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## **Hospitality and Tourism Industry amid COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives on Challenges and Learnings from India**

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### **Highlights**

- Carried out content analysis of interview responses from industry experts on COVID-19 pandemic.
- Presented the identified themes that emerged from the qualitative study.
- Interview focused on senior personnel from star category hotels and some from academia.
- Criticality of the concerns reflected in light of previous researches and future implications discussed.

### **Abstract**

COVID-19 outbreak has presented unprecedented circumstances before the fragile tourism and hospitality industry. The highly infectious novel coronavirus continues to thwart the sector and raises serious questions about the present and future survival of the sector. The study draws on the interviews with 15 participants in senior positions in hospitality industry, and tourism and hospitality education services. Various themes that emerged from the content analysis of interview responses related to the COVID-19 pandemic have been condensed and presented. The dominant themes that emerged out of the qualitative enquiry included need of multiskilling and professional development of the employees, increased sense of hygiene, sanitation and related SOPs, optimism toward rival of the industry, media roles, and need of better crisis preparedness, followed by provisions for reserved funds, adoption of technology in future, costs and expense related aspects etc. The study critically discussed prominent themes in the light of the existing arguments from the literature and reflects on implications for the decision makers. Limitations and scope of future research has also been highlighted.

**Keywords-** COVID-19, SARS, Hospitality, Tourism, Industry, themes, qualitative, interviews

## **Introduction**

The decade 2020 started with a much unsettling and unfortunate occurrence of new disease in the line of over 30 novel infections that the world has experienced in past 30 years (Nkengasong, 2020). This time the nomenclature given to the new severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak was the novel corona virus. Later termed COVID-19, the disease represented an atypical pneumonia that started in China, and later spread across nations' the world over. Except Antarctica the virus has made its presence felt in all the continents. Adding to the woes several other countries like United States of America, Italy, Spain, France, South Korea, Italy, Iran and many more are experiencing unprecedented spread of the disease and life loss from past several months. The outbreak has made corporations like Google and Microsoft dedicate their intelligence in offering information to tackle this outbreak, so much so that Microsoft dedicated an interactive map for tracking the spread of the COVID- 19 (<https://www.bing.com/covid>).

Akin to COVID 19, the previous SARS outbreak was characterized by its rapid spread, which led to travel advisories issued by World Health Organisation (WHO) (Chuo, 2007). Travel restrictions and advisories have again revealed the vulnerability of the tourism industry (Zhang, Cho & Wang, 2020; De Sausmarez, 2004). The eerie sight of isolation of the cruise ship in Japan carrying virus infected cruise tourists was only the beginning of the latest catastrophe that still continues to unfold. This epidemiological catastrophe brought horrors among unsuspecting tourists who wouldn't have imagined their vacation to take such a dramatic turn. The infections and deaths on board portended the future of delicate tourism and hospitality industry across the globe. Since then the outbreak has gone beyond everyone's imagination and is now being compared to the infectious plague that affected countries during the times of First World War, termed as the Spanish flu. Till date researches have prominently pointed at previous SARS outbreak (2002), whenever discussion on threat (health crises) to tourism industry was discussed (see for example Table 1). However, this time onward, coronavirus is all on course to become a lethally colossal reference point in the texts of leisure industry.

The tourism and hospitality industry thrives on the patterns of visitations and an enormous amount of research and practice focuses on the development of newer tourism products to increase inflows and bolster the multiplier effect of the industry. It's understood that the travel behaviour

scholarship will be influenced by the current global happenings pertaining to the outbreak, and that too for a considerable amount of time in future. This study first apprises readers about the ongoing pandemic and then goes on to summarise the literature in the context of tourism and hospitality that pertains to health crises in past, which affected the sector to various degrees. The remainder of the paper builds upon the responses of 15 participants who reflected on the ongoing global pandemic, and these responses resulted in varied themes that reflects important contribution of the study.

## Literature Review

### *The COVID-19 Pandemic*

Epidemiological evidences pointed at the outbreak to have association with a seafood market in Wuhan (Wu, et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020), a city in Hubei province in China. The first case reported in China was on 12 Dec 2020, but by the month end in January 2020, the virus had infected around two thousand people in China (Wu, et al., 2020). The COVID-19 (caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, i.e. SARS-CoV-2) belongs to the same family as SARS and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) (Usher, Durkin & Bhullar, 2020). From the probable place of origin i.e. Wuhan seafood market, the zoonotic transmission began and spread in countries all over the world. This arguably became possible due to the property of the coronavirus, of being capable of getting transmitted between person to person (Bai, 2020; Liu, 2020; Gautam & Trivedi, 2020).

The impact of current corona virus outbreak till date has long surpassed the impacts felt during SARS epidemic in 2002-2004. The lives lost and the shutting down of major economies is speculated to have a tremendous impact on the economies worldwide. At the time of writing this section of the paper the total lives lost across the world stood above 278000 and more than 4 million confirmed infections (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). Policy makers, politicians and economists have an extraordinary situation on their hands. The enormity of this outbreak can be imagined from the fact that even the leaders and prominent people couldn't escape from the infection, for instance the virus infected British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who had earlier warned the citizens of the United Kingdom to prepare for the lives that the country would lose in the times to come, which turned out to be true with death toll continue to rise in the country.

India has its own share of issues related to the preparedness and dealing with this virus infection. Till the time of compiling this research the country had extended the lockdown for another two weeks, which came as an extension to the already existing two former lockdowns in the entire country, with some activities allowance and zoning of places (Red zones for high infection hotspots, Orange zones for places with lesser spread and Green zones for the places without any reported cases) depending on the severity of disease spread. The attempts to impose lockdown with a population of 1.3 billion has brought social, economic and political challenges at the forefront. Despite challenges of remarkable proportion the country has held the tide by keeping the number of COVID-19 cases to a considerable levels, especially when compared to countries that quintessentially represent the best of health care infrastructure globally.

### *Tourism and Hospitality Industry and Education*

Tourism is termed as a complicated psychological process (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010) and the impacts of SARS are also primarily psychological in nature (Wen, Huimin & Kavanaugh, 2005). The former SARS outbreak was spread across different countries including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada, Singapore and many more. In terms of the impacts of SARS on hospitality and tourism,

various studies have been published (refer to Table 1). Some of the key highlights are discussed here, besides readers are advised to glance over the tabulated studies in hospitality and tourism discipline in the light of several health epidemics.

The impacts of earlier SARS outbreak on hotels in Hong Kong were severe enough, so much so that the staffs' were asked to take annual leaves, probationers and contract employees were terminated, and banks were appealed for loan repayment deferments for making way to pay for the employee salaries (Pine & McKercher, 2004). Taiwanese hotel stocks performance too were severely affected during the same outbreak, which witnessed panic among shareholders and confirmed extreme fragility of the hotel businesses toward epidemics and also signalled at the ominous consequences of future outbreaks (Chen, Jang & Kim, 2007).

Dombey (2004) noted several changes that previous SARS outbreak brought about in China. This involved increased sense of hygiene at the restaurants, heightened sense of physical activities and reduction of spitting habits for healthy surroundings, regularising of temperature examination in schools and improved health services in hospitals (Dombey, 2004). Malhotra and Venkatesh (2009) contrasted the preparedness for SARS outbreak between Thailand and Hong Kong, and found Hong Kong's response to be better in containing the detrimental effects of the disease. Malhotra and Venkatesh (2009) also accentuated on the framework proposed by Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) to mitigate the impacts of eventualities. This included reduction (early warning signs detection), readiness (related preparedness), responses (operations during eventualities), and recovery (studier attempts to return to normalcy) (Malhotra & Venkatesh, 2009).

The ongoing pandemic has also taken a serious toll on the education sector cross the globe. COVID-19 pandemic has affected 90 percent of the student population globally, with more than 1.5 billion students from over 190 countries are out of the schools (<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>). The situation remains critical in the higher education as well, but the colleges are stepping up to the challenge of meeting the needs of students though online classes. It is worthwhile to mention that the sectorial education, such as tourism and hospitality that increasingly depend on practical sessions, are likely to be affected significantly. The previous SARS outbreak also placed a strong negative impact on hospitality and tourism education in Hong Kong (Law, 2005). Such educational effects were felt from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore to even Canada (Feast & Bretag, 2005). In India's context the tourism and hospitality industry has been gaining momentum from past several years now, which has resulted in a major push to education in tourism and hospitality. It is normal to see related courses to feature in the catalogues of private and public universities, individually run institutions, to even schools offering such subjects in their curriculum. Law (2005) posed some relevant questions in the context of tourism and hospitality education. These were typically essential at that time, perhaps because prior experience of such an epidemic was majorly absent. Law (2005) questioned the timeline posed for expected duration of the individuals to return to classes and internships. Correspondingly, the current pandemic places countries in the similar situation, the question continues to hold relevance and validity. Going forward, educators and institutions shall be curious about returning to the business as usual conditions without the fear of infection spread. Current review attempted to synthesise major researches that affected the leisure industry, while it is also important to note that a very few studies were found to have been conducted in regards to SARS outbreak in the backdrop of hospitality and tourism education. Nevertheless, a summary of select studies have been presented in Table 1, which may be used as a reference point for future researches.

**Table 1:** Review summary of relevant studies

Authors	Health Crisis	Focus	Important Finding/ Issue addressed	Place
Law, 2005	SARS	SARS and hospitality and tourism education	Addressed the academic, internship concerns during outbreak for students in higher risk industry such as hospitality and tourism.	Hong Kong
Pine and McKercher, 2004	SARS	SARS impact on Hong Kong's tourism industry	Highlighted the fragility of sector and coping behaviour adopted by practitioners, with speculation of recovery in a year's period.	Hong Kong
Chen, Jang & Kim, 2007	SARS	SARS impact on Taiwanese hotel stock price movement	Documented severe damage to the hotel stocks due to the outbreak compared to several industries and highlighted strategies to offset the effects.	Taiwan
Henderson & Ng, 2004	SARS	SARS impact on Singapore hotel industry	Categorised stages of emergencies and outlined recommendations for actions.	Singapore
Tse, So & Sin, 2006	SARS	SARS impact on restaurant business	Elucidated restaurants preparedness, and outlined cost reduction and revenue enhancement strategies in the face of adversaries.	Hong Kong
Kim, Chun & Li, 2005	SARS	SARS impact on South Korean hotel industry	Highlighted pre planning and swift response to crisis and engagement during the slowed business period.	South Korea
Dombey, 2004	SARS	SARS impact on Chinese tourism	Social and political impacts of the epidemic, the response and changes that resulted in the aftermath.	China
Malhotra & Venkatesh, 2009	Various Health Crises	Crisis preparedness in hospitality & tourism	Reinforced PATA's framework for crisis management: Reduction, Readiness, Response and Recovery model.	-
Wen, Huimin & Kavanaugh, 2005	SARS	SARS impact on Chinese tourism	Empirical analysis of SARS impact on travel behaviour with a sample drawn from multiple locations in China.	China
Chien & Law, 2003	SARS	SARS impact on hotels in Hong Kong	Impacts summary on hotels and recommendations related to task force for effective contingency response.	Hong Kong
Chuo, 2007	SARS	SARS impact on theme parks	Empirical analysis of customer profiles and theme park visit intentions during the outbreak.	Taiwan
Leung & Lam, 2004	SARS	SARS impact on hotels in Hong Kong	Reported employee layoffs and unpaid leaves used to cope with financial losses in the sector.	Hong Kong
Gruman, Chhinzer & Smith, 2011	Various Health Crises	Disaster Management in Canadian	Highlighted lacunas in planning and response capabilities in times of disasters.	Canada

		hospitality industry		
AlBattat & MatSom, 2014	Various Health Crises	Disaster planning and recovery in Malaysian hospitality sector	Considered disaster life cycle to conclude higher reactivity than pro-activeness in preparations.	Malaysia
Min, Lim & Kung, 2011	SARS	SARS impact on Taiwan's tourism inflow from Japan	Time Series intervention modelling confirmed sharp decrease in Japanese tourist movement to Taiwan for almost a year.	Taiwan
Barrows, Gallo & Mulleady, 1996	AIDS	AIDS impact on education system in the US	Presented status of AIDS among the hospitality workforce and formulated policies and necessary education to overcome challenge.	USA
Ladki, 1994	AIDS	Strategies to overcome the fear of AIDS in hospitality industry	Called for minimisation of discrimination with employees with AIDS in hospitality and shed light on their rights and policies for protection.	USA
Phelan, 2015	AIDS	Experiences of international volunteer tourists in Botswana	Highlighted challenges articulated by volunteers in Botswana while participating in 'Voluntourism' (conservation, medical services, education perspectives).	Botswana
Smith & Goss, 1993	AIDS	Perceived risk of AIDS on Hospitality & Catering Employees	Reported inadequate information about AIDS rendering in higher perceptions of risk, anxiety, and socially unacceptable forms of behaviour.	UK
Palmer, 1988	AIDS	Problems of AIDS affected people at workplace	Several recommendations on treatment of AIDS afflicted employees at workplace including issues pertaining to sexual orientation.	US
Yap & Ineson, 2009	AIDS	Status of HIV-infected employees in Asian hospitality sector	Concerns and anticipations in staffing and managing of HIV infected employees in Hospitality industry using triangulation study.	Select Asian Countries
Kabote, et al, 2015	AIDS	Employee Perceptions of HIV & AIDS on Hospitality in Zimbabwe	Unclear organisational policies and tabooed treatment of HIV/AIDS in country's hospitality segment and recommended acknowledgment, policy framework and liaising among government and NGOs.	Zimbabwe
Page, Song and Wu, 2012	Swine Flu	Economic crisis & Swine Flu impact on inbound tourism demand	Proposed econometric model to address impacts of two pronged crises (economic crisis and swine flu pandemic in 2008) on tourism demand in the UK from various source markets.	United Kingdom
Haque & Haque, 2018	Swine Flu	Swine flu and economic impact	Reported estimated loss in tourism revenues using time series model estimation considering two crises of 2008	Brunei



		on tourism in Brunei	i.e. swine flu and economic crisis.	
Maximiliano, 2010	Swine Flu	Role of Mass-Media in Buenos Aires during Swine Flu Outbreak	Analysed short newspaper columns to critically reflect upon the media reactions on swine flu outbreak.	Buenos Aires
Wu, Law & Jiang, 2010	Swine flu	Swine flu impact on Hotel Occupancy Rate in Hong Kong	Employed factor modelling to report driving forces of hotel occupancy rates in Hong Kong during the epidemic with potential implications for impacts of other disease outbreak impacts.	Hong Kong

### Research Methodology

The current investigation considers an outbreak that continues to unfold while this study is underway. The situation is novel and not much is known about this ongoing and ever expanding catastrophe. In the instances of newer problems for which understanding needs to be developed, qualitative methods can offer critical insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the circumstances, it was felt appropriate to take a qualitative stance of research, in that the method of data collection was considered to be the email interviews. Email interviews are becoming a commonplace in qualitative research, and in current circumstances where social distancing has been widely practiced, it felt most appropriate for the current investigation. In this way of data collection the interview questions may be pasted into the emails or separate document may be attached to the email (Burns, 2010). Email interviews are also termed as cost effective when compared to the telephonic or face to face interviews, yet can yield in-depth information from the participants (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). In the current study with a limited sample size, judgemental sampling was used, which is a non-probability sampling. For the research problem at hand a set of senior industry personnel and academics were considered to be appropriate for garnering responses. In judgmental sampling the onus lies on the researchers to select the elements from the population based on the samples' representation of the population of interest (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

The questions used in the email interviews were adapted from the reviewed literature that has underscored implications for academicians and practitioners. Some of the published works from which interview questions were derived included Law (2005), Kim, Chun and Li (2006), Wen, Huimin and Kavanaugh (2005), Maximiliano (2010), Bharwani and Mathews (2012), Garg (2015), Palmer (1988), Yap and Ineson (2009).

At the outset 42 individuals were approached for their participation in the study. Out of those approached, 15 accepted to participate in the study. As the participants were in the senior positions and were mostly occupied with various tasks the intention was to reduce delays in getting reverts. To avoid such delays occasional follow-ups were carried out. The received responses were pasted in excel spreadsheets and word documents for conducting content analysis. A summary of the participant profiles is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Participants Profile



Participant	Organisational Designation/ Department	Organisation Category/Type	Participants Age (In Years)	Total Experience (In Years)	Experience In Current Organisation (In Years)	State/Region
P1	Indian Master Chef- Food & Beverage Production	5 Star Deluxe Hotel	32	11	2	Uttar Pradesh
P2	Executive Housekeeper	4 Star Hotel	38	16	2	Haryana
	Food & Beverage Manager	5 Star Hotel	33	10	<1	Jharkhand
P3	Assistant Director of Sales	5 Star Deluxe Hotel	33	12	2	Bihar
P4	Head of Hospitality- Airport Services	Commercial Non Aero	43	23	2.3	Delhi
P5	General Manager	4 Star Hotel	40	15.5	15.5	West Bengal
P6	Additional General Manager	5 Star Deluxe Hotel	47	27	12	Uttar Pradesh
P7	Food & Beverage Manager	5 Star Hotel	33	10	<1	Jharkhand
P8	Director of Food & Beverage	5 Star Hotel (Indian overseas Brand in Nepal)	36	14	1	-
P9	Area Director	5 Star Hotel	34	12	7	North India
P10	Head of School	Institute	41	15	12	Haryana
P11	Head of School	Institute	50	25	1	Delhi
P12	Professor & Deputy Director	University	45	25	1	Uttar Pradesh
P13	Executive Housekeeper	5 Star Hotel	35	14	5	Rajasthan
P14	General Manager	5 Star Hotel	38	18	2.5	Rajasthan
P15	Rooms Division Manager	5 Star Hotel	37	15	<1	Haryana

## Discussion and Implications

Content analysis of the responses resulted in varied themes from the open ended questions asked in the email interviews. For the purpose of content analysis of interview responses key learnings were taken from the works of Thyme, Wiberg, Lundman and Graneheim (2013) and Mazaheri et al. (2013). The responses were read and re-read several times to interpret variations and discern similarities and differences in the content. These variations and similarities resulted in several underlying themes (Thyme et al., 2013). This kind of analysis is valuable, systematic and one of the ways to recognise data and identify recurring themes (Thyme et al., 2013). The responses were coded/labelled to uncover the similarities, which turned out to be helpful in containing them under manageable heads. Coding assisted in providing the garnered content some logical level and condensation brought preciseness (Thyme et al., 2013). In that process certain responses resulted in similar patterns across broader queries. For example multiskilling, adoption of technology, planning and management of funds, appeared in responses to several interview questions. This sort of

condensation and coding/labelling also made quantification possible of the recurring content and the same has been reported in Table 3.

**Table 3**

Emergent Themes ↓ Broad Queries→	Key Challenges	Industry Learning	Educators'/Trainers' Learning	Governments' learning	Future Consumption behaviour	Media Response & Responsibility	Workforce Continuation & Redundancy	Expected Industry Policy Changes	Way Ahead for future employees	Total
Multiskilling/ Professional development		3	6				4	1	2	16
Hygiene Standards/Hygiene SOPs/Sanitation Standards	1	2	3	1	3	2	1		2	15
Optimism/Patience for revival		3	3						9	15
Media for image creation/ awareness/Justified response				2		10				12
Crisis Management Planning		4	1	3					3	11
Cash Reserves/Funds for Crisis		6	1	1	1			1		10
Digitisation/Technology Adoption/Artificial Intelligence		2	6		1			1		10
Fixed Costs/Expenses	9									9
Employee Morale/Motivation	3	2	3							8
Reduced Travel/Demand/outing/gathering	3				5					8
Likely Layoffs/ Contract employment/pay cuts							6	1		7
Unimpeded Cash Flow/ Continued Revenues	5	2								7
Continued Job/Payroll/leave benefits	3	2						1		6
Community unbiasedness						6				6
Employee health/Wellbeing	3							2		5
Better Health Care Infrastructure				5						5
Budgetary Considerations/Tax benefits/Rebates		1		4						5
Short haul/domestic travel over long haul/international in future	1				2				1	4

Students training/sessions	2		2						4
Guest Safety/Wellbeing	1				1			1	3
Careful spending/Cost Control		2	1						3
Adaptability		1	1					1	3
Population Control				3					3
Market Research		2							2
Leadership		1	1						2
Alternative/Multiple Career Options			1				1		2
Packaging Consciousness/Reduced outdoor eating					2				2

*Note: Numbers indicate times the interview responses occurred, with total specified in the last column.*

Most prominent theme that emerged was related to the skills of the employees. This was visible in the way experts felt about the vital learnings from the ongoing crisis, where multiskilling was considered as a latent solution to the issue of reduced redundancy and retaining employees in the long run. This reflects that going forward specialisation of employees may take a backseat and increased engagement in multiple job roles is likely to become a norm in hospitality and tourism. Research in past (Kyriakidou & Maroudas, 2010) indicates that this may be achieved by delegation of additional responsibilities, on the job training, and across departmental work projects. The added advantage of multiskilling may also reflect in the form of retaining usefulness of employees during lean seasons or in low demand (Kyriakidou & Maroudas, 2010).

Hygiene and sanitation remained a recurrent theme throughout the responses, be it about foreseeable consumer behaviour or learnings for the industry and educators or trainers. The issue of hygiene has been well documented in tourism and hospitality literature (Jauhari, 2010; Jauhari, 2009; Tripathi, Choudhary & Agrawal, 2010). However, for a developing country like India that deals with issues like over-crowdedness and congestion, it is too serious a concern to be overlooked (Nath, 2003). This issue, in the light of the recent publication by Lancet (Lodder & Husman, 2020), where the researchers have speculated presence of SARS-CoV-2 in human waste water becomes more consequential if not managed effectively. The seriousness of this issue can't be emphasised enough and regardless of the type and size of the establishment, next crucial aspect that is likely to govern the survival would be the presence of standards of waste management and effective sanitation practices visible in all forms of hospitality operations.

The notion of retaining optimism and hopes of revival remained high. This was particularly visible with the responses pertaining to the manpower development. This viewpoint of the experts in tourism and hospitality may be attributable to their rich experiences, where they must have observed highs and lows in the industry. Although COVID-19 presents an unprecedented case before all the sectors, in that the reduced demand and revenues are obvious consequences, which can resonate with the previous crises that also had detrimental effects. However, in previous health (e.g. SARS, Swine Flu, MERS, and Ebola) or other sorts of crises (acts of terrorism, natural calamities) travellers mostly had alternatives at their disposal. This time the entire planet has been held hostage to this severe pandemic, which has brought an absolute halt on various activities, leisure sector being the prominent casualty. From the responses it is evident that alike educators, industry leaders

too didn't shy away from highlighting the human resilience and seemed hopeful towards the eventual recovery, meanwhile reassuring individuals who have or intend to pursue careers in the industry.

Participants shared mixed opinions about the media response to the ongoing pandemic, where some lauded the Indian mass media's role in bringing awareness about the COVID-19 outbreak, while others expected it to be more unbiased. Recent press freedom ranking in 2020 placed country's media at 142 position ([https://rsf.org/en/ranking\\_table](https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table)), which may, to some extent, explain the variations in the way participants reflected on the media's role. In addition, the initial surges in infections were also linked to religious congregation in the country's capital Delhi, coverage of that triggered debates over media's handling of outbreak on the grounds of particular community (see for example Slater & Masih, 2020). The participants expected media to remain unbiased and not target specific community amid pandemic for gaining viewership. However, a unanimity was observed in acknowledgment of the media's potential in assuaging the impact through positive publicity, sensitising population about hygiene and sanitation and build confidence among viewers.

Crisis management remained a reoccurring response under various categories of inquiries. Management of crisis entails creating blue print for the support during unexpected and unforeseen events. An embryonic risk can take form of crisis due to the unpredictable nature of incidents, which may ensue in unprecedented outcomes. Crisis management warrants formulation strategies at a swift pace to overcome or lessen the effect of the threat. It requires systems to be updated to meet with the unforeseen phases and be able to guide in the entire cycle of crisis management (Mitroff, Shrivastava & Udwadia, 1987). In doing so the management of crises warrants rapid and timely coordination, not only between members within a team but also between members of different teams (Reddy et al., 2009). In the current research industry experts felt it as a crucial learning for themselves and the government to minimise damage in the event similar catastrophes make reappearance. Voices of effective crisis management have been gaining momentum, so much so that 'Journal of Tourism Futures' published perspective paper (Jamal & Budke, 2020) toward COVID-19 outbreak in barely third month of its spread in China in 2020. In addition to the suggestions made by Jamal and Budke (2020) about care for local residents, clear communication among tourism and hospitality stakeholders, and need of UNWTO and WTTC to assist industry prepare for global health emergencies and support research; current research accentuated on the crisis planning and management from three major perspectives, namely industry, trainers/educators and government. Going forward, investigation into the current pandemic is most likely to gain traction and learnings from previous researches (see for example Senbeto & Hon, 2020) which can lay empirical groundwork for the health crisis such as COVID-19 and tourist typology and its influence on short or long haul travels. Because in the current findings too, participants had signalled change in short and long haul travel behaviour in future and also cited it as a key challenge for the tourism industry.

Preparedness of employees for unforeseen contingencies and provision of reserved funds are crucial strategic areas and learnings that can be taken from earlier studies (Malhotra & Venkatesh, 2009; McCool, 2012). Businesses, large or small, face the dilemma to continue to pay employees in the event of reduced demand. Especially in the case COVID-19, impacts would arguably be damaging for the industry (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020). Massive job loss and weakened contribution of the sector to the GDP is imminent, and calls of bailout are rising. Participants majorly acknowledged management of contingency funds for facing such eventualities among key industry learning and responsibility. While the sector is known to be prone to sporadic crises and economic crests and troughs owing to the seasonal variations, the effects of the current pandemic are yet to be abundantly realised.

Participants have gauged the severity of health impacts emanating from the physical interactions and proximities. The responses related to the digitalisation and need of adopting online modes of interaction were also frequently noted. Educators, for instance, stressed on the need of the adoption of technology for establishing virtual connect to minimise physical contact between individuals. Utilisation of artificial intelligence and robotics in the industry was also recommended, which falls in line with various scholarly recommendations (Yang, Henthorne & George, 2020; Webster & Ivanov, 2020; Ivanov & Webster, 2018). The inclusion of robotics in various tourism and hospitality operations are expected to become commonplace, where applications such as robotics in guidance, cleaning, kitchens, airports, hotels, deliveries, may see an increased adoption (Ivanov & Webster, 2017).

Furthermore, the industry heads reflected on the immediate challenge of managing fixed costs when the enterprises are continuing to lose business. Lodging and food service sectors are known to have higher fixed costs and are sensitive to the shocks and instabilities in the market (Dimitropoulos, 2018). In this regard the responses conveyed similar challenges that the organisations faced. Participant P1 reflected that

“COVID19, now globally carrying the status of a pandemic, has led to a worldwide crisis with its effects on the hospitality industry potentially heavier than those of 9/11, SARS, and the financial crisis in 2008. Challenges faced by many of the organisation in today’s scenario is very common -Managing Fixed Expenses, Payroll, Morale of the Employees and specially Cash Flow”.

In the similar vein participant P14 commented

“... As the payment cycle of the hospitality industry varies from 90 to 60 days except the weddings so working capital to meet out the fixed cost is a challenge (sic.)”.

To overcome challenge of lost revenue participant P5 responded

“Various cost cutting measures implementation wherever it is possible. Can’t do much on fixed costs.”

These reflections are indications of the acknowledgement by the industry actors of the ongoing struggle and the need to keep the business running while facing the uphill task of meeting their expenses on regular basis. To add to this, the industry is familiar with the variations in demand and it can be argued that unlike other sectors that may ensure steady income, tourism and hospitality oriented businesses are aware of the potential slack times arising out of various reasons like seasonal demand and crises. Employees and employers likewise need to strengthen their competencies and should sail through these tough times, also because if cost cutting is done, for instance, in the form of employee reduction or layoffs, the re-hiring would be needed as and when the industry recovers. Retaining employees is argued to be less expensive than letting employees leave (Ineson, Benke & László, 2013). This argument holds relevance particularly in the Indian context where “it is noted that reducing staff or laying off employees may not be the most favored action” (Israeli, Mohsin & Kumar, 2011, p. 373).

Some critical reflections from industry experts are worth noting. On the question of latent redundancy of employees in hotels, participant P9 voiced out that

Post Covid19, organisations will surely redesign /reorganise their business models based on the loss handled and market conditions for the future. Workforce reduction is a possibility however smarter organisations may look at utilising the available workforce in newer roles

as per the need of the business. Its (sic) important to understand that hospitality is all about human connections and people will be at the heart of everything we strategize.

While bringing up the aspects of the working culture in the hotel sector, same participant also pointed out that the

Learning for hospitality industry (issues of sick leaves/higher wages cost/business continuity) is that we must continue with our work life balance approach post normalcy. Hotels to continue sending people on leaves (PLs) etc so that we must not come back to the old mindframe (sic) of long work hours and related issues of working in hotels. Employees also need to learn to support the organisations in turbulent times by being flexible in consumption of leaves and not just saving it for monetary gains.

The impacts of the current SARS COVID-19 will be more pronounced and long lasting, especially in the light of absence of immediate vaccine to create immunity in the common masses. Although some countries have had attempted to adopt the path of herd immunity (for example Stockholm) but that approach has been questioned by a body of scientists in the absence of data to support such radical action. This is critical for the tourism and hospitality sector because of the perpetuity exhibited by the outbreak. The effects are going to remain for a longer duration and sectors that thrive on social contacts such as tourism and hospitality need to embrace for tumultuous times ahead. Going forward, it would be crucial for the governments and marketing firms to undertake research to analyse the effects of the current catastrophe on the industry (Min, Lim & Kung, 2011). This research too makes a case for raising awareness to view this pandemic as a wakeup call to prepare for the aftereffects. Going forward other highlighted aspects in the current study such as change in travel and dining habits, careful spending, need of adaptability, market research, leadership roles, population issues would be critical in preparing industry and stakeholders.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is subject to certain limitations that must be addressed. Some of them are highlighted here and future directions of research have been indicated. First and foremost the research is based on the qualitative analysis that although uses interview responses from managers or senior personnel, may not justifiably work toward generalisation of the results. Thus with the problem at hand robust empirical investigations are deemed necessary in immediate course to study the pandemic's industry impacts and make model based estimations and recommendations. However, this research makes a sturdier point in giving an exploratory stance to trigger other empirical investigations. The researches from here can take various variables exhibited as themes that accumulated through perspectives obtained from the industry experts and may operationalise them in future investigations. Statistical investigations using structural equation modelling and even triangulation studies can bring deeper insights and help enrich literature. Although studies on SARS and other outbreaks have happened in past, the extent and enormity of the current pandemic is comparable to even greater health catastrophes of past. Thus scales development to study the outbreak impacts, industry response and change in travel and consumer behaviour are strongly recommended.

Another important limitation that should be addresses is that the perspectives reported in the study are from India. Several other themes may surface and some factors manifested from current research may not apply in other scenarios, which remains a strand that could be picked in future researches. Random samples from diverse geographical and cultural setups may contribute toward newer findings. It is also important to note that situation is still evolving and the matters that were

prominent a few weeks or months ago may not be as influential now, for instance the rise and decline in the number of cases and its varied manifestation in various geographical settings. This increases the relevance of studies that factor in the temporal change in the circumstances. Going forward, there certainly would be need of more dedicated issues dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak for ensuring literature captures its evolution and recommends practices to mitigate the impacts. One more limitation in the study is that it mostly takes into cognizance individuals working in higher positions in hotels with few senior individuals from academics. The study didn't consider other stakeholders viewpoints. This leaves a glaring gap for future researches to consider other players in the leisure industry like travel intermediaries, airlines, restaurants at destinations, locals at destinations, other accommodation providers, travel and hospitality students and even different levels of employees' etc. Addressing to these limitations can fill potential lacunae and improve understanding of scholars and practitioners toward dealing with the ongoing crisis and minimise future fallouts.

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