

Steering India's tourism & hospitality renaissance

Platforms like BW Hotelier Indian Hospitality Summit & Awards play a crucial role in positioning India as a key player across the world. They are not only essential for fostering industry growth, promoting best practices but attracting investments and reinforcing India's image as a premier global hospitality destination," observed Gajendra Singh Shekhawat. The Union Minister for Tourism & Culture was speaking on the inaugural day of the 8th edition of the two-day annual event where Shekhawat was the Chief Guest.

Over the last few years, the BJP MP from Jodhpur has played a transformative role in reshaping the cultural and tourism sectors in the country. He has been instrumental in positioning India as a global hub for tourism and hospitality. Shekhawat has also spearheaded major initiatives such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, the Ram Mandir and Kartavya Path. Under his leadership, policies like Swadesh Darshan 2.0 and the PRASHAD scheme have been introduced to promote sustainable tourism while enhancing connectivity and accessibility to heritage sites.

Talking about transformative projects like Kashi Vishwanath Temple restoration and Ram Mandir, Shekhawat emphasised on their importance in showcasing India's cultural vibrancy and rich heritage. "These iconic sites have become major pilgrimage destinations, attracting millions. They not only highlight our rich spiritual legacy but contribute significantly to the growth of the hospitality and tourism sectors," he observed.

Religious tourism is a major motivation for tourists to travel. He also mentioned the PRASHAD scheme, which supports the integrated development of identified pilgrimage destinations in the country. "A total of 46 projects worth over Rs 1,600 crore have been sanctioned, ensuring these sites offer world-class facilities while retaining their spiritual essence."

Policies shaping a thriving hospitality landscape

Underlining the importance of policy-driven growth, the MoT shared insights into the revamped Swadesh Darshan 2.0 initiative, focussing on sustainable and responsible tourism. “A total of 34 projects have been sanctioned for Rs 790 crore-plus and the scheme aims to create destinations that are not only attractive but environmentally and culturally sustainable too,” he said.

“The Ministry of Tourism, following the Budget Announcements for 2024-25, has rolled out guidelines for the ‘Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment’ (SASCI) scheme,” shared Shekhawat, adding that proposals from various states have been shortlisted to provide interest-free loans for 50 years. “This initiative is aimed at developing globally competitive tourist centres, boosting local economies and creating employment opportunities through sustainable tourism projects,” he said.

Shekhawat also talked about the Paryatan Mitra and Paryatan Didi programmes which engage local communities to harness tourism’s potential for employment and enrich visitor experiences. “On World Tourism Day 2024, MoUs were signed between hospitality chains and IHMs to provide industry exposure to students and improve service quality.”

The massive strides in infrastructure development across various sectors have played a crucial role in boosting India’s tourism industry. “Tourism in India has greatly benefitted from improved road and air connectivity,” observed the Union Minister for Tourism & Culture, highlighting the expansion of national highways, new air routes, state-of-the-art airports and the introduction of Vande Bharat trains as key elements driving the sector’s growth. These advancements have attracted more visitors, generated employment opportunities and fostered increased investment.

Promoting India’s hidden gems

Shekhawat emphasised on the importance of promoting India's lesser-known destinations through initiatives like the Dekho Apna Desh campaign, launched in January 2020, alongside international platforms such as ATM Dubai, IMEX Frankfurt and PATA Travel Mart. Additionally, the Ministry hosted an Incredible India exhibition at the 46th World Heritage Committee meeting, offering a global audience a deeper insight into the country's rich cultural and tourism heritage.

“These efforts highlight India's vast cultural and geographical diversity, bringing attention to destinations that deserve global recognition,” he stated. Shekhawat also praised the Ministry's Hospitality Scheme which invites international media and influencers to explore India. “Such initiatives amplify India's presence on the global tourism map,” he said. Additionally, the International Tourism Mart (ITM), held in the Northeast, showcases the region's unique tourism potential, with its 12th edition scheduled for November 2024 in Kaziranga, Assam.

Strengthening industry growth

Stressing on the importance of a single-window clearance system and dedicated land banks for tourism infrastructure projects, Shekhawat said, “These measures would streamline approvals, attract investments and ensure timely completion of world-class projects.” He also shared the Ministry's commitment to skill development. “Through initiatives like Paryatan Mitra programme and collaborations with hospitality chains, we are creating a skilled workforce to meet the industry's growing demands,” he said.

Sustainable tourism for the future

The MoT's Travel for LiFE initiative, launched during the G20 Tourism Working Group meeting, embodies sustainable tourism practices. “It encourages mindful consumption of resources, aligning with our National

Strategy for Sustainable Tourism,” explained Shekhawat and also talked about programmes like Best Tourism Village Competition wherein spotlight is on rural destinations, blending cultural preservation with economic empowerment. “This ensures tourism benefits local communities while safeguarding our heritage,” he added.

Empowering India’s hospitality workforce

Recognising that skill development and employment in hospitality sector are essential pillars for India’s growth story, the Ministry of Tourism has been proactive in its efforts to meet industry demands. It provides financial assistance for expanding and upgrading existing institutions like CIHMs, IITTM and NCHMCT while establishing new Institutes of Hotel Management (IHMs) and Food Craft Institutes (FCIs). The idea is to address the requirements for trained manpower. “The Government’s initiatives are paving the way for a skilled workforce that will enhance the tourism sector’s potential,” remarked Shekhawat. The Ministry has signed MoUs between hospitality chains and IHMs, facilitating industry exposure for students and raising service standards. “These collaborations are a significant step toward bridging the gap between academic learning and practical industry needs,” he said. Additionally, the Incredible India Tourist Facilitator (IITF) Certification Programme, an online training platform, was introduced to create a pool of skilled professionals at tourist sites, ensuring visitors enjoy enriched experiences.

The Ministry has also launched the Capacity Building for Service Providers (CBSP) scheme which aims to enhance skills, tap into India’s tourism potential and create employment opportunities, benefitting both urban and rural areas. Community engagement too has taken centre stage with programmes like Paryatan Mitra and Paryatan Didi which leverage the potential of tourism-related employment to improve destination experiences.

Promoting India's unique heritage globally

The Ministry's Hospitality Scheme invites global media, travel agents and influencers to explore and promote these destinations. Social media channels, including @incredibleindia, amplify the reach of such campaigns, celebrating the country's cultural diversity. "India's untapped cultural gems are finally receiving the recognition they deserve on global stage," felt Shekhawat. Regional efforts like Krishnaveni Sangeetha Neerajanam cultural event in Vijayawada, showcase Indian classical music and local crafts, bringing hidden gems of India's heritage into the spotlight on a global stage. "These events not only promote tourism but also instil a sense of pride in our cultural heritage," he added.

Concluding with a big nod to BW Hotelier's IHA-2024, Shekhawat underscored the event's importance in uniting stakeholders and driving growth. "Platforms like these are essential for fostering collaboration and innovation in the hospitality and tourism sectors," he said.