Changing Travel Preferences Post-COVID: The New Normal?

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Abstract   *Tourism, a booming industry pre-COVID has been devastated by the gradual and world wide spread of corona virus. International tourist arrivals could decline between 58-78% (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism and hospitality sector have emerged as the biggest sufferer from the lockdown, quarantine and border closures due to corona virus. The closed borders and restrictions imposed on air travel by the governments have put the travel and tourism activities on hold. Tourism scenario may appear to be grim at present but the industry is bound to bounce back once the situation begins to normalize. Whenever lockdown would be lifted, safety would be the prime concern of tourists along with the need and desire to seek refuge in the lap of nature for soothing and calming the agitated nerves after enduring months of stress induced by COVID-19 threat. Governments and tourism planners have already started to formulate strategies to resume travel and economic growth. In the wake of COVID-19, this paper is an attempt to draw attention of tourism planners and also to devise strategies to deal with the changing travel preferences post-COVID.*

Keywords: *Corona Virus, Lockdown, Safety, Tourism, Travel Preferences*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, a booming industry pre COVID has been devastated by the gradual and world wide spread of corona virus. International tourist arrivals could decline between 58%-78% in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism and hospitality sectors emerged as the biggest sufferers from lockdown, quarantine and border closures (Goodell, 2020; Gossling, Scott & Hall, 2020). The same has been endorsed by International Air Transport Association. There has been more than 80% fall in flights in the month of April, 2020. The closed borders and restrictions imposed on air travel by the governments have put the travel and tourism activities on hold (Nicola, Alsafi, Sohrabi, Kerwan, Al-Jabir, Iosifidis, Agha & Aghaf, 2020). It has further been predicted that more than 100 million jobs in tourism and travel sector could be lost due to the impact of Corona virus (WTTC, 2020). Tourism is a highly volatile and vulnerable industry and the stake holders need to adapt to this (Daye et al, 2008). This highly vulnerable industry is severely affected by disastrous events, risk for personal safety, security and health (Cro and Martins, 2017; Becken, Zammit, & Hendrix, 2015; Bassil, Saleh, & Anwar,

2017; Law, 2006) along with many other factors that can be bio-physical, environmental, and economic or health related (Briguglio, 1995; Pelling and Uitto, 2001; Boruff and Cutter, 2007; McGregor et al., 2009). World has endured many epidemics in previous decades such as Ebola, SARS, MERS (Gossling, Scott & Hall, 2020), but none had such devastating effects on the society and economy as corona virus (Naumov, Varadzhakova & Naydenov, 2020).

The industry at present is dealing with a major health crisis that has now turned into a socio-economic crisis. Tourism scenario may appear to be grim at present but this industry is bound to bounce back once the situation begins to normalize. With the progression of corona virus, majority of nations across the globe had imposed travel restrictions and sealed their borders. While these absolute restrictions on travel and tourism activities have helped in checking the spread of the deadly virus to a large extent but these have also pressurized mankind by forcing them to adopt ways against the basic human nature. Man is dynamic and 'becoming' in nature rather than 'being'. Therefore staying bottled up and confined in stressful environs for long, people would be eager to participate in travel and tourism activities,

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once these travel sanctions are lifted and the threat of virus recedes.

Globally governments have already started to formulate strategies to resume travel and economic growth (Fakhruddin, Blanchard & Ragupathy, 2020; Collins, 2020). Research by the United Nations specialized agency for tourism the 'COVID-19 Related Travel Restrictions' report has elucidated that many destinations are maintaining a cautious approach to lifting or easing restrictions on travel. The EU member states and Schengen Associated countries have temporarily suspended non-essential travel from 'third countries'. With an eye for opening up the borders and uplifting economy, EU has released a 'safe list' of nationalities who would be allowed to travel within EU. From July 1, residents from over 14 countries that are not part of the European Union (EU) and are deemed to be 'safe' have been allowed to enter the EU (Indian Express, 2020). To restart travel and tourism activities, the entire industry needs to be overhauled with the incorporation of new protocols and updated hygiene and safety measures for the tourists firmly in place (Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder & Salazar, 2020). Successful execution of these new protocols and safety measures will govern the fate of travel industry in the post COVID era.

Theoretical Framework

Though people have been travelling for varied purposes since time immemorial, 'nascent tourism' however, is of recent origin. Tourism has emerged as an extremely sought after recreational activity among masses. Mass tourism has converted popular tourists' destinations into tourists' hot spots. However, mass tourism is not expected to gain momentum post-COVID as tourists are expected to be more cautious of venturing out in tourists' hot spot destinations. Tourists' perceptions, inclinations and outlook for travel are likely to undergo drastic changes (Peters, Peters & Peters, 2020). Tourism industry is a 'people oriented' industry and is based on the interaction between people and places. The industry is extremely susceptible to social and physical conditions of the destination micro and macro environment (Hanafiah & Harun, 2010). Whenever there is a threat to safety or health as in pandemics, tourists cancel their plans to visit such places and people (Nicholl, 2006).

Many scholars have tried to identify constraints in tourism that affect travel decisions and govern travel behavior. Suhud (2014) has documented tourism constraints as intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic constraint factors have been identified as lack of information, safety and security, distance, family travel companions, social interaction and/or isolation and transportation. During pandemics and crises situations, safety, security and distance act as the major extrinsic constraint factors governing travel decisions. Some others are in agreement with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs of

prioritizing safety and security, in context of tourism (Kay, 2003 and Tikkanen, 2007).

Crises influence tourists' cognitive travel behavior (Wen, Huimin & Kavanaugh, 2005; Bhati, Upadhayaya & Sharma, 2016).The decline in tourist arrivals is due to people's risk perceptions and evading those regions that are considered to be risky (Page, Song & Wu, 2011; Kozak et al., 2007; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos & Tarlow, 1999; Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie & Winter, 2014; Trumbo et al., 2016; Williams & Baláž, 2015).

Tourists' perceived risk is a significant predictor of their behavior to avoid travel to infection or disease prone destinations (Cooper, 2008), perception of threat to their safety also influences their behavior to travel (Zou & Meng, 2019). People are expected to travel to places that are not so 'popular' among tourists, but on the contrary located in remote and distant places albeit rich in natural beauty. Predicting and comprehending travelers' behavior after the pandemic would be the main issue and the major obstacle to deal with, for tourism marketers (Lee et al., 2012).

It has long been suggested by many researchers and planners to diversify tourism activities and products towards promoting remote and unknown/lesser known destinations. Post-COVID would be the most opportune time to put forward the case of quality tourism and alternate tourism, as all tourists' activities related to mass tourism would be discouraged for quite some time, owing to the anxieties, concerns and apprehensions for personal safety of tourists. Responsible and sustainable tourism would certainly gain momentum, when the time is right (UNWTO, 2020).

To revive ailing economy many destinations across the world have started to open up tourism activities in a cautious and phased manner. China was the very first country to enforce lockdown after the spread of the dreaded virus, and also the first one to open up. Gauging the tourists' sentiments and their needs, Chinese authorities have devised certain strategies for recovery and revival of tourism (Wen, Kozak, Yang & Liu, 2020). Impetus has been given to domestic and rural tourism. Major travel motivators post- COVID are expected to be good, clean outdoor air, and natural surroundings (Lei, Wu, 2020). Domestic tourism does not require people to cross forbidden international boundaries during the pandemic scare. Tourists feel secure and protected in their own countries, travelling short distances, not very far from home (Enger et al., 2020). People are more likely to travel in their own self driven vehicles rather than travelling in a pre-arranged tour package (Enger et al., 2020). The same is endorsed in a survey carried out by a travel company and published in Travel Economic Times, 24/06/2020. To gauge the post-COVID travel moods and expectations, EbixCash Travel & Holidays, carried out a survey of more than 5000 respondents that include travel enthusiasts, corporate and MICE divisions. According to

this survey a whopping 87% had wanted to travel within the country and 56% respondents preferred to go for self-drive holidays (Travel Economic Times, 2020). People may also prefer to opt for travelling within their regional boundaries. The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania opened their borders to one another, creating a coronavirus 'travel bubble'. Under the new rules, anyone who has not travelled outside the Baltic States in the past two weeks, is not infected, and has not been in contact with somebody who has tested positive may travel freely to the other surrounding nearby nations (BBC, 2020). European countries have also started to ease travel restrictions for European citizens residing in Schengen countries. 24 out of 26 Schengen countries are now cautiously planning to open up for tourism purposes for their own citizens, thereby creating their own 'travel bubble' (UNWTO, 2020).

COVID has put forward an unprecedented situation for the mankind that demands immediate attention. Entire tourism industry has been disarrayed. Travel trends are bound to undergo a paradigm shift post COVID. Therefore, it is pertinent to study and analyse the shift in tourists' destination preferences after such 'force majeure' situation.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on the secondary data and the previous researches done by various researchers on the concerned topic have been reviewed. Many relevant websites have also been consulted.

DISCUSSION

With the increase in 'cultural homogenization', global diversity has been on a steady decline. All the tourists' hot spots have started to look like replicas of each other with no novelty value, authenticity or uniqueness, very much akin to the concept of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993). This has created the need for development and promotion of alternative models of sustainable tourism which would satiate wanderlust of allocentrics and mid-centrics tourists. Researchers have proclaimed post-COVID era to be the most appropriate period to push forward the case of alternative tourism. Well-travelled and environmentally conscious tourists having responsible self-images, seek varied versions of 'alternative tourism'. These environment conscious tourists desire to experience 'authentic tourism' (Poon, 1989). Travel post-COVID is expected to take-off on such alternative forms of tourism. Therefore this period could also be considered as an opportunity post-COVID for reviving the 'authenticity in tourism' instead of relying solely on 'staged authenticity'.

'Slow tourism' is also expected to take a giant leap after COVID. Suggested models of slow tourism are community based and pro-poor. This form of tourism is also expected to be women oriented because women generally have more contribution in community based tourism. Researchers have predicted that rural areas would emerge as preferred travel destinations post-COVID. Rural and remote destinations are supposedly custodians of age old craft, culture and rituals. Remoteness and distance from rest of the world might have aided in keeping the authenticity intact in such destinations. These destinations may offer culturally rich tourism resources and indigenous products for tourists. In tune with the travel trends after COVID, new generation of tourists could be encouraged to be a part of the production process by co-creating tourist products along with locals, thereby acquiring the skills of natives. The demand to learn and acquire natives' skills and co-creating tourism products tends to inculcate a sense of pride among locals for their own heritage, thereby paving way for its revival, besides enhancing employment opportunities for the native population (Smith, 1994). Tourists could be interested to learn village pottery skills, handicrafts, ethnic cuisines, weaving and producing textiles, paintings and embroidery to name a few. This participative form of tourism that offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in courses and learning experiences, which are characteristic of the holiday destination where they are taken, has been termed as 'Creative tourism' (Raymond and Richards, 2000). Creative tourism is about learning and acquiring the indigenous skills of manufacturing/producing the local handicrafts, focusing on niche markets or quality tourists. Majority of untouched/ unexplored remote destinations are reservoirs of indigenous art and craft. COVID has wreaked havoc on the unskilled and semi-skilled rural population. They had to migrate out from their native places in search of employment. During this on-going virus threat, unable to earn, these migrant workers had no option but to reverse migrate to their villages. Rural tourism could be instrumental in creating employment avenues for these migrant workers besides reviving natives' heritage. Tourism should be utilized to support local production especially after COVID-19 situation. The way ahead should be to encourage a direct link between the local environment, local culture and local production (Richards, 2005). Tourists' and travellers' preferences post-COVID are expected to support and encourage this trend. Nurtured in rural settings, this form of tourism is designed to practice sustainability model. Sustainability must no longer be a niche part of tourism but must be the new norm for every part of our sector (UNWTO, 2020). Local community is expected to be a major stake holder in pro-community tourism. Indigenous community is placed into decisive managerial positions ensuring a strong link between alternative tourism and community development (Butler & Hinch, 1996; Houseal, 1986; Mowforth & Munt, 1998; Van Den Berghe, 1992). Unlike mass tourism, local community is expected to be the direct and major recipient of the benefits to be accrued from

this form of tourism. The target market of this kind of tourism is going to be allocentrics and midcentrics categories of tourists. These 'Niche markets' are looking for opportunities to venture out of their 'environment bubble' and explore the culture and life style of native communities by indulging in 'experiential tourism'. This may, on one hand serve as a tool for 'ironing out' the unevenness of tourists' demand and also tourism driven development in destinations and on the other hand will soothe the anxious minds of people after battling the corona virus.

All these activities are intended to aid in diversification of tourism products. Tourism post COVID should be developed on the Bhutan Model of Tourism of 'high value, low volume'. This form of tourism is low impact, sustainable and nature based. Following the post-COVID travel trends, many activities could be devised under the umbrella of 'slow tourism' for quality tourists. Rather than building on tourists' numbers, this form of tourism aims at increasing the levels of quality and upgrading, protecting and promoting the authenticity of tourism products and services. Post COVID, there would be more demand for destinations that offer rest, recuperation, rejuvenation, relaxation and are away from the 'frenzy' of mass tourists. Remoteness of such destinations would prove to be an added advantage over the mass tourists' destinations.

'New tourism', tourism of the future, characterized by flexibility, segmentation and more authentic tourism experiences' (Poon, 1994) has been proclaimed as a successor of mass tourism. 'New tourism' is a term that comprehensively describes the new-aspects of social, cultural, economic changes and diversification of tourism (Weaver, 1991; Conway, 1993; Poon, 1994). 'New tourists' are not passive observers. This category of tourists is 'participators', who are eager to experience host culture. This form of tourism does not put excessive demands on the natural and cultural resources of the visited destinations. Post COVID, it is predicted that demand for 'new tourism' would pick up rather than mass tourism. Green tourism and nature tourism would be preferred over conventional tourism post COVID (Global Market News, 2020). It has also been pointed out by the experts that post COVID; demand will be more for health and wellness tourism. There will be a shift in preference and behaviour of tourists post pandemic. The public health conditions of destinations, the hygiene standard of transportations, hotels and other tourism facilities would become top priority. Wellness themed trips would become a new trend (Global Market News, 2020).

It has also been predicted that people will not opt for long haul travel for sometimes. Post COVID, short haul travel or 'staycations' are going to be the sought-after tourism and travel activities as people are expected to be skeptical of undertaking long and arduous journeys that involve air travel. The above predictions are in conformity with the survey conducted by *Zapwater Communications* - a leading communications agency in the U.S.A. specializing in travel and lifestyle. This communications agency surveyed 1,280 participants across the United States from 26th April to 6th May 2020. The survey revealed that 83% of Americans preferred to travel within the U.S. for their first trip post-COVID-19. Similarly, it was revealed by *The Vacationer* that more than 56% of Americans intended to wait for one year at least before embarking on their international trip post COVID. They had surveyed 583 Americans on 17th May 2020 using Survey Money's interface.

Zostel carried out a survey with regard to the new normal post-COVID travel trend where 'safety' emerged as travellers' prime concern (Chaturvedi, 2020). Travelling in confined and closed spaces is going to be a major deterrent for tourism activities after COVID. People would be hesitant to travel using public transportation. To ensure safety, majority of the travellers were willing to travel in their own vehicles. Solo travellers still remain the most likely to travel in the near future (Chaturvedi, 2020). The same is reiterated by Auto Trader, the U.K.'s largest marketplace for used and new cars, after they carried out a consumer survey (AutoTrader, 2020). Almost half of their respondents (48%) opined that even after lifting or easing of current restrictions they would be less likely to use public transportation. Concern for 'transport distancing' was even more in younger customers (18-24-year-old). More than half (66%) were less likely to use public transport during the times of COVID. The research also found that more than half of the respondents (56%) were of the view that owning a vehicle would be more important in future. Post COVID travellers are expected to be more cautious towards safety and hygiene. Based on a Travelport survey of 5000 travellers across India, U.K., U.S., Australia, New Zealand and 29 leading travel suppliers it was found that travel trend would drastically shift post COVID (E.T.Travel, 2020). Participants were of firm opinion that they needed to have assurance regarding embracing all the safety measures and protocols by the concerned airlines, hotels, airports and car rental companies in order for these to be used by the travellers.

CONCLUSION

Post-COVID, push-pull factors are expected to take an inadvertent swing. Tourism and travel activities have always been regarded as stress busters that invigorate humans. Push motivations post COVID would be, need to de-stress, relax and rejuvenate. Visiting serene and natural environments to sooth and calm the prolonged disturbed state of minds after enduring months of anxieties is expected to be a major push factor. Travel motivations would pull tourists towards authentic tourism experiences.

Remoteness and inaccessibility would be considered as advantages in the prevailing scenario. Therefore, people would be willing to visit destinations that are yet to be discovered by mass tourists. Remoteness of a destination could emerge as a key 'pull' factor post-COVID as unexplored, distant destinations are generally considered to be free from disease. Mountains emerged as the most preferred travel destination for travellers post COVID (Chaturvedi, 2020). This also confirms to the travellers' opinion of undertaking travel related activities in rural areas which are not popular mass tourism destinations. This is also in conformity with the opinion of experts that post COVID, tourists will favour those destinations that pose minimum health risks and are not frequented by mass tourists (Global Market News, 2020).

Months of 'lockdown' all across the world has paved way towards 'healing' of earth and environment because of minimal human activities. Tourism though thrives on natural and manmade resources, but at the same time has been alleged to be a big contributor towards environmental degradation. During the corona time world seemed to have made headway towards a greener and cleaner environment. Global emission has dropped since corona (McGrath, 2020). Global electricity usage is reduced by 20% due to industries' lockdown (McGrath, 2020). Rural tourism is expected to take a quantum leap post COVID. All the other forms of tourism closely associated with rural tourism like creative tourism, agri tourism, orchard tourism, nature tourism, home stay, and health and wellness etcetera are predicted to be the most sought after activities once the travel restrictions are eased. Health and wellness tourism is also expected to be a key drawing factor post COVID.

Safety would be of prime concern of tourists after lifting of lockdown. It has also been observed that people are shifting from airlines to railways for short duration travel owing to fear of travelling in confined spaces. For safety reasons people would be opting to travel in their personal vehicles rather than taking public means of transportation. As the travel trends suggest that post COVID, there would be more demand for quality tourism and wellness tourism, therefore nations across the globe should make use of this opportunity to put forward the case of various alternative forms of pro-community tourism. Post COVID time should be used as an opportunity to practice low carbon tourism which would follow 'bottom up' rather than 'bottom down' approach. This form of tourism is expected to limit environmental pressures and to give fillip to local empowerment rather than submitting to foreign control over resources and planning (Renard, 2001). COVID has ravaged the existing tourism and travel industry worldwide; however, there could still be a few streaks of silver lining. Post COVID, following the travel trends, tourism should be planned away from concentrated tourists' hot spots to the beautiful, rural and distant destinations. This would ensure spread of tourism to hitherto unexplored destinations. This would also be in sync with the latest travel trends post COVID and would be instrumental in economically benefitting the local community.

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