in over 80 countries around the world. Many foreign reputed hospitals and clinics have started their branch in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Foreign tie-ups and collaborations help in the improvement of the healthcare system as a whole which helps in mutual knowledge sharing and help the growth of healthcare and medical tourism as a whole (Gallardo-Prado, 2013).

Simon & Xiang (2012) opined that Medical tourism is the blend of 5 'S' i.e., Sun, Sand, Sea, Sculpture and Surgery, that facilitate a comprehensive memorable holiday experience for tourists with medical care. They also put forth a novel idea of converting hospitals into 'hotel-spital'. Give a makeover for the hospital by changing the decor and interior design, providing a pleasant and cosy feeling like a high-class hotel. This setup must also provide state-of-the-art medical services for both modern and alternative medicines. This will surely attract more people to this facility.

Understanding the importance of medical tourism; the government, authorities and stakeholders involved in this sector are putting in more effort to promote their unique healthcare facilities. Every country has its field of medical expertise and provides medical tourism in their specific field. Table 1 provides an overview of medical tourism specialty provided by various countries.

Table 1, Medical Tourism: Speciality – wise Countries (Adapted from Statista, 2020)

Sl No	Country	Medical Tourism Speciality Offered
1	Brazil	Plastic Surgery
2	Canada	Orthopaedics procedures, complex heart surgeries
3	China	Acupuncture and Acupressure for Back pain, Head pain, etc.
4	Costa Rica	Gynecology, Bariatric
5	Hungary	Dental Care
6	India	Cardiac, Oncology
7	Israel	Bone marrow transplants, IVF, heart surgery
8	Japan	Neurosurgery, Gynecology, Urology
9	Malaysia	Cardiac, Cosmetic Plastic Surgery, Hearing issues
10	Mexico	Weight Loss treatment and surgery
11	Singapore	Gastroenterology, Liver Transplant
12	South Africa	Cosmetic Surgery
13	Spain	Cosmetic Surgery, Dental Treatments
14	Thailand	Plastic Surgeries, Neurological, Gender reassignment surgeries
15	Turkey	Ophthalmic, neurosurgery
16	UAE	Long-term care and rehabilitation
17	UK	Oncology Treatments, Cardiovascular Surgeries.
18	US	Oncology services, Cardiac surgeries.

Fetscherin and Stephano (2016) noted the importance of Medical Tourism Index (MTI) which plays an important role in the selection of destinations for medical purposes. The four main dimensions of MTI include the country's environment, tourism destination, medical costs, medical facility and services. Medical tourism can be called transnational healthcare and countries providing medical tourism services realizing its potential are combining elements of medical and wellness tourism with recreational and leisure activities to attract more tourists to their countries. Leisure, vacation and excursion activities can be arranged for tourists before and after their medical procedures are over (Shreya, 2018).

Noree et al., (2016) noted that medical tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors in recent times. They further opined that medical or health tourism has become an umbrella term that covers all forms of health-related tourism activities both curative and preventive, as well as leisure and other pleasure activities. Medical tourism is a non-seasonal tourism avenue and tourists visit around the year for medical and healthcare. European Hospital and Healthcare Federation (2015) opined that medical value travel happens when the treatments are unavailable, there is a long waiting time in the home country and when budgets are appropriate in other countries even when the facilities are available in local markets. The federation further stated the importance of having a proper marketing strategy in place.

Cai et al., (2019) stated that there is a shift in medical tourism towards Asian destinations. This is due to the presence of high-quality hospitals and medical professionals and also the possibility of taking a vacation while receiving treatment. They also opined that medical tourism in Asia is projected to grow at a rate of 25% during the next 10 years and countries like India, Malaysia, Singapore, etc are going to benefit from this growth. Cham et al., (2021) noted that hospitals and healthcare facilities in Asian countries are trying to improve their online and social media presence. They further opined the need for hospital representatives to actively engage and interact in online platforms as social media, electronic word-of-mouth (e-Wom) and social media presence play a significant role in building an image of the medical tourism destination and the intention to revisit.

The number of medical tourists visiting Asia-Pacific countries is growing due to the changing consumer values, aging population in European and American countries, increasing need for healthcare, high costs of treatment in the home country, increase in demand for cosmetic surgery and other elective procedures, presence of traditional medical care and other tourism avenues. This has made countries such as India, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, etc, popular destinations for medical tourists (Moghavvemi et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted all sectors including medical tourism. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was predicted that medical tourism would reach around USD 9 billion by 2020. However, the restrictions on travel and concerns regarding health risks and infections resulted in a decline in the medical tourism sector (Josephin & Thowseaf, 2023).

But, the decline in medical tourism is considered to be a temporary one, as the COVID-19 pandemic changed the mindset of people. People started to give importance to wellbeing and holistic wellness including physical wellbeing. This shift started to benefit both wellness and medical tourism, with more medical tourists seeking wellness and prevention rather than solely for medical reasons. This emerging change can be seen globally

and to leverage this opportunity, the countries must be ready to address them effectively (Nisa & Sharma, 2023).

Medical Tourism Vs Wellness Tourism

Tour and travel related to physical, mental and spiritual health can be broadly named Health Tourism. Health tourism facilitates both medical and wellness activities. Medical tourism involves the movement of patients across borders for disease diagnosis, treatment, therapy, prevention and other related activities as well. They might take part in other leisure or tourism activities during pre-treatment or post-treatment scenarios (Maurya et al., 2021).

Wellness tourism involves those activities taken up by people to improve and balance their physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual well-being. Wellness tourist looks towards lifestyle-improving activities, fitness, nutritional diet and curative treatment. It also helps to detoxify the body and ameliorate lifestyle diseases. Wellness tourism is considered to be the act of people travelling for health-sustaining and enhancing activities that include physical and mental fitness, healthy nutrition, relaxation and meditation (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001).

Some countries are popular for both medical and wellness tourism avenues. India is the top destination that has made a mark in both, as it has the presence of top-notch healthcare professionals in both modern and traditional forms of medicine (UK Essays, 2018).

Medical Tourism in India

Baxi (2004) opined that India has an important spot on the World health tourism map due to the reputation of the doctors who excellently discharge their duties, the availability of world-class medical facilities and well-trained medical support staff. India is one of the important hubs of medical tourism, providing a combination of modern and traditional medicine that provides holistic well-being and healthcare for patients and tourists. India has an advantage over Western and Middle Eastern countries as quality healthcare services are provided at significantly lower costs. Hence, both quality-driven and price-conscious patients and tourists select India over others (Shankar, 2019).

Ghosh & Mandal (2019) cited that a highly trained medical fraternity who are well-versed in English, less medical tourism expenses, good medical tourism infrastructure, destination appeal, destination culture, and ease of access are the factors that attract patients and tourists to India. Medical professionals and hospitals in India are quick to adapt and upgrade any advancement in the field of medicine and offering at affordable cost with a humanitarian approach. This has helped the country to establish itself as a major health tourism destination. Further, any health tourism to get a competitive advantage needs to be backed by other supporting facilities like decent accommodation, recreational activities, proper connectivity and other tourism attractions (Sultana et al., 2014).

Jadhav et al., (2018) pointed out that medical tourism is a confluence of the two sectors, the tourism industry and the health industry. They further noted that Thailand which is a competitor of India in medical tourism is famous for 2S, "Sunshine and Surgery" in health tourism, whereas India has the advantage of 4S, "Sunshine, Surgery, Stethoscope and Sambar". India has a combination of quality medical and surgical treatment facilities, skilled manpower, attractive travel destination spots, the presence of traditional medical care, and an exquisite variety of cuisine and dishes. Vinaytosh & Mohita (2021) stated that the presence of reputed hospitals offering a comprehensive range of medical treatments with advanced technological procedures, the availability of online consultations and minimal waiting time for treatment are the advantages India have in the medical tourism sector. She further noted that due to these reasons, medical tourists from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Oman, Maldives, Sudan, Yemen, and Uzbekistan prefer India for medical treatments.

Medical tourism in India is a booming segment of the tourism industry by offering specialized treatments and operations with personalized care at a cost one-fourth that of developed countries. Realizing this fact, the Government of India outlined the government strategy of combining medical spending with tourism in the 2023 budget. Further, diverse governmental efforts and initiatives were directed towards fostering medical tourism in India, by introducing marketing schemes to enhance medical tourism through efficient promotional activities, strategic collaborations between the public and private sectors. India holds a distinctive position in the medical tourism arena by providing comprehensive traditional medical care like Ayurveda, Yoga, Meditation and other systems of healthcare. The Government of India took initiatives for the formation of the Department of AYUSH solely dedicated to complementary and traditional healthcare systems (Veeragoni & Prity, 2023).

The decision taken by the government to offer visa-on-arrival (VOA), especially for medical purposes for the citizens of 180 countries has given a big boost to this sector. Mumbai, New Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Gurgaon and Kolkata are attracting a huge number of national and international medical

tourists. Kolkata is mainly attracting medical tourists from adjacent countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar (Isita & Swati, 2016). SAARC nations, Russia, Middle East and Africa are the chief source of foreign medical tourists to India, even though medical tourists from all over the world visit India for medical purposes. Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore have the maximum number of JCI-accredited hospitals (Sumit & Pooja, 2019).

Table 2, Major Corporate Players in Indian Medical Tourism(Adapted from Siddharth, 2016)

Hospitals	No. of Beds	Turnover (Rs. Millions)	Percentage Revenue from International Patients	Major International Markets
ESCORTS	326	2180	11.9	SAARC, East African Countries, Afghanistan
APOLLO	1500	2010	15	Middle East countries
INDRAPRASTHA-APOLLO	650	1650	7.3	Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Gulf countries and Africa
HINDUJA	351	1350	3	African and SAARC countries
JASLOK	376	1080	10	Japan, Middle East and African Countries

Many corporate hospitals chains like Apollo, AIIMS, Breach Candy, CDR, Columbia Asia Referral Hospital, Fortis Escort, Hinduja, Hiranandani Hospital Hosmat, Cloud Nine Hospital, Kokilaben Hospital, Lilavati Hospital, Medanta Hospitals, PGIMER Chandigarh, Ramaiah Hospital, Tata Memorial Hospital, Wockhardt and Yashoda Hospitals have established their super-speciality hospitals throughout India to meet the needs of patients within the country and abroad. These hospitals provide quality medical amenities, allied services backed by high-end infrastructure and medical professionals. Wockhardt Hospital chain has been promoting them as an Associate Hospital of Harvard Medical International (Majumdar & Kishore, 2018).

Nanita & Rinzing (2016) noted that the growth of medical tourism and the flow of foreigners to India to get medical care will help in the modernization of healthcare facilities in India. But, they also noted that this flow of patients from foreign countries must not affect the healthcare of local residents. The local people also need to get access to complex surgeries, specialized treatments when required. The quality of healthcare provided by India is at par with developed countries and its equivalence with the latest methods of medical science in the world. The presence of other value-added tourist attractions makes India one of the most favourable places for medical tourism in the world (Malhotra & Kartik, 2024).

Table 3, Advanced treatments provided by Major Hospitals in India (Adapted from Maurya et al., 2021)

SI No	Hospital	Advanced treatment options
1	Apollo Group	Robotic Spine Surgery, kidney transplant, Liver Disease and Transplantation
2	Fortis group	Cardiac Sciences, Gastroenterology, Diabetes and Endocrinology, Oncology
3	Medanta	Bariatric surgery, Hepatobiliary Sciences, Oncology, Haematology and liver transplant
4	Manipal hospital	Robotic surgeries, PCOS, Radiation oncology, Organ Transplant
5	Aditya Birla Hospital	Cardiac, Trauma, Pediatric Services,
6	Artemis Health Institute	Multi-organ transplant, Cardiology, Heart transplantation, Liver Surgery, Interventional radiology, Kidney/Lung transplantation
7	Columbia Asia hospital	Cardiology, Orthopedics, Obstetrics & Gynecology, Neurosurgery, Deep Brain Stimulation, Gastroenterology
8	BLK Hospital	Pediatric centre, Organ transplant, Oncology, Cardiology

Madha et al., (2014) stated that India has gained worldwide acclaim for their advanced medical technology, skilled doctors, and high standards of care being the key components that have propelled India to the forefront of medical tourism. India also has a large pool of highly qualified and experienced medical professionals, including doctors, surgeons, and nurses. The medical professionals are well-versed in English and the language advantage makes it easier for international patients to communicate and understand the treatment procedures. This creates a sense of comfort, trust and further reinforces India's reputation as a reliable place for medical tourism.

India is the most sought-after destination for medical tourism in the world. Medical tourists mainly arrive from Bangladesh, Maldives, Iraq, Sudan, Kenya and other neighbouring countries. Europeans and American

medical tourists prefer India due to the low cost and short waiting time compared to their home country, the availability of specialized medical treatments often at par with that of developed nations and the desire for a vacation-like experience while receiving medical care. Renowned hospitals and healthcare providers in major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Bangalore provide advanced cardiology, orthopaedics, organ transplantation, neurosciences, oncology, bariatric and complex surgeries. Patients from the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, opt to travel to India for these advanced surgeries and treatments (Mahanta, 2024).

India is also renowned for its traditional systems of medicine like Ayurveda, Yoga, Siddha, Unani, Naturopathy and Meditation. These traditional medical systems are experiencing a growing demand globally. Traditional medical systems are an integral part of the medical system in India along with modern medicine. Prominent entities such as Apollo and the Manipal Group have established centres focusing on conventional healthcare treatments, and Ayurveda. In Southern states of India, particularly Kerala, several reputed Ayurveda centres have come up and hence are witnessing a proliferation. Tour and travel operators have realized the significance of Ayurveda and other traditional healthcare systems that is attracting medical tourists and have incorporated it into their packages (Dar & Kirti, 2023).

India is one of the largest producers and exporters of generic drugs globally and is often called the "Pharmacy of the World". The relationship between India's pharmaceutical industry and medical tourism is twofold. The availability of a wide range of pharmaceutical products and drugs at competitive prices further enhances India's attractiveness as a medical tourism destination. India's robust pharmaceutical industry ensures both domestic and international medical tourists with ready supply of medicines, often at lower costs compared to other countries. A cost-effective healthcare solution, with affordable medications further contributes to the overall appeal of India's medical tourism sector globally (Ravi et al., 2022).

India has many distinct factors and advantages in the medical tourism sector that can draw patients from across the globe. But, there is a need for active marketing strategies promoting these factors effectively. For a substantial expansion of this sector, strategic planning, investments, and collaborations in the medical tourism sector is the need of the hour. Medical tourism holds the potential to further propel India's economic growth and empowerment. Currently, less importance is given to promotional activities and there is a lack of proper online branding, confronted by the medical tourism sector in India. There are many competitors in the medical tourism sector. A proper marketing outline for the promotion in both offline and online platforms needs to be designed for the growth and development of medical tourism in India. A fool-proof cutting-edge marketing strategy to promote Indian medical tourism to target national and international audiences mixed with high-standard health services will act as the key driver for the growth of this sector in the future (Parwaiz, 2022). Healthcare institutions and hospitals in India need to take the initiative to get proper accreditation and certification from national and international organizations. The foreign patients measure the quality of healthcare based on these certifications. To shape and streamline the medical tourism industry in India these certifications will give a boost to this sector (Chillimuntha et al., 2024).

Rath et al., (2012) noted that Kerala has a large number of NRIs present in Middle East, European and American countries. They need to be motivated by the authorities to act as Ambassadors of Kerala and can act as a driving force to enhance medical and wellness tourism in the state. They further stated that many doctors, nurses and para-medical staff from the state are working in foreign countries. This has improved the goodwill of Kerala's healthcare system and professionalism in foreign countries. Deepu et al., (2020) stated that the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) have taken initiatives in the promotion of Medical tourism in Kerala, by bringing more than 40 hospitals under one umbrella. They further noted that such collective efforts from health and tourism stakeholders need to be taken up by all states and the government of India which can convert India into a medical tourism hub. Top medical professionals in dental, modern medicine and alternative medicine, high caliber and renowned healthcare institutions, affordability of medical procedures, presence of other tourism avenues are the advantages of the Indian medical tourism sector. But, there are certain challenges such as administrative hurdles like visa and paperwork, safety concerns, lack of standardized pricing across hospitals, and limited insurance coverage for medical tourists (Sindhu, 2012).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamics as it witnessed a temporary decline in the medical tourism sector. Even though mass vaccination initiatives in many countries have helped the opening of borders again, still necessary changes and revamping are required in the Indian medical tourism segment. The government and stakeholders also need to jointly take measures to promote medical tourism in post-COVID times (Neha & Kartik, 2022). After the COVID-19 pandemic, people have become more aware of the importance of health and are conscious of healthy body, mind and well-being and have started to travel more to other countries for healthcare purposes (Hekmat et al., 2022). This emerging trend has increased the number of medical tourists visiting India. India has become a special interest area for medical tourists and they are trying out medical care, various restorative and wellness services, and are also trying out other tourism avenues, before and after the treatment is over (Bivek, 2022).

Advantages of Indian Medical Tourism over other countries

- Well-experienced healthcare and paramedical professionals.
- Low waiting time compared to developed countries.
- Affordability of medical treatments.
- Affordable air access to India from every part of the globe.
- The Indian healthcare workforce is good at English communication.
- Offering multiple tourism packages clubbed with healthcare.
- A strong foundation of alternative medicines like Ayurveda, Siddha, Unnai, Naturopathy, Yoga and Meditation.
- Strong private sector partnership in the healthcare sector.

These factors impart a competitive advantage for Indian medical tourism which attracts foreigners to visit the country.

Indian Medical Tourism Structure

Indian medical tourism is a mix of modern medicine and a traditional healthcare system. The Indian medical tourism structure can be broadly classified as given in Figure 1.

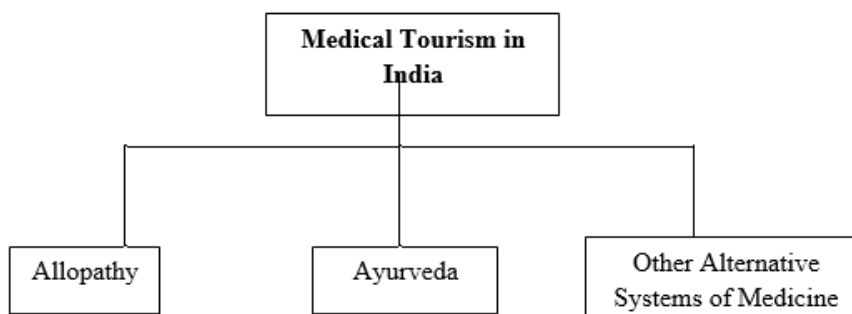


Figure 1, Indian Medical Tourism Structure (Source: Researcher)

Other alternative systems of medicine include Siddha, Naturopathy, Unani, Yoga, etc.

Stakeholders in the Medical Tourism Sector in India

Medical tourism has emerged as a potential sector in the tourism sector. The competition in this sector is increasing as many countries compete to grab their hold. Since consumer values are changing and the global population is aging, all stakeholders' collective and conscious effort is necessary for sustainable growth in this field.

Key stakeholders in the Indian Medical Tourism Sector are:

1. Government bodies and authorities (ministries of commerce, tourism, healthcare, tourism departments)
2. Tourism stakeholders (destination management organizations, travel and tour operators, hotels, airlines, transports, etc).
3. Health care providers, corporate hospital entities
4. Healthcare professionals, nurses and para-medical staff
5. Insurance providers and other stakeholders

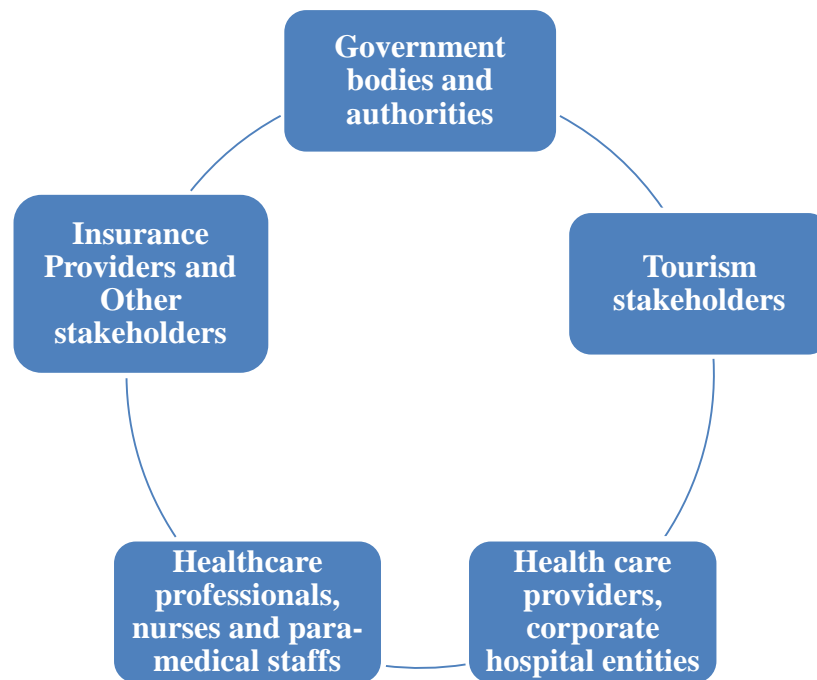


Figure 2, Stakeholders in Medical Tourism Sector in India (Source: Researcher)

Accreditation and Certification

Healthcare institutions and hospitals need to have proper accreditation and certification, as these measures the quality of healthcare they provide to the patients. There are various organizations globally ensuring the quality of healthcare, like US-based Joint Commission International (JCI), Accreditation Canada (Canada), Japan Council for Quality (Japan), National Accreditation Board for Hospitals - NABH (India), Health Care Accreditation (Jordan), etc. These certifications and accreditations ensure that healthcare services provided match international standards for quality and patient safety. This benchmarked accreditation enables to attract many foreign medical tourists who require exclusive and complex medical amenities (UNWTO, 2017).

Medical Tourism Association (MTA) is an organization that prepares a guide that includes details about hospitals, tourism destinations and all other necessary details to help patients to selecting a healthcare provider. India has 54 hospitals accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI) and more than 600 hospitals accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH). Leading Indian hospitals are top-notch and are comparable to those of internationally recognized medical facilities (Vinaytosh et al., 2019).

FINDINGS

After conducting a detailed literature survey, the pertaining themes related to the Indian medical tourism sector were reached and are mentioned below.

Theme 1

Cost-effectiveness:

Cost-effectiveness is the most important parameter that provides Indian medical tourism sector a competitive edge over other destinations. Almost all, international patients consider the overall cost of medical services before selecting a medical destination. India is an ideal destination where medical procedures are affordable compared to other markets.

Theme 2

Quality Service and Less Waiting Time

Quality treatment and care make patients prefer availing of medical facilities in India. Less waiting time, quality, language, and ease of travel are other important factors that are favourable to medical tourism in India.

Theme 3

Professional Doctors and Healthcare Professionals

India has a large pool of qualified and professional super specialist doctors, nurses and para-medical staff, a presence of globally accredited hospitals with advanced technology providing world-class facilities, and a huge amount of investment in the healthcare sector by both public and private players.

Theme 4

A unique pool of exotic and ancient medical therapies and other tourism avenues

India has a blend of both modern medicine and traditional healthcare systems like Ayurveda, Siddha, Naturopathy, Unani, Yoga, etc which make it unique from other destinations. Patients, who visit India, get holistic healthcare. Also, there are many tourism avenues that the patients and tourists can explore after treatment and therapy are completed.

Theme 5:

Infrastructure

Hospital and healthcare infrastructure facilities in India are overall good. However, there is a need to improve the road and rail accessibility to medical tourism destinations, proper accommodation facilities and proximity between the hotel and the hospital, existence of other amenities like good quality food and water.

Theme 6:

Marketing and Promotion

A proper marketing plan for the promotion of Indian Medical tourism is lacking. More cooperation and strategic alliance among the stakeholders of medical tourism is required. Hospital representatives need to participate in international fairs, medical tourism workshops and seminars and government and authorities need to conduct more fairs, workshops and seminars related to medical tourism.

From the above facts, we can conclude that the cost-effectiveness, quality services, less waiting time, presence of a professional healthcare workforce, unique traditional healthcare system and presence of other tourism avenues act as competitive pillars for the Indian Medical Tourism sector. Insufficient infrastructure and lack of proper marketing and promotion activities act as weak pillars in this sector.

Benefits for the Indian Economy from Medical Tourism

- Creating job opportunities in the healthcare sector, hospitality and tourism industries,
- Boost tourism revenue, increased foreign exchange earnings
- Improving the healthcare infrastructure of the country
- Attracts more foreign investment
- Transfer of knowledge and technology
- More investment in the healthcare sector including the expansion of hospitals, clinics, and allied services,

CHALLENGES

- Complex visa procedures
- Non-availability of insurance coverage
- Room for improvement in overall infrastructure facilities
- Absence of reasonable accommodation
- Proper food and hygiene
- Overall safety concerns
- Ineffective marketing strategies
- Highly unorganized sector
- Too many unregulated brokers/middlemen
- Lack of standardization and regulation
- Need for quality assurance and risk of follow-up

RECOMMENDATION

- Creation of the Medical Tourism Chamber of Commerce
- Converting hospitals into 'hotel-spital' by a makeover of decor and interior design of hospitals to look like high-class hotels
- Setting up state-of-the-art medical services of modern and traditional healthcare under one roof
- Participation of medical tourism service providers and stakeholders in international programmes, seminars and workshops
- Setting up an apex body for medical tourism with the partnership of stakeholders from various sectors like travel, tourism and healthcare with joint ventures with overseas partners and established medical universities
- Increasing Non-Resident Indians' (NRI) investment in the healthcare sector
- Clubbing Medical and Ayurveda tourism with other niche and leisure tourism
- Extensive PR campaign by the government
- Proper training of medical professionals and paramedics
- Improve the infrastructure facilities
- Spread the credibility of NABH certification

- Public-private partnerships and collaborations between healthcare institutions and tourism agencies
- Streamlining Visa processes, medical tourism facilitation centres
- Special incentives and benefits for hospitals to attract international patients
- Need to ensure local residents also get quality healthcare services like other tourists
- To highlight the holistic healthcare of modern and traditional healthcare
- Continuous investments in research, training and clinical outcomes
- Start liaison centres in other countries to attract medical tourists
- Ensuring the proper safety of patients
- Establishment of dedicated healthcare zones
- Incorporating telemedicine and e-health platforms to extend medical services

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

The present study contributes to the existing literature and provides future direction in developing a framework for the promotion of medical tourism in India and further research in the area of medical tourism in the post-COVID world.

The study was purely based on secondary data and hence future studies must concentrate on quantitative validation of these findings and recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Medical tourism is one of the most important and fastest growing sectors globally and all countries compete with each other to have a greater share of this market. This study tries to identify that medical tourism in India is on the horizon and has a great potential, also tries to identify pertaining themes and components prevailing in Indian medical tourism. While the future of medical tourism in India is promising, there are still certain challenges faced. Also, while concentrating on serving foreign patients, local patients should not be ignored. Hence, this study provides insights into the medical tourism sector in India and recommendations that need to be looked upon by policymakers, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders that can contribute to the continuous growth and competitiveness of the Indian medical tourism sector.

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