



A Chinese Solution to Kerala's Tourism Sector Woes

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A Chinese Solution to Kerala's Tourism Sector Woes

European cities or Asian tourist destinations, North America or Australia or even Africa, wherever one goes these days, one gets to see swarms of Chinese tourists milling around. It is their sheer number - a mammoth figure - rather than anything else that makes them so inescapably conspicuous. However, though one would get to see Chinese tourists in droves even in the neighbouring Sri Lanka and Maldives, the number of Chinese tourists visiting India is abysmally low.

Since the later part of 2014, China has replaced developed nations that boasted of populations with decent levels of disposable incomes as home to the largest number of outbound tourists. According to studies by the China Tourism Academy (CTA), a government sponsored organisation, 11.7 crore Chinese tourists visited various global destinations in 2015. In 2016, the figure rose to over 12.2 crore, who spent over US\$ 110 billion, an average of US\$ 900 in each trip. These figures rose to about 12.9 crore travellers, marking a 5.7 percent growth over 2016, and US\$ 115.3 billion in 2017. Increasing disposable incomes, fewer visa restrictions, better exchange rates and improved flight connections are among the reasons for the ongoing surge.

To put things in perspective, it is apposite to note that the number of outbound tourists from India in 2016 was 2.187 crore (in comparison to China's 12.2 crore), which is less than 18 percent of that of China in the same period. Interestingly, only about 10 percent of the Chinese hold passports now. Reports indicate that as the economic status of the average urban and semi-urban Chinese continues to grow and the size of the Chinese middle class keeps swelling up, there is an increasing interest among them to visit foreign

lands. Therefore, they are keen to apply for new passports.

This report will stick to the 2016 figures for the following analysis, as some of the 2017 figures related to India are confusing. If more than 12.2 crore Chinese visited foreign countries in 2016 as mentioned above, only about 2.5 lakh of them chose India as their destination. Among them, only a meagre 6,000 opted to visit Kerala. At the same time, the total number of foreign tourists who visited Kerala in the year (i.e., from all over the world) was about 10 lakh. That is, the total number of foreign tourists who visited Kerala in 2016 is equivalent to less than one percent of the total number of Chinese who undertook foreign tours in the same year. If Kerala had been able to attract just one out of every 100 Chinese who went on foreign tours during 2016, the state's intake of foreign tourists would have simply doubled. In other words, if Kerala succeeds in luring a 'mere one percent' of Chinese tourists visiting foreign countries, the difficulties the state faces in terms of poor footfall of foreign tourists can be resolved in the short and medium term. This, in turn, can give a much-needed impetus to the state's economy that is reeling under the impact of the recent devastating floods. Above all, China is a market the Kerala tourism industry has not been able to exploit so far.

India, Not yet on the Chinese Tourists' Radar

Are issues like the unresolved border dispute and unpleasant incidents that keep cropping up in the Indo-China bilateral relations that prompt the Chinese tourists to keep away from India? The answer is that it is not the key reason for this apathy. Because, even as China

continues to have serious disputes, including maritime boundary issues with countries like Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia, the Chinese traveller has not avoided these destinations from his/her itinerary. If these nations could attract hordes of Chinese tourists despite similar or even graver bilateral issues, India can also do so (the border dispute, intermittent incursions and face-offs between our armies, and the episodic media diatribe on either side notwithstanding).

Despite being a neighbouring country, there is a lack of general awareness among the Chinese about India as an attractive tourist destination. India is still considered a 'dirty' country by a cross section of the Chinese population. Unfortunately, this misconception continues despite an ongoing effort on the part of various Indian government entities to create awareness among the Chinese about India as a safe, attractive and affordable tourist destination. Further, the outsourcing of the visa application process, simplification of related paperwork and introduction of electronic visa authorisation system, among other steps, have made obtaining an Indian Tourist Visa a lot easier for the Chinese than in the case of the citizens of many other countries. However, the fact remains that the Chinese in general have not shown much enthusiasm in visiting India.

Who is a Chinese Traveller?

The obvious question now is what more needs to be done to attract the Chinese traveller in addition to the earlier-cited efforts by the Indian side. It is important to know more about the average Chinese traveller, his/her budget and engagements in a foreign land.

In 2016, most of the outbound Chinese tourists departed from metropolises like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In 2017, the top 20 cities that witnessed the departure of maximum number of Chinese

outbound tourists were Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Tianjin, Xi'an, Changsha, Chongqing, Xiamen, Kunming, Wuxi, Harbin, Shenyang, Hefei, Fuzhou and Zhengzhou. However, the scenario is changing rapidly. An interesting development noted is the reported emergence of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, overtaking Guangzhou and Shenzhen in terms of outbound tourists. The fastest developing/growing centres of outbound tourism were smaller Tier-II, Tier-III cities like Zhuhai, Nanning, Kunming and Hefei during the year. In terms of growth in outbound departures from hitherto smaller centres, the top 10 cities were Xi'an, Changsha, Wuxi, Taiyuan, Wuhan, Hefei, Chengdu, Nanjing, Harbin and Kunming, in that order. Incidentally, a good percentage of the important cities from the perspective of tourism promotion falls under the consular jurisdiction of India's Consulates General in Guangzhou and Shanghai, and therefore, any efforts to woo the Chinese tourists must be focused in these areas.

Focus on Group Tours

About half of today's Chinese travellers are in the age group of 35 to 45 years. Some reports, however, indicate that people younger than 35 years of age, and people above 45 years of age have also started showing increased interest in travelling abroad. Another important point to be noted here is that more than 55 percent of Chinese travellers are women. Equally important is the fact that more than 40 percent of the Chinese travellers strongly prefer to join group tours. That the Chinese prefer group tours is evident from the fact that they number well over a whopping 5 crore, and that the total number of India's outbound tourists might hit that level only by 2020!

The reason for a large chunk of the Chinese travellers preferring group tours is

simple - the security one feels in the company of one's own people while travelling in faraway alien lands. This is particularly so in the case of the average 'language-handicapped Chinese traveller' who speaks only Mandarin or any native dialect. While the average Indian traveller would try to manage things with a smattering of the English language anywhere in the world, the average Chinese leans heavily on interpreters. Then, the Chinese strongly believe that they would not be taken for a ride in foreign lands if they opted for time-trusted, successfully run group tour circuits. Indian tour operators must keep these factors in mind while trying to penetrate this market with its own unique characteristics.

What do the Chinese Look for Abroad?

According to a recent CTA report, "...outbound tourism has [now] become a demand [sic] for Chinese consumers. Despite reduced [economic] growth rate compared to the previous two years, Chinese tourists have been increasingly making outbound trips and are now more focused on their well-being and sense of happiness. [Notably,] the purpose of outbound tourism [is fast changing] from sightseeing to enjoying high-quality services. Focuses have been placed on destinations with greater environments such as better climate, better air quality, medical tourism and more. Outbound tourism has become a measure of happiness for Chinese urban dwellers and youngsters."

It is imperative to find out the factors that an average Chinese traveller considers while deciding on a foreign destination. First is the convenience of travelling to the destination, including easy, hassle-free procurement of visa. Next, the typical Chinese traveller is concerned with the problems s/he is likely to face in an alien land. This is followed by the kind of sights and activities s/he could engage in at the destination. The next

quest is whether s/he would get good food of his/her liking there. It might appear a bit strange but the traveller from the country that manufactures anything and everything one requires in daily life is a keen shopper abroad. Naturally, opportunities for shopping quality international brands are another important factor he, rather she, takes into account while finalising the travel destination abroad.

Chinese Love Asian Destinations

In 2017, a maximum number of Chinese outbound tourists chose Thailand (98 lakh), followed by Japan (over 70 lakh), Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the US, South Korea and the Maldives, in that order. The fact that Chinese package tourists are ahead of any other ethnic or linguistic groups that visit every possible European destination during the tourist season, is not forgotten here. Interestingly, Chinese are now the largest group of inbound tourists in countries such as Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Russia, Maldives, Indonesia, North Korea, the UK and South Africa.

Nine out of the top 10 countries the Chinese tourists liked to visit in 2017 were not in the Western world, but in Asia. Notably, Southeast Asia and South Asia witnessed the highest growth rate in the number of Chinese visitors in that year. In the case of Singapore, the year-on-year growth in the number of Chinese tourists visiting that country in 2017 was over 50 percent. Surprisingly, in the case of Vietnam, a country with which China cannot boast of having the best of relations, the year-on-year increase was a whopping 127 percent. The countries or cities where the Chinese travellers spend maximum amounts of money are also in Asia. The study also reveals that Asian cities continue to be the top favourites among a list of cities that the Chinese wish to visit in the future. A list of countries that do

not figure in the current popular destinations (for the Chinese), but are soon likely to be so, also has a number of South and Southeast Asian countries in it. A pleasant surprise here is that India figured at number three on this list in 2016.

Financial limitations or presence of close relatives and friends in Asian countries and cities could be among the reasons behind the Chinese tourists' preference of for these destinations. But, at the moment a tour operator in Kerala, or India for that matter, should be happy with the simple fact that Asian countries and cities continue to be the favourite destinations of the Chinese tourists.

Opportunities for Kerala

Chinese travellers are seen increasingly paying attention to air quality and natural environment when selecting foreign tourist destinations these days and, therefore, islands with 'fresh air and bright sunshine' are becoming increasingly popular among them. Over 30 percent of the Chinese outbound tourists chose islands as their travel destination in 2017. It comes as no surprise that nine out of the top 10 island destinations the Chinese tourists chose in the year too were in Asia.

Even though India is currently not a popular destination among the Chinese, the number of Chinese who visited the country in 2016 saw a whopping 81 percent increase over the 2015 figure. Since the actual numbers were small, this increase has gone largely unnoticed. Though there was a minor dip in the numbers in 2017 for some reasons, India was number three on a 2016 list (published in 2017) of nations that are likely to be popular among the Chinese in the near future. In other words, even as irritants, some even of serious nature, continue to hamper the development of Indo-China relations, particularly on the land border, it is time that we made concerted

efforts in attracting Chinese tourists to India, in general, and Kerala, in particular.

True, Kerala cannot boast of dazzling metropolises like Tokyo, Singapore or Seoul, or even big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai or Bengaluru. There are no amazing monuments in the state, the likes of which are flaunted in Europe. It has no sprawling, well-endowed museums like the ones in Paris, New York or the Vatican City that the Chinese love to visit. There is no giant wheel like the London Eye, Disney Land as in Hong Kong, or the Universal Studios of Singapore, which are the favourite haunts of the Chinese, particularly those travelling with children. Yet, countries like Vietnam, the Maldives, Thailand or Indonesia, which cannot boast of such tourist traps, succeed in attracting Chinese tourists in throngs. Hence, the absence of such destinations should not deter Kerala from pursuing the Chinese to visit the land.

It is important to understand that Kerala's unique heritage is no less attractive than big cities, sprawling monuments or large museums. The state is a treasure trove of picturesque locales that are capable of attracting the Chinese. Those places in Kochi, Kollam and Kozhikode where the Chinese landed in the past, the artefacts unearthed at Pattanam in North Paravoor, the historical sites of the Muziris period, the spot where Saint Thomas is believed to have landed at Kodungallur, the site of Vasco da Gama's landing in Kozhikode, large temples that are architectural marvels spread across the state, the Cheraman Mosque, which is the first mosque in India, Jewish synagogues scattered across central Kerala, and Kalady, the birthplace of Shankaracharya for whom intellectuals among the Chinese Buddhists harbour mixed feelings, are just a handful of destinations that can lure Chinese tourists. These can be presented in the same way the Chinese have smartly packaged

even small objects and sites connected to Faxian, Xuanzang and Bodhidharma and a host of other religious and historical places in the country for attracting foreign tourists. That the relics of Kerala's age-old links with the Chinese and other civilisations can spice up the tour packages serves as an important argument, the main thrust should be on what the Chinese actually want in a terrain like that of Kerala.

Rural Tourism, Ecotourism

Rural Kerala presents great scope for attracting foreign tourists to the state. States like Rajasthan and Gujarat have made headways in the area. Kerala needs to use its beautiful geographical features in the rural areas imaginatively as the future of its tourism industry lies in the countryside. People in rural areas could be roped into the system in many ways to translate the idea of rural tourism into a successful reality. The Ministry of Tourism at the Centre and UNDP, among other agencies, have schemes aimed at developing rural tourism, and Kerala should be able to tap into their resources to develop the sector to desired levels.

Ecotourism is emerging as one of the fastest growing segments in the tourism industry. Since, ecotourism means, "...creating as small an environmental impact as possible and serving to maintain the original nature and encouraging the conservation of wildlife and habitats when visiting a place," it would well fit into the idea of rural tourism.

Mountains, Sea, Beaches, Backwaters

Nature has endowed Kerala with diverse features like beaches, backwaters, mountains and valleys. If the beaches in Phuket in Thailand, Bali in Indonesia, Nha Trang in Vietnam, Sabah in Malaysia, and Boracay in the Philippines and those in Sri Lanka and the Maldives could enthral the Chinese, the beaches in Kerala

like those at Kovalam, Varkala, Marari, Cherai, Bekal and Kannur, which are second to none in their beauty, have the potential to entice them. However, it is necessary to upgrade infrastructural facilities available at these locations to satisfactory levels. Building additional facilities can be accomplished without much hassle by opting for eco-friendly local resources as discussed elsewhere in this note. Staying overnight in an eco-friendly stilt house or a treehouse amidst Nature or on a houseboat in the beautiful backwaters would last in anyone's memory for long.

Studies indicate that several young Chinese tourists are increasingly opting for short-period hiking (lasting for a few hours to a couple of days) in mountains while travelling abroad. Hill stations like Idukki, Munnar, Thekkady, Nelliampathy, Ponmudi, Lakkidi, Vythiri, Peerumedu, Mattupetty, Athirappally, Ayyampuzha, among a host of others, can cater to the young mountain lovers. Adventure water sports like white water rafting and water skiing are also popular among the young Chinese as a part of their itinerary abroad. If Kerala is able to develop the required infrastructure to meet the demands of young tourists, that would be an added attraction for them to choose Kerala as a destination. Such facilities could attract young tourists from other countries as well.

Kerala should package such destinations attractively and present them to Chinese tourists, after constructing basic infrastructure wherever it is lacking. The state need not build any permanent structures, at least initially, but it can probably use the old coconut, areca, palm and rubber tree trunks, bamboos, coconut/palm fronds, coir mats and mattings, etc. to make eco-friendly structures that the Chinese would be drawn to. The implementing agencies need to ensure that they are kept clean and maintained regularly. A collateral benefit to this approach of tapping into the

above-mentioned rural resources would be lending a helping hand to the farmers. Adding enough e-toilets at these sites should be a natural corollary to these efforts.

Adventure Tourism

As discussed above, efforts may be made to put in place necessary infrastructure for catering to the requirements of those who enjoy mountaineering, trekking, rock climbing, mountain biking, safaris, skiing, skating, river rafting, canoeing and kayaking. Amenities for diving, snorkelling etc. may be provided for those who love the seas, after identifying spots conducive for the purpose by experts in the field. Enthusiasts in seawater sports from Kerala, a state that boasts of a 550 km-long coastline, often go to states like Goa or even countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives for engaging in such activities.

MICE Tourism

There is great potential for further developing MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) tourism in the state as large and medium business houses are increasingly going overseas these days for holding such events involving their executives, dealers and important clients. The resorts and heritage hotels in Kerala can definitely entice this section of people. What might be required to be added at resorts and heritage hotels in this regard are decent conference rooms/halls, good business centres with modern equipment and fast Wi-Fi connections. While efforts may be made to attract such clientele from China, efforts could also be made in this direction in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore, and in other Indian states to ensure a steady stream of customers.

Mini Golf Courses

It goes without saying that there would be

difficulties in acquiring land, say 150-200 acres, for developing a world-class golf course in the state. So, the concept of 'golf tourism' or 'weekend golf tourism' may not work in Kerala. However, the importance of golf courses cannot be ignored if the state wants to be at the top of sought-after tourist destinations, particularly one that hosts corporate executives or even regular MICE-related events. The government may look into the possibility of allowing interested private parties to develop smaller versions of golf courses, preferably close to resorts and hotels holding MICE events, as has been done in some parts of the country. Of course, it may be possible only if water, preferably recycled water, for maintaining the grass turf is available. If done with care, development of small golf courses could be done without any damage to the environment.

Houseboats

Some Kerala-based tour operators and government agencies have tried to project Chinese fishing nets as an attraction with Chinese lineage. The average Chinese may not be able to relate to it, as most of them are not likely to have seen them on mainland China. However, houseboats have the potential to entice the Chinese traveller to Kerala, and if an overnight stay on a houseboat with some entertainment programmes onboard is added to group tours, it has the potential to be a big hit. There could be the provision of a few modern fishing rods, live Yoga demonstration and Ayurveda massage (using odourless oils or oils with a delicate sweet fragrance that the Chinese love, but definitely not the ones with the traditional Ayurvedic odour) on the houseboats. Chinese love karaoke, hence the provision for Chinese karaoke songs would be appreciated by them. A junior Kathakali artist could demonstrate a few *mudras* and steps, and compare it with the Chinese opera. A couple of local Kalarippayattu practitioners could perform for them on the

houseboat, if space permits, or somewhere else during the day trip/cruise. Comparisons could be drawn between Kathakali and Chinese opera, or Kalarippayattu and Shaolin Kungfu, but theories like the Bodhidharma introduced the martial artform at the Shaolin Temple are best avoided for obvious reasons. Such value additions could be introduced to the itineraries of the Chinese tour groups without any major additional expenditure.

The houseboat operators may be encouraged to take a long-term view, and offer some good discounts to Chinese group tours, at least till Kerala gets ingrained in the Chinese psyche as a popular tourist destination. High prices levied currently by some of the houseboat operators might increase the package cost enormously, making the whole package unattractive. It has to be kept in mind that the Chinese middle class are as prudent as Indians are, when it comes to spending disposable incomes.

Amusement Parks

According to a study, the Chinese youth, particularly young parents who travel with small children prefer destinations with a Disney Land like Hong Kong, the Universal Studios like Singapore, the giant Ferris wheels like the London Eye, or huge amusement or theme parks. Even as Kerala does not have such big-ticket attractions, amusement parks like Wonderla are quite impressive and affordable in comparison to several others in many other countries. If some package tours, or customised tours, can include Kerala's amusement parks or theme parks, at least as an 'option on a free day', this can attract Chinese families that travel with children.

Shopping at Malls

The well-heeled Chinese, the youth, the middle class and particularly the women are big

shoppers abroad. In fact, shopping opportunities figure among the first five things that the Chinese look for while deciding on a foreign destination. The reason is simple; though there is nothing that can be bought with money not available in China's mega markets and malls, many Chinese, particularly the big-spending *nouveaux riche*, believe that most of the luxury goods like branded, expensive women's purses, shoes, wristwatches, perfumes etc. available in their country are copies.

According to a study by Euromonitor International, an organisation engaged in market research and analysis for decades, "Chinese consumers [currently] account for about 30 percent of the US\$ 1 trillion in luxury-goods spending worldwide." Company showrooms and big retailers in large metropolises have been targeting China's wealthy tourists who seek out "...pricey handbags, jewellery and other luxury items while on vacation in Paris to Dubai." A recent *Bloomberg* report agrees, and adds that the week to 10-day long "...Chinese New Year holiday [season] is traditionally a major occasion for shoppers from China to splurge" and "...about two-thirds of those sales takes place outside the country as Chinese tourists open their wallets while travelling abroad." They "...take advantage of better selection and cheaper prices than available at home," the report concludes.

The anticipated cutting down on spending on luxury goods by the Chinese during early 2019 because of the adverse effects the trade war with the US have on the Chinese economy, a weakening yuan, and a possible government control on big-time overseas consumer spending may be viewed as a temporary phenomenon only.

As in many other countries, India may further liberalise the duty/tax-refund/drawback schemes available to foreign tourists that would make prices of imported goods in

India competitive for foreign tourists. This would be an added attraction for the deep-pocketed Chinese on the one hand and give a boost to the retail sector on the other. Then, the provisions in this regard may be clarified in simple language and highlighted prominently in the tourism literature and websites. Duty drawback or not, it is important that shopping opportunities for top international brands in big malls in India also find a place in the tour packages and the related information highlighted in our websites and brochures.

Possibilities of Medical Tourism

Even though China has made great strides in the healthcare sector, Chinese are increasingly visiting hospitals in Japan, South Korea, the US, Taiwan, Germany, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, in that order, for diagnostics and medical treatment purposes. Reasons for the Chinese choosing a foreign destination for medical treatment are many. First, like in the case of Indians, some Chinese who can afford it prefer to avail of the latest medical facilities available abroad. Second, medical insurance coverage in China is still inadequate in the case of expensive treatments. The cost of certain types of treatment is exorbitant, if one had to pay for it from own pocket. Then, the government hospitals, even as many of them are quite well equipped, are unimaginably overcrowded. In many hospitals, one must wait for long to get a surgery appointment. Some medicines, for example, the drugs for certain types of cancer, are not available locally and those imported from the West are several times more expensive than, say, in India. In fact, even the Chinese media has pointed out that a particular cancer drug imported from Switzerland is over a hundred times more expensive in China than what is manufactured in India with identical results. This author has heard of stories of another cancer medicine being 'smuggled' in by patients' relatives or

friends from India, as it is several times cheaper here than those imported from, say, the UK.

Even though India is currently not one of the top favourite destinations for medical tourism for the Chinese people, it did figure at number 10 on a 2016 list of countries frequented for medical treatment by them. On closer examination, it can be found that India is emerging as a destination for people from China's Tier-III and Tier-IV cities, mostly for treatment of cancer and liver ailments. Those Chinese who do come to India for medical treatment are not aware of the advances Kerala, at the southern tip of the peninsula, has achieved in the field. They prefer medical centres in well-known big Indian cities instead. With highly qualified and skilled medical practitioners, well-equipped hospitals, and the comparatively lower fees charged here, Kerala has the potential to be among the top medical tourism destinations for the Chinese. The occasional mishaps that happen in Indian hospitals, be it in Kolkata or Gorakhpur, no doubt, have brought disrepute to Indian hospitals in China. What is required is removing misconceptions, if any, and creating good awareness and trust in India's capabilities and competitiveness in this area in China.

Details like the increasing number of foreigners visiting Kerala on medical tourism and their nationalities, profiles of the state's highly qualified and skilled doctors, their dedication and working experience in prestigious hospitals abroad, details of treatments and diagnostics available, the affordable rates, the reasons why/how India can provide cheaper medical treatment etc. need to be highlighted. Some pictures of satisfied patients, particularly those from the West, if possible, as also from the East and Southeast Asian countries, on the websites and tourism brochures would go a long way in convincing the Chinese. The fact that there is hardly any

waiting period/waiting list for major surgeries in Kerala, in comparison to the West, or even in most of the government-supported Hong Kong hospitals should invariably be highlighted. A few charts comparing the relatively low rates for various specialised treatments and diagnosis, normal waiting periods etc. in India with China as well as other countries where the Chinese frequent for medical treatments can help tremendously in this regard. The websites with the Chinese version of these details need to be linked to the websites of Indian Embassy and Consulates in China, as to the websites of India Visa Application Centres, India Tourism Office in Beijing, Confederation of Indian Industry in Shanghai and various Indian associations in the country. These details are also to be prominently projected in the Chinese version of India's tourism literature circulated in China. An important point to be mentioned here is that the hospitals may be encouraged to bill the patients directly and not allow tour operators and their agents to levy any package rates, which could be counterproductive. Tour operators and their agents can charge for their service in a transparent way.

What the sector needs to remember is the potential that medical tourism offers in the long run. The Indian Tourism and Hospitality Industry Analysis 2018 by India Brand Equity Foundation points to the possibility of medical tourism in the country growing to US\$ 9 billion worth by as early as 2020, and that it has the potential to surge to around US\$ 20 billion over the next few years.

Ayurveda

Ayurveda, if packaged appropriately, is another aspect that has the potential to attract Chinese tourists to Kerala. In this case, the primary focus should be on beauty treatments, *sukhachikitsa* massages, *panchakarma* treatments etc. With the increase in disposable incomes among

the middle class and amassing of wealth by young and middle-aged entrepreneurs, there is a craze in China for beauty products, particularly those with organic ingredients. Chinese travellers returning home from India buying Ayurvedic beauty products from the outlets of leading Ayurvedic pharmaceutical manufacturers prior to the departure of China-bound flights is a common sight these days at major airports. So, if the benefits of Ayurvedic treatments, particularly the fact that the medicines and oils used are almost entirely of organic origin, are highlighted appropriately, that could help kindle the imagination of prospective Chinese tourists. That China has its own thriving Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) industry, which is a part of the curriculum of local medical students, makes things easy for creating awareness in the country.

While treatments like *panchakarma* could be separate packages by themselves, body massages, foot massages etc. could form part of sightseeing trips/group tours. Some value addition within limits, if the constitution and effectiveness of the formulations don't change, may be tried to make the Ayurvedic *thailams* and *kuzhambus* odourless or even sweet smelling. If and when the Chinese tourists come for full-time treatments, their stay in Ayurvedic centres could be made even more interesting by adding live Kalarippayattu or Kathakali or Yoga demonstrations, or even some Bollywood-style dance performance, which the average Chinese love, by local students/artists in the evenings. Normally, the treatment in Ayurvedic centres lasts for a couple of hours only in a day, and such enjoyable distractions could help ease the monotony of the remaining day. Care needs to be taken with respect to the food served at the treatment centres as discussed elsewhere in this paper.

Yoga at Resorts, Opening Yoga Training Institutes

Yoga has become very popular in China in recent times. The way Yogacharya BKS Iyengar was received, when he arrived in Guangzhou in southern China in 2011 to participate in the First India-China Yoga Summit, by yoga enthusiasts from all over the country would have made the most popular pop star or even a film star envious. Even a set of eight postage stamps was issued in his honour at the time. Yoga/Ayurveda centres or tourist resorts should be able to take advantage of this enthusiasm and organise short-term courses in yoga for tourists without any additional or detailed infrastructural development. However, selection of a good teacher is important as a bad yoga teacher can do unimaginable damage all around. There are trained yoga teachers, otherwise homemakers, who work part-time at Ayurvedic centres even in small villages in the state. So, taking the help of such part-time teachers (so that cost of packages does not escalate) in conducting short-term courses at resorts/hotels where the Chinese tourists stay can also be explored.

The Kerala Government or some reputed educational institutions in the private sector may consider opening a couple of well-equipped centres for teaching yoga and meditation, from basic to advanced levels, like the ones available in Pune or elsewhere in India. Presently, yoga enthusiasts from China, including yoga teachers, learn yoga at bigger institutions located in Pune and other places in the country. The proposed centres could be modest at the beginning. Apart from tourists and serious foreign students, these institutions can train local teachers who, in turn, would be able to teach it in other smaller centres. If the government has any administrative or political difficulties in opening such an institute, it could encourage reputed institutions to open one or

two such centres in the private sector.

Destination Wedding Tourism

While destination wedding tourism at Indian destinations is catching on among tourists from the West, Chinese weddings are simple, formal affairs, with all the traditional rituals vanishing after the Cultural Revolution. (That the traditional rituals are slowly making a re-entry in China's social life is another matter.) But Chinese couples are crazy about taking pictures and videos in various traditional Chinese outfits for their wedding album. If some of the traditional wedding outfits in free size from various parts of India could be made available on rental, Chinese tourists, both young and old, would love to take some pictures in them.

Are we Ready to Welcome the Chinese?

Having said all these, let's presume that the Chinese are going to swarm India as they do in some countries in Asia and Europe, say, in the coming few months. In that case, Kerala should be ready in all aspects for hosting them. But the state cannot boast of having enough hotel rooms in the three-star and four-star categories to accommodate waves of Chinese tourists. The common grievance when one tried to convince Chinese travel agents about sending group tours to India has been that hotels, particularly at three-star and four-star levels, are expensive, making package tours unattractive to tour operators. The government may encourage building more hotels in these categories and persuade the existing ones to expand as far and as early as possible. In the interim, the shortage of decent rooms in the urban centres in Kerala could be resolved to an extent by enlisting services of small but good hotels in suburban towns (not very far away from the main cities), as being done by major tour operators during package

tours to European destinations. Resorts may also be brought to the package tour loop, as has been successfully done in countries like the Maldives. Additionally, the government may encourage the hotels to give special discounts to Chinese packages for the next few years so that tourists from that country start visiting India in large numbers, and Kerala and India get ingrained as an attractive destination in Chinese minds.

Keeping smaller groups and backpackers in mind, house-owners in the state may be further sensitised on the benefits of providing their houses lying idle (with the owners living away or even overseas) for rent under platforms like Airbnb. Here, the local administration and Kudumbashree units may be roped into the system in some form or the other, under the supervision of Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC), so that the house-owners would be confident that their places are not misused by caretakers or cleaning staff, leading to legal issues as has happened in some cases, even as isolated they are. Smaller hotels may be encouraged to get themselves registered with platforms like OYO and a host of other similar entities that are becoming increasingly popular among budget travellers.

Furthermore, the staff, particularly the migrant workers, in the hospitality industry at three-star and four-star levels, or at ordinary restaurants for that matter, should be well trained to serve guests politely matching with the level of courtesy the Chinese are used to back home. The tour guides should be trained in at least a smattering of spoken Chinese. If training the tour guides in the Chinese language is not an immediate viable option, the rules should be amended to allow some Chinese tour guides to stay in India as they do in some other countries.

There are some greater concerns that arise at this stage with respect to welcoming

tourists from China, or any other country, that need to be addressed - the stinking garbage decaying on roadsides almost everywhere in the state, the potholes that keep appearing on the roads, including national highways, soon after repairs, and lack of clean toilets at tourist attractions. Above all, the present government has to take the initiative to discuss with all political parties and other stakeholders and arrive at a consensus to exclude the tourism sector, including the vehicles carrying tourists, places they visit, restaurants where they eat etc. from the 'purview' of *hartals*.

Importance of Food

It might sound a bit trivial to ask, but are the tour operators in the state equipped to provide the Chinese visitors with decent Chinese meals two times a day (i.e., lunch and dinner) at/near all venues? (The paper will talk about the breakfast separately.) Indians are proud of the variety of their amazing cuisine, and genuinely so. No doubt, most of the people from the West enjoy it. But the fact remains that the Chinese, particularly those who are having Indian food for the first time, do not relish it. The availability of *good food* is the number three factor that an average Chinese considers while choosing a foreign destination. Though the Chinese are adventurous as far as the ingredients that go into a dish, there is no denying the fact that for the Chinese, good food simply means *good Chinese food*. Remember the recent controversy surrounding cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu's statement that he is more comfortable travelling in Lahore than in South India from a food/eating preference perspective. That holds good for a good number of Indians when they visit foreign lands. In fact, this author has seen some Indians refusing to eat at all when the tour operator offered some local (vegetarian) flavours to them for a change while on package tour in Europe. So, like Indians, if the Chinese

are comfortable with the food they are used to, they should be provided with that. It is well known that tour operators hire Indian and Chinese chefs to cook specially for their respective groups when they travel in some European countries where there are no Indian or Chinese restaurants at the hotels where the tour groups stay, or have their lunch or dinner.

A Chinese traveller would generally get up early in the morning. By 7 a.m. or latest by 7.30 a.m., s/he would come to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. Typically, s/he likes to eat his/her lunch by 11 a.m. or 11.30 a.m., and dinner around 6.30 p.m. or 7 p.m. Therefore, hotels/restaurants should stick to these timings or timings agreed upon before the start of the tour. Remember that an average Chinese tourist would most likely get upset if food is not served as per his/her timings.

Thrusting Indian food on Chinese groups would be unwise, and can be even counterproductive. The average Chinese tourist cannot be expected to enjoy Malayalee/Indian food, spicy or otherwise. Additionally, what Indians enjoy thoroughly as Chinese food here in India is largely and, in many cases, different from what is served in China. Further, if they are served good Chinese dishes even with little Indian masalas, the Chinese will not welcome that either. 'Chinese dishes' like Gobi Manchurian that are hugely popular in India cannot be found in any restaurant on mainland China, except perhaps in the Indian restaurants there. Though the Indian version of fried rice is largely similar to that in China, what the Chinese generally prefer is a small bowl of plain rice in the middle, or even towards the end of the meal. Yes, they do love Kerala *parathas* made with *maida*, *appam* and stew (non-spicy), as *paalpayasam* (milk and rice *kheer*), albeit with only a hint of sweetness.

While the Chinese love leafy vegetables, fresh green legumes, soya, chicken, fish and

pork, mutton is not popular in most parts of China. They, without any gender difference, enjoy a beer during lunch, and beer or wine, particularly red wine, with dinner. They prefer brandy to whisky. Rum is not popular in China. Chopsticks are essential for them, and only a few might be happy to manage with fork and knife as substitutes. Eating with fingers, and serving food, even snacks, with fingers is an anathema all across China.

As the preparation of Chinese food is different from that of Indian food, they also expect the food to be served in the typical Chinese way. Dishes are served one by one in serving plates, one per table, from where they would help themselves. In many places in China, soup is served at the end of the meal unlike in the West where it is served at the beginning. However, soup and rice can be served earlier after finding out the visitors' preference in advance. The meals, both lunch as well as dinner, end sometimes with traditional sweetmeats, but definitely with a cut-fruit platter. One or two types of melons and a few black/purple grapes, if in season, will make a normal Chinese cut-fruit platter. Many of them like ice-creams as well. The restaurants should remember that their table manners are also different from the Indian or even the Western way, and the same should be respected. Hence, it is imperative to train the already trained chefs, cooks and bearers for a couple of days to prepare at least near authentic, if not completely authentic, Chinese dishes, and serve it to them the way they like it. The restaurants also need to stock up on good Chinese spices and herbs so that the food tastes authentic. Actually, they are simple and quite affordable.

Breakfast could be a mix of the usual Continental with a couple of Chinese items like an easy to make congee, which is similar to Kerala's rice *kanji*, with some (easy to

make) Chinese pickles and dumplings (similar to *momos*) with both sweet lentil pastes and vegetable/meat fillings added to it.

Besides water, the rooms should be stocked up with sachets of normal Chinese tea, along with coffee and sugar. Chinese tea is normally taken without sugar and/or milk/dairy whiteners. Only recently, the youngsters have started taking Indian/Ceylon/English tea and coffee with milk and sugar, particularly while eating out. They mostly drink copious amounts of Chinese tea, of course, without sugar and milk, through lunch and dinner, and some, even all through the day. So, it has to be made sure that there is an electric kettle in each room (quite common even in small hotels these days), and enough Chinese tea at dinner/lunch tables.

Clean Toilets

Chinese are particular about clean toilets especially while travelling abroad. The Chinese tourists might have a preconceived notion about cleanliness in India in general and public toilets in particular. This author has overheard some Chinese friends criticising among themselves about alleged 'inadequate cleanliness' in even some of our star hotels. That some of the public toilets at the tourist centres back home may be found wanting on the cleanliness front is no excuse on this aspect. (The fact that the Chinese authorities are making constant efforts to keep their public toilets clean is also not forgotten here.) If the public toilets at tourist spots in Kerala are not clean and without toilet papers, hand wash dispensers etc., or if they find the people urinating in the open, this would be a major topic of discussion in the tour groups. The matter may even find place in the Chinese social media and could do great damage to Kerala's reputation in general and tourism sector in particular. Therefore, the state government, local administration

authorities and hospitality industry should take this aspect seriously. If Kerala wants to host Chinese tourists, it should take responsibility of providing what they want in terms of decent basic facilities. Remember, the Chinese tourist may not be as forgiving as his/her Western counterparts on such matters. Hence, before embarking on a mission to attract Chinese travellers, Kerala needs to put such basics in place. There is no scope for compromise on this.

What the Government could do

Kerala's renewed efforts to attract the Chinese tourist may begin with a ministerial level visit to Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, or even Chengdu and Shenzhen, the centres from where the state may be able to attract maximum number of Chinese tourists. The minister should be able to get a meeting with his/her counterpart at the municipality level in Beijing and Shanghai, and at the provincial level (and *not* city level) in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong, and Chengdu, capital of Sichuan. (Beijing and Shanghai are municipalities, but their 'status' is more or less equivalent to Chinese provinces, and states in the Indian context.) The minister should meet only with his/her counterparts for reasons discussed elsewhere. Not all these ministerial-level municipality leaders in Beijing and Shanghai, and ministerial-level provincial (and *not* city level) leaders in Guangzhou and Chengdu may be available during the minister's first visit itself, and s/he may have to make more than one trip to achieve this. India has its Embassy in Beijing and Consulates in Shanghai and Guangzhou that can help in getting these meetings arranged. The Consulate in Chengdu is in the works, and the Consulate General in Guangzhou would be able to help in getting a meeting there.

At the same time, the minister may

avoid his/her visit(s) to *any of the above-mentioned or other cities* when large tourism festivals are held there, as the visits are not likely to yield desired results. The Chinese counterpart would then be busy meeting ministers from 'more important countries' from a Chinese perspective. There would be ministers and high officials from the Central Government during such tourism festivals and the local ministerial-level officials would also be busy looking after these high-level Central delegates. So, if the Kerala minister visits any of these cities when big tourism festivals are being held there, his/her meetings with the Chinese counterpart are most likely to end up as mere official formalities. This means that the minister should choose a relatively free time of his/her Chinese counterpart so that the latter devotes time and pays adequate attention to the former's visit.

The reason behind the argument that the Kerala minister should meet with only provincial ministerial-level officials in charge of tourism in these Chinese centres is simple. Kerala would need his/her 'blessings', some sort of personal intervention, or at least a nudge, to succeed in its endeavour to attract Chinese tourists. In China, things work better based on *guanxi*, literally, a sort of 'dynamic in personalised social networks/personal relationships/contacts' rather than by rules and regulations. In the past, the Chinese government used to list out the countries where their tourists could visit. The days of such guidelines based on political likes and dislikes are long gone, and a Chinese tourist can now choose a destination based purely on his/her personal likes. But the fact remains that a 'direction' or 'guidance' or perhaps a 'gentle nudge' from the powers that be is often required in many issues which are otherwise apparently apolitical. To clarify this position, it is apt to add here that the stakeholders in various sectors in China, including the

tourism sector, take such unspoken words of their senior leaders as 'guiding principles' while formulating their trade and commercial strategies. Such a 'direction', 'guidance' or a 'gentle nudge' from the provincial-level leader would be possible only if the minister is able to convince the former at *a personal level*. It would be relatively easy for a minister from Kerala to do so because of the socio-political environment existing in the state.

All the ministers and political leaders should make it a point to bring up this issue, even in informal interactions, during their visits to China or when the Chinese leaders, including senior diplomats, visit Kerala. The focus of the leaders could be: (a) visits of Chinese tourists to India and vice versa would help deepen the understanding and people-to-people relations and (b) such group visits leading to their spending some money in India would, at least to an extent, address the perennial Indian complaint of trade deficit with China. The Chinese side can also be assured of the safety and security of the Chinese visitors in the state.

While urging the provincial-level Chinese leaders to help create a favourable atmosphere for sending group tours to India, they may also be invited to visit India at mutually convenient dates, if possible, with a delegation from China's tourism industry at the provincial, if not national level. The brief the Kerala minister carries to such meetings may be handed over to the Chinese leader with a proper typewritten Chinese translation for which help should be available in Kerala itself. The minister can always offer to help the Chinese tour operators to organise tourism promotion and roadshows in Kerala in return. The fact that China is fast becoming a favourite destination for Indians and the projection that the number of India's outbound tourists is expected to cross the 50-million mark by the year 2020 would be

music to the Chinese tourism industry, and the same may be reiterated at all the meetings.

The ministerial meeting may be followed by a seminar, where senior Chinese government officials, particularly the provincial level (municipal level, in the case of Beijing and Shanghai) Director General handling tourism, senior managers of the regional outbound tourism industry (both in the government and private sectors), local journalists, and senior officials of India's local diplomatic mission and other stakeholders as deemed necessary by the latter may be invited to. Care must be taken to invite even the smallest of the Chinese tour operators *if* they are currently sending even very small groups to India. After brief customary remarks by the minister and local Chinese and Indian Embassy/Consulate officials, the government official who accompanies the minister may do PowerPoint and video presentations on Kerala with subtitles and voiceover in the Chinese language (which could be got done in India itself as such services are prohibitively expensive in China). More importantly, the next step should be one-on-one meetings between the members of the business delegation that accompanies the minister and the Chinese tour operators at the same venue. (Adequate small tables and chairs should be made available for the business delegation's one-on-one meetings.) The government official(s) in the Kerala delegation may take a backseat here, except intervening to clarify any doubts the Chinese side may have.

The minister in his/her statement at the meeting may extend an open invitation to the Chinese tour operators to visit Kerala for a sightseeing-cum-business development trip to see the potential for themselves. In fact, this group could be selected with the help of the respective Indian diplomatic missions in the city to ensure that only genuine tour operators

find place in the invited delegation. It can be an all-paid-for trip (except the plane fare) of which the expenses could be borne by the state government/KTDC. The plane fare may be borne by the respective Chinese delegates because it would ensure that only serious members opt to join the group.

Participation in Tourism Festivals in China

The government may encourage tour operators in Kerala interested in hosting Chinese tourists, particularly tour groups, to participate in major tourism festivals organised in China, especially in its target areas (the details of which are discussed elsewhere in this note). Participating in tourism fairs, besides giving an opportunity to the tour operators to visit the stalls of all major Chinese operators, would also give a chance to meet with tour operators from other countries present at the fair. An officer from the tourism department/ministry may accompany them for coordination and continuity in their efforts at major festivals, and give clarifications during negotiations. It is heartening to note that the India Tourism Office in Beijing hires and tastefully decorates India Pavilions at major tourism fairs in China with enough space for tour operators to hold one-on-one negotiations. This takes away a major financial burden from the tour operators, as hiring space at tourism fairs and festivals is otherwise quite expensive.

On Closing Deals and Drafting Agreements

One of the most important things to be kept in mind is that when the tour operators visit China for canvassing business, including while accompanying the minister, they should be ready with *all details* of the packages they wish to offer. That is, they should have everything ready in writing with a Chinese

translation. While preparing the proposals, even the smallest detail, which one takes for granted as ordinarily expected while dealing with other countries, should be clearly spelt out. For example, timings of breakfast, lunch and dinner, all inclusions and exclusions, complimentary services in hotel rooms, number of water bottles kept in vans/buses etc. should find place in the proposals. There should also be a clause stating that only the services figuring in the agreement would be available to the tourists, and payment as per market rates would be charged for anything extra asked for and provided.

Terms like payment schedules, currency in which the deals are fixed and paid and the side that will bear the loss or gain in exchange rate fluctuation are to be made clear in the agreements. Generally, all tour operators in China insist on a certain percentage of the charges as advance at the time of booking and the balance at the time of confirmation. Anyway, the full payment is taken *before the tour begins*. The same arrangements may be insisted upon in the case of Chinese group tours to India as some tour operators might start bargaining and ask for reduction in the charges agreed upon pointing out even minor and imaginary issues after the tour starts. The ideal thing is for both sides to keep their promises on all aspects already agreed upon in black and white in the interest of long-term friendly business relationships. At the same time, the credibility and trustworthiness of the Chinese tourism company with which Indian tour operators wish to engage in business may be got verified from Indian Embassy and Consulates and/or the India Tourism Office in Beijing or China Council for Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT). The Chinese tour operators may also be encouraged to do such basic due diligence on their potential Indian partners through their diplomatic missions in India or through the respective Indian chamber

of commerce or the India Tourism Office.

Indian tour operators should have a clear understanding on the percentage of commission that can be given to their Chinese counterparts when they visit China for business development. In addition, the Chinese want immediate decisions and hate postponing matters indefinitely. Some Chinese have also complained that Indians are hard 'bargainers' and have gone back on promises after deals were struck. Some Chinese businesspersons have the habit of asking for a renegotiation of the deal all over again at the last moment, i.e., just before signing the agreement. So, while negotiating, each point agreed upon should be noted down by both sides to avoid future conflict and misunderstanding.

The Chinese are equally good, if not better than their Indian counterparts are, when it comes to bargaining and deal making. The government-run business establishments in China are equally smart as private ones when it comes to negotiations and closing deals. Further, it would be wise on the part of Indian tour operators not to appoint GSAs in China hastily as division of the share of commission between GSA and his/her sub-agents who actually do all the legwork could run into difficulties resulting in the latter showing disinterest in developing business. It should be made clear in the agreement as to who would pay for advertising group tours in the Chinese media and new/social media.

Sister State/Sister City Relationships

As indicated earlier, gone are the days when the Chinese government identified certain countries for permitting its citizens to visit. Having said that, the fact remains that an unwritten directive or a gentle nudge from the local administration is still an important factor that the tour operators, both in government and private sectors, take seriously while

drawing up tourism programmes and tourism calendars. Forging sister city or sister state-province relationships between Indian and Chinese provinces and cities is an important way of getting such support. Though several Indian states and Chinese provinces and cities have forged sister state-province and sister city relations, forming such a new alliance is a time-consuming process involving central governments on either side. In addition, an Indian state or city cannot forge such alliances with many provinces and cities for administrative reasons. Moreover, since Kerala cities are small, their Chinese counterparts might not show keen interest in tie-ups with them, as the latter would naturally look for bigger, 'more useful' ones. However, since tourism is an important contributor to the Kerala economy, the government may consider taking up the matter with the Central Government for forging sister state-province relationship with a Chinese province that sends out large numbers of outbound tourists. Of course, several aspects need to be considered before making such proposals.

Cost of Advertising

There are about 10,000 newspapers and magazines, including dedicated travel industry journals, and umpteen number of news portals in China. Almost all of them carry travel advertisements. Many of them have dedicated weekly supplements on travelling abroad. One can see any number of ads on package tours to even Nepal and the Maldives, but hardly any on India. Hence, the average Chinese traveller cannot be blamed for not making a trip to Kerala or even India as adequate information is not available in China. Creating awareness in the Chinese outbound markets by advertising package tours is an important task to be addressed.

At the same time, the advertising costs

in China are exorbitantly high, and even the biggest of the Indian companies may not be able to afford it over a long period. That is why this report reiterates the need to make clear in the agreement as to who would pay for advertising group tours in the Chinese media and new/social media. Though the India Tourism Office in Beijing used to have a small budget for advertising Indian tours, it would be sensible to find out from them whether or how much they would be able to help Kerala in this regard. Rules do not permit the Indian Embassy's or Consulates' advertising budget to be used for advertising tours to India, leave alone using it for promoting a particular state. However, the Embassy and Consulates do hold periodic 'media briefing' on various aspects, including the tourism potential in India with video presentations. Even though it is debatable as to what extent such sincere efforts actually translate into journalists writing about India, it would be a good idea to request the diplomatic missions to include Kerala also in their programmes. There are several beautiful videos on Kerala's tourism potential available with KTDC and other stakeholders. If Chinese editions of some of these videos can be produced, preferably with a Chinese voiceover, the Embassy, Consulates and India Tourism Office would find it handy to be used in their efforts.

Digital Marketing in Chinese

Since China has one of the largest internet penetrations in the world, the government, KTDC and other stakeholders should launch a concerted online campaign to present the state in all its allure in Chinese. Taking the help of native speakers, perhaps some Chinese students in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, or elsewhere may be a viable option for subtitling and voiceover in these campaigns. A couple of young officials in the marketing department of KTDC may be entrusted with

the task of uploading images and videos in Chinese, produced for the abovementioned campaign, in the new media and social media spaces in China. Similarly, accounts may be opened on the Chinese version of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc. (which may not be available to the entire mainland Chinese due to government restrictions) and Chinese social/newmedia platforms like Weibo, WeChat, Tencent QQ, ToudouYuoku, Toutiao, Douban, Meipai, DouYin, etc. for the purpose. A Chinese language expert may be hired as a consultant or on contract basis to answer queries that may be raised by Chinese readers and viewers on a real-time basis to keep their interest alive.

Visiting Journalists

Every year, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and India Tourism invite Chinese journalists and editors, among others, to visit India under their respective outreach programmes. Mostly, such visits and related programmes are New Delhi and North India-centric. However, Kerala may consider requesting the ministries concerned to include the state periodically in the itineraries of the visiting Chinese journalists. Kerala can also consider offering two or three days of all-paid-for visits to the state, as an extension of the India visit of the visiting journalists (after their main programmes charted out by the central ministries are complete). Actually, many such visiting journalists extend their visits by a few days on their own for sightseeing. This author remembers a journalist on such an outreach programme extending her stay on her own expense, visiting Varanasi for a few days and writing a series of articles on the city on her return to China. Now that almost every Chinese journalist is active on the (China-based) social media, such visiting journalists may be encouraged to upload interesting stories and pictures and videos they take in Kerala on various portals and social media sites.

Good Quality Brochures, Videos and Websites in Chinese

Different central organisations bring out a large number of good quality brochures and well-produced videos on places and monuments of tourist interest in India. Many of these brochures have Chinese versions also. However, the focus of these brochures is often on the Delhi-Agra-Jaipur Golden Triangle and the Buddhist sites in Northern India. The Kerala tourism department may bring out good brochures and videos on the tourist attractions, various packages, possible customisation of packages and other services available in the state in Chinese, and disseminate them to potential tourists with the help of the Embassy, Consulates, Beijing-based India Tourism Office, India Visa Application Centres and Chinese tour operators, among others. Different travel agencies can also bring out brochures of their packages in Chinese and ensure their distribution through the India Tourism Office and through their counterparts in China. The tourism department, KTDC, leading travel agencies, leading hospitals, Ayurvedic centres and other tourism-related organisations should have websites in the Chinese language and efforts need to be made to have them linked to the websites of the Embassy, Consulates, India Tourism Office, the China office of Confederation of Indian Industries and India Visa Application Centres in China. If the Embassy and other government organisations have difficulty in giving links to the websites of private organisations, then they could be requested to give links to the websites of the Kerala tourism department and KTDC, which in turn can give links to the websites of reputable service providers in the private sector. After all, Kerala, like any other state, can succeed in attracting tourists in the long-term only with the active participation of the private sector.

Add Kerala Destinations to Existing Packages

Chinese and Indian tour operators currently doing successful Delhi-Agra-Jaipur Golden Triangle and Buddhist circuits may be persuaded to consider altering or expanding their existing tour packages by a couple of days to include some Kerala destinations. These days, Chinese tourists are swarming destinations in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, like never before. The fact that Kerala is only a few minutes flight away from these countries can be used to good advantage and the tour operators in China, the Maldives and Sri Lanka can be presented with appealing offers to make minor changes to existing itineraries or expand them by a couple of days to include a few Kerala destinations. Like several Indians, Chinese also prefer to visit maximum number of destinations, particularly in different countries, in a single trip, if the additional expenditure involved is not substantial.

Business-cum-Pleasure Trips

An increasing number of Chinese wants to see India for themselves before doing business with the country. If the Indian experience succeeds in making an impression on the business or business-cum-pleasure traveller, the word would get around, resulting in higher footfalls in the future. Similarly, travel agents booking business travels to India can be persuaded to suggest to their clients a couple of days of rejuvenating pleasure stay in Kerala added to their itineraries, after their official engagements. Kerala hotels and other service providers would be required to give attractive two/three-day packages to such visiting businesspersons and tour operators.

Education

Education, besides being an important tool in a country's soft power projection, plays an

important role in attracting travellers to the countries concerned, and projecting a good image of these foreign destinations in their homeland. China has made great leaps in this area. Presently, there are about 20,000 Indian students in China, most of them engaged in medical studies. However, India has not been able to attract foreign students matching with its potential in the educational sphere, for example, in technical education/engineering, hospitality industry, classical dances, mural painting, Sanskrit studies, English literature etc. Of course, the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand are the favourite destinations of the Chinese student. But those who cannot afford high education expenditure are choosing some private institutions in Bengaluru, Vellore and Hyderabad in India. Chinese students and their parents are serious about studies, and unrest on campuses has been more or less unheard of in China since 1989. Kerala with its relatively open-minded society can attract Chinese students, provided it is able to ensure peace on campuses. Therefore, even if this particular aspect may not be of much interest to the tourism sector, it would help in creating awareness about Kerala in China in the long-term.

Handling Smaller Groups

Another practical aspect to be addressed is the small number of Chinese tourists opting for a group tour in Kerala, which makes it almost an unviable option. The ideal way forward under such circumstances would be to combine such groups with similar small groups from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore or even South Korea and Japan, instead of cancelling the trip. If looked at closely, the likes and preferences of such heterogeneous groups might vary on many aspects, but overall, they can fit into a group better than they would with people from other geographical areas. Of course, there could be issues like the need to have interpreters/

guides speaking different languages, which the tour operators should be able to sort out. However, the most important aspect for this concept to succeed is coordination between Indian tour operators and their counterparts in the East and Southeast Asian countries. The point is not to turn away anyone trying to join a Kerala group for want of larger participation in a particular group.

More Airlinks

The days when Indians had to go to China through Hong Kong or any other third-country intermediate station are long gone. Aerial connectivity between the two countries has improved tremendously with direct flights now servicing multiple cities on both sides. But, if there are no major issues related to the Fifth Freedom, the Ninth Freedom/Beyond Rights etc., an airplane arriving in Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore from China can possibly extend the trip to Kochi or Thiruvananthapuram on its onward journey or on its way back, as the case maybe. This is a complicated technical subject, but experts can probably work out something without hurting the interests of domestic and international carriers in both countries. The mantra here is simple: increased connectivity would naturally lead to more number of people travelling between the two countries.

Chinese Language Courses for Guides

An average Chinese traveller depends heavily on interpreters while travelling/sightseeing abroad. Unfortunately, Kerala is woefully ill-equipped to handle this issue. The state should develop a basic course in training tour guides where the syllabus includes a tourist-guide level interpretership in languages like Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Arabic etc., allotted to students according to their aptitude. It may not be possible for a student to acquire a decent level of proficiency in the Chinese language

after doing a short-duration course. However, a guide can take the help of digital audio guide systems at monuments and museums. In addition to digital tour guides/virtual tour guides, tour apps and pocket guides can also be made available. Then, there is the translation app on mobile phones, which admittedly needs further improvement. If a guide with such basic knowledge of the language takes interest, s/he could gain good ground after interacting with a few visiting Chinese groups. The Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies in the MG University, Kerala, among others, can chip in by offering such short-term courses for tourist guides (along with other short-term courses for corporate executives). Maybe, such courses can be included in the Central Government's Skill India initiative, or even at the polytechnics, so that institutes conducting them could draw in the much-needed financial help from the government.

Indian Visa

Studies show that the possibility of getting a visa free of any hassles is right at the top of the issues that the Chinese take into consideration while choosing a foreign destination. Though the visa documentation process is generally decided on a reciprocal basis and the visa application process has since been largely simplified, including the introduction of e-visa (electronic-visa authorisation) system, the Chinese in general continue to feel that getting an Indian visa is a Himalayan task. This impression has to change, for which suitable publicity measures need to be undertaken by all the Indian stakeholders in China.

The number of visa application centres in China has to go up considerably from the current three, in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Admittedly, limiting the number of visa application processing centres is owing to a bilateral understanding, and increasing

this number is a time-consuming bureaucratic exercise. However, the entities involved can always find a way to have authorised sub-centres (working for and under the above three centres) in more cities to help enhance increased movement of people across the border. If India is happy to host more Chinese tourists, it is imperative that there are more visa application centres in all the important centres in that country.

Investment Opportunities, Job Creation

According to UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals increased by 7 percent globally between 2016 and 2017 to reach 1.3 billion. The figure was just above a billion in 2013. Though the developed countries continue to attract more tourists, tourist traffic is on the rise in developing countries, with international tourism arrivals to these economies increasing from 507 million in 2013 to 597 million in 2017. It is quite clear that Chinese nationals would form a major part of the anticipated growing number of international tourists in the medium term and long term. A number of countries in the world, including some in Asia, depend on the travel and tourism industry for generating incomes and jobs for their citizens. Kerala needs to pay greater attention to this area in view of a possible influx of its expatriate workers returning home, as a developed travel and tourism industry in the state could definitely help in accommodating a section of them.

However, large investments need to flow into the state from both domestic and foreign sources for creating necessary infrastructure to host such growing number of international tourists, including the Chinese. Rules now permit 100-percent FDI in the sector through the automatic route. A five-year tax holiday has been given to organisations that

set up hotels, resorts and convention centres at specific destinations, subject to fulfilment of certain conditions. Indeed, money is being pumped into India for creating infrastructure in the hospitality segment, primarily for building hotels. Some money has come from abroad into the online hotel and tours and travel booking platforms. But more needs to be done to attract investments in other areas in the sector as well. In the case of Kerala, it has to be routed mainly to the countryside as the future of Kerala tourism lies in its rural areas. For a start, the political parties in power, the opposition and trade unions need to join hands to ensure rebuilding investor confidence in the state, particularly in the travel and tourism sector.

Tapping NRK Investments

While rich Non-resident Keralites (NRKs) have been investing in malls, big hotels, multi-brand retail sector, auditoriums and gold retailing, many average NRKs have been putting their hard-earned money into restaurant business as can be seen on either side of the state's highways these days. The average NRK does so because s/he is sure to make profits without having to wait for long. Some have also put money into buying tourist cars and minibuses because they are confident of managing their businesses and getting decent returns without having to wait indefinitely.

The average returnee NRK investor is both an entrepreneur and, at the same time, a wage earner in his/her own company. However, many among ordinary NRKs are hesitant to invest their money in businesses in Kerala because of the alleged '*varavelppu*' mentality that prevails in the state. The government may step in and reassure the potential small-time NRK investor by forming a PPP-model platform for tourism-related infrastructure development, perhaps involving KTDC that has experience

in the field. There has to be involvement in some form or other of the respective local administrations to ensure that bureaucratic red tape does not delay projects. As suggested elsewhere, the role of KTDC may be limited to laying down policies, supervising policy implementation and general supervision of operations to ensure overall quality. The actual running of such projects may be entrusted to qualified professionals and not civil servants. The Kudumbashree units in the respective areas could also benefit in several ways if they are involved in these projects. A good share of the employment in these establishments may be reserved for rehabilitating returnee NRKs, particularly those who invest in the sector.

Investments from China in the Tourism Sector

China is now a major source of investments globally either made directly or routed through one or more countries for various reasons. The possibility of inviting some reputed Chinese travel companies to invest in the tourism sector here, i.e., by tying up with their counterparts in the state, may be considered seriously. This will be an added motivation for Chinese tourism companies to organise group tours to India, and Kerala.

Look East-Act East

'Pragmatism' - pragmatism of the country's leadership - would be the one word that can

describe the China model of development. The leadership of all hues in Kerala has to take a cue from the Chinese leaders, break the ideological shackles and allow infrastructural developments in rural areas, near beaches, rivers, backwaters, lagoons and mountains, to happen, of course, respecting environmental concerns, but not overstressing them for narrow political gains. After all, the future of Kerala tourism lies squarely in its countryside.

It is time for the Kerala government to come together with private players in the industry to launch a mission on war footing to get the infrastructure ready to welcome Chinese travellers who could flock to the state if the right environment is created. The two most populous countries in the world can deepen their cooperation in tourism and perhaps repeat the 'Visit India Year' in China and 'Visit China Year' in India periodically.

Kerala with its abundant tourism resources should keep working on improving the quality of its services. The government agencies concerned may consider simplifying the visa application procedures further and strive to improve upon existing connectivity by introducing more direct flights. While continuing the tourism promotion efforts in Kerala's traditional markets in the West, it is high time that the state made concerted efforts in the East, particularly East Asia. Another Look East-Act East initiative, perhaps!

