

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON TOURISM INDUSTRY. A CASE STUDY OF UNION TERRITORY OF LADAKH (INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

The recent outbreak of deadly virus called COVID-19 has posed serious challenges to the whole world, be it to cure or prevent its further spread or to survive with it or to revive the economy from its impact. With no vaccine at present to prevent the deadly virus, the imposition of travel restriction and stay at home orders has caused severe impact on various socio-economic dimensions especially tourism sector. In view of preventing the spread of virus the government of India has imposed a nationwide lockdown which leads to complete stop on travel and tourism. The global or interstate travel has been restricted, people were not allowed to visit any place and almost all the business sectors had to close except the daily or basic needs. This gave a huge shock and setback to the economy of Nation. Ladakh which got the status of Union Territory after the abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019 is not an exception in this crisis and its economy had suffered a lot as the region's major economic contribution depends on tourism and its hospitality sector. The present work aims to identify, investigate and analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector of Ladakh. The present study is based on secondary sources of data which has been obtained from various organisations such as Department of Tourism Jammu and Kashmir, Ministry of Tourism Government of India and Economic Survey of Jammu and Kashmir, various research articles news papers, etc. in order to gain fruitful results. Furthermore, the chapter also puts forth various suggestions and recommendations for the revival and sustainable tourism development in the region.

Keywords: COVID-19, Tourism sector, Lockdown, Services, Economy, Ladakh.

INTRODUCTION

Pneumonia like disease of unknown cause was first reported in Wuhan city of China on 31 December, 2019, later it was named as novel corona virus (COVID-19). It is caused by new corona virus which results into severe respiratory infection and known as SARS-COV2. Patients with this disease show clinical symptoms like dry cough, fever, tiredness and in some serious cases like difficulty in breathing, chest pain and organ failure in some rare cases. The first outbreak of this infectious disease was in China and infected 84,603 number of people out of which 4,645 people died till date (WHO). By the mid of March the virus had transmitted to various continents of the world via global transport mainly through air, following which the world Health Organisation on 11 march 2020 declare it as pandemic. In India the first case was reported on 30th January, 2020, which originated from China. As per the latest statistics of Ministry of Family and Health Welfare Govt. of India, as on 17th June, 2020, more than 350000 people have been infected in India. Indeed, The Union Territory of Ladakh also affected by this virus and reported its first case on 7th March, 2020 with two patients who have returned from Iran. As on June 17th, 2020 the total number of cases rose up to 687, out of which 92 were recovered and reported death of one person. In response to flatten the curve and to safe its citizen from the virus, the government of India announces a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020, which restricted the movement of people, shutdown borders, people had to stay in their homes. It not only affects the daily life of people but also the working of economy as most of industries were shutdown. Working people were not allowed to go to their office, businessman were not allowed to run their business. The outbreak of COVID-19 in the country has a destructive impact on the economy of Ladakh, particularly the tourism and hospitality sector. The tourism and hospitality sector which contribute more than 50 % GDP of Ladakh has suffered a serious losses. As per the hotel association of Leh, bookings from foreign tourists which was a regular feature in March or April have been either cancelled, put on halt or hasn't been any query at all, due to the inter border travel restriction and scare of COVID-19. Earlier by the mid of the year there used to lot of foreign as well as domestic tourists but by mid of 2020, it's hard to find any tourists in the region. All the registered hotel, guest houses and home stays have been closed since the last seasons.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relevant literature related to the COVID-19 and Tourism and hospitality sector is reviewed as follow:

(a) COVID-19 Outbreaks

The outbreak of COVID-19 is considered similar to SARS-CoV, MER-CoV and regarded as zoonotic events which cause severe respiratory illness (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020). It was first detected in Wuhan, China with 41 patients having laboratory confirmed COVID-19 infection and reported to the office of World Health Organisation China on 31 December 2019 (Gossling, *et; al* 2020). It is believed these patients have got virus from the seafood wet animals wholesale market in Wuhan (Bagoch, *et; al*, 2020). As on 30th January 2020, around 7700 cases were reported in China and around 90 cases were reported out of China in different countries (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020). On that day the World Health Organisation declared it as a public health emergency and state that the spread of virus can be curtailed by early detection, isolation, prompt treatment, and vigorous system of contact tracing (Sohrabi, *et; al*, 2020). By 5th March 2020 it has spread across 85 countries (Guo, *et. al.*, 2020), and on 11th March 2020 World Health Organisation declared it as pandemic. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 is not a first pandemic threat that world has observed, there has been different major pandemic outbreaks in twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as in 1918-1920 Spanish Flu which took life of about 100 million people, 1960 HIV/AIDS which leads to death of around 35 million people, 2009 swine flu (influenza) with 284000 deaths. (Hall, *et; al*, 2020).

(b) COVID-19 and Tourism and Hospitality Sector

The hardest hit industry due to COVID-19 outbreak is tourism sector, the virus has affected both the supply and demand of travel. The impact is very massive that the council of world tour and travel has notified that there is risk of losing 50 million jobs in global travel and tourism sector (World Economic Forum). As per the study conducted by Nicola, Alsafi, Sohrabi, Kerwan, Al-Jabir and Agha (2020), the European Tourism Manifesto Alliance highlighted the need of aid and measures to be provided by the government in the form of easy access to loans (shorter-term or medium-term) to mitigate the lack of funds to revive from the losses incurred by various public and private firms in tourism and travel industry in addition found that, due to COVID-19 the Chinese visitors to Vietnam has reduced by 6,44,000 in month of January, 2020 and estimated \$ 5 billion loss in the tourism sector of Vietnam if the pandemic remains in second quarter of 2020. Furthermore, the study by Karim, Hague, Anis and Ulfy (2020) expressed that the outbreak of COVID-19 had a

devastating impact particularly on tourism and hospitality sector of Malaysia as it experienced a situation where different Airlines has to stop their operations, hotel industry has to shutdown their working as per Movement Control Order (MCO). Another study by Hoque, Shikha, Hasanat, Arif and Hamid (2020) provided that emergence of COVID-19 has led to fear of infection in minds of people as virus has emerged as great threat to human life, which results into significant reduction in the tourists activities in china and caused a severe impact on their tourism industry. Furthermore, (Gossling, Scot and Hall, 2020), observed that various travel restrictions and lockdowns has results into significant slowdown in the global tourism as number of flights have dropped by more than half and also the number of passengers have reduced sharply. In addition, the study also highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality sector and found more than 50 % decline in the number of guest in all countries. A report by Norwegian Tourism Organisation NHO Reiseliv (2020) shows that 41 % of business in tourism sector has registered cancellations, 90 % has laid off staff on temporarily basis, 65 % of them has reported difficulties in paying invoices, 63 % of hotels and restaurants has suffered the problem of liquidity. In addition the report also shows that the tourism sector has more impact of COVID-19 compared to other sector.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the present study are:

- (1) To analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism and hospitality sector of Ladakh.
- (2) To study the measures taken by the UT administration to compensate the losses incurred.
- (3) To suggest necessary suggestions and recommendations for recovery and survival of the tourism and hospitality sector from COVID-19.

METHODOLOGY AND DATABASE

The methodological principles adopted for the present analyses is based on secondary sources of data obtained from various govt. and non govt. organisations such as Department of Tourism Jammu and Kashmir, Ministry of Tourism Government of India, Economic Survey of Jammu and Kashmir, United Nations World Tourism Organisation, World Travel and Tourism Council, media publications, articles and research papers. Besides, the interactions were also made with the researchers, students and general public involved in the tourism sector through online platforms and social media.

STUDY AREA

The area of study is Union Territory of Ladakh which is composed of Leh and Kargil districts. The region got the status of Union Territory after the abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019. It is the highest altitude plateau region in India and lies in the north-east region of India, eastern side of Jammu and is flanked on the north by the Karakoram Range and on the south by the great Himalayan range. The Indus River and its major tributaries, the Shyok-Nurba, Chang-Chenmo, Hanle, Zaskar, and Suru-dras rivers, drain the region. Ladakh covers an area of approximately 60,000 square miles (100,000 sq. km) and is situated at an altitude of about 11,350 feet (3,500 m) and some of the surrounding peaks reach heights of 22,500 feet (7,000 m). The region consists of a number of distinct areas (mainly under Indian rule), including the fairly populous main Indus valley, the more remote Zaskar (in the south) and Nubra valleys (to the north over Khardung La, the almost deserted Aksai Chin (under Chinese rule) and Kargil and Suru Valley areas to the west. Before partition, Baltistan (now under Pakistan administration) had been a district in Ladakh. The region experiences extreme cold and dry type of climate due to its combined features of arctic and desert climates. These include wide diurnal and seasonal fluctuations in temperature ranging from - 40 °C in winter to + 35 °C in summer, and extremely low precipitation with an annual range from 10 cm to 30 cm primarily from snow. The regions on the north flank of the Himalayas like Dras, Suru valley and Zaskar experience heavy snowfall and remain virtually cut off from the rest of the country for several months in the year.

The Union Territory of Ladakh constitutes a total population of about 270000 (census 2011). Out of its total population, Muslim population (followers of Islam) is the largest with 127,296 (46 %) people followed by Buddhists (followers of Buddhism) with around 108,761 (40 %) and Hindus (followers of Hinduism) with 33,223 people (12 %), while other religions constitute less than 1 %. The population of Ladakh constitutes a blend of many different ethnic groups, predominantly the Tibetans, Monpas and Dards. People of Dard descent predominate in Dras and Dha-Hanu areas. The Dards around Dras, as an exception, have converted to Islam and have been strongly influenced by their Kashmiri neighbours. The Mons descends from earlier Indian settlers in Ladakh. They work as musicians, blacksmiths and carpenters. Unlike the rest of mainly Islamic Jammu and Kashmir, majority of people in Leh District as well as Zangskar Valley of Kargil District are Tibetan Buddhists and historically associated with Tibet, while as most of the people in the rest of Kargil District

(divided from Leh in 1979) are mostly Balti and Muslim Dards (originating from the northwest). There are sizeable minorities of Buddhists in Kargil District and of Muslims in Leh District. The main language spoken in Ladakh is Ladakhi, a Tibetan language; other dialects are Changpa and Purigpa. Bauti is spoken by majority, Hindi, Balti and Purkhi in Leh district. Kashmiri, Balti, Ladakhi, Shina and Hindi are spoken in the Kargil.

The majority of people of Ladakh are self-supporting farmers, living in small settlements scattered in the high desert. The principle crop in Ladakh is barley and about two thirds of the fields are planted with barley and the remainder with fast growing varieties of wheat. Most farmers also have small fields of peas and a garden of turnips. Besides, the other vegetables raised around Ladakh are potato and cabbage. Pulses are raised on a very small scale. Cultivation of grain is supplemented by fruit growing and Ladakh is the home of the apricot, the only cash crop, apart from *pashm*, the only product exported from Ladakh in any quantity. In the very highest settlements, people depend largely on animal husbandry. Livestock, mainly sheep, goats, yaks, cows, donkeys and horses plays a central role in providing manure, fuel, transport, labour, wool, milk, meat, hides and heat in winter. Hence villages in upper mountains are rich in livestock and of lower areas rich in crops. The subsistence economy of the region is primarily an agro-pastoral economy, which is based on an efficient system of utilization of different and complementary agro-ecological zones: high elevation pastures, forests and lower elevation irrigated agriculture fields.



Fig. 1

PROFILE OF TOURISM IN LADAKH

Tourism is considered as an economic bonanza of Ladakh and is the main contributor to the local economy. The region was partially opened for tourism in the year 1974, with 527 tourists, since then it has evolved rapidly from 527 tourists in 1974 to 14,286 tourists in the year 1982 (Singh and Kour, 2014). Despite being the most remote area compared to the rest of the India, the region has become successful in attracting tourists from every corner of world because of its mesmerizing natural beauty, Buddhist culture, traditions and historical monuments. The high altitudes, cold desert, geo-climate, tropical condition, barren mountains and rivers offers a great opportunity for adventure tourism such as tracking, rock climbing, hiking and rafting. The diverse tourism options available to tourists whether it is adventure, cultural or religious makes the region every one's must visit destination on their travel list. Some of the popular places of tourist interest in Ladakh are Leh, Drass valley,

Suru valley, Kargil, Zaskar, Zangla, Rangdum, Padum, Phugthal, Sani, Stongdey, Shyok Valley, Sankoo, Salt Valley and several popular trek routes like Manali to Ladakh, the Nubra valley, the Indus valley etc.

Although tourism in Ladakh is a recent phenomenon among the domestic tourists, however, the region has always been visited by number of foreign tourists since the opening of tourism. It is the year 2011 that shows more than double increase in the percentage of domestic tourists to the total number of tourists (Statistical report Leh, 2016-17). The region has become more famous among the local tourists in consequence of the phenomenon of film induce tourism started in Leh. Many films documentaries and various advertisement films were filmed in Ladakh from long time earlier but only in the year 2010 after the release of Hindi Movie “3 idiots” (Bollywood movie in December 2009), the recent phenomenon of film induced tourism can be conclusively derived here due to the huge commercial success of this particular film and has driven the local tourists to the region. The number of tourists visiting the region has been increasing since its initiation. In fact, there has been very rapid growth in the arrival of tourists in Ladakh that even in the third year only the growth rate of total tourists was 521.21 %. From the table 1.1, it can be observed that percentage of foreign tourists to total tourists is high in first three decades. However, in the year 2004 to 2014 it has increased significantly and it might be due to success of Bollywood movie (3 idiots) which shows the incredible beauty of Pangong Lake. According to the statistical report (2016-2017) by LAHDC Leh, the region welcomed total of 29,614 foreign tourists, out of whom the top international tourists were from France (3,842), Germany (2,185) and Britain (2,419) and 1,16,887 Indian tourists in the year 2015.

Table 1: Tourist Arrival in Ladakh

Year	Domestic	International	Total
1974-1984	13211	96736	109947
1984-1994	34727	126812	161539
1994-2004	63951	133057	197008
2004-2014	709080	133057	842137
2015	116887	29614	146501
2016	197693	38005	235698

Source: Sood (2014), Pelliciardi (2010) & LAHDC statistical report.

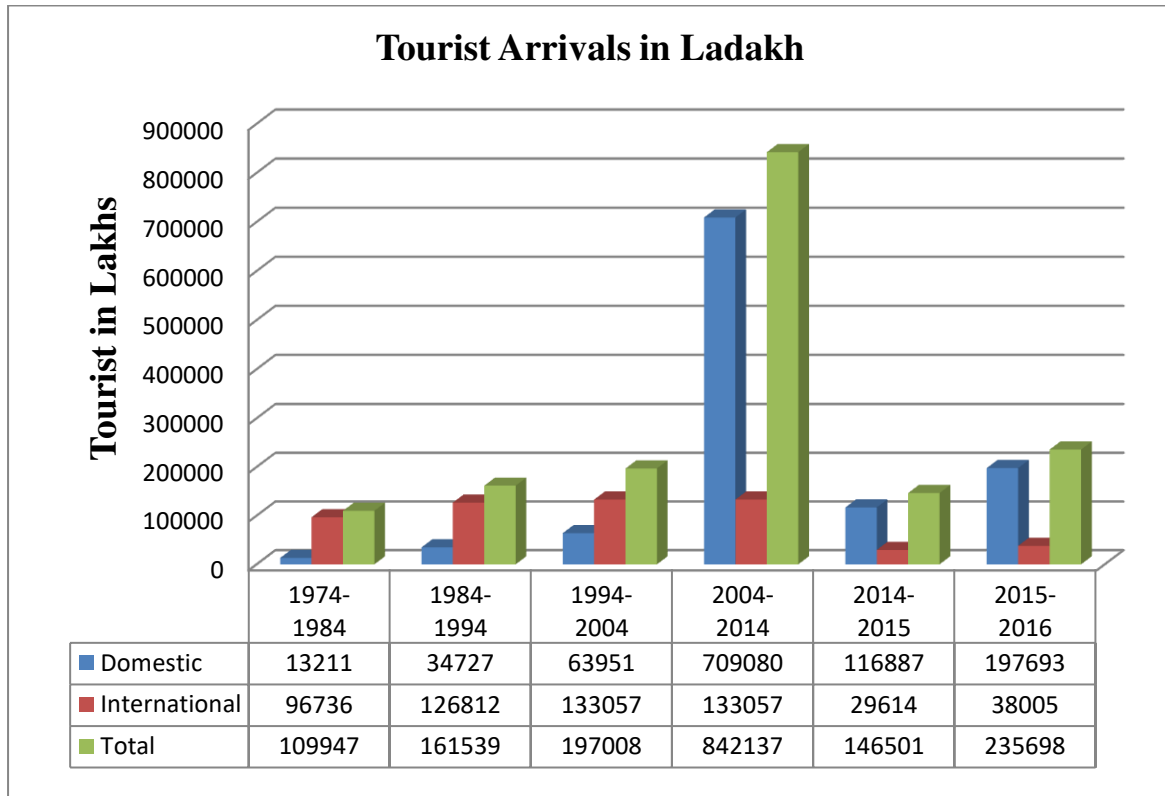


Fig. 2

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(a) Impact on Hospitality Sector

Due to yearly rise in the arrival of tourists and visitors in Ladakh, the hotels and hospitality sector are increasing rapidly. As per the statistical report of LAHDC Leh and Kargil, during the year 2016-17 there were 158 registered hotels in Leh and 21 in Kargil district; likewise the numbers of guesthouses were 433 in Leh and 73 in Kargil. The arrival of tourists in Ladakh mostly starts from March and it was the month from which the government has announced lockdown, even before the lockdown the restriction on international travel was there as aviation department has stopped the regular running of flights from foreign countries affected by the virus, as a result there was hardly any tourist staying at hotels or guest house or at other facilities. The bookings made by the visitors before the outbreak of deadly virus has been cancelled and since the COVID-19 virus is still growing in India and some other countries too, it is expected that there won't be any enquiry regarding the bookings of hotels and other facilities at least for the year 2021. The hospitality sector not only covers the hotels or guest houses but various bedding facilities and camping sites. Hunder in Nubra region and Pangong Lake has the maximum number of camping facilities. The outbreak of COVID-19

has lead to complete halt on the working of the hospitality sector and cause an immense loss to the hotels, guest houses, home stays, Camping sites and various bedding facilities. Since the tourism in Ladakh is seasonal and workforce in hospitality sector is hired only for summer season when tourism is active in the region, a huge number of personnel or professionals in hospitality sector have lost their job for the season of 2020. Moreover, large number of restaurants especially, ethnic restaurants, cafes have also suffered due to the outbreak of COVID- 19.

(b) Impact on Transport Sector

The outbreak of COVID-19 not only affects the hotel industry but huge losses have been suffered by the airlines and local taxis operators. Majority of tourists especially foreigner travellers chooses the air route to travel to Ladakh because of harsh roads of Zojilla, Taklangla and other passes. As flight operation was restricted due to nationwide lockdown, various airlines have suffered a huge loss. Apart from the airlines, the local taxis operators have also been affected by the spread of this dreadful disease. There are more than 2000 taxi operators in Ladakh that solely depends on tourism for their livelihood. For them the earning period is only between April to September or October but due to the spread of COVID-19, the peak season of tourism was severely affected due to the nationwide lockdown and even in the coming season, the arrival of tourists is not expected as the fear is still there in the minds of people and in India the number of infected people are still growing.

(c) Impact on Travel Agents and Tour Operators

The effect of COVID-19 outbreak on travel agents and tour operators cannot be ignored. They have suffered immense losses due to no bookings or enquiry regarding tour packages from tourists around different countries that was a usual feature during previous years, and even if there were some bookings before the outbreak of this dreadful disease, they have got cancelled. As per the respective statistical report of Leh and Kargil District, there are 468 travel agents in Leh and 44 in Kargil as on 2016, who are providing different services to tourists regarding tour and travel. There are different types of tourism product available in the region for the enjoyment and entertainment of tourists such as tracking, river rafting, tracking, mountaineering, biking etc, the travel agents and tour operators are the ones who are providing these services to the visitor. Since the tourism in the region has been on halt due to the nationwide lockdown, the offices of these travel agents and tour operators have been closed and their business has been suffered badly. The 80 % of the season's tourism (April-October) in the region has been in lockdown and even in unlocking period the arrival of

tourists is not expected as it will take some time for people to overcome the fear of getting infected by the virus.

(d) Impact on small retailers

Apart from the main participants of tourism sector, the small retailers have also been affected by COVID-19. There are number of retailers whose income mainly depends upon the tourists visiting the region, such as those involved in handcrafts and sells various Pashmina products, Kashmiri's handicrafts, Ladakhi's local clothing etc. Further, there are many local shopkeepers selling the local products like dried apricot, walnuts, apricot seeds oil, sea buckthorn juice etc, their shop have been shutdown even after the unlocking orders by government of India. Moreover, there are many general stores or tiny restaurants (*maagi points or chai shops*) at various remote tourist spots such as Pangong Lake, Khardongla, Tsomoriri etc. These shops or stores have also been closed due to the absence of tourists at these destinations. Even the normal general stores or fancy stores which have been closed during lockdown but open after the unlocking orders have suffered significant loss of percentage in their incomes. Well it can be seen that even after the unlocking orders around half of the shops of main markets of Ladakh towns are closed, and it is all because of no tourists at all.

MEASURES ADOPTED BY CONCERNED AUTHORITIES

The impact of COVID-19 is massive and felt by every participant in tourism industry and requires an effected approach or measures to rebuild and revive the sector from its impact. The local administration has been focusing their efforts on following.

1. Federation of Association in Indian Tourism and Hospitality (FAITH) has recommended and asked government to adopt following important measures to revive the tourism sector:
 - ❖ A complete suspension of all statutory dues such as GST, custom duties, advance tax payments, license fees etc. for twelve months.
 - ❖ Minimum of 50,000 crore as “tourism COVID-19 relief fund” to be set up by RBI.
 - ❖ Extend of 3 months moratorium on EMIs of principle interests on loans to 12 month.
 - ❖ Focusing on boosting domestic tourism by providing 200 percent weighted reduction of expenses to Indian corporate for carrying out their conferences, exhibitions, meetings etc.
 - ❖ Exemption of up to Rs 1.5 lakh of Indians for undertaking their holidays in India.
2. The Ministry of Tourism of Government of India made following measure to help tourism sector for surviving in and reviving from COVID-19

- ❖ Made new protocols and guidelines for various service providers in tourism sector to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
- ❖ Provide different operational recommendations for hotels, restaurants, home stays, farm stays etc.
- ❖ Reviving the tourism economy by stimulating demand through *Dekho Apna Desh* and *Incredible India*.
- ❖ With *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan* (making India self reliant) the prime minister asked states and union territories to boost domestic tourism.
- ❖ On May 12 the prime minister announced 20 lakh crore as special economic package.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following suggestions for the safety and protection of tourists and revival of tourism and hospitality sector in Ladakh.

1. There should be touch less working practices such as use of various digital means to avoid the spread of virus.
2. Proper screening, enhanced sanitation and safety measures should be adopted by the hotels, restaurants and other participants in the sector for the safety of the travellers.
3. There should be proper set procedures and protocols to deal with situation where an employee in any organisation in the sector tests positive.
4. The administration should focus their efforts to restore the confidence of travellers and try to increase demand for tourism by ensuring rigorous implementation of all measures for their safety and health.
5. There should be a comprehensive recovery plans to revive and rebuild the tourism sector in the form of various schemes, good economic packages and also by promoting various destinations.
6. An effort to encourage investment and innovation in tourism sector by providing easy access to short term and medium term loans to new comers and those who wants to start their business in tourism sector.
7. The government should take current crisis as opportunity to rethink tourism in the form of more sustainable and resilient way, as the lockdown has given an opportunity for nature to heal and restore its beauty.

8. The concerned authorities should provide timely and accurate information regarding the situation at various destinations and should provide travel guidance so that travellers can plan their holidays accordingly.

9. Protection and support should be provided to worker who has suffered unemployment and loss of income by ensuring safety of their job and by helping firms to pay salaries to their workers even in the lockdown situation.

10. For speedy recovery full support should be provided to destinations in form of higher budgets for its promotion, marketing and development.

CONCLUSION

The contagious diseases and pandemics have severe impact on the economy particularly on travel and tourism sector as it leads to complete shutdown of the borders, inter territory travel, shut down of various tourist attractive destinations. The current outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted the global travel up to 25 %, equivalent to a loss of three months of travel (World Economic Forum). The present study portrays the impact of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality sector in Ladakh and it can be seen that due to COVID-19 almost 90 % of the tourism sector in the region has shutdown. All the hotels, guest houses, restaurants etc. are facing immense loss due to nationwide lockdown. The unlocking orders by the government have hardly helped in reviving the tourism sector in Ladakh. Even after various relaxations given by administrations, the restaurants, hotels, shops etc are not able to earn due to lack of visitors. The impact is expected to last for long period if recovery plans are not made at an early stage.

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