



Women Entrepreneurship in Travel and Tourism Industries: A Study on Opportunities and Challenges during Pandemic Covid-19 in West Bengal and Assam

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Abstract. Travel and Tourism Industry is an important contributor to world economy. As per WTTC's Economic Impact 2019 report, India's Travel & Tourism GDP contribution grew by 4.9%, which was third highest after China and Philippines. Entrepreneurship is always recognized practice in tourism industry as it encourages in creative freedom and accepting challenges. Women plays very important role in this industry. Their contributions are not only restricted to employees, but also equally in business and entrepreneurship. The present study has been conducted to understand the opportunities and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in this field. Due to outbreak of pandemic Covid 19, the travel and tourism industry has been highly affected. Some of the challenges faced by entrepreneur are non-availability of finance, pressure of domestic responsibilities, stiff competition, problems pertaining to expansion/diversification, less scope for diversification, requirement of professional expertise, lack of guidance, direction and government support etc. This paper studies the revival strategies taken up by Durga and Bihu and infers how they focus on few priority areas like maximizing use of technology in the tourism sector; promote sustainability, going green and foster partnerships to enable tourism to survive in times of Covid 19. It is also important for the entrepreneurs to follow current trends tourism trends in response to consumer behavior, especially after the corona virus pandemic. Both these entrepreneurs have initiated new concepts like 'satiations', short trips taking extra care for safe travels to not only revive their businesses but also do well during this pandemic time.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Travel and tourism industry, Pandemic covid- 19, Revival Strategies.

1. Introduction

To have an inclusive and overall growth of a nation, it is inevitable to promote women's economic empowerment. According to Brush and Cooper (2012) women businesses is one of the fastest growing entrepreneurial populations in the world. Women have significant contributions to innovation, employment and wealth creation in all economies. According to Heilman and Chen (2003), women entrepreneurship is growing at double the rate of men, and their growth rate of employment and revenue has outpaced the economy. Among various industries women entrepreneurship is growing fast in travel and tourism sector. Travel and Tourism Industry is an important contributor to world economy. As per World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC) Economic Impact 2019 report, India's Travel & Tourism GDP contribution grew by 4.9%, which was third highest after China and Philippines. India's travel & tourism sector contributed US\$121.9 billion or 4.7% to the total GDP. The sector provides employment to 31,785,200 people and accounted for 7.3% of the total jobs in 2020. Despite the pandemic, in 2020, international visitors spent Rs. 890.7 billion, while domestic visitors spent Rs. 7201.4 billion on travel (WTTC Economic Impact Report, 2020). The sudden outbreak of the novel corona virus Covid-19 had a major impact on travel and tourism industry worldwide. Asia and the pacific saw an 82% decrease in foreign tourist arrivals from January-October 2020. The Middle East recorded a 73% decline, while Africa saw a 69% drop in first ten months of 2020. Both Europe and America witnessed a decline by 68% during this period.

Background of the Study: A case study has been conducted with two women entrepreneurs in travel and tourism industry but situated at two different locations i.e. West Bengal and Assam. A travel business entrepreneur, Durga, based in Kolkata, West Bengal deals specifically in International Tours and caters to middle class section of people. In 2011, Durga, a travel entrepreneur from Kolkata started her journey with an initial capital of Rs. 1 lakh to cater to that section of people who have low budgets but aspires to travel abroad. The business tag line "Alpo takay swapno Purna" i.e. fulfill your dreams with little money described it all. Durga with no formal training in travel and tourism sector specializes in group tours, particularly for elderly and retired. It offers lucrative packages for people travelling to UK, Europe, Thailand and Bangkok. Elderly people travelling abroad are given special care and it is ensured that a person is appointed to accompany and supervise the whole tour. The Company's key Strength is its ability to give personalized packaged excursions at a reasonable cost. Packages included services starting from booking tickets, visas, airport pickup drop, lodging and meals etc. Care was taken to each and every need of customers so that they feel homely and travel with comfort. On the other hand Bihu, an entrepreneur based in Assam expertise in domestic travel and tourism. Bihu started her business with an initial capital of Rs.2, 00,000 and also holds diploma in travel and tourism. Assam, a treasure trove of natural beauty and diverse history, is one of the least explored regions in the country, lending it an immaculate, untouched aura that is sure to allure one. A land of wild forests, mighty rivers, and acres and acres of tea plantations, Assam, located in North East India, has a breath-taking landscape and is known to be one of the top biodiversity hotspots in the entire world. Bihu takes the advantage of this beauty

of Assam and explores its various unexplored destinations to always offer something new to its customers. It not only focuses on sustainable tourism but also offers customized packages for women, elderly -and other people with a special emphasis on mental relaxation and changing concept to travel therapies. All the destinations are carefully and wisely chosen so that it provides peace and mental relaxation to those who wants to take a break from their hectic schedules and relax in the lap of the nature.

Objective of the Study: The present study has been conducted to understand the opportunities and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in this field.

- Opportunities and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the field of travel and tourism
- To study the business strategies adopted by these women entrepreneurs during the worst affected pandemic times to revive their business and do well.
- To study government policies to support and boost travel and tourism industry.

Primary Challenges of the business: For the tourism industry to preserve its dynamic model in terms of wealth creation and employment, it is essential to take some measures – to guarantee quality services and continue to improve people’s lives. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to identify the challenges that the sector is facing and most importantly, what tourism businesses must do to overcome them. Some of the challenges are – non-availability of finance, pressure of domestic responsibilities, stiff competition, and problems pertaining to expansion/diversification, less scope for diversification, requirement for professional expertise, lack of guidance, direction and government support, seasonal nature of employment, lack of reliable and fixed income, definite compulsion to earn profits within short span, and lack of mobility. Fasci and Valdez (1998) and Birley (1989) suggest that due to multiple responsibilities women can devote less time to business than their male counterparts. Having primary domestic responsibilities for their children, home and other older dependent family members only few women can devote full time and energy to her business (Starcher, 1996). Over the years, it has been observed that women’s business networks are poorly developed as social assets yet effective networking can provide significant advantages for women entrepreneurs by helping to provide a competitive edge in the business (Miller et al,2007).

Challenges due to covid-19: In 2020, total contribution of the sector to India’s GDP declined by 36.3% over 2019. The main reason for this decline was mainly due to international and domestic travel restrictions, lockdowns and social distancing measures implemented by the Government of India. In 2020, the sector also recorded a 20.8% decline in employment. According to United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, The global pandemic, the first of its scale in a new era of interconnectedness, has put 100 million jobs at risk, many in micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises that employ a high share of women, who represent 54 percent of the tourism workforce. 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs are at risk. The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) forecasts a loss of 1.5 to 2.8 per cent of global GDP. All these factors had a great negative impact on the business of both entrepreneurs Durga and Bihu. During complete lockdown their businesses were reduced to almost nil. Sudden cancellation of flights and closing of train lines resulted in huge loss for the business.

TABLE 1. Bihu’s annual turnover and number of full time employees during last three years from 2018-19 to 2020-21.

Year	Annual Turnover (Rs.)	Number of Employees
2018-19	1,34,00,000	7
2019-20	1,10,00,000	7
2020-21	67,00,000	3

Source: Primary data

From the above data, it is observed that the company had to suffer a sharp decline in turnover during 2020-21 from Rs.1.1 crores to Rs. 67 lakhs. The total number of full time employees was reduced from 7 to 3.

TABLE 2. Durga’s turnover and number of full time employees during last three years from 2018-19 to 2020-21.

Year	Annual Turnover	Number of Employees
2018-19	1,99,99,951	4
2019-20	73,69,814	4
2020-21	10,00,000	1

Source: Primary data

Durga’s business too witnessed a sharp decline in annual turnover during 2020-21 mainly due to travel restrictions in many countries and safety concerns after the sudden outbreak of novel corona virus covid-19.

2. Revival Strategies

- It was remarkable that during a short span once the complete lockdown was lifted both these entrepreneurs with their changed business strategies started reviving their business.
- Both these entrepreneurs have initiated new concepts like ‘satiations’, short trips taking extra care for safe travels to not only revive their businesses but also do well during this pandemic time.
- Since there were travel restrictions outside a State with most of the air and train lines closed, both these entrepreneurs started focusing on small trips which can be easily travelled by roadways.
- Safe travel was primary concern
- During complete lockdown people’s mental health was affected so short road trips were like oxygen for them.

- Bihu's new project exploring Molai Forest and offering home stay there has been a hit.

3. Government policies to Revive Tourism Industry

To boost the domestic travel and tourism sector, the government of India has launched several schemes through various ministries from 2020 to 2021. The Ministry of tourism has outlined policies to support new tourism products such as development and promotion of caravans and caravan camping parks. To support this sector, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has introduced a new scheme- All India Tourist Vehicles Authorization and permit Rules, 2021. Through this scheme, a tourist vehicle operator can receive an "All India Tourist Authorization/ Permit" online within 30 days of submitting an application. On June 28, 2021, the Union Finance Minister announced relief packages to revive tourism in the country which includes financial support for Travel and Tourism Stakeholders (TTS) and registered Tourist Guides under which a loan upto Rs. 10 lakh can be received by the eligible TTS. The government will be providing guarantees for these loans. The Indian government will provide free visas to first 5 lakh tourists. These measures are expected to infuse the required liquidity to support in operations in near future. Assam government is making efforts to revive the Covid-hit tourism industry by lifting restrictions from 1st Nov, 2021 in lieu of improved pandemic situation. It is also making effort to ensure that the maximum number of people gets vaccinated. The Chief Minister of Assam has announced a relief package which will provide Rs 2 lakh each to 142 tour operators and Rs. 25000 each to 605 guides to overcome losses due to the pandemic. (The Economic Times, Sept, 2021).

4. Inferences and Teaching Lessons

According to World Travel & Tourism Council, travel and tourism industry generates around 10% of the global GDP. It could add 12 trillion dollars to global growth by 2025 (McKinsey Global Institute Report, 2020). It has evolved to become one of the fastest growing sectors around the globe. Indian tourism sector has the prospective to drive economic growth, and it also has the power not only to elevate women out of below-poverty-line but also provide dignified sustainable employment. A positive trend is noticed in women entrepreneurship in travel and tourism. Certain factors have propelled this- like government support, stepping up women education, desire to be economically independent and so on. Women has lagged in terms of profits, market share, contribution, sustainability etc. because of lack of empowerment, confidence, gender-centric factors, lack of internal/external support and cooperation, women entrepreneurs are not confident about their performance. Women entrepreneurship in the field of travel and tourism sector is still an untapped area in India. Government should focus on establishing necessary infrastructure such as women centric incubator models at college, university, industry and government levels. It should provide finance to women for start ups in this area. The present study has shown that successful business models are always flexible and changes with circumstances. In new normal, people prefer to choose destinations that are less crowded. Home stays are becoming more popular in current times. They are perfect fit for vacationers looking for mental peace hence encourage women entrepreneurs to partner with them and also help in promoting local culture and savory.

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