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How are hospitality and tourism businesses in India responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theme editors Gunjan M Sanjeev and Shweta Tiwari share their reflections on the significance and outcomes of the theme issue with managing editor Richard Teare.

Overview

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) predicted that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis would cost the international tourism industry at least US\$22bn that the industry would contract by up to 25% in 2020 and that this would result in the loss of 50 m jobs (WTTC, 2020). The analysis by WTTC reveals that the Asia-Pacific region is the most heavily impacted, with up to 49 m jobs at risk with an overall impact of US\$800bn on gross domestic product (GDP) (WTTC, 2020). Given this backdrop, the issue focuses on how hospitality and tourism businesses in India are responding to the pandemic. Each article addresses emerging issues related to different topics: Human resource strategy, innovative design, consumer behavior, challenges facing hospitality education, training and development, technological changes, risk and uncertainty, revenue management and financing and operational strategies. A list of the articles in this issue can be found in [Appendix](#).

Why in your view, is your theme issue strategic question important?

Indian hospitality and tourism has faced a major and evolving challenge with COVID-19 and today, it is experiencing an all-time low demand. The negative impact on hospitality and tourism businesses is simply immeasurable due to on-going uncertainty. Along with hotels and restaurants, the Indian tourism and hospitality industry contributes more than US\$250bn—nearly one-tenth of India's GDP (Deloitte, 2020). The purpose is to explore the issues arising and to provide specific recommendations for industry professionals, policymakers and other stakeholders on what strategies could be adopted to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality and tourism in India.

Thinking about your theme issue plan and approach, what worked well?

The aim of the theme issue is to evaluate how hospitality and tourism businesses in India are responding to the pandemic and so we sought to gather the perspectives of representative stakeholders in order to address our theme issue question. As theme editors, our objective was to ensure that the article contributions explored the widest possible range of issues impacting the industry in India, including the opinions of employees and employers as well as customers. The article collection explores different contemporary issues such as the technological transformations occurring in hotels, practices adopted by hotel managers in an effort to restore revenues, various innovative training programs for employees and the impact of the pandemic on hospitality and tourism education. We also sought to analyze employee perspectives on sustainable practices and examine new housekeeping practices. The theme issue also captures some interesting reflections on specialist areas such as medical tourism in the Covid-19 era and the styles adopted by millennial travel vloggers. Overall, what worked well is that we were able to incorporate the opinions of stakeholders across the



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range of article contributions and this helped us to analyze and respond to our strategic question.

How did you engage with different stakeholder groups?

Given our focus on a strategic question that relates to what has become a global crisis, we sought to respond constructively to the situation created by the pandemic and the concept of a “new normal” and so in this, securing the participation of key stakeholders was not difficult. In fact, all academic members of the writing team engaged with practitioners via interviews and various discussion formats to obtain their views on the issues under consideration. Two of the authors are themselves practitioners: David Mathews is the general manager, Trident Bandra Kurla hotel, Mumbai, and Sharda Sharma is the executive housekeeper at the Radisson Blu hotel, Delhi. We found that all stakeholders had opinions on best practice implementation, economic revival strategies and about the deployment of various innovative programs in response to the pandemic. As documented by the respective authors, roundtable discussions, interviews and surveys were some of the tools used to reach out to stakeholders representing different segments ranging from large hotels such as *The Taj* and *The Oberoi* to small hospitality and tourism businesses. Further, we encouraged the writing team to include quotes from interviewees to help reinforce the opinions of practitioners.

What were the highlights from stakeholder group interactions?

It is evident from the theme issue outcomes that all stakeholders strongly agree that Indian hospitality and tourism is facing a major and evolving challenge and there is broad consensus that the industry is doing all it can to respond by deploying innovative solutions and redefining its consumer-centric policies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. That said, stakeholders identified gaps that need to be addressed and recommended that government and industry should work more closely together to try to overcome the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Thinking about your peer review process: what went well and why?

In essence, our review process worked well in the context of the strategic question we were addressing because of the unpredictable impact of the pandemic on revenue management, which meant that it was relatively easy to obtain the feedback. To elaborate, industry representatives were keen to ensure that the theme issue articulated the industry’s viewpoint about the pressing need to support the industry and in so doing, assist the wider society. Overall, the peer review process provided guidance and suggestions to our writing team and enabled them to come up with a 360° view of the situation created by the pandemic. It was however somewhat challenging to obtain timely feedback and we had to send out reminders because some of our reviewers and the wider team were themselves distracted by the impact of the pandemic on their work and personal lives.

What are the most significant outcomes of your theme issue in terms of the contributions to knowledge and/or professional practice?

The article collection documents the impact of the pandemic on hospitality and tourism in India by examining interpretations of the contactless experience in most of the operations cited by study participants. The issue also highlights some key developments relating to: Technology transformation, profit management, the importance of training programs and the delivery of education in the context of a “new normal” hospitality and service blueprint. Additionally, two articles provide perspectives on the scope for medical tourism and virtual tourism respectively and how these could open up new opportunities for a crisis-ridden tourism industry. Furthermore, the cash flow and working capital management strategies adopted by hotels are

seen to be a critical factor in economic revival and the theme issue contains stakeholder suggestions, practical approaches and recommendations that could help policy makers and industry to set realistic expectations and take the necessary steps to prepare for recovery. Finally, it is important to add that the issue is based on discussion and evidence-based analysis that aims to evaluate corrective action and the on-going documentation of outcomes.

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What are the implications for management action and applied research arising from your theme issue outcomes?

There are clear implications for all major stakeholders namely: hoteliers, policymakers, analysts and others interested in understanding industry responsiveness to the pandemic in India. Sustainable tourism growth is one of the key pillars of the Indian economy and the issue focuses on how hospitality and tourism businesses in India are coping with the disruption to this caused by the pandemic. In this context, the article collection captures the issues that are currently affecting the industry and provides specific recommendations for industry professionals, policymakers and other stakeholders on what action needs to be taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. It is our view that by implementing recommendations provided by our writing team, managers can begin to revive their businesses in the short, medium and longer term.

Having served as a WHATT theme editor, what did you enjoy about the experience?

We enjoy the experience of WHATT theme editing and for one of us, it is the fifth opportunity to serve as a WHATT theme editor. In our view, this sustained collaboration speaks for itself: WHATT offers theme editors and the wider writing team an excellent opportunity to draw on their interests and expertise to define and then respond to an industry-led strategic question. In this, the managing editor provides guidance and support at every step and this enables the theme editor/s to design their theme issue in a creative and innovative way. WHATT seeks to explore ways of bridging the gap and re-connecting academics and practitioners and its format encourages innovation, exploration and the creation of interesting articles with wide readership potential. The approach used by WHATT is both engaging and motivating because the theme editors and contributors share equal responsibility for developing potential solutions that are of value to industry.

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- World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2020), "COVID-19 World impact", available at: <https://wtcc.org> (accessed 8 June 2020).

About the Theme Editors:

Gunjan M. Sanjeev, PhD, is the Vice President RBEF (Amity Education Group), Director of International Affairs and Professor (Finance) at Amity University, Haryana, India. She is responsible for some of the

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Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes (WHATT) aims to make a practical and theoretical contribution to hospitality and tourism development and we seek to do this by using a key question to focus attention on an industry issue. If you would like to contribute to our work by serving as a WHATT theme editor, do please contact the Managing Editor, Dr Richard Teare via the Emerald website.

Appendix 1: Theme issue contents (WHATT v13 n5 2021)

Responding to the coronavirus pandemic: Emerging issues and challenges for Indian hospitality and tourism businesses

Gunjan M Sanjeev and Shweta Tiwari

Introduces the theme issue which explores real-life issues that are impacting hospitality and tourism in India and some of the wider implications. This exploratory work is based on inputs from industry professionals, policymakers and other stakeholders as they try to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on hospitality and tourism businesses in India.

Post-pandemic pressures to pivot: Tech transformations in luxury hotels

Sonia Bharwani and David Mathews

Provides an empirical exploration of the tech-based transformation strategies being adopted by luxury hotels in India to assuage the fear psychosis and restore guest confidence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It sheds light on the "new normal" and its overarching implications for hotel operations from the user experience perspective.

Surviving and growing in the post-COVID world: The case of Indian hotels

Raju Majumdar

Explores financial management strategies adopted by Indian hotels in response to the pandemic. They include measures to enhance cash flows/revenues, reduce operating costs and cash outflows, and conserve resources. Growth enhancing measures in anticipation of the longer-term "new normal" includes restructuring of the workforce and increased product diversity.

Reviving the Indian hospitality industry after the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of innovation in training

Vikas Gupta and Garima Sahu

Draws on virtual in-depth interviews to identify the features of innovative training programs used by hotels in India to support guests and employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also discusses the role of contemporary training programs in boosting consumer confidence and enhancing re-visit intentions.

Service blueprint 4.0: A service design for hotels beyond COVID-19

Ashutosh Pandey and Ruchika Kulshrestha

Explores ongoing changes in the hotel service delivery process during the pandemic and reveals ways in which the service blueprint has been re-framed. It also profiles an updated service blueprint model for hotels which could assist hotel service managers to address potential sources of customer dissatisfaction and service failure arising from pandemic restrictions.

Assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hospitality and tourism education in India and preparing for the new normal

Vishesh Joshi and Ila Gupta

Assesses the impact of the pandemic on hospitality and tourism education in India and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies in support of the industry. The study also suggests possible avenues and methods for industry and academia to form more symbiotic relationships and become more mutually supportive and resilient.

Analyzing employee perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable practices: A study of five-star hotels in India

Kamakshi Mehta and Shikha Sharma

Draws on interviews and a survey of employees of five-star hotels in India to analyze how the pandemic is affecting financial sustainability and its mediating impact on the efforts of hotels to maintain a sustainable operating environment. Implications include the need for new standard operating procedures to enable hotels to establish a self-recovery path.

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Aesthetically clean to clinically clean – A study of housekeeping practices in Delhi hotels in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Sharda Sharma and Tanuja Kaushik

Draws on an industry survey to identify and analyze emerging best practice in hotel housekeeping in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The article reports on new standards that are being adopted with the aim of assuring hotel guests and employees about the hygiene and safety measures and standards that have been adopted and implemented.

Medical tourism in the COVID-19 era: Opportunities, challenges and the way ahead

Arvind Chhabra, Mehak Munjal, Prabhu Mishra, Kritika Singh, Debjanee Das, Neha Kuhar and Monika Vats

Draws on data provided by the Indian government and from non-government sources available in the public domain to review the impact of COVID-19 on medical tourism. Considers the short-term factors affecting medical tourism and how they could be mitigated by incorporating technological advances to secure long-term growth.

Millennial travel vlogs: Emergence of a new form of virtual tourism in the post-pandemic era?

Urjani Chakravarty, Gulab Chand and Udaya Narayana Singh

Presents a perspective on the new narrative styles adopted by international millennial travel vloggers during the COVID-19 pandemic. They aim to promote virtual tourism and the article features six examples of millennial vloggers. Given tighter government regulations relating to travel, vloggers have developed novel ways of content creation through “travel writing.”

Conclusion: Emerging issues for Indian hospitality and tourism businesses: How are managers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Shweta Tiwari and Gunjan M Sanjeev

Summarizes the main findings in response to the theme issue strategic question: *How are hospitality and tourism businesses in India responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?* The theme issue draws on industry-focused research to explore the challenges and possible solutions to current and pending challenges and it also provides insights for further collaborative research.