

Record note of discussion of the IATO Interactive meeting on Friday 19th June 2020 at 4 pm

An interactive meeting of all members was organised on 19th June 2020 via Zoom Video Conferencing and Mrs. Meenakshi Sharma, Director General Tourism, Government of India was invited as the Guest Speaker to update our members and also interact with them.

Mr. Rajesh Mudgill, Hony. Secretary called the house to order and welcomed Mrs Meenakshi Sharma, DG (Tourism) to the platform and requested her to share her plans to take tourism out of the Covid Crisis.

Mr. Pronab Sarkar extended a warm welcome to DG Madam and thanked her for coming for the interaction with IATO members and solicited her road map to bolster confidence among the tourism stakeholders.

Mrs Meenakshi Sharma while addressing the members mentioned that in this Challenging times in all facets, we have to be optimistic, two months' post Covid decline- tourism may look up as has been the experience of other nations, We are already working on relaxing certain guidelines, whether it is MDA for Domestic or International, looking at Champion Sector Scheme to give some benefit , within our resources we shall do whatever is possible taking your suggestions, along with Domestic Tourism focus on Inbound tourism will always be there. MOT is in constant touch with - MHA, MEA so that whenever we are ready to open International airports or commercial flights, stakeholders interest are taken care of, other countries should also allow their citizens to fly to India. We are in coordination with MoH & FW to follow a regime to assure that destinations are safe with hygiene for the incoming tourists , MOT is working with Quality Council of India on a method of certification to ensure services are bound by a regime that ensures safety of the tourists, focus is on kind of promotion, messages, content that is needed internationally and these will be very different from that was earlier so that we remain competitive and a meeting with stakeholders is planned in the coming week to discuss this.

Mr. Sarkar requested DG Tourism to give some update on MSME which he had discussed with MOT

Mrs. Sharma apprised that there is a Meeting on 22nd June and hoped that something positive will be done.

Mr Sarkar sought update from Mrs. Sharma as members were keen to know about the revision in MDA Scheme proposal.

Mrs. Sharma mentioned that it is being liberalised as far as possible and being made simpler, which is the need of the hour. The Liberalised scheme will be there for at least three years, we will have a relook after that.

Mr Sarkar requested an update on the request for revision in the guidelines for recognition of inbound tour operators as things were changing, due Covid 19 most of us are working from home and therefore the criteria of office space, requirement of staff and work from home is needed to reduce expenses.

Mrs. Sharma mentioned that she was always of the view that we should not have such harsh conditions. So one can take her assurance that the ministry will relax these rules. She also said that she will call for a meeting at her office with IATO and shall inform the date of the meeting soon.

Thereafter, IATO Short Film Video was launched by DG Tourism and played. The film is to show case India is waiting to welcome tourists with New Normal and hygienic preparedness.

Mr. Sarkar mentioned that Video has been produced for our members, which they can share it with their counterparts and more volumes to follow.

Mrs. Sharma mentioned that Ministry of Tourism will also produce such videos which IATO members can use and She appreciated the film made by IATO and mentioned that IATO may like to produce in other languages also for various markets. She wanted IATO to increase its membership as 1600 does not seem to be a very good number anymore.

Mr. Mehra requested DG (Tourism) to use the IATO video in promotions overseas and mentioned that a couple of more such videos are in the pipe line.

Issues raised by members in the interaction with Mrs Meenakshi Sharma, DG Tourism.

1. Rebate/ Incentives to promote Domestic Tourism to be considered.
Mrs Sharma agreed that it is doable.
2. When can 19-20 SEIS Scheme be availed and 7 to 10% increase is expected
Mrs Sharma said that it has been proposed and response is awaited from MOC.
3. International Flights are to start. All protocols should be done before tourists board the flight. If a 7 or 14-day quarantine is imposed when they arrive in India, then no one will come. There should be medical checks and scanning, if someone is Covid positive then only quarantine. There is negative publicity of India in the world which we need to counter. We should talk about recoveries.
4. India is getting ready with SOPs for Hotels, Road Travel etc. Can these be highlighted, as it may incentivise the tourist to come to India.
Mrs Sharma responded that Ministry of Tourism is working on the content creation. Content coming out will depend on the existing situation. It is the time to prepare the message and dwell on strategies.
5. Dekho Aapna Desh videos with subtitles should go not only to International Markets but also to embassies abroad.

In response Mrs Sharma said that Dekho Aapna Desh videos had a very good response. 60 countries watched it, including the source countries. It will be a continuous exercise. May be made in other languages. Tour Operators should use these material and MOT will offer the help.

6. Ministry of Tourism may like to make it a part of their videos that foreign agents should deal with MOT GOI approved tour operators and agents.
7. Restriction by states governments hampering domestic tourism.

Mrs Sharma said that her Ministry had advised the state governments to open up but need to appreciate that the state governments have to take care of the health issues first. MOT can't impose any guideline as this stage. In a month's time the Ministry will be in a better position to address the issue.

8. Money is stuck with Safaris, specially Rajasthan Government. Refund from Luxury Trains, hotels are also not coming. IATO had written to all authorities concerned but haven't really got any positive response so far including Air India. Requested the Ministry of tourism to intervene and impress upon the states
Mrs Sharma said her ministry shall take it up with them again

9. An Office Order issued by Rajasthan Govt on 18th June 2020 said that for the Safari Bookings which were made between 18th March to 30th June 2020, can be used by the same tourists till 30th June 2022. The question is that will the same tourists come back again? Full Refund is needed to be made to the tour operators

Mrs Sharma asked IATO to connect with her office and effort would be made to sort it out.

10. All the agents feel that India is passive and doing nothing to say that it wants tourists. Ministry of Tourism to have a calendar and start work with time lines drawn with respect to SOPs, VISA and International flights that are scheduled to open up. Does India have a plan to take a share of the inbound tourism of China?

Mrs Sharma opined that the Ministry is working on the content strategy and there will be a meeting on this next week. The ministry is working very closely with MHA and MEA and the required input will be brought to the public domain. The China-

India perspective has changed. We have to work with reality in sight.

11. Refund from Airlines not coming. They charge heavy cancellation or offer credit shell when tour operators have to refund to their foreign clients.

Mr Sarkar said that Mrs Sharma had assured help in the matter and IATO is coordinating with her.

12. When the Taj Mahal will be open to tourists?

Mrs Sharma said that as of now she can't say. We need to wait for 15 days.

Mr. Rajiv Mehra thanked Mrs Meenakshi Sharma DG Tourism for joining the interactive session and offering replies to the key issues of MDA and revision of guidelines on the recognition of Tour Operators.

OPEN HOUSE DISCUSSION, with issues raised in *Italics*

Mr. Mudgill said that weekly updates on IATO activities are being sent to the members regularly.

USTOA have come out with a very interesting guideline. IATO can spearhead the initiative to standardize our services.

Mr Mehra said that IATO has to follow the guideline which MHA has given with inputs from MOT. It cannot contradict what the govt has laid down but on their line it can make an effort to improve it.

Taking cue from what DG Tourism said, there is a need for IATO to its increase its membership base.

Mr Sarkar said that government listens to IATO, is helpful, offers patient hearing, time and consideration whenever IATO approached them.

IATO needs to get SOPs from different associations and map them out a little better. There is No refund for cancelled wildlife safaris due to Covid. There is a desperate need for to adopt very responsible and very sustainable operations as we go forward,

Mr Sarkar requested that a note to this effect be written to IATO Office so that it can be shared with members.

What is IATO doing for getting refund from airlines?

Mr Mehra said that IATO is communicating with Indigo, Air India and Spice Jet in this regard. Indigo will offer the refund as Credit Shell for FITs only and this will be clear in 1 to 2 weeks. Thus the actual refund has to be made to the client by the tour operator only and the credit note by Indigo can be utilised for future ticket bookings. Spice Jet is likely to follow Indigo. Air India is not responding to communication by IATO. IATO is ready to go to court. 22nd July is the date. As regards other refunds from Safaris, Hotels, Luxury Trains, IATO has written to the CMs of the concerned states, chapter chairs have also been marked to follow up.

What about refund from International Airlines?

Mr Mehra said that the problem our members are facing is with the domestic airlines. IATO has decided to file a case in the Supreme Court with regard to refund of air fare for the air tickets in domestic flights and flights to neighbouring countries cancelled due to Covid-19.

An emergency meeting of members was solicited but no response was there and it was said that if required a meeting will be called.

Mr Mehra said that a circular was sent to all members to let IATO know their suggestions/ problems for the meeting as most points were answered with the circular issued by the president. No one responded with a suggestion and hence the meeting could not be held. Mr. Mudgill said that many do not write but want to interact and speak and we should continue what we are doing now.

TAFI has taken up the issue of International Airlines. Our issue starts the day VISAs got cancelled.

Airlines do not have the money to pay, even if the court order goes against them, they can maximum adjust against future travel.

Mr. Mehra said that TAFI is talking about 25th March onwards, IATO is talking about the refund from 1st February onwards. Domestic Airlines have the money now

Mr. Sarkar said that IATO has to fight for its members and take action. IATO will go to the court so that airlines start refunding the dues to our members.

Can IATO request MOT to lower the staff requirements for getting the license from MOT?

Mr. Sarkar said that Rs 25 lakhs minimum turnover needed and two staff will be required

On a query of that with 40 years of experience, two persons are enough to handle the business of 30 to 40 lakhs, Mr Sarkar said that renewal is different and the new cases are different. We have to make two different criteria.

When there is no business and if our members are providing a balance sheet, which has a turnover of one or two crores but they do not meet requirement of minimum number of staff, particularly the skilled staff recognized by an Institute and by Department of Tourism so that cap should be removed for one year or they should give extension for one year to everybody unconditionally

IATO needs to increase the morale of its members. We should not file a case against the Govt. Our request should now become a demand.

From IRCTC some positive signals are coming so far as Maharaja Express refunds are concerned. With regards to Palace on Wheels from Rajasthan Govt we have to restart the efforts from 22nd June as they are to appoint a new MD of RTDC. With respect to safaris, the June 2022 credit shell does not serve any purpose. The local guild at Ranthambore is sending a legal notice as their money of around 4 crores is stuck. FHRAI IHHA and HAI to be pursued though FAITH for refunds. For the airline part IATO is set with the legal petition on the 22nd focusing on the domestic tickets.

Mr. Najeeb thanked to all the members for their participation and encouraged them to come and interact with IATO and said that efforts of IATO to serve its members will continue.

Mr Sarkar said that IATO is making all efforts with respect to MSME and SEIS and requested members to give their feedback on the IATO short film shown today.

The meeting ended with thanks to the chair.