

Reframing the Rules of Business in Indian Hotel and Restaurant Sector Post Pandemic

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Abstract

The Novel Coronavirus, believed to be emerged from the Chinese city of Wuhan has rapidly spread in various countries of the world and has affected millions of lives, while people were caught up in the fear of contracting the virus, the nationwide lockdown of 21 days was announced by Indian government on March 24, 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic has gravely impacted the employment opportunities rendering lakhs of people without jobs. One of the worst affected sectors was the hospitality sector, this study aims at understanding the hotel executives' behavior, sentiments, and problems faced by them during this entire lockdown period.

Keywords— Effect of COVID-19, Hotel & Hospitality, Pandemic, Restaurant, Service Quality, Tourism Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, or the Corona virus outbreak is a condition which is caused due to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Although the investigations are still going on, it is evident that the corona virus was emerged out of the Wuhan sea-food market in China during December 2019 [1], [2]. COVID-19 was declared by WHO as a Public Health Emergency with international concerns on 30 January 2020, and subsequently was declared as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 [3].

Currently, there are no known vaccines or specific treatment, So only preventive measures were recommended. These include handwashing, covering one's mouth using masks, lockdowns and isolating from people who have been infected [4].

India implemented a nationwide lockdown of 21 days starting from 25th March 2020 [5]. The lockdown confined people to their homes. Services like Road, Air and Railway used for transport were stopped except for the emergency services, but essential services like medical shops, Petrol pumps, ATMs were allowed to keep open. (Guidelines, 2020). As

the Companies and Workshops were kept shut, millions of daily wage workers faced food shortage and job losses [6].

Indian hospitality sector was affected drastically by the COVID-19 pandemic due to ban on global travel, Visa suspensions and Suspension of transports. In India the effect of outbreak was started during the end of February due to which the bookings across hotels reduced rapidly. Hospitality sector has never experienced such decline in business. [7].

With the respect of the background of the rapid spread of pandemic, this paper has three goals. First is to review the literature regarding the quick spread of the disease throughout the world and the reported impacts on the Indian economy, especially the Hotel Industry. Second is to contact various hotel executives throughout the country via a detailed questionnaire and understand their predicaments. Finally, this paper enlightens on how the pandemic can change the future of Hotel Industry and proposes the solutions to help the industry to start at its previous conditions after the crisis is over.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly spread in India. From January-2020 to the date of writing this report (7th July 2020) [8], excess of 7 lakh cases were reported and around twenty thousand patients lost their lives [9]. With the nationwide lockdown in place, people from almost all walks of life were severely affected. There was rampant confusion among the people about the lockdown rules and social distancing norms. Due to the rapid spread of infection, the already over-burdened healthcare system of India was spread too thin. There was mass hysteria among the people especially regarding their health and economic condition. There were overwhelming job losses especially in the unorganized sector and MSME's. As per figures from Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 12.2 crore people lost their employment in the month of April 2020 [10]. Most of them were from the vulnerable parts of the society like daily wage earners, vendors, hawkers, construction workers and also MSME's [11], [12]. Even those from organized sectors have had to take salary cuts.

The Hospitality and travel Industry were the hardest hit globally. Hotel Industry revenue in the USA dropped by 11.6 percent during the first week of March. In Germany, occupancy rates decreased by over 36% starting from March-2020 while Italy recorded just 6% occupancy rate during the same period [13]. London remained consistent with 47% occupancy rate. Overall, the pandemic has led to the significant downs in the hotel industry [14]. The pandemic impacted all the parts of the operations of hotel industry. The impact of cancelled reservations was immediately felt in other processes like laundry, catering and supply chain [15], [16].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research followed a systematic and scientific approach of data collection. A research questionnaire is designed based on objectives of the research and respondents were contacted to respond through questionnaires. After getting the responses data is tabulated, analyzed and interpreted.

Objectives

The primary objective of this project is to study the effect of the COVID-19 and how to overcome from it. It can be achieved by understanding the following pointers:

- Hotel executives' viewpoint on government's decision to implement nationwide lockdown
- Whether they have experienced salary cut
- Whether they have experienced job losses or terminations
- Additional marketing measures taken by hotels till the lockdown ends
- Various problems faced by management for everyday operations
- Any modifications made to hotel infrastructure or SOP's during the lockdown
- Whether any special training provided to employees regarding hygiene and other safety measures
- How much time will it take for the business to reach pre-COVID levels?
- Possible solutions to tackle the ongoing situation

We started by studying about Covid-19 pandemic and its rate of spread around the world and then India. Then, we looked at the various courses of action adopted by the Government to control this pandemic [17]. We looked at the economic impacts of these measures, focusing specifically on the Hotel Industry. We connected with various Hotel executives throughout the country via social media platform LinkedIn. We then sent out a detailed questionnaire to them asking them about their circumstances and get their opinions. We collated this data and analyzed it using MS Excel to get a detailed outlook of the current situation.

We studied the various measures that ought to be implemented in the Hotel Industry post Covid-19 and together with the executives' opinion; we drafted a comprehensive plan for the Hotels for when the lockdown ends.

Secondary data collection

The secondary sources include all the following mediums and other sources

- Portals of Aayush Mantralay (Health Ministry), World Health Organization, John Hopkins University and related websites for information on Covid-19
- Websites of hotels, travel management companies, restaurants and bars, banquet halls etc.
- Research papers about economic effect of Covid-19 on Hotel industry.
- News and Press articles with respect to the Hotel Industry.
- Blogs from leading hoteliers about changes in Hotel Operations post Covid-19 era.

Primary data collection

We conducted primary research by sharing the questionnaire with various participants associated with the Hotel Industry to analyze the validated data. The research questionnaire helped us to get information on following points

- It gave us information on market size and trends, economic condition, hindrances in day-to-day operations, future conditions, etc.
- It also helped in validating the secondary research outputs.
- It further improved our understanding related to the upcoming developments and current market.
- Executives from all levels of management have participated including CXO's, VP's, National and Regional Managers, Supervisors, and other employees

Type of research

This is the descriptive and empirical type of research. A research questionnaire is designed to collect the responses from the respondents. Then the descriptive statistical analysis is done and interpretations are derived.

DATA PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

A detailed analysis of the questionnaire and the respective study related to each question is elaborated in this section

Distribution of Respondents

As stated earlier, we got responses from some of the leading Hotel chains of India. Some of them are:

- OYO Rooms
- Marriott International
- Taj hotel
- Hyatt Hotel Corporation
- VITS Kamats Silvassa
- Le Royal Meridien
- Radisson Blu
- The Orchid
- Sheraton Grand Pune Bund Garden Hotel
- Novotel
- Renaissance Mumbai
- Lemon Tree Hotels
- Sarovar Hotels
- Pride Group of Hotels

Services offered by the above-mentioned hotels:

The various services including, but not limited to, by these hotels such as:

- Food and snacks
- Coffee and beverage
- Multi cuisine Restaurant
- Accommodation
- Banquet hall

Department-wise distribution of respondents

The respondents belonged to a variety of Departments which can be seen from the below Pie Chart.

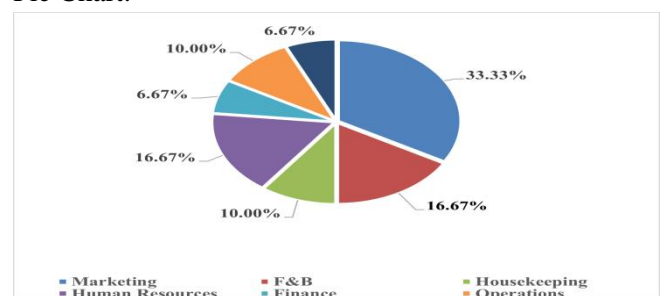


Fig 1. Department-wise distribution of respondents

As we can see in fig. 1, most of the respondents are from Marketing Department (more than 33%). This denotes that the hotels deploy a lot of manpower in marketing and sales related activities. Marketing is followed by Human resources, Food & Beverages (both 16.67%) and Operations (10%). Finance, Front Office and Housekeeping department make up the rest

of the staff. Also, since the survey was conducted online via LinkedIn, most of the respondents are from Middle Management or Upper Management Level.

General Mood of the Respondents:

To know about the emotions of the respondents during the lockdown, we asked them to rate their own performance on a 5-point scale, with 1 as the worst and 5 as very good.

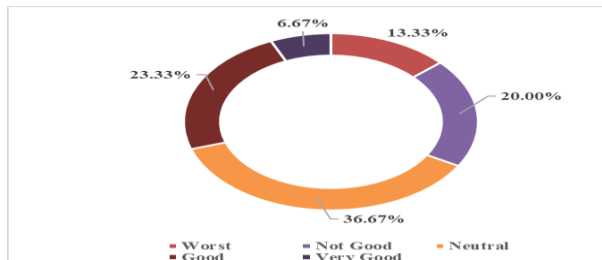


Fig 2. Mood of the Respondents

As we can see in fig. 2, most of the respondents are in a neutral mood (more than 36%). This denotes that many people are not actually sure about the lockdown and are uncertain about the future. The number of people having “worst” and “not good” mood far outweigh those of “good” and “very good”. This underlines the general despair amongst the respondents about the current situation.

Opinion on Government decision to implement the lockdown:

We asked the respondents if they thought the Government’s decision to close down hotels, bars and restaurants was correct.

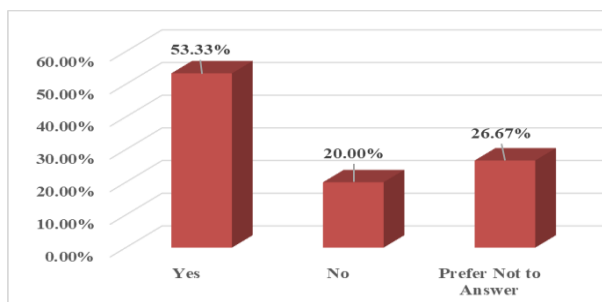


Fig 3. Regarding decision of Lockdown

From the fig. 3, we can see that more than half of the respondents support the Government’s decision of lockdown. However, 20% also feel that it was not necessary and around 27% of the respondents are not sure about the decision

Regarding Salary Cuts

We asked the respondents if they experienced any salary cuts during the Lockdown

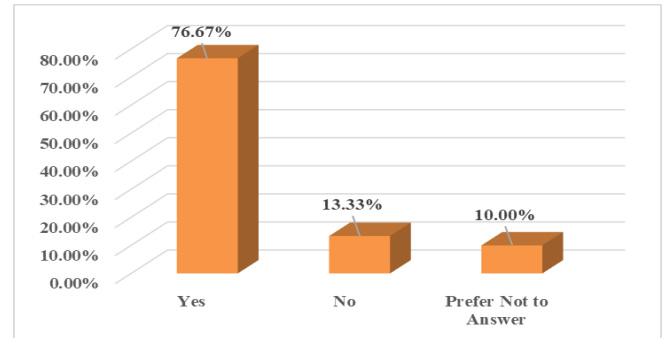


Fig 4. Salary Cut Experienced

From the fig. 4, we saw that a staggering 77% of the respondents experienced salary cut due to the Lockdown. As the Hotels were closed for customers and the fixed costs were mounting up, the management had no choice but to decrease the salary of the employees. Only 13% of the respondents escaped from the salary cut while 10% chose not to disclose this information.

Regarding Job Losses and Termination

We asked the respondents if they kept their jobs or were terminated during the Lockdown

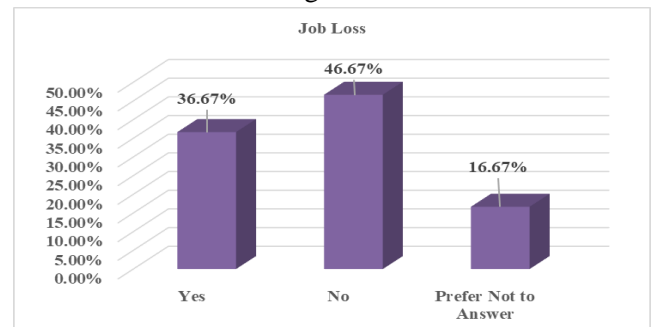


Fig 5. Job Loss Experienced

Here in fig. 5, the response was much more equally divided but almost 37% of the respondents reported to have lost their jobs. This figure is significant especially considering the fact that most of the respondents are from Mid-market/Premium segment. This raises a serious cause of concern for the relatively smaller chains of hotels and independent or unbranded operators where job losses could be even higher. Despite the revenue losses, 47% of the respondents managed to keep their jobs, albeit taking salary cuts. Almost 17% of the respondents preferred not to answer this question.

The next few questions were subjective regarding the activities undertaken by the management during the lockdown.

Marketing Measures

Around 40% of the respondents reported, their management is undertaking a few marketing measures to lure the customers for when the lockdown ends. These hotels have planned well and look to get ahead of the competition when the restrictions are lifted. Some of the measures are:

- Discounts
- Increased Marketing Budget
- Coupons
- Pay now stay later

Infrastructure Improvements

Many hotels also utilized this period of lockdown to fine-tune their services by undertaking various measures such as:

- Renovation, painting work
- Reassignment of personnel
- Changes in Management
- Changes in Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's)

Problems faced by management in recent times regarding everyday operations

- Availability of Raw materials like Vegetables, fruits etc.
- Availability of other supporting materials like floor cleaner, detergent, soaps etc.
- Threat of contamination of food items while preparation.
- Threat of contamination while food delivery
- No relief package received from Government

Regarding Special Training Received.

We asked the respondents whether they received any special training regarding new Standard operating procedures to be implemented after the hotels are reopened.

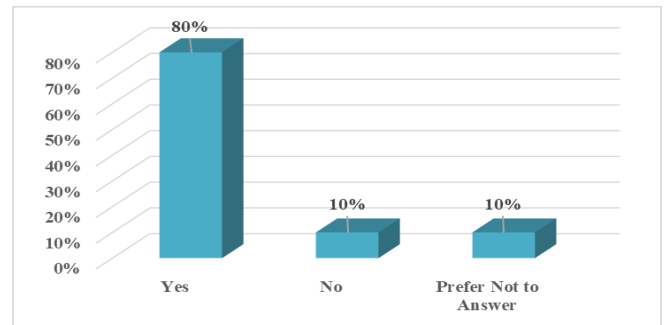


Fig 6. Special training Received.

In fig. 6, The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly rewritten the rules of engagement in day-to-day life. The hospitality sector is no different. It is an industry where cleanliness and hygiene are of utmost importance, so it is good to see that almost 80% of the hotels have undertaken various training measures to prepare their employees for the post COVID era. About 10% of the respondents have not started any such preparations and 10% chose not to answer the question.

Return to normalcy

During these uncertain times, we asked the respondents how much time they think will take for the hotel business to return to pre-COVID levels.

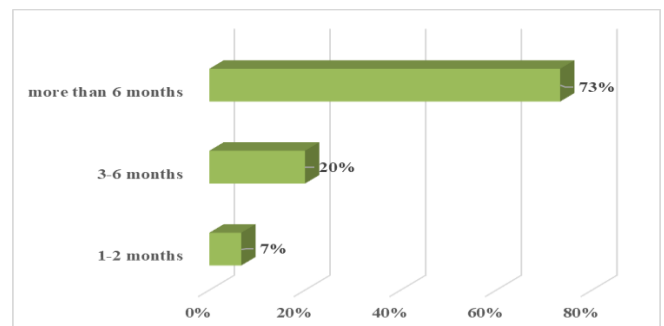


Fig 7. Return to normalcy period

Majority of the respondents as per fig. 7, (73%) predicted it will take more than 6 months to regain back the original business. This was expected as there is no certainty of when the pandemic will end and people will not prefer going on holidays till the entire country is safe for travel again. There were still a few optimists who believed it will take less than two months (7%) and 3-6 months (20%) for the situation to stabilize.

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic shows no signs of slowing down. After an initial 21-day lockdown, some economic activities have started in various states especially concerning essential services. However, travel restrictions are still in place and the hotels are still closed down. Even those which have opened face severe shortage of cash flows and human resource. Add to that, the strict guidelines issued by the government regarding social distancing norms, many hotels, restaurants, and bars have opted not to open their business for now.

After conducting research by collecting responses from various hotel executives throughout the country, we have listed possible solutions that can help the Hospitality Industry to get back on track. These solutions have been collated from the responses of the participants themselves and we have also referred to various sources as part of the secondary research. Finally, we have added a few solutions of our own to make the list as comprehensive and inclusive as possible.

Suggestions to the Government and Management:

To conclude we asked the respondents what measures the Government, and their organization should have taken to alleviate the impacts of lockdown. Some of them are:

- More funds to the industry via the Atmanirbhar Economic relief Package
- Salary to be paid to every individual
- Give tax relief to the organizations
- Special relief package for restaurants
- More awareness and preparedness regarding Covid-19 pandemic
- Job and financial security, don't sack any employee
- Reduction of fixed electricity charges
- Hotels should reopen with revised rules and special attention to sanitation and hygiene

Day-to-day operations:

- Hotels should start their daily operations with only essential facilities and staff like housekeeping, kitchen, dining room etc. [10].

- Security can be kept at the entrance to monitor the symptoms of incoming guests with thermometer and to give sanitizer.
- Hand sanitizers should be kept wherever surface contact is possible. Example. - Reception, Elevators, lobbies and rooms.
- Since it is not possible to recall all the staff at once, the present staff should be multifunctional and loyal.
- All the staff should wear masks, face shields and surgical gloves. Special training in hygiene to be provided to all the staff
- Shorter menus in restaurants instead of a full menu. The menu maybe rotated as per availability of inventory. This would reduce cost of having a high stockpile of raw materials.
- Ample spacing between dining tables as per Government guidelines.
- Focus on contactless delivery and develop delivery-specific menus [17].
- Use disposable or E-menus, plastic-wrapped cutlery and restricting number of people on a single table to only four [17].

Use of Technology:

- Mobile apps so that guests can remotely check-in to their rooms.
- Use IOT-based room automation so that guests can use the mobile app to control the temperature, switch on/off the lights, remote for the TV etc. [10], [18].
- Since people will prefer dine-in more than dine-out, have food dispensers on floor pantries
- Digital payment must be encouraging than cash payment for foods and beverages.
- Thermal gadgets for fever recognition.
- Use of gesture-based taps and flush in washroom, sensor-based lights in hallways, lobby and also rooms,
- Big Data analytics should be implemented to identify guest behavior and analysis [19].

Marketing Measures

- Hotel industry should target the youth populations they will be first to start travelling after the lockdown is lifted. Also as this segment is more responsive to Personalized messages, deals etc. [20].
- Constant communication with regular customers in domestic markets through digital marketing mediums.

- Redesign the marketing campaign to find effective offerings like free desserts etc.
- Developing new trends like meal kits, vouchers and online cooking classes, those techniques will be helpful to the restaurant to thrive in the long run. [17].

- Use website to inform potential customers of sanitization measures taken by the hotel

Hotel Maintenance and Renovation, Revision of existing health and safety techniques

- Make the list of repairs to be done with respect to the items and things.
- Check the inventory of maintenance supply, laundry room, and running of elevators, safety system, pools and lights. [20], [21].
- Carry out the cleaning of A/C, Carpets, beds and furniture.
- Also, the employee health should be closely monitored and precautions should be taken, to ensure no further spread of Covid-19.
- There should be revision of employee compensation and insurances.

Stay Informed and up to date

- Be aware about the government policies to assist businesses to restart. In some countries, government has given discount in taxes, business supports, funds and low interest capital loans [20], [21].
- Indian government has also given a temporary relief of 3 months in the form of moratorium for repayment of loans to banks.
- Organizations should take initiatives to help their employees and customers by giving them software, courses and services [22].
- Hotel management should take care while sharing information with employees and customers to avoid spread of misinformation. They should trust information from sources like WHO and other government health care providers [23], [24].

CONCLUSION

In this study we saw the effect of Covid-19 and lockdown on hotel industry in India. We tried to understand the grievances of the Hoteliers through the questionnaire. Finally, we tried to address the situation by giving a detailed

solution to ready the Hotel Sector for the post COVID era.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is here to stay. There is a phobia among the people regarding the disease. Until there are any vaccines available, we must equip ourselves to live with it. The draconian lockdown did help to reduce the rate of infection but left the state of the economy in tatters. The tourism and hospitality sector were easily the biggest victim of the lockdown and the lack of financial help from the Government did not help the cause. Hotel industry has also dealt with the slowdown due to SARS virus in 2003 but within 2-3 years, it was back on track. Man is a social animal, so his return to busy restaurants and bars is only natural. After staying away for so long, he will learn to appreciate the efforts of the employees that put in countless hours of hard work regularly. It is evident that pandemics like Covid-19 are temporary so we should plan for the future and take steps to reduce the long-term impact of covid-19

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3. Current Organization
 4. Services offered by the organization
 - o Food and snacks
 - o Coffee and beverage
 - o Multi cuisine restaurant
 - o Accommodation
 - o Banquet hall
 - o Others
 5. Your Department
 6. Your Designation
 7. How are you doing during lockdown
 - o Worst
 - o Not Good
 - o Neutral
 - o Good
 - o Very Good
 8. Do you think government's decision to close hotels, restaurants and bars during Lockdown are correct?
 - o Yes
 - o No
 - o Prefer Not to Answer
 9. Have you experienced any salary cut due to COVID-19?
 - o Yes
 - o No
 - o Prefer Not to Answer
 10. Have you experienced Termination/ Job loss due to COVID-19
 - o Yes
 - o No
 - o Prefer Not to Answer
 11. How many Bookings got cancelled this month due to COVID-19 or other reasons?
 12. Are you taking any Marketing measures till the lockdown ends (E.g., Coupons, Increased Budget, and Discount?)

ANNEXURE

Questionnaire:

1. Name of the Employee
2. Email ID

13. Problems faced by management in recent times regarding everyday operations

- Sourcing of Raw materials like Vegetables, fruits etc.
- Sourcing of other supporting materials like floor cleaner, detergent, soaps etc.
- Threat of contamination of food items while preparation.
- Threat of contamination while food delivery
- Others

14. Have you made any changes in your hotel structure during lockdown, if yes add below?

- Infrastructure
- Management
- Employee
- Others

15. Are you providing special training to employees regarding hygiene and other safety measures?

- Yes
- No

16. Have you received any relief package from Government?

- Yes
- No

17. Your Suggestions to Government and Hotel administration

18. According to you how much will be decrease in the number of customers per month after lockdown ends? (in percentage)

- 10-20 %
- 20-30 %
- 30- 50%
- more than 50%

19. According to you how much Time will be required for hotel industry, to come to the normal conditions?

- less than 1 month
- 1-2 months
- 2-3 months
- 3-6 months
- more than 6 months

20. What changes do you expect to be seen in the hotel industry after lifting of lockdown?