

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE HOST COMMUNITIES OF ROHTAK, HARYANA AND DURGAPUR, WEST BENGAL

***Armaan Bruno¹, Manu Ghanghas² and Sanjay Kumar³**

¹Doctoral Research Scholar, Toulouse School of Management, France, ²PhD Student, Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak, ³Assistant Lecturer, State Institute of Hotel Management, Durgapur
armaan.bruno1993@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: *The ongoing pandemic has caused severe crisis in the hospitality sector with millions of people forced to stay home and under quarantine to stop the spread of contagion. The following paper aims to highlight the problems and difficulties faced by the hospitality sector and the host communities in particular due to the mandatory nation-wide lockdown owing to COVID-19 pandemic.* **Objective:** *The purpose of the study was to analyse and highlight the common characteristics of the host community towards the stranded international and domestic travellers while catering and accommodating them owing to local authorities' obligatory lockdown along with the forced shutdown of hotels and large commercial establishments in Rohtak and Durgapur.* **Methodology:** *The geographical area of the research and data collection was limited to the city of Rohtak in Haryana and Durgapur in the state of West Bengal. Population of the study is limited to the region of Rohtak and Durgapur. The number of participants or respondents were 42. The paper is exploratory in design and follows a qualitative methodological approach. The data was collected with the help of an online self-report questionnaire.* **Results:** *Over a period of 95 days, the interviews of hosts and tourists were conducted. The content analysis revealed eight themes in all the recorded interviews. A majority of tourists and host communities were impacted by the pandemic in psychological aspects by 35.7%, followed by accommodation and protocols by 33.3% each.* **Conclusion:** *There have been various studies that have been conducted in the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic but not many of them have highlighted the importance of host communities which are an indispensable part of our society as well as the hospitality sector.*

Key Words: *COVID-19, Pandemic, Host Community, Lockdown*

INTRODUCTION

An infectious disease with symptoms very similar to that of Pneumonia was reported for the first time in the Chinese city of Wuhan located in the province of Hubei on the new year's eve of December 31st 2019. The infection was later termed as the novel corona virus and the disease as COVID-19. It has its roots and is similar to the previous South Asian Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), hence is termed as SARS CoV-2. The ongoing global health crisis has posed a great threat to the growth of the hospitality sector all across the planet. This has led to some of the greatest economies in the world to collapse within a short period of time. Since the outbreak of the contagion in the country in the beginning of the month of March, The Government of India imposed travel restrictions to almost all the countries to curb the spread of infection. In order to stop it locally, the government imposed a strict lockdown all across the nation. This led to an economic crisis in the country and undesirable deaths among the migrant population from different states. The pandemic has created an extraordinary crisis in the hospitality and tourism industry. As of January 25, 2021, there have been over 100 million confirmed reported cases of the novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2) with over 2 million deaths (Roser et al., 2020).

The beginning of the new century saw as many as 30 novel coronaviruses being emerged since 2000 (Nkengasong, 2020). The infection quickly spread from China to different parts of the world including India where it was even more contagious and deadly. The earlier SARS outbreak in the year 2002 was also very contagious which led to travel restrictions all across the globe. The present situation is not different from the previous one and the restrictions for travel in force have revealed how vulnerable is the travel and hospitality sector (De Sausmarez, 2004; Zhang et al., 2020). Most of the travellers were horrified and scared because of the experience they had as they never had such an encounter earlier. The first case of the infection was reported in the country on the 7th of March, 2020. The patients suffering with the viral infection show symptoms such as cough, fever, headache and rarely an organ failure (Pine et al., 2020). The World Health Organisation on January 31st 2020, declared the disease as a pandemic and declared it as an international health emergency. The global hospitality and tourism industry sector is solely based and dependent on tourists because if there are no tourists, the commercial accommodation establishments will have nobody to cater to. The restrictions placed on travel and introducing the closure of borders from state

and national authorities lead to spread of fear as well which in turn placed great challenges and hardship to the hospitality and tourism sectors (Gössling et al., 2020).

A host community is a group of individuals who are like-minded and share a common objective of helping the travellers in need. They may belong to same geographical location, community, class or ethnic background. This community provides support services to the tourism sector is often engaged in the management as well. The evidence has shown that the outbreak has some sort of association with the local seafood marketplace in the city of Wuhan, China located in the province of Hubei (Wu et al., 2020). From here the infection spread to different parts of the country and then to the whole world. The infection is highly contagious because it spreads rapidly with the help of transmission due to the movement among the human population where human beings are the probable carriers of the virus (Gautam and Trivedi, 2020). Previous findings from Bruno et al. (2020) revealed that a majority of tourists and travellers get impacted because of the psychological and emotional difficulties they face while travelling and staying in an accommodation during the times of pandemic. Travelling is considered to be an intricate conceptual process (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010) and the impact of SARS is predominantly self- induced in nature (Wen et al., 2005). The previous studies regarding the effect of pandemic on the hospitality industry has shown that the consequences are severe where the management and staff were told to take leaves and go on layoff for an indefinite period of time with employees having contractual employment were terminated with immediate effect. The public sector banks had to intervene in order to defer payments for loan so that the salaries of the staff shall be paid (Pine and McKercher, 2004).

As the pandemic evolved and grew fatal over time, the travel behaviour of the people started to change. Governments across the planet started to introduce measures to restrict travel domestically and internationally. A study from Chen et al. (2007) mentioned that the hotels in Taiwan were performing very bad on the basis of their financial performance which led to panic among the shareholders and led to a fragile business. The Chinese hospitality industry and the economy as well was hit hard as they had to introduce several new measures and changes to combat the effects of pandemic (Dombey, 2004). This leads to an increase in the levels of hygiene in place serving food, enhancing measures for sanitation to reduce the infection if not stop it and introducing social distancing. The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) introduced a framework which consisted of 4 Rs namely readiness, recovery,

responses and reduction (Jauhari et al., 2009). Recently a study by Alonso et al. (2020) tried to highlight the problem faced by not so big enterprises in the hospitality sector that faced several issues during the current crisis and developed a framework that consists of nine hypothetical dimensions which shows the measures taken by various stakeholders from the industry on managing the pandemic. The accommodation providers have given full support to the travellers who got stuck and had to stay in quarantine and also to the health care workers who are involved in treating the infected patients (travellers).

The effects of the pandemic on the hospitality and tourism sector in India are getting more serious because of the ongoing layoffs and people losing jobs as a result of the pandemic. The rate of unemployment in the hospitality sector is rising at an exponential with some estimates keeping it around 38 million lost jobs (Radhakrishna, 2020). It is equivalent to 70% of the total workforce of the industry. The Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism and Hospitality (FAITH) has projected that the industry will lose anywhere between US\$ 68 billion to US\$ 130 billion (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2020). The effects of the pandemic can be seen on inbound and outbound tourism as the numbers are continuing to dip even though the pandemic began almost a year ago. In order to curb the effects of the pandemic, the host communities need to completely understand the ongoing situation to think of post-pandemic preparation even though it will not be soon as hundreds of thousands of cases are reported on a daily basis all across the globe. Under the National Disaster Management Act, the government of India has special powers and have invoked different multi-layered approaches while further collaborating with state authorities to tackle the pandemic (Iyer et al., 2020). Apart from the lockdowns that were introduced by the government in the beginning of March, society and individuals have been asked to maintain physical distancing, practice and maintain hygiene standards and to avoid unnecessary gatherings (Sharma, 2020). The government in a bid to put the economy on track and to revive tourism sector introduced check-ins at various with relevant negative test reports and encouraged people for a minimum days stay at accommodation units (Traveller, 2020).

Norris et al. (2008) mentioned that there is a need for people to display an adaptive behaviour towards the ongoing global health crisis as people have not seen something like this in a long time. This will help the people to prepare themselves physically and mentally because the pandemic is not going to fade away and it is there to stay for a long time. The ongoing pandemic has helped the decisions makers in a big way. Unlike before as a result the current

situation has helped them in retrieving the momentum they had lost in previous occasion (Kim, 2020). The host communities should emphasise and focus on how they can comply with COVID-19 safety measures while at the same time maintaining safety standard and hygiene protocols (Hu et al., 2020). Their studies mentioned a four-step process consisting of health awareness, apparent utility level, adaptable behaviour and COVID-19 integration. Bai et al.(2020) used a dynamic stochastic general equilibrium model to assess the consequence of pandemic on the tourism industry.

The significance of the study is to analyse and highlight the common characteristics of the host community towards the stranded international and domestic travelers while catering and accommodating them owing to local authorities' obligatory lockdown along with the forced shutdown of hotels and large commercial establishments in districts of Rohtak and Durgapur. Thus, the objectives of the study were-

- To analyse the factors affecting host communities regarding hospitality services amidst COVID-19.
- To explore the problems faced by host communities in implementation of COVID-19 related guidelines.
- To study the role of host communities in Indian hospitality sector during COVID-19.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The study is an amalgamation of descriptive and exploratory research. The purpose of the study is to analyse and highlight the common characteristics of the host community towards the stranded international and domestic travellers while catering and accommodating them owing to local authorities' obligatory lockdown along with the forced shutdown of hotels and large commercial establishments in Rohtak and Durgapur.

Locale: Rohtak and Durgapur.

Sampling Design: A simple random sampling technique was used to collect the data. This type of sampling technique is used because it is free from bias and the sampling technique consists of 'n' number of individuals from the selected sample size where each individual has an equal opportunity or probability to be picked (Cochran, 2007). Population of the study is limited to the region of Rohtak and Durgapur. The number of respondents (hosts) were 42

(n=42). The sample included 31 male respondents and 11 female respondents. All the respondents were adults between the age of 30 and 65 years.

Tools and Technique: The primary source of data collection in this study is with the help of an online questionnaire. The secondary source of data collection consists of literature that is already available. Therefore, both the sources of data collection (primary and secondary) were significant for the given study along with the incorporation of different ideas, theories and practical knowledge from the real world. The paper is exploratory in design and follows a qualitative methodological approach. The data was collected with the help of an online self-report questionnaire designed with the help of Google forms. The structured questionnaires provide the respondents with a freedom to express their opinions and experiences (Alvesson and Sköldbäck, 2008). Each respondent was asked to fill the questionnaire that consisted of 10 questions.

Fox and Bayat (2008) described the population as a set of elements that consists of people, individuals, groups and actions that form the basis for the sample so as to qualify for the population. The results of the questionnaire were collected between September 11 and December 14, 2020. The study is cross-sectional in nature which means that the data is collected at one single moment. The establishments and host communities were contacted through email and telephone and the questionnaire were sent electronically.

Data and Statistical Analysis: Responses were coded using a codebook (Table 1). The coding process was followed by sentiment identification (Positive, Neutral and Negative). Later the inter-coded reliability was checked. The raters were not part of the coding process. A mutual agreement of 94% for the coding process was recognized suitable for this study. The results of the data collected were compiled in the form of a codebook which is formulated as under in table 1.

Table 1: Codebook

S. No.	Code	Definition
1	Motivation	Rationale behind serving tourists amid pandemic.
2	Accommodation	Level of facilities provided to the tourists.
3	Protocols	Guidelines followed while accepting tourists.
4	Food	Quality of food provided to the tourists.
5	Psychological Impact	The effect of COVID-19 on the psychology of tourists during their stay.
6	Aid	Level of assistance provided by the local government to the hosts.
7	Challenges	The issues faced by the host communities while serving the tourists.
8	Relationship	The levels of connection established between hosts and tourists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over a period of 95 days, the interviews of hosts and tourists were conducted. The content analysis revealed eight themes in all the recorded interviews. A majority of tourists and host

communities were impacted by the pandemic in psychological aspects by 35.7%, followed by accommodation and protocols by 23.8% each (Table 2).

Table 2: Content and sentiment analysis

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Motivation	5	11.9
Positive	5	100
Neutral	0	0
Negative	0	0
Accommodation	10	23.8
Positive	5	50
Neutral	5	50
Negative	0	0
Protocols	10	23.8
Positive	8	80
Neutral	2	20
Negative	0	0
Food	5	11.9
Positive	2	40
Neutral	3	60
Negative	0	0

Psychological Impact	15	35.7
Positive	5	33.3
Neutral	2	13.3
Negative	8	53.33
Aid	3	7.14
Positive	2	66.66
Neutral	0	0
Negative	1	33.33
Challenges	3	7.14
Positive	1	33.33
Neutral	0	0
Negative	2	66.66
Relationship	1	2.38
Positive	1	100
Neutral	0	0
Negative	0	0
Total	42	100

The ongoing pandemic has impacted the host communities and tourists and due to this the problems like emotional burnout and anxiety are causing people to experience the initial stages of depression. Furthermore, the in-depth analysis of responses revealed that 53.33

percent of the psychologically related responses (n=8) were revealing a negative scenario, whereas 33.3 percent (n=5) responses were showing positive impact.

According to several articles published in international journals, one of the most impacted sectors is the hospitality sector (Nicola et al., 2020). Due to the implementation of nationwide lockdown, tourists were left in despair and this invariably created negative sentiments towards Indian hospitality industry.

One of the most appreciated themes was that of motivation. The host communities under study have shown the positive intent of 100 per cent (n=5) in terms of providing food and shelter to the tourists during this pandemic. This theme was special as this emphasize the humanitarian aspect of the host communities, thus, we all want to highlight the importance of this theme in a rather auspicious way.

The two other important themes are accommodation and protocols. The kind of facilities provided by the host communities have gained positive sentiment of 50 per cent (n=5) and neutral sentiment of 50 per cent (n=5). In addition to accommodation, another theme which got the majority of positive sentiments is “protocols”, these are the guidelines followed by the host communities while accepting the tourists in their facilities. Around 80 per cent (n=8) of the responses were found to be positive towards this theme.

In addition, the two other themes were: aid and relationship. The aid theme deals with the critical analysis of the support provided to the host communities by the local government in form of financial and other materialistic aspects. The support by local government have indicated the positive sentiment of 66.6 percent (n=2) and negative sentiment of 33.3 percent (n=1). The relationship theme highlighted the level of resonance among the tourists and the host communities. This theme gained the positive sentiment of 100 percent (n=1).

The Food theme has dealt with the most essential aspect of human survival and that is nourishment. This theme was divided into three segments, first is basic meals which included rice, dal, chapatti etc. Second segment was exotic dishes, these have food items like: pizza, pasta and so on. The last segment was balanced meals. These segments helped in evaluation of nutritional aspects of tourists daily ingestions. This theme gained the positive sentiment of 40 percent (n=2) and negative sentiment of 60percent (n=3).

Moreover, the most critical theme was “challenges”. This theme was essential to enlist the dimensions which were daunting for the host communities. This included subjects like, financial loss, emotional burnout, and sanitation and hygiene issues. All these issues were studied in detail with intent of grasping the zeal of the host communities. The hardships faced by the host communities have gained the positive sentiment of 33.3 percent (n=2) and negative sentiment of 66.6percent (n=3).

These themes have clearly highlighted the intricacies of the services provided by the host communities during the ongoing pandemic. Furthermore, the essence of Indian hospitality was reflected in the findings of this study. It is thus inferred that despite the terror of COVID-19 virus the vigour of host communities have kept the humanitarian values intact.

CONCLUSION

Various themes revealed by this paper have projected the impact of COVID-19 on the relationship of host communities and the tourists. This study revealed three major concerns of host communities while serving the tourists during lockdown, these are human psychology, robust guidelines to curtail spread of virus and quality of accommodation provided to the tourists. Out of these human psychology remained the focal point for the authors. Further, it was found in the responses that hospitality providers were juggling between human trait of survival instinct and generosity. Furthermore, the most satisfying theme revealed out of this study was “Motivation”, this is so because as we all are striving to fulfil our needs and ambitions, and there are people in among us who are serving the humanity in its true essence. The nationwide lockdown presented unprecedented challenges to the host communities in terms of resource availability, hygiene and sanitation. Despite of all the hurdles, the local hospitality providers have kept their humanity intact and provided vital support to the stranded tourist during lockdown. In addition, stringent guidelines were followed by the host communities in order to curtail the impact of COVID-19 virus. This pandemic has tested the human race in terms of resilience, passion, devotion and equanimity. Thus, it is imperative from the this study that local host communities of Rohtak, Haryana and Durgapur, West Bengal had done their level best to hold on to the theme of Indian culture, which is “*Atithidevo Bhava*”.

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