

# Dental Tourism in Kerala: A case of Kochi city

<sup>1</sup>Linchu Chacko, <sup>2</sup>Prof.Sherin P.V

<sup>1</sup>Student, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor (Adhoc)  
School of Architecture and Planning,  
Government Engineering College  
Thrissur, India

**Abstract-** Dental tourism means individuals seeking dental care outside their hometown and accompanied by vacation. Dental tourism emerged in Kerala in 2004. With the benefits of cost advantage, standardized technology and skilled doctors, tourists from England, Austria, Switzerland and Germany visit India. The presence of four international airports has made connectivity and accessibility to Kerala easier. This article concentrates on the Kochi corporation area and nearby municipalities since Kochi is a medical tourism hub and the footfall of tourists is also high. Presently there are clinics that promote dental tourism in the study area. Through primary survey and expert analysis, the potential of dental tourism in Kochi is identified. So in order to improve dental tourism and elevate it to a higher level, suitable proposals and strategies are given so that it can socially, economically and technologically benefit people.

**Keywords-** Tourism, dental tourism, cluster development, floating dental clinic.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an industry that helps a country to generate income and gives opportunities to the employment sector and other related sectors. According to the World Tourism Organisation tourism means people “traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure and not less than 24 hours, business and other purposes”. Today as the medical fields bloom with technologies rising, changing lifestyles and people get more conscious about their health and well-being. So dental care has become as important as any other treatments and has become part of health. It is becoming cheaper in developing countries with accredited hospitals, qualified staff and modern technologies attracting tourists leading to dental tourism which is growing worldwide.

## II. DENTAL TOURISM

Dental tourism is a part of medical tourism and it is an emerging industry that is gaining popularity globally. Dental tourism is not only about oral health, it is clubbed with vacations and wellness. It is reported that Dental tourism contributes to 10% of Indian medical tourism which grow to an extent of 30% by 2015 [1]. According to reports by Economic Times “Globally, there is a drastic increase in the growth rate of dental market with Asian countries showing a growth of 10% followed by European countries and USA (5%). India is blessed with the vast dental workforce with graduates from 313 dental institutes and over 5000 dental labs and over 300 dental hospitals” [2].

### a. Scope of Dental Tourism

India is becoming the favored destination for dental tourism due to its advanced technology and infrastructure. India has the best treatment centers in the world and is a preferred tourist destination in the world. The low cost of capital and skilled dentists are assets to the country. Even with airfare, the cost of traveling to India for dental treatment can be economical and the quality of services is better than that found in the Western world. The key hubs of dental tourism in India are Delhi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Chandigarh, Kerala and Goa. These centers offer trained dental experts, the latest dental technology and world-class facilities [1].

### b. Dental Tourism in Kerala

Kerala has been one of the hubs of dental tourism for decades along with Goa. The recently emerged hub is Jaipur in Rajasthan. The reason behind dental vacation could be the cost-effective treatments that are offered in low-income countries which attracts people from high-income countries. Connectivity to the destinations in Kerala is primarily through the four major airports: Kochi International Airport, Calicut International Airport, Kannur International Airport and Thiruvananthapuram International Airport.

### c. History of Dental Tourism in Kerala

It was in 2004 that dental tourism began its way in Kerala. Kerala has witnessed the arrival of nearly 3000 foreign travellers in 2008 seeking dental treatment and in the past three years Kerala has shown 25 to 30% growth in dental tourism. The reasons behind the emergence of Kerala as a destination for dental tourism is due to the increase in dental hospitals on par with international standards and the attractive cost advantage when compared with the U.S. and UK.[3]

### d. Process flow of Dental Tourism

First, the tourist arrives at the airport then he goes to the destination where the clinic is present. The tourist undergoes the treatment. After getting accommodation at hotels or resorts provided by agents or suggested by dentists tourists may undergo Ayurveda or Siddha since Kerala is known for its Ayurvedic treatments. The tourist goes for site seeing to beautiful destinations in Kerala. Finally, he goes back to the airport to reach his hometown. Fig.1 shows the process flow of dental tourism.

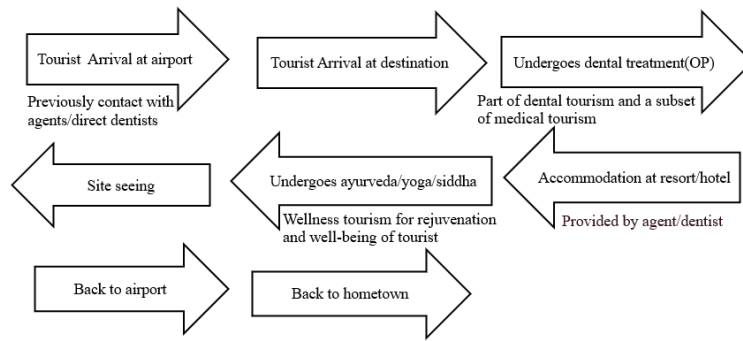


Fig. 1. Process flow of dental tourism

**III. ASSESSMENT OF DENTAL TOURISM IN THE STUDY AREA**

Through primary survey and expert analysis scope of the study area was identified. From the infrastructure analysis, it was found that dental clinics in the study area meet the needs of people and are on par with international standards. Road, transport service, water and power supply are well maintained.

The study area is the Kochi Corporation Area and municipalities like Maradu, Thripunithara, Kalamassery, and Thrikakkara. The area is 183.76 sq. km. Kochi is a coastal settlement with a backwater system. Connectivity through the air is Cochin International Airport at Nedumbassery (32 km from the city). By rail, Ernakulam is well connected to all major cities in India. By road, The KSRTC Central Bus Station is near Ernakulam Junction Railway Station.

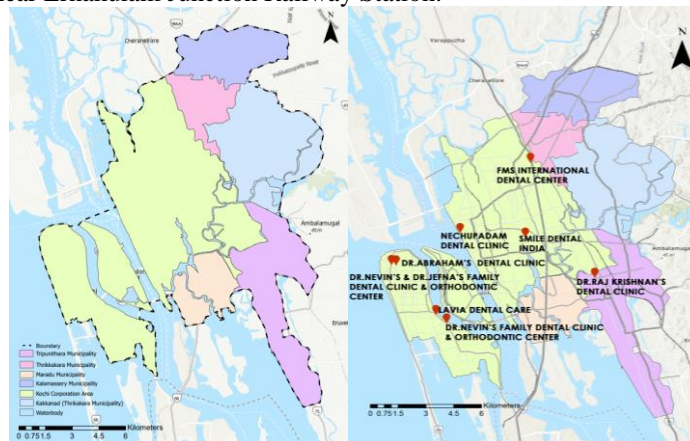


Fig. 2. Study area

Fig.3. Location of dental clinics surveyed

*a. Why Kochi for Dental Tourism?*

Kochi is well connected through airlines with other countries than Thiruvananthapuram and Calicut. Almost 25 to 30% of the revenue of the major hospitals in Kochi is from medical tourism. The number of tourists from Maldives to Thiruvananthapuram is only three flights a week whereas to Kochi is fourteen flights per week which accounts for a lion's share of tourists followed by GCC countries.

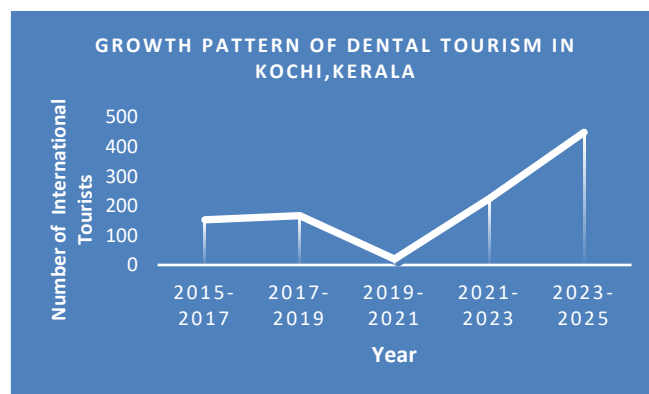


Fig. 4. Graph showing the growth pattern of Dental Tourism in Kochi

From the graph, it can be seen that dental tourism shows an increasing trend in the future in Kochi. The dip in the graph shows the pandemic scenario where tourist's footfall was less. Tourists from the UK, Australia, US, UAE, Maldives visit Kochi for dental treatment.

### b. Analysis

Fig.5. shows the 1st cluster Fort Kochi area with a maximum number of tourists - 11% of foreign tourist arrivals according to tourism statistics 2019. The second cluster inside Kochi Corporation surveyed 3 dental tourism clinics and more than 5 resorts with the presence of Ernakulam Fort Kochi boat ferry and marine drive and connectivity to NH 66. The 3rd cluster surveyed 1 clinic and identified 2 dental tourism clinics and the presence of a lesser number of resorts than other clusters. The 4th cluster with 3 identified dental tourism clinics in Kakkannad. These clusters possess a macro effect since interdependency on other sectors and possible potential of development in the connected sectors like hotels, resorts, ayurveda centers and opportunities for budding dentists to growth of their careers. Also, this gives other dental clinics to develop as dental tourism clinics in the future.

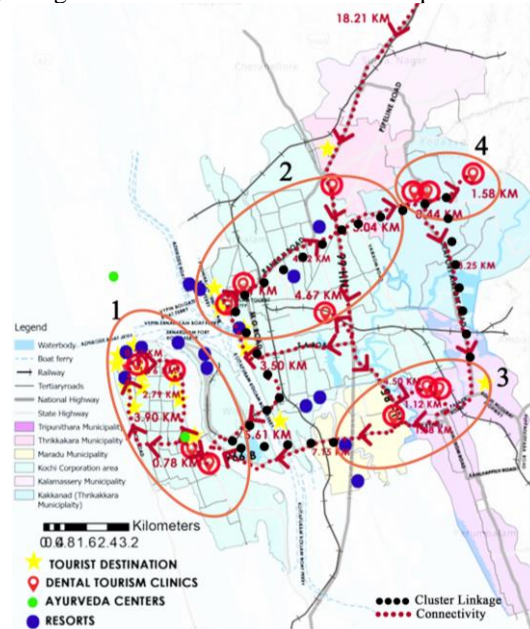


Fig. 5. Cluster development

## IV. PROPOSALS

### a. Proposal 1 – Cluster Development

Along with cluster development, patients undergoing long-duration treatment in phases can consult doctors in clinics (land) as well as through floating clinics. So patients can undergo treatment as well as experience tourism.

### b. Proposal 2 – Floating dental clinic

Introducing concepts like floating clinics along with ayurveda treatments, handicraft shops, and some recreational areas, pharmacies can be a boon to the dental tourism industry and a good expedition. Construction of clinics on stilts and traveling in waterways by boats can be done. Modular-type floating clinics can be placed where they can be expandable according to need and can be used on land as well as on water. Especially in Kochi where backwaters play a major role floating clinics provide an opportunity for tourists to undergo treatment as well as enjoy the views.



Fig. 6. Conceptual model of floating dental clinics

### c. Proposal 3 – Houseboats for dental treatments

Wellness treatments can be either done in houseboats as well as in resorts through the trip routes. Along with it if dental treatment packages can be incorporated, it will be uplifting tourism to the next level. Kochi has a good potential for these. A trip from Kochi to Kayamkulam through the backwaters for wellness, as well as dental treatments, can be proposed by extending the study area to join a bigger circuit.

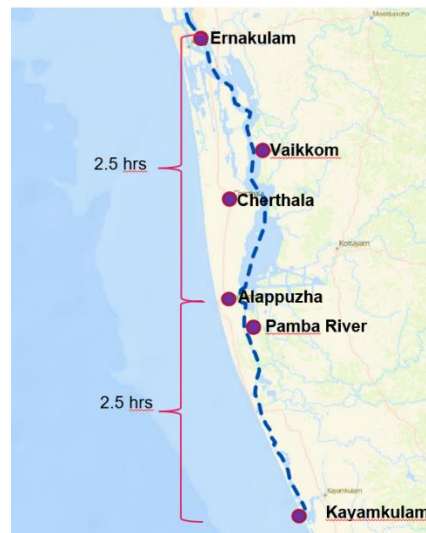


Fig.7. Route map for the ride

## V. STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strategy 1* - One of the primary strategies is to develop a niche. This includes focusing on a particular type of dental procedure.[4]
- Strategy 2* - It is important to build a good relationship with international patients. Proper online presence and high customer-level service to ensure patients are satisfied with their experience.
- Strategy 3* - It is important to build relationships with insurance providers to make it easier for those who have insurance and do not pay from their pocket.
- Strategy 4* - It is important to focus on high-quality services. Investing in the highest technologies and techniques to ensure that the dentists are trained and experienced in the latest techniques.
- Strategy 5* - Quality control: It is important to check the quality control to ensure the quality of care is consistent

### I. Recommendations

- Awareness of dental tourism to the public:**  
Through campaigns, awareness programs, short film competitions, and training sessions the importance of oral health and hygiene is created among people. At the same time, the benefits of bringing tourism to this sector are envisioned.
- Stakeholder participation:** From Tourism departments, travel agents, and NGO's can help increase the promotion of dental tourism in Kochi.
- Quality infrastructure:** Promote proper monitoring and accreditation of clinics from the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare, QHA trend accreditation, Australian Council on Healthcare Standards International and The Joint Commission. Also, promote proper management for sustainable development.
- Connectivity:** Proper connectivity through roadways, railways and waterways can be improved.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Tourism is an invisible export. Therefore it is our responsibility to treat the tourists properly. Dental tourism is gaining popularity nowadays. Kerala being a favourable destination for tourism has the potential to catch tourists around the globe. Kochi, a medical hub of Kerala, has scope to widen its dental tourism. With modern techniques, awareness, promotions and proposals dental tourism can mark a new path in the tourism industry.

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