

Revitalising India's Nation Brand in the Amrit Kaal: An Analytical Reading of Swadesh Darshan and the Atithi Devo Bhava Ethos

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ABSTRACT- India holds a remarkable stock of cultural, spiritual, and natural assets, yet it captures only 0.52 per cent of global tourist arrivals—a share that trails most of its Asian neighbours. This paper answers why such a gap exists, analytically rather than descriptively. Working entirely from secondary data (Ministry of Tourism statistics, UNWTO reports, Press Information Bureau releases, and peer-reviewed branding scholarship), the study triangulates three theoretical lenses: Nation Branding Theory [1][2], Destination Image Theory [3], and the UNWTO Sustainable Tourism–SDG framework [4]. Three complementary analytical techniques are applied: thematic content analysis of policy documents, comparative statistical benchmarking against Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and the UAE, and a structured SWOT analysis. Four constraints recur across the evidence: weak infrastructure at secondary heritage sites, a persistent safety-perception deficit, fragmented digital marketing, and thin public–private coordination. The central argument is that India's symbolic proposition—Atithi Devo Bhava, together with the Swadesh Darshan and PRASAD schemes—is sound; what suppresses the payoff is a mismatch between what policy promises and what the ground delivers. To close that gap, the paper proposes a five-P marketing realignment anchored in SDGs 8, 12, and 14, targeting high-yield segments: MICE, wellness, and river tourism.

KEYWORDS- Amrit Kaal; Atithi Devo Bhava; Destination Image; MICE Tourism; Nation Branding; Secondary-Data Analysis; Sustainable Development Goals; Swadesh Darshan; Tourism Marketing

I. INTRODUCTION

Branding a nation in the Amrit Kaal is not the same as advertising it. The idea runs deeper. It rests on a civilisational line—Atithi Devo Bhava, the guest is God—which treats hospitality as a duty rather than a commercial transaction. That older grammar now sits beside a modern positioning effort, and in principle the resulting story should carry across markets. In practice, however, the numbers reveal a significant gap.

Consider pre-pandemic data. India recorded 10.93 million foreign tourist arrivals in 2019, holding just 0.52 per cent of the world tourism market. Thailand drew 39.8 million;

Singapore 19.1 million; Vietnam 18 million; and Dubai 16.7 million—all with a thinner cultural inventory than India. The gap is not about a shortage of attractions. It is a conversion problem rooted in image, access, and coordination.

Swadesh Darshan attempts to narrow this gap by activating under-marketed assets—Kerala backwaters, quieter thematic circuits—rather than leaning only on over-photographed icons. The Amrit Kaal branding push presents an India that is plural, current, and full of opportunity while directing gains toward host communities. Lucknow illustrates the potential: a city of Awadhi cuisine, Nawabi heritage, and rich footfall that rarely features in international long-haul itineraries.

Three structural frictions convert potential into shortfall: (i) secondary heritage destinations lack world-class amenities, depressing dispersal beyond marquee sites; (ii) safety-perception gaps, especially regarding women travellers, erode visitor confidence; and (iii) fragmented digital presence leaves India out-marketed by competitors running coordinated, well-funded destination campaigns. This paper examines how India can reposition itself as a premium, sustainability-anchored destination by combining its cultural proposition with better infrastructure and capturing high-yield segments that remain largely untapped: MICE, wellness, and river tourism.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Work on place competitiveness consistently demonstrates that a destination's market outcome depends less on its raw stock of attractions than on how that stock is branded, perceived, and governed. Three bodies of theory bear directly on India's situation.

A. Nation Branding and Destination Image

Anholt [1][2] treats nation branding as a strategic exercise tying economic, cultural, and political signals into a coherent image, warning that scattered messaging dilutes competitive identity. For a place as varied as India, no single image can represent the whole without flattening it. Echtner and Ritchie [3] explain the perceptual side: destination image forms from cognitive judgements (infrastructure, safety, access) and affective associations (how a place feels). Konecnik and Gartner [5] extend this through

customer-based brand equity, where awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty together decide a destination’s pull. Together, these theories indicate that India’s arrivals problem is partly an image problem—particularly on the cognitive side. Cayla and Arnould [6] add a caution against standardised global branding in favour of a culturally sensitive, polycentric approach—directly applicable to India, whose edge rests on cultural specificity.

B. Sustainability as Competitive Strategy

Hassan [7] identifies environmental sustainability not as a constraint on tourism growth but as a competitiveness factor: destinations that degrade their ecological base undermine the product they are selling. The UNWTO [4] operationalises this through the Sustainable Development Goal framework, linking tourism to SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), and SDG 14 (Life Below Water). For India, where distinctive products—Himalayan trekking, coastal experiences, river circuits—are ecologically sensitive, sustainability is a supply-side necessity.

C. Research Gap

Most existing scholarship handles nation branding, destination image, and sustainability as separate literatures. What is absent is an integrated, secondary-data reading

connecting India’s symbolic proposition (Atithi Devo Bhava), its policy architecture (Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD), and its measurable performance gap—with the resulting strategy tied to specific SDGs. This paper addresses that absence.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study pursues five interlinked analytical objectives:

- Examine how tourism activity in India advances SDGs 8, 12, and 14.
- Assess the branding and developmental performance of MV Ganga Vilas, YashoBhoomi, Swadesh Darshan, and PRASAD.
- Identify infrastructural, environmental, and regulatory constraints and evaluate how digital transformation can relieve them.
- Specify the conditions under which India can compete in the global MICE market.
- Analyse the diversification potential of wellness, cultural-immersion, coastal, and river tourism, and derive actionable, sustainability-aligned recommendations.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



Figure 1: Tourism and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 8, 12, 14) [4]

A. Research Design

The study uses a descriptive–analytical design within a qualitative, interpretivist framework. The object of inquiry—perception, policy effectiveness, destination branding—is interpretive rather than purely numerical. The design is calibrated to explain the branding–performance gap rather than merely documents it, with focus on how

India’s tourism ecosystem built on Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD, and the Atithi Devo Bhava ethos contributes to national branding during the Amrit Kaal.

B. Data Sources

All analysis draws on secondary data chosen for authority, currency, and policy relevance. Table 1 sets out the source classes and their analytical roles.

Table 1: Secondary-Data Sources and Analytical Roles

Source Class	Representative Sources	Analytical Role
Official statistics	Ministry of Tourism; India Tourism Statistics [8]	Arrivals, share, and revenue benchmarking
Multilateral reports	UNWTO International Tourism Highlights [4]	SDG alignment; global comparators
Government releases	Press Information Bureau; Union Budget [9]	Policy intent; medical-tourism standing
Scheme documents	Swadesh Darshan; PRASAD reports [10]	Implementation appraisal
Peer-reviewed scholarship	Anholt [1][2]; Echtner & Ritchie [3]; Hassan [7]	Theoretical framing
Industry sources	Lonely Planet [11]; market reports	Demand signals; positioning benchmarks

Note. Source: compiled by the authors.

C. Analytical Framework

Three theoretical lenses are triangulated so that no single perspective dominates. Table 2 sets out each lens and its application.

Table 2: Triangulated Analytical Framework

Theoretical Lens	Core Proposition	Application
Nation Branding (Anholt [1][2])	Image is a strategic, multi-dimensional asset	Diagnoses fragmented messaging as the primary brand liability
Destination Image (Echtner & Ritchie [3])	Cognitive + affective perceptions drive choice	Explains the cognitive-side arrivals gap
UNWTO Sustainable Tourism [4]	Tourism advances SDGs 8, 12, 14	Links growth targets to sustainability outcomes
Brand Equity (Konecnik & Gartner [5])	Awareness, quality, loyalty determine pull	Frames the repeat-visitation deficit

Note. Source: synthesised by the authors from the cited works.

D. Analytical Approach

Three complementary techniques structure the analysis. First, thematic content analysis: policy texts—Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD, Ministry of Tourism reports, UNWTO publications—are coded to surface recurring themes (branding gaps, infrastructure deficits, safety concerns, digital limitations) and to contrast stated policy intent with implementation outcomes. Second, comparative statistical interpretation: India’s arrivals and market share are benchmarked against Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and the UAE to locate the precise margin of under-performance. Third, structured SWOT synthesis: internal strengths and weaknesses are weighed against external opportunities and threats to derive strategic priorities.

E. Conceptual Model

These strands converge in one causal sequence: tourism branding (Atithi Devo Bhava and Swadesh Darshan) drives infrastructure development and marketing strategy; these lift the tourist experience; which generates employment; and ultimately delivers sustainable economic development aligned with SDGs 8, 12, and 14. A feedback loop through stakeholder collaboration and monitoring continuously refines the brand. The model treats tourism as a multiplier of cultural and economic value, with the implementation–perception gap at the centre of the mechanism to be overcome (See figure 2).

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

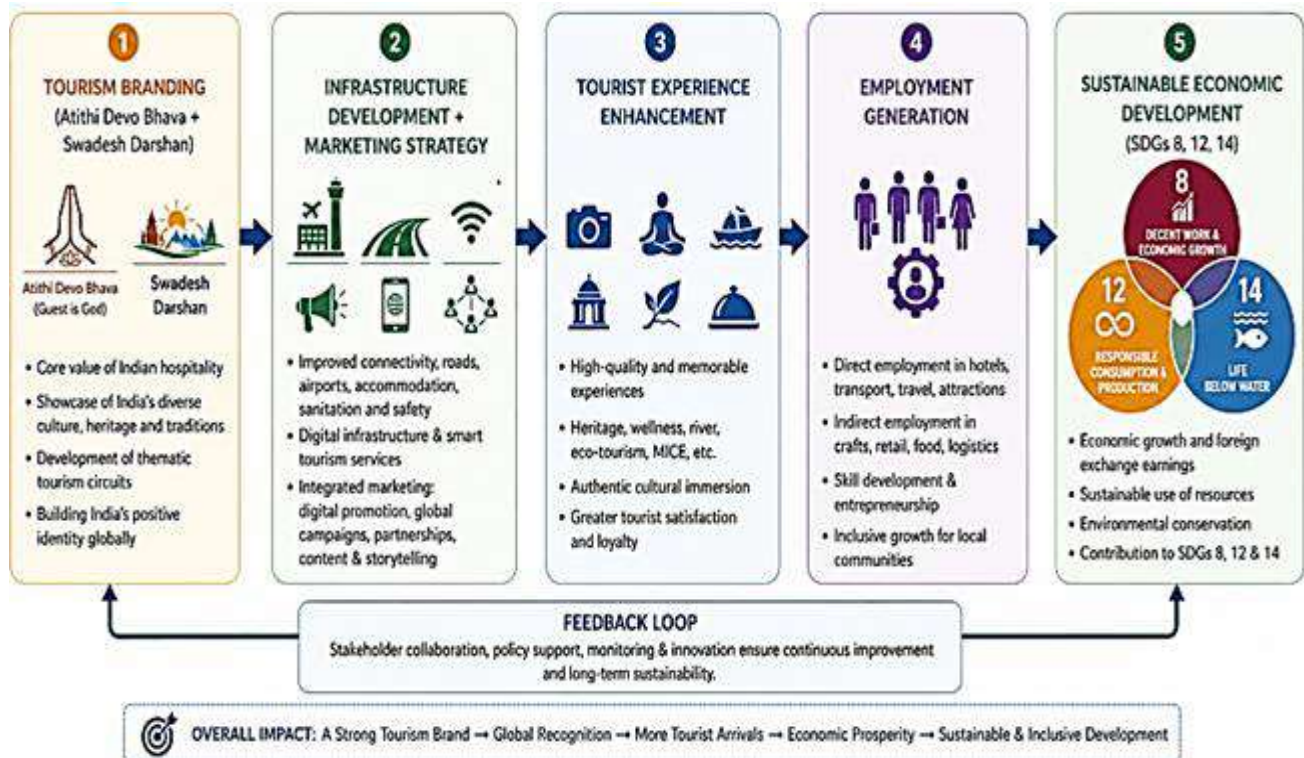


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework: Tourism Branding to Sustainable Economic Development *Source:* Developed by the authors from Nation Branding Theory [1], [2], Destination Image Theory [3], and UNWTO Sustainable Tourism Framework[4]

A. The Arrivals Gap in Comparative Perspective

In 2019, India drew 10.93 million foreign arrivals, holding 0.52 per cent of the global market. Table 3 shows the

shortfall clearly. Destinations with thinner cultural inventories consistently out-draw India by 1.5 to 3.6 times.

Table 3: Comparative International Tourist Arrivals, Pre-Pandemic Benchmark (2019)

Destination	Arrivals (mn)	vs. India	Analytical Reading
Thailand	39.8	≈3.6×	Mature marketing ecosystem; liberal visa policy; resort infrastructure
Singapore	19.1	≈1.7×	Regional connectivity hub; premium MICE infrastructure
Vietnam	18.0	≈1.6×	Aggressive cost positioning; coordinated digital marketing
Dubai (UAE)	16.7	≈1.5×	Engineered luxury events ecosystem; aviation hub
India	10.93	Baseline	Deep cultural, spiritual, natural endowment; 0.52% global share
<i>Note. mn = million. Source: Ministry of Tourism [8]; UNWTO [4]. Figures rounded.</i>			

Read through Destination Image Theory [3], the pattern is diagnostic. India’s affective image—its cultural richness—is strong. Its cognitive image—safety, infrastructure, service reliability—lags behind. The cognitive side most directly determines whether a first-time long-haul visitor converts from interest to booking.

B. The Safety-Perception Deficit

Safety is the most cited deterrent in the secondary record. It operates through perception as much as actual incidence. In brand-equity terms, even rare events carry a disproportionate reputational cost once they align with stereotypes already circulating in travel media. National Crime Records Bureau data [12] identify theft, assault, and

crimes affecting women travellers as the most-cited deterrent categories among foreign visitors.

The policy lesson is direct: safety improvements must be accompanied by credible, visible communication. Tourist police, multilingual helplines, and transparent grievance mechanisms function as brand investments. Without these, the perception holds—because it feeds on information gaps rather than facts alone.

C. SWOT Synthesis

Table 4 consolidates the thematic analysis into a structured SWOT that maps capabilities against the external environment and translates each quadrant into a strategic inference.

Table 4: Structured SWOT of India’s Tourism Sector

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Deep cultural, spiritual, and heritage capital (UNESCO sites; pilgrimage circuits) Diversified portfolio: eco, wellness, MICE, river, medical, spiritual Flagship policy support (Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD, YashoBhoomi) Resilient domestic-tourism base Ayurveda and yoga as globally unique propositions MV Ganga Vilas: innovative river tourism product	Infrastructure deficits at secondary and rural destinations Safety-perception gap, acute for women travellers Fragmented national branding; inconsistent global messaging Limited digital integration and service standardisation Implementation gaps in flagship schemes thin public-private coordination mechanism
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Fast-growing global MICE market (USD 1.4 tn by 2028) Experiential expansion: cruise, wellness, eco-lodges Digital transformation: AI planning, VR previewing Rising demand for authentic cultural and spiritual tourism G20 legacy: enhanced international brand visibility (See figure 3)	Intense competition from Thailand, Singapore, Dubai Environmental degradation at over-visited sites Global economic volatility compressing long-haul demand Negative safety and hygiene perception in key source markets Climate risk to coastal and mountain tourism assets
<i>Note: Key strategic insight: India’s best opportunities (MICE, experiential, digital) are blocked by its core weaknesses (safety, infrastructure, coordination). Strategy must attack the gating weaknesses first.</i>	



Figure 3: Global MICE Tourism Market Growth Trend (2023–2032) [16]

D. Policy Intent versus Implementation

Content analysis of scheme documents reveals a consistent pattern: ambition at the design stage, attrition at delivery. Swadesh Darshan and PRASAD set well-specified goals for circuit development and pilgrimage infrastructure. Government of India [9] and Ministry of Tourism [10] document uneven budget absorption, weak inter-agency coordination, and shallow host-community participation.

The consequence is a branding paradox: when visitors arrive expecting what the campaign promised and encounter something short of it, the result is an active brand-equity loss rather than neutral disappointment. This implementation–perception mismatch is the central mechanism this paper identifies.

E. High-Yield Segments: MICE, Wellness, and River Tourism

Table 5: High-Yield Segment Analysis

Segment	Global Market	India Position	Priority Action
MICE	USD 1.4 tn by (2028)	Emerging; <1% share	Leverage YashoBhoomi; improve connectivity; systematic international event bidding
Wellness	USD 1.1 tn (2023)	Natural leader: Ayurveda, yoga	Standardise quality certification; target high-income European and North American segments
River & coastal	Growing; under-tracked	MV Ganga Vilas (Jan 2023)	Expand river-circuit infrastructure; integrate with spiritual and heritage tourism
Medical	USD 44.8 bn by (2026)	Top 10 globally [11]	Raise international awareness; streamline medical-visa processing

Note. Source: UNWTO [4]; PIB [12]; Ministry of Tourism [10].

Each of these segments maps directly onto SDG 8 (employment and foreign-exchange earnings), SDG 12 (resource-efficient tourism operations), and SDG 14 (protection of marine and river ecosystems). This alignment is not rhetorical; it is a precondition for accessing the growing cohort of international travellers who factor sustainability credentials into destination choice.

VI. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis converges on an integrated programme organised around the five Ps of services marketing, re-specified for a sustainability-aligned national brand. Table 6 presents the framework.

Table 6: Five-P Sustainability-Aligned Strategy for India’s Tourism Brand

P-Lever	Strategic Action	Implementation Mechanism	SDG Linkage
Product	Diversify into MICE, wellness, eco, and river tourism; sustainable circuits	Swadesh Darshan 2.0; wellness certification; river-circuit investment	SDG 8, 12
Price	Value-based pricing through global operator partnerships	Preferred-rate agreements; dynamic pricing pilots	SDG 8
Place	Upgrade secondary-circuit connectivity, sanitation, last-mile access	PPP model; dedicated tourism corridors in state road plans	SDG 9, 12
Promotion	Unified digital campaign; influencer-led storytelling; multilingual outreach	Single national tourism platform; coordinated state digital presence	SDG 8
People	Invest in training, service standardisation, and community participation	Tourism sector skill councils; community benefit-sharing protocols	SDG 8, 14
<p><i>Note.</i> PPP = public-private partnership. Source: developed by the authors from the analytical findings.</p>			

Four cross-cutting imperatives complement the five-P framework: (i) convert safety from a liability into a visible assurance system—tourist police, multilingual helplines, and streamlined visas communicated as brand features; (ii) treat digital infrastructure (AI-assisted planning, VR previewing, frictionless booking) as core capability, not a marketing add-on; (iii) institutionalise public-private coordination so that branding signals and ground capability advance together; and (iv) embed community participation and ecological safeguards in every circuit design.

VII. CONCLUSION

For India, the Amrit Kaal marks a genuine opportunity to shift from curiosity to high standing in the global tourism economy. The analysis makes one finding clear: the binding constraint is not endowment but conversion. A country with singular cultural, spiritual, and natural assets still commands only 0.52 per cent of world tourism and roughly 10.93 million annual arrivals—well short of regional peers. Closing that gap requires dropping fragmented promotion and building an integrated strategy in which infrastructure capability, brand coherence, and safety assurance advance together. Swadesh Darshan and PRASAD have already built a credible base. The strategy proposed here builds on that base by targeting high-yield segments, anchoring the brand explicitly to SDGs 8, 12, and 14, and treating digital infrastructure and safety communication as non-negotiable brand investments. Three barriers remain decisive: safety perception, particularly for women travellers; infrastructure quality at destinations beyond the metropolitan core; and disciplined, digitally native marketing that replaces externally authored stereotypes with authentic, locally generated narrative. Revitalising Brand India is ultimately the work of keeping Atithi Devo Bhava alive in contemporary form—through coordinated public-private action and a coherent five-P strategy—so that every visit becomes a meaningful, sustainable encounter.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is bounded by its exclusive reliance on secondary data, which limits causal inference and currency of findings. Future research should add primary visitor-perception surveys, longitudinal arrivals modelling, and experimental safety-communication studies to test the implementation-perception mechanism proposed here. Widening the comparative frame to other emerging-market destinations would further strengthen the evidence base.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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