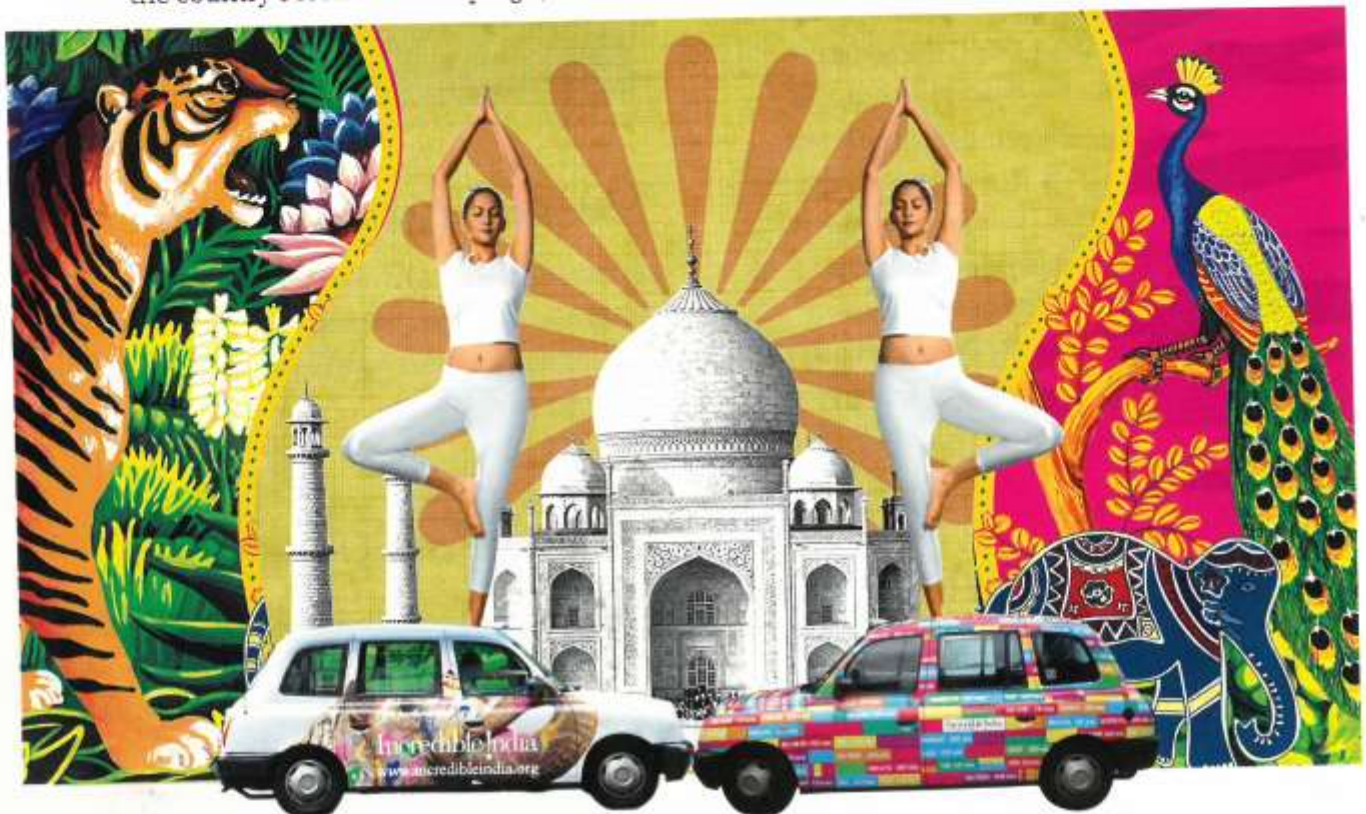


# THE FUTURE OF INCREDIBLE INDIA

Amitabh Kant, CEO & MD of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project and the man behind the country's iconic ad campaign, talks about the key to its success—and the way forward



In the global travel industry, India is often referred to as a 'sleeping giant' or a 'sleeping elephant'. The country's many assets are eulogised at every international tourism meeting. The chasm between potential and performance has existed not in spite of, but because of, the richness, authenticity and complexity of its assets and the sheer size of the country.

A crisis of massive magnitude gripped global tourism in 2001-02. For India, this was a time for reflection—and action. The biggest challenge was to develop one powerful idea that would unify India as an aspirational destination. That idea was christened 'Incredible India'. The campaign was launched at the peak of this crisis, to bring back consumer demand, and generate momentum and growth in the tourism industry. A strong, clear image increased consumer confidence and enhanced the desirability of



Above: Amitabh Kant. Top: Images from the Incredible India ad campaign

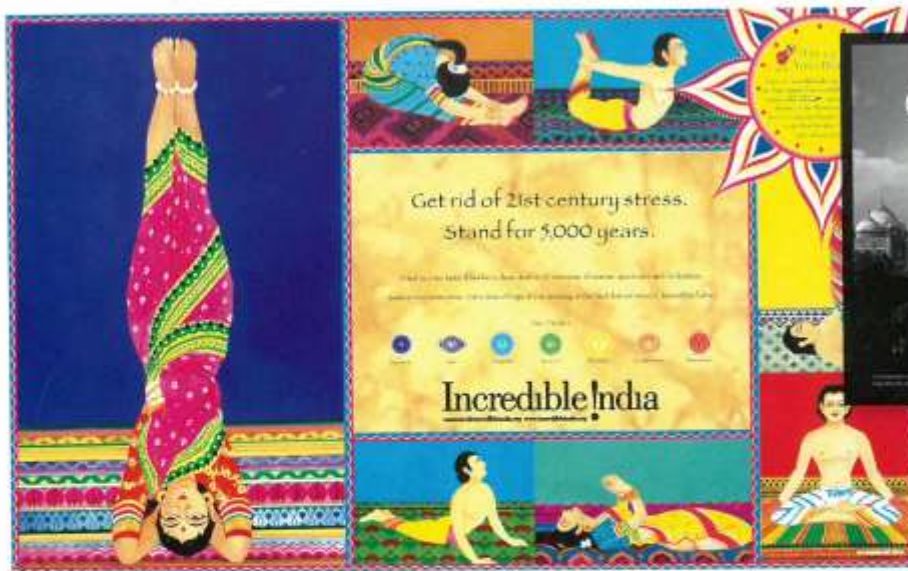
India's tourism products. It catalysed worldwide brand recognition and a strong brand equity.

On a recent visit to Kerala, I discovered Kalari Kovilakom, CGH Earth's 'Palace of Ayurveda', aimed at giving the tourist a chance to start one's life all over again. It promises

not only a new body and mind, but a deep connection with the spirit. This authentic experience attracts an international clientele and operates to full occupancy. Breaking new ground, the Taj group, in collaboration with Conservation Corporation Africa, has created interpretive wildlife experiences with a light eco footprint in places like Bandhavgarh and Pench. Meanwhile, Aman Nath and Francis Wacziarg operate the Neemrana 'non-hotels' and provide a cultural experience through the heritage properties they have restored across the nation.

Indian entrepreneurs are experimenting, driven by dynamism and influenced by innovation, sensitivity and new market opportunities. These experiences represent a new style of Indian elegance, luxury and spirituality. They provide a sense of timelessness, an opportunity to discover India and its people. In this shift towards experiential

## First word



Above and left: Incredible India's global campaigns

tourism lies the makings of a revolution in Indian tourism.

I have never believed in the numbers game. India should focus not on the masses, but on foreign tourists spending more time and money here. By targeting the upmarket clientele, India's net value realisation will go up. Markets are deferential and responsive to the views of upscale tourists; the mass market inevitably follows. This has a positive impact on the destination itself: an inflow of upscale tourists accelerates investment and attracts talent.

‘Economic downturns impact tourism only temporarily. The need for travel, for business as well as leisure, will remain an integral part of our lives’

The tourism sector has been one of the major beneficiaries of sustained growth in the Indian economy. Domestic tourism is witnessing a phenomenal momentum — Indians are travelling from one part of the country to another, discovering unexplored places. Kerala, Goa, Rajasthan and now Madhya Pradesh have emerged as 365-days-a-year destinations on the strength of domestic tourism. The success of states in attracting domestic traffic will become the springboard for key international source markets.

Indians are travelling not merely to domestic locations, but abroad — discovering new destinations, exploring

new products, shopping, and trying out different cuisines. Indians are already considered the highest spenders in several destinations in the Asia-Pacific region. A recent report by VisitBritain highlights the fact that Indian tourists outspent Americans in Britain. No wonder: the World Travel & Tourism Council has estimated that India and China will increase their travel and tourism demand most rapidly until 2018. These two countries together have a population double the size of the US, Western Europe and Japan. Only

five percent of their population has travelled extensively, as compared to 50 percent in developed countries. Hence, India and China will be the future tourism tigers, and Asian-led growth will be the key feature of the travel and tourism industry in the coming years.

The global economic downturn has impacted tourism, but I have no doubt that the industry will be resilient and bounce back. Tourism has a unique capacity to adapt and flourish. It has constantly demonstrated its ability to overcome crises. Economic downturns impact tourism only temporarily — they redistribute it geographically, alter the product and make travellers

more creative. The need for travel, for business as well as leisure, will remain an integral part of our lives.

The present economic crisis also presents opportunity. Until the mid-1990s, no one had heard of Kerala as a tourism destination. Its emergence in great measure was due to traffic diversion from terror-prone Kashmir. But Kerala was ready — it had developed new products like the backwaters and ayurveda; its entrepreneurs had created experiential boutique resorts; proper infrastructure was in place. Other states will emerge as tourism destinations if they enhance the quality of experience, improve infrastructure and create sub-brands. The potential of travel and tourism as an employment creator still remains untapped: an emerging economy, demographic changes, the rise of urban middle classes, the shift towards experiential tourism, and the evolution of technology open up vast opportunities.

There is thus a need to reinvigorate India's positioning and branding as an attractive destination. The Incredible India brand has to be constantly re-invented, kept alive, fresh and vibrant. This necessitates an effective private-public partnership. India needs an institutional restructuring with a tourism board like that of Singapore, Malaysia or Thailand, where hotels, tour operators and the government are all stakeholders. India also needs to unleash a new campaign in the global market every year. This calls for creativity, brilliant execution and constant innovation to ensure India stays incredible. 📌