

Traveling preferences in Madhya Pradesh post COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — Travelling preferences and expectations play a dominant role in influencing tourists' decision-making and choice of destination. Tourism sector is undergoing recovery from COVID-19, showing strong signs of change with the surge in domestic tourism in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. People's priorities and expectations post-COVID-19 are going through continuous reformations under several socioeconomic and psychological makeup. Therefore, the research is conducted with the prerogative of understanding the traveling preferences of tourists post-COVID-19 towards the choice of tourism products.

Method — The research follows a descriptive cum explanatory research design to study tourism prospects in Madhya Pradesh, known as Tiger state of India, which is popular for wilderness indigenous or heritage tourism. The data is collected through close-ended questionnaire from prominent tourist locations of Madhya Pradesh during 3-4 months of peak season and analyzed through descriptive statistics.

Result — The study reflects the expectations of tourists concerning factors such as safety, hygiene, public works, quality of services, etc which affect their decision for choosing a destination and likelihood areas of expenditure.

Contribution — The study is a unique account of research work on prospects of domestic tourism in Madhya Pradesh post-COVID-19. It fills the existing gap in the literature and will be facilitative for further studies and marketers alike for bringing resilience to the sector, understanding tourist's preferences after any health or national emergencies.

Keywords: domestic tourism, post-COVID-19, tourists' preferences



INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been the sunrise industry for tourism's socio-economic contribution to development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council report, tourism generates about 10% employment with 319 million jobs globally equating to 10.4% of GDP set to grow by 3-5% in the next decade (Vedapradha et al., 2017; WTTC, 2019). It creates a multiplier effect in the economy (Raju, 2016) with forward and backward linkages in local economy bringing substantial inclusive economic growth (Mishra & Padha, 2010; Athma & Nalini, 2017).

United Nations launched its "Tourism and Poverty Alleviation" at the World Summit in 2002 naming it "Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP)" (Ashley, Boyd, & Goodwin, 2000; DFID, 1999). However, creating a spill over effect with mounting problems of environmental depletion, destruction of biodiversity and cultural dilution apart from unequal economic opportunities (Devi & Upadhyay, 2020; Mihalic, 2020; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2020). Indian Tourism industry is thriving with continuously growing foreign tourists with a robust growth rate of 5.93%, boosting 33% of foreign exchange earnings (Sivakami & Bindu, 2020) and economic opportunities to overcome regional disparities fulfilling UN Sustainable Development Goals (Kaur & Sarin, 2016).

The government has developed dedicated tourism policy framework and budgetary allowance for promoting domestic tourism products from wildlife, adventure, religious, historic, cultural, or many more in the last decade (Arunmozhi & Panneerselvam, 2013; Rallan, n.d.; Mary, n.d.). It aims to facilitate regional economic development bridging the economic and technical divide, (Kifworo et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2021) catering to their preferences attributed to lean marketing strategies promoting niche tourism areas like wildlife, ecotourism, wellness, etc. segmenting market based on diverse identified preferences (Carr et al., 2016). It furnishes triple bottom line (Sharma et al., 2019; Joseph, 2016) creating civic infrastructures, access to more information and communication resources (Pandey et al., 2014; Mir, 2019), but facing numerous operational, structural and socio-cultural challenges (Bhandari & Bijlwan, 2019). Engagement of local community in policy making and execution level may benefit to people at large (Kebede & Zelelew, 2020).

Madhya Pradesh blessed with immense scenic beauty, forest cover, rich culture and religious sentiments is leveraging numerous tourism opportunities promoting the unexplored locations. Prominent advertising campaigns, such as: *MP ajab hai, gajab hai*, etc, dedicated financial or marketing efforts and assistance for developing accessibility and functionality through world class civil works are actively worked upon (Patricia et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2014). The

state incorporations Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Board (MPSTB) and Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (MPSTDC) has taken numerous initiatives for tourism development bagging the “Best Tourism State Award” by government of India. The tourism policy amendment in 2016 aims to support local economy by management and promotion of niche areas under the label of Temple & Tigers, Nature & Heritage and so on using technological aids (Jain, n.d.) that led to double growth of tourist arrivals to 15.05 crores (Pandey et al., 2014; Das & Chatterjee, 2015), but marred with poor infrastructure and connectivity with non standardized quality and price of products (Mishra & Sajnani, n.d.). The sector is undergoing a constant resurrection for building the physical, technical and structural innovative support systems with Public Private Partnership (PPP), government intervention for speedier approvals and incentivising brown or greenfield projects under state nodal agency Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (MPSTDC) with Tourism Policy 2016 (Venkateswari et al., 2018; Mary, n.d.).

Figure 1. Best tourists' circuits in Madhya Pradesh



Source: www.traveltriangle.com

According to [Lonely Planet \(2015\)](#), it is acknowledged as the Tiger state of India. The state plans to promote ecotourism (sustainability) adventure activities (like treks, climbing, camping, paragliding, hot air ballooning, etc) under Madhya Pradesh Forest (Entertainment & Wildlife Experience) Rule 2015 with greater involvement of the local community.

Tourists' decision making is influenced by several personality attributes, preferences and expectations with available factors-civil works, amenities, tourism activities, socio-cultural factors, and pricing ([Cuculeski et al., 2016](#); [Cohen et al., 2014](#)). According to [Paul & Roushan \(n.d.\)](#), it can be attributed to a continuous interaction of personal attributes (like age, income, gender, marital status, or family) and expectations with technological ([Buhalis, 2019](#)) or physical elements like attractions, public facilities, activities, or prices. Destination branding is a delightful experience of a tourist's i.e. a mixed bag of psychological and physiological deliverables ([Vuuren & Slabbert, 2011](#)). It is conceptualized as a model of antecedents and consequences analyzed for the influence of marketing strategies, quality of service, attitude of community and so on for creating loyalty ([Dahiya et al., 2020](#)). Destination connectivity, easy travel policies, safety and cleanliness are few most important factors for attracting tourists while poor infrastructure, accessibility, and low promotion campaigns as threats ([Kapure et al., 2020](#)). According to [Kumar & Soni \(n.d.\)](#), destination marketing plays a strategic role in understanding the customer experiences, expectations for creating distinctive marketing campaigns, integrative policy framework and communication strategies catering different customer needs ([Gohil, 2015](#); [Hristoforova et al., 2019](#)).

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 triggered unprecedented job losses and revenues in entire Tourism sector. Reports by CARE Ratings projected the sharp decline in Indian Tourism Industry nearly by 40% in 2020 due to COVID-19 with recorded fall in Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) to Rs 56,150 crore, nearly 50% ([Ranasinghe et al., 2020](#); [Gössling et al., 2020a](#)) and cancellations as confirmed by managers ([Bae & Chang, 2021](#); [Fung et al., 2020](#)). Tourists' sentiments and behaviour is hugely transforming with intensity of infection rate and travelling needs. Experts foresee recovery throughout the sector largely depend on domestic tourism demands ([Matiza, 2020](#); [Yusuf et al., 2020](#)). The work from home culture inspired travellers to look forward to domestic hinterlands and natural landscapes like tiger reserves, religious or cultural places and so on for recreation, leisure, and events. Rural hinterlands and wildlife tourism in Madhya Pradesh has been on the list of many tourists' for enjoying the aesthetic beauty amidst the ecological diversity and shared cultural resources without fear of health risk ([Newsome, 2020](#)).

Few researchers have analyzed the post-COVID-19 physiological and behavioural factors that dominate destination selection, however, domestic tourism in Madhya Pradesh is yet unexplored area. Therefore, this study tries to examine preferences and expectations of tourists for their greater role in influencing choice of destination and revisiting plans to tourism destinations in Madhya Pradesh. It will further throw some light on measures undertaken to promote domestic tourism opportunities in Madhya Pradesh.

METHOD

This research is a descriptive and exploratory research undertaking collection of data from both primary and secondary data. Exploratory researches dwells deeper into a new area or perception of measuring or looking at things. The research tries to create an understanding on domestic tourism in Madhya Pradesh and influence of COVID-19 that might govern the changes in future.

This study collects data from tourists or people intending to travel on their preferences and expectations from a destination and products or services from various popular destinations of Madhya Pradesh. It substantiates the study based on other secondary sources published online or offline from websites, UNWTO web portal, newspaper reports, blogs, and research papers. The aforementioned study's data is collected through a well designed and structured questionnaire at the identified tourists' destinations through systematic random sampling.

The data was collected from Bandhavgarh, Kanha, Bhopal, Indore, Gwalior, Khajuraho, Jabalpur, Ujjain, Maheshwar, Chanderi and Orchha during the period November 2021 to February 2022. Approximately 400 respondents were reached out through Google form circulation, out of which 374 are completed ones were received. Being a descriptive study, it elaborates on what is happening and develops detailed account using statistical tools for presenting the data.

The data was analysed statistically using comparative descriptive elements based on gender and marital status to check whether the factors influencing their preference for a destination in the current scenario is similar or different for both the groups. Thus, drawing relevant and reliable information for futuristic vision.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

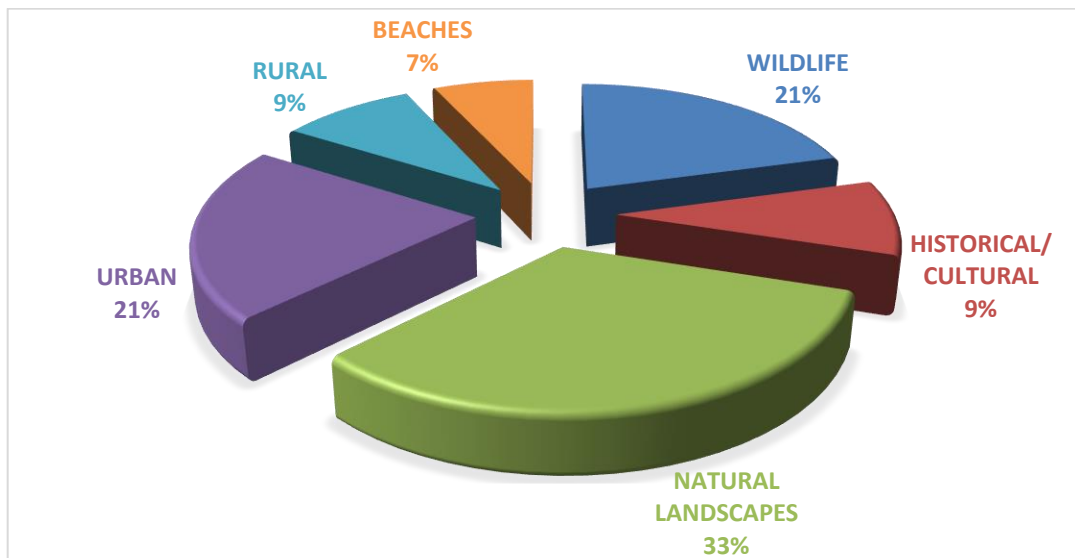
Tourism in the state has been on the growth trajectory in the last decade with continuous efforts of the public entities to boost niche areas along with private investors and stakeholders from the community. According to annual tourism

report 2021-2022, the number of tourists visiting the state post COVID-19 increased from 21,400,693 (January - November 2020) to 24,597,691 tourists in January - November 2021. However, the foreign visitors have declined from 96,916 to 41,302 within the same period, indicating restrictions on international travel and strings attached to it.

Our survey results were evidence of the general trend as a mean score of 1.87 out of 2 with no significant difference in opinion of people of different classes of gender, marital status or age. The increase in domestic tourism within the state has substantially added to surge in domestic tourism activities. A comparison of the two year statistics of destination wise number of tourists in 2020 with 2021 shows a clear escalation in rural tourism and wilderness activities at places like Panna, Bandhavgarh, Khajuraho, Kanha, or Pench rather than populated urban areas for travelling without fear of contracting infection.

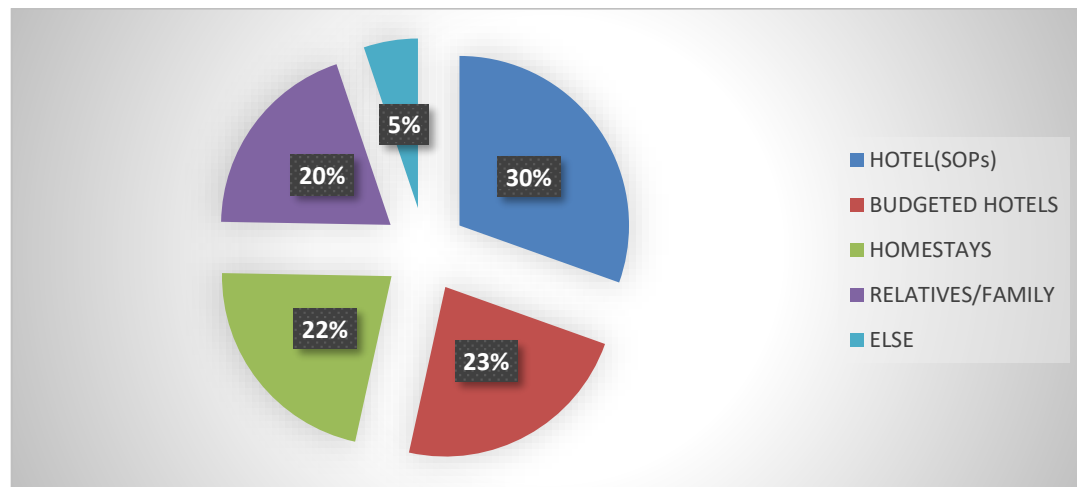
The survey findings substantiate majority of the tourist prefer natural destinations (33% for natural, 21% for wildlife, and 9% for rural) and like to stay at budgeted hotels or home stays following all guidelines for prevention of COVID-19. The choice is mostly influenced by digital medium like website ads, social media, and friends or family.

Figure 2. Preferred destination by respondents



Source: field data (2022)

Figure 3. Preferred place of stay during visit by respondents

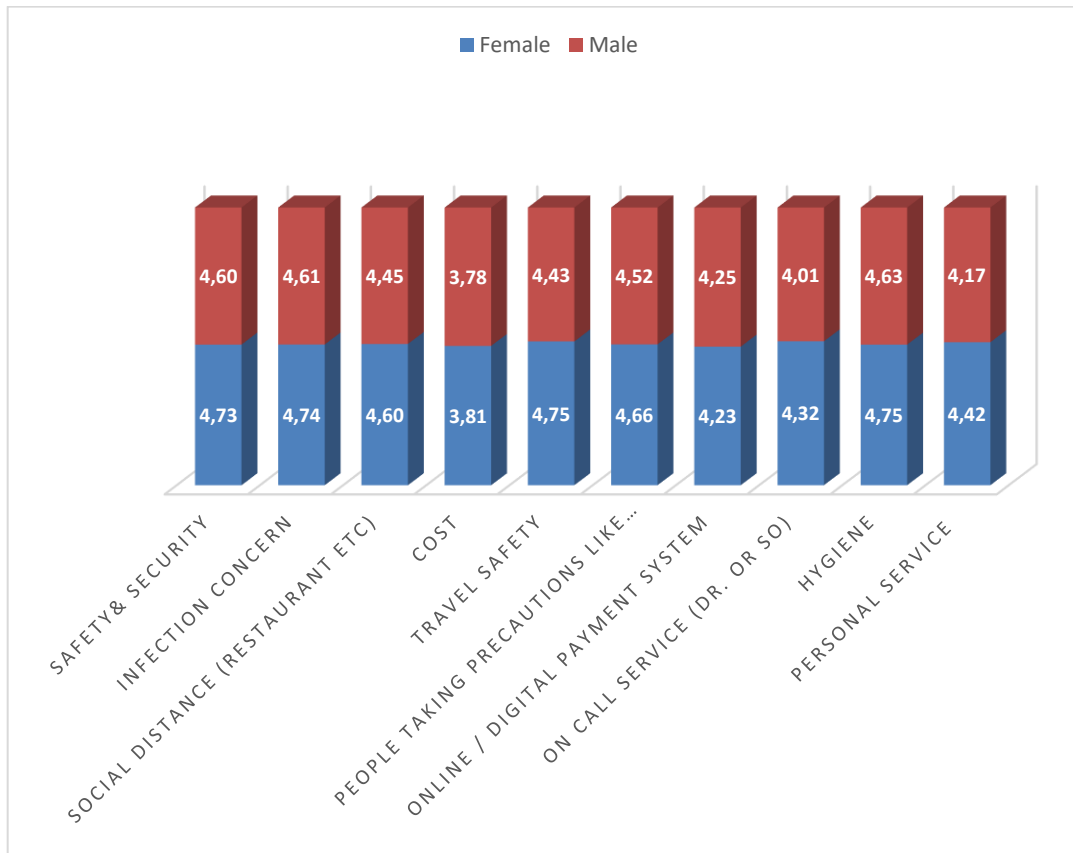


Source: field data (2022)

Tourists' preferences for the choice of destination and services are important features of tourists' behaviour useful for predicting the future trajectory. With current restrictions due to covid-19 affected entire sector, safety, security, and hygiene factors has majorly influenced tourists' preference for destination rather than cost or other tourism attractions or activities in both genders based or marital status-based groups. However, females are more concerned with safety in comparison to male similarly majority married couples are more concern for security or hygiene while singles consider cost and service quality more important (Fig. 5). Females are more concerned and likely to spend more on health, hygiene, and security rather men, who are likely to spend more on convenience and safety of transport (Fig. 6). On the similar lines married couples with or without family are likely to spend more on hygiene or good lodging facility (Fig. 7) while singles are likely to spend more on excursion activities and transport facility (Fig. 8).

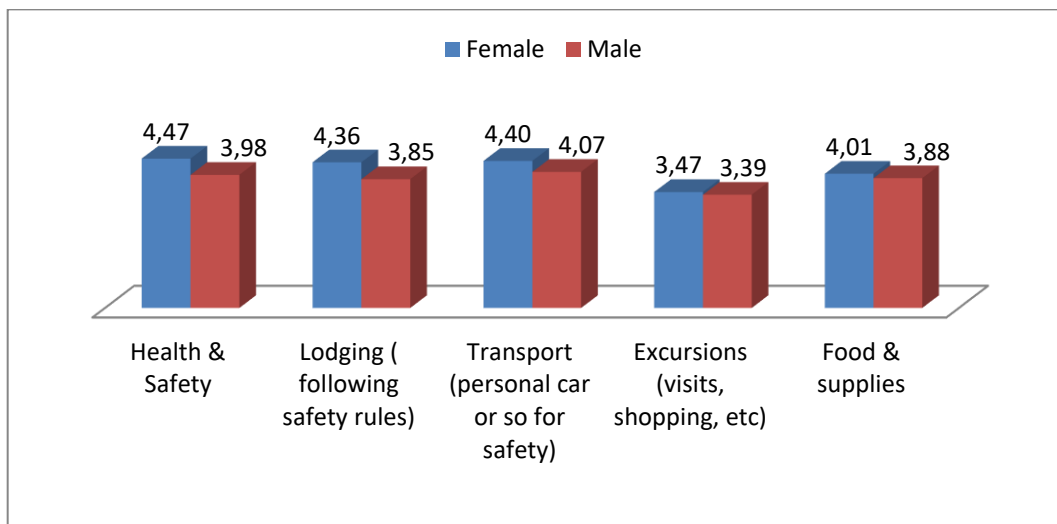
Therefore, the study provides the tour operators, service providers and destination managers with relevant information on qualitative parameters for planning and managing operations based on tourists' changing preferences post covid-19 emphasizing behavioural and psychographic changes based on demographic features. Sanitization and Hygiene (4.67) is being the highest priority amongst all groups of respondents, followed by safety & security during travel or stay (4.65), and precautionary measures taken by service providers, operators, or other people like wearing masks, etc (4.58).

Figure 5. Priority of factors while choosing a travel destination based on gender



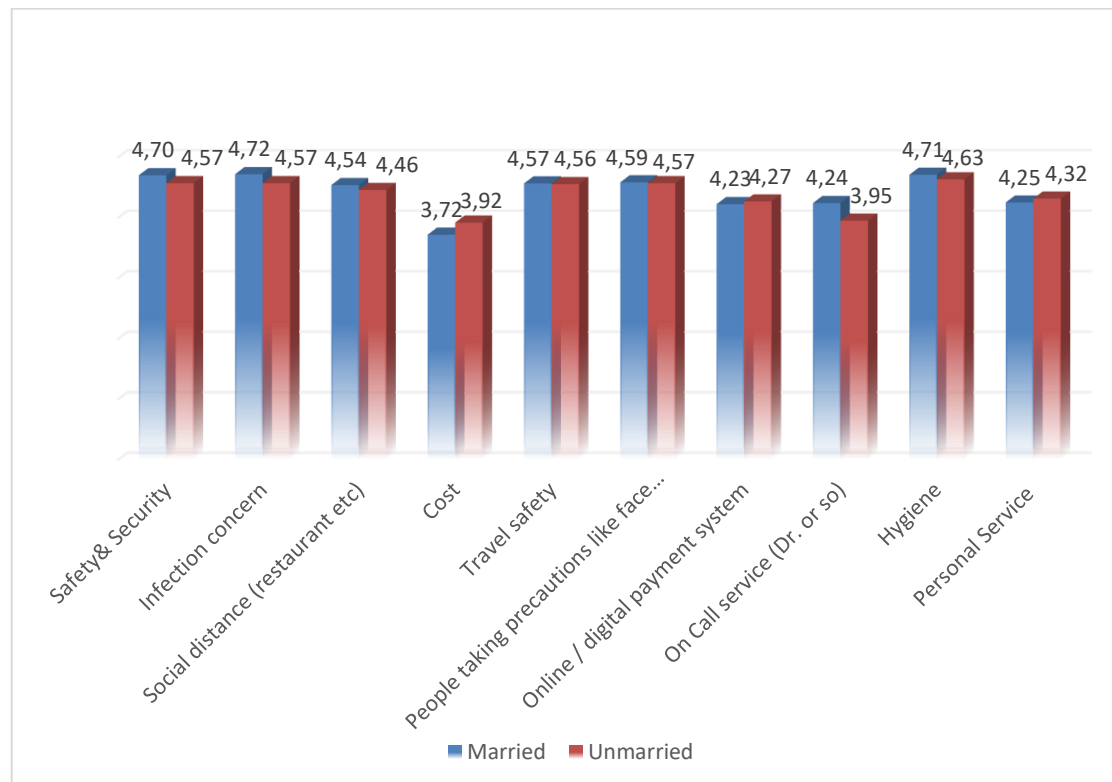
Source: field data (2022)

Figure 6. Factors with likelihood to spend more during travel based on gender



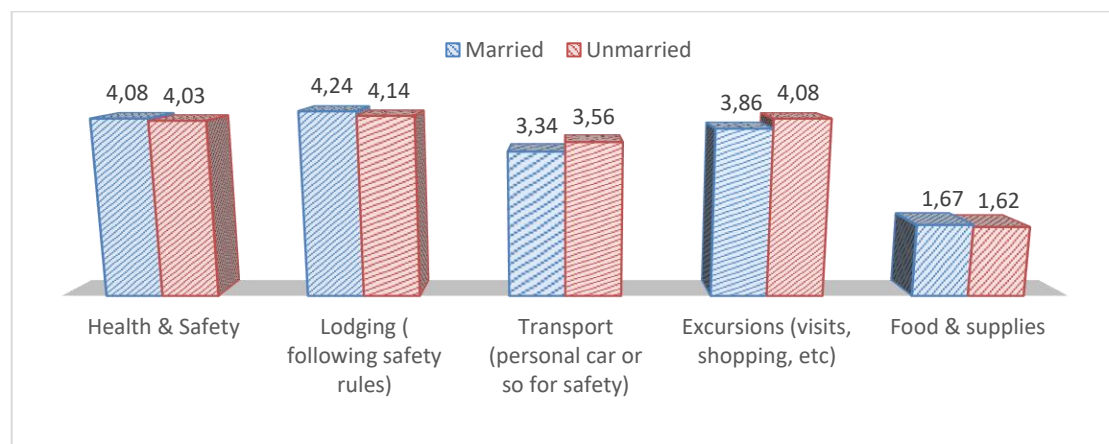
Source: field data (2022)

Figure 7. Priority of factors while choosing a travel destination based on marital status



Source: field data (2022)

Figure 8. Factors with likelihood to spend more during travel based on marital status



Source: field data (2022)

Discussion

Madhya Pradesh known as “The Heart of Incredible India” promotes its exquisite temples, tiger lands and an architectural marvel truly depicts the tagline

“Hindustan ka Dil Dekho” with astonishing campaigns on social media. It plays a significant role in recovery of tourism economics through innovative tourism products or services with far more resilience by converging ICT and local economy to gain mutual benefits. Destination experience hugely depends on many factors such as economic, functional, emotional attributes that integrate environmental, socio-cultural, and behavioural cognitive values of tourists. Pandemic COVID-19 that has resulted in myriad changes leading to several cancellations perceiving risk of infection globally (Gössling et al., 2020b) will bring few permanent shifts in travel preferences and behaviour. Destination managers across are making a continuous effort to understand preferences of travellers to substantiate their offerings combining the multifarious socio-economic forces, tangible and intangible offerings such as: good quality services, infrastructure, healthcare & hygiene assurance, ecological sensitivity (Neuburger & Egger, 2021) and all the stakeholders for a better travel experience.

The study is primarily conducted to understand the travelling preferences of people visiting identified tourists’ Madhya Pradesh destinations to boost domestic tourism sector. Domestic tourism managers strive continuously to for developing tourism destinations offering.

The study's findings suggest that most tourists would like to visit natural landscapes (33%) followed by wildlife sanctuaries or reserves (21%) in Madhya Pradesh.

Most of the travellers with fear of contracting the infection would prefer to stay at a hotel following all standard operating procedures regarding health and hygiene (30%), followed by homestays (22%), and relatives (20%) while visiting any outstation destination. They prefer to travel through personal cars and private taxis rather than public mode of travel.

According to the mean score of collected responses from our primary survey, factors determining the choice of travel destination is primarily influenced by cleanliness & hygiene (4.68), risk of contracting the infection (4.67), followed by safety & security (4.65), following standard operating procedures or precautionary measures like sanitization, wearing masks (4.58), followed by other secondary forces like mode of transport and its safety (4.56), availability of good quality food at hotels, restaurants or eateries etc (4.51), quality of services, politeness of personal (4.28), online or digital payment system (4.24), and lastly by cost (3.79). It indicates that the tourists are more concerned with health safety and hygiene even at premium costs.

The respondents expressed they are most likely to spend more for transport (4.21), lodging (4.18) and safety measures (4.18) to eradicate their chances of contracting the infection or health emergencies. They will enjoy good quality local cuisine (3.94) and indulge in shopping or excursions at mostly crowded tourist spots or shopping (3.42).

Female respondents are more centric towards hygiene (4.75), concern of contracting infection (4.74), safety and hygiene (4.73), followed by quality of service (4.42), and online or digital payment (4.23) and lastly by price (3.8) which is mostly similar to the responses of male population studied. Gender, age and marital status as reported by previous studies have moderated on impact of tourist satisfaction, attractions and accessibility ([Biswas et al., 2020](#)), but female are likely to spend more on travel whether for transport (personal cars or private taxis), lodging, food, hygiene or excursions. They are willing to pay more for sanitizers, masks, social distancing, and other norms.

On the similar lines respondents who are married, most of them (211 of 374) have a high mean score showing their preference for hygiene, safety & security, and concern for infection (4.72), followed by following precautionary measures like sanitization, social distancing or wearing masks (4.59), while unmarried respondents practising the same behaviour with little low scores emphasizing their resilience and adaptability with new normal post COVID-19. Their choice of travel is a complex relationship between earlier known measures like cost (3.92), quality of services and personal (4.32), and digital payment (4.27). Unmarried respondents are likely to spend more on tourists' attractions or excursions, good quality food, and transport, unlike married respondents who are likely to spend more on hygiene and lodging facility.

The above findings substantiate the steps taken by the tourism department of Madhya Pradesh to increase connectivity by roads, air or rail along with attractive incentivised schemes for investors planning to opening and operating lodging facilities with easy regulatory policies. The tourism department is continuously trying to improve facilities and infrastructure at destinations ensuring safety & hygiene, good quality services and trained personnel by local community involvement. The public initiatives (various tourism related programs) for targeted groups–women, physically challenged apart under the new economic policies aims to motivate small bread & breakfast hotels & resorts in rural areas, homestays, and skill development. It advocates a four-stage model for communicating with customers, media, and community reassuring their safety with prevention, preparation, and mitigation by educating and training employees ([Tourism Annual Report of Madhya Pradesh 2021-2022, n.d.](#)). The state has recognised five training and certification centres for youth providing

degree or diploma or certifications every year and marking significant national or international days like tourism week celebration promoting various activities and awareness campaigns to promote unique cultural heritage, aesthetic ecological diversity, and sustainable tourism.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic has been a turning point in the socio-economic landscape of millions of people who were severely impacted worldwide. Tourism sector suffered the most among all other sectors with several lockdowns and closure of national boundaries. The recovery of tourism activity post COVID-19 in the “new normal” as suggested relies on changing travelling preferences and behaviour of people. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the destination managers to understand the same to enhance willingness of tourists to revisit or recommend the destination apart from planning communication strategy for the destination.

The study was conducted in Madhya Pradesh, one of India's most popular tourism destinations and the second largest state. It aims to understand travelling preferences, such as: hygiene, safety, mobility, cost or price, willingness, and likelihood to spend on critical factors like hygiene, travel safety, mobility, lodging, good quality food and more. The results emphasise increased awareness on health hygiene and safety measures wherein majority are concerned over health safety and have fear of contracting infection. It advocates applying ‘adaptive cycle’ thinking to such situations focusing on building safety, health, and hygiene measures to reduce risk perception ([Reddy et al., 2020](#)). They would like to travel to avoid monotony but with more vigilance over safety measures. They are willing to pay more for ensuring higher safety needs during travel, maintaining hygiene and good quality lodging and rest services.

The research adds to available sources for better understanding tourists' perception of destination attributes, risks, and other elements to develop quality infrastructure economically and innovative use of ICT or social media for management of tourism operations and communication engagement.

The results of the study would be helpful destination manager in devising pricing and promotion studies deployed for the new normal. It facilitates developing resilience through collaborative and supportive policy measures at local level to promote domestic tourism opportunities and economic growth. However, the responses may be affected due to time scenario, ethnic or regional views. Destination image and tourism management requires continuous product appraisal, need and resource identification, timely training and certifications of services or services providers in the current era of global dynamism.

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