

## **India's G20 Tourism Working Group: Turning a new leaf, nurturing a resilient world**

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The world we live in is a digitally connected family, a concept aptly described through *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the core mantra of India's G20 Presidency. This unique perspective opened new facets of international collaboration and the unprecedented power of tourism is making the world more sustainable and economically resilient.

Being a part of the global travel ecosystem, I have witnessed this revolution first-hand through the G20 Tourism Working Group Meetings. With both small and large economies combatting the aftermath of the pandemic these meetings have infused new hope and an actionable roadmap for the travel trade.

*"Tourism provides employment to the poorest of the poor."* These words by the honourable Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, best describes the multiplier-effect impact potential of the tourism sector. Job creation, foreign exchange earnings and the long-term benefits of embracing diverse cultures, among others, tourism encompasses a massive canvas to bringing defining change. However, the sector has its vulnerabilities which were widely exposed during the pandemic.

Under India's G20 Presidency, I have observed, the G20 Tourism Working Group Meetings, emerge as a defining forum for addressing these vulnerabilities jointly and cooperatively. These gatherings enabled the sharing of best practises, strategies, and policies to lessen the effects of crises on the tourist industry by bringing together leaders from top economies, global think-tanks and diverse landscape.

The distinctive viewpoint brought in by India's G20 Presidency is equally pertinent to note. India, given its thriving tourist industry and a rich cultural past, is aware of both the benefits and difficulties presented by the industry. Our nation can draw attention to the need for sustainable tourist practises that respect local traditions, safeguard natural resources, and guarantee fair distribution of benefits.

This emphasis highlights the critical role that responsible tourism plays in building a more inclusive and ecologically conscious world and is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

This has inspired industry to adopt robust sustainability strategies. Speaking about us, VFS Global's Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) strategy is aligned to national priorities and UN SDGs.

We want to ensure that our ESG commitments are supported by measurable actions which are consistently reviewed and improved upon. For instance, this year our target is to improve Gender Diversity at senior management level to 30%, enhance employee engagement by 2% of 2022 and reduce overall carbon footprints by 10% with base year

2019. Our performance management system and bonus plans of all employees are also linked to the top three sustainability goals of the organisation.

Coming back to the G20 Tourism Working Group, it became a platform for promoting innovation and technology development within the travel and tourism sector. I strongly believe that modern technology, from smooth flight bookings to immersive virtual tours, is essential to improving the tourism experience. The G20 countries may promote the development and use of cutting-edge technologies that increase the effectiveness, accessibility, and sustainability of tourism by combining their resources and knowledge. India's experience in digital innovation and information technology may greatly influence the agenda of these sessions and further this cause.

Another critical aspect addressed by the G20 Tourism Working Group Meetings is economic resiliency. The tourist sector needs a robust structure to resist shocks and maintain continuity since it is extremely vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and economic changes. Through the G20 tourist Working Group Meetings, countries may work together to create strategies to diversify tourism product offers, make investments in workforce skill development, and create effective crisis management plans. These pre-emptive steps improve a country's capacity to recover from crises while also promoting long-term economic stability.

Next in line, I feel the need for global collaboration that offers the chance to tackle problems that go beyond national boundaries. For instance, safeguarding cultural heritage places, protecting biodiversity, and reducing carbon footprints are all cooperative efforts in sustainable tourism practises. The G20 Tourism Working Group Meetings provide a forum for the sharing of information and expertise, the harmonisation of standards, and the creation of alliances that go beyond national boundaries. Co-operation is essential to address problems that no one country can solve on its own.

The forum's key differentiator are its five fundamental focus areas which capture the spirit of promoting sustainable, creative, and resilient tourism practises on a global level. It is personally gratifying for me that these areas—Green tourist, Digitalisation, Skills Development, Tourism MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises), and Destination Management—reflect India's resolve to taking the lead among the G20 nations in influencing the direction of the tourist sector. For instance, the mandate for Green Tourism involves promoting eco-friendly and responsible tourism practices that minimize the industry's carbon footprint, preserve biodiversity, and protect fragile ecosystems. Likewise, the group focuses on leveraging digital tools to streamline travel processes, offer personalized experiences, and provide real-time information to tourists.

Skilling, reskilling and upskilling for me are the key differentiators in this endeavour. By investing in training and skill enhancement programmes, G20 nations can empower their tourism workforce with the necessary tools to meet evolving visitor demands and expectations thereby boosting local employability and economic growth.

Building a competitive ground for MSMEs catapults opportunities for a new generation of entrepreneurs to participate in the global tourism value chain fostering entrepreneurship and driving economic diversification.

And, destination management, the final piece of the puzzle is the most crucial as it entails creating strategies to balance tourism growth with the protection of local heritage and the well-being of residents.

In summary, I would like to say that I strongly believe in pursuing the path of sustainable value-creation. This course correction will not just help us mitigate transient challenges but help in making the sector more resilient and future ready. Through collaboration, knowledge sharing, and best practice exchange, G20 nations can work together to ensure that tourism benefits both visitors and the destinations they explore.