ABSTRACT

Tourism by definition necessarily involves the movement of people away from their normal place of residence – from tourist-generating regions to the tourist destination areas – and the movement is essentially facilitated by the means of transportation. Transport is therefore, acknowledged as one of the most significant elements in the total tourism system, which significantly contributes to its development. Not only do the means of transportation provide an essential link between tourist’s origin and destination areas but many a times these also form the focal point of any tourist activity which involves a significant component of travel, for example, coach holidays, scenic rail journeys etc.

The promotion and development of tourism in any country or region lies on the shoulders of many stakeholders related to tourism, such as government, travel agents and tour operators, hotel industry, transport operators and agencies etc. In India the inland transport sector is represented by all the major transport modes viz. road, rail, air and water. While the inland water transport is almost non-existent, the scheduled domestic air transport is very limited, both in its expanse and capacity, in comparison to the size and population of the country. It is also very expensive, therefore accessible to only the high-income segment of the population. The rail and road transport are the prime and major transportation modes in the country. While the road transport is preferred over short distances and on short-notice travel due to flexibility in its departures, the rail transport is preferred over medium and long distances. India being a large sized country with highly dispersed tourist destinations, the rail
transport becomes an obvious choice for a majority of foreign and domestic tourists.

The railways in India can play a bigger role in the promotion and development of tourism not only because of having some competitive edge over the other means of transport but also because of having an enormous potential to promote itself as a tourist attraction. However, over the years the Indian Railways has by and large lagged behind in effectively and efficiently utilising its tourism potential. Baring a few attempts the railway till recently made no serious efforts to meet the needs and requirements of this sector. However, during past few years the railway is gearing up to respond to the growing and dynamic tourist market. The recent establishment of Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC), for the promotion and development of rail-based tourism in the country, is step an important step in this direction. The establishment of this company and the changing attitudes of the railway men towards dealing with rail-tourism are the indications of the better future of rail-based tourism in the country. However, this can only be possible if Indian Railways works for the effective implementation of its policy decisions.

The situation is thus indicative of a need to study and investigate the role of Indian Railways in the promotion and development of tourism in the country and to trace out the possible bottlenecks that have hitherto led to the poor performance of Indian Railways in utilising its tourism potential. In the present study entitled, “Role of Indian Railways in the Promotion of Tourism – A Case Study of ‘Palace Wheels’”, an attempt has been made to explore and evaluate the rail-based tourism potential of the country and to investigate into the role that Indian Railways has played and could play for its promotion. In this work
a case study of ‘Palace on Wheels’ has also been carried out to evaluate its performance as the first specialised ‘tourism project on wheels’ by Indian Railways.

In India the wheels rolled on iron rails for the first time on April 16, 1853, when on that day the first ever train in India ran on a 21 mile track between Bombay (non Mumbai) and Thana (now Thane). Ever since its inception the railway in India for more than any other form of transport has been used by the people of the sub-continent as a means of communication between the North and the South, between the East and the West, across its hills and plains and over mighty rivers that were bridged for the first time by these iron ways. Through 150 years of its service to the nation, the railway in India engineered social revolution, brought about national integration and transformed the economy.

The railway is one of the inventions the British used in India. Though, its arrival in the country was primarily governed by the British Rule’s need to ferry troops rapidly through the length and breadth of the country and to transport raw materials from the hinterlands to the ports for their easy transportation to Britain, it was nevertheless marketed as an innovation. The royal princes of erstwhile Indian princely states were quick to seize the idea of establishing railway networks in their respective states for the movement of royalty and the people within their territories. At the time of the independence, in 1947, there were 42 independent railway systems in India. After the independence, all of them were nationalised and amalgamated into various Railway Zones under the single management.

Over the years, since independence, Indian Railways developed the capacity to perform the functions related to manufacture, maintenance,
administration, operation, etc. Today the Indian Railways is the second largest railway network and the largest under single management in the world. With its wide network spread across the length and breadth of the country, it reaches out to every nook and corner from snow-capped mountains in the North to the sunny sand-beaches marked by the Indian Ocean in the South, from the lush evergreen and dense rainforests in the East to the vast, barren and golden sand-deserts in the West. It annihilates distances and cuts across all geographical barriers to enable the people to intermix. Today it carries more than 13 million passengers daily on about 8,500 passenger trains with more than 40,000 passenger coaches over more than 63,000 km of its route network and connects about 7,000 railway stations across the length and breadth of the country.

However, it lacked in improving its organisational and managerial environment, which has been production-driven and continuously ignored the customer focus. Though this had partly been because the railway has been overburdened with its social obligation; the monopoly status, which the railway enjoyed, also helped it to get away with neglecting the market realities. Above all the uncritical attitude of the average rail users, who view the service of the railway as neither their right nor their responsibility and take whatever is given to them uncritically, has further distanced the railway services providers from its users. The inadequacies and inefficiencies of the railway services are even more evident while it deals with tourists as consumers of its services, despite its huge potential to meet the requirements of this growing market.

India is a high potential tourist destination with diversity in culture, history, traditions, languages, climate, physiography etc. and Indian Railways cuts across all these barriers and reaches out to every nook and corner of the country. It has a vast potential to promote tourism on its tracks, not only in that
it reaches out to places throughout the country and has some competitive edge over the other means of transport but also in being a complete tourist product in itself. The heritage of Indian Railways acquired through 150 years of its history bears an immense nostalgic appeal. It has become a treasure house of old steam locomotives, saloons, colonial railway stations and bungalows, unique construction, buildings, ghats (river jetties), tunnels etc., which makes it second to none in the world in terms of heritage value. It has five hill railways to its credit; many of them still run by old steam locomotives, evoking the memories of a bygone era. These hill railways chug up the mountain slopes with breathtaking views enroute and hardly have any match in the world. The special luxury tourist trains such as ‘Palace on Wheels’, ‘Royal Orient’, ‘Deccan Odyssey’ etc., have become the talk of the international tourist circles. The unique heritage train, ‘Fairy Queen’, hauled by the world’s oldest steam locomotive in working order, is a treat not only to the rail enthusiasts but to all alike.

Estimates show that about 38.77 percent foreign and about 30.15 percent of domestic tourists in India prefer to travel by rail. Though, the percentage of domestic tourists preferring the railway is comparatively low. However, even this share is significant to attract the attention of the policy makers as it constitutes about 1.2 percent of the 13 million passengers traveling on Indian Railways daily. The railways in the country however remained unresponsive to and uncaring for the needs and requirements of the dynamic and growing tourism market. It generally treated tourists merely as passengers and never made any distinction between a tourist and a normal traveler.

Ever since the independence of the country various expert commissions and committees on tourism, time and again, highlighted the role that the
railway could play in the promotion of tourism in India. But it hardly ever made any efforts to work for the promotion and development of tourism till 1980s, when the railway authorities envisaged to make some concerted efforts in this direction. The efforts so involved were initially focused on the promotion of foreign inbound tourism because of its ability to generate the much-needed foreign exchange. Special tourism projects on rails, such as ‘Palace on Wheels’, ‘Royal Orient’ and ‘Fairy Queen’, were launched to cater to the high-spending foreign tourists. ‘Palace on Wheels’ was first of its kind in the country. The project was launched with the major objective of promoting India as a tourist destination abroad in general, and rail-based tourism in particular. Though the ‘Palace on Wheels’, by and large, succeeded in its objectives and received an overwhelming response from foreign tourists, no serious attention was given to the existing mail/express trains going towards important tourist destinations, which could have catered to the growing domestic tourism market. The ever-growing domestic tourism market therefore remained almost completely neglected over the years.

Also several schemes and incentives like ‘Indrail Passes’, one year advanced reservation facilities, separate booking countries at important reservation centers, ‘foreign tourist quota’ on specific trains and GSA facilities abroad were offered to foreign tourists. Some schemes like ‘circular journey tickets’, ‘break journey’ and ‘onward journey’ options and provision of special coaches/trains for group travel etc., were extended to domestic tourists. All these schemes and incentives are good only as long as these are utilised. But except for Indrail Passes, which evoked a good response from foreign tourists, all the other incentives and schemes remained largely unutilised in the absence of any differentiation made between a tourist and a normal traveler. Also the
procedures involved to avail these facilities were, and still are, so lengthy, cumbersome and tedious that the tourists rather prefer to not to avail them.

However, during last little more than one decade, there has been a positive shift in the Indian Railways’ policy as it has now envisaged to induct professionalism into its system, to restructure and to reform and to diversify into the peripheral areas related to its core business of transportation. The tourism promotion has been put high on the agenda and the railway is committed towards bridging the symbolic hiatus with the sector. Apart from being a facilitator of tourism transport, it is now assuming the role of a tour operator, information bank and a hospitality bureau. It is now all set to market itself with its long romantic history and heritage as a tourist product. It has been trying to adopt itself to the challenges posed by the highly dynamic tourism market.

Tourism business, however, calls for professional skills and dynamic management structure that has far more common with a corporate work culture than a government department. This realisation more recently, led Indian Railways to establish a separate railway company – IRCTC. This specialized tourism company has been set up with the objectives of consolidating the existing fragmented and unorganised rail tourism and catering services, and promoting value added tour packages on Indian Railways network through increased private participation. The establishment of this company has raised hopes for the better future of the rail-based tourism in the country.

However, to make all this happen and to contribute to the overall development of tourism in general and achieving the objectives of promoting rail-based tourism in particular, Indian Railways will have to strive hard. It must formulate a strong rail-tourism policy under its overall policy framework
and in consonance with the overall National Tourism Policy of India. It must differentiate the consumer called ‘tourist’ from the wide set of consumers called ‘travelers’ or ‘passenger’ with whom they are tangled and maintain a database pertaining to both domestic and foreign tourists. This will, on the one hand, become basis for drawing objectives for an effective rail tourism policy and, on the other hand, will facilitate as a yardstick for the measurement of intended results and unintended consequences of such policy measures. The separation of tourists will also help Indian Railways to effectively implement the special schemes and incentives available to tourists.

It is also necessary that Indian Railways removes all the bottlenecks, which have acted as serious constraints in the promotion of rail-based tourism in the country. The need of the hour is to create adequate facilities to meet the requirements of anticipated tourist traffic and evolve a high degree of coordination with other agencies related to tourism to avoid duplication of efforts and to optimise the use of available resources. Also the important thing is to give personalised and specialized attention to the needs and requirements of the tourists.

Indian Railways must also focus on the seven key areas as identified by National Tourism Policy of Government of India, released in May 2002, viz. Sawagat (welcome), Soochna (information), Suvidha (facilities), Suraksha (security) Sahyog (cooperation), Samrachna (infrastructure) and Safai (cleanliness) as a thrust to tourism development. The concerted efforts towards all these key areas will in the long run benefit Indian Railways in general and its efforts to promote rail-based tourism in particular.