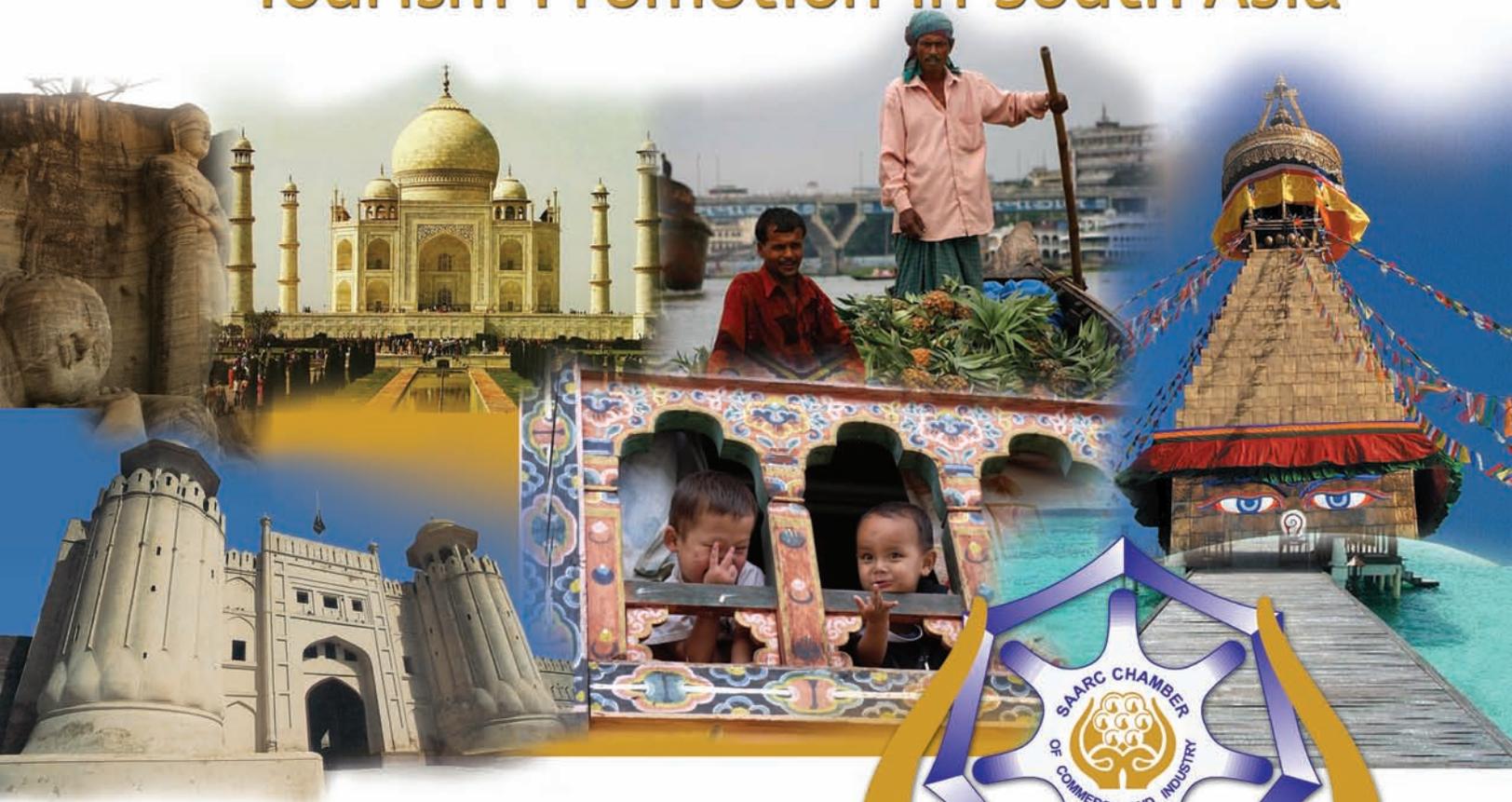


Regional Integration through Tourism Promotion in South Asia



A special Session

Organized by
SAARC Chamber of Commerce & Industry
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In Collaboration with



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Friedrich Naumann
STIFTUNG **FÜR DIE FREIHEIT**



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South Asian tourism has been operating at sub-optimal levels for quite a long period of time. With the exception of Maldives and more recently India, all other countries need to work harder towards achieving more conducive operating environments for the tourism industry. Accounting for only 1.1% of the global visitor arrivals, South Asia's recent growth levels indicate promise of the region's ability to move forward harnessing the vast potential that exists in the industry.

To express solidarity with the Government and the people of Nepal on the occasion of Country's Tourism Year 2011, the SAARC Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SAARC CCI) arranged a special session on tourism under the theme "Regional Integration through Tourism Promotion in South Asia". The session was inaugurated by Mr. Sarat Singh Bhandari, Hon'ble Minister of Tourism of Nepal. Mr. Ghulam Muhammad Quader, Hon'ble Minister for Aviation and Tourism, Bangladesh; Mr. Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Hon'ble Minister for Economic Affairs, Bhutan and H.E. Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, Secretary General, SAARC also graced the occasion with their presence.

The event was organized in collaboration with the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FNCCI) and Friedrich Nuemann Foundation: fur die Freiheit, New Delhi India. Mr. Suraj Vaidya, officiating President of FNCCI and Chairman SAARC CCI Council on Tourism chaired the session, which was moderated by Mr. Iqbal Tabish, Secretary General, SAARC CCI and concluded by Mr. Pradeep Kumar Shrestha, Vice President, SAARC CCI from Nepal.

Maldives, known today as one of the most successful island destinations in the world, works on a business model of establishing strong partnerships with foreign investors and tour operators. Beginning with investments from Sri Lankan conglomerates in the early 1980's (still accounting for about 20% of all hotel rooms), Maldives Tourism, offering the 'sunny side of life' as its positioning platform, is driven in the main by some of the best international and regional brand names in the island tourism business.

In promoting and branding South Asia as a tourist destination area, the challenge faced by the marketer is to ensure that the three key characteristics of brand identity are assured. They are quality, consistency and integrity. To assure that these characteristics are maintained, an intense and continuous effort need be made both at the destination and at the regional levels.
(Excerpts from a presentation made at the recent South Asia Economic Summit in Colombo.)



Mr. Annisul Huq, President, SAARC CCI in his welcome address urged upon the leadership of South Asia to pursue a flexible visa regime as a fundamental requirement for promotion of tourism in the region. Citing figures of tourists' inflow and revenue generation through tourism in France, EU and ASEAN Nations, he lamented that despite having enormous potential the region could not fetch even 1% of the total revenue through tourism.



Mr. Annisul Huq, President, SAARC CCI

H.E. Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, Secretary General SAARC in his address said that regional tourism had enormous potential to integrate South Asia. According to him, social amalgamation and economic benefits are the two immediate effects which are drastically required for the promotion of regional integration of South Asia.



H.E. Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, Secretary General SAARC



Mr. Ghulam Muhammad Quader, Hon'ble Minister for Aviation and Tourism, Bangladesh

Mr. Ghulam Muhammad Quader, Hon'ble Minister for Aviation and Tourism, Bangladesh informed the gathering that his Government had been quite proactive in promoting tourism including infrastructure development in Bangladesh. He was of the opinion that by developing means of transportation such as roads and rails by South Asian nations, our region could be physically integrated. In this respect, he identified number of areas where complementarities for economic cooperation existed. He laid emphasis on joint programs at both regional and bi-lateral levels to develop

infrastructure and institutions for the purpose of promoting tourism operations in the South Asian region.

Mr. Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Hon'ble Minister for Economic Affairs, Bhutan expressed his Government's resolve to promote tourism while preserving the beauty of nature and green environment. He said that mountainous Bhutan offered unique opportunities for investment in many areas including tourism.



Mr. Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Hon'ble Minister for Economic Affairs from Bhutan



Regional Integration through Tourism Promotion in South Asia



Chief Guest, Mr. Sarat Singh Bhandari, Hon'ble Minister of Tourism, Govt of Nepal

The Chief Guest, Mr. Sarat Singh Bhandari, Hon'ble Minister of Tourism of Nepal stated in his address that Nepal was like a compact disc which had all the software of tourism promotion as the country had the highest and the lowest points of the World and its multi-cultural environment had a lot to attract regional and international tourists. He was of the opinion that all the countries of South Asia had unique cultural and religious heritage which provided enormous complementarities to bring nations closer together.

Mr. Siegfried Herzog, Regional Director FNF shared his experience with the audience. He was full of praise for SAARC region's rich and diversified cultural heritage. In his opinion there were many possibilities/opportunities to promote tourism in South Asia and that all the South Asian countries should come together to boost tourism in the region. Mr. Herzog, however, was of the view that the potential of South Asian tourism is falling back in infrastructure development due to political turmoil faced by many countries of the region.



Mr. Siegfried Herzog, Regional Director FNF

Mr. Pradeep Kumar Shrestha, Vice President, SAARC CCI said that it was imperative for regional integration to promote tourism as it was one of the few powerful weapons which could win hearts through noble values and hospitality services. He further added that since the number of tourists in Nepal had undergone gradual increase, his country was now in a position to offer numerous opportunities for investment in allied industries and services. He expressed his concerns for lack of liberal air access between countries of the SAARC region. He urged upon the governments



Mr. Pradeep Kumar Shrestha, Vice President, SAARC CCI

of South Asian countries to develop means of transportation including roads/highways, railways and ocean/other water based systems within SAARC grouping mainly for the purpose of promoting tourism in the region. This would go a long way to achieve the long cherished dream of regional integration among the SAARC member countries.

Currently, except for the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Nepal for the rest of the countries of SAARC, visa formalities are cumbersome. If one is to analyse the measures taken in the ASEAN region almost all countries within the region allow visa free or visa upon entry facilitation for intra-regional travel. The ASEAN grouping goes one step further to offer an ASEAN Air Pass, where travelling to one ASEAN country qualifies a traveller to visit other countries at a concessionary airfare.



*Mr. Suraj Vaidya,
Chairman SAARC CCI
Council on Tourism*

Mr. Suraj Vaidya, while concluding the session, remarked that the governments in South Asia needed to make earnest efforts to promote tourism. He demanded of the leadership of SAARC member nations to relax visa regime in order to maximize people to people contact in the region and construct necessary infrastructure to minimize the cost of traveling, which on account of non-availability of direct air and land-routes become exceedingly high as compared with other regions. He urged upon the need to adopt open sky policy by the governments of South Asia to augment the mobility of tourists in the region.

At the end of the session, Mr. Iqbal Tabish, Secretary General, SAARC CCI thanked the speakers and guests for their participation in the special session. He proved himself quite innovative when he described the word tourism as a combination of words: T for Trust, O for Ownership (combined), U for unity, R and I for Regional Integration, S for Strength (which were required to achieve) and M for Milestone. He was applauded by all the participants for his creativity. Mr. Tabish urged the political leadership of South Asia to help reduce trust deficit and open up Visa regime which was one of the prime requirements to explore untapped potential of tourism sector in the region. Later on, SAARC CCI hosted dinner in honor of guests/participants of the session.



*Mr. Iqbal Tabish,
Secretary General, SAARC CCI*

The session was attended among others by government representatives and diplomats of South Asia region particularly H.E. Syed Abrar Hussain, Pakistan Ambassador in Nepal, H.E. Thosapala Hewage, Sri Lankan Ambassador, Mr. Ahmed Saleh, Permanent Secretary, Government of Maldives, SAARC Directors and government officials.



Bhutan, has presented to the world a model of tourism development where its operations are based on the model of a kinked demand curve in creating premium value for the destination. Upon limiting access to tourists to Bhutan to a few tens of thousands, a premium charge is made for the visit, placing the per capita yield from a tourist at a high level. A business model aimed at conserving Bhutan's heritage, cultural and natural resources, it is also in keeping with the unique development indicator of 'Gross National Happiness' this 'Thunder Dragon' nation has presented to the world, as against the key conventional development measurement of 'Gross National Product'.



CONCLUSION:

Recent experiences have witnessed that the growth in tourism industry has spurred activities in other sectors of economy such as horticulture, handicrafts, agriculture, construction and even poultry. A case in point is that of India where recent growth in tourism has created new jobs in a variety of related sectors. The numbers tell the story: almost 20 million people are now working in India's tourism industry. We should also consider intra-regional tourism promotion to be a precursor to promoting the region for international visitors, as taking that route will strengthen the capacity within the region to develop better structures and institutions to rectify some of the problems that are endemic in the body polity of the region.

The special session has highlighted various measures which are required to be undertaken by various governments of South Asia to bring about real change/ growth in tourism industry in this part of the world

Following is a list of such measures extracted from the speeches and presentation of hon'able speakers, which could be adopted by the member nations to achieve the ultimate goal of SAARC:

- Liberalize air access between countries of SAARC, facilitating their national flag carriers to operate in the region without restriction.
- Facilitate all kinds of means of transportation including ocean/ other water based, roads/highways and railways for enhanced mobility of people of the SAARC (to serve tourism as well).
- Undertake programmes at both regional and bi-lateral levels to jointly develop infrastructure and institutions needed for the promotion of tourism operations.
- Undertake the publication of an annual South Asian Tourism Events Directory (to be published an year in advance to enable tour sales for the events)
- Commence a twinning of cities programme within the SAARC region.
- Establish a SARRC Joint Climate Change Response using Sri Lanka's pioneering 'Tourism Earth Lung' initiative as the platform.



- On the pattern of ASEAN Air Pass, SAARC Air Pass should be issued (ASEAN Air PASS qualifies a traveler to visit other ASEAN countries at a concessionary airfare).
- On the pattern of ASEAN Hotel Pass (Hip-Hop Pass), similar passes should be issued to SAARC frequent travelers with similar incentives.



Nepal is an example of pioneering a brand of unique community based tourism initiative. With its early model of the Annapurna Tourism Development Project and the Bhakthipur Conservation Project of the 1980's, Nepal introduced a good tourism operational model to the world with its unique nature and heritage conservation, community benefit and sustainable funding features. Sri Lanka, in addressing the challenge of global warming and climate change faced by all nations of the world, has ventured to extend its conventional positioning as a tourist destination of a treasured island with a warm people and a nature, culture, adventure offering to taking advantage of its extensive green cover to strive to be a 'Tourism Earth Lung' working towards being a carbon neutral destination by year 2018.



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