

# “DEVELOPING HEALTH TOURISM INNOVATIONS IN VARANASI: FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO WELLNESS”

DIMPLE<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF PANCHKARMA, INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCE,  
BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY, VARANASI, 221005  
E-MAIL: [dimple.shailsingh@bhu.ac.in](mailto:dimple.shailsingh@bhu.ac.in)

DR. VIJAY KUMAR SRIVASTAVA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PANCHKARMA, INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCE, BANARAS  
HINDU UNIVERSITY, VARANASI, 221005  
E-MAIL: [srivijay@bhu.ac.in](mailto:srivijay@bhu.ac.in)

SHASHI SINGH<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ph.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR, EDUCATION DEPARTMENT, CCS UNIVERSITY, MEERUT  
E-MAIL: [shasheesingh@gmail.com](mailto:shasheesingh@gmail.com)

NEHA<sup>4\*</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Ph.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF SANGYAHARAN, INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCE,  
BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY, VARANASI, 221005  
E-MAIL: [n130798@bhu.ac.in](mailto:n130798@bhu.ac.in)

DR. RAKESH KUMAR JAISWAL<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF SANGYAHARAN, INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCE, BANARAS  
HINDU UNIVERSITY, VARANASI, 221005  
E-MAIL: [rkj41a@bhu.ac.in](mailto:rkj41a@bhu.ac.in)

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## Abstract

A popular destination for health tourism is Varanasi, a city with a long history of spirituality and culture. With the integration of Ayurveda, Yoga, contemporary medical procedures, infrastructure development, governmental support, and sustainable practices, the paper offers a comprehensive plan for turning Varanasi into a destination for health tourism. The objective is to leverage Varanasi's spiritual and cultural legacy to advance socioeconomic development and holistic wellbeing. Access to quality and affordable healthcare is a universal necessity, and health tourism plays a pivotal role in fulfilling this demand. As one of India's oldest spiritual and cultural centers, Varanasi holds immense potential to emerge as a health tourism hub by integrating traditional wellness practices like Ayurveda, Yoga, and modern healthcare services. This study explores the influence of health and economic indicators on the growth of health tourism, using tourism data as a proxy in the absence of specific health tourism statistics. Multivariate regression analysis was employed to examine how variables such as public health expenditure and infant mortality rates correlate with tourist arrivals and revenue generation. The findings indicate that enhanced healthcare investment and improved health outcomes positively influence tourism inflows. The results underscore the importance of strengthening health infrastructure and service quality in Varanasi to boost its appeal as a competitive health tourism destination. By aligning public health development with cultural and wellness tourism, Varanasi can establish a sustainable and innovative model for holistic community wellness and economic growth.

**Keywords:** Ayurveda, Health tourism, Wellness, Medical tourism, Sustainable development, Holistic Approach, Varanasi.

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**\*Corresponding Author:** Neha, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Sangyahan, Institute of Medical Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005, [n130798@bhu.ac.in](mailto:n130798@bhu.ac.in)

## INTRODUCTION

Practices in the global health tourism sector are changing to become more moral, culturally aware, and community-focused. India, the cradle of Ayurveda, is in a unique position to provide its ancient medical methods to people from other countries. At the same time, social work may be extremely important in this expanding field to guarantee community involvement, empowerment, and equity.

"Good health and well-being" (SDG 3) is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN), and its official summary is to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." Like all the other SDGs, achieving this one calls for a concerted international effort from all nations<sup>1</sup>. Health tourism is an emerging sector that combines travel with health and wellness services. It encompasses medical tourism (clinical treatments and surgeries) and wellness tourism (preventive and holistic care).<sup>2</sup> The department has introduced the "Tourism Policy 2022" to boost tourism investments, increase private sector participation, and build capacity. The policy has increased capital subsidies by up to 30% per project, resulting in efficiencies and faster project completion. It has enabled investment in 33 new tourism units. These also include a policy for health and medical tourism.

Because of this, medical tourism has a lot of potential for all countries. Many countries are trying to make themselves a popular and desirable place for medical tourists to go. This gives medical travel yet another unexpected benefit. Since medical tourism is all about healthcare services, nations that wish to compete in the global medical tourism market must constantly strive to increase the caliber and accessibility of their healthcare offerings. So, competition between countries makes it easier to get good, affordable healthcare. This is why medical tourism is very important to everyone.<sup>3,4</sup> With India's rich heritage in traditional medicine and spiritual practices, cities like Varanasi offer immense potential to develop innovative health tourism models. This research examines how Varanasi can harness its cultural, historical, and medicinal assets to emerge as a leading health tourism destination.<sup>5</sup>

Medical tourism is therefore very important for everyone on the planet because it benefits everyone. Because of this, it is equally important to examine the factors that affect medical tourism. The literature contains a number of studies that look into different aspects that could influence medical travel. In medical tourism, patient loyalty is positively impacted by medical cost and staff expertise, according to Afthanorhan et al.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Online word-of-mouth has a positive impact on medical tourism travel intention and destination trust, according to Abubakar and Ilkan<sup>7</sup>. Han and Hyun also discover that customer retention in medical tourism is positively correlated with perceived quality and affordability<sup>8</sup>. According to Yalghouzaghaj et al., medical tourists' behavioural intentions are significantly influenced by perceived quality<sup>9</sup>. Our objective was to examine the effects of economic and health-related factors on the tourism industry in the state and district that lead the way in medical tourism. Given that medical tourism revolves around healthcare services, it is expected that medical tourism will be influenced by health-related factors. However, it is commonly known that every industry in a country is impacted by economic factors, without exception<sup>10,11,12</sup>; in fact, they have an impact on every company and even every individual in a nation.<sup>13</sup>

## DEFINITION OF HEALTH TOURISM

- Defined as individuals traveling outside their home country for medical treatments, procedures, or wellness experiences.
- Motivations include cost savings, access to specialized treatments, shorter waiting times, or combining medical procedures with leisure travel.

## Types of Health Tourism

- **Medical Tourism:** Travel for elective surgeries, dental treatments, fertility treatments, and cosmetic procedures. Packages often include treatment costs, physician fees, ground transportation, and hotel accommodation.
- **Wellness Tourism:** Promotes physical, mental, and spiritual health through activities like spa treatments, yoga retreats, and mindfulness workshops.
- **Preventative Healthcare Tourism:** Focuses on proactive health management, including routine medical check-ups, diagnostic tests, or alternative treatments.

In this study, the concept of these 3 types of health tourism was used as a guideline for developing innovations to promote health tourism to cover all 3 areas:

1. Tourism innovation to promote health
2. Tourism innovation to restore health
3. Tourism innovation to maintain health<sup>14</sup>

## Medical Tourism in India

India is a trusted destination for international patients. The fact that the number of medical tourists grew from 183k in 2020 to a projected 635k in 2023 is evidence of its reliability. Beyond treatment, India offers a unique blend of cultural richness and serene landscapes. It creates an ideal environment for recovery and exploration.<sup>15,16</sup> Uttar Pradesh is quickly becoming India's most popular place for tourists. The state has a lot of different popular tourist spots that are known around the world, belong to different religions, and are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The state is quickly building new tourism infrastructure and amenities, brand development, and niche thematic products (include personal care, nutrition, yoga, and alternative therapies etc.) within or outside its twelve Mega Tourism Circuits with its own resources and help from the private sector.<sup>17</sup>

The state is attracting national and global attention through spiritual tourism and wellness tourism, promoting yoga, ayurveda, and other lifestyle-enhancing practices. Uttar Pradesh's Wellness and Spiritual Tourism Strategy is:

- Integration of Wellness with Spiritual Tourism in spiritual areas like Sarnath, Shravasti, Kapilvastu, Varanasi, Mathura.
- To promote Uttar Pradesh as a wellness travel destination, the state hosts an annual International Yoga Conclave.
- Creation of wellness facilities in environmentally sensitive areas to draw visitors and offer experiential travel.
- Identifying possible medical tourism target nationalities throughout the state and developing a focused marketing and promotion strategy.
- The creation of a network of intermediaries and travel service providers for medical tourism.<sup>18</sup>

A minimum of one acre of lodging space with twenty rooms and therapy rooms that provide services for: 1. Ayurveda 2. Naturopathy and Yoga 3. Unani 4. The Siddha 5. Using homeopathy to attain, encourage, and preserve optimal health and wellbeing.<sup>19</sup>

### **Varanasi And the Ayurveda**

India is leading the way in the quickly expanding field of medical tourism. According to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Noida is a key medical tourism hub in Uttar Pradesh. According to him, funding will soon be allocated for the construction of medical schools in Ballia and Balrampur. The remaining six districts will then also see the establishment of medical colleges. He stated that BHU's IMS and two AIIMS (Gorakhpur and Raebareli) are part of UP. Every district now offers free MRI, CT, and dialysis services. In rural areas, efforts have been made to guarantee the availability of better medical professionals and technical personnel.<sup>20</sup>

### **Historical and Cultural Context of Varanasi**

Varanasi is situated on the banks of the Ganges River and is also referred to as Kashi or Banaras. As a sacred city in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, it attracts millions of pilgrims annually. The city is home to numerous ghats, temples, and traditional healing centers. Varanasi's historical association with Ayurveda, Yoga, and meditation positions it uniquely for health tourism. For ages, the city has served as a hub for holistic practice, philosophy, and education.<sup>21</sup> In his description of Kashi, Sri Harsha, the author of *Naishadhacharita*, wrote Kashi, a replica of the Mokshadayini, is a city located outside of Earth, believed to end all sorrows. It is believed that leaving one's mortal body in Kashi, a person receives liberation from all sins through Lord Shiva's Mukti Mantra, making it the city of salvation.<sup>22</sup>

The World Health Assembly's resolution on traditional medicine prompted the creation of the WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2014–2023. It seeks to assist Member States in creating proactive plans of action and policies to enhance the contribution of traditional medicine to population health maintenance. The strategy places a high priority on health services and systems, including practitioners, practices, and products related to complementary and alternative medicine. By incorporating T&CM services into healthcare delivery, the goals are to promote universal health coverage, improve quality assurance, safety, and effectiveness, and increase knowledge for active management.<sup>23</sup>

### **Traditional Medicine**

- Contains information, abilities, and customs derived from indigenous values, convictions, and life experiences.
- For the diagnosis, treatment, improvement, prevention, and maintenance of physical and mental health.

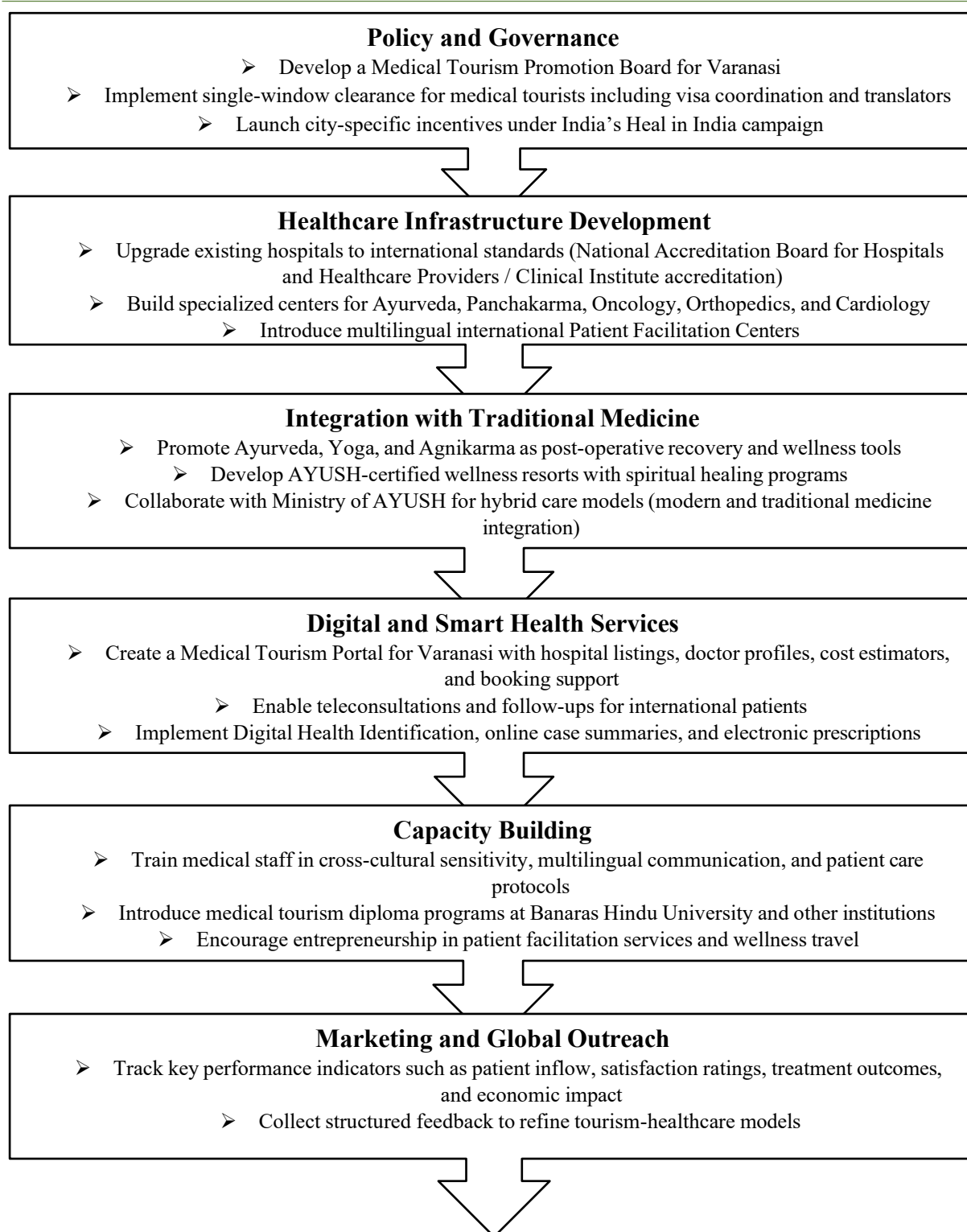
### **Complementary Medicine**

- Describes medical procedures that do not fall under a nation's traditional or traditional medical practices.
- Not fully integrated into mainstream healthcare system.

### **Herbal Medicines**

- Involves the use of herbs, herbal materials, preparations, and final goods that contain active ingredients made from plant parts or combinations.<sup>24,25</sup>

### **Framework for Increasing Medical Tourism in Varanasi**



*Fig.1. Framework for Increasing Medical Tourism in Varanasi*

### Medical Tourism: Varanasi's Growing Potential

Prime Minister Narendra Modi says Kashi, also called Varanasi, would become a major healthcare hub in eastern Uttar Pradesh and beyond. The city has drawn pilgrims for thousands of years because of its historic temples, ghats, and ashrams. Modi recently stated in his address that the city is working to maintain its religious significance while simultaneously utilizing its ability to offer eastern Uttar Pradesh residents contemporary healthcare facilities. In addition to opening the RJ Shankara Eye Hospital, he lay the groundwork for a number of infrastructural and healthcare initiatives totaling ₹6,700 crore nationwide.<sup>26</sup>

Varanasi, India's medical tourism hub, is poised to attract patients from across India and neighboring countries due to its world-class medical facilities and spiritual significance. The growing medical tourism industry in India attracts patients from countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Africa due to low costs and high-quality

care. Varanasi's advanced healthcare infrastructure and better connectivity can capitalize on this trend. The spiritual charm of Kashi makes it an attractive destination for holistic healing, as traditional Indian practices like Ayurveda and yoga can be combined with modern treatments. PM Modi emphasized the potential of Varanasi as a global hub for health and wellness, highlighting the city's rich heritage and state-of-the-art facilities.<sup>27</sup>

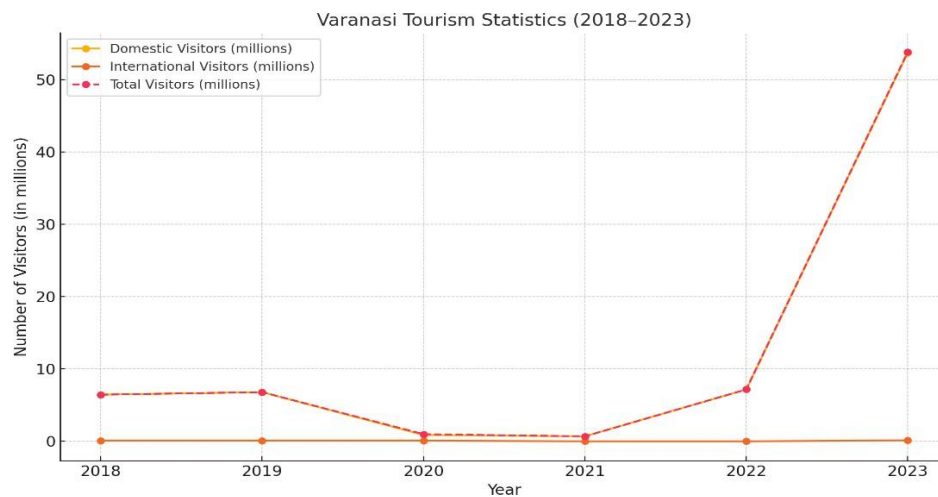


Fig.2. Varanasi Tourism Statistics (2018–2023)

Here is the graphical representation of **Varanasi Tourism Statistics (2018–2023)**:

- The graph shows a **significant dip in 2020–2021** due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A **strong recovery in 2022** is followed by a dramatic surge in **2023**, reaching nearly **54 million visitors**, largely driven by domestic tourism.<sup>28,29</sup>

### Scope and Significance of Health Tourism in Varanasi

Varanasi, one of India's oldest living cities, has the potential to become a global health tourism destination by blending spiritual heritage with modern healthcare and traditional Indian wellness sciences. Strategic innovation in medical, wellness, and spiritual tourism can enhance the city's appeal. Key innovations include integrating Ayurveda, Yoga, Agnikarma, and Panchakarma with modern medicine, improving healthcare infrastructure, digital facilitation, and international-standard patient services. The success of health tourism in Varanasi requires a collaborative framework involving policy support, public-private partnerships, educational institutions, and community stakeholders. With a rise in tourist footfall and demand for integrative wellness, Varanasi is on the cusp of becoming a holistic health hub.

Visitors from all over the world have been drawn to Varanasi because of its unique features, diversity, and distinctions. After the Taj Mahal, Varanasi is one of the most popular tourist destinations in India for foreign tourists. The Heritage Arc's construction has made Varanasi the second most popular foreign tourist destination, surpassing the Golden Triangle as the most popular tourist destination. Every year, more than 5.9 million devout Hindus travel to this hallowed location to carry out pilgrimages and other basic rites. The number of foreign tourists and domestic pilgrims visiting Varanasi has been rising steadily in recent years. In comparison to 2016, there was a 9.56 percent increase in domestic travel and a 12.65 percent increase in international travel in 2017 with 23,39,77,619 domestic tourists and 35,56,204 foreign tourists. A little over 5.9 million tourists visited Varanasi in 2017, a nearly 9% increase from 2016. However, Varanasi has a staggeringly high number of domestic visitors—roughly twice as many as some Indian states. The tourist attractions in Varanasi combine religion, health, medicine, culture, tradition, and the environment. Because of this, visitors with different goals would be drawn to the city. The Buddhist Stupa in Sarnath (Varanasi), an ancient Buddhist site, has been tentatively added to UNESCO's list of sites (UNESCO, 2022).<sup>30</sup>

The global health tourism market is projected to grow significantly in the coming years. India ranks among the top destinations for medical and wellness tourism due to its affordable costs, skilled professionals, and traditional medicine systems. Varanasi's unique blend of spirituality and health traditions makes it ideal for those seeking physical, mental, and spiritual rejuvenation. Health tourism in Varanasi can:<sup>31</sup>

- Boost local economy
- Generate employment
- Promote traditional practices
- Enhance global cultural exchange

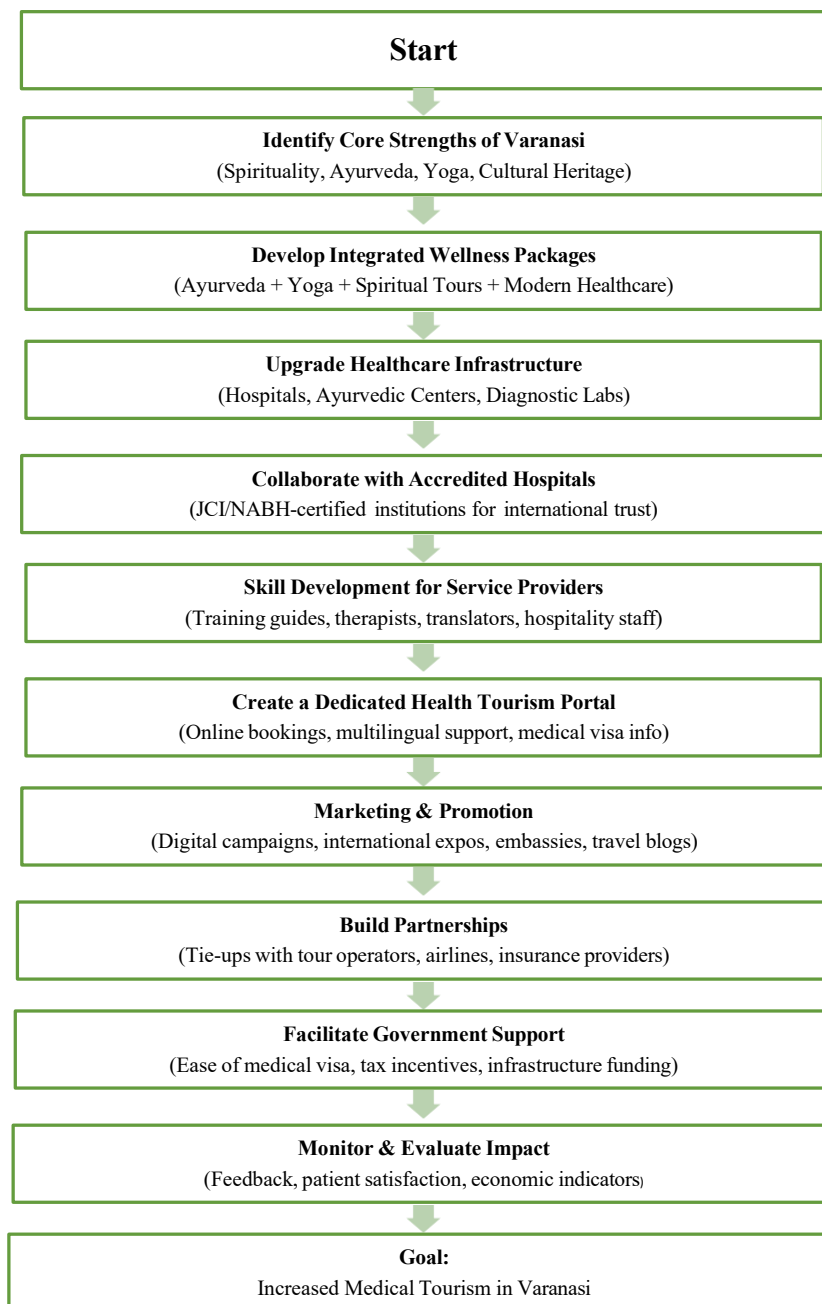


Fig.3. Steps to Enhance Medical Tourism in Varanasi

### Research Objectives

- Examine the requirements of international tourists in terms of health tourism.
- Examine the latest developments in health tourism for international tourists.

### Research Instruments

- In-depth interview issues about the needs of health tourism activities
- Focus group discussion issues for tourist groups to study the needs of health tourism activities
- Brainstorming issues used to collect data to develop health tourism innovations.
- Interview form to evaluate the satisfaction of tourists and establishment owners after participating in health tourism activities

### Suggestions

The development of innovations aimed at enhancing health tourism for international visitors forms a significant foundation for actionable recommendations.

### Policy Recommendations

The innovations identified in the study provide valuable guidance for establishing health tourism policies and practices. These can serve as reference models for organizations involved in health tourism to design effective and engaging experiences.

### Practical Recommendations

- The innovative health tourism models developed through this research can be adapted by businesses to fit their unique operational contexts.
- It is recommended that all three innovations identified be integrated into a single, cohesive health tourism program to maximize their impact.

### Academic Recommendations

This study contributes fresh insights into the field of health tourism, particularly in designing engaging health-promoting activities. Relevant academic institutions should consider the following:

- Tourism and hospitality faculties can utilize this research as a case study to enhance curriculum content in related courses.
- The findings can also be employed to refine existing theories and conceptual frameworks in health tourism.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Since this study employed a qualitative research and development approach, primarily using interviews and innovation testing, future research should incorporate quantitative methods. Developing these activities into structured models and validating them through techniques such as structural equation modeling would enhance the reliability and generalizability of the results.

**Conflict of Interest: Nil**

**Sources of funding: Nil**

## CONCLUSION

Varanasi holds untapped potential to emerge as a health tourism hotspot by innovatively integrating traditional and modern health practices. A coordinated effort involving government, private sector, and local communities can create a sustainable and inclusive model. By investing in infrastructure, policy, and marketing, and by honoring its spiritual legacy, Varanasi can offer a unique health tourism experience that benefits both tourists and residents alike. Health tourism is a growing global sector, driven by cost savings, specialized treatments, and a focus on wellness and preventative healthcare. Countries are investing in healthcare infrastructure to attract health tourists, offering diverse medical and wellness services. Collaboration between healthcare providers, governments, and tourism organizations is crucial to ensure high standards of care and promote sustainable practices, while promoting sustainable practices within the industry.<sup>32</sup> Varanasi has the potential to become a major international destination for health tourism because of its rich spiritual legacy, conventional healing methods, and state-of-the-art medical facilities. By integrating Ayurveda, Yoga, and modern healthcare services, the city can provide a holistic wellness experience to both domestic and international visitors. The study suggests that improved healthcare investment, sustainable infrastructure, and policy innovation significantly influence tourist inflows and satisfaction. A comprehensive health tourism model that promotes, restores, and maintains health can serve as a sustainable development pathway, addressing global demand for affordable healthcare, boosting the local economy, creating employment, and preserving traditional knowledge systems. Collaboration across sectors is crucial for achieving this vision.

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