

# Medical Tourism in Modern Medicine: The Kerala Perspective

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## Abstract:

Medical Tourism has become a fast-growing industry in the world. Among the world tourist destinations, India has attained a top position along with other Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. The main reasons favorable to India are lower treatment cost, absence of long waiting list, availability of expert doctors and advanced medical care. Among the Indian states, Kerala is at the top in medical tourism industry, combining improved medical facilities, expert and foreign trained doctors and improved tourism facilities. Most of the corporate hospitals in Kerala gets patients who are either relatives of Non Resident Indians and those from abroad. Some of the hospitals have a liaison centre in other countries and considering the cost of treatment being low are able to attract more patients. This study looks into the aspect of the same and also some of the challenges faced in medical tourism.

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## I. Introduction

Traditionally tourism is an activity of travelling for leisure purpose. But modern tourism is not a simple phenomenon. Today tourism is an economic activity of immense global importance as it is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, accounting for 10.6 percent of the world's employment (Ahluwalia, 2002). "Tourism enriches individuals, families, communities and all the world". This message of the awareness campaign by World Tourism Organization (WTO) clearly conveys the impacts of tourism on life, culture, economy and society at all levels (Singh, 2008) Tourism in India has now become the second largest net foreign exchange earner for the country (John and Chelat, 2013).

When tourism is combined with medical treatment in a foreign country it becomes medical tourism. In medical tourism, people cross the borders, to attain high quality healthcare service at a lower cost which is either absent or not available without much waiting time in their home country. When it is attached to a tourism program, it becomes part of a global medical tourism. In this sense, during the last decade India has attained a top position among the medical tourism destinations in the world along with other Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. In India, Kerala is considered to be the most popular destination for the foreign tourist patients. The perspective aspects are highlighted in this paper.

## II. Growth of medical tourism

Medical tourism is not a new phenomenon, but now it has become a fast-emerging industry in many counties of the world. The main reason for its importance is that it provides cost-effective medical care in collaboration with the tourism industry for patients who need specialized treatments like surgery and other procedures.

In early days, according to the traditional medical tourism practice, wealthy patients from less developed countries from Europe and Asia used to travel to developed countries for their medical treatment (Chanda, 2002). But the recent trend is the reverse whereby both middle class and rich people travel to developing countries to obtain medical treatment coupled with visit to tourist destinations. (Chanda, 2002; Lagace, 2007; Hall, 2011). This is mainly due to the unaffordable treatment cost and long waiting time in the developed countries like U.S and U.K, and also due to high quality treatment with low cost, now available in developing countries like India, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Costa Rica and Mexico (Table 1).

**Table 1: Medical Tourism destinations**

Asia /Middle East	The Americas	Europe	Africa	Others
China	Argentina	Germany	South Africa	Australia
India	Bolivia	Italy	Tunisia	New Zealand
Israel	Brazil	Republic		
Jordan	Colombia	Hungary		
Singapore	Canada	Latvia		
Malaysia	Costa Rica	Littuania		
Thailand	Cuba	Portugal		
Turkey	Mexico	Rumania		
South Korea	Ecuador	Spain		

Philippines	Barbados	Belgium		
United Arab Emirates	United States	Poland		
Hong Kong	Dominican Republic			
	Guatemala			
	Panama			
	Peru			
	Uruguay			

**Source: Kumar (2008), Thompson (2011) and World Tourism Statistics**

According to Dawn and Pal (2011), medical tourism is the act of travelling to other countries to obtain medical, dental or surgical care. During this medical need, the patients can make use of the time and money for a leisure tour and for the enjoyment of attractions in a foreign country. The main factors that motivate medical tourists in developing countries are:

- Considerably lower cost of treatment
- Avoidance of long waiting time or unavailability of services in home country
- Favourable currency exchange rate
- High quality treatment due to technological development
- Availability of expert doctors, nurses and hospital staff
- Ease of travel due to increased air-travel facilities
- Increased accommodation facilities
- Advanced tourism facilities

All the above factors boosted medical tourism industry when large number of patients from several countries including developed countries like United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Western Europe started travelling to other developing countries in Asia and Latin America to receive medical and health care

services. Singh (2008), reported that the real attraction for medical tourism was price. He observed that the cost of surgery in India, Thailand or South Africa can be one tenth or even less than that in the US or Western Europe. For example, when a heart valve replacement costs US \$2,00,000 in US, it costs only US \$ 10,000 in India, including airfare and a vacation package. Similarly, a Lasik eye surgery worth US \$ 3,700 in the U.S can be done for US \$ 730 in many other countries. These reports still remain with slight variations in the current treatment costs.

Horowitz and Rosenweig (2007) stated that developed countries having long waiting list for specialized procedures make use of medical tourism by sending patients to other countries to receive medical care at a low cost without much waiting time. They have also observed that, in 2003 around 350,000 patients from industrialized nations travelled to many developing countries for health care. It was also projected that 750,000 American will go to other countries for medical care in 2007 and the number will be increased to six million in 2010. These reports show a steady growth of medical tourism industry.

## I. Medical Tourism in India

Traditionally, India has been well known around the world in the Ayurvedic sector of medical treatment. For this, Kerala and Karnataka are very popular destinations for the world medical tourists (Chanda, 2002). Even today, a good majority of foreign medical tourists are coming to Kerala for Ayurvedic treatment (Dept. of Tourism, Govt of Kerala, 2018). However, as a result of globalization and economic liberalization in 1990s, medical tourism in modern medicine got a sudden momentum in India. Consequently, a large number of multi-specialty hospitals having high technological and modern medical facilities were established (Vijaya, 2010), along with various tourist destinations.

It was estimated that 150,000 foreign patients would have travelled to India for medical treatment in 2004 with an annual growth rate of about 30 percent (CII and McKinsey & Co., 2002; Chacko, 2006). Also, Bookman and Bookman (2007) and Singh (2008) further made a forecast that the value of medical tourism in India would reach US \$ 2 billion by 2012, showing a regular progress in the modern medical tourism in India. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2018), the provisional estimate of foreign exchange earnings through medical tourism was Rs. 1,35,193 crores in 2015, Rs. 1,54,146 crores in 2016 and Rs. 1,77,874 crores in 2017, showing a steady growth in the modern medical tourism industry in India.

The most important reason for the growth of medical tourism in India is the low cost of treatment without compromising quality in treatments. For example, when a heart bypass surgery costs \$ 123,000 in US, it is only \$ 7,900 in India. Also, the cost of treatment in India is the lowest in Asia, even lesser than that in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. For example, when a heart valve transplant costs US \$ 13,500 in Malaysia, US \$ 16,900 in Singapore and US \$ 17,200 in Thailand, it is only US \$ 9,500 in India (Table 2).

**Table 2: Cost comparison of selected treatments in different countries (in US \$)**

Medical procedure	USA	Costa Rica	India	Mexico	Thailand	Malaysia	Singapore
Heart Bypass	123000	27000	7,900	27000	15000	12100	17200
Angioplasty	28200	13800	5700	10400	4200	8000	13400
Heart Valve Replacement	17000	30000	9500	28200	17200	13500	16900
Hip Replacement	40364	13600	7200	13500	17000	8000	13900
Hip Resurfacing	28000	13200	9700	12500	13500	12500	16350
Knee Replacement	35000	12500	6600	12900	14000	7700	16000

Spinal Fusion	1100 00	157 00	103 00	154 00	9500	6000	12800
Dental Implant	2500	800	900	900	1720	1500	2700
Lap Band	14,0 00	9,4 50	7,3 00	6,50 0	11,50 0	8,150	9,200
Gastric Sleeve	16,5 00	115 00	6,0 00	8,90 0	9,900	8,400	11,500
Gastric Bypass	25,0 00	129 00	7,0 00	11,5 00	16,80 0	9,900	13,700
Hysterectomy	15,4 00	6,9 00	3,2 00	4,50 0	3650	4200	10,400
Breast Implants	6,40 0	3,5 00	3,0 00	3,80 0	3,500	3,800	8,400
Rhinoplasty	6,50 0	3,8 00	2,4 00	3,80 0	3,300	2,200	2,200
Face Lift	11,0 00	4,5 00	3,5 00	4,90 0	3,950	3,550	440
Liposuction	5,50 0	2,8 00	2,8 00	3,00 0	2,500	2,500	2,900
Tummy Tuck	8,00 0	5,0 00	350 0	450 0	5300	3900	4650
Lasik (both eyes)	4000	240 0	100 0	190 0	2310	3450	3800
Cornea (per eye)	17,5 00	9,8 00	2,8 00	N/A	3,600	N/A	9,000
Cataract surgery (per eye)	3,50 0	1,7 00	1,5 00	2,10 0	1,800	3,000	3,250
IVF Treatment	12,4 00	N/A	2,5 00	5,00 0	4,100	6,900	14,900

Source :<https://medicaltourism.com/Forms/price-comparison.aspx>: Prices as on 2019

Among the developing countries, India is well known for offering advanced treatments in various procedures like cardiac, pediatric, dental, cosmetic and orthopedic surgical systems (Dawn and Pal, 2011). The favourable factor for success is that India's infrastructure, technology and the doctor's expertise are at par with those of the US, UK and European countries (Thompson, 2011). Similarly, in the case of dental treatments, when the cost of single-implant is US \$ 3000 to 5000 in the United States, it is only US \$190 in India, US \$ 240 in Thailand, US \$ 990 in Mexico and US \$ 360 in Hungary. Again, when, a root canal treatment costs US \$ 699 to 1300 in USA, it is just US \$ 38 in India (Table3).

**Table 3: Cost comparison in dental treatment**

Procedure	Approximated figures in US \$				
	US	India	Thailand	Mexico	Hungary

Single Implant	3,000 – 5,000	1,90	240	990	360
Veneer	800 – 1200	140	240	369	360
Root canal	699 – 1300	38	90-200	299-329	60
Crown	750 – 1000	60	210-390	299	285
Bonding	150 – 300	20 – 30	80	70	70
Wisdom teeth Removal	250 – 500	60	80	120	180

Source: [www.midac.in/internat-patients/](http://www.midac.in/internat-patients/)

Thus, in the case of cost-effective treatments, India is the most accepted destination in the world. In addition to this, the waiting time in India is almost nil.

## II. Medical Tourism in Kerala

### 2.1. Kerala as a Tourist Destination

Kerala, the southernmost state of India, and popularly known as 'God's Own Country' is considered to be the most accepted destination for the world tourists. This greenest state of Indian sub-continent, is blessed with excellent tropical evergreen land, comprising thick rain forests, plantation-covered high ranges and hill tops of Western Ghats, beautiful midlands of vegetative variations and palm-lined coastal belts with interspread lakes, rivers and beaches. In addition to these natural attractions, the excellent tropical and moderate climatic conditions throughout the year make Kerala a world popular tourist destination.

Some popular centres that attract tourists from various countries are: Kovalam and Varkala beaches; Kumarakom, Alappuzha and Kollam Backwaters; Munnar, Thekkady and Ponmudi Hill stations; Athirappally and Parampikulam Projects, Malampuzha Dam, Edakkad and Bakel Ports and Pookot lake. Pilgrimage centers like Sabarimala, Erumeli, and the world-famous Lord Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple at Thiruvananthapuram are also well-known destinations (Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala, 2017).

### 2.2. Tourist Arrivals and Government Support

State Government (Department of Tourism) and other Govt Agencies like Kerala

Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) and Kerala Tourism Promotion Council (KTPC) together undertake several tourism promotion activities to boost the tourist arrivals. Consequently, domestic tourist arrivals in Kerala increased from 1.31 crore in 2016 to 1.46 crore in 2017, registering 11.39 percent increase. In the case of foreign tourists, the number increased from 10.38 lakhs in 2016 to 10.91 lakhs in 2017, making 5.15 percent increase (Department of Tourism, Govt of Kerala, 2018).

According to the new tourism Policy of the state Govt., several projects like Responsible tourism, Adventure tourism, Pilgrimage tourism and Heritage tourism have been addressed. Activities of Responsible Tourism Mission started two years ago are progressing well. Consequently, 86,765 foreign tourists arrived in the village tourism centers of the state during the last two years. In 2018, despite the severe flood disaster in the state, Kerala tourism earned Rs. 30,000 crores and the employment opportunity rose to 15 lakhs. In the Responsible Tourism sector job was provided to 30,549 people directly and 59,763 indirectly. Based on the overall developmental activities, Kerala Tourism has achieved three international Awards from the Asia Pacific Travel Association (Surendran, 2009). Since tourism sector plays an important role in medical tourism, the development projects and achievements lead to the growth of the medical tourism industry.

### **2.3. Medical facilities in Kerala**

When tourism is combined with medical treatment in a foreign country, it becomes medical tourism. In this sense, Kerala is one of the most popular medical tourist destinations in the world. Even from the early days, Kerala has been internationally well known for the Ayurvedic treatments. Consequent to the economic recession, globalization and liberalization during 1990s, the patients in Europe who needed special treatments like surgeries were looking for places to get treatment at affordable cost and without long waiting time. The European visitors and tourist patients identified that Kerala has a pool of expert doctors and nurses attached to a network of super specialty hospitals where any type of treatments can be obtained at low cost and without much waiting time. Since then, numerous International patients from Europe including those from Western

developed countries started travelling to Kerala to utilize the advantages of medical facilities at affordable price, along with a tourism program (Kumar, 2008; Singh, 2010). Medical tourism in Kerala, thus became a full-fledged activity. Today, Kerala is one of the most popular medical tourism destinations in the world.

### **2.4. Advanced Hospital facilities**

Majority of multispecialty hospitals engaged in medical tourism in Kerala belong to private sector. Most of them are having NABH accreditation. Some of the most popular hospitals engaged in health tourism in Kerala are: Kerala Institute of Medical Science (KIMS), Ananthapuri Hospitals Pvt Ltd, SP Fort Hospital, NIMS Medicity and Kailas Dental Clinic belonging to Southern Kerala; Amrutha Institute of Medical Science (AIMS), Aster Medicity, VPS Lakeshore Hospital, Medical Trust Hospital and Facet's Dental Clinic belonging to central Kerala; Aster MIMS, Baby Memorial Hospital, Meittra Hospital, IQRAA International Hospital and Research Centre and Midac Dental Care belonging to Northern Kerala, to name a few (present study).

### **2.5. Low cost and no waiting time**

Exorbitant and unaffordable treatment charge and long waiting list in the home country are the main reasons for the foreign patients to seek healthcare in Kerala. The cost comparison among India and other countries is stated elsewhere. The price in India is applicable to Kerala also (Tables 2 and 3). The low cost is due to exchange rate and not due to low quality of treatment.

### **2.6. High quality services by expert doctors**

Indian doctors are known worldwide for their expertise in almost all treatment systems. Most of them are well trained in developed countries like US and UK. Even the nurses are also well trained and qualified to work in foreign countries. All specialty hospitals are well equipped and prepared to undertake any treatment procedure using advanced technology.

### **2.7. Accommodation facilities**

A network of accommodation units is available in the state. Many star- Hotels owned by private sector are at par with those of advanced countries having branches all over the world. The total number of tourist accommodation units owned by the State Govt. is 5494 with 80,221

rooms. They include 3,368 hotels, 569 Resorts, 914 Home Stay, 80 Guest Houses, 180 Rest Houses and 89 House Boats (Dept. of Tourism, Govt. of Kerala, 2017). They are managed by the Government Agencies namely Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) and Tourism Promotion council (Dept. of Tourism, Govt. of Kerala, 2018).

## 2.8. Ease of Travel

Kerala is well connected by Air to all countries in the world. The Govt. has relaxed visa policy to promote medical tourism industry. A visa-on-arrival scheme specially for medical tourists and their accompanying persons (upto four) has also been provided. The major medical tourism markets in Kerala include, US, UK, Mali, Gulf- Bahrain, Oman, UAE and Sharjah to name a few (present study, unpublished).

## 2.9. Health vacation in Kerala

Health vacation phenomenon is a new trend in modern medical tourism (Singh, 2010). Tourists from various countries are now visiting Kerala for wellness solutions. In 2006, the tourist arrival was 16,000 and it was estimated that the number could rise up to 100,000 in 2010, mainly due to Kerala's world class doctors and excellent infrastructure (Singh, 2010).

## III. Conclusion

India's healthcare systems are now globally known for its safety, trust, compassion and excellence. High quality treatment for lower price and without waiting time attract foreign patients to India especially for the surgical treatments. In India, Kerala is the most popular destination for foreign tourists. Added to this, factors like accredited multispecialty hospitals, having expert doctors and nurses, technologically developed treatment facilities and quality medical care for affordable price available at any time, combined with world famous tourist destinations, provide very good scope for the growth of medical tourism in Kerala.

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