

WELLNESS TOURISM IN INDIA – IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND REBUILDING WELLNESS TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE IN POST CORONA TRAVEL

Bushra Choudhary*,
Abdul Qadir

Jamia Millia Islamia,
New Delhi, India

Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the tourism industry. The pandemic hit the world with such a magnitude that it caused a great fall in economic and tourist activity which resulted in economic crisis with effects that are still difficult to overcome. Wellness tourism along with other forms of tourism was disrupted because of the imposed restrictions on travel by various countries to curb the growth of corona virus. While India is recognized as a prominent and historical wellness tourism destination in South East Asia for offering traditional wellness products that attract people from all over the world, the pandemic has not spared it. The present study identifies the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on wellness tourism in India. It further discusses the positive image of India as a wellness tourism destination which will help service providers to ameliorate the marketing strategies during the tough time. Despite having great uncertainties because of the ongoing pandemic, the world has slowly started moving towards a recovery stage. Wellness tourism is one of the tourism products that are expected to witness an increased demand in post-pandemic travel. This study examines secondary data available in the public domain by the Indian government and non-government sources to review the impact of COVID-19 on wellness tourism. The findings of this study are beneficial for the destination to boost its products profile and become more resilient to any future uncertainties.

Keywords:

COVID-19, wellness tourism, Health tourism, Destination image.

INTRODUCTION

For more than a year now, health and wellness have become a major concern in people's minds around the world. Crises are inevitable and cause both positive and negative impacts on society. The crisis of COVID-19 hit the world differently, started from Wuhan-a city in China and within a short period, it spread to a different part of the world and was later declared as a pandemic by WHO (World Health Organization-Europe, 2020). The impacts that COVID-19 has caused on society are unprecedented. The tourism and hospitality industry has faced survival challenges amid nationwide lockdown and travel bans in various countries (WTTC, 2020). Before the pandemic, the Indian wellness tourism market witnessed an annual growth of 17.59% from 2015 to 2017 and also a rise in the number of trips by 17.4 million compared to 2015 (Global Wellness Summit, 2020).

Correspondence:
Bushra Choudhary

e-mail:
bushrachoudhary4@gmail.com



Destination image plays a crucial role in generating travel intentions. Destination image is projected by social media and mass media, their coverage plays a very important role in making a negative and positive image of a destination, and any misleading information towards the crises will result in causing fear and panic among people. The pandemic resulted in causing a huge impact on India as a health and wellness tourism destination because of continuously rising cases and for being the most adversely affected country in the world. Because of the mismanagement by the Indian government, India witnessed the second wave of COVID-19 which was worse than expected. The country needs to consolidate its destination image as a wellness tourism destination to encourage people to travel in the post-pandemic period.

There is a development of anxiety and fear to travel among people which has lowered their travel plans. The COVID-19 has impacted travel behavior which in turn decreases the tourism supply and demand around the world. However, despite facing such a fall, most of the studies discussed the risen demand for wellness tourism in post corona travel. The study examines the impacts that pandemic has caused to wellness tourism in India and it will further discuss the positive image of India as a wellness destination to rebuild its wellness tourism destination image in post corona times. The study will help service providers to ameliorate their marketing strategies during tough times.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wellness Tourism

Medical and wellness tourism are two major terms that come under health tourism (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). Medical tourism is defined as a form of tourism in which tourists travel to another country to seek medical treatment (Connell, 2013) whereas wellness tourism refers to people travelling from their native place to the tourist's destination offering a pleasant natural environment and specific culture to improve their health (Devereux & Carnegie, 2006). Some of the desired outcomes of wellness travel are transcendence, relaxation, and escape, novelty, self-indulgence, physical health, and self-esteem (Voigt et al., 2011). People usually travel to escape from the hectic life, to reduce the stress level among people, slowing down the pace of living, to relax, to move towards a healthier life, to search for the meaning of life and these are also the factors that result in the development of wellness tourism.

Destination Image

The term destination image refers to the interpretation of a place in the mind of tourists which affects their behavior as tourists during three stages: priori, loco, and posteriori (Agapito et al. 2013). The destination image in simple terms means the characteristics or features of a place that influence tourists' decisions while selecting a destination. The major components of a positive image destination may consist of product, behavior, and attitude of employees who are in one-to-one contact with the tourists and the scenery, safety, and security (Milman & Pizam, 1995). Therefore, a destination must maintain its positive image to attract tourists since a negative image causes a huge loss to the destinations' tourism industry.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted is based on secondary data available in the public domain by the Indian government and non-government sources with personal observations. To fulfill the objectives of this study, extensive secondary data is collected from journals, websites, reports, and newspaper articles. A rigorous search has been done through online sources for studying the impacts that COVID-19 had on India's wellness tourism. The study attempts to depict the positive image of India as a wellness tourism destination which eventually attracts tourists to travel to India in post corona period.



RESULTS

Impacts of COVID-19 on wellness tourism in India

Positive and negative:

- ◆ Temporary and permanent shut down of wellness centers in India due to nationwide lockdown imposed by the government.
- ◆ Restrictions on travel, fear of exposure to COVID-19 virus fall in tourists' footfall in India, both domestic as well as international
- ◆ Loss of revenue to wellness service providers in India
- ◆ People became more conscious of their health amid the pandemic; therefore, it is expected that a greater number of people, primarily domestic tourists will travel for wellness purposes in post corona travel
- ◆ Tourists are focused on developing immunity to fight against the deadly virus, hence, participation in immunity programs has risen
- ◆ The country is moving towards rebuilding its image by offering a wide range of wellness packages to maintain health, to relax, also assuring to follow proper measures and guidelines to get back the trust of customers

Attributes of wellness tourism in India

- ◆ Because of the growing interest of tourists to undertake wellness trips, India has received high revenue on wellness expenditure.
- ◆ India offers a vast range of wellness services such as Ayurveda (the oldest traditional system of medicine), yoga, spa, massage, etc., the country provides a natural setting for wellness tourists which is the most important consideration while selecting a wellness destination. The country's vibrant culture, peculiar geographical location, scenic backwaters, number of beaches, long coastal line, flora, fauna, and picturesque landscape attracts tourists from the borders and makes it one of the leading destinations for wellness purposes.
- ◆ Kerala is known as India's best wellness destination, the state is focused more on providing fusion services of wellness tourism, medical tourism, and cultural tourism to showcase unique experiences to the tourists. Kerala is one such state which has developed an authentic and place-based wellness product and brand.
- ◆ The Indian government has proposed a roadmap and national strategy to promote its wellness tourism and maintain its competitive advantage

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Results suggested that COVID-19 has both negative and positive impacts on wellness tourism in India. Because of the travel restrictions imposed by the Indian government, there is a huge decline in tourists' arrival both domestic and international. There is a development of fear among common people - fear of getting the infection, fear of losing friends and family, fear of losing livelihood, and these fears made people anxious and led to a rise in mental stress and affected their health and well-being. In the post corona time, people are expected to travel to reduce the stress level among them, to relax, to move towards a healthier life, to search for the meaning of life and these are also the factors that will result in the rebuilding of wellness tourism. There is a paradigm shift towards wellness activities among people. The wellness service providers have this opportunity to develop wellness products according to the changing market demand.

One of the main reasons why India is a preferred wellness destination is its competitive advantage of having different types of wellness traditional medicine such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) and these wellness techniques and procedures have been exported to other countries worldwide which offer health and wellness programs (Connell, 2006). The COVID-19 has drastically impacted the destination image of India as a health and wellness destination in the world as people develop a fear of travelling to a country



that is second on the COVID-19 cases tally in the world. Also, still, several countries are not allowing flights to and from India. India needs to focus on its strength as a wellness destination to rebuild its destination image. India is rich in culture and history; therefore, wellness centers are combining different fields to create a niche among tourists. One such example combines wellness services, cultural events (traditional dance and songs), festivals, and houseboat trips to showcase the marvelous backwaters of Kerala, a state in India famous for its wellness services. The government of India has recently prepared a national strategy and roadmap to utilize its potential to compete with other leading wellness destinations in the world

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