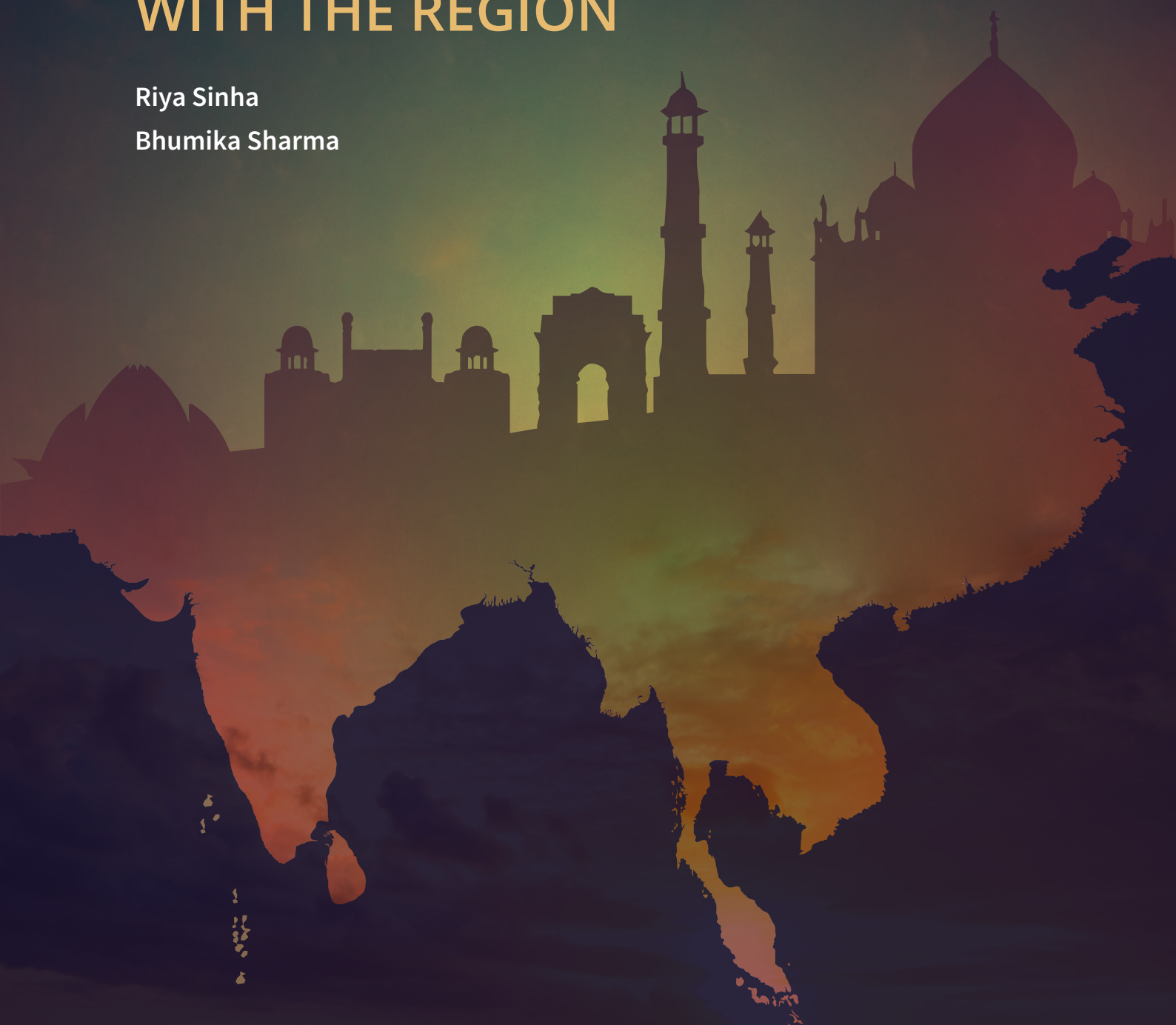SAMBANDH
Regional Connectivity Initiative

Policy Brief | July 2020

TRAVEL SOUTH ASIA: INDIA'S TOURISM CONNECTIVITY WITH THE REGION

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Riya Sinha and Bhumika Sharma[1]

Key Takeaways

Tourists from the neighbourhood comprise approximately a third of the total foreign tourist arrivals in India - 29% in 2018.

After liberalisation of visa rules in 2013 and 2018, the number of tourists from Bangladesh increased by 80%, making it the top source of foreign tourist arrivals.

Chinese tourist arrivals in South Asia have grown significantly between 2007 and 2018 - by 687% in the Maldives, 462% in Nepal, and 2486% in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Tourism is an important metric of a country's soft power potential, marked by an increase in movement of people and enabling people-to-people connectivity. Over the last two decades, South Asia has emerged as an attractive tourist destination due to its natural and cultural diversity, and price competitiveness.[2] The region is home to tourism-based economies such as Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka that attract high spending per traveller.[3] In 2019, the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) ranked South Asia as "the most improved region since 2017."[4] Within this, India has shown the greatest improvement in rank among the top 25% countries, from 40th in 2017 to 34th in 2019.

India accounts for a majority of South Asia's travel and tourism gross domestic product (GDP) and has also been the preferred destination for tourists from within the region. In the last decade, India has witnessed an increase in the share of South Asian tourist arrivals. While geographic proximity and cultural affiliations are the underlying factors for high cross-border mobility, the market size and the tourists' spending capacity have also played an important role. Additionally, tourist spill-overs from India to the rest of the region contribute significantly to the regional tourism economy.

This policy brief highlights tourism connectivity between India and its neighbours, capturing the tourism trends within South Asia. Given China's increasing tourism imports and a growing presence in the region, the brief also offers a comparative analysis of reciprocal tourism trends between South Asia and China.

2   "The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019: Travel and tourism at a tipping point," (Geneva: World Economic Forum (WEF), 2019), P. 31, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2019.pdf

3   "The Cursed Blessing of Public Banks," (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2020) P. 38, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/551641586789758259/pdf/South-Asia-Economic-Focus-Spring-2020-The-Cursed-Blessing-of-Public-Banks.pdf

4   "The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019: Travel and tourism at a tipping point," World Economic Forum (WEF), op-cit.

Methodology

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as "the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes."[5] Along similar lines, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Government of India, defines a foreign tourist as "a person visiting India on a foreign passport, staying at least twenty-four hours in the country, the purpose of whose journey can be classified under one of the following headings: (a) leisure (recreation, holiday, health, study, religion, and support), and; (b) business, family mission, meeting."[6] The definition extends to transit passengers who stay overnight in India and are counted as tourists.

The data on inbound and outbound flows is from the Ministry of Tourism's India Tourism Statistics Reports and the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) e-library. The inbound statistics used in Figures 1 and 2 are equivalent to outbound tourism data from each neighbouring country to India. Qualitative inputs were collected through informal interviews with officials from the Ministry of Tourism and the Bureau of Immigration in India to understand the data collection methodology and various steps taken to promote tourism.

It should be noted that the Ministry of Tourism changed its methodology in 2014, standardising it with the UNWTO methodology, and added Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) to the Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) category, which together formed the "International Tourist Arrivals" (ITA).[7] For the purpose of analysis and standardisation of data with the preceding years, Figures 1, 2 and 5 only focus on the FTAs. The mode of arrival data in Figure 4 is from the India Tourism Statistics reports, published annually between 2010 and 2019 by the Ministry of Tourism.

This policy brief covers tourism data between India and seven of its neighbouring countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which are collectively referred to as 'South Asia' or N7.

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5   "Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended methodological Framework," United Nation Statistics, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesF/SeriesF_80E.pdf

6   "India Tourism Statistics 2017," (New Delhi: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018), P 185, http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/INDIA%20TOURISM%20STATISTICS%202017.pdf

7   "Rank of India Improves in International Tourist Arrivals," Press Information Bureau, 2017, https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=161959
Although there is no clear definition for NRIs in the legal statutes, Section 6 of the Income-Tax Act, 1961 contains detailed criteria on who is considered a resident in India and provides that anyone who doesn't meet these criteria is a non-resident. It is not clear whether Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) card-holder arrivals are considered in the tourism arrival statistics.

Growing Share of Tourist Arrivals from South Asia to India

Figure 1: Tourist Arrivals in India (Regional and Total)

The share of tourists from South Asia (N7) has been growing since 2014
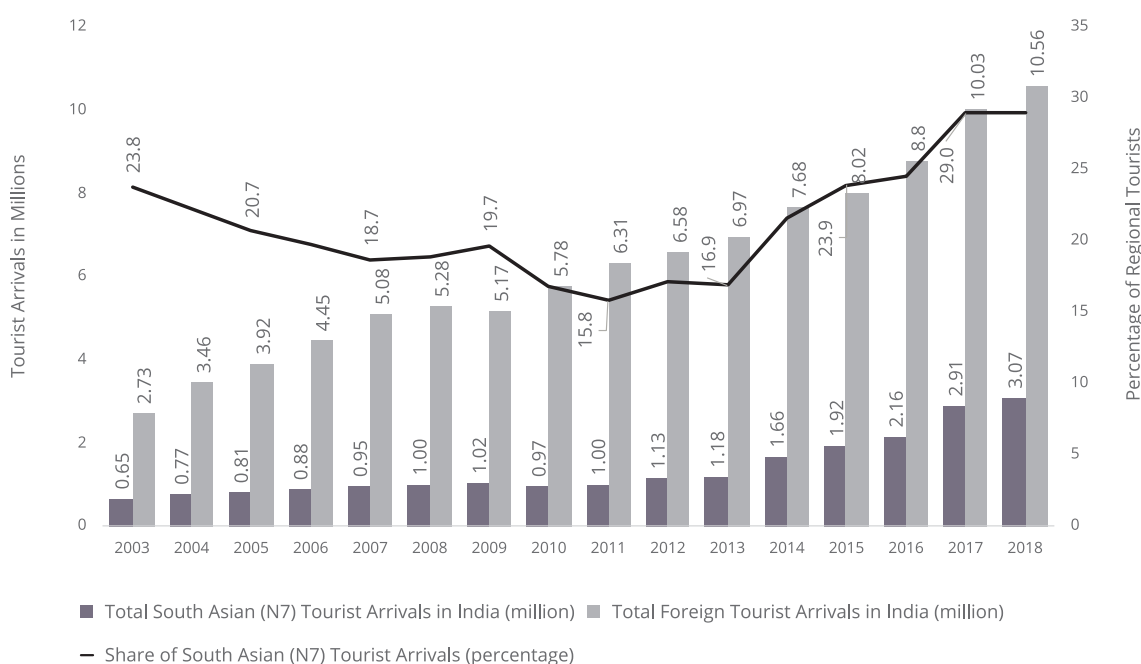
N7: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka
Source: E-Library, UNWTO

While India declared tourism as an industry in 1982, it adopted the National Tourism Policy two decades later in 2002.[8] Supporting this, the Ministry of Tourism launched the "Incredible India" campaign in 2002 targeting increased tourist inflows. The impact of these developments is seen since 2003, when India started witnessing a linear growth in the total number of foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) (Figure 1). Despite this, India's share of global tourist arrivals remains abysmally low at 1.2% (2018).[9]

However, India is growing as an attractive tourist destination for travellers from the South Asian region. Tourists from the neighbourhood account for roughly a third of the total FTAs (Figure 1) in India. In 2018, South Asia accounted for the highest percentage share of tourist arrivals (29%) among all the regions, followed by Western Europe (21%).[10]

From 2003 to 2013, the share of South Asian tourist arrivals dipped from 23.8% to 16.9%. This declining trend registered a shift in 2014, when the share increased for the first time in more than ten years, to 21.6%. Between 2003-2013, the cumulative annual growth rate (CAGR) of total FTAs was 10%, which increased to 22% between 2013-17. Much of this shift is attributed to the rise in the number of Bangladeshi tourists.

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8   "National Tourism Policy 2002," Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/policy/National%20Tourism%20Policy%202002.pdf

9   "Increase India's global share of international tourists to 3% by 2023: NITI," Business Standard, December 19, 2018, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/increase-india-s-global-share-of-international-tourists-to-3-by-2023-niti-118121901140_1.html

10   "India Tourism Statistics 2018," (New Delhi: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018), P. 13, http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%202018.pdf

How tweaking rules can have a big impact: the case of Bangladesh

Figure 2: Foreign Tourist Arrivals from South Asia to India, country-wise (N7)

2017 saw more than two million tourist arrivals from Bangladesh, a 311% increase over 2013
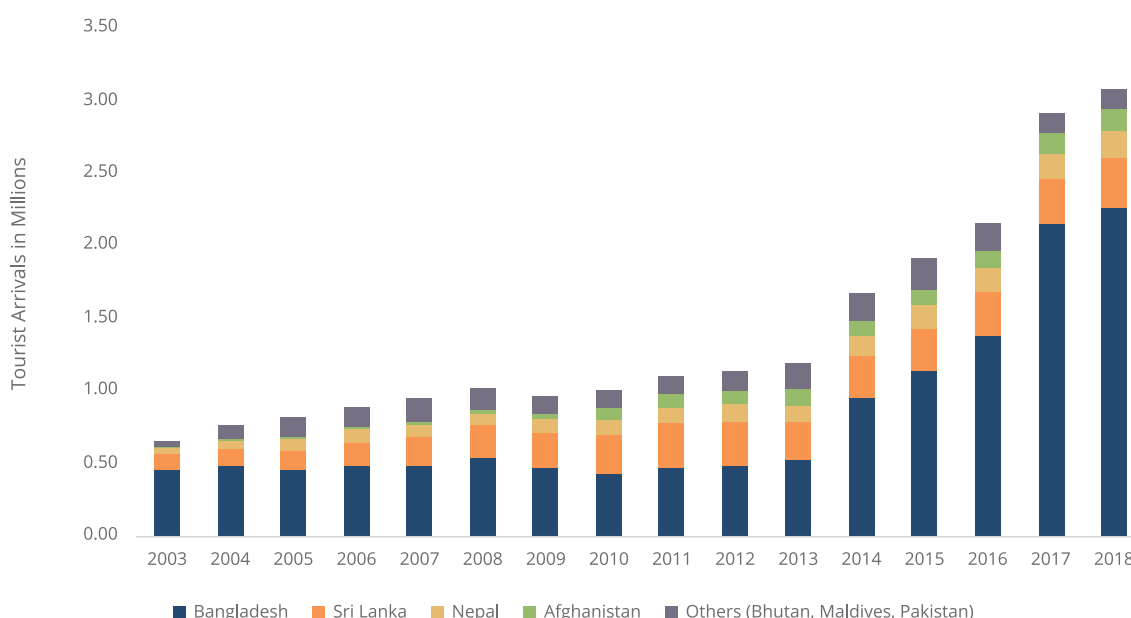
Source: e-Library, UNWTO

A country-wise breakdown of FTAs in India (Figure 2) reveals that the top four South Asian countries for inbound foreign tourists are Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan.

For years, Bangladesh has featured in India's list of top ten tourist source countries due to its proximity and cultural linkages. However, figure 2 shows that there has been a sudden surge in the number of Bangladeshi tourist arrivals from 2014. Between 2003-2014, the growth of Bangladeshi tourist arrivals was 1%, whereas, in 2014, the arrival of Bangladeshi tourists to India increased by 80%. Since then, the number been growing at an average annual rate of 40%. In 2018, one in every four tourists from South Asia arriving in India was from Bangladesh.

A possible explanation for this upward trend could be the liberalisation of Revised Travel Arrangement (RTA) between India and Bangladesh in 2013 and 2018. The 2013 revision brought certain changes to the provisions of the 1972 Agreement on Passport and Visa System, to remove difficulties faced by the nationals of either country in obtaining a visa.[11] Some key revisions include extending the short-term visa on medical grounds for a year, allowing up to three accompanying attendants and similar extension facility, and relaxation in the issuance of multiple-entry permits. India and Bangladesh further liberalised the RTA in 2018, to include longer employment time, student visas and five-year multiple-entry permit for the elderly and freedom fighters.[12]

In 2013 and 2018, India liberalised the Revised Travel Arrangement with Bangladesh, resulting in an average 40% year-on-year growth of tourist arrivals

11   "Revised Travel Arrangements between India and Bangladesh, 2013," Ministry of Home Affairs.

12   "Year-End Review 2018: Ministry of Home Affairs," Press Information Bureau, December 14, 2018, https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1555980

Interviews with stakeholders revealed that as a result of ease of obtaining a visa, several informal cross-border movements have been converted to formal movements. This can be exemplified by tracking movement through the formal border-crossings such as the Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) or Land Customs Stations (LCS). For example, the total incoming and outgoing passenger movement from ICP Agartala increased by 51% in 2014-15 over the previous year, and movement through Petrapole has doubled in the last five years (2014-2019).[13] The increase in registered movements also reflects the efficiency of border infrastructure, including digitzation of immigration processes.

A detailed 2018 survey on 'Study on Visits of Nationals of Bangladesh in India' by the Indian Institute of Tourism & Travel Management (IITTM), reveals the profile, purpose and expenditure pattern of tourists and visitors from Bangladesh.[14] It found that while a majority of the tourists visited India for religious and leisure purpose – 37% and 26% respectively – about 14% of Bangladeshi nationals visited India for medical treatment.

Owing to the cumbersome procedure or inability to obtain a medical visa, some of them were found to have entered India through regular tourist visas. Some Bangladeshi tourists were also repeat visitors to India, with about 24% visiting India six times or more for different purposes. Furthermore, the affordability of India is an important factor for Bangladeshi tourists. The survey shows that the majority of Bangladeshi tourists spend approximately INR 8,000 (approx. USD 115) on a 5-9 day visit to India, with many dependent on public buses for transportation within India.

In the last two years, India also focused on improving visa application processes, which could further explain the rise in Bangladeshi tourist arrivals. In 2018, India inaugurated a new integrated state-of-the-art Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) in Dhaka – its largest visa centre in the world. Additionally, the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh also announced the withdrawal of the appointment system for submission of visa applications.[15]

Visa barriers to regional tourism

India's bilateral visa policies and the resultant degree of ease of access for tourists have an instrumental bearing on the number of FTAs. Within South Asia, agreements with Nepal and Bhutan exempt all nationals of these countries from requiring a visa to travel to India and vice-versa, with only minimal exceptions. Similarly, Maldivian nationals travelling to India for tourism do not need a prior visa if their period of stay in India is less than 90 days in the preceding six months.

We developed an openness index, tracking the ease of access to visas for nationals from

South Asian countries seeking to travel to other countries in the region (Figure 3). The index shows that Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka have the most open tourist visa policies towards citizens of the other South Asian countries. India ranks fifth in travel openness towards South Asia, with only three countries (Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives), eligible for visa-free travel to India. By contrast, Sri Lanka offers visa-on-arrival or e-Travel Authorisation to all South Asian countries and maintains an open border with the Maldives.

13   Data retrieved from Land Ports Authority of India, http://www.lpai.gov.in/content/innerpage/icp-petrapole.php

14   "Study on Visits of Nationals of Bangladesh in India," (Orissa: Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management, 2018), P. 95 – 96, Management, 2018), P. 95 – 96, http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/Final%20Report%20on%20Visit%20of%20Nationals%20of%20 Bangladesh%20to%20India.pdf

15   "India opens its largest visa centre in Bangladesh," Hindustan Times, July 14, 2018, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-opens-its-largest-visa-centre-in-bangladesh/story-ORZfDFw5ioAOPNW662wCiM.html

Box 1: South Asia Tourism Visa Openness Index

Types of visa requirements for tourists from the seven other South Asian countries (Maximum score: 28 = most open | Minimum score: 7 = least open)

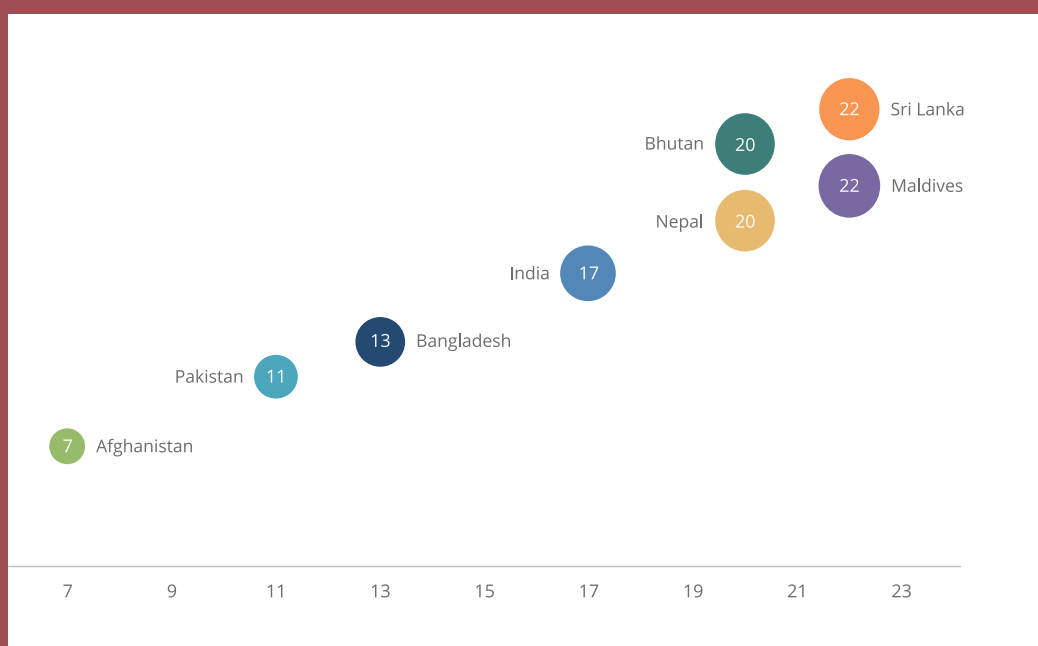Type 1: No visa required (4 points)

Type 2: e-TA and/or visa-on-arrival without prior clearance (3 points)

Type 3: e-Visa and/or visa-on-arrival with prior clearance (2 points)

Type 4: Visa application at the embassy (1 point)

Figure 3: Ranking of Intra - South Asia Tourism Openness

Sri Lanka and the Maldives have the most open tourist visa policy for South Asian countries


Note: Calculated by multiplication of instances and visa type score (4, 3, 2, 1)
Source: Based on an online compilation of requirements of country's official consular and immigration sources, as of May 2020.

Transportation Matters: Mode of Arrival

Figure 4: South Asian Tourists Mode of Arrival to India

Air and road dominant, rail and sea held back by lacking infrastructure
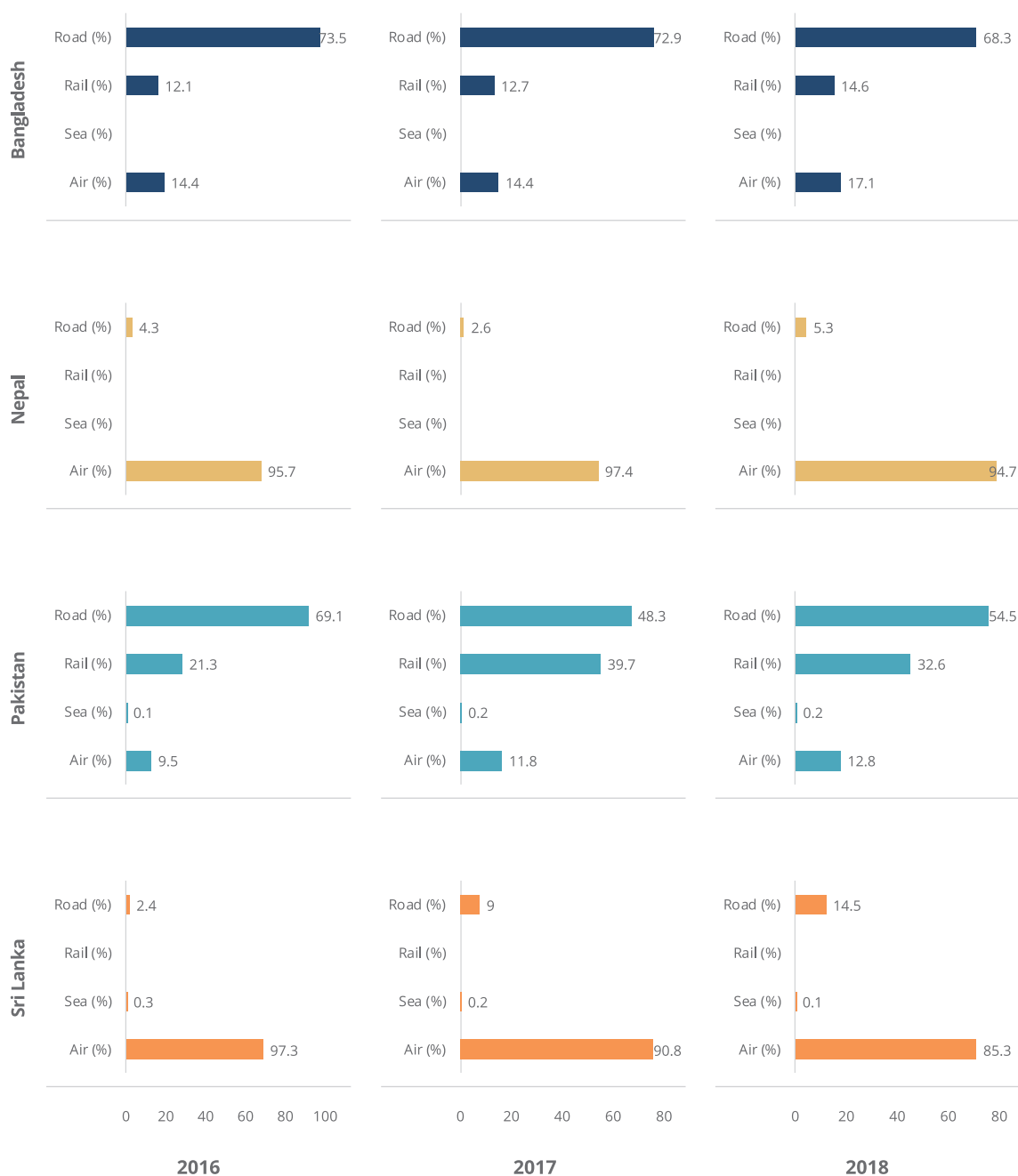
Note: Maximum registered tourist arrivals from Afghanistan, Bhutan and Maldives is by air without any significant variance, hence not included.
Source: India Tourism Statistics Reports (2017-2019), Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

The mode of arrival data in figure 4 is derived from the record of all passports stamped by the Bureau of Immigration at recognised ports of entry. Qualitative inputs reveal that not all land border arrivals from Nepal are stamped, as seen in figure 3, where the majority of the reported arrivals from countries sharing a land border with India, such as Nepal and Bhutan, are via air. Informal crossings are also frequent, especially on the India-Nepal border. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the number of road arrivals from Sri Lanka to India has been increasing. This is possibly due to religious tourism along the Buddhist circuit, with Sri Lankan citizens crossing overland into India after visiting Nepal.

Apart from serving as an indicator of the possible rise in the income profile of India's inbound tourists from South Asia – with more tourists opting for air travel – the data may also reflect improvement of India's infrastructural connectivity with its South Asian neighbours. In the last few years, there has been an increase in investments on cross-border connectivity infrastructure such as Integrated Check Posts (ICPs), airports and sea connectivity. In January 2020, for example, India and Nepal inaugurated the ICP at Jogbani-Biratnagar to facilitate trade and people's movement. This is the second ICP on the India-Nepal border – the first one was built at Raxaul-Birgunj in 2018.[16]

Additionally, in 2018 India and Nepal agreed to open four new cross-border air routes connecting the provinces of Nepal directly to India and Bangladesh.[17] India and Sri Lanka also expanded flight connectivity with the resumption of flights to Jaffna from Chennai after more than four decades. Interestingly, to support such air connectivity, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, India, waived the "5/20" rule, requiring five years of experience and a minimum of 20 flights for an airline to operate international flights.[18] In March 2019, India and Bangladesh commenced a passenger cruise linking Kolkata and Dhaka as part of the Agreements for Enhancing Inland and Coastal Waterways Connectivity.[19]

16 "Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister of Nepal K P Sharma Oli jointly Inaugurate Integrated Check Post at Jogbani-Biratnagar," Press Information Bureau, January 21, 2020. https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=197531

17 "India And Nepal To Have Four New Air Gateways," NDTV, June 18, 2018, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-and-nepal-to-have-four-new-air-gateways-1868948

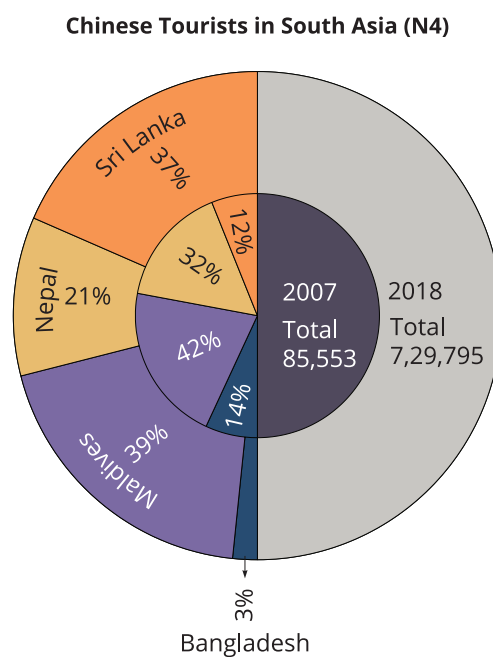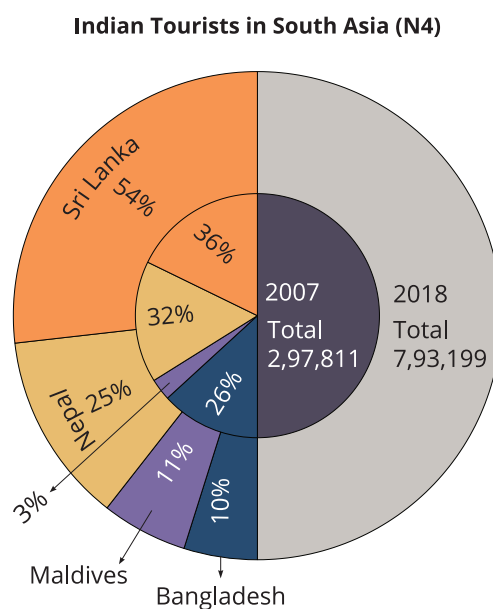18 "Air India unit exempt from this key rule for India-Sri Lanka flights," Financial Express, February 5, 2020. https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/air-india-unit-exempt-from-this-key-rule-for-india-sri-lanka-flights/1857156/

19 "India and Bangladesh Sign Agreements for Enhancing Inland and Coastal Waterways Connectivity," Press Information Bureau, October 25, 2018. https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=184384

Ni Hao! South Asia welcomes Chinese tourists

Figure 5: Indian and Chinese Tourist Arrivals in South Asian Countries (2007 and 2018)

Around one million Chinese tourists visited the region in 2018, a five-fold increase over just ten years ago

Indian Tourists in South Asia (N4)

Sri Lanka 54%
36%
32%
Nepal 25%
26%
3%
11%
10%
Maldives
Bangladesh

2007 Total 2,97,811
2018 Total 7,93,199

Chinese Tourists in South Asia (N4)

Sri Lanka 37%
12%
32%
Nepal 21%
42%
Maldives 39%
14%
3%
Bangladesh

2007 Total 85,553
2018 Total 7,29,795

Source: E-Library, UNTWO
Note: Indian and Chinese outbound tourist data for 2007 has been for used for the decadal comparison since 2008 data is not available for all South Asian countries. The data for Indian and Chinese tourist arrivals in Bhutan and Pakistan is not available and hence, not reflected in the figures. Indian and Chinese outbound tourism data for Bangladesh is available till 2014, hence, the same has been used for the figures of 2018.

Tourism is a lucrative source of foreign exchange earnings. As per the World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC), the sector contributed US$ 234 Billion or 6.6% to South Asia's total GDP in 2019.[20] There was a 4.5% travel and tourism GDP growth vis-a-vis the 5% real GDP growth in the region. While foreign tourist arrivals to the region have increased over the years, there has also been a significant increase in the contribution of tourists from the two largest economies: India and China.

A comparison of Indian and Chinese tourist arrivals in four South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka – reveals that while more Indian tourists visit South Asia, the last decade has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the number of Chinese tourists, approximately by 753% (Figure 5). In 2007, few Chinese tourists were visiting South Asia, concentrated mainly in the Maldives and Nepal (42% and 32%, respectively). In the same year, the number of Indian tourists was significantly more in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Figure 5).

A decade later, the 2018 figures reflect a rather different reality, with a phenomenal rise in the number of Chinese tourists to the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Between 2007 and 2018, Chinese tourist arrivals rose by 687% in the Maldives, and 462% in Nepal. Sri Lanka registered the highest growth in tourist arrivals from China, from just about ten thousand in 2007 to almost two hundred and sixty thousand in 2018 (a rise of 2486%).

According to the UNWTO and the Chinese Tourism Academy, China has been the world's largest tourism source market since 2012. The number of outbound travel departures increased from 4.5 million in 2000 to 150 million in 2018, with an average annual double-digit growth of 16%.[21] However, it is reported that the market is still in its infancy. Since only 7% of Chinese citizens currently own a passport, the number of trips could surge to over 400 million by 2030.[22]

This enormous expansion of the Chinese outbound tourism market can be attributed to reasons such as increased air connectivity and a rising middle-class with growing disposable income. Between 1990 and 2016, the number of international air travellers has increased from just one to 52 million.[23] Furthermore, a profile segmentation of Chinese outbound tourists shows that women and millennials (aged between 15-34 years) dominate the market with respectively 53% and 55% of the total outbound tourist share.[24]

Between 2007 and 2018, the number of Chinese tourist arrivals has increased five-fold in Nepal, seven-fold in the Maldives, and twenty-five-fold in Sri Lanka

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Countries in South Asia reportedly gain more from tourism exports to China than India. This is reflected in the average per capita spending capacity of Chinese and Indian tourists in 2018, at approximately US$ 1850 and US$ 960, respectively.[25] In the same year, the total Chinese tourist expenditure amounted to US$ 277 billion, registering a 5% increase from the

20   "Economic Impact Report," World Travel and Tourism Council, https://wttc.org/en-gb/Research/Economic-Impact

21   "Guidelines for Success in the Chinese Outbound Tourism Market," (Spain: UNWTO and China Tourism Academy, 2019), P. 12, https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284421138

22   Louise Moon, "China's influence on global tourism continues to grow: study," South China Morning Post, October 23, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/business/china-business/article/2169789/chinas-influence-global-tourism-continues-grow-study

23   "How is commercial aviation propelling China's economic development?", China power, https://chinapower.csis.org/china-commercial-aviation/

24   "Guidelines for the Success in the Chinese Outbound Tourism Market," UNWTO and CTA, op-cit.

25   Calculated by dividing total "international tourism expenditure" by total "number of departures" in 2018. World Bank Data.

previous year. By comparison, India's total international tourist expenditure was US$ 26 billion after a 9% year-on-year increase.[26]

China's increasing investments in tourism and allied sectors in South Asia could have possibly led to the rise in Chinese tourist arrivals. For instance, in the Maldives, China has invested significantly in infrastructure, housing, hotels and airlines.[27] In 2011, the Sri Lankan government sold a strategically important site, the Colombo beachfront property, to a Hong-Kong based holding company for USD 125 million.[28] Nepal and China have established direct flights from Kathmandu to Beijing through Himalayan Airlines, a Nepal-China joint venture.[29] Furthermore, China's Northwest Civil Aviation Construction Group, with financial assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), is constructing the new Gautam Buddha International Airport.[30] During his 2019 visit to Nepal, China's President Xi Jinping noted that "Nepal is the first South Asian country to be designated an approved destination for Chinese tourists" and that there now are about sixty weekly flights connecting both countries.[31]

Conclusion

India has been the preferred short-haul destination for tourists from its neighbourhood. Tourists visit India not only for leisure and medical reasons, but also use the country for transit to other regions. Bilaterally, there have been improvements in visa policies, for example, the relaxation of the India-Bangladesh visa policy in 2013 and with the Maldives in 2019. However, there are still significant challenges towards promoting free and open intra-regional tourism such as visa-openness, gaps in cross-border infrastructure, etc. China, on the other hand, has been increasing its presence in the region, with a growth of 753% in the last decade (2007-2018). It has also made significant investments in South Asia's tourism and hospitality sectors.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented unforeseen challenges to global tourism. With geography gaining significance and the importance of shorter distances becoming more pronounced, regional tourism is likely to grow. Governments must thus pivot to focus considerably more attention on regional tourism through investments in infrastructure and services, particularly digitisation to reduce human transactions. India, in particular, will have to leverage the wide range of cultural similarities with its neighbours such as the regional Buddhist trail and pilgrimage, etc. Such a push would also contribute locally through employment and revenue generation from foreign exchange earnings.

26   "International Tourism, Expenditures (current US$) – India, China," World Bank Data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.XPND.CD?locations=IN-CN

27   Amit Bhandari and Chandni Jindal, "The Maldives: Investments Undermine Democracy," (Gateway House, February 7, 2018.), https://www.gatewayhouse.in/chinese-investments-in-the-maldives/

28   "In Sri Lanka, China's Building Spree Is Raising Questions About Sovereignty," National Public Radio, December 13, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/12/13/784084567/in-sri-lanka-chinas-building-spree-is-raising-questions-about-sovereignty

29   Atul Aaneja, "China expands footprint in region with new air links with Nepal, Myanmar," The Hindu, October 28, 2019, https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-expands-footprint-in-region-with-new-air-links-with-nepal-myanmar/article29813863.ece

30   Elizabeth Roche, "Nepal gears up for tourism challenge with swanky new airport," LiveMint, December 3, 2019, https://www.livemint.com/news/india/nepal-gears-up-for-tourism-challenge-with-swanky-new-airport-11575343348170.html

31   "Full text of Xi's signed article on Nepali newspapers," Xinhuanet, October 11, 2019,   http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/11/c_138463745.htm

Policy Recommendations

Several steps can be taken to ensure a seamless flow of tourists in India and its neighbourhood:

1. E-visa, with digital application and delivery: Technical modernisation, upgradation and other improvements are needed in the Indian visa application and delivery system for South Asian nationals. Currently, only China and Sri Lanka are eligible for an Indian e-visa. Considering the rising share of tourists from the neighbourhood in India, the e-visa facility should be extended to other countries in the region.

2. Investing in digitisation in the tourism industry: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an increasing focus on digitisation of various services to revive the tourism sector. Contact-less transfers, hotel check-ins, site-visits etc. will be crucial for revival of the industry. This requires participation from both public and private sector stakeholders and significant investment in digitisation to enhance secure travel and ensure revenue from foreign exchange.

3. Inter-ministerial coordination to enhance infrastructural connectivity: The Ministry of Tourism should actively work with other ministries such as the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Ministry of Home Affairs to undertake infrastructure-related connectivity initiatives, for example by further expanding the UDAN Scheme to neighbouring countries and supporting digital immigration services at the Integrated Check Posts.[32] Apart from this, the government must play a role in facilitating tourism infrastructural development supported by multilaterals such as the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, etc.

4. Tourism promotion through regional initiatives: India must take the lead in promoting intra-regional tourism through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) or the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal initiative (BBIN). Following the example of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India could host regional tourism summits and facilitate inter-regional cooperation among tour operators, for example with the Federation of ASEAN Travel Associations (FATA). India should also work and cooperate bilaterally with other South Asian countries on joint tourism promotion and advertising campaigns, towards establishing the tourism industry as a regional value chain.

5. Promoting religious tourism circuits: The historical and cultural linkages between South Asian nations offer the potential to develop tourism circuits within the region. There has been an interest towards developing a Buddhist circuit between India and Nepal, and a Ramayana circuit between India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. India's regional governments will have to play a vital role in targeted outreach initiatives to promote their religious heritage to specific countries.[33]

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32   Press Information Bureau (2019). Shri Suresh Prabhu announces UDAN 3.0 results. New Delhi: Government of India. Retrieved from https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=187783

33   Press Information Bureau (2019). Ministry of Tourism has organized Road Shows in several countries to attract Buddhist tourists: Shri Prahlad Singh Patel. New Delhi: Government of India. Retrieved from https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=191115

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