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## Reviving Indian Tourism amid the Covid-19 pandemic: Challenges and workable solutions

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### ABSTRACT

This conference communication discusses insights from the roundtable discussion for reviving tourism in the post-pandemic era, conducted by the Centre for Marketing in Emerging Economies at the Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, India. A varied group of eminent members from government, industry, and academia deliberated on the challenges, possible solutions, and way forward with regard to reviving the tourism sector amidst Covid-19 uncertainties. Major outcomes emerging from a roundtable discussion among experts were textually analysed. A survey was conducted among attendees to assess the degree of willingness to travel and related concerns. A framework was developed with a workable action plan for boosting tourism. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research are provided.

### 1. Introduction

Covid-19 has severely affected the socio-economic and political landscape of the world. International tourist flows dropped from 30.8 % to 76.3 % in different regions (Fotiadis, Polyzos, & Huan, 2021). Economically advanced countries suffered a considerable plunge in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP): –853bn US\$ in Europe, –895.6 in Northeast Asia, –1.5 trillion US\$ in Americas, and –1.1 trillion US\$ in the Asia Pacific region (Škare, Soriano, & Porada-Rochoń, 2021). The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2021) estimated that in 2020 the travel and tourism industry's contribution to GDP declined to 49.1 %, and about 62 million jobs were lost (18.5 % decline) globally. Compared to the worldwide scenario, KPMG reported that the Indian tourism and hospitality sector witnessed massive unemployment of around 38 million, comprising 70 % of the total workforce (The Hindu, 2020). The unemployment rate went as high as 23.5 % in April 2020 and 21.7 % in May, with some improvement in the following months, reaching 9.1 % in December (Economic Times, 2021).

Critics have examined different schools of thought and challenges to sustainable tourism in the wake of Covid-19 (Arbulú, Razumova, Rey-Maqueira, & Sastre, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a; Im, Kim, & Choeh, 2021). A large-scale ban on travel (including even intra-country), closure of borders, cancellations of conferences and events, and strict quarantine protocols to manage the spread of the virus have put much pressure on the tourism and hospitality sectors from

managing the cash cycle to attracting customers (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020; Li, Zhang, Liu, Kozak, & Wen, 2020). Flexibility and agility in tourism, travel insurance, and funding policies are expected to boost tourism globally (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020). McKinsey & Company (2020) suggested public–private partnerships, designing new financing options, open and transparent communication, and employing digital and analytical platforms for the purpose.

India has shown tremendous growth in the tourism and hospitality sector in recent years. However, the Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality estimated a loss of around 133.33bn US\$ due to the pandemic (Press Trust of India, 2020). An emerging economy with a vastly diverse population and economic zones, India requires skill-development of employees, heightened emphasis on hygiene and optimism towards tourism revival, and better crisis preparedness (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020). Any change can have significant consequences for stakeholders in the tourism industry (e.g. tourists, local people, tour operators, hotels, the transportation sector, and policy-makers). Successful execution of crisis management depends on how stakeholders are affected by the crisis and how they address it (Sigala, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for focused deliberation on the coping and revival mechanisms in the tourism sector by incorporating the views of multiple stakeholders (Gössling et al., 2020). Based on a roundtable discussion, this conference communication presents a multi-pronged approach to address the imminent challenges faced by the tourism industry. The action plan provides a workable solution that addresses

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various realistic challenges in emerging economies like India. Tourism is one of the most important contributors to the Indian GDP and its revival is directly related to the economic survival of the country. Thus, this paper has significant implications for policymakers and organizations involved in tourism at national and international levels.

## 2. Tourism in the age of Covid-19

Tourism is a highly experiential and psychological process that has previously been affected by SARS, Ebola, and similar health crises (Novelli, Burgess, Jones, & Ritchie, 2018). Although Covid-19 is not as contagious and fatal as Ebola, people tend to spread the virus well before experiencing the actual symptoms (Bai et al., 2020). Additionally, in several regions with limited testing, the probability of asymptomatic transmission increases, which is a significant concern (Li et al., 2020). To contain the pandemic, large-scale travel bans and safety concerns were put in place, leading to a loss of about US\$2.1 trillion in 2020, as reported by WTTC (Gössling et al., 2020). Studies have found that consumers will accept tourism recovery initiatives if governments intervene to control the epidemic quickly (Fong, Law, & Ye, 2020) and if transport policies are revised to address such health hazards (Zhang, 2020). The present article extends the literature on tourism revival by considering the concerns of travel agents, online travel service providers, railways, hotels, and government regarding the tourism sector amidst the Covid-19 situation. It highlights the support systems, schemes, policies, and marketing initiatives needed to regain international and domestic tourism confidence.

## 3. Overview of roundtable discussion

The roundtable discussion was conducted in association with the Centre for Marketing in Emerging Economies (CMEE) at IIM Lucknow, India. The panelists (Table 1) represented the government and various other industries associated with the Indian tourism industry.

Simultaneous data collection and analysis with a small sample of domain experts help reveal meanings and ideas underlying a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Varied experts helped us gain practical insights about the challenges ahead and the support commanded by tourism-related industries (e.g. tour operators, hotels, online travel companies, and media) and the government schemes and policies needed to address them. In addition, academic representation helped to provide valuable insights from the current and previous collective crises (SARS, Ebola, Covid-19) to develop an actionable recovery plan in the present context.

## 4. Key discussion areas and action plan

The roundtable discussion opened with findings of a PAN India study conducted by CMEE on 'Understanding public sentiment during

lockdown' in two phases: May 2020 and September 2020. The results indicate that around 79 % of people are anxious and suffer from fear (40 %) and sadness (22 %), mainly due to the adverse economic impact and the risk of becoming infected. The roundtable discussion revealed that acceptability, affordability, accessibility, and awareness of the changing nature of tourism post-Covid-19 are essential to attract travellers (Sheth & Sisodia, 2012). Agencies comprising hotels, airlines, tour operators, and government need to find common ground to rebalance the economic, social, and ecological priorities for sustainable tourism (Romagosa, 2020). Compared to the recovery plan presented by United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Kreiner & Ram, 2020) and other researchers (Galvani, Lew, & Perez, 2020), this roundtable discussion highlighted factors unique to emerging markets (Table 2). The findings contribute towards an action plan comprising seven priority areas and which parties are accountable for its implementation to revive Indian tourism amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

**1) Large-scale focus on safety and hygiene:** Hygiene and sanitation were recurrent sub-themes throughout the discussion (Jauhari, 2010). Fewer travellers equate to increased costs, which is not sustainable in the long run. Wearing protective gear on airplanes and trains, passenger screening at airports and stations, monitoring and assistance for viral symptoms, keeping the middle seat vacant on aircraft, and distributing sanitizers and disinfectants will encourage people to travel. Developing countries such as India are subject to overcrowding and congestion, meaning that these severe concerns are often overlooked (Nath, 2003). Additionally, the administration of the Covid-19 vaccine is an important measure to increase people's confidence in tourism. The World Health Organization (WHO) is facilitating collaboration and accelerated efforts among different stakeholders and promoting vital communications regarding vaccines (WHO, 2021). However, people are afraid, and vaccine safety and side effects are prominent factors driving their vaccination decision (Frontline, 2021). Low tourist arrivals in emerging economies during the pandemic can also be attributed to low information transparency and poor healthcare infrastructure (Gössling et al., 2020). Therefore, the government, pharmaceutical companies, and doctors need to stress the efficacy of the vaccine and address people's concerns to make the vaccine drive successful. Several Indian Bollywood actors (e.g. Amitabh Bacchan and Priyanka Chopra) and sports legends (e.g. Sachin Tendulkar) have sought to educate their fans on the benefits of hygiene and safe living to safeguard from this pandemic (NDTV, 2021). They have used social media channels to share the news of their vaccination, implying that influencer marketing could be a key tactic for mass mobilization in other countries.

**2) Government support for the declining tourism sector (financial and operational):** A second important step will be to offer liquidity, policy support, or deferred debt payments to firms in the tourism industry. The panellists highlighted that the working capital of most tourism-related companies has fallen by almost 60 %, and for micro, small and medium-sized firms by almost 80 %. Further, the new standards of cleanliness and hygiene entail higher costs, increasing the financial burden during this time of crisis. The government must incentivize investments in hotel and tourism infrastructure and reduce procedural hassles such as the requirement of a Tax Deduction Account Number; it should also allow cash receipts from foreign tourists on transactions above US\$ 2744 (The Print, 2021). Despite the crisis, hotels have continued distributing food to quarantine facilities for incoming passengers and healthcare workers. The government must recognize their contribution by allowing tax deductions for their corporate social responsibility activities because Section 37 of the Companies Act does not consider such costs in computing business income. In the 2021 budget, the Indian government announced that more tourist coaches and trains would be provided, and emphasized public-private partnerships of seaports to help cruise tourism. A total of 4803K US\$ has been allotted for

**Table 1**  
Profile of the panelists.

Panellist	Details
Jyoti Mayal	President, Travel Agents Association of India
Gurbaxish Singh Kohli	Vice-President, Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association and Joint Managing Director, Pritam Group of Hotels
Sunil Suresh	Chief Marketing Officer, MakeMyTrip Ltd.
Rajni Hasija	Director – Tourism and Marketing, Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC)
Shri Mukesh Meshram	IAS, Principal Secretary – Tourism and Culture, Government of Uttar Pradesh
Meenakshi Sharma	Director General – Tourism, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India
Divia Thani	Editor, Condé Nast Traveller India
Prof. Devashish Das Gupta	Professor, IIM Lucknow

**Table 2**  
Recommended Action plan for Revival of Tourism Sector.

Action item	Accountability	Priority	Salient government initiatives
Largescale focus on Safety and Hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government</li> <li>Tourism and associated industries</li> <li>Civil society/Individual efforts</li> </ul>	Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting up of COVID-19 Cell for dissemination of Advisories and Guidelines in respect of COVID-19 and 24 × 7 HelpLine</li> <li>Coordination with Hotels regarding stranded guests</li> <li>Accommodation to Foreign Tourists by ITDC</li> <li>Joint Working Group with State Tourism Officers</li> <li>Setting up of –Stranded in India Portal for foreign tourists</li> <li>Sanitization drives by civic bodies with the involvement of RWAs/ community organizations</li> </ul>
Government support for declining tourism sector (financial and operational)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government</li> <li>Banks and financial institutions</li> <li>Industrial federation/Chambers of commerce</li> </ul>	Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loan Guarantee Scheme for Covid-19 Affected Sectors</li> <li>Awareness drives, analysis, advocacy and suggesting measures for the welfare of those in tourist industry</li> <li>Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS)</li> <li>Continuation of Service Export from India Scheme (SEIS) scheme</li> <li>The loan guarantee scheme for Covid affected players would be administered by the Ministry of Tourism through the National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company (NCGTC).</li> </ul>
Standard operating procedures: continuous monitoring and auditing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government (particularly Health ministry in consultation with ICMR and AIIMS)</li> <li>Corporates - tourism and associated industries</li> </ul>	Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The loan guarantee scheme for Covid affected players would be administered by the Ministry of Tourism through the National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company (NCGTC).</li> </ul>
Evolving tour packages e.g. longer stays at one destination, faith, medical and ecotourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online travel companies</li> <li>Indian railways</li> <li>Tour operators</li> <li>Hotels</li> </ul>	Medium-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Ministry of Tourism under its Swadesh Darshan and PRASAD schemes have sanctioned projects worth approx. Rs. 6500 crores for the development of the tourism infrastructure to provide a better experience and facilities to the visitors.</li> <li>The government is preparing to rollout insurance policies for foreign tourists—that will also account for the treatment of Covid-19. More Indian hospitals are planned to apply for accreditation by the Joint Commission International (JCI)</li> <li>Plans to develop northeast region. For example, the three-day dragon festival in Chamera Lake at Taleru while the paragliding festival held near Dalhousie.</li> </ul>
Widespread use of Digital Media as the tool for communication, consideration and cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government</li> <li>Corporates - tourism and associated industries</li> </ul>	Medium-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dekho Apna Desh (DAD) initiative to promote domestic tourism and encourage every citizen to visit at least 15 destinations by the year 2022. Creating mass awareness through online pledge and Quiz on DAD on <a href="https://quiz.mygov.in/">https://quiz.mygov.in/</a></li> <li>The Incredible India digital platform, in collaboration with the Google, presents a variety of 360° walk-throughs and stories about prominent tourist attractions.</li> <li>The Ministry of Tourism has launched the Incredible India Tourist Facilitator (IITF) Certification Programme as an Online learning platform to develop well trained professionals</li> </ul>
Promoting local handicrafts and artwork: vocal for local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government</li> <li>Tour operators and tour guides</li> <li>NGOs</li> </ul>	Long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Government has further announced the Atmanirbhar Bharat package in which Rs 3 lakh crore collateral free automatic loan has been made available for the Micro Medium and Small Enterprises (MSMEs). The loan will have a 4-year tenure and 12-months moratorium</li> <li>Considering Indian culture and philosophy and changing branding from 'Incredible India' to a new brand called 'Namaste Incredible India' as the greeting symbol has gained popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic</li> <li>State governments (e.g. Tamil Nadu) are working that temples, treks, local festivals, handicrafts, and heritage be brought together as a joint effort between the tourism department, forest department and HR and CE and other departments to offer wholesome tourism experience.</li> <li>Rajasthan Tourism (state tourism) and UNESCO adopted 'Art of Life' to develop cultural tourism hubs linking culture with skilling, enterprises, and economic development.</li> </ul>
Motivating employees, agents and service professionals associated with the tourism industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tourism and associated industries</li> </ul>	Long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial incentives, improved commissions, educational and housing loans etc</li> <li>The Ministry of Tourism launched the System for Assessment, Awareness and Training for Hospitality Industry (SAATHI). As India opens up for tourism, hotel owners can easily get themselves trained and certified through the SAATHI website following three easy steps.</li> </ul>

vaccination and to improve medical infrastructure, which will also affect medical tourism. Globally, more such initiatives are needed to revive this ailing sector.

**3) Promoting local handicrafts and artwork:** Covid-19 has compelled economies to devise sustainable tourism practices (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a; Romagosa, 2020). This industry can protect and engage vulnerable groups (artisans, local tribes, folk groups) while reducing poverty and inequality. Being vocal for local

comprises a new locus to revive tourism (Brouder et al., 2020). Thus, there is a need to redefine tourism with a triple bottom line approach to secure a resilient and sustainable local economy and strengthen environmental hope and positivity (Atejjevic, 2020; Romagosa, 2020). The Indian government's mantras of 'vocal for local' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (making India independent) are innovative ways to promote domestic tourism and inclusive growth while considering local artisans, cultural heritage, and regional cuisines.

However, strong partners are needed to promote local handicrafts. The All India Handloom Board and All India Handicrafts Board ended in July 2020 and August 2020, respectively (Business Today, 2020). Other geographies can also launch similar schemes/policies and nurture such institutions as the bridge between artisans and the government to develop a sustainable ecosystem. For example, The Blue Yonder, a Kerala-based travel organization in India, compensates artisans for the time and knowledge (e.g. traditional jewellery, dresses) they share with travellers, which helps save dying art forms and provides an immersive experience to tourists. Additionally, with large cities being the hotspots of Covid-19 contagion, countries could devise and offer short getaways to the countryside. For example, Kabani and Uravu, India-based social enterprises and Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) have developed an inclusive community-based tourism program in backwaters and rural regions.

**4) Standard operating procedures: continuous monitoring and auditing:** The Ministry of Tourism and the Quality Council of India jointly designed an innovative program in October 2020 entitled SAATHI. This aimed to implement policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs) issued in the light of Covid-19 for the safe operation of hotels, restaurants, and other such establishments. Governments should formulate national standards for tourism and hospitality related businesses, with any slack leading to appropriate penalties (Wen, Huimin, & Kavanaugh, 2005); for example, mandatory temperature checking at the entry and exit of workplaces and institutions could be enforced. Indian Railways has issued a fine for passengers and staff not wearing masks on stations or inside trains. Likewise, various Indian states charge a penalty for violating rules such as wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and spitting tobacco in public places. Crisis management demands a swift formulation of strategies to overcome the effect of Covid-19 on tourism and a focus on auditing. The online travel service providers in India (e.g. MakeMyTrip) are linked with an audit firm that monitors various SOPs. As the crisis evolves, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India, revises the SOPs for hotels and hospitality units concerning service delivery and employee management (see: <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/SOPonpreventivemeasuresinHotelsandotherHospitalityUnitstocontainspreadofCOVID19.pdf>). Thus, continuously updating SOPs and auditing/monitoring of different institutions are necessary.

**5) Evolving tour packages, such as longer stays at one destination, and faith, medical, and ecotourism:** The discussion highlighted that the tourism sector should focus on promoting domestic tourism, faith tourism, and ecotourism to ensure sustained demand (Gössling et al., 2020). Socializing tourism involving the public good should be realigned (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020b). The roundtable discussion also highlighted the importance of food tourism (Atejjevic, 2020) and connecting regenerative agriculture with transformative tourism for long-term sustainability. In the 2020–21 budget, the Indian government allotted 171.70 million US\$ for 'Swadesh Darshan' (campaign to promote domestic Indian tourism) to develop tourist circuits in the northeast region and 29.70 million US\$ for Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) and 'adopt a Heritage'. Travel integrator companies such as Thomas Cook and SOTC (a leading travel and tourism company) are collaborating with various hospitality brands in India to create innovative workstations, wellness breaks, and affordable luxury holidays. Other geographies can adopt such schemes and collaborative efforts incorporating free transfers, flexible cancellation, minimal booking deposits, easy payment, and overall immersive experiences for customers. The Indian government and private players are proposing innovative religious and cultural packages such as 'Buddhist circle', 'Ramayana Trails', and 'Royal Rajasthan tours'. Unfortunately, some religious events, such as Kumbh Mela and Tablighi Jamaat, reported the collapse of official measures, resulting in a massive spike in

Covid-19 cases in India (Mint, 2021b). Religious leaders and mass influencers came forward to educate people about the grave repercussions and appealed to the public to celebrate festivals by staying indoors and taking all precautions. People have expressed disappointment because of the closing of temples, mosques, and other religious places. As a priority, the tourism sector should focus more on wellness tourism based on ancient Indian philosophies of yoga, Ayurveda, and ecotourism. This will improve tourists' mental and physical well-being, and the authorities can ensure better enforcement of social distancing, safety, and hygiene practices. Interestingly, India is emerging as one of the premier destinations for medical tourism post-Covid-19 (Financial Express, 2021b).

**6) Widespread use of digital media as the tool for communication, consideration and cooperation:** Tourism marketers should have a social marketing orientation in their advertisement campaigns. The campaigns should include hashtags such as #staysafe, #safetravel, #hygienefirst, and #mindfulconsumption to convey that the businesses care about consumers' well-being. Since sustainability (people, planet, and profit) is the key strategic focus to revive tourism, educating consumers about mindful consumption (reduce, reuse, and recycle) will encourage a safe and sustainable tourism experience for all (Sheth, 2021). In this regard, managers and policymakers must harness the power of digital technologies at various touchpoints. The Ministry of Tourism in India has started 'Dekho Apna Desh' (visit India) webinars and largescale adoption of digital media to enhance awareness of tourist destinations, local art, and cuisines (Economic Times, 2020a). New content is being developed for the Incredible India website and mobile application, including tourist-friendly personalized features and stories in collaboration with Google. In addition, 360-degree walk-throughs are being created for prominent World Heritage Sites in India. NITI Aayog (the planning commission in India) has stressed the provision of experiential tourism as the hallmark of the Indian economy in the post-pandemic era, with the widespread use of information technology (Hindustan Times, 2020). Organizations have also started using mobile and digital channels for customer engagement, implying high adoption of artificial intelligence and robotics to develop enhanced tourism experiences in the post-pandemic era (Zeng, Chen, & Lew, 2020). As a benchmark for the hotel industry, some luxury hotels in India, such as ITC, are moving towards keyless rooms, digital menus, and robot services (Financial Express, 2020).

**7) Motivating employees, agents, and service professionals associated with the tourism industry:** Providing financial support to contract staff in the hospitality and tourism industry is necessary as they form the backbone of the sector. Several governments (China and the European Union) have offered a direct cash injection into tourism, including wage support. The Maharashtra state government in India has been inspirational in announcing industry status to the hospitality sector (The Print, 2021) and reducing the number of licenses required to open a restaurant from 70 to 10, moving towards a single clearance policy. Policymakers must devise an extensive training program for upskilling employees and staff to tackle redundancy and retain productive employees in the long run (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020). Multitasking would be the subsequent norm in the hospitality and tourism sector. In many industries, workers are apprehensive about returning to work for health reasons, posing a considerable problem. Employers need to ensure workplace safety, provide required medical assistance, train employees on crisis management solutions, and extend medical insurance. Several Indian banks, technology firms, and educational institutions have distributed safety kits among employees, including masks, hand sanitizer, a face shield, a document detailing the symptoms of Covid-19, guidelines on wellness and boosting immunity, and details of whom to contact in an emergency. Offices and retail shops are keeping sanitizer at their entrances. Additionally, the central government has called for Covid-19 vaccination at workplaces with 100 eligible beneficiaries



from April 11, 2021 (Firstpost, 2021). Several retailers, designers, and entrepreneurs are sharing the details of their craftsmen so that customers can order from them or donate directly to their cause. Employers and managers have realized that if their artisans, tailors, and craftsmen fail, their businesses will also fail (The Wire, 2020).

The roundtable was attended by more than 250 people. These people were surveyed three months after the roundtable to understand their willingness to travel based on the availability of the vaccine and related concerns. In October 2020, the vaccine was about to be released, and in February 2021, the vaccine had become available in India. Based on the responses, the respondents were classified into four segments with diverse travel preferences (definitely will travel, probably will travel, probably will not travel, and definitely will not travel), each with unique concerns regarding tourism. By referring to the above action plan, necessary structured interventions are proposed for these segments (Fig. 1). Despite the government focus on the tourism sector people are still uncertain about traveling. There is a gap between the implementation of various schemes and customers' awareness/perception of those schemes. To understand this disparity, interviews were conducted targeting independent consultants, members of the Travel Agents Association, and government representatives to gain deeper insights into the prospective plans and probable efficacy of current policies to revive the tourism industry. Table 2 highlights some of the key government initiatives in line with the proposed framework.

The Ministry of Tourism has circulated a new tourism policy among the states (Business Standard, 2021) and founded a National Tourism Task Force for the revival of the hospitality and tourism sector that includes state tourism ministers, joint secretary-level officers of the related central ministries, and representatives from various industry associations such as Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, and The World Travel & Tourism Council, India Initiative (WTTICII), and tourism and hospitality associations (Economic Times, 2020b). The Ministry of Tourism launched a 24/7 toll-free tourist information helpline in 12 languages to assist domestic and foreign tourists. The Ministry of Tourism has also extended the recognition/authorization of travel agents, tour operators, and tourist transport operators by six months, and the procedure for obtaining recognition has been simplified. So far, 142,368 citizens have joined the *Dekho Apna Desh* (boost domestic tourism) pledge, of whom almost 75 % are between 25 and 40 years of age. This can be seen as a resounding success, as many of the destinations are fully booked for the foreseeable future. The government is geared up to support businesses by providing free visas to the first five lakh tourists visiting the country once international travel resumes. An Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) and loan guarantee scheme have been announced for Covid-19-affected sectors (Financial Express, 2021a). States in India are also coming forward with electricity tariff cuts and tax incentives for the tourism sector (The Hindu, 2021). Such facilitation of credit lines and expansion of emergency funds will not only accelerate the revival of the tourism sector but also create new jobs (e.g. acceleration in Ram corridor and Buddhist corridor activities).

However, the independent consultants and private players associated with the tourism sector presented a few concerns. First, there is a dual challenge of regaining the lost market due to Covid-19 and creating better facilities for the future. Therefore, central and state governments need to work together. There should be a promotion of state-wise year-round tourism packages. The Ministry of Civil Aviation's ban on international airspace for scheduled flights should have been lifted long ago as per global norms. UNWTO and IATA have launched a free online tool called 'Destination Tracker' in a collaboration to boost international travel. The Ministry of Tourism, with the cooperation of State tourism departments and the tourism industry, could provide regular updates on this Global Tracker for international travellers planning to travel to India, as per current regulations. Second, there is a need for a robust

regulatory body to monitor tourism related offerings for international and domestic tourists. For example, in 2015, the government introduced the PRASAD Scheme to promote domestic tourism; however, only about half of the projects have been completed to date (Business Standard, 2021). Third, there is a need to enhance positivity among all of the various stakeholders. The hospitality sector seems to have been neglected as emphasis has been placed on selected players registered under Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME) and India tourism, which comprise only 10 % of the trade. The Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality (FAITH) has requested the government to declare travel and hospitality industry members as frontline Covid-19 workers so that they can all be vaccinated at their respective sites (Hindustan Times, 2021a). This will give a strong message that India is preparing to receive tourists in a safe and responsible manner. Additionally, FAITH has asked the central and state governments to focus on both the supply side (grants and interest-free loans to ensure working capital; tax reductions; and waivers of statutory obligations for about five years) and demand-side (extension of e-visa waiver) initiatives to revive tourism (Business Line, 2021). In addition, there should be standard guidelines for the hospitality sector to install partitions at tables, provide visible cooking areas, implement digital menus, provide disposable crockery, and enable drive-through food delivery and online ordering. Fourth, emphasis should be placed on co-creating a vacation experience with rural India as a sustainable tourism model. However, this requires time and resources to train villagers and tour guides and to build safe and hygienic mud-houses and small farmlands for a wholesome village experience. In short, for the success of all stakeholders associated with the tourism sector, greater accountability and monitoring of the innovative schemes and sustained collaboration between central and state governments is needed.

## 5. Concluding remarks and future research directions

This conference communication recommends an action plan to revive the tourism sector in India. However, considering India's socio-economic and infrastructural diversity, this plan may not work as a standard protocol for the entire country. Thus, it should be seen as a blueprint that highlights the broad action items. The specific nature of implementation will vary depending on the extent of the crisis and problems in different regions. Additionally, this framework provides some key learning points for other geographies. For example, the responsible tourism mission in India includes designing environmentally conscious luxury travel options, leveraging indigenous wisdom for wildlife conservation, expanding rural tourism, and lowering carbon emissions through local plant-based cuisine (The Shooting Star, 2020). Countries should promote sustainable tourism by leveraging what different regions are famous for, such as cultural heritage, biodiversity, and spiritual/philosophical wisdom, with the motto of going back to basics. Another significant route is medical tourism, as exemplified through the Indian mission in Myanmar: during Covid-19 special flights were arranged from Myanmar to India as several patients in Myanmar had been waiting for over six months for treatment/surgery (Hindustan Times, 2021b). Moreover, hotels should transition to unmanned services and technological interventions.

The Covid-19 pandemic is still not under control and is progressing in many parts of the world with a fourth wave. The roundtable discussion highlights some of the major challenges of the tourism sector and workable solutions for practitioners and policymakers. However, more analysis is needed to understand how the pandemic is likely to transform the tourism industry (Sigala, 2020). Studies should investigate the impact of different types of tourism on consumers' mental health (Buckley & Westaway, 2020). The recovery of the tourism industry can be facilitated by following the action plan suggested in the roundtable discussion; however, future research should validate the relative impact of these factors on the tourism industry. Scholars are encouraged to undertake systematic longitudinal studies to assess the impact of

Would you travel after vaccine will/has come? (percentage of respondents)		
20	25	Definitely yes
30	31	Probably yes
30	25	Probably no
20	19	Definitely no
October 2020	February 2021	

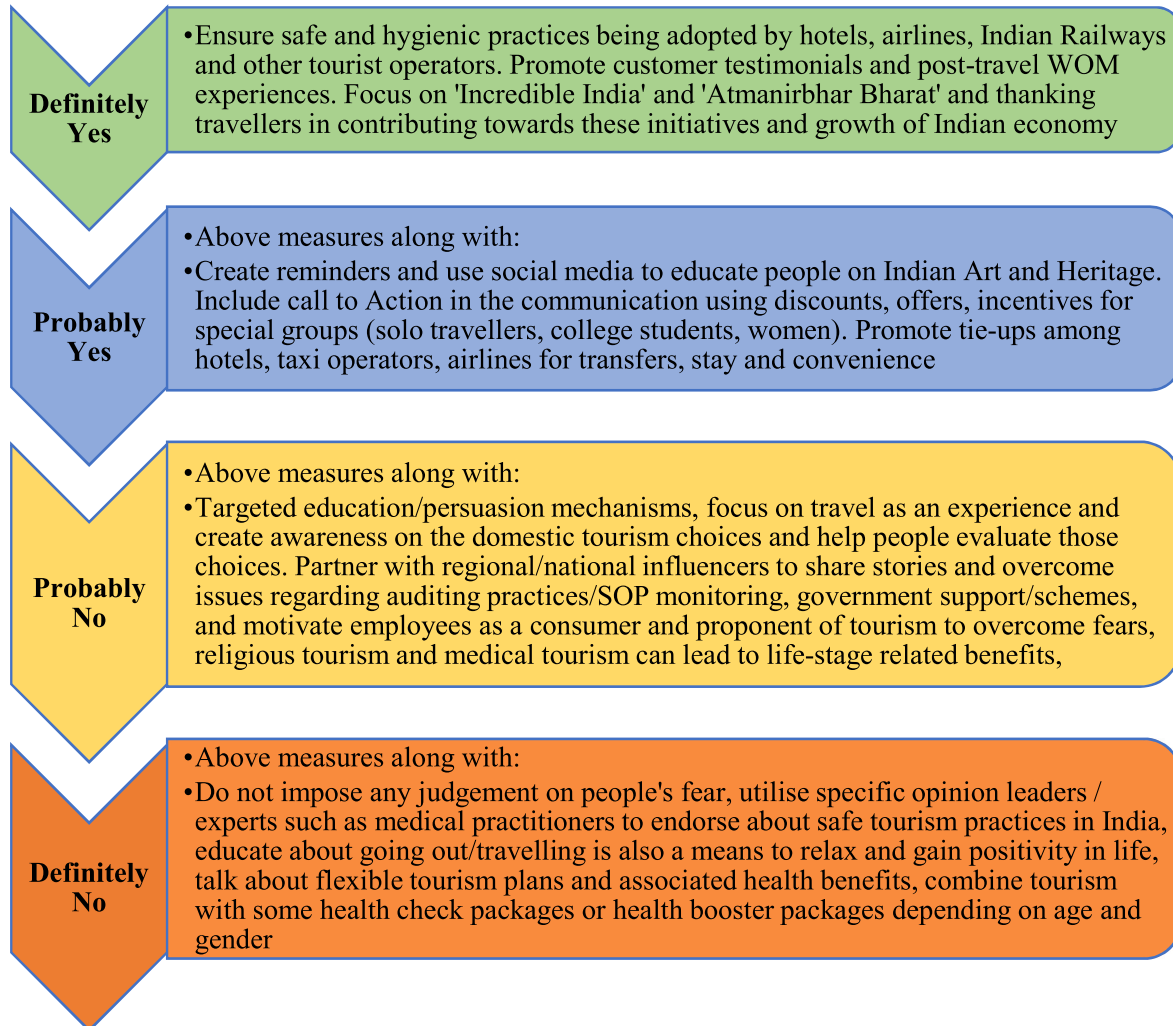


Fig. 1. Communication plan to promote tourism based on customer segment.

government policies. Although India has ramped up its Covid-19 vaccination drive, some states are still lagging, with slow adoption of vaccination (Mint, 2021a). Researches should assess pandemic containment with reference to the rate of vaccination and other preventive measures in tourist destinations. The full impact of Covid-19 on the billions of people who indirectly depend on tourism and hospitality has yet to be assessed. As a result, policymakers do not fully realize the economic significance of tourism, which calls for systematic research. Studies should seek to design optimal rescue packages for service providers and incentives to travellers to encourage tourism. Insights from research studies can be collated to develop best practices concerning pandemics, tourist confidence, organizational resilience, and structural support to revive tourism.

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