

# Scope of Medical Tourism in North Bengal

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**Abstract -** India has evolved into a growing center for Medical Tourism in a couple of decades where people from different countries are coming for high-end treatment at an affordable cost. Health tourism in West Bengal is also flourishing gradually. Kolkata holds an important position in international patient service for different neighboring countries. North Bengal represents a geographically critical area with an immense prospect of healthcare and tourism both. The purpose of this study is to find the “Scope of Medical Tourism in North Bengal”. The study is based on secondary data explored from various articles, books, journals published in national and international magazines.

The study evaluates the prospects of providing tertiary care health services from hospitals based in North Bengal to International Patients from Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and further countries like East and West Africa, Middle East and South Eastern Asian Countries as well as Europe. The study also focuses on the prospective medical specialties for an international patient such as renal transplant, Heart transplant, joint replacement, Valve Surgery, Robotic Surgery, Cosmetic Surgery, and Cancer treatment.

The overall study analyzes various pros and cons of setting medical tourism infrastructure in North Bengal. It assesses the role of various stakeholders and probable future growth in terms of health tourism and also opens up the scope of business development opportunities by providing International Patient Service in North Bengal.

**Key Words:** Medical Tourism, North Bengal, Potential Market, Health-care, International Patient, JCI.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “**Medical Tourist**” represents an individual seeking health-care outside the country of origin, sometimes combined with the intention of enjoying a post-treatment vacation. This complete process is evolving into a whole new branch of the tourism industry. Medical tourism is primarily composed of patients traveling overseas to receive tertiary care treatment in specialties such as cardiovascular, nephrology, orthopedics, cosmetic surgery, infertility, cancer, and organ transplant. The treatment is generally provided by multi-specialty hospitals and lots of other stakeholders, such as Healthcare Facilitators, Travel Organizers, Hoteliers, Medical Insurers and respective Embassies and Consulates of the countries are involved into the entire process. Whether it is the comparably lesser cost or less waiting period or the scopes of exploring a new country; medical tourism is gaining potential day by day and bringing heavy attention to the corporate healthcare players in Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and most promising in India.

India has shown a remarkable growth in this segment and it has the potential to double its current US\$ 3 billion in revenue to US\$ 8 billion, with a compound annual growth rate of 15.6 percent by 2020. Cities like Bangalore,

Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, and Thiruvananthapuram have already occupied the majority of the market whereas Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Jaipur etc are making their position strongly every day. As an eastern part of the country, West Bengal has gained its potential Medical Tourism Market in the countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Thailand. Presently Kolkata and Durgapur are the only two cities offering standard International Patient Services and both the cities are located in the Southern part of Bengal. The North Bengal region, though having substantial potential, is yet to develop in this segment. North Bengal is truly a treasure hunt for the nature lovers, especially for those who are looking for a periodical escape from the hectic chores of the modern city life. Lying in the Northern half of the State of West Bengal and encircled by international boundaries of Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, North Bengal offers a unique combination of varied landscape from high mountains to dense forest, bird sanctuaries, lakes and plenty of rivers and waterfalls. Along with the natural beauty, there are a number of heritage monuments and places of historical importance. The geographical diversity blended with the cultures of different ethnic groups has placed North Bengal in the most treasured tourist destinations in Northeast India. Now,

considering the outstanding tourism factor of North Bengal, can a smart and estimated move in the existing healthcare industry of this region develop a growing market in Medical Tourism? The objective of this paper is to analyze the feasibility of the above presumption.

## II. ANALYSIS

To analyze the feasibility of setting up medical value tourism facilities in North Bengal's Multi-specialty Hospitals (primarily private), we evaluated the scenario in following five different dimensions:

**Availability, Accessibility, Affordability, Acceptability, and Quality (AAAAQ)**

### Availability

The primary reason for traveling abroad for treatment purpose is indeed the un-availability of competent medical facilities and complex surgical procedures. Hence prior to thinking about entering seriously into Medical Tourism business, one hospital should be equipped with most of the commonly desired services and procedures.

We may focus on following major therapies/procedures as the primary service line for international patients.

Treatment/Procedure	Department
Coronary Artery Bypass Grafting (CABG) & Valve Surgeries	Cardiac Surgery
Coronary Angioplasty (PTCA)	Cardiology
Hip and Knee joint replacement	Orthopedic
Kidney Transplant & Dialysis	Nephrology
Complex Neuro-surgery (Brain & Spine)	Neurosurgery
Laparoscopic Surgeries	General Surgery
In-vitro Fertilization	Infertility
Chemotherapy/ Onco-surgery	Oncology
Face Lift, Liposuction, Rhinoplasty	Cosmetic Surgery
Hysterectomy, Uterectomy, cyst surgeries	Obstetrics & Gynecology
Prostate Surgery	Urology
Gastric Bypass	Gastro Surgery
ICU/CCU/NCU	Critical Care
AYUSH	Alternative Medicine

**Table-1 (Common treatments for medical tourists; Source- MVT in India, FICCI and KPMG, (2014))**

Apart from the availability of above tertiary care procedures, following supporting infrastructure is desirable for attracting Medical Tourists:

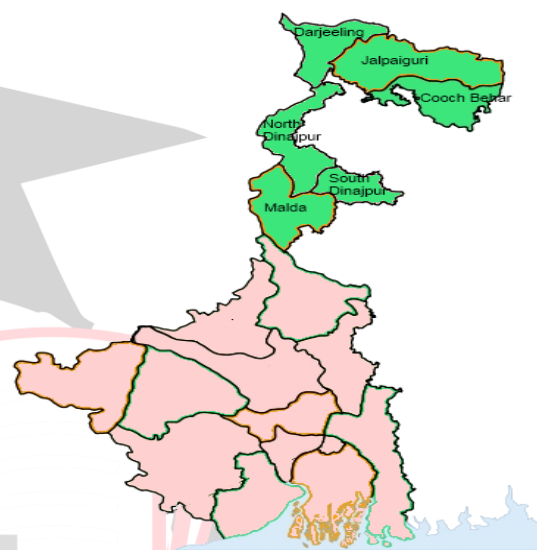
- Deluxe Cabin
- Separate International Patient Help Desk

- The arrangement of Guest House for medical attendants
- Arrangement of interpreters
- Pick-up and drop service from Airport/Entry Gate
- Leisure Tour Consultant/Agency
- Visa related assistance

### Accessibility

It is always an advantage to have an accessible location-well connected by Air-Road and Train as well.

North Bengal shares its border with three countries: **Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan** and three states: **Bihar, Assam, and Sikkim**.



**Fig - 1**



**Fig-2**

**North Bengal, as a part of the state of West Bengal (Fig-1) and its borders (Fig-2)**

The major cities/towns in the region are Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, and Raiganj. However, the present availability of tertiary care multi-specialty hospitals is centralized around the city Siliguri which is a part of Darjeeling district. The location of the city is quite convenient and kind of perfect to build a healthcare hub. Following chart represents the accessibility of Siliguri from different key points:

Key location	Distance in KM by Road
Bagdogra Airport- Darjeeling	12
Pakyong Airport- Sikkim	90
New Jalpaiguri Railway Station	5
Banglabandha-Nearest inland port of Bangladesh	15
Jaigaon- Bhutan Gate entry	150
Kakarvitta- Nepal Border entry	30

**Table-2 (Accessibility of Siliguri from different key points; Source: Wikipedia)**

As we can see in table-2 that the city Siliguri is well connected by road with three neighboring countries and the areas nearby to the borders can be identified as the potential international vicinity for promoting medical tourism.

**Currently, following Multi-specialty hospitals are having their units in Siliguri:**

Hospital Name	Number of beds	Kye Specialities
Neotia Getwel Healthcare Centre	250 beds	Cardiology, Neurology, Orthopedics, Neurosurgery, Urology, Nephrology
Medica North Bengal Clinic	150 beds	Gynecology, General Surgery, Paediatrics
Desun Hospitals Siliguri	300 beds	Cardiology, Burn, Critical Care
Anandalok Hospitals Siliguri	150 beds	Neurosurgery, Trauma, General Medicine
Maharaja Agrasen Hospital Siliguri	250 beds	General Medicine, Laparoscopic Surgery, Nephrology, ENT
Disha Eye Hospital	50 beds	Eye Surgery- Retina, Cornea, cataract

**Table-3 (Source: Respective Websites)**

Apart from the above hospitals, there are many small hospitals and nursing homes are operating in the industry

and some of them are also potential for International Patient Service in single or multiple specialties.

Few more big brands of hospital industry are planning to set up their units in this area within the next five to ten years.

Though the above analysis of accessibility has majorly considered the nearby international vicinity, if quality health care can be provided at an affordable cost then these hospitals have the prospect to attract patients from distant countries as well.

### **Affordability**

Affordability is the key factor for Indian Medical Tourism and this is the place where we are much ahead. The cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi & NCR, Chennai, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad were all in competition with pricing whereas Kolkata came into the picture quite late, around 2008, and showed quite promising growth in specific areas of treatment. Kolkata is now having patients from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Europe, Afghanistan, and many more countries because of a few key factors like:

- Comparatively lower price
- Easy processing for treatment like Organ Transplant
- Comfortable stay for attendants
- Lesser cost of living in case of long stay
- Well connectivity with a number of flights available in the International Airport
- Roadway connectivity from nearest entry points

All the above factors can be available in North Bengal, moreover, the advantage of tourism can be the value-added factor here.

Treatment cost is the first and foremost thing that comes to the mind of a medical traveller. Let us have a look on the **countriwise comparative costs (in USD) of treatment for some common procedures:**

Medical procedure	USA	Costa Rica	India	Thailand	Malaysia	Singapore
Heart Bypass	\$123,000	\$27,000	\$7,900	\$15,000	\$12,100	\$17,200
Angioplasty	\$28,200	\$13,800	\$5,700	\$4,200	\$8,000	\$13,400
Heart Valve Replacement	\$170,000	\$30,000	\$9,500	\$17,200	\$13,500	\$16,900
Hip Replacement	\$40,364	\$13,600	\$7,200	\$17,000	\$8,000	\$13,900
Hip Resurfacing	\$28,000	\$13,200	\$9,700	\$13,500	\$12,500	\$16,350
Knee Replacement	\$35,000	\$12,500	\$6,600	\$14,000	\$7,700	\$16,000
Spinal Fusion	\$110,000	\$15,700	\$10,300	\$9,500	\$6,000	\$12,800

Gastric Bypass	\$25,000	\$12,900	\$7,000	\$16,800	\$9,900	\$13,700
Hysterectomy	\$15,400	\$6,900	\$3,200	\$3,650	\$4,200	\$10,400
Breast Implants	\$6,400	\$3,500	\$3,000	\$3,500	\$3,800	\$8,400
Rhinoplasty	\$6,500	\$3,800	\$2,400	\$3,300	\$2,200	\$2,200
Face Lift	\$11,000	\$4,500	\$3,500	\$3,950	\$3,550	\$440
Liposuction	\$5,500	\$2,800	\$2,800	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$2,900
Tummy Tuck	\$8,000	\$5,000	\$3,500	\$5,300	\$3,900	\$4,650
Cataract surgery (per eye)	\$3,500	\$1,700	\$1,500	\$1,800	\$3,000	\$3,250
IVF Treatment	\$12,400	N/A	\$2,500	\$4,100	\$6,900	\$14,900

Table-4 (Source: <http://medicaltourism.com/Forms/price-comparison.aspx>)

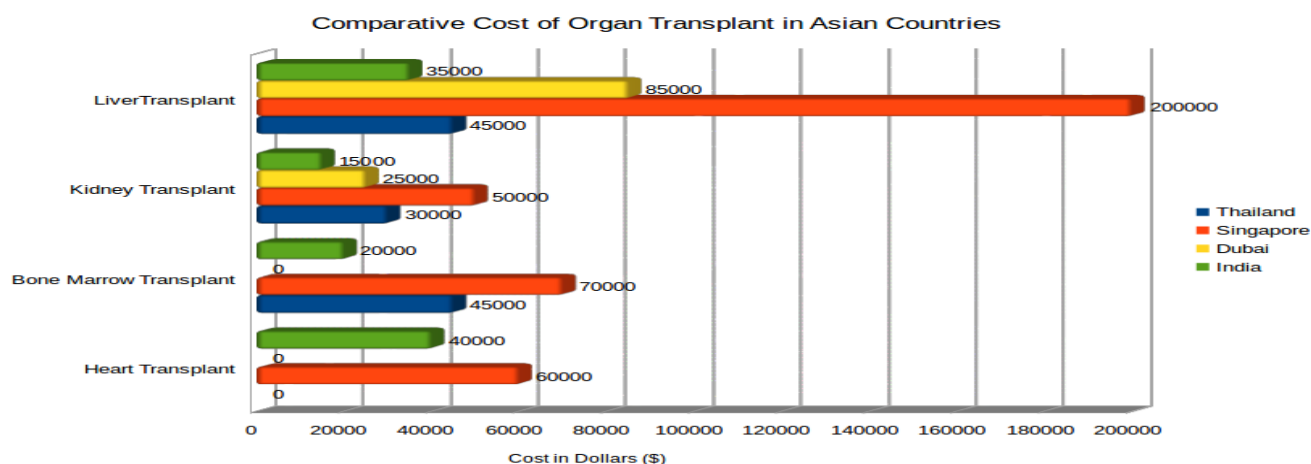


Chart1(Source:<http://medicaltourism.com/Forms/price-comparison.aspx>)

Apart from the above procedures, another most important area is organ transplant and India has the most competitive prices for this segment. Above graph represents the comparative price of four major organ transplant procedures of four Asian countries who are major players in medical tourism:

show the steady growth in this segment in the last few years:

Considering North Bengal as a prospective Medical Tourism hub, the pricing of all major procedures shall be done keeping the above examples in mind so that the advantage of affordability remains the key attracting factor. Along with the direct medical costs, there are some indirect variable costs as well which play role in decision making for selecting a place for long-term treatment. Those include:

- Cost of Hotel/Guest House
- Apartment Rent
- The average cost of meals per day
- Transportation cost

North Bengal has the advantage in most of the above points as compared to other metro cities of India. Hence is the quality of treatment is equivalent then a medical tourist may prefer Siliguri over any other destination.

#### Acceptability:

Indian Medical Value tourism has shown sustainable growth in the last couple of decades. The following charts

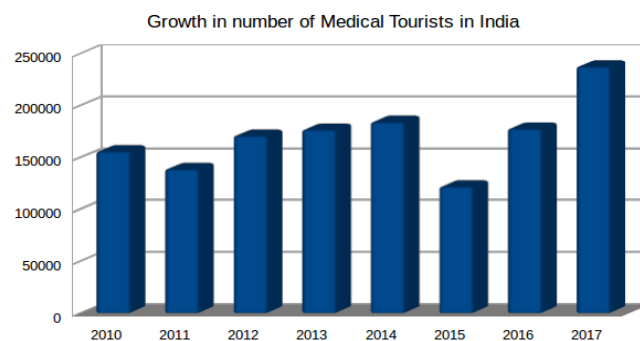


Chart-2 (Source: India Tourism Report 2017)

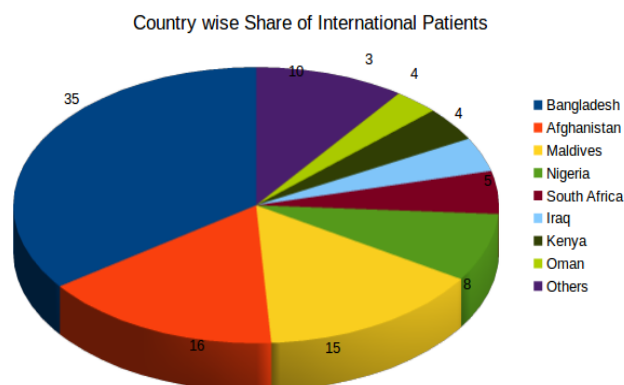


Chart-3 (Source: India Tourism Report-2017 )



The growth signifies worldwide acceptability of India as a medical tourism destination. To develop such acceptability in North Bengal, the hospitals have to develop proper business development and Promotion plans.

### III. QUALITY

Quality Accreditations help build confidence around the quality of care provided. There are multiple international organizations providing accreditations with JCI (Joint commission international) considered as a gold standard for quality healthcare. While JCI is globally recognized, hospitals certified by national boards such as NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare providers) also tend to meet global standards in clinical outcomes and processes. The more accredited hospitals a country has, the better it's positioning in the global medical tourism arena. Even insurance companies that consider financing procedures undertaken abroad mandate JCI as a necessary condition. Currently, There are a couple of hospitals in North Bengal which are accredited by NABH, however, none of the hospitals is having JCI standards. Hospitals need to focus on getting international accreditation to promote medical tourism as a major service.

### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Demand-based Service Development:** Hospitals need to develop specific medical therapies as mentioned in the availability section as per the need of medical travelers.

**2. Organ Transplant:** It is one of the major sources of revenue in medical tourism and it has a rising demand in countries like Myanmar, Nigeria, Kenya, UAE, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Hence this can be a key product to be promoted.

**3. Focus on AYUSH** India has promoted Ayurveda as part of the 'health tourism' and it has brought a new definition to vacationing in India itself.

Ayurvedic Therapies can be used to treat ailments like Anxiety, Arthralgia, Asthma, Back pain, Diabetes, Disc Prolapse, Diseases of the eye, Dislocation, Dystonia, Hemiplegia, Hypertension, Impotence, Infertility, Miscarriage, Motor diseases, Multiple Sclerosis, Obesity, Peptic Ulcer, Peripheral Neuritis, Psoriasis and other skin diseases, Rheumatic Joint pains, Rheumatoid Arthritis etc. Apart from treatment for these diseases it also offers therapy that rejuvenates the body and mind from the ills arising out of the frictions of everyday life.

**4. Development of Healthcare Facilitator Network:** Efficient and effective medical tourism cannot grow without proper support of a strong facilitator network.

**5. Medical and attendant Visa Assistance:** Obtaining Visa is one of the biggest issues for medical travelers.

Essential support shall be given from hospital in coordination with the embassy.

**6. Focus on Tourism opportunities:** Keeping in mind above factors such as availability of services, affordable cost, acceptance and smooth accessibility alongside quality health-care; the biggest advantage of Siliguri and North Bengal is the immense prospect of tourism.

### V. CONCLUSION

The future of the medical tourism industry in North Bengal seems hopeful. The study reveals that most of the medical tourists in Bengal are coming from Bangladesh but there is an immense scope to enter the South-east Asian and African Markets provided the hospitals develop International standard Services. In order to strengthen its position, North Bengal would need to focus on the dual objectives of 'tourism friendliness' and 'patient's need assessment'. Siliguri seems to be the most suitable city to become the center of the hub and competitive pricing can be one of the key tools to grab the initial phase of the business. Although achieving a remarkable position in the map of medical tourism is a long path to walk, the possibility of North Bengal to evolve as a dream destination for medical tourists is always there.

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