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India: A Destination Nightmare for Tourists? Implications of Sexual Violence

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Introduction

In the past few weeks, there were two significant rape cases involving foreign tourists in India. The first featured an American tourist who was gang-raped on 4 June 2013 by a group of men in a hill resort in the town of Manali in Himachal Pradesh. The 31-year-old woman was leaving the Vashishth Temple site at around one o'clock in the morning that day. After failing to get a taxi to take her back to her hotel, she accepted a ride from a group of men who took her to a wooded area where they raped and robbed her. Subsequently, three men have been arrested in connection with the incident.

Just one day earlier, it was announced that a 21-year-old Irish national, who was volunteering as a charity worker in Kolkata, was raped. It was suspected that she was drugged and raped by a local businessman. The two cases are just the latest in a series of sexual attacks against foreign female tourists. In March this year, a British tourist, fearing a sexual attack, leapt from the second floor of a hotel balcony in Agra. In another incident, a Swiss tourist was reportedly gang raped whilst on a cycling trip in Madhya Pradesh. In January, a South Korean tourist was allegedly drugged and raped, in the same state, by the son of the owner of the hotel where she was staying. All five cases have

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made international headlines and do not bode well for the future of India's tourism industry.

This is not new to India. In fact, "female tourists have been the subjects of high-profile attacks in India before, most notably in 2008 when a 15-year-old British girl was raped and left for dead on a beach in the resort area of Goa".² However, what has been especially troubling over the past few months of this year is the spike in the number of cases of sexual assault against foreign tourists in India and that these were reported so frequently and within such a close timeframe. Despite the international outrage over the gang-rape of a 23-year-old Indian physiotherapy student in New Delhi in December 2012 and the stricter laws governing rape and sexual harassment that were consequently put in place several months later in April, the problem of sexual assault against women in India shows no sign of slowing down. While it is too early to indicate any sort of substantial impact these cases could have on India's tourism industry, it is clear that they will adversely affect the numbers of tourists visiting India. The December Delhi rape did not involve any foreigners, yet it had a significant impact on the number of tourists coming into India. Due to fears about the risk of sexual assault, "the number of foreign tourists arriving in India dropped by 25 per cent during the first three months of this year", while the number of female tourists "fell by 35%".³ One can only imagine how much stronger the impact of the cases directly involving tourists will be on India's foreign tourist market.

Does Increased Reporting Reflect Increasing Violence?

Mumbai police have noted "a three-fold rise"⁴ in the reporting of rape this year compared to 2012, while Delhi police have seen a "more than two-fold rise".⁵ However, given the difficulties of reporting and proving rape, especially in India, it is a challenge to tell whether the increase in rape cases is an indication of an actually increasing level of sexual violence, or simply a result of more women coming forward to report rape due to

² Mahr, K. 2013. Will Indian Tourism Be Tarnished By Attacks On Women? *TIME* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://world.time.com/2013/03/20/will-india-tourism-be-tarnished-by-attacks-on-women/>>.

³ Rahman, M. 2013. India Tourist Visits Down by 25% Following Fatal Delhi Gang Rape. *The Guardian* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/31/india-tourist-visits-down-delhi-gang-rape>>.

⁴ Sood, M. 2013. Rape Cases on the Rise: Police Record. *The Indian Express* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/rape-cases-on-the-rise-police-record/1106427/>>.

⁵ Press Trust of India. 2013. More Than 2-fold Increase in Rape Cases in Delhi This Year. *The Indian Express* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/more-than-2fold-increase-in-rape-cases-in-delhi-this-year/1111793/>>.

the increased awareness of their rights and the machineries that have been put in place to make the reporting process easier. The difficulties Indian women face in reporting cases of rape (India, which has more than 1.3 billion people, recorded 24,000 cases of rape”⁶ in 2011) can be linked to socio-cultural factors such as shame, the importance of upholding family honour, the risk of threatening marriage eligibility and pressure from the rapist’s family to keep quiet. These factors, however, cannot be used to the same extent to question whether the increasing number of reports of sexual attacks against foreign tourists in India is indicative of an actual rise in attacks against them.

Foreign female tourists would be far more likely than their Indian counterparts to report sexual violence – India, with “about four times the population of the U.S.”, has “fewer than a third as many rapes reported”.⁷ Therefore, the increasing number of rape and sexual assault cases over the past few months, involving foreign female tourists in India, provides a somewhat more accurate picture of the reality of increasing violence. It reveals that the country is more dangerous for foreign female tourists than ever before.

India’s Tourist Demographic

The fact that foreign tourists, across gender, are less likely to visit India than ever before conveys that sexual harassment impacts the entire tourist market rather than solely female tourists. This may very well be because India remains most popular among the demographic of tourists within the age group of 35-44 years (making up “21.2%”⁸ of tourists in India in 2011), according to a 2011 report by India’s Ministry of Tourism. The majority of women within this group would most likely be accompanied by their husbands or partners in India. Therefore, those who object to travelling to India would likely have husbands or partners similarly unwilling to consider India as an attractive travel destination. Most tourists visit India for vacation purposes and would therefore, especially if they are over the age of 35, only travel as a couple or a family. This would, thereby, result in a large proportion of tourists within this age group, both male and female, being less likely to travel to India.

The third most popular demographic of foreign tourists in India, those within the age group of 25-34 years (“16.6%”⁹), would probably be less affected on the whole. Many tourists in this age bracket may not be attached, and so it is likely that the men would not

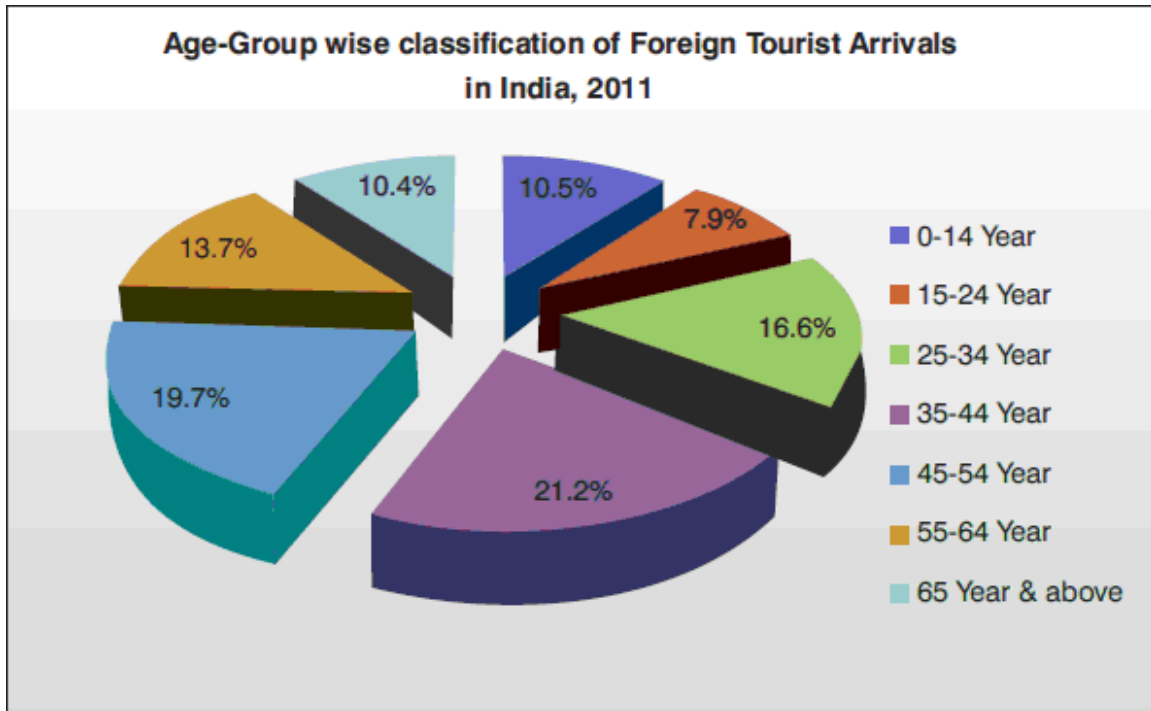
⁶ Singhal, J. 2012. How Many Rapes Go Unreported In India? *The Washington Monthly* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: < http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2012_12/how_many_rapes_go_unreported_i042077.php>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bhatnagar, S.R.K. 2012. *India Tourism Statistics 2011*. New Delhi: Ministry of Tourism, 33.

⁹ Ibid.

be dissuaded from visiting India by the issue of women’s safety. Women from this age group, however, would probably be even more cautious about travelling to India than tourists from any other category, given that they fall within the age group of the female foreign tourists who were raped or sexually assaulted in India this year.



No Guarantee of Safety for Female Tourists

It is likely that female tourists, accompanied by their male partners, would also be wary about travelling to India, considering that even they are not entirely free from the possibilities of sexual assault. The reported rape of a Swiss tourist highlights the threat of rape even in cases where female tourists are accompanied by men. In this case, the men beat up the husband, tied him to a tree and then raped the woman. The fact that many of these recent cases, including that of the Swiss tourist, involved gangs of men, further demonstrates the extent to which male accompaniment does not guarantee women’s safety in India. Even with a male companion, the advantage in numbers means that a gang is easily able to overpower and assault both the male and female tourists. The global focus on India’s gang rape problem will certainly make it harder for both men and women to consider travelling to the country. If travel agents and websites were previously able to convince women that India was a safe travel destination, based on the condition that they did not travel alone, such precautions may now be more difficult to use to justify travel to India. This is clearly evident from how the British government urges women to “exercise caution” in India, even when travelling as part of a group.

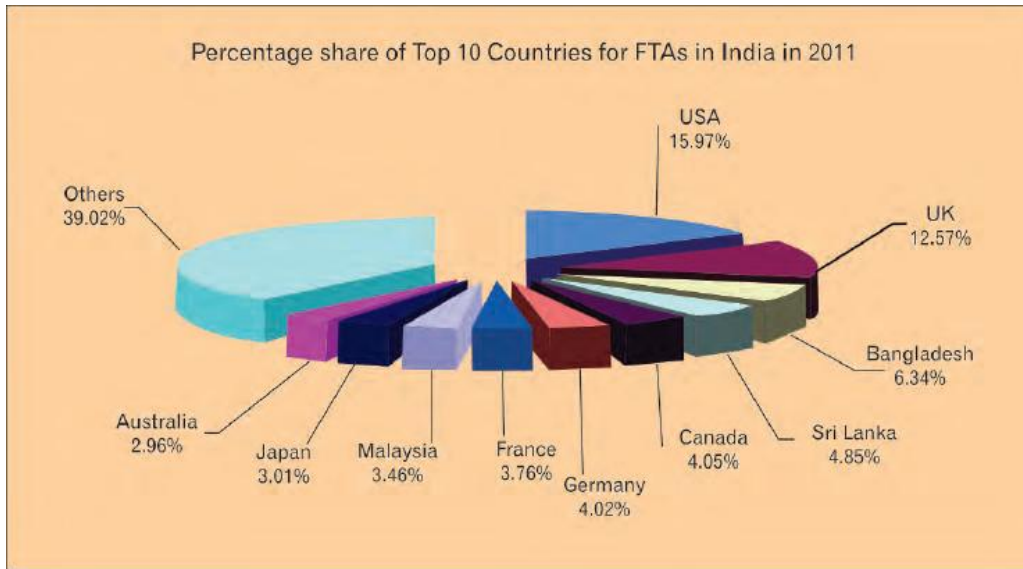
The India-wide Problem of Sexual Violence

Another factor that is damaging India's tourism is the widespread nature of sexual assault in the country. Contrary to popular perception, the risk of sexual assault of foreigners is not limited to Delhi alone. In fact, it is occurring in a number of places, such as Kolkata, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, all locations in which female tourists were sexually assaulted or raped. This raises implications for several of India's top tourist destinations, given that these states host some of the highest numbers of foreign tourists in India. Foreign tourists may be less likely to visit these states and some may even forego the option of visiting India at all. Prior to being featured in the headlines for all the wrong reasons, these states had drawn many tourists to visit India in the past. India's natural advantage over other countries is that its sheer size and regional diversity mean tourists have a wide variety of locations to choose from. Whether it is "Mumbai, with the old-world feel of 18th century Europe", "Goa with the beautiful scenery of the Arabian Sea" or "Kerala where the abundant nature and freedom of thought meet the lives of the Indian people",¹⁰ India has something to suit the specifications of every type of tourist. With rape and sexual assault of tourists happening across India, however, choice becomes severely restricted.

The nationalities of the tourists in the five cases in question (of which two were from the United Kingdom and one from the United States) will also play heavily into the consideration of many potential visitors to India. This is because the US and the UK are the top two source-countries for foreign tourist arrivals in India. In 2011, nationals from the US and the UK made up "15.54%" and "12.65%"¹¹ of all foreign tourists in India, respectively. Given the likelihood that there was greater coverage of these stories in the home countries of the tourists who were assaulted, it is possible that travellers from the US and the UK (those who represent the largest share of the market for India's tourism industry) would be more hesitant to consider a vacation in India. Going further than simply documenting the stories of sexual assault, many newspapers and websites in these countries have themselves explicitly raised the question of whether India is safe for female tourists, thereby presenting a further obstacle to India's tourism industry.

¹⁰ Ji-hoon, K. 2012. India has Potential to Become a Travel Powerhouse. *POSRI Chindia Quarterly*. 9, 64.

¹¹ Ibid, 41.



Conclusion

The cases of sexual violence against foreign tourists in India could not have come at a worse time, just when the possibilities for India's tourism business were beginning to seem better than ever before. In recent years, Hollywood has prominently featured India in several of its films, such as the 2012 film *Life of Pi* (the entire first act of which was "shot on location in the coastal town of Pondicherry"¹²), the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* which was set in Mumbai and the 2011 film *Mission Impossible – Ghost Protocol*, of which several scenes were filmed in Mumbai and Bangalore. With India as a starring character in some of the most popular films of the past few years, the future for India's tourism industry could not have seemed brighter. In China, which is "poised to become the world's largest tourist nation by 2015", the film *Life of Pi* broke box office records and "raked in US\$16 million in its opening weekend alone".¹³ A large number of young Chinese, after seeing the film, "expressed a desire to explore India on the social network platform Weibo (China's version of Twitter)".¹⁴ Films such as *Eat Pray Love* (released in 2010) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (released in 2012) even directly promoted India as a tourist experience. The former featured Julia Roberts as a tourist

¹² Carter, J. 2012. *Life of Pi: On Location in Pondicherry, India – in pictures*. *The Guardian* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/gallery/2012/dec/20/life-of-pi-on-location-pondicherry#/?picture=401343431&index=0>>.

¹³ AGI. 2012. *Can Life of Pi Boost Incredible India's Tourism?* *Asian Global Impact* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.agimag.co.uk/portfolio/can-life-of-pi-boost-incredible-indias-tourism/>>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

praying and meditating in an Indian *ashram* while the latter starred Judi Dench and Maggie Smith as travellers from Britain to Rajasthan.

However, the cases of rape and sexual assault that have rocked India and the rest of the world seem to have dampened the effects any of those films may have had on India's tourism industry. Aside from the falling numbers of tourists, one can already see the impact of sexual violence on the way in which the tourism industry operates in India. Both hotels and tour operators have been heavily affected. For example, "Thomas Cook India has started exclusive tours for women", while "The Imperial, a luxury hotel in New Delhi, has created a 'single lady corridor' of 12 rooms, each with a security camera on the door, staffed by an all-female staff".¹⁵ Even police forces stationed at tourist spots "are already present in the states of Goa, Rajasthan, and Jammu and Kashmir".¹⁶ Whether this will further reassure tourists who are more cautious about safety or detract from the experiences of those seeking to enjoy India in its natural state remains to be seen. Conducting business has certainly become harder for those on the other end of the phone call, the tour operators. No longer having to merely sell India as a vacation spot for tourists seeking to experience history, nature or a spiritual retreat, they have started "scrambling to reassure would-be visitors"¹⁷ of the country's safety. According to Arun Varma, the Chief Executive at Prime Travels, a tour operator, "we need to tell the world that Indian cities are as safe or unsafe as any other metropolitan cities like London, New York, Sydney, Paris, etc."¹⁸ Security aside, other issues such as improving gender relations within the country itself, and modifying India's tourism campaign in a way that explicitly presents the country as a female-friendly destination, are all important factors that will need to be considered by the government.

India's tourism industry plays a critical role in the country's economy, contributing (both directly and indirectly) to "4.5%"¹⁹ of India's GDP in 2011 and sustaining "39.3 million jobs"²⁰ that same year (7.9% of total employment). It is "almost three times bigger than the size of the country's automotive manufacturing industry and generates more jobs than the chemical manufacturing, automotive manufacturing, communications and mining

¹⁵ Bagri, N.T. and Timmons, H. 2013. Rape Cases Are Making Tourists Wary of Visiting India. *New York Times* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/11/world/asia/rape-cases-are-making-tourists-wary-of-visiting-india.html?_r=0>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Chaudhary, M., Babu, S. and Gupta, P. 2011. *IITM-ICC Report - Travel and Tourism Industry in India: Looking East*. Kolkata: Indian Chamber of Commerce, 7.

²⁰ World Travel and Tourism Council. 2012. India: How Does Travel and Tourism Compare to Other Sectors? *World Travel and Tourism Council* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.wttc.org/site_media/uploads/downloads/India_sector_release_study.pdf>.

sectors added together”,²¹ according to the World Travel Tourism Council. In an otherwise slowing economy (“GDP growth fell by almost 2% to 6.5% in 2011–12”²²), India’s tourism sector represents a bright light. Furthermore, “the foreign currency that tourists inject into the economy” is especially needed by the Indian government “to offset huge payments for imported oil and coal, which cannot be paid in rupees”.²³

The numbers provide a hopeful picture, yet the reality of sexual violence in India acts as an obstacle to the continued growth of the country’s tourism industry. If India is to achieve its potential of becoming a global tourism powerhouse (the number of tourists visiting India is “increasing exponentially each year, recording double digit growth rates from 2003 to 2007”²⁴), measures need to be taken that resonate internationally. Trying to prevent stories of rape from coming out into the public domain in the hope of projecting a ‘safer’ India will be almost impossible when foreigners are involved, given that their cases would be publicised by their own countries and the international media. Instead, the government needs to continually demonstrate its commitment to eradicating India’s culture of sexual inequality and violence.

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²¹ World Travel and Tourism Council. 2012. Tourism in India Contributes More to GDP than Automotive Manufacturing. *World Travel and Tourism Council* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.wttc.org/news-media/news-archive/2012/tourism-india-contributes-more-gdp-automotive-manufacturing/>>.

²² Chadda, M. 2013. India in 2012: Spiraling Down? *Asian Survey* y. **53** (1), 48.

²³ Bagri, N.T. and Timmons, H., above n 15.

²⁴ Ji-hoon, K., above n 10, 62.