

## COVID-19 Induced Crisis in Heritage Marketing in Agra – A Roadmap for Reforms in Policy

Dr. Suneet Silas

Associate Professor, Department of History, St. John's College, Agra, INDIA.

### ABSTRACT

The city of Agra is globally renowned for its ancient culture and heritage. The tourism industry, comprising of the sectors of heritage marketing, handicrafts and the hospitality sector, are major generators of revenue and employment at Agra. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented healthcare concern, has wreaked havoc worldwide. This paper attempts to address the crippling effect of the pandemic on the heritage industry in Agra. The study discusses the pre-pandemic scenario, which has been compared with the drastic downfall witnessed by the industry, brought about by the pandemic. The paper further presents the demands of the relevant stakeholders, and the government response to the same. Furthermore, certain suggestions have also been provided, which may prove to be fruitful for addressing and alleviating the state of crisis in the industry.

**Keywords-** COVID-19 pandemic, heritage sites, bailout package, footfall, tourism.

### *The significance of Agra in the heritage-marketing industry*

The city of Agra, a major historical site, has been severely affected by the pandemic, giving rise to a crisis of huge proportions in heritage marketing. Agra is primarily a heritage city with three world heritage sites, the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri, with the efforts of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to get world heritage tag for two other significant monuments of Agra, the tomb of I'timad-ud-Daulah and the tomb of Akbar at Sikandra. There are in all, sixty-seven cultural heritage sites in the ASI's list of protected monuments of national importance in the Agra district. These include all the major and minor monuments, each of great significance as the living witnesses of the entire region's rich historical past. The distinctive identity of the city is undoubtedly the Taj Mahal, a matchless world heritage site and a crowning glory of Indian heritage.

### *(a) The employability potential of the heritage marketing industry in Agra*

The tourism and heritage sector in Agra has astounding potential for employment generation. There are 90 units engaged in carpet manufacture with a turnover of Rs. 400 crores, exports of Rs. 100 crores, average investment of Rs. 75,000 and employment to 75,000. Likewise, the marble (stone craft and inlay work) segment has 2,500 units with a turnover of Rs. 200 crores, exports of Rs. 100 crores, average investment of Rs. 50,000 and employment to 30,000. The other segment of garments and embroidery, wood/wooden based furniture, leather based and miscellaneous have a total of 2839 units, an average investment of Rs. 276.539 crores and employment to 33,133 persons.<sup>1</sup> The art of *zardozi* is estimated to have 100 workshops, 70 showrooms, 100 crore turnovers with 30,000 artisans, and losses due to the COVID-19 induced shutdown amounting to Rs. 80 crores. The losses to the stone and marble handicraft products are estimated to be Rs. 700 crores with a turnover of Rs. 1500 crore and carpet industry losses at Rs. 150 crores. The total losses to the handicrafts sector alone is stated to be Rs. 930 crores.<sup>2</sup> The situation got worse with the cancellation of overseas orders and the curtailment of movement of containers containing handicraft items. The cancellation of the 49<sup>th</sup> International Handicrafts and Gifts Festival (IGHF) Spring 2020 scheduled from April 15, 2020 at India Expo Mart in Greater Noida added to the woes of the handicrafts sector.<sup>3</sup> Coming back to the employment figures, another 80,000 to 1,00,000 persons

## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic left a trail of destruction of human lives, affecting familial and social bonds, the social fabric as well as the economic infrastructure, in a grievous manner. Plainly speaking, it has targeted the very foundation of human civilisation, built upon the human potential and skill of production in a social environment. The society has been suddenly pushed into an air tight compartment wherein the basic requirement of earning a livelihood and surviving became a remote horizon for many. The risks involved are tremendous because of the nature of this contagious disease, which has uprooted the framework of social interaction that is intrinsic for human enterprise and survival. Almost all of the economic sectors have been hit, ranging from services to businesses, particularly the small and medium industries and the unorganised sector comprising of the daily wage earners. One of the service-based sectors that has gone off the rails is the one which rests on destination and heritage marketing with associated sectors such as hospitality, transport and craft production.

are estimated to be dependent on the trading of the handicraft items, with around 2 to 4 lakhs employed as guides, photographers, hotel and restaurant owners and workers, rickshaw pullers, auto and cab drivers, roadside vendors, hawkers etc. Hence, as per a logical estimate, the employment figures of those depending on the Heritage destination travel and hospitality sector in Agra is well over five lakhs (five to seven lakhs) and at an average per family of 4 to 5 members, around twenty- five lakh people may be considered to depend on this sector as a source of their livelihood.

**(b) Sector-wise turnover of the heritage marketing industry at Agra**

The different sectors associated with the heritage marketing industry at Agra, display impressive turnouts, annually. As the figures for the handicrafts sector have been mentioned above, let us look at the revenue generated directly from the Heritage sites in the pre COVID-19 period. According to the ASI data, the total revenue earnings of Rs. 146.05 crore in 2017-18 by the Taj Mahal and four other centrally protected monuments (Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Qutb Minar, Red Fort and Fatehpur Sikri) the revenue from the Taj was stated to be the highest at Rs. 56.83 crores.<sup>4</sup> The revenue earnings from the monuments of the Agra circle from the year 2016 to 2019 was of the order of: <sup>5</sup>

**Table- 1: Year wise Revenue (in Rupees)**

Monument	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Taj Mahal	496789740	565677570	779040555
Taj Mahal Main Mausoleum			40505800
Agra Fort	274656590	305597470	344778635
Fatehpur Sikri	75903279	108058420	119816630
Akbar's Tomb	10756230	10731660	13806235
Mariam's Tomb	760610	491400	800590
I'timad-ud-Daulah	14081280	37257355	29902985
Ram Bagh	1225570	1072545	1906900
Mehtab Bagh	11007335	17983735	27039270
<b>Total</b>	<b>885180634</b>	<b>1046870155</b>	<b>1357597600</b>

The revenue from the Taj Mahal increased fourfold over the five-year period from 2014-15 to 2018-19 as per the figures specified by the Union Ministry of Culture in Parliament. The revenue figures for the year 2014-15 was Rs. 212355330 crores and for 2015-16 was Rs.179227050.<sup>6</sup>

**(c) Agra's hospitality sector of tourism and heritage marketing**

The capacity of the hospitality sector aimed at Heritage marketing in Agra has steadily increased over the time. The heritage rich area of Agra has 12 five- star hotels with 400 other hotels, with an inventory of 6000 to 7000 rooms in the hospitality sector. It is stated to generate employment for around 4 lakh people, with an economic contribution of Rs. 3000 crores.<sup>7</sup>

The number of registered guides in the city is given as 3500, with 800 registered photographers and also a sizeable number of unregistered guides and photographers. The total losses to the industry centred on the city's heritage was estimated at Rs. 2200 crores, with Rs. 72 crores loss under the entry fee heads. <sup>8</sup> Another estimate pegs the revenue loss at Rs. 2000 crores, with the loss of 2 to 3 lakhs jobs as on an average 3 out of 10 people are said to depend on tourism activities as the only source of their livelihood.<sup>9</sup>

**Pre COVID-19 scenario of the heritage and tourism sector at Agra: figures of the footfalls**

The very basis of the marketing of the Heritage sector is that it solely depends on the "footfalls" i.e., the number of visitors who would turn up continuously without break, though with fluctuations in numbers. The fluctuations can be caused by several factors like the erstwhile situation in the guests' countries; economic and political conditions; climatic conditions at the host's end and general situation in the host city. These can be temporary phases and all regions do not have such hindrances at the same time. In this context the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented. Let us first consider the footfalls in Agra in the pre COVID period. The Taj Mahal is estimated to have around 7 to 8 million tourists on an annual basis as the main crowd puller, with 737000 foreign tourists visiting the monument in 2019.<sup>10</sup> The average footfall during the weekends is normally between 25000 to 30000, going up to 50000 <sup>11</sup> on long weekends and rising even to 75000 in the festive seasons. The overall footfalls at the Taj and the other centrally protected monuments at Agra from 2016 to 2019 were of the order of: <sup>12</sup>

**Table- 2: Year wise Footfalls**

Monument	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Taj Mahal	6088011	6473628	6885124
Taj Mahal Main Mausoleum			202536

Agra Fort	2241279	2511263	2497741
Fatehpur Sikri	553968	698444	708782
Akbar's Tomb	440891	388586	367246
Mariam's Tomb	28227	30096	33977
I'timad-ud-Daulah	237569	433666	261396
Ram Bagh	58149	67914	84307
Mehtab Bagh	255814	273077	311216
<b>Total</b>	<b>9903908</b>	<b>10876674</b>	<b>11352325</b>

Several of these footfalls might be common to one or more sites but each visitor at a different site is generating revenue at that particular site as the case may be. A person 'A' visits site A, B and C in one visit i.e., through a single footfall in the city but generates revenue at three different sites hence footfall at each site is significant. With the multiplier effect the footfalls in the Heritage sector generate revenue for transport, hospitality, handicrafts and other associated services utilised by the tourists in completing their tour itineraries.

## II. THE ADVERSE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE HERITAGE SECTOR AT AGRA

Ever since the pandemic struck with full force in the middle of March 2020, the Heritage sector at Agra has also come to a standstill, with a nation wide lockdown having been imposed on March 18, 2020. Not one would have expected that this was going to be the worst nightmares of their lives and it would be looked upon as "Black Day" for tourism in Agra.<sup>13</sup> It signalled the start of a long spell of total inactivity for the Heritage sector, before the Taj Mahal and other monuments were allowed to open on September 21, 2020 after a gap of six months. Prior to this closure, the Taj Mahal had been shut briefly during the floods of 1978 and from December 16 to December 18, 1971 during the Indo Pak war of 1971.<sup>14</sup>

In the present shutdown, the guests were allowed in two shifts, with the number in each shift restricted to 2500, according to the new guidelines of strict compliance with the COVID- 19 protocol.<sup>15</sup> As is clear, the footfalls remained low and nowhere near to even 5000 visitors on a single day.<sup>16</sup> In the first week of February 2020, the Taj Mahal was stated to have 1.10 lakh visitors, the number coming down to 93000 in the first week of March 2020. On Monday prior to the shutdown, the monument had 8709 footfalls preceded by 13,186 on Sunday. Of the footfalls on Monday, 1104 were those of foreign visitors which were 170 less than on Sunday.<sup>17</sup> The visitors who turned at the monument on the day of the shutdown were disappointed and contented themselves with visits to the nearby sites like the *Gyarah Sidi* (remains of Humayun's Astronomical Observatory) and ADA (Agra Development Authority) park.<sup>18</sup> There were 6 active cases of COVID-19 in the city at that stage, with 114 cases reported all over India, when the Taj was shut down on March 17, 2020, laments the Agra Tourism Chamber

Welfare Secretary, implying thereby that things could have went on albeit with restrictions from time to time.<sup>19</sup> However, shutdown has become the widely exercised option the world, with hopes that it would soon lead to the easing out of the situation.

The footfalls at Agra heritage sites witnessed a steep fall, by 60 per cent in 2020, with more than 4.5 lakh people depending on the trade having been impacted. The segments which suffered apart from the hospitality sector included guides, photographers, tour operators, cab drivers and emporium owners.<sup>20</sup> The prolonged closure of the Taj at Agra adversely affected the tourist arrivals in the state of Uttar Pradesh as a whole with its tourism numbers falling down by a whopping 84 per cent. <sup>21</sup> The Taj was stated to have got less than 1 per cent of foreign visitors in peak season of 2020, with negligible revenue from international tourists therein. <sup>22</sup> In the approaching month of June 2020, during the Unlock 1.0, the tourism industry stakeholders raised concerns with the central government over the continued closure of the Taj Mahal and the other Agra monuments.<sup>23</sup> They called for the reopening of the monuments in Unlock 1.0 as the offices, malls and markets had opened and transport resumed. All safety measures and guidelines could be strictly adhered to till the situation normalised. Their apprehensions were regarding the loss of an entire tourist season if the monuments were not opened in September at the beginning of the season, as the tourists would then be unable to plan their visits in advance. The problems faced by the people in the trade was widely cited, with no assistance from the central government.<sup>24</sup> This demand was not unjustifiable as 50 per cent of the households in Agra are estimated to be directly or indirectly associated with the tourism business, with no business assistance from the government at the time and the existing confusion regarding COVID-19 rules and regulations, which was discouraging the tourists.<sup>25</sup>

However, the problem now was regarding the source of supply. The UN World Trade reported a 70 per cent decline in international travel, with \$935 billion losses in travel revenue around the world predicted to drag the sector back by 30 years.<sup>26</sup> Preceding the pandemic, the total Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) comprising International Tourist Arrivals (ITA) and Non-Resident Indians (NRI) in India in 2019 were 17.91 million with Annual Growth Rate (AGR) of 2.8 per cent and the growth rate of FTA's at 3.5 per cent.<sup>27</sup> The estimated foreign exchange earnings during the same year were INR Rs. 211.61 crores with AGR of 2.6 per cent and US

\$30.058 billion with AGR of 5.5 per cent. In the same year, India ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> in World Tourist Arrivals (WTA) with 12<sup>th</sup> rank in receipts and ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in Asian Tourist Arrivals (ATA) with 6<sup>th</sup> rank in receipts. The total FTA's of 10.93 million, excluding 6.98 million NRIs, plummeted to just 24,62,224 in 2020, when COVID-19 struck.<sup>28</sup> The Consortium of Indian Industries (CII) estimated the losses of 1.58 lakh crore to the organised sector in Indian Tourism with 1.10 lakh crore to branded hotel groups, Rs 4312 crore to online travel agencies, Rs. 25000 crores to tour operators (inbound and domestic), around Rs. 9000 crores to adventure tour operators and Rs. 419 crores to cruise tourism.<sup>29</sup> The National Federation of 10 Tourism, Travel and Hospitality Organisations of India, FAITH estimated the total losses of Rs. 5 lakh crores to Tourism trade in the country.<sup>30</sup> As per recent estimates, the industry has 5 per cent share in the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), with 88.72 million jobs (direct and indirect) in 2018-19. The contribution to the GDP in 2018 was given as 9.20 per cent and 6.8 per cent in 2019 with generation of employment at 8 per cent of the total employment in the country. Moreover, the travel and tourism sector remained at the 10<sup>th</sup> spot in terms of travel and tourism spend. A loss of Rs. 35,070 crores were predicted for tour operators and agencies with hotels likely to suffer 80 to 85 per cent reduction in revenue with occupancy rates in hotels stated to remain on the lower side till the end of 2020. As per report of Tourism Secretary to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture, 2 to 5.5 crores persons lost their jobs directly or indirectly in the sector with the revenue losses of an enormous scale standing at Rs. 1.58 lakh crores.<sup>31</sup>

### III. THE DEMANDS OF THE INDUSTRY AND THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The overall losses to the government exchequer as well as to employment were and continue to be of an enormous scale, with the total disruption of the supply chain and stalling of the multiplier effect. Putting this industry back on the rails seemed to be a herculean task with a great risk accompanying an immediate full throttle reopening process. Hence the reopening had to be done in a phased manner but even more important was having visitors. The heavy losses of business and jobs at the local, regional and national level with no respite in sight, the call and the need for "bailout package" was arising from all sectors of the Tourism industry. It caused much disappointment with no allotment to the industry stated to be worth Rs. 18 lakh crores, giving employment to 4 crore people, reported to be on the verge of collapse, from the bailout package of Rs. 20000 crores announced in May 2020.<sup>32</sup> The Heritage sector at Agra had called for the reopening of the Taj Mahal and other monuments as early as June 2020 in Unlock 1.0 to salvage the badly shattered businesses. According to the estimate of the vice

president, Tourism Guild of Agra the businesses have been put back by several years with no normalcy in sight before the year 2023. The total losses to the industry were estimated to be 50 billion Indian rupees (563 million euros) faced with an extremely difficult task of revitalising and no hopes of a turnaround in sight.<sup>33</sup> The industry stakeholders felt that a lot more had to be done in addition to the easing of visa restrictions and flight restorations. Consequently, appeals were made to the government to consider a package and offer tax relief in the light of the industry's 10 per cent contribution to the GDP, generating employment for 5 crore people with losses of approximately 5 lakh crores and 75 per cent left jobless.<sup>34</sup> Appeals centred on resumption of international flights and issuing of online visas with continued pleadings of the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) with the Ministries of Tourism, Finance and Commerce, Niti Aayog, RBI, MSME (Micro Small and Medium Enterprise) and SEPC (Services Export Promotion Council). The IATO even started a "postcard campaign" to draw the attention of the government towards the plight of the industry.<sup>35</sup>

The Heritage sector at Agra was largely aware of the difficulties of revival after the Unlock, mainly due to the hesitation of the tourists to travel. For the international tourists it was the issue of resumption of international flights and issuing of visas and until then it would be a long wait. The hotels, emporiums and monuments had finally reopened with proper Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) but were getting negligible footfalls, that too only on weekends because of these factors. The demands for bailout thus focussed on interest free loans for a year, rebates in GST, waiving of fixed charges on electricity bills etc. A basic requirement which was also emphasised that all stakeholders need to instil confidence among the tourists that India is a safe destination for visitors.<sup>36</sup> The CII's recommendations for relief measures focus on grant of short-term interest free loans or low interest loans for rebuilding businesses; 12-month deferment of all statutory dues and a moratorium of additional three to six months on all working capital, principal, interest payments on loans and overdrafts and creation of a salary corpus for employees. These demands have been made in 2020, with expectations of resumption of trade and cash flow by the end of 2020 and progress anticipated in the beginning of 2021.<sup>37</sup> In Uttar Pradesh the sectors of the tourism industry have asked for 50 per cent of the salary bills of staff engaged with the hotel and travel industry to be borne by the government; payment by the government of six month employee's share of employee provident fund (EPF) and exemption to bars and hotels from paying SGST and property taxes for the same period; monthly stipends to registered guides for at least six months; interest free loans with option to pay back in EMI's after the revival and consideration of a 'tax holiday'.<sup>38</sup>

Initially, the government had not announced any allotment to the industry from the Rs. 20000 crores



overall relief package declared in May 2020. The demands of the industry for relief measures were made at the time of the onset and initial spread of the pandemic, with expectations that businesses would resume at the end of 2020 and gradually inch towards attaining normalcy during 2021. In the Tourism AR of 2020-21, <sup>39</sup> GST cuts were revised as:-

- a. From 18 per cent to 12 per cent for hotel rooms with tariffs up to Rs. 7500.
- b. From 28 per cent to 18 per cent on room tariffs of more than Rs. 7500.
- c. No GST'S on room tariffs below Rs. 1000.
- d. 5 per cent GST for all air conditioned and non-air-conditioned restaurant eateries.
- e. 18 per cent GST for restaurants located in hotel or club premises with room tariffs of Rs. 7500 and above.

#### IV. SUGGESTIONS TO SUSTAIN THE AGRA TOURISM SECTOR DURING THE PANDEMIC- THE WAY FORWARD

The question arising in the present scenario is regarding the policy initiatives that ought to be adopted, in addition to the bailout measures, to revive and sustain the Heritage sector at Agra, when the prospect of subsequent waves of the pandemic, is looming large over the horizon. It is clear that it would be a long time before the world gets rid of the COVID-19 pandemic, that too in possibly an incomplete manner. As has been made clear, the marketing of the Heritage sector solely depends on the footfalls occurring at any given time. There is no digital solution to the marketing of heritage sites, apart from the introduction of paid virtual tours, which could be an innovative step to revive the industry. The first and foremost priority is to therefore capitalise on the vaccination facility which is picking up in the country. Henceforth, vaccination of all stake holders and visitors should become the topmost priority of this sector and be made the topmost requirement of the SOP. It has to be seen at the same time that the other necessities such as regular wearing of masks and sanitisation of monuments, hotels and transport are in strict adherence to the SOP. Steps can be taken to appoint staff separately, which is particularly entrusted with the implementation of the SOPs at the Heritage sites and the hotels. Log books can be maintained, prescribing the sanitisation schedules at each place. Monitoring, accompanied with the principle of self-responsibility meant for emporiums, guides, photographers, drivers and vendors, needs to be observed in right earnest. Brief orientations can be organised for all stakeholders from time to time, as human nature is given to carelessness and forgetting. There is no escape route from inculcating responsible behaviour and an increased relevance of the concept of responsible tourism. Earlier, it was the responsibility to protect the monuments from growing number of footfalls and now it is to motivate

visitors to plan their visits with adherence to prescribed norms and regulate their numbers. Some sort of a mechanism also needs to be worked out to link the number of tourist arrivals with the prevailing conditions of COVID-19, in addition to vaccinations and prescribed SOP. The numbers at a time can be split in slabs of, more than 75 per cent in relaxed conditions; 50 per cent to 75 per cent in constrained conditions; 25 per cent to 50 per cent in conditions of risk; and below 25 per cent in conditions of heightened risk. This approach may afford a sustainable solution in difficult times and reduce complaints of the stakeholders against shutdowns. It is essential to recall here that the maintenance funds of the heritage sites in Agra are largely sourced from the revenue earnings of the monuments. The official maintenance figures of the last three years of the total allocation and expenditure on conservation, preservation and ecological development of the monuments of Agra Circle were:-<sup>40</sup>

2016-17		2017-18		2018-19	
Allocat ion	Expendit ure	Allocat ion	Expendit ure	Allocat ion	Expendit ure
940 lakhs	940 lakhs	850 lakhs	850 lakhs	860 lakhs	858.19 lakhs

A greatly positive aspect is of the heritage monuments being adorned with natural landscapes which present open airy environment facilitating social distancing between visitors. It is only within the monument buildings that overcrowding needs to be prevented with the enforcement of controlled movement. Though above all only specific number of visitors may be allowed at a time till the situation normalises completely, to ensure proper observance of the SOP's. Thus, the whole approach necessitates a relook and redesigning to address the issue of marketing of the heritage at Agra in these troublesome times. In this context the role of the other government protected lesser-known heritage sites in the background of the Mughal riverfront<sup>41</sup> along with the ecological sites assume significance. It is essential to redesign tourist packages aimed at the heritage sites of Agra with the incorporation of the lesser seen but equally significant sites in the tour itineraries to ease out tourist congestion at the popular monuments. It is equally important to capitalise on the ecological wealth of Agra with enhancement of the green belt in the city. In the ensuing scenario the prospects of eco- tourism are bright which can be actively linked with the networking of monuments. The ecological sites like the Sur Sarovar, Chambal safari and Keoladeo bird sanctuary leave much potential to be exploited. Cultural activities showcasing the cultural heritage of the city which are chiefly organised during the ten-day Taj Mahotsav in the month of February can be organised at weekends during the entire tourist season from October to February at the *Shilpgram* complex and other auditoriums or even at open spaces in big hotels. The city of Agra already has an

ongoing metro rail-project commissioned by the present state government which shall supplement the accessibility to the heritage sites in a big way.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the prevailing conditions the onus of exploiting the heritage potential of Agra to the utmost in a responsible and sustainable manner rests on all the stakeholders. It is a paradigm shift for the whole sector from the earlier times when there was no dearth of footfalls. Now the Heritage sector is faced with the unique situation of having to attract visitors and at the same time limiting their numbers to prescribed safety levels. Both the stakeholders and government agencies have to work in conjunction with inputs and aid (sanctioned relief package) from the government and strict adherence to the prescribed norms and SOP's by the industry to ensure their own safety and those of the visitors on whose footfalls the future of this trade depends.

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