

## **Resilience of the Indian Hospitality Sector to Unforeseen Calamities**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis critically analyses the way, the hospitality industry in India has responded and is recovering from unanticipated catastrophes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This particular crisis has significantly shattered the concerned sector, which was once considered as the ‘backbone’ of the Indian economy. Keeping that in mind, this work examines the effects of the virus on hotel businesses. At the same time, it investigates the measures implemented by organisations to combat with the unexpected adversity. As a part of this research, I interviewed two employees from Lemon Tree and Roseate House, a three and five star hotel respectively in Aerocity, New Delhi. This was to acquire up-to-date and hands-on information from people practising in the industry. Furthermore, the comparative method was employed to highlight the findings. The results indicated that Roseate House creatively reduced costs, relied on the values and economic backing of their parent company, diversified their income streams, and technologically innovated to reinvent themselves. Whereas Lemon Tree strategized more at cost-cutting measures, adopted digital and hygiene services in collaboration with companies, introduced new packages, and modified their meal plans to adapt and sustain in the ‘new normal’.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Context

Coronavirus, or simply, COVID-19, has brought the world to a standstill today. The virus that originated from Wuhan (China), rapidly escalated into a pandemic. The infectious disease is responsible for producing grave financial and social ramifications in the world. The hospitality sector (that incorporates hotels, restaurants, and many more units) is one of the most important elements as it largely contributes towards the overall national income. The concerned industry has also been on the receiving end due to the outbreak. It caused widespread havoc, where several organisations have suspended their operations. For instance, “Hilton Worldwide has also notified lenders on 5th March 2020 borrowing a precautionary \$1.75 billion under a revolving loan to preserve money and to maintain flexibility in light of uncertainty in the global markets” (Kumar, 2020: 703). The hospitality sector has dealt with unanticipated disasters in the past. To further stress on this, the paper draws inspiration from catastrophes like financial crisis of 2008 (with a prominence on Spain), 26/11 terrorist attack (Mumbai), Malaysian floods, and severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemic (Hong Kong). Nonetheless, it is integral to examine the shock effects produced by coronavirus. This is because of the nature and scale of the unprecedented crisis.

This research would revolve around the Indian hospitality sector, focusing on hotels in the New Delhi area. The industry is considered to be the ‘backbone’ of the economy, as it “is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest foreign exchange earner for the country” (Nain, 2018: 78) and “from 2006 – November 2017, direct contribution of tourism and hospitality sector to national GDP has registered a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.05 per cent” (79). The particular sector is extremely valuable to the Indian government, as it employs a large number of people. To be precise, a report by KPMG indicated that “the Indian tourism and hospitality industry risk of losing around 38 million” (Patel and Kulkarni, 2020: 29). Moreover, the government has been cognizant of its importance, and over the years, implemented various measures to boost the sector. For instance, they provided “flexible tax incentives, flexible policies, better road, rail & air connectivity, ease in availability of e-visas to foreign tourists etc.” (Nain, 2018: 81). Similarly, the Ministry of Tourism has significantly invested on marketing, through the introduction of campaigns such as ‘Incredible India’.

The global outbreak resulted in a worldwide lockdown. With respect to the Indian context, the hotel businesses experienced tremendous losses due to factors like provisional ban on the operation of flights. It halted domestic and international tourism, especially the movement of MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) travellers, thereby drastically reducing the occupancy and revenue per available room rates. However, numerous enterprises were able to operate due to the

evacuation flights of stranded citizens, organised by the government. For instance, “Radisson hotels, Taj group of hotels, and international hotel groups [had] collectively offered 392 rooms as paid quarantine facilities for the “Vande Bharat Mission” (Joshi and Bhaskar, 2020: 150).

The approach to herd immunity, considered by nations like Sweden, was dismissed. This is due to a lack of data, which made the scientists sceptical to approve the particular course of action (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2020). Despite the availability of COVID-19 vaccines, there is an immense amount of uncertainty with respect to the containment of the virus. This is due to factors like enormous population, a lack of infrastructure and medical management, possessed by countries such as India.

The aim of this work is to critically examine the way, the Indian hospitality sector responds to and recuperates from unforeseen circumstances, like the coronavirus pandemic. It is important to research about the specific matter, as the industry significantly contributes to economic growth of the country. Due to the lack of literature, it is also integral to highlight the strategies adopted by the Indian hotel businesses.

For the purpose of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted of stakeholders in the particular sector, in order to garner different perspectives. Apart from the collection of primary data in New Delhi, the paper will also rely on secondary source materials. The articles have been extracted from online journals and digital news publications. Additionally, a book on hospitality and tourism industry, published by Bharti Publications, has provided this thesis with vital information and statistics.

The information collected from the interviews were categorically organised and the comparative method was employed. Accordingly, the analytical case studies were divided into two segments. The first one, highlighted the innovative measures that Roseate House implemented in order to diversify its revenue channel and recover from the losses. The second chapter emphasised the steps and initiatives undertaken by Lemon tree, to lower its expenditure and sustain itself during the pandemic. Another chapter (fifth) was dedicated for the comparative study that discussed the identical and different tactics between the two organisations and the existing literature.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This thesis aimed to explore the measures executed by the Indian hospitality sector, to combat the coronavirus pandemic. Shedding light on the methodology, it was important for this paper to take into account primary along with secondary research methods. This is due to the nature of the topic, that was so current and evolving, that secondary literature was not able to provide everything, such as up-to-date information. Therefore,

interviews were conducted with the purpose of obtaining first-hand information from individuals practising in the industry.

## 2.1 Primary Research

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, with a sample size of four. Due to the ongoing pandemic and other hindrances (for example, mandatory quarantine and curfew periods), I was unable to reach out to a greater number of respondents. The field work for the research was conducted at the Aerocity area, which is located in close proximity to Indira Gandhi National Airport, New Delhi. The district encompasses a hub of luxury hotels, which suffered staggeringly as this is a target market catered around the travellers. I concentrated on two hotels, Lemon Tree and Roseate House, a four- and five- star establishments respectively.

This was to critically understand how the businesses in the Aerocity area responded to the COVID-19 crisis.

Since the methodology embraced the technique of a semi-structured interview, I was able to collect more information. This is due to the essence of the method, that allowed for rapport formation, at the same time, the interview to be flexible. The questions were divided into three themes: Lockdown, Post-Lockdown, and Post-Pandemic. Each cluster incorporated 4 questions. Refer to Appendix-I for the complete list of questions.

The interviewees came from the age bracket of 25-50. The young respondents (25-30) were more involved at the operations level (throughout the lockdown and other stages). Whereas the senior (45-50) participants were at managerial positions who implemented innovative and crucial steps to minimise the costs and maximise the profits. The interviews took place in English language, wherein the respondents were ensured that their identity would remain confidential. This was pivotal in avoiding socially desirable answers to sensitive questions related to the government.

## 2.2 Secondary Research

The secondary sources have been drawn from online academic journals, that revolve around the disciplines of *Sustainability, Business Excellence & Management, Architecture & Technology, Hospitality Management, and Scientific Progress & Research*. In parallel, news reports were obtained from digital news medias, like The Times of India, Scroll, NDTV Profit, and CNBC18. These materials were essential to cover the themes in the review of literature. To further elaborate on this, the references equipped this study to analyse the history of the hospitality industry, as well as the economic impact produced by the virus. The sources also assisted in conducting a

comparative research, through critically examining the way the concerned sector tackled unexpected and distinct calamities in the past. Moreover, the scholarly articles facilitated in highlighting the strategies executed during COVID-19, by the hospitality industry in India and overseas (primarily in China, USA, and Sweden).

The paper has utilised key figures (such as Occupancy and RevPAR rates) from the book, *Hospitality and Tourism Industry: Post Pandemic Challenges and Opportunities* (edited by P.P Khanna, Suvojit Ganguly, Madhumita Mukherjee, and Sudipta Mukherjee). I have particularly stressed on chapter 8, “Tale of Hotels in Kolkata: From the Beginning Till COVID Era”, written by Professor Ajoy Bhakat. This is because it provides a narrative on the current status, obstacles, and scope for the hospitality administration in Kolkata in the ‘new normal’. This thesis also demanded magazines (like Hotelier India and Magzter) and blogs from Institute of Culinary Education (ICE) to reflect the viewpoints of the players in the concerned industry.

I experienced various limitations while writing this work. Apart from the factor of coronavirus, it was a tedious process to secure an appointment with the staff of the two hotels, due to their extremely busy schedules. In the initial stages, I experimented with an interview on a video call, nevertheless, the process did not generate desirable results because of connectivity issues and limited time. Questions that revolved around specific numbers, such as Average Room Rate, were deflected as they revealed company policies. On a similar note, I had to tweak certain questions after the first interview, as the respondent was not able to grasp what I was looking for. Though I was permitted to record the interviews at Lemon Tree, it was not the same case for Roseate House. Thus, I had to focus on writing the notes, which constantly broke the flow of the process between the researcher and interviewees.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The review of literature will throw light on references that deal with the consequences of unpredicted events witnessed by the hospitality industry. It will also emphasise on how the particular sector seeks to recuperate after such occurrences. This literature review is broadly divided into four clusters: 1) Impact of Coronavirus on the Indian Hospitality Sector,

2) Strategies and Responses of the Indian Hospitality Sector to Covid-19, 3) Reactions and Measures Implemented by the Hospitality Sector to Unforeseen Circumstances in the Past, and 4) Approach and Initiatives Executed by the Hospitality Sector in Abroad, as a Response to Covid-19.

### 3.1 Impact of Coronavirus on the Indian Hospitality Sector

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on the Indian economy, primarily upon the hospitality sector. In this particular context, Patel and Kulkarni (2020) estimate the overall financial loss to be “around Rs 5 lakh crore in the financial year 2020-21” (29). Additionally, Gohel (2020) segmentizes the industry into three parts and analyses the loss incurred by each category. He highlights the “the revenue loss for organised players is seen at Rs 40,309 crore, semi-organised at Rs 8,379 crore, and unorganised at Rs 41,126 crore” (par.2). Kumar (2020) broadly evaluates the economic loss (that will be observed) by the branded hotels to be between “₹130-155 crore, whereas the alternate accommodation segment is likely to make losses of over ₹420-470 crore” (707).

Emphasising on the occupancy level and Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) rates, Bhakat (2020) argues that the former “dropped by 5-17 percentage points” whereas the latter “dropped by 13-29 across 11 cities” (85). Gohel (2020) envisions the same rates to drop by “31.6...and 57.8 percent” (par.4). The concerned industry contributes to the “12.75% of employment- 5.56% of its direct and 7.19% indirect” (Patel and Kulkarni, 2020:29). Thus, in other words, people are hired as a part of contract or casual staff. As the sector is reliant on a labour-intensive work force, the lockdown escalated to financial struggles for them (in terms of job insecurity and compensation). To be precise, “3.5-4 crore employees in India’s hospitality sector may lose their jobs” (Patel and Kulkarni, 2020: 29).

A temporary ban on International travel has had a negative correlation on elements such as corporates and leisure (where people are no longer travelling for meetings and vacations). A decrease in revenue from MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) travellers has minimised the traffic in hotels (and other sectors), thereby adding to the existing losses (Kumar 2020; Gohel 2020). Although a drastic fall in revenue has been experienced by all units, (namely hotels, restaurants, bars, and many more), Gohel (2020) stresses on the fact that different types of hotels will be affected distinctly due to the virus. He classifies it on the basis of vulnerability, indicating that full-service hotels will face severe obstacles in terms of recovery, followed by secondary and tertiary markets. Those kinds of hotels that reside in small towns or incorporate the concept of drive through and extended-stay are likely to recuperate faster because of low reliance on international customers.

As the uncertainty still persists even after the existence of a vaccine, Gohel (2020) advocates that the hospitality industry will rebound to the pre-pandemic level by 2022 or 2023. On the other hand, Bhakat (2020) is relatively on a more optimistic belief and anticipates the “cash flows to improve in November 2020” (85). On the whole, Patel and Kulkarni (2020) underline the importance and call for the implementation of

emotional and financial strength (from the lens of the management), as they foresee a long journey for the rejuvenation of the economy. Thus, coronavirus has introduced undesirable ramifications on the Indian hospitality sector wherein it has threatened the livelihoods of people. In spite of a cure, the industry has to cope with several obstacles in its restoration phase.

### **3.2 Strategies and Responses of the Indian Hospitality Sector to Covid-19**

The pandemic escalated into a global lockdown which posed a great threat for the existence of several segments incorporated under the hospitality sector. However, during the lockdown “some hotels still got little business by serving COVID-19 patients” (Bhakat, 2020: 86). The concerned industry responded and implemented different strategies in order to maximise revenues and reinvent themselves. To elaborate on this specific context, alterations in operations have been made to attain the goal of social distancing and cashless transactions. I-ZEST, known as Zero- Touch Service Transformation, has been adopted by The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) who have modified the layout of their lobbies and restaurants in their hotels (Sharma 2020; Sachdev 2020). Moreover, the overall experience has changed from the lens of a guests, where they not only have to go through compulsory thermal screening but are now offered digital key cards, invoices, menus and many more amenities. Similarly, Hilton Garden (a hotel situated in Gurugram) ventured into the service of a work from hotel concept, offering a workplace environment at reasonable rates (Singh 2020). In order to produce more revenue streams, hotels have engaged in those kinds of services that were not offered before.

One common sort of business that can be witnessed among the hospitality sector is of delivering food. The latter could be seen in top hotel giants such as Taj, Vivanta, SeleQtions and many more firms. (Sachdev 2020; Singh 2020). Nevertheless, even after executing hygiene and protocol measures, consumers are still sceptical towards ordering food from outside. To understand the willingness of customers to order/dine out post-COVID, Jain (2020) conducted a survey where the results indicated that “53% of consumers [had] decided not to order food or dine out Post COVID. 34% were to still order while 13% were undecided” (4). Thereby, the cynicism hampers with the dying need of revival for the Indian hospitality sector. Though, one can only hope, embrace creative thinking and innovation to attract the footfalls.

Furthermore, Sharma (2020) throws light on identical kinds of services that are being carried out by organisations. For instance, she discloses that Oyo is imparting paramount health and precautionary measures to its partners, at the same time, releasing

vouches to make their rates affordable (taking the current situation of the economy into account). Similarly, she reveals that Radisson and FabHotels have fabricated important protocols, that encompasses factors such as recurrent sanitisation in public areas, that need to be followed by the employees and customers. Sachdev (2020) emphasises on the R.E.S.E.T 2020 strategy enforced by the IHCL. It stands for “revenue generation initiatives such as Hospitality@Home...Urban Getaways, and Bizcation to stimulate domestic demand” (6). It further integrates excellence in implementation of new technologies (to make the entire experience digital), spend optimisation in order to cut costs (and careful utilisation of resources), efficacious asset administration, and thrift and financial prudence (enhancing cash-flows and overall decreasing the fixed, running and operating costs).

The Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association of India (FHRAI) have solicited financial aid from the government. The former which “represents 55,000 hotels and 5,00,000 restaurants in the country, has also written to the finance minister requesting immediate extension of moratorium by 3 months for the hospitality industry” (Singh, 2020: par.6). The Indian hotels executed multiple common and unlike measures to boost their numbers in the midst of the pandemic. Nonetheless, the consumers are still reluctant and hesitant to venture out of their homes in order to seek their services. As a result, the industry is dependent on their governing body for monetary assistance.

### **3.3 Reactions and Measures Implemented by the Hospitality Sector to Unforeseen Circumstances in the Past**

The hospitality sector (all round the globe) has encountered and dealt with unforeseen circumstances in the past. To throw light on the former’s reaction to such events, I have drawn inspiration from disasters like floods witnessed by Malaysia, the epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Hong Kong, financial crisis of 2008 (with a primary emphasis on Spain), and 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack. It is imperative to be cognizant about the various responses of the hospitality sector during crisis. This would enable us to examine whether the same measures could be applicable for the industry during the coronavirus pandemic.

Immense reliance on government support was one of the common themes that emerged on the path to recovery. Albattat (2014) illustrates that the governing body introduced heavy marketing campaigns (for instance, ‘Malaysia Truly Asia’ and ‘Cuti-Cuti’ Malaysia) with the purpose to attract domestic and international tourists. He even emphasises that “the government start to give the citizen paid leave if they want to travel domestically” (50) along with tax benefits to the hospitality industry. Whereas Pine and Mckercher (2004) argue that the hotel proprietors demanded to scrap (for a



year) “sewage and trade effluents charges, property rates and suspension of employer or employee MPF contributions which would only help to save about 7 per cent of total expenditure” (141). However, Albattat (2014) further argues that once the epidemic was under control, campaigns (such as “Be My Guest”) were released by the Hong Kong Hotel Association.

Additionally, Almeida and Bremser (2013) advocate that hotels need to market intensely (not only in times of crisis) in order to possess a strong quality and brand image. This would empower the hospitality industry to financially recover themselves during and post-bad times. For example, “emotional advertisements like “I will prevail” and “Welcome home again” were released in public media” (Balakrishnan, 2011: 1322) by the Tata Group after the terrorist attack that took place in Mumbai. Cost-cutting, as an immediate measure was prevalent in the recovery stage during the crisis of flood, epidemic, and financial chaos (Albattat 2014; Pine and Mckercher 2004; Almeida and Bremser 2013). This significant response was more common in the small and middle businesses, who were detrimentally impacted due to the tragedies. On the contrary, Ratan tata, who was the CEO of a billion-dollar organisation, not only reimbursed all the salaries of the employees but also “provided psychological support through group and individual counselling, town hall meetings, workshops, meditation programs and professional training on a regular basis” (Balakrishnan, 2011: 1322).

Furthermore, a striking resemblance was seen when tariffs were reduced to induce the tourists and restore the hospitality sector to the pre-catastrophe levels. To elaborate on this particular argument, tactics “such as increasing the service quality, hotel renovation, tax reduction, and cheap tour packages” (Albattat, 2014: 51) were employed in Malaysia. Similarly, the hotels in Hong Kong “offered discounts of up to 50 per cent on rooms to lure back tourists” (Pine and Mckercher, 2004: 142). On the other hand of the spectrum, only the worst performing hotels (not all of them) were compelled to reduce their charges during the economic catastrophe in Spain (Almeida and Bremser, 2013).

Claiming for insurance, was also a common reaction due to setbacks caused by the outbreak and urban guerrilla. For instance, Shangri-La Asia “planned an insurance claim for lost revenue caused by SARS” (Pine and Mckercher, 2004: 142). While on the flip side, “the insurers paid for the first installment of the US\$ 2.2 billion without” (Balakrishnan, 2011: 1324) Taj Hotels having the need to put in a request for it. Hence, Albattat (2014) asserts that in-depth information of such unforeseen tragedies, might assist the government and other key stakeholders in better management to three stages of calamities: before (proactive emergency planning), during (response), and after a catastrophe (recovery). Thus, it is evident that are patterns of distinguishable and indistinguishable practices adopted by the hospitality sector as a response

to different crisis. At the same time, it throws light onto the fact that the industry can draw inspiration from past experiences in order to resuscitate themselves during the pandemic.

### **3.4 Approach and Initiatives Executed by the Hospitality Sector in Abroad, as a Response to Covid-19**

The virus has spread at disproportionate rate in different countries, thereby propelling the hospitality industry to undertake strategies in accordance with the rules imposed by their respective governing bodies. Although multifarious measures have been employed, the central idea has remained constant; to ensure social distancing and hygiene protocols. In China, hotel groups such as Huazhu and New century, offered unique technological features to its customers like “face scanning, voice control of room service, robotic room service, and the zero-second check-out” (Hao, 2020: 7). The likes of Iberostar, NH (top hotel brands in Spain) “relied on SGS (Société Générale de surveillance), an entity that provides inspection, verification, testing, and certification services related to COVID-19” (Antón and Almeida, 2020: 11). Accor (who have a significant presence in North and Central America) not only engaged in similar kind of services but also collaborated with an insurance company and offered its guests free sessions for medical consultations (Trejos 2020). Moreover, Ligula Hotels, located in Sweden, sought to enhance communication with its clients, through integrating a layer on their booking site which boasts about their free cancellation and rebooking guidelines (Gillen, 2020).

The hospitality industry has tried to appreciate and contribute towards their communities. It could be witnessed in China, as Hao (2020) highlights that “180 Dossen hotels were voluntarily designated as anti-pandemic hotels, which hosted more than 20,000 persons-times of medical staff from 68 hospitals” (7). Similarly, Marriot, as an International brand, has assigned free accommodation for Covid-patients, at the same time, provided discounted rates for Healthline workers in Spain and Latin America (Antón and Almeida, 2020; Trejos 2020). Withal, Hao (2020) advocates that homestays are recommended “with abundant private space, such as balcony, private kitchen” (9) etc. This particular change of trend is also witnessed among domestic tourists in Sweden and America.

In the rehabilitation phase for the hospitality sector, marketing has acted as a catalyst to boost up the numbers. In fact, Shilifangfei Hotel’s success (in the fiscal year of 2020-21) was accredited “to attractive brand storytelling, keen market positioning, space utilization, highly educated customer community, rapid innovation, and iterative operational capabilities” (Hao, 2020: 9). In a similar fashion, Kungstradgarden Hotels

have endorsed online gift vouchers to attract potential customers, thereby employing an ingenious way of advertising (Gillen 2020). As a part of their innovation strategy, Brown's Hotels partnered with Pashley Cycles, in order to offer some sort of outdoor activities for its guests (Trejos 2020). To emphasise on operational capabilities, several hotels diversified their revenue streams and distribution channels. For instance, the Jingling organisation, "broadened the operating income structure" via establishing a food retail business "which integrates the commercial scale production of classic dishes, an online sales system, and the cold chain logistics system" (Hao, 2020: 9). Correspondingly, proceedings from e-commerce have become an indispensable part of Atour Hotels.

Although, the workers in the hospitality sector have observed layoffs due to protocols and digitisation, new work opportunities have transpired in front of them. Antón and Almeida (2020) reflect on the "creation of a person in charge of health security" (12) in Spain. Trejos (2020) champions the argument that professionals who have been a part of this industry would be successful in areas like project management, customer success, and retail. Therefore, the hospitality sector all-round the globe have implemented distinct strategies, while functioning under the current law and technology at hand. The fundamental essence has remained the same; to attract the footfalls and provide a safe environment (prioritising on cleanliness and hygiene).

#### **4. ANALYTICAL CASE STUDIES**

This section provides case studies of two institutions - Roseate House and Lemon Tree. The reason behind the selection of these enterprises is to comprehend different approaches of the hotel businesses, which were operating within the same space and industry. The first (Roseate House) and the second chapter (Lemon Tree) are going to narrativize information that were collected from the interviews and secondary research. The third chapter will compare and contrast the steps and initiatives of the two hotels and the existing literature. In addition to that, all the chapters are written in a systematically ordered manner wherein an emphasis is laid upon the themes: Lockdown, Post-Lockdown and Post-Pandemic.

##### **4.1 Roseate House**

###### **Introduction**

The Bird Group, is an organisation that provides services in the industries of education, retail, travel, hospitality, and many more. It possesses a diverse portfolio of luxury hotels and operates under the name of Roseate Hotels and Resorts. The brand's success

can be attributed to its ambience, hospitality, and facilities. This has enabled the establishment to build a significant presence not only in domestic but also the international space. To be precise, the group “offers a collection of 6 properties in India and the UK, each having an individual brand identity” (Roseate Hotels & Resorts). It further plans to penetrate new markets, in the local and global arena.

This chapter revolves around Roseate House, that is located in Aerocity, New Delhi. Apart from its five star rating and Food Safety Standard Certification (FSSC), it is strategically situated near Indira Gandhi International Airport and the corporate hub of Gurugram. The hotel offers more than two hundred rooms along with a beautiful environment (due to ample of greenery spread across the two acre campus) and fine dining experience. This particular organisation was also a victim of COVID-19, and hence, struggled financially. I have highlighted the insights I received after conducting the interviews on (7th April, 2021) of two employees associated with this hotel.

### **Lockdown**

The administration had expected some sort of a lockdown. This is because an evening before, the government had imposed a day-long Janata Curfew (voluntary quarantine). As a part of its immediate steps, the hotel prioritised on the safety of its guests, and adhered to the health protocols set by the regulating authorities. These measures included donning of PPE kits (for the staff), installation of sanitisation stations, and social distancing (minimum of six feet). To minimise its costs, the hotel had no layoffs as well as leaves. In fact, the top management took a fifty percent cut in their salaries. Throughout the period of lockdown, the occupancy level was high (around 85-90%) at the concerned establishment. This is due to the onset of Vande Bharat Mission, that entailed evacuation flights for stranded citizens who were stuck abroad. Despite the immense occupancy, the Average Room Rate (ARR) rate was tremendously low (dropped by fifty percent) as the tariffs were fixed by the government. However, Roseate was firm on reinventing itself. This is because of its parent company, i.e. the Bird Group, is known for its innovation across various industries, in terms of delivering products and services. Their values also revolve around inspiration, wherein they emphasise that “we do not let boundaries and paradigms limit our thinking. Imagination leads to new ideas and new ideas lead to innovation” (Bird Group). Thus, the administration at Roseate implemented various strategies, in order to diversify its revenue streams and augment the earnings. For example, the hotel started offering door to door laundry service, not only at reasonable rates but also with a guarantee of returning it within twenty four hours. Since the option for dine-in at restaurants was prohibited, Roseate exploited this opportunity and entered into the food delivery business. Although the enterprise collaborated with Zomato, the consumers were

cynical with respect to issues of hygiene and cleanliness. The management harnessed the power of technology to eradicate the particular scepticism. This was achieved by providing customers access to a live stream, who then had the ability to observe their food being prepared. A weekly bakery was also introduced to supplement the profits.

### **Post-Lockdown**

Roseate was cognizant of the prodigious scope for domestic tourism, and accordingly executed measures. For instance, staycation deals were launched to lure the customers. The inexpensive packages were marketed as a weekend getaway, wherein it integrated a night's stay (in company with all three meals) plus the comfort of lounge access and a butler. Additionally, the hotel extended pickup and drop services in the offer. On a similar note, 'Work from Roseate' was another initiative that was aimed to attract the corporate guests (who had the option to work at the organisation's business centre). To replace the staff who had left because of personal reasons, the executives employed students from hospitality management schools. It was cost-cutting and simultaneously provided experience to the trainees along with moderate stipends. The administration also adopted strict protocols to ensure the safety of its customers (advertised as 'Care by Roseate'). To further throw light on it, digital menus and bills, thermal screening, contactless check-ins, sanitisation of vehicles and luggage, avoidance of self-service during buffets and random COVID testing of staff were some of the steps enforced by the establishment. Furthermore, multiskilling was utilised with the workforce at hand to improve coordination with different departments, leading to higher levels of efficiency. Resumption of restaurants, such as Kheer, DEL, and Tara (that offered a unique experience of rooftop dining) after the lockdown, were a huge economic boost for the hotel. Although they were permitted to operate with fifty percent occupancy, it remarkably enhanced the footfalls. Roseate, owing to its marketing efforts, also experienced an influx of bookings on its banquet halls. Apart from the factor of marriage season, the significant demand was due to that particular market whose destination weddings were cancelled because of the virus. Thus, these creative decisions enabled the food and beverage unit to perform exceedingly well, even in comparison to pre-pandemic levels.

### **Post-Pandemic**

The management was not shocked with the lack of aid from the government. Interestingly, they had a different lens on the concerned matter. They were of the opinion that the regulating authorities were not worried about the hospitality industry, since the branches under it (like restaurants) earned themselves. Therefore, the inadequate support for the particular sector, whether during the lockdown or budget

2021, was due to a lack of priority. Moreover, the employee stationed at front desk believed that the only contribution of the hotel businesses (to the government) was through taxes such as GST and VAT. While Roseate had experienced slight turbulences in the past, nothing could be compared to the repercussions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. On a further note, the administration considered luxury establishments to recuperate faster (to unpredictable catastrophes), in contrast with small lodging enterprises, like B&B and one-two star hotels. Even with the commencement of mass vaccination programmes, the top level executives foresee the desirable numbers to kick in from April, 2022. This is due to the imposition of night and weekend curfews, that has hampered with the progress made by Roseate (in the start of 2021). Despite the uncertainty, the management is optimistic for the future, and underlines the scope of the hospitality sector. It also aspires to extend its restaurants, such as 'Roasted by Roseate' to its properties abroad. At the same time, the management desires to launch its magnificent hotels in states of Jaipur, Goa, and Himachal Pradesh.

## **4.2 Lemon Tree**

### **Introduction**

Lemon Tree Hotel (LTH), was founded by Patanjali Keswani in mid 2000's with an aim to dominate the hospitality industry. Over the years, the organisation has "emerged as India's fastest growing hotel company where the number of rooms [have grown] at a rate of 43% from 2014 to 2018" (Dhir and Sushil, 2019:127). With the group's success in the medium-priced category, LTH has introduced new brands to compete in other segments. For example, Redfox (economy), Keys Select (midscale), Aurika (upscale), Lemon Tree Premier (upper midscale), and many more. This has allowed the enterprise to operate more than sixty hotels across fifty two cities in the domestic and International space.

With respect to this chapter, I have focused on Lemon Tree Premier that is situated in the Aerocity area. In fact, it is directly opposite to Roseate House. The establishment offers greater than two hundred rooms and various in-house services like spa and conference rooms. The hotel has experienced tremendous setbacks due to the coronavirus pandemic. I interviewed the staff on 9th April 2021 who were employed at this particular hotel. Accordingly, I have elaborated upon the insights in this segment.

### **Lockdown**

With the rise in cases, the CEO had held meetings to prepare the management for strict restrictions. However, the firm did not expect a nationwide lockdown, which was declared by the Prime Minister of India on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020. As a consequence, Lemon

Tree observed immense complications. For example, it witnessed a significant decline in revenue through the cancellation and suspension of reservations, bars and, restaurants respectively. Moreover, as part of its immediate steps, the organisation had several layoffs (in the form of unpaid leaves), at the same time, refunded the amount on advanced bookings. On the other hand, the concerned enterprise also collaborated with Diversey, which is a company that supplies hygiene products to numerous industries. As a result, LTH was able to implement cleanliness measures, like placing sanitisation stations at every corner. Unlike the group's other hotels, the premier in Aerocity had desirable level of occupancy (90% and above) throughout the period of lockdown. To be precise, around 200 guests were checking in and out on a daily basis. This because of the Vande Bharat flights, that enabled the institution to operate as a quarantine facility. Though the occupancy rate was high, the Average Room Rate (ARR) was significantly low which further contributed to the losses. In comparison with pre-pandemic level, it had dropped from 5000 to 1800-2300. Apart from that, to maintain social distancing and provide a safe environment, the administration innovated via serving the guests with packed thalis in their rooms (three times a day).

### **Post-Lockdown**

Once the lockdown was lifted, Lemon Tree executed strategies that revolved around the guests. The primary idea was to achieve break-even, i.e. no profit and no loss. This is the reason why the particular hotel did not outsource any part of its operations (except for laundry). Stressing on the in-house restaurants, Citrus Café recommenced whereas Republic of Noodles remained shut (which is not in-action till now). The seating capacity per table was also reduced from six to three. In addition to that, the organisation heavily marketed for leasing its banquet halls for weddings and conferences. However, a limit on the number of people was set at fifty. The management terminated live counters and also modified the way buffet services functioned. To further elaborate on this, the size of the menu was drastically curtailed and an employee was deployed to serve the guests, replacing the traditional method of self-service. New packages, such as Day-Use Rooms were introduced to lure the customers. On a similar note, prices of the meal plans (European, Continental, Modified American, and American) were adjusted during the pandemic. According to the administration, this was essential in increasing the footfalls. LTH did not compromise on the safety of its guests over profits. For instance, after every checkout, the rooms were properly sanitized and not allocated for 72 hours. The food and beverage department also adopted QRestro that was a software that enabled the guests to digitally order food in their rooms.

### **Post-Pandemic**

The management was of the belief that elements, such as advertising and government support can act as the driving forces in the recuperation of the hospitality sector. Along the same lines, they also emphasised that because of the enterprise's strong reliance on international and corporate travellers, small businesses would recover faster from such a crisis. The administration was disappointed with the government's role, iterating that the tourism ministry should have provided financial support to those who experienced layoffs in the industry. Besides that, the hotel has never encountered such extreme difficulties prior to coronavirus. Attributing it as the most important thing, the particular group implemented the necessary hygiene and cleanliness measures, in order to fight the scepticism (from the consumer's lens). Impediments like curfew and containment zones has constantly hampered with LTH's progress. Nonetheless, Keswani launched five hotels during the pandemic, and aspires to establish seven more. With reference to the future, the organisation anticipates the hotel industry to revive by June, 2022.

## **5. COMPARATIVE STUDY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will compare and contrast the strategies and measures of the two hotels (Lemon Tree and Roseate House) and the existing literature.

### **Lockdown**

Patel and Kulkarni (2020) emphasised that around 3.5 to 4 crore workers (skilled or unskilled) in the hospitality industry may get discharged because of the pandemic. My primary research indicated that this was also the case in Lemon Tree, wherein several employees were sent on unpaid leaves and were not called back for more than a year. On the other hand, Roseate House followed a different approach. The senior administration took a fifty percent drop in their salaries to avoid such harsh measures. In fact, they hired interns from hotel management schools to reduce their expenses.

Bhakat (2020) stressed that the occupancy and Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) rates had significantly declined by a percentage of 5-17 and 13-29 in major cities of India respectively. My respondents expressed that Lemon Tree (greater than 90 percent) and Roseate house (approximately 85-90 percent) had witnessed desirable levels of occupancy during the lockdown. However, the value of Average Room Rate (ARR) was tremendously low as it had dropped by fifty percent at both the hotels.

Kumar (2020) highlighted that the ban on international flights halted tourist and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) travellers. It negatively impacted



the hotels as they contributed a large part to their business. The interviewees revealed that since Roseate House and Lemon Tree were located near the Indira Gandhi National Airport and the corporate hub of Gurgaon, the restraint of such travellers produced severe obstacles for the enterprises to sustain themselves.

Bhakat (2020) threw light on the fact that certain hotels were able to function during the lockdown, in the form of covid care institutions. Having said that, my primary research demonstrated that the four and five star establishments catered to another set of clientele. They operated as quarantine facilities for citizens who returned to India from abroad via the Vande Bharat Flights.

Sachdev (2020) and Singh (2020) elaborated that luxury hotels such as Taj explored new opportunities like delivering food in the initial stages of the pandemic. Yet, such organisations experienced challenges as 53% of customers were determined to not order food from outside (Jain 2020). Through the interviews, I learnt that Lemon Tree solely focused on the cost-cutting measures, while Roseate House adapted to reinvent itself. For example, it did not only set foot in the bakery and food delivery business but also engaged in door-to-door laundry service. To eliminate the scepticism, the management at Roseate introduced a livestream system that enabled its consumers to watch their food being prepared.

### **Post-Lockdown**

Sharma (2020) drew attention to the measures and technological innovations (like Zero Touch Transformation Service) which were executed by hotels under the Tata Group to ensure minimal contact and safety of the guests. My respondents highlighted that Roseate House implemented similar steps such as digitisation of menus, invoices, check-ins and many more technological features. In addition to that, it conducted random covid tests for its staff to provide a safe environment in the hotel. Whereas, Lemon Tree eliminated its live counter system, adopted QRestro (a software to digitally order food), and did not allot a room for 72 hours after checkout. Both the enterprises installed sanitisation stations around the property, reduced the seating capacity at restaurants to fifty percent, and eradicated the practice of self-service during buffets.

Sachdev (2020) underlined the importance of marketing and initiatives like Bizcations that attracted the customers and enhanced the footfalls. Similarly, Gohel (2020) advocated that certain weddings would also be shifted from international to domestic destinations which would benefit the hotels. My first-hand research indicated that Roseate launched packages and schemes such as staycation deals and 'Work From Roseate' respectively. They were introduced at reasonable prices with an aim to lure the families and corporate guests. On a related note, Lemon Tree developed the concept

of Day-Use Rooms to provide the client a change in their environment. The two establishments were also successful in their marketing efforts as they observed a copious amount of reservations on their banquet halls (for weddings and other functions).

### **Post-Pandemic**

Gohel (2020) emphasised that small businesses would recover faster to unpredictable calamities in comparison to full-service hotels. This is due to the low rates and dependency on international clients. The respondents at Lemon Tree had a similar opinion, and further added that their particular organisation was extremely reliant on MICE travellers. On the contrary, the management at Roseate House considered luxury hotels to recuperate faster because of its strong economic backing. Despite numerous hindrances, both the institutions have projects in the pipeline to extend their brand in the domestic and international space.

Singh (2020) stressed that the people practising in the hospitality sector were unsatisfied with the contribution of the government. For instance, a letter was sent to the finance minister by the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association of India (FHRAI) regarding an extension in moratorium. My primary research indicated that the employees at Roseate, were not surprised as they articulated that the units under the particular industry were responsible for itself (since they were self-earning in nature). Whereas, the staff at Lemon Tree expressed that economic aid should have been provided to those who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic.

Patel and Kulkarni (2020) highlighted the importance of emotional strength, at the same time, threw light on the notion of uncertainty even with the availability of a cure. Moreover, Gohel (2020) anticipated the hotel businesses to recover by 2022 or 2023. Along the same lines, the interviewees at Lemon Tree and Roseate House expected the profitable figures to kick in from April 2022 and June 2022 respectively.

This thesis has explored how the hotel industry in India coped with the challenges presented by the pandemic. It is evident from this chapter that Roseate House and Lemon Tree had different approaches and measures to overcome the adversity caused by the virus.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study examined how the hospitality industry in India recuperates from unprecedented crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from the lack of literature, it was vital to research about the effects of the virus on the particular sector.

This was due to the fact that the Indian hotels previously did not experience a catastrophe of such a magnitude. Additionally, coronavirus produced unfortunate consequences not only in India but also in abroad. It completely disrupted the economic and social infrastructure of numerous countries.

With respect to India, hotel businesses witnessed complications because of the rise in cases, temporary ban on international flights, and nationwide lockdown. Through the fiscal year of 2020-21, the concerned industry observed economic losses and layoffs to be around Rs 5 lakh crore (Julie, 2020) and 38 million (Joshi and Bhaskar, 2020) respectively. Moreover this work utilised secondary sources to express the perspectives of the key players, at the same time, highlight the hospitality industry's: history, responses to unforeseen disasters in the past, and measures to tackle with the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides secondary literature, this research also employed primary methodology to collect relevant and up-to-date information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at two hotels, Roseate House and Lemon Tree, that reside in the Aerocity area. The comparative method was adopted to emphasise upon the results.

The findings from the case studies threw light on the strategies executed by the two organisations. The five star establishment, i.e., Roseate House significantly advertised their new deals, generated multiple revenue channels, utilised tools like multiskilling, and exploited technological features such as live-stream to gratify their customers. On the other hand, Lemon Tree, a four star enterprise, altered the procedures in different departments, implemented cleanliness and digital systems in partnership with firms, and had several cutbacks to reduce their expenditures during the pandemic.

The enterprises adopted different approaches even though they were operating within the same vicinity and sector. On a further note, it is evident that Roseate performed and reacted more effectively in comparison to Lemon Tree. This is because the management at the five-star hotel drew inspiration from its parent company (i.e. The Bird Group) who are recognised for its innovation in providing products and services. This particular group not only motivated but also financial backed its subsidiary to reinvent itself. In my opinion, that was the most crucial factor that enabled Roseate to ingeniously reduce costs (wherein it had zero layoffs) and be successful in its business ventures (such as food delivery, bakery, laundry service and many more) that were developed during the lockdown. Whereas, Lemon Tree's initiatives aimed at attaining break-even, i.e., no profit and no loss. This is due to the fact that the brand had more than eighty hotels under it. Thus, the four star establishment implemented only the paramount measures related to hygiene and safety of the guests. In addition to that, Roseate coped better as it did not rely on the government for any kind of support. They promptly executed steps that benefitted their employees, guests, and the business. While, Lemon Tree was

dependent for aid on the finance and tourism ministry, to an extent where the managing director publicly voiced his disappointment at various platforms. Hence, the organisation's progress was slow because of its over-reliance on the government.

The hospitality industry is an extremely vulnerable sector. It has recovered from unanticipated calamities in the past, and would certainly recuperate from COVID-19. However, this period of rehabilitation may be delayed due to emergence of new variants, availability of vaccines, and many other factors. On account of such uncertainty, I strongly suggest that hotels should continue to implement innovative measures in order to provide a safe environment, increase the numbers, and adapt in the 'new normal'. On a similar note, Vineet Kumar (2020), an academician in tourism and hospitality, also recommends that "Government must give certain relaxation on taxes imposed on tourism industry, or to provide certain soft loans with minimum interest rates and must issue additional funds for the betterment of tourism industry in the near future" (184). Moreover, the enterprises should constantly modify their business strategies, embrace new technologies, learn from this tragedy, and devise protocols to effectively manage in future adversities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor and advisers, Professor Lina Sonne, Professor Madhura Lohokare, Professor Shivani Kapoor, and Professor Sadia Khan for their constant support and guidance. None of this would have been possible without their feedback and meaningful comments. I am also grateful to the employees at Roseate House and Lemon Tree, for sharing many insights with me.

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## **APPENDIX-I**

This is the list of questions for the unstructured interview.

### *Lockdown*

- What were some of the immediate steps you took when the virus hit in India?
- Were you anticipating a lockdown?
- Were you able to operate in any capacity during that period? If yes, could you please elaborate?
- How did the pandemic impact each segment of the business? How did you cope with the losses?

### *Post-Lockdown*

- Did you implement any innovative measures post-lockdown? If yes, what were some of them?

- How were the occupancy and Average Room Rates (ARR) during that time?
- What initiatives did you adopt to attract the guests and provide a safe environment to them?
- What strategy did the management execute to minimise the costs and maximise the revenues?

*Post-Pandemic*

- Are you satisfied with the government's contribution to revive the hospitality industry? Why and why not?
- In your experience, have you witnessed such a setback? If yes, what were the circumstances then?
- Do you think luxury hotels recuperate faster than low star hotels? Why and Why not?
- Even with the availability of vaccines, when do you expect the particular sector to completely recover?

