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## Adapting to the New Normal: “Restart Gujarat’s Neo Business in Tourism and Hospitality Industry: Navigating the post-COVID Era

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### ABSTRACT

*Tourism and hospitality industry play an essential role in the Indian economy. There is a significant impact of COVID-19 on India’s and Gujarat’s tourism and Hospitality Industry. This unexpected outbreak has sharply decreased the contribution of these Industries to India's GDP. The COVID-19 outbreak has affected and changed both industry's lives and increased concerns about its present and future. The study is based on 15 senior-level interviews with representatives from the hotel and tourism industries in Gujarat. The main themes that came out of the qualitative investigation were the need for multi-skilling and professional development of the workforce, increased awareness of sanitation, hygiene, and related SOPs, positivity toward industry competitors, media roles, and the need for better crisis preparedness, which were followed by provisions for set reserved funds, the adoption of technology in the future, costs and expense-related aspects, etc. This research also uses Quantitative research methodology. This study includes pre-covid and post-covid of both. Regarding neo-businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry, Gujarat has seen a rise in the adoption of digital technologies. The research critically examined critical themes in the context of the literature's existing arguments and considered the consequences for decision-makers.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Hospitality, Tourism, Industry, Themes, Qualitative, Interviews, SARS, Post Covid

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The third-largest source of foreign money for India and one of the key service industries, tourism contributes around 9.6% of the nation's GDP. It is essential for economic development, job generation, and rural change (Taqi, Ajmal, and Shamim Ansari, 2018). Due to the country's unique ecosystem, cultural and historical history, terrains, and natural beauty sites, India has a lot of tourism potential (Kinjal Parikh & Bilva Desai, 2021). One of the

more than 30 new illnesses the world has experienced over the previous 30 years, the year 2020 started with a terrifying and awful new sickness (Nkengasong, 2020). This severe acute respiratory syndrome(SARS) epidemic was called the "new coronavirus." The disease, later known as COVID-19, was an uncommon pneumonia that started in China and gradually spread to other nations across the globe. Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh are India's five most impacted coronavirus states. Kerala was the site of the country's first proven coronavirus infection, and there are still more instances as of the writing of this paper.

When talking about Gujarat, The highest statue in the world, at 182 meters(597 feet), is in Gujarat, close to Kevadiya. Gujarat's tourist attractions include Sasan Gir, the Statue of Unity, the polo forest, the Rann of Kutch, and many more. The brand ambassador for Gujarat tourism, Mr Amitabh Bachchan, has given the Kutch region a tagline: "Kutch Nahi Dekha to Kuchh Nai Dekha." As a result, the TCGL has become quite aggressive in promoting various Gujarati tourism sites (Kelasur & Manish Vyas).

Businesses like Google and Microsoft have devoted their expertise to addressing the outbreak due to the pandemic; in fact, Microsoft has built an interactive map just for monitoring COVID-19. In Gujarat, 47373461 cases were tested for covid 19, and 11047 total deaths were listed till 23/3/2023 Many tourists travel to Gujarat every year, but COVID stopped their gurneys as they approached the state. According to estimates from tour companies and travel agencies, many reservations for the Statue of Unity have been cancelled (SoU).

The number of visitors to Gir National Park has decreased by 50%. Significant temples in Gujarat were ordered to close for devotees due to COVID. One of Gujarat's top tourist destinations is the Rann of Kutch, a sizable salt desert with a distinctive environment and rich cultural traditions. Several visitors attend this prominent, vibrant cultural festival, but the celebrations in 2020 were very different from those in the past. Tourist traffic decreased by more than 50%. Because of the three Covid waves, 21.5 million individuals in the tourist business have lost their employment. Tragedies resulted from this epidemiological catastrophe for unaware tourists who wouldn't have anticipated their vacation to take such a catastrophic turn. Every time the risk of a health disaster affecting the tourism industry has been raised, research has continually brought attention to the 2002 SARS pandemic.

### **Neo Tourism**

India is a sizable market with lots of potential for travel and tourism. Recent years have seen changes in nations that promote tourism, such as India. In addition to the usual adventure travel activity, visitors participate in development initiatives. To reach out to tourist destinations where they may directly become involved with local development projects, they are using the assistance of Non-Governmental Organizations(NGOs) and Tour Operators. These NGOs raise public awareness of the assets and resources related to tourist development.

Even when air connection is available to make stopovers at some critical locations where visitors may observe and engage with locals in communities that the tour operators and local NGOs select, it is noticed that tour operations prefer to take a road journey instead. Such minute adjustments to the trip schedule have produced results. Several visitors have returned to the community to volunteer their skills or instruct the youngsters about trades like plumbing, writing, carpentry, and organic farming. Visitors contacted the Charity to conduct teaching sessions in nearby schools in Pemayangtse, Sikkim. Learning new languages, especially English, and raising local income levels are essential for enhancing community engagement and knowledge since doing so will promote more sustainable tourism (Seviset et al., 2018). According to studies, communities' livelihoods and tourism must be better linked for greater food security (Degarege & Lovelock, 2021).

In Khonoma village, Nagaland, neotourism has assisted local jobless youngsters in becoming tour guides. Tour providers may be urging locals to abandon hunting and adopt sustainable lifestyles. They are observed educating the locals about the fundamental tourist

laws(Ravi Teja,2013). Several businesses that aid and encourage indigenous tourism are unaware of the Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs). Yet, several Goals are reflected in their operations(Scheyvens et al., 2021). Women's empowerment through tourism can completely mediate the link between social empowerment and long-term, sustainable tourist growth(STD). Due to their psychological and political affluence but lack of social capital, their participation in planning and execution procedures utilising tourism might help promote gender parity (Elshaer et al., 2021).

## 2. OBJECTIVES

- Tourist's knowledge about neo tourism.
- To research visitor preferences across various demographic factors.
- To determine a person's interest in travelling.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Neo Tourism

Gujarat is a state in western India with a rich cultural and historical heritage and natural and architectural attractions that draw tourists from all over the world. Gujarat's tourism and hospitality industry has been growing in recent years, with the state government promoting various initiatives to attract more visitors and investments. The state is also home to numerous wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, and beach resorts that offer a range of adventure and relaxation activities. The hospitality industry in Gujarat has been expanding to accommodate the increasing number of tourists. The state has a diverse range of hotels, resorts, homestays, and guesthouses that cater to different budget levels and preferences. The government has also launched initiatives to promote sustainable tourism, such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and rural tourism, which create opportunities for local communities and small businesses.

Regarding neo-businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry, Gujarat has seen a rise in the adoption of digital technologies by tourism and hospitality businesses, such as online booking platforms, mobile apps, and social media marketing. This has enabled small businesses to reach a wider audience and compete with established players in the market. Additionally, there has been a growing trend of startups and entrepreneurs entering the tourism and hospitality sector, developing innovative products and services to cater to changing consumer demands. Overall, Gujarat's tourism and hospitality industry has excellent potential for growth and innovation, with the state government and private players working together to create a sustainable and diverse ecosystem for visitors and businesses alike.

### The COVID-19 Pandemic

According to epidemiological statistics, the pandemic was connected to a seafood market in Wuhan, a city in China's Hubei province (Wu et al.,2020; Xu et al.,2020). Although the first instance was only discovered on December 12th, 2019, the virus infected around 2000 persons in China by the end of the month in January 2020 (Wu et al., 2020). The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or COVID-19, and the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) belong to the same family of viruses (Usher, Durkin & Bhullar,2020). The seafood market in Wuhan is where the zoonotic transmission most likely began, swiftly spreading to other countries. One may claim that the coronavirus's capacity for human-to-human communication made this possible (Bai, 2020; Liu, 2020; Gautam & Trivedi, 2020). The death toll and the demise of major economies are expected to impact the world economy significantly.

Gujarat was not under lockdown while this study was being put together. This research has been written after COVID. With a population of 1.3 billion people at the time of lockdown, attempts to impose lockdown have brought social, economic, and political difficulties to light. 1.42 billion people are currently trying to revive Gujarat's and India's economies gently but steadily post-COVID.

## Tourism and Hospitality Industry

The word "tourism" describes a sophisticated psychological activity (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010) and SARS's impacts are primarily psychological (Wen, Huimin & Kavanaugh, 2005). Many studies on the consequences of SARS on hospitality and tourism have been released (refer to Table 1). The main concerns are briefly discussed here, and considering current health outbreaks, readers are invited to study the tabulated research in the hotel and tourism sector. The hotel and tourist businesses have been significantly impacted by the worldwide COVID-19 issue (Vineet Kumar, 2020).

The loss of work has been the coronavirus outbreak's second-largest effect after its toll on health in India. Until the March 25th closure, 5500000 jobs were lost in India's hospitality and tourist sectors due to the coronavirus-led lockdown (Industry estimates).

This required boosting hospital health care, enhancing restaurant hygiene, encouraging physical activity, eliminating spitting to keep the environment clean, and encouraging physical exercise (Dombey, 2004). In January and February, the number of visitors to Gujarat's Statue of Unity plummeted by more than 38%, and the amount of money gathered decreased by almost five crores. Going ahead, the tourism and hospitality industries will be curious to resume operations under normal circumstances without worrying about the spread of an epidemic.

Table 1 summarizes a few selected papers that might act as a roadmap for further research.

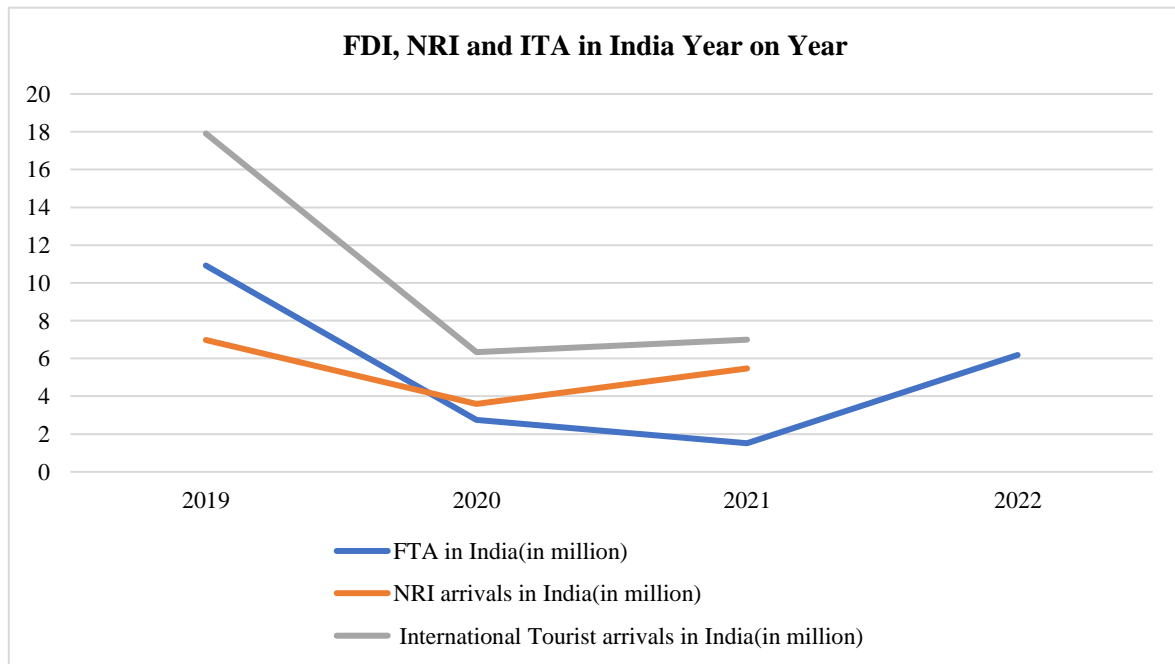
**Table 1: Review summary of relevant studies**

Authors	Crisis	Focus	Key Finding/Issue	Location
Henderson & Ng, 2004	SARS	SARS's effects on Singapore's hotel industry	Crisis stages were categorised, and actionable advice was offered.	Singapore
Kim, Chun & Li, 2005	SARS	SARS's effects on South Korea's hotel industry	Highlighted participation during slow business, fast disaster reaction, and proactive preparedness.	South Korea
Wen, Huimin & Kavanaugh, 2005	SARS	SARS's impact on Chinese tourism	An empirical analysis employing a sample from many Chinese sites looked at the impact of SARS on travel behaviour.	China
Gruman, Chhinzer & Smith, 2011	Various Health Crises	Canadian Disaster Preparedness	Highlighted weaknesses in the ability to anticipate and respond to disasters.	Canada
AlBattat & MatSom, 2014	Various Health Crises	Malaysia's hotel business is preparing for calamities and recovering from them.	The catastrophic life cycle indicates that planning is more reactive than proactive.	Malaysia
Min, Lim & Kung, 2011	SARS	SARS's impact on Japanese travel to Taiwan	Time Series intervention modelling supported a considerable decline in Japanese travel to Taiwan for roughly a year.	Taiwan
Smith & Goss, 1993	AIDS	Employees in the hotel and catering sectors sense an AIDS threat.	The lack of understanding about AIDS is responsible for increased risk perception, anxiety, and socially unacceptable behaviour.	UK
Yap & Ineson, 2009	AIDS	HIV-positive workers' circumstances in Asian hospitality	Concerns and expectations from triangulation research on hiring and managing HIV-positive employees in the hospitality sector	Select Asian Countries
Maximiliano, 2010	Swine Flu	Function of the media during the Buenos Aires swine flu epidemic	We looked at a few short newspaper pieces to analyse how the media covered the swine flu epidemic.	Buenos Aires

**4. METHODOLOGY, DATA & FINDINGS**

**Research Methodology**

The current investigation considers an outbreak still expanding while it is being carried out. While the situation is developing and worsening, nothing is known about this catastrophe. Qualitative techniques might offer vital insights when more contemporary concerns require expanding understanding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the circumstances, a qualitative research strategy was judged appropriate, and email interviews were selected as the primary data collection method. Email interviews are increasingly used in qualitative research, and for the current investigation, using email interviews appeared most appropriate given the present context, which commonly uses social distance. With this data collection, the interview questions may be attached to emails or included in a separate document (Burns, 2010). Email interviews are reported to be more cost-effective than phone or in-person interviews while still having the potential to elicit thorough responses from participants (Ratislavová & Ratislav,2014). The current research used judgmental sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, due to the small sample size. While utilising critical pieces, the researchers must choose which demographic segments to include based on how well the samples represent the community of interest (Malhotra & Birks,2007). Initially,42 participants were asked to participate in the study. Fifteen of the individuals that were contacted consented to participate in the study. The participants were in senior positions and frequently preoccupied with other duties. Hence, the aim was to reduce reaction times. To avoid these delays, a few follow-ups were made here and there. The responses were entered into a word processor and Excel spreadsheets to undertake content analysis. The participant profiles are summarised in Table 2.



**Fig 2: FDO, NRI & ITA distribution**  
 Source: - Bureau of Immigration, Govt. of India

**Fig 2: No. of Foreign Tourist Arrivals in India**

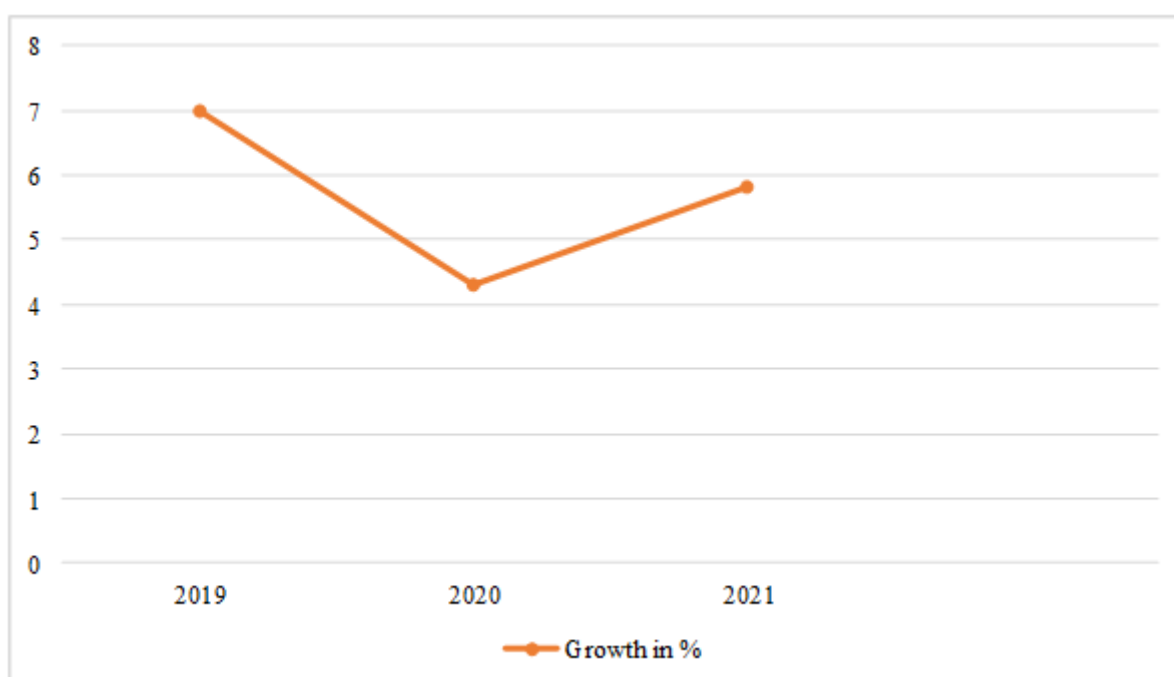
Years	FTA in India (in Million)	Percentage (%) change over the previous year	NRI arrivals in India (In million)	Percentage (%) change over the previous year	International Tourist arrivals in India (in Million)	Percentage (%) change over the previous year
2019	10.93	3.5	6.98	1.7	17.91	2.8
2020	2.74	(74.9)	3.59	(48.6)	6.33	(64.7)
2021	1.52	(44.5)	5.48	52.6	7.00	10.6
2022	6.19	307.2				

### Explanation

The Indian government is working to boost international travel to the country. According to the study's above data, the FTA in India was 10.93 million, and due to COVID-19, it rapidly declined in 2020 by 74.9%. Then, as COVID instances reduced and more people received vaccinations, individuals began to lead new lives and preferred visiting tourist attractions, as seen by 2021. People began to live everyday lives after COVID-19, so the FDA increased in 2022 to reach 6.19 million. Regarding NRI and foreign visitor arrivals, COVID-19, which displays statistics for the year 2020, also has an influence.

**Fig 3. Contribution of the travel and tourism sector to the GDP of India from 2019 to 2021**

Year	Contribution percentage (%)
2019	7
2020	4.3
2021	5.8



### Explanation

The travel and tourism industry is one of the most significant service sectors in India's GDP. The travel and tourism industry contributed 7% of India's GDP in 2019 but fell precipitously to 4.3% in 2020 due to COVID-19. It was increased by 1.5% while discussing post-COVID due to the almost normal state.

Just 13% of respondents know what Neo Tourism is, but 22% had visited a Neo Tourism-related tourism destination created or maintained by NGOs, locals, tour operators, hotels, or resorts.

Do you understand what neo-tourism is?	Frequency	Percent
No	46	77.9
Yes	13	22.1
Have you ever visited a tourist attraction created or maintained by NGOs, locals, tour guides, hotels, or resorts?		
Have No Idea	15	25.4
No	22	37.3
Yes	22	37.3

**Table 2 Participants Profile**

Participant	Organisational Designation/ Department	Organization Category/ Type	Participants age (in Years)	Total Experience (In Years)	Experience In Current Organisation (In Years)	State/ Region
P1	Food and beverage production by an Indian Master Chef	5-Star Delux Hotel	35	12	5	Sasan Gir
P2	Assistant to the Executive	3-star hotel	40	15	10	Statue of Unity
	Management of food and drink	5-star deluxe hotel	35	10	5	Rann of kutch
P3	Associate Sales Director	4-star hotel	45	20	15	Polo Forest
P4	Manager of General	3-star hotel	44	19	10	Mount Abu
P5	General Manager, in addition	5-Star Delux Hotel	45	20	11	Gir Somnath
P6	Manager of Food and Drink	5-star deluxe star hotel	45	20	12	Dwarka
P7	Head of Food and Beverage	4-star hotel	44	19	15	Porbandar
P8	Sector Director	3-star hotel	30	5	5	Dwarka
P9	Admin Housekeeper	5 Star deluxe hotel	35	10	9	Porbandar
P10	Manager of General	3-star hotel	40	15	10	Polo forest
P11	Manager of the Rooms Division	4-star hotel	45	20	15	Rann of Kutch
P12	Sector Director	3-star hotel	30	5	5	Dwarka
P13	Admin Housekeeper	5 Star deluxe hotel	35	10	9	Porbandar
P14	Manager of General	3-star hotel	40	15	10	Polo forest
P15	Manager of the Rooms Division	4-star hotel	45	20	15	Rann of Kutch

### Discussion and Implications

The email interviews' open-ended questions led to various themes, which content analysis was used to examine. The research used Mazaheri et al. (2013) and Thyme, Wiberg, Lundman, and Graneheim (2013) to identify essential lessons. Throughout the study, it was discovered that several answers shared trends across other topics, including multi-skilling, technology adoption, planning, and money management.

**Table 3**

Emergent Themes ↓ Broad Queries →	Key Challenges	Industry Learning	Governments' learning	Future Consumption behaviour	Media Response & Responsibility	Workforce Continuation & Redundancy	Expected Industry Policy Changes	Way Ahead for prospective employees	Total
Career progression and multi-skilling		3				4	1	2	10
Sanitation requirements, hygiene requirements,	1	2	1	3	2	1		2	12

and hygiene SOPs									
Wishing/Waiting for a Resurrection		3						9	12
Using media to raise awareness and support actions			2		10				12
Crisis management planning		4	3					3	10
Cash Reserves and Crisis Funding		6	1	1			1		9
technological adoption, digitalisation, and AI		2		1			1		4
Fixed costs and expenditures	9								9
Motivation & Workplace Engagement	3	2							5
Reduced demand, excursions, gatherings, and travel	3			5					8
probable job cuts, contract work, or salary reductions						6	1		7
Unrestricted Cash Flow and Consistent Revenues	5	2							7
Occupational safety and health	3						2		5
Budgetary considerations, tax advantages, and rebates		1	4						5
In the future, short-haul domestic travel will surpass long-haul international travel.	1			2				1	4
security and welfare of visitors	1			1			1		3
judicious expenditure and cost control		2							2
Adaptability		1					1		2
Population Control			3						3
analyses the market		2							2
Leadership		1							1
many/different career paths						1			1
Packaging sensitivity/reduced outdoor eating				2					2

The most prevalent topic that emerged from the experts' replies to the current situation was connected to the employees' talents. This was seen from how they saw the crisis' most important lessons, where multi-skilling was considered a viable remedy to reduce layoffs and long-term employee retention. Whether referring to consumer behaviour or business, cleanliness and sanitation repeatedly appeared in the comments. A recent article in the *Lancet* (Lodder & Husman, 2020) reveals the potential existence of SARS-CoV-2 in human wastewater. If not correctly handled, the severity of this issue becomes even more significant. Particularly in replies about workforce development, the concept of preserving optimism and a belief in recovery persisted. Reduced demand and revenue are apparent effects of COVID-19's unprecedented challenge to all industries. It is evident from the comments that business executives did not hold back on highlighting human resilience and maintaining optimism about the ultimate recovery while comforting those who have or want to seek employment in the sector. Participants' thoughts on how the media has covered the continuing epidemic have been seen differently. While some complimented the Indian media for raising awareness of the COVID-19 epidemic, others said it could have been more objective.

Participants felt that the media might assist in lessening the epidemic's effects by spreading awareness, teaching people about sanitation and hygiene, and fostering audience confidence. Making a strategy to handle unforeseen and unplanned situations is part of crisis management. Effective crisis management depends on quick and efficient team coordination. According to the industry, training, and government viewpoints, the study emphasised the significance of crisis preparedness and management. According to Gössling, Scott, and Hall (2020), COVID-19 will harm the industry, resulting in a significant loss of employment and a diminished GDP contribution.

Participants in the survey acknowledged that managing contingency funds is a crucial industry duty and skill to develop in front of such occurrences. A focus on using technology to



create virtual ties and lessen actual interaction among people was made particularly by educators. Also, it was advised that the sector adopt robots and artificial intelligence, consistent with earlier academic recommendations (Yang, Henthorne & George,2020; Webster & Ivanov, 2020; Ivanov & Webster,2018). Robotics will likely be used more frequently in various tourist and hospitality tasks, including guiding, cleaning kitchens, airports, hotels, and deliveries (Ivanov & Webster,2017). Industry experts also discussed managing fixed expenses in the face of persistent company losses. The participants' reactions in this situation suggested that their firms faced comparable problems. For instance, Participant P1 pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been deemed a global disaster, has caused a worldwide crisis, with the hotel industry perhaps suffering more effects than those of 9/11, SARS, and the 2008 financial crisis. Managing fixed expenditures, payroll, employee morale, and cash flow are among the main problems many firms are currently confronting.

In a similar vein, Participant P14 brought out the difficulty in managing working capital due to the lengthy payment cycle of the hotel business, except for weddings. While there is little room to reduce fixed expenses due to reduced revenue, Participant P5 proposed taking cost-cutting initiatives wherever possible. These observations show that business experts know the constant challenge of operating a corporation while paying monthly costs. The tourist and hospitality industries are also familiar with demand changes, such as seasonal crises that may lead to slack periods. Because cost-cutting measures like layoffs may result in higher costs for rehiring once the industry recovers, employees and employers need to increase their competencies to get through hard times. Employee retention is viewed as less expensive than firing workers, particularly in the Indian environment where cutting staff is not the most desirable course of action. Industry professionals have offered insightful commentary on the subject. Participant P9, one of the specialists, talked about the potential for latent redundancy among hotel staff. Based on the losses they have experienced and potential future market conditions, the expert predicts that enterprises will need to modify their business models after COVID-19. Although decreasing the workforce is possible, more astute businesses will discover ways to repurpose their current staff members into new positions that better suit their needs. The subject matter expert emphasised that people should be at the centre of all efforts because hospitality is about human interactions.

In the hotel industry, establishing a work-life balance is crucial, and Participant P9 emphasised the necessity to stick with this strategy even after things return to normal. The hospitality sector should continue to prioritise issues like sick days, rising labour costs, and company continuity. It should also consider offering employees paid time off so they don't have to put in lengthy hours. The industry mainly relies on social contacts, so it must be ready for difficult times. The paper stresses the importance of using this pandemic as a wake-up call. It emphasises other crucial elements, including altered eating and travelling patterns, prudent spending, adaptability, market research, leadership, and demographic concerns to prepare the sector and stakeholders.

## **Post COVID**

### **Neo Tourism**

- Customers will prioritise natural-based tourism.
- Shoppers will choose hygiene as the top concern.
- Flexible terms of service are required.

### **Tourism and Hospitality Industry**

The tourism and hospitality industries are progressively recovering after the COVID-19 period. Less than a lakh fewer visitors entered India up to May 2021 compared to the same time last year, a severe impact on the country's tourism business caused by the devastating second wave of COVID-19.

The government hoped for a complete recovery in international tourist arrivals by December 2022, when the number of foreign visitors doubled to 6.19 MN but was 43% lower than in 2019.

Gujarat is luring more tourists by gradually expanding its tourism business, but the safety and well-being of visitors and locals are the top priorities. Were closed during the pandemic, but following COVID, all significant temples in Gujarat reopened to pilgrims, including Somnath, Dakor, Pavagadh, Dawarka, and Shamlaji, starting on June 11th, 2021, when Ambaji Temple reopened after a day.

Since the pandemic, more people are travelling within Gujarat to short-haul destinations at a derivable distance, according to Manish Sharma, chairman of the Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI) Gujarat. The demand for Somnath and Dwarka pilgrimage visits during Gujarati holidays is high. The Union territories of Diu, Daman, and Nagar Haveli are another popular destination. According to members of the tourist business, reservations for the resorts in the Gir Forest, Saputara, the tent city near the Statue of Unity, and Rannotsav, which begins on November 1st, are doing reasonably well. People frequently choose Junagadh, Sasan, Somnath, Dwarka, and Kutch as their top vacation spots during the Diwali festival holidays. Both Dwarka and Mandvi are now well-known tourist destinations. In fact, according to tour organisers, hotel rates have skyrocketed because of the strong demand. Travel agent Sanjay Mehta from Rajkot stated, "In Kutch, bookings for Rannotsav and Mandvi beach are strong. Bookings are over 70–80% filled, and hotel rates have tripled." "The tourist inflow has increased over the last few months at our hotel," said Saragam Gupta, chief managing director of BRG Group, which owns a 143-room hotel next to the Statue of Unity (SoU). Not even one room has been emptying for several days. After the second wave subsided, people began making hotel reservations, and tourism increased.

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