



Red carpet rolled out for Indians

TOURISM in Japan had been on an unprecedented growth path with the industry pegged at contributing more than 2 per cent to the nation's GDP and sustaining close to 1.5 million jobs.

All this changed with the events of March. While the tsunami and earthquake had a localised effect, tourism suffered mainly due to apprehensions of nuclear radiation brought on by the Fukushima incident. A month after the incident, the number of tourists dropped by 62.5 per cent in April, forcing several hotels to close down and most to cut down on staff.

However, as the rest of the Japanese economy, the tourism industry has seen a remarkable recovery in the past few months. In August, while there was a decline in tourists over the same period last year, the decline was down to 31 per cent. A total of 5,46,800 tourists visited Japan, bringing in an average of \$1,500 each into the economy.

While it would take some time to reach the annual figure of 8.6 million tourists which was achieved in 2010, the Japanese tourism ministry is optimistic that a quick recovery by the end of the current financial year. "The number of tourists has increased from April to August even though it is not stable yet. The main concern of tourists was the radiation effect from the nuclear plant. Many tourists are back in Japan in places other than the northeast," says Susumu Kida, director of international tourism relations of the Japanese tourism agency.



The agency has now rolled out a series of promotions to attract Indian tourists to Japan, the focus being to convince travellers that radiation is not an issue and dis-

pel harmful rumours about the situation in the country.

"We invited a delegation of Indian celebrities including actress Dia Mirza in August to show that

things are normal. She went to Tokyo and Yokohama. A video has now been posted online, detailing her experience. We want Indian tourists to see that things are safe here," says Kida.

The main tourism spots that Indian travellers frequent are the picturesque town of Kyoto and the historic city of Hiroshima, both of which are in the south, far away from the northeastern region of Tohoku where the disaster struck.

The campaign, plus a serious drive to promote Japan to tourism agents across the country, has paid off. While the overall decline of tourists is over 30 per cent, Indian travellers have bucked the trend and in August, 4,500 Indians visited Japan. Just 19 per cent fewer than last year. Records with the agency show that while there was a slight decline in Indians travelling on leisure, there was no drop at all in the number of people coming in for business trips.

The spark of optimism and the concept of a fresh start have infected the Japanese tourism industry too. "Not many Indians would come to Japan for tourism in the past. We can change that now as we push tourism as a major industry here," officials say.

One would think that things will be tougher in Fukushima and the northern provinces where apprehensions of nuclear radiation still remain. But this too, agency officials feel, can be turned into an advantage. "Now the world knows of Fukushima. In the future, this recall can be used to promote tourism too," says a senior ministry official.

Fukushima struggles to recover

Known for its fruits, Fukushima has been hit less by the disaster and more by harmful rumours about radiation



AS appearances go, the quiet town of Fukushima is as normal as any medium-sized town in Japan can be. Less than two hours away from Tokyo on the bullet train, the picturesque town surrounded by low hills is cold and perhaps a bit dull but gives no other indication that it was at the centre of the biggest nuclear scare since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986.

The region, once known for the quality of its fruits and dairy products, has been badly crippled by the disaster, but more, residents say, by harmful rumours about the nuclear radiation fallout that has cast doubts on all products being churned out by the region.

Fukushima is the largest prefecture in the disaster-hit Tohoku region. Once the hub of economic activity, the town has slowed down considerably over the past months with hordes of foreign workers leaving in the aftermath of the reactor collapse. Few have returned and production levels have fallen. The pharmaceutical products it was famous for are no longer welcome in the international market and its famous fruits find no favour in the domestic market.

The main town itself is located over a hundred kilometres away from the coast where the reactor accident occurred but that has no bearing on the economic downturn that has begun. The area around the crippled Daiichi reactors is isolation zone. High radiation levels mean that a 20 km radius around the reactor is a no-entry zone, displacing hundreds of thousands.

While nuclear safety experts say that a cold shutdown can be achieved within a year, it is still not certain when the isolation zone around the reactor can be brought back to normal. "The government is fully committed to decontaminate the area but we are not sure much time it would take," a nuclear safety agency worker says.

The plan for rehabilitation is exhaustive – from government support to purchase new machinery to setting up of industrial zones and manufacturing hubs in the area that would make up for the loss of livelihood for the two million population of the prefecture.

The struggle for the region, residents say, is to shed the image of radiation each times the name of Fukushima comes up. The reality is different, given that radia-

tion levels in the city are nearing normal and the effect of radiation has been limited to the coastal region that is not very close to the city. The image problem needs to be sorted out to get the economy started, residents say.

"The city was not damaged badly, it was the coastal areas that were affected. But the rumours of high radiation in Fukushima ensured that people got badly worried. The number of visitors here has dropped by half. Because of the name, people misunderstand that the city is close to the power plant," says Tsutomu Watanabe, manager of commerce, industry and tourism division of the prefecture's government.

Promotional events are first being planned for Japan itself – over the past months, fruits and vegetables are being showcased in neighbouring regions to dispel doubts of radiation. "Fukushima is known as the fruit kingdom. We have cherries and apples and grapes but concerns of radiation mean that prices have fallen below sustainable levels. There is no government regulation on export but the name Fukushima itself means that no one is willing to buy," says Watanabe.

While revival of the economy is the long-term goal, the immediate concern is the welfare of the displaced, close to 20,000 of whom are living in temporary homes. This is where a massive army of volunteers from around the region is focusing its work on.

"From the middle of May to the end of September, more than 112,000 people volunteered to help. Out of these 60,000 were from Fukushima while the others came in from other prefectures. These are the people who have really made a difference," says Kazukya Sato, who heads the local welfare division of the prefecture and is in charge of volunteer works.

While volunteers have shifted homes, cooked for the displaced, erected temporary shelters, delivered food, conducted schools for children and comforted the elderly, what survivors appreciate the most is something much more simple – old photographs.

"For people who have lost everything in the disaster, the most cherished possessions are old photographs that are memories of the departed and records of their loved ones," says Sato, adding that volunteers who collect old pictures are most in demand.

The Indian in Fukushima

Mana's Rasoi is an exotic exception in Fukushima



MOST Indians woke up to the startling visuals of the Fukushima nuclear plant on fire in April. For Narendra Sharma, tragedy had stuck closer home. The lone Indian presence in the town of Fukushima – Mana's Rasoi – shook uncontrollably but managed to survive the intense earthquake with little damage.

The small but immensely popular restaurant on a commercial street near the center of the town recovered from the quake but its owner, Sharma, who claims to be the only Indian staying in the Fukushima, says that business has slowed down so much over the past few months that the thought of shutting shop has crossed his mind. Mana's Rasoi is an exotic ex-



ception in Fukushima, which though less than a two-hour train ride from Tokyo, has not yet adopted the multicultural flavour of bigger towns. Besides locals who sampled Indian food, the restaurant was a regular haunt of westerners working in the numerous factories and production units around town.

"We had no problem with the earthquake or the tsunami. The nuclear radiation, however, has killed business. All families have ensured that their children are sent away

from fear of the radiation and our clientele is gone," Sharma says, adding that sales have slumped by over 50 per cent.

Westerners who frequented the eatery have also left the region, and there is no indication of an early return. "Many people have shifted out, and there is no certainty of their return," says Sharma, who started the restaurant in 2002 and is married to a local.

His other business, automobiles, has also been hit, indicative of the larger economic problem the

region is facing. "Earlier, people used to come from Tokyo to buy vehicles as they were cheaper here. Now they are too scared to come," he says.

Sharma, who belongs to New Delhi, says that he did not even consider returning to India after the disaster struck, but now rethinking his options due to the economic slowdown. "I have kept things on standby and am maintaining liquidity. If things don't get better in a year or two, I may be forced to shift base," he says.

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