



Post-Pandemic Travel: Decoding the Trends and Challenges for Indian Travellers

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Abstract

The Indian tourism industry has reached a great scale over the years. With the ever-increasing internet penetration, more travellers are booking online travel in India. However, the world and, in particular, the tourism industry, has seen an unprecedented shutdown due to Covid-19 affecting 2020. It is important to understand the current scenario of Indian travel patterns prior to the impact of the corona virus and the factors influencing the decision-making process of Indian travelers in the future. Hence, this paper attempts to study and decode the decision-making process of Indian travelers through an extensive review of contemporary academic literature on post-pandemic tourism emerging with the COVID-19 crisis. This study area is important because it addresses the pressing problem of comprehending post-pandemic travel. The research outcome suggests practical solutions to overcome the critical barriers arising out of Covid-19 for Indian travelers and learn to practice a new way of travelling in the future.

Keywords: Decision making, Indian Travelers, Covid-19, Tourism, Corona, Pandemic

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1. Introduction

The year 2020 appeared to be a very promising year with predictions by projecting various tourism statistics in India. The Covid-19 pandemic is novel and nobody saw it coming, not only because of the effects of the virus on health world over, but perhaps more so because of its manifestations on the tourism industry worldwide. The tourism sector worldwide witnessed a pause over concerns of quarantine. In India, the industry faced a slowdown because of the temporary suspension of visas and travel advisories blocking travel movement all over the world due to the lockdowns. (Chaturvedi & Alves, 2020). Usually, the tourism industry is among the first to get affected and the last to recover compared to other industries during a crisis like the pandemic.

The Indian government has constantly been monitoring the situation with central and local health authorities, airlines, tourism boards, hotels, and other associated public and private agencies. The government has taken bold steps to contain the spread of the virus and took necessary measures to treat the patients by especially recording their recent travel history and maintaining databases of their contact history.

According to the Confederation of Indian Industry, Covid-19 is by far the terrible crisis to hit the tourism industry in India, impacting the entire nation and its associated geographic elements such as inbound, outbound and domestic. Covid-19 has not spared any tourism channels like leisure, outbound, MICE, adventure, heritage, cruise liners, corporate and niche segments. Therefore, the first half of the year for the travel industry saw a full stop in the nation. In such situations, it is vital to keep in mind the best interest of the travelers and all the stakeholders and the industry at large. The entire industry had to go through the worst nightmare by experiencing cancellations for all the tours and handling refund requests and escalations during the pandemic. Indian travelers have a specific pattern of travelling in recent times prior to Covid-19. It is crucial to study the pattern in which the decision-making process for future travel will take place post-Covid-19. Due to the gradual spread of the virus, almost the entire remaining season of

2020 faced the risk and subsequently impacted the following holiday seasons. With chances of the pandemic to return as a third wave, travelers are even more vulnerable to make travel related decisions post pandemic.

2. Review of Literature

The article, 'Opinion on the impact of COVID-19 on travel plans India 2020', talks about the country going into lockdown on 25 March 2020, which restricted the movement of 1.3 billion people, turning out to arguably be the largest in the world. Based on the results of a survey regarding the impact of COVID-19 on travel plans, 31 percent of Indian respondents stated that they had not made any travel bookings and would decide based only after the development of the outbreak (Keelery, 2020). Many customers kept their bookings on hold, and some cancelled their bookings and did not get a refund due to this unforeseen circumstance. Even though service providers came up with strategies such as credit shell, book now travel later, a child gets to travel free with family, and so on, the majority of travelers hesitated with the Covid-19 scenario.

The article, 'Post-COVID-19 crisis travel behaviour: towards mitigating the effects of perceived risk', provides an insight into the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its potential impact on tourist decision making in the near future. The impact of the pandemic on tourist's perceived risk is pretty evident, and its impact on their future travel decisions has been quite significant. The article discusses the reasons of travelers will be more cautious in making travel decisions in the short and medium term. Additionally, this paper provides tourism stakeholders with few effective recommendations for minimizing the effect of potential heightened perceived risk on travel and tourism decision-making post the COVID-19 crisis as travellers have applied brakes in taking spontaneous travel decisions. The potential influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the post-crisis decision-making process of tourists and pertaining to their purposeful behaviour serves as a precursor to further empirical research (Matiza, 2020).

The article, 'Post-Covid', people desire to travel twice what they did previously, highlights a survey conducted by FICCI and Thrillophilia, which was aimed towards understanding the post-Covid preferences of Indian travellers. While one may think that travellers will be more mindful when it comes to making travel plans, statistics reveal that over 50 percent plan to travel in the next two months and surprisingly, 33% are making plans to travel twice of what they did previously. (Keelery, 2020)

The article, 'Change in Plan: Travelling in post-COVID-19 world' highlights regarding the growing importance of the protection of travellers. The author also talks about a calculated shift towards domestic tourism, which rolled out in the short run and sustainable and responsible travel being the 'new normal' (Marwaha, 2020). Travellers and service providers are looking inwards towards promoting domestic destinations, which is perceived safer than international sports also due to the strict regulations of international travel. Domestic tourism could finally see the light of the day.

According to the article, 'Impact of corona virus on Indian tourism could run into thousands of crores of rupees, the holiday season of Indians those travelling domestic or outbound was projected to be heavy in April-July, October and December in 2020. (Impact of corona virus on Indian tourism could run into thousands of crores of rupees, 2020). The author brought to light the December holiday season of 2019 took an approximate hit of almost 40-50 percent, the holiday season of April to July 2020 was forecasted to have a devastating hit as high as 80-100 percent, unless there is positive news of the decline of virus progression.

In the article, 'The Corona virus's Effect on Tourism will carry into 2021, experts highlighted the opinion of various industry experts regarding the impact and future post-Covid-19. The article highlights the opinion of Hilton Chief Executive Officer Chris Nassetta, who believed that the impact of the new corona virus will last at least for a year (Ekstein, 2020). However, some experts were positive and believed that the tourism industry would bounce back just like it did after Ebola, SARS, the 9/11 attack and so on. It is

quite difficult to cope up if new strains of the virus will prolong the negative impacts on the tourism industry.

The article, 'How does India Travel', throws light on the trends in Indian travel based on a joint report of Google and Bain Analysis, Kantar IMRB Survey, Euromonitor, World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), Phocuswright and many more travel review surveys. The recent Indian travel trends led to the classification of Indian Travellers under NCCS (New Consumer Classification System). These categories include Business solo/small groups and Leisure family and friends/large groups (Sheth et al., 2019). Under business groups, frequent flyers who are convenience-oriented regular business travellers with high budgets and budget business travellers who travel sporadically for work with budget constraints have been categorized in that fashion. Under Leisure groups, experience-oriented travellers prefer to travel with specific activities and experiences as top priorities that cannot be compromised. The budget group traveller includes mostly aspirational middle-class travellers seeking leisure within a budget, and the occasional traveller visiting friends and relatives also forms the final category. The article further critically presents various analyses for tourist spending patterns in transport and various other components. It highlights areas that can be tapped in the future to leverage travel spending across various purchase funnels. These insights would be most relevant to plan travel patterns and decision-making in the future.

The article states that Indians are the most confident in the world to travel post-Covid-19. Indians also top the list of people most eager to travel internationally in the next year. Although there are hints of a gradual and careful restart of travel, it can be noted that confidence is low (Whye, 2020). This could be due to risk factors involved in contracting a deadly virus, with cases being high and herd immunity not established. Release of vaccine and post successful vaccination drive may gradually improve the confidence levels among travellers to resume travel.

The article, 'Wanna fly abroad? Where all Indians can travel amid Covid-19 pandemic', talks about their bubble arrangements entered with multiple countries by the Ministry of Civil Aviation

such as India who had formed air bubble arrangements with around 19 countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Bhutan, Canada, France, Germany, Iraq, Japan, Kenya, Maldives, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, the UK, Ukraine and the U.S.A. Regular international flights had been banned owing to the Covid-19 pandemic (Ojha, 2020). The article emphasizes that international travelers are expected to strictly adhere to the guidelines of the Union Health Ministry of India regarding quarantine and associated Covid-19 concerns. Even though some countries are easing restrictions on international travel, the new strain of the virus with its variants from different parts of the world is driving nations to get stringent with the restrictions again.

The article, 70% of Indian travellers, will be more price-conscious while planning trips post Covid-19, highlights a recent survey on travel plans of people post the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey revealed that 70 percent of Indian travellers believe they will be more price-sensitive when searching for and planning any trip post-Covid-19 (Awasthi, 2020). This is quite natural considering the fear psychosis among the travellers. With many people losing jobs throughout the world, it is quite common to not splurge money on travel which for many would be the last on the priority list.

The article, '14 percent Indians likely to travel once lockdown ends', reflects key consumer behaviours and trends according to Thomas Cook and SOTC Travel Ltd.'s Holiday Readiness Travel Report - Future of Travel post-COVID-19. They surveyed over 2500 consumers across India's metros and Tier 1 & 2 cities, including Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Pune, Lucknow, Guwahati, Jamnagar, Surat, Vizag, Indore, Jaipur and so on, covering four age groups below 30 years, 31-44 years, 45-59 years and 60 years and above, 76 percent being in the 28-55 age segment. Some of the key travel drivers include Domestic Tourism which is expected to be the focal point. Travel is set to rebound with the size of the group getting smaller. It is expected that there will be a shift in holiday duration and spending patterns. Booking channels will also see a preference over online channels over the offline mode (ETTravelWorld, 2020). Travellers would prefer holidaying with social distancing in FIT's (Free Independent

travel) than Group tours. Even though travel did begin after lockdown, new strains of virus affect future travel courses where constant fear looms the tourism industry.

In the article, *India Remains a Strong Destination for Outbound Post COVID-19*, to further rethink to take a deeper dive into the future of outbound tourism, T3 organised an e-conference during SATTE GenX titled, 'Outbound Travel: Reinventing Strategy'. Outbound tourism from India was one of the fastest-growing globally and was projected at around 27 million travelers before the onset of the pandemic (Kumar, 2020). It was predicted that the market is estimated to touch 45 million outbound travellers in the next couple of years. However, the unexpected turn of events has put a brake to the growth of the travel industry. To further attract travellers, Maldives is now the first destination to introduce a loyalty programme for its guests. The majority of the resorts in the destinations are now open for travellers. Also, Maldives is set to allow guesthouses to function. The Maldives, because of its exclusive islands and secluded beaches, has managed to grab the attention of many celebrities who made the Maldives their first choice of holiday destination during the pandemic. The article also pointed out that countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia are also opening up for outbound markets and have begun receiving tourists.

The article, *Covid pandemic: India ranks second globally in avoiding travel destination due to safety concerns*, revealed key details about the prevalent Corona virus pandemic situation. It introduced a new breed of "safety first" travellers. The survey conducted by Booking.com also forecasts about 2021 to be the year of road trips due to the pandemic since many tourists will have a fear psychosis of travelling in public transport. Travellers will now prefer more recreational vehicles and may also see a boom in caravan tourism or highway tourism (Sinha, 2020). Many travellers may prefer travelling in their own vehicles or subscription vehicles. There is a surge in the promotion and popularity of subscription vehicles since the economy has gone down due to Covid-19. Many travellers are opting for road travel to be in their comfort and safety zone.

3. Research Gap

The tourism industry has seen different phases of a downslide but never before has there been so much fear and helplessness caused by COVID-19. Once the situation returns to normalcy post-covid-19, it is important to study how Indians will be travelling in the near future compared to the recent travel patterns. There is minimal literature on identifying and understanding the influencing factors for Indian travellers to decide regarding their travel post-Covid-19. Practical solutions to overcome the critical barriers arising out of Covid-19 for Indian Travellers and learn to practice a new way of travelling in the future is the need of the hour. Thus, this research will attempt to cover this gap in the literature through this study.

4. Objectives of the Study

To study the current scenario of Indian travel patterns

To study the decision-making process of Indian Travellers post Covid-19

To suggest solutions to overcome the critical barriers arising out of Covid-19 for Indian Travellers.

4.1 Research Methods

An extensive literature review is done for the study of the objectives. Secondary data sources from journal articles, government reports, newspaper articles and private travel surveys have been used for this study to generate the main output through an overview of knowledge is made relevant by the results from the literature.

4.2 Findings of the Study

Bain Company estimated that Indians would spend USD 136 billion by 2021 for travel. However, this momentum will now be affected because of Covid-19 impact on tourism.

In an article in (Hindustan Times, 2019), it was stated that Indian tourists are among the world's highest spenders per visit made at outbound destinations, and total visitor spending is projected to rise from USD 23 billion in 2018 to USD 45 billion by 2022.

According to the New Consumer Classification System, Travellers in India fit into five broad cohorts. Some of the major concerns of Indian travelers are fear of accidents during their holiday, loss of their baggage and personal belongings. Other major concerns included health issues, flight delays and loss of passport. However, post-Covid-19, and the major concern for travellers would be to avoid contracting illness due to a virus.

According to a study by Booking.com, factors influencing decision making for Indian travellers are the need for relaxation, activities to spend quality time with loved ones, nostalgia to rediscover past good times, social status and peer-pressure of visiting most Instagrammed destinations or going to places where their followers have not visited ("Indians travel: Social status, and not the drive to explore, is what makes most Indians travel," 2019)

In another finding, the "Unravel Travel" study revealed that travellers would prefer contactless travel once the situation is normal to resume travelling. 76 percent of respondents stated that their preferred destinations would be countries that offer safe and contactless experiences. In terms of the future of travel, the study found that e-boarding passes at 41 percent, touchless restrooms at 43 per cent, contactless journeys between airports and hotels at 40 percent, no more middle seats in transportation at 36 per cent and digital health passports at 35 percent are some of the new ideas that global travellers hope to see implemented shortly. Expectations are changing and evolving with post-pandemic as there is an emergence of a new breed of conscious travellers.

When it comes to the confidence levels, Indians are topping the list in the world to travel post-Covid-19. Indians are also number one in the charts of people most eager to travel internationally in the next 12 months. It is interesting to note that Indian travellers were among the most travelled before the COVID-19 pandemic and are the most confident in the world about resuming their international voyages provided conditions are favourable for travel if there is no progression of the virus. The survey further indicated that Indians are most eager to travel to outbound destinations in the next 1 year, with 77 percent showing keen interest to travel, followed by Thais at 70 percent and Indonesians at 60 percent.

Residents of India, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong and the Philippines prefer Singapore as a favourite destination for travel post-lockdown based on the newly released study conducted by social research agency Blackbox Research, data provider Dynata and language partner Language Connect, "Unravel Travel: Fears & Possibilities in a Post Corona virus (COVID-19) World. It examines the sentiments, preferences, and expectations of 10,195 people across 17 countries regarding travel in a post-COVID-19 world. When travel can resume under a 'new normal' travel framework, the "Unravel Travel" survey found that with a score of 76, India and Thailand are tied for the top position for nationalities most confident of travelling. Asian countries dominate the countries that scored above the global average of 61, including China (69), Indonesia (65), and Singapore (64). France and Germany also rated above the global average. At the other end of the spectrum, Japan was rated the most cautious with a score of 40, followed by the Philippines (43) and Hong Kong (50). Other countries that scored below the global average include Sweden, New Zealand, UK, Canada and the United States.

The survey revealed that 70 percent of Indian travelers opine that being price-conscious when it comes to searching and planning a trip post-Covid-19. While 64 percent prefer promotional offers and savings, 74 percent expect travel companies to support their future travel plans via discounts and promotions. As budget tops the list of priorities, travellers will shift their choice of destination as well. Studies suggest that 57 percent of Indian travelers opine that they will prefer a discounted trip to a place they would not have otherwise chosen, rather than paying more for a dream destination. The intention to travel is pretty evident, especially with concepts like revenge travel picking up in the market and later which will also see the rise of vaccine tourism through price and safety-conscious travel.

Almost 62 percent of Indian travelers preferred to opt for a trip they could afford based on their budget in the short term, rather than saving for a dream trip plan which may never take off. The survey further revealed that the majority of the Indian travellers (77 percent) responded that travel platforms need to add value during

covid times by increasing transparency about cancellation policies, refund processes and insurance options for travel. Since novel corona virus never made its debut before, many policies never covered this under their clauses, leaving travellers at the mercy of the service providers. Flexibility is also on top priority, with 38 percent of travellers who believe that they will consider refundable accommodation a must-have in their trip. In comparison, 36 percent will want the flexibility to change the check-in dates without being charged, especially during the pandemic or lockdown related implications.

India ranks in the second position globally, after Thailand in avoiding certain travel destinations due to health and safety concerns that may be more crowded. 86 percent will take necessary precautions while travelling in future, according to a recent study. Around 71 percent of Indians wish to give a total miss to specific destinations altogether due to safety due to heavy tourist footfalls and the associated safety and health concerns. Travellers now prefer less crowded and unexplored spots for travel, hoping they can have a safe trip keeping in mind social distancing norms. There was a sudden surge of staycations in the market to encourage more travel on the domestic front, such as Goa being one of the first to open up itself for tourism again.

The survey conducted by Booking.com has brought out key details about the new breed of “safety first” travelers as a result of the Corona virus pandemic, 78 percent of Indians are happy to travel to destinations where there are provisions for standard health spot checks on arrival, 81 percent Indians are fine travelling to a destination where it is compulsory to wear a face mask in public which is quite alarming, 77 percent of Indian travellers will choose a hotel which has clearly stated its health and hygiene policies with 79 percent preferring hotel that provides antibacterial and sanitizing products available at guest’s disposal. Travellers will definitely expect promise and reassurances from the travel industry, with 75 percent of Indians looking back to service providers in travel to clearly outline the safety precautions they keep in mind before making travel decisions.

Recent studies project that 2021 will witness a shift in destination and transportation preferences. It is believed that 2021 will be the year of road trips, with around 68 percent of Indians who are not likely to prefer public transportation and avoid travelling with large groups due to the fear of getting COVID-19 infection. This estimate is higher than the global average of 46 percent. Instead, travellers prefer to hire or self-drive to their favourite destination.

Booking.com conducted the survey among select individuals who were business or leisure travellers in the last 1 year and are planning to travel in the next 12 months. In total, 20,934 respondents across 28 countries were surveyed. Among the total respondents, the majority were from India, Columbia, Brazil, Australia, Spain, Italy, France, UK, Germany, Mexico, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea and the U.S. The rest included Canada, Argentina, New Zealand, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Croatia, Israel, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam, who completed the online survey in July 2020. It reflects the respondents' sentiments that travelling can be halted temporarily, but in the long-term, everyone prefers to resume travel eventually.

Henley Passport Index 2020 brings out every year the rankings of the world's most powerful passports. Indian passport has secured 84th position in the list. Currently, the Indian passport ranks 70th position in terms of the Global power of the passport. Indians can travel to only 26 countries without a visa which indicates that with a visa score of 51, Indians can avail the visa on arrival only in 44 countries which implies that Indians still need Visa for 124 countries ("Henley Passport Index," 2020). Having a weak passport poses a critical challenge for Indian travel. If Indians have a valid visa for US, UK and Singapore can give Indians an upper hand in procuring visa on arrival for a couple of more countries. Most Indians panic during applying for their first visa because the chances of getting rejected are relatively high. Due to these barriers, it is so hard for Indians to make sudden travel plans for outbound destinations.

The strength of the Indian currency is another significant reason that influences the way Indians plan their travel. For the majority of the Indians travelling to foreign countries, a large portion of their

savings is invested in their travel. Indians are known to be conditioned to certain cultural mindsets entirely different from other travellers across the globe. For instance, some travellers are willing to spend money on luxury products like phones cars. However, the same users, because of a shortage of funds, expressed their difficulty to travel. On the other hand, some Indian travellers are reluctant to experiment. For instance, middle-aged Indians do not prefer to stay in hostels or Airbnb's instead of Hotels, and it can be observed that there is a gradual shift in perspective, at least among the younger crowd, which makes Indian travellers unique in their own way.

In today's generation, Indian women are working and at the same time keep the passion of travelling alive, but this is not the case for a majority of the women. Travelling is still an unachievable dream. Many Indian families discourage the woman for travel and advise them to start travelling once they are married. Most Indians undermine tourism within India and believe that travelling in India is chaotic and unsafe to some extent. It can be observed in many discussion forums where foreigners express the safety concerns in India.

As per a study, there is a trend of many Indians travelling solo than usual, which boosted the tourism industry. As per data from Oyo India in 2018, they found an increase of nearly 133% in bookings made by people who travel alone. As per Bain analysis, the majority of the solo women travelers originate from tier-1 cities such as Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru. The majority of Indians who travel solo are as a result of not finding a common travel date to match with friends.

According to Bain Analysis, online channels impact customers' decisions as much as offline mediums. Meanwhile, of the 160 million active Internet users in India who are non-transacting, less than 5% of online travellers are from Tier-2 or Tier-3 cities. Their study indicates that online engagement drops in gaining travel information after the research phase, as many still prefer to book offline through familiar tour operators.

The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, predicting a downturn in international travel, launched the 'Dekho Apna Desh', a webinar series hosted by experts who shared key areas of information on destinations like Varanasi, Pondicherry, Ladakh, Kolkata and Lucknow. The main focus was on building enthusiasm and interest around key domestic destinations during the pandemic and post-pandemic.

A recent survey reveals that India stands second in the world in neglecting travel spots due to safety issues in 2021. The year is projected to be a year of road trips. Over 20 percent of all related searches on its platform in India have been for long-duration vacations for more than 28 nights at an accommodation. This shows that people are willing to work from home for a long period from inaccessible remote locations with the presence to remote access technology. For example, designer-actor Ms Masaba Gupta, used the services of Airbnb and spent months in Goa to work on her new collection.

International travel, when it happens after a long recovery, maybe mostly within the region and between corona virus-free destinations such as Bhutan and Sri Lanka, may benefit as both are close to India and their main cities of tourist importance Thimphu and Galle.

Thomas Cook and SOTC Travel Ltd.'s Holiday Readiness Travel Report - Future of Travel post-COVID-19 reflects key consumer behaviours and trends. 14% of respondents indicated that they might travel in 2020 once restrictions are removed. While 45% of respondents plan to postpone their holiday to 2021, 41% are undecided also due to the virus's progression for a longer duration. During festivals, the peak season was preferred for holidaying in 2020, either November (29%) or December (50%).

72% of respondents only wanted popular brands for their holiday while availing the services of every component of the travel industry such as hotels, airlines, travel agency tour operators and so on. Safety ranking system was indicated as the main issue for the majority of the respondents, and the rest were willing to increase their travel spending for the same.

A domestic destination was the preferred choice of the majority of the respondents, especially for destinations such as Ladakh, Goa, North East region, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Kashmir, and Bhutan being not so far behind in the Indian sub-continent. Self-driven destinations with reasonable distance were also preferred, such as Coorg, Ooty, Mussoorie, Shimla, Amritsar, Munnar, etc.

36% of respondents showed a preference for an international holiday. Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, being popular short-haul destinations for Indians, saw the highest interest to visit them by 41%. In contrast, the USA, Australia and New Zealand are the preferred long-haul destinations that usually witness demand in the fourth quarter of the season. Interestingly, Europe is a favoured region with hotspots such as Switzerland, France, Germany, UK, and the Czech Republic, despite the region being severely impacted by Covid-19.

Respondents of the survey indicated a decent preference towards travelling in small FIT (Free-Individual Travel), mostly due to safety concerns. A significant share of 63% of the respondents was tilting towards solo travel with their immediate/extended family or friends and colleagues, whereas 25% of respondents preferred to travel in small groups of below 20 co-travellers and 12% preferred for a group size of approximately 35 plus.

86% of respondents selected a holiday period of between 4-11 days; 14% preferred a holiday of over 12 days. In terms of travel spends, 67% of respondents stated that they would spend less than Rs. 1 lakh per person on their next holiday, while 11% said that they would spend up to Rs. 2 lakhs per person. Travellers strongly express the need for a personalized experience and expect reassurance during their travel booking experience, with 58% opting to purchase holidays through retail outlets or home service. This was followed by 40% preferring for online channels such as Website or App and 12% stating a preference for video chat.

31 percent of Indian respondents stated that they had not made any travel bookings and would decide based on the development of the outbreak based on the results of a survey regarding the impact of COVID-19 on travel plans.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that 36 percent of travel information searches have been for stays between a week and a month. With homestays in Manali and Leh offering a month-long vacation with food and WiFi in the hills for as little as 25,000, most WFH techies are booking away their vacations for the last 12 weeks of the year.

Travellers are not totally hibernating away; instead are reuniting with nature through special or unique stays such as tree houses, farm stays, jungle lodges, and camping stays. Also, many families have a keen interest in exploring the unexplored breaks, especially those that focus on their children and searches for 'trips with kids' witness a significant number compared to all searches.

Curly Tales conducted an online survey on social media to know what, where, when and how would people like to travel and dine post lockdown. Out of our total respondents, 52% were between the age groups of 26 to 35 years, and 48% were within the age group of 18 to 25 years.

According to the Payback-Unomer Travel Study published in October, from the time the first unlock came about, it is surprising to notice that around 40 percent of the respondents have either gone back to their hometowns or for a weekend getaway. More than 20 percent of respondents are planning a vacation in the peak vacation season, with nearly one-third of respondents in South and North India planning their trips. It shows the respondents' willingness to choose domestic holidays, a weekend or short getaways to nearby destinations after an unlock. Nearly three-fourths of those who have booked looked at safety precautions which are the most sought-after aspect. Sanitization certificates and high star ratings have emerged to be key booking criteria, as opposed to affordable rates, deals and offers, which would be the norm of selection before the pandemic.

This entire paradigm shift towards post-pandemic travel decision making has already seen a sea change at various stages of the pandemic has indeed evolved for the better. Indian travellers and travellers, in general, will now pay for hygiene even if it is at a premium and embracing many technology developments ensuring contactless experiences to stroll at unimpeded destinations.

5. Suggestions

It is vital to consider few suggestions for immediate implementation, which is an outcome of the research. Alleviating

customer concerns and mass perceptions arising out of disease outbreaks through awareness programmes is the need of the hour.

They are incentivizing domestic travel and making it lucrative to retain the confident and high-spending tourists, which should not be challenging due to the travel restrictions in place for outbound destinations. The most critical aspect to promoting domestic spots would be to minimise the fears of tourists by ensuring that strict protocols for safety are followed.

They are adopting sanitization security standards to meet expectations for travellers. It is suggested to initiate preliminary screening of travellers in their home countries before they board their international flights as a part of a Global Agreement. Both the government and the tourism industry will have to prescribe minimum Standard Operating Procedures for hygiene and sanitation to conform by travellers. Divert international to domestic destinations for domestic tourism promotion and development in India as a present coping mechanism for survival and future growth.

Pan-India alternative and decent hotel stays can be encouraged during covid times like homestays and boutique hotels in remote locations. Places that offer more customized options be it cottages for accommodation, self-drive vehicles, or even private swimming pools, will enjoy higher preference in the minds of cautious travellers. A cab would be preferred over a bus or a train, and a rented bike in Goa would be preferred over a cab.

Promote and unblock travel spending across all purchase funnels in the near future by leveraging the rising online travel spending. Travel service providers need to facilitate new users and increase penetration among existing customers across all the purchasing phases such as interest, researching, booking, experiencing, and post-trip sharing.

There is a sizeable chunk of existing customers who do not believe that online channels are authentic. Building brand trustworthiness and reliability is the key among already existing customers regarding payment terms and conditions at the booking stage. The

on and off the lock and unlock of international travel restrictions will result in severe competition as all countries will target the same markets. This calls for an effective and aggressive strategy for exclusive micro-markets focused on special communication tactics in social media.

Meeting the expectations of all categories of travelers by various tourism stakeholders will encourage travellers to take up future travel with relation to rules and regulations. For instance, companies must change customers' perception that online channels are not misleading customers. In the case of frequent flyers and experience-oriented travellers, extending loyalty programmes for a longer period is the way forward for meeting customer expectations,

It is suggested to penetrate the Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities to create better access to increase online booking among mass leisure segment and motivate active internet users who never or limited transaction.

Make the country safer for women in general and also during tourism. Travel apps such as Xoxo Tours, Meetups and Tourbar provide a platform to connect with other solo travellers travelling to the same destination sharing the same date of travel. Car rentals can offer great tariffs post-lockdown for driving holidays with assurances of every vehicle being cleaned and sanitized after every use.

Identifying and promoting indigenous travel for leisure can help during the pandemic. It has been factually proved that local people started visiting nearby tourist spots and availing other leisure services every time the pandemic was being slightly controlled. Indians may use local destination knowledge to take up same-day excursions programs to provide an escape.

The reason for this sudden push to the travel sector is also the fact that most companies have extended their work-from-home (WFH) periods. Needless to say, it is giving young professionals who have been home for long stretches more than enough reasons to travel.

There is a huge scope for promoting unexplored excursion destinations more in these times than ever before due to lesser crowd. Critical issues of tour operation and niche marketing for such destinations through excursion centres or short road trips have to abide by geopolitical policies, consider chances of sudden changes, and obtain the local government's support, which all is needed to analyze.

It is suggested to encourage virtual travel attractions of countries through 360-degree experiences through various augmented reality platforms, for instance, FlipAR.

National Tourism Policy inclusions for setting up self-screening kiosks in all the tourism service providers to ensure contactless checkpoints with the help of Artificial Intelligence may re-enforce the confidence in Indian travellers to take up travel. Mass sustainability and community orientation can be achieved by laying down consumer preferences and tourism policies, which have evolved worldwide.

There is a need to bring about a new orientation in the tourism planning and policy issues to keep in mind the interest of the entrepreneurs and young tourists for niche and special interest tourism segments with alternative and responsible tourism. In the era of millennials, safe tourism in organised segments replaced with different types of alternative tourism among millennial tourists can be suitable options.

With burnt pockets due to financial challenges as a result of the pandemic experienced by the masses throughout India, the tourism industry will have to come out in an innovative manner to offer a deeper value proposition, better alternative choice, increased flexibility, assurance of safety and transparency to the travellers. Prioritising specific tourism products and destinations that would yield interest in the target market and ensure that these deliver value for money should be the focus.

It is suggested that governments will need to pay more attention to ensure travellers' safety by empowering the tourism industry through investment in new technology. Effective research and

development of innovative, seamless, and contactless travel experience are crucial. The service providers to embrace will unfold opportunities that can be leveraged upon as soon as restrictions are lifted

It is true that even though technology may cost some of their jobs, India should market aggressively and host campaigns with state support to organize the best international conferences and trade shows to showcase the safety standards of India to resume business. With access to technology and infrastructure, service providers must regain trust and improve confidence levels among their customers.

Case examples of Thailand can be considered where tourists are expected to always wear a digital wrist band that has been rolled out by Thailand, which helps local authorities to allow tracking and monitoring of the health condition of a tourist. Besides this, a Special Tourist Visa is available to travelers at 2,000 Baht from low-risk countries. Sterling Holiday Resorts have tied up with corporate hospital Apollo Clinics to introduce 'holiday insurance' besides tech innovations such as QR code menus. They designed a new set of games and holiday activities, keeping the norms of social distancing, safety and hygiene in mind.

With many countries launching the Covid-19 vaccine, especially India being the forerunner, tour operators in India have already started planning 'vaccine tourism' packages for Indians who want to travel to England to take the shots. Travel agencies such as Zenith Holidays in Kolkata, Gem Tours & Travels in Mumbai and Chariot World Tours in Bengaluru confirmed that they are formulating vaccine tour packages, which may include the vaccine cost. India's travel and tourism sector was one of the first to be hit by the Covid-19 crisis and restrictions on international travel. The industry hopes to survive and revive the post-vaccination drive.

It is also suggested that Indian tour operators could explore an Adventure Tourism circuit with Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, where travellers get to experience the majestic Himalayan landscapes or trip to explore some of Sri Lanka's best-surfing spots. Similarly, a Spiritual Tourism circuit could offer the international

traveller a holistic package to discover oneself and the rejuvenation of mind, body and soul. India has been a hotspot destination for medical tourism, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, this is now one of the worst-hit, resulting in high tourist footfalls. An opportunity that can be explored to bring back the international tourists to India is to carve out a niche tourism product of medical, wellness and Ayurveda tourism, which may be developed to leverage the prospects of curing the covid-19 affected patients.

It is suggested to have a uniform protocol for seamless travel across India. The state governments can sort out the bottleneck by issuing a common permit to a tourist or a single test that could suffice the entire circuit. Such a request must be put to the Union home ministry or the health ministry by all stakeholders. The tourism industry must depend only on domestic tourists for some time. Hence hassle-free travel for inbound tourists across must be ensured for travellers in India. Today, Indians have money. Many places, such as the North-East region, can be a high-end destination for mindful tourism. Travellers will also have to play their part by preparing to handle the uncertainties emerging during Covid-19 while ensuring that they conform to changing domestic and international regulations, which is enforced to protect travellers and citizens in their best interest.

6. Conclusion

The tourism sector is a resilient industry. The tourism industry will need to remake and redefine itself by transforming the entire tourism landscape post-pandemic. Empirically, one must accept that pandemic has returned to haunt the travellers and citizens again in the form of a second wave. The future scope lies in alternative and unexplored excursion hotspots in Indian tourism, which may save the industry to revive after Covid-19. At this point in time, the tourism industry will have to embrace and comprehend that the choice for travel is only possible if there are more innovations in accessibility with safety and legal clearances. This implies that, as the world exits from lockdowns, it will enter another difficult phase of lock-in if there are new strains of variants of Covid-19 that will limit international travel yet again.

Destinations may open up, but the adamant virus is here to stay or long-term. Moving forward, technology will be the only saviour in ensuring travellers are scanned through a machine that disinfects before they enter hotels and offices. Technological interventions will create minimum physical touch points with the help of co-creation models that can bring about a significant change in tourist group dynamics in India. With a healthy trend towards understanding the gravity of the situation and being mindful of environmental costs, destinations will gradually embrace a zero-carbon footprint along with higher levels of hygiene. Tour operators and hoteliers inclined towards more sustainable and meaningful experiences will be a great deal. The pandemic has given compelling reasons to be viewed as an opportunity to hit the reset button and transform the tourism industry into a sustainable engine for economic growth and development.

The path to normalcy is far from the near, but gradual restoration of tourism will re-instill the faith and confidence among Indians for the commencement of travel. The effect of Covid-19 has and will continue to evolve the way one travels, impacting travel choices and decisions in the present and near future.

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