

The scope of developing medical tourism in Kolkata

Dr. Sreejita Mukherjee

Raja Birendra Chandra College, Kandi, Murshidabad

Email: sreejita79@gmail.com

Abstract : Travelling to places away from ones' residence in order to seek medical treatment is known as medical or health tourism. It is an ancient practice. People often visited shrines or hot springs to cure their ailments. This ancient practice has now been modernised and presented as a well rounded package to the patients at competitive cost. India has become one of the leading destinations of medical tourism. Kolkata is the only major metropolis in eastern India. In this context, this paper seeks to examine whether Kolkata is ready or able to develop the market for medical tourism. It studies the scenario of medical tourism in India and in this backdrop, analyses the problems and prospects of developing health tourism in Kolkata. The paper also analyses primary data collected from travel agents to understand the current situation of medical tourism in the city and draws conclusion about the future of this activity.

Keywords: Medical tourism, Health tourism, wellness, niche.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The idea of medical tourism is nothing new. In ancient days, the air or water of certain places gained recognition for their healing properties and patients were often prescribed to travel to such spots. Hot springs were popular healing areas. Similarly, certain places, often at high altitudes were free from pollution and people with breathing difficulties were asked to spend time there. Sanatoriums were set up in places known for their invigorating climates. People also travelled to pray and worship at certain shrines for cure of specific diseases (Rai, 2017). Hence, it is clear that people have travelled for their health since a long time ago. But, such travel were restricted to the very rich – those who could afford the cost of travel and staying at the spot for an extended period of time, suspending their jobs. It was not for the middle classes or the poor. However, with time, travel for medical purposes have not only become more affordable, but rather, actually cheaper and more effective than the treatment at home. This has opened up the scope of developing Medical or health tourism.

2. Background of the study :

Over time, a number of interrelated concepts like medical tourism, health tourism, wellness tourism etc have emerged in the tourism literature. A number of definitions have been put forward. For example, Weiermair K (2003) regards any travel across international borders for availing health care services as a form of health tourism. Definitions with wider scope have emerged in the writings of other scholars. Hunter (2007) had described health tourism as movement of the patients in search of any type of treatments including exercise, spa or meditation to a specific place to take advantage of its physical and / or cultural features.

It was common at one time in Developing countries like India for the super rich to seek treatment abroad for difficult medical conditions. Those who could afford it would opt for the Swiss Sanatoriums or the advanced medical procedures in the United States of America, Britain or Germany. However, the scenario has gradually changed. Now, the people of the developed countries flock to India and other Developing countries for healthcare treatments. Today, countries like Thailand, China, India, Cuba and Argentina have become popular destinations of medical treatments (Singh, 2015). In this context, this paper seeks to investigate how far it is possible to develop medical tourism in Kolkata.

3. Objectives:

- i. To examine the potential for the growth of medical tourism industry in India in general and Kolkata in particular
- ii. To study the current condition of the medical tourism industry in Kolkata

- iii. To suggest steps to overcome the shortcomings and fully develop the resources for encouraging the medical tourism in Kolkata and its surroundings.

3.1 Hypothesis

- i. India has emerged as one of the foremost medical and health tourism destinations in the world.
- ii. Kolkata has huge potential to develop medical tourism.
- iii. The Government has to play an active and encouraging role in order to develop health tourism in Kolkata

4. Materials and methods :

I have consulted various research papers and websites in order to develop the ideas about health tourism in India. I have also carried out field survey to collect primary data from travel agents who help patients to visit Kolkata and avail medical treatments. There are no agents who provide medical tour packages in Kolkata. Hence, I have chosen to collect data from travel agents who make the travel arrangements for those seeking medical treatment in Kolkata. A total of 11 travel agents spread across Kolkata were surveyed in order to understand the status of health tourism.

Medical tourism in India

In the days following independence, the medical infrastructure of the country was under tremendous pressure. It suffered from several lacuna including lack of modern machines and medicines, paucity of medical practitioners – especially those trained in the latest treatments and procedures as well as the total number and accessibility of the medical institutions. It was common for those who could afford it to travel to foreign countries – mostly in Europe to get the best and latest medical treatment.

Today, the scenario has reversed completely. The countries of South East Asia including India has developed a unique form of travel known as health tourism or medical tourism. People from all over the world – especially Developed countries come here for physical treatment and wholistic improvement in mental and physical health. Countries like Thailand, Indonesia, China and India have emerged as big players in this sector (Sultana et al, 2014)

What are the factors that have brought around such complete about face in medical tourism? Several reasons have been identified by scholars:

- i. Cost is always a major consideration in healthcare. Treatments are often expensive. In many cases there is no guarantee that the treatment will yield positive results or that they will last. Sometimes, treatments do not become successful at the first round but may have to be undertaken several times. It is difficult to plan for the cost in face of so many unknown factors. In fact, the rising cost of health care in Developed countries emerged as one of the primary reasons why people gradually opted for other destinations. On the other hand, Developing countries – especially the Asian countries are known for their low labour cost. According to Kshetri (2011), lower labour cost helps people to save 40% to 60% of money when seeking treatments in these countries. Even among those countries which have emerged as modern destinations for healthcare, India enjoys considerable cost advantages. This has been shown in Table 1

Table 1: Comparative cost of selected procedures (US\$)

Country	Coronary artery bypass surgery	Bypass surgery, Heart valve replacement	Hip replacement	Knee replacement	Face lift
Costa Rica	24100	30000	11400	10700	4900
Malaysia	12000	13400	7500	12000	6400
Taiwan	27500	30000	8800	10000	8500
Thailand	22000	25000	12700	11500	5000
USA	70000 - 133000	75000 - 200000	33000 - 57000	30000 - 53000	10500 - 16000
India	7000	9500	7200	4300 - 7200	3100 - 4800

Source: Indian Medical Travel Association, ICRA Management Consulting Services Ltd

- ii. The quality of healthcare in India has gained the trust and appreciation of people worldwide. Indian doctors working abroad have helped to build up a very positive image of Indian healthcare professionals over the last few decades. The availability of doctors with ultra specialist training and international work experience has been increasing rapidly in India. The doctors are supported by a growing school of support staff including nurses and medical technicians. This availability of skilled professionals help in the growth of the medical tourism sector in the country.
- iii. In addition to the personnel, the availability of latest technology, machines and pharmaceuticals in India have also acted as an important factor behind the vigorous growth of the healthcare industry. Tele-radiology and tele-medicine sector is still in its infancy in India, but they are growing rapidly and has already commanded international respect. The pharmaceutical sector is robust and its quality is at par with those of the developed countries. India today manufactures most of the medical equipment and drugs in the domestic sector. This has helped to reduce cost drastically as well as almost eliminate any time lag.
- iv. A number of infrastructural factors have come together to help in the growth of the health tourism industry in the country. One such factor is the highly proactive insurance sector. Non life insurance segment has the second largest share of the market. According to a survey by IBEF the health insurance market has grown from \$169 million in 2002 to \$1.1 billion in 2008. The use of plastic money has become common. Several laws regarding international transactions and foreign exchange have been relaxed. Connectivity has increased and foreign flights reach most corners of the country. Widespread use of English language help facilitate communication and put the patients at ease. The net result is that India has become an attractive destination for health care for people all over the world.
- v. Time is often of utmost importance to those seeking medical care. A number of life saving treatments and surgeries cannot be delayed if they are to be effective. There is often a long waiting period in the home countries of the patients. The private medical sector in India offers speedy treatment. This is another major attraction.
- vi. The government have taken a number of steps to help the growth of this sector. The most important step is the issue of Medical or M-Visas to patients for treatment. These are valid for a year but can be extended up to another year by the State Government or the Foreigner Regional Registration Offices if sufficient medical grounds can be proven. A maximum of two attendants or blood relatives can also be issued MX-Visas in order to accompany the patient. The Ministry of Tourism promotes the medical tourism industry in target market countries by developing and distributing print materials, ad films etc. The government has also undertaken a system of accreditation of Private Medical service providers to ensure that they maintain a high standard of care. Financial support is also provided to certain approved service providers under the scheme of Market Development Assistance Scheme. In 2007, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued a notice allowing medical practitioners from several foreign countries including China, Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA and Canada to work in Indian hospitals. This is expected to lead to knowledge exchange and improving the standard of the industry.
- vii. Alternative treatment, wellness and wholistic healthcare of India has created a niche market in international medical sector. India has a long tradition of wellness and healthcare. The country has developed an integrated system of improving and balancing the mind, body and spirit. Ayurveda is the medical science of ancient India. Traditional Ayurvedic treatments have gained wide popularity in treating chronic conditions. Ray (2007) pointed out that foreigners travelling to India during their vacation often get attracted to traditional ways of wellness like Yoga, Ayurvedic spa etc and decide to return for more treatments. Kerala in particular has gone a long way towards marketing the centuries old Ayurvedic treatments. Yoga has gained international recognition. The Yunani medicine is also growing in popularity. Naturopathy, homeopathy, and meditation are also part of the wellness experience in India. Voight et al (2011) cited several research to identify the motives behind this sector of wellness tourism. They showed that tourists seek this sort of experience due to reasons like balancing body and mind, try something unique, lose weight, improve looks and gain a novel experience in their social circle. As a result, wellness tourism has become such a growing sector that the Ministry of Tourism earmarked two areas – Puducherry and Hardwar – Rishikesh area for developing exclusive wellness retreats.

Medical tourism in Kolkata

The various factors helping in the growth of the medical tourism industry in India has been outlined in the previous section. However, the sector has not developed uniformly all over the country. Certain trends of specialization have emerged very clearly. For example, Kerala has specialized in Ayurveda and traditional massage; Uttarakhand has become known for yoga and meditation; Rajasthan commands the market for spa treatments; eye, dental care and surgery

are best carried out in areas around Chennai, Mumbai and Bengaluru (Singh, 2015). In this background, it is necessary to analyse if and how Kolkata can take advantage of the growing market of medical tourism.

When we examine the various factors, we find that the city has both positive and negative factors relative to the industry. The factors which can play a positive role in the growth of medical tourism in Kolkata are as follows:

- i. Kolkata is the largest metropolis in eastern India. It is the centre of all medical treatments for the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Sikkim and all the north eastern states. The neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh also depend almost exclusively on Kolkata for major medical treatments. The area has a very high population density. This rich hinterland provides a vast and varied patient source to the city.
- ii. The city is well connected by road, rail and air to all its neighbouring region. Patients can travel easily and access all the medical facilities.
- iii. Medical infrastructure is well developed in the city of Kolkata. In India, private sector plays the dominant role in serving foreign tourists. The government hospitals are often overburdened and the number of available beds are inadequate. The hospitals of private sector on the other hand provide high quality health care, often in a package system which helps foreign medical tourists to plan their time and expenditure in the most effective way. In the last decades, the giants of the private healthcare industry have put their foot in Kolkata. It is true that their presence is still in a nascent stage when compared to South and West India, but they have already begun to make their presence felt in Kolkata and its hinterland.
- iv. Cost effective support facilities like accommodation, diagnostic testing, non medical support staff are available in plenty in the city. Living cost is one of the lowest in the country. This would prove attractive to patients who may have to stay for a prolonged period of time to complete their treatment.
- v. There are a number of tourist places in and around the city. Patients and their attendants can visit such places. The religious places are often the most attractive. Temples like Kalighat and Dakshineswar, historical attractions like the Indian National Museum and the Victoria Memorial, other places like the Zoological Garden are all potential tourist spots.

In spite of the above factors, Kolkata has not been able to command a major portion of the healthcare industry. The difficulties faced by this sector in the city are as follows:

- i. The medical infrastructure of the city is extremely overcrowded. Faulty government policy have created a situation where the district hospitals are ill equipped to deal with any serious medical issues. The practice of referring patients to Kolkata has become entrenched and no number of government circulars or directives have curbed this problem. As a result, the hospitals of the public sector are overcrowded. The number of beds are so low that often two to three patients are accommodated in a single bed and extra beds are put out as mattresses on the floor. The number of doctors, nurses, paramedics and attendants are much less than required.
- ii. Additional pressure is created on the medical infrastructure when patients from neighbouring states and countries flock to the city to consult at the public hospital. A sort of resentment can be clearly felt among the local patients who feel that life giving infrastructure is being hijacked by “outsiders”. This gives rise to a social situation where development of medical tourism is actually regarded as a negative event.
- iii. In other parts of India, medical tourism has been developed by the private sector. But the private sector hospitals and wellness centres have not received much encouragement in West Bengal. It is only in the last decade that the giants of private health care have shown some interest in Eastern India. It will take a long time and an active public private partnership to boost this sector in the city.

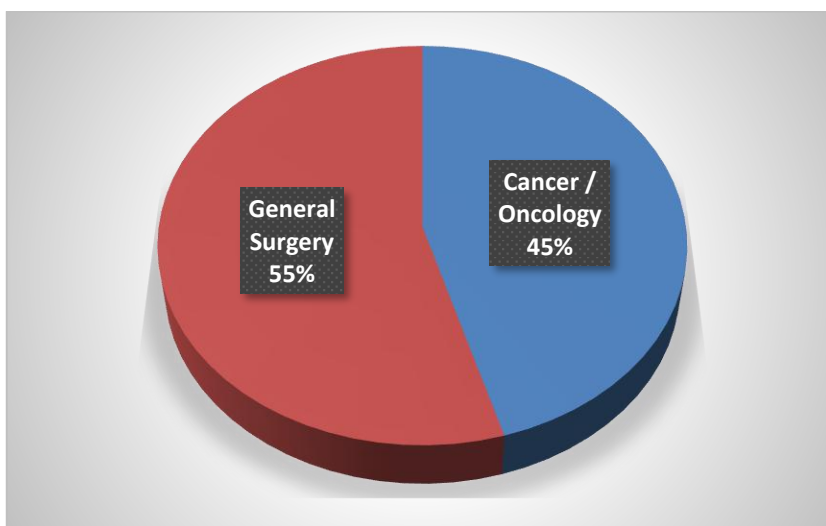
The health tourism scenario in Kolkata

In order to understand the exact nature of health tourism in Kolkata, a survey was carried out of eleven travel agents. The picture which emerged was not very encouraging. In the first place, it must be mentioned that I failed to find any travel agent who exclusively catered to medical tourists or even any agency which offered a complete healthcare package including transport, accommodation, doctor appointment and post treatment recovery. A search of the websites show that such packages are available in foreign countries and even in Southern India where the travel agency creates custom tours for medical tourists, taking care of their travel as well as medical needs. Though I tried to find even one such agency in Kolkata, the respondents said that the tourists mainly used them for arranging transport and in some cases, accommodation. However, the medical side is taken care of by the patients themselves.

All the 11 travel agents are located around two major medical hubs of Kolkata – one in Mukundapur and the other in Thakurpukur. All of them reported that they get maximum number of foreign patients from Bangladesh. They also responded that 55% of the medical tourists seek general surgery while the rest visit to treat cancer.

The agents who were surveyed said that about 72% of the medical tourists stay for more than a week in the city while the rest stay almost a week but less. They often seek low cost accommodation facilities near the hospital that they are visiting.

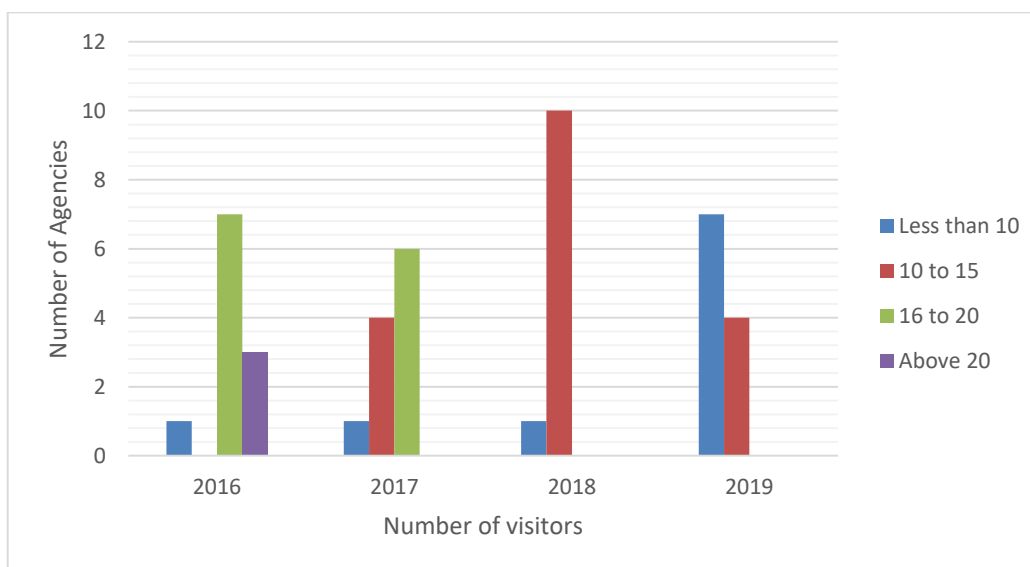
Fig. 1. Types of treatments sought by visiting patients in Kolkata



Source: Primary data (Field survey conducted on 20th to 28th August, 2022)

While the covid pandemic dealt a severe blow to the international and even national travel, we can get a clue to the status of medical tourism industry in Kolkata by comparing the number of visitors at this time. All the 11 agencies had shut their offices in 2020. In 2021, though the offices were open and travel restrictions imposed due to covid have been relaxed to some degree, no foreign visitor had come for treatment to the city. Hence, a graph has been drawn with the number of foreign visitors who came to Kolkata for treatment between the years 2016 and 2019.

Fig. 2. Number of foreign visitors seeking treatment in Kolkata catered to by the surveyed Travel Agencies

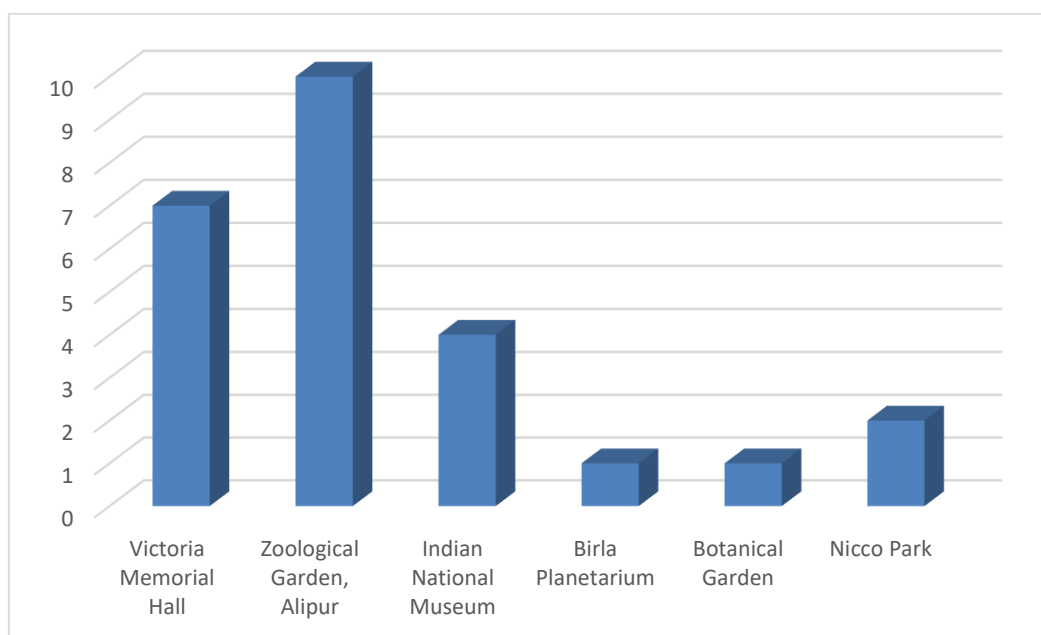


Source: Primary data (Field survey conducted on 20th to 28th August, 2022)

The above graph brings out the fact that the number of foreign patients seeking treatment in Kolkata has been increasing gradually from 2016. All these agencies deal only with patients from Bangladesh. However, the impact of covid had already begun to be felt in 2019 and the number has fallen drastically.

If we keep aside the disruptive effect of covid, we can clearly see that Kolkata is a popular destination for medical treatment for the people of Bangladesh. My survey brought out an anomaly here. The city also attracts a large number of domestic tourists from the districts as well as the neighbouring states for medical treatment, but it is almost impossible to identify such patients. This is because often they do not use travel agents; and even if they do use them to buy tickets and arrange for accommodation, the travel agents are not aware of the purpose of their visit. There is no system of offering medical travel packages in Kolkata.

Fig. 3. Tourist spots visited by medical tourists in Kolkata



Source: Primary data (Field survey conducted on 20th to 28th August, 2022)

Since I am studying medical tourism, I asked the 11 travel agencies whether the patients coming from Bangladesh visit any of the tourist attractions of Kolkata. The response shows that the Victoria Memorial Hall and the Zoological Garden at Alipur are the most commonly frequented tourist spots. Other places visited by the tourists include Indian National Museum, Birla Planetarium, Nicco Park and the Botanical Garden.

According to the surveyed Travel agents, the average expenditure of the Medical tourists on travel arrangements range from Rs. 15000 to Rs. 45000. However, this cost does not include the cost of the medical treatment. The agents failed to say whether the patients return for repetitive treatments because there is no communication between the agents and the patients regarding their medical necessities. The next time they come, they may use a different agent altogether. As a result, the medical tourism sector remains underdeveloped in Kolkata but the hospitals are always seen to be overcrowded.

Testing the hypotheses

India has emerged as one of the foremost medical and health tourism destinations in the world.

Data from various research papers as well as government surveys clearly show that India has begun to emerge as one of the popular destinations for medical and health tourism. The concept of Yoga, wellness and mind – body – spirit balance has been developed in several retreats across India. The comparative cost analysis show that India is in a strong position to command a major share of worlds medical tourists. Stiff competition is being offered by several countries of Asia and South America, but India has curved a niche market which is growing rapidly.

Table 2: Classification of the services spectrum of healthcare tourism in India vis-à-vis its competitive countries

	Wellness tourism	Alternative systems of medicine	Cosmetic surgery	Advanced and life savings healthcare
Services offered	Spas, Stress relief, rejuvenation centres	Yoga, Ayurvedic, Siddha treatment for diseases e.g. Arthritis, Rheumatism	Dental Care, Plastic Surgery , Breast enhancement, Tummy reduction , Skin Treatment	Open transplants, cardio vascular surgery, Eye treatment , Hip Replacement , In vitro fertilization
Key competitors	Thailand , South Africa	--	South Africa , Cuba , Thailand	Singapore , Jordan, Thailand and Malaysia
India's strength	Low –Thailand has captured a significant share of the market	High-Kerala is popular for this service	Low –South Africa and Thailand leads in plastic surgery	High-India has strong image on medical tourism

Source: Adapted from Singh (2015)

Kolkata has huge potential to develop medical tourism.

The medical facilities offered by the Kolkata metropolis is huge and the city has a rich hinterland of patients. Hence, it does have a potential for developing medical tourism. However, a few important points need to be kept in mind. The medical facilities all over eastern India is not very well developed. So, Kolkata has to bear a huge burden of patients from the states around it. The public health infrastructure is already severely overburdened. It is not possible to cater to foreign tourists. The private sector is just beginning to develop. The Medical giants of southern and western India has made appearance in Kolkata just a few years ago. Unfortunately, the covid pandemic set back the entire process. Moreover, Kolkata does not offer any niche services like Ayurvedic and Yoga in Kerala or wholistic wellness in Uttarakhand. Keeping all these factors in mind, it can be said that the potential of developing medical tourism in the domestic market is high in Kolkata but it is still not ready to offer international level medical services to patients. Neither the health sector nor the travel sector is ready for this.

The Government must play an active and encouraging role in order to develop health tourism in Kolkata

After examining the state of medical tourism in Kolkata, we can say that huge support is necessary from the government if this sector is to develop and become economically significant. Ironically, it is necessary to develop the district level health facilities first. This would gradually reduce the number of patients visiting the city hospitals after being referred to from the district hospitals. As the pressure lessens, then only the hospitals will be able to cater to patients coming from other states and countries. The health infrastructure in West Bengal has to be upgraded in order to serve the huge population of the state. The burden on healthcare in Kolkata needs to be eased. Apart from this, the government can also identify health retreats – especially in the lap of nature in North Bengal and develop them as Yoga and wellness centres. Infrastructural and policy support from the government is essential to develop medical tourism.

5. CONCLUSION :

The healthcare sector is developing rapidly in India. The covid pandemic showed that while even the most Developed countries of the world were fighting a difficult battle, India coped far better and provided much better medical service to the people. This strength of India has been highlighted in the international arena. At the same time, the pandemic has created a new awareness regarding wholistic living and alternative systems of wellness. All these provide a huge boost to the medical tourism industry in India. Kolkata would do well to join the trend and take advantage of its highly trained staff, low cost of labour and medical infrastructure to develop health tourism. But this will not be an organic growth. Active policies of the government are necessary to develop this sector. Health tour packages need to be offered. Public private partnership will play a key role and the government should work towards joining hands with the healthcare giants who are just now looking to expand their businesses in eastern India.

REFERENCES :

1. Hunter, W C. Medical Tourism: A Global Niche, *International Journal of Tourism Science* 7, no. 1, 2007: 129 - 140. Ibid.
2. Kshetri N (2011). The healthcare off-shoring industry in developing economies-institutional and economic foundations: An Indian case. *Int J Health Care Qual Assur*, 24(6): 453–470.
3. Rai, Anu. (2017) From prayers to surgeries – journey of medical tourism, *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, 22 (6)
4. Ray S, Mukherjee A (2007). Development of a framework towards successful implementation of e-governance initiatives in health sector in India. *Int J Health Care Qual Assur*, 20 (6): 464–483.
5. Singh, Jitendar Pal. (2015), Healthcare tourism in India: opportunity and challenges, *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research*, 4 (3)
6. Sultana, Seyama., Haque, A., Momen, A., Yasmin, F., (2014), Factors Affecting the Attractiveness of Medical Tourism Destination: An Empirical Study on India- Review Article, *Iranian Journal of Public Health*, 43 (7)
7. Voigt, Cornelia., Brown, Graham., Howat, Gary. (2011), Wellness tourists: in search of transformation, *Tourism review*, 66 (1/2)
8. Weiermair, K. and Steinhauser, C. (2003), “New tourism clusters in the field of sports and health: the case of Alpine Wellness”, paper presented at the 12th International Tourism and Leisure Symposium, Barcelona, 15-18 June