

Rising Above Terror: A Framework for Tourism Recovery

📅 January 16, 2009 / 👤 By Avantika Vijay Singh

The carnage in Mumbai... Terror attacks at the hotels... Threat to major airports...

Mumbai is the financial capital of the country. The hotels where the terror attacks occurred are synonymous with luxury. Airports are an important constituent of the country's infrastructure and development. Hence, these incidents should not be viewed in isolation, but as part of a well-executed strategy to create terror in the country... to cripple its growth story, which was already beginning to feel the heat of recession. Intricately linked with the growth story is the tourism industry (one of the main drivers of the services sector after IT), which has become an unfortunate victim.

Foreign travellers were especially targeted in the recent carnage at Mumbai to dissuade them from coming to India either for business or leisure, which has now been reinforced by the negative travel advisories issued by many countries against India and the ensuing cancellations and low occupancies in the middle of the tourist season.

However, other popular tourist destinations in the past have also suffered from terrorist attacks. They have recovered from the sudden downturn in image and so will India, eventually. In the meantime there is a need to formulate a framework for recovery of the tourism industry so that it may rise once again, like the proverbial phoenix. A three-pronged strategy needs to be followed which would essentially be: creating a safer environment, marketing a changed image, and finally focusing on domestic tourism.

(A) Creating a safer environment

At the **policy level**, there is a need for stringent laws against terror for creation of an overarching climate unfavorable to the development and expansion of terrorism. The new anti-terror bills - the *National Investigating Agency Bill, 2008* and the *Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment (UNPA) Bill, 2008* - are welcome steps in this direction.

Within this broad safety umbrella, the **tourism industry** needs to work on a plan guaranteeing a higher degree of safety to tourists from the point of entry to that of exit. This would include airports, road and rail transport, hotels, and tourist destinations. Travel, especially for women, should be made safer and include radio or GPS-monitoring of taxis by a control room so that they do not go astray.

It may be the right time for the **hospitality industry** to converge on a common set of security standards that are well defined and internationally accepted. Such measures would help win the confidence of travellers, especially international ones. Guests should be checked along with their baggages by X-ray machines and metal detectors as it is done at airports. The screening should start at the very entrance, far from the hotel block, so that a Marriott in Karachi is not replicated. Effective security systems and intruder deterrents should be in place so that hotels can react immediately to the situation. The security, especially, at the entry points and perimeters should be strengthened so that an easy walk in, like at Mumbai, is not facilitated. It should be supported by latest technology, for example a sensor like system by way of which the general manager would know that the initial security had been breached and an immediate action may be initiated. This may also be linked directly to an external control team in the government with a specified person 'incharge' who would then initiate a coordinated action plan given the range of different agencies required for the rescue efforts.

Summary

This article articulates a framework for recovery of the tourism industry from the shadow of terrorism through a three-pronged strategy: safety, image change and domestic tourism promotion.

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Knowledge of hotel layout and who has this knowledge has emerged as a crucial differentiator in the terror war. The captured terrorist disclosed that they were familiarised with the hotel layout through videos; hence, video/photography that could potentially compromise the security of the hotel must be prohibited. Even hotels that give guided tours on their websites must abstain from showing layouts and focus only on the attractiveness of their facilities.

(B) Image Change

The most important issue is to change the public perception of India as a high-risk destination to a low-risk one, as tourists value safety first. This is possible through revoking of the negative travel advisories, which will have better support with the anti-terror law in the anvil, and a media campaign that focuses on 'realistic' safety elements initiated across all sectors of the tourism industry. In this aspect, the 'Incredible India' campaign would also need to be re-focused and re-launched. At this juncture an image diversification is required from that of the iconic Taj up in flames. With the countdown for the **2010 Commonwealth Games** starting, this may just be India's opportunity to create a new image for itself.

One of the most moving images in the aftermath of the Mumbai tragedy was that of the peace rally held in the city, where there was an outpouring of common grief by the masses. It signaled that the middle class Indian is no longer apathetic and voiceless; public fury resulted in a flurry of resignations by politicians. Hence, campaigns built around solidarity and 'nation building' will meet with success.

(C) Promotion of Domestic tourism

Domestic tourism is set to grow as more and more Indians travel. In this aspect, **hospitality** will have to invest in good quality budget hotels to facilitate the growth of domestic tourism. At the same time, infrastructure development, which includes highways, roadways and airports, must continue and that will eventually benefit tourism.

To conclude, a strategic alliance needs to be created across all sectors of the tourism industry that can then formulate a common strategy hinging on safety, image change and tourism promotion for the recovery of the industry.