

The Taj Mahal - Responsible Tourism A Far Goal to Reach

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Abstract: *Taj Mahal, one of the most celebrated World Heritage sites, has become a victim of its universal popularity, overburdened with the influx of tourists making it vulnerable in its environment. This paper examines if tourism at this global heritage site justifies responsible tourism by all stakeholders, and whether the brand image of Taj Mahal needs to be revisited with this concern. This work confirms that the Taj Mahal is oversubscribed and the prevalent tourism here is far from responsible tourism. The 'destination partnership' among the multi stakeholders of the Taj emerged as the most viable option to bring it around the responsible tourism. The brand image of Taj needs to be revisited to highlight the responsible way of tourism at Taj Mahal.*

Keywords: Taj Mahal, overcrowding, overtourism, heritage site, responsible tourism.

1. Introduction

The marvel of aesthetics and architecture – the Taj Mahal, stands in such a perfect symmetry, which truly characterizes William Blake's phrase 'this fearful symmetry' (Islam, 2013). The dimensions of the mausoleum are so perfectly calculated that even today the connoisseurs of art and architecture wonder at its style and workmanship. Undoubtedly, Shahjahan got it built with such involvement that it should reflect the persona of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. The Taj Mahal epitomises grief and love which lends a unique 'sense of place' to this monument. This glorious landmark in Agra was commissioned in 1632. But this monument which marks the silent grief of Mughal emperor, famously described as "a teardrop on the cheek of time" by Rabindranath Tagore, is ironically bearing the brunt of overcrowding and over tourism today.

2. Background

In 1983, when the Taj was hailed as a World Heritage Site, the tourism in international as well as domestic categories boomed beyond imagination. The Taj became the fixed point of the itinerary of every traveller. The mass appeal of Taj lies in its universality as Ebba Koch elaborates, "It was created by fusing so many architectural traditions—Central Asian, Indian, Hindu and Islamic, Persian and European—it has universal appeal and can speak to the whole world." According to the World Tourism "from a conservationist point of view, as well as from a public sector perspective, the main value of tourism at heritage sites lies in the fact that it serves as an introduction to the historical, and cultural background of a country or place which people may never approach otherwise". But in this case, it was a clear deviation that the heritage site of Taj has always been therein public fantasy, and people were drawn to it at any period and time. Though in older times, the measures of protection and conservation deemed adequate considering the less number of visitors and the passive nature of their visits. But today, the overcrowding at this monument has often created near stampede situation which has raised alarm among policymakers, administration, public interest groups and travellers.

3. Purpose

This paper raises some concerns about the Taj in special reference to responsible tourism: Is Taj Mahal an over-visited space by tourists? The Taj Mahal justifies the responsible way of tourism? The Taj as a brand needs to be revisited in responsible way of tourism? With the ever continuing boost in travel, there is an increasing recognition among both travel professionals and consumers regarding the significance of responsible travel—"travel that minimizes negative impacts, brings economic benefits to host communities, and preserves the cultural and natural resources of the destinations" (CREST, 2013).

4. Design

The present work revolves around the viewpoints, accounts and the ground reality about the tourism prevailing at Taj Mahal. The local survey at Taj complex comprised one hundred respondents across the nationality, regions and religion, who delved around the responses with expectations, disappointments, awe, suggestions and admiration for this heritage landmark. In order to capture the complete view on the matter, all the stakeholders like tourists, authorities and locals are analysed for their respective roles in responsible tourism.

5. Discussion

The Taj Mahal has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1983 making it a global asset. As stated in Taj Mahal Site Management Plan, 2001, 'the whole Taj Mahal complex is laid out in the principle of perfect symmetry. Consistent symmetrical planning with emphasis on bilateral symmetry on both sides of a central axis is evident here. The emphasis is on the features in the center, the tomb and the gateways, on both sides are arranged structures mirroring each other. Every component is thus indispensable for the whole of the balanced composition. Each and every structure of the Taj complex is of equal importance and deserves the same kind of attention.' Though it is true from the management point of view to pay attention uniformly of the whole complex, but the ground check shows that from the main gateway the movement of tourists surge towards the

core element of the whole complex - the Taj, making the mausoleum as the convergence of the crowd.

The Taj Mahal is the core monument set in a large complex of several other structures and elaborate gardens in the vicinity. Although the gardens have changed substantively over the years, the original layout remains the same. It is researched that the Taj Mahal gardens and their orientation are planned with sunrise/sunset azimuths on solstices. Most Mughal 'charbaghs' are rectangular with a tomb or pavilion in the center. The Taj Mahal garden is unusual because its main element, the white Mausoleum, is located at the end of the garden instead of the center point (Sparavigna, 2013). This innovative style of the architects of Taj Mahal added depth and perspective to the monument even from far visual range. 'In fact, the symmetry with which the whole garden has been organized and laid out, can be clearly observed and experienced as one can get an unhindered view of the mausoleum from any spot' (Falakians, 2013) People move through the walkways and as the view of Taj Mahal can be captured from a distance, the tourists are busy taking selfies and photos throughout, making the crowd movement sluggish most of the times.

In recent years, there is a surge of domestic visitors from across the states of India and the international tourists from many countries far and wide. The Taj Mahal attracts from 7 to 8 million visitors annually, with more than 0.8 million from overseas. The most quoted figures in references is more than 70,000 visitors per day, is a huge number for any monument. In a bid to conserve the Taj Mahal, as well as ensure visitors' safety, officials have planned to cap the number of domestic tourists to 40,000 per day. As per the official portal of the Taj, there is an additional charge of 200/- over and above 50/- for domestic tourists and 1100/- for the foreign tourists, towards the option of visiting the main mausoleum. This is an important step towards decongestion inside the main mausoleum. Probably, Taj is the most visited monument of India. But this also emerges as the example of irresponsible tourism in respect of the visitors, authorities and the locals.

Taj Mahal and the visitors: Agra is located at the center of north India which is accessible from all the parts of the country with major arterial highways passing through it. Every day there is a huge influx of tourists that come to visit the Taj Mahal and hence, the intensity of impact of tourists is also high around this area. To keep the monument protected the government and other authorities that work on its preservation and maintenance, such as the Archaeological Survey of India, have issued many do's and don'ts. However, on closer observation one can find a lot of irresponsible behaviour on the part of tourists, mostly the domestic tourists. One of the rules before entering the central section of the mausoleum is to cover one's shoes with cloth shoe-covers so as to reduce the friction of the shoes against the soft marble and protect it from erosion and physical wear and tear. These shoe-covers are sold outside the complex for a paltry five rupees for general tourists whereas it is inclusive in the visit charges of International tourists. However, a certain section of tourists shows their irresponsible conduct by avoiding to procure them, and rather walk in their shoes/slippers or barefoot. Another

option that they resort to, is to pick up the used shoe-covers from trash cans, discarded by the earlier users, and wear them and then throw them around. Though, the arrangement of shoe-racks has been made near the walk ways but, people ignore its utility and leave the footwear around the gardens. Making loud noises, breaking of queues, touching the walls, pillars, gates unnecessarily, pushing people while the queue is on the move, spitting, defacing and vandalism to a certain extent, are some of such irresponsible behaviour by the mass tourists. Marisa Laurenzi Tabasso, an Italian chemist and conservation scientist says, the main human impact on the monument probably occurs inside the tomb, where the moist breath of thousands of daily visitors—and their oily and sweaty hands rubbing the walls—has discoloured the marble.

Taj Mahal and authorities and locals: The management authorities and agencies are amply supported by the Government to manage and protect this heritage site but the callous attitude of the employees on duty at site is more than noticeable here. The broken and dysfunctional video-audio earphones which are provided for lingual choices in the commentary on site visit, indifferent and insensitive behaviour of front staff and lack of surveillance by marshals inside the monument leave much to desire by those visitors who genuinely come from far and wide to see this marvel and vouch for its grandeur.

The chronic air pollution, contaminated water of Yamuna bank, industrial and vehicular pollution, open burning of Municipal solid waste, are only a few reasons to count which are responsible for the decay and decolouration of the marble of this monument. From the local industries combined with oxygen and moisture, sulphur dioxide settles on the surface of the tomb and oxidizes the marble, forming a fungus that experts call 'marble cancer'. This is combined with high levels of suspended particulate matter, dust and exhaust, yellowing the Taj Mahal (Stuart 2007). Though the government is planning a lot of measures but on ground zero they appear to be much inadequate so far.

Unregistered guides roam around and become a nuisance to those who are not willing to hire them. Many a times, international tourists are befooled by such fake guides who have no authentic knowledge about the monument. Apart from that the unwanted pursuance by the local shopkeepers of the shops lined up outside the monument also appears to be a coercive behaviour towards the visitors. Other petty crimes like shoe lifting pick pocket, theft and cheating are other matters of concern which should be dealt with sternly by local police with the cooperation of local communities.

6. Findings

On the basis of survey done at the site of Taj Mahal in special reference to the irresponsible tourism prevailing here, the findings are as follow:

- 1) Majority of the visitors found the tourism at Taj, less responsible; whereas many felt it irresponsible and only a small margin of visitors found it responsible enough, on the basis of factors like quality of maintenance,

- cleanliness, crowd management, behaviour of staff, law and order and also the conduct of the fellow visitors.
- 2) Almost all the visitors found the crowd more than expected (on a week day in autumn) and found the Taj Mahal overcrowded which directly affected the visual experience of tourists.
 - 3) In regard to the improvement of the situation, about two-third respondents expected the Government and concerned authorities to adopt measures as the most important stakeholder, whereas others felt that the role of corporate, NGOs, local community and the visitors could also be desirable.
 - 4) Visitors who found Taj Mahal 'as expected' and 'not found as expected', are in almost equal ratio.
 - 5) A large number of domestic tourists were critical and disgruntled about the restriction on free access to the main mausoleum by imposing additional charges, as a measure of decongestion. When it came to the question, whether they would like to visit Taj again, almost all wanted to visit again but for different reasons, as they were satisfied and therefore wanted to visit again or they wanted to visit again in expectation of a better visit. But surprisingly, despite dissatisfaction, almost all the visitors were found in favour of recommending their friends and family to visit Taj Mahal.

7. Conclusions

As per general opinion the atmospheric pollution is primarily causing physical and aesthetic damage to the Taj Mahal. But some International experts and Indian authorities are of the view that the prime cause of decolouring may not be attributed to air pollution, but to climatic condition with heat, humidity and the biological decay of the marble. , even hard marble does not last forever, and can be worn out.

Decongestion and crowd-management are important measures to control overcrowding and over tourism at the Taj Mahal. The riverfront beautification of Yamuna in the close vicinity of Taj Mahal, may be taken up for Nature-walks and soft tourism to promote responsible tourism in the Taj complex.

A more holistic approach is being envisaged in terms of blending responsible tourism with the destination i.e. the idea of 'destination partnerships' rather than any one party being responsible for protecting a destination, this is a multi-stakeholder approach whereby all parties interested in a destination as a resource, look at how they can work together to achieve a common goal of sustainability (CREST, 2013).

So far, the branding of Taj is concerned; it is believed to prevail effectively among domestic as well as the international tourists. The brand image of the Taj Mahal is so positive that despite the fact that 'Taj' experience could not meet the expectations of most of them, but almost all the respondents want to recommend a visit to the Taj Mahal to their friends.

The 'Taj' as a tourism brand may be revisited for its image enhancement once the deterioration is controlled and tourist

experience is improved. The fact remains that the Taj Mahal is one of the universally most admired heritage sites of the world. If the Taj has to come back to its original glory, a holistic approach has to be adopted with all its stakeholders in a responsible way of tourism. *Kalpna Bhakuni is teaching in University of Delhi for thirty- four years. She specializes in tourism within the fold of Geography discipline, such as Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Natural scenery resource, Community-based livelihoods, Gender studies etc in mountain region.*

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