



A Study Of Rural Development Through Tourism To Tackle Mental Health Issues Post COVID 19

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Abstract—The COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on all the living things on earth. It has brought life to a standstill. Most of the population is experiencing physical as well as mental problems. The symptoms of physical problems are visible and these illnesses can be treated comparatively in less time duration than mental problems which; during these pandemic times stem from large scale fear of contraction of disease and anxieties due to uncertainty, fatality, and lack of public health preparedness.[1] The aim of the article is to explore the impact of this unprecedented environment on mental health of individuals and assess the utility of rural tourism destinations in maintaining mental health in individuals during this crisis.

Keywords—COVID-19, Mental health, Tourism, Rural Development, Positivity, Spirituality

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, first case of this COVID-19 pandemic was reported in Kerala in first fortnight of March 2020. Central government swiftly came into action and declared lockdown as an important step to curb the spread of the virus. Educational institutions, factories, offices, travel modes and public spaces etc. were closed. To survive the pandemic has become the primary concern of the population at large. Loss of life, loss of livelihood and loss of academic opportunities are some of the serious consequences of this pandemic. These ill effects have resulted in negative impact on individuals ranging from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorder, behavioural disorders, domestic violence and child abuse. [2]

A research article authored by Brooks et al. (2020) in the *Lancet*, reviewed a large number of previous studies and reported the effect of quarantine on the mental health of patients. Most studies reported negative psychological effects including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger. Major reasons of these mental health issues included longer quarantine duration, fears of infection, helplessness, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss and stigma. [3]

During nationwide lockdown, majority of the population has too much time at disposal which is being largely consumed by news channel and ill informed, unverified social media articles, messages on COVID-19. It has resulted in unexpectedly loud and negative reactions by general public. A study conducted in China by Gao et al. (2020) to estimate the prevalence of mental health problems and examine their association with social media exposure illustrated a positive correlation between the two. [4]

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the imposed mobility restrictions have been unprecedented on a local, regional and global scale. Further, companies in all sectors, which are facing massive losses due to fickle demand and reduced production, might institute measures such as replacing most business travel with meetings on virtual platforms. The fact that over the last 2 months Zoom and Skype meetings have become the new norm for numerous public and private entities worldwide might accelerate a fundamental paradigm shift in the way of conducting business. [5] Earlier people travelled to attend the office work. Now work from home culture has reduced this commuting. At the same

time, it has resulted in increase in stress, mental health issues, physical problems such as migraine, backache etc.

Now that central and state governments have undertaken careful unlock exercise, people can take short break to change the routine, visit peaceful places and rejuvenate their mental strength. People are now aware of preventive measures such as maintaining social distance, wear mask and wash hands frequently; regarding COVID-19 due to consistent campaigns on various media.

II. SOLUTIONS TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While discussing the contributory factors, there could be instantaneous discussion on protective factors that may aid in promoting good mental health among population. In the current scenario where physical health is a priority due to the spread of the virus, the protective factors that may aid in promoting good mental health among population have to be checked and prevention at level of individuals, families and communities must be carried out.

The WHO (2020b) too has shared strategies to enable global population to stay mentally healthy during this never-before global health crisis. In summary, it implores people to engage in routine activities, stay calm, indulge in hobbies, stay connected through social media, talking to friends or counsellors in case of unmanageable anxiety or fear, doing physical exercises and not resorting to alcohol or drug for dealing with emotional problems.

At the national level too, the government agencies are issuing advisories to institutions to run dedicated psychosocial and mental health helplines for resolving any issues that may be affecting individuals during the lockdowns. Many such helplines have become active and available through premier educational institutes in the country. The positive messages in social media are being circulated through active citizen groups, civil society organizations and government agencies to spread awareness and share strategies to keep a check on individuals' mental health.

India is a land of yoga and spirituality; it has great legacy of the mindfulness and meditative practices that had been the part of tradition. Such practices have known to alleviate mental sufferings. It can prove to be of tremendous value and help to incorporate meditation in our daily regimen for better mental and physical health.

III. THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SPIRITUALITY ON MENTAL HEALTH

In the past decade or so, researchers across a range of disciplines have started to explore and acknowledge the positive contribution spirituality can make to mental health. Service users and survivors have also identified the ways in which

spiritual activity can contribute to mental health and wellbeing, mental illness and recovery. [6]

Spirituality is a word used in an abundance of contexts that means different things for different people at different times in different cultures. Although expressed through religions, art, nature and the built environment for centuries, recent expressions of spirituality have become more varied and diffuse. This is reflected in the range of vocabulary used to describe spirituality. Some of the more common themes in the literature describe it using one or more of the following elements: a sense of purpose, a sense of 'connectedness' – to self, others, nature, 'God' or Other, a quest for wholeness, a search for hope or harmony, a belief in a higher being or beings, some level of transcendence, or the sense that there is more to life than the material or practical, and those activities that give meaning and value to people's lives. Underlying many of those themes is an assumption that an intrinsic (often sub-conscious) human activity is one of trying to make sense of the world around us and of our meaning and place within it. In this context, "spirituality" becomes the vehicle through which that meaning is sought, and can vary according to age, gender, culture, political ideology, physical or mental health and myriad other factors.

Large portion of population is working from home; almost all the academic activities have gone online, use of internet for information, communication and entertainment is on rise. The screen time of children as well as adults has increased beyond limit. Eye strain, back pain, insomnia are some of the physical issues and depression, anxiety, stress, helplessness, low patience, anger etc. are some of the mental health issues due to lack of physical activity and constant screen exposure. There is a general feeling of despondency amongst population. With the beginning of unlock stages, the travel and tourism industry is opening up.

The pollutions of noise and light, junk food, crowded places, time spent for commuting, constant online presence, high speed of life are after effects of large scale urbanization. The public now wants to go offline so there is need of no internet zones for strict internet fasting. Change of environment and routine are the prescriptions for bringing back positivity in life.[7]

IV. ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of tourism in rural development is more relevant than ever. Tourism in rural areas offers important opportunities for recovery as tourists look for less populated destinations and open-air experiences and activities. Rural destinations in India offer spiritual experiences through various means such as

Vipasana meditation in Igatpuri (Maharashtra), Yoga in Hrishikesh (Himachal Pradesh), Traditional body massage in Munnar (Kerala) etc.

The UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development aim to support governments at various levels, as well as the private sector and the international community in developing tourism in rural territories in a way that contributes to inclusive, sustainable and resilient development. Such development will ensure the fair distribution of tourism's benefits, enhance job creation, protect natural resources and cultural heritage, promote social inclusion and empower local communities and traditionally disadvantaged groups, particularly women, youth and Indigenous peoples. [8]

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered rising interest from tourists looking for new experiences based around natural and rural areas in the open air, far from congested settings. This, combined with the already rising demand for more authentic experiences that offer stronger engagement with local communities, their culture and products, as well as demand for a greener approach in all stages of the travel experience opens up immense opportunities for the economic, social and environmental revitalization of rural areas through tourism. The current crisis has also emphasized the importance of building resilience among communities in those rural areas which rely on tourism. This implies better social protection and benefits-sharing among communities, as well as economic diversification and the broadening of tourism products and markets through added value experiences. To achieve this, investment, skills development, access to finance, infrastructure development, digital transformation, sustainable development, impact assessment, improved governance and women's empowerment should be placed at the heart of the recovery plans for tourism in rural communities. This will help support them as they navigate through the crisis and emerge stronger. Public-Private-Community (PPC) partnerships can create new opportunities for jobs and economic activities in rural areas through tourism.

With the COVID-19 risk knowledge and risk prevention measures, rural tourism willingness can increase. Risk knowledge can reinforce behavioral intention through risk perception and risk attitude in the face of public health emergencies. The model established and findings by Zhu and Deng have attempted to fill the research gap in consumer behavior under incomplete circumvention and public health emergencies to some extent in the field of rural tourism. [9]

CONCLUSION

As the world faces one of the most challenging crises of all times, there is a collective opportunity to renew our efforts and develop innovative approaches that will foster tourism's potential for development, including its unique ability to drive development for rural communities as one of the socio-economic activities engaging across and throughout communities and leaving no one behind. The new form of tourism that will emerge post-COVID-19 pandemic will stress on seeking experiences particularly spiritual with awareness of risk and preventive measures. In this perspective, rural tourism can play a major role in providing unique natural, cultural, and social experiences to travelers in the serene, clean and peaceful setting of villages. The most sustainable way of developing rural tourism should be a mixed format i.e. retaining and protecting the existing livelihood of the rural population and equipping them to earn extra income through tourism. The setting up of Destination Management Organization in special purpose vehicle (SPV) model proposed in the National Tourism Policy is a welcome development that will further strengthen rural tourism. [10]

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The template will number citations consecutively within brackets [1]. The sentence punctuation follows the bracket [2]. Refer simply to the reference number, as in [3]—do not use “Ref. [3]” or “reference [3]” except at the beginning of a sentence: “Reference [3] was the first ...”

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For papers published in translation journals, please give the English citation first, followed by the original foreign-language citation [6].

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