

## AGRA TOURISM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

Agra has three UNESCO world heritage monuments; Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri. Millions of Indian and foreign tourists visit Agra every year to experience these heritage monuments and other tourists attractions.

Tourist infrastructure of Agra is not developing as fast as the inflow of tourists. Agra has many problems for tourists specially related to tourist facility management in the area of transportation, accommodation, electricity, drinking water, pollution, site visits, safety and security, access to information and human resources. In the age of internet potential tourists can easily compare the facilities of the different tourist places in the world and expect better facilities. These problems and expectations have created vast opportunities for the government, companies and entrepreneurs to create both traditional and modern economy businesses that can improve the facilities for tourists.

This paper is based on a survey whose objective was to find out the nature of problems faced by tourists and the tourism facility providers along with solutions of the problems. The paper identifies and analyzes the problems and suggests solutions keeping in mind the stake holders of Agra and its monuments.

**Key Words:** Agra, Taj Mahal, Tourist Destination, Tourist Facility Management, Destination Image

### Introduction

India is a large country with plethora of options is available for tourists. Recently India has started attracting large number of foreign tourists. In India, Agra is one of the most famous heritage tourist destinations of world. The most prominent reason why people come from all over India and all over the world is to see the grand Taj Mahal one of the Seven Wonders of the

World and an immortal tribute to love. Agra is world famous for its UNESCO world heritage monument the Taj Mahal. The stature of Taj, set amongst a calm garden, is awe-inspiring. Although not all the incoming foreign tourists come to Agra but even then large number of foreign tourists visit Agra due to Taj Mahal. It is visited by more than eight million Indian and foreign tourists every year.

Agra rests grandly and statuesquely in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which is located in the northern region of India. It is below the Himalayas and part of the great northern plains. The city lies on the west bank of Yamuna River. As Agra was the seat of the great Mughal rulers for many years, there remain other vestiges of its powerful history, with historical monuments in and around the city dating back to the 16th and 17th century. Emperor Akbar built Fatehpur Sikri the beautiful city of red sandstone, near Agra. Four UNESCO world heritage sites the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri and Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary are situated in the stretch of hardly sixty kilometers.

Generally tourists choices of a particular destination depends on the varied information they have from the different sources about that destination. All countries promote their own destinations for tourism and they compete with each others for the same tourists in the era of globalization. Incoming tourists to a destination make their decisions about duration of visit, mode of transportation, choice of hotels, food, guides and local sightseeing based on the information they gathered from different sources especially from internet. On internet image of Taj Mahal is positioned very high in all the forums and tourism information portals but on contrary to Taj Mahal, image of Agra city is positioned very dismal.

Agra is a very touristy place where millions of Indian and foreign tourists come every year to see the beauty of Taj Mahal. Agra has some of the finest hotels of India where tourist enjoy their stay. Despite of the number of luxury, mid range and budget hotels, most of the tourists prefer to come to Agra for a day trip. Generally tourists come to Agra in the morning by train, taxi or bus and leave the city in the evening. Their quick visits to Agra do not provide the desired monetary gain to the local population because they spend most of their money for Agra tour out of Agra.

### **Purpose of the research**

Agra is one of the most visited places in India by both Indian and foreign tourists due to three UNESCO world heritage monuments Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikiri and especially the Taj Mahal, the symbol of love. On all forums related to Agra tourism it was found that tourists praise the beauty of Taj and admire other monuments but they do not like the city environment at all and avoid staying in Agra for any other purpose then visiting monuments in shortest possible time.

To know the exact causes of tourists' annoyance a survey was conducted with the help of questionnaire cum informal interviews of tourists. Also the observations were made objectively by surveyors at the point of contacts between tourists and tourism service providers. Observations were also recorded regarding the cultural differences in behavior of people at different touristy locations.

The paper explain how the day trippers do not contribute much to the local economy and why these tourists are surrounded by touts, tuk tuk drivers, rickshaw pullers and souvenirs sellers in touristy areas. This paper tries to find out the causes of tourists reluctance to stay in Agra and try to find the strategy to attract the tourists to stay longer in Agra.

### **Methodology**

Random samples of tourists at different monuments, railway stations and hotels were drawn from March 2009 to May 2011. Five hundred thirty one tourists were interviewed. Only two to three interviews were conducted following a specific selection rule in each location on a given day. This was done to avoid the bias of sampling only those who offered themselves for interviewing like group of students at particular location and effects of seasonality on the overall results. The data was analyzed separately for each location and then pooled, according equal weight to data from all locations.

To avoid politically correct answers from the tourists, questions regarding name, nationality, profession, and ethnicity were not asked. Earlier it was found in testing of the questionnaire in test survey that foreign tourists were not giving their true reactions when their identities along

with nationalities were disclosed. Also no questions were asked related to the positive aspects of the Agra destination and about their visit.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The question of how people consume travel and tourism products has become a focal point in tourism research in recent years. Efforts to identify the determinants that shape travel behavior stemmed not only from pure academic interest, but from practical business purposes as well. The physical shape of the destination and rich heritage can attract visitors from all corners of the world. Naturally, a destination must have something very special to attract travelers to it in this competitive global village. Tourists are usually pulled towards a destination that offers a bundle of experiences to suit their needs and desires.

Destinations are places with some actual or perceived boundary, e.g. political and physical boundaries (Kotler *et al* 2003). Destinations are geographic locations with resources, attractions, infrastructure and facilities that attract people to visit and stay temporarily for diverse reasons (Pike, 2004). The word destination can have different meanings depending on the context. For example, a macro-destination such as France can have several micro-destinations; Ile-de-France, Paris, Eiffel Tower in Paris (Kotler *et al* 2003).

Similarly Taj Mahal is an important micro destination in a macro destination like India. The Taj Mahal is visited and liked by millions of tourists every year. India is a huge country and when tourists decide to come to this country they choose to visit a few destinations of their choice among the plethora of micro destinations and possible activities accordingly. Taj Mahal is one of the most preferred destinations among both Indian and foreign tourists itinerary.

A day tourists or a day trippers are people who spend less than 24 hours in a place and who do not stay overnight in the place visited.

Crompton (1996), state image is a total belief, idea and impression of a person about a destination. According to Kotler (1998), image is a network of decision about believes, ideas, experiences of a person towards a place or object.

As tourism destination products and services cannot be tested prior to the purchase, consumers have to build images of them and make their purchase decision based on these images. Whether the image is an accurate portrayal of what the respective destination is really like is thereby not so important, what really matters is the mere existence of the image in the minds of potential consumers (Mayo, 1975, p. 15).

When it comes to destination choice, secondary information sources, providing the information for image formation before experiencing a destination, basically fulfill three functions. First of all, obviously, they create an image. They also minimize the risk that the destination in question might entail, and finally, they can serve as a mechanism for a later justification of the eventual choice made (Friás, Rodríguez & Castañeda, 2008, p. 165 cited following Mansfeld, 1992, n.p.a.).

It has been demonstrated by research that image is a valuable concept in identifying and comprehending tourists' destination selection process. Hence, there is a clear correlation between destination image and visitation intention. The initial phase of forming an image before the actual visitation of the destination is considered to be the most important stage in the selection process (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, pp. 868-869).

Once a tourist knows more or less where he wants to go, he starts accumulating more information from external sources and adjusts his expectations accordingly. Although this information may be correct, false or misleading, its only purpose is to feed expectations. From the moment he starts consulting external sources, the tourist's personality still plays a major part during the pre-tourist stage. Some pre-tourists listen to advice from friends, others go for the glossy travel magazines, while others study all possibilities on the Internet – the choice of sources for information depends on the personality of the pre-tourist.

Destination image is also heavily influenced by external factors such as media, popular culture, biases, history, assumptions, preconceptions, prejudices, and factual stories. Therefore, the image might also be negative or simply out-of-date (Anholt 2003).

Since tourism products are mainly intangible and the potential traveler has no or only limited knowledge about them, image is believed to represent the destination and subsequently has the power to influence destination choice (Tasci and Gartner, 2007, p. 419).

In a tourism context, the image potential customers have of a destination is a very important issue. Images play an essential role in destination choice matters and in this regard, “As tourism services are intangible, images become more important than reality” (Govers & Go, 2007).

Images play an essential role in destination choice matters, and the ultimate goal of any destination is to influence possible tourists’ travel-related decision making and choice through marketing activities. Although not all elements contributing to the development of an image can be controlled, tourism marketers want to strategically establish, reinforce and, if necessary, change the image of their destination (Chi & Qu, 2008, p. 634).

However image not only affects pre-visit behavior and destination choice, but also the behavior during and after a visit. Image has the power to influence the process of choosing a certain destination, the following evaluation of the trip there, as well as the tourists’ future intentions (Chi & Qu, 2008, p. 624).

During a stay, the variables of length of stay, enjoyment and satisfaction are said to be related to the initial image. Also the effect of image on post-visit behavior has been identified, however, this is an aspect largely neglected in research. The few studies dealing with it are mainly trying to explain the correlations between destination image and re-visitation intentions or destination loyalty (Tasci and Gartner, 2007, pp. 418-421).

As destination image can have a positive effect on satisfaction and plays an essential role in achieving tourists’ loyalty, it is essential to improve the overall image of a place held by an

individual, so he or she can make a ultimate positive assessment of the stay, transmit positive word of mouth to others and maybe even intend to revisit the destination (Chi & Qu, 2008, pp. 632-633).

It is important that parts like private and public companies, media, popular culture, educational materials create a common image of the destination. However, negative information about a destination sometimes comes forward. This can be due to terror attacks, increased crime rates, etc. In these cases, a destination can counter negative information by using marketing channels such as word-of-mouth by satisfied visitors. A close cooperation with travel journalists in an effort to utilize a strategic advertising tool, namely positive testimony of known people, helps the process of creating a positive image of the destination (Tasci and Gartner 2007).

Image of a tourism product and destination plays an important role in a tourist mind when deciding about the potential visit to any destination. Individual's image of the world is based on their experiences, learning, emotions and perceptions. This image is critically important also to an individual's preference, motivation and behavior towards tourism products and destinations. Nobody likes to visit places they for one reason or another don't like. Therefore the image of a destination area is one of the key factors when people are choosing where to travel and spend their holiday. Whether or not the image is a true representation of what any given region has to offer to tourist, what is important is the image that exists in the mind of the holiday makers. Once established, the attitudes and behavior towards a certain tourism products are not easily changed, unless new information or experiences are gained.

Although it is of great importance to identify the factors that attract tourists to a destination, it is of even greater importance to identify those that inhibit potential tourists from selecting a particular destination. Travelers often research a destination on their own before making a purchase decision.

The most important reason for avoiding a tourist destination is believe to be safety concerns. People like to travel to safe places, where there life is not at stake. Anxieties about terrorist attacks, scams, thefts, foreign languages, new currencies, food, sanitary standards, medical and police system in different countries are a few deterrents for tourists. Depleted infrastructure and

an ugly city hardly attract tourists. Conversely, they deter them. The same applies for unfriendly encounters with the local population.

Images of a destination in the mind of potential tourists are a very important issue. Images play an essential role in the choice of visiting and staying in a particular destination.

Tourists make their decisions about destinations, duration of visit, mode of transportation, choice of hotels, food, guides and local sightseeing based on the information gathered by them from different sources especially latest information available on internet and their own circumstances.

### **Findings and Analysis of Survey**

1. Time and money constraints
2. Poor Destination Image of Agra
  - a) Heritage destination not a leisure destination
  - b) Crowded and unsafe
  - c) Depleted infrastructure
  - d) Traffic congestion
  - e) Poorly managed destination
3. Infrastructure
  - a) Transportation connecting Agra: Train, Road and Air – No reliable easy entry and exit
  - b) Transportation in city: Traffic jams
  - c) No night life facilities except in five star hotels
4. Lack of good budget accommodation and not competitively priced
5. Bad behavior by tuk tuk drivers, rickshaw pullers, potential guides, souvenirs sellers, police and public.

Internet is a powerful tool and the potential tourists go through the internet resources while making the decision about the tourism destination of their choice. In the survey it is found that



almost all the international tourists and large number of Indian tourists are sufficiently educated and are increasingly using the internet resources for required information. Survey result show that tourist perceive Agra as a heritage destination not as a leisure destination.

Foreigners and Indian tourists wish to experience Taj Mahal of Agra but Agra city is notoriously infamous for its bad infrastructure, pollution, touts, traffic jams, inflated prices of goods, commission on everything, credit card frauds, food poisoning scams for medical insurance bills, food poisoning for looting, insensitivity of local people towards tourists and crime against tourists. All the above things come in media and especially on the travel portals like lonelyplanet.com and tripadvisor.com etc. That's why on all the forums generally people recommend to visit Agra only for a same day trip or maximum for two days from Delhi and other places.

It is written everywhere that Agra is well connected by rail, road and air. Fact is that air services to Agra is very erratic and get discontinued any time especially in summers.

National highways from Delhi, Jaipur, Bombay and Varanasi are good. Large number of tourists comes to Agra from Delhi by road. The main problem is that the roads and traffic in Agra itself are very bad and the moment tourists approach near the Agra they taste the bad traffic sense and traffic jams everywhere in the city from morning 10 am to 9 pm.

There is only one good train named Shatabdi Express that runs from Delhi to Bhopal via Agra. Shatabdi Express leaves Delhi every day early in the morning at 6.15 am and reaches Agra around 8.20 am. The same train goes back to Delhi in the evening at 8.20 pm and reaches Delhi at around 10.30 pm. Others are Taj Express and Intercity express. There are dozens of trains who pass through Agra but it is very difficult to get reservation in these trains. It is really wastage of time for tourists to stand in queue for reservation for such a short distance. These trains are also not very reliable because they could get late for any reason in their long journey.

Most of the tourists prefer short visit due to time and money constraints. They want to cover as much as possible in short duration. Agra hotel association and other people related to tourism industry always complain that Delhi hotels and tour operators lobby prevents tourists to stay in Agra by advising them to visit Agra for a day tour. But people of Agra do not provide any big

incentive to the inbound tourists to stay here for a longer duration. Delhi being the capital of India Agra in no way can compete with Delhi in infrastructure facilities. All International and domestic flights go from Delhi while Agra has only a military airport having little and restricted facilities where single flight operates in whole day between Agra and Delhi only in tourist season.

Budget hotels in Agra are as expensive as in Delhi. Generally the checkout time is 12 noon in hotels both in Agra and Delhi. If a tourist stays in Delhi then s/he can come to Agra easily by train, taxi or bus in the morning and go back to Delhi same day in late evening after visiting Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Sikandara. This way the tourists do not need to change the hotel, carry their entire personal luggage to another city.

Tourists who want to go to other destinations like Varanasi, Jaipur or Khajuraho etc. via Agra, or the tourists who also want to see Fatehpur Sikiri and other places of Agra only prefer to stay in hotels of Agra.

**Table 1**

<b>Consumption Pattern of Goods &amp; Services by Day Tourists in Agra</b>													
Transportation	Hotel	Porter / Coolie	Food Consumption Day Tourists				Local Transportation			Guide	Parking	Shopping	
			Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snacks & Drinks	Taxi	Tuk Tuk	Cycle Rickshaw			Souvenirs Trinkets	Real Shopping
Air	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N
Train	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y/N	N	Y	N
Govt. Bus	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N/Y	N	Y	N
Tourist Coach	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y/N	Y	Y	N
Taxi	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y/N	Y	Y	N
Car	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y/N	Y	Y	N

Source: Based on survey results  
 Note: Y=Yes and N=No

It is obvious from the Table 1 that the tourists who visit Agra only for a day do not spend much for local economy. If a tourist doesn't stay in any hotel and do not use the local transport then practically that tourist doesn't contribute much to the local economy contrary to that their vehicles contribute in polluting the environment and congesting the traffic. It is also reflected from the table what type of services a day tourists want and that is why there is oversupply of these service providers in the city. These service providers compete and collude with each other to take share in tourists' expenditure.

A decade ago Agra had a thriving tannery, cast iron foundry and electric generator manufacturing industry which has been closed by the government to protect the Taj Mahal from environmental pollution by the order of Supreme Court of India. Now Agra has no big manufacturing industry except several low paying shoe manufacturing units.

Agra is expanding very rapidly because of growing population which is increasing due to migration from small towns and villages. These migrated people do not have required education, skills and training to find jobs in organized sector. Therefore, they turned to unorganized service sector of souvenirs selling, guiding, touting and local transportation where entry and exit is very easy in absence of any enforceable regulation due to corrupt government machinery.

Anyone can take a tuk tuk or cycle rickshaw on rent and ply on roads in connivance with local police. These tuk tuk drivers and rickshaw pullers earn more money than working as labor in construction industry or shoe manufacturing units where skills, hard work and discipline are required. Driving a tuk tuk or rickshaw pulling provides the freedom of choice for working hours and the hope to earn easy money from tourists in the form of commission from hotels and emporiums besides exorbitant fare. This situation has increased the number of souvenirs sellers, guides, touts, tuk tuk drivers and rickshaw pullers many fold than the required numbers in tourist's foot fall areas.

Potential tourists to Agra read and hear all the bad things about Agra ranging from depleted infrastructure, pollution, traffic jams, touts, theft and scams to orchestrated food poisoning for money of health insurance but the beauty and love story of Taj Mahal pull them to Agra. Therefore, due to this bad image of Agra city with time & money constraints most of the tourists decide to visit Agra to see Taj and other monuments in a day only. When the day tourists decide to visit Agra by early morning trains they have to get up early in the morning to catch them on time. A few of them sleep at night with the anxiety of catching early morning train to reach Agra. These tourists board the trains and carry the bad image of Agra along with their luggage.

Two famous trains arrive in the morning from Delhi that brings large number of Indian and foreign day tourists. As the tourists arrive at station in the morning, herds of tuk tuk drivers, rickshaw pullers, touts cum guides pounce over the tourists to fix them for the day in absence of any effective system run by corrupt administration. When the tourists arrive at monuments they get stalked by souvenirs trinket sellers. The whole scenario gives a bad experience to the tourists at large and they try to leave the city as soon as possible.

When tourist experience the poor governance and bad infrastructure of Agra and encounter the aggressive touts, tuk tuk drivers, rickshaw pullers, untrained guides and souvenir sellers who do not care a bit about tourists space, then several of these tourists get very annoyed with whole touristy environment of Agra. Some of them again write bad things but true about Agra on tourism forums and social networking sites and this cycle goes on forever.

### **Recommendations**

Agra is a big, old and unplanned city having population in excess of 1.5 million. There is an urgent need to transform the city into the thriving non polluting environmental friendly service industry city. Governments lip talk to make the Agra city world class. Billions of dollars and strong will are needed to make the city world class for tourists. Looking into the government track record it doesn't seem that government will ever make it possible in near future. Government has no will and capability to make the city world class.

1. Government should at least make the city functional and tourist friendly especially in the tourist areas.

Agra needs better tourist trains connectivity. Tourists want to travel between Agra and Delhi in air conditioned chair car compartment of a fast train not in sleeper class for such a short journey. Frequent, fast, air conditioned comfortable and reliable trains between Agra and Delhi will certainly win the confidence of the tourists. Both Indian and foreigners are willing to pay one way train fare between Agra Delhi ranging US\$10 to US\$25 for safe and pleasant journey.

2. There is an urgent need that two world class fast air conditioned trains should shuttle between Agra and Delhi from early morning to late night.

Agra is connected by air only with Delhi having only one flight in tourist season in winters. Agra needs a civil airport not a military airport having lot of restrictions to tourists.

3. In short run air connectivity should be increased with other cities from existing airport and in long run a new civil airport is needed to cater the needs of fast growing air travelers.

To tackle the nuisance of tuk tuk driver, touts, guides, rickshaw pullers, souvenirs sellers and better governance of all other facilitators or service providers to tourism industry, a web and mobile technology based monitoring system should be developed.

4. Create web based dynamic data base of all the service providers of tourist industry.
  - a) Create online guide register, certification system and licensing for all guides.
  - b) Create online tuk tuk, taxi, rickshaw register for both vehicle and drivers
  - c) Create web and mobile based tracking system of all tourists for security purposes
5. There is a need for safe and secured night life facility for budget and mid range tourists in Agra.
  - a) Construct and create a property in the tourist area for night life with modern security.
6. Free all the tourist roads from encroachment for better traffic management in short run and for long run construct new roads by the use of modern technology and consolidation of government and private land.
7. Agra does not have modern budget hotels to accommodate large number of budget travelers at competitive price. Government should arrange land for private players to construct big modern budget hotels to attract day tourists to stay overnight and use Agra as a hub for other destinations.
8. Helicopter service should be started between the monuments to increase the tourist gaze of visitors and earn profit from rich tourists.
9. Take the help of technology to monitor the tourists' movement to prevent the terrorism threat.
10. Taj Mahal opens for tourists from sunrise to sunset. It is said that the Taj looks more beautiful in the morning. Several tourists prefer to visit Taj Mahal in morning hours to experience the beauty of Taj Mahal in peace. Government should increase the price of entrance ticket of Taj Mahal for Indian visitors from rupees twenty to rupees one hundred. Government should also restrict the entry timing of low priced tickets from 9:30 am till closing of the Taj Mahal. Morning hours should be used for restricted entry valid

only for tourists who pay higher entry fee equivalent to the foreign tourist's entry fee. This way crowd could be reduced in morning hours.

This action will differentiate the tourist gaze of Taj Mahal and the time slot will be perceived as premium time slot and will motivate the tourists to stay overnight.

## **Conclusion**

There is always scope for improvement especially for a touristy place like Agra. A few of the above suggestions if implemented will certainly help the local tourism industry and increase the number of day tourists as well as those tourists who are willing to stay overnight in Agra.

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