



HOSPITALITY LOCKED DOWN: Impact of Covid-19 on Hospitality by Arnav Das, Leela Resort, Goa



On 24 March 2020, our respected Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed, "Aaj raat 12 baje se sampurn desh me sampurn lockdown hone ja raha hai", what it meant in simple English that, India will observe a complete lockdown from tonight; the move is necessitated due to the fast-spreading nature of coronavirus; but no one knew what this lockdown will turn up to be. The decision and execution was right or wrong, totally up to you. With nearly one year since lockdown we have still not reached stability and the recovery is still not promising. With the NEWS of lockdown, everyone sat on their couches with uncertainty and I will show you the side of an industry that no one actually cared about; your favourite Restaurant and Bars.

THE IMPACT-

The sector that was the first to get hit and the last that will recover completely. Within few weeks we saw on our social groups and networks, how organizations of all different scales from single stand-alone to multi-million dollar companies reacted.

Hotels, restaurants and bars were shut, talented professionals were shown the doors, people who worked were on salary cuts up to 50% and on offers of salaries being paid in lieu of leaves from the coming next year; a situation that created hue and cry. People went on to express their grief on social media; where it sometimes became even unbearable to see how the big firms who have received the employee loyalty was treating the very people who ran the show.

Job losses in India due to the Coronavirus-led lockdown	
Sector	Jobs lost since March 25 lockdown
Travel/Tourism	5500000
Hospitality (Hotels and Restaurants)	3800000
Automobile (including commercial drivers)	1000000
Retail	200000
IT	150000
Startup	100000
BFSI	30000
Total	10780000

Source: Industry estimates

Food and beverage suppliers were in huge distress as their stocks remained idle and there were no glimmers of hope. Hospitality, a sector that contributes around 9.2% of the nation's GDP was forced down to the knees. We waited for a sigh of relief from the government; but the very ministers and officials who enjoy their business and leisure time in these posh hotels, bars, and restaurants avoided and neglected them.

This phase saw complete closure of F&B outlets throughout India and it is predicted that only around 40% of these places will be able to revive; putting a huge comma on the lives and jobs of people who worked there. Friends working as Restaurant Managers were riding Rapido (bike taxi), started working in farms of their families, became delivery boys and joined commercial factories to at least earn something.

Goa my work home has seen job loss of around 35-58% due to the pandemic. The real victims being the temporary and seasonal staff members who were laid off as business struggled to meet ends.

THE POSITIVES-

There are few positives in these dark times. Lockdown saw a wave of trends to keep professionals on their toes and sharpen their knowledge. Online seminars by winemakers, master classes by world-class chefs, online competitions etc helped people to stay motivated as they connected with professionals worldwide.

Online training programs by; Wines of South Africa, Wines of Portugal, Consejo Regulador del Tequila, BarStarts and BarS-marts by Pernod Ricard, Sessions by Diageo Bar Academy were available free of cost.

The only sigh of relief in the food and beverage business was the increase in online sales of ration and the permission of selling alcohol online through home delivery whereas beverage companies who had their stores stocked up had their stocks moving in good volumes in online retail. Restaurants started opening in many phases with new rules and minimum hands working. Norms of social distancing, wearing masks, and sanitization have been the most important points of concern. Hotel and restaurant chains have heavily invested in new types of equipment and safety programs to ensure guests stay safe and travel safely. Few examples would be Suraksha by The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, We Assure by ITC, AllSAFE by Accor, We Care by Marriott etc.



Servers are seen in masks, aprons, gloves, and face shields, menus are replaced by QR codes, sanitizer counters all-around restaurants, disposable cutlery etc have become the new normal for the industry.

Personally, I felt happy to see guests going back to their favorite joints and enjoying again within the limitations of Covid- 19 protocol. It was the first time in my life that I was on a waiting list outside a restaurant and I mentioned to them that, "I feel happy to be on the waiting list, as this shows that we are starting to heal".

THE HELPING HANDS-

The industry came together to help and assist eateries to get on track. Giants like Diageo came forward with help in cash and kind; they supported them with attractive offers to get more footfalls. Diageo launched 'Raising the Bar' program to raise Rs. 75 Crores to support different outlets in various cities in the span of next two years.

Brands contributed with sanitizer kits, PPE kits, sanitization stations to restaurants and bars; that somewhat helped in one way or other. Brand ambassadors and beverage enthusiasts came forward and promoted their favourite outlets.

Care videos like a recent one posted by Ryan Reynolds featuring rapper Diddy and David Beckham encouraged everyone to contribute and return to the places where they dined and made memories.

CURRENT SCENARIO-

The current scenario is pretty much a mixed bag in India; where on one side professionals in sectors like IT, automobile, pharmaceuticals have started to receive bonuses from their employers, hospitality professionals are still suffering to make ends meet in various parts of the countries.

Few destinations like Goa, Shimla, Kashmir has seen people coming back to celebrate their freedom from lockdown. This has enabled companies to call back their employees who were on an unprecedented sabbatical and many who were laid off. While in many other locations people are still waiting for things to fall in place so that they can go back to work. With a huge percentage of eateries set to not return, the places opened working with staffing that is cut down by around 30%; the future of many professionals are still in the dark.

FIGHT BACK-

Restaurants and bars, nationwide are working hard to get the business and footfalls back through various dining schemes and offers. The vaccine rollout has created glimmers of hope for the industry, but more or less the situation is believed to see normalcy by the end of this year only.

As professionals we need to be on our toes to anticipate guest needs more than ever as lock down has changed guest expectations, try to exceed guest expectation with service and hygiene standards that will get them back to you, run promotions that provide a good balance between quality and quantity and mostly remember that positive word of mouth will create the moment of truth for your brand. It's not molecular mixology and gastronomy that will get more footfalls; as simple as it gets, it is the ability to create trust through your service that will get footfalls back to our restaurants and bars. In the current scenario; it's said that we have lost 5 years' worth of growth and it will be tuff to recover back. I suggest we try to remain patient, help the industry and businesses to grow as much as we can, innovate and most importantly try and assist our fellow colleagues

We in the industry need to keep working hard and stay patient for the results as however dark and long it may be, "there is a light at the end of every tunnel".

