

# A Study on the Post Covid Scenario of the Tourism Industry in the Nilgiris District

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**Abstract - The COVID-19 pandemic and its variants have shattered the global economy as international/domestic travel and tourism was brought to an abrupt halt on and off due to lockdowns, disrupting the tourism industry worldwide. In India and The Nilgiris in particular, the tourism industry faced a set-back that changed the lives of many who depended on the income generated by tourism. The government revenue and foreign exchange earnings that come in from tourism showed a sharp downward trend to the curve that seemed to be growing upward until the break of the pandemic. This paper focuses on analysing the overall impacts of the pandemic on the travel and tourism industry in The Nilgiris District and presents the post-covid scenario that is indeed alarming. The study aims at understanding the challenges faced by the different players in the tourism industry to overcome problems, survive the pandemic and limp back to normalcy as fast as possible. The paper is purely conceptual and based on literature reviews of the prevalent covid situations of the world.**

**Index Terms - Covid-19, Pandemic, Lockdown.**

## INTRODUCTION

The adverse effect of the Covid-19 pandemic began to be felt as early as Jan/Feb 2020 with the announcement of lockdowns and strict restrictions in The Nilgiris. Initially, The Nilgiris was a safe place and a haven of rest and relaxation, but tourism introduced Covid into this Greenland which forced the District Collector to appeal to tourists to postpone their visits to The Nilgiris. Check posts, RTPCR tests at all the borders of The Nilgiris and the forceful evacuation of resorts, lodges and home stays ultimately stopped the influx of tourists who otherwise would have planted themselves in The Nilgiris to enjoy a comfortable vacation during the lockdown periods.

The announcement of the first covid case in The Nilgiris sent ripples of shock and fear among its people

due to the awareness that the cold climate was likely to cause a spike in the number of cases. Rightfully so, the number of cases began to spike in a short time. Gradually the numbers reduced, and the district began to heave a sigh of relief. Slowly tourists started returning and the situation became near normal. Tourists were admitted with vaccination proof and covid negative certificates. Just as tourism was recovering and catching up in all fields, the Delta variant came with a fresh scare and the Omicron variant brought in more restrictions for travel and tourism.

The transport systems - aviation, railways, buses, taxis, autos were affected badly with the lockdown and restrictions imposed on travel and tourism all over the world and this situation caused a stand-still even in The Nilgiris. If transport is hindered, tourists are not able to travel to places within and out of borders. The fear of travelling by public transport and contracting the virus prevented tourists to venture out of their enclosed safety space and this reduced the tourists even when the lockdowns were lifted. Air-conditioned travel was taboo and this again aggravated the travel conditions. All those who owned tourist vehicles converted their vehicles to sell fruits, vegetables and groceries. Their earnings were barely enough to cover the fuel costs.

Many of the The Nilgiri people have invested in hotels, lodges, home stays and resorts which provided them with a consistent income as tourism was a 24x7 industry pre-covid days. Some of them have availed of huge loans for the construction of extravagant buildings to attract tourists. Due to no business, the hospitality sector suffered grave losses due to the exorbitant compound interest rates charged on their loans.

The farmers of The Nilgiris were not spared either. The tea industry could not sell their produce; fruits and

vegetables were sold at dead cheap prices; eucalyptus oils and other Nilgiri oils remained stagnant on the shelves. The home-made chocolates had no market. Farmers who had taken loans could not pay back and their loans multiplied.

The Nilgiri Mountain Railway was suspended during the lockdown periods due to the crowded trips. This heritage toy train journey between Mettupalayam and Udhamandalam is the main tourist attraction and a revenue earner for the government.

The tourist spots like gardens, parks, lakes, viewpoints all wore a desolated look during the lockdown times. The Nilgiris never looked so empty for a good many years; parking lots had plenty of vacant space but the beauty of covid is that it left a cleaner environment, birds in the air, butterflies flapping and pollution-free environment.

Floriculture suffered greatly with no markets, no occasions to celebrate or decorate and many of the floriculture farms had to close down. The flowers that were grown were thrown away or distributed free of cost.

Tour operators, travel agencies, tourist guides were out of jobs. Tribal tourism, medical tourism, adventure sports, trekking, hikes, wildlife sight-seeing had to be abandoned. All these were the lifeblood of The Nilgiris and during the covid time, The Nilgiris just did not seem its usual self.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Tourists are influenced by the media to a great extent. As the media flashed the number of rising positive cases in The Nilgiris and the awareness created that the cold climate was not conducive to bring the situation under control, tourists became apprehensive about visiting The Nilgiris. The strict border checks and RTPCR checks were not a welcoming note for tourists. The economic imbalance and overall well-being became huge concerns for the workforce in the hospitality and tourism industry. The purpose of this study is to examine the pre-covid and post-covid scenario of the tourism industry in The Nilgiris District.

#### SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study can help tourists to understand the safety initiatives taken by the district to prevent the spread of Covid and its variants. It will provide reassurance to

dispel the fears of tourists and draw them back to enjoy vacations, visits and nature that The Nilgiris is famous for.

#### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the impact of the pandemic on the Tourism Sector in The Nilgiris.
- To create awareness on the safety initiatives taken by the district for the benefit of tourists.
- To evaluate the post-covid scenario.

#### TOURISM IN THE NILGIRIS DISTRICT

The Nilgiris is one of the most captivating hill stations in Tamilnadu and rightly called the “Queen of Hills”. It is one of the top tourism destinations in South India. Over the last one year since the COVID-19 pandemic began, tourism to the Nilgiris has fallen by a staggering 80%. Based on statistics from the Ministry of Tourism department which calculate the number of visitors to the Government Botanical Garden (GBG) in Udhamandalam as a barometer to gauge the tourist inflow into the district, the number of tourist visitors to the Nilgiris fell from 3,371,087 visitors in 2019, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 to 4,78,617 visitors in 2020.

In 2021, only 63,850 visitors have been recorded. “Cumulatively, since the pandemic began, tourism has fallen by more than 80%, as most of the visitors in 2020 had visited prior to the first cases being reported in Tamil Nadu,” officials from the Horticulture Department said. While the gardens and parks were opened during the last few months of 2020, the district once again closed to tourists earlier this year after the second wave of infections hit the State.

TABLE 1

| YEAR | FOREIGN TOURISTS | DOMESTIC TOURISTS | TOTAL     |
|------|------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 2010 | 23,124           | 2,135,220         | 2,158,344 |
| 2011 | 32,438           | 2,428,860         | 2,461,298 |
| 2012 | 33,997           | 2,437,348         | 2,471,345 |
| 2013 | 35,075           | 2,371,093         | 2,406,168 |
| 2014 | 34,691           | 2,338,366         | 2,373,057 |
| 2015 | 42,904           | 2,895,937         | 2,938,841 |
| 2016 | 42,500           | 3,073,936         | 3,116,436 |
| 2017 | 41,870           | 3,227,456         | 3,269,326 |
| 2018 | 33,900           | 3,112,627         | 3,146,527 |
| 2019 | 36,077           | 3,335,010         | 3,371,087 |
| 2020 | 6860             | 471757            | 478617    |
| 2021 | 6                | 210308            | 210314    |

Source: Ministry of Tourism - 2021

According to Table 1, a ten-year statistics of the inflow of domestic and international tourists shows that there

is an increase in the number of tourists till 2019 and then a drastic fall in numbers due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tourism is one of the major employment sources that many depend on in The Nilgiris District.

Some of the most affected by the tourism industry shutting down, which apart from agriculture, supports the largest number of people in the Nilgiris, are tourist guides.

According to The Hindu (2021) John Bosco, a tourist guide and tour operator in Udthagamandalam, said that there were around 120 tourist guides, out of whom 26 are certified guides who help travelers find their way to popular tourist spots and also help arrange accommodation. "These guides would earn anywhere between 1,500 to Rs. 2,000 a day during peak season. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many are struggling to pay bills and provide for their families," he said.

Similarly, boatmen who operate paddle and motorboats at the Ooty Lake and Boat House have also had their livelihoods impacted. According to officials, there are around 40 boatmen working at the Ooty Lake and Boat House, and they are paid based on the number of boat trips they make each day. "As the Ooty Lake and Boat House too, have not been functioning for the large part of 2020 and 2021, their livelihoods have been affected," said an official from the Tourism Department. The Department has written to the government to provide monetary relief to the boatmen, and officials say they hope that tourists would once again be allowed into the Nilgiris in the coming months.

To contain the spread, many countries completely/partially close their boarder and cancelled all flights, and events including sports, entertainment, pilgrimages, conferences etc. UNWTO (2020) estimated that international tourists would decline by 1%–3% compared to 2019 rather than the forecasted 3%–4% growth. As a result, global tourism has slowed down significantly. The number of international flights dropping by more than half following the tourism industry temporarily laid off half of their workforce. The World Travel & Tourism Council predicts a tourism-related loss of up to US\$ 2.1 trillion in 2020 and up to 75 million jobs (WTTC, 2020).

The travel industry, which includes airlines, hotels and restaurants, will shrink by 50% in 2020, which would mean a significant loss of jobs and revenue. According

to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), Airlines worldwide are expected to lose a record of \$84 billion in 2020, more than three times the loss made during the Global Financial Crisis (The World Economic Forum, 2020). Most of the airlines are undergrounded. Hotels are being closed due to fewer tourists and many five-star hotels turning into quarantine facilities. Most restaurateurs see operating costs rising further because of social distancing, hygiene, and sanitation-related costs. Therefore, sustaining during this crisis is a challenging task for the tourism industry.

#### FINDINGS

In 2020, the travel and tourism sector in India contributed around 4.7 percent to the total GDP of the country. This was a significant decrease compared to nearly seven percent in the previous year . On World Tourism Day, the impact of Covid-19 on India's travel and tourism industry, tourism's contribution to India's GDP and employment falls 36.3% and 20.8%, respectively. Tourism not only generates revenue; it also creates employment. The revenue from tourism to GDP in India is through foreign visitor spending, which is 12.8%. The estimated unorganized workforce in the tourism sector across India from 2017 is 401,000. The predicted employment loss in the travel and tourism industry due to COVID-19 in India is 9 million.

#### SUGGESTION

- Masks should be made compulsory for tourists. It is a fact that tourists are careless about the mask culture of The Nilgiris. Masks should be worn properly and in all public places.
- Liberal Policies that support the present financial status of travel, tourism and hospitality undertakings should be introduced.
- Sanitation facilities should be a priority.
- Domestic and local tourism should be promoted and marketed more aggressively. The pandemic situation has created a demand for easily accessible domestic travel instead of far-off places or international places.
- Tourist attractions and destinations are to be fully equipped with hand sanitizers and digital thermometers to check and record the temperature of the tourists visiting the destination. Training is

to be provided to the staff employed at destinations to ensure hygienic and safe conditions for tourists at the destination.

- Social distancing to be strictly followed to avoid over-crowding.
- Entry and Exit points to be increased. The number of ticket counters should be increased. Online portals will help tourists to avail entry tickets instead of standing in long queues.
- Travel passes that include easy entry into all tourist destinations will benefit the tourists.
- Package tours with safety measures can be advertised more efficiently.
- Business Meetings, conferences or seminars can be organised professionally meeting all covid requirements.
- Tour operators and service providers should be instructed to follow strict covid precautions to provide meaningful experiences and environment -friendly, responsible tourism.
- Wide awareness for the virtual tourism initiative of the Ministry of Tourism, 'Dekho Apna Desh', to provide suitable virtual experiences of safaris, heritage sites, monuments, museums and much more.
- Medical facilities available to handle emergencies should be communicated to tourists. Latest medical facilities should be introduced into the district government hospitals and primary centres for the benefit of tourists.

### CONCLUSION

The Nilgiris is facing a see-saw sort of situation in the present times. As much as tourism has been affected, we hope it will not remain for long. Among all the apprehensions that Covid has come to stay, there is also a prediction that all up-coming variants will be mild and that 2022 will be a sunrise year for normalcy to return. People will not remain indoors all the time. They are yearning and learning to brave the situation and come out for enjoyment and relaxation. As science and technology finds new ways to handle the covid situation, there is an element of positivity that this hopeless condition will not prevail for long. Tourism will surely bounce back and find its own way to improve the economy and livelihood of the people of The Nilgiris.

### SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

The present study is purely conceptual and based on the secondary data related to the topic. A quantitative analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the travel and tourism industry by involving the prime stakeholders of the industry can be further researched. The progress of the tourism and travel industry post-Covid pandemic is another central area with scope for further extensive research.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. A detailed study is not possible due to prevailing restrictions.
2. Due to lockdowns, data is not easily available.
3. The data is taken from other published sources.

### REFERENCE

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