

Impact of COVID-19 on Small Domestic and Inbound Travel Agencies and Tour Operators in West Bengal, India: Perspectives of Offline Owners-Managers

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Abstract

Purpose: This article delves into the mindset of small family business owners in tourism during the COVID-19 crisis, their strategies, and the barriers they faced in recovery. The study is particularly significant as it sheds light on the experiences of entrepreneurs in both urban and backward/rural areas of West Bengal, providing valuable insights for policymakers and professionals in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Methodology: The qualitative research approach involved semi-structured interviews with thirteen family-owned tour operators or travel agency owners/managers. A fixed semi-structured questionnaire was used to explore their views on management operations during and after the crisis, allowing for open discussion and new insights.

Principal Findings: The findings underscore the remarkable resilience of small family-operated tour operators and travel agencies. Despite facing multiple challenges, including threats of existence, the pressure of fixed costs, non-performing travel inventories, feeling unethical, uncertainty about the future, and feelings of loss of goodwill with lenders, these entrepreneurs have shown remarkable adaptability and determination.

Originality: This research offers unique insights into the mindset of family business owners in the Indian context, particularly the urban-peripheral context. The study also highlights the gap between the government's measures and the needs of entrepreneurs in this post-COVID-19 era, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the tourism industry.

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality and tourism family businesses have contributed significantly to regional development. A successful family business contributes to community development, provides new employment, and improves citizens' quality of life. They entice new businesses and residents to move to these locations for regional development (Emoet *et al.*, 2020). The recent outbreak of novel coronavirus or COVID-19 has marred industrial growth throughout the world from 2019 to till date 2020 (Xiang *et al.*, 2021; Dev & Sengupta, 2020; Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Nicola *et al.*, 2020). The tourism industry itself has endured a lot because of intercountry travel restrictions and lockdowns imposed by the governments to check further escalation and emergencies (Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021). Until recently, the trends in the global economy have been depressive, turning tourism and hospitality towards a grassroots upliftment. While global domestic visitor spending registered a decrease of 45%, the same for international visitors is 69.4% (WTTC, 2021). A recent move of the United Nations World Tourism Organization, during the year 2019, was 'Tourism and Jobs: A Better Future for All' and after that, in 2020 and 2021 were 'Tourism and Rural Development' and 'Tourism for Inclusive Growth' respectively (UNWTO, 2022). Surprisingly, all these themes are consistent with local entrepreneurship, community development, and the optimum use of investment in continuation with the pre-COVID trends of socio-economically sustainable practices.

While the number of IATA-accredited travel agents increased from 9,600 in 2006 to 11,800 in 2008 in the Asia-Pacific region, India registered from 2,400 to 2,900 in 2008 over the same period with a noticeable trend of the highest number of withdrawals (Nair, R.A., 2009). According to the BOTT Travel Sentiment Tracker, in partnership with seven national associations like IATO, TAAI, ICPB, ADTOI, OTOAI, ATOAI, and SITE, around 40 percent of travel and tourism companies are at risk of complete shutdown over the next 3 to 6 months, and nearly 36 percent of such companies are likely to witness a temporary cessation (Singh, A., 2020; World Travel and Tourism Council (2021). The report also highlighted that 81 percent of travel and tourism companies lost their revenue by up to 100 percent, while 15 percent registered a slack of up to 75 percent. Even with this depressive situation, the Indian tourism sector accounted for 31.8 million jobs, which was 7.3% of the total employment in the country in 2020. By 2029, it is expected to account for about 53 million jobs (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2021), and the reduction in the size and volume of this industry is not uncalled for. There was an exponential increase in domestic tourist arrivals from 2000 to 2018, with arrivals

of 220.11 million to 2321.98 million, respectively. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this arrival has drastically reduced and registered 610.22 in 2020 (Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India). Tourism Policy, 2019) so its income and employment opportunities from tourism. Though travel and tourism were the largest industry in India during the pre-COVID-19 period (with \$234 bn in 2018), no direct measures were evident in India. While many developed countries helped minimize the decline in domestic spending through stimulus initiatives (WTTC, 2021), no such stimulus is offered in India.

[India Brand Equity Foundation \(IBEF, 2021\)](#) projected the industry's direct contribution to the growth rate of GDP up to 10.35% between 2019 and 2028. By 2028, Indian tourism and hospitality is expected to earn US\$ 50.9 billion as visitor exports compared with US\$ 28.9 billion in 2018. However, the scope for domestic tourism is also high, as it is expected to drive growth, [India Brand Equity Foundation \(2022\)](#). In April 2021, the percentage share of foreign tourist arrivals in India was highest at Bengaluru Airport (29.96%), whereas for Kolkata Airport, it was only 2.11%. Therefore, domestic and internal tourism is more critical in Kolkata, possibly through small family businesses. Therefore, the performance of domestic tourism was found increasingly crucial in the Indian tourism economy till the pre-COVID-19 era and justified more micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) development in this sector ([Batabyal et al., 2022](#)).

Again, many studies have investigated the relationship between the informal and subsidiary sectors and tourism and how this relationship has contributed to healthy guest-host relationships, resistance to competition, and regional development ([Getz & Carlsen, 2005](#)). From a very early stage, hospitality and tourism family businesses were for employment generation, boosting the local economy, and developing economically marginalized societies (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2013). West Bengal is emerging as India's most preferred tourist destination (West Bengal Tourism Policy, 2019). The government of India is also providing free loans to MSMEs to help them deal with the crisis and revive the economy, including the tourism sector ([Tripathy et al., 2021](#); IBEF, 2021; [Ghosh, S. 2020](#)). This study discusses the crises, barriers, and strategies of small domestic and inbound family businesses in tourism in the study area and how these agencies envisage their business in the future.

Also, from a larger perspective, this study will further contribute to envisioning the operational, managerial, and entrepreneurial issues in future travel agency businesses. In this future crisis, managerial issues for a tourist destination and stakeholders' roles and responsibilities are critical, with owners' perspectives predominating ([Cakar, K., 2018](#); [Donbak et al., 2021](#); [Batabyal et al., 2020](#)). It also endeavors to assess the mindset of family business owners in an Indian context with a particular reference to the urban-peripheral backdrop, as recommended by many researchers. The study also unfolds the gap between what measures the government takes and what entrepreneurs are required by the need of the hour amidst this post-COVID-19 era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family-Owned Business

Small tourism businesses are usually varying, challenging conventional wisdom, questioning indoctrinated presuppositions, and have a research history that examines characteristics, finding similarities and diminishing differences ([Zhao et al., 2008](#); [Morrison et al., 2010](#); [Thomas et al., 2011](#); [Carmichael et al., 2011](#)). [Getz, D. and Carlsen, J. \(2005\)](#) investigated family business themes and topics from 1978 to 2005 in the tourism literature. It is categorized into four broad areas: operations, entrepreneurship, roles and responsibilities, and future business development. This period represents the pre-globalization and post-globalization periods and substantial economic, socio-political, and cross-cultural transformations. Through an extensive review of the previous literature, mainly during the post-globalization period, [Morrison, A. et al. \(2010\)](#) further categorized the tourism family business literature into four areas of mythology versus reality, context myopia, disciplinary lenses, and research dimensions, respectively. In both cases, family businesses went global from this time onwards with certain enhancing and constraining characteristics ([Patel et al., 2012](#)). [Patel et al. \(2012\)](#) also investigated the pull factors for going global (e.g., desirable locations, networks and alliances, and preemptive positions) and push factors based on pressure, maybe for development, expansion, promotion, etc. Though the demographic, psychographic, socio-economic, and cultural profile of tourists were analyzed for the future scope of the travel agency business ([Engvall et al., 2012](#)), the same was not found for owners or travel entrepreneurs.

Family businesses as tourism service providers were not given much attention in West Bengal since the independence of India, even though the number of tourism service providers had been increasing till the COVID-19 outbreak. Tourism in West Bengal has been transformed from an elitist tag to indispensable for medical treatment, education, business, and lifestyle for increasing populations. During this post-COVID-19 scenario, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, continues to recognize all the tourism service providers voluntarily to encourage service quality and standards in the country, subject to such amendments suitable for these stakeholders (Ministry). This trend is also diminishing with the emergence of other cities in Eastern India. According to [Walsh \(2015\)](#), family businesses in developing nations gained very little attention and continue to be an interchange between emerging and advanced countries. However, these are vital for academics and experts to evaluate the business climate. According to some scholars, the global tourism academia investigates the unique behavior related to family businesses in tourism, which seeks attention with a new entrepreneurial orientation ([Getz et al., 2005](#); [Kallmuenzer & Peters, 2018](#); [Camilleri et al., 2021](#)). Another recent study further confirms

that massive restructuring was going on, investor attention is significant, and media coverage from time to time amidst the COVID-19 pandemic ([Li et al., 2020](#)).

Sustainability

The most contemporary literature further recognized a triple bottom line of sustainability, viz. people, profit, and the planet as the foundation for the overall sustainable performance of all business organizations, with a special notice on the growing pressure from all stakeholders on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and family businesses (FBs) of the hospitality sector and emphasized on survival of small businesses herein with small business social responsibility framework ([Fonseca et al., 2021](#); [Legrand et al., 2013](#); [The Scottish Government, 2018](#)). Another recently conducted study by [Shekhar et al. \(2021\)](#) on family business in the tourism and hospitality sectors indicated a lack of research in the eastern hemisphere on country-wise collaboration in the bibliometric analysis of 124 articles in the WOS database. According to [Arcese et al. \(2021\)](#), this research area requires a more standardized comparative examination of the different contexts in which family businesses operate, especially regarding the sequence from rural or periphery to urban areas. From an Indian perspective, [Kokkranikal et al. \(2002\)](#) developed a descriptive case study on indigenous entrepreneurship as evidenced by the operators of a houseboat tourism product in Kerala. After the pandemic crisis, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India plans to tap into regional tourism by opening doors for South Asian country tourists (IBEF, 2021). As the lockdown restrictions relax, many people look ahead, reviving themselves with short vacations. Holiday-goers are considering safe distance, hygiene, and related safety over accommodation locations while booking ([Le et al., D. \(2016\)](#)).

COVID-19 Outbreak

The present COVID-19 outbreak is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the tourism and hospitality industry against external shocks ([Karunarathne et al., 2021](#)). Thousands of tourism service providers, from the premier blue-chip enterprises to beach souvenir vendors, have entered an unprecedented era of zero sales, leaving the industry's stakeholders in a dilemma on the next steps ([Samarathunga, 2020](#); [Ghosh, S. 2020](#)). While traditional travel agencies have their proficiency in providing service, customizing trips and offering expert advice, online travel agencies offer more packages, competitive prices and a comfortable way to buy trips ([Engvall et al., 2012](#)). While offline tour operators have high-quality associative and institutional networks, their online counterparts are increasing online social capital, with online social capital predominating in the future ([Lee et al., 2020](#)). Since the advent of the present century, small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs) have ensured their well-developed and innovative websites to resist challenges. Though large organizations are predominant, they can manage "equal internet access" to international tourism markets ([Kim C., 2004](#)). Now, the global online travel agent market reached a value of nearly \$460.9 billion in 2020, having decreased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of -3.5% since 2015 ([The Business Research Company, 2022](#)) and the reduced accessibility, increasing regulatory transport network, increased transport costs and a new focus on excursion and domestic tourism have resulted in an inverse trend during this post COVID-19 scenario.

Family-Owned Business Amidst COVID-19

The position of India's Micro, Small and medium enterprises (MSME) is the second largest in the world, but the conditions of these MSMEs are unpredictable after the COVID-19 pandemic ([Prasad et al., 2020](#); [Kumar, A. 2020](#); [Ghosh, S. 2020](#)). Tourism offers several options, some of which are rare for family-owned firms interested in operating an enterprise or business houses aspiring to establish appealing destinations and embrace a preferred way of living ([Elmo et al., 2020](#)). Again, the social capital of all small firms is of immense importance in West Bengal ([Saha et al., 2015](#)), and the tourism industry is no exception, particularly after this COVID-19 pandemic. Modern small industries in India started adapting information communication technologies in the last decade before this COVID-19 pandemic ([Zahra, 2021](#)). However, there was doubt about the scarcity of relevant online information that is valuable for the average small and medium enterprises with changes in generic tour products ([Andam et al., 2003](#); [Batabyal et al., 2022](#)). This pandemic further disrupts the information and communication gaps that demand new business and network restructuring ([Hussain et al., 2021](#)). In India, the MSME consists of both 'traditional' and 'modern' small industries ([NCERT, 2021-22](#)). The turnover of a small enterprise in India should not exceed 50 crore, and the owners' share percentage must be at least 52 percent or above ([NCERT, 2021-22](#)). The small tourism enterprises in West Bengal green shoots or startups and such tourism service providers are found to have their head offices registered in West Bengal with six other essential criteria, viz. minimum number of paid-up capital, minimum turnover of capital turnover, minimum number of hotel rooms booked in preceding financial year, minimum period of operational experience, qualification and requirements of promoters, partners, directors and staff, and office space respectively. Considering the federal structure of India, it is found that all startups to other tourism service providers whose annual turnover does not exceed 50 crore and owner's (s') capital is a minimum of 52 percent or above fall under this category with their head offices in their respective states/UTs, subject to six other applicable criteria as mentioned in the policy document. India has 28 states and eight union territories, and the tourism industry is not equally efficient regarding development, marketing and promotion, profitability, and conservation measures ([Ghosh et al., 2022](#)). However, in any developing country, small businesses are significant for socio-economic stability and the overall business ecosystem. Restoring this business ecosystem and sustainable practices empirically requires

innovation that reduces business risks and assures long-term survival (Memili *et al.*, 2018; [Elmo *et al.*, 2020](#); [Obrenovic *et al.*, 2020](#)).

In small and family businesses with these long-term orientations, innovation is recommended ([Berrone *et al.*, 2012](#); Le *et al.*, 2016; [Lee *et al.*, 2021](#)), with family dynamics that influence the importance and implementation of sustainability policies ([Stafford *et al.*, 1999](#); [Craig & Dibrell, 2006](#); [Berrone *et al.*, 2010](#); [Kallmuenzer *et al.*, 2018](#)) often with catalytic roles of the government bodies through marketing and promotion, investment incentives and incorporating allied segments ([Deb *et al.*, 2022](#)). Though the central government as well as the respective state government are projecting and promoting tourism entrepreneurship in India through the schemes of MSME, actual entrepreneurial sentiment is different, dispersed from special financial assistance to the clarity in restrictions (West Bengal Tourism Policy, 2019; [Banerjee, 2022](#), [Ghosh, *et al.*, 2022](#)). A tour operator seeking recognition in West Bengal is defined as one who plans, promotes, and operates tours and makes arrangements for transport, accommodation, sightseeing, entertainment, and other tourism-related services and activities for tourists visiting destinations only in West Bengal ([WBTD, 2021](#)). With specific elaborations, it is mentioned that the tourism enterprise in West Bengal includes inbound tour operators, inter and intra-state domestic tour operators, MICE tour operators, cruise tour operators, adventure tour operators, travel agents making offline and online arrangements of travel-related services for tourists visiting West Bengal and tourist transport operators for sightseeing facilities within West Bengal ([Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, 2021](#)).

Therefore, dealing with challenges and scopes for the small and medium tourism entrepreneurs in the study area at this time is a new area of research that will contribute to such global or regional crises.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Until the pre-pandemic period, experts believed that the digitalization of tourism would further displace traditional offline travel houses from the tourist market, and tour development would be designed according to the parameters set individually by many organizations ([Nikolskaya *et al.*, 2019](#)).

The recent pandemic has redirected the priorities for developing and operating travel agency businesses worldwide ([Obrenovic *et al.*, 2020](#); [Lee *et al.*, 2021](#)). As the restrictions are easing out and situations improve during this post-pandemic session, various countries have started reorganizing the tourism sector ([Assaf & Scuderi, 2020](#); [Deb & Nafi, 2020](#)), though varying worldwide concerning strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Around the world, considerable attention is given to the prospects for developing micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the tourism economy, but very little relevant research evidence has been found so far ([Lynch *et al.*, 2000](#); [Kirsten *et al.*, 2010](#); [Arcese *et al.*, 2021](#)). This research is more relevant during the global crisis when the tourism industry may transform into a new global economic order ([Sharma *et al.*, 2021](#); [Deshmukh *et al.*, 2020](#)). Many countries have yet to introduce a strategic plan and policy guidelines for micro, small, and medium tourism enterprises ([Kim, C., 2004](#)), and the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated revisiting this policy. This unusual outlook during these critical spaces for recovery from the pandemic advocates a micro-level business approach, a catalyst in building a resilient tourism sector ([Kumar *et al.*, 2022](#)).

This study investigates offline domestic and inbound small tourism service providers' perspectives of the present travel trade at the back-drop of urban-peripheral settings of different issues, challenges, and prospects as desired in many studies ([Nilsson *et al.*, 2005](#); [Arcese *et al.*, 2021](#)) and that too with a completely new orientation amidst COVID-19 outbreak through a semi-structured questionnaire, designed for owners-managers ([Alonso *et al.*, 2020](#); [Alonso *et al.*, 2021](#); [Alonso *et al.*, 2022](#)).

Following are the *research questions* raised in front of owner-managers during the interview.

1. What crisis did the family-operated travel business firms face during the pandemic?
2. What strategies did the family-owned travel agencies adopt to manage their business during the pandemic?
3. What were the barriers to the recovery of these travel agency businesses?
4. How do travel agencies envisage their business in the future?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study area and sample collection

In this study, tourism service providers comprise tour operators, travel agents, tourist transport operators, and adventure tour operators specified by the Government of India recently ([Ministry of Tourism, 2020](#)), and they are based in West Bengal, representing both urban and peripheral settings as recommended by contemporary researchers in this field ([Getz *et al.*, 2005](#); [Arcese *et al.*, 2021](#)). The members chosen in this study are active members of the Travel Agents Associations of Bengal (TAAB). Also, the minimum requirement of annual turnover for these travel houses is 20,00,000 or above and situated in the urban areas or specified areas or backward areas (of North Bengal districts, Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, and

blocks under Sundarban areas of North-South 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas respectively) (Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, 2022). The firms under this study are experienced and transgenerational tourism service providers and tourist transport service providers only. Startups are excluded as they lack experience and operate within a small domain of tourism (Ismail *et al.*, 2019; Baggio & Valeri, 2020).

This investigation uses purposive sampling to identify owners cum respondents with whom to conduct qualitative interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The respondents were consciously chosen to present heterogeneous opinions. They were selected based on the criteria of owning and operating as domestic and inbound tourism service providers for at least ten years, incorporating 7-8 years of experience before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because experts agreed that owners or leaders are imperative and essential to small businesses and argued that small business failures can be connected to a lack of leadership (Beaver, 2003; Perry, 2001; Vecchio, 2003).

The location of their office premises was accorded the utmost importance to equally represent the small tourism service providers from urban and peripheral areas, as recommended by contemporary researchers (Arcese *et al.*, 2021). A schedule was prepared for the respondents cum owners who were members of TAAB and met the specified criteria of the study. The schedule incorporated questions based on the categorized entrepreneurs' character, vision, relationships, wisdom, and inspiration to create personal and organizational meaning amidst this post-COVID-19 crisis (Ohlhaber, M.S., 2019).

Data analysis and research tools

The semi-structured questionnaire incorporated open-ended questions facilitated by the interviewer to allow meaningful responses (Alonso *et al.*, 2020; Alonso *et al.*, 2021; Alonso *et al.*, 2022). Regarding the website of the (Travel Agents Association of Bengal (TAAB), 2022), there were more than 200 members representing different chapters of West Bengal. Out of the total 107 available addresses and contact numbers of the members on the Travel Agents Association of Bengal (TAAB) website, 54 were active members, and 53 were allied members, respectively. Among the available 54 active members, 40 were from Kolkata, and 22 were running small family-owned businesses. All the owners were contacted over the telephone for the appointment, and 20 were interested. Finally, 15 owners appeared for the extensive thematic interview. The interview took place during January 2022.

The reason for choosing a qualitative study was that no similar study had been conducted so far in this area after the COVID-19 pandemic in Kolkata. A thorough, in-depth inquiry with a schedule was conducted as this approach is the most suitable while investigating new research areas and is feasible when the sample size is small (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2013; Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016). The face-to-face interviews lasted 40 minutes on average. Thematic analysis was used to explore the interview findings. The most rigorous use of thematic analysis in tourism research has been its application to interpreting written documents such as interview transcripts (Walters, 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings from the extensive thematic interview to illuminate the literature's outcome. These views are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Views of Tour Operators

Name of Tour Operators & Location	Contact person with designation	Views
Zenith Holidays, Kolkata	Shrabanti Ghosh, Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The tourism and hospitality industry was hit hard by COVID-19. Most travel agencies and tour operators were not getting any clients as the clients canceled most of the tour packages. Most of our country's population has yet to be vaccinated, restricting outbound and domestic tourism.
Riya Travels, Kolkata	Ali Akbar, asst. Manager,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government policies must change regarding financial packages, support, or relaxation to boost tourism during this challenging period. Concern about the uncertain condition of the tourism industry in that crisis period.
Nil Nirjone Resort, Burdwan	Pratap Chandra, Owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The devastating effect of this prolonged lockdown was that travel houses were bound to retrench most of their employees for that period, and 40% to 50% of them moved to other businesses to survive. With the passion for tourists, favorable government policy, and coordinated efforts of all the travel houses, the tourism and hospitality industry will be revamped soon.
Himalayan Travels, Siliguri	Akash Nandi, Owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There should be more emphasis on empowering customers to choose destinations, participate in e-commerce, and find new routes,

		eventually producing new business.
Mithi travels, Siliguri	Sreyashi Chatterjee, Proprietor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It mentioned two types of travel agents, one with their car service and another without, mentioning the extra maintenance and staff cost to be borne by the owned car service travel houses. She insisted on introducing some remedial measures as part of the guest confidence-building strategy, like proper car sanitization, staff with proper safety kits, and providing contactless delivery as much as possible.
Tibet Travels, Darjeeling	Mr.Harka Bahadur Pradhan, Owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He explained travel restrictions and odd-even rules post-lockdown, hugely affecting the business. He also hopes it will return to its normal position soon.
Duranto Travels, Kolkata	Mr. Aninda Bose, owner (Member of TAAB, Owner-Manager)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He stated that during COVID-19, it was hard for tourism houses to maintain the break-even point. Only a few of the workforce were retained. As the purchasing power of the tourists has been reduced, much focus needs to be given to the nominal packaging rate. To maintain the service quality, profit can be sacrificed for the time being so that tour packages can be offered at minimum price to enhance a customer pull for the future.
MK haj & umrah travel Pvt.Ltd, Kolkata	Mr. Junaid, Owner (Member of TAAB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customized and discounted packages were made for tourists to attract their interest in traveling. International tourism, such as haj and pilgrim travel, travel for wellness, and medical tourism, was greatly affected as vaccination and isolation rules differ in various countries. To make the tour safer and more secure for tourists, various insurance, medical facilities, and health packages will be included in the travel packages.
Pushpak Tours & Travels, Durgapur	Mr. Sukhen Poddar, Owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Travel agencies nationwide are trying to educate the masses about the necessity of vaccination and new COVID rules and regulations through digital and print media promotion. More cooperation and coordination among tour operators are vital for tourism growth, especially during challenging epidemics, pandemics, recessions, and depression.
Avijan Tourism, Berhampore	Mr. Gobinda Das, Owner (Member of TAAB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The tourism and hospitality industry was hit hard by COVID-19. At this stage, as a survival and growth strategy, it was advised to sacrifice the profit margin to some extent by providing some extra facilities, mainly food, transport, and accommodation, at a reduced rate.
Avisari Holidays, Kolkata	Mr. Avik Jana, Owner (Member of TAAB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health insurance measures can be applied to the tour plan to safeguard tourists from health-related travel problems like epidemics or pandemics. Locals of a particular tourist spot need to maintain their roles properly to build tourists' confidence in the destination.
Baba Loknath Tourist Centre, Canning	Mr. Newton Sarkar, Owner (Member of TAAB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage tourists to visit a particular destination, the role of all the stakeholders is to be aligned. More government measures for the boosting of tourism need to be taken.
Barama Tourist Service, Ahmadpur	Mr. Manas Kumar Chatterjee, Owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proper knowledge or training must be given to locals of the host country or city about the development of themselves and their city from the tourists' money inflow. Rates of accommodation, food, transport, and other tourist-related products and services need to be fixed so that they do not affect tourists' affordability.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the tourism industry, leading to cancellations and layoffs. Participants emphasized the need for government support and policy changes, implementing safety measures to build guest confidence, and offering affordable packages while aligning stakeholders' efforts for tourism revival.

Based on the views expressed by respondents, here are four prevalent themes after analysis:

1. Impact of COVID-19 on the tourism and hospitality industry:

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the tourism and hospitality industry.
- Travel agencies and tour operators faced cancellations and a lack of clients due to travel restrictions and concerns.

- The prolonged lockdown resulted in employee layoffs and some travel agencies transitioning to other businesses for survival.
2. Government policies and financial support:
- Participants expressed the need for government policies to change and provide financial packages, support, or relaxation to boost the tourism industry during the crisis.
 - They emphasized the importance of coordinated efforts between the government and travel houses to revive the industry.
3. Guest confidence building and safety measures:
- Participants highlighted the importance of implementing remedial measures to build guest confidence.
 - Measures such as proper sanitization, staff equipped with safety kits, and contactless delivery were suggested.
 - The inclusion of health insurance and safety measures in travel packages was also mentioned.
4. Affordability and stakeholder alignment:
- Participants discussed maintaining tourists' affordability by temporarily sacrificing profit margins and offering discounted packages.
 - Stakeholders, including locals and all tour operators, were seen as crucial in building confidence in specific destinations and aligning efforts to encourage tourism.
 - Proper training and knowledge sharing among locals were suggested to ensure the host city's or country's development from tourist inflows.

These themes highlight the challenges faced by the tourism and hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of government policies and financial support, the importance of guest confidence building and safety measures, and the need for affordability and stakeholder alignment to promote tourism.

CONCLUSION

India's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) position is the second largest in the world, but the conditions of these MSMEs are unpredictable after the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary purpose of this article is to investigate the current mindset of small family business owners in tourism during the present crisis, strategies adopted, and barriers to recovery in the urban and backward/rural areas of West Bengal in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the objective, the methodology adopted is a qualitative research approach. The data for the research is collected through a semi-structured telephone interview with a prior appointment interview from the 13 family-owned tour operators and travel agency businesses in the study area. All the respondents shared their pathetic business conditions during COVID-19 when the tourism and hospitality industry was affected miserably. They also suggested remedial measures for revamping the industry with the support of all the stakeholders like government, tourists, society, etc.

Though we have tried our best to make our study more impactful, there are always some limitations that provide opportunities for future research. One limitation of our study is that we have considered only those articles written in English, so some valuable articles in other languages may be left out of our study. Second, we adopted a qualitative study with a few respondents. So, a quantitative study with a larger sample size can be done to have a more impactful outcome. Lastly, our study only covers travel agents and tour operators from West Bengal, so the research will become more effective by considering a broad study area like the entire eastern region or the country.

Theoretical implication

Though COVID-19 and its effect on the hotel and tourism industry at a large have acquired significant attention in the hospitality and tourism study (Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020; Batabyal *et al.*, 2021; Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021), to the best of our knowledge the perspectives of small domestic and inbound travel agencies and tour operators on COVID-19 pandemic has not been pointed out before the present study. The present crisis of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) in the tourism sector amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, strategies adopted by tour operators and travel agencies to overcome the uncertain yet unavoidable situation, barriers to recovery in the tourism industry, and how to overcome the barriers are discussed in the study through a semi-structured interview with 13 family-owned tour operators and travel agency businesses in the study area.

Practical implication

The unique practical contribution of this study involves identifying the factors that the MSME travel and tourism experts considered crucial but were not empirically validated before the present literature. Through a qualitative study method, this paper explores the viewpoint of small, domestic, and inbound travel agencies and tour operators on the COVID-19 pandemic in West Bengal, India. The number of India's Micro, Small, and medium enterprises (MSME), especially in the

travel and tourism sector, is enormous, but the conditions of these houses are unpredictable after the COVID-19 pandemic. The problems faced by the tourism industry amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the guest mindset of traveling, and the revamping strategies of this sector in the post-pandemic era have been pointed out by the owners or managers of those travel houses in their interviews. Our results highlight the importance of all stakeholders' support, proper vaccination awareness programs, maintaining proper hygiene standards in the hotel, and including various health and insurance packages in the tour. The present study also mentioned the need for favorable central and local government support, financial packages, and relaxation of rules and regulations to boost tourism during difficult times. Hence, we suggest that academicians and industry professionals note the study's findings and implement them so that small family-operated tour operators and travel agencies can develop survival and growth strategies amidst this post-COVID-19 era.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Study conception–Debasish Batabyal, Yashwant Singh Rawal; Draft manuscript preparation- Debasish Batabyal, Namrata Chakraborty, Analysis, and interpretation – Yashwant Singh Rawal, Pratim Chatterjee. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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