

Lamenting the loss of Kovalam

Amitabh Kant, the former Tourism Secretary who is credited with successfully pitching the 'God's Own Country' slogan globally, has admitted that tourism had spun out of control in Kovalam

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“We must not repeat the mistakes committed in Kovalam. All tourism destinations have a certain carrying capacity. We must ensure that tourism growth does not go beyond the boundaries set by the carrying capacity. You cannot have unbridled growth.”

The observation was made by no less a person than Amitabh Kant, the man who inspired a zillion exclamation marks all over the world by way of the 'Incredible India' campaigns and, more significantly, the former Tourism Secretary who is credited with successfully pitching the 'God's Own Country' slogan globally.

Amitabh Kant, in effect, was admitting that tourism had spun out of control

in Kovalam. Kant was interacting with the media on Wednesday as part of the promotion of his book 'Branding India: An Incredible Story', his debut work as an author.

Kant's observation came in response to a question about the teething troubles faced by the Responsible Tourism (RT) Movement in the State, especially in Kovalam. Though it has been three years, RT has failed to take off in Kovalam, or for that matter in Munnar and Wayanad too. He was asked why.

Kant tried to fend off the question. "It is not fair on my part to sit in judgment of what is happening in Kerala at the moment," he said.

And then he spoke about the steps taken during his tenure to check the wild and crazy concretisation of a once virgin beach destination. "We had introduced a Bill to conserve and preserve tourism spots. The Bill had called for the conduct

of carrying capacity studies," Kant said. He, however, did not mention the obvious; that nothing had come of it.

Amitabh Kant was one bureaucrat who had tried to stem the rot in Kovalam that was visible even a decade ago in 1998, the year he took over as Tourism Secretary. "Back then, Kovalam was the only product Kerala Tourism had. There was a mass inflow of low-value tourists. Charters full of cobblers and garbage collectors arrived from Manchester and other English cities. If they spent 10 pounds a night, they used to take away 100 pounds worth of sun, sand and sea. It was necessary to change the emphasis from high-mass low-value tourists to low-mass high-value tourists," Amitabh Kant said.

Kant was told that there was no sea change in the situation. He was told that during the last year when the high-mass low-value charters cancelled operations,

there was not a single hotel in Kovalam that recorded over 80 percent, leave alone 100, room occupancy during the peak tourism season.

(Normally, a 100 percent occupancy is a given during the peak season.) In short, Kovalam continued to depend on mass tourism. The unceasing, forever proliferating, issue of garbage is perhaps a fallout of this.

"The shift to discerning travellers from backpackers will be very painful in the short run. But, in the long run, it will pay rich dividends," Amitabh Kant said.

The top bureaucrat, currently Principal Secretary and Commissioner in charge of Kerala affairs in Delhi, was also instrumental in shifting the limelight from Kovalam to Ayurveda and the backwaters. It was also an attempt, on hindsight an unsuccessful one, to ease the pressure on Kovalam.