



FESTIVAL TOURISM IN KERALA: A STUDY OF ITS PROSPECTS FOR THE SUSTAINED ECONOMIC GROWTH OF THE STATE

Aneeb K Jose* Dr. J. Sundararaj Dr. Manoj P. K. *****

**Research Scholar (PT) Dept. of Commerce, Annamalai University, Chidambaram (TN).*

***Associate Professor, Dept. of Commerce (DDE), Annamalai University, Chidambaram (TN).*

****Faculty Member & Research Co-ordinator, Dept. of Applied Economics, CUSAT, Kochi, India.*

Abstract

Kerala has got one of the best tourism infrastructure in India and also elsewhere in the world. Its slogan 'God's own Country' is being promoted aggressively by the state tourism department, tourism being a major source of foreign exchange earnings (FEE) for the state. Kerala's festivals and cultural events have been growingly attracting the attention of tourists from far and wide - both within India and abroad. In the above context, this paper makes a closer look into the scope for promotion of festival tourism in Kerala so as to support sustainable economic growth of the state, and the paper suggests strategies for the above purpose.

Key Words: Festival Tourism, Sustainable Development, SGDP, Foreign Exchange Earnings.

Introduction

The high potential of the tourism industry for the generation of employment, attraction of foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) and hence as a tool for rapid economic development is widely acknowledged in the literature. Hence, tourism is being promoted by various nations of the world for accelerating the pace of their national economic development. This trend is particularly prominent among the developing nations like India. From a global perspective, tourism is ranked second largest in terms of income creation, and is second only to the oil industry in this regard. Today, tourism is one of the largest and the fastest growing industries in the entire globe. Heightened levels of leisure time in modern times along with constantly growing levels of purchasing power enable more people to opt for tours. Vast linkages effects of tourism sector makes it the driver of so many other related sectors, like, for instance, the amounts spent by tourists on their transport, accommodation, food, recreation etc. have got definite linkages – both forward and backward – with the allied industries. Hence, promotion of tourism industry automatically drives the whole economy through the above sort of linkages, thus resulting in faster economic development. Tourism industry is accorded better attention by the Governments worldwide because of its capacity to attract more FEEs than any other industry. Government of India is no exception in this regard. So also are the cases of many States (eg. Kerala) comprising the Indian union. Kerala Government has been keen in promoting its tourism sector, especially the Responsible Tourism (RT) segment within it. Of late, Festival tourism has emerged as one of the major kinds of tourism wherein tourists get attracted by festivals and other cultural activities.

In India, festivals constitute a part and parcel of the nation's rich cultural heritage. Festival tourism is inseparably intertwined with India's cultural heritage. In India, tourism ministries of the Governments, both at the State and Union, have recognized festival tourism as a special type of cultural tourism. From a macroeconomic perspective, the importance of festivals lies in their capacity to attract thousands of tourists, both domestic and international. This in turn translates into generation of enormous amounts of money because every year millions of tourists attend such festivals and cultural events. Sizeable share of such tourists being foreigners, festivals attract large amounts of FEEs also. This capacity of festivals



to lure foreign tourists and hence FEEs is its major attraction from a national economic perspective, especially for nations like India which has a marvelous cultural heritage. Within India, Kerala is particularly suitable for promotion of festival tourism because of the unique endowments of Kerala in the tourism front.

Relevance and Significance of the Study

The excellent potential of the tourism sector for employment generation and economic growth is widely recognized in the tourism literature. Many developing nations like India have started promoting tourism aggressively for utilizing this development potential. For instance, one of the poorest economies in the world viz. Nepal has been trying to lure maximum tourists, “both Indians and non-Indians”. (Ranade, 1998) [19]. Campaigns like “Visit Nepal Year 1998” or “Nepal Tourism Year 2011” all have the basic aim of luring more foreign tourists to Nepal and are primarily targeted at cultural/religious tourists from India. Even developed nations like Hungary, Finland etc. (Europe), of late, have been keen in developing tourism for economic development. Because of the rich cultural heritage of India, it has got wide scope for attracting tourists, especially foreign tourists. In India, the number of tourists has been on the rise, year after year. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO), more than 40 percent of the total international tourists belong to “cultural tourists” – those who are attracted by the festivals and other cultural activities. Hence, festival tourism – a major type of cultural tourism – does have excellent growth prospects in a country like India, particularly when the Governmental policies are in favor of attracting the tourists. Deliberate promotional activities are being organized by the Union and State Governments in India.

About the state of Kerala in Indian union, besides the State’s rich tourism resources and its world renowned brand viz. ‘God’s own country’, many other features like its unique cultural heritage, diverse religious and cultural events etc. make it an ideal sought-after Festival tourism destination of the whole world. In this context, this paper makes a detailed study of the prospects of festival tourism in the state of Kerala and suggests strategies for its long term sustainability.

Review of Literature

Studies on festival tourism are rather scarce, but many research studies have analyzed the scope of Festival tourism or its variants like Cultural tourism, Religious (Pilgrimage) tourism, etc. Ranade (1998) [19] has studied the relevance of Nepal tourism as a foreign exchange earner for the Nepalese economy, particularly because of tourists from India. The social usefulness and economic sense underlying tourism has been noted by the author. Given the vast tourism resources of the ‘Himalayan Kingdom’ of Nepal, the aggressive tourism promotion by the Nepalese Government (‘Visit Nepal Year 1998’, for instance), the growing trend in foreign exchange earnings etc. have been discussed.

Kumar, Yathish (2007) [9] in his paper, “Tourism Sector and Sustainable Development” has pointed out that while the basic objects of tourism include enhancing the quality of life of people and providing a good experience to the tourists, it is equally important to ensure that the environmental quality is duly protected because the latter is vital for both the tourists and the local population. The author thus highlights the need for maintaining environmental purity for long-term sustainability of tourism. A study on the sustainability of Indian tourism with special reference to Kerala tourism by Manoj P K (2008) [10], ‘Sustainable Tourism in India: A Study from a Global Perspective with Focus on Tourism Prospects of Kerala’, presented in connection with the Second International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, has discussed the immense growth prospects of Indian tourism from a global



perspective. Kerala tourism and its peculiar features are discussed in better detail. Based on his study, suggestions have been made for the faster growth of tourism in Kerala in a manner that is sustainable in the long run. Another study by the same author, Manoj P K (2009) [11], 'Environment Friendly Tourism for Sustainable Economic Development in India', has highlighted the vast growth potential of Indian tourism for the rapid economic development. The utmost need for ensuring that all tourism initiatives are environment-friendly has been pointed out by the author. Accordingly, environmental purity and ecological balance are to be preserved at any cost, and hence environment-friendly tourism initiatives alone need to be promoted.

A book on ecotourism in India authored by Singh, Sarvjeet (2009) [20] has stated that ecotourism is entirely a new approach in tourism and it provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful displays of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity, conservation and local cultures. It involves travels towards locations wherein flora, fauna, cultural heritage etc. are the main attractions. It encourages the active participation by the local populace in the conservation and education dimensions of tourism development. A paper by Manoj P K (2010)[12], 'Tourism in Kerala: A Study of the Imperatives and Impediments with Focus on Ecotourism', has analyzed in detail Kerala's tourism sector using SWOT methodology. Based on the findings of his study, the author has made suggestions for sustainable development of tourism in Kerala. Nagy & Nagy (2013) [17] have observed in their research paper that Festival tourism has become a 'determining factor' in the economic development of Hungary and will continue to be so in the future. It has been stated that festival tourism needs to be promoted as it plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of rural areas of Hungary.

Sudheer, B (2015) [21] has studied the impacts of Responsible Tourism (RT), both economic and cultural, as part of his UGC-Sponsored Minor Research Project. His case study of RT at Kumarakom in Kerala has revealed the need for alternative and innovative practices like RT for minimizing the adverse effects of tourism on the environment, and hence to make tourism sustainable in the long run. On the RT at Kumarakom, its positive effects (like, employment to the local community), empowerment of women through RT-related activities (like, providing vegetables, fish, meat etc. which are all procured locally), positive linkage effects on the locality (eg. earnings from the purchases made by tourists) are noted. An ecotourism study in Kerala using field-based data by Manoj P. K (2015) (a) [13], 'Prospects of Ecotourism in Kerala: Evidence from Kumarakam in Kottayam District' discusses the prospects of ecotourism, and based on his findings suggestions are made for sustainable development of ecotourism in Kerala. Another empirical study by Manoj P. K (2015) (b) [14], 'Employment Generation from Rural Tourism: A Field Study of the Local Community at Kumbalangi, Kerala' has used the feedback received from the local population about their experiences relating to the potential of rural tourism for creation of employment, the relevant Governmental interventions as expected by them etc. It has been noted that there are high prospects of employment generation. However, the need for improving tourism infrastructure by way of Governmental efforts has been noted.

UN World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO) (2015) [22] has noted the tourism in South Asia has grown by more than 7 percent driven by the commendable growth of over 11 percent in India, over 20 percent in Sri Lanka etc. World Economic Forum (WEF) (2015) [23] in its report on tourism competitiveness made a detailed study of the competitiveness of various countries of the world, in the area of travel and tourism. This report contains the competitiveness of nations at the regional and global



levels using a few well-defined parameters; the global competitiveness of Indian tourism is 52 as against 17 of China. At the regional (Asia Pacific region) level too, there is a huge gap in the competitiveness, with in the 12th position whereas China is in the 6th rank. WTTC (2015) [24] in its comprehensive report relating to the economic impact of tourism and travel industry has made a detailed study of the relative performance of different nations of the world in the tourism front, along with region-wise performance as well as future projections. WTTC has pointed out that South Asian region, spearheaded India and the Middle East, is globally the fastest growing region in terms of the share of Travel and Tourism sector to the GDP value. India is one the large and fast growing markets along with China, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey. It has also been reported that South Asia will be the fastest growing sub-region in its long-run growth to 2025 (7.0 percent) of Travel & Tourism GDP, and that India will outpace China by the year 2025. A paper by Manoj P K (2016)(a)[15], “Impact of Rural Tourism on the Environment and Society: Evidence from Kumbalangi in Kerala, India” in *International Journal of Advance Research in Computer Science and Management Studies* has noted the obvious positive effects of rural tourism but has warned about the utmost need to preserve the environmental purity by controlling the unchecked inflow of tourists, minimizing the use of non-degradable wastes, more stress on preserving the environment etc. In another paper, Manoj P. K. (2016)(b)[16], “Determinants of Sustainability of Rural Tourism: A Study of Tourists at Kumbalangi in Kerala, India” published in *International Journal of Advance Research in Computer Science and Management Studies*, the author has identified the major determinants of sustainability of rural tourism based on his empirical study. Accordingly, the following are the most important factors: (i) Natural beauty, (ii) Service and safety, (iii) Basic needs, (iv) Cost effectiveness, (v) Overall satisfaction, and (vi) Infrastructure. Based on the findings suggestions have been given for the sustained growth of the sector and these include (i) preserving the nature and hence the natural beauty, (ii) better quality service (hospitality) and ensuring tourists’ safety, (iii) preserving the unique culture of the local populace, (iv) measures for betterment of transportation and other infrastructure facilities, and so on. India Brand Equity Federation (IBEF) (2017) [7] in its very recent industry report on *Tourism and Hospitality* has noted the immense potential of the tourism sector for contributing towards the economic development of India.

Despite many studies have been done on tourism in the Indian context, including a few in the Kerala context too, studies on the festival tourism in India are very scarce. Hence this study aims to bridge this research gap by making a macro level study on festival tourism in Kerala.

Objectives of the Study and Methodology

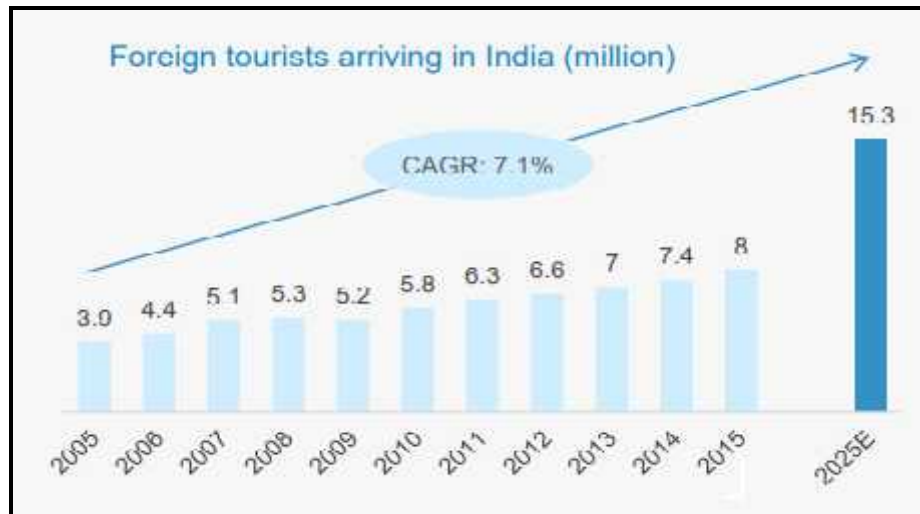
- (i) To study the prospects and issues with respect to tourism sector in Kerala state as a tool for the faster economic development of the State, with a focus on festival tourism (FT); and
- (ii) To suggest strategies for the sustained growth of FT in Kerala, based on this study.

The study is descriptive-analytical and is based on the analysis of macro level data available from authentic secondary sources, like the publications of the Government and those of the Ministry of Tourism. Common statistical tools are used for data analysis and interpretation.

Role of Tourism Sector in Economic Development – An Overview of Kerala State in India

Tourism sector in India plays a vital role in the economic development of the nation due to its growing contribution to the GDP of the nation, both direct and total contribution, over the years. This arises

because of the steady increase in the Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India over the years which is estimated to have a CAGR of 7.1 percent for the period 2005-2025. (Figure I).



Source: IBEF (2017, Jan.) [9], p.12.

Figure I: Trend in Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India.

Regarding Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from tourism sector, there is a clearly increasing trend as is evident from Figure II. It is noted that India's FEEs from tourism has increased from USD 8.6 Billion (2006) to USD 21.1 Billion (2015) and there is a growing trend.



Source: IBEF (2017, Jan.) [9], p.13.

Figure II: Trend in India's Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from Tourism.

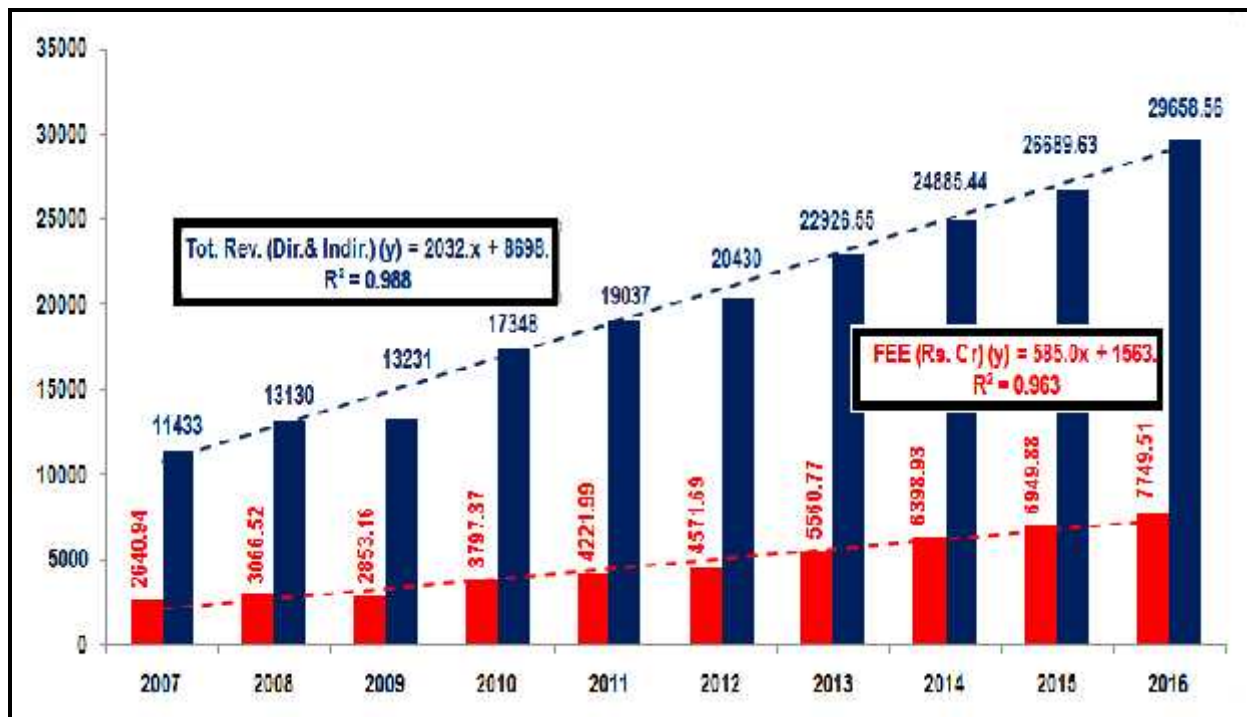
In respect of Kerala tourism in particular, there has been appreciable growth in the State's share of FEE as well as the total revenue from tourism (both Direct and Indirect) as is evident from Table I and also the corresponding Figure III. It is noted that on an average an amount of Rs.2032 Crore is earned by Kerala state in terms of tourism earnings (direct and indirect) and Kerala's earnings in the form of FEEs alone is an incremental Rs. 585 Crore every year.



Table I: FEEs and Total Revenue (Direct & Indirect) from Tourism (Kerala)

Year	FEE (Rs. Cr.)	Total Revenue (Rs. Cr.)
2007	2640.94	11433.00
2008	3066.52	13130.00
2009	2853.16	13231.00
2010	3797.37	17348.00
2011	4221.99	19037.00
2012	4571.69	20430.00
2013	5560.77	22926.55
2014	6398.93	24885.44
2015	6949.88	26689.63
2016	7749.51	29658.55

Source: Govt. of Kerala (2017) [30], *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2016*, Feb.



Source: Govt. of Kerala (2017) [30], *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2016*, Feb.

Figure III: Trend in FEEs and Total Revenue (Direct & Indirect) from Tourism (Kerala)

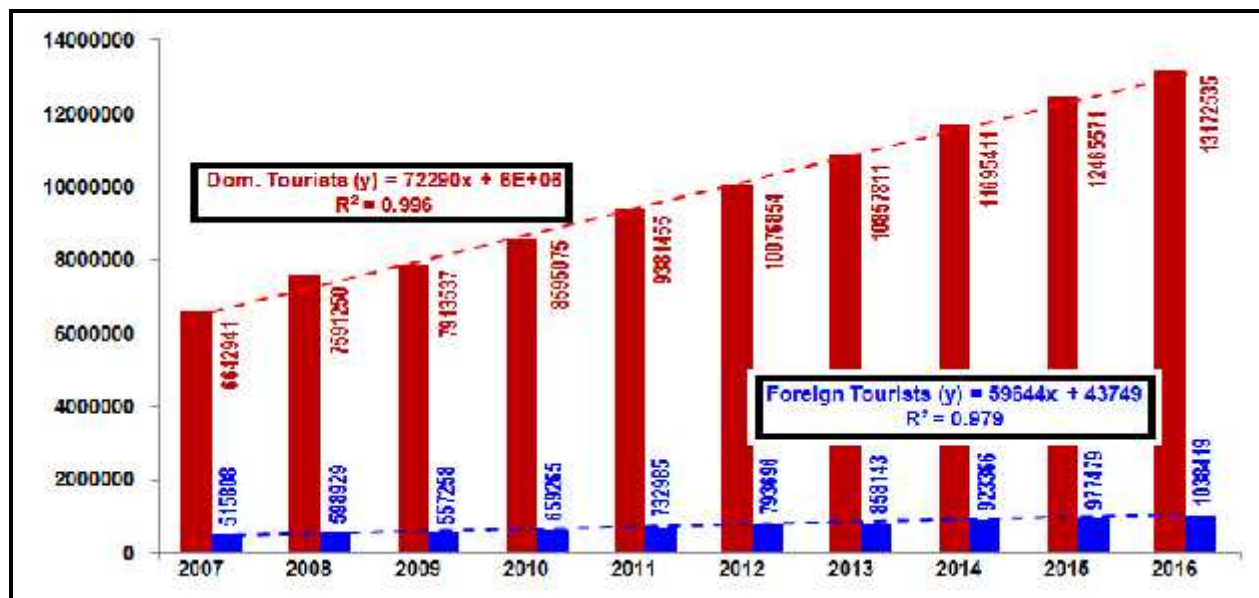
From Table I and Figure III, it may be noted that tourism sector in Kerala state has got excellent potential for economic development by way of attracting earnings (direct and indirect). Besides, it contributes significantly towards the employment generated and the GDP of the State. Hence, there is enough scope for promoting sustainable tourism initiatives in the state of Kerala.



Table II: Trend in Tourist Arrivals into Kerala – Domestic and Foreign (2007-2016)

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists
2007	6642941	515808
2008	7591250	598929
2009	7913537	557258
2010	8595075	659265
2011	9381455	732985
2012	10076854	793696
2013	10857811	858143
2014	11695411	923366
2015	12465571	977479
2016	13172535	1038419

Source: Govt. of Kerala (2017) [30], *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2016*, Feb.



Source: Govt. of Kerala (2017) [30], *Kerala Tourism Statistics 2016*, Feb.

Figure IV: Trend in Tourist Arrivals into Kerala – Domestic and Foreign (2007-2016)

From Table II and Figure IV, it is be noted that Kerala tourism could attract growing number of tourists over the years, both domestic and foreign. It is clear that the growth rates in respect of the number of foreign tourists and hence the FEEs from tourism are quite lower than those of number of domestic tourists and also revenue earned from tourism (Figures III and IV).

The relatively slow pace in the growth of foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) into Kerala i.e. at an average rate of 59,644 (incremental) every year (Figure IV) and similar slow growth rate in FEEs i.e. at an average rate of Rs.585 Crore (incremental) per year (Figure III). This in turn indicate the need for



focused efforts for attracting more FTAs and hence FEEs, for the purpose bringing about sustained economic development of the State through tourism route.

Over the years there has been impressive performance for Kerala tourism, as already noted. For the year 2016, the Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) into Kerala has been 10,38,419 which is 6.23 percent higher than the previous year. The Domestic Tourist Arrivals (DTAs) for 2016 has been 1,31,72,535 which is 5.67 percent higher than the previous year. Similarly, the FFEs for 2016 has been as high as Rs. 7749.51 Crore and this is as high as 11.51 percent more than the previous year. Over the years the Kerala could win numerous National and International Awards. Of these, Awards relating to 2016 alone were many, and these include two Awards of PATA (Pacific Asia Travel Association) viz. PATA Gold Award for E-Newsletter 2016 and PATA Award for 'Visit Kerala' Television Commercial Campaign 2016. Kerala had won another PATA Award in 2015 ie. CEO Challenge Top Destination Award for Thekkady of PATA, 2015.

From the foregoing analysis, it is noted that there are bright growth prospects for the tourism sector in Kerala state and it can contribute effectively for the faster and sustained economic development and employment of this small southern-most state in India.

Festival Tourism – It's Role in bringing about Sustained Economic Development in Kerala.

The world renowned brand name 'God's Own Country' has been a boon to Kerala Tourism over the years, irrespective of the type of tourism. Naturally, the above slogan could be used meaningfully to market Festival Tourism too in the Kerala context. In the Festival tourism / Cultural tourism front, the following are the unique advantages of Kerala state:

- Kerala's worldwide reputation as the 'God's own Country' coupled with its growing image as the ultimate destination for renowned festivals, fairs and other cultural events. Kerala's high achievements in the fields of social, educational, health, and allied sectors wherein its performance indicators are comparable with advanced nations of the world, would add up to its suitability as a major festival tourism destination within India or the whole world. Its universal literacy rate – highest in the whole nation, and also glaring historical record of vast trade linkages of most of the continents of the world since so many centuries etc.
- Kerala is one of the few states in the whole of India which could successfully promote its extreme natural beauty to the leisure tourism sector.
- Kerala's unique heritage coupled with cultural diversity has helped the state to attract tourists from far and wide, virtually from every part of the world.
- Kerala has worldwide reputation for its emerald backwaters as well as its traditional medical treatment viz. Ayurveda and 'Kerala Ayurveda' has become a brand in itself also.
- Monsoon rains that occur in Kerala in the mid-October ('Thulam' month as per Malayalam calendar), lasting for a few hours with sunny interludes, is an added attraction for tourists.

Over the years, the fairs and festivals in Kerala has been attracting millions of tourists into the State, both domestic tourists and foreign tourists. Attracted by such reputed festivals and such other cultural events, many tourists schedule their tour programmes in such a way that they coincide with the festivals and cultural events of their choice. Rich cultural heritage of Kerala and also its world renowned festivals need to be effectively showcased from the above perspective. The never-ending kaleidoscope of diverse and distinctive cultures spanning for several centuries is something that Kerala state alone can boast of in the whole of India. Each culture has its distinct kind of festivals, art forms, customs, practices, rituals and lore. The State has a plethora of distinct festivals that can clearly illustrate the



glaring diversity of its rich culture. Of late, as part of tourism promotion Kerala's festivals and cultural events are viewed with enthusiasm and gaiety by tourists worldwide, some of these are being performed round-the-year too. Almost every season in Kerala brings with it its own new festivals also, and each festival being a clear celebration of the bounties of the State's rich traditions that are followed since time immemorial.

One of the most reputed festivals celebrated in Kerala that has attracted worldwide reputation is the snake boat race. Besides, Kerala has large number of temple festivals which are celebrated in different parts of the State. Akin to other parts of India, myths and legends are also associated with the origin and growth of the major fairs and festivals celebrated in Kerala. Traditionally, elephants are widely used in all major festivals and cultural events in the State. Ornately decorated elephants catch the attention of tourist from all over the world, such elephants being a common scene in all major temples festivals in the State. Another characteristic feature of the fairs and festivals in the State is that they offer the best opportunity for the display of various traditional performing arts and also delicious cuisine of the State.

Strategies for Promotion of Festival Tourism for Sustained Economic Development

- Efforts for popularizing the less known festivals in Kerala having adequate tourism potential (popular festivals, religious events etc. not duly publicized) so that 'Over crowding' issue associated with the popular destinations can be minimized. Due to the vital need for limiting the number of tourists to a level that is sustainable in the long run, as per the carrying capacity of the concerned area, it is relevant to project emerging destinations.
- The inflow of tourists needs to be limited to a level that can ensure the preservation of environmental purity. This precaution is vital for any kind of tourism at any destination, including the festival tourism destinations – both established ones and emerging ones.
- More thrust is required for the adoption of ICT and other latest advances in the field of technology is required. While continuing the present practice of promoting E-Visa facility for foreign tourists, further measures like online reservations, online marketing etc. have to be encouraged by the Tourism Department, Govt. of Kerala. Requisite ICT infrastructure, like, broad-band connectivity, uninterrupted internet facility etc. needs to be ensured.
- Infrastructure facilities of various kinds, like, physical, human, technological (ICT), etc. need to be upgraded in a phased and environment-friendly manner. Better connectivity between various tourism destinations should be ensured and 'Circular-trips' be promoted.
- Effective marketing of various festivals in the State is vital for improving Kerala's earnings from Festival tourism. Use of ICT tools for tourism promotion is preferred, as today's customers are growingly using ICT for selecting tourism destinations, online booking etc.
- Measures to preserve the unique cultural identities and peculiar characteristics associated with of various festivals, cultural events (like, their customs, practices, religious functions) have to be initiated to ensure the long-term sustainability of such tourism destinations.
- Skilled and trained human resources must be used for effective promotion of tourism products, providing quality services, use of ICT, protecting the environment purity, etc.
- Any measure for the promotion of festival tourism (or other kinds of tourism) should be environment-friendly. Strict control over the use of plastics and such other non-degradable materials in various tourism destinations is vital for the long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives. Maintaining the number of tourists visiting a certain destination within sustainable



limits, ensuring the ‘green cover’ of the destinations, and ensuring the purity of the environment, and the practice of using eco-friendly materials are vital in this regard.

Concluding Remarks

Given the vast potential of Kerala for development of various kinds of tourism including festival tourism, the growth prospects festival tourism in Kerala is noted to be strong. Many historical as well as socio-economic factors that are quite unique to Kerala state alone in the whole of India could be observed to be contributing positively to the State’s potential in the cultural front. This in turn has got a direct bearing on enhancing the prospects of festival tourism, cultural tourism and allied tourism segments. The favorable policy measures of both the State and Union Governments further add up to the growth prospects of the State. The recent move by the State Government proposing Sree Narayana Guru Spiritual Tourism Network to the Centre and the positive response of the Central Government to consider the above Spiritual Tourism Network is a classic example of the positive attitude of the State and Union Governments to Festival tourism and allied tourism segments. Adoption of ICT and other technological advances as well as enhancing the infrastructural facilities are imperatives for tourism development in Kerala. Equally important is to ensure that Kerala tourism policies and practices must be built-up on the principles of preserving the environment and ecology so as to ensure its long-term sustainability.

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