

Assessing the Effects of COVID-19 on Hospitality and Tourism Employment

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality and tourism industry is one of the biggest contributors to the GDP and employment in India, but like many service sectors, they are significantly vulnerable to global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines the impact of COVID-19 on India's hospitality and tourism industry using secondary data collected from government reports, academic papers and credible industrial sources. It reports a steep decline in tourist arrivals, causing massive revenue losses and significant job disruption for 14.5-40 million workers. The most affected sub-sectors included hotels, aviation and travel services that were faced with operational and financial challenges. The recovery has been uneven. Domestic tourism has rebounded quickly than international travel. Government initiatives such as Dekho Apna Desh and skilling programs have played a significant role in stimulating demand and supporting the hospitality and tourism development. This study highlights the importance of the need for sustainable recovery strategies focused on workforce re-skilling strategies, investment in infrastructure, and data-driven policy planning to help build resilience within the sector. This study adds value to the existing literature around post-pandemic tourism recovery and provides a basis for future field-based research and policy.

Keywords: Hospitality, Tourism Industry, COVID-19, GDP, Employment, Aviation Industry, Dekho Apna Desh

INTRODUCTION

The green economy has a strong reliance on the hotel and tourism sectors as a path towards sustainable development (Pan et al., 2018). It has been the most significant and dynamic segment of the world economy in recent years. The tourism and hospitality sector plays an important role in supporting economic growth and employment in India. During 2019, the tourism and hospitality sector accounted for 10.3% of the global GDP and 330 million jobs (Balan, 2021). However, the hospitality and tourism industry remains susceptible to various crises, including pandemics, armed conflict and environmental risks. The primary forms of crises that negatively affect the hospitality and tourism industry include armed conflict, environmental risks and pollution, and pandemics. Furthermore, Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) state that pandemics hinder both demand (mobility and consumer confidence) and supply (closure of facilities and services), thereby inducing widespread instability.

As a result, it is difficult to predict the direction of the tourism sector over the aforementioned timeframe. Author Toubes (2021) states, "somewhat of an early phase and marketing plan on tourism products that align with the new standards," attributed specifically to COVID-19, is certainly necessary. The reason is that those standards have both changed and emerged. This supports the need for more extensive research that concentrates on the effects, changes, and understanding of the phenomena.

COVID-19 led to a decline in world GDP of 5.2% in 2020 (Khan et al., 2021), severely impacting India's

tourism and hospitality sector. Travel bans, lockdowns, and restrictions resulted in substantial revenue losses, reduced visitation, and job losses. The hotel and tourism sector in countries such as India has suffered during this pandemic. To keep the spread to a minimum, many hospitality institutions were fully closed for a period. Lockdowns, conducting business while maintaining social distancing, house orders, travel bans, and travel restrictions. Also, there was a drastic decrease in demand for businesses that were authorized to remain open. COVID-19's effect on the hospitality and tourism industry is summarized as "uncertainty and chaos."

India, similar to other developing countries, is heavily dependent on the hospitality and tourism sector for sustainable economic development. As referenced in The Times of India (2025), in 2019, the sector contributed \$194 billion to India's GDP, ranking 10th in the world. However, by the middle of 2020, foreign tourist arrivals had dropped to almost zero. India ranked 10th out of 185 economies for travel and tourism spend in 2019, and the sector contributed \$194 billion in GDP to the economy. The decision for lockdown level in India, March 25, 2020 - May 31, 2020, worsened the situation with an attendant steep decline in foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs): 50% in January-February, a 70% decline in March, and almost 0% in the April to June period.

The pandemic brought a major blow to the sector with a projected loss of INR 1.25 trillion in 2020. This represents a 40% drop from 2019 revenue. Initiatives from the Indian government, such as "Dekho Apna Desh" and "Incredible India," seek to boost domestic tourism and assist the industry in its recovery. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2024) likewise notes the economic significance of Travel and Tourism, accounting for 10% of the contribution to GDP and 357 million jobs globally. Visitor spending in the domestic market is around \$5.3 trillion, a 5.4% growth from 2023. International visitor spending increased to \$1.9 trillion with a growth of 11.6%.

On June 8, 2020, the lockdown on hospitality was lifted, meaning hotels, restaurants, temples, and other tourism institutions could begin reopening. Still, it is impossible to estimate the economic impact of the COVID-19 epidemic by zone because the wave of the epidemic and its duration remain unresolved. In other words, it is very unlikely that the industry returns to a favourable string of signals very soon. So, it is important to further study and analyse the economic impact of COVID-19 on the Indian hospitality and tourism industry.

The study employs secondary data analysis to analyse the pandemic's impact on the Indian hospitality and tourism sector. The study objectives are to: -

- (1) Identify the type and extent of the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian hospitality and tourism sector.
- (2) Review key challenges and strategies for recovery.
- (3) Identify gaps for future empirical research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers across various fields have been studying pandemics' influence on societies and economies. Although there have been many investigations into the global repercussions of pandemics, it is the case with respect to India that we can see a glaring gap in the literature that emphasizes the necessity of being deliberate about a pandemic's ramifications on social and economic structures in an Indian context. Pre-existing research on pandemics has determined that across the world, there are wide-ranging socio-economic dislocations. COVID-19 has had catastrophic consequences for public health and economic downturns. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted sectors dependent on mobility and face-to-face interactions, such as tourism. (Ibn-Mohammed, et al., 2021; Song et al., 2025). Ravallion (2016) noted that the World Bank will have repercussions from a socio-economic perspective for years to come. Many countries, regions, and communities will have to reevaluate GDP forecasts and estimates due to significant drops in domestic demand and supply. Travel restrictions and closure of borders, and the fear customers had of consuming services, led to reduced demand. Restricting lodging and transport led to adverse supply chain consequences. (Yu et al., 2021).

The production of services and goods in the non-essential sector is at a peak level. In countries that have a high reliance on exports, lower prices of goods have been damaging to economies and have led to layoffs in exporting countries (Leibovici and Santacreu, 2020). Before the onset of COVID-19, congested tourist locations such as Venice, Barcelona, and Kyoto were experiencing swelling populations (Koh, 2020). Across the world, airline and transport company staff are being prompted to take paid/unpaid leave while accepting lower compensation due to the economic environment. COVID-19 has also had a major impact on the hotel industry, especially since municipal and federal governments are restricting all pubs, cafes, and overseas hotels as a precautionary measure.

Research reveals a profound level of cancellations in bookings within Europe and North America that resulted in considerable revenue losses and staff reductions (Camilleri, 2025). In India, similar declines in inbound and domestic travel were observed (Sharma et al., 2025), leading to an estimated loss of US\$150 billion (Hussain et al., 2020). Despite operational closures and travel disruptions caused by lockdowns and regulations to ensure safety, determining the recovery time has taken much longer than anticipated due to uncertainties regarding access to vaccines. The region's tourism sector also incurred significant losses in meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibits (MICE). Many airlines, including Indigo and Emirates, were left with no option but to cut employee pay and to terminate staff (Gautam, 2021). Airline revenues were predicted to be significantly affected, with a 44% drop in revenues anticipated in a report by The Economic Times published in 2020, compared to the previous year. Fortunately, in later reports, there was a recognition of some recovery in the industry.

Tourism and hospitality employees could lose up to 70% of their jobs as a result of the current economic climate (Liu-Lastres, 2023). The Indian tourism sector is projected to suffer losses of up to US \$150 billion as a result (Hussain et al., 2020). Researcher Smith (2020) added how lockdown procedures began to be put in place immediately at the onset of the outbreak. Although the number of COVID-19 daily cases has decreased after September 16, further methods have required social distancing, wearing masks, and avoidance of social activity. These policies have greatly impacted the tourism and hospitality industries. Even if a vaccine is developed, it will be a long time before any positive impact is felt due to uncertainty surrounding effective vaccines and medicines, and the challenge of distributing vaccines to such a mass of population (1.3 billion people). In sum, the literature focuses on economic vulnerability, employment instability, and the post-crisis recovery is slow across the sector. However, few studies concentrated specifically on the Indian context and on employment outcomes or restructuring within the sector. The current study utilises these insights to further address this gap.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic approach enhances clarity, replicability, and transparency regarding our use of secondary evidence to inform findings. A total of 45 sources were reviewed. Each source was assessed for relevance, recency, and credibility. A thematic content analysis was then performed to examine patterns related to economic impact, employment, and recovery. This study adopts a secondary data analysis approach. Data were obtained from: Journal articles published in peer-reviewed journals (2020-2025);

- Official reports (e.g., WTTC, Ministry of Tourism);
 - Government press releases and policy briefs; and
 - Well-respected news and industry publications.
1. Relevance to COVID-19 impacts on tourism and hospitality;
 2. Recency (published from 2020 to 2025); and
 3. Credibility (from academic or reputable institutional sources) and
 4. A focus on India, with some sources extending beyond India for comparison.

In conducting the analysis:

- Thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns in the economic impacts, employment, and recovery. Sources were checked in terms of consistency, and repetition of information was synthesized instead of being duplicated. Citation limitations of the missing primary field data were necessarily added in the thinking around the review process. This systematic approach will improve clarity, replicability, and transparency in how secondary evidence develops findings.

a) Effect on the hotel industry

India's hotel industry, along with the country's economy as a whole, was hit hard as a result of the COVID-19 shutdown. Around 1.43 million people were employed in the Indian hotel industry between 2013 and 2017 (Kesavaraj, 2020). Carlson, a global hotel chain, has 94 properties operating in India and is projected to build another 30 properties by the end of 2023 (Nandwani and Bhatnagar, 2023). Major industries under lockdown now saw a growth contraction of 39.3% in the manufacturing industry; a decline of 47% in the commercial and hospitality sectors; and losses of 50.3% in the construction sector. Agricultural production was only reported to increase by 3.4% in 2019 versus 2018, and that was only during the monsoon season (Biswas et al., 2021). The hotel industry is experiencing the brunt of the lack of travel due to the cancellation of domestic and international flights for Indian travellers, train cancellations, hotels withdrawing their reservations, travel agencies closing, transportation services suspending, and artisans closing their shops for business and returning home. Almost all of India's hotels were not fully operational until December 2020. Hotel chains, including Trident and Hyatt, are luring new customers by offering discounts as high as 60% (Gautam, 2021). Approximately 40 million workers in India's hospitality industry lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic (HAI Vice President K.B. Kachru, *The New Indian Express*, 2020). TATA Group's premium hotel segment is also looking to cut costs due to COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown. "The segment has never experienced such a drop in revenues over the last century," says Puneet Chatwal, CEO of Indian Hotels Co Ltd. (Business Standard, 2020). However, the company has not reduced hotel staff at the iconic Taj brand—which includes The Pierre in New York—with employees being repositioned elsewhere in the TATA Empire. The company reported a loss of \$51 million as of September 30, 2020. The Treebo hotel chain is encouraging its approximately 400 employees to voluntarily resign, citing a 60% pay cut for the company's founders and a 40% pay cut for its managers. As of April 15, Oyo's layoffs totalled 5,000 employees (Sain, 2022).

Razak (2020) states that COVID-19 negatively affects medical tourism because it has a direct impact on luxury hotel and travel service companies. Lockdowns and the temporary suspension of domestic airline services have made medical tourism to India difficult. Still, the majority of the articles are focused on hotels that fall into the medium and large categories.

b.) Effects on employment in the hospitality sector

Skare et al. (2021) pointed out in their study that the World Travel and Tourism Council has indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic could potentially cause a loss of 50 million jobs worldwide in the travel and tourism sector. Asia is predicted to be the hardest hit region, and evidence suggests that the sector may experience a prolonged interruption. To the extent that travel bans, border closings, and quarantines disable workers from being able to get to or conduct their work, their income levels have been diminished. The climate of anxiety and apprehension will likely cause businesses to postpone investment, purchases, and hiring. Studies indicate that the changes to India's hospitality industry may threaten the jobs of the majority of its workforce. Hamid and Bano (2023) stated that the Indian tourism industry is preparing for significant bankruptcies among companies, layoffs, or increases in unemployment due to this pandemic.

Overall, Leung (2021) stated that hotels and restaurants could become more efficient and leaner, rendering a balance between smart and capable workers. Therefore, many of the workers are going back to their home countries, where many of the front-line hotel staff will be located. In light of the hospitality business trying to cut costs, we suspect temporary staff to be the first to face layoffs, and if things do not improve, permanent employees will be next. Furthermore, this could lead to a dramatic increase in individuals switching occupations to earn more money. This mass migration for financial gain has created a drain on talent, which

may not rebound until employers adjust their practices. A humane approach by organisations is the only avenue for preserving the workforce (Ewers et al., 2022).

c.) COVID-19 and its disruptive effects on Indian air travel

The Indian aviation services sector is expected to be most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Low-cost carriers are likely to improve domestic tourism in 2019. The industry has considerable fixed costs, which are 35-40% of revenue, based on leasing or renting, salaries for people, and interest (Shah and Chugan, 2019). The Ude Deshka Aam Naagrik (UDAN) scheme seeks to integrate low-cost aircraft into connecting the country's regions and boosting domestic tourism (Iyer and Thomas, 2020). Furthermore, India's airport authority planned to reach 250 airports in the country by 2020. As of 2019, there were 132 airports in India. The fiscal year 2018-19 experienced of domestic and international airline; India saw a 14.1% jump in increased passengers and a 3.4% increase in international passengers. It was projected that passengers using Indian airports would reach 450 million people in 2020. The pandemic significantly disrupted aeroplane service. Airlines, which have low-profit margins, liquidity concerns, fixed costs, and high leverage, are vulnerable to a two-month bill of lockdown (Kizildag, 2023).

The airline industry has also suffered in terms of its employees due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Air India rescinded job offers to about 180 trainee cabin crew because of the economic downturn (Scott, 2020). Meanwhile, Indigo, the largest airline in India, suspends flights for several months because of a lockout and has stated that it will likely lay off about 10% of its employees due to low revenue. Gautam (2021) states that this 10% layoff will result in about 2,400 layoffs in a company that employs 24000 employees. Many other smaller airlines are in this position and are preparing to engage in similar employment strategies to avoid going bankrupt. Indian airlines have also given significance to the threat of going out of business based on international comparisons; by 2020, this figure was likely only the reason that accounted for half of an airline's revenues, which also posed a risk of going bankrupt as an entire industry and placed significant pressure to prevent this on airline jobs.

"2020 is the worst year in aviation history, airlines are now in survival mode," says Conrad Clifford, IATA's Vice President for the Asia, Victor including an estimate that COVID-19 would have the greatest negative impact on airlines with a forecasted loss of almost US\$29 billion, which accounted for more than a third of the total losses of US\$84.3 billion for the overall Aviation sector. Furthermore, the region's passenger demand is predicted to fall by 53.8%.

d.) Challenges and recovery strategies for the tourism sector post COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic caused serious damage. In the aftermath of COVID-19's economic destruction and social disturbance, the global economy is in tatters (Makengo, 2021). Companies' survival and long-term sustainability will be far more endangered in the aftermath of such an epidemic. Moreover, it is an especially difficult period for hospitality services, such as the airline and hotel industries. For instance, it has been suggested that the aviation industry would experience the most significant loss in 2020-- estimated at 84.3 billion dollars--this sector alone would likely report the largest single loss annually in aviation history. As noted, more than three-quarters of tourism workers in the Asia Pacific are in low-wage job sectors, and they were most likely impacted negatively by the COVID-19 crisis (Dempster and Zimmer, 2020).

Stakeholders should also work toward mitigating losses rather than maximising earnings after COVID-19. There will be chaos for the global economy to recover if there are no workers in the hospitality industry. Here are some precautions to take, and the industry should not be restructured at this time. The hotel workers could be affected by COVID-19 in the recovery period. The economy may not return as quickly because of the limited workforce. The tourism sector must be protected with great care to smooth the transition for hotel sector workers after the crisis (Wong, 2021).

Now that COVID-19 is over and the tourism sector is recovering, the tourism industry must be supported. The future of the tourism industry will depend on the ability to build mutual trust with visitors and all other stakeholders. The welcoming process must begin, and to do this, financing for the tourism sector, along with

help and thoughtful planning, is required. At that time, tourism circuits with friendly neighbouring countries can be developed by the stakeholders. India is still a destination of choice for overseas medical tourists. Nonetheless, Pulla et al. (2022) state that the pandemic has put medical tourism on hold for now. Although the pandemic poses hurdles, the medical tourism industry will likely be fully operational soon, as patients are arriving from all corners of the world to places such as Europe, the Middle East, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the United States. Therefore, even after the pandemic, it is predicted in the future that restoring Indian medical tourism to its pre-pandemic levels will become a major issue (Dash and Sharma, 2021).

This would affect destination marketing activities in the future, particularly as it is likely to take time to develop medicines and vaccines. It will likewise take time for luxury hotels and travel to return due to the effects of social distancing. Currently, the option to avoid the possible risk of viruses and maintain social distance is available through domestic boutique hotels, homestays, and various travel planning accommodations. It is believed that government involvement is important for this type of domestic tourism. It will be hard to rejuvenate the tourism industry until there is an effective medicine/vaccine available and significant distribution to the public.

Strategies To Support And Rebuild

a.) India's tourism and hospitality industries

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is negatively affecting India's economy, which is influencing the hospitality and tourism sectors of the country, causing many people to lose jobs. To aid the industry in moving from crisis to recovery, some suggestions can be made to the national and provincial governments of India (Sharma et al., 2020). It is possible to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic using these recommendations.
2. To begin, provide urgent support and tax waiver for day-to-day labourers such as taxi drivers and porters.
3. In addition, a low or simple-interest-rate loan for infrastructure equipment in the hotel industry must be offered. Revise all tariffs and all statutory and licensing fees to ensure that they are for six to twelve months.
4. Make sure the entity has a comprehensive support framework and a pay support strategy.
5. Support for airlines should be direct (ground-processing fees, airport fee waivers, parking fee waivers, exemption from landing fees, etc.).
6. Loans for the long-term and working capital could be quick, interest, or low-interest loans for reorganizing businesses.
7. Establish a separate tourism fund from the Ministry of Tourism, which proposes providing a 10-year unsecured loan for infrastructure. Interest-free for the first two years, and a minor interest for the subsequent 8 years.
8. Solutions in aviation, travel, and transportation are linked with those in the travel and leisure industry.
9. Develop and implement employee salary support programs and reduce insurance fee policies.
10. The Incredible India campaign aims to increase investment in beach tourism, promote marketing, and promote bespoke products.

b.) Reversing the impact on the talent pool

By reducing current staffing and retraining employees, front-line personnel will have an increased likelihood of acquiring a job when the economy improves. Severing specialised workers could reduce the migration of workers to other industries and extend the recovery period of the hospitality sector.

c.) Opportunities to upgrade the skill set

Up-skill

During a period where layoffs are expected at all levels in the hotel sector, giving hotel employees the chance to enhance their skills could improve trust in the sector. Many people will indeed lose their jobs, as the prevailing asset-light model allows a greater number of working units to be dismissed at once. Many hospitality workers will be dislocated in an already difficult market.

d.) Re-skill

Competent front-line hospitality workers will be able to embrace new opportunities, such as 'Recognition of Prior Learning' chances that better prepare them for employment in hotels and other hospitality-related activities in a lean but highly skilled industry.

e.) Other innovations in continuous education

The current situation offers great positive prospects for students and institutions through online classes to recover lost time during this period. Institutions may indeed rearrange and implement live classes, which achieves a continual cash flow and relieves tension on their cohorts' plans. Content may be either hosted and delivered remotely through an easy self-learning mechanism or a classroom-style presentation. The current technology allows for a variety of unique approaches to providing learning continuity that are bound to occur in the future due to the constant need for new solutions.

It has never happened in history that firms in nearly 200 other countries have been disrupted by a single disruptor. To be relevant in the hospitality market, thinking outside the box and new ideas will be essential. There is information available on the internet about global hospitality trends that may potentially generate new ideas. Ultimately, however, it will be the market adaptation to these concepts that will be essential to the end of the tunnel. Retaining most of their employees eases the burden on HR and gives firms and governments comparable power because they can stay connected.

Data-Driven Insights

Table 1 shows important statistics related to the tourism industry between 2019 and 2023.

Year	Domestic Tourists Visits (millions)	Foreign Tourists Arrivals (millions)	Notes
2019	2321.98	10.93	Pre-pandemic baseline (Ministry of Tourism)
2020	610.22	2.74	Lockdown year – large decline
2021	677.63	1.52	Partial recovery, domestic rebounds faster
2022	1731.01	6.19	Significant domestic rebound
2023	2509.63	19.25	Provisional -domestic surpasses 2019 levels

These numbers illustrate the significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic and international tourist visits, as well as on the recovery of the tourism sector. Data from the Ministry of Tourism, India, and datasets of WTTC were compiled.

The tourism and hospitality industry experienced one of the most significant declines during the pandemic. In 2020, the estimated number of jobs at stake was between 14.5 million to 40 million, depending on the source. According to the Ministry of Tourism, by 2022–23, the tourism and hospitality sector sustained approximately 76.17 million jobs, including both direct and indirect jobs in the sector, indicating a gradual but significant

recovery. While the aviation and luxury sectors showed slower recoveries, the tourism sub-sectors that were most dependent on domestic travellers (ex., budget accommodations, alternative accommodations including homestays, and local attractions) demonstrated the fastest recovery.

Figure 1. Domestic Tourist Visits (2019–2023). Source: Ministry of Tourism, India.

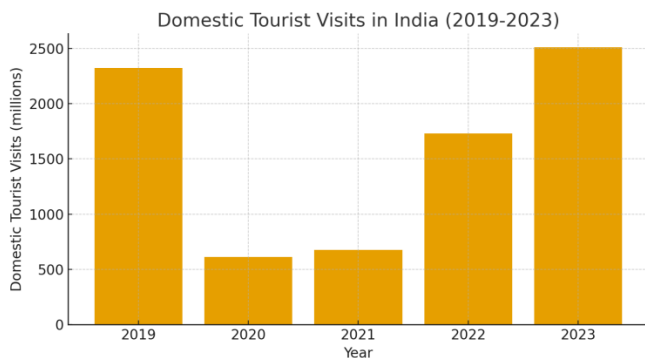


Figure 2. Foreign Tourist Arrivals (2019–2023).



Source: Ministry of Tourism, India & WTTC.

Policy Implications

Evaluation of Government Initiatives

The Government of India put forth multiple initiatives to boost tourism recovery, including the "Dekho Apna Desh" initiative, which was started in January 2020. This initiative aimed at domestic tourists to promote lesser-known circuits, rural destinations, and cultural heritage.

1. Demand stimulation: By supporting domestic travel, this initiative sped up the recovery of domestic tourist visits, given the dramatic rise observed in 2022-23.
2. Distributional effects of the initiative: It assisted small circuits and local businesses, homestays, and pilgrimage sites to improve income generation prospects in rural communities.
3. Policy complementarity: In conjunction with programs such as Swadesh Darshan, PRASHAD, and UDAN, the initiative aided in the improvement of tourism infrastructure and promotion nationally.

Notably, the impacts of the initiative were uneven by state the states' relative connectivity and hygiene/safety standards, or readiness connected with local context affecting states' recovery as for international tourism. Recovery of international tourism requires a separate approach through diplomacy and marketing.

There were also other forms of government support, such as liquidity schemes, fee waivers and skill development programs, which assisted businesses and workers in managing through the crisis. In moving forward from positive recovery, future policies should sustain a good balance between domestic and

international strategy, strength and support measures for employment, and invest in sustainable infrastructure.

KEY FINDINGS

The assessment provides evidence of profound disruption throughout the tourism and hospitality value chain. Major hotel groups, airlines, and travel service providers experienced revenue reductions of around 40-50%. Also, job losses in India's hospitality sector affected about 40 million workers. For aviation, there were sharp declines, and Indigo and other airlines announced some layoffs.

The recovery approaches discussed in the literature highlight schemes for financial support, promotion of domestic tourism, investment into workforce skilling, and the need for flexible business models. Given the absence of coordinated sectoral data, this note highlighted the need for future field work to more accurately investigate recovery and employment issues.

CONCLUSION

This research, relying entirely on secondary research sources, indicates that COVID-19 had severe disruptions within the Indian hospitality and tourism sector, especially in terms of employment and revenue generation. Existing literature provided useful perspectives; however, the lack of validation in the field using primary research is a significant limitation. Future research must involve collecting primary research data through surveys, interviews, or case studies, to triangulate the findings in this study and would be of benefit for developing more finely tuned policy interventions. A more comprehensive methodology, as developed in this study, will help ensure that the findings of this study are transparent, clear, and address some of the previous gaps regarding the structure of the literature review and description of methodology.

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