

Tharoor's visa curb tweet backed by IIM data

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Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor's latest tweet on potential loss of tourism revenues to India due to arbitrary tightening of visa regulations may have ruffled some feathers in the government.

However, Tharoor's criticism on India's revised visa rules has the backing of data from researchers in the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs).

As reported by Business Standard on April 10, inbound travel to India peaked at a record 5.5 million arrivals in 2008, and these tourists spent nearly Rs 64,000 crore, so even a 1 per cent decline would amount to \$130 million (Rs 640 crore) per annum, according to a study by IIM-Ahmedabad professor Dileep Mavalankar and his co-authors from Brandeis and Oxford universities.

These studies were discussed earlier this year at the second international conference on tourism in global village jointly organised by IIM-Lucknow and IIM-Kozhikode.

The findings of the study and the conference on tourism are being brought out in the book 'Tourism in global vil-



Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor wears a cap at the Nepal stall of the Annual Dastkari Haat Samiti Festival in New Delhi on Wednesday. PHOTO: PTI

lage'. According to SS Vasan of Oxford University, co-author of the study and member of a core group on key health areas set up by Gujarat government, "Malaysia and Thailand have similar and

healthy shares of world tourism receipts (1.64 per cent and 1.82 per cent, respectively), which constitute 9.4 per cent and 7.4 per cent of their respective GDPs. Indian states are correctly aspiring to compete at this level. For instance, international tourist arrivals in Malaysia (14 million) and Thailand (11 million) are over two orders of magnitude higher than that in Gujarat (93,000). So, we have ample potential to plan for a sustainable growth in this sector."

In the backdrop of the David Headley case, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a directive on November 4 that foreign nationals with multiple entry long-term visa must have a mandatory two-month gap between two visits. Tharoor, an MP from Kerala who has objected to the move, has made a number of postings on the social networking site Twitter observing that "26/11 killers had no visas" and asking "whether visa restrictions protect our security" and "R we going 2 allow terrorists 2 make us less welcoming?" (sic).

However, in a latest twist, the government appears to be in no mood to relent on the new visa rules for tourists, arguing that no genuine tourist would like to come to India within two months

after staying for 180 days. Industry watchers believe that the move would prevent India from becoming a hub for travel and tourism in South and South-East Asia, leading to severe losses to India's tourism and airline industries.

The US embassy in New Delhi has posted in its website that "To date, these changes have mostly affected tourist visa holders, but the US Embassy and Consulates in India have also received reports pertaining to other visa types and about inconsistent implementation of the new rules, which have not been widely publicised and are subject to change." Alarmingly, the embassy also said that business travellers had reported being denied re-entry due to the new regulations.

According to the IIM study, "The minister's prediction that this move will 'cost us millions of dollars' in lost tourism revenues seem to be on sound footing and backed by the IIM study. From well over 14 per cent year-on-year growth rate in tourism during 2003-2006, India's tourism has already slowed to 12 per cent during 2007, and to 5 per cent during 2008. The World Travel and Tourism Council has predicted 7 per cent contraction of tourism revenues for 2009 and no growth for 2010."