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Challenges in globalizing the Taj Mahal- Impact on regional economy

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ABSTRACT

The Taj has stood steadfast, an indomitable symbol of India's cultural heritage, over years of evolution and subsequent modernization of our country. Over the generations, it has only gained popularity, not only adding to the country's glory but also becoming a major earner of revenue for the Indian government. Even though it has earned itself a coveted spot amongst the Seven Wonders of the World, the need to consider the further effective globalization of the Taj, its challenges and consequences, is more necessary than we like to think. The challenges to the globalization of Taj largely include the upkeep of its surroundings, the tourism facilities that are available, and the preservation of the other tourist attractions around the Taj. A preliminary bird's eye view of the historical city of Agra, home to this monument, amongst many others, displays the connection that exists between these largely forgotten heritage sites, and the Taj Mahal. There is also need for consideration of the further development of the booming business in handicrafts which display Mughal craftsmanship of the days of yore, and the erosive effect of rapid construction of structures, on the ecological health of the city. In addition to the above, the recent spat in the number of industrial units in the area, and the lack of any world-class facilities, amongst others, also present major challenges to the task of bringing the Taj closer to the global audience. While the paper seeks to lay down the need, and the hurdles that exist in catapulting the monument to a higher position, globally, yet, the paper also lineally presents the efforts that have been made till present, to overcome each of the identified challenges. While advertisements, cleanliness drives, greater facilities for tourists, the stricter procedure for the public, and the popularised public interest litigation of the Taj Trapezium case, have gone a long way in securing a global platform for the Taj, much still needs to be done to significantly achieve the same. The paper seeks to discuss many varied and unique solutions to the issue at hand, while closely reminding the reader the impact the same will have on the regional economy of the area. The paper hence, seeks to successfully establish the relation of micro-commerce of the region of Agra, with the varied solutions that could be adopted to bring about further globalisation of the Taj, the vista of opportunities that will subsequently open up for employment in the region, and the positive impact on the overall economic development of the country.

Keywords— Globalization, Tourism, Economy, Industrial pollution and Agra Master Plan 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

When we talk of globalising the Taj, one has to think and plan in terms of the publicity status of the destination. The Taj and its surroundings, the accessibility factor, facilities and security of the tourists, tourism attractions, hospitality to tourists and the preservation of the heritage monuments in Agra, need to be considered. Though the publicity aspect imparts primary input to efforts at tourism promotion yet the other factors mentioned here are basic to tourism development with long term objectives. The immensely rich cultural heritage of Agra has the distinction of three world heritage monuments on its culture map, the Taj, the Fort and Fatehpur Sikri in Agra district. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been making efforts to get world heritage tag for two other significant monuments of Agra, the tomb of I'timad-ud-daulah and the tomb of Akbar at Sikandra. There are in all, sixty-two cultural heritage sites in the list of protected monuments of national importance of the ASI in Agra district. These include all the major and minor monuments, all of them of great significance as these are the living witnesses of the entire region's rich historical past. In the entire Taj Trapezium Zone (TTZ) there are 40 protected monuments of national importance. In the heyday of the Mughal empire, when Agra was the centre of all imperial activity the banks of the river Yamuna were flanked by exclusive havelis of ministers and high noblemen which got erased with time in the post-Mughal era. In the days of imperial grandeur, the Yamuna River was the lifeline of the Mughal capital city of Agra and its socio-cultural milieu.

The Mehtab Bagh, diametrically opposite to the Taj, situated on the left bank of the river with the remains of its octagonal water tank with fountains, is of a special interest as it has been developed by the ASI as a vantage point for experiencing the riverfront beauty of the Taj from across the river, especially during moonlight. It was planned as a focal point for the proposed 300-acre Taj National Park (TNP) which however could not materialise owing to problems in land acquisition. The Mehtab Bagh has been

developed in symmetry with extensive polyculture in formal style with the planting of 40 varieties of around seven thousand saplings on the Charbagh pattern. Most of these plants have medicinal value as including medicinal herbs in their garden collections was an ardent Mughal practice. The main species comprise *Anar, Gudhal, Kaner, Ratanjot, Amla, Neem, Bel, Ashok, Kachnar, Chandni, Jamun* and *Sadabahar*. The work of the rejuvenation of the site carried by the ASI has a great value for tourism and ecological development. Significantly, the scheme augments the riverfront feature of the Taj. There are several other monuments in this heritage rich area along the river including the gardens designed by Babar. Most of these have faded into oblivion including the palatial havelis of the nobles and Grandees of the empire with their riverfront gardens which adorned the riverbank on both sides of the Yamuna. The neglect and plunder prior to the establishment of the ASI and subversion by urban interests and excessive encroachment are among several of the factors which have resulted in the loss of valuable part of heritage of the city.

2. TAJ: TOURISM PROSPECTS AND LINKS WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Present tourist influx and revenue generation

A network of these and other centrally protected monuments in the city afford multiple avenues for tourism-related development. The city of Agra in its proud possession of the Taj, the crowning glory of Mughal style of architecture, carves for itself a popular niche on the tourism map of the country as well as the world. A decade ago, the Taj on the average had 7,500 visitors every day and on Fridays it used to go over the 10,000 mark. With the construction of the Yamuna expressway the footfalls in the Taj have risen to 40,000 to 50,000 on a weekend and holidays and to 70,000 in the peak season. The excitement to get a glimpse of the monument is such that people wait in queues in thousands for getting tickets and subsequent entry after requisite security check-ups. This year the putting up of scaffolding over the minarets and mausoleum during the entire season for the application of the mud pack treatment has not deterred or brought down the number of visitors to the Taj. This has led to serious rethinking on reformulation of policy for restricting and limiting the visitors on any single day through sale of tickets and fixing the duration of visit hours for each ticket. This year a restriction was imposed on pilgrims from outside Agra for *namaz* on Eid which brought down their number to 5,000 which earlier used to exceed 25,000. Now the entry fee has been imposed on all days except Mondays when the monument remains closed for routine cleaning and restoration work. The entry fee has also been hiked recently for domestic and the foreign tourists. The Taj is thus a major source of foreign exchange for India tourism. Recently an additional fee of Rs. 200 had been decided upon by the ASI on the main mausoleum with objections and suggestions invited from the people till October 28, 2018. When implemented the overall entry ticket for those opting for going up to the main mausoleum would be for domestic tourists, Rs. 250; for international tourists Rs. 1300 and those from the SAARC countries to Rs. 740. The Tourism Guild of Agra has already raised objections stating that this would restrict tourist footfall at the Taj which was 8, 61,539 (foreign) and 56, 18,138 (domestic) in 2017 with an average of 7.25 lakhs for the former and 55 lakhs for the latter during five-year span between 2013-17. It has been stated that such a policy would be inhibitive to the tourism ministry's aim of getting 20 billion foreign tourists to India by the year 2020. A major part of the amount from the entry tickets to all monuments is diverted to the Agra Development Authority (ADA) as toll tax or *pathkar* which is utilised for development work in the city and funds for the ADA. The revenue generated from the over a period of three years prior to 2017 amounted to 75 crores averaging 25 crores per year; 10.50 and 13.42 crores from Agra Fort (2014,15,16); 56.13, 63.07 and 52.35 lakhs from Fatehpur Sikri (2013-16); 72.38 lakhs from Akbar's tomb (2013-14).

2.2 Innovative solutions for the factors impeding influx

The Taj is the highest revenue earner in India tourism. There are fewer visitors to other heritage and protected monuments sites in the city despite vast potential owing largely to a host of factors. These chiefly comprise short duration guided tours without night stay, lack of publicity, deficiency in facilities, stray animal nuisance near monuments, monkey menace within the Taj, lack of reliable public transport and harassment by touts and hawkers even theft in certain cases. Higher tourist concentrations centred on the Taj and the resulting pressure thus created over law enforcing, civic and Survey authorities is another potent reason for the other heritage sites receding in the background. The need of the hour hence is the preparation of consolidated tourism packages highlighting the chronological importance of other heritage sites of the city with particularly those on the riverbank and their proper networking converging on the Taj. This coupled with a general up gradation of tourist facilities can further enhance the tourism potential directly proportional to global prospects of the Taj and the positive impact thus generated over the region's economy.

3. HANDICRAFT SECTOR AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE DRIVE FOR GLOBALISATION

The city of Agra has emerged as a popular centre of handicraft items owing to its glorious historical tradition and impressive trade in international tourism with the presence of the Taj and other heritage monuments. The main articles in handicrafts comprise art products with numerous designs in white marble designed with the Mughal craftsmanship of *pietra dura* or inlay work of semi-precious stones so characteristic of the Taj. This was first applied in the marble mausoleum of I'timad-ud-daulah by Empress Nur Jahan. There is a vast range of handicraft items which comprise leather goods, brassware items, carpet weaving, and finely worked precious and semiprecious stones, jewellery and ornate *zardozi* or *zari* embroidery. The Mughals were great patrons of the arts and crafts. The royal workshops established by Emperor Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri and the Meena bazaar within the Sikri palace and the Fort at Agra extensively contributed to the growth of handicrafts trade during the period. Akbar patronised textiles and the shawl industry of Kashmir and even sent an embassy to Goa with the purpose of learning the craftsmanship of the Portuguese. Nur Jahan also took personal interest in the royal *karkhanas* which produced handicraft items and was herself an accomplished artist in *zari* embroidery work. Her design of the *farsh-i-chandni* or the silver carpet was an elaborate and novel masterpiece of the times. In the post-independence period as per a survey authorised by the state government in 1957-58 the total number of conventional units which included glass beads, pottery, black-smithy, spinning, handloom, basket, rope-making and toys along with the crafts mentioned above numbered 3,354. The capital investment was Rs.28, 49,920 and value production was Rs. 70, 36,550.

The finished handicraft items are exhibited for sale in several government approved emporiums and shops and those owned by the government itself. The main shopping areas are at Taj Ganj, the southern, western and eastern gate of the Taj, Taj road, Mall road, Sadar *bazar*, Kenari *bazar*, M. G. road, Gokul Pura and Munro road. A substantial number of artisans amounting to about 1, 00,000 are engaged in the production of handicraft items (carpet, marble and stone craft and others) at Agra. Hence at an average per family

of seven to eight members around 8 lakh people directly depend on the handicrafts industry as a source of their livelihood. Another 80,000 to 1, 00,000 can be estimated to depend on the trading of the handicraft items. About eight to ten lakhs employed as guides, hotel and restaurant owners and workers, rickshaw pullers, auto and cab drivers, roadside guides, hawkers etc. Adding to these employed on the travel trade focussed on the Taj the numbers associated with tourism trade in Agra crosses the figure of twenty lakhs. This is significant in the context of tourism trade as the dominant industry at Agra with the restriction, closure and shifting of other industries from the TTZ because of their high pollution index.

4. EFFECT OF LOW TOURIST ACCESSIBILITY ON TAJ TOURISM: PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The Delhi based tourism industry also pockets a major chunk of tourism revenue from the Taj and Agra owing to the absence of facilities for international flights at Agra. As per figures released by the Airport Authority of India (AAI) to an RTI (Right to Information) query, it is estimated that there were only 35 visitors per day on an average who came to Agra by air in a five-year period, from 2014 to June 2018 out of the daily average of 20,000 domestic and international flights in that period. The low number of flights (average of one flight every two days) is the main reason why tourists visiting Agra to see the world heritage sites and local exporters of shoes, handicrafts and carpets avoid using the local airport. The long-standing demand of the tourism industry at Agra for an international airport has not materialised with the recent agreement between the state government and the AAI which focussed on expanding the civil enclave of the Kheria airbase to facilitate international flights, on which progress at a slow pace is worrisome. Moreover, the sanctioning of an international airport at Jewar in NOIDA will further restrict the direct influx of tourists to Agra by air. The central minister of state for tourism and culture described Agra as a slum on a recent visit because of improper roads, encroachment and garbage everywhere. This was taken very distastefully by the Agra Mayor with suspicions that the minister is enhancing the interests of the tourism lobby of Delhi. Putting the tourism scenario at Agra in the right perspective the Tourism guild of Agra feels rightly that tourism activity centred on the Taj has the potential to sustain an entire economy if packaged and delivered in a proper manner.

5. CRISIS OF ECOLOGICAL DECIMATION

5.1 The menace of industrial pollution

Among the other factors which are impediments in globalising the Taj, one that concerns the most is the considerable decimation of ecological wealth of Agra over the years, which has also resulted in a severe crisis in the preservation of the cultural heritage of the city. The several monuments of the city, particularly in the minor category, have become interspersed with buildings which have encroached on their landscape, obliterating the entire structures in several cases. With an objective to restrict the debilitating influence of the modern growth patterns of the city that ignore the cause of environment conservation, serious efforts have to be channelized to prevent irreversible erosion of the cultural heritage. Acting on the directions of the Supreme Court, a beginning was made in this direction by the Central government and its agencies (the ASI, Ministry of Environment and Forests and Ministry of Culture and Tourism), with the demarcation of an area of 10,400 sq. kms. As Taj Trapezium Zone (TTZ). It was the report of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) prepared in 1981-82, which became the basis of the formation of the TTZ. The area was defined as 'Air Pollution Protection Area' in the CPCB report with prohibition imposed upon the setting up of new units or expansion of existing ones of 'High Polluting Nature'. A moratorium on the setting up of new units is still in force with orders for the closure and shifting of polluting units. Several foundries and brick kilns were closed down during the period with permission to shift outside the TTZ boundaries.

5.2 Crisis aversion: efforts and misadventures

There are 128 active foundry units functioning in the city according to environment friendly standards. The closure of industrial units and moratorium on opening new ones is being strongly contested by the industrialists of Agra who took recently took out a protest march with the slogan that the Taj is their glory and the industry is their life. The main concern is the rise in unemployment figures in Agra and the loss of revenue as well. Unemployment in Agra, as per the 66th round of National Sample Survey Office, rose substantially in the 2000's, from 0.2% in 2004-05 to 5.5% in 2009-10. Agra thus became one of the three cities registering maximum increase in rate of unemployment. In retrospect, Agra was an important trade centre, being the centre of court during the larger part of the Mughal Empire, as testified by all foreign travellers who visited Agra in those times and stayed here. Modern industrial development commenced in Agra in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the large and medium industry comprising Oil mills, Cotton spinning mills, Tannery, Roller flour mill, Ginning and Pressing units, Dal Mill, Iron foundries, Tin Industry, Glass works, rolling mills, Metal works, Iron and steel, Printing and Glass blowing, originated. To the close of the nineteenth century, the trade balance in Agra tilted much in favour of revenue from exports in comparison to imports.

5.3 Alternative solutions

Hence, shifting of industrial units should involve generating alternative means of livelihood with a well-planned transition to environment friendly technology. Such alternates can also be generated through expansion and augmentation of depleted infrastructure of tourism industry in Agra. At present there is a moratorium on setting up new hotels also with the categorisation on the basis of overall pollution index applied to them also with permission to open those only which qualify in the 'white category'. The hotels with 20 rooms have been kept in the 'green category', with 21 to 100 rooms in 'orange category' and above 100 in the 'red category'. Recently, in the ongoing hearing in the Supreme Court, the Hon'ble court asked if there can be a restriction on the number of hotels and eateries owing to other polluting activities apart from atmospheric pollution. The availability of 50 rooms/lakh tourists is much below the national average of 423 rooms/lakh tourists. The probable reason for this is that Agra is merely a short stopover destination for a large number of tourists who either return back to Delhi or proceed to Jaipur through Fatehpur Sikri. This is a two-way loss to the economy with the closure of industrial units on one hand and on the other inability to retain the tourists and prolong their stay with restrictions on the expansion of hotel infrastructure. In a recent order the apex court rejected the proposal of increasing the night viewing duration of the Taj from 30 to 45 minutes for five batches of 80 tourists each from the present sanction of 50 tourists in eight batches in the pending ASI application of 2015. The ASI had also requested the Supreme Court remove the restriction of the sale of tickets for night viewing at least 24 hours in advance which was also not accepted.

6. YAMUNA: THE LIFELINE OF THE TAJ

It has already been pointed out that the Yamuna River has been the lifeline of the city in the bygone era. The river has been a basis of the scheme of construction of the Taj and the other monuments and gardens which once lined up on both banks of the river. Many of these have been lost into oblivion. The river also has lost its charm and lustre of the earlier days. The river flow decreases substantially till it reaches Agra as most of the water is diverted into canals from Hathnikund barrage and into Agra canal from Okhla barrage. The other barrages, Mohna and Gokul, latter at Mathura further reduce the intensity and amount of water in the river. The BOD (Biological Oxygen Demand) of Agra after treatment varies from 52 mg/l to 64mg/l not even suitable for irrigation. As to its condition, the water levels are reduced to the extent turning the river to a shallow stream for a period of almost nine months from October to June. This creates a gap in the support scheme of the Taj with the absence of the pressure generated by the river flow on the northern boundary wall adjacent to the river. The maximum permissible limit of the river flow has been fixed at 147 metres and the minimum at 30 metres for ensuring the structural stability.

6.1 Alarming conditions of the river Yamuna

The optimum water level is also essential for the well foundation of the Taj which have planks of *Sal* wood whose tensile strength and life is dependent on their being continuously submerged in water. The drying of the river bed on an annual basis due to regular silting thus reducing the depth of the river. The increasing silt on the Yamuna bed causes the influx of dust and particulate matter within the fore walls of the Taj complex by winds blowing in the north south direction. Presently the river largely acts as a repository of the organic waste from industries and the municipal drains of Delhi, Okhla, Faridabad, Mathura and Agra. The untreated waste thus discharged keeps on accumulating on the river bed owing to depleting water levels and weak flow of the river. The waste decomposes further on the river bed polluting the environment with a foul stink and becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes, flies and insects. These swarm inside the Taj complex dropping their excreta on the main mausoleum. The insects of *Goeldi chironomous* specie frequently breed in the polluted rivers and are threatening the Taj with black and green patches all over virtually discolouring the monument. The industrial waste transforms the chemical nature of the water which pollutes the river habitat and poses threat to the foundations of the Taj with the seeping in of the industrial effluents.

6.2 Efforts to sustain the river

Whereas it is so important to develop the river front of the monument, as per the original scheme for tapping the tourism potential of the heritage rich waterfront of Yamuna to the fullest. With the enhancement of the green cover and the restoration of the encroached and lost gardens of the area, visual corridors need to be developed over the river as done from the restored Mehtab Bagh. The river view is the most important aspect of any global scheme pursued in the area and it is that which needs to be capitalised upon in its entirety. It is a herculean task given the deteriorating status of the river and no work has yet been initiated on the ground on the old scheme of Agra barrage which has been announced again. The ongoing work on the Taj corridor project pursuant to the orders of the apex court aimed at the development of Taj view garden on the pattern of the Charbagh style of the Mughals shall result in the enhancement of the riverfront feature of the Taj. Within the city a fifteen-day tree plantation drive "*Tham Lo Hariyali*" has been initiated by the Mayor till October 2, 2018 with a target of planting 10,000 saplings of different varieties both sides of selected roads and on the central verge and parks and vacant spaces in the city in various localities including the Taj Ganj zone.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Agra master plan 2021: A constructive approach

It is encouraging to note that the Agra Master Plan 2021 has recognised Taj *Dharohar* as one heritage precinct in the city while there are several other heritage precincts in the form of other monuments including the several minor monuments which require proper landscaping and accessibility with a plan of cohesive development. The task is formidable with the obliteration of the other heritage precincts from the threats posed by rapid urbanisation, economic development requiring modern infrastructure and the increasing number of private vehicles in the city. The Master Plan emphasises growth in the tourism sector in consonance with the global identity of Agra and the Taj. It contemplates development of high-tech enclaves, corporate and private sector involvement in urban development, better inter and intra city transport connectivity and quality infrastructure which are basic to a global perception and image building. A convention centre is coming up at the site of the Shilpgram, though unfortunately the Taj National Park project could not materialise. Leisure and recreational activities are proposed in the southern zones of the city consistent with the Global Tourist Agra image with both the State and planners trying to accommodate global agencies. However, the state government has expressed the impracticality of declaring the whole of Agra as a Heritage city as per the directive of the apex court of 1996. Though Agra could not get an international airport but work has started on the civil enclave at the Kheria aerodrome. It has to be seen that when completed, to what extent it shall be instrumental in aiding the inflow of foreign tourists in Agra particularly with the Jewar international airport already sanctioned by the Union government. The Taj Improvement District (TID) planned with an outlay of Rs. 1699 crores over a five-year period under the Smart city proposal for Agra as a heritage precinct with the demarcation of 2250 acres of local area around the Taj, Fort, Jama Masjid and Fatehabad road till inner Ring Road to be developed with street improvement, vending zones, beautification, flyovers, murals, façade improvement etc. The concept of night bazaars needs to be taken up in right earnest. The locality of Taj Ganj, a part of the history of the Taj and historically integrated with it, needs to be enhanced particularly from the visual aspect by capitalising on the sequential vision of the Taj from the streets of Tajganj. This could bring about a revival and further integration of the micro commerce with the heritage of the area generating fresh opportunity of economic development and globalisation of the Taj in its entirety.

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