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IN COVID TIMES: DOCUMENTING TRAVEL, TOURISM & HOSPITALITY!

TRAVEL IS THE BIGGER PICTURE, Tourism Follows

IT IS SAFE TO TRAVEL with adequate precautions

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We have been shut since March this year; plans for the forthcoming editions will be announced shortly, as clarity begins to emerge out of the Corona pandemic, in India and globally. One thing is certain – our subject matter, sharp focus, and an eye on action going forward will guide the spirit of our future conclaves.

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Destination India was first published in 1975 and has appeared in different avatars over the years. How did industry respond to the Covid-19 crisis? Presenting a cross section of reactions from across verticals, this special edition is a reflection on these times. Published by Cross Section Media Private Limited, from 401, Surya Kiran, 19 Kasturba Gandhi Marg, New Delhi, this special edition has been printed at RaveScan, Manesar, Gurugram. Business enquiries may be addressed to info@bitb.org

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25

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Chairman, AB Smart Concepts
26

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30

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34

ANURAAG BHATNAGER
COO, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts
38

ASHWANI LOHANI
Ex-CMD, Air India/ ex-Chairman, Railway Board
42

ASHWINI KAKKAR
Entrepreneur
46

BINOD CHAUDHARY
Chairman, CG Corp Global
50

CHANDER BALJEE
Founder, Royal Orchid & Regenta Hotels
54

DEEP KALRA
Founder & Executive Chairman, MakeMyTrip
56

DEEPIKA RAO
MD and CEO, Ginger Hotels
60

DHRUV SHRINGI
Co-Founder & CEO, Yatra.com
62

DILIP PURI
Founder & CEO, ISH
66

E M NAJEEB
Founder Chairman, Airtravel Enterprises Group of Companies
68

HARSH VARMA
Former Director, UNWTO, Madrid
72

J B SINGH
President & CEO, InterGlobe Hotels
76

JEAN-MICHEL CASSÉ
Former COO, Accor India & South Asia
82

K B KACHRU
Chairman Emeritus & principal advisor, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group
86

KAPIL CHOPRA
Chairman of The Board EazyDiner/ Founder, The Postcard Hotel
90

KAPIL KAUL
CEO & Director CAPA South Asia
94

LAKSHYARAJ SINGH MEWAR
Executive Director, HRH Group of Hotels
96

NAKUL ANAND
Executive Director, the board of ITC Ltd
100

NEERAJ GOVIL
Senior VP – South Asia, Marriott International Inc
104

PRASHANTH RAO AROOR
Founder, Intellistay Hotels and Mango Hotels
108

PUNEET CHHATWAL
MD & CEO, IHCL
110

RAJEEV KOHLI
Joint MD, Creative Travel
114

RAJIV KAUL
Advisor, Leela Hotels and Palaces
118

RAKESH MATHUR
Co-founder, Responsible Tourism Society of India
122

RATTAN KESWANI
Deputy Managing Director, Lemon Tree Hotels/ Director, Carnation Hotels
126

ROHIT KHATTAR
Founder Chairman, Old World Hospitality
128

S P JAIN
Founder Promoter, Pride Hotels
130

SANJAY KUMAR
Chief Strategy & Revenue Officer, IndiGo
134

SANJIV KAPOOR
Ex-Chief Strategy & Commercial Officer, Vistara
136

SUBHASH GOYAL
Chairman, STIC Travel Group
138

SUNDER ADVANI
CMD, Advani Hotels & Resorts
140

SUNJAE SHARMA
VP Operations - India, Hyatt Hotels and Resorts
144

SURESH KUMAR
Founder, KUE Management Services
148

VIBHAS PRASAD
Director, Leisure Hotels Group
152

VIRENDER DATTA
Founder & Chairman, International Institute of Culinary Arts
154

ZUBIN KARKARIA
Chief Executive Officer, VFS Global Group
156

ZUBIN SAXENA
MD and VP Operations, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group
160

NAVIN BERRY
Chief Editor Destination India
6

My Take

Navin Berry
Chief Editor
Destination India

TOURISM ON PAUSE BUTTON; PUSH TRAVEL FIRST, DOWN-UP TOURISM THAT INVOLVES US ALL

This moment in history calls for a new narrative for tourism

Sometime back last year, at a BITB conclave, Sanjeev Sanyal, principal economic advisor, Ministry of Finance, shared his belief that tourism is all about storytelling. He suspected that the industry had lost this vital and most important connect, had forgotten the story behind all our tourist places. In his opinion, bringing forth the folklore of all these forgotten stories will resurrect our tourism again. Few months now down the Covid crisis, I am beginning to believe that tourism itself, as an industry that is important for the country's economic activity, needs a new narrative. If we are to build tourism, in the manner that we believe it deserves, I believe that we will need to build our case again, from scratch. Tell our story, afresh. **While selling tourism to our consumers, we will need to revisit the art of storytelling; when selling tourism's importance as an industry in the corridors of power, we will need a new story to tell.**

> "While selling tourism to our consumers, we will need to revisit the art of storytelling; when selling tourism's importance as an industry in the corridors of power, we will need a new story to tell."

This momentous, once-in-a-hundred-years crisis is amidst us, and people have drawn an analogy, suggesting we have had such a crisis every hundred years. Most of us are not going to witness another such crisis again, assuming it is a centennial occurring. It also logically follows that that most of those who will see another such disruption will not be from amongst us.

There are also believers who say that from now on, such occurrences are likely to happen every other decade, again and again. Such viruses are likely to be repeated, given the new edge countries have acquired in technology and the labs that are operated. This present one, unknown to the world, travelled across the globe, and the country where it originated, is sitting pretty, the most among all countries in the world. Its economy also seems recovered, almost miraculously, by sheer magic. If this was true, then travel and tourism are likely to get affected again and again, be the first to get knocked down, as and when the virus erupts again, in one corner or the other in the world.

Documenting these times, therefore becomes even more important, especially the learning for an industry that has been amongst the most affected. As an industry that was the first to get affected, and the last to recover, the impact has been most unprecedented. Conceptualising this book, it was important that we engage senior leadership across hoteliers, travel agents and tour operators, restaurant and food businesses, individuals who have been in pivotal roles in the last few decades. They have been in the forefront of the crisis, bearing the brunt of the onslaught;vocal in their expression of the anguish of doing businesses in these times, its impact and the distress surrounding it.

What have these times meant to them? As individuals, as corporations and as an industry. What has been the impact, the learning and what in their opinion is the road ahead?

I am conscious that our illustrious contributors have spent considerable time thinking over the ramifications and documenting them. I remain grateful to each one of them for taking their time out and putting in their effort for this initiative.

We often hear about how the industry has faced various tumults over the years. This too shall pass, but we must acknowledge its unprecedented impact. Typically, crises were localised, such as the plague in Surat, in their effect, perception and the ability to attract visitors at destinations. 9/11 had its effect, rightly stunning the world, but travel did not suffer everywhere, not on all fronts. Domestic tourism remained untouched; there were no curfews and closures, and life went on close to usual. Inbound suffered for some time, but only the tourism sector was affected.

Covid-19's mark has been genuinely unprecedented on those counts. There was a pan-India lockdown. Air, rail, road, hotels, monuments or local eateries, and every other incentive to travel, had shut doors. If travel was meant to signify economic activity, all of it came to a screeching halt – not only in India but across various parts of the globe. The spread of the virus and the closure on travel were both equally global.

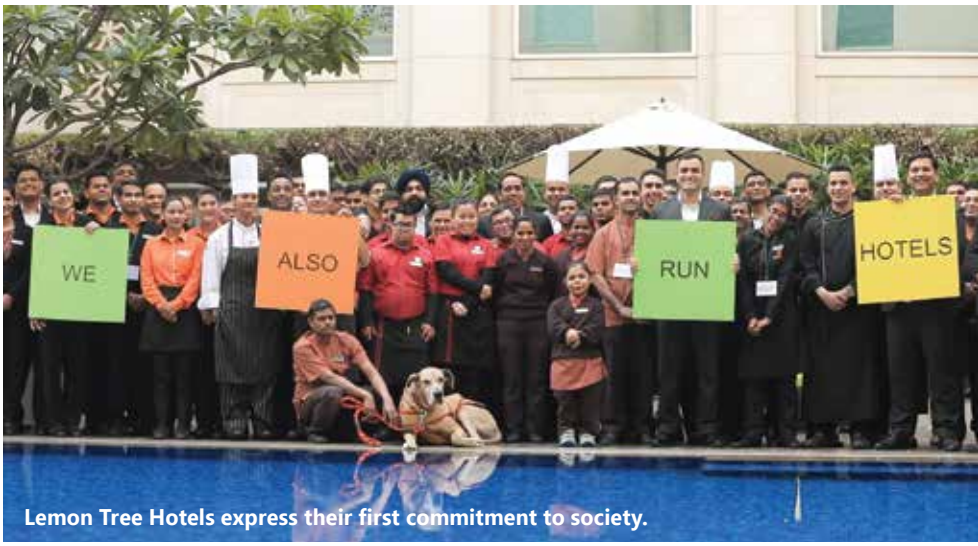
Every component of the composite tourism product – hotels, airlines, restaurants, spas, wellness – nationally and globally - has been impacted, consequently denting millions of jobs.

The industry, amidst the turmoil, has lent a helping hand and contributed to the national efforts in stemming the adverse effects of the Corona-led disruption. There have been individual and organisational acts of giving, in varying measures, driven by the philosophy of individuals, the hotel chains, and corporations. My one regret has been, mentioned in my columns earlier in the year, that these efforts, while retaining their individual stamp, could have additionally been given an industry colour, that Tourism Cares, which would have gone a long way in giving that additional mileage to the industry. The restaurant industry did this, admirably, when some of the leading restaurant chains also carried the NRAI stamp on their efforts.

On the business front, companies, across the board, have been confronting the challenge of rationalising costs to ensure survival. The motto 'cash is king' has assumed more significance than ever before. It has become commonplace to say that one who can survive, only he can later thrive.

As I pen my thoughts, there is a sense of businesses coming back on track, albeit very slowly. The road to recovery would be long-haul; it may take another six to twelve months. Niche segments may even take longer. Big business may take another two years, possibly. It is not necessary to think immediately of large-scale conferences and conventions. It is more important to bring in a semblance of regularity to the business by ideating upon small calibrated steps, like having meetings, involving smaller audiences, as example. If we can hold such events by adequately following safety measures, we would have kick-started the process quicker than previously imagined.

I hear a new refrain that industry has learnt to collaborate, which has always been a dire need. However, I wish this could get extended to the bigger realm of hospitality, providing mentorship to verticals such as *dhabas*, which the industry could adopt and train, towards greater hygiene and cleanliness. Beyond the bigger chains, with the exception of a few stand alone hotels, the vast canvas of Indian hospitality needs an upliftment in its standards; the newly acquired popularity of webinars can be effectively used to train across segments, across the country; **voluntary training and mentoring could become the new mantra for the industry. This could become the new benchmark of successful associations at work!**



Lemon Tree Hotels express their first commitment to society.

> "Voluntary training and mentoring could become the new mantra for the industry. This could become the new benchmark of successful associations at work!"

Hotelier Kishore Kaya was among those who lent a big helping hand to the needy.

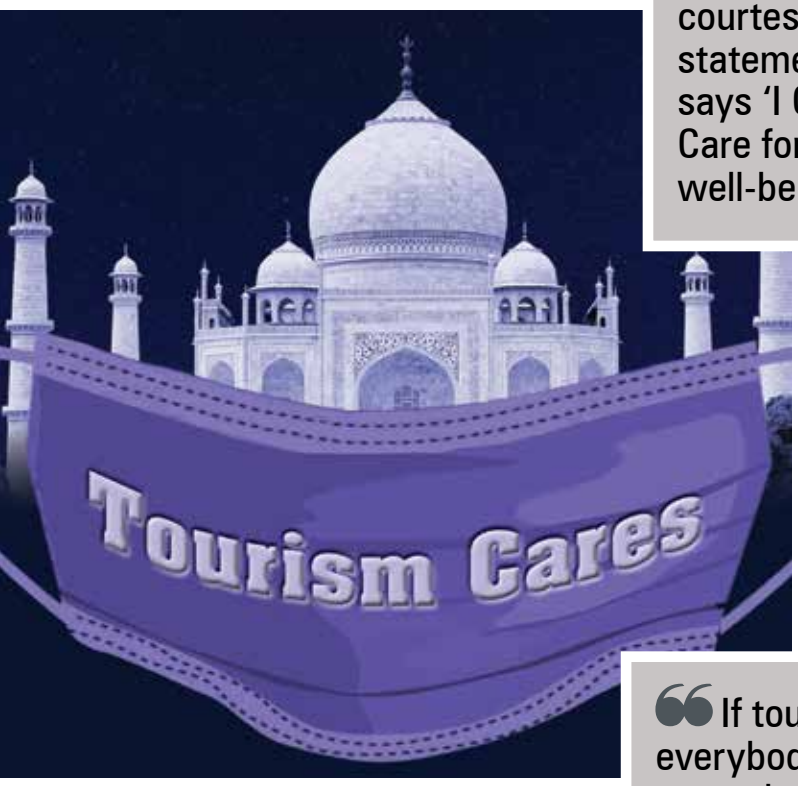
Taking stock of the learning curve for the travel, tourism and hospitality industry, especially in India, as we all have come to realise, it has not been a sector-specific disruption. Activity across the economic spectrum has suffered – automobile, retail, FMCG, aviation, construction, among others. It is a challenging task to create a pecking order for government's attention and intervention. I think our losses somewhat pale before the sight of the migrants walking back to their native places, uncared for and battling sorrows. Therefore, **I believe there was a need for us to get a grasp on how we were part of a larger picture**.

My second learning was that **industry associations made strenuous efforts; extensive workhours were put by stalwarts to ideate the industry's sufferings on diverse media platforms, including extensive presentations to those in government**. I do not think that people in the corridors of power did not accept our position, but they were not in position to view hospitality, aviation or

tourism in isolation from the overall economic distress. While our perspectives were eloquently represented, but viewed in the broader national landscape, could not be singled out for incentives or bailouts.

I came across arguments that we needed to emulate international best practices, such as the interventions in Singapore, but many of those do not apply in the Indian context. For instance, London has doled out incentives, where the government is reimbursing 50 per cent cost, up to 10 pounds per person. How can that apply to India and to what star-category of restaurants can it be applied? Dhabas, thousands of them, have lost business as there has been no traffic on the highways. I think that should be equally concerning. A metro like Mumbai has an eatery at every nook and corner, and they were all out of business. It would not have been fair to offer concessions to the branded segment that, ironically, can or should be able to afford the stress and not to those establishments whose personal kitchens at home may not be operational because of the pandemic-ensued financial constraint.Indian society is not covered by social security as Western countries are, benefits are slow to reach the most affected and most vulnerable. Governments cannot be seen as favouring the haves and uncaring for the have-nots! At one point we were in danger of losing the plot, missing the bigger national picture.

> “Masks can become the new benchmark for courtesy. It is a statement that says ‘I Care’ - Care for your well-being.”



> “If tourism is everybody’s business, then make it so. If tourism involves us all, then it is high time we ensured that it did.”

Should we chase the travel story of our country. Think of our nodal ministries as surface transport, aviation, railways, culture, urban development (push for accommodation as essential infrastructure, in the same breath as hospitality and metro connectivity, and a more friendly visitor experience). Once this happens, tourism will be the automatic beneficiary.

We need to differentiate between travel and tourism, and point out how the two meet, mutually co-existing as perennial partners. **Pure tourism as an activity, despite our PM’s personal advocacy, is possibly still not an adequate vote catcher; unless the BJP’s party machinery can accept *paryatan* as an instrument of social and economic re-engineering, and then it can work!**

As a moment in history of Indian tourism, this evident pause button on our growth story presents a rare opportunity to look back, and accept that despite such stupendous efforts of numerous industry stalwarts and associations, tourism and hospitality did not get what was being sought.

As the industry embraces the new norms, one hopes they are here to stay. These must not be forgotten but should become permanent fixtures in our future operations. Can we see branded masks being created by hotels and given to every visiting guest. **Masks can become the new benchmark for courtesy. It is a statement that says ‘I Care’ - Care for your well-being**.

It would be a matter of joy to see Namaste being adopted as a standard norm across the industry. It is core culture for us, forgotten somewhere down the line, and needs to be resurrected, soonest.

Health, hygiene and focus on immunity-inducing food, among others, could be adopted as a standard practice, ensuring continuity to its transition to a healthier lifestyle.

Thanks to Covid-19, it would appear, we would have recovered and brought back some aspects of hospitality that we had either forgotten or overlooked.

There is a need to look inwards and authenticate Indian experiences, which have not yet been adequately emphasised. An international architect, Dale Kellar put up an Indian restaurant at ITDC’s ‘Akbar’ in the 1970s, featuring *matkas* on the ceiling, as part of a very strong ethnic ambience. A restaurant called ‘Rasoi’ at the Centaur at the Delhi Airport, was among the first to create a rural setting. Hotels must similarly infuse critical elements of Indian ethos while striving to be global – both can coexist. Our contribution to being patrons of Indian art, heritage, culture and folklore are becoming a thing of the past and need to be restored quickly and impactfully.

It is common amongst us to say we have not touched the fringes of our tourism potential. Here are just a handful of suggestions to kickstart the tourism process afresh:

- India is the size of Europe. That there is vast tourism potential in every nook and corner. Like in the case of our handling the Corona virus, the tourism product needs central nurturing and mentoring but action on the ground must be decided upon at

local levels. A central advisory and mentoring agency needs to exist to guide and create guidelines. But the action is among states, and perhaps even lower, down to the city level, the panchayats and municipalities. **If tourism is everybody's business, then make it so. If tourism involves us all, then it is high time we ensured that it did.**

- We must re-design the profile of stakeholders. We have been myopic in the belief that hotels and tour operators are the stakeholders when the real ones are those that provide products – like museums, forts and palaces, shopping malls, whatever drives the travel and tourism momentum. We have seldom reached out to them to make our tourism effort more inclusive.
- We need to create special tourism zones. Immediately, our target can begin with 100, mostly conversions of what we have as existing and recognized predominant attractions. These should be converted into areas of excellence, where everything works. Take New Delhi's Connaught Place, for instance. A careful walk around will highlight all that is not there. Tinkering won't do, overhauling the amenities is critical to a makeover! Each one of them must be empowered to promote themselves more comprehensively and in a consolidated manner. These should be self-sustaining and be driven locally by those who have a direct stake in the area.

> "Each city must have its own game-plan, and each of these tourism councils must be empowered to decide on their course of action."

- We must go as local as possible and empower a country-wide city development in terms of tourism. We may consider a minimum of 1000 tourism centres across the country and enable them locally. These could be called tourism hubs. For instance, Dehradun, Mussoorie and Nainital are potential hubs in a state like Uttarakhand. Each can further act as a nodal hub to tertiary destinations around them. **Each city must have its own game-plan, and each of these tourism councils must be empowered to decide on their course of action. The so-called tourism circuits, that have never taken off the ground, should be built around nodal cities as centres of tourism activity. Ground up, is how the tourism story should be re-engineered**.
- That travel and tourism coexist must be recognised. There is no tourism without travel. Tourism is the most obvious beneficiary of every facility that we create to make people travel. Therefore, the integration of travel with tourism is more critical than with culture, commerce or heritage.The story of India's tourism and travel industry must be woven together.
- There is a realisation that domestic tourism is the way forward. But we have not yet defined a roadmap for it. It can be initiated at the level of a city, or a product, through a robust PPP model. The state government would fund a big part of the promotion, and the private sector would provide the services, facilities, packages and promotions. Both sectors must together devise packages and promotions that are more evolved and developed over time, since the successful 'Goa Monsoon packages' of 1985-86. Each destination must have its own individual story, told exceedingly well over its uniqueness to every possible audience it can attract.
- Domestic tourism requires some form of incentivisation. Given the present distress among domestic airlines, their offers may not be adequate in stimulating the traffic numbers that we would wish. PM Modi, last 15th August, had given a clarion call, asking the citizens to visit some 15 destinations within the country during the next few years. Income tax relief is one possibility. Each journey could get a set off, the next one more than the previous one. Family holidays, thereby, would be encouraged, improving the quality of family life of our people. Those who do achieve the target of 15 holidays can get a bonus in the form of additional reliefs. Imagine the multiplier effect of 15 trips to the economy!
- During the present Covid times, given the fact that the virus will be around for some more time, governments will be required to keep imposing restrictions, time and again. This process of closures and re-openings is likely to continue. However, it is important that every such action is advertised, clearly and transparently, with zero ambiguity. Best that these allowances and restrictions be displayed prominently on some national dashboard. **States and governments must understand the importance of keeping travel intact, and not doing anything that disrupts travel. Travel is the essential lifeline of the country.** Rules can keep changing, understandably. But when creating guidelines, while demarcating containment zones, care can also be taken to ensure least disruption to normal activity. And, travel is the key element.

Migrants alone in their misery.
Photo courtesy National Catholic Reporter

- The developments in the geopolitics augur considering travel and tourism as a critical instrument of soft diplomacy. India is a major provider of travel and tourism to a host of smaller countries in the vicinity. We must examine ways of providing increased connectivity. Indians can be encouraged to travel, and traffic should be viewed as a two-way street. India can incentivise the opportunities to strengthen the process.

Covid-19 is an opportunity for us to streamline processes, create greater efficiencies and synergies and tie up long-pending loose ends. Tourism and travel can emerge as a more robust and an all-encompassing sector, positively impacting national growth and development. We must acquire a futuristic hue, simultaneously imbibing all that is authentically Indian, radiating the best of both worlds! Streamlining how we can travel, ease of travelling, can become new stimulants to boosting our economy. Jai Hind.

My Take

Navin Berry

HANDLING OF CIVIL AVIATION HAS BEEN A SILVER LINING; INDIA'S GROWTH STORY REMAINS INTACT!

There have been challenges, for sure. But the sector has calibrated its return well, with measured steps

What has been the over-arching sense of these times? There have been pandemics and challenges earlier, but Covid-19 is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We have had other viruses, such as SARS, Ebola, the H1N1 Flu Virus; the fatality rate in SARS was 17 per cent. The fact is that we in India have done well. The mortality rate in Covid-19 is only 3 per cent; in India, it has come down to 2.14 per cent. But, how the Covid-19 pandemic has panned out – initially, the Chinese kept a lid on it and did not warn the world, leading to subsequent increases globally.

Several countries, as they began to realise what was happening, had to take severe and drastic actions. We were lucky in the sense that we envisaged the trend and the PM took a timely, effective and comprehensive action – and we had a lockdown on 23 March. The fact is that our knowledge of the virus then was near zero, and now in the first week of August, we are relatively well-informed, and in a better position to understand how it gets transmitted. The lockdown resulted in a fortunate situation today, where we have been able to curtail the total number of deaths to only about 40 thousand-plus. Even as the daily number of infections keeps rising, the recovery front is doing even better. We have to wait and watch the rural scene but in cities like Delhi, the timely created infrastructure, quickly and efficiently, as an example of effective cooperation between the state and the centre, much of it has remained unused, mercifully and thankfully. The situation in other metro cities is also getting under control. However, the lack of medical infrastructure in the rural areas and tier 2 and 3 cities poses a challenge.

We cannot predict the virus' behaviour. We were able to control its spread to an extent because governments, at the centre and in many of the states, took timely action.

Once the lockdown was lifted, the centre created a template of guidelines and left it to states to take their own call, preferring them to decide best, with their ears on the ground. One single order could not be expected to work for the entire nation. Lives against livelihood became the debate, with the growing realisation that the virus was not going away soon, and people had to get

on with their lives. Life must therefore return to near normal, with all the precautions, but it must be done gradually and in a calibrated manner. Then, began the Unlock phases, as we have entered 4.0 period, with the removal of curfews and removal of all interstate movement.

One silver lining in these dark clouds has been the sure footed and calibrated manner, in which the aviation sector performed and opened up. There was the required and much needed clarity, firmness and implementation. Government decisions were suitably backed up by the private operators, both airports and airlines. Although the country had to navigate a very challenging terrain –people were stranded abroad, essential medical supplies needed to be distributed within the country, and domestic aviation had to be opened up.

The lockdown commenced on 23 March. India witnessed the lifeline 'Udaan' flight within a few days. Our national carrier, Air India, and other private-sector carriers, transported close to a thousand tonnes of medical equipment, including PPE kits, medicines, etc. throughout the length and the breadth of the country. It was one of the most efficiently executed arrangements where all essential medical supplies could be distributed across the nation. These were undertaken by exceptionally courageous and motivated teams, and the country was indeed proud of these missions. Remember, at the stage, there was fear writ large with people locking themselves within their four walls.

Minister of civil aviation, Hardeep Puri has been credited for his efficient and calibrated reopening of the sector.

> The Covid-19 battle cannot be fought from Delhi. It must really be fought from the states. Our hope is that a new messaging takes place. That it is safe to travel, but with adequate safeguards.

Special mention must be made of the 'Vande Bharat' flights. The first estimates of the External Affairs Ministry about the number of people stranded abroad was around 190,000 Indians. Fast forward, as the nation embarked upon on phase 5 of the flights, the number of people brought back under different phases of Vande Bharat by Air India, private carriers and charters, land routes and naval ships, had touched 9,00,000. It is a record of sorts and needs to be applauded by the nation.

Simultaneously,with opening up air bubbles of bilateral civil aviation agreement, the government has moved yet another step, to opening up of international traffic. India has a bilateral bubble with the USA, Germany and France; we have a civil aviation agreement with the UK – they don't want to call it a "bubble." Similar agreements were in progress with countries like Canada and subsequently with the neighbouring countries.

At the time of writing this piece, first week in August, not much can be said for regular commercial flights. We cannot predict the virus' behaviour. It is mercurial. Normal civil aviation could occur if there are no entry restrictions. Now, countries are not allowing other than their own citizens' entry, or as in the Middle East where there is a need for doctors and nurses or a select category of people. However, new guidelines for incoming passengers are meant to simplify travel, and bring about ease in incoming travel.

As a nation, we have done exceptionally well on domestic aviation front. Figures till the end of July were almost 80,000 passengers flown on domestic flights. Passenger accounts have been exemplary. One traveller from Delhi to Goa, said he was proud to be an Indian. He noted that there was meticulous planning on the ground, no disruptions and every other user was following strict protocols. The same was true on the flight. Not one passenger, he noted, went to the washroom, everybody kept to themselves, and he felt truly safe and secure.

Civil aviation remains a robust story in India, notwithstanding the pressures. We are the third-largest domestic market and would soon be the third-largest market overall. Then, from the present 345 million footfalls, we can hope to take it up to one billion.

The 'India story', the Big Picture, would do well. Present challenges apart, the economic activity is resuming, though many of us would want to see more, who would not?

The general view gaining traction is that lockdown is not the answer to Covid-19; resume activities and learn to live with it. That is what is going to make the difference. Travel must be recognized to be the first visible step that will revive the economy. No government, no private player should create any impediment, impose any restriction that disrupts travel. Containment, wherever required, must be so calibrated that travelling around it, must also be spelt out. Again, the Covid-19 battle cannot be fought from Delhi. It must really be fought from the states. Our hope is that a new messaging takes place. That it is safe to travel, but with adequate safeguards.

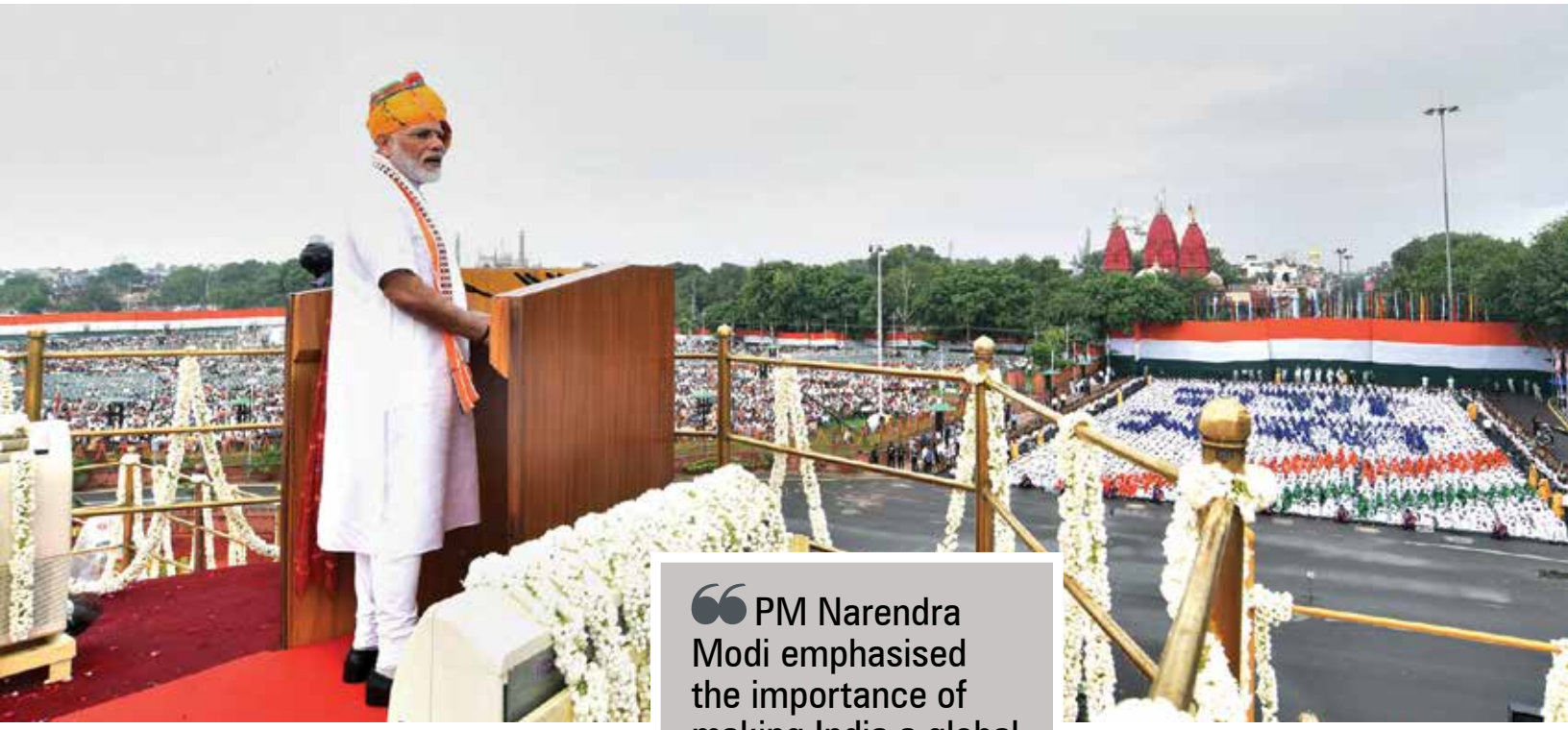
Amitabh Kant

TRAVEL & TOURISM WILL ONCE AGAIN BE ECONOMIC DRIVERS POST COVID 19

This sector remains relatively untapped despite its immense potential

His has been the most vocal and committed voice in government over matters in tourism and hospitality. An alumni of St. Stephen's College, as CEO of government think-tank, Niti Aayog, he has structured many a case for our industry. Kerala cadre IAS officer, Kant has been principal secretary tourism, Government of Kerala and later Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. During his stint at the centre, Kant was responsible for steering the much-acclaimed campaign 'Incredible India'; he was responsible for India playing partner country at ITB Berlin and initiating many of the infrastructure projects during his tenure.

More recently, he has scripted the 'Make in India' story.



> PM Narendra Modi emphasised the importance of making India a global hub for tourism, urging each citizen to visit 15 tourist destinations in India by 2022.

The Coronavirus pandemic has taken a toll globally on several sectors, but perhaps none have been impacted as much economically as the Tourism sector. Coinciding with this is the impact on international travel and until recently, on domestic travel necessitated by the safety measures required for containing the spread. With a prudent and well thought out resumption process rolling out, recovery should eventually follow. I understand the challenges that the industry has had to weather, but I am at the same time confident that the resumption of travel and tourism along with the hospitality sectors is a roadmap for recovery. What will spur recovery in the short and medium term horizon will be the potential of robust and accelerating domestic demand for these sectors.

In this new normal, of immediate priority should be the gradual and eventual trust and confidence building period. This should automatically follow from awareness that the proper compliances, safety and sanitization measures are put in place, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for responsible reopening are being issued and enforced. Already, several states across India have begun the process of recommencing travel, and this will exponentially increase once the tried and tested safety and hygiene compliances are standardized and universally adopted.

Travel and tourism have a huge multiplier impact in the economy, with a massive impact on direct and indirect job creation. They can and ordinarily do exponentially create jobs and that is what the need of the hour is – more high quality job creation. They are the key sectors for growth of high quality jobs in India. Employment, direct or indirect from these sectors in India is to the tune of more than 4.2 crore people or in percentage terms, accounting approximately for 8.1% of the total employment opportunities. Just the previous year, travel and tourism in India contributed 9.3% of India's GDP, and in fact was the recipient of 5.9% of total investments. What is indisputable is that these are the sectors that will accelerate the path to 9-10% annual growth and millions of added high quality jobs each year. These outcomes are vital, given that 72 per cent of India's population is below the age of 32, and the average age is only 29. We are the youngest country in the world, and tourism is the perfect fit for our future generations.

The recovery is sure to happen, given the leaps India was taking in these sectors from a global perspective. The World Economic Forum which conducts a biennial study across 14 vital parameters saw India having improved by a sizeable 12 places over just the past 2 years, improving to a ranking of 40th out of the 136 countries ranked in terms of Travel & Tourism Competitiveness. India is currently ranked 3rd in WTTC's Travel and Tourism Power Ranking, assessing 185 countries on the basis of 4 key sector ingredients-total travel and tourism GDP, foreign visitor spending, domestic spending, and travel and tourism capital investment.

The vastly improved position of India on the world travel and tourism map is no doubt extremely encouraging and impressive, but there is one aspect that makes this sector an essential cog to India's steep rise as a global powerhouse. Simply put, the sector has limitless potential and even today, is relatively untapped from the Indian perspective. An added aspect of the travel and tourism sector is that not only does the sector provide high quality jobs and countless synergies, but it also enhances investment into India, accelerates development, and showcases India's unique treasures to the rest of the world. All of this will resume when the situation

stabilizes globally. A long term systemic intervention that will greatly help accelerate tourism recovery post pandemic will be the Electronic Tourist Visa on arrival for tourists from 150 countries. During 2018, foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) in India stood at 10.56 million, achieving an impressive growth rate of 5.20 per cent year-on-year. This bodes well for the long term recovery.

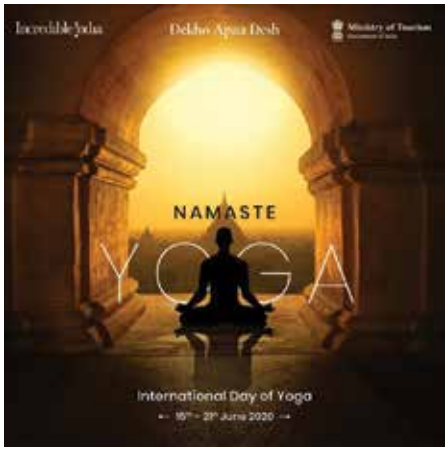
Major developments in infrastructure and transportation prior to the pandemic set in place avenues to allow access to many of India's hidden treasures. Of particular potential is the announcement in early July of the Railway Ministry commencing to the formal process of privatizing 109 routes to enhance the quality and efficiency of the process. Also in the planning stages is the launching of one hundred tourism oriented trains. The UDAN scheme has been a huge success. Also adding to the ease of access is the amount of work that has been done on highways, roads, and ports, highlighted by the Bharatmala and Sagarmala projects, with slated investment at INR 10 trillion and INR 8 trillion, respectively. A lot of work had also been done to enhance airport capacity and expand regional connectivity. Airports Authority of India has estimated capital spending targets of more than INR 20,000 crore by 2022, and more than 70 regional airports that are under-utilized will be developed. Privatization of airports is being undertaken with New Mumbai and Jewar Airports as private sector airports. The NextGen Airports for Bharat (NABH) Nirman, is also a game-changer, expected to increase the number of air passengers to 1 billion by 2030.

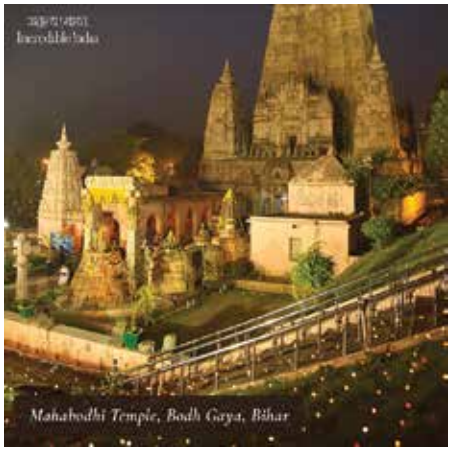
Systematic tourism promotion campaigns will be important in the near future. There are two which I have helmed, that brought the spotlight on India's immeasurable attractiveness for tourists. Incredible India and God's Own Country have blended the potential with awareness, allowing new dimensions for entrepreneurs including Indian entrepreneurs, global entities, domestic and foreign tourists, and the government machinery to work together and accelerate growth in the sector.

In his Independence Day speech last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the importance of making India a global hub for tourism, urging each citizen to visit 15 tourist destinations in India by 2022. With an inward focus on travel, we must convert this into an opportunity and advance our domestic tourism and hospitality sectors.

A domestic focused Incredible India 2.0 that showcases what India offers to Indians could be the sustainable growth plan for the sector. India has amazing diversity, from 38 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, to the Himalayas, to pristine beaches, and plenty of other natural assets. Besides that, India's massive achievement in tiger population conservation has led to a rise in the tiger population to 2967 in 2018 from 2226 in 2014. This is an increase of 741 tigers or nearly 25%, making India home to around 70% of the world's tiger population. Several other sanctuaries with varying habitats add to the allure of Indian tourism.

The Holistic Island Development plan conceptualized by the Government of India is one of the most ambitious and visionary policy directives ever made, focusing on the Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) and Lakshadweep Islands. It is multi-pronged, and addresses tourism-based projects that automatically create jobs for islanders, connectivity through key infrastructure projects, digital connectivity, green energy modules, desalination plants and effective waste management, betterment of social sectors, and enhanced verticals for employment and economy generation including through fisheries.

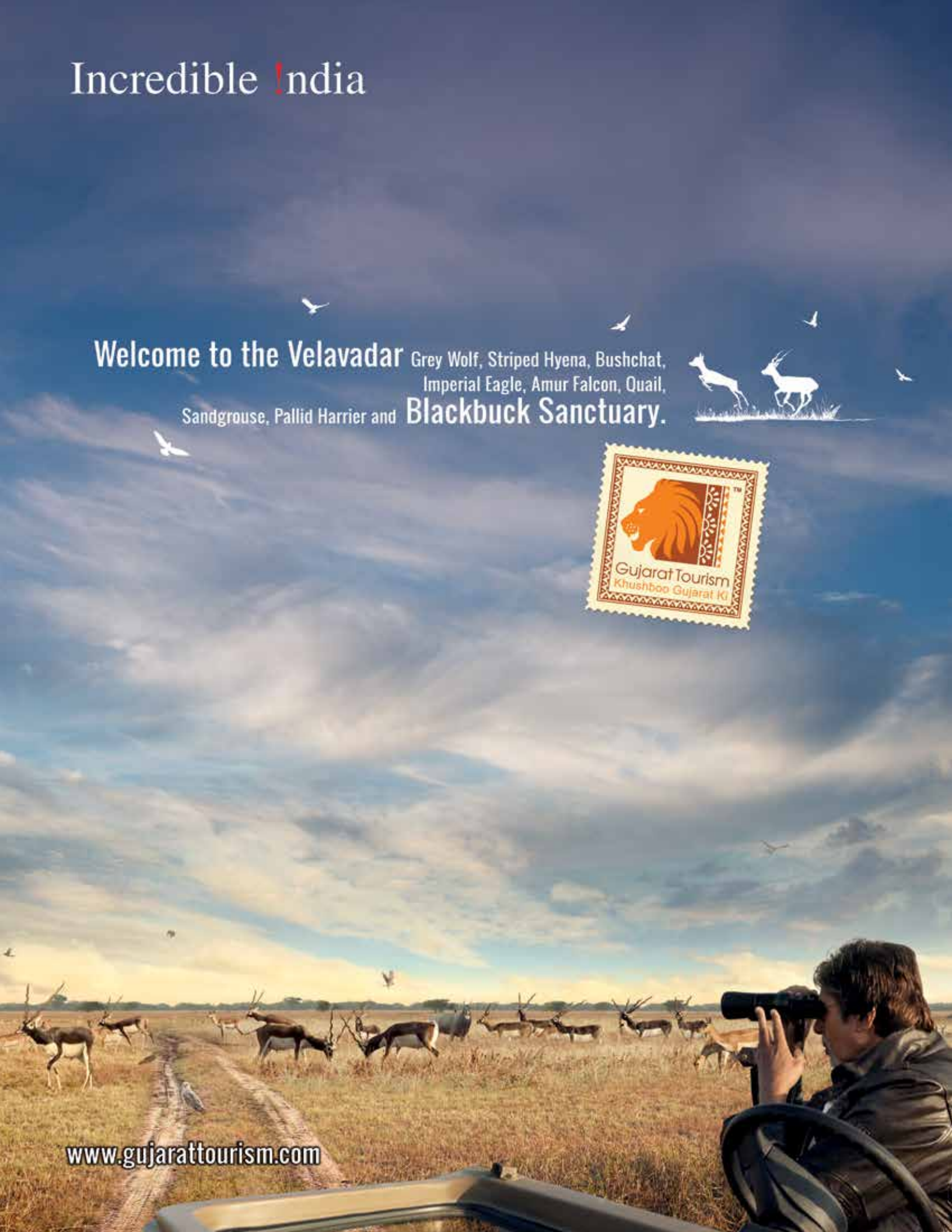




> The Holistic Island Development plan conceptualized by the Government of India is one of the most ambitious and visionary policy directives ever made, focusing on the Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) and Lakshadweep Islands.

India in just the last few years has launched plans for 100 smart cities, 50 metros, high speed trains, expanded waterways, and adding an unprecedented 36 km of urban roads and 170 km of rural roads each day before the pandemic. Once the reopening is complete and normalcy is somewhat restored, these will all be integral cogs of the domestic tourism plan. As India responsibly reopens, the opportunities for the sector to help growth will continue to increase, and the domestic demand will help build confidence in the sector's revival.The pandemic has only altered the progress, not stopped it. Travel and tourism will once again be the key driver for high quality employment and unparalleled sustainable growth for the next 30 years. It will be the fulcrum of a peerless India.

The author is CEO, NITI Aayog. Views are personal.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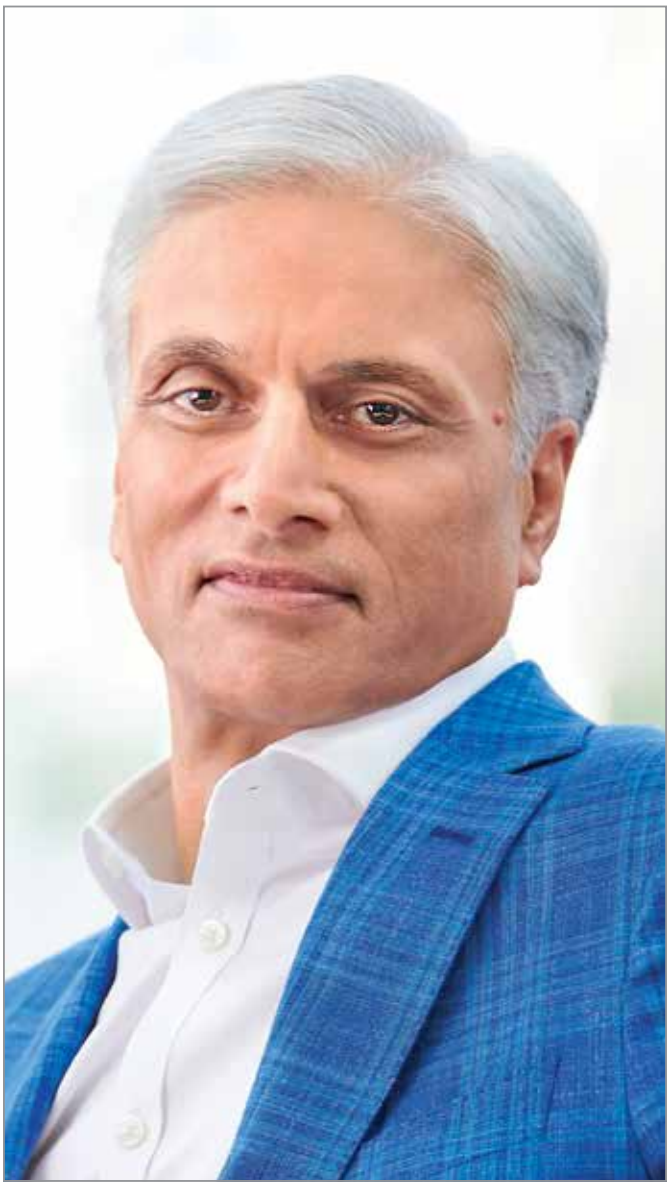
Ajay Bakaya

HOSPITALITY WILL SURVIVE ALL ODDS; WILL WELCOME GUESTS AGAIN TO THE BRIM

Mankind will refuse to be locked down forever



A seasoned hotelier, a trailblazer in hospitality, Ajay Bakaya, Managing Director, Sarovar Hotels, has played an integral part in the phenomenal growth story of Sarovar Hotels since its early inception to 90 hotels now. An alumni of Cornell-Essec, France, and product of Oberoi School of Hotel Management, he has worked extensively in France, Scotland, Australia, Africa and India.

His work mantra has been that sincerity and hard work will always give results.

He became the "CEO of the year" at the Hotelier India Awards 2017.

As I crested Belvedere Hill in Gurugram on my bicycle, I chuckled to myself. The 6 am weather mirrored our biz. Hot, sweaty, muggy, unmoving, devoid of action despite the push. I spotted my former running mates – Rashmi and Prince. Their presence offered welcome respite for banter. Then one casual question from Prince changed my world view!

"I'm sure you've found yourself a new line of work, Ajay? You can't go quiet and sedate beyond 3 months! Must be tough, eh??

This was the real wake up call, far more penetrating than my daily one at 4 am. You couldn't just roll out of this one. Knowing routine and the sun would clear away the cobwebs in your mind and in life.

For 42 years, I've worked in hotels. Good and bad, but always fun. Faced challenges, stepped up to them, changed gears, and, eventually – sometimes taking weeks or months – overcome them. Banquets for several hundred that involved counting wine glasses in your sleep, shepherding bikini clad Pan Am crew away from the pool and soldiers during a coup in Liberia, lengthy and painstaking union negotiations in India in the 80s, drumming up biz for 300 room luxury hotel in Hyderabad in 1988 when the market could barely support 100 keys; metamorphosis of work style with the relocation to Australia; a failed entrepreneurial experiment in Holland; the agony and ecstasy of birthing new hotels; Owner Operator debates; economy see-saws; personal issues. I've always managed to see them for what they were. Obstacles to be overcome. No second thoughts. But now, at a ripe age, the question is – do you, and can you – reinvent yourself and your biz?

> "The inn, the innkeeper, the fun, the frolic, the bonhomie, and the Sarovar brand of hospitality shall survive even these odds."

It's now over 100 days since we noticed Covid. A crippling 100 days for the world. Unsparing, without exception. The U.S. alone reported 55 K cases in the last 24 hours. Statistics continue to tumble and to alarm.

Personally, I am for an attitude of careful bravado. We were the first to reopen offices. We've kept our teams and our guests constantly engaged. We follow thermal scanners, hand sanitizers, masks and social distancing to perfection. But we go out and work. It's tough, it's unresponsive. But we continue chipping away. Our teams have begun to travel. Including me. Short car hauls. 200 – 300 km. If we don't travel – who will? We have experience and learned from Covid positive guests and employees. We know there may be more. We know how to handle these situations – patience, sensitivity, friendliness, caring. And definitely no stigma.

In these 3 to 4 months, Sarovar's contemporaries have all embraced old and new solutions. Have sat on tables on Zoom calls for analysis. Have conducted endless webinars and offered expert insights. Have trained our staff on Covid preparedness. Again and again. Have communicated with our guest databases with videos and with new offers. Have implemented deep cuts in salaries. Have even gone through the most painful experience of asking colleagues to leave. It's alleviated some problems. But a big solution is elusive.

The problem began mid-March. It's now July. Biz in hotels is dominantly Covid, or Covid related. Doctors, Caregivers. Patients. Returning Indians or Vande Bharat flights obliged to quarantine for 7 days. Seafarers following the same rules. Wherever Owners shunned this biz, hotels lie closed. Or perilously poised at 10 - 20% occupancy. Bleeding profusely. At current recovery levels, most hoteliers would be happy to see 50% occupancies in their hotels by November 2020. There's little expectation that any meaningful biz will fructify before October 2020. In the summer

loaded hill states of Himachal, Kashmir and Uttarakhand, hotels are likely to open only in summer 2021. A whole year lost.

It's way way beyond unprecedented. It's sweeping, tornado like, tsunami like biz destruction. Conventionally, hotels have thrived on hotel guests. Rooms, dining, weddings, events, receptions, product launches, book launches, conventions, celebrations. Accommodation, gastronomy, bonhomie, togetherness, cheer!

What does one turn to in a Covid lockdown, quarantine ruled scenario? Masked. Socially distanced. We have worked, and are working on several ideas. Some will mature. Others will falter.

> "Yes, this too shall pass. Hotels will welcome guests to the brim again. Mankind will refuse to be locked down forever. Vaccines will prevail. And our journals will record we're now Covid seasoned."

> "In the summer loaded hill states of Himachal, Kashmir and Uttarakhand, hotels are likely to open only in summer 2021. A whole year lost."

1. BRING IN RESTARUANT BRANDS. LET THEM RUN THE SHOW.

Many top notch standalone restaurants will bite the dust simply because of unaffordable rentals and low footfalls. This is an opportunity for hotels to adopt proven performers and to hand over hotel run restaurants to these players. They excel in this part of the biz. They'll bring in an established popular name, sworn loyal customers, and a keener desire to excel. Hotels have prime locations, ready state of art kitchens etc. There's strong dynamic potential in this marriage. Hotels have resident guests. So the biz has a 2 in 1 impact.

2. HOTELS FOR OFFICES

We're AAA located. We have back up services like no one else. We have flexible areas. Hotel rooms. Suites. Meeting rooms. Banquet halls. We can remove beds. Rearrange things. Waive deposits and monthly rentals. Rent by day, week, month. Pay as you go.

These stand out as 2 of the best new ideas today. I'm sure more will come as we go along.

I nudge my bicycle on the return leg downhill. As I gather speed and the trees whizz past, the wind kisses my face and blows into my chest. The heat evaporates. There's a certain flying, fleeting calm. The world's in balance. It could be a big hill, even a lofty mountain. Once you go over the summit or a pass, with some learnings and a lot of respect, there's always the fun downhill on the other side.

Yes, this too shall pass. Hotels will welcome guests to the brim again. Mankind will refuse to be locked down forever. Vaccines will prevail. And our journals will record we're now Covid seasoned.

The inn, the innkeeper, the fun, the frolic, the bonhomie, and the Sarovar brand of hospitality shall survive even these odds. ■

Incredible !ndia
Spot the Great White Pelican, the Little Egret,
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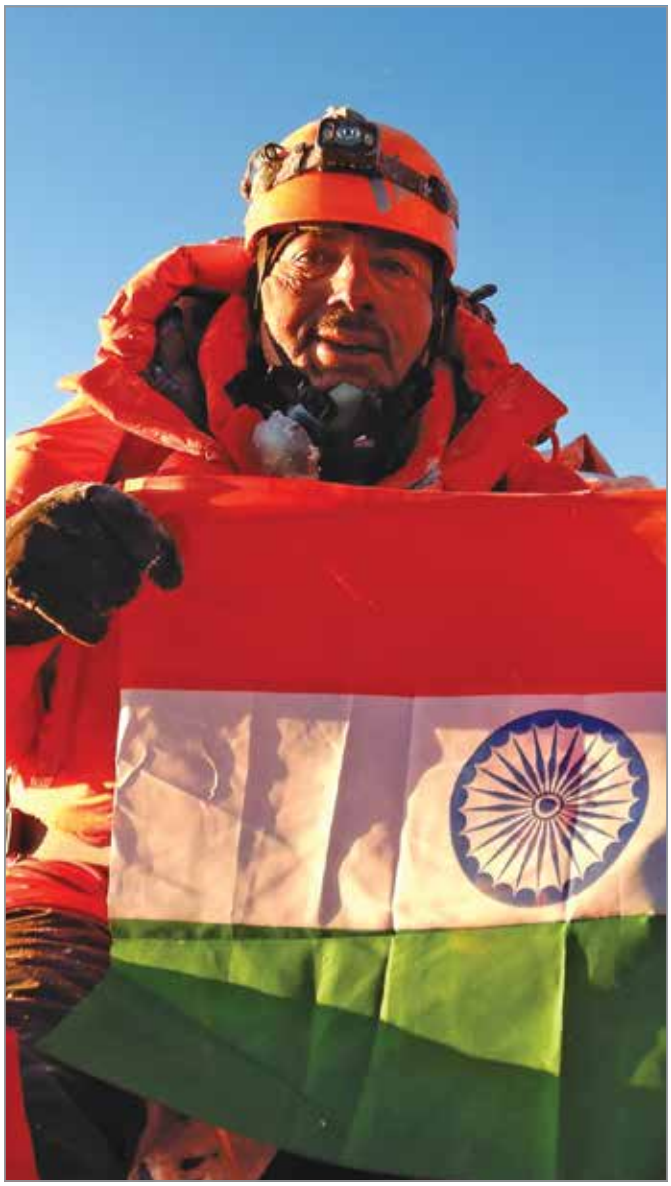
Ajeet Bajaj

WE WILL BOUNCE BACK LEAN AND MEAN; USE THIS TIME TO CONSOLIDATE OUR PRODUCT

Our vision must be to target 60 million by 2030



Ajeet Bajaj completed the Polar Trilogy by skiing to the North Pole, South Pole & across Greenland, has scaled Mount Everest and won a bronze medal in the national games, one silver and two bronze medals in international rafting competitions.

Ajeet is MD, Snow Leopard Adventures, three times National Tourism Awardee. He was Chairperson, Camping & Caravan Tourism Policies for Government of India; Member, Global Sustainable Tourism Council and served two terms as President, ATOAI. Ajeet is a Padma Shri awardee and Hall of Fame by IATO & ATOAI.

Coronavirus pandemic has hit us all hard. It has knocked the wind out of our sails. The biggest crisis of our times, it has become a VUCA world; there is volatility, uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity of an unprecedented magnitude, both in our lives, our organisations, and the tourism and travel industry.

"It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; not the strongest; but the one that is able to adapt to and to adjust best to the changing environment," Charles Darwin, Origin of Species (1859).

In the Indian Armed Forces, they say "when the going gets tough, the tough get going." As individuals, organisations and the tourism, travel & hospitality industry, we have to get going, be resilient, retain our sangfroid and adapt quickly to survive.

At a personal level, this has been a time for rejuvenation at all levels, mental, physical and even spiritual – spending quantity time with the family, getting into peak physical condition, working on a book, doing two to three motivational talks a week, going back to playing the saxophone (my family has acquired robust earplugs), physical distancing but staying socially close with family and friends. My daughter Deeya and I were to embark on a mountaineering expedition to Mt. Denali in Alaska, the last of our Seven Summits, the highest mountain on every continent, but, alas, we will have to wait for another year.

With daughter Deeya on top of Mount Everest.

> "My daughter Deeya and I were to embark on a mountaineering expedition to Mt Denali in Alaska, but alas we will have to wait for another year."

But underlying all this is the anxiety, driven by no revenues, to ensure that my extended family, the Snow Leopard Adventures team is taken care of and our organisation stays afloat during these tumultuous times.

The year 2020-21 was to be our best ever at Snow Leopard Adventures, with an anticipated growth of 30-40 per cent. I am now psyching myself to 'go for it,' with the same passion, zeal and spirit with which I started Snow Leopard Adventures, thirty years ago.

Of course, the difference being that I have gathered a bit of experience along the way and a carefully nurtured team on board to support the effort. As an organisation, we are on survival mode, preparing for revival. We know that we have to adapt, be fast, focused and flexible in the new situation. We are staying positive and drawing strength from our team, looking at our post-Covid-19 protocols and SOPs, keeping in touch with our guests and suppliers, leveraging technology, working on getting relief from government schemes for MSMEs and working on a few rock-solid Corona-proof business ideas. Managing finance and HR have been the biggest challenges. We do know that the best way to beat the 'Covid Blues' and 'Cabin Fever' is by venturing out, to the 'great outdoors' and we are gearing up for the bounce back. We are determined to not just survive but adapt quickly and thrive in the 'new normal.' The one thing that we will definitely work on is building reserves, cutting flab and bouncing back as a 'lean, mean adventure tourism machine,' since this situation can happen again.

As a country, our national dream of being a five trillion-dollar economy by 2022 can only fructify if we focus on and leverage our immense service sector potential, especially the travel and tourism industry, like the 'Make in India' campaign.

India's ranking in the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019, is 34 out of 140 countries listed.

We have to endeavour to be in the first ten by 2025. The ranking is based on 14 pillars on the index, and we must focus on each and every pillar to get our tourism act together.

The National Policy on 'Tourism Standards,' covering the 14 pillars of the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index: A National Tourism Standards Policy, implemented across India with a tremendous emphasis on health, safety, security and sustainability in the policy is the urgent need of the hour. A state and destination-wise audit by a credible international organisation would go a long way in the sustainable development of the tourism sector. Central funding for the states should be based on a minimum rating in the audit process. State governments must be encouraged to set up inter-ministerial teams to work on harnessing this immense potential.

The synergy between state departments is of paramount importance. While many state governments are proactive and make the entire country proud, the lackadaisical approach of other states has led to unstructured and non-sustainable tourism development. It is time to make the Ministry of Tourism more robust with a larger

budget, additional resources and manpower to enlarge the ambit of the industry both at the central and state levels.

Visitor Experience in India: As per Indian Travel industry estimates, we have approximately two hundred products that are giving us 80 per cent of our business. We need to focus on these products and make them the best on the planet. Let us not spend too much time and effort on advertising 'Incredible India' but make the experience speak for itself – a safe, clean, happy and transformational experience. The 'visitor experience' in India has to be taken to the next level, to the next orbit, and this is our low-hanging fruit. The travel infrastructure, health and hygiene, road, rail and air connectivity, has to be at par with international standards, showcasing India as an emerging power and not a third-world country.

As an example, the road to Kumarakom from Cochin in Kerala – one of the jewels in Indian tourism – the backwaters – is in a terrible state, with more potholes and fewer roads!

After 'Swachh Bharat,' 'Surakshit Bharat' is the need of the hour. India has to become the safest place in the world for travellers, especially women. Media campaigns, sensitising the local population and administration, having tourism in the school curriculum and tourism police to assist tourists would go a long way in sending the right message to potential tourists all over the world. As a country, we must leverage our rich natural, cultural and historical heritage and identify 100 new products and develop them to international standards in a sustainable manner, while being mindful of the carrying capacity.

Ease of travel in India: India has to be a 'hassle-free travel experience.' The online visa process needs an urgent review, entry and exit from India, post-Covid-19 protocols, safety and security of our travellers, road, rail and air travel infrastructure, health and hygiene, have to add up to make 'Incredible India' a seamless travel experience.

Ease of 'doing travel, tourism and hospitality business' in India: While India's ranking in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index has improved to 63 out of the 190 countries surveyed, it has to be a national priority to improve our rating in the ease of doing travel, tourism and hospitality business in India.

Being a part of the travel industry is a nightmare. Presently, India is possibly amongst the most challenging countries on the planet for being a part of the travel and tourism industry. We have to simplify procedures, move away from the license raj, have uniform systems and procedures across all states, online time-bound permissions, incentivise entrepreneurs and rationalise taxes.

Leveraging our immense natural heritage: In India, we have every conceivable geographical terrain. We are a global biodiversity hotspot, have 73 per cent of a culturally diverse Himalayan range, rich fauna and flora. The one thing missing is a National Sustainable Tourism Policy leading to immense issues with frequent changes in rules and tariffs, as also court cases and the National Green Tribunal's interventions, mostly to ban activities. As an example, the recent ban on camping in Bugyals in Uttarakhand has led to immense heartburn amongst tour operators and tourists.

There are issues of 'over-tourism' and carrying capacity that need to be addressed urgently through a National Sustainable Tourism Policy. The UNWTO Global sustainable tourism criteria must be adopted in letter and spirit across the country, as part of the policy.

Adventure Tourism: Adventure travel is a $683 billion industry globally, showing a 21 per cent Compound Annual Growth rate since 2012. Given our huge potential vis-a-vis adventure and sustainable tourism, we can easily double our inbound figures, presently at 10 million tourists (UNWTO) in the next three years through Adventure Tourism alone. According to a Neilson report for the Ministry of Tourism and industry estimates, Adventure tourism in India is presently an INR 2000 crore industry (pre-Covid 19) and is ranked 96 out of 163

countries in the 2019 Adventure Travel Development Index of the Adventure Travel Trade Association, USA and George Washington University. The 10 Pillars of Adventure Tourism Market Competitiveness include Government Policies, Supporting Sustainable Development, Safety, Natural Resources, Health, Adventure Resources, Entrepreneurship, Humanitarian, Infrastructure, Cultural Resources, Adventure Image/Brand.

> "India needs a National Adventure Tourism policy with clear guidelines, online processes and an enabling environment for investors."

A few suggestions to make India an adventure hotspot as popular as New Zealand by 2025:

1. The National Adventure Tourism Task Force must be revived to work on the ten pillars of Adventure Tourism Development Index, involving all stakeholders and state governments.

2. India needs a National Adventure Tourism policy with clear guidelines, online processes and an enabling environment for investors. This policy must be adopted and implemented by all state governments.

3. It must be made mandatory for all adventure tour companies in India to be registered by the state or central government. Presently only 1200 adventure tour operators out of approximately 15,000 operators are registered in the country. Soft loans and GST waivers for registered adventure tour operators for three years would go a long way in bringing all operators into the mainstream and streamlining adventure tourism in the country.

4. **Risk Management:** The 3 Gs for risk management in adventure tourism is critical to realising this dream, i.e. guidelines, guides and gear.

• **Guidelines**: Indian Adventure Tourism Guidelines of the Adventure Tour Operators Association must be adopted and strictly implemented across the country, in letter and spirit.

• **Guides**: Skill development, with courses in adventure tourism and courses for adventure and nature guides by Govt-run IITTMs, will help with the overall development of the sector. Training modules to train and upskill all adventure guides in the country in adventure tourism and related skills, such as first aid and CPR, communication skills, F&B, guest handling, soft skills, search and rescue will go a long way in improving our image as a prime adventure tourism destination.

• **Gear**: Until India can produce its own gear at par with international standards, tax incentives and duty-free import of equipment would help operators to ensure that the best equipment is used for adventure.

5. A senior government official of the rank of JS should be incharge of adventure tourism at the centre, and state governments must be encouraged to have senior officers to support the development of adventure and nature tourism in the states, in a systematic and sustainable manner.

At the state level, a synergy between Tourism and Forest Departments is a must for sustainable growth of the tourism sector.

Search and rescue and insurance for adventure travel need to be addressed urgently.

6. **Opening New Areas:** Indian Natural Heritage and Adventure Tourism holds immense potential for economic development and job creation in the remote, far-flung regions of the country. We must gauge carrying capacity, improve infrastructure and accessibility, including road and rail connectivity and invite entrepreneurs to invest with incentives. Opening and promoting areas like Kargil, Nubra, Pithoragarh, Spiti, Pasighat and areas like the inner sanctuary of the Nanda Devi sanctuary, which was closed in 1983, in a limited, responsible manner, will put India in the global spotlight and help boost tourism in the remote regions of the country.

7. **GST Holiday:** Post the pandemic, one of the ways to grow this sector in rural/remote parts of India and channelise local employment is to incentivise investors' interest by providing a GST tax holiday to Adventure Tour Operators. Extending tax advantages will also align with the development objective of most of these regions, which are either in the hill states, border states, coastal areas or other areas which need economic development and alignment with the rest of India.

8. **Air Connectivity, Accessibility and Infrastructure Development in the Adventure Hubs in India:** Opening airstrips in the Himalayan region will make India a year-round destination. Improving/ launching air connectivity to the Nubra Valley, Kargil, Pithoragarh, Chilyanisaur, Gauchar (in Uttarakhand), Spiti and Arunachal Pradesh and developing highways and introducing fast trains to reduce travel time to popular adventure hubs of the country will give a much-needed boost to adventure tourism in the country.

In India, we claim that 'Atithi Devo Bhava' is ingrained in our very ethos. The figures have a different story to tell. If China can get its act together and attract 63 million tourists per year (UNWTO 2019), India, with only 10 million, can do much better! As the tourism and travel industry, we must have big, audacious dreams and plan accordingly. Our vision must be to target 60 million inbound travellers annually to India by 2030. We need to have the national and political will to drive this. Post pandemic, the Indian Tourism and Travel industry must change with fresh, out-of-the-box thinking and propel Indian tourism to the next orbit.

"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday's logic." – Peter Drucker ■

Aman Kapoor

THE CRISIS HAS SHOWN THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING NIMBLE AND AGILE

Some changes will erode, others will stay, as the crisis abates

Aman Kapoor is the CEO of Airport Land Development, GMR Airports Ltd. He oversees the group's real estate initiatives across all GMR airports and spearheads initiatives on real estate strategy, land monetisation, property development, joint-ventures and partnerships.

Aman has been responsible for developing Delhi's Aerocity into a global destination and curating Aerocity into Delhi's new centre of dining, art and culture. He continues to lead the group's real estate vision of expanding Aerocity in Delhi and developing new Aerocity-like projects at Hyderabad and Goa.

> A major hallmark of successful companies is their ability of early detection of changes in consumer behaviour and responding accordingly, to take advantage of those changes.

Covid-19 has brought about a global crisis hitherto unseen and unknown to us. Normal life came to a grinding halt across continents in the wake of the lockdown implemented in most countries to contain the virus. International borders got sealed, which delivered a severe blow to the global economy. Consequently, one of the most severely impacted sectors was Travel & Tourism. According to UNWTO, international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) worldwide saw a 44 per cent decrease in January-April 2020. As the movement of people got restricted, occupancies dipped to historic lows across hotels. Aviation and hospitality sectors were staring at a major crisis. With the deepening of their crisis, companies in these sectors were posed with a greater challenge of meeting these fixed expenses.

DIAL, as a company, is uniquely positioned in the travel and tourism sector. Besides operating the largest airport in the country, it is also the destination of India's largest hospitality district. While, along with our partners, we have benefitted from the tremendous growth of the sector in the past decade, we are also sharing the pain as both aviation and hospitality sector are at the receiving end of the Covid-19.

History has witnessed that social crises tend to change attitudes, policies and demand. For example, World War II increased women's participation in the workforce, and the 9/11 attack reshaped transportation and security policies. Experts across the globe have been crystal ball gazing on how the world will look like post the Corona. COVID-19, being a black swan event of the century, will leave its dark imprint on the world's social, economic behaviour on the other side of the pandemic.

The uncertainty prevailing due to the crisis has led to consumers cutting down on their discretionary spending. There has also been a significant rise in spending on digital channels. Considering people's emphasis on health, hygiene and safety, the hospitality sector will witness a paradigm shift in its functioning to meet this expectation. We already see initial signs of this in leading hospitality chains. They have come up with new programs, designed around hygiene to ensure a very high level of safety at their properties. Not only this, safety and hygiene initiatives are now a major part of the marketing communications of hotels as they try to reposition themselves by differentiating on the basis of safety.

As the graph of the virus is slowly flattening, gradual unlocking of economic activities has commenced. However, safety concerns are proving to be a major dampener as people are apprehensive about moving out, except for essential purposes. As a company with major stakes in the travel sector, we have been trying to convince people that it is safe to move out and travel. Short videos, showcasing our safety and hygiene initiatives at Delhi Airport as well as the Aerocity,are being circulated on various social media platforms to instil confidence among travellers.

As human beings are social animals, travel, tourism, and hospitality will definitely rebound but in a phased manner. In business travel, day trips like client visits and site visits will return first, but MICE is expected to take a long time to recover. In the leisure segment, staycation will become a preferred option to escape from the mundane lockdown life, that people have been experiencing. In addition, domestic and close-to-home travel will be the first to recover while long-haul will take time to come back. We can probably look towards China, to get some cue on potential trends in the sector as people start to travel. Four major trends being observed in China are – Preference for close-to-home and staycations; most people who are travelling are young and 'non-family' persons; international economy hotel chains and local boutique hotels are the most preferred category since they combine reasonable prices with comfort; Self-driven tours to less crowded nature-related places is the most popular form of leisure travel. Economies such as Italy and Spain, which are primarily tourism-driven, have also opened up for domestic as well as foreign tourists.

Though people will start to travel, occupancies in hotels will take time to return to pre-Covid levels. But any crisis propels the human need to innovate in order to survive, and thus we witness major innovations during trying times. The hospitality industry cannot remain an exception, and a re-imagining of the business model is required. A major hallmark of successful companies is their ability of early detection of changes in consumer behaviour and responding accordingly, to take advantage of those changes. Some suggestions include – designing programs around 'staycation' to attract the 'rubber tire' population, creative pricing models to cross-sell amenities and capitalising on emerging trends like online food delivery and co-working spaces. Hotels should also ensure not to lose their loyal customers. For this purpose, they need to be generous in terms of cancellation policies and refunds and continue communication with customers through digital channels.

As efforts continue to contain the virus, sooner or later normalcy will once again prevail upon us. There will be changes that will erode with the crisis, and there will be changes that will stay with us. For example, contactless check-ins have truly transformed travel experiences permanently by making it more seamless and smoother. Hotels are finding new ways to add a human touch and personalise experiences for travellers as some of the old ways will have to be foregone in post-Covid world. These changes will strengthen the sector and make it more capable of withstanding any headwinds in the future. The crisis has shown us the importance of being nimble and agile. Prompt response to changing dynamics is a must-have strength for the survival of all enterprises, including hotels. However, hotels that will fully exhibit this character will emerge from this crisis stronger and sure-footed to take advantage of the expected post-Covid growth in the travel and tourism sector. ■

Anil Bhandari

CONFIDENT OF THE INDUSTRY'S RESILIENCE; TEAMWORK IS KEY

Let us stoke the fire in our bellies, tighten our belts and move ahead

Anil Bhandari is Chairman, AB Smart Concepts, with 52 years experience in managing and operating hotels, travel companies and turning around hotel enterprise.

Worked as:

- Advisor, ITC Ltd – Hotels, Travel, Tourism and Real Estate
- Chairman and Managing Director, India Tourism Development Corporation
- Managing Director, JHM Interstate Hotels
- Managing Director, Travel House
- Managing Director, Hotel Corporation of India

Author of three Books:

- Tourism an Economic Industry
- Top Chefs, Top Recipes
- Art Of Plating

No phenomenon has struck so much fear in recent times as Covid-19. It has dramatically changed lives the world over. Our generation has faced many natural and human-made disasters the years, but the nature and scale of Covid-19 are unprecedented.

This invisible enemy can strike anyone anywhere. It is this unknown and unpredictable factor about this virus that makes everyone feel very vulnerable and fearful.

There is no individual, company or industry that has not been impacted by this menace.

As an individual, my freedom to move out of the house has been curtailed. I am constantly concerned about the welfare of my near and dear ones. All my social and professional activities are on hold. I have to keep ensuring that everyone around me follows all the necessary protocols, and everything that enters my house is properly disinfected in Corona Oven. We are living in a constant state of apprehension.

> "We have realised that we need to discard outdated systems and adopt new ones. We also need to re-evaluate our priorities."

On the flip side, the rushed and hectic life has given way to a relaxed, laid back routine. I am able to spend more quality time with my family, watch movies and listen to my favourite *ghazals*. I am also helping my wife with her social service at the NAB Centre for Blind Women. We are arranging the collection and distribution of rations and medicines to the blind and disabled, living in the far-flung areas of Delhi.

My consultancy work is presently on hold, except for what can be done online. We are increasingly relying on digital media to overcome the physical limitations created on account of the Virus. We are participating in many webinars and discussing the problems created by Covid-19 for the hospitality industry and mulling over how to resolve them.

As regards the industry, we all know that the hospitality industry has been most severely impacted by Covid-19. The short-term impact is obvious, with businesses at a standstill and no incomes to meet overhead expenses. Many hotel companies, particularly those owned by individuals, are already in the red. Many others are on the verge of closure.

Post lockdown, much of the staff have gone back to their respective native places due to lack of work and job loss. Some of the staff have had to take salary cuts, and the salary payments have been deferred in some cases. The probationary staff has generally been dismissed or asked to go on leave without pay. There is all around despondency and gloom in the industry.

> Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh are a tourist's paradise. Similarly, the North Eastern states have a great deal to offer for the tourists.

The long-term impact depends on the following factors:

- The duration of the Covid-19 crisis
- The time it takes to find and make available a drug or vaccine for the virus
- Measures taken by state governments and the central government to provide financial and logistical support to the industry
- How soon the state borders are opened for free movement of air, rail, road transport to take place
- Other countries opening their borders, allowing international travel
- How much confidence will the industry be able to instil among clients and customers that all protocols are being followed to ensure their safety
- How soon adequate staff will be available to run full-scale operations and how trained and motivated they are to cope up with the tough and changed scenario
- How soon people learn to live with Covid-19 and manage to keep themselves safe by following all precautions
- Any new inventions and techniques that will help in improving operations
- The speed at which the industry can devise new ways to run businesses and be in sync with the new normal.

The Covid-19 crisis has triggered unlearning, learning old lessons afresh as well as new learning. We have realised that we need to discard outdated systems and adopt new ones. We also need to re-evaluate our priorities.

As an individual, I have realised that any amount of planning can go haywire in a trice. I have understood the importance that we give to certain things is inconsequential in the bigger scheme of life. I realise that family and good health are the two most important things in life. I have pondered over how ravaging the environment had cost us dearly.

As a hotelier, I have re-learnt the following lessons:

- Becoming overambitious and getting into a debt trap by taking huge loans for expanding one's business is unwise. Due caution should be exercised while taking investment and business decisions.
- Having sufficient liquidity is very important. One should have enough cushion for any unexpected expenditure and calamitous situations.
- It helps to brainstorm with one's staff and associates to find ways to tackle the crisis.
- One should have a human face in a crisis. There should be empathy and understanding for the staff and service providers. One can face the crisis better together as a team.
- One should explore techniques and technology that can assist in making one's operations cheaper, speedier and give better results.
- The credibility and reputation of an enterprise stand in good stead even during a crisis. Satisfied customers will come back to you.

As regards the industry, the lessons that emerge are:

- Concern for the environment should be paramount for the industry.
- Sanitation and hygiene cannot be compromised.
- The industry should keep innovating and adopting technology for ease of operations. Knowledge should be shared by all.

The general view is that the cure for corona or a vaccine is not likely to be available for at least another 18 months. The WHO is saying that the worst is yet to come. It is, thus, a fluid, uncertain and unpredictable scenario.

The challenge bigger that controlling corona will be to check the rapid downward slide of the economy. Reviving the economy, which is presently in shambles, to acceptable levels may take half a decade or more unless some fortuitous circumstances intervene.

Hence, we need to have a roadmap for the interim period. The road ahead is going to be uphill and rocky for everyone. Covid-19 has brought in its wake a lot of devastation. Lockdowns to minimise the spread of Covid-19 has derailed social, business and education systems and strained the health system.

Governments and the people have resigned themselves to the fact that we have to live with Covid-19 until a cure is found, or a vaccine is freely available. A senior doctor has counselled "Do not live with Fear. Live with Caution".

Various governments have started opening up to tourists. Europe has opened up for tourists within Europe. Back home, Goa, Gurgaon some other states have opened hotels for tourists. The restrictions on intra-state tourists have been lifted. Thus, gradually, the tourism and hospitality industry is opening up at least in non-containment zones. The operations will, however, continue to remain restricted until the entire transport system, that is, rail, air and metros are operational.

Hotels and restaurants will be facing several problems in reopening. A lot of maintenance work will be required to restart the plant and machinery as the hotel properties have been lying closed for 5 months. The entire property will have to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. The kitchen equipment and restaurant seating will have to be rearranged as per new norms of social distancing.

Seamless no-touch checks-in and check-out system, QR code touchless menus will have to be introduced. New SOPs will have to devised and implemented for avoiding all contact between the

staff and guests. New gadgetry like Corona Oven – which uses UV rays technology – will have to be installed for the disinfection of various items and areas.

Marketing of the properties will have to be taken up afresh upon their re-launching. Promotional campaigns will have to be undertaken, of reassuring the customers that the property is operational and totally safe.

All the preparations mentioned above, will cost a substantial amount. Hoteliers are already cash strapped. This additional financial burden will add to their woes.

The availability of adequate staff will be another problem area. Regrouping the staff will be a challenge for the hotels. The migrant staff that have left for their native places may or may not return. The existing staff are likely to be demoralised and demotivated. New staff may have to be recruited and trained as per the demands of the new protocols.

> “Change ushers in a new order. Adversity gives birth to inventions. Let us accept the change and adapt to the new normal.”

There are likely to be takeovers and mergers of properties and, these will be a distressed sale at this stage; though buyers will be difficult to find. There will be price wars. In my view, this should be avoided, as everyone will be starting from the zero-base.

International tourist traffic cannot be expected for quite some time in India. International flights are yet to resume. Even after flights start operating, people will be scared of travelling to third-world countries.

Last year, around 25 million Indian citizens travelled abroad. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has exhorted the people of our country to travel within our country as there is so much to see here that they have never seen before. The Ministry of Tourism has launched a campaign ‘Dekho Apna Desh’ to promote domestic tourism. In a country of 1.3 billion people, domestic travel can be the key to the revival of the travel and tourism industry.

States like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh have breathtaking views of the majestic Himalayas and several mighty rivers. They have the holiest of shrines, mystical yoga ashrams, diverse flora and fauna, various adventure sports and tiny hamlets against the backdrop of exquisite natural beauty and quaint cultures and customs. These regions are a tourist paradise. Similarly, the North-Eastern states have a great deal to offer to the tourists.

Unfortunately, there is an acute shortage of room capacity and other infrastructure at these destinations. The constraints in developing these destinations are lack of finance and various legal hurdles. States and the central government will have to make substantial budgetary allocations to develop these destinations.

They will also have to remove restrictions on the purchase of land by outsiders in states like Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and some North-Eastern states for private players to come in. Governments will also have to change the archaic labour laws. The central government has brought some reforms in this area, but much more action is required. The resistance from some states to the reforms also has to be tackled. The state governments that want tourism to flourish in their states should create Tourism Parks and lease out land to all Indians to invest in their states and not only the domiciles. Most importantly, Central and State governments should grant the ‘industry’ status to the hotel industry so that the investors can get loans at lower rates and other benefits. The governments should also grant tax holidays and other fiscal incentives to the investors.

The factors that will impact the choice of a hotel for a guest will be cleanliness, sanitisation, hygiene and social distancing. Hotels that adapt to the new protocol as per the government guidelines and get safety audit done by reputed agencies will be preferred.

Hotels that have embraced the latest technology and are offering touch-less services will definitely have the edge over others. Also, properties that attract more guests will be those that provide wholesome entertainment, fun activities, health programmes and memorable experiences. It will not be very long before international tourists, too, begin flocking to India.

I wish to point out that this is not the first time that our industry has had to face a crisis hitting our business hard. I have personally faced tough challenges after the 1984 riots, the serial bomb blasts in Mumbai in 1993 and the Plague in Surat in 1994. After all such incidents, countries had issued advisories to their countrymen on not to visit India. As a result, our occupancies had plunged drastically. However, with hard work, teamwork, determination and a positive attitude, we managed to come out of every crisis and went on to do much better than before.

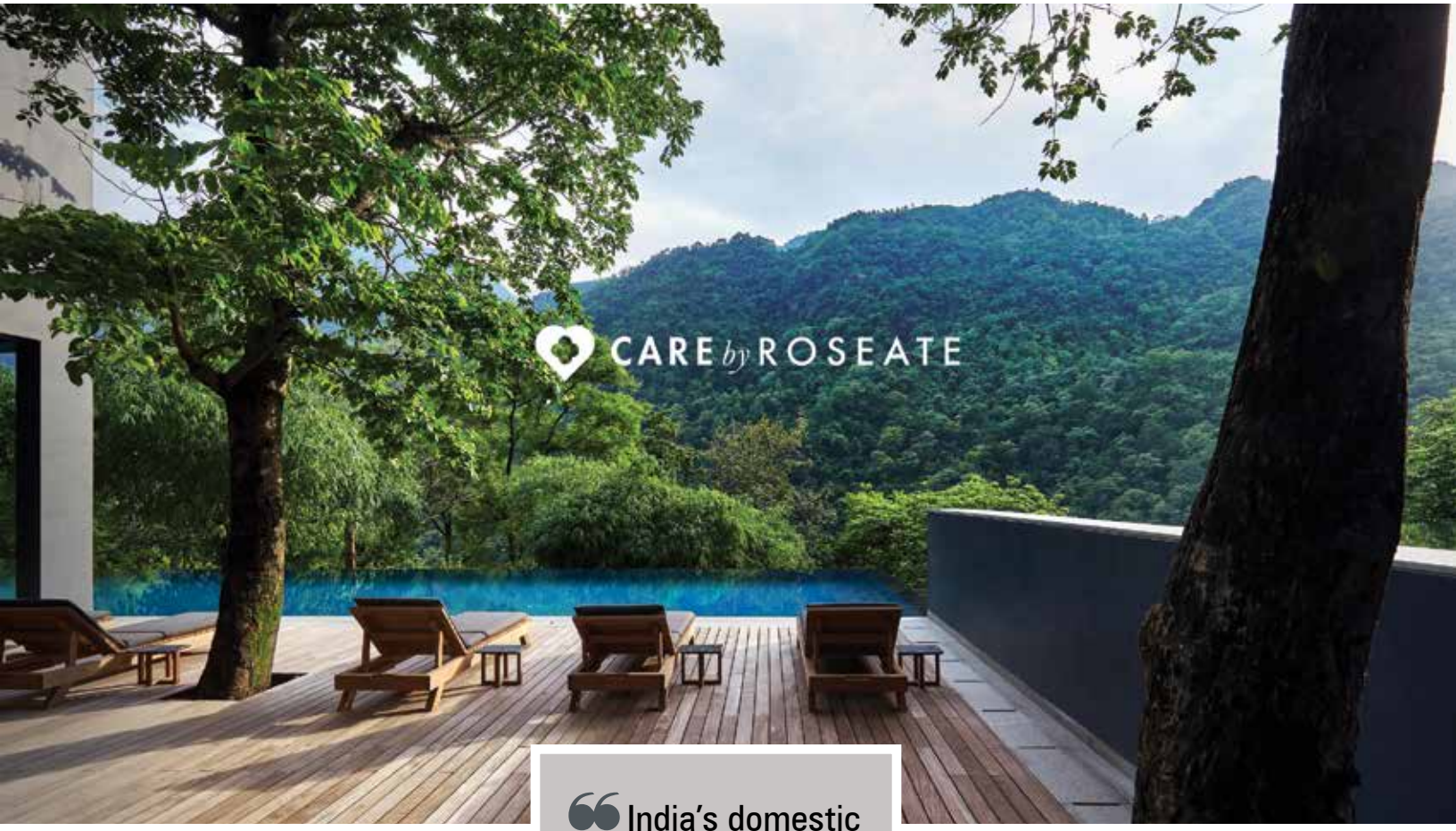
No doubt the Covid-19 crisis is unprecedented in scale, but there is no need to lose heart. In fact, with the right attitude, one can emerge stronger and wiser after a crisis. Change ushers in a new order. Adversity gives birth to inventions. Let us accept the change and adapt to the new normal. Let us seize this opportunity to discard faulty practices and adopt new systems that will be good for us, our country, the world and the coming generations. Let us meet the challenge head-on with a positive attitude, indomitable spirit, grit and determination. Let us stoke the fire in our bellies, tighten our belts and move ahead. ◘

Ankur Bhatia

CLOUD BASED PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS WOULD BECOME THE NEW ORDER

Expect new normals and also new trends in hospitality services

A prolific and outstanding leader, Dr. Bhatia is credited with bringing in the Amadeus brand to the Indian sub-continent in 1994. He spearheaded the growth for Bird Group in the hospitality sector through Roseate Hotels & Resorts. He launched the country's first natural and perennial indoor ice-skating rink and café – iSKATE, and Bird Electric, offering a portfolio of unique new age mobility vehicles. He also opened a IT Solutions & Services company in Dubai, Bird Technologies. In 2017, Dr. Bhatia established BirdApps, an on-demand market place for the travel, hospitality and lifestyle sectors. A member of CII's National Committee on Aviation, Infrastructure and Luxury Retail, he served from 2006 - 2007 as the youngest elected Chairman for the Delhi State Council for CII. He was conferred upon with the title of Honorary Consulate General of the Republic of Liberia in India.



> India's domestic travel and tourism sector is powerful in itself and offers a lot to those who have an urge to explore the unexplored.

These are unprecedented times for everybody across the globe. There is no such country or economy which has not been affected by the pandemic and no wonder, the world is up against something no one could ever imagine. Due to the present COVID-19 induced crisis, the travel, tourism and hospitality sector is facing a situation which is both unique and challenging. Among the service sectors, travel & hospitality have been worst hit. In India particularly, travel & tourism account for a nearly 10% of GDP and supports employment of a huge workforce in the jobs related to the sector. All of this has got severely impacted due to the pandemic situation. Having said that, we have a very strong domestic market which would be further enhanced and strengthened since international travel would be restricted for some more time. Due to the lockdown, people have been shut down in the house for nearly 3 months, and as we are now moving towards the unlock mode, and as the situation gets better and starts to open up, people would be keen to travel again and look for destinations within the country. India's domestic travel and tourism sector is powerful in itself and offers a lot to those who have an urge to explore the unexplored. Since travel has become an important part of everyone's life, we are hopeful that the sector could bounce back quickly. For mapping a revival of the sector, we would need the government to support and help by increasing such opportunities and creating an environment where the domestic spend is encouraged among the travellers.

We are confident that together we can overcome this situation and move ahead.

This situation is challenging for the whole world, industry and is not unique to a company. This pandemic has hit businesses world over and everybody in their own way is working, innovating and devising strategies on a nearly daily basis in order to survive and move towards a quick recovery.

Life is said to be an evolving learning process and we have been thriving to work towards jump starting the business with a set of innovative ideas.

As of now the pandemic is far from over and as a learning we have realized the need to evolve and to adapt to the changing needs of the travellers and guests. Under our new initiative 'Care by Roseate', we have completely remodelled our standard operating procedures towards providing greater care and ensuring a safe environment for our cherished guests. In the times to come, touchless check-in, staying and dining are going to be paramount.

> We are working on touchless dine in process with the help of our brand Bird Apps and minimum contact laundry services by Launderette.

We are working on touchless dine in process with the help of our brand Bird Apps and minimum contact laundry services by Launderette, an app for laundry services. For instance, for dining, the guest while booking a table can see the menu and order from it. The guest shares her location with the hotel so that the hotel staff starts preparing the food when the guest is enroute to the hotel restaurant. Guests also have an option to add more items while they are enjoying their meal at the hotel. At the end, the bill comes on the App, and the payment can be done via credit cards.

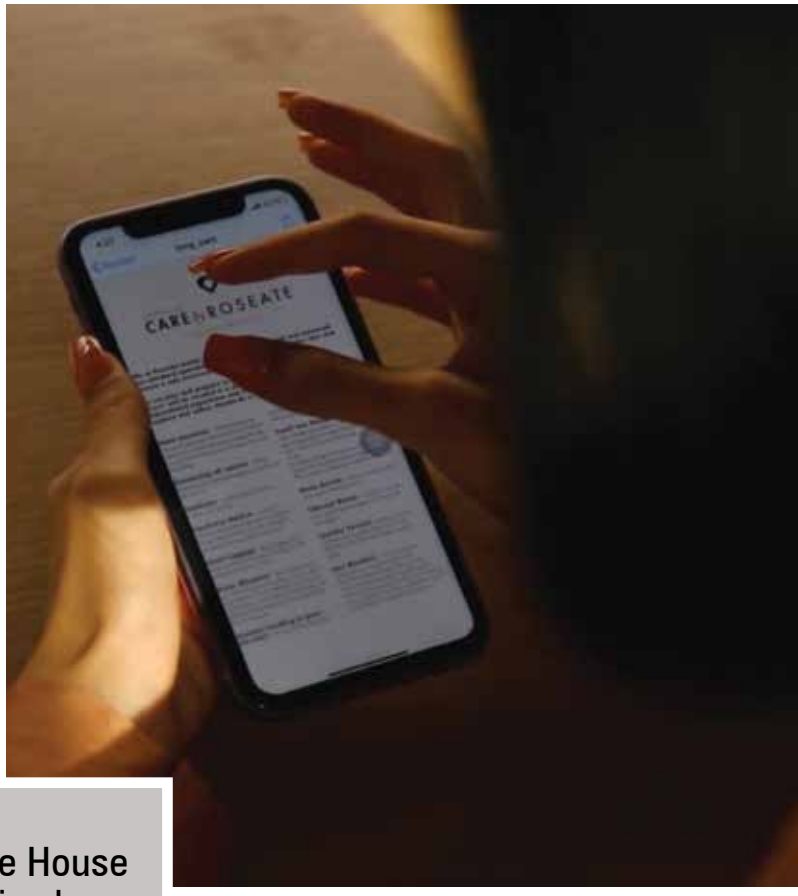
Similarly, guests can check in and check out for stay through this app. Special counters would be there to ensure speedy, minimum contact check ins. All the front desk and hotel personnel would be dressed in protective gear. Sanitisers would be a commonplace across the hotel. Stringent procedures will be in place to ensure no contamination enters via any route. The measures would involve thermal screening at entry gates of all passenger vehicles, display of 'Safe' status in Aarogya Setu app for staff and guests. To enable seamless, remote check ins, touchless check ins would be facilitated via app, in which all information would already be pre-registered. After check out, the same room would be allocated to another guest only after 24 hours, post being thoroughly disinfected and sanitized.

Another new technology feature that has been introduced at our hotels is wherein we given kitchen access to guests through a camera fitted in our kitchens. In this way, people who order food from outside the hotel as well as in-house guests can keep a surveillance on the hygiene and quality of their food by monitoring how their food is being prepared. The access shall be provided for the direct orders placed with our restaurants and eventually leading to the orders through the food aggregators as well. The live streaming from the kitchens shall be continued as an ongoing process even after the lockdown is lifted, in order to entrust the guests of the hygiene standards being in place.

In this new world, as businesses we are looking at new opportunities and at the same time trying to offer unforgettable experiences to our discerning customers. In order to enhance our revenue stream, we have started food deliveries from our signature restaurants through Zomato and Swiggy. The customers shall now be able to enjoy their favourite dishes from our Indian restaurant 'Kheer' and our in-house patisserie and boulangerie, Roasted by Roseate. Through our recent partnership with MakeMyTrip, we intend to bring gourmet experiences to the doorstep. These meals are delivered with utmost CARE- maintaining safety and hygiene standards.

Going forward, where do you see us heading? For you, as an individual, company and as an industry. It is not a forecast, not a prediction, but as you see the road ahead? What cautious steps we need to take, where do we find the growth and evolution happening, and what could be the implications for the industry as a whole? This is going into the future.

The road ahead for the industry in short to mid-term will be the rise of domestic travel. Safety will be paramount for the businesses in the travel and hospitality sector, going ahead.



> "Roseate House New Delhi is also the first hotel in India to be FSSC certified and fifth in the world to achieve the highest levels of Food Safety & Hygiene Standards."

These times call out loudly for trusted associates and we have discovered various ways in hospitality to ensure our valued guests have a beautiful experience and utmost satisfaction keeping all the hygiene and safety standards in place. Utmost hygiene practices and standards has always been the core of philosophy and followed in all our hotels; Roseate House New Delhi is also the first hotel in India to be FSSC certified and fifth in the world to achieve the highest levels of Food Safety & Hygiene Standards.

Providing a safe environment to the travellers will be key. Following the SOPs religiously is the core solution and instilling trust in the customers is the key for the business resumption.

Under 'Care by Roseate', we have devised stringent procedures across our India and UK properties as a step towards instilling confidence and trust in our guests and to continue giving them unforgettable experience every time they choose us. Reiterating that the importance of "touchless hospitality" in the new future is key and is here to stay with us.

In the past, hoteliers might not have given much thought to managing their hotel from afar. The unprecedented crisis will nudge them to embark on technology solutions that employees can access remotely for keeping operations on track. Cloud-based property management systems will become the new order of the day.

Industry as a whole is expected to see transformation in line with the new normal, not just ensuring safety but also introducing new trends. ■

Ankush Nijhawan

Ankush Nijhawan, Managing Director, Nijhawan Group/ Co-Founder TBO Group, is a graduate from Bryant College, USA. A major in Marketing and Psychology, Ankush set up and launched "Travel Boutique Online" in 2007. TBO Group works with almost +60,000 travel agents in India, Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe, China, Australasia and Asia Pacific with a turnover of US$2 billion. He was also chosen by CNBC as a Young Turk for revolutionising the travel trade through his B2B travel portal and has won numerous awards over last many years. He was recently awarded Most Influential Person 40 under 40 by URS Asia One and PWC and ET Game Changer. A keen sportsman and a music and movie buff, Ankush loves living life to the fullest.

Nearby destinations such as Dubai will witness an upsurge as and when borders open.

As an individual born in the post-independence (partition) era, we have not seen a situation such as this. We always took life for granted. We never really witnessed conditions that our forefathers had to endure - the partition trauma, wars with Pakistan and China, the Gulf war, etc. Today, everyone in their thirties and forties is facing a crisis of this magnitude for the first time. I think the youth of India has realised that crises (such as the Coronavirus) can occur. It has provided learnings that we never imagined we would have to undergo. For instance, we usually spend more and believe that life is good, and there are no reasons to be financially cautious. I am not talking about myself, but people should generally have a healthy cash surplus, going forward.

> "It has given opportunities to recalibrate strategies to ensure we are well placed to manage more such unforeseen eventualities."

There have been some good outcomes for me. I was always fit, but I have given more attention to my health and wellbeing than ever before. The stress level is comparatively lower as there is no travel involved, you eat home-cooked food, and there are no social gatherings to attend. Working from home has also allowed me to spend time with my family and let us reboot ourselves. It has given opportunities to recalibrate strategies to ensure we are well placed to manage more such unforeseen eventualities.

We are placed very well as a company because TBO (or the Nijhawan Group) does not have any debt in its books. We have enough cash surplus to survive for a couple of years, even if COVID-19 continues.

The temporary challenge did, however, force us to ask about 30% of our staff to go on leave without pay. However, we have not terminated anyone's services. Some of them have started coming back to work, with the opening up of the domestic skies and a slowly normalising situation.

It is a great opportunity for our company because we have always excelled in improving our record when such disruptions have occurred. We will perform at least 25% better in 2021 over what we did in 2019, both in revenue and profits.

TBO became stronger when the global markets crashed in 2008 (after the Lehman Brothers crisis). There was another shakeup in the market when Kingfisher Airlines went down in 2012-13 – TBO became stronger. We diversified to ensure we were not involved in a particular product or business.

I think set processes would now change. Employees would value their employers more, and also lay greater emphasis on profits and diversification. I do believe that the competition would shrink. Some companies would become larger, while others would scale down. It depends on specific companies and how they fare against the challenges. Every company that braves 2020 would be much stronger in 2021, because navigating the choppy waters in the past few months, and through the rest of the year, would require extraordinary effort.

It has made me calmer and more pragmatic. You have no control over the developments, and you can do only that much. It is important to withstand the storm to not get wiped out. I have always communicated transparently. But I went a step further to share with all our stakeholders about the enormity of the challenge. These are tough times, and we are fighting an invisible enemy without even knowing how long we would have to fight it. It compounds the problem.

We operate not only in India but in over one hundred countries. Some of the markets that suffered because of the COVID-19-induced disruption are now back to business. It is enabling us to bring back our revenues. This has been a result of our decision to expand the business. We have decided to further diversify into other seg-

ments of the travel sector - airlines and hotels aside. We are exploring medical tourism, a corporate self-booking tool, Umrah Service, cargo business, etc. It would ensure our revenue streams are maintained even if any other such situation occurs in the future. We never focussed on the domestic market (not inbound but domestic tourism); TBO was primarily an outbound player, with 85% business share emanating from overseas. We are now focussing on the domestic market for the first time. A lot of us, previously concentrating on the outbound, would now also examine the possibilities in the domestic sector.

'Cash is king' and, fortunately, TBO always had cash and continues to have it. We would be extremely watchful of the company's treasury to ensure we don't face any existential or survival issues. We are comfortably placed because we have always been uptight about our cash reserves.

Industry stakeholders would become more conscious of costs, and there would be a greater belief in creating cash reserves and surpluses. In future hopefully, margins will improve because good sense will prevail to ensure you have enough profits in the book to survive another such pandemic.

Technology will play a significant role because of operating leverages would further kick in. Companies are likely to conduct the same quantum of business with fewer people at workforce. Technology would be a key driver to ensure that the same business can be done with sixty, instead of a hundred people.

The terms and conditions of businesses will also change, be it airlines or hotels. Because some of them would go down, and some others may lose money from their suppliers/stakeholders. I think business processes would change a little because the term "Force Majeure" was never stressed upon to such an extent.

I would like to break it down into two parts - one is from the first of July to the end of September and then from October until the end of the year.

I think July is when people would start going back to work. The business would be limited to road trips, and monsoon breaks closer home where people do not have to travel across state borders, etc. There may be apprehensions about any possible lockdowns. We may go to drivable distances, such as Rishikesh or Jaipur from Delhi; or to Alibaug, Pune or Goa, from Mumbai. Also, 'corporate business essential travel' would be undertaken from July to September. The airline passenger count is also expected to grow from the end of July as the world has to move on.

COVID-19 should be behind us by the beginning of October and international flights should have a 50% load factor. Visa regimes and quarantine policies across the country should be settled. People would begin to look at the Diwali break starting October, and I think most of it would be outbound travel. There is a tremendous pent-up demand for travel and short-haul destinations globally, be it Dubai, Singapore, Sri Lanka or the Maldives, would emerge as favourites. Destinations that offer more lucrative and friendly visa regimes and enabling quarantine policies would be favoured. I think guests would not have to go into quarantine unless one is diagnosed with Covid-19.

> "In future hopefully, margins will improve because good sense will prevail to ensure you have enough profits in the book to survive another such pandemic."

There will be no looking back starting October. What I call 'revenge travel' will induce more movement as people have been starved off being indoors for such prolonged periods. Travel during the new year is equally no-brainer.

However, I do not see MICE and weddings happening this year in India. Outbound weddings may begin to pick up starting November.

We will see some uptake in MICE travel, domestically and internationally, in the first three months of the next year. I expect a major boom in leisure travel beginning March 2021 and corporate travel would be back to 100%. I hope for 25% more business beginning April 2021 compared to the 2019. However, companies have to survive the storm and ride the 'low tide' to ensure they are capable enough to commence operations in full capacity. The business pie will shrink obviously, but there will be fewer takers than before.

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THE SUN TEMPLE

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Anuraag Bhatnagar

WE MUST NOW STAND POISED FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW BEGINNINGS

When we come out of the storm, we won't be the same

Anuraag Bhatnager, the Chief Operating Officer at The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts is a dynamic leader with an impeccable track record of over 27 years. He has spearheaded hotels across world renowned brands positioning them as leaders in the market through strategic and inspirational leadership, a passion for operational excellence and delivering personalized guest experiences.

Known as the 'Man with the Midas Touch', he has been entrusted with the responsibility of strengthening and elevating The Leela's positioning as an epitome of true Indian luxury while driving the brand's future growth.

There is no denying the fact that these are indeed unprecedented times. In the last couple of months the world around us has changed rapidly and we have had to adapt to a new way of life, become more thoughtful in the way we do things and ensure we keep our families, our communities and our associates safe.

These are also existential times. From bizarre to surreal to complete disbelief, each one of us has been through an emotional roller coaster both personally and professionally trying to make some sense of what has been happening around us. Even though this isn't the first health crisis the world has faced, it is perhaps one that has had the most far reaching and defining consequences.

For the first time ever the world came to a complete standstill. As countries went into lockdown, people were asked to do nothing and we realized how difficult this really was! Companies around the world have had to take some very tough decisions, decisions that have been far more difficult than during 9.11 or the 2008 financial crisis and it has become a priority to simply just survive.

> "These are also existential times. From bizarre to surreal to complete disbelief, each one of us has been through an emotional roller coaster."

Personally, for me, this has been a turning point in my career. I barely moved into my new role and the pandemic hit us. The global crisis has made us all rethink our priorities. To me this has been a time to pause and reflect… who are we, where are we headed and where do we want to go? We have had the luxury of time to reassess our personal and professional situations and introspect. All the disruption caused by the present circumstances has made us challenge everything we have done so far….even basic assumptions about our career, about our workspaces, about technology, about our families, about our needs. Mindsets have shifted and life goals have evolved.

When life changes so dramatically and at breakneck speed, the one thing we do know for sure is that something has ended and a new era has begun. We know that the "normal" we return to will not be the "normal" we knew before. And that the trends and behaviours that were predicted at the start of the decade are no more applicable. So our strategies and the way we have approached our business needs to evolve. For me this has been a time to pivot and reinvent yourself, a time for business transformation and innovation.

We have been spending the last few months to think creatively about our operations and reimagine the guest experience based on our insights into how consumer behaviour will change. Our focus has been to Reimagine, Redesign and Reset. As a leader I am focusing on keeping abreast with the

THE LEELA PALACE
BENGALURU

IMMUNE BOOSTING DRINKS

Welcome Drinks served at the Palace

Healthy Hibiscus – Hibiscus petal with Jasumi

Tulsi Cooler – Indian holi basil powder with hint of ginger

Turberry – Blend of turmeric and berries and Bacopa/Brahmi (smoothie)

Non-alcoholic cocktails

Beetroot, carrot and cider
Coconut water with fresh beetroot and carrot juice with lemon juice and salt

Sugarcane, aloe vera and spinach
Fresh sugarcane juice blended with Aloe Vera juice, baby spinach, ginger and lime

Pineapple and camomile ice tea
Fresh ripe pineapple blended with camomile ice tea and Genovese basil

Cocktails

Gin, goji berry, pomegranate and hibiscus
Cold infusion of goji berries and hibiscus with fresh pomegranate juice and mint

Vodka, goose berry (amla) and citrus cooler
Fresh lemon water mixed with an extract of goose berry,
Krishna tulsi and organic jaggery

Turmeric pina colada with white rum
Fresh turmeric infused pina colada with basil seeds

Unpeated Scotch, sappan wood and nanari sherbet
Extracted wood water with sarsaparilla syrup, lemon and ginger

Rosemary infused vodka and watermelon slush
Chilled rosemary infused vodka with iced watermelon and chia seeds

evolved expectations of our guests and ensuring we not only meet but exceed them, keeping in mind we remain true to the values of our brand and continue to deliver a true luxury experience. I also want to ensure, as a business we remain agile, to be able to quickly adapt to an ever-evolving tomorrow.

This pandemic is almost certainly one of the biggest global events – and challenges – of our lifetime. It has not only shifted travellers' expectations; it has fundamentally changed human attitudes and behaviours at a speed we've never seen before – and all of us must adapt and respond. Whether it is 'isolated wellness breaks' or 'hyper hygienic getaways' the one thing that's clear is that whenever the recovery comes, it will bring a new style of 'normal'.

There have been many learnings these past few months. Safety and hygiene is front and center and this is here to stay. Working from home is not only possible but can also be very productive. Technology is an enabler and brings the world closer. Family and your health and the health of your loved ones should be above everything else. The need to be more mindful of our actions and the impact they have on others and to act responsibly towards yourself and towards your communities. The fact that this is perhaps not the only pandemic that we will see. Coming to terms with how quickly our world can change and to be ready for it at all times.

At The Leela, our focus these past few months has been on four things - safely reopening our hotels in a phased approach and carefully planning for our teams to return to work as hotels reopen their doors and scale back up; gradually and slowly building consumer confidence and trust and engaging with our customers and associates, reassuring them with a relentless focus on the highest levels of sanitisation to ensure our hotels are sanctuaries of cleanliness: devising strategies and initiatives that will help elevate the guest experience and strengthen the positioning of the brand as a leading luxury hotel brand true to its Indian heritage; driving demand through compelling and meaningful offers with inclusions and value additions built in around what matters most to our guests.

We know, the world will start to travel again, however, it won't be at the flick of a switch. While every sector has felt some repercussions, few have been hit as hard by the pandemic as the travel sector. We know the road to recovery will be slow and bumpy. But we also know from history that hospitality is one of the most resilient industries. It will bounce back. We remain cautiously optimistic that demand will return and sooner than we expect. And we are preparing to be ready to welcome our guests when this happens.

While the new Leela experience, as we embrace the "new normal", may look different, we want our guests and our associates to know that it is thoughtfully curated so they can continue to feel as welcome and comfortable as they did before. And in doing so we are guided by our governing principle "Atithi Devo Bhava"…. Keeping the guest at the center of everything we do.

I don't have a crystal ball and cannot really predict what the road ahead will look like but I can safely say that the world as we know it has changed and changed forever.

What can we do? In one word: prepare.

We must all prepare for the coming recovery and ready ourselves to take advantage of opportunities that will gradually but undoubtedly arise. Albert Einstein once said, "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity". Of course, we're well aware of the hazards we have faced, but we must now stand poised for the opportunities, too.

So what will the future look like? I will pick 5 trends that I think will shape the future of the industry.

1. Health and Safety Front and Center

Our 'new normal' will see health and hygiene at the forefront of our customers' minds, and we'll need to reimagine how we deliver the customer experience in a hygienic yet human way. Today more than ever it has become imperative that we take even more stringent measures to ensure our guests and associates feel safe as we prepare to welcome them back again.

At The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts the safety and wellbeing of our guests and associates is of paramount importance. We therefore launched SURAKSHA in partnership with Bureau Veritas India. This comprehensive program builds on The Leela's existing rigorous cleaning protocols and is aimed at elevating sanitisation, hygiene and safety procedures to deliver a safe environment for guests and associates.

SURAKSHA redefines our processes so our guests can continue to enjoy our indulgent services and distinctive experiences with peace of mind.

For the last three decades, the brand has come to be known for delivering an uncompromising level of personalized experiences with the true graciousness of Indian hospitality. SURAKSHA further reiterates this commitment and is grounded in genuine care backed by unobtrusive technology so guests have trust and confidence as they begin to travel again and continue to experience the renowned Leela service.

> "Safety and hygiene is front and center and this is here to stay. Working from home is not only possible but can also be very productive."

2. Technology as an Enabler

Health and wellness practices will no longer be a nice-to-have in a post-COVID-19 world. All travelers will expect higher standards to ensure their wellbeing, and digital tools will enable and expand existing "no touch" options.

For example, mobile-first technologies such as contactless payments have been in the market for a few years, with limited adoption. However, recent behaviors signal a spike in adoption as customers become more comfortable with the behavior and reconsider who and what they come into physical contact with. For travelers and guests, mobile usage will increase throughout the travel journey, from passports and boarding passes, to keyless hotel entry and digital checkout at hotels.

3. Meaningful experiences and purposeful luxury

One of the most striking characteristics is that spending in the luxury sector is often based not on rational decision-making process and reasoning but on emotions and feelings. While this unexpected crisis will undoubtedly have strong impact on societies, it is unlikely to affect the very roots of human nature.

After potentially months of isolation, customers may, indeed, be willing to go back to their lives and enjoy luxury services including luxury travel, entertainment, food and beverage and spa services. And when they do, we want to be ready and provide for them a safe and welcoming environment where they can continue to enjoy the distinctive experiences and unparalleled service that The Leela brand has come to be known for.

COVID-19 might have changed the way we work, interact, shop and spend time but it will not change who we are essentially and what we want from life. Having had time to reflect, people will value authenticity and purposeful values more than ever before. And finally, after months of isolation and anxiety, customers the world over will want to experience life again. Companies which will figure out how to offer experiences instead of services, will lead the way.

Luxury brands are based on stories and heritage. This is unique time for luxury brands to show what their values truly are and how much they are prepared to give to support these values. Today is the time to build strong brands for the future. And we must focus on experiences, storytelling around purpose and values, heritage and authenticity to remain relevant to our discerning customers.

4. Privacy will be the new luxury

We are already seeing a demand for high end resorts in markets where restrictions have been partially lifted which is a clear indication that there is a pent-up need to travel and get out.

Hotels and resorts that naturally lend themselves to social-distancing and provide expansive settings such as private pools and private lawns will see a surge of interest. So also private accommodations, such as larger suites, villas and residences, where people can gather with family and friends while social distancing from others and yet feel safe.

COVID-19 has brought family, friends and loved ones closer together. Once things go 'back to the new normal' people will have an emotional need to travel with people they know and trust and stay where they feel safe. Personal space has become more important than ever before and we as hoteliers must determine how to give travelers personal spaces they feel they can control.

This is good news for us. With our portfolio of 8 distinctive Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, we provide for all this and more.

5. Going Local- True Indian luxury

Shopping from the local stores, consuming locally grown and crafted products, and traveling locally will become the new norm not just to support the economy but as an act of solidarity. The disruption of supply chains and the dark side of globalization may give way to small businesses and the return of the gig economy.

One of the many initiatives we have undertaken is the introduction of a new range of all-natural bath amenities. Created in line with the core principles of the brand, this new range is inspired by the four elements, focuses on the wellbeing of our guests and is completely locally crafted.

A quote I read somewhere

"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same."

Ashwani Lohani

CRISIS HAS COME ABOUT, GIVING US A NEW SENSE OF REALITY

Testing times continue, with no hope yet of solutions

Ashwani Lohani is from the Indian Railway Services. He has the rare distinction of having worked in and headed three premier organisations in the public sector, namely, Indian Railways, Air India and ITDC. He also headed Madhya Pradesh Tourism in three different spells. Other positions that he has held include Director Tourism, Government of India; Divisional Railway Manager, Delhi; Chief Mechanical Engineer, Northern Railway; Director, National Rail Museum.

Ashwani Lohani holds a Limca Record for his four engineering degrees in the disciplines of Mechanical, Electrical, Metallurgical and Electronics & Telecommunication Engineering.

COVID took the world by a storm. Never ever did the inhabitants of this planet imagined the kind of life that they are leading in the present times. Shorn of closeness to people, and devoid of the trappings of satiating the sensory organs, life has reverted to its simplest form. Spending time with the family at home and managing not to get infected has emerged as the sole purpose of life.

I remember the 30th and 31st of January this year when the first rescue flights to Wuhan took off from Delhi airport. It was a 747 Jumbo that was going to bring back Indians from the severely corona infected province of Wuhan in China. The nationalistic fervor was at its peak when the most royal aircraft from the stables of the national carrier was readied to bring back our own citizens, mostly students from a land that was reeking of infections, to the safety and comfort of the motherland. Air Indians, the crew that was proceeding and those who attend to ground requirements had only two words to say and that too repeatedly. The sound of Jai Hind filled the air and yes there were many eyes that had become moist.

Even though the situation at Wuhan was very serious, not one Air Indian displayed disinclination to proceed on this dangerous but patriotic mission.

And all of us lived those moments to the hilt thinking that the calamity is happening on a distant land far away from ours and the thought that someday we can also be affected never crossed our mind even once. Why is it so that we always associate calamities with someone else, never with us till they almost strike home.

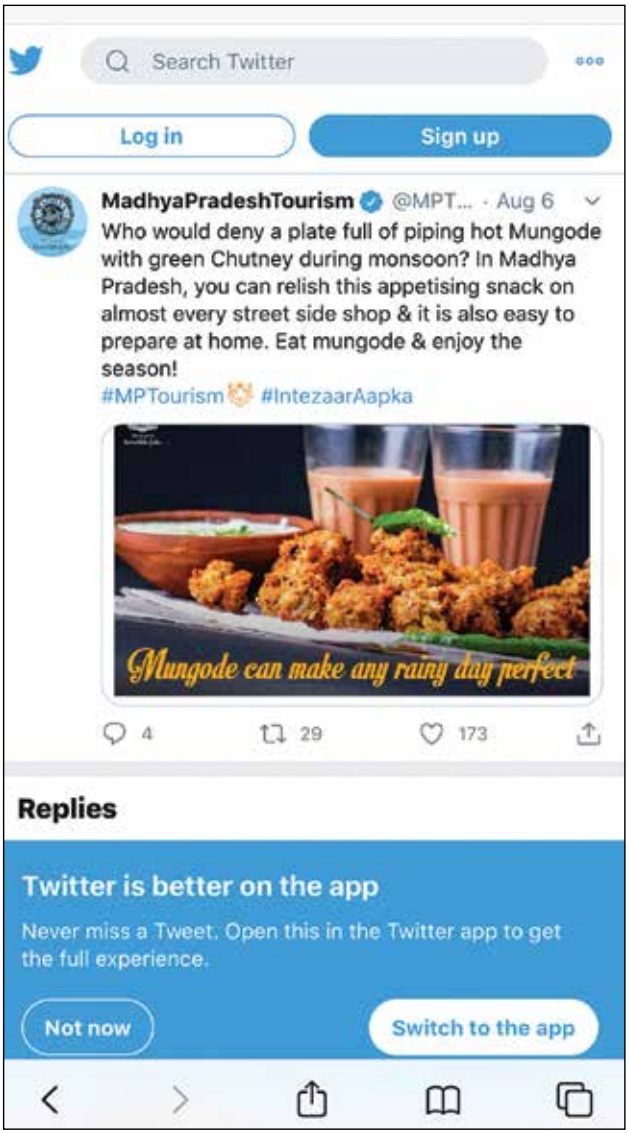
And the world kept on behaving normally till the Chinese virus started hitting almost all nations on the globe.

This Chinese virus has made even a child aware of what exponential growth is all about.

The ugly face of the virus and its impact had started getting visible in the first week of March itself and from the 11th, all inbound travellers started getting screened at the airports. Holi, the festival of colors was a damp affair with hardly anyone participating in the same for the fear of getting infected. And the airports though still functional till then had started giving a vacant look.

22nd of March India had its first lockdown, a voluntary one called for by the Prime Minister of the nation. The entire nation remained confined to their houses, yet the complete reality of what we were confronted with had not dawned.

And then the first real lockdown, an enforced one started on the 24th of March for a full two weeks. And these two weeks brought everyone face to face with what was in store for us. Staying confined to the house and not moving out whatsoever was something that almost all of us were not accustomed to. No clubbing or eating out in restaurants. No meeting friends for a meal at their place or ours. And this change in lifestyles was so sudden and so massive that many of us were at a loss to how spend time. Slowly however we all became accustomed to this life with lockdown getting extended every time we wished it would end.



A recent promotion of Madhya Pradesh Tourism on Twitter: Lohani has been three times head of the organisation during his career in government.

> Never before in the history of India, have the Indian railways come to a grinding halt. Yet Covid virus led to the 22000 trains a day coming to a halt.

With all of us including my younger one at home, the attention immediately shifted to food, almost always. And Arunima my wife did not disappoint us. With her best at work, she regularly churned out dishes galore throughout the day and that is still continuing. And Netflix helped in the beginning. I searched for and located shows and in the initial days resorted to what is called binge watching. Meanwhile, writing also started in right earnest. After completing my third book titled "Heart over Mind" my attention switched to writing a handbook on management, an effort that is still ongoing.

I wonder with all the people stuck at home, initially due to the lockdown and later due to the fear of getting infected, gorging away

and gaining weight, would our beloved prime minister start his next address with *hathiyon* instead of *sathiyon*.

Slowly, continuously staying at home started getting on our nerves.

This Covid incident is way beyond any of the catastrophes that we have ever faced in the past. All of them were manmade and an end could therefore be visualized, whereas the Covid pandemic does not show any light at the end of the tunnel. It is like a dark unending tunnel that may see an end if a vaccine is found. An all of us are aware of the imponderables in the search for a vaccine to tackle a virus.

And the news did not help either. With figures of infections and deaths galloping every day, everyone was afraid that it is only a matter of time that the virus would start striking closer home. The tales of hospitals and cremation grounds running short of beds and space also contributed in dampening spirits. And this environment created a scenario in which focussing on anything worthwhile started proving difficult. Reading and writing was the first to get hit as both these activities need a positive environment. Even TV programs failed to enchant. Yet life went on.

> “With the aircrafts grounded and lined up at airports and only one third of the domestic fleet in the air, travelling from one city to another is indeed a project akin to climbing the Everest.”

And suddenly webinars started. Seminars on the web started attracting people in droves. Seminars and conferences on anything under the sun started getting organized on the various video conferencing platforms that mushroomed. The boom in the webinars has now started tapering off and so is the enthusiasm for this newfound technological attraction.

The worst in Covid times is the fear of infection, the fear of an untimely and painful death that this virus can lead to. And the way the numbers are rapidly climbing with no peak in sight is really horrifying. The empty roads and the empty shops almost throughout the day give an eerie twist to the tale.

Never before in the history of India, have the Indian railways come to a grinding halt. Yet Covid virus led to the 22000 trains a day coming to a halt. Even now with hardly 200 trains running every day and that too almost empty, the silence of the rails is indeed deafening. And with the aircrafts grounded and lined up at airports and only one third of the domestic fleet in the air, travelling from one city to another is indeed a project akin to climbing the Everest.

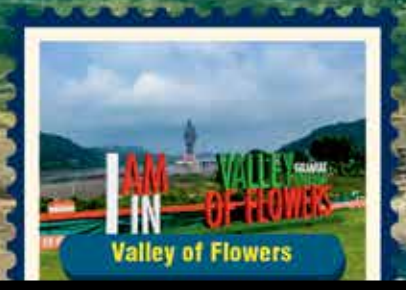
Covid also made us aware of intercity and interstate borders, as till then a border was regarded as a line that separated nations, not provinces. Yet the unilateral shutting down of the Noida and Gurgaon borders either by the Delhi government or by the state authorities, suddenly without notice disrupted lives unbelievably.

The testing times continue in the hope that someday mankind would be able to defeat this virus and again live a life that is devoid of fear.

The daily battle continues. Till then stay safe.

Statue of Unity,
World's Tallest Statue standing tall at 182 meters Proudly gets listed in

Time Magazine's World's Greatest Places 2019



Ashwini Kakkar

OUR INDUSTRY COULD SHOW THE WAY IN FOSTERING COOPERATION ACROSS BORDERS

The human spirit will be yearning to soar free

Ashwini Kakkar is an Entrepreneur, earlier, Chairman of Via. com, Executive Vice Chairman of Mercury Travels Ltd. and continues as Chairman, Action Against Hunger India. He is a Mechanical Engineer with a Post-Graduate from IIM Kolkata (PGDM Finance), MBA from INSEAD France, a Law Education from the Government Law college Mumbai, has a Diploma in French and has completed the IRDA regulatory Insurance exams. He is on the global boards of US based Dot Travel, Action Against Hunger and NASDAQ listed Recipharm in Sweden. He is an angel investor and mentor to many startups across businesses. A past president of Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry, past Chairman of WTTC (II), a distinguished fellow of the Institute of Directors London, Kakkar was knighted by the French Government (President Jacques Chirac), in 2006, with the "Chevalier De L'Ordre Merite" (Equivalent to Padma Vibhushan).

Coronavirus has emerged as a major Black Swan event, where the scale of deaths and the speed of spread of the pandemic has taken the entire world by surprise. Hopefully a mitigant or vaccine will be found and in the end we will all be older and wiser and undoubtedly have a 2020 vision.

Maybe unbeknownst to us, we are traversing a unique moment in the history of our world, one that will perhaps be a turning, or even a tipping point in defining the direction of future generations of mankind.

While the medical calamity is the most important and most urgent today, multiple upheavals are presenting themselves at the same time. These include a technological transformation changing the nature of our work, our lives and businesses, a looming economic crisis in an already debt laden world, where trillions of dollars worth banknotes are being printed, a social upheaval triggered by extremes of poverty and riches, a political crisis between polarised ideologies of the far left and the far right, an ecological crisis of disastrous proportions and the rise of populism and protectionism which may cause the collapse of world trade and multilateral institutions.

In the impending recession, while the growth model of capitalism is being questioned, Universal Basic Income models will continue to be experimented with. However thought leadership in economics has fallen behind, in not being able to come up with new Economic Models for our world, posing a threat to the role and value of Money as we know it, in the world of tomorrow.

“Thought leader-ship in economics has fallen behind, in not being able to come up with new Economic Models for our world, posing a threat to the role and value of Money as we know it, in the world of tomorrow.”

Narrow focussing the lens on the Travel & Tourism industry, this has to be one of the “must survive” industries, if for nothing else then for the 10.6% of the world's employable population that survives on it, for the peace and communities that it builds by bringing people together and the GDP and universal joy and happiness quotient it adds across caste, creed, colour, race and socio-economic strata, throughout our world.

The airline sector seems to have come under the highest pressure with IATA predicting a global loss of US$84 Bln. for the industry, emanating from a US$ 314 Bln. loss of revenues. It also seems to be the most supported sector with Lufthansa and Air France+KLM getting government support in one form or other of about US$10 Bln. each, Cathay Pacific US$5 Bln., the US carriers promised US$58 Bln. of which US$25 Bln. is already delivered. At the other end of the same spectrum, a dozen airlines across the world have already declared bankruptcy including Jet Blue, Avianca, FlyBe, Trans States Airline, Air Mauritius, Compass, Virgin Australia etc.

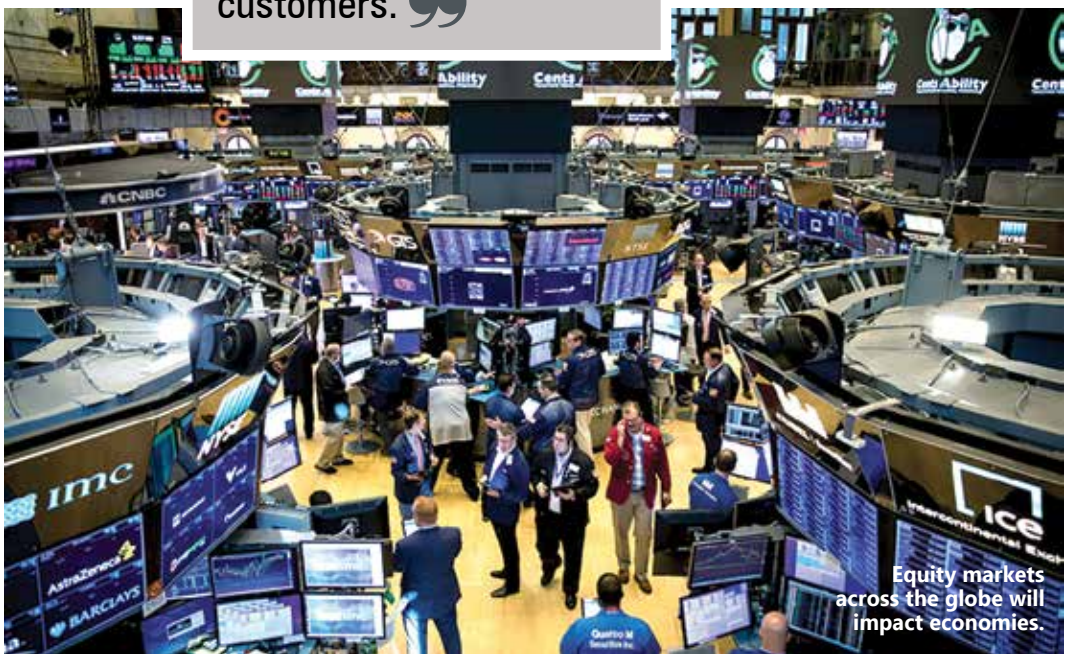
Hospitality, including hotels, restaurants and resorts, is the second most affected sector with revenues for CY 2020 expected to drop to 25% of normal annual revenues. All segments of this industry have seen sharp declines: Leisure, Corporate, Restaurants, Weddings, MICE etc. Alternate accommodation, guesthouses, and Air B&B businesses have also come under severe pressure. The losses in this sector in India alone could be of the order of US$ 7-10 Bln., inspite of the fact that a few properties have helped out and earned a bit from support to care workers, quarantine cases and patients.

The Indian Travel & Tourism sector would undoubtedly suffer in line with the rest of the world. WTTC estimates indicate an year long post-pandemic recovery process, with wage or employment effects on between four to five million workers. For India on an annual basis, eleven million inbound visits with spends of US$ 28 Bln., and twenty five million outbound visits with spends of US$ 25 Bln. could be partially affected, as also the 1.8 Bln. domestic trips, which are the mainstay of the industry. One estimate puts the decline number as high as 40% to 50%. While domestic airlines and hotels could see a halving of their revenues, the worst affected in India, of course, would be the daily wage earners and those in the Micro, Small & Medium sectors including Travel Agents, Tour Operators, Online Agencies, Specialists like Adventure, MICE, Weddings, Cruises etc who could be staring at a collective revenue loss of Rs. 60,000 Crores (US$ 80 Bln.). All these would undoubtedly have an impact on taxes collected by the Central and State Governments.

The cruise business across the world has come to a grinding halt. Stories of ships being put in isolation as well as being turned away from ports and thousands of employees remaining stranded, may have a larger impact on consumer sentiment. The financial cost of extended moorings could also pose severe issues for this US$150 Bln industry. A long delay can be expected before cruising returns to normalcy affecting not only the owners but also their staff and the small countries that depend hugely on Cruise Tourism.

Destinations, Attractions, Museums, Monuments and those associated with them have been devoid of tourists for the last few months and would be looking forward to welcoming travellers albeit under new norms. Apart from Airlines, Hotels and Cruise companies that will be under severe pressure, other segments are also feeling the pinch, with car rental major Hertz going into Chapter XI Bankruptcy Protection and foreign exchange major Travelex having declared bankruptcy. From large destination economies and railroad companies to small time guides, auto drivers and a slew of others, difficult times are being faced in this entire sector. With the emergence of WFH (work from home) as the new normal, battered corporates will also look to reducing travel costs by embracing it. Corporate travel will surely come back, but on a reduced scale with some measure of caution being exercised by travelling individuals.

> “The impact of technology for corporates and some other consumers may prove to be a double edged sword due to the proliferation of webinars and zoominars and the cost cutting mindset of struggling customers.”



Equity markets across the globe will impact economies.

BLOOMBERG

Travel-related insurance while taking a short term hit, will herald a huge bounce back and may be the small but shining star of the industry as health and safety take centre stage. Lower oil prices and cargo movements may also provide a little silver lining, especially for Air, Rail and Road transport.

In dealing with these circumstances, finding liquidity against short term losses will be the most important factor in ensuring the survival of this industry. Some of it is being promised by governments, at least at the level of 50,000 feet, though success may vary in line with execution at ground level. A major challenge for this industry is to try and save as many as possible of the over 100 million jobs that WTTC says are globally at risk. On the ground support of governments across the world would be critical in this endeavour. These measures could include Direct Benefit Transfers, furloughs, taxation changes and targeted schemes for all companies, big and small in this sector.

The issue of ecological sustainability has been amplified by this crisis and the industry in conjunction with governments and other stakeholders would do well to build this, alongwith health and safety into their resurgence plans.

Social distancing rules, hesitation with crowded places and fear of contracting the virus, may lead to lower sustainable demand till a cure is at hand.

Consumer behaviour will certainly be altered in multiple ways as we come out of the crisis with low invitation prices probably driving pent-up and risk adjusted demand, but price elasticity will be tested with fewer planes and cruise liners operating, at higher price points. This may get exacerbated by a consumer tilt towards savings in a restless world affected by unemployment and inflation.

While this industry is probably the second most technology embracing industry in the world after IT itself, this augurs well for the consumer centricity and innovation of the businesses themselves. On the other hand, the impact of technology for corporates and some other consumers may prove to be a double edged sword due to the proliferation of webinars and zoominars and the cost cutting mindset of struggling customers. This space needs to be seriously worked upon, especially by the smaller players with a strong focus on staying close to their customers.

While the “One World” response that was expected from humankind and our leaders was sadly missing in overcoming this pandemic, it is hoped that the travel and tourism industry will show the way with cooperation across borders and engender global collaboration to overcome its economic fallout.

The overall desirability of travel, near or far, will however come back with a bang as the human spirit manifests its yearning to soar free.

Incredible !ndia

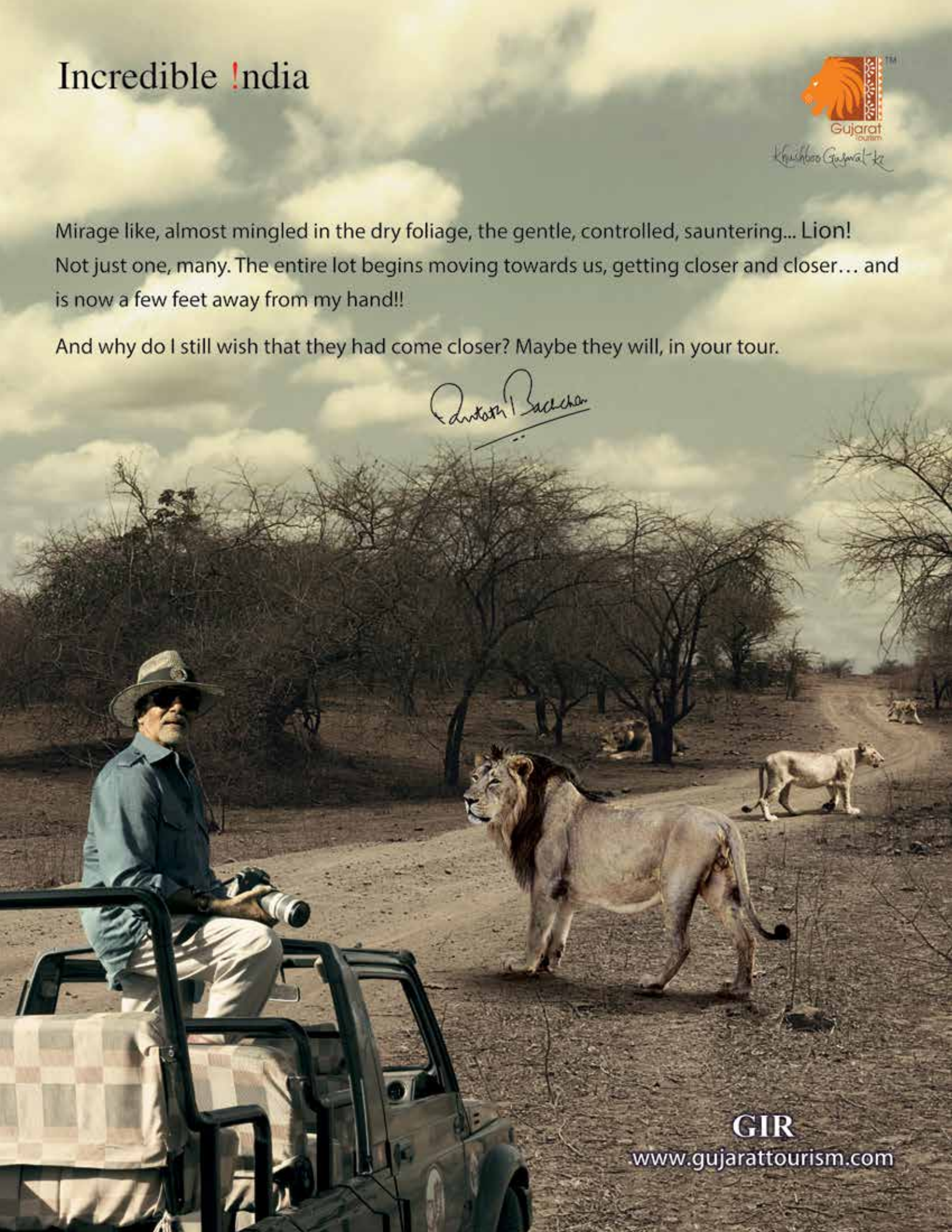
Gujarat tourism

Khushboo Gujarat ki

Mirage like, almost mingled in the dry foliage, the gentle, controlled, sauntering... Lion!
Not just one, many. The entire lot begins moving towards us, getting closer and closer… and is now a few feet away from my hand!!

And why do I still wish that they had come closer? Maybe they will, in your tour.

Amitabh Bachchan



GIR

www.gujarattourism.com

Binod Choudhary

ADAPT TO CHANGES AND UNCERTAINTIES

This too shall pass. The tourism and hospitality industry needs to devise strategies to adapt to uncertainties in the future and use data analytics to assess opportunities

Dr Binod Chaudhary is the Chairman of CG Corp Global, Nepal's only multinational conglomerate with a portfolio comprising over 167 companies, 79 brands, workforce over 13,000 in 24 countries globally.

He has a controlling stake in the largest bank in Nepal and investments/ partnerships in over 134 hospitality assets in 12 countries globally. Chaudhary is also the brain behind the famous noodles brand 'WaiWai.' His other business interests include Telecom, Education, Cement, Hydropower and financial services, to name a few.

Chaudhary is an Honorable Member of Parliament of Nepal, and the only Forbes listed Billionaire from Nepal since 2013.

Fairmont Mara Safari Club

AS AN INDIVIDUAL

As the world comes to terms with the sudden and unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19, the overall impact on human life, economy, and businesses are hard to predict at the moment, given the uncertainty around how things will evolve. While we already lived in the age of disruptions, the radical changes arising now will leave a lasting impression on our lives post-COVID.

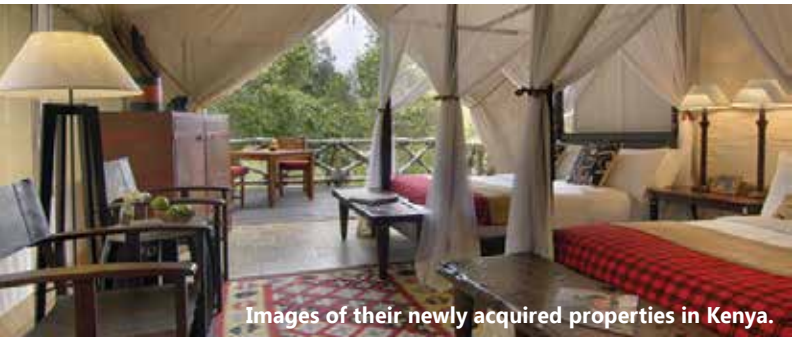
The pandemic and global lockdown have compelled us to introspect and revisit areas that we have overlooked in our fast-paced lives; be it more focus on cleanliness, hygiene, mental and physical wellbeing, spending quality time with the family, deliberating on sustainable business modules or helping communities around us both as a business and an individual. The pattern of life, which was self-centred and erratic, will hopefully change and make way for a new world of compassion, care, happiness and most importantly, sustainable growth. Personally, I have looked at this crisis as an opportunity and a silver lining to pause and re-look and analyse my approach from a different angle and perspective. As a family running a conglomerate, we recognise the paramount responsibility of protecting our employees and providing support to every community we operate in. While we focus on our business strategies, we are equally committed to providing support to people across our global footprint to help humankind overcome these challenging times.

AS A COMPANY

As a company, the impacts of the crisis have reached every industry in the world, with hospitality undoubtedly being one of the biggest casualties of the COVID-19 outbreak, as the demand has declined to an all-time low. The hospitality segment depends chiefly upon tourism, which is debilitated due to the impact of the pandemic – as of now, inbound tourism has come to a halt with India under lockdown, suspension of visas and global advisories against travel.

The hospitality industry finds itself facing immense losses in

Fairmont The Norfolk



Images of their newly acquired properties in Kenya.

the business, jobs, closure of hotels, and the inability to meet cash flow requirements, all pointing to a calamitous future for the industry in the near-term. The sector is staring at a loss of billions in revenues. For its sustenance, the hospitality sector relies entirely on transportation, trade and tourism.

Due to our presence, stretching from the USA to China and in between, we have had to deal with issues in various jurisdictions. This becomes an even bigger challenge while dealing with local laws, cultures, governments and officials, financial institutions, amongst others. Unfortunately, only a few countries have stepped forward in terms of providing relief and support to the sector. While we are engaging with our partners and operators globally, our prime objective is to survive, for which while we are working towards keeping the operations running, we are doing so jointly with all the stakeholders for continuity and sustainability.

> “The efficiency of current work models will have to be re-evaluated, and employee wellbeing should be put even higher on the priority list.”

AS AN INDUSTRY

With travel restrictions being imposed on all global destinations, resulting in the suspension of flights and cancellation of events, the hospitality industry is faced with a crisis we have never experienced before. The disruption has impacted the entire travel and tourism value chain that includes airlines, hotels, travel agents, restaurants, cruises and all other such service providers. A complete halt in bookings will lead to negligible revenue generation for hoteliers in the near future. India started feeling the ripple effect of the global COVID-19 turmoil towards the end of February 2020, which worsened at the beginning of March. As the shutdown and slow down is expected to last for a period stretching from February till October of 2020, the toughest time coincides with this offseason period of six months, with a downfall in revenues and exponential growth in cancellations, while new reservations are near to zero.

However, we must realise that the hospitality industry is not new to dealing with challenging situations. We have faced crises and virus outbreaks in the past as well. For example, the SARS virus drastically impacted the industry in 2003. There was a 50% decline in hotel bookings, which led to a loss, estimated in millions. But, despite that, the travel industry managed to register immense growth by 2006, with a total contribution of US$5160 billion to the global GDP within a year. Similarly, outbreaks such as H1N1 were estimated to have had a global economic impact of between US$45-55 billion, but we overcame that as well – or the horrific attack of 9/11 in New York, the US, and the rest of the world trembled with such an unexpected event. The attacks especially brought air travel to a grinding halt. Airport security got a new concept, and the tourism and hospitality industry entered a tailspin. The steps put in place by the US ensured it they raised its safety standards to unparalleled levels and restored the trust in travel. Following COVID-19, we have to accept that future epidemics and virus breakouts can most likely happen again. The key takeaway from this is that we need to be prepared to adapt to changes and disruptions while understanding that ‘this too shall pass.’

As the COVID pandemic hit the sectors, the hospitality sector has been reorganising itself, adapting to the change and strategising ways to survive and revive. Hotels are repurposing a lot of areas, spaces while exploring newer revenue generation opportunities. We see new trends in revenue generation already picking up like collaboration with e-portals for the delivery of food. The hotel industry is also revisiting safety standards and the deployment of cutting-edge sanitisation, and hygiene technology is being seen across the globe. The emergence of such adaptive new trends to uphold and evolve businesses will continue to be witnessed in the near future.

The immediate repercussion on the sector is the subsequent job loss for millions as shared recently by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The impact of COVID will fully manifest itself through the impacted GDP of nations with higher dependency on travel and tourism for revenue generation. With the estimated sector-related bankruptcy and mammoth unemployment figures, governments› support to strategise ways to mitigate the impact and drive economic development will be imperative.

As the signs of recovery have started surfacing in certain regions, the first step in the direction of the revival of the travel and tourism industry is to address the fear of health and hygiene in the minds of people. The recovery will be slow, but once the COVID is contained, tourism will be the first sector to clock major growth.

Images of their newly acquired properties in Kenya.

Given travel continues to be one of the most preferred mediums of rejuvenation, post the lifting of the longest ban on international/ domestic travel, people will want to explore again.

The hospitality sector, at large, has been the biggest casualty of the COVID-19 shock, with demand at an all-time low across the globe. With such heavy impacts, the hospitality industry will have to learn to function in a way not seen before. As the relationship between each brand and consumer starts with building trust, regaining customer confidence will be the first step in overcoming the crisis. Strict sanitary and hygiene measures will need to be applied, with new practices put in place to monitor and control the environment in which the business takes place. Humanity shall walk into a new era of a post-crisis world that will require the players in the industry to adapt their approach towards the new traveller.

As for the growth in the industry, the key to revive the market would be an increase in domestic travel - airlines and hotels - with the aid of quick and efficient strategies by the government to deliver quality to their returning customers. As the sector continues to build contingency plans to alleviate the fallout of the crisis, hotel operators should also look to extend the hand of solidarity towards their owners by providing certain relief measures. With the new approach to remote working, businesses shall have to adapt to the emerging trends in work practices. The efficiencies of current work models will have to be re-evaluated, and employee wellbeing should be put even higher on the priority list.

With the number of cases rising sharply every day, even though the pandemic is soon to be contained, the ripple effects will be felt worldwide, well into the year, dragging all major economies into a potential recession. So, to weather the storm, the hospitality sector requires aid to regain its fiscal health and needs to evaluate multiple measures such as a stimulating program to stabilise and help the sector in the long-term by offering budgetary assistance, including job support fund to ensure no job losses.

Domestic travel will be the key to the revival: The current situation is extremely bleak, as all domestic flights were ordered to shut down for the near future, and all other demand segments such as MICE, industry, social and sporting events were cancelled or postponed indefinitely. Assistance from the government in reviving the demand, which we believe should include, to a large extent, assistance to domestic travellers, will go a long way in cushioning the blow to the sector.

We should use this chasm to prepare for the upcoming demand by focusing on marketing and upgradation. This is about maintaining a thread of communication, using social media and advertisements, with the consumers. Its also about strengthening the communication within the company, to make a budget and plan for the reopening and utilise this period to fix and upgrade whatever is possible.

Every reopening program must be carried out considering the long-term benefits and compliances to safety. It is imperative that hospitality companies reach out to postponed and cancelled reservations and pay due attention to domestic travellers. Hotels and airlines will carry out their services slowly instead of beginning immediately and not get caught up in spending.

It is imperative that all the industry participants collaborate and work harmoniously in the current crisis by sharing best practices, keeping the workforce motivated and seeking to put the industry back into the recovery-mode because this too shall pass soon.

This is the time to determine what direction you want your hotel to take in the years to come. Data analytics is going to play a major role in outlining the damages to your current revenue streams, but it will also allow you to build a more flexible business strategy for the revenue in the lowest months, select cost-saving strategies, and in the long-term, aid you in bouncing back. This is of utmost importance for the hospitality sector, as it will allow it to continue its contribution to the economy and the generation of jobs, as it had in the past.

The reopening plan of a hotel should be viewed through the prism of the past pre-opening plan that was devised for the hotel before its initial opening. The only critical difference in this instance is that the hotel will now reopen after a horrific event that would have fundamentally altered the foundation of the hospitality sector globally.

Business continuity, in any form, is a refreshing change at this time. Moreover, there are many variables that will decide the reviving plan for the whole industry, and soon businesses will revive and return to normal.

However, just as travellers rely on the hospitality industry to be tolerant, the businesses are also in need of the right public decisions. Travel, around the world, will not be postponed but rescheduled for the near future. All businesses and customers should follow the same message by being mutually sensitive, respectful, and showing solidarity: live for today while planning for tomorrow. ■

Chander Baljee

PATIENCE WILL GET US THROUGH THIS CHALLENGE

Technology has appeared as the true enabler

A veteran with 40+ years of experience in hospitality, Chander Baljee is a thought-leader who founded Royal Orchid & Regenta Hotels, a public limited company listed on NSE. The brand operates 4000+ rooms in 60+ hotels across 39 locations in India. Chander specializes in the setting up and profitable running of hotels and is a 'go-to' expert for owned, leased, managed, and franchised hotel models. He also passionately undertakes free of cost 'Skill Development' initiatives for youth at the bottom of the pyramid who want to become part of the industry. His success story features in a book titled 'Stay Hungry Stay Foolish' by Rashmi Bansal which follows the journey of 25 IIM Ahmedabad entrepreneurs.

Well, the pandemic has taken the world by surprise. The global economy has stalled and businesses have crashed. This is a first for all of us and the challenge will continue till the time a vaccine proves successful. The challenge is big, and hence our resolve to be resilient must be bigger. We humans have faced many problems in the past, and every time - we have eventually sailed through, successfully.

It is unfortunate that businesses have been affected because of the lockdown, we shouldn't however lose hope - not all is lost. Our assets; our infrastructure is safe and it's only a matter of time before operations return to normal, perhaps a new normal. I'm an optimist and I like to keep motivating my teams and keep reminding them that mankind has seen many hardships all through time, and this too, shall pass. We've seen the global meltdown of 2008, 9/11, as well as the Mumbai terror attacks, the scale of those events was of course much smaller, but the learning is the same. Resilience, a stoic stature, a calm composure, timely corrective action, and patience will get us through this challenge as well. I am certain we'll come out of it stronger.

As a business, we're in a much stronger position than we were in the past. Our debt is low, our operations more efficient and an 'asset-light strategy' has ensured that we don't get beaten down by the lockdown. The learning is that there's merit in nurturing talent within the organisation, it takes people a while to truly understand business and contribute for the benefit of the brand, and once you have a team that's strong and capable, you'll be much more confident of sailing through any challenge. We used the lockdown to scale down our expenses, discover new efficiencies, create SOPs and we're confident of operating in a better fashion. When things were good, we never looked at expenses and we didn't want to rock the boat. There's a saying that 'stones at the bottom of the sea are only visible once the water dries out', and it holds true. It is only in times of trouble that we fine comb business operations and switch to newer ways, newer perspectives. That's how individuals, businesses, economies, and countries evolve. It is inevitable.

> "Our assets; our infrastructure is safe and it's only a matter of time before operations return to normal, perhaps a new normal."

On the personal front and on a lighter note, I've discovered that technology truly is an enabler. I have always been working from my office and working from home never sat well with me as an idea, I'm convinced now. I have been operating from my house, there are much fewer distractions, and come to think of it, it's much more efficient too. There's actually no need for print outs and almost all jobs can be done on your computer or phone or on video calls. I've actually for the first time, discovered how lovely my patio is and that working from my lush-green lawn is a delight in the mornings. I'm seeing birds, squirrels, butterflies, and flowers for the first time.

Think from an absolutely new perspective. Everyone will need to think like an entrepreneur to generate new business and to save costs. Fine comb operations, weed out inefficiencies, train people to multitask, to take added responsibilities and to be open to 'new ways of doing business. At Royal Orchid & Regenta Hotels, we've been running multi-skilling programs and we're training our brightest managers to become future general managers. This way, we nurture talent from within the organization and we save costs. We'll obviously have to adapt to the new normal - hygiene and safety assurance become all the more important and operations will have to be redefined keeping social distancing norms in mind. The teams will perhaps be much smaller, but more efficient. It will be survival of the fittest.

In this new normal, we must however not forget and continue to support the underprivileged. Through our CSR arm, the Baljee Foundation, we continue to support the needy through our several commitments with NGOs such as Nightingales Home for Destitute Women. We recently also donated beds, mobile phones, and laptops to Parikrama Foundation. We must all, support the ecosystem and help those who aren't strong enough to fend for themselves. We must continue to be 'enabling' human beings.

Deep Kalra

TIME TO REBUILD GROUND UP AGAIN; TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MODEL

Time to pause and course correct

Deep is the Founder & Executive Chairman of India's leading online travel company, MakeMyTrip Limited.

He is the Vice Chairman of IAMAI and is also currently serving as the co-chair of CII National Committee on Tourism and Hospitality. In addition, he is a member of the National Startup Advisory Council.

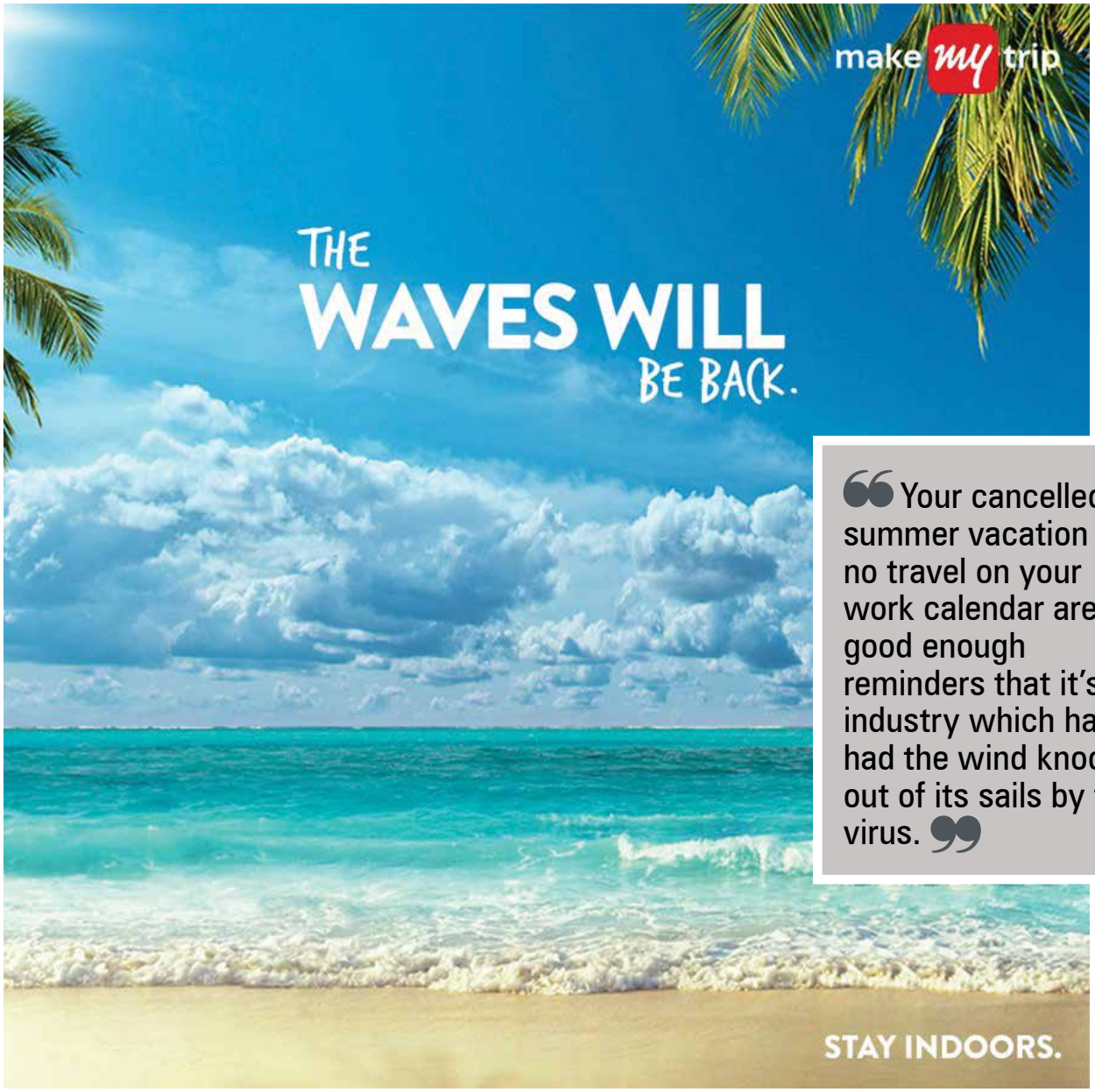
He is one of the founders of Ashoka University.

Deep has been recognized by Ernst & Young as Entrepreneur of the Year - Business Transformation (2011) and as the most powerful Digital influencer in India (2012) by KPMG.

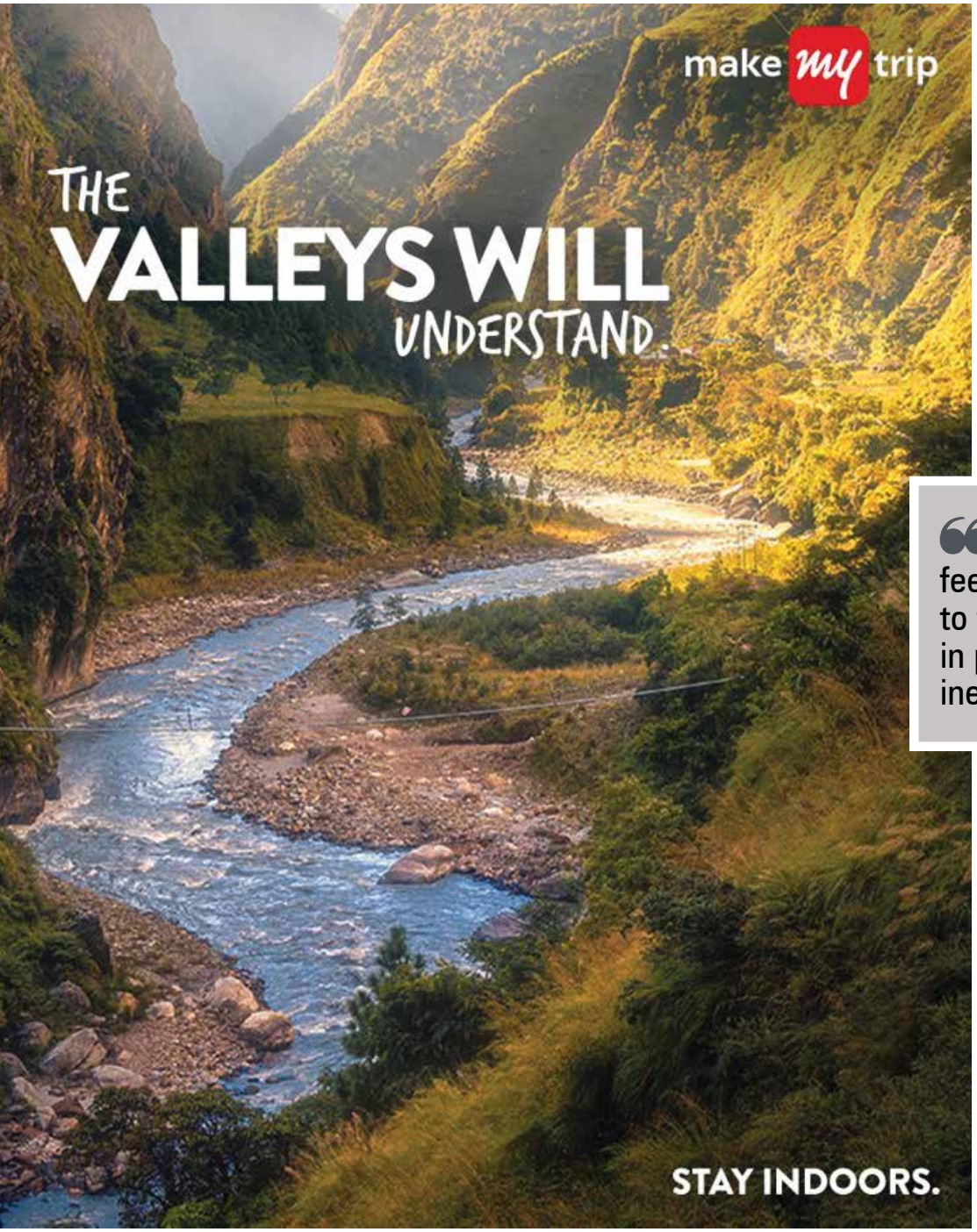
As I sit down to write, Hotels will open across India today after staying closed for nearly 75 days because of the pandemic-triggered restrictions. While they reopen following new protocols, it is anybody's guess right now when will they start seeing guests throng these properties again and travel becoming a way of life as it was pre-Covid. You don't have to be in the business of travel to know that travel has been severely hit. Your cancelled summer vacation and no travel on your work calendar are good enough reminders that it's an industry which has had the wind knocked out of its sails by the virus.

For those of us in the industry, we know it's not an exaggeration that this pandemic has caused a disruption greater than all the previous disruptions combined. Once a booming sector, travel came to a grinding halt as the virus forced people to stay indoors – making even a trip to the grocery store a perilous journey that people looked to avoid. The unpredictability of the spread, the highly contagious nature of the disease making real life human interactions hard, the time that science needs to produce a vaccine to provide an armouragainst the virus – has all led to a crushing impact on the travel industry that is built on the ability to help people be out and about. In the wake of the pandemic, few industries have been hit as hard and as fast as travel and hospitality.

In April, the World Travel and Tourism Council, the trade group representing major global travel companies, projected that if the pandemic continues for a few more months it could result in a global loss of 75 million jobs and $2.1 trillion in revenue.



"Your cancelled summer vacation and no travel on your work calendar are good enough reminders that it's an industry which has had the wind knocked out of its sails by the virus."



As an industry, we are no strangers to downturns and adversities. We have survived various watershed incidents of different magnitude in the past - 9/11 attacks, SARS epidemic, 2008 global financial crisis and closer home the closure of domestic airlines to count a few.History shows that the tourism industry is extremely resilient and has always bounced back with renewed vigour. But before I gaze into the crystal ball and predict what the future holds for us, I want to focus on what we can do today to fast forward to better times. Ultimately, it's about working on things that we have control over.

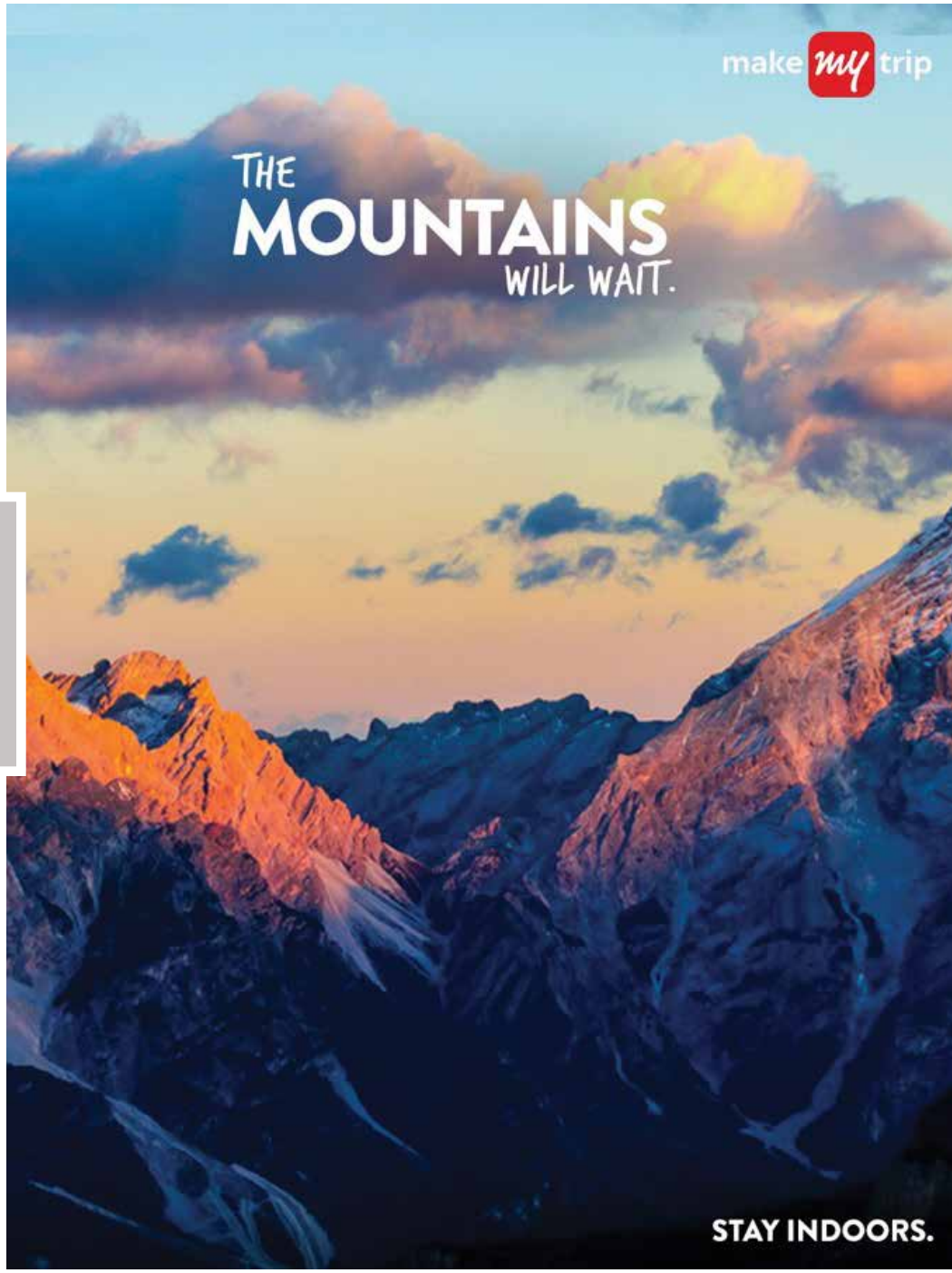
> "To get back on our feet again, we will have to think of collaboration in previously unimagined ways."

To get back on our feet again, we will have to think of collaboration in previously unimagined ways. Travel industry operations run smoothly at the back of thousands of local operators who mostly have family run businesses with varying degrees of tech prowess. They work across different geographies, speak different languages and may even deal with different currencies. The circular nature of travel economy means we need to assist and work closely with the smallest of players to help lift the sector together.

Those numbers will see major revision as the pandemic will run into many months and it has even come back as a second wave in some countries. Battered by the pandemic, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) estimates that the tourism industry is staring at an overall loss of ₹5 lakh crore and job cuts impacting up to five crore people. The organised sector in the tourism industry — which consists of branded hotels, tour operators, travel agencies — may be the worst hit with an estimated loss of ₹1.5 lakh crore. While all of these projections show the devastating impact on the sector, it barelyscratches the surface in terms of the havoc this is causing at a human level with businesses upended and people robbed off their dreams.

We will have to be ready to go to great lengths to instil confidence in people to make them feel more comfortable venturing out. It's why standardising protocols as much as possible to ensure a certain level playing field for businesses of all sizes is the new need for travel and hospitality industry to bounce back. Just the way security protocols around flying changed fundamentally post 9/11 – we can expect more sweeping impact across the travel and hospitality value chain as a result of COVID-19. To bring travellers back, we will have to invest in collaborated confidence-building measures that can reassure them of the concerted efforts made by the entire ecosystem – to provide a safer travel environment at all steps of their journey.

Innovation has and will always remain the key to survival. The present moment brings along an opportunity in this grave crisis to relearn, readapt and rebuild travel solutions that can help ensure the viability of our industry for decades to come. For instance, adoption of new age and advanced technology solutions in travel & tourism industry has been slow so far – or to put it precisely, slower than the adoption rate in many other sectors. The current crisis is forcing our hand to accelerate adoption of technologies that will help future-proof businesses in line with the expected travellers' behavior in the post-COVID world.



> Built at the back of human nature to explore and engage, travel is as old as time and will remain timeless.

With innovation and increased technology adoption becoming key to survival in the future, hotels and airports will accelerate their investments to expand their existing 'no touch' options through biometrics, barcoding, automation and personalized digital interactions while enabling social distancing. The industry will undergo rapid transformation and will be seen swiftly shifting gears to seamlessly integrate technology at all touch points, from passports to boarding passes, to keyless hotel entry and digital checkout at hotels among others.

No business was prepared for the move from office to home for the entire workforce running into many months. Not only did it come without any precedence or manual but it also exposed customers and corporations to cybercrime and fraud as home networks could never have adequate levels of security. At MakeMyTrip, even as customer service teams were dealing with enormous volumes of traffic as a result of unprecedented travel disruption, powered by tech tools and innovative processes, we were up and running as a virtual company in no time. This pandemic has shown, if it weren't for the tech advancements in the last two decades, this crisis would have crippled us way worse than it has.

As countries begin to end their pandemic induced lockdowns and ease travel restrictions, travel is returning in a calibrated manner. A lot of times we struggle to pause and course correct to avoid impinging on the momentum with which we are marching forward but now that we have an opportunity to build things ground up again – it's time for us to build a more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable tourism model.

While businesses go back to the drawing board to assess current working models, products and offerings and customer service levels to smoothen the creases – the crisis provides an opportunity to press reset in more fundamental ways. So, I am not worried about whether the world will travel again the same way or will we lose our wanderlust. The forced time indoors will only whet people's appetite to travel once again and perhaps even more.Built at the back of human nature to explore and engage, travel is as old as time and will remain timeless.

Deepika Rao

MID-SCALE AND ECONOMY SEGMENTS WILL PICK UP FASTER

Brands will relook at their portfolio

Deepika Rao is the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer at Ginger Hotels (Roots Corporation Ltd.).

Deepika started her career with Tata Motors in 2000. Having completed the Tata Administrative Services (TAS) leadership programme, she has had several stints across functions in various Tata Group companies for the last 18 years. She has moved to her current role from her previous position as Vice President, Asset Management at IHCL, where she was responsible for leading solutions for margin enhancement at the company. She has also served as interim CEO for Ginger Hotels in 2015 for a short period.

India and the world at large are grappling with global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. This outbreak has deeply impacted the hotel business as most institutions and commercial establishments have shut down. While the situation for most of the companies is difficult, this is an opportunity for brands to reimagine their business model and re-invent themselves to meet the changing needs of the customer. The Customer will place a higher weightage on trusted brands thereby reinforcing the need for consistent service delivery.

The past 3 months the industry has witnessed a contraction of revenue and expenses are in excess of the earnings. Curtailment of expenses in the hotel industry requires interventions in its fixed cost which form a large proportion of its total expenses. This is posing to be a challenge in addition to servicing debt repayments.

Ginger like other hotel companies has been focussed on expense rationalization and maximising revenue opportunities. Our hotels have served repatriation guests, health workers, corporates (i.e. companies which provided essential services / business continuity requirements) and quarantine requirements.

Keeping in mind the changing customer expectations and needs, we have launched Ginger 5G Safety Assurance to further enhance our service delivery. We have partnered with the best in the industry to deliver services which have been further enhanced as per the mandate by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare. In partnership with SGS India, we have implemented our Operational Assessment Program to perpetually monitor and improve overall compliance in the areas of cleaning, food & beverage hygiene, sanitation, personal hygiene, contactless experience and social distancing.

“Keeping in mind the changing customer expectations and needs, we have launched Ginger 5G Safety Assurance to further enhance our service delivery.”

As the economy un-locks, corporates and individuals will be looking to conserve cash and undertake essential travel in the short term. In this context the Midscale and Economy segment will experience a higher traction of occupancy pick-up in comparison to other segments.

Ginger positioned in the Midscale - Economy segment coupled with its presence across metro cities, state capitals, industrial townships, coastal cities and Tier I & II cities is well positioned to achieve its fair share of occupancy as the demand picks-up.

The current situation has reinforced our belief that communication and alignment of the team towards a common objective is the best way to deal with any crisis. At the outset of the crisis we undertook periodic communication with all the stakeholders and defined a set of key initiatives. We staffed these initiatives with teams processing the right mix of competencies and backed this with diligent monitoring and execution. Further this crisis has reinforced our strategy of building scale and network of hotels. It is our presence in multiple cities / states that has enabled us to tap various demand pockets across the country. To illustrate while some states in the western region were severely affected by the pandemic, our strong presence in the eastern part of the country kept the occupancy ticking.

The coming months are going to be all about survival and revival. As brands and customers start adapting to the new normal, it will be agility of the brand to adapt and cater to the dynamic demand which will determine its relevance.

A few implications for the industry are Brands will look at having a balanced portfolio of assets between owned, leased, managed and franchised. The crisis could throw up opportunities for conversions. Entry of additional supply into the market will be delayed thereby allowing the existing players a runway to build occupancy. Brands that evoke trust in the customer will prove to be more resilient.

Dhruv Shringi

AGILITY AND ABILITY TO ADJUST ARE IMPORTANT PARAMETERS

Every crisis forces us to re-invent

Dhruv leads the company's business initiatives across continents & has successfully led Yatra to its listing on NASDAQ in Dec'2016, making it only the second Indian E-commerce company to be listed on one of the world's largest stock exchanges.

Since its successful launch in January 2006, Dhruv has led Yatra.com to grow from a 3 member organization to a 2,000+ people strong organization – thus making Yatra.com the leading travel brand in the country.

Dhruv currently chairs FICCI's Tourism subcommittee on Online Travel and Technology and in 2011, Dhruv was listed by Fortune magazine amongst the top 40 CEO's under 40 (yrs) in India. He has also been actively involved in building out the internet framework in India and has previously served as the Vice Chairman of the Internet and Mobile Association of India. Dhruv holds an MBA from INSEAD and is also a qualified Chartered Accountant.

The nationwide lockdown from March 25, 2020 affected lives and livelihood across the county. We were living through unprecedented times where the country as well as businesses came to a standstill. We were looking at the impact COVID-19 and the challenges posed towards the travel & hospitality sector every day, where we were trying to assess the situation and take business decisions accordingly.

People were planning their summer holidays to domestic and international destinations, when the COVID-19 crisis brought everything to a halt; this was also the time when we were witnessing a lot of inbound travelers vesting India. In the aftermath of the lockdown, the global revenue passenger kilometers (RPKs) declined and stay-at-home orders in place across the world had a negative impact on the global aviation and tourism sector. With restrictions on movement, the hospitality sector also incurred losses. At Yatra.com, we were working closely with our hospitality and airline partners and were trying our best to streamline processes for our customers. However, the focus has been on the immediate future of the travel and hospitality industry and recovery from the impact the pandemic has had on the sector.

Understanding how businesses are working to skim through this difficult time without major losses, we fear that small travel agents and companies are facing maximum pressure in keeping things together at their end. Measures such as cost cutting, cash conservation, putting marketing campaigns on hold can help the businesses to survive this lockdown period.

During this when the country's aviation, tourism and hospitality sectors are fighting the crisis triggered by COVID-19, the entire industry has come together and has undertaken certain measures which have greatly benefited the country. From bringing stranded Indians in COVID-19 infected countries back home to delivery of essential items and medical equipment to the most remote locations to fight COVID-19. At Yatra.com we have extended our support to essential service workers and healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic by associating with our hotel partners and chains to offer a comfortable stay with best amenities at the partner hotels. We also helped over 3,500 migrant workers to reach their homes.

> "At Yatra we have helped stranded Indians in Covid-hit coutries to back home, delivered essential supplies and also helped 3,500 migrant workers to reach their homes."

With the center and state governments gradually lifting travel restrictions and a few states including Goa and Himachal Pradesh allowing the entry of tourists, we can expect domestic tourism to be in a better position in helping the revival of the tourism sector in India. Also, with relaxation for business travelers we have seen a steady increase of these travelers between cities for essential work. We understand that this will only be a steady process and cannot expect everything going back to normal in a short period of time. However, the entire industry relies on customer confidence right now and sustainable practices.

The industry players are devising comprehensive and effective strategies to deal with the pandemic including expanding their business horizons to sustain the impact of such health or economic crisis in future as well. The government has also initiated consultations with the industry stakeholders to map out the best practices that can be adopted once the restrictions are further eased and normal operations for the industry resume.

In the present-day scenario, the industry is looking at 'responsible travel' wherein best practices have been adopted for the sustenance of the tourism sector. Being one of the key revenue generators for the economy, the sector is slowly opening with various regulations and will look at enforcement of new guidelines from each stakeholder for the 'new normal' of future.

Learning from the crisis

The global coronavirus pandemic is one of the most trying challenge ever faced by the travel industry especially with closed borders and slowed economic activity. This crisis occurred at a time when technological advancement and globalization was taking place. A by-product of globalisation, was the rise of travel both at the domestic and international level. However, with COVID-19, forcing the employees to work from home, travel has reduced significantly.

To survive this, one needs to become truly agile, be able to adjust or even change their business models with extreme rapidity. To adapt to this changing environment, we at Yatra have also diversified our portfolio beyond travel to become an end to end solution provider to our business partners. Being relevant for stakeholders is very important, hence, as an organization, we have introduced lot of new products such as safe space solutions (ensures safety and sanitization at work place), learning and development programs (employee skill enhancement), automated expense management solution, catering to the hospitality industry for their daily essentials and more. Keeping in mind the customer's fears and needs, we have also introduced "Clean Pass", which ensures safe and secure environment across our partner hotels, cabs and bus service providers. We have also ensured that at every customer touch point during their travel journey, our vendors are maintaining highest level of precautionary measures and complying with GOI/WHO guidelines.

At times of crisis like these, communication with all stakeholders—employees, business partners, investors, customers—is absolutely critical. In this age of social media, it is very easy to misinterpret information, leading to spread of confusion and incorrect perception building. Hence, COVID 19 has made it apparent that digitalisation is critical in helping organisations to adapt at the necessary speed and ensuring the right communication is being sent to the relevant stakeholders. Another important thing is to have a strong customer relationship by building trust, keeping them engaged with the brand and by spreading optimism about the future.

> "A few states including Goa and Himachal Pradesh allowing the entry of tourists, we can expect domestic tourism to be in a better position in helping the revival of the tourism sector in India."

The main takeaway for companies to overcome a crisis like this is the need to be resilient, have the ability to react quickly and be decisive, to be open to change, and to be able to recover quickly from a disaster, for obtaining long-term sustainability.

What will the future of travel look like?

Once the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, the entire travel and hospitality industry came to a standstill. Flights were grounded, buses were not plying, trains were stationary and hotels were shut. With no vaccine in sight and people confined to their homes; social distancing is the new mantra and masks and gloves are the latest accessories.

With countries coming together for efforts to open borders with 'travel bubble' or 'travel bridge', it feels like a 'new normal' will come soon with customer need and confidence. Travel being one of the highest contributors of revenue in economies across the world, governments are trying to figure ways in which the gap can be reduced.

Customer confidence will be an imperative aspect for travel in the coming future, where different companies are announcing a myriad of initiatives to provide a safe and sanitized environment. We can expect customers to take some time to move from essential travel to leisure vacations. Domestic travel will be the first to pick up in terms of interest and enquires especially those destinations which are at a drive-able distance. Travelers will prefer smaller groups with family, solo vacations, staycations, secluded destinations, all this to keep afar from any risk of contraction. Experiential travel has always been a trend to pick up fastest, and it will only gain more popularity. Travelers will be keen to absorb the culture, legacy and history as they will look forward to a meaningful vacation. Destination weddings may find roads inwards to places such as Udaipur, Goa, Kerala, thereby, boosting the domestic economy. In all likelihood, nature and wildlife will be preferred; the hills, the beach resorts, safaris and secluded locations will win over otherwise crowded places. We also anticipate home- town vacations to be a big segment.

While uncertainty and fear are hanging over traveling, the new health security measures are being adopted by each section of tourism industry to provide customers with 'freedom to travel'. Hospitality industry is also re-opening slowly wherein health measures are being adopted at every step of the way and for customer confidence, there are certifications being announced as well. It is imperative to know that 'pick up the bag and move' kind of travelers will also be cognizant henceforth.

It is important to understand that all the measures, steps, guidelines announced by government, hospitality industry, airlines, transport among others are only to make travel a safe option today. Responsible and sustainable strategies are important in the current scenario. Citizens would require reassurance about health and safety standards during travel and stay which in turn would require companies to innovate as they adjust to the new normal.

The future of global travel has now been changed. It is time for the industry to be innovative and revive tourism to reinstate faith amongst tourists who experiment with locations. Countries with a strong pandemic-control record will naturally attract more individuals and restart travel first.

Every crisis pushes the human race to reinvent and rise up, so will this pandemic. ◘

Dilip Puri

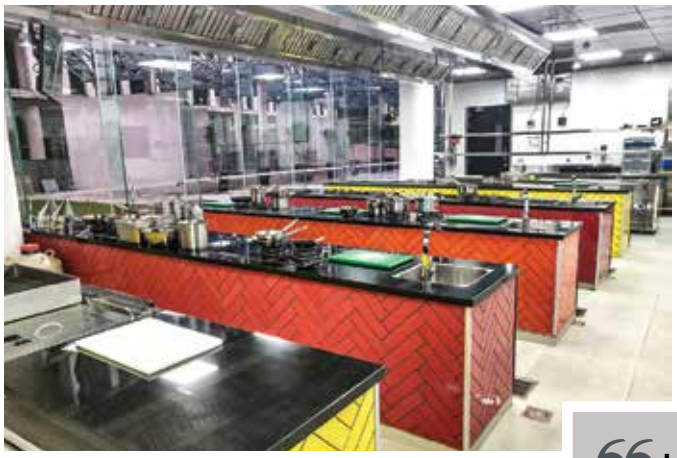
TIME TO FOCUS ON BASIC NEEDS, BECOME REALISTIC

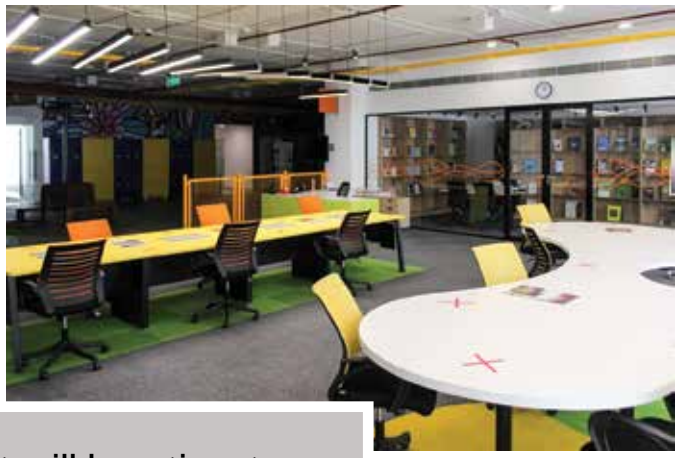
Ponder over consequences post-Covid

A prolific OCLD alumnus, Dilip has over three decades of experience in hospitality & has worked with brands such as Oberoi, Taj, IHG & Starwood in India, Australia, & Africa.

As Managing Director of Starwood Hotels & Resorts South Asia, Dilip grew the portfolio by more than double and introduced luxury brands St. Regis & W Hotels to India. As the CEO of Duet India Hotels, he raised USD 166 million in private equity capital to set up India's first PE backed hospitality development company.

Besides being the founder & CEO, Dilip is also a member of the ISH faculty & mentor to students.





> It will be a time to re-skill, up skill, learn new skills. The one great habit the lockdown has forced upon us is that of consuming learning online.

I sometimes think I am living in a dystopian future rather than in the present. A time in which fear is the biggest disease and a mask is a necessary appendage. A time when your mental sanity is as great a threat to your health as your physical well being is. As I remind myself and everyone around me that this too shall pass, I worry about the consequences it will leave behind once it passes.

Survival is a natural human instinct. The present is about survival. Of yourself, your people, your business and your community. Everyone needs to climb down a rung or two in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Press pause on your self fulfilment needs, limit your psychological needs and focus on your basic needs. Harsh as it is, live the present experience to its fullest. Because experience is the best teacher. It tests you first and you learn the lessons later. What the future holds for you will largely depend on how you mange to navigate the present.

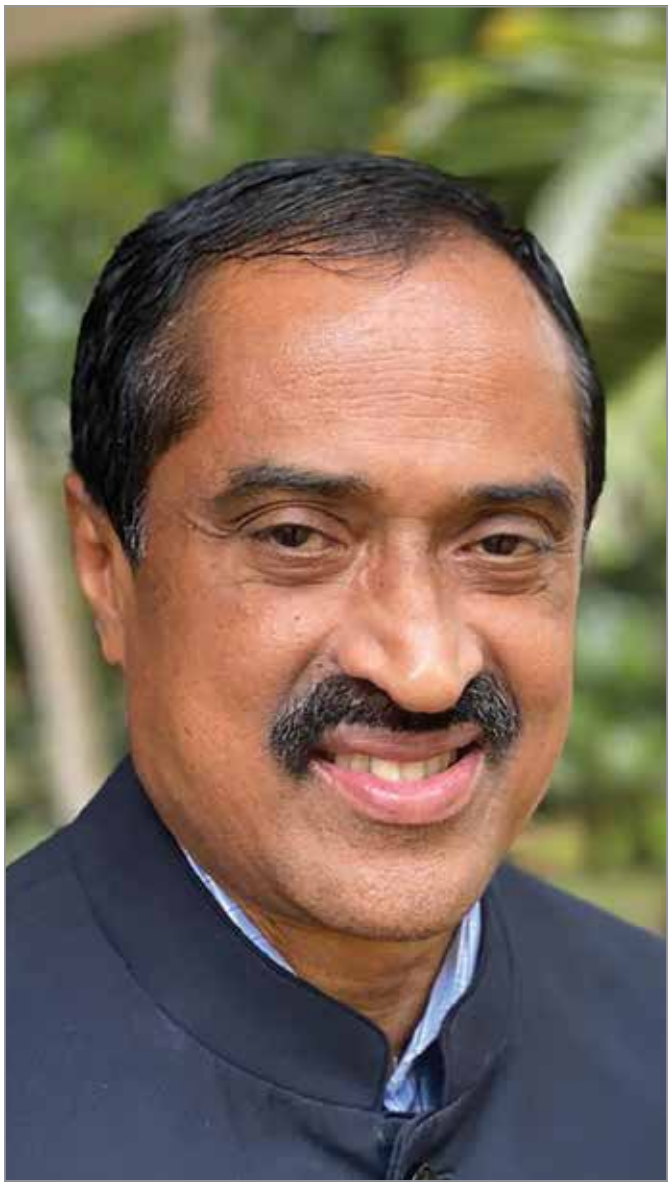
I now have a greater appreciation for what Alvin Toffler wrote in his book Future Shock back in 1977. A monumental amount of change in a very short period of time. That's pretty much what this crisis is about. Not everyone can deal with such change or adapt to harsh realities. A leader's ability is severely tested in such times. You have to prioritize people over profits. Your people have fears. You have to give them hope and optimism.

We have to take baby steps. From a business perspective, the first thing is to figure out how long a runway of cash flow do you have. Then figure out how the uptick in demand will play out. Then decide whether it is worth staying in business or finding alternate uses for your assets. From a people perspective, many will have to press the pause button. It will be a time to re skill, up skill, learn new skills. The one great habit the lockdown has forced upon us is that of consuming learning online. This can become a lifelong habit for people which will enable them to keep themselves upskilled for all the changes that will take place.

E M Najeeb

TIME TO PLAN, WISE TO KEEP OPTIONS IN PLACE

The passion for tourism will surpass all odds



E. M. NAJEEB is the Founder Chairman, 'Airtravel Enterprises Group of Companies', established in 1976. He is also the Executive Director of 'KIMS HEALTH', a chain of multi-speciality tertiary care hospitals in India and the GCC countries, including a Cancer Care Hospital in Trivandrum.

Main business domains are Travel, Tourism, Hospitality, Consultancy, Advertising, Housing, Logistics, and Healthcare.

He is an Individual Expert Member of the 'National Tourism Advisory Council' (NTAC), and a Member of the 'Tourism Advisory Committee', Government of Kerala.

> 1990s were a blessed period for Kerala tourism. The government was very keen on developing tourism. In 1986 tourism was declared as an industry by the government of Kerala.

The year 2020 became a crossroad, and a difficult juncture for the Travel & Tourism industry the world over, not sure of the way forward. Like many other industries in the world, Travel & Tourism also came almost to a standstill.

Standing here at this point, I look back about forty long years that were filled with my experiences in the industry, full of challenges, excitement, successes, recognition, networking, and good teamwork. There was an exciting high about being in a beautiful business. I loved this sector of business primarily because it was one that related to people. It has always been people-oriented, and I felt I was cut out for it.

It was by the end of 1980s, as a young and successful travel agency, I realised that tourism was slowly emerging as another major vertical. Kerala, my state, was unique, with its natural beauty, culture, tradition, seas, beautiful beaches, lakes, rivers and backwaters. The famous Kovalam beach was identified by Col. Goda Varma Raja of the Royal family of Travancore as a tourist location in the sixties and converted their palace at Kovalam beach as a facility for the tourists to stay and enjoy the sea. In 1972, the India Tourism Development Corporation started a five-star beach resort with outstanding architectural beauty, namely The Kovalam Beach Resort. Then the beach village of Kovalam started appearing on the tourist map of India, bringing attention to Kerala.

In the late 80s, tourism was talked about largely in Kerala, and the state government ventured into identifying and developing tourist locations in various parts of Kerala, putting up hotels with the intention of pioneering it so that the private sector would follow. It happened that way. The Kerala tourism destination landscape was filled with high-quality resorts and hotels in due course.

My mind turned earnestly towards tourism, and I wanted to create a brand of ours, to work as destination management and tour operating company. In 1990, a separate company was formed for this, namely 'The Great India Tour Company Pvt Ltd.' Then it was an intense journey for me in tourism. We tried to promote Kerala as a destination through well-made classy brochures, offering various packages. In fact, we were partly doing the work of Kerala Tourism, promoting the destination as that was much needed at that time.

We embarked on Kerala promotion, initially, and later launched another promotion of South India as a whole, linking it to Kerala. The promotion was 'You should be here in South India,' and I remember with happiness the award-winning brochures and materials launched by us on it.

Building up the Kerala Tourism Brand

The 1990s was a blessed period for Kerala Tourism. The government was very keen on developing tourism. In 1986, tourism was declared as an industry by the Government of Kerala. The brilliant officers leading tourism in the early nineties farsightedly branded Kerala Tourism. The branding "Kerala-God's own Country" went a long way in projecting Kerala as a top destination brand internationally.

The private sector by then was energised and started investing in putting up facilities and hospitality infrastructure at various strategic locations in Kerala. Many private sector companies, including leading brands like the Taj Group, came up with projects. Talking about the ethnic beautiful tourist resorts at vantage locations in Kerala, I should acknowledge the farsightedness and professionalism of the Dominic brothers of CGH Earth Group. Shri Jose Dominic was at the front, pioneering the private sector hospitality industry initially in Kerala, after the initial steps by the state-owned Kerala Tourism Development Corporation. Later on, many leading hospitality brands established hotels in Kerala. The government recognised the private sector as the engine of growth and was in constant interaction with it.

“We, the private sector, pushed for declaring backwaters tourism, beaches, wellness tourism, cultural festivities, eco-tourism, etc. to be the thrust in the promotion strategies of Kerala Tourism.”

Thus, a great model of public-private sector participation evolved in Kerala in tourism. I was fortunate to be part of that effort, contributing my part in forming this great model of partnership.

Another favourable factor happened that helped the growth of tourism was the declaration of the Trivandrum Airport as an International Airport, making it a gateway in 1991. Many international airlines started operating to this airport, connecting different points in the western and eastern parts of the world. Being a gateway, it helped the airlines to offer tourist fares.

Kerala was open to new ideas to promote tourism. We, the private sector, pushed for declaring backwaters tourism, beaches, wellness tourism, cultural festivities, eco-tourism, etc. to be the thrust in the promotion strategies of Kerala Tourism. Kerala Tourism had embarked on major tourism promotion campaigns by then. It started to participate in international tourism fairs promoting Kerala as a destination. Kerala Tourism came out with a number of major tourism policy declarations, consecutively and consistently.

A retrospect into myself and my learning at this crossroad

Now we are in 2020. The industry is at a standstill and wondering what the future could be. Experts are predicting good times and being innovative about going forward. The industry machines were seen stopping. Employees who never had dreamt of a bad time are uncertain. Caring employers are concerned and trying to support and sustain them, but the resources are running out. The industry is hit.

I learned many things from my journey. I know it is time for looking back and introspection. But it is not the time for losing courage. The new lesson should teach us to be fighters – fighting realities to achieve success.

Tourism and travel are one of the most beautiful, memorable and exciting businesses. It is difficult to stop tourism, but it is, at the same time, one of the most sensitive industries. We cannot take any successful business for granted at any point in time. Anything can go wrong at any time. But we should have options for planned permutations and combinations for taking our business forward, and we have to be ready to move on. We should have alternatives in plan B and C.

Many of us have to admit that we weren’t doing much homework and planning, as things were going beautifully. It is a fact that business works on borrowings and the essentiality of funds in hand is not often looked at seriously. The biggest lesson learned by all in this crisis is the importance of liquidity. Unforeseen circumstances are always a threat.

The world is under constant change. Now the changes are happening fast. We should watch the change, equip and move accordingly. The models of business should have the innate flexibility to change or modify according to the changes. We often continue with old models and patterns that do not work in changing scenarios. It applies to our industry.

In the serious environment of this pandemic, the key new norm is to distance socially and follow the protocols. In such a situation, technology should help and support. The business is happening now on technology platforms, offering products and services from a distance. Our industry is not yet fully technologically equipped. Digital and other technologies reach tourism products and services directly to the individuals through mobile-phones. The future patterns of tourism business could be following new protocols.

Survival is prime for all businesses now, and we could look at fringe areas to do business, utilising the existing workforce. Some leading names in the business, in India, have even started doing that. It doesn’t mean that big names should not look at such areas of activities until things become normal.

Indian tourism should mobilise its vast domestic tourism potential, now in this crisis. The market is big, and destinations are many. It could start by offering a family holiday at a cosy, well taken care of resort, nearby. We should ensure health protocols and care to build up their confidence. Certification of the place by health authorities would convince the visitors.

Airlines operating to India should take efforts to highlight our destinations through their holiday marketing channels.

We had a good target for tourist arrivals earlier, and we couldn’t achieve it. This is a good time to think of ways to reach our earlier target of 20 million.

What’s my desire and determination?

Let me say this once again that I love the industry and the business very much. I would continue to be an active player in it and will change patterns and strategies if needed. But still, I will be in it. I want to feel travel and tourism in me, every day. I understand its language fondly well. ◘

Time Travel to The Jurassic Era In Gujarat

Harsh Varma

DOMESTIC DEMAND STIMULUS IN TIME WILL BOOST REVIVAL

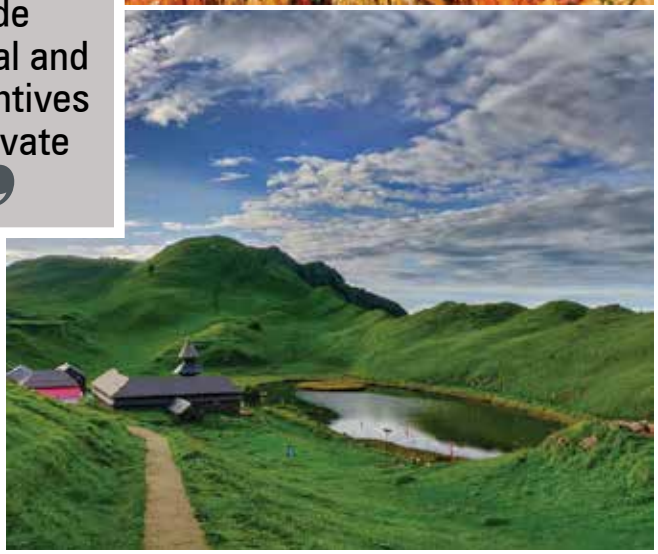
Agents need to be innovative and imaginative

Dr. Harsh Varma has more than 40 years experience in the tourism sector, particularly in tourism planning and tourism marketing. He worked for the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for 26 years and headed the Department for Technical Cooperation for almost 11 years, in addition to being the Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific for 15 years. He has worked for the tourism sector in more than 100 countries on subjects of contemporary interest and concern to UNWTO member states. He has researched extensively on the qualitative and quantitative impacts of Covid 19 in both developed and developing countries.

The first step in the direction of rebuilding the tourism sector is to regain the consumer confidence and trust, and revive domestic demand since revival of international demand is likely to take some time. As the Minister of Tourism has recently said, "every possible effort has to be made for people to get over the fear of travel. The sector has to be rebooted in all its dimensions which would lay the foundation for recovery".

While there is no doubt that consumers would give top priority to health and safety measures, a big stimulus to domestic tourists would be to provide them with financial and non-financial incentives which would motivate them to travel. In addition to sending out unifying messages in support of consumer confidence and perception, both public and private sector have an important role to play in achieving this fundamental objective.

Some of the suggested measures, both by the Government and the private operational sector, inter alia, include:



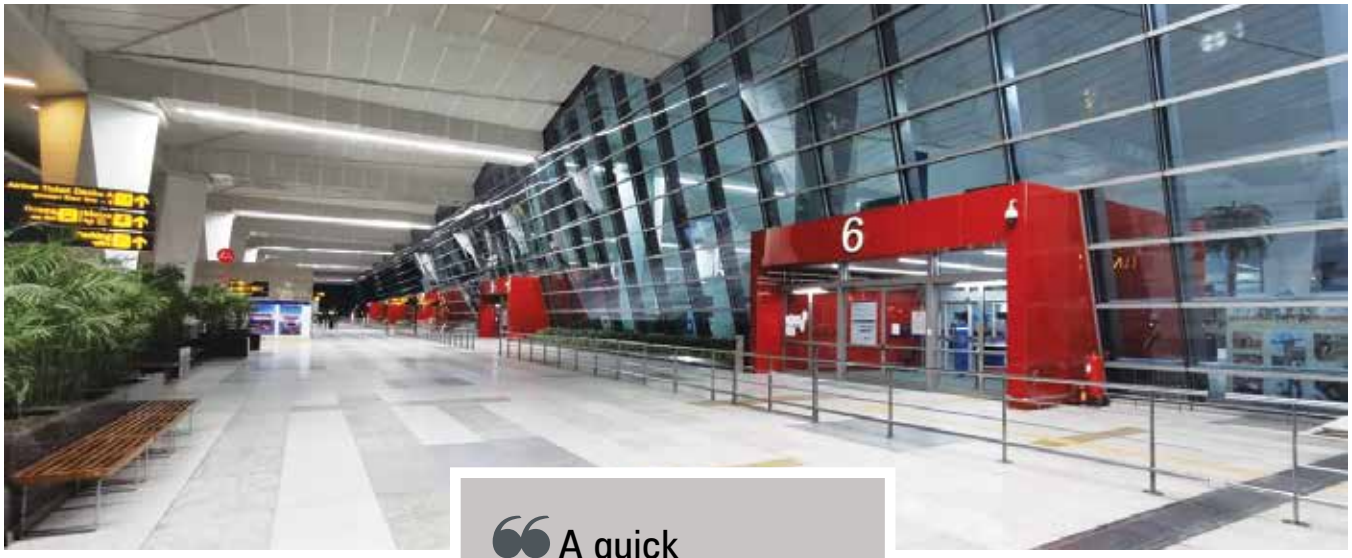
> "A big stimulus to domestic tourists would be to provide them with financial and non-financial incentives which would motivate them to travel."

1. The Government of India should consider providing income tax exemption/rebates to consumers for tourism and travel-related expenditure. The Government can prescribe the parameters for the exemption/rebates such as areas in which, the extent to which, and the duration for which, these would be applicable. Consumers would be required to file a detailed statement of travel and its purpose, destination, duration and expenditure incurred. The statement will have to be supported by appropriate documentation such as copies of air tickets, hotel receipts, etc. The statement should be filed with their annual tax returns to seek the exemption/refunds.

2. Similarly, tax exemption/rebates should be offered to companies which offer incentive tours to their employees.

3. As is well-known, international organizations such as IATA and IHRA have already issued Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for airlines and hotels of all categories. The Ministry of Tourism has also issued operational guidelines for hotels, restaurants, and other tourists services and facilities such as tour operators, travel agents, and car and coach operators. It is for the private sector to ensure that these SOPs and guidelines are followed to the last letter. The accommodation sector has added responsibilities because it is here that tourists make overnight stays and avail of food and beverage services. Therefore, hotels have to make public, as widely as possible, their new safety and hygiene standards. These may include up-skilled and re-skilled personnel who are well-versed in new standards and are able to minutely supervise regular sanitizing services, replacing or supplementing toilet kits with hygiene kits (masks, disposable gloves, sanitizers, extra bars of soap, wet wipes), staggered table layout in dining areas, and setting up as many open dining areas as possible by erecting mid-sized gazebos (maximum 6-8 covers).

4. Hotels may also think of the following as part of their marketing and sales strategy:
- No-frills packages, truly skeletal in nature (e.g. room only, transit/day accommodation, etc.)
- Cash-back offers on selected products and services
- Flexi rate policy for cancellations and re-bookings
- Special offers such as "buy three nights and get one free"), free accommodation for under 12 children
- Special incentives to "book direct" consumers
- Extra awards for customer loyalty
- Bonus trip points which can be used in future to avail services and facilities
- Free courtesy transfers
- A novel idea which is currently doing rounds of the European hotel industry is "buy now, use later". Hotels have worked out their optimum revenue per available room (up to 30-35 per cent lower than



their normal tariff), and locked down the tariff up to 20 December 2020, and, in some cases, up to 30 June 2021 (except the Christmas and New Year period in 2020). This would be particularly attractive to frequent travellers and those who wish to travel but are still undecided about the dates of their holidays. They can buy the hotel rooms in advance without specific dates at locked down tariff. This strategy is a win-win one for both consumers and hoteliers. While consumers get the benefit of reduced tariff and have the freedom to travel at any convenient date in the future, hoteliers gain advance revenue, though at a lower price. Nevertheless, it goes a long was in sustaining hotel operations, particularly in introducing and maintaining new safety and hygiene standards which involve extra costs and human resources.

“A quick discussion with some consumer groups has revealed that they would prefer to go on “open air”, activity-oriented holidays during September 2020-March 2021 period.”

5. As to tour operators, every possible endeavour must be made to encash upon the perception of “safe destinations” in the post-Corona recovery period. It would be important at a juncture when the pessimists would question the very need to travel due to fear of the disease and related health and safety issues. Therefore, the name of the game would be “innovation” and “imagination”, product re-packaging/offering, re-pricing, and bringing off-beat destinations on board. A “run of the mill” approach will surely rebound.

6. Looking to the price sensitivity of the Indian domestic market, the travel trade should think in terms of offering value added packages by introducing freebies such as limited free use of spas and wellness centres, free half-day excursions, free guide services and limited use of water sports and trekking/hiking equipment. A new trend which has emerged in Europe is to offer a free welcome lunch or dinner to consumers, in addition to what is on offer by hoteliers.

7. There is no guarantee or indication that the fear of the pandemic would go away from the consumers’ minds once the peak is over. Though there is a pent-up demand, the pessimists would always have their “ifs” and “buts”. Therefore, the travel trade has to come up with new products and destinations which are/will be perceived to be safe. A quick discussion with some consumer groups has revealed that they would prefer to go on “open air”, activity-oriented holidays during September 2020-March 2021 period.

These should include thematic packages such as countryside tours, agri-tours, local community tours, farm-stays, rural heritage tours, local cuisine and folklore tours, wild-life tours, living with the nature tours, hiking and trekking, to name a few. Another feedback clearly indicates that consumers would definitely like to avoid urban areas, crowded places where social distancing may not be possible, travelling in local public transport, and large hotels.

8. Undoubtedly, some of the above-suggested measures would entail extra costs for the private sector and may affect the profitability of their businesses. This is precisely where the role of the Government comes in, both Central and state governments, to help mitigate the impact of the crisis, ensure the recovery of the sector and allow it to lead wider socio-economic recovery, particularly in terms of employment, incomes, sustainability of MSMEs, and other self-employed segments of the industry.

9. Unfortunately, in spite of tourism industry’s pleadings, the sector was left out of the massive aid package announced by the Government. Tourism was not found fit to be integrated in national emergency, mitigation and support package. But all is not lost yet. Central and state governments, in consultation with the industry, can provide indirect relief which would not involve direct outflow of cash for governments. Some of the suggested measures include:

- tax holiday for a fixed duration
- deferred taxation
- reduced taxation including GST and local taxes
- reduced/deferred corporate taxes
- special relief package for MSMEs and self-employed including training
- waiver of penalty/interest owed to state governments
- reduced/deferred energy and property taxes, excise duty.

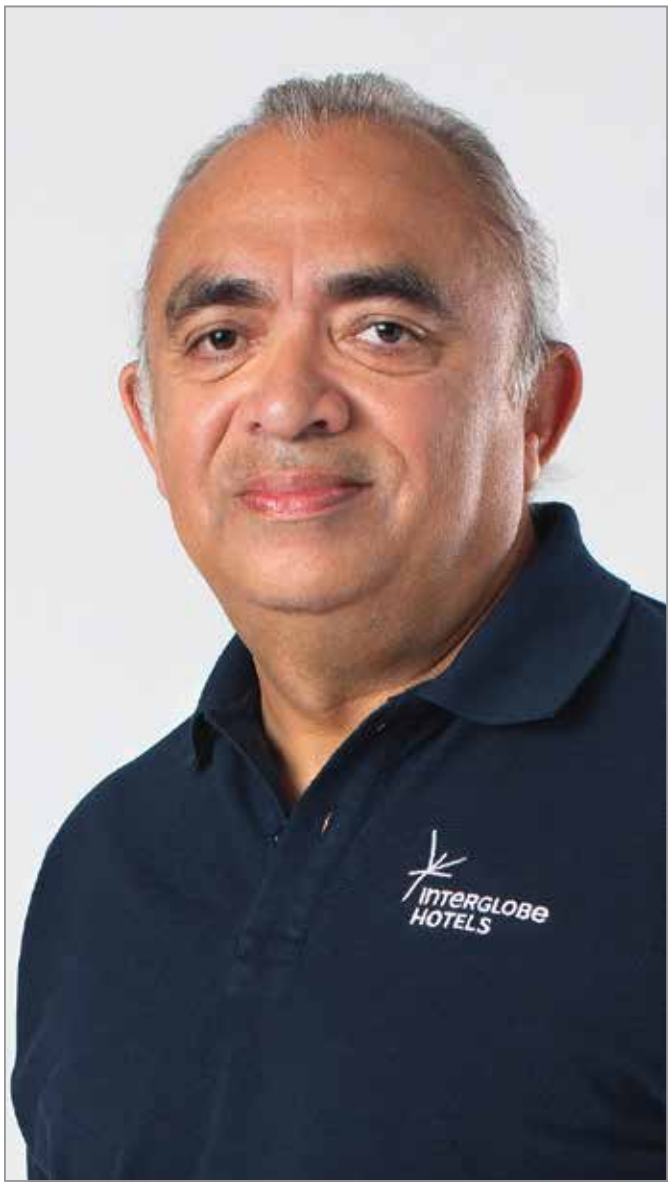
Incredible !ndia

In Patan there is a structure called Rani Ki Vav. An elaborate step-well. So ornate are its walls, it almost feels like one is in a temple. I asked for the architect's name and no one seemed to know. I asked about the sculptors. Even their names were unknown. Here, art precedes the artist. The creation is better than the creator!

J B Singh

RIGHT TIME TO REBOOT THE TEAM, BUSINESSES AND INDUSTRY

Travel trade must come out with innovative packaging



JB Singh is the President and CEO of InterGlobe Hotels (IGH) since 2013, a joint venture between InterGlobe Enterprises and Accor Asia Pacific established in 2004, to develop a network of 'Ibis' hotels throughout India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. InterGlobe Hotels currently has a portfolio of 23 hotels with a total committed investment of over US$400 million comprising 17 operational hotels and 6 under construction.

JB is a seasoned professional and a leader with over 35 years of experience across leading hotels, airlines and distribution companies including InterGlobe Technology Quotient, Travelport, Worldspan, Jet Airways, Scandinavian Airlines and British Airways. He holds a Post Graduate BTEC diploma in Management from Oxford Brookes University, UK. Aside from his business, JB also mentors and coaches start-ups, medium and large organizations, including a football team.

The first news started to trickle out of China by late December. In the beginning hardly anyone noticed. Some that did, decided it was something that was happening too far away and did not concern them. As the rest of the world returned to work in the 2nd week of January, trying to shake away the hangover of the festive season, news was gathering steam and murmurs of 'the flu' christened novel Corona virus (later COVID-19) could be heard in some discussions. Still it wasn't something that was expected to have any impact on the world at large.

The conversations started to pick up early February and it was becoming evident that the disease could travel via contact, and it could travel fast. Stories started to emerge out of Italy about how the population was being effected. Even then it was only treated as a localized issue and was at no stage expected to affect businesses and economies. Our hotels were witnessing business as usual; a strong February and a robust March, with all forward bookings in line with and stronger than the last year.

> "As part of our Future-Mindedness Approach, our New Generation Hotels and Rooms showcase a new identity change which represents a cultural movement that does not judge or exclude and is designed for everyone, including families, friends, seniors, small businesses, couples travelling for leisure or partners on business."

Numbers were rising and the World Health Organization declared it as a pandemic. The only advise they had was to identify, trace and isolate. By this time of course both Italy and China were already in a lockdown and struggling to contain the virus.

In India, our government reacted quickly and decisively. All arrivals at airports from any foreign destination started being screened for flu like symptoms and were advised 14-day voluntary quarantine. By now everyone had realized that this was a problem and not just for China or Europe but also in our neighbourhood. On 21st March, when our Prime Minister announced the 'janta' curfew, followed by a minimum of 21 day complete lockdown, the country skidded to a halt.

This was turning out to be a deep humanitarian crisis gravely affecting the

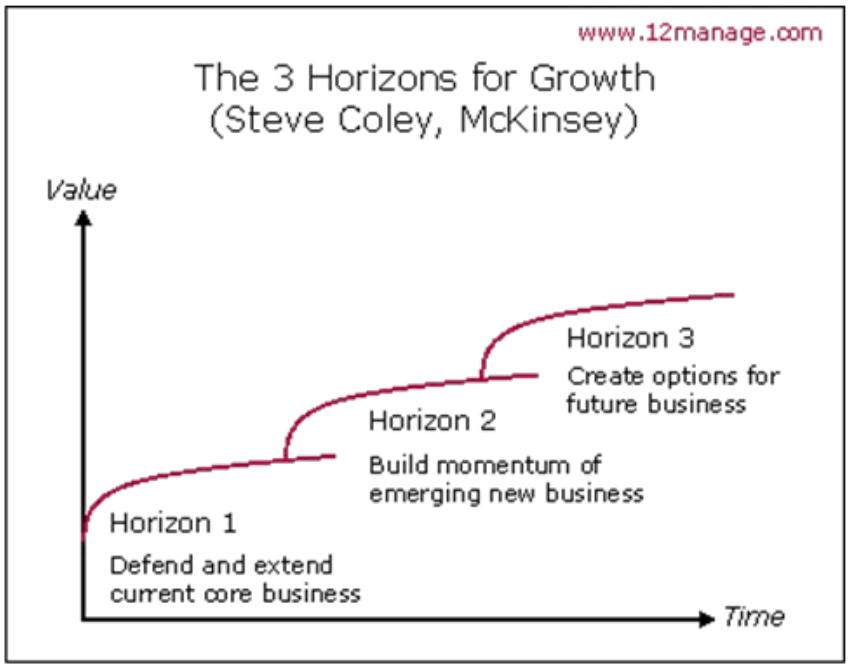
world economy. As the days were unfolding, it was getting difficult to keep pace with the fast changing environment. It was evident that by the time one would launch responses, the situation would have changed and probably worsened.

Majority of the economic activities remained shut and the stock markets played havoc losing all the gains of past several years. The sharp and quick downward correction took everyone by surprise. As reflected by the share prices some industries were more impacted than others. There was no doubt that all industries which fell in the category of non-essential discretionary spends would suffer the most. Added to that if the core of the industry revolves around high density congregations, close proximity service and several touch points (all of which the virus was educating us to avoid) the road ahead is bound to be painful and prolonged. Travel and hospitality clearly were ticking all the wrong boxes dialling down overnight to a zero revenue business.

Pundits are busy predicting the losses, shape of the recovery curve and the period of time by which business would return to pre COVID levels. Damages are being touted around ₹90,000 crore with long and painful recovery curves. There is no doubt the damage has been far and deep threatening businesses into extinction and putting the jobs of 4.5 crore people, that the industry now employs, at risk.

The last few months have been very trying to say the least, and it is now time to take stock of the situation, of where we are, what we did and what we need to do. To evaluate our dilemmas, our learning's, correct and reset our course. To follow a structured path to prepare ourselves for what is yet to come through the door. It's time for us to introspect.

The true test of any model is in its ability to stay relevant over various business cycles. The McKinsey three horizon theory is one shining example of this (see figure below). Most businesses in pre-COVID times were in Horizon 1 which is about ''mastering the now". Some forward looking businesses however, not being satisfied with business as usual focussed on Horizon 2 on "exploring the next". Only a champion few looked at Horizon 3 i.e. in creating options for future business.



Horizon 3 "imagining the beyond" remained in the distant future for most. The current situation has inverted the horizons. The distant future is NOW. This, more than anything around demand/supply situation (both of which can stay depressed only for a finite time) has threatened the existence of companies.

Over the years, InterGlobe never lost focus of Horizon 3 even as our businesses went from strength to strength. A business built on the fundamentals of excellence and humility it has served a lesson on how one can through intelligent processes, a strong and honest DNA, challenge the status quo and lead the market in a bleeding industry with wafer thin margins.

We at InterGlobe Hotels (IGH) are writing our own history. Credited with many firsts, through its 16-year history (started in 2004) we have seemingly followed a strategy that goes against conventional wisdom by largely sticking to greenfield projects. With 17 operational hotels, 6 in pipeline and ₹2,500 crore committed investment we have remained true to our original philosophy of providing high quality accommodation at great value for money, aimed at the young upwardly mobile Indian through our now ubiquitous Ibis brand. This has been bought about in no small measure through a unique joint venture with Accor both on the owning and operating side.

It has been our belief at IGH that we have to, at all times be in a state of evolution keeping our 3 core values as the guiding beacons. It must be reiterated, at the cost of repetition, that the resilience and longevity of our values have been tested again and again, none more than in the current times. But it is our relentless focus on not missing the woods for the trees that has held us in good stead and taken us from strength to strength. Let us look at these in further detail.

Continuous innovation is a way of life at IGH which is constantly setting new standards through its Future-Minded (our first core value) approach. When we introduced the ibis brand back in 2008, it challenged the status quo of the industry. Our effective use of space, cookie-cutter room designs, pod bathrooms and well-designed public areas were game changers.

To remain efficient and gain scale, cost and time-to-build were critical. This prompted us to launch our IGH 2.0 mission. Bringing in external facilitators our teams launched into extensive workshops to deliberate upon these two parameters. No idea was treated as too wild and each one was discussed thread bare. The result was stunning and resulted in cost and time reductions by almost 30% setting a new bench mark for the industry.

We have always remained ahead of the curve to adapt to our customer's changing aspirations. This has led to a complete overhaul of the ibis product with New Generation Rooms, chic and trendy public areas, intimate community spaces and state-of-the-art fitness facilities. Our New Generation room was first showcased at our last opening in Kolkata in 2018 and our under construction projects in Vikhroli, Mumbai will unveil a completely new ibis product by 2021.

We have also introduced a new food and beverage concept which is quirky, engaging and in keeping with the tastes of our new generation guests. The concept focusses on a unique product offering that sticks to the basics in terms of taste, but offers a twist to presentation and visual appeal.

In a bid to always be looking ahead sometime last year we kick started IGH 3.0 with an agenda to push collaboration, learning and innovation as our culture pillars. Our revitalised teams, who are always looking for more, took on the challenge. Cross functional teams (for each significant value chain) where employees from various verticals worked together as one were created and the building blocks of a learning organization (where one could learn, unlearn and relearn all in their own time) was formed amongst others.

When the crisis hit the leadership team quickly realized that it was far deeper than what it initially appeared. We planned for the long haul as early as end of February.

A three pronged strategy was put in place.

The first was business continuity. A remote working environment was put in place where adequate technology support was identified and provided to the entire team to enable them to continue their work. To ensure that despite geographical separation, the teams remained connected and engaged daily team meetings were held (on MS Teams over 6,000 meetings over 100 days) and carefully planned virtual engagement programs were carried out, which included serious learning on one hand and fun and games on the other.

The second was around cash conservation and preservation. Multiple scenarios were drawn up as early warnings on the trajectory the future could choose and cash burns at nil revenues were established. Each stakeholder including but not limited to land owners, vendors, contractors and the government agencies were consulted and partnered with to establish how the pain could be equitably distributed.

The third was to re-focus the teams on the future i.e. the now oft used new normal. Enter IGH 3.0 in its new avatar IGH 3.0+. In a virtually held co-creation workshop, various work streams around ways of working, culture influences, approach to learning and development and new business opportunities were established. Whilst it is all still work in progress some of the findings have been no less than astounding, such as over 40+ ideas with revenue potential being mooted by the team.

> “As a leading hotel company with a Customer Centric approach, this is all about making guests feel welcomed, heart-warmed, incredible and like they belong. Taking the ibis brand further, our way forward epitomises a personalised approach whether it’s being trendy, fun, young, distinguished or anything that makes you feel alive and at home.”

IGH has set the bar very high in the industry in terms of Integrity (our second value) and corporate governance. Our credit rating of (A-) is the highest in our segment, and amongst the best in the industry. Our performance has helped restore faith amongst the lending community – something that had been earlier marred by over capitalised projects and NPAs.

The company’s risk management processes are best-in-class and widely recognised; we have been awarded the coveted Golden Peacock Award for two years running and have won over 100+ awards in several different categories. We are a certified ISO 9001, 14001 and 18001 company covering areas of Quality, Health and Safety and Environmental Management. This ensures that our processes are watertight and result-oriented.

Our internal audits check and document over 44,000 points to ensure 100% compliance to the law of the land.

The companies that will remain preserved and poised to get on to a new growth curve on the other side of this crisis will have to be holding compliance in highest regard even though this comes at a cost. This ‘no compromise’ stand towards corporate governance will ensure that we will remain the poster boys of the industry and someone who the government can hold up as a model corporate citizen.

Our Customers (Customer Centricity is our third and final core value) are at the heart of every decision that we make. The ibis brand

is synonymous in the smart economy space for offering high quality hotel accommodation at an affordable price. Our hotels are highly-functional, technologically advanced and extremely relevant from a guest experience point-of-view. In fact, it is not uncommon for one to walk into our offices and find the teams deep in deliberation over decisions like increasing the size of the room by one square meter to accommodate a larger bed.

The teams managing our properties are trained as per international standards and operate from best-in-class back-of-the-house setups, ensuring a smooth and hassle-free service delivery to our guests.

> “Our modern hotels are designed with a striking exterior and quirky interior which welcomes both new-age business and leisure travellers. Guests will enjoy taking pictures in the many cool, Instagram-friendly spots within the hotel.”

Once again our dedication to this core value ensured that we have very closely looked at the customer’s new motivators. In order to restore their confidence health and safety will be more important than ever before. They must feel that they are in a safe environment. Our operating partners Accor have been one of the early movers in this aspect. A global partnership with Bureau Veritas (a global gold standard in this area) has resulted in “All Safe’’ program. All SOPs have been redefined and new standards set. Under this regime we have created a safe and secure ambience where one can rest assured in their safety.

Our customer centric value extends across all stakeholders. High level of transparent engagement with employees, customers, vendors, partners, governments has enabled us to partner and participate in the crisis together.

The only constant in this world is change. There is no way we can remain rooted in this abyss and humanity has started to fight back. I have no doubt that we will soon have this behind us. However, as we go through this it will do us good to chronicle the learnings from these times and I see them as under.

A company’s culture defines its behaviour and its conduct irrespective of the situation. This is a continuous journey. It keeps us in a perpetual state of readiness. Most of the organisations DNA, its people, its practices, quality of stakeholder’s engagement, its commitment towards its purpose etc. will all emerge from the culture that prevails in the organisation. Therefore, building organisation culture becomes a key attribute towards building resilient businesses.

As one enters the storm; Reboot the purpose of the organisation. Very quickly evaluate each stakeholder’s aspiration from the crisis and restate the purpose if needed.

When times change, our most powerful tool is communication. Communicate, communicate and then communicate some more to engage all stakeholders. Further, the communication should be transparent and heartfelt. More importantly it should all be rooted in realism and should avoid both optimistic and pessimistic overtures. All stakeholders must be encouraged to come forward and participate in the solution. This includes stakeholders outside the organisation. Customers, partners, vendors, and most importantly in a crisis, the regulator and the government.

Our key stakeholders are always our teams. Involve your organisation in every decision. Access to information and decision making builds commitment and co-creates the way forward. Solid, progressive and agile teams are the hallmarks of great a leadership mind set. They need to be engaged and guided towards a solution orientation. This is critical at all times and even more so in a crisis.

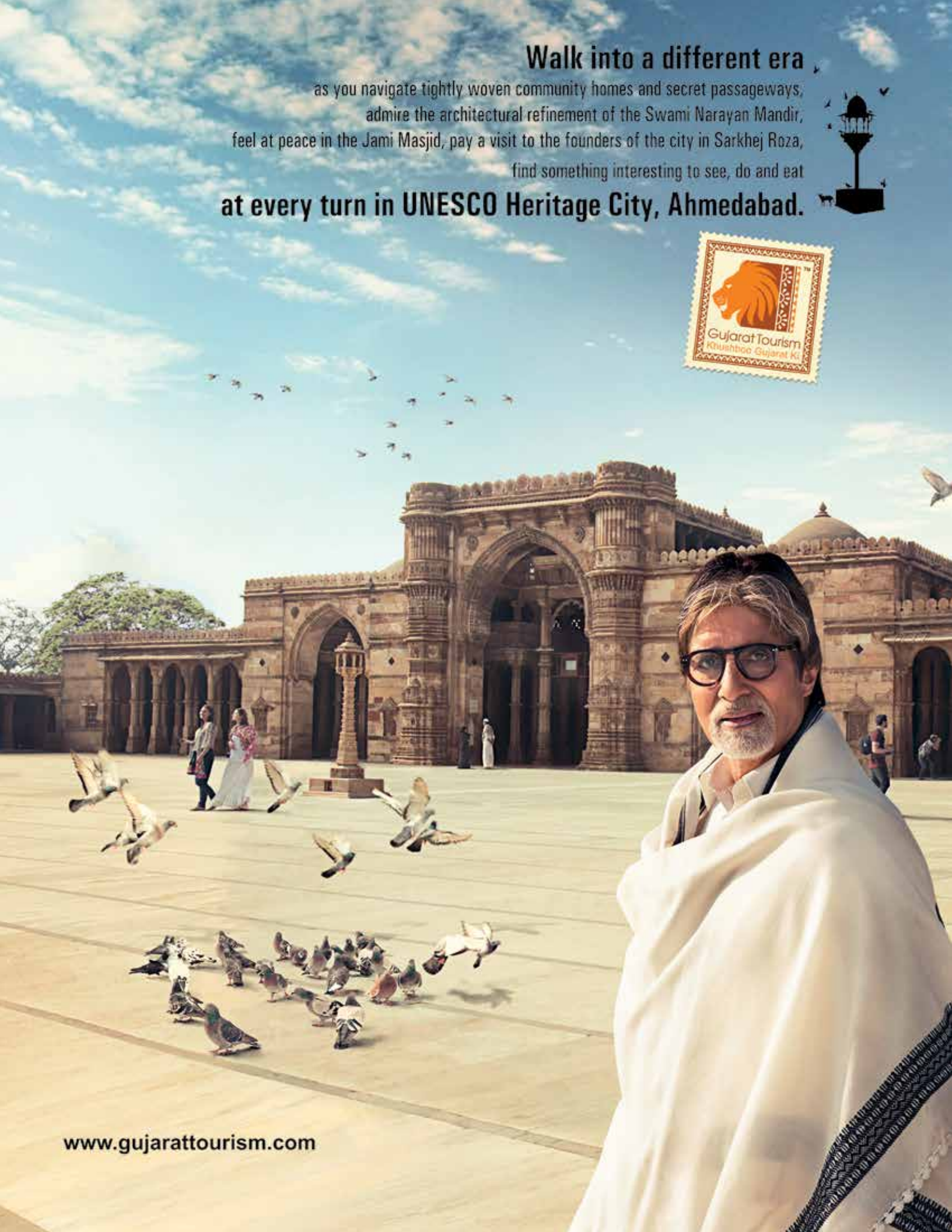
The world today has a much better assessment of what has happened. If there is one critical take away from this, it’s reforms. This crisis will take its toll and for all those who survive, will have to navigate the future with fractured balance sheets and changing customer demand and behaviour. Lean and agile structures will help us all. And this has to be mirrored not just in the industry but also in the regulatory climate.

Most crisis deliver reforms to accelerate and build enough escape velocity to make up for lost time. As we open up, our purpose must be re-calibrated and accountability must be established. There is too much at stake.

Massive structural and policy reforms and building institutional accountability will be needed to get India to meet its post Covid economic aspiration. The industry and the government has to play a collaborative and a responsible role to achieve that.

It is therefore a great time to pause and reassess where we are going. Very seldom do businesses get a chance to re-boot when the cylinders are firing. This is a great time to reboot the team, reboot the business and reboot the industry.

Finally, it is most important to paint a vision for the future and ensure that it is co-owned by each stakeholder in the organisation, the industry and the country. It can only become a reality if everyone is behind it… ■


Walk into a different era
as you navigate tightly woven community homes and secret passageways,
admire the architectural refinement of the Swami Narayan Mandir,
feel at peace in the Jami Masjid, pay a visit to the founders of the city in Sarkhej Roza,
find something interesting to see, do and eat
at every turn in UNESCO Heritage City, Ahmedabad.
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Jean-Michel Cassé

OUR TASK IS NOT JUST TO FORESEE THE FUTURE BUT TO ENABLE IT

These times have taught us to remain humble

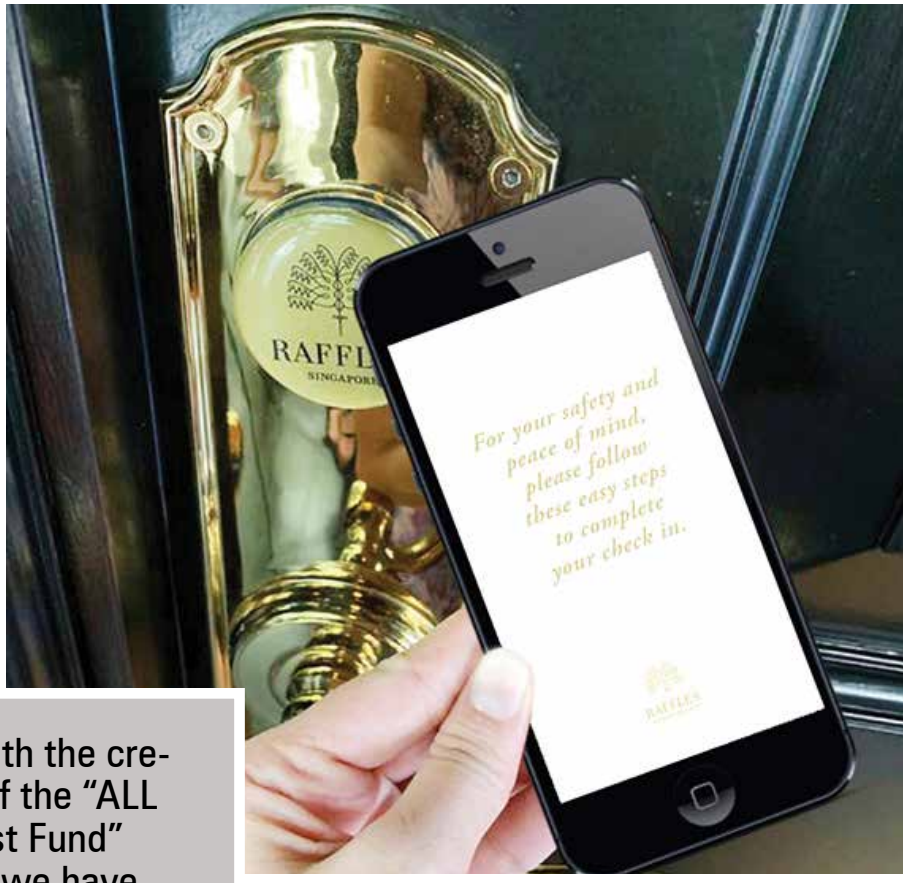
Jean-Michel Cassé is the former COO of Accor India & South Asia. For more than a decade, he has spearheaded Accor and built a strong foundation for the group. With his great relationship with owners and partners like InterGlobe Enterprises, Accor has achieved great milestones. A seasoned hotelier, he was conferred with the "Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Merite", a French honour for distinguished civil and military achievements by the erstwhile French President. Holding immense passion for discovering new cultures, he has worked across multiple international markets as a hotelier.

Extraordinary situations require extraordinary measures, we are monitoring the progress very closely. It has been tough, it has been more difficult than ever expected but at the end, when we will look back, it will be a very rich adventure, humanly speaking.

The first thing one should do, is accept some matters are just uncertain; accept the unknown; accept you do not have a solution for everything. Also, an important part is to interact as much as you can with your team members – they have made great efforts, suffered in most cases such as severe pay cuts, went through leave without pay, worried for the future of the industry, and so on. We need to assure them and convey that first comes health, second is family and work only comes third.

Many of our employees accepted and appreciated the transparency and when we see the hotels for a full quarter (April-June) with zero revenue and in some cases being officially shut, the only thing you care for is your owners and employees. We have spent as much time as we could answering their questions and concerns, they had, however we did not have all the answers. No one does. Tough decisions were made considering an unprecedented situation; we had to take necessary measures to weather the crisis but also prepare for the future and the rebound.

What these last two months have taught us is to be present and remain humble. I would suggest that do not look onto the next 12 months but look at next 3-4 weeks instead. Make sure you enable measures that will generate sufficient cash flow for short-term solutions to overcome the immediate crunch and ensure everybody is safe. Get information from the outside, learn as much as you can, and then embark people as much as you could even though you do not have all the answers but provide them with a direction.



> “With the creation of the “ALL Heartist Fund” where we have allocated 25 percent of Accor’s planned dividend (€70m) to the fund, a COVID-19 special purpose vehicle which will assist Accor’s 300,000 employees.”

Since the beginning of the COVID-19, Accor has been mobilizing to protect its business and support its employees and partners, notably with the creation of the “ALL Heartist Fund” where we have allocated 25 percent of Accor’s planned dividend (€70m) to the fund, a COVID-19 special purpose vehicle which will assist Accor’s 300,000 employees. We are proud of this initiative, which has been able to help many of our associates heavily impacted by the crisis since its launch. Our employees are most important to us and every employee is a Heartist®. Through this, we build our distinct identity, share a common language, common set of values, common desired guest experience, common way of being, in every brand, with our colleagues around the globe.

As the pandemic stabilizes and India gradually relaxes its lockdown measures, it is an opportune time to look ahead and implement what we have planned for the future and think about the lessons we can learn from it. The last few months were an opportunity personally and professionally speaking, to understand how we all faced these challenges working together as a team. This was an amazing experience with unprecedented mobilization across all quarters! Throughout the region, our hotel teams have launched numerous solidarity initiatives to help the most disadvantaged and support the heroes on the front lines of the epidemic.

In the present environment our priorities as a Group, remain:

Employees: Caring for our most precious assets

Guests: Reaching out to all from the heart

Owners: Closer than ever, weathering the storm together

Partners: Strong cooperation and tailored solutions

Shareholders: Taking all mitigation measures to protect the present and future group value

Responding to urgency and planning for the future:

Working with government agencies, national health authorities

Proactively engaged to prepare recovery

Stay close to the teams, make sure they are safe and not alone

Additionally, at Accor we have been engaged in implementing the following procedures:

As an immediate measure, we have informed all associates at all levels across the hotels that following the end of the lockdown (or any relaxation which may apply to the hotel), they are not to report to the hotels and that they should await formal instructions from their General Managers on their return date.

> We have developed the ALLSAFE label certification, 16 guiding principles and commitments, established with and vetted by Bureau Veritas, representing our new cleanliness and prevention standards.

We will also enforce medical testing for these employees prior to commencement at work at the hotel.

We are also planning for recovery and we are working on a strategic plan for the second half of 2020 once we have more clarity on the business moving forward.

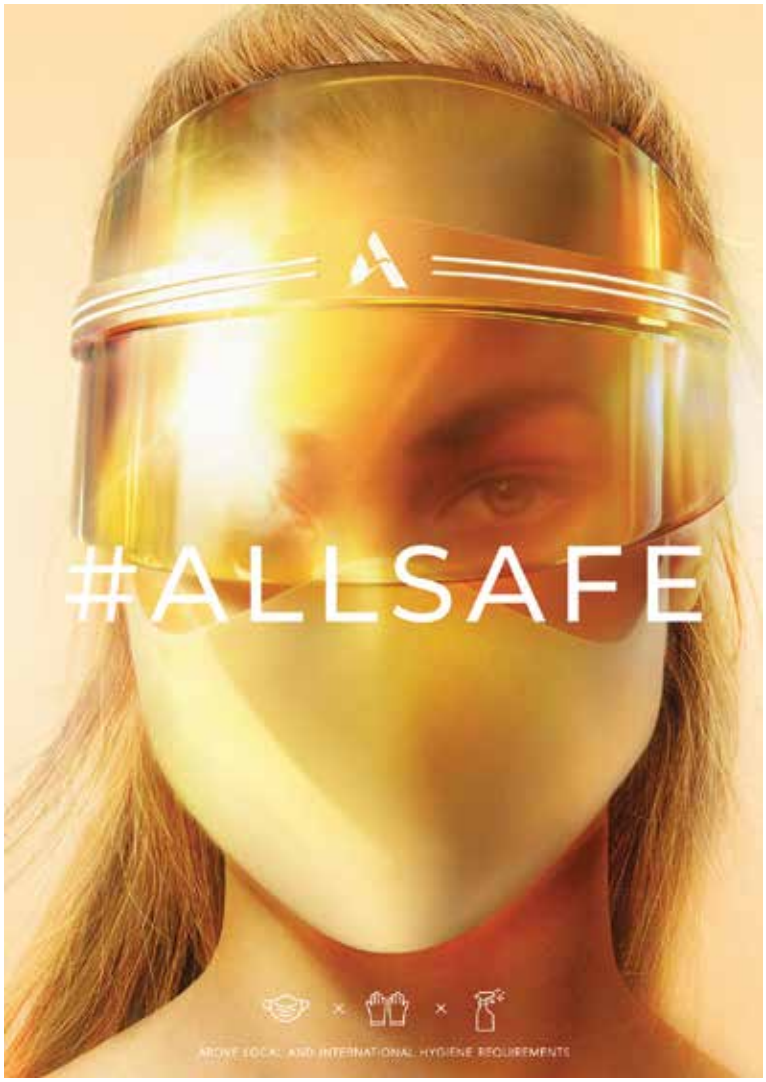
We have developed the ALLSAFE label certification, 16 guiding principles and commitments, established with and vetted by Bureau Veritas, representing our new cleanliness and prevention standards. This provides assurance that these standards will be met by our hotels in anticipation of the progressive reopening of its hotels across the different regions. Every hotel will also have an ALLSAFE Officer to ensure all protocols are followed.

We are sharing our thoughts with our owners and partners in these difficult times as we are focused on working with them as we look to the rebounding of travel in India.

We are going through precarious economic prospects for the entire industry that is already the most affected of all sectors and will be the last one to go back live. From the early days of the outbreak of the pandemic, we have immediately adopted cost saving measures to protect both hotels profit/loss and cash. We know for sure that whatever cost savings we made; we will never go back to previous cost level. Savings are to remain, and sad enough hospitality will never reemploy everyone. We expect 2021 lot better than 2020 but still a tough year as we do not anticipate going back to even 2019 numbers before last quarter of 2021. We foresee that only in 2022 we will be at the same level as 2019. With 'Unlock 1.0' phases we are seeing some light in the tunnel but not the end of it though. It has started to unlock, but no miracle is expected as it is will ramp up slowly.

Heading for a gradual recovery, Accor as a group is now having a fresh look at the world, whose mindset and priorities have changed. The future remains uncertain and many questions remain unanswered, but Sébastien Bazin, Chairman and CEO, Accor, invited us all to reinvent ourselves and review our priorities to refocus on the essentials. Authenticity and commitment will be the watchwords of this new turning point. "The world is full of opportunities, and those opportunities never went away, they are still there, waiting for us," he added.

After a shaky period, our hotels are gradually reopening, and business will pick up thanks to the power of the domestic demand. After ten weeks and five different phases of the lockdown; we have entered 'Unlock 1.0' from Monday 8th June. Hotels, restaurants,



and bars will now gradually be allowed to open, except in very few states with few limitations we understand.

While it may be a slow recovery, we are here with them for the long-term and are confident of better days. The plan is to prepare a phased rebound focusing predominantly on all leverages to lift the domestic market opportunities in our hotels.

Historically, recessions in India have led to a rate drop of almost 25% in the following year and rate recovery from such a steep drop has been challenging and detrimental for the entire industry. We expect an immediate rate drop due to change in business mix (with quarantine business), however in the long term (10-18 months), we plan to hold on to rates. Recovery across segments will not be uniform with midscale and economy demand coming back earlier driven by down trading and economic growth. Luxury and leisure will be slower as it has a higher discretionary component and consumers look to conserve cash.

This is clearly the time to plan and strategise in an environment where demand will not be price elastic and added operating costs for hygiene, medical risks and service delivery will need to be compensated. Our plan is geared towards the domestic market prioritising corporates, a room as your office, staycations, MICE both small and moderate. There seems to be good confidence in the return of MICE demand, albeit in much smaller groups – the reduced group size is to be expected. Staycations are gaining importance, as a concept; consumer will simply want a change of scene and will check into hotels in their own cities rather than risking journeys. Leisure, FIT and group travel demand is expected to be low – lack of flight options and challenges for inter-state travel, combined with the heat, would be a factor for rating this down.

And to conclude a message from our Global CEO Sebastien Bazin quoting a French Author Antoine de Saint Exupery who wrote 'The little Prince'. "As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it".

Now, as my tenure with Accor in the region comes to an end in July this year, I am grateful to have been a part of this wonderful journey. And now, after the pandemic, Accor's journey will have to be written with a new mindset, new strategies and with a different persona. It is an opportunity for me to provide all the learning and insights to my successor who can with a new perspective lead the Accor Group in this region.

In my journey with Accor, I, along with the support of our partners, guests, and employees, have built a strong foundation, this is the reason we have been surviving in these tough times. Now is the right time to handover the baton to a person whom will bring a new perspective and provide a new landscape.

K B Kachru

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND REENGINEERED STRATEGIES WILL ENSURE SURVIVAL

Uncertainty in business is also a new normal

K.B. Kachru is the chairman emeritus and principal advisor, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group. He has been instrumental in building the RHG's business in South Asia. K.B continues to be on the board of the Group's South Asia business entities.

K.B. is an active member of various Tourism and Hospitality Advisory Committees at the state and national level.

He has been on the board of directors for the Tourism Corporation of various state governments. He has also served as an executive member of PATA-India Chapter, ASTA-India, Hotel Association of India (HAI), FHRAI and ICPB. He also spearheaded the formation of IIMT, in collaboration with Oxford Brookes University, UK.

He was recently appointed on the Board of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Trust.

We are presently at ground zero, literally flattened out. You could not have ever imagined a situation like this, not in your wildest dreams. What does it mean for you, as an individual, as a company and as an industry?

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, our lives have changed in ways we had never imagined before. In the last few decades, the hospitality sector was leading the way in terms of not just modernizing India's tourism economy but also as a major contributor to country's GDP and employment. With an economic valuation of $247 billion, the Indian hospitality segment accounts for 9.2 per cent of the overall GDP. The entry of international hotels in the last decade helped create fresh tourism demand, giving a boost to the overall tourism economy. In the first 11 months of 2019, India welcomed close to ten million international visitors and our global travel and tourism competitiveness rank had risen from 65th position in 2013 to 34th in 2019. As of today, this business has come down to near zero and the five-year remarkable growth cycle has come to an abrupt halt.

According to Hotel Association of India, the industry is facing possible job loss of 5-7 billion employees and a decline of USD 10 billion in revenue for financial year 2021. It is no surprise that the sector would also be amongst the last ones to recover long after this crisis is behind us as brands will have to completely relook at the protocols at all customer touchpoints, especially with health and safety becoming top concerns for business and leisure travelers alike.

I believe that these times of extreme uncertainty can also be the window to opportunity if we focus our energies on developing innovative, long term, sustainable growth strategies. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to reflect on areas in which India has a huge potential. While I agree, that the road to recovery will be extremely slow for the industry, but the silver lining is that much before this outbreak, leaders in the sector had already started investing in areas that could help us cross this chasm, like automation and technology, focus on sustainable business practices and creating robust loyalty programs. These solutions will not just help win back the trust of our guests but will also play a vital role in the growth of Meetings, incentives, conferencing, exhibitions (MICE) business when the economy opens up again. The industry has already found unique new ways to serve its guests and members with initiatives such as order-in facilities and will continue to reinvent how they approach all aspects of services.

As a destination, the potential of India is unbeatable. Even as an 80% domestic market, I believe there is enough room for growth for all stakeholders. The current times will make it even more important for every player to have a strong domestic business as when travel does resume, it will primarily emerge out of domestic centers such as Goa, Kerala, Shimla, Mussoorie, Manali etc. India is also favorably positioned to become a world leader in sustainable and culinary tourism, in the longer run. We have swathes of stunning natural scenery and national parks; which can be capitalized upon to ensure that we are viewed internationally as a responsible and forward-thinking destination, as we sail through these unfortunate times.

> "The potential of India is unbeatable. Even as an 80% domestic market, I believe there is enough room for growth for all stakeholders."

Some of us are looking at China and how the business there is turning around. As per a research by STR Global, about 90 per cent of hotels in China are now open and occupancy levels crawled back up to 31 per cent in mid-April, from lows of near zero. Looking back at some of the past crisis that we have to acknowledge that we eventually survived and bounced back from adverse situations like SARS epidemic and acts of terrorism. The Darwinian reality is that these crises made the industry more resilient and stronger. As such, we must continue to find ways to reinvent practices and develop new models keeping sustainability, safety, hygiene and technology as priorities.

I am also extremely pleased with how the industry has banded together to help the society and advocate within the government corridors for support in revival of the industry. Hospitality staff across the nation has risen above their call of duty to provide selfless services to quarantined guests, essential workers, medical staff, and society at large, keeping the spirit of hospitality alive.

Government's assistance is of utmost importance to help level up the industry to the surface. Some recommendations have been shared by Hospitality Association of India (HAI) to the Prime Minister:

- Deferment of all statutory liabilities including EMI's to a minimum of 9-12 months at center, state and municipal levels;
- Subsidise employment for 3-6 months by government contribution per employee of 50% of the salary
- Lease, license, rentals and excise fees as well as property taxes to be suspended effective March 11, till the end of COVID-19 period

- Enable GST collected to be used as working capital for 6 months; and finally
- Utility costs like electricity to be charged on actuals versus the load.

Whether its job security for employees or operations of the businesses involved, for now at least, all efforts should focus on survival. We are working together with the government to establish a path for normalcy in general and build confidence in this industry in particular.

As an industry, our sense of responsibility, collective solidarity and creativity has never been so vibrant. I am positive that once we achieve survival in the short term, we can then look at the mid to long term measures more positively and work towards business continuity to come back stronger, with sharper focus and resilience and with new delightful experiences.

This is also a turning point in your journey ahead. From ground zero, to ground up, there is no looking back. But you also have immense learning behind you. In these last few weeks, I am sure, you have had the opportunity to clear your thoughts, to assimilate your learning. What would this be, for you as an individual, as a captain of your company, and for the industry in which you operate? What can you share with us, as your learning?

This indeed is a turning point, probably the sharpest one we have seen as an industry. The world in general has come to this fork down the road where one road goes towards 'business as usual' in a post post-lockdown world, and the other, the more challenging one, leads to new ideas and innovation.

All the past global crisis have given way to some of the biggest, and at times most unexpected, shifts in market leadership across industries. The underdogs become leaders, erstwhile leaders become laggards and even before the industry finds stability, the market dynamics change completely. This is also when creativity and innovations create new categories to meet new consumer demands, sometimes even new industries emerge. Therefore, it is one of the most critical tasks for businesses to keep their ears to the ground and work towards not just short term goals, but also towards ensuring relevance and building value, to emerge stronger in the longer term.

Specifically, for the hospitality industry I believe that the biggest lesson is to invest today for the crisis of tomorrow. Businesses that have had a focus on domestic expansion, automation and technology, sustainable practices are better prepared to mitigate the impact of this tragedy. Another important lesson from the past is the balance between leading from the heart with your head focused on achieving mission critical objectives for the business. Previous events and disruptions, such as the SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009), Ebola (2014-2016) and acts of terrorism have made it imperative for leaders to walk with empathy in the shoes of their staff, guests and stakeholders at large and yet take a hard, rational approach to safeguarding share of market and revival of business. Successful businesses take decisive actions in an extremely fluid environment, sometimes even with less than full information, but with courage and foresight. And finally in line with the ethos of serving with a smile, which is the at the core of our business, being able to inspire trust in your guests after unprecedented events such as these, is often the competitive edge that a brand can have over another. This is achieved by demonstrating the ability to be transparent about what you don't know about the future, address what you can in the best way possible for your stakeholders and remaining committed to finding innovative solutions to the problem of today.

> "Specifically, for the hospitality industry I believe that the biggest lesson is to invest today for the crisis of tomorrow."

While we live through the crisis, it is critical to keep learning as the situation unfolds and identify opportunities for improvement. Every day we need to reassess our response to the environment. How effective was our response today and what can we improve tomorrow? What did we learn today that can help build resilience for the future? That really is how I look at success during crisis- finding stability in chaos and identifying opportunities amid constraints. When the anticipated new normal becomes the 'new reality', this will be the reason for a business to emerge as the nexus of a new ecosystem.

Going forward, where do you see us heading? For you, as an individual, company and as an industry. It is not a forecast, not a prediction, but as you see the road ahead? What cautious steps we need to take, where do we find the growth and evolution happening, and what could be the implications for the industry as a whole? This is going into the future.

In a crucible of crisis, resilience is defined by how effectively a business can look at the road ahead and plan recovery effectively. While we attempt to define the destination of this journey in clear empirical manner, we also need to assess and respond to mindset shifts.

With all its suffering, the pandemic has also brought about a healthcare and sanitation revolution, which won't just be limited to any one sector, rather would be reflected in our evolved lifestyle. All Standard Operating Procedures in this area will need to be rewritten and improved on an ongoing basis. The gravitas that safety and hygiene protocols held in the minds of the consumers have rightly grown exponentially. Regaining reliability in terms of safety and hygiene shall demand strategic and consistent efforts. This however, can be a long drawn process and only the brands who can pivot their strategies at the right time will be able to survive. It is also equally important to take necessary steps to ensure effective communication of the measures taken to guests in order to regain reliability. Embedding their trust on this journey will be the most important catalyst to recovery.

Furthermore, these forward steps towards recreating demand have to be achieved along with lingering internal challenges. Managing ancillary operations after the labor exodus is in itself, another challenge. Employee trust – permanent staff, contractual employees or suppliers- needs to be rebuilt and to achieve that, a consistent flow of communication across channels needs to be observed along with the disclosure of the recovery actions in place.

> "There is also an urgent need to reimagine and transform the way our industry serves experience to the consumers."

There is also an urgent need to reimagine and transform the way our industry serves experience to the consumers. The renovation of consumer experience must not unilaterally be focused on only reducing guest density. Restructuring hotels and services to ensure guided distance along with maximizing capacity should be a more viable solution. There is a need to truly revolutionize serving social interactions, beginning right from adapting the restaurants and bars for a post COVID-19 world to finding out pioneering ways to push hospitality services beyond the premise of hotels. Personalization will remain the most important way to deliver delight, even long after this is behind us. Touchless hospitality is an automatic response and a pervasive objective across the industry at the moment. Moving ahead, technology would be a concrete and fundamental solution to achieve the goal of attaining touchless hospitality. Hence, contactless dine-in and delivery are a few revolutionary footsteps that should be followed along with consistent up-gradation in technology-based solutions. Some of these factors will be key to reignite the passion of travel again.

Sustainable practices and reengineered commercial strategies could be the strongest pillars to hold the industry above waters during these times. Not only does sustainability have an impact on growth of the business, it could be the key differentiator for the discerning traveler of the future. Today it is indispensable to develop and impart increased consciousness about managing food waste. Zero waste practices should become a widely adopted practice in the hotel kitchen. I would also encourage businesses to practice extreme caution in resolving to heavy discounting. Rate cuts in the longer term may lead to an adverse impact on market competition and revenue generation for brands.

Recovery from this crisis will be defined in large parts by who we are and what we do differently across multiple immediate priorities. Strategic business impact assessments, reengineering strategies to address key systems, employees, guest expectations and industry stakeholders and applying our collective learnings from the crises of the past will be the three priorities that I would encourage all leaders of the industry to think about as they navigate this uncharted territory and attempt to respond, survive and recover.

Personally, I think, in the journey ahead, I also have to reevaluate what we see as 'uncertainity' in a business as usual scenario. We had been living through what we thought were uncertain times – financial crisis, the emergence of cloud and advent of digital transformation, changing geopolitics, climate change and implications of globalization on travel – but the coronavirus outbreak has challenged the notion of the pace and impact with which an 'uncertainity' can bring the entire world to a standstill. The fluidity of the situation makes it commensurately harder to take decisions and yet it becomes critical to outpace these developments. All this has really changed my perspective on how, personally and professionally, we can get detached from the reality and how impermanent success can be. ■

Kapil Chopra

BUSINESSES ARE LEVERAGED AND LEVERAGES KILL BUSINESSES

Focussed strategy critical to sustained success

An art collector, an instinctive entrepreneur, hotelier, Chairman of The Board EazyDiner and Founder of The Postcard Hotel, Kapil knows no limits when strengthening his brands everyday, defining the people culture and leading strategic decisions. He was President, Oberoi Hotels and Resorts and during his tenure, the group had shown the fastest growth with an exponential rise in occupancy and revenue. The brand was also voted The Best Hotel Group by The Telegraph UK, and also voted as The World's Best Hotel Brand for two consecutive years by readers of Travel+Leisure, USA. Kapil was the Chairman of WTTC-India, heads various tourism initiatives for the government and was awarded "Hotelier of the Year" by Hindustan Times.

The Coronavirus pandemic is a once in a 100 year event. In case of a cataclysmic event such as this, a lot is re-aligned – it may change employment status for many, decimate most industries on cash flow situations and so on. Let us take an example of a severe cyclonic storm hitting, which is long drawn and results in a lot of destruction. What do people do in such a situation? They move to a safer place and try to secure their property so that there is minimum loss of life and damage to property. This is exactly what is the need of the hour right now. Secure what you can and let the storm pass.

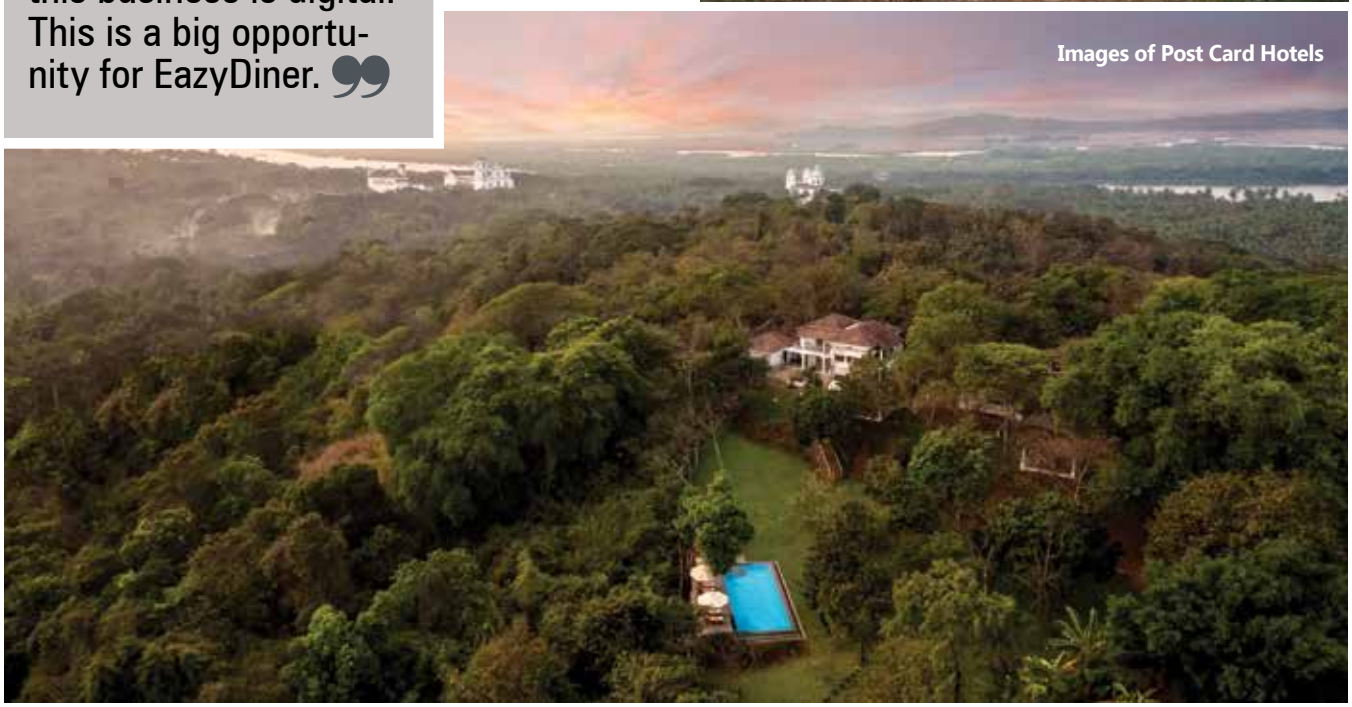
The overall pandemic severity in most countries, except for a few like India, is now globally declining. I strongly believe that the worst is behind us and, in the next 3 to 6 months, whenever a vaccine is found things will get better.

We have two companies – EazyDiner which is India's largest restaurant reservation platform and The Postcard Hotel which is am experiential intimate luxury hotel brand. All restaurants listed on EazyDiner were closed. I am frequently asked about the future of the food and beverage industry and my answer is that human beings are intrinsically social in nature and seek social activities. They will go out and, therefore, eating out will not go out of vogue. For instance, people in Europe are already comfortably stepping out and eating out will follow. The important thing to address is fear. This can be done by incorporating hygiene related changes at eating places and transparently communicating them.

> "The food service business in India is a US$ 61 billion industry. Only 1 to 2 percent of this business is digital. This is a big opportunity for EazyDiner."

The food service business in India is a US$ 61 billion industry. Only 1 to 2 percent of this business is digital. This is a big opportunity for EazyDiner. Even if the food service business shrinks by 25 to 30 percent in the next year, the market size is 50 times bigger. So, all we need to do is ride out the storm and wait for things to get better.

The Postcard Hotel, on the other hand, has had 3 key points in its favour. First, our hotels are intimate and small, luxury boutique hotels. This category of hotels has received a major boost post COVID-19 as presently no one is comfortable checking in to a 200 room hotel and sharing their breakfast space with over a hundred guests. People want to avoid too much contact and hence the preference is for smaller hotels. Moreover, we designed The Postcard keeping in mind that experiential luxury was evolving and people were seeking out personalised experiences instead of standard cookie cutter hotels and experiences. We have also received many development queries because of this in the past three months, and we will be making some major new hotel announcements in the coming months.



Images of Post Card Hotels

Second, The Postcard Hotel was built as an "India First" brand. I say this as Indians make 1.8 billion trips within the country. These trips could be by train, air or by road. Assuming that 99% of these trips do not fall in the luxury segment, still 1% of this, which is 18 million, falls in the luxury segment. This itself is a bigger market than the 10 million inbound tourists that India gets from abroad. Thus, our hotels benefit from the high end luxury Indian domestic traveller who wants to holiday in India but did not have enough options. The luxury hospitality scenario in India, especially in cities of Rajasthan or even Agra, was built to welcome foreign nationals from a 5 star luxury hotel perspective. The Postcard Hotel adopted an anti-strategy and built our hotels for the luxury domestic traveller in India. As destinations such as Goa open up, we are already witnessing a very healthy traction of people who have been locked up at home for 3 months and now want to get out and stay with us.

Third, we were very careful with the financial structuring and putting debt on our balance sheet. Our cost structures are minimal, there is no debt on our balance sheet and we are not leveraged at all. All this planning has helped us survive this pandemic. From a hospitality industry perspective, the first category to recover will be branded budget hotels. The second to recover will be high end luxury resorts. This is because 25% of the 26 million high net value Indians, who used to holiday abroad, will now be looking at hotels in India as they cannot go to the US or Europe in the immediate future. This segment is not impacted by pay cuts or by downsizing significantly. Hence, with limited small luxury hotels, the high end luxury resorts will get a significant boost in business. The last segment to recover will be luxury business hotels. Business has now evolved to meetings on zoom and video conferencing. In person meetings have been pushed back. Business travel will now only happen if absolutely essential. The other business earner for luxury business hotels in cities was banquets- social functions and conferencing. These hotels have been severely impacted as 30% of revenue in these hotels came from weddings. Both the above factors have resulted in a big setback for luxury business hotels in cities.

> "The Postcard Hotel, has had 3 key points in its favour. First, our hotels are intimate and small, luxury boutique hotels. The Postcard Hotel was built as an "India First" brand. we were very careful with the financial structuring and putting debt on our balance sheet."

It is most important to build hotel brands from a financial perspective so that when something untoward happens, one does not have to take drastic measures with either their properties or their people. It is surprising that brands that have existed for decades started reviewing manpower at unprecedented levels, just because there has been no revenue for two months. Though it may not be incorrect to reduce manpower, but a lot of people did not lay enough emphasis on cashflow management and, hence, did not de-risk their businesses. Businesses were leveraged and leverage kills businesses. This is one of the key lessons I have learnt as a hotelier.

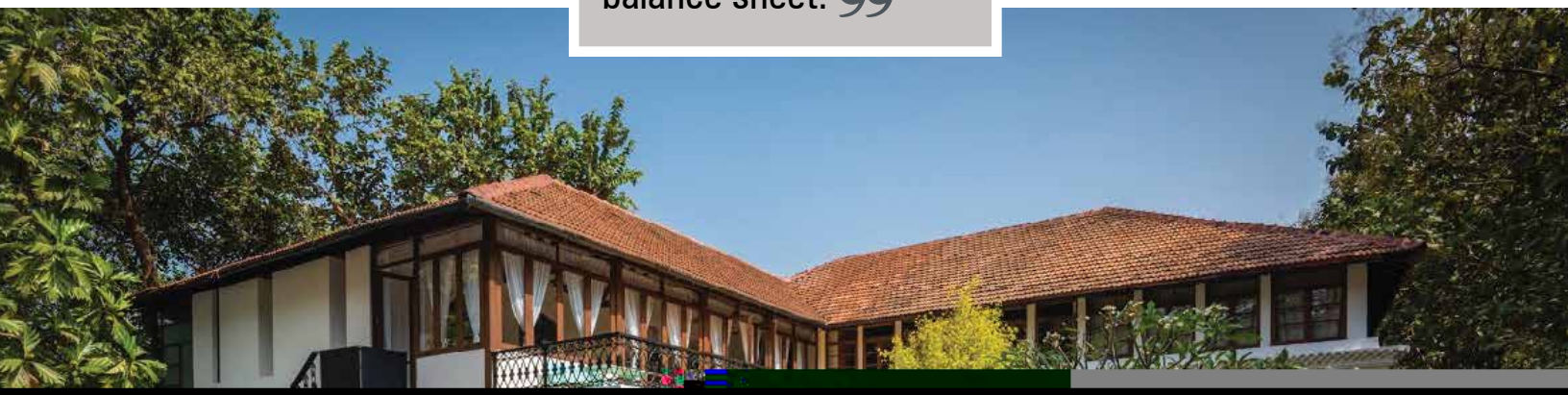


Image of Post Card Hotels

Images of Post Card Hotels

Also, when one builds a company, there has to be a clear philosophy. When we formed The Postcard Hotel, we had a very clear philosophy that "small is big". We now believe that "small is bigger". It is, therefore, very important that one focusses on the core areas of strength. India's core strength is that it has a very vibrant domestic tourism market. A lot of brands possibly didn't realise the potential of this market or ignored it, and now it may be a bit too late for them to woo these customers.

Another very important learning is to stay positive and to look at things in the longer term. If you are building a hotel company for the next 30 years, then 3 to 6 months of disruption is not significant. It is, however, significant when there is loss of human life, loss of employment and when entire industries are decimated. Also, for operations such as ours which is built on a platform of innovation and experiential travel, during these 2 to 3 months of disruption we could focus on strategic questions as to how our hotel development could be even faster. It is a time to reflect and strategise as the world will, undoubtedly, return to normal. How strong one emerges from this pandemic is what will be the key differentiator which will separate a great company from average companies.

Though in the short term all hotels are closed, but it is our firm view that pandemic is about controlling the fear. Once the impact of fear subsides, business will start recovering. People will still go on holidays. However, travel will become more regional and will depend on whether the region is a COVID free destination.

The first sign of recovery will be the return of the domestic traveller because international travel will take some time to recover.

I also strongly believe that recovery will happen with domestic tourists driving in. For example, people from Mumbai and Bengaluru will drive to Goa for a holiday. Also, people will be more comfortable in an 8 room or a 15 room hotel which will offer privacy and open outdoor dining areas. Moreover, people in self-formed groups will travel for holidays to smaller hotels as they can fully book the hotel for themselves. These people know each other well and are sure that they have taken all safety precautions. This is another big advantage at The Postcard Hotel, as our hotels are small.

People will look at longer duration of stays. People believe that if business has to happen from home then why can they not work from Goa instead of home. All our bookings in July and August are for an average of 10 nights or more with a few going to 15 and even 30 nights. In one case, the duration of stay is 40 nights.

Insofar as recovery of international travel is concerned, I foresee the recovery at least 6 months away. The real sign of recovery will, however, be seen when a medical treatment or a vaccine for Coronavirus will be in place. Therefore, holidays to Europe and to the US are completely out for the next 12 months. Outbound travel will shrink by 80%. Moreover, international travel, if it happens, will be between Corona free destinations.

As for business hotels, the economy in the branded budget hotel segment will be the first to recover as people at this level will have to travel. The market for luxury business hotels, especially city hotels, will not recover for at least another 12 months. ■

Kapil Kaul

POST-COVID NEEDS COLLABORATION WITHIN INDUSTRY, CAPA WILL WORK TOWARDS IT

Invest more in knowledge building and training

Kapil is the CEO & Director, CAPA South Asia, which he established in 2003. He has 30 years' experience in aviation and hospitality industry.

Kapil has led closer to 200 consulting and research projects for over 100 Indian and global clients over the last 17 years, covering the entire aviation value chain, including airline restructuring and airport bid advisory.

Kapil is currently leading CAPA's expansion in areas like Aerospace & Defence.

Prior to joining CAPA, Kapil has worked with ITC- Welcomgroup, EWA, Air Sahara, Crown Air, Aviation Resources Group and also advised Kuoni Travel Holdings.

Covid-19's impact on people, society, environment, businesses and the government has been unprecedented and more importantly, very humbling. From the poorest to the richest, everyone has been humbled by this pandemic, which has forced people to rethink about the way we live, work and socially interact. Freedom and personal liberty – which we take for granted – are now suddenly valued and appreciated.

Health, hygiene and civic sense are now likely to dominate the public discourse over the next few years.

Covid-19 has been a wake-up call for the industry and me personally. The industry was in a deep freeze for a few months with unknowns and uncertainty; more importantly – the loss of control was evident. The level of uncertainty and devastation caused in the last few months threatened the existence ofbusinesses.

Focus is now on survival, and we see a structurally different aviation industry in India – smaller in size, more financially vulnerable, and with a higher risk profile in short to medium term.

The learning for the industry is that it must not take growth for granted and focus a lot more on consumers and employees. Have an obsession for reducing costs and increasing productivity. More importantly, have a fortress-like balance sheet, and that is most critical in surviving this crisis.

For us at CAPA, the gains made over the last few years in terms of attracting large and diversified work, both projects in hand and the pipeline, from India and globally, have come to a grinding halt. Signalling a directional change is required to overcome this crisis.

Learning from this crisis has been immense. The sincerity, dedication and the intellectual power of our team have been extraordinary. I am pleasantly surprised by the emotional strength and maturity demonstrated by our staff. This has motivated the entire organisation and made us more resolute in confronting the challenges.

> "CAPA has decided to continue with its business plans, which will see us launching the CAPA Knowledge Centre – data and technology focussed R&D centre for aviation, aerospace and travel industry in India and globally."

Work from home saw a significant increase in productivity with a higher quality of interactions, which was another important learning. A virtual office is feasible, anda hybrid solution will certainly be the norm going forward. This will be a win-win from the perspective of reducing costs and increasing employee satisfaction.

Another critical learning, especially for knowledge businesses, is that we must break these hierarchy-driven barriers and bring more cohesiveness and a strong sense of purpose. Too much emphasis on hierarchy reduces innovations and outcomes.

For me, learning is to invest more in people, training and knowledge building, ring-fence their future, learn from them and create a compelling,intellectually driven institution that can manage the next crisis more easily. We will also seek to collaborate more with our clients and the entire industry as a post Covidtimes need a decisive collaboration.

We, at CAPA, have decided to continue with our business plan, which will see us launching the CAPA Knowledge Centre – data and technology focussed R&D centre for aviation, aerospace and travel industry in India and globally.

We are focusing a lot more on digitalisation to increase the efficiency of our consulting and research practice. This will enable our teams to focus more on delivering solutions and original thinking for our clients.

Overall, and because of learnings of Covid-19 – CAPA will fast-track investments in people, training and digitisation to very effectively compete globally and become a 'fit for future' company.

We have decided not to waste this crisis and will make fundamental changes in our business model. ◘

Lakshyaraj Singh

NEED TO SEE BEYOND OUR OWN NOSES, STRIVE FOR THE GREATEST GOOD

Be bold, brave and think out-of-the-box

Lakshyaraj Singh Mewar is the Executive Director of HRH Group of Hotels, Udaipur and a Trustee of the Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation. As an educationist, he has revitalised the Maharana Mewar Public School and as a keen sportsman he remains committed to promoting cricket and young sporting talent. With a passion for poetry, music and motor-cycles, his range of world-class collectibles span unique sets of trains, aircrafts, passenger cars and trucks. His life and achievements are regularly profiled in the global and Indian media, especially the three Guinness World Records he was awarded in 2019-20.

Undoubtedly this is a unique year in global history. 2020 will remain a landmark year, just as the end of the World War II, the coming down of the Berlin Wall, and disintegration of the Soviet Union were to the 20th century. History has been made.

For everyone, across the world, there is fear, anxiety and apprehension about the present and the near future. The privileged and the under-privileged have been hit by the pandemic which emerged from the skies and engulfed us, sparing no one in its wake. We are all in the same boat, so to say.

With every negativity, there is also an equally powerful positive energy that needs to be tapped.

As a person and as a professional, I am consciously and constantly tapping into the vast positive energy sources to ensure that we remain strong and stable in the present. We have to collectively follow the common guidelines and regulations being issued by the government. It is the only way we can provide a unified answer to the problems arising out of the pandemic.

Each one of us has to think of our families, our communities, our stakeholders, our citizenry and do the best we can to alleviate problems and sufferings. In big and small ways, we have to be continuously working to shield ourselves and provide the shield to as many others as we can. I have always believed that our actions reach out to the 'greatest number for the greatest good'.

As compassionate human beings we have tremendous power and energy to reach out to our fellow citizen with material support and advise to remain mentally strong and alert. This is exactly what we are doing and will continue to do in these times.

Yes, it is very distressing to see how the business cycles have been completely thrown to the winds by the global pandemic. Not just tourism and hospitality business but every services and manufacturing activity has been equally adversely affected. These are indeed very traumatic times. I am sure that our governments, industry associations and our own communities will rise to the occasion and find solutions which can be best for 'the greatest good'.

I am an optimist and confident that the pandemic will run through its course and change our worlds; but it will also give us the power and ability to fight back to the best of our resources. I pray to the Almighty that we remain united in this endeavour in a humane and compassionate way.

> "I have always believed that our actions reach out to the 'greatest number for the greatest good'."

The tourism and hospitality industry has witnessed a fairly productive, successful and profitable decade. From 2010 to 2020, it had been a period of high tide: leisure and business travel had been growing in every segment, every metro-city and heritage-city was

Images from the HRH portfolio.

Images from the HRH portfolio.

recording greater number of visitors. Quite naturally there were investments and more investments into tourism-related infrastructure and services than ever before!

Udaipur, as most are aware, was voted thrice as the 'best city in the world to visit' by Discovery Travel + Leisure. This success was due to the collective efforts of the entire city of Udaipur and every stakeholder in the tourism and hospitality industry. We are always proud that Udaipur as a destination has grown beyond expectations. Every major global hospitality brand has sunk its roots into the business terrain. Our focus on developing the destination has proved to be on target.

> "We have witnessed how fragile businesses can be; what is strong and unconquerable is the human spirit."

Please note that since the 1960s it was my illustrious grandfather Maharana Bhagwat Singh ji who singlehandedly worked to put Udaipur on to the international map. He travelled across the world, interacting with Royalty and Heads of State wherever he went in the UK, Europe and the US. As a result, Udaipur witnessed the visits of high-profile VVIPs, celebrities and Royalty: the list is impressively long! By the time our Family Summer Palace 'Jag Niwas' was converted into the Lake Palace Hotel (as we know it today) Udaipur had emerged as an incomparable destination.

There are enormous learnings from the 1960s and 1970s that may well be applicable today in the post-pandemic world. A key universal learning: Be bold, brave and think out of the box!

At the same time, we have to think 'beyond ourselves'.

The pandemic has made comic the focus on quarterly sales and occupancy rates! It has given us a great opportunity now to regroup, relearn and revitalize ourselves as and when the 'new normal' era begins.

I recall the famous Hollywood film 'Invictus' which profiled one facet of Nelson Mandela's life as he assumed the office of the President of the Republic of South Africa. Mandela used the Rugby World Cup as an occasion to unite the entire country, the rainbow nation as he described it.

In the film, Morgan Freeman who is cast as Nelson Mandela, says "we have to be inspired to exceed ourselves, go beyond our own expectations to build a great nation.How do we do that?"

These powerful words and thoughts are exactly what are stirring in my mind today:

Are we going to surpass our own expectations when we work in the post-pandemic world?

Do we have the inner strength and positive energy to re-build a great society, nation not just a profitable business?

We have witnessed how fragile businesses can be; what is strong and unconquerable is the human spirit. It is this spirited approach which will be required in the future when 2020 and the pandemic becomes past history.

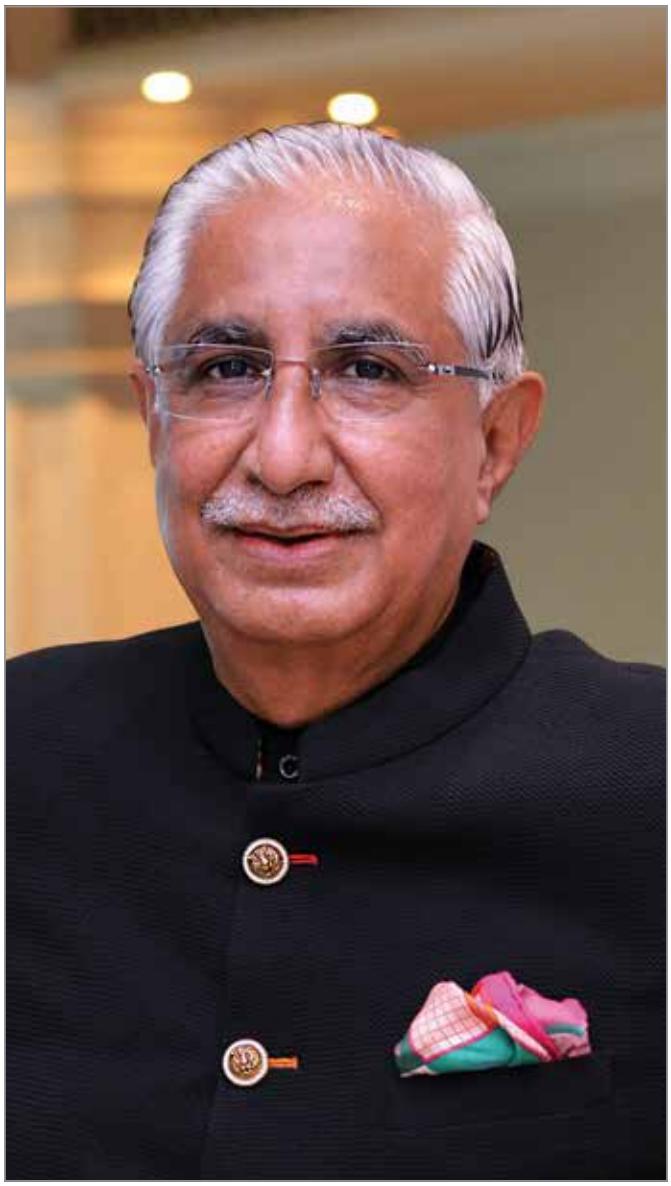
Moreover, what is our source of inspiration today?

These are thoughts which I am humbled to be sharing through these words with audiences who may be wiser than me. I am convinced that the future, however daunting and challenging, will be met head on, provided we are inspired to go beyond ourselves, see beyond our own noses and create a 'great new world'.

Nakul Anand

EVERY STORM OR DISASTER BRINGS WITH ITSELF SEEDS OF OPPORTUNITIES

Those who capture on it would be gainer as the world recovers



As Executive Director on the board of ITC Ltd., Nakul Anand is in charge of the hospitality, travel & tourism businesses of ITC. He has been entrusted with the mantle of fructifying the company's expansion plans for ITC Hotels.

Nakul Anand has been recognized as the "Corporate Hotelier of the World 2019" by Hotels USA magazine, he is also a recipient of the 'Green Hotelier' award by the International Hotel & Restaurant Association (IH&RA); his commitment to the environment is evident in the abiding principle of 'Responsible Luxury' adapted at ITC Hotels.

Currently, Nakul Anand is the Chairman of the apex Tourism body in India, FAITH (Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality).

> Since inception, ITC chose the 'namaste'. 'Namaste' is a no-touch form of greeting, which is in no way inferior to the handshake.

As somebody rightly said that there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen. This is one such event where I think that we have now close to six and a half million people affected by the Coronavirus. We have nearly four and a half to five lakhs (five hundred thousand) people dead. It is what you would call a black swan event truly, and I think it is more so for the industry.

I could give many such statistics, but I think if I was to look at the global statistics – about two months ago – WTO, the authority on global travel, had said that the drop (in numbers) would be (in range of) 30-35%. Today, it is saying that the figures concerning international travel could be anywhere between 60-80%. That is the extent of the impact that international travel would have as far as COVID-19 is concerned.

In terms of the value, the forecast is anywhere between USD 2.1 to 2.5 trillion. There are various estimates on job losses that go up to 100 million, in the travel and tourism industry.

In India, there are many ways to estimate the impact. I have a straightforward estimate, and I say that we (the travel and tourism industry) are 10 per cent of the GDP – which is an accepted figure by the WTO. India's GDP is INR 200 lakh crores. It's 10 per cent is 20 lakh crores. I am saying that we would be down by, at least, 50 per cent – which is 10 lakh crores. As the Chairman of FAITH, I had earlier arrived at an estimate of 5 lakh crores, but gradually, over the months, rather over the weeks, I have been upping it. Now I put my figure at 10 lakh crores. And I think that the industry would be down by, at least, 50 per cent.

More importantly, this is what we call a black swan event where values change. And when values change, much changes with it. It brings about a new world order. Society sort of resets its values and arrives at new priorities, etc. These new priorities always bring about changes. To quote examples, the Black Death ended Federalism and Serfdom; the second World War increased the participation of women in the workforce. You know what happened after 9/11 and how airports became security barricades of a kind. At home again, after 26/11, hotels had to bring in the security aspect when designing new properties to ensure their safety, etc. The 2003 SARS led to a surge in online shopping in China. So, each of these black swan events brings about changes in the value. Events may disappear, but some of these things continue to remain and make a permanent mark as far as we are concerned. This (COVID-19) is one such event that is going to leave a lasting mark.

I think the most important value is that 'health is the new 'wealth.' Health is moving from reactive to proactive; many years ago, it was felt that the absence of sickness was having health. I think that definition has changed quickly. Your health certificate will become as

> “Cleanliness has become the new amenity. Hotels that used to say ‘location, location, location,’ now have to say ‘cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness.’ ”

ITC Grand Bharat.

important as your visa. Remember the old days when you had to carry a health certificate. In South Africa, you had the Yellow Fever and all the rest. The single most important thing that this (the pandemic) has done is told people how vulnerable they are; everything else that has happened is its offshoot. What is the offshoot? People have realised the importance of safety, which assumes greater importance because of what I call the 'fear of infection.' Therefore, there is an enhanced focus on 'distancing' and 'disinfecting.'

As people have had more time to reflect, as they have been at home, they have realised that nature does not realise the artificial borders that people have set for themselves. And therefore, it is a global order, and the sustainability will also get amplified – the concern for sustainability, the concern for planet Earth.

Cleanliness has become the new amenity. Hotels that used to say 'location, location, location,' now have to say 'cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness.'

Additionally, the new 'normal' has paved the way for the digital. People have realised that they have to digitalise every service and interaction to keep up with this world order and the fear of hygiene and sanitation, etc. People call it 'social distancing;' I call it 'safe-distancing.' I don't think people by nature can socially distance themselves; we are socially wired. I think it is all about safe distancing.

There are two things that we need to do. One is that we keep one eye on the microscope because we have got to see how we can reduce the costs, etc. We are going to survive. I remember someone saying, "it is not about capability but cope-ability." How are you going to cope up in this new world order? We must remember that we are in the service business and hotels are in the luxury business. We can trim the fat but cannot cut the muscle; cutting the muscle will take us to an absolute doomsday.

We have got to keep an eye on the telescope, from a company's, the industry's and the country's point of view. Every storm or disaster brings with itself seeds of opportunities. This is perishable. Those who can capture on it would be gainers as the world recovers.

> "I am fairly happy that as a hotel chain, we had foreseen a trend, whichever way it came in. I think we are very well geared as a hotel chain to take all of this up, acknowledged worldwide; we are Harvard case study."

Going forward,yes, I guess you have to learn to co-exist with this for a year or two years. Even after the vaccine is found, it is going to take some time before somebody is immunised. In this co-existence, international travel is not going to pick up immediately. What is good for India is that if we have 11 million inbound tourists, we have close to 27 million outbound tourists. A substantial percentage of that (outbound) will yearn to travel. I think that is an excellent opportunity. How can we create demand for these people? How can we bring them into our resorts, hotels and cities, etc.? We also heard the PM echoing this, saying how people must see and discover India. That, however, is in the revival phase and we must first survive to revive.

My understanding is that there is going to be a phased opening up of what I call the 'revenge holidays'. You and I would love to take a holiday. There is a pent-up demand, and in the first phase, we would take holidays to places and destinations to which we can drive – motorable holidays. And gradually, as thing begin to settle down and we become accustomed to the 'new way of life,' you and I could take a flight with all the necessary precautions and go forward.

This is what I call the 'telescope' stage. I think India has a great opportunity to reinvent itself; Incredible India can be more incredible than ever. We need to look at new markets and new trends and how we can create new products for new markets – yoga and Ayurveda. Albeit, we will become more religious after this pandemic, there will be more travel to religious places. How can we capture this? What are these source markets? I guess that long-haul will always continue, but there will be a higher demand for short-haul tourism. Any country that has crossed the 45-50 million tourist mark has a majority of footfalls emanating from within the region.

For one, most of the Buddhist countries are within our region. Four out of every five places of Buddhist pilgrimage exist in our country. How can we get those people there? Another, for example, people may be wary about going to China, in the immediate future, at least. What were the source markets of China, and what can we do there? In other words, we look at different products and different markets.

I don't think we need to push our beaches and jungles, etc., those can be kept for domestic tourism. I think where we have, what I call a purple cow in terms of the unfolding trends, and I see 20 of them.

To a certain extent. I don't imagine safe distancing being practised to such an extent that there would be partitions between tables. But the concern for cleanliness, hygiene, health, food, air quality, that the hotel is clean would exist. Interestingly, I was reading an article the other day, and it had an advertisement for the Holiday Inn, which stressed on clean rooms. It was back in the 1970s. It is interesting how things take a full circle. Hygiene, cleanliness and avoiding contact where it not necessary would become important. If you can avoid contact, and get a superior result, then why not?

Sorry, I quote the example of 'namaste' again. Why shake hands when you can convey the same message with a 'namaste?' I am using this is as a metaphor; a symbolic explanation of what I am saying. A lot of these would remain. Buildings would get reshaped and redesigned. People would realise that a cleaner building, lesser touchpoints, lesser possibility of bacteria, and such, would only improve my health and can't do me any harm. So, many of these things are here to stay.

With my experience that we launched 'Responsible Luxury' 10-11 years ago as a hotel chain. Responsible luxury did not only entail sustainability; green was only a part of it – it included health, hygiene, safety. We had laboratories in all our hotels 20 years ago where microbiologist would carry out random food tests and test the swabs of human hands. We have already been practising a lot of it as a hotel chain.

It does not necessarily mean extra cost; that is the way the business must be done. Yes, there could be some extra cost in terms of sanitising, etc. I don't think it is going to be a phenomenal cost of that kind. And my own experience tells me that we've been very happy with the sort of things we have done. Most of it - healthy food, our research on food and beverages, alert meals that keep you awake even after conferences, are all part of our responsible luxury initiatives. Room service offers a welcome meal, which is a consolidated meal, sort of a buffet on the plate, are all part of our same initiative.

Neeraj Govil

INDUSTRY MUST INSPIRE PEOPLE TO TRAVEL, BUILDING CONFIDENCE IS THE KEY

It is logical that domestic will bounce quicker

Neeraj Govil, Senior Vice President – South Asia, Marriott International Inc, is a visionary leader with a deep understanding of the hospitality space. He is responsible for running all facets of the business, while effectively expanding the market share of the Marriott portfolio across South Asia.

Neeraj has a proven management track record and over 20 years of experience in the hospitality sector, having worked across a range of Marriott brands worldwide, spanning India, Australia, Vietnam and China. He is highly regarded for his ability to create innovative business models and is known for consistently delivering soaring results in operational excellence, service delivery and revenue growth. He is today, a key member of the Marriott International, Asia Pacific leadership team.

I agree we are navigating through unchartered territory here. These are challenging times, completely unprecedented and the situation is in a constant state of evolution and fluidity. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all sectors across the world.

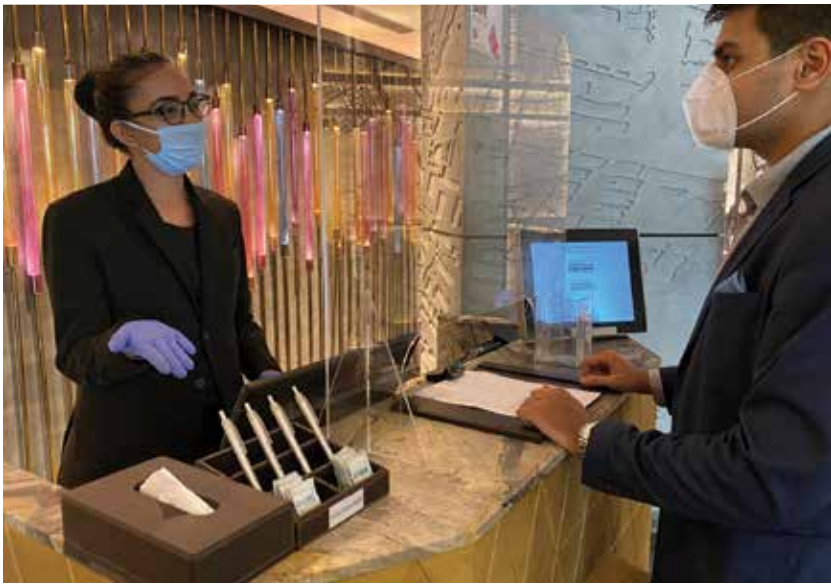
In a short term, the impact on our hotels in South Asia has been very pronounced with significant cancellations and declines in business on the books for most of March, April and May. This is the first time the impact has been felt with such force across the globe. Occupancies are at an all-time low.

We all know our industry has undoubtedly had the biggest impact, India like many other countries has been on an extended lockdown, the ramifications of which are directly felt on the economy and on the people. One should logically expect that an overall economic slowdown will be just one fallout of this crisis and getting business levels up to where they were prior to this will also present its own set of challenges. Domestic travel ought to commence once the lockdown is eased, travel restrictions are lifted, the curve is flattened and once it is generally deemed safe to move. However, the process will be slow, as cash flows will be a challenge for most organizations and individuals. A full return will take time as assessing the impact ischallenging given the global scale of this crisis.

> “In the recovery period after the outbreak stabilizes, our primary focus is to assure travelers of a sanitary, safe environment for healthy and productive travel.”

Having said that, our long-term aim is to protect and minimize the impact on jobs as well as preserving the financial health of our company. Part of this effort will necessitate that we implement certain measures.We need to anticipate the changes that are required to resuscitate business, still guided by our core values, but also responsive to the realities of a business climate dramatically altered by the pandemic.

> Contact less experiences such as virtual concierge, mobile check-in, chat-bots for help will emerge as a need. When things start to open, it is logical to assume that the domestic market will bounce quicker.



Looking back, I believe I have not experienced a professional crisis of this magnitude in the past. Having said that, I believe every such event has its own impact on an individual. The extraordinary events that we are witnessing around the globe as we deal with this crisis does throw the spotlight on how we currently go about our lives and the manner in which we operate our business. Predictions of speed to market recovery should not be overly pessimistic, but realistic in the short term, middle term and long term corresponding with a focus on consumer behaviour patterns. - There are many learnings that will emerge and collectively these will form the backbone of the "new" normal of travel and hospitality as we know it. For starters, Hotel operators must seize this opportunity to rethink the core of our business operations and where the business comes from. Segment strategies will be relooked at as will manning levels at our hotels. Fixed costs will be closely scrutinized. There will be a renewed vigor in embracing the use of technology to amplify operational efficiencies. I also see practicing good, corporate social responsibility as an integral part of our business dynamics. On a personal and professional level, it's a time to pause and reflect. As a leader it is integral to 'walk the talk' and instill a sense of security and confidence in the team as we collectively weather this storm. Resilience is going to be the key to survival.

> "There are many learnings that will emerge and collectively these will form the backbone of the "new" normal of travel and hospitality as we know it."

As far as the future is concerned, each one of us will have to embrace the 'new normal'. A lot of our old patterns are going to change, some of the measures we are currently undertaking like social distancing are likely to playout in the short - term as we emerge out of this. We will need to become more socially responsible I think a lot of learnings will emerge from this, some of this will be most relevant in the short term and as things gradually start to normalize, we will revert to the ways of the past but in a more responsible way.

When we engage in a dialogue with our customers, each one of us will have to be extremely sensitive as consumersare going to be filled with a deep sense of fear and caution. There's also going to be strong demand from customers for a more digitized approach across industries, a need for automation and advanced technology. There is a very high possibility that we will see reduced transaction points with our customers; contact less experiences such as virtual concierge, mobile check-in, chat-bots for help will emerge as a need. When things start to open, it is logical to assume that the domestic market will bounce quicker.

As an industry, we will have to work towards building a strong foundation of trust amongst customers. The revival of tourism largely depends on inspiring travel again, it's about building confidence by intensifying our engagement levels with travelers. Only then will we see demand and patronage return. We will all have to co-exist in an environment largely driven by trust & transparency.

Prashanth Rao Aroor

NEW TRENDS EMERGE AS NEW PRIORITIES FOR GUESTS, CHANGE IS IRREVERSIBLE

Luxury as a term will be redefined and the new luxury is minimalism

Prashanth founded Intellistay Hotels and Mango Hotels in 2008. Intellistay Hotels successfully validated the Mango Hotels business model by reaching the finals of the Economic Times – Power of Ideas 2009. Since then, Intellistay Hotels has emerged as a leading hospitality group in India with three well-defined brands. Together, the group manages and operates 30 hotels in 21 cities with 900+ employees.

Prashanth serves as the Managing Director and CEO of Intellistay Hotels. He has a Bachelors in Engineering from VTU and an MBA from SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, Mumbai; Director – Shanker Vittal - Jan 2002 Till Date. Shanker Vittal has been in existence since 1929 and, over the years, has diversified from its core business of public transportation into strategic investments in real estate as a real estate holding company. Prashanth serves on the family board.

Ground zero is a good way to describe it. The Sars-CoV2 virus, due to its high transmit-ability and danger to vast sections of the population, mandated the world to go into a standstill and stop the human interaction and movement. Lives over livelihood. Travel as an industry caters to exactly the opposite. We exist for human-to-human interaction and a seamless movement of people.

IntelliStay Hotels is an asset-light company. We don't own our hotels which are each owned by independent families or developers. Our brands optimize and operate these assets with large central teams and fixed costs that need to be met. The pandemic has shut down these hotels by force, and as we open up now, we are surveying the damage, both short and middle term.

We have no worries about the long-term story. I will say that in the FY19-20, IntelliStay Hotels had a record yearly revenue and new openings, and even delivered a positive EBITDA. We had just hit critical mass after back-breaking efforts of our people over 6-7 years. We were in the top 5 hotel opening company for three years in a row, a rare Indian brand emerging as a first choice player by using flexibility and localization to its advantage. This event has brought all that momentum to a standstill. I get the feeling that we are starting afresh now, as a new company. As cash flows disappear, it has also severely hurt our people who are struggling to meet their monthly minimum outflows and needs and our asset owners who are servicing fixed costs and interest. It will be a struggle to climb out of this hole, and definitely, there will be a material change for the industry as a whole. I expect that overall, in the industry, 25-40% of existing hotels may never open in their current form and may face liquidation. It's tragic that there has been no government recognition of the status of our industry as one of the principal employers of the lower economic strata and having gone through the most stress in a lockdown situation. In the absence of infrastructure status and long-term borrowing options, there was already a lot of stress in the capital-intensive industry. In such a pre-existing 'hand to mouth' situation, this pause is a deathblow to the cash flow and, therefore, to the serviceability of the debt. If there is no support and stimulus package for our industry at the end of this, more than 50% of the million-plus jobs in the industry will be lost forever. An NPA crisis is also sure to develop, spreading risk to financial institutions and the suppliers' community of the industry. It has already begun.

I think the way people travel in future, where they go and where they stay has also changed irreversibly. A new trend will emerge with new priorities for the guests.

> "I will say that in the FY19-20, IntelliStay Hotels had a record yearly revenue and new openings and even delivered a positive EBITDA."

We have learnt a lot about ourselves and the industry during the crisis. The first is an affirmation on my faith in people. Be it our own #intelliZens or our hotel owners; everyone has behaved in a balanced, cautious, kind and understanding manner. People have come together to face the crisis. Not one legal exchange has been issued or received in these six months, and this bodes well for the concept of 'good faith' and natural justice. Second is that we have learnt to compartmentalize. To separate each problem from the next like untying a complicated shoelace and put together the bricks of rebuilding. We have learnt the full extent of 'force majeure' and how helpless one feels when certain situations are not envisaged. We have lost our innocence. Risk and liability have a whole new meaning. We have learnt that our zero-fat operation still had some fat in it. We have questioned every operating cost, every facility and every need in a way we have never been forced to investigate before. Finally, cleanliness has a new meaning. Another heartening trend is how the industry has come together to support, counsel, and advocate and collaborate for and with each other. Most heartening and much comfort was available at a pitch-dark moment in our journeys.

As an industry, we have slipped into an 18-24 month 'trough' that will require both smart capital and a survival plan to cross. Those who can do this will reap the benefits on the other side. But I think the lockdown has changed mindsets and people have discovered the power of family bonds, space for mental solitude and sustainability for the future of the human race. I expect a renaissance for sustainable resorts, wilderness resorts, natural environments and small and medium properties with high trust and a sense of 'isolation.' The models we had, that secured returns for any one party, will disappear, and every partner in a hotel will have to share the risk and returns. A brand's ability will matter much more, and loyalty and collaborative efforts will see more returns. A phase of sustained mergers and acquisitions should be expected with good companies available at cents on the dollar in their attempt to raise fresh capital in a downturn. Luxury as a term will be redefined, and the new luxury is minimalism. Less will be more – authenticity over opulence. We have a rare opportunity to set out on our new journey in a way that we are not at odds with the planet. I don't think we will have another chance.

Puneet Chhatwal

INDUSTRY IS PARTNERING, COLLABORATING AND WORKING TOGETHER LIKE NEVER BEFORE

Finding common solutions and supporting one another

Puneet Chhatwal joined IHCL as the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer in November 2017. He is a global professional with over three decades of leadership experience at highly-acclaimed hotel groups in Europe and North America. Serving on many Tata company boards, he is the current President of Hotel Association of India. In his illustrious career, Chhatwal has won many awards including the prestigious Carlson Fellowship and was rated as one of Europe's 20 extraordinary minds in Sales, Marketing and Technology - HSMAI European Awards 2014. A graduate of both Delhi University and Institute of Hotel Management, Delhi, he has completed an MBA in Hospitality from ESSEC, Paris and an Advanced Management Program from INSEAD.

> The word unprecedented, although completely overused, suggests very clearly that we are all operating in unchartered territory without any clear guidance from history.

Crises are, by their very nature, largely unpredictable and incredibly dynamic. Five months into the world's tryst with COVID-19, we are still struggling to come to grips with its effect on our daily lives. In addition to the enormous impact in terms of human suffering and loss of life, the economic damage is already significant and far reaching. Conversations today are mostly centred on a possible global recession along with discourses around health, safety and progress towards the discovery of a successful vaccine. The word ***unprecedented***, although completely overused, suggests very clearly that we are all operating in unchartered territory without any clear guidance from history.

The travel and tourism sector is amongst the most affected, with airplanes on the ground, hotels closed and travel restrictions put in place by virtually all countries around the world. As per UNWTO (The World Tourism Organization), this currently translates into a loss of around 850 million to 1.1 billion international tourists and about a US$ 910 billion to US$ 1.2 trillion fiscal impact in export revenues from tourism, while placing approximately 100 to 120 million jobs at risk. These figures translate to probably some of the worst results the industry has seen globally since 1950, putting an abrupt end to a 10-year period of sustained growth since the 2009 financial crisis.

Closer home, tourism remains a critical industry for the nation – both from a development as well as an employment point of view. Tourism employs 43 million people – or 8% of all paid occupation in the country. In addition, every single job in this sector creates up to an additional six jobs downstream: the multiplier effect evident.

Prior to Holi in India around March 13th or so, IHCL was doing very well and ahead of its commitment in terms of performance numbers. However, almost overnight, the COVID-19 outbreak and start of containment measures has forced a significant decline in hotel occupancy levels. As an organisation, we were clearly facing a new reality and it was important to quickly respond and come up with actionable mitigating steps. Consequently, IHCL rapidly set up a cross-functional task force to assess business losses, impact of COVID and implementation of safety and hygiene protocols. Decisions were being fast tracked and communicated to leadership teams in real time so that immediate mitigating steps could be taken. At all times, our immediate priority was the safety of all our guests and employees; while determining how to be of service to the country to the farthest extent possible, during this unfortunate time for many.

Of course, the last many weeks have resulted in the company navigating through completely new and ambiguous territory. We are used to handling economic and market-led challenges, have gone through the terror attacks of 9/11 and 26/11 including other epidemics and pandemics like SARS and Ebola – but nothing has ever been of this magnitude, where the world has virtually been bought to a standstill.

The global aspect of the crisis and not having control over the rapidly unfolding sequence of events, despite IHCL being on a strong wicket on all parameters and poised for the next level of growth, was challenging to say the least. I am an optimist and firmly believe that every crisis is a learning. When one was able to process and dissect

> Staying aligned with company values and putting humanity first during times of crisis will inspire loyalty that can help its brand weather even the roughest of storms.

this without all the noise, especially that arising from the information overload or *infodemic* as someone rightly referred to it –I did see many aspects of our business differently. A very interesting feature was that this crisis also threw up opportunistic revenue streams that we had never thought of – for example, takeaway of food and hospitality hampers for the convenience of our guests, hosting doctors or guests for quarantine purposes, repatriation of Indian guests from abroad etc. I am very confident that we will continue to see many such new avenues in the short to medium term.

This health pandemic is a huge learning for all businesses and definitely the hospitality industry, where health hazards need to be specifically factored into business strategies and risk management plans.

Live by your values: these should always be your guiding principles, and will light your path no matter what. It clarifies direction and provides one with the best answers going forward. Our values at IHCL are Trust, Awareness and Joy and this has helped all of us collectively, as an organization, to do what is right for all our stakeholders, partners and employees.

Staying aligned with company values and putting humanity first during times of crisis will inspire loyalty that can help its brand weather even the roughest of storms. The Tatas and IHCL have been at the forefront when it comes to caring for the community. This is possibly one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times, and we are humbled and proud that we were given an opportunity to be of service to the nation. We delivered around 2 million meals during the lock-down, both to the medical fraternity and migrant workers. We also offered around 30,000 guest nights to doctors and healthcare workers so that our heroes at the frontlines could focus on fighting this fast growing pandemic.

One of the most positive effects of the ensuing crisis is that we are possibly the only ones who have the ability to come together as *One Hospitality,* despite geographies or cultural differences. The industry is partnering, collaborating and working together like never before to find common solutions and to support one and another in overcoming the various challenges.

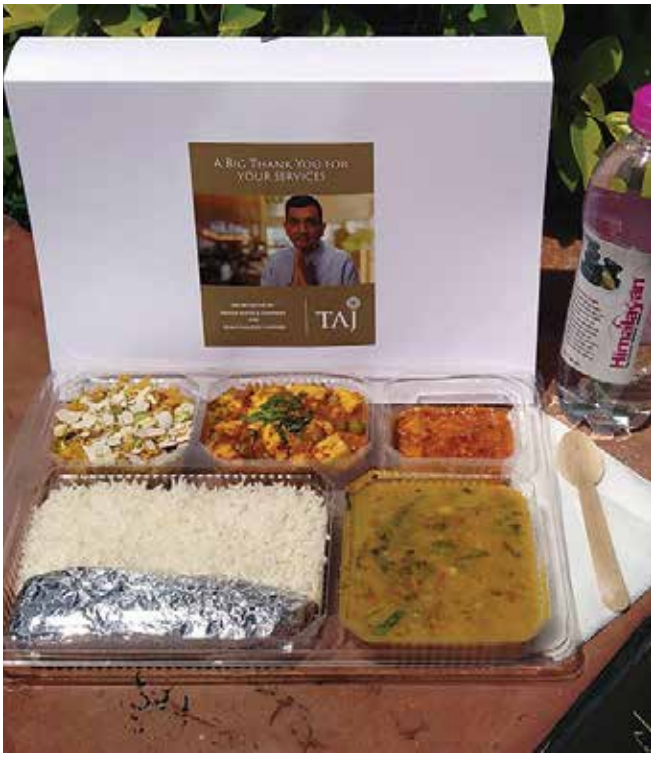
As President of the Hotel Association of India (HAI), we have approached both – the Central Government as well as the State Governments for various relief measures, moratoriums and tax holidays to help the industry overcome this crisis. Though survival is the need of the hour, timely government aid and intervention can also help in the revival for the medium term and thrival for the long term – all the three need to happen simultaneously for an industry that generates maximum employment.

Furthermore, the industry needed to **re-imagineand re-invent business plans**, offerings and even entire business models in order to adapt to the new circumstances with minimal hassle. It is necessary to embrace lessons learned from the crisis, adopt an innovative approach and execute processes in accordance. As a part of our ongoing evolution, we began this process two years back in order to optimize value from all our brands, products and services; and, as an example – have continued this during the lockdown by adding a digital food and beverage model to our 'Hospitality@Home' offering, thus making personalised items available to guests during this period. Hotels will clearly have to increase revenue contribution through non-traditional sources such as home delivery of meals or even institutional catering, while focussing on models that add to additional revenue streams in the foreseeable future.

The pandemic will change the way we do our business. Social or physical distancing is here to stay. Hygiene was always important, but will now become a critical factor in guests deciding which hotel to stay in. COVID-19 has also accelerated the shift to digital and the industry will have to embrace technology sooner than it had planned.

It is with much pride that one can affirm that we have stood firmly behind our ethos of guest and employee safety and welfare being paramount. Under the guidelines instituted by WHO, the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, other regulatory and statutory bodies – IHCL has also instituted additional stringent precautionary standards from pre-arrival that starts with airport transfers to check-out. Relevant SOPs have been provided to our employees, while changes are being implemented factoring in intensive sanitization, use of PPE, thermal screenings, contactless payments and embracing digital without any compromise to our spirit, warmth and the inimitable magic of ***Tajness– A Commitment Restrengthened***–which remains an industry differentiator.

Whatever be the new normal being established – we will embrace change, and use the learnings of the crisis to better prepare us for the future, whilst continuing to raise the bar of hospitality.



> "With our learnings from the crisis using agility, innovation and the manner in which we are collaborating and sharing– we will come through much stronger."

Domestic travel will initially play a key role in recovery. The first phase will be the beginning of domestic leisure followed by essential business travel. There is quite a bit of pent up demand or what some are referring to as *revenge travel* that will kick-in. Many are seeking a break from being at home for over two months; and even if different –travel has evidently never seemed more exhilarating than it is now. This will first start with more cautious travel, which is within motorable distance. After international flights resume, NRI's, whose families are in India, will start traveling first, followed by a gradual increase in international business travel and maybe some leisure travel. FinallyMICE and weddings will probably stay within India for the short–medium term. Recovery for domestic travel should take anywhere between 6-9 months to stabilise while the international sector may be longer at 12-18 months. However, if a successful vaccine comes out faster and is scaled to the required capacity – these timelines may be reduced. There is also the possibility that a vaccine may not be available at all in the near term, which will undoubtedly result in changes in the time estimates and continuation of safety, and prevalent hygiene standards along with social distancing norms as being mandatory.

As an optimist and also as someone who has spent decades with the industry across the globe, I can tell you that we are possibly amongst the most resilient industries, and with our learnings from the crisis using agility, innovation and the manner in which we are collaborating and sharing–we will come through much stronger. I also believe travel will return, and when it does – may well surpass pre-COVID numbers when full recovery happens.

Last but not the least, I am fortunate to be part of a globally respected and trusted conglomerate –the house of Tata's, and an iconic hospitality company with a legacy of over 116 years. Over the years, we have stood the test of time and weathered many a storm. The trust and emotional connect our brand evokes is unparalleled – in fact, just recently Taj, our flagship brand, was rated as India's Strongest Brand by Brand Finance, rated highest across all sectors. This only gives me and all of us greater confidence and the determination to play our part in what will shape the future of a much-storied company and institution. ■

Rajeev Kohli

WITH MOTHER OF ALL DISRUPTIONS UPON US, TIME TO CHANGE OUR HABITS

We will pick up from the ashes and start all over again

Rajeev Kohli, CIS, CITP, DMCP has over 25+ years of industry experience and is Joint Managing Director of Creative Travel. Rajeev has significantly contributed to the development of the tourism industry at different levels. He is the current President of the global DMC association EUROMIC. He is a member of the CII National Committee on Tourism and also been involved with IATO, ICPB and ASTA in leadership roles. Rajeev was the first Asian ever to be global President of the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence.

> “Tourism was at the forefront of the attack as our business is all about the movement of people and that was crushed mercilessly by rules implemented by governments across the world.”

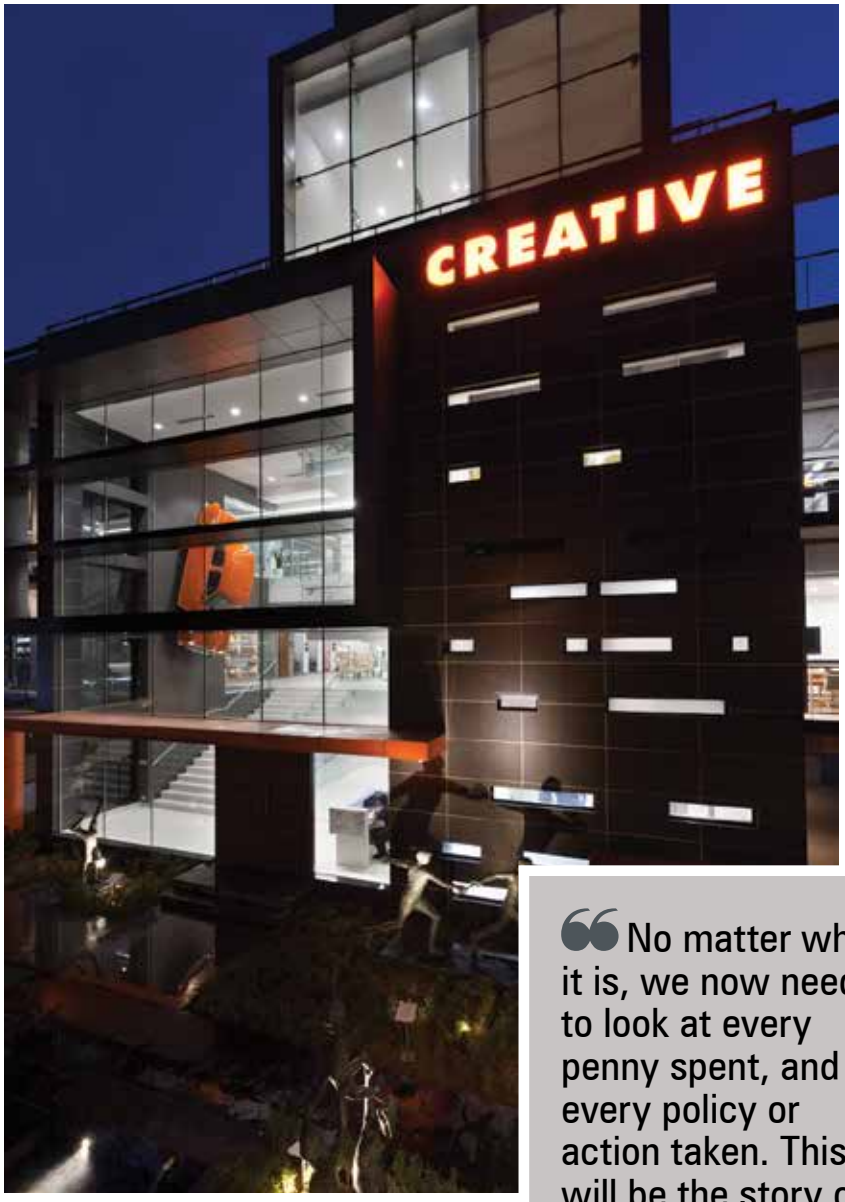
I remember making a video for our clients and the social media in the first week of March, proudly stating that India was now virus free. I was so happy that the checks that were put in place were successful. This was a golden opportunity for my country to shine and show the world what the second largest country in the world could do.

Then the very next day things changed and today weeks later we all are testament to where we stand. Our peace has turned into a great nightmare, fuelled by general confusion, lack of understanding of the virus at that time and public disobedience.

The stories that future generations will be told of the great darkness of 2020 and the accounts of human fragility. Tales will be woven; Books will be written; Movies will be made. No generation since World War 2 has seen such economic and human devastation. What bothers me is the lack of questioning and guts to hold those responsible for this tragedy accountable for their sins. I will never blame the Chinese people for this epidemic, but I will most certainly blame the Chinese government for their deception.

As an industry, the toll on tourism is uncountable. The virus gas been blind to who it has affected. Every company, big of small, has been affected in one way or the other. Tourism was at the forefront of the attack as our business is all about the movement of people and that was crushed mercilessly by rules implement by governments across the world.

Will tourism ever bounce back to the pre-Covid levels? The answer is complex. Will people start travelling again – Yes most certainly. Will employment levels return to hat they were – No, it will not. This virus has created a major correction in how the industry has operated over the years and unfortunately many companies, especially in the aviation and hospitality space, will take this opportunity to correct their levels which they could not have done in better



times. So, the impact of the epidemic on tourism will unravel for the tears to come.

As a company, Creative is no different from anyone else. No matter whom I speak with amongst my peers in the industry, the story is the same – cash flows are low, business is zero, we have to downsize. Big or small, hotel or airline, DMC or travel agent, the challenges are exactly the same. The pain is the same. Just the degree varies from company to company. The actions each one will take are going to be exactly the same. We will have to downsize, even if its temporarily. We are having to make unpleasant hard decisions. But we have no choice. If any company is to survive long term, this is the only option we have.

The next 12 months will show the reverberations on consumer confidence and spending which will shake the economy. There will be no winners in this war.

The effects on me personally have been strong as well. I and my wife haven't been able to hug our sons who are still in the US. We have not been able to see friends and relatives. It has affected my mother deeply in curtailing her social & family circle and placing her in a zone of uncertainty on our collective future, not something a senior person needs to be placed in. Yes, we have more time for each other. But that does not fill the vacuum of all the loss we have had. Human connections are important. These links are broken, albeit it temporarily. But there is a strain that we all having to bear.

But then this is today. The Present. The Now.

As we look into the future, what learnings do we need to take going forward? What mistakes did one make in the past and how can they be corrected. Were their opportunities missed or hidden?

20:20 hindsight is a great thing. So simple and easy. It allows us to rationalize what could have been, should have been. Would it not be wonderful if we were all blessed with the ability to have hindsight in advance? But such is not the way of nature.

But as our lives have now come to a standstill this is also an opportunity to do some deep introspection and soul-searching on how we all have been running our individual businesses. Time to do some spring cleaning and update systems. It is hard to bring in change in any running organization as normal business interferes with disruption. But now that we have had the mother of all disruptions, we might as well change our habits.

> “No matter what it is, we now need to look at every penny spent, and every policy or action taken. This will be the story of most players in the global travel industry.”

Today my company is back to a start-up mode. We know our product. We know our business. We know how to operate. But we have no income or cash flow. Like any other start-up, the next many months will go in (re)building from the scratch. No matter what it is, we now need to look at every penny spent, and every policy or action taken. This will be the story of most players in the global travel industry.

My questions to myself are what I would do if I was starting the company today. How would I get my business? How would I sell our services? How would I select my suppliers? There are so many levels we can and need to ideate at. So many new concepts can be formulated.

This biggest challenge however to building for a different and new future is ironically our past. We work in an industry that has manpower that is deeply entrenched in their ways. Every part of travel has a system, a method, a pattern and everyone has been stuck to those patterns for time immemorial. All hotels do things in the same ways. DMCs, tour operators, airlines – all are predictable and consistent. There are of course variations in flavors and colors. Shapes and sizes. But at the end of the day, they are all the same. It is true that all recent disruption in the travel, tourism and hospitality space has come from outsiders to our industry. Airbnb, Uber and so many others are tech companies that saw an opportunity not to so much change what is delivered, but how it is delivered, consumed or sold.

So, sitting in the middle of 2020, its time to think very, very carefully on what the past has shown us and how much of that we need to take to the future. If we just repeat our past actions and expect different results going into 2021, we will be in for a sad and disappointing ride. We all need to change the fundamentals. Mother nature has demanded so.

My advice to my colleagues – sit down, take a blank piece of paper and think afresh on each and every element on how you operate your companies, big or small. Think out of the box. And the best thing you can do is get younger, fresher minds into the conversation as they will add a different perspective on what our clouded eyes cannot see.

What comes next for us is anybody guess. There are no oracles here as no one in the industry has ever experienced anything of this magnitude. No one can claim to predict the future. Each country will see a different type of recovery. Each company will find themselves in a different position. Each person will be faced with unique choices.

Is the future dismal. Most certainly not. I am fed up with people moaning about the end of the world. It is a gloomy time indeed. We are depressed. But is it the end? Most certainly not. Not everyone will be able to weather this storm. Charles Darwin perhaps said it the best – "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

This is what will define the next generation of the tourism industry. Some will do well. Some will revive. Some will not. Such is the reality of the Survival of the Fittest.

The tourism industry needs to use this downtime to reinvent its product offering. Inbound operators need to find new ways of selling whatever they can sell. Hotels, airlines, cruise lines all need to redesign their service plans. Destinations, global and local, will need to compete with each other to attract the eyeballs of the traveler. There is a lot of work we need to do as an industry. Retraining and retooling are the call of the day.

Man is an animal that has travelled from the start of time. Wandering is instinctive to our nature. So, I expect people to pick up the pieces a lot faster than we anticipate and start exploring our world again. The start might be small or rocky. Some destinations might be favored over others. But travel will happen and as the months pass buy, people will get used to the new way of travel where things will be cleaner, more controlled and perhaps a bit safer.

As our country and the world unfolds and opens over the next few months, we will better understand the damage done and what opportunities lie ahead. Am I depressed? Absolutely. By the time you will read this piece, my company will have taken drastic actions on our work force. Steps that I will never be able to come terms with.

I hold the government at all levels to blame for failing our citizens. Every Indian has found themselves alone in this battle. But then, the Indian tourism industry has always been alone. We have grown, prospered and survived over the years. We will pick up from the ashes and start all over again.

The future which will most certainly be different. But it is a future and that future for you has yet to be written. The Ministry of Tourism needs to seize the opportunity to work with the private sector and create a whole new game plan. Start afresh. We have some control on our destinies. It is time for all of us to collectively to take this challenge head on and tell the world that the Indian tourism industry is the strongest, most resilient and most innovative tourism fraternity in the world. We will survive and we will be back!

Images of the Creative Travel HQ in Gurugram.

> But travel will happen and as the months pass buy, people will get used to the new way of travel where things will be cleaner, more controlled and perhaps a bit safer.

Rajiv Kaul

HOSPITALITY IS HERE TO STAY – TODAY, TOMORROW AND THE DAY AFTER

Life will thrive, and it is a guarantee

Rajiv Kaul has over 45 years of experience working with luxury brands in the Indian hospitality sector. Presently, he is Advisor, Leela Hotels and Palaces, which he headed as president for over a decade. His work started with Oberoi Hotels where he headed prestigious luxury properties such as those in New Delhi, Mumbai and Egypt. In between, he was with Taj Group, where he looked after the four hotels portfolio in Mumbai.

Kaul was a key strategist in overseeing the dreams of Capt Nair, translating them into iconic properties; Travel & Leisure magazine has been consistently voting Udaipur and New Delhi properties amongst the best in the world.

Leela Hotels evoke luxury.

Only months ago, air travel, hospitality and experiential tourism were booming, and several destinations like Venice, Barcelona, Macchu Picchu, even Mount Everest were voicing concerns with "over-tourism."

Today we are confronting an unpreceded global lockdown, with Hotels, Airlines, Cruise ships, Restaurants - in fact, the entire tourism ecosystem at a virtual standstill. While the world battles the Covid19 virus, the economic fallout of this pandemic has damaged the Travel and Tourism sector more than any other industry.

Further, this is a different kind of crisis which would probably take longer to recover from as compared to other recent domestic and global crises. In the case of the Gulf war, 9/11, Kargil conflict, 26/11 Mumbai attacks, 2008 financial markets meltdown, the bounce-back time was 12 to 24 months. However, given the unpreceded disruption of the industry, the recovery time for Covid19 is expected to be much longer.

Presently, many domestic and most international Borders remain closed. Entire cities remain in a shutdown mode, while fear reigns – fear of infection, fear of impending economic distress, fear of – a painful tomorrow and most of all – fear of the unknown. Tourism analytics firm, Tourism Economics estimates a 60 to 80% precipitous fall in outbound tourism, with a four year recovery period for international travel. The US-based Skift research data indicates that pre-Covid Hotel revenues may not return until 2024.

> "The first opportunity shall be offered by "Travel bubbles" with consumers flying less and driving more. The pent-up desire to travel shall invariably be an important demand catalyst."

As quarantine restrictions ease, businesses resume and flight capacity increases, hotels shall see gradual Occupancy gains. The first opportunity shall be offered by "Travel bubbles" with consumers flying less and driving more. The pent-up desire to travel shall invariably be an important demand catalyst. With road trips finding favour, the drive to leisure destinations is expected to rebound before business and fly to markets.

Good Health, Hygiene, Safety & Sanitation practices have always been a part of hospitality DNA. This pandemic has elevated their importance and both consumers, as well as business partners, shall view these as one of the most important purchases decision criteria. Safety, health and sanitation shall be central and paramount to reviving consumer confidence. Hotels shall adopt hospital-grade sanitation standards, often promoted with well-known cleaning brands or health and safety experts.

> Good Health, Hygiene, Safety & Sanitation practices have always been a part of hospitality DNA.

Cleanliness will make or break a business, with reputed hotel brands using sanitation standards as a competitive edge.

As succinctly stated by Global consultant Accenture "Every business is a health business… Almost every experience, product and service will be reassessed by people according to the extent to which it either enhances or diminishes health."

Marketing communication shall need to reassure consumers by highlighting intensified health and hygiene protocols. To inspire consumer confidence, these new best practices and preventive measures need to communicate with transparency and credibility. Outside of cleanliness and sanitation, other messages to consumers will focus on remoteness, seclusion, generous space, outdoor choices, spacious accommodations. Also, Brand trustworthiness and Value for money shall be key drivers for consumer choice.

Also, sustainability will be more important than ever. It will acquire a central spot, around which forward-thinking hotel brands will develop their business philosophy and commercial model.

The trend of wellness that was booming pre-pandemic will continue with a new iteration. We are likely to see more In-room treatments, self-cleaning entities and emergence of new therapies such as salt inhalation, with "low touch" involvement of the therapist.

Social distancing restrictions shall greatly alter the guest F&B experience with consumption and revenues being significantly impacted. Restaurants are built as social hubs, designed to provide a rewarding convivial experience where interaction and service are as important as food and ambience. The focus on distanced service delivery and frictionless payment shall spawn many emerging trends, with dining regrettably becoming more functional than experiential. Banqueting, the F&B dept's star earner, will suffer a serious setback, and the lucrative wedding business shall be drastically downsized.

Until the vaccine arrives, overall hotel demand shall remain muted. While domestic traffic (corporate and leisure) shall be the demand backbone; all other market segments shall witness a sharp drop – Business travel, MICE and weddings, International FIT and leisure groups.

In such a challenging environment, as business leaders vested with stakeholder responsibilities, how should we act balancing the interests of our guests with our fiduciary responsibilities to our shareholders, along with our duty to our employees? How do we reboot our organization to survive and thrive?

COVID -19 is a unique challenge with a 360-degree impact on demand axis, supply-side and on cash liquidity. No one has experience or perfect answers to this unprecedented situation. We will need to experiment in real-time and accept the fact that not all that we do shall succeed; however, we must keep at it till we succeed. Piecemeal success with small acts of control is how to take control of the bigger picture.

So far, many Hotel companies have responded by aggressively conserving cash, managing liquidity, and reducing non-essential spending. Most Asset- light hoteliers have worked proactively with Hotel Owners and Franchises, deferring enforcement of brand standards and even providing Fee relief to alleviate crisis pain.

Re-imagined hospitality industry

This crisis has made many of us recognize that community matters over material pursuits in life. Travel builds communities; it brings people together and breaks barriers. It is the best form of education, inspiration and even therapy. In this spirit, global travel is sure to bounce back, albeit in a new avatar.

It's impossible to predict how the travel economy shall fare once the pandemic subsides, but we will surely see new trends emerging. For sure, everything will be cleaner – cities, streets and subways. Following weeks of monotony, restlessness and anxiety caused by covid 19 quarantine people will crave for a healthy dose of enchantment, catered by travel.

New motivations will drive tomorrow's consumers; Market segments will undergo a drastic change; Channels of business would shift; Concept of consumer perceived value will change.

Millennials being more fearless and desirous of unique experiences, are expected to be the first to start travelling. Even Gen Z will cast a huge influence on the travel trends of tomorrow. Business

travel will be on the essential basis and will be all about efficiency. This crisis surely accelerated the learning curve for all of us in terms of leaning on technology to make business more efficient and cost-effective. Leisure experiential travel for this segment is synonymous with education, self-expression and connecting with the world.

Health Passport might become a reality soon. It's a good way to ensure health and facilitate hassle-free travel for healthy folks. There will be a huge focus on personal space. Ranging from air travel, hotels, restaurants & bars, shopping, entertainment, or local experiences, ensuring a minimum of personal space will be a priority.

Rakesh Mathur

CRISIS WILL RESULT IN IMPROVED COST EFFICIENCY AND SAFER BUSINESS PRACTICES

We will bounce back and make our pioneers proud

Rakesh Mathur is a hospitality industry professional with over 47 years of leadership experience in Indian and Global Hotel groups.

An Economics Honours Graduate from SRCC, Delhi, he joined Oberoi Hotels in 1973 as a Management Trainee and grew in the Industry and worked with Global and Multinational Hotel Organizations.

Rakesh co-founded the Responsible Tourism Society of India, to spread awareness about sustainable tourism practices. A recipient of several awards, Rakesh continues to contribute his experience and expertise as a Board member to the IHHA, INTACH Tourism Committee, Auro University, Surat, (Tourism), and HI AIM as Chairman. He is a Paul Harris Rotarian, Hon. President of Save the Children India (Delhi), and supports a personal Charitable Foundation engaged in poor and orphaned children's health and education and women's empowerment.

I consider myself a Tourism Baby!

The foundations of the tourism industry in India were laid the same year that I was born. So said Mr. Som Nath Chib, the acknowledged " Father" of Indian Tourism. Several years later I was very privileged not only to meet him but also work closely with him at the headquarters of The Oberoi Hotel Group where I was heading the Manpower Development Division and he was a guide, mentor and Advisor to the group. I, my several colleagues, and he would meet over a quick lunch at The Auberge Restaurant at Oberoi Maidens Hotel, and we would listen in rapt attention as he narrated how the Tourism Baby in India was born.

A civil services officer, Mr S. N. Chib, returned from a global government assignment and with great difficulty convinced the Government of India to set up the Tourism "Department". He was appointed its first Director General. Thus started the Tourism journey in India.

Coinciding with this there were the trail blazers, the pioneers who laid the foundations of the Hospitality Industry in India. The migrant entrepreneurs who bore the brunt of Partition and through sheer hard work, perseverance, ambition, a vision and some luck, invested their life savings and jewellery to establish hotels wherever there was an opportunity. Rai Bahadur Mohan Singh Oberoi is the acknowledged legendary Father of the Hospitality Industry, The Taj Group led by Mr. J. R. D. Tata, Mr. Ram Pershad of Ambassador Hotel in Delhi, Sardar Ranjit Singh Akoi who built Imperial Hotel, the Spencer Group, are some that stand out. The Government too stepped in with The Ashoka Brand to initially cater to official guests and functions.

And what good are Hotels without Tourists? To bring them in, egged on presumably by Mr. Chib, the torch was carried in the firm and able hands of Mr. Inder Sharma, Mr. Gautam Khanna, Mr. Nari Katgara, Mr. Vinoo Ubhayankar, to name a few. Legends all!!

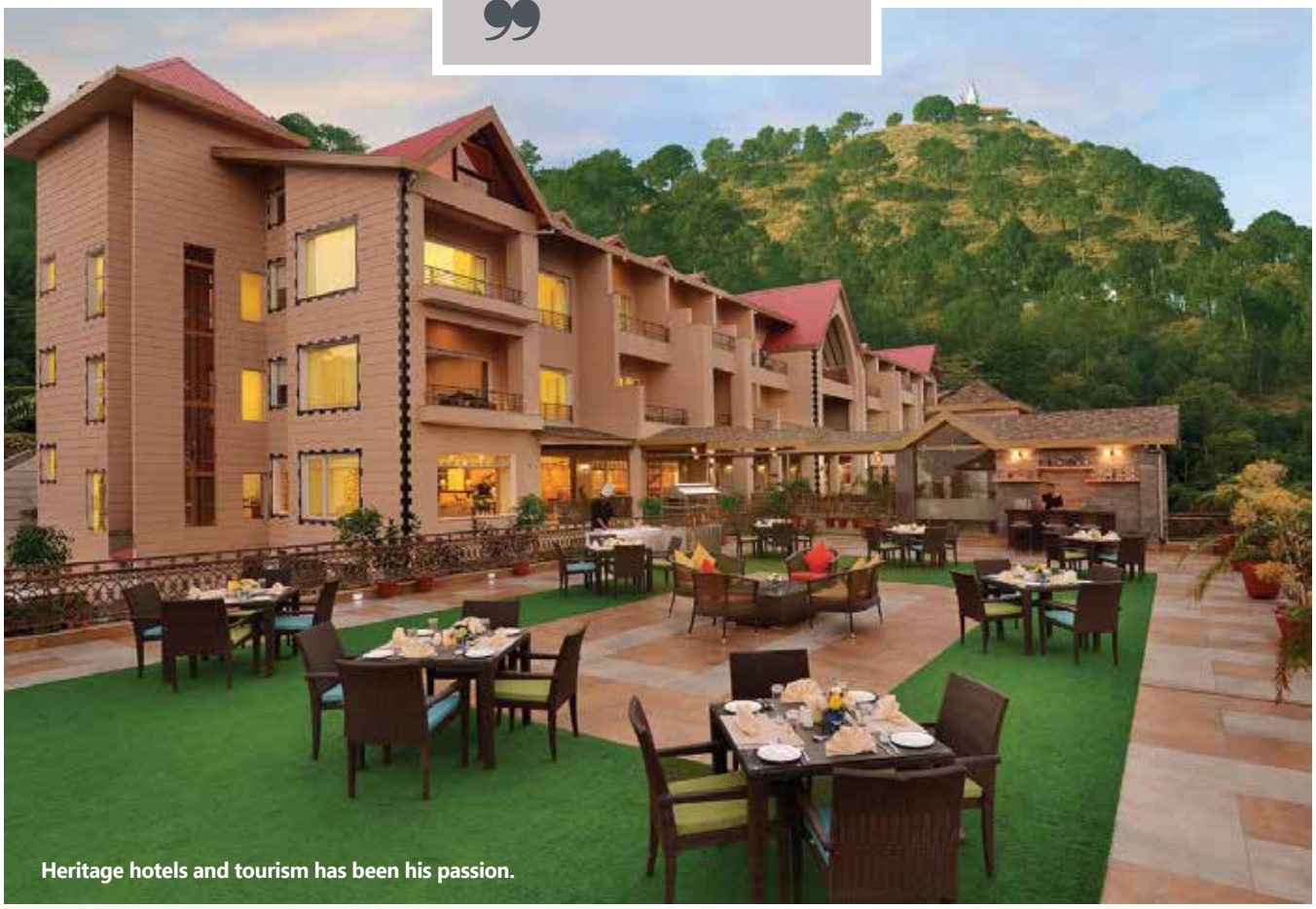
A small industry then, created largely by the spirit of entrepreneurship and vision of these pioneers. But deservingly supported by the then "Department".

So when I joined the Industry in 1973 , it was young, sturdy, on a growth trajectory, supported by the "Ministry" to which the "Department" had been upgraded. Close knit, and small enough for everyone to know everyone and work closely. It was a "people's" industry.

It matched my age and ambitions. It meant a lot to me at that young age.

There was a spurt in growth for Asiad

> “We are fighting an enemy we don't know and can't see. We have no known weapons to combat it. All are gripped by fear and the uncertainty of what will happen next.”



Heritage hotels and tourism has been his passion.

1982, but the Industry came into real adulthood in the 90s and the first decade of the 21st century. Global companies came in and I was privileged to have been at the helm of one of them. Huge investments flowed in. Tourism, both inbound and domestic, grew with the growing disposable incomes. Domestic Chains grew, replacing the monopoly of foreign brands, and successfully too. Technology brought about a change in operating styles and even contributed to further growth by creating new opportunities and markets. From a "people's" industry, it became a "stakeholders" industry.

I too aged gracefully with it.

Everything looks hunky dory till, just when you're about to settle in a comfortable retirement, a bolt of lightning hits you from the blue. An earthquake shakes the very foundations that you helped build. Almost crumbling it. And to top it all you find yourself rudderless. An abandoned orphan without the last straw to hold.

That's the way I feel. That's what this pandemic has done to me, my Associate Companies and my Industry that nurtured me and that I nurtured. No support in sight. From anywhere.

An endless bottomless sea with no land in sight and hundreds of desperate colleagues trying to row the boat of which I am Co-Captain. That's how we all feel.

One bitter lesson I have learnt is that from now on, pandemic or no pandemic, I and we, all have to learn how to swim ourselves.

And that's my first message to myself, my colleagues and my Industry.

The Tourism Industry has to learn to swim on its own!!!!!

That's the singular most important learning that hits you like a sledgehammer. But first, where do we stand? What is this ground Zero?

It's that uncertain uneasy feeling you get when you've been laid off from a job and don't know where the next meal will come from. Or how the next instalment of the home loan will be paid. To be honest, this is currently the actual brutal truth not only for employees but also for Companies and, surely, the Industry too.

What is the ground reality?

We are fighting an enemy we don't know and can't see. We have no known weapons to combat it. All are gripped by fear and the uncertainty of what will happen next.

The first to suffer are your people. Your staff who you trained and nurtured into your Company values, philosophy and culture. It takes a year or two to build a hotel. But it takes far longer to build a cohesive, skilled and efficient work force, committed to your vision, poised for new challenges of growth.

It has been painful to see teams disintegrate because of shut downs. Painful to cut wages and even more painful to lay people off even though we have tried to be very fair by rotating those laid off.

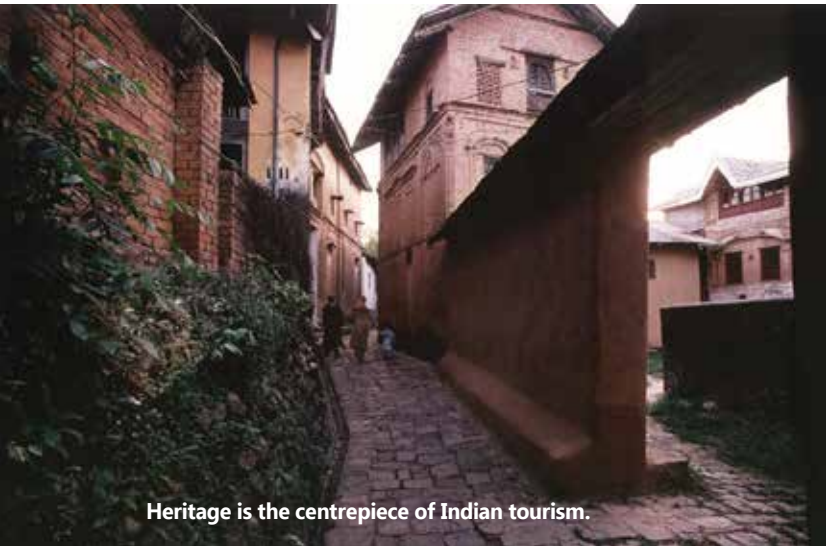
But the ground reality is that there is no end in sight. There is no business. No anticipation of when things will start returning to normal. And, worst of all, no support system in this multi-layered, bureaucratic decision making environment. And under these circumstances, how long we can support our people, is a big question challenging our minds.

Another challenge is the complete revamp of operating systems and processes with new priorities and protocols in place. The temperature meter has replaced the Aarti and Garland!! No more minibars and fruit baskets or turndown evening service!! Uniforms that look like space suits. Detached distance instead of the customary warmth of a hand shake. Touchless, social distancing. We call it "a new normal". New norms of food service and new menus to cater to local availabilities and new customer preferences.

The biggest challenge of course is the business. Who will travel? What kind of traffic will resume? With foreign traffic reduced to zero what level

> “To my mind the greatest positive impact the pandemic has had is a concern for the Environment at all levels. Also a concern for hygiene, sanitation, pollution, energy and water conservation etc.”

Responsible Tourism questions the carrying capacities of individual destinations



Heritage is the centrepiece of Indian tourism.

of domestic leisure and business travel can be expected? What kind of rates will sustain? And worst of all, a full hotel actually means 50% rooms due to the need to sanitise alternately.

Restaurant space is reduced to half. Weddings are restricted and conference and meetings business has dried up.

So, in a nutshell, business models on which projects were made shall no longer be relevant. Losses will lead to great upheavals in the industry with transfer and sale of assets, some desperate.

But, as the saying goes, we have to rise above the ashes and if we survive this Tsunami, we have to re-invent our business models. In any case we have no choice. And in the absence of any significant support from the government, we are very much on our own

To begin with, hotel projects may not attract the kind of financing through bank loans or other vehicles that they enjoyed earlier. Mixed use developments may become the norm. Hotel design and architecture will change drastically along with materials and fittings and fixtures. Operators are already looking at alternate sources of revenue, ie, laundry services, home food delivery, and even home sanitisation services etc. New skilling will be needed. New capital investments shall have to be made in re-designing areas and new equipment needed. Legal agreements, Credit arrangements, Insurance policies etc, will come under review as relationships redefine.

Last but not the least there will be huge pressure on operators to control costs in the two main areas of concern, manpower and energy. With uncertain revenues, there is bound to be added pressure on these two major areas.

The next big question is that even if mankind is able to eliminate the pandemic through curative or preventive medicine or vaccine, will we as an Industry revert to our old ways, or is the "new normal" here to stay???

I do believe that ever so often, it is mostly a calamity, natural or man made, that brings out the best in us humans.

To my mind the greatest positive impact the pandemic has had is a concern for the Environment at all levels. Also a concern for hygiene, sanitation, pollution, energy and water conservation etc.

Another impact is the tremendous amount of innovation that is happening in new technology in safety, security, communication, processes, etc.

Changes in building materials and design which bring about more efficiency and hygine, new materials for furnishings that are easy to clean and maintain, new fixtures , fittings and machinery that minimise energy consumption, shall be the new norm.

There will be a shift towards local consumption to minimise inventories and cut costs of procurement and storage.

All this, and a shift towards advance payments shall reduce working capital requirements.

A very welcome fallout should be strict adherence to construction bye laws, approved plans, health and fire safety norms etc. The norms laid down by the National Green Tribunal and the Pollution Control Board may be strictly imposed and followed. Workers will get proper facilities to stay, rest, bathe, etc. It is sadly true that several buildings, specially in the unorganised sector balantly violated these norms in collusion with corrupt officials in their greed for more saleable space.

So, will the Industry revert to pre-pandemic practices and processes and operating systems? To my mind, No.

It stands to reason, and is safe to assume that any practice and process that brings about operating cost efficiency will and should be adopted.

Any practice that impacts environmental sustainability, increased hygine and sanitation, decreased pollution, shall become a norm. Not changing bed linen and towels may become standard practice unless needed.

Any practice that ensures guest safety and health shall be adopted.

But in the context of our tradition, nothing will make me happier if I can warmly shake hands with my guest, receive him or her the traditional way. Wine and dine with family and friends at the Bar or Restaurant.

And this is evolution. This is Change.

But as an Industry, my recommendation to my friends and colleagues it that let us not humiliate ourselves further by going to the Government with a begging bowl. Let's fight for our rights and not free-bees. Give us some "time" respite from taxes, loan interest and principle repayments, liquor licence fees, statutory payments and taxes. Give us Industry benefits. Foreign Exchange earnings benefits. Give us what we deserve as major employers and foreign exchange earners. I have seen 47 years repeating the same things!!!!

And, let us support each other.

I am confident that we will bounce back and make our pioneers and torchbearers proud. ◘

Rattan Keswani

OUR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL CULTURE MUST CHANGE; MUST LEARN FROM NATURE

Important to invest in education and healthcare

With nearly 40 years of experience, Rattan Keswani is a stalwart in the Indian hospitality industry. Prior to joining Lemon Tree Hotels, he was President, Trident Hotels, where he was responsible for ten Trident Hotels in India, as well as Clarkes, Shimla and Maidens Hotel, New Delhi. He has also worked across various Oberoi Hotels & Resorts in India and overseas, including Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka.

As an individual it's been a most humbling journey – the impact has gone beyond work, it has touched everyone's lives and those of all our team members, and families, to the core. What is even more worrying are the forecasts that such pandemics or black swan events could come back in other forms. The Spanish Flu and the two World Wars were thought to be once/twice-in-a-generation events. Pandemics will probably be physical and psychological wars that we and the younger generation will have to face more than once in a lifetime.

Having been a part of many calls with industry stalwarts and having read opinions from leaders in the hospitality industry all over the world, one thing is clear – there are no sure fire answers and no one size fits all solution. Everyone's optimism seems to be built more on hope and possibly an inner strength of conviction. There are no trends to build forecasts with logic.

Industries that serve the basic requirements of the citizenry will bounce back, while those dependent on discretionary income spend/growth will take time to stoke interest, demand and finally, conversion. We must all invest in making our healthcare and education segments bigger and better, more resilient and qualitative at the right value. It must be available to all.

Much has been said about the segments that will revive and the new business models that the industry will need to introduce. In my opinion, resorts and boutique hotels within driving distance will see early traction, followed by economy and mid-scale hotels in Tier 1 and 2 cities. The luxury hotels may see a slight uptick in leisure, followed by corporate travel. However all this is dependent on state wise quarantine rules for travelers, which are currently in a state of flux. Air travel needs to revive for all of us to succeed. For that, inherent fears need to be dispelled and laid to rest. As Franklin Roosevelt said "the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself". The domestic traveler will finally get the recognition he/she deserves, as international travel may not revive for at least a year.

As hoteliers we should have spent the lockdown/work from home period contemplating and finding the right business models to cut waste and make our operations financially and environmentally sustainable. As an industry, we must ensure that necessities are taken care of and personalization is focused upon to provide greater comfort to guests, while keeping ourselves from becoming indulgent and giving away more for less, simply in a bid to poach business. Even in midscale hotels – more warmth, more engagement and curation will be the norm, which will have to tailored to fit in with the new safe distancing norms. Showcasing safety and hygienic processes unobtrusively will help to build confidence and brand ambassadors.

> "If we can learn to market regional locations together, the price differentiation with each service level will be natural. Each of us, in our own segments, will grow if we keep working towards price and service value excellence."

Having seen multiple emergencies and crisis in the past, from deaths/suicides or strikes in hotels, to floods ravaging some of our cities/hotels and even 26/11 up close, my unfortunate realization is that humans are forgetful, wasteful and uncaring once the incident has taken its toll. We tend to revert quickly back to indifference and apathy, and the penchant to do what is comfortable and convenient overtakes the need the do what is right and required. Our tendency to forget the past, to forget the catalysts and the mistakes as well as the learnings and the resilience, unfortunately is very high.

The only way to combat this situation, and others in the future, is that our professional and personal culture MUST change.

Hospitality is dependent on economic conditions, a happiness quotient and an appreciation of nature. The irony is that we don't seem to learn from nature at all. Philosophically speaking, nature teaches us to plant, nurture, persevere and grow in fine balance with the environment and in harmony with the social structure. Yet, we are parasitic and predatory in our practices. We wish to grow, at any cost, even the expense of others.

Our culture and people practices, our engagement with our team and focus on their welfare, our transparency with our partners, both customers and vendors, will define our tomorrow. If we didn't do all this well in the past and the last few months, then we would have failed them and ultimately failed ourselves.

Our industry must come together in unison to protect supply and distribute demand equitably, as much as we can. If we help each other survive, we shall all persevere and revive, and in the long run, thrive. Governments aren't always expected to help – we must help ourselves and each other. If we can learn to market regional locations together, the price differentiation with each service level will be natural. Each of us, in our own segments, will grow if we keep working towards price and service value excellence.

To quote Socrates "The highest realms of thought are impossible to reach without first attaining an understanding of compassion; the easiest and noblest way is not crushing others but in improving yourselves; to move the world we must move ourselves"

We are all so concerned with the pandemic, we seem to be oblivious to the churn in our world between the reaction to racial inequities, trade wars and worrying political changes. Let us not just focus on one challenge, but prepare ourselves for the possible impact of all world events too. As they say, if one doesn't get you, the other definitely will. Challenge the status quo and find a new beginning, a new normal, a new way of being – hopefully one that is more caring, sustainable and supportive.

As a renowned hotelier once famously said, "The idea is not to make money, but to do the right things. Profits will come."

The uncertainty will be with us for a while, but rather than fear it, we should face it – with awareness of our shortcomings, confidence in our past strengths, willingness to learn, and conviction in our steps for future growth. Through unity, integrity and courage, we shall find the path to a better, more hospitable world. ◘

The view in this article are personal

Rohit Khattar

THIS CRISIS WILL HELP UNDERSTAND INTRICATELY EVERY COST IN THE BUSINESS

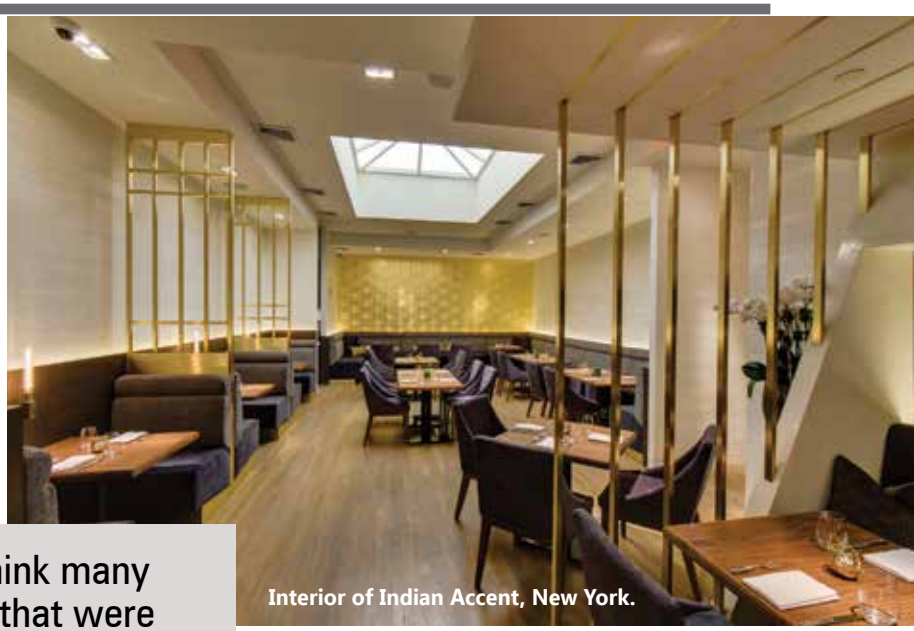
Diversifying is an option for sustainable business

Rohit Khattar is Founder Chairman of Old World Hospitality Private Limited, which operates Habitat World at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi and several iconic restaurants.

Rohit is credited with several firsts in the hospitality and entertainment sector – the first public-private partnership in the arts (Habitat World), India's first theme restaurant (Chor Bizarre), India's first Food Court (Eatopia) and many more.

His restaurant Indian Accent, New Delhi is the only restaurant from India on the "World's 50 Best Restaurants" since 2015 and was part of Time Magazine's 100 Great Destinations in the World in 2018. Indian Accent has an equally successful outpost in New York.

This is an unprecedented crisis for the world in general and the hospitality, tourism and entertainment industries in particular. Unlike previous crises, this one feels different and is made worse by uncertainty about when it will end. These industries (and many others) may see fundamental changes because of how long this crisis has drawn out. It is hard to predict how consumer behaviour will transform over the long term, and when people will find it safe to travel, dine out, and socialise. The hospitality industry is built on the premise that people want to go out and connect. To survive this crisis, people must stay in and stay apart from each other, which itself is contradictory to what 'hospitality' is all about.


Interior of Indian Accent, New York.

> "I think many trends that were underway will gain faster traction – cloud/dark kitchens and home delivery, innovations in food tech, digitisation of parts, etc."

As a company, we are (like most others) facing a challenge we couldn't have imagined. Virtually all of our operations have been closed for over three months now. With zero revenues, one still needs to step up and support our teams during this difficult time, and we have found our team members to be extremely considerate and understanding of the situation. This crisis has allowed us all to reflect on how we can move ahead and adapt to the circumstances. We used this time when we were closed to prepare for reopenings as safely as possible when we feel we are able to do so. We have taken a closer (and very intensive) look at our costs and practices, so we can become even stronger and less susceptible to shocks when we emerge from this crisis.

I don't think I have worked more hours than at any other time. Juggling between sliding alternate realities and evaluating other areas of revenue that we had not hitherto even conceived of. I have had a chance to reassess my priorities for the future and the strategies I had coursed out for my company and even personal goals.

I have been trying to tease out the most important learnings from this crisis of which there are many – being nimble and adaptive, paying attention to details overlooked in the past (everything is magnified in a crisis!), and spreading one's risks. But the most important insight I have gained is also the most positive – the best in people comes through during a crisis. Colleagues who have been with us from anywhere between one year to 30 years, many of whom are like family, have stepped up and shown unbelievable strength and support.

There has been a virtual bonfire of the vanities – the arrogance of success, of not having a table available in most of our restaurants are now leading to clutching straws like the delivery and dark kitchen business. We follow a hierarchy (not unlike the army) within the hospitality business and protocol demands that you speak to heads of departments if at all, you bypass your CEO. During the lockdown and even today, with some of them in areas not allowing them to come to work, I have personally enjoyed my dealings with mid-management and directly with staff. The relevance of the lowest common denominator and their contribution has never been more eye-opening than at this time.

I think parts of the hospitality industry faced a stressed business model that was in trouble even before this crisis. The pandemic has now made those problems unsustainable. Sadly, many businesses will close. I think those that survive will do better than before.

I think many trends that were underway will gain faster traction – cloud/ dark kitchens and home delivery, innovations in food tech, digitisation of parts of the dining experience (from reservations – still rare in India – to online menus), better quality options in fast, casual and quick-service restaurants.

Survival is key, even more than expansion. Cash flow is king. So we have had to take sad decisions akin to having to choose between children and take hard decisions on which units to shut down. To actually side with units that have a better chance of bouncing back as opposed to the ones that will require a lot of nurturing is heart-wrenching. However, putting good money after bad is contrary to the mantra of good business.

Tragic choices and decisions to make; team members are being reduced to mere numbers as one adjusts and recalibrates payroll amongst other projected expenses for each individual unit. The human tragedies that have been brought about in these surreal times are of two types – medical and economic.

The good thing is that nothing is permanent. So this too shall pass. When it does, we would have been chastened and we would not only have got to understand our businesses so much better but also intricately understood every cost.

We would have realised the value of what we had and what we took for granted. As I said earlier, barring the tragic circumstances, there is a lot to be grateful for, and we in the hospitality industry are known for being able to express our gratitude better than anyone else. We are also known for our patience and fortitude, and we will all come out much stronger.

As a company, I see us diversifying in ways we hadn't considered before while retaining the values of sincerity, trust and innovation that made Old World Hospitality what it is.

S P Jain

LIVING FOR TODAY AND PLANNING FOR TOMORROW

We must mutually be sensitive and respectul

S. P. Jain is a chartered accountant and the Founder Promoter of Pride Hotels Limited, with over thirty years of experience in hotels, construction and finance.

S.P. Jain took his first step in the hospitality industry by establishing the very first hotel under the Pride Group umbrella in 1988 at Pune. Today, Pride Hotels operates 20 hotels across the country under brands Pride Plaza, Pride Hotels and Pride Resorts with a host of banqueting and F&B facilities. Jain is active in industry forums and is former President of Hotel & Restaurant Association (Western India) and former Vice President of FHRAI. He continues to contribute to the industry with his knowledge and expertise.

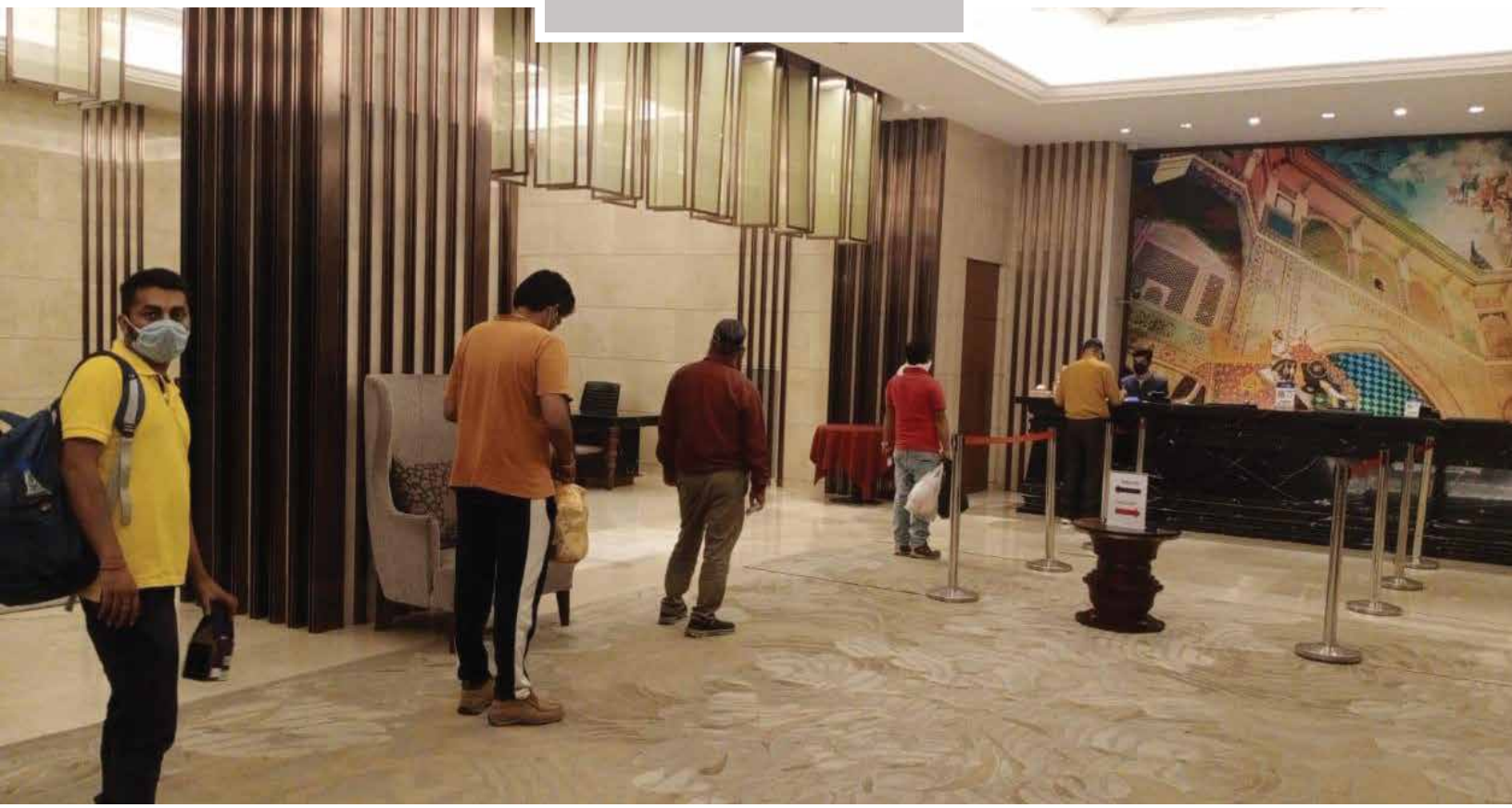
In the past, the hospitality industry has bounced back from crises created by epidemics or even from the financial crisis of 2008, but the effect of COVID-19 has been heavier than any of them. Now, globally carrying the status of a pandemic, Coronavirus has put the entire industry in a tight spot. Putting human lives directly in danger, the virus has instilled deep fear and confusion that this generation has never felt before. And, on top of this, the entire emotional conundrum, and the physical confinement has aggravated the situation.

On a business level, there is no industry that hasn't been hard hit by it. The hospitality & tourism industry has taken a massive hit due to the worldwide travel restrictions on international flights. Many hotels that have never experienced a deserted lobby have been left with minimum or no occupancy at some of their properties. Because of the uncertainty in the lockdown period, we, as an industry, have experienced a big drop in new reservations and an increase in cancellations on both business and leisure. In this current scenario of the outbreak, it's hard to pick a segment that is not hit. The reduced traffic to the hotels also has a cascading effect on revenues from F&B, MICE and other areas.

From an employer's point of view, we have communicated to our team that they have to be creative and work in a different style to cut down on the fixed and variable cost. We are very cautious about reducing our HLP cost as well as workforce costs. Our team has also taken the task to cut down on the F&B cost and wastage at any and every point. In the coming time, the hospitality sector will try to adjust and follow up with the model used in foreign countries by controlling the cost but at the same time not affecting the service to our guests. Nevertheless, the grave situation has given space for national solidarity with many hotels across the nation, providing their premises to house medical staff and quarantine guests.

> "From an employer point of view, we have communicated to our team that they have to be creative and work in a different style to cut down the fixed and variable cost. Our team has also taken the task to cut down on the F&B cost and wastage at any and every point."

During this unprecedented time, the industry has come together and has contributed towards the battle against COVID-19 through various initiatives. The food-service team of the Pride Group of Hotels has also contributed by preparing meals for the doctors, nurses, service experts, police officers, medical practitioners, hospital support staff, civil services personnel, among others who are leading from the front while putting themselves



at risk in order to battle the crisis. They're our real heroes. We understand that most of them are deprived of basics like food and water during this difficult period. As a small gesture of appreciation towards our most deserving saviours, Pride Group of Hotels has distributed free food parcels.

In the last few months, things have accelerated drastically for the Indian hospitality industry, but it will have to learn to function in a way not seen before. As the relationship between the brand and its consumer begins with building trust, regaining the guest's confidence should be the first step in overcoming the crisis. Instilling a sense of safety among the guests will play a huge role. So, stricter sanitary and hygiene measures will need to be applied across the industry, with new practices put in place in order to monitor and control the environment in which the business takes place. Communication will play a lead role in reaching out to the guests and needs to be done subtly. Gently, so it reassures the guest of safety in their decision to start planning and travelling again. As an industry, we should be ready to adapt our approach towards the new travellers that are locked safely in the confines of their homes at the moment.

> "To help the travel, tourism and hospitality industry to bounce back the Pride Hotels have launched a new campaign called 'India Dekho With Pride'."

Changes will also be applied at an employer level. The efficiency of current work models will have to be re-evaluated, and the employee well-being should be put even higher on the priority list. Keeping it in mind, we, at the Pride Hotels, have conducted training sessions for our employees so they can adapt to the changing trends in the work practices. These training sessions are also focused on awareness and understanding of the emerging world post-Covid-19. It will not only help the employees to take care of the guests, but they will also be able to help each other. We have ensured that our teams are up-to-date with new cleaning practices and hygiene standards as advised by the government. Also, strictly following them so that it becomes a way of life for them in the new normal. Further, the use of masks and gloves has been made mandatory across all departments. The biggest challenge that the industry will face once the operation starts will be keeping these safety measures intact.

For me, my plans, and my industry (airlines), this is a fundamental 'reset' event. We are in stage 1, which is survival. Many will not make it. Companies will shut down, and individuals at all levels and from all roles will be forced out of the industry. Stage 2 will be about rebuilding, which will occur when restrictions on travel are removed. Stage 3 will be the new normal from a reset baseline. 'Business as usual' will change forever. The survivors will fall into two categories: those who limp along and eventually exit, and those who are able to transform their business and, thereafter, prosper in the new normal.

The fundamental learning is that 'cash is king.' One needs to have a significant cash war chest to survive such events. The second learning is actually a re-enforcement of something that I have already believed in: the industry has overcapacity, especially in India. That is why so many players are bleeding, all discounting to chase the same pool of customers or stimulate demand. It is a game of survival of the fittest, however unlike in other parts of the world, here somehow the walking dead, technically bankrupt and out-of-cash entities, keep walking. This further distorts industry dynamics and deepens the bleeding.

Additional learning is that one must continually challenge the status quo in order to transform or re-invent the business. We can no longer accept high costs, fees, taxes, royalties, and extortionate, almost monopolistic contracts forced by the industry oligopolists who hold the industry at ransom. Here, I am not talking about aircraft manufacturers, who are actually good partners with aligned interests. I am talking about everyone else that feeds off airlines while the airlines bleed. That needs to change. New, more efficient suppliers need to enter the market to challenge the 'fat and happy' old-timers.

> We can no longer accept high costs, fees, taxes, royalties, and extortionate, almost monopolistic contracts forced by industry oligopolists holding the industry at ransom.

> At a more basic level, I think as older, less-efficient, less well-run entities are forced out of business, an opportunity is created for new, efficient, modern, digital-led entities to enter the business, together with a new breed of partners and digital-led suppliers, and fundamentally change the way the business is done.

At a more basic level, I think as older, less-efficient, less well-run entities are forced out of business, an opportunity is created for new, efficient, modern, digital-led entities to enter the business, together with a new breed of partners and digital-led suppliers, and fundamentally change the way the business is done. The 'fat cats' and those stuck in a pre-COVID time-warp, will find the world will change for them; a new breed will take over.

Subhash Goyal

INNOVATING UPON STRENGTHS NEEDED TO TIDE OVER CRISIS

Stakeholders must learn to multitask and find new ways of supplementing their incomes

Subhash Goyal, MBA, PhD is Member, Advisory Council, Tourism Ministry; Chairman, STIC Travel Group; Chairman, ASSOCHAM Tourism Council & Indian Chamber's Aviation Committee; Honorary Secretary, FAITH.

He is the author of the book titled 'Poverty Eradication & Economic Development Through Tourism' and several other articles in Economic Times, Hindustan Times, Times of India and several trade magazines.

He has also given several interviews on NDTV, India Today, AajTak, Zee, CNN-IBN, CNBC, DD News, BBC, ABP news, etc.

No one in the world could have imagined a situation like this. I have seen the Indo-Pakistan war, Indo-Bangladesh war, SARS, Plague, 9/11, but in my lifetime, I could never imagine in my wildest dreams, where the whole world will be in a situation of complete lockdown.

This seems to be worse than the Second World War. In the Second World War, all the countries knew who their enemies were. In this Third World War, the enemy is invisible, and more people seem to be dying today than in any other pandemic.

For me, as an individual, it is a much bigger challenge than when I started my business in 1973. At that time, I had no liabilities, hardly any staff and rent to pay. So, whatever I earned was a bonus and net profit. Today, for the last three months, the earning is zero, but there are crores of rupees worth of liabilities in terms of office rents, statutory obligations, staff salaries, government taxes, etc.

Fortunately, we have a very dedicated team, which is like a family, and most of our staff have taken sabbaticals or voluntary pay cuts. Therefore, we are confident that, together, we will not only overcome this unprecedented crisis but bounce back a much stronger, determined and healthier company. This definitely has been a learning process for me and one thing that I would like to share with all my friends is to remember that every dark cloud has a silver lining and there is light at the end of every dark tunnel. So, the starting of domestic flights has given us hope that international flights will also restart soon.

> "As far as the industry is concerned, we have requested the government for a bailout package. Unfortunately, nothing substantial has been done by the government."

As far as the industry is concerned, as the Chairman ASSOCHAM Tourism & Hospitality Council and as the Honorary Secretary of Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism and Hospitality (FAITH), representing ten associations like the Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Association of India (FHRAI), The Hotel Association of India (HAI), Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI), Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI), Association of Domestic Tour Operators of India (ADTOI), Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOAI), Indian Convention Promotion Bureau (ICPB), Indian Heritage Hotels Association (IHHA), and Indian Tourist Transporters Association (ITTA), we have made representations for a bailout package to the Prime Minister, Finance Minister, Tourism Minister, the RBI Governor and the Minister of Commerce, asking for the following:

- A twelve months moratorium on our EMIs on the principal and interest payments on loans and working capital from all financial institutions (banking and non-banking). Additionally, we request the doubling of our working capital limits, interest-free and collateral-free.
- A deferment on all statutory dues for twelve months, whether GST, Advance Tax payments, PF, ESIC, customs duties at the central government level. Or at any state government level, excise fees, levies, taxes, power and water charges, deferred renewals periods for all permits, licenses, bank guarantees and security deposits across the tourism, travel, hospitality and aviation industry.
- A support fund for twelve months on the lines of MGNREGA to support basic salaries with 'direct transfers' to the affected tourism employees.
- TCS (tax collected at source) on travel, as proposed in the Finance Bill 2020 from April 1st, not to be introduced.
- A deferment of the increase in any insurance premium for a period of 12 months such as standard fire and special perils rate for fire, loss or profits.
- The restoration of 10% duty credit of SEIS scrips. The previous year's foreign exchange earnings can be taken as a reference point for credit.
- A 200% weighted exemption for twelve months on the expenses incurred by Indian corporates in holding exhibitions, conferences and incentive trips in India.
- A national tourism task force of all relevant ministries of the central government along with the ministry of tourism and chief secretaries of the state governments and industry stakeholders headed by the Honourable Prime Minister of India or Cabinet Secretary and the Tourism Minister.

Unfortunately, nothing substantial has been done by the government, and it has become very difficult for the industry to survive or bounce back.

Going forward, not only we but the entire industry has to reinvent itself. We all have to see what our strengths and weaknesses are. We need to diversify and build on our strengths for e.g. if we are good at technology, we need to diversify in technology. If our strength is sales and marketing, we have to find new products to sell and market. If our strength is distribution, then we need to, apart from travel and tourism, start distributing some other products.

Because the essence of business is to find out what the market needs in goods or services and provide those goods or services by keeping a reasonable profit; every company and every individual will have to reinvent themselves. In the travel, tourism, aviation and hospitality industry, because of this pandemic, about 20-30 million people are going to lose their jobs. So my advice to all those who still have jobs is to hang on to them and opt to multi task so that they are valuable to their organisations or employers.

As an industry, it will take at least one year, after the vaccine is discovered, for international tourism to revive. International air travel will be reduced to either stranded passengers returning and essential travel, which will be on medical, religious or family compulsions. However, essential business travel will also take place. My advice to friends in the industry is to focus more on domestic tourism, neighbourhood tourism, religious tourism and medical and adventure tourism. However, they should not keep all their eggs in one basket and think of innovative ways of having a supplementary income. ◘

Sunder Advani

DESIGN WILL UNDERGO CHANGES; GOOD TIME TO UNDERTAKE REFORMS

Some may not survive even as there would be little new supply

Sunder Advani is the Chairman & Managing Director of Advani Hotels & Resorts (India) Ltd, which owns and operates the 5 Star Deluxe Caravela Beach Resort in Goa. He brought Holiday Inns into India in 1971 and Ramada in 1984. He built 11 hotels in India and Colombo; was able to obtain large equity as a JV with his family's Goa Renaissance (now called Caravela) and went public in 1989. Owned the first full-fledged Casino in India in 2001, besides having his book 'EVEN AGAINST ALL ODDS' accepted by the US Library of Congress. Received a Lifetime Achievement Award from SATTE.

Even as awareness of the spread of Covid 19 shattered our complacency and invaded our decision making, I could not help reminiscing that I had found myself in a somewhat similar situation, though not as long-lasting, when we opened our Renaissance Resort on 4 December 1990. The Gulf War had broken out on 2 August 1990 when 100000 Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. Iraq also attacked Saudi Arabia. Though the UK/US /Soviet Union won the War in April 1991, Iraq did not accept Kuwait sovereignty until 1994. No civilian flights could operate from Europe to India. Our peak months for Goa were from December to April. All our foreign clients came on charter flights from Germany and the UK and needed to refuel in the Middle East, and they all got cancelled. Ms Barbara Peisert, the Contracting Manager of TUI, who had blocked 50 rooms daily, called me from Germany and said she felt very sorry for me that I would go bankrupt. We had no domestic business as there was only one daily Indian Airlines flight to Goa. It operated from Mumbai but also had passengers proceeding to Cochin.

Even before we could open, our hotel construction had been totally stopped by the High Court for four months based on a frivolous Public Interest Litigation, which led to cost and time overruns and legal expenses. Having somehow survived, I took the decision not to depend wholly on foreign tourists. Domestic tourists now account for about 75% of our revenues.

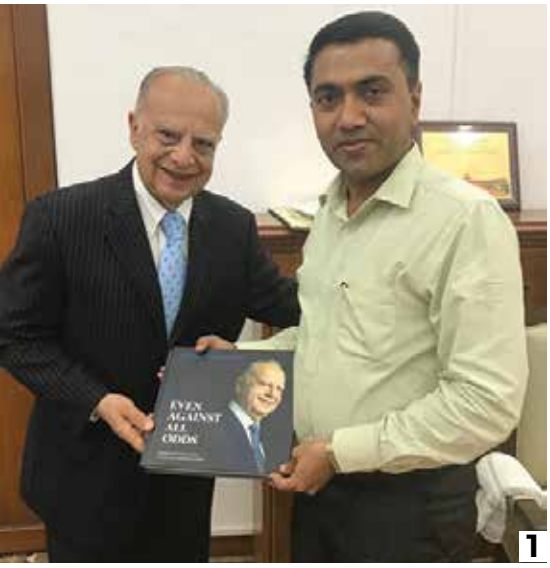
However, in the present crisis, this learning experience did not help as both foreign tourists and domestic clients were not able to travel to Goa after our Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightly decided to stop all flights and ordered a lockdown for all of India to avoid the spread of the highly infectious Coronavirus.

On a personal level, I have missed seeing the havoc that has been caused by the Coronavirus in India. I had registered to attend ITB, Berlin – an event which I never miss as I meet our large clients. There was no impending threat of Coronavirus and I took a flight from Mumbai to New York on 29 February to attend a meeting with the Consul General of India in New York.

After the meeting with the CG in New York where I requested his help to promote tourists from the USA to Goa (a proposal I had discussed with the Minister of External Affairs Dr Jaishankar), I flew to Florida for a scheduled appointment with a specialist in Glaucoma. The Reliance Hospital in Mumbai had found that my one eye had been affected. The specialist in Florida confirmed the same and prescribed several eyedrops but insisted I revisit him after two weeks. My office in the meantime informed me that ITB Berlin had been postponed. I returned to NYC. I could not leave New York thereafter.

> “I took the decision not to depend wholly on foreign tourists. Domestic tourists now account for about 75% of our revenues.”

The lockdown of NYC was announced on 15 March and is scheduled to continue till 13 June. My daughter and son-in-law who live in Manhattan and have a great view of the Hudson River and the Statue of Liberty have given me one of their bed-



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1. Chief Minister of Goa, Dr. Pamod Sawant receving my autobiography 'Even Against All Odds'.
2. Hotel Design changes to provide privacy for in room outdoor dining with semicircular balconies Caravela Beach Resort Goa.
3. Hotel Design changes to merge the outdoors with the indoors to create a feeling of space,Caravela Beach Resort,Goa 1990.
4. Hotel Design changes to allow social distancing and natural air circulation Caravela Beach Resort Goa.

rooms and ensured that I do not need to go anywhere. In fact, to protect me from possible infection, they do not go out even for walks as one out of five residents of NYC have been diagnosed as Covid19 positive. From these surroundings, one can peacefully think about India, Goa and the future of our hotel and our industry.

Zee TV provides news about India. I dial in on various webinars and also receive the daily newspapers from Goa and Mumbai. Thanks to WhatsApp, I can keep in touch with my son Prahlad and our key executives who are based at our 5-Star Deluxe 'Caravela Beach Resort,' which remains shut.

Since all hotels are to remain shut, the first difficult decision was to reduce fixed costs which included the cancellation of annual maintenance contracts, GST and other consultants, renegotiation of office rentals etc. The team had to walk a tightrope to balance the needs of maintaining the property, especially in view of the impending monsoon and saving costs.

The Chief Engineer was asked by me to keep the taps of each room running for 5 minutes daily to avoid Legionnaires Disease when we reopen. I had spent seven years studying and working in Philadelphia, and the Belleview Stratford was the iconic hotel in the city. However, it had to be shut down after over 100 people died at the hotel from Legionnaires Disease contracted through the air conditioning system. This simple solution can prevent this. There is so much one learns in the US about how to prevent em-

Meeting with Dr. S Jaishankar in Washington DC to obtain assistance from foreign embassies in promoting tourism to India.

ployees, and future guests from contracting Covid19 and these ideas are shared not only with our team in Goa but also with the Chief Minister of Goa and the Health Minister. I was also asked by the PMO to be part of a small panel to advise on a proposed study to prevent rapid escalation of Covid19 in India as well as the decision on when the lockdown could be removed. PMO has posted my written suggestions.

One understands that the Government has conflicting priorities, but was surprised that no reliefs were provided to our industry. Tourism contributes to over 8% of GDP and provides 87.5 million jobs or 12.75% of the total jobs in India. So far they have only made loans easier for MSME with revenues of under INR 10 million, but have not helped either to cover wages and salaries as many other countries have done or to give relief from utility bills or taxes.

The industry has made a lot of effort through various organizations to suggest to the Government how they can help the hospitality industry. I have also been contributing to this effort by advising the Ministry of Tourism and the CEO of Niti Aayog on reliefs that could be provided to our industry. Being past Chairman of WTTC(II), I guided them on how to make a renewed effort to obtain some relief from the Government as none had been announced despite the best efforts made by them and other associations like FAITH, CII, FICCI etc.

One idea occurred to me while I participated in a webinar recently addressed by the Council of Economic Advisors, Mr K Subramanium, courtesy of USIBC. He made an outstanding speech explaining the stimulus package offered by the Government of India. His opening remarks were that the Government could not CREATE DEMAND. During the Q and A that followed, I asked him the following: "My name is Sunder Advani. I am an economist turned hotelier and own a hotel in Goa, India. Can I offer a solution? You mentioned that there will be a decline in discretionary spending and that there is little that the Government can do to increase demand. Hospitality / Travel is over 8% of the GDP of India. If the Government gave an incentive by way of a reduction in Income Tax to Indians to stay in hotels or fly for a holiday in India, it might stimulate demand."

Since the session was coming to an end, he asked USIBC to mail him my proposal, and he would reply. USIBC is pursuing this but wanted details of what Income Tax incentives would make people travel and CREATE DEMAND.

Thereafter, I have found specific Sections of the Income Tax Act under which the Government could easily give an incentive for Indians to stay at hotels in India and fly Indian carriers. My proposal has also been sent to WTTC, and they are also writing to FM about the same. I was aware of the appeal made by the Prime Minister of India, Mr Narendra Modi in his Independence Day speech last year when he stated: "I know people travel abroad for holidays but can we think of visiting at least 15 tourist destinations across India before 2022 when we mark 75 years of freedom." The Prime Minister further said that India has a lot to offer, and we will be able to attract more international tourists by increasing domestic tourism.

This solution will encourage people to holiday and hold Destination weddings and conferences in India instead of going abroad.

The nature of business is likely to change drastically. Weddings will still be number 1 for Goa, but conferences may decline since companies have learnt how to carry out their discussions through video conferencing and will be in cost-cutting mode due to the impact on their revenue due to the lockdown. If schools remain shut for long, families with children could be a big segment, as Goa is considered a relatively safe destination. I would enhance the facilities and entertainment for younger persons.

I am learning that even in the US where domestic flights are permitted despite a lockdown, very few passengers travel by air due to fear of catching the virus at the airport. The aeroplane itself is equipped with sophisticated filters and will not pass on the infection. Jet Blue was the first to insist that all crew wear protective gowns and masks and all passengers are allowed after screening before departure. Masks for all passengers are mandatory. When domestic flights were resumed in India on 25 May, all these precau-

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1. Lifetime Achievement Award from the Director General of Tourism - 2020.
2. Receiving a Momento from Chief Minister of Goa after organising the Roundtable on Goa Tourism2019.

tions were taken. Despite that, there were cases on the flight due to which the entire crew had to be quarantined. This could only prolong the fear of flying to destinations and make it much harder for the hospitality industry to come back to anywhere near the level it had reached.

I advised the Government of Goa to arrange testing facilities at the airport and at the port and the borders to prevent the virus from spreading. Goa was the first state to be Covid19 free. Though there are only a few deaths from Covid19, tourists are not comfortable to fly as yet. I have advised the CM to expedite the construction of the Mumbai Goa Expressway so travellers can reach in 7 hours.

It will take several months for a large number of domestic clients to come to Goa. Although there is a pent up demand for travel because people have been closeted in their homes for three months, they do not feel safe in taking the journey. Foreign clients, especially from the UK, may trickle in from November to avoid the cold winters. I made it a point to help a UK tour operator to obtain permission to allow their special charter flight to land in Goa to evacuate their British clients after the lockdown.

People will start travelling again but initially undertake shorter air journeys until a vaccine is freely available. India will have to rely primarily on domestic tourists for the rest of this year. Goa will still receive British and Russian tourists, but they will avoid crowded places. The Goa Government has announced a strategy suggested by me which is to try to attract affluent tourists and not numbers. Upmarket hotels, such as our Caravela Beach Resort, should do well but they will need to make changes in operations.

Most hotels in Goa will make losses, and many with high debt service may not survive. Some hoteliers facing a cashflow problem may consider taking a partner to survive. From my experience, I would suggest that they try to obtain financial help from the company that is managing their hotel in that their interests would be aligned. I was fortunate in that Ramada Inc. subscribed to 10% of our equity before our company's public issue in 1989. Our company is in a fortunate position in that we are practically debt-free.My philosophy has been not to leverage the company excessively for the sake of growth. I learnt this lesson when we took a sizable loan guaranteed by our company to buy a Casino ship from Florida for our casino subsidiary. We had to sell our casino subsidiary to survive. Two years ago, we decided to promote our own Caravela brand and save costs by not renewing our franchise agreement with Ramada. Our revenues have also increased thereafter. This was a difficult decision for me personally as I had brought them into India almost 35 years ago.

> "My philosophy has been not to leverage the company excessively for the sake of growth."

As you know, I brought franchising into India in the 70's with Holiday Inns, followed by Ramada and Renaissance (now part of Marriott). More owners will now go for franchises versus rigid and expensive management contracts after seeing the impact of Covid19. More owners will try to negotiate better terms in their management contracts and other areas.

My concern has always been for the tourism industry of India and not just for Goa or for our company. Which is why I joined WTTC and attend their annual summits in different parts of the world, attend as many tourism conferences and interact personally with Government officials who can change policies for the tourism industry.

As regards the road ahead, hoteliers may have to look at:

- Mixed-use development.
- Since the focus on health and immunity will now be paramount in people's mind, the menus will have to reflect health menus as an option.
- Provide fewer items in the guest rooms, which may have been used by others.
- Professional methods of sanitization that find credibility to the consumer will be needed.
- Constant engagement with the customer to assure him of a safe and enjoyable experience.
- Investment in a fleet of cars as opposed to coaches etc.

In conclusion, I see that the Covid19 impact will most likely end in a year. There will be a bright future for the hospitality industry after that, though some may not survive, and new supply will not be forthcoming. The design will play a larger role. Room sizes and lobbies of luxury hotels will be smaller. There will be fewer Speciality restaurants. There will be greater use of technology to allow contactless check-in, food service etc. ■

Sunjae Sharma

IT'S A BRAVE NEW WORLD WHICH GREETS BOTH US AND OUR GUESTS

Re-imagining guest experiences and hospitality in a new era

As Vice President of Operations - India, Hyatt Hotels and Resorts, Sunjae Sharma has been at the helm of executing the company's operational and growth strategy in India. Sharma has been associated with Hyatt since 2001, and has held several leadership positions within the company prior to his current role. A bona fide hotelier, in the last three decades Sharma has worked across regions, and helmed some of Hyatt's cornerstone India hotels. Since the last two years, he has harnessed his in-depth experience to lead the India portfolio of the hospitality chain.

Who would have ever imagined that the world would come to a grinding halt in this manner? The COVID-19 pandemic that put the globe in lockdown for extended periods has curtailed economic and social activity – especially in India where we are currently witnessing a surge of cases.

Much like others in the hospitality industry, Hyatt Hotels Corporation has also been directly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak with international travel coming to a standstill and the longest lockdown any country has seen. According to CII, the tourism industry will see an overall loss of Rs 5 lakh crore and job cuts for 4 to 5 crore people. Few people realise that one in 10 jobs in the world depend on tourism. Of the total losses, the organised sector in the industry -- branded hotels, tour operators, travel agencies - may be hit the hardest with an estimated loss of around Rs 1.58 lakh crore. Branded hotel groups are set to lose as much as Rs 1.10 lakh crore

However, it is in times of crisis that organisations prove their strength. And this unprecedented crisis has only strengthened Hyatt's purpose to care for people so they can be their best. That includes the safety and well-being of our colleagues, guests and our surrounding communities in all our 900 hotels and resort properties across 65 countries, which includes 32 properties in India.

We were quick to combat the crisis from the start. According to the Disaster Management Act, all hotels had to be closed for business – which had a direct impact on us. Over a few months, alarge number of people had to take temporary pay cuts globally and were put on furlough in other countries. To counter this, we launched the Hyatt Care Fund to provide support to our colleagues around the world. The senior leadership team and Board of Directors took extended salary reductions. The salary reductions taken by senior leadership members helped to launch the Hyatt Care Fund – along with donations from Hyatt Hotels Foundation and Pritzker family foundations – to provide financial relief to our colleagues around the world. The Fund is being used to help our colleagues manage their priorities such as rent, utility monthly payments, groceries and child care assistance.

On the operations front, while the lockdown did not permit guests to stay at our hotels, we adopted innovative measures to ensure our guests could still experience their favourite hotels at home. We started home delivery from many of our hotels. Hyatt Regency Delhi and HR Kolkata, Andaz Delhi, Grand Hyatt Mumbai and Park Hyatt Hyderabad have been delivering some of their signature dishes and comfort food to the homes of our guests. Our F&B team also innovated and created do-it-yourself meal boxes for guests to assemble at home. In the case of the Hyatt Regency Kolkata's 'Cook Like A Pro' DIY experience, we send the recipe and measured and prepped ingredients for a dish to our guests, and our chef then assists them virtually to cook up a signature Hyatt preparation in the convenience of their homes.

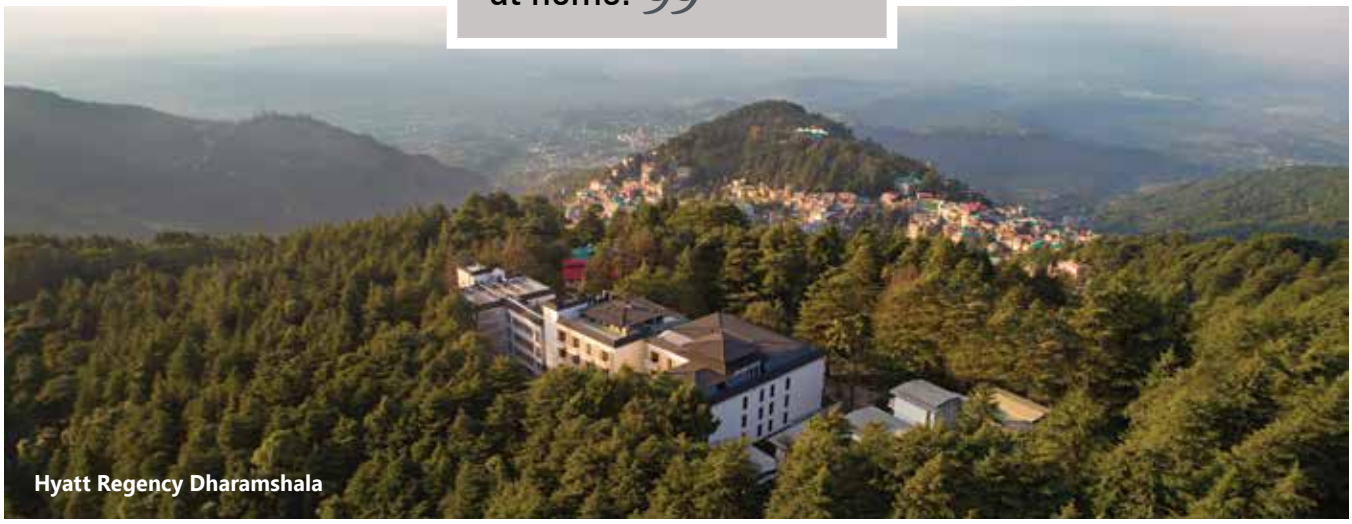
As the lockdown is lifting in parts of the world and in India, we are optimistic about the road ahead. We simply need to prepare ourselves for the new reality.

There is no denying that the world as we knew it has fundamentally changed. This is bound to affect the way we live, work, dine, socialise – and indeed travel as individuals, organisations and as a society.

While we were always known for providing guests and colleagues with a safe, clean environment to stay and work in – we have elevated our approach to meet the need of the hour. There is now a renewed thrust on safety and hygiene, for one. Undoubtedly, this is a key concern for people as the world reopens and they begin to venture out.

We have wasted no time in allaying theconcerns of guests and colleagues across our hotels by strengthening our focus on their safety and wellbeing through our multi-layered Global Care & Cleanliness Commitment. Hyatt has collaborated with medical experts from Cleveland Clinic among other trusted medical and industry advisors to fine-tune reopening

> "While the lockdown did not permit guests to stay at our hotels, we adopted innovative measures to ensure our guests could still experience their favourite hotels at home."



Hyatt Regency Dharamshala

Hyatt Regency Thrissur

Grand Hyatt Kochi Bolgatty

Alila Fort Bishangarh

and operating procedures such as colleague reorientations, enhanced cleaning and safety protocols, and ensured that there is a Hygiene and Wellbeing Leader at every property, who is responsible for the hotel adhering to the new operational protocols on hygiene, cleanliness training, food safety et al..

We have become the first hospitality brand to commit to accreditation from the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC) for all our hotels. The GBAC accreditation is designed to deal with biological risks and real-time pandemics like the Covid-19. The performance-based cleaning, disinfection and infectious disease prevention programme will focus on establishing a sanitary, safe and healthy hotel environment. This will entail detailed training at more than 900 Hyatt hotels worldwide.

We have set up a cross-functional working group of medical experts and industry professionals to critically re-examine and refine every aspect of the hotel experience -- from every vantage point. This covers everything from our rooms and lobbies to our spas and dining spaces, from our kitchens and housekeeping services to our back offices and supply chains. In the process, we are harnessing the latest research, technology and innovations. We are confident that every guest who walks into our hotels will now feel reassured that all aspects of their safety and well-being have been considered.

Needless to say, this is only one step in the journey ahead. There are other lessons the pandemic is teaching us. It has driven home one of the key differentiators for Hyatt – the focus on sustainable development. Global warming and climate change continue to be the biggest threat to humanity. And it is imperative that the hospitality industry works in environment which is sustainable.

To this end, we have installed glass bottling plants at two of our properties, Hyatt Regency Delhi and Park Hyatt Hyderabad. Apart from promoting sustainability, these plants ensure complete hygiene as each bottle is rinsed, cleaned and sterilized with ultra-violet rays without any human contact. Our thrust will be on more such innovations, going forward.

The role that frontline workers play in keeping us safe today is of paramount importance to us as well. Not only have we provided accommodation to frontline workers at our hotels, we are also supporting local frontline workers – the police and doctors – with meals and accommodation, wherever required.

The good news is that hotels and travel services are beginning to open up around the world, including India. At the same time, the situation is fluid and evolving.

Our primary focus is to make our hotels safe havens for guests and colleagues. Which is why we have introduced comprehensive COVID-19 guidance while reopening Hyatt hotels globally, detailing how to protect against transmission of the virus in line with the recommended protocols from health bodies like the World Health Organisation and local authorities.

Undoubtedly, change is in the air – and we are evolving too. Based on our in-depth conversations with local and global authorities, and economic data analysis, we believe transient travel in general will lead the recovery with leisure transient being the first to come back. As travel restrictions begin to lift, we are expecting to see stronger demand in drive-to resorts and leisure destinations initially.

Large meetings and MICE business, though, will take longer to recover given the government's social distancing rules. But a demand

> In the case of the Hyatt Regency Kolkata's 'Cook Like A Pro' DIY experience, our chef assists them virtually to cook up a signature Hyatt preparation in the convenience of their homes.

for staycations in cities is foreseen -- and all Hyatt hotels in India that have reopened so far are curating special Staycation Offers, personalised to appeal to families, couples and friends who are looking for an indulgent short break in their own city to reconnect and unwind.

We are also reimagining guest experiences such as private check-ins in the lobby and private dining too. For instance, at Hyatt Pune, we are converting two of our garden suites – which include rooms that open to private gardens – into a premium dining facility. So, guests can enjoy both their privacy and a gourmet dining experience as our chef sets up a live cooking area and personal al fresco barbeque for them. The hotel will also convert its poolside lawn into a sparsely laid-out outdoor restaurant, and the executive lounge into a Deli snacks bar with tables placed as per social distancing guidelines. This is so guests can enjoy both indoor and outdoor seating with a great city view and their personalised space.

Exceptional food and beverage experiences have always been fundamental to Hyatt and a crucial part of the excitement of travel. Hence, we are introducing reimagined dining offerings in unique spaces, such as buffet-style meals that are curated and proportioned for each dining table at Hyatt Place Hyderabad Banjara Hills.

Elsewhere in the world, the Park Hyatt Moscow is offering its suites for private in-room dining experiences to the city's residents. Meanwhile, Hyatt Regency Bangkok has transformed its rooftop bars into a private work-out facility, which guests can book for yoga or training sessions. Some of our other hotels have also moved fitness equipment into separate rooms for social distancing.

We are also using the power of our personal connections along with data and analytics, as well as digital marketing, to drive demand – and care for our customers and colleagues in new ways. This includes attracting new segments of customers – millennials are likely to be more open to resuming travel than vulnerable populations -- and catering to new customer preferences, especially on health and safety.Contact-less services, which are yet to gain popularity in Indian hospitality, may well become the trend in the post COVID-19 era. There are many such introductions that we are implementing at our hotels.

Our focus is now on reimagining experiences and hospitality and on providing luxury experiences in a safe environment. The world and Hyatt is rebooting in line with the COVID-19 pandemic and are confident that our enduring value of caring will help us retain the trust of our guests and customers and embark on a new, stronger and more responsible journey together.

It's a brave new world which greets both our guests and us. And while we might face some new challenges, we are certain there's a lot to look forward to in the coming months as we see ourselves innovating, reinventing and inviting our guests back to the world of Hyatt.

Suresh Kumar

RE-ALIGN OUR PAST LEARNINGS, REDEFINE OUR ATTITUDE

Our recovery is dependent upon a new breed of hoteliers

Suresh Kumar is currently Founder of KUE Management Services (Hospitality Advisory Firm) and Founder & Mentor, ROSAKUE Hospitality (Boutique Hospitality chain). He is also a Director on the Board of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels Ltd. and a Member of Advisory Board of School of Hospitality Management, AURO University, Surat. In his preceeding career of four decades with ITC Hotels, he was the MD of ITC's Fortune Hotels with the additional charge of WelcomHeritage Hotels. He was VP Operations, ITC Prefixed Hotels, during his prior stint.

"What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts will build our life of tomorrow. Our life is the creation of our mind."
Gautam Buddha

Unprecedented, unmitigated, black swan, new normal, pivot, reimagine, etc. These are just some of the numerous buzzwords that have become a part of our daily conversations ever since the onset and rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. A small, invisible, spiked organism has caused global businesses and trade activities to come to a grinding halt, unlike anything else experienced in our living memory. India, too, could not remain unaffected for long by this new 'global traveller.' As the country enters its 82nd day of lockdown (on 14th June), despite gradual unlocking, beginning in pockets of the country and sectors of the economy, the travel and tourism industry continues to struggle to quantify the impact and brace itself for the 'unknown unknowns' that lie ahead with the re-opening. There is uncertainty about not just when the business will return, but what it would look like when it does.

In 2018/19, the travel and tourism industry, collectively, contributed to 9.2% of the GDP, 8% to all employment (approximately 43 million jobs) and was the 3rd largest forex-earning sector for the country.

As the pandemic continues to evolve, accurate mapping of the scale of the impact may not be possible as yet. Estimates for India suggest approximately:

- 5-7 million job losses in the hospitality sector (total tourism job loss of 11 million)
- A potential revenue loss of US$10 billion for hotels with occupancies declining and the revenues down by almost 50%
- International arrivals could drop and would remain dependent on the gradual re-opening of the borders and the 'fear mindset' now associated with travel and associated risks.

A WTTC report of April 2020 estimates the Global Travel &

> Tourism remains a critical industry for the nation – both from a development as well as an employment point of view.

Tourism impact to be approximate,

• 100.8 million job losses

• 30% decline in global travel andtourism GDP,thus pegging the global economic impact of Covid-19 to be approximately 5x the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis.

These figures have captured our minds today, and calculations and scenarios seem to evolve almost as quickly as the virus. The pandemic and measures to contain it has changed the way we consume, work and think. While some changes may be temporary, some have and will continue to fundamentally reshape our beliefs and behaviours. "Our thoughts of yesterday and our present thoughts will build our life of tomorrow," as quoted by Gautam Buddha, our thoughts, attitude, and habits determine not only our present, in terms of crisis management but also chart the course of our future.

Covid-19 has accelerated our transition to a 'low-touch economy'. It is characterized by low-touch interactions, health and safety measures, new human behaviours and permanent industry shifts.

Potential consumer behavioural/business shifts that are emerging from the pandemic:

• A hygiene-first wake-up call; Health and hygiene will be sought in every experience and touch-point

• Understanding the meaning of the word 'essential' overindulgence, has changed to basics

• Opulence was the past and practicality is the future

• Local/domestic and community-first; safe and familiar spaces preferred

• Mindful consumption; the ability to do more with less

• High-touch to high-tech and contactless

• Cost-efficient operations

• Increased anxiety/apprehension about the unknown, of touching someone or being touched, of being infected or infecting someone

• From escorted guest journeys in travel and hospitality businesses to 'guided stickers'

• Evolving architectural/interior designs giving more emphasis to smaller, less cluttered spaces

• Altered social and business metrics

- Socializing vs social/physical distancing
- Business seasonality vs crisis/disease seasonality
- From demand and supply to pent-up demand and supply (chain disruptions)
- Social bragging rights to the survival of self and family. More people will adopt a 'lookafter self-first policy.'

These behavioural shifts have also had an impact on the basic and essential components of effective business management, i.e., the 4 M's.

People

• It is now ironical that the most important component – people – themselves are now suspected as potential carriers.

• Due to increased contactless interfaces and interactions, the pandemic has made most people hyper-aware of every touchable surface that could transmit the disease and proximities with other people, even if they are asymptomatic

• Trust and familiarity may become more important than ever before

Money

• Liquidity has always been a critical part of efficient business operations. However, at no other time has this been emphasized more than during this crisis.

• The need for enforcing and maintaining value over the valuationmay become a key factor, going forward.

Material (Supply Chain)

• A key component in business operations, this pandemic has highlighted the criticality of a supply chain for personal survival and the peace of mind.

• The interdependence and fragile relationship with people (the man component) is also a key factor that would need to be reassessed in the post-pandemic times.

Machine

• An essential component due to its contribution in increasing efficiencies and productivity in operations, machines may have to undergo a major revolution to ensure other than already built safety measures, the hygiene aspect of the businesses

• During the pandemic,increased remote/digital working/meetings in the formal and corporate jobs will lead to a decline/loss in the social and economic value of work as a place. This will lead to an acceleration in automation/technological transformation.

• While the impact and dependency on industrial machine operations may resume to pre-Covid-19 times quicker than expected, the impact on travel and hospitality sector is likely to remain for the time, especially in the leisure and business segments. However, there is hope that, with increased tech-enabling and dependency, the pent-up demand for 'real experiences' will also return.

There is, therefore, a greater need, now, for the industry and entrepreneurs to adapt themselves by following a few principles and changing their mindset:

• Build on the past
  - Stick to the basics, core practices and strategies
  - Reflecton core hospitality values and culture
  - Revisit habits, priorities and costs
• Accept the present
  - Prepare, but don't panic
  - Appreciate the available resources and focus on sustainability
• Strengthening your future
  - Shift towards localization
  - Collaborate to bring in supply chain resilience
  - Enhance capabilities and agility in the decision-making and adaptability to the market situation
  - Focus on digital strategies and 'high tech.'

"The recovery and sustainability of the industry are dependent on a new breed of hoteliers who possess the inherent trait of resilience."

It is imperative that we opt for a growth mindset vs fixed mindset, i.e. realizing that there's no 'reset to normal' as some changes that have happened are inevitable, unavoidable and will have a permanent impact.

Every crisis in the past has proven to be a catalyst (for humanity) to emerge better and stronger. Similarly, business models need to be modified to the new reality.

You can't cope with an emergency if you haven't anticipated the possibility that an emergency will come along. In a 'new normal' where anything can come from anywhere and re-navigate the world, we need to be more adaptable, flexible and ready to provide solutions. I believe the time has now come to realign our past learnings and redefine our attitude, thus determining our adaptability, agility and altitude in the future.

The recovery and sustainability of the industry are dependent on a new breed of hoteliers who possess the inherent trait of resilience.

It's now time to decide if we want to become the vitamin, the vaccine or the patient the next time a crisis, pandemic or global disruptor comes around.Leadership during this crisis will,therefore, not just be about making decisions but will also largely depend on behaviours and attitudes.

Vibhas Prasad

THE INDUSTRY HAS RESPONDED AS BEST AS IT COULD

Every player is responsible and nurturing the way forward

Vibhas Prasad is Director at Leisure Hotels Group. The Group is a dominant player in North India's leisure hospitality sector with its portfolio of bespoke villas, luxury camps, smart business hotels & boutique resorts and are well known for its beautiful properties in some of the most spectacular locales.

The company owns a hotel with Taj Group and two with Club Mahindra Group.

His motto in life is to continuously keep learning and improving himself and contribute to the process of wealth creation with integrity.

he novel coronavirus has literally stopped the world in its tracks. There is uncertainty as we have to confront financial, social, workplace and economic disruptions. We are all caught in a transition period of unknowable length and consequences.

What is obvious, though, is that this virus will impact everyone explicitly and/or indirectly. For most of us, COVID-19 began off as a distant threat that evolved into what has now stopped our normal lives. As the infection becomes more widespread, it will continue to make its way to us on even more personal and professional levels.

IMPACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the Indian lockdown has had a disastrous impact on the country's tourism sector for now and perhaps forever. Massive cancellations in March, leading up to the lockdown and closure of all our hotels has ensured complete erosion in all revenues.
Seeing the current status and spike of new cases across the country and especially North India, the trajectory of the curve, recovery of business to pre-COVID levels is 2-3 years out.

Leisure Hotels Group operates properties primarily in north Indian business and leisure destinations in Himachal, Uttarakhand & U.P which are short drivable distances away from Delhi NCR. As the lockdown started at the end of March wherein we had to close the properties we missed the key summer holiday months of the first quarter that are peak season for us across most of our properties.

The second quarter of the monsoon months have always been bleak with low occupancies compared to the other quarters, and this time around, we will not be breaking even though the properties have reopened. We now expect some business to revive from the third quarter (October – December 20) with domestic leisure travellers.

Our Hotels will continue to see the cascading effects on MICE, Wedding Business and F&B as restrictions will continue for the foreseeable future.

Hence, this Financial year we expect business to be half or less than half of last year's business with operational losses in some of the properties.

RECOVERY (FUTURE OUTLOOK)

In the near future, we only expect domestic leisure to pick up wherein people would travel in their cars to areas where there are limited cases or chances for exposure. Small boutique properties would be attractive for customers due to their layout, which pro-

Virender Datta

TIME TO NURTURE NEW BUSINESS IDEAS AND SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

Companies have to re-invent for survival

Virender Datta Is the Founder and Chairman of the International Institute of Culinary Arts, New Delhi, established in 2005. He is presently the President, Datta Hospitality Management Support Services Pvt. Ltd. With over 50 years of versatile experience in Hotel & Hospitality Industry through assignments in India and overseas as Executive Chef, Hotel General Manager, founder president of Fortune Hotels by ITC Hotels and several other corporate assignments, Virender is an active member of various national associations including CII. He has actively served institutions such as Pusa Institute and others.

This crisis has been the mother of all learnings. A new normal has emerged, and we need to re-learn, adapt fast and smart. The most profound lesson has been to slow down the life's pace, be kind to nature and invest in sustaining the future.

As an individual, I have learnt to shift focus from smart leadership to involved leadership. Today, our team needs us more than ever before. A realisation that you are not the only one; everyone is going through the crisis and maybe more than you. Do care and address their personal and family anxieties. Hence, do make your employees feel that today, you are working more for them than for the business. This approach shall ultimately lead to better commitment and hence improved business.

As a person responsible for the success of my company, which is primarily into culinary skills education, one has realised that greater automation, enhanced use of communication technology and e-learning shall be the norm of future education.

Due to the social distancing protocol, lab kitchen classes shall take only limited no of students, hence flexi and variable working hours like MULTIPLEXES shall be the new normal.

We must create new and creative options to maximise the use of our infrastructure by expanding the learning options to future student chefs. The industry too has to review its commitment and support to Culinary Institutes so that a suitably trained, and ready-for-employment task force is available to adopt to the new work culture in hospitality industry.

We must train and develop new chefs, who are familiar with revised expectations of hygiene, sanitation, and capacity to work without supervision; thus, merging the role of a cook and a chef.

We are certainly heading for challenging times, full of opportunities for those who are creative and willing to give the customer a superior experience while ensuring complete adherence to the new norms.

People have to eat, celebrate, and socialize as part of their basic needs. It is up to us, the hospitality professionals, on how we respond to this demand. Customers would certainly like to be convinced about the safety of the food they are going to consume. Industry professionals may be very confident of their efforts to provide safe food, but the challenge shall be of how to assure our customers and give them the same level of confidence that we have in our product.

The reality of the matter is that all businesses and personal lifestyles have been grossly impacted due to this new normal. Today, all organisations are confronted with similar challenges that have adversely impacted business performances.

This situation has not only resulted in your personal discomfort, due to lockdown protocol, including deep concerns about our own safety but also our business revenue model and operations methodology.

No one can say with complete confidence, that how long this will last, but there is no doubt that this is a long-term situation. It is therefore important that we fully comprehend the situation and initiate necessary actions to meet the challenges of the future.

The key areas of impact can be identified as follows:

A. BUSINESS has been negatively impacted, resulting in reduced admissions, discontinuation of other institutional activities that generated additional revenues.

B. FACULTY & STAFF MOVEMENT has been constrained due to containment zones, the absence or reduced public transport and personal safety concerns.

C. OPERATIONS at the Institute has almost come to a standstill, with extremely limited use of the vast infrastructure available to us.

D. OPERATING COSTS are more or less fixed and hence unavoidable, especially payroll, electricity, rentals, generator charges, miscellaneous maintenance expenses and government taxes.

The real challenge is to understand the situation we are in and take decisive actions, professional and personal, to come out, not only as survivors but as winners.

Let us understand, what the future work culture shall be like:

1) TECHNOLOGY: The use of electronic communication technology is going to be the dominant force in our day-to-day work environment.

This will ensure social distancing, reduce the need to travel to the workplace and cover a larger section of the student community.

2) FLEXI OPERATION HOURS: The concept of fixed working hours (9 am to 6 pm) may not be possible any more. Since the workspace capacity is being substantially reduced (due to social distancing protocol), working hours may have to be staggered to maximise the use of the workspace, same as multiplexes have done to movie halls. No more three shows of 12 to 3, 3 to 6 and 9 to 12 pm.

3) DUTY ROASTERS: These shall also need to be redesigned with Flexi working hours, as demanded by the operation hours. This means that the staff schedule may show different time schedules for different staff, depending upon the scheduled timing of the classes.

4) SELF DEVELOPMENT: This is the most significant aspect of the future work culture. The world is changing amazingly fast around us, and our current work skills may not be enough to meet the expectations of a dynamically changed work culture. Every staff member must look inward to identify opportunities to learn and acquire new skills to supplement our current skills – acquiring proficiency in communication technology being the most important skill that must be honed.

5) MULTI SKILLING: The future shall place a premium on those who are multi-skilled and can do additional jobs than the ones they are trained in or have as their prime core competency. If your core competency is, say, the French cuisine, then, maybe, you would like to be a good baker & confectioner as well and vice versa. A good accountant may also learn counselling skills, etc.

6) NEW BUSINESS IDEAS: What was normal till today, may become passé tomorrow due to the lack of demand or constraints in movement. We need to look out for new ideas and opportunities that can be executed by using our existing infrastructure or new skills we may have acquired on our own. ◘

Zubin Karkaria

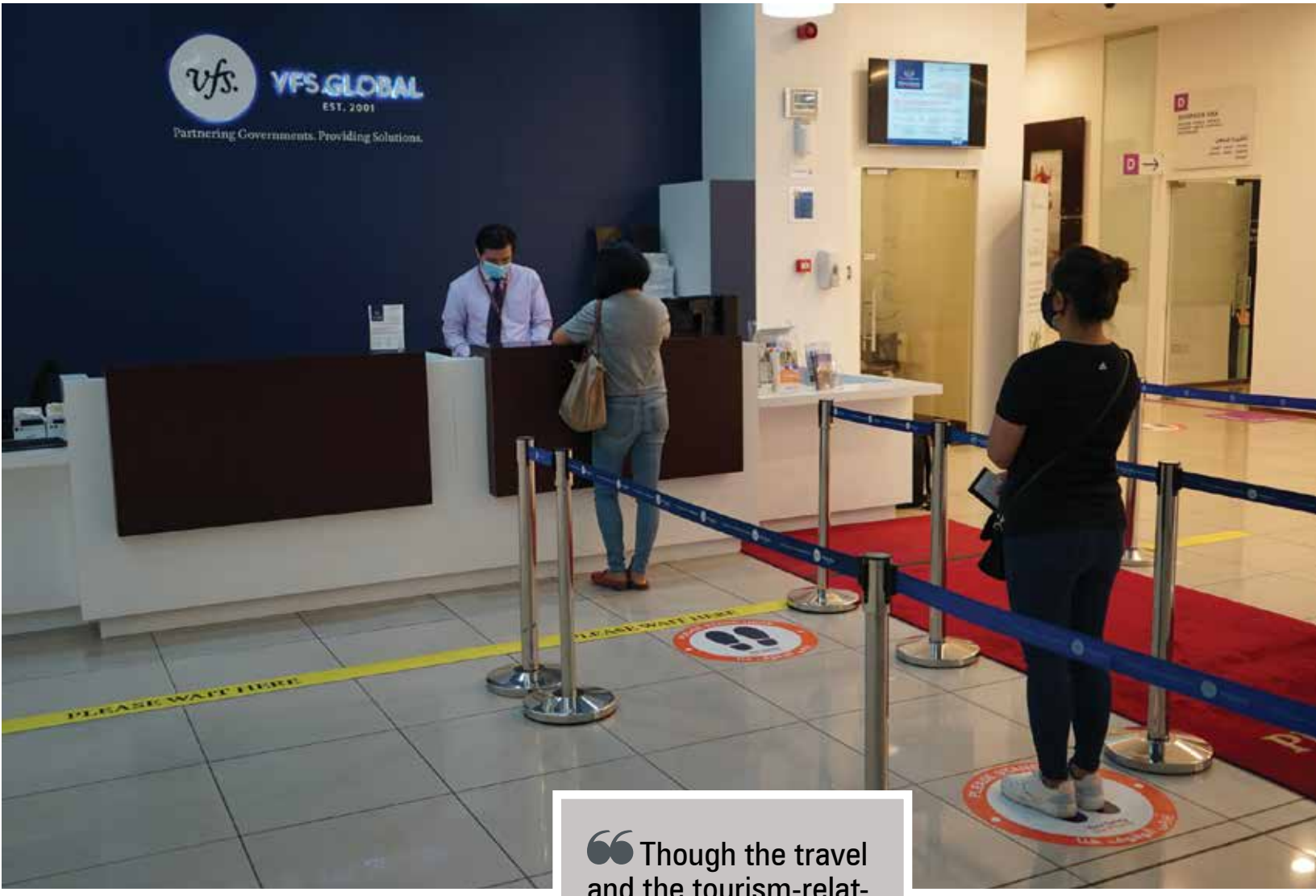
DEVELOP NEW BUSINESS MODELS WITH FUTURE NEEDS OF SAFETY

Ensure health and safety of all stakeholders

Zubin Karkaria is Chief Executive Officer, VFS Global Group.

In 2001, Zubin Karkaria conceptualised and set up VFS Global (as part of the Switzerland-headquartered Kuoni Group) and led the company to become a global leader in its space.

Zubin was appointed as the CEO and Managing Director of Kuoni India and South Asia in 2005. In 2015 he became the first Asian to be appointed as the CEO of Kuoni Group when the Group was split-up into stand-alone businesses following its privatization.



A crisis of unprecedented magnitude for sure. Yes, the world has seen and overcome many crises over the past few decades – and earlier of course – but none of them has prepared us for this socio-economic catastrophe. Sadly hundreds of thousands of people have already lost their lives, and millions more have seen their livelihoods heavily affected. Though the travel and the tourism-related sector is one of the worst affected, there is hardly an industry which has gotten away unscathed and for millions of businesses around the world, this is a severe existential crisis. Companies which survive are likely to undergo a significant change in their business model and/or operational processes and evolve into even more robust organisations.

“Though the travel and the tourism-related sector is one of the worst affected, there is hardly an industry which has gotten away unscathed and for millions of businesses around the world, this is a severe existential crisis.”

As an individual, on a personal level, I am saddened by this huge value destruction global communities are facing. However, as the leader of a business which was doing very well and had a positive outlook, this crisis was a rude awakening. Our core market – for visa application services – came to a complete pause within a few short weeks in March as country after country introduced border closures or very stringent travel restrictions. From a company with a growing business, healthy profitability, and positive cash-flow, we were suddenly in a crisis mode, and sustenance became our foremost priority.

Fortunately, we acted fast and acted decisively. Yes, we had to take some very tough decisions – especially about right-sizing the organisation, which are always very painful not just for the affected employees but also for the organisation. No organisation

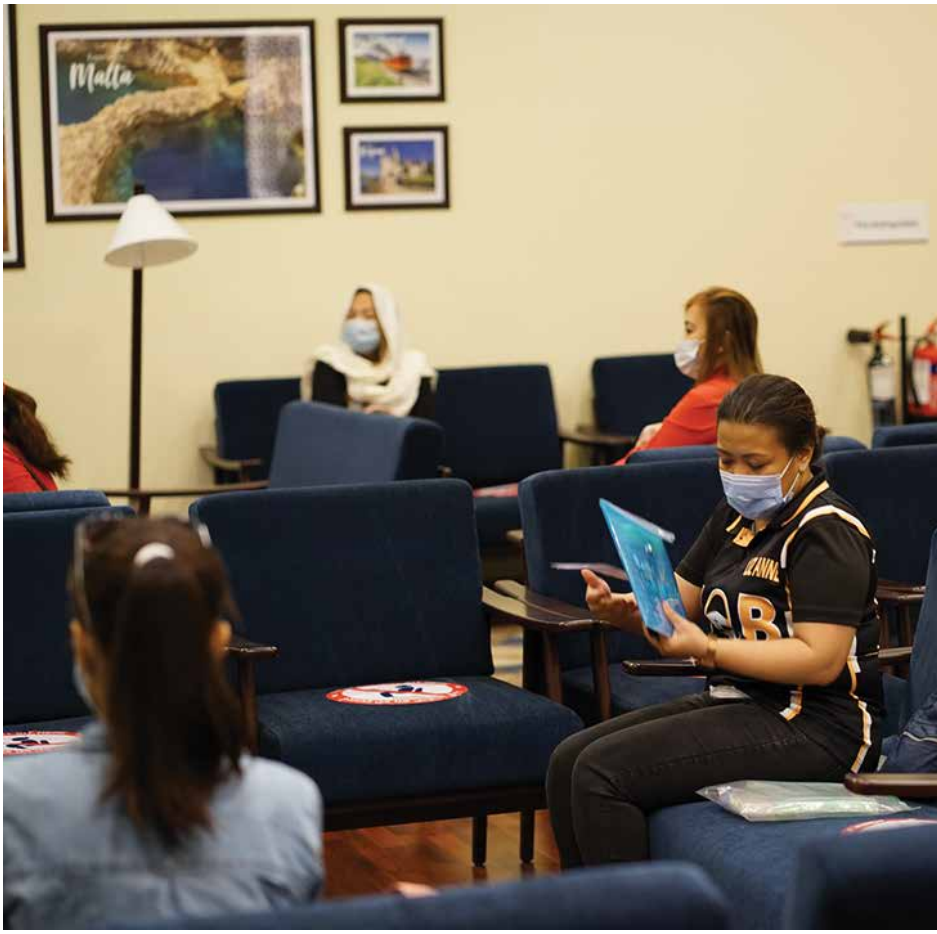
likes to let go of people after the value they have brought to the company – and especially not in tough times. Over the past few weeks, we have initiated multiple programs, focussed not just on the sustenance of the company but more importantly also on coming out of this crisis in an even stronger position. I firmly believe this crisis presents an excellent opportunity for companies to modify their business models and make them more relevant for the future needs of society. Furthermore, I am fully confident that our value proposition remains strongly intact, and we are working closely with our clients to support them during these testing times. We are fully confident we will come out of the crisis in a strong manner.

Yes, we have learnt some pretty harsh lessons. Lessons which are not really new... In fact, they are age-old lessons which during decades of good times, companies often tend to discount or even forget. Some of the things we learnt and did – and continue to do as we work towards recovery – are as follows:

Cash is King. How old is this lesson? And how very relevant it is today! Leveraged companies suffer the most in depressions… and even more in full-blown crises. VFS Global has a cash generative business model. Yet, we faced a liquidity challenge as volumes took a hit at very short notice and recovery in the travel and tourism sector is anticipated to be slow. We have been forced to implement a very stringent cost rationalisation and right-sizing program while serving our contractual obligations with client governments. Thanks to the support from our strong parent company and other shareholders, and our business reputation, we have managed to overcome this challenge. We learnt that scenario planning and securing liquidity at a very early stage of a crisis is extremely important.

Dynamic cost model. During such unprecedented times, it is important to review one's cost structure to ensure that we are optimally structured. The crisis allowed us to review our fixed and variable cost base to bring it into the optimal balance and in doing so, strengthening our resilience during what is envisaged to be a volatile short to medium-term outlook.

Communication. Communication is critical in any crisis management situation. We started updating our key stakeholders – our client governments, our people, and key business partners – from the early days of the crisis, and continue to send a periodic update to our client governments and our people. Stakeholders need to know the company's position and plan to maintain their confidence



in the company. Employees need to be engaged and motivated, despite the difficult environment.

Don't lose focus on the future. Operate from the premise that every crisis has an expiry date. Apart from the first couple of weeks of the crisis when we focussed exclusively on sustenance planning, we have not lost our focus on the future. Yes, we have slowed down or paused some projects, but we are keeping them on the back-burner and keeping them alive as we firmly believe in the future of our company and our industry. We are using the current crisis to strengthen and enhance the resilience of our organisation and operating model even further.

> "We cannot yet predict when Covid-19 will cease to be a serious threat, but companies will have to learn to live with it or work-around it until it is no longer a significant threat."

Let me be very clear … this is a temporary state of affairs. Yes, unfortunately, the travel and tourism-related sector will be one of the slowest to recover – especially the international travel segment, and yes operating and service models of companies will have to evolve but recover it will! This is my firm belief. We cannot yet predict when Covid-19 will cease to be a serious threat, but companies will have to learn to live with it or work-around it until it is no longer a significant threat. For many companies, this could be an opportunity to re-position themselves for the future.

I believe companies first need to stabilise themselves and sustain their business through these challenging times, but they also need an eye on the future. As far as the travel & tourism industry is concerned, the immediate strategy would be to focus on developing a generally reduced physical contact service model and assure customers about a safe and secure service process – which I believe will be necessary even in the post-pandemic environment in developing a strong and sustainable business. The travel & tourism industry has proven itself to be highly resilient – driven by the hunger and appetite for people to travel, whether it be for leisure, business, studying or medical. Given our business is heavily focussed on larger emerging markets with stronger travel growth rates across and we operate across all of the visa types mentioned, I am confident that we are well placed when travel resumes.

Finally, operating models should be based not only on commercials and sustainability but also on health & safety of all – customers, employees, clients, partners and other stakeholders. ■

Zubin Saxena

ROAD TO RECOVERY MUST BEGIN WITH MEETING INTERNAL CHALLENGES

As travel begins, recovery will be slow

Zubin Saxena is MD and VP Operations, South Asia at Radisson Hotel Group. He is a member of the Executive Committee of Radisson Hotel Group Asia Pacific that directs the business of the company.

Previously, Zubin has held senior and leadership positions with prominent global companies such as InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), Jones Lang LaSalle Hotels and HVS-New York. Zubin is an active member and advisor to various industry bodies. He is Co-Chairman of the CII Tourism Committee for Northern India. He holds an MBA from the Adam Smith School of Business and Management, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom, where he graduated with Distinction.

At the onset of 2020, the Indian hospitality sector was booming. With demand outstripping supply and occupancy touching almost 80%, the industry was set up for a prolonged period of prosperity and growth. The COVID-19 crisis turned the industry on its head, with almost 70 days of complete shutdown, near zero occupancies and mounting fixed costs. According to industry analysts the Indian hotel sector will decline to the tune of INR 90,000 crore in 2020, including a 48% year-on-year decline in occupancy and a 58% slump in revenue per available room (RevPAR). As the biggest black swan event of our times, this is truly unprecedented in terms of its scale and impact, especially the threat it poses to millions of livelihoods.

Fortunately, we are starting to see the green shoots of recovery – albeit at an embryonic stage. It is encouraging to see that the world is creating a coordinated recovery strategy; the UNWTO recently released its "Global Guidelines to Restart Tourism", and the UN's civil aviation body, ICAO, has started rolling out its global guidelines for safely re-starting aviation. We also welcome the Ministry of Tourism's operational recommendations for the hotel sector.

Even as the industry reopens, it may take as long as 6-12 months for most people to feel reassured enough to travel again. There is hope however, as essential travel restarts under Unlock 1.0. The industry reported a lot of pent-up demand as the government announced resumption of domestic air and rail travel. People will start to travel again after a long period of confinement, either out of necessity or desire. We are positive about the short-term revival prospects for business travel in urban centres and leisure travel in destinations like Goa, Kerala, Shimla, Mussoorie and Manali. The Culture Ministry recently approved the reopening of 820 monuments, which should spur leisure and pilgrimage travel. International travel will take longer to rebound, but this puts India's hospitality sector at an advantage compared to other countries, as we are primarily driven by domestic demand.

The road to recovery can only be achieved by addressing internal challenges, such as managing ancillary operations despite the labour exodus and assuring employees – permanent staff, contractual employees or suppliers–of the highest levels of safety and protection.

Long before the pandemic, we embarked upon our India Unification Plan that leverages the strength of our network to deliver efficiencies across talent, procurement, food and beverage (F&B), operations and commercial. This exercise is focused on creating clusters of resources and skillsets by instituting subject matter experts. It leverages our expertise as a hotel management company to drive value to our owners in the form of reduced costs,

higher returns and improved efficiencies. During the lockdown period, we put this on a fasttrack to a 12-week action plan. I believe this model is working very strongly for us in these troubling times. The value of many other strategic imperatives that we had initiated ahead of the crisis, such as ramping up our focus on F&B and managing hotel flow-throughs, have been reaffirmed in the current environment.

At Radisson Hotel Group, we have spent a lot of time in recent weeks building a robust recovery plan. In order to reassure guests, ensure the safety of our hotels, and bounce back faster, we have placed health and hygiene at the heart of our business. We reviewed our existing health and safety processes and developed a new in-depth cleanliness and disinfection protocol in partnership with SGS, to ensure our guests' safety and peace of mind from check-in to check-out. This includes a new 20-step protocol for hotels and a 10-step protocol for meeting and event spaces for all our hotels. New cleaning and disinfection procedures, increased attention to safety in communal spaces, social distancing, protective equipment, and updated training for team members are included in these new guidelines.

Additionally, an exhaustive set of experience mapping guidelines have been implemented across our hotels which detail the procedures that need to be observed across a guest's journey, along with our team members' journey across various access points and touchpoints, such as arrival, housekeeping, kitchen, offices etc. Long before this crisis we had invested in enhancing our customer experience with the latest smart technology, such as apps to check-in and check-out and equipping our meeting rooms with latest video conferencing facilities. The need for these solutions will only increase as contactless technology pervades all areas of daily life. Touch-free controls including smartphone apps, sensor-based lighting, sensor taps and gesture-controlled mechanisms are already widely deployed across our hotels. Our staff have also been equipped with resources, educational materials and trainings on effectively handling new situations as they emerge.

> "We embarked upon our India Unification Plan that leverages the strength of our network to deliver efficiencies across talent, procure-ment, food and beverage (F&B), operations and commercial."

Radisson Hotel Group has the best interests of our partners at heart. We have pioneered innovative initiatives like our "Owners for Owners" programme to leverage various parallel business lines that are owned by our partners. Such steps will help us optimise costs and pass on the benefits to our owners across the system, while also stimulating the revival of local economy.

We are not just updating guest experience across our hotels; we are inventing new ways of working and extending our signature hospitality to serve guests in their own homes. Various new experiences such as contactless food delivery and safe takeaway services, specially curated menus and the unique 'Take Home a Chef' concept for private catering or cooking classes, are just some of the initiatives we have implemented to keep our guests close, even in lockdown. We have also been reinventing touchpoints like concierge services that will evolve into bespoke offers including cuisine, lifestyle and long-term car parking solutions.

As businesses innovate and reinvent themselves to face a new world, they need to address the fundamental question of survival in the short term. With the systematic opening of business, we are expecting travel demand to rise, initially as stranded people start to move to their safe zones, closely followed by business travel from small enterprises and self-employed professionals. This phase will be followed by the aforementioned trend of 'revenge tourism' – frequent travellers who couldn't travel during lockdown and start to return to leisure destinations, perhaps for shorter holidays with emphasis on social distancing. As the situation normalises,we are looking with optimism to the recovery of the destination wedding market– including celebrations that were previously planned for international locations that will move to local settings.

As we focus our efforts on restoring the business, it is essential to acknowledge that hospitality, as we know it, will not remain the same – at least not in the short to medium-term. The revival of every industry is interdependent on various other trades and sectors. At Radisson Hotel Group, we have prepared a comprehensive revival plan that's based on taking concrete steps towards the 'new normal', whilst also being flexible enough to respond to new developments – both in terms of the pandemic and towards society at large.

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Simply standing within the ancient remains at Dholavira and Lothal, I felt like I was reading a page of history written in stone and brick.

Dholavira & Lothal gave me a sense of heritage.
Where else can you leave your fingerprints on the past?

Amitabh Bachchan

DHOLAVIRA
www.gujarattourism.com