

Why respectful Indian tourism is everyone's win

This article is authored by Sriparna Pathak.

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As global power configurations change in an extremely turbulent world order, what now emerges as an important metric of power is economic prowess of countries, over and above sheer military might and diplomatic clout. Consumer spending, over and above mere GDP figures become an important lens to understand the growth stories of countries. Outbound tourism, and related consumer spending further become important in this context. India figures in the list of the top ten countries with the most outbound tourists.



GDP (Shutterstock)

As India's middle class continues to expand, and international travel becomes more accessible, millions of Indian tourists have been exploring the world each year. According to data from the ministry of tourism, approximately 35 million Indians travelled abroad in 2024, with a 10.79% increase over 2023. Outbound tourism brings substantial economic benefits to host countries, from bustling Southeast Asian hubs like Thailand and Vietnam to landscapes in Europe to the glistening attractions in Dubai. Sri Lanka, an important neighbour for India with historical, economic and cultural ties from India, which also figures in importantly in India's Neighbourhood First policy relies on India as the largest source market for international visitors in recent years. This not just creates goodwill for the source country but also helps in bolstering economic revenues for friendly countries in the neighbourhood in particular, which over the years has been getting deeply contested.

Similarly, in Thailand, international visitors, including a growing number from India, contribute billions in revenue through consumer spending on hotels, restaurants and shopping. Travelling often in family groups, or for leisure, Indian tourists support local jobs in hospitality, transport and handicrafts. Similarly, in Bali, Indonesia, or in various European cities, there has been immense benefit from the influx of Indian tourists. Stability also gets created in recipient economies that depend on seasonal or fluctuating tourism inflows.

Yet, as tourist numbers increase, challenges such as overcrowding at iconic sites, and occasional incidents of inconsiderate behaviour emerge. While these issues and instances are not unique to any particular nationality, they occur when large groups converge. Inconsiderate behaviour can strain local resources and patience. When a few disregard rules, or local laws, or customs or traditions, the result is frustration among hosts and may lead to broader negative perceptions, which in turn affect fellow travellers of the same nationality. An example of this is from 2023, when a viral video from Bangkok's Wat Arun Temple, showed a group of Indian tourists ignoring 'no photography' signs, climbing restricted areas and posing inappropriately, leading to a scuffle with security. This was followed by similar complaints in Phuket beaches where allegations of littering and loud music being blared by Indian tourists emerged. Similarly, in Bali in 2024, Indian tourists at Seminyak beach were caught on video littering with trash, prompting local authorities to impose spot fines.

What follows, is sensationalisation of these events by global media, portraying Indian tourists as entitled or uncultured. An example of this is a BBC 2023 report titled, The Dark Side of India's Travel Boom. This gets amplified by social media algorithms, which have an anti-India bias to begin with, since Indians on western social media platforms are the largest in numbers, and when they engage with such posts, in the form of arguing with the reports, or postulations, retweeting or engagement in any format monetisation gets created, from which platforms and handles (including media) benefit.

The creation of respectful and thoughtful tourism is not easy, that too in the world's most populated country. But disrespectful tourism does not augur well for the host country or for other Indian travellers, even if they might be the most respectful and law-abiding ones. Stereotypes are ruthless. However, creation of responsibility, starting from the earliest schooling levels can go a long way. Teaching that even domestic tourist spots in India are to be respect, and law is to be adhered to, will go a long way in fighting stereotypes created by some irresponsible tourists from the country. Courses in schools and higher educational institutions on the usage of eco-friendly options in India and abroad, the avoidance of single-use plastics, the concept of cultural differences and the need to respect them would be beneficial in the long run. The damage caused by even a handful counts of irresponsible tourist behaviour is so huge that even positive stories of Indian philanthropy abroad, like donations during disasters or joining hands with local communities to help endangered species abroad, get overshadowed. Collective efforts in education, starting from primary school levels can definitely mitigate the damage. Responsible travel ensures that the economic advantages continue flowing jobs stay secure and communities remain eager to host more visitors, given that tourism thrives on mutual respect.

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