

Study of the Growth of Guwahati as An Emerging Hub of Medical Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has become an integral part of life. It is also an inseparable ingredient of economic development of any region of the country. Tourism gained momentum specially after the globalisation took place in India and has seen a tremendous shift in domestic and foreign travellers. Among all sort of tourism, the health oriented tourism has gained a lot attention and has given a lot to the people from all sections of the society. India has seen a tremendous growth in the tourism sector and with this Assam which is having abundance of natural beauty and lots of potential in tourism sector has started attracting tourist from all part of the country and foreign countries. Medical sector in the capital city of Assam, i.e. Guwahati has seen a boom and has brought a lot of changes in health care sector for the North-eastern people along with neighbouring countries.

Guwahati is the gateway to other North eastern cities and hub of all sorts of communications to rest part of the region. The development in healthcare sector has changed the several aspects of life of the people of this region. Reforms in healthcare sector have not only changed the medical services but it has also changed the economic scenario of the state.

The study aims to gain an overview of medical tourism in Guwahati

Keywords: Tourism, Medical Tourism, Guwahati, Assam.

INTRODUCTION:

One of the fastest growing industries among all other industries in the world is tourism industry. Tourism can also be termed as accelerator in growth of an economy and generator of employment opportunities in either direct or indirect ways for all type of workforce and for almost each section of society. For any nation, tourism industry is a major source of foreign exchange earner. It is also, one of the main measures to resolve interstate and intercommunity conflicts.

Before 1990, India was the least preferred country for any sort of investment. Since 1991, India has entered into a different phase of economic reforms and since then India is on rise. Since globalisation, India has opened its door for many new opportunities which led to drastic changes in socio-economic life style of the people of India. In the course of time, India has become a global destination among travellers. Now a day, tourism has got new definition and has been divided into several segments. The types of tourism are adventure tourism, eco tourism, agriculture tourism, sports tourism, spiritual tourism, medical tourism and so many in lists.

The concept of Medical Tourism is something that most of us know about but very few of us, outside the industry understand the term. Medical tourism can broadly be stated as provision of cost effective private medical care in collaboration with the tourism industry for patients.

Medical Tourism is associated with, where people who live in one country travel to another country to receive healthcare services e.g. medical, dental or surgical care in order to get better or equal care than they would have

received in their own country. People travelling from one country to another in order to get improved or better medical care largely depends on their spending capacity and desire to receive higher or better services than what is available in their home country.

In domestic medical tourism people living in one part of the country travel to another part of the country in order to get better and improved healthcare services than what is available in their home city.

Though, medical tourism is almost a new term but it's not a new idea. Even in past, patients have travelled a long for better healthcare services. If we talk about India, medical tourism is evident from the period of Lord Rama, when Hanumana travelled across a lot of boundaries to get medicine to make alive Laxmana, the younger brother of Lord Rama and many more stories are there. In present scenario, medical tourism has become more appealing as travelling has become much easier and constraints like long waiting hour at home city and availability of less advance technologies.

Geographical Location of Guwahati:

Guwahati is the capital city of Assam which is one of the states in the North Eastern Region of India. It is a sprawling city beside the River Brahmaputra. It is also known as the gateway of the North Eastern India. Guwahati is known for holy sites like the Kamakhya Temple, featuring shrines to the Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu. To the east, 18th-century Navagraha Temple is an astronomical center with planetary shrines. Umananda Temple, dedicated to Shiva and covered with engravings, stands on Peacock Island in the river. Due to the increasing trade relations between the ASEAN countries, Guwahati has been gaining momentum in all respects. Besides, Assam has also been identified as the gateway to the ASEAN countries. This is also a reason why the tourism sector of this part of the country has been getting further boosted.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The objectives of the study are

- a. To study the existing scenario of medical tourism in Guwahati
- b. To study the obstacles in the way of flourishing medical tourism in Guwahati
- c. To study the prospects of medical tourism in Guwahati

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY:

Medical tourism, in India has grown exponentially and the reasons for its growth are supply as per demand and assurance of quality. The number of foreigners visited India to get healthcare services is 460,000¹ in 2015-2016. The visa rule has also been made much easier for the person who is in need of medical attention. In few years of time, India has become well known spot for medical tourism and the cities which are known as medical cities and where maximum people are visiting for receiving healthcare services are Chennai, Vellore, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Kolkata. India achieved great success from the field of information technology and medical tourism is supposed to be next story in the history of success of India. One of the main reasons for the success of this industry is cost effectiveness as compared to western countries and other South East Asian countries. It can also be said that the cost of medical services in India is 50% lesser than that compared to that of western or South East region of the world.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary data only and has been obtained from journals, blogs, e-newspaper and websites.

Tourism in Assam:

Assam is the state located in the north east region of the country. Assam shares its border with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Burma, and Bhutan. It shares its boundaries domestically with Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal. Assam is also known as the gateway to Northeast India. Guwahati (Dispur) is the capital of Assam and it is the largest city of Assam. Assam is famous for the availability of natural resources, bio diversity and cultural diversity. The state is also famous for its one horn rhino. There are also several national parks in Assam. There are vibrant categories of tourism available in Assam based on wildlife, natural beauty, religious, eco and medical tourism. Assam has extremely high potential in tourism sector and huge scope to improve it. In recent time, eco tourism has emerged as fastest

¹ <https://www.imtj.com/news/india-medical-tourism-statistics-released/>

growing tourism sector in Assam. The climate is pleasant and it is having a scenic landscape. Assam is becoming a popular tourist destination day by day among other states of the country and neighbouring country also. The growth in tourism sector has equally been fuelled by latest development in the medical sector, which has led to growth in medical tourism in particular.

Medical Tourism in Guwahati :

The recent growth in healthcare industry in the capital of the state, has given a new meaning to life to the people of Assam and its neighbouring states and countries. With recent changes in medical sector in the capital of the state, it has become centre of medical excellence for the people of Assam, neighbouring states and countries. It has started to attract patients from neighbouring cities, states as well as countries. The city from a place of primary healthcare facility, dispensaries and clinics, has now converted itself into a hub of specialised centre in healthcare services. There are several critical care, multispecialty and super speciality hospitals in the city which has given the status to city as the hub of medical care. Experts in the healthcare sector attribute this emerging trend, which can be termed as the beginning of medical tourism in the region. This rise in the healthcare sector in the capital has given a momentum to low cost quality treatment, modern infrastructure and availability of specialised and highly skilled professionals. Assam is a hub of all sorts of tourism and latest growth in medical sector; it has boosted the growth of medical tourism in the state. Definitely, the growth in medical sectors in the state capital has given a new life to health.

Medical tourism is already an established industry in many countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. With the latest development in medical sector, India has become a major facilitator in medical tourism. Following the path of other preferred states in India, the development in this industry in the state capital has definitely given the status of major medical tourism facilitator to Assam also. Assam has become a favourable hub for medical tourism among neighbouring states and countries with the latest development in the capital city. Several initiatives have also been taken up by the government of India, Ministry of Health and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in order to promote medical tourism in this part of the country. Recently a memorandum of understanding has also been signed among the governments of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, which is a positive step towards promoting medical tourism.

Attraction of Medical Tourism in Guwahati:

- a. **Cost:** The cost of living and expense incurred on medical treatment is much low as compared to other states and country, which makes Guwahati, the most favoured destination for getting medical treatment. The cost of travel, accommodation and food in North Eastern cities are reasonable and affordable comparing to other cities of North eastern states and other states of India.
- b. **Quality of Care:** In recent time Guwahati has come up with many private sector health care hospitals.
- c. **Ease of Travel:** Guwahati is well connected with neighbouring states by all means, which makes it easier for domestic traveller to travel to Guwahati. Assam is also well connected by road from neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar via Manipur. Only a bit problematic with Nepal and other Asean countries by means Air. The provision for air ambulance is also available now days.
- d. **Language:** Guwahati is such a city, where almost all the language exists. Thus, it makes the visitors highly comfortable to communicate with the locals. This region has sufficient man power. Beside the local languages, English is widely and fluently spoken in the region.

Major Healthcare Providers in Guwahati:

Guwahati is one of the fastest growing cities of India; it is the biggest city of Northeast India. It is also a hub of all type of communication in the region. The population of the city is not only highest amongst other cities of the region but also it is equipped with medical facilities to support them as well. Only a few years back, private nursing homes were available to meet the medical services for the people of this region. But, these establishments were lacking in the specialised services. Either there was a shortage of specialised doctors or modern equipments or both, which are must need for proper medical care. This shortage in the field of healthcare industry in this part of the country compelled them to travel outside for better medical care. As of date, city has got multiple government and private hospital to cater the needs of not only the people of this region of India but also neighbouring countries.

Back in the year 1987, the idea of medical tourism got kicked off in this region in the form of GNRC by Dr. N.C. Bora. Earlier, this institute was mainly dealing with neurological problem but with the advancement of time, it has got transformed into multi speciality hospital with its own three units in Guwahati.

Healthcare facilities in Guwahati have improved tremendously in the past few years. In recent time, several prominent hospital chains and private, govt hospitals have opened branches in Guwahati such as:

Sl no	Name of Hospitals
1	Narayana Superspeciality Hospital
2	Apollo Hospitals-Unit International Hospital
3	Arya Hospitals
4	Hayat Hospital
5	Nemcare Hospital
6	Nemcare superspeciality hospital
7	Dispur Hospital p ltd
8	Dispur polyclinic
9	Rahman Hospitals
10	Agile Hospital Pvt. Ltd.
11	East End Nursing Home & Research Institute
12	GNRC Hospitals Limited
13	Sanjevani Hospital
14	Down Town Hospital
15	Good Health Hospital
16	Greenland Nursing Home And Medhi Diagnostic Clinic
17	Swagat Hospital Pvt Ltd
18	Piramal Diagnostics
19	Dharanidhar Memorial Institute Of Medical Science And Research
20	Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya
21	Excel Multispeciality Clinic
22	Marwari Maternity Hospital Guwahati
23	Satibari Christian Hospital
24	Aruna Memorial Hospital
25	Lions Eye Hospital Guwahati
26	GMC and Hospital
27	Institute Of Human Reproduction
28	Nightangle Hospital
29	Wintrobe Hospital
30	City Heart Hospital
31	Global Surgical Hospital
32	Swagat Endolaparoscopic Surgical Reararch Institute
33	Ayursundra superspeciality hospital
34	Pratiksha Hospital
38	B Borooah cancer institute

(This is a composite list; for reference purpose only.)

Obstacles:

Health care sector in this region has grown at a tremendous rate still the supply is lagging far behind as compared to demand in medical services. There is vast scope for the developments of infrastructure of hospitals and other necessary services required for prompt services. There are still several areas in terms of technology which need to be upgraded and skilled workforces to be engaged.

There are enormous barriers which are creating hurdle in the development of medical tourism. Some of them

are very critical when it comes to cross border trade. It is highly required to remove these trade barriers to increase the pace of economic development. This will automatically strengthen the medical tourism and will intensify the regional. Some of the barriers are listed as below:

- a. When it comes to payment of fees by the people of foreign origin to India, is a major challenge particularly from the people of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. A payment of fee in these cases becomes informal which directly or indirectly reduces the government's revenue.
- b. Till date, there is no bank branch from country like Bangladesh, Bhutan or Myanmar.
- c. When it comes to transportation, it becomes the main issue in this region which is a vital ingredient for the development of medical tourism. Still most part of North Eastern region is not connected by railways. Some of them are connected by road, but the condition is not good. Air connectivity is there, but it is also limited to certain areas.

There are certain issues related with communication, which needs to be addressed on priority basis. Unless addressing these issues, it is not possible to pave the path for the success of medical tourism. The challenges in the way of success of medical tourism are as below:

- a. There is no direct flight to Dhaka, Kathmandu or Yangon from Guwahati. Guwahati is the airport which is connected with Thimpu and Bangkok by Druk air, which flies thrice a week.
- b. There is no assistance for on arrival visa services for the patients arriving from Bangladesh at Dawki or Tamabil border.
- c. The bus service connecting Guwahati-Shillong-Dhaka is still not operational.
- d. There is no direct bus service to Thimpu or any other part of Bhutan from Guwahati.
- e. There is no direct communication between Guwahati and Yangon.
- f. The consulate from Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal is also not available, which is having importance from the point of view to flourish medical tourism in Guwahati.
- g. An integrated agency is in much demand to meet the need of person in need of medical care.
- h. Proper food in nearby area of food is also a problem to some extent for the patient and accompanying person to the patient.
- i. The view towards the patient from the person is also a hindrance as they treat the patient more as obligation rather than services from heart.
- j. Although world class machines are available, skilled workforce is missing; which in other ways takes a long time to deliver the report from the lab.
- k. The city is also missing to high extent, the specialised travel agents from medical industry.

Prospects:

With the insurgency problem under control and several lucrative promises made under the Act East Policy *and it has started to attract investors from both front i.e. domestic and international. Medical tourism is a rising industry and it has a high potential to attract investment in this region of India. With the development in this industry in this part of the country, it has started to show its impact. A large number of job has been generated which has contributed in the economy. The growth in any form of tourism accelerates the growth of almost all other sectors in the region. The health sector has seen an unprecedented growth and it has brought changes not in the life of hospital staff but people from other walks of life has got benefited.* By the development in healthcare sector, apart from just the hospital staff, people from other walks of life are also getting benefited from this growth of Medical Tourism. Supplementary services like accommodation, transportation, food, etc have also grown at the same pace. The region near the hospital has now become a hub for affordable accommodations with self cooking facilities. Transport services like taxi and auto are also flourishing in the area. Foods from various region of the nation are also available here, at a pocket friend price. Most of the people in the nearby localities, including shopkeepers, hotel staff, eatery owners and even auto rickshaw and taxi drivers are fluent in Hindi and some even in Bengali, Assamese, Bhojpuri or Odiya and other local languages of Northeast.

There are certain factors, which has given boost to Medical tourism are as:

- a. Visa is no more the barrier to tourism in BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal). Visa norms have been relaxed for the people of neighbouring countries to travelling to this part of the country to avail medical facility and services.

- b. Now a days, it can be said that, insurgency in Assam is under full control. It is expected that there would be large investments from business houses in the healthcare facilities. In future, it is expected that the medical facility in the state capital will increase tremendously.
- c. The development in quality hospitals has already started to attract patients not only from different parts of India but also from other Asian countries. As the city is coming with more super speciality and multi speciality hospitals, it would certainly attract more patients from Middle East and even US, where the cost of treatment and surgery is at least 12 times higher as compared to India.
- d. With the introduction of UDAN, definitely the communication issue will get resolved to high extent.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT AND HOSPITALS:

- a. There should be specialised travel agents from medical sector who can handle query from neighbouring states and countries and able to provide necessary assistance.
- b. Tourism policy by the Government of Assam should be relaxed and implemented in full fledged.
- c. There should be on arrival visa assistance to the patient and at least one accompanying person at all the international border check points
- d. The bus and flight services should be started with neighbouring countries.
- e. There should be money exchange facility at Hospitals
- f. Skilled and highly motivated staff to treat the patient as human not as a case

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

This study is all about the facilitating environments available in the state, whereas this study has not covered areas like:

- a. Types of services available in the hospitals
- b. Factors affecting decision making to travel this part of the country to get better medical facility.
- c. Expectations of the patient
- d. Patients satisfaction level achieved after being treated
- e. Overall experience

The future research can be conducted on the above mentioned areas and give input to government and management of Hospitals so that the quality of services and care can be improved, if any.

CONCLUSION:

Guwahati is developing in the medical sector exponentially. It is having a bright future for both the industry and people of this region. With the latest development in medical industry, definitely the life of the people of this region and neighbouring countries has changed. There are certain loopholes left in this industry and once these problems are handled, Guwahati will also become another hub of medical tourism in India. With the latest development in the medical sector in the city, has brought several growths not only in the city but in the region. There is a huge scope for further development in terms of behavioural part of the hospital staff and infrastructural development. Travel policy has to be implemented in full fledged meaning. As tourism involves low cost, there is huge scope for further addition to employment generation with the proper growth of tourism in this region.

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