



ENGAGE

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RE-ENGINEERING HOSPITALITY

Industry leaders come together for the
7th HAI Hoteliers' Conclave

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK



K.B.KACHRU
President, Hotel Association of India
Chairman - South Asia,
Radisson Hotel Group

Re-engineering hospitality for the new era

Indian hospitality stands at an exciting inflection point. The industry has weathered extraordinary disruptions over the past quarter century—from global crises and economic downturns to the pandemic and geopolitical uncertainty—and emerged stronger and more resilient. The focus now is not merely on growth, but on how the industry can re-engineer itself for the opportunities ahead.

This special issue of HAI Engage brings readers highlights from the 7th HAI Hotel Conclave, held on 18 September 2026 in New Delhi, appropriately themed 'Re-engineering Hospitality'. The conclave brought together leading lights of the hospitality industry to debate the issues that will shape its future—from investment, infrastructure and technology to talent, sustainability, inclusion, MICE and weddings.

Setting the tone was a special message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, recognising the importance of tourism and hospitality to India's economic journey. The conclave underscored the need to translate this recognition into measurable action and strengthen collaboration between government and industry. Union Minister of Culture and Tourism Gajendra Singh Shekhawat offered his perspective on the changing face of Indian tourism and the need to build an experience-led hospitality ecosystem. Tourism Secretary Bhuvnesh Kumar highlighted priorities ranging from ease of doing business and skilling to sustainability and closer government-industry collaboration.

Across the sessions, one message came through clearly: tourism and hospitality have the potential to become an even more powerful engine of employment, entrepreneurship, investment and inclusive growth. But realising that potential will require us to think differently—making young people job-ready, attracting capital, improving last-mile connectivity, creating better destinations and marketing India more effectively to the world.

As HAI has emphasised, these are no longer merely industry demands; they are national economic priorities. Re-engineering hospitality, therefore, is not simply a conference theme—it is a call to action.

As the PM mentioned in his message, offering hospitality to a guest is an expression of our culture. As the festive season kicks off in the country, we get to celebrate our country's greatest tourism strengths—its extraordinary culture and festivities. Few countries offer such a rich tapestry of festivals, traditions, cuisine, heritage and local experiences. From religious and cultural celebrations to weddings and regional festivities, each creates opportunities for people to travel, discover and connect.

As you browse through this special issue, we hope you enjoy the ideas, insights and celebrations that capture an industry preparing confidently for its next chapter. **HAI**

7th HAI HOTELIERS' CONCLAVE

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By Riaan Jacob George

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We have entered the age of transformational experience where travellers seek cultural, emotional, and elevating experiences beyond physical.

M. P. Bezbaruah
Secretary General, HAI



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B 212-214, Somdutt Chambers-1,
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hai@hotelassociationofindia.com
www.hotelassociationofindia.com

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Delhi-Mathura Road, Faridabad -121 007, Haryana

EDITOR & PUBLISHER
Hotel Association of India
info@hotelassociationofindia.com

CONSULTING EDITOR
Kunal Advant

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Ratnamanjari Sharan
CONTENT & MARKETING



editorhai@consociaadvisory.com

DESIGN
Anthony Lawrence
anthonylawrance@gmail.com

EDITORIAL ENQUIRIES
(concerning reproducing of article)
editorhai@consociaadvisory.com

ADVERTISING ENQUIRIES
info@consociaadvisory.com

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प्रधानमंत्री
Prime Minister
MESSAGE

I am pleased to learn that the Hotel Association of India is organising the 7th Hoteliers' Conclave in New Delhi. I extend my warm greetings and best wishes to the organisers and all the participants on this occasion.

India's philosophy on hospitality is rooted in the timeless wisdom of 'Atithi Devo Bhava'. For us, offering hospitality to a guest is an expression of our culture. Our hotel industry has inherited this great legacy and is carrying it forward, catering to people from India and the world.

When people travel across our country, their experience is shaped by many things. They see the beauty of our destinations, experience the warmth of our people and of course, spend an important part of their journey in hotels and other places of hospitality. The people working in this sector play an important role in making these experiences memorable.

India's tourism landscape is also changing rapidly. Better connectivity and improved tourism infrastructure are making it easier for people to travel across the country and discover destinations that were once less accessible. Religious and spiritual circuits, adventure travel, wellness tourism and wedding tourism are creating new opportunities for businesses, generating employment and enabling greater economic activity.

The use of technology is also expanding possibilities to discover India. Social media is helping people share new destinations and plan their travel experiences. Technology is also helping create more immersive experiences, especially at our historical and cultural sites.

However, it is also true that the warmth of human emotions will always be at the heart of hospitality. A professional who cares for a guest and understands their needs is the face of India's hospitality that guests will remember forever. Therefore, investing in the skills of our youth and other stakeholders is an important part of enhancing the tourism and hospitality sector.

As we move towards the goal of Viksit Bharat, our vision must be to ensure that the tourism potential of every region contributes to the prosperity of the people. Organisations like the Hotel Association of India have an important role to play in this regard. Such conclaves bring together the experience and understanding of various leaders in the sector to discuss emerging possibilities and exchange best practices. May the deliberations at the Hoteliers' Conclave be beneficial for the future of the industry and the nation.

Best wishes to the HAI and the participants for the success of the 7th Hoteliers' Conclave.

(Narendra Modi)

New Delhi
भाद्रपद 25, शक संवत् 1948
16 September, 2026

FROM ROOMS TO EXPERIENCES RE-ENGINEERING INDIAN HOSPITALITY

*As tourism gathers scale, India must build destinations, embrace technology and sustainability, develop future-ready talent and combine its distinctive human touch with world-class experiences, says **Gajendra Singh Shekhawat**, Union Minister of Culture and Tourism. Excerpts from his address:*

Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Union Minister of Culture and Tourism, said the theme of "Re-engineering Hospitality" reflected a fundamental shift in the way travellers think, choose destinations and experience hospitality. Despite geopolitical turbulence and rapid technological change, he expressed confidence in India's tourism prospects, underpinned by a resilient economy and a rapidly expanding domestic tourism market.

"The next era of hospitality will not be room-centric. It will be completely experience-centric," Shekhawat said. Hotels, he argued, would have to move beyond accommodation to become part of a larger destination experience encompassing local culture, cuisine, crafts, heritage and communities. India's tourism story, he said, was increasingly one of "scale, speed, confidence and transformation".

The expansion of India's middle class, rising disposable incomes and changing consumer preferences would provide a powerful growth engine. Spiritual tourism, weddings, MICE, wellness, medical value travel, wildlife, agricultural tourism and culinary experiences were already creating new demand. Improved connectivity would further open up Tier-II and Tier-III cities, temple towns and emerging destinations.

Shekhawat said India needed to create destinations that met global standards, including the 50 new destinations envisaged by the government. The industry, too, needed to build capacity and quality ahead of demand rather than merely respond to it.

Technology would be central to this transformation. The government plans to build a National Destination Digital Knowledge Grid, while hotels would increasingly use technology for demand forecasting, pricing and

"Ultimately, every hotel should become a gateway to its destination, bringing alive its soil, art, music, fragrance, cuisine and heritage"



multilingual guest assistance. But technology should remain "an enabler, not a controller", he stressed. "Technology and high-tech will have to travel together with high-touch and the human touch."

Sustainability would become equally important as travellers increasingly consider the environmental and community impact of their spending. Hotels would need to focus on metrics such as water consumption, energy intensity and waste diversion, while responding to climate change and adopting more responsible procurement and waste-management practices.

Human capital would remain critical. While technology could automate repetitive tasks, Shekhawat said hospitality's emotional and experiential dimensions would continue to depend on people. Government and industry therefore needed to work together to build skills aligned with changing traveller expectations.

Ultimately, he said, every hotel should become "a gateway to its destination", bringing alive its soil, art, music, fragrance, cuisine and heritage. Tourism's reach would increasingly extend beyond established destinations to border villages, tribal hamlets, islands, the North-East and desert landscapes.

Shekhawat called for deeper government-industry collaboration, with government acting as a facilitator and enabler of growth. With the right

reforms, investment, skills, technology and sustainability framework, tourism could significantly increase its contribution to the economy and emerge as one of India's biggest employment generators. **HAI**

“GOVT & HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY ARE PARTNERS IN DELIVERING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE”

Bhuvnesh Kumar, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, is a 1995-batch IAS officer of the Uttar Pradesh cadre, with experience in policy planning, e-governance and infrastructure development across sectors. Over the course of his career, he has held key portfolios including Finance, MSME, Technical Education and Vocational Education, and headed the Uttar Pradesh Skill Development Mission. At the Centre, he has served as Joint Secretary and Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. He also served as CEO of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI). Excerpts from his address.

The hotel industry is often the first touchpoint for any visitor, especially a foreign traveller arriving in India. It is the person who opens the door, says “welcome” and makes the visitor comfortable who brings the India experience to life. When the Ministry of Tourism promotes India, it is ultimately hotels, restaurants and other tourism facilities that deliver that promise on the ground. So I see the government and hospitality industry as partners in delivering the visitor experience.

The first issue I want to mention is growth. India is growing rapidly and is now the world's fourth-largest economy. Rising incomes have created a large group of people who travel, driving unprecedented growth in domestic tourism and, consequently, the hotel industry. The number of hotels planned over the next three years is remarkable. But these travellers are not just travelling within India. Technology has exposed them to the world, and they compare Indian hotels with those in Thailand, Dubai, Vietnam and Indonesia. Outbound travel has grown much faster in recent years, and over the past three years, India has become net foreign

“We need to reduce approvals and construction timelines to improve the industry's viability”



exchange negative in tourism after being in surplus for a long time. That is something we need to focus on.

The second issue is ease of doing business. The number of licences, approvals and NOCs required to set up and operate a hotel remains a concern. I am told that a hotel requires 49 approvals before starting, another 21 during construction and 27 before operations—nearly 100 in all. The Ministry is conscious of this and has taken it up strongly with NITI Aayog and the states. We need to reduce approvals and construction timelines to improve the industry's viability. Industry status, promised by several states but not fully implemented, is another concern. I want to assure you that we will continue to work on these issues.

The third issue, very close to my heart, is sustainability. Sustainability cannot be driven by the government alone; it has to come from all stakeholders. The younger generation, particularly Gen Z, is increasingly conscious of water and energy use and other environmental issues. This awareness will influence their choice of hotels. The industry, therefore, needs to pursue sustainability vigorously.

The fourth issue is skilling. I have often heard from the industry that students graduating from hospitality institutes are not job-ready from day one, requiring hotels to invest considerable time and effort in training them. This calls for closer collaboration between institutes and the industry. The objective should be to ensure that when students graduate, they are productive from day one.

Lastly, the industry spends significantly on promotion, but largely through individual companies and associations. Both the government and industry ultimately promote the same message—visit India. There is an opportunity to make Incredible India a joint government-industry effort.

Indian hospitality is unmatched and has the potential to make India “the tourist destination of the century”. The key is consistency—ensuring the same high standards of hospitality across major cities and smaller destinations. **HAI**

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UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF HOSPITALITY FOR VIKSIT BHARAT

Suman Billa, *Additional Secretary & Director General (Tourism), Government of India*, has contributed significantly to Indian tourism, helping shape policy frameworks for Incredible India and promoting sustainable, rural, adventure and golf tourism, while strengthening international ties and global outreach. He tells us the opportunities, challenges and the solutions for the sector to keep shining.

One way to unlock the potential of Indian hospitality is to begin with the numbers. Domestic tourism reached 426 crore visits in 2025, up from 132 crore in 2014—more than tripling in a decade, at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11%, despite the disruption caused by Covid-19. The message is clear: domestic demand is surging. India's strong economic growth has put more money in people's pockets, while its young population increasingly sees travel as aspirational.

But two other numbers matter. India received 2.1 crore international tourists in 2025, generating \$32 billion in foreign exchange earnings. That represents annualised growth of just 3.93% over the past decade—well below India's potential. Meanwhile, 3.2 crore Indians travelled overseas in 2025, spending \$37 billion.

Tourism has thus become a net user of foreign exchange for India, unlike before COVID. The trend is clear: domestic tourism is booming, inbound growth remains muted, while outbound travel is expanding faster, at a CAGR of 4.88% against 3.9% for inbound tourism.

Unless we have a coherent strategy to unlock tourism's potential, we risk missing an opportunity to make it a much stronger engine of economic growth and employment. Globally, travel and tourism accounts for one in nine jobs. At a time when AI and other technologies are making investment increasingly capital-

intensive and less labour-intensive, tourism remains a powerful job creator. According to WTTC, one in three new jobs created globally in 2025 came from travel and tourism. Accelerating inbound tourism must therefore be a priority.

We need to leverage tourism as an engine of economic growth. The national ambition is to double tourism's contribution to GDP from 5.22% to 10%. The task is clear: double the sector's contribution over the next decade.

The other goal is to create 25 million additional tourism jobs over the next seven to eight years. The sector already supports 89 million jobs in India—a significant base on which to build.

India has been among the world's fastest-growing large economies for more than a decade, putting more money in people's pockets. It also has a young population for whom travel is increasingly aspirational, and that is reflected in the growth of domestic tourism

Infrastructure is another critical factor. For hospitality investment, the biggest enabler is connectivity—and India has made good progress there. The number of airports has risen from 76 in 2014 to 156 today, while the commercial aircraft fleet has grown from about 400 to 850. With another 1,000 aircraft on order, the fleet could more than double by around 2030.

One step is to create Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) for major tourist destinations. Fifty destinations have been identified for development as global tourism hubs, and effective destination management must be central to that effort

This presents both an opportunity and a threat. Better aviation connectivity supports domestic tourism and brings India closer to international markets. But it also makes overseas travel easier for Indians. Unless tourism capacity within India keeps pace, expanding connectivity could work against us.

Road infrastructure has expanded substantially too. National highways have grown from about 90,000 km in 2014 to more than 1,50,000 km today. The connecting infrastructure is increasingly in place, but private investment in tourism infrastructure has not kept pace.

Branded hotel inventory, for instance, has increased from about 80,000 rooms in 2014 to around 2,00,000 today. That is strong growth, but still insufficient relative to the opportunity.

India has an estimated 150 lakh unbranded hotel rooms. Yet, even conservatively assuming 50 crore travellers stay in hotels or guest houses for business, leisure or shopping, the country needs at least twice its current capacity. Demand is surging, but supply is not keeping pace.

The answer is to "follow the infrastructure". New airports, highways and faster rail links are opening up destinations across India. Government and industry must map these emerging corridors and use improved connectivity to guide private investment and expand tourism infrastructure in a coherent manner.

The fourth priority is to look beyond hotels to the destination itself. Indian hotels offer high standards of service, but does that quality of experience continue once a guest steps outside? Travellers do not choose a destination simply for a great hotel; the real draw is the destination—its attractions, experiences and overall environment. Hotels therefore need to play a more active role in shaping and improving the destinations in which they operate.

One step is to create Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) for major tourist destinations. Fifty destinations have been identified for development as global tourism hubs, and effective destination management must be central to that effort. Destination governance remains a major gap in India. While tourism is governed at the Centre and state levels, individual destinations are largely left to municipalities or panchayats, which may lack the capacity or focus required. We need DMOs at key tourist destinations, bringing government and industry together to shape their development. The industry must have a seat at the table because the long-term success of hotels depends equally on the quality of the destination experience. Strong government-industry collaboration will be critical to unlocking the opportunity ahead. And if we have to practice, we have to work together. How do we unleash more and more investments to come? How do we enable investments? Today, we all know that we're just not getting enough investments into this country

because of a few structural problems that we have. One, the cost of real estate is stratospheric. High land costs make other real estate asset classes faster and more secure investments than hotels. The capital structure is also stacked against hospitality: unless a hotel is in a destination with a population below one million, lending norms treat it as real estate, resulting in higher interest rates and repayment periods of just eight to ten years—too short for most hotels

to repay their debt. We have therefore been engaging with the Department of Economic Affairs and the RBI for infrastructure status for hotels, which has so far been extended only in a qualified manner.

In a meeting with the Prime Minister, he emphasised the need to enable investment in tourism through closer government-industry collaboration. The industry must identify the barriers to investment and work with the Ministry of Urban Development and state governments to simplify clearances, improve ease of doing business and create a predictable investment environment. **HAI**

If our priority is to create jobs and livelihoods, we need to leverage tourism as an engine of economic growth. Unlike manufacturing and many services, which often require workers to migrate to urban centres, tourism can take jobs to people, creating livelihoods within their own communities



SUSTAINABLE RE-ENGINEERING

While we have re-engineered the edges of the business, have we really re-engineered hospitality itself? asks moderator **Patanjali G. Keswani**, CMD, Lemon Tree Hotels, of industry leaders **Priya Paul**, Chairperson, Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels, **Anil Chadha**, Managing Director, ITC Hotels, **Shwetank Singh**, Managing Director & CEO, Chalet Hotels, and **Anuraag Bhatnagar**, CEO, The Leela Palaces, Hotels & Resorts.



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(L to R) Patanjali G. Keswani, Priya Paul, Anil Chadha, Shwetank Singh, and Anuraag Bhatnagar

P

atanjali G. Keswani, CMD, Lemon Tree Hotels, opened the discussion

and said the hospitality industry had traditionally evolved through incremental improvements in yields, costs, service scores and menus. Re-engineering, however, required a more fundamental question: whether the industry was still “running the right engine”. At its core, hospitality continued to revolve around rooms, food and beverage, and experiences, and that had changed little in 50 years, Keswani said. What had changed dramatically was the ecosystem around it—from the guest journey and booking channels to pricing and ownership of the customer relationship. He asked the panellists whether the industry was genuinely building for what hospitality would look like five years from now or merely defending existing models.



“Business models are evolving in different directions, with some companies combining ownership and operations and others separating the two”

Patanjali G. Keswani
CMD, Lemon Tree Hotels



"it's really about experiences and differentiation—using art, design, music, food, fashion and culture to build communities and tribes who are loyal"

Priya Paul

Chairperson, Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels

Priya Paul, Chairperson, Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels, said differentiation and experiences had long been central to Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels' strategy. The company had used art, design, music, food, fashion and culture to build communities of loyal customers who sought more than simply a hotel room. A strong connection with the local destination was equally important, she said, adding that this approach had helped keep non-room revenue high.

The challenge, Paul said, was to continually reinvent these experiences as competitors could replicate successful ideas quickly. Hotels therefore needed to keep their communities engaged while fostering a culture of creativity and innovation among employees. "How do we keep on driving that innovation culture and that creative culture, and let our teams move forward?" she asked.

Shwetank Singh, Managing Director & CEO, Chalet Hotels, offered a different perspective,



arguing that there was nothing wrong with incremental change. Even small, continuous improvements could produce significant gains over time, he said. Chalet Hotels was comfortable learning from early adopters and then replicating successful ideas at scale. "We like to be N-1," he said.

Singh said Chalet had itself evolved from being an asset owner to entering third-party management and experimenting with the franchise model, beginning with Four Points in Navi Mumbai in 2009. That journey had given the company a better understanding of hotel unit economics and eventually led it towards creating its own brand.

For now, Singh described the new brand as an experiment aimed at demonstrating that Chalet could consistently deliver the intended guest experience. The company has announced a pipeline of around 1,400 keys, backed by ₹2,000 crore of capital expenditure.

The priority, he said, was to establish the brand, prove the model to itself and to guests, and only then consider taking it further. Starting with a clean slate gave Chalet greater control over the changes it wanted to make, while allowing it to learn quickly and adapt in response to customer feedback.

Keswani pointed out that much of the value in hospitality was increasingly being created in the wider ecosystem, often by businesses that neither owned nor managed hotels. He asked **Anil Chadha**, Managing Director, ITC Hotels, whether hotel companies risked becoming mere suppliers rather than owners of the customer ecosystem.



"Chalet evolved from being an asset owner to entering third-party management and experimenting with the franchise model, beginning with Four Points in Navi Mumbai in 2009. That journey has given the company a better understanding of hotel unit economics and eventually led it towards creating its own brand"

Shwetank Singh

Managing Director & CEO, Chalet Hotels

Chadha agreed that the game was changing and said hospitality brands needed to move "from mattresses to memories" by capturing a larger share of the guest experience. That meant going beyond rooms to food and beverage, spas, wellness, loyalty programmes and even products such as festive offerings. "There is so much that a brand can actually bring alive," he said.

Customer loyalty, too, could no longer be taken for granted, Chadha said, making continuous reinvention essential. But as hotel companies expanded, they needed to "scale with the soul". Scale might deliver numbers, he said, but brands must retain their values, warmth and emotional connection with guests. "It is a game of people," he added.



Turning to **Anuraag Bhatnagar**, CEO, The Leela Palaces, Hotels & Resorts, Keswani raised the question of industry structure. Globally, hotel development, ownership, management, branding and distribution are increasingly separated, while Indian hospitality has traditionally bundled several of these functions together. At the same time, business models are evolving in different directions, with some companies combining ownership and operations and others separating the two.

He asked Bhatnagar how The Leela, as a luxury hotel owner and operator that is also expanding into management, viewed this evolution and how the ownership-management model was likely to change over the next five to 10 years, particularly in the luxury segment.

Bhatnagar said The Leela had a clear strategy of combining ownership with management agreements and strategic partnerships. Of the 15 hotels it operates, it owns six. Including its pipeline, nearly half of its 5,200-room inventory comes from owned assets, with the balance through management agreements and partnerships with third-party owners and developers.

In luxury hospitality, Bhatnagar said, ownership offered significant value-creation opportunities provided companies acquired the right assets in the right locations and at the right price. Recent projects had delivered stabilised yields on cost (YOC) in the mid- to high-teens, he added.

Management agreements, however, required equally careful selection. The location needed to be distinctive and difficult to replicate, while partners needed both the capital and willingness to invest in



"I would say, scale with soul. You know, scale will give you the numbers, but you need to keep your soul intact. It is important that you do not lose focus on your brand values"

Anil Chadha

Managing Director, ITC Hotels

the level of experiential luxury expected of the brand. Where outright acquisition was not possible, partnering with owners who had access to attractive land or destinations could provide another route to growth.

Bhatnagar favoured an "asset-right" rather than a rigid asset-heavy or asset-light approach, with each decision based on the merits of the asset and location. Improved connectivity and the development of new tourism destinations would open up many more underserved markets over the next five years, he said, taking luxury hospitality beyond the traditional resort destinations and major cities.

Keswani said two forces would increasingly shape hospitality—disruption and sustainability. Referring to Morgan Housel's book *Same as Ever*, he argued that rather than trying to predict an inherently uncertain future, businesses should focus on what is unlikely to change.

He cited Sam Altman's early thinking around

OpenAI as an example of embracing uncertainty while pursuing transformative innovation. The hotel industry, Keswani said, needed more of that mindset instead of assuming it could accurately predict what lay ahead.

At the same time, companies needed to identify enduring customer expectations. Keswani referred to Jeff Bezos' approach at Amazon: customers would continue to value quality, price and timely delivery, making investment in these fundamentals relevant regardless of technological change.

Responding to Keswani's question on how disruption and sustainability would play out, **Paul** said artificial intelligence could have an immediate impact on costs by eliminating repetitive and routine tasks. That, she hoped, would free employees to focus on "good old-fashioned hospitality"—spending more time engaging with guests and building genuine human connections rather than filling forms and ticking boxes.

AI could also lower the cost of delivering hotel services, including through automation and technologies such as cleaning robots, she said. Paul expected the impact to be transformational rather than incremental. The industry, she added, needed to prepare for a future in which "half my team could be non-human" and consider how such a workforce would operate alongside employees and interact with guests.

Bhatnagar agreed that AI would disrupt hospitality, but said luxury would continue to depend on the human touch and warmth that guests were willing to pay a premium for. The biggest near-term impact, he said, could be in areas such as revenue management, marketing and back-end operations.

AI would make large amounts of data available almost instantly, replacing analysis that currently



We favour an 'asset-right' rather than a rigid asset-heavy or asset-light approach, with each decision based on the merits of the asset and location"

Anuraag Bhatnagar

CEO, The Leela Palaces,
Hotels & Resorts

takes hours and enabling faster, better-informed decisions. The real value, Bhatnagar said, would lie not merely in using AI to generate questions, but in getting the answers needed to make better decisions.

Chadha said technology could drive significant efficiencies in the mid-scale and budget segments, reducing manpower requirements and improving profitability. Luxury hospitality, however, would

continue to require human skills—"you cannot have a robot making Bukhara kebabs or biryani," he said.

On sustainability, Chadha said ITC Hotels had embraced "responsible luxury" long before the concept gained wider acceptance. At the time, investments in areas such as water conservation and carbon reduction were often questioned because customers were not necessarily willing to pay more for them. "It is not just about money. It is about responsibility," he said.

That mindset was now changing, with younger travellers increasingly conscious of sustainability. Customers were asking about carbon footprints, local sourcing and dependence on imported produce, he said. For an industry traditionally associated with extravagance, responsible use of resources would increasingly become integral to hospitality.

Singh said the rapid evolution of AI made its long-term impact difficult to predict, particularly amid concerns over the technology's own environmental footprint, including its consumption of electricity and water.

Sustainability, however, was already a business imperative for Chalet Hotels, Singh said. The company ranks second globally on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index and has committed to the RE100 (renewable electricity), EV100 (electric vehicles) and EP100 (energy productivity) initiatives, with a target of becoming carbon neutral by 2040.

Singh said the financial impact of climate change was already becoming visible. Construction projects had faced delays because of unusually heavy rainfall, while extreme weather and road closures had disrupted hotel operations. "We are not necessarily calculating the cost of it yet, but we are feeling it," he said.

Sustainability also increasingly offered a financial return, Singh added. Guests might not necessarily pay a premium for it today, but would increasingly expect it. Lenders and investors, too, were demanding stronger sustainability programmes, with credible initiatives helping companies secure more favourable financing rates and terms.

The consensus was clear: as technology, business models and sustainability imperatives reshape hospitality, the industry will need to keep re-engineering itself without losing the human connection at its core. **HAI**





Dr Jyotsna Suri with Amitabh Kant

“INDIA NEEDS A MASSIVE GLOBAL TOURISM PUSH”

The destination may be extraordinary, but if the last 20-25 km of the journey is terrible, the visitor experience suffers,

Amitabh Kant, former G20 Sherpa of India and former CEO of NITI Aayog, tells **Dr Jyotsna Suri**, Chairperson & MD, The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group, in a fireside chat.

The world has radically changed from the time when we launched the Incredible India campaign. At that time, we were doing television commercials, films and other traditional forms of promotion. If I were to do it today, it would be totally digital. India today is a \$4 trillion

economy and a technology power. We use digital identity, phones and apps across payments, credit, stock markets and insurance. This rapidly growing, advancing and increasingly confident India needs to be demonstrated to the world with energy, vibrancy and dynamism.

Whatever you want to call it—India 2.0 or India 3.0—India

needs to be branded, promoted and marketed globally in a very big way. And it needs a massive spend behind that effort.

This is particularly important because India is going to buy close to 2,000 aircraft. As connectivity expands, more Indians will travel overseas. We cannot afford a situation where we make it easier for Indian tourists to discover foreign



destinations without making an equally strong effort to bring foreign tourists to India.

Domestic tourism has grown enormously, and Indians are travelling across the country. Hotel chains, too, have created outstanding properties across India. But we also need to attract international travellers because they bring significantly greater value to the tourism economy. We need both—continued expansion of domestic tourism and a much stronger push for foreign tourist arrivals.

Jobs, jobs, jobs

If India wants to become a \$30 trillion economy, tourism must play a much bigger role. My view is that the tourism industry needs to talk about tourism primarily in terms of jobs.

The language policymakers and politicians understand is job creation. And there is hardly another sector that can match tourism's ability to create jobs and livelihoods, directly as well as through its multiplier effect.

The industry needs to define that opportunity clearly. How many millions of jobs can tourism create directly? How many more can it support indirectly? Put a number to it and communicate it. India needs growth and India needs jobs. Tourism delivers growth with jobs. That should be the message: jobs, jobs, jobs.

Incredible India must also be liveable India

There is another fundamental requirement. Incredible India

cannot simply be about great hotels. For Incredible India to truly be incredible, India has to become liveable. If our cities are surrounded by slums and garbage, if drainage and sewage systems do not work, and if basic urban infrastructure is poor, we cannot create a world-class tourism experience.

Urbanisation will be one of India's biggest drivers of economic growth over the coming decades, as hundreds of





RAPID FIRE

Jyotsna Suri: Quiet holiday or an adventure holiday?

Amitabh Kant: Adventure.

Suri: Early morning, or a late-night person?

Kant: Early morning.

Suri: Good food or a good book?

Kant: I prefer my book. I love food.

Suri: Strategist or a mentor?

Kant: Strategist.

Suri: Your advice to young people? Ambition or balance?

Kant: Ambition to transform India, disruption and to grow & evolve.

As connectivity expands, more Indians will travel overseas. We cannot afford a situation where we make it easier for Indian tourists to discover foreign destinations without making an equally strong effort to bring foreign tourists to India

millions of Indians move into cities. Travel and tourism must become an integral part of that process. But we need to get the basics right, particularly last-mile connectivity.

Take Hampi, which in my view is one of India's—and indeed the world's—great destinations. Yet the approach to Hampi was a nightmare. During G20, I put a great deal of energy into getting that stretch of road improved. The destination may be extraordinary, but if the last

20-25 km of the journey is terrible, the visitor experience suffers.

This is true across India. Whether it is roads, toilets, water, cleanliness or garbage management, we need to identify the gaps at our leading destinations and fix them.

The Hotel Association of India should identify the top 20 destinations and spell out precisely what is missing in each one: Where is the connectivity gap? Where is the infrastructure failing? What is damaging the visitor experience?

Look at Goa. You arrive at one of India's best-known tourism destinations and even basic local mobility can become difficult. If tourists face poor transport options, traffic congestion or harassment on arrival, what kind of destination experience are we creating?

This is why destinations such as Bali and Phuket are able to

extract much greater value from tourism. We need to hold policy and administration accountable for the quality of our destinations.

Khajuraho is another example. In my view, it is one of India's greatest destinations, yet we have not been able to provide the kind of connectivity it deserves.

States need to recognise tourism's value

One of India's challenges is that, barring a few states such as Rajasthan and Kerala, many states have still not fully understood tourism's multiplier effect on jobs and their economies. Once they recognise that value, they will invest more aggressively in tourism infrastructure and destination development.

Destination management in India remains extremely poor. Look at our top 20 destinations and ask: Who is actually responsible for managing the complete visitor experience?

That needs to change. Great hotels alone cannot compensate for poor destinations. Tourism is



an ecosystem, and every part of that ecosystem—from connectivity and cleanliness to mobility and public infrastructure—has to work.

Govt and business require different approaches

Having worked in government at both the state and national levels, and now serving on corporate boards, I have seen the distinction between the two. In government, I have worked on execution at the state level and policy making at the national level. In the private sector, the role of a board is very different.

When you are on a board, you

See what's missing in the destinations: Where is the connectivity gap? Where is the infrastructure failing? What is damaging the visitor experience?

should not interfere in day-to-day operations. The board should focus on strategy, vision and succession planning. Operations must be left to the CEO and the management team. Hold them accountable for outcomes—that is the board's job. Boards often go wrong when they start interfering in day-to-day management.

Today, I am also travelling more and experiencing travel, tourism and hospitality across India and the world. And that only reinforces my conviction: India has extraordinary tourism assets, but we need to market them better, manage our destinations better and recognise tourism for what it can become—one of India's most powerful engines of growth and job creation. **HAI**





"WE NEED TO TURN INCREDIBLE INDIA INTO INVALUABLE ECONOMICS"

India has vast tourism assets but is yet to realise their full economic potential. Better infrastructure, connectivity, policy coordination, skilling and global promotion can turn tourism into a powerful engine of investment, jobs and growth, says **Puneet Chhatwal**, Chairman, FAITH; MD & CEO, The Indian Hotels Company Ltd. Excerpts from his address:



I am reminded of a quote from Longfellow's A Psalm of Life:

**"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time"**

I have to view Incredible India through the lens of economics. India possesses an extraordinary wealth of tourism assets: its culture and heritage, spiritual destinations, mountains and beaches, wellness traditions, business centres and modern infrastructure. Yet, for all that we have, we have not fully translated these assets into economic opportunity.

That is the gap we need to address. We have built Yashobhoomi and Bharat Mandapam. We have leisure, sports, adventure, health, wellness, Ayurveda, and more. The opportunity now is to capitalise on these strengths and unlock the full economic potential of tourism.

If India becomes a \$7 trillion economy by 2030, it will be among the world's largest and fastest-growing major economies. But GDP growth of 6.5% is not enough. We need substantially higher growth to turn Incredible India into Liveable India—an India with better housing, good roads and the infrastructure needed to support a higher quality of life.

India is a \$4 trillion economy today. If it grows to \$30 trillion by 2047—the Viksit Bharat goal—tourism could contribute 10% of that, compared with about \$0.25 trillion today. Research also shows a strong multiplier effect: every rupee invested in tourism generates an additional ₹3.25-3.50 in economic value. The sector's current contribution is estimated at 6.6%, partly because a large part remains unorganised.

Domestic tourism spending far exceeds foreign tourist spending. Rajasthan and Kerala remain strong markets, while Jammu & Kashmir is growing from a smaller base. More recently, Uttar Pradesh has emerged strongly, helped by the Maha Kumbh. Sikkim,

India is a \$4 trillion economy today. If it grows to \$30 trillion by 2047—the Viksit Bharat goal—tourism could contribute 10% of that, compared with about \$0.25 trillion today

Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh are also seeing strong growth.

Connectivity will be critical. Take Khajuraho. At a CII event in Indore, we discussed how improving connectivity and bridging the viability gap—including government support for flights during certain periods—could unlock its tourism potential.

Foreign tourism offers an even bigger opportunity because international visitors tend to spend more. A foreign tourist taking a rickshaw to Kashi Vishwanath Temple and leaving even a small tip can make a meaningful difference to the driver's daily livelihood. It is this wider economic impact that India

has been missing since COVID.

That is why India remains highly underleveraged as a tourism destination. Paris receives around 25 million international visitors, while India receives fewer than 10 million. Rather than a reason to complain, the gap illustrates the scale of the opportunity.

The same applies to our attractions. Peru's famous heritage sites draw visitors in huge numbers, while the Sun Temple at Konark attracts only a fraction of its potential international audience.

Hotel capacity is another constraint. India has only about 0.1 branded hotel room per 1,000 people, leaving it far behind larger tourism markets. During peak seasons, rooms are often unavailable. When people cannot find accommodation, they do not travel. We are, quite literally, leaving money on the table.

What are the challenges? The biggest are infrastructure gaps and last-mile connectivity. India ranks 54th globally in tourism infrastructure. The high cost of

capital also makes building hotels expensive.

Then there is policy fragmentation. Tourism and hospitality do not fit neatly within either the Centre's or the states' remit, nor is tourism on the Concurrent List. Infrastructure status involves the Centre, while industry status rests with the states. Bringing tourism onto the Concurrent List could enable a more coordinated policy approach.

The Concurrent List was drawn up at a time when tourism could hardly have been a national priority. The focus then was on livelihoods and employment. But circumstances have changed. HAI and other industry associations have consistently pushed for greater recognition of the sector, contributing to hospitality receiving industry status in several states.

The Finance Minister has announced the development of 50 tourism destinations in mission mode, with harmonised infrastructure status. We are awaiting the final list, but the process is under way.

Rather than focus only on what is missing, we need to ask how we get there. Our six-point execution roadmap starts with planning: seamless connectivity, inclusive and responsible tourism, MICE destinations, food tourism and integrated tourism circuits.

Connectivity is critical. India needs many more airports and, equally importantly, reliable year-round flight connectivity. Destinations also need cleanliness, hygiene, responsible management and, above all, safety and security.



Today, about 75% of our leisure traffic is concentrated in just 15-20 destinations, putting enormous pressure on fragile ecosystems. Extreme rainfall and the difficulties of development in areas such as Khandala and north of Rishikesh underline these risks.

Part of the problem is that existing destinations have not been managed sustainably, while new tourism ecosystems have not been developed. We need to disperse tourism beyond the familiar hotspots and build new destinations capable of accommodating future growth responsibly.

On people, the priority is skilling and development, recognition and rewards, and global partnerships that can help equip India's young workforce. If we are to realise our demographic dividend, we have a long way to go. The advantage of hospitality is that people can be trained quickly and equipped for a wide range of jobs. An estimated 60% of the workforce still lacks formal training.

On policy, beyond industry and infrastructure status, we need a National Tourism Policy and a National Tourism Board, with greater alignment between the Centre and states. India is highly

Infrastructure status involves the Centre, while industry status rests with the states. Bringing tourism onto the Concurrent List could enable a more coordinated policy approach

Paris receives around 25 million international visitors, while India receives fewer than 10 million. Rather than a reason to complain, the gap illustrates the scale of the opportunity

diverse; what works in Rajasthan may not work in Karnataka, Kerala or Sikkim. Policy needs to accommodate those differences while providing a common national framework.

India also needs to expand its branded hotel capacity dramatically—from about 2,00,000 rooms to two million additional rooms, requiring an estimated 1 lakh crore of capital. Infrastructure status could lower borrowing costs, attract investment and accelerate growth and employment.

Tourism is a powerful job creator. According to WTTC, one in four new jobs globally is linked to travel and tourism, while each direct tourism job can support several more across transport and other services. The potential for India could run into tens of millions of additional jobs.

Finally, processes must improve—from ease of doing business to ease of travel and visas. Other destinations, including Thailand and Indonesia, have moved ahead on these fronts. India faces its own security challenges, but simplifying travel and business processes will be critical to competing effectively for global tourists.

Since the Incredible India

campaign, we have not mounted another comparable global push. It is time to start promoting India overseas again. Hotel and travel companies have done their part, but India needs a much larger, coordinated effort.

Every additional \$1 million invested in tourism marketing could generate 10,000 incremental foreign tourist arrivals and more than \$35 million in economic value, reflecting tourism's strong multiplier effect.

This could help propel India into the top tier of global travel and tourism economies, with employment rising from 45 million jobs today to 60 million by 2030 and potentially 100 million by 2047. The sector's economic contribution could grow from about \$250 billion today to nearly \$3 trillion.

I would conclude with a simple point: India does not have a tourism deficit; it has an opportunity deficit. The assets are here, the diversity is here, the culture is here, and so are the aspiration and ambition.

It is our collective responsibility to connect the dots and make it happen. We need support from the Tourism Ministry, the infrastructure ministries and other arms of government, but we cannot wait for somebody else to act.

We must do what we can to turn Incredible India into invaluable economics—creating jobs and livelihoods, attracting domestic and international investment, generating prosperity and, most importantly, strengthening the soft power of a grand India. **HAI**



M. P. Bezbaruah

SECRETARY GENERAL & MEMBER, EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, HOTEL ASSOCIATION OF INDIA, IN HIS WELCOME ADDRESS

"We feel encouraged to move forward, first because of the resilience and self-confidence the industry has demonstrated. Second, the absence of tourism during the pandemic made the world realise its importance. Two unprecedented United Nations conferences dedicated to tourism recognised its role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering economic growth, alleviating poverty and creating productive employment.

We are also fortunate to have the unequivocal support of our Prime Minister, who has repeatedly emphasised the importance of tourism. Most recently, the BRICS Summit declaration under India's leadership recognised tourism as a key driver of economic growth, employment, livelihoods and cultural understanding."

"The last quarter century has seen one disruption after another—from 9/11 and SARS to the global financial crisis, COVID and geopolitical conflicts.

But through it all, one thing has stood out: our resilience. We should applaud ourselves for facing these challenges and bouncing back.

Yes, we are sometimes criticised for high tariffs and rising hotel rates. But when the industry was in the dumps, we learnt how to survive. More importantly, we learnt to work together. Now, we want India to thrive, and that means focusing on priorities and measurable outcomes. That is the spirit behind this conclave—re-engineering hospitality and re-engineering ourselves. If we are serious about contributing to India's ambitions for 2030 and 2047, and making tourism a much larger engine of economic growth and employment, we cannot continue doing business as usual. We have to move faster and think differently."



K. B. Kachru

PRESIDENT, HAI & CHAIRMAN – SOUTH ASIA, RADISSON HOTEL GROUP

HIGHLIGHTS



"The next era of hospitality will not be room-centric. It will be completely experience-centric."

Gajendra Singh Shekhawat
Union Minister of
Culture and Tourism, GoI



"Sustainability cannot be driven by the government alone; it has to come from all stakeholders."

Bhuvnesh Kumar
Secretary,
Ministry of Tourism, GoI



"India has only about 0.1 branded hotel room per 1,000 people, leaving it far behind larger tourism markets. During peak seasons, rooms are often unavailable. When people cannot find accommodation, they do not travel. We are, quite literally, leaving money on the table."

Puneet Chhatwal
Chairman, FAITH;
MD & CEO, IHCL



"The success of the conclave is attributed largely to the quality and expertise of speakers, and we had some excellent sessions and engaging conversations."

Charulata Sukhija
Deputy Secretary General &
Member Executive Committee,
Hotel Association of India



"The industry must identify the barriers to investment and work with the Ministry of Urban Development and state governments to simplify clearances, improve ease of doing business and create a predictable investment environment."

Suman Billa
Additional Secretary &
Director General (Tourism), GoI



"Whatever you want to call it-India 2.0 or India 3.0-India needs to be branded, promoted and marketed globally in a very big way. And it needs a massive spend behind that effort."

Amitabh Kant
Former G20 Sherpa of India
and Former CEO of
NITI Aayog



"Re-engineering hospitality isn't just about adapting to change. It is about actively redesigning our business models to capture maximum value."

Rohit Khosla
Vice President,
HAI & Conclave Convener
and Executive
Vice President, IHCL



"It's been our core strength—to develop the brands along this whole premise that people are looking for more than just a hotel room, and also to have a very strong local connect wherever we are."

Priya Paul
Chairperson, Apeejay
Surrendra Park Hotels



"We need to have a budget for marketing and promoting tourism."

Dr Jyotsna Suri
Chairperson &
MD, The Lalit Suri
Hospitality Group



"Customer loyalty cannot be taken for granted, making continuous reinvention essential."

Anil Chadha
Managing Director,
ITC Hotels



"Artificial Intelligence would disrupt hospitality, but luxury would continue to depend on the human touch and warmth that guests were willing to pay a premium for. The biggest near-term impact could be in areas such as revenue management, marketing and back-end operations."

Anuraag Bhatnagar
CEO,
The Leela Palaces, Hotels & Resorts



"Identifying talent is perhaps the biggest challenge facing the hospitality industry as it expands."

Zubin Saxena
Senior Vice President
and Regional Head-
South Asia, Hilton Hotels



"People might see photographs of hoteliers with Hollywood stars or heads of state, but rarely see the enormous work behind such moments. Teams could spend months preparing for a high-profile arrival, working overnight and attending to the smallest details."

Meena Bhatia
Vice President & General Manager,
Le Meridien, New Delhi



"The hospitality industry had traditionally evolved through incremental improvements in yields, costs, service scores and menus. Re-engineering, however, required a more fundamental question: whether the industry was still 'running the right engine.'"

Patanjali G. Keswani
CMD,
Lemon Tree Hotels



"The rapid rise of AI is set to transform how hotels attract guests, deliver experiences and run their operations, while raising new questions around data, jobs and the human touch."

Ajay K. Bakaya
Chairman, Sarovar Hotels



"Guests might not necessarily pay a premium for green practices today, but would increasingly expect it."

Shwetank Singh
Managing Director & CEO,
Chalet Hotels



"Transforming an established property is more difficult than creating one from scratch because it involves protecting what has been inherited while taking it forward. Helping a great hotel write a greater version of itself is particularly satisfying."

Amandeep Kaur
General Manager,
ITC Gardenia, Bengaluru



"May we continue to create an industry where women do not simply find a seat at the table, but lead the conversation around it."

Sonali Chauhan
General Manager,
The Connaught,
New Delhi - IHCL SeleQtions



"Infrastructure has to develop more evenly, alongside hotel-room capacity, connectivity and skilled manpower. Rapid hotel expansion is already creating a talent challenge for both hospitality and the events industry."

Samit Garg
Managing Director,
E-Factor Experiences

"YOUR EGO SHOULD NEVER BE BIGGER THAN THE TEAM"



(L to R) Rajdeep Sardesai and Kapil Dev

Rajdeep Sardesai, Consulting Editor & Lead News Anchor, India Today Group, in conversation with cricket legend **Kapil Dev**.

Of Kapil Dev's many records, there's one that few people know about. He played his first Test for India in 1978 and his last in 1994—16 years and 131 Tests, virtually without a break.

The only time he missed a Test was when he was dropped, for reasons we may never know. 16 years without missing a Test because of injury!

Sardesai asked Dev the secret behind his remarkable fitness and whether he relied on gyms or fitness trainers. Dev credited good genes and luck, but said his routine

was simple—running, swimming and playing different sports, while listening closely to his body.

"People talk about natural talent but often forget the hard work and mental strength that go with it. When I entered the Indian cricket team, there was also this perception that English was very important. But your ability and talent are more important than anything else," said Dev.

Asked how he captained senior players—many of whom had been his heroes—at just 24, Dev said everyone was equal on the field. "On the field, I was the captain and had a responsibility. I could be very hard, but in the evening, I would apologise to the seniors if I felt I had hurt them. Off the field, they were still my seniors and I treated them with respect. Leadership is about taking responsibility, but also being able to

say sorry and look after everybody."

Asked by Sardesai whether his lack of fluency in English ever made him feel inferior, Dev said ability mattered far more than language. He recalled surrounding himself with people who would point out his mistakes rather than praise him, saying that even successful people must remain willing to learn. "It doesn't matter how smart you are, there is somebody smarter than you. If you are ready to learn, there is no shortage."

Turning to young cricketers such as Vaibhav Suryavanshi, Dev stressed the importance of mentorship, particularly when fame and money arrive early. He said cricket authorities should help young players manage their earnings and protect them from poor influences. While acknowledging Suryavanshi's rare talent, Dev cautioned against comparisons with Sachin Tendulkar, whose passion sustained a career from his teens to 40. His advice was simple: "Don't follow the genius. Follow the simple people... What is basic is more important than anything else."

Asked by Sardesai whether money can dilute a sportsperson's passion, Dev said the desire to play for the country may drive a player initially, but earning money eventually becomes important. "Ninety-nine per cent of sportspeople in this world will say, 'Show me the money,'" he said, adding that players have to think about their families and financial future.

Dev, however, said he had no regrets about playing in an era before the IPL and its lucrative auctions. The love, respect and enjoyment he received mattered more, he said, and he was happy to see today's cricketers earn far more. Given that most sporting careers last barely 8-15 years, Dev said athletes must ultimately take responsibility for securing their own future.

Asked by Sardesai about the potential for sports tourism in India, Dev, now president of the Professional Golf Tour of India, said golf needed to shed its image as a sport only for the elite. He saw considerable

RAPID FIRE

Rajdeep Sardesai: Who would be your toughest opponent?

Kapil Dev: The person I can't get out is the toughest.

Sardesai: The cricketer you most admire?

Dev: Nobody comes close to Sunil Gavaskar. And outside, I admire Vivian Richards. Not for his cricket, but the way he conducts himself.

Sardesai: Your best moment on a cricket field?

Dev: Whenever I played for India.

Sardesai: If Kapil Dev was not a cricketer?

Dev: My father had a timber business, I would have joined that.

Sardesai: Would Kapil Dev have wanted to be a politician?

Dev: No, not at all.

Sardesai: Golf or cricket?

Dev: Nothing comes close to cricket.

potential in combining hotels with golf courses and said he would readily partner with the hospitality industry to create golf tourism circuits across the country, particularly if hotels could offer players affordable accommodation.

On leadership, Dev said individual ego should never become bigger than the team, just as the team should never become bigger than the country. He stressed the importance of respecting seniors, seeking advice from both senior and junior colleagues, listening to the team and owning mistakes. Once a collective decision is taken, he said, everyone must stand by it—even if the outcome is a loss.

Dev also urged the hospitality industry to help keep large celebrations and events in India rather than losing them to overseas destinations such as Bangkok, Singapore and Italy. He suggested incentives for large weddings and events to encourage spending at home and conserve foreign exchange. **HAI**



AI CHECKS INTO HOSPITALITY

From smarter travel discovery and customer conversion to data security, jobs and profitability, **Ajay K. Bakaya**, Chairman, Sarovar Hotels, talks to **Ankit Khanna**, Chief Product Officer, MakeMyTrip, and **Ravish Swarup**, Founder & CEO, Praxis Services & Onefinerate.com, about how AI will reshape hospitality.

The rapid rise of AI is set to transform how hotels attract guests, deliver experiences and run their operations, while raising new questions around data, jobs and the human touch. Moderator of the session, **Ajay K. Bakaya**, Chairman, Sarovar Hotels, asked **Ravish Swarup**, Founder & CEO, Praxis Services & Onefinerate.com, how his company was using technology and AI, and where he saw it heading over the next five years.

Swarup traced the journey to his time at Oberoi, where he had the opportunity to create what he described as the country's first global capability centre. He later founded Praxis Services after identifying a gap in the hospitality industry's

understanding and use of technology. "As hoteliers, we had a deficiency in really understanding technology and how we could bring technology to good use," he said.

Praxis now works with several leading Indian hospitality companies, including ITC, IHCL, Lemon Tree, The Leela and Chalet Hotels, providing technology-enabled services aimed at helping brands retain business within their own ecosystems. Swarup said the technology and database infrastructure built over the past decade had also positioned these companies to take advantage of AI. "AI's natural demands are to have a structure in place, to have a database in place," he said.

He pointed to centralised reservations as an



(L to R) Ajay K. Bakaya, Ankit Khanna and Ravish Swarup

example of how technology could improve efficiency and measure lost business. Traditionally, hotels had little visibility into unanswered calls, emails or enquiries that failed to convert. Technology, he said, made it possible to measure these gaps and understand the potential revenue being lost.

Swarup also highlighted lessons hospitality could learn from sectors such as airlines, banking and financial services, which measure the customer journey more comprehensively. Praxis, for instance, services Air India's Priority Connect, where he said customer satisfaction scores were around 95%.

Hotels, by contrast, often focus on guests already captured in their property management systems. If only 35–40% of enquiries convert, Swarup argued, the bigger question should be what happens to the remaining potential customers. "What's happening to the other 55–60%?" he asked. Understanding and measuring that lost opportunity, he said, is where technology—and increasingly AI—can make a significant difference.

Bakaya then asked **Ankit Khanna**, Chief Product Officer, MakeMyTrip, how he saw AI shaping travel over the next five years.

Khanna said MakeMyTrip's AI strategy had three broad priorities: improving efficiency across the business, making customer servicing more effective, and, most importantly, transforming travel discovery. "The biggest one is how we utilise AI in the best possible way to enable the discovery of travel," he said.

Traditionally, online travel platforms have largely been transaction platforms, while discovery has happened through social media, search and word of mouth. AI, Khanna said, creates an opportunity to bring discovery onto the travel platform itself, allowing consumers to interact with intelligent agents that understand their requirements and guide them towards relevant destinations, accommodation and experiences.

He cited Myra, MakeMyTrip's AI assistant, as an example. Consumers can ask it questions about destinations and accommodation, with the



"AI was not something to resist, calling it perhaps "the most significant event that's happened to mankind", but questioned whether meaningful guardrails were possible given the extraordinary intelligence now accessible through everyday devices"

Ajay K. Bakaya

Chairman, Sarovar Hotels

conversation eventually leading towards a booking. "Travel is something where, depending on your context and use case, you have tons of questions," he said. The objective is to answer those questions on the platform itself rather than forcing consumers to search elsewhere. "We are trying to bring it on the agent, make it digital, so that consumers need not look for these answers somewhere else."

The bigger shift, however, is towards experiential travel. Increasingly, travellers begin not by choosing a hotel or flight, but by deciding what they want to experience. Their queries are becoming more open-ended: "This is what I want. Now you suggest it."

That, Khanna said, challenges the traditional travel-booking funnel, where consumers search separately for hotels, flights or experiences. In the future, a travel platform will need to behave more like a search engine, capable of understanding natural-language queries and recommending an entire experience.

MakeMyTrip has an advantage because it can



"AI creates an opportunity to bring discovery onto the travel platform itself, allowing consumers to interact with intelligent agents that understand their requirements and guide them towards relevant destinations, accommodation and experiences"

Ankit Khanna

Chief Product Officer at MakeMyTrip

combine information from suppliers with user-generated content and the history of millions of customers who have interacted with the platform. Bringing these datasets together with AI, Khanna said, could allow the platform to deliver far more personalised recommendations and fundamentally change how travellers discover and book their journeys.

Bakaya then asked Swarup how technology companies could remain relevant when AI had dramatically lowered the barriers to entry. While building a technology business 10–15 years ago required specialised expertise, today a smart entrepreneur could use AI to create solutions far more quickly.

Swarup said his role was increasingly that of a conduit between the hospitality industry and technology. "What we do is a balancing act," he said. As hotels embrace AI, they also need to think carefully about where their data resides, who has access to it and how securely different systems are integrated.

He cautioned that the growing number of



"The guardrails, the hygiene, the discipline and everything that is required to be done requires a completely different set of think tank"

Ravish Swarup

Founder & Chief Executive Officer,
Praxis Services & Onefinerate Com

connections between hotel websites, channel managers, property management systems and other technology platforms could create vulnerabilities. "We have to build guardrails," he said. Hotels, he argued, should critically evaluate every integration rather than automatically connecting their core systems to new AI platforms. "You have to evaluate whether this really makes sense for a database which is at the heart of the business."

Bakaya then turned to Khanna, pointing out that work that once required 20–25 people and six months could increasingly be accomplished by one person over a weekend. In a country that needs to create jobs, he asked, what would this mean for employment?

Khanna put the AI shift in the context of earlier technological transformations. For generations, humans have used technology to become more productive, from manufacturing to services, and each wave of automation has changed the nature of work.

"If you are not going to embrace it, it's anyway going to happen," he said. Rather than resisting AI, businesses and workers needed to adapt and redirect their skills. "The best way to look at it is to embrace it and re-channelise your skill set very differently."

This would not apply only to technologists, he added, but to virtually every profession. Drawing a parallel with manufacturing, Khanna argued that greater automation had not necessarily meant fewer opportunities. Instead, rising efficiency had helped create new kinds of jobs and expand economic activity. AI, he suggested, should similarly be viewed not simply through the jobs it might automate, but through the new opportunities it could create.

Bakaya clarified that AI was not something to resist, calling it perhaps "the most significant event that's happened to mankind", but questioned whether meaningful guardrails were possible given the extraordinary intelligence now accessible through everyday devices. Swarup said they were essential and needed to become basic "hygiene checks" within organisations. Hotels, for instance, must determine how much information AI systems can access and disseminate, and whether their own brand websites should remain the authoritative source. He warned that hotel companies lagged OTAs, which had invested years ago in sophisticated data structures and platforms. As the industry moves from generative AI to agentic AI and ultimately AI commerce, hotels will need to rethink how their brands are represented and how AI makes commitments to customers. "The guardrails, the hygiene, the discipline and everything that is required to be done requires a completely different set of think tank," he said.

Concluding the discussion, Bakaya reflected on how dramatically hotel operations had changed. "At one time, we operated with three staff to a key. We are now down to one and a half," he said, noting that fewer people were willing to take up hospitality jobs that required long hours on their feet. AI, he said, would inevitably reduce staffing requirements further while making hotels more efficient. At the same time, younger travellers were less interested in excessive personal attention or "six people hanging around you to say how good your stay is". He hoped the transformation would ultimately benefit everyone, while creating more efficient and profitable hotels. **HAI**

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(L to R) Zubin Saxena, Keshav Suri, Natwar Nagar, Sonica Malhotra Kandhari and Vishwanath Joshi

WINNING THE WAR FOR TALENT

Zubin Saxena, Senior Vice President and Regional Head – South Asia, Hilton Hotels, in conversation with **Keshav Suri**, Executive Director, The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group; **Natwar Nagar**, Founder & CEO, The People Network & The Job Plus; **Sonica Malhotra Kandhari**, Joint Managing Director, MBD Group; and **Vishwanath Joshi**, EVP & Head – People & Culture (India), Great Place to Work.

Zubin Saxena, Senior Vice President and Regional Head – South Asia, Hilton Hotels, opened the discussion by identifying talent as perhaps the biggest challenge facing the hospitality industry as it expands. He asked **Sonica Malhotra Kandhari**, Joint Managing Director, MBD Group, whether the real problem was a shortage of people or an outdated talent model.

Kandhari said the long-standing gap between demand and supply of hospitality professionals had widened considerably. At the same time, enrolment at many hotel-management institutes remained low, raising questions about the sector's attractiveness to young people. "The generation today wants an accelerated growth path," she said. The industry, she argued, needs



"The generation today wants an accelerated growth path"

Sonica Malhotra Kandhari

Joint Managing Director,
MBD Group

to rethink both recruitment and career progression. Entry-level roles in areas such as housekeeping, stewarding and service could increasingly be filled by people without hotel-management degrees, who could be trained in the required skills. Hotel-management graduates, meanwhile, could be put on faster tracks towards supervisory and executive roles. "We need to completely dissect the industry in terms of how we want to attract talent and how we want to retain talent," she said.

MBD has already begun recruiting graduates from outside traditional hotel schools and training them for hospitality roles. "We're actually getting very good talent from non-hotel-school graduates as well," she said.

Saxena then asked **Keshav Suri**, Executive Director, The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group, whether the industry needed to look beyond traditional talent pools, particularly as younger employees sought faster career progression. Suri argued that the real challenge was not a shortage of people, but a shortage of opportunities for those traditionally excluded from the workforce. "There is no dearth of people. India is a country of 1.5 billion people. What there is a dearth of is the opportunities that we're giving these people," he said. The industry, he added, needed to



"There is no dearth of people. India is a country of 1.5 billion people. What there is a dearth of is the opportunities that we're giving these people"

Keshav Suri

Executive Director,
The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group,

change its mindset and look beyond urban Gen Z to talent from rural and tribal communities, minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

He cited The Lalit Suri Hospitality School, which offers scholarships and training to under-represented communities, and the group's skilling initiatives involving young people from Jammu & Kashmir, Manipur and Nagaland. He urged hotels to collaborate with the school through scholarships, training and recruitment. "People want a life with dignity. There are enough and more. But we have to change that mindset," he said.

Suri also pointed to the diversity of The Lalit's own workforce, which includes transgender and queer employees, acid-attack survivors and neurodivergent people. Calling for greater industry collaboration on skilling and employment, he said, "We need to be able to stand together as an industry." Saxena noted that the retention levels Suri cited were particularly significant in an industry grappling with high attrition, making a strong case for a more inclusive approach to talent.

Saxena then asked **Natwar Nagar**, Founder & CEO, The People Network & The Job Plus, whether the challenge was less about headcount and more about changing traditional HR



"The new generation requires swift money, visible growth and a very clear career lifecycle"

Natwar Nagar

Founder & CEO, The People Network & The Job Plus

structures. Nagar agreed, arguing that the new generation expects faster rewards and a clearly defined career path. "The new generation requires swift money, visible growth and a very clear career lifecycle," he said, pointing to sectors where young recruits know what their next role and salary progression will look like.

He cited The Job Plus, which he started during COVID to help young people find employment. Over the past three years, it has skilled, trained and placed nearly 10,000 young people from households with an average annual income of 1.5 lakh, with training and guaranteed employment completed within eight weeks. The programme has reached 101 cities across 15 states, with women accounting for 53% of participants.

Saxena asked **Vishwanath Joshi**, EVP & Head – People & Culture (India), Great Place to Work, what hospitality could learn from other sectors in attracting talent. Joshi said the challenge went beyond numbers to how the industry positioned itself as a career. "Why should I get into this industry? I think is a big question to ask and answer," he said. Hospitality, he argued, faced an "identity crisis", with perceptions about careers and working conditions deterring potential recruits. This could not be addressed by individual HR teams alone. The industry needed to collectively articulate why hospitality was an



"Hospitality faces a sort of an 'identity crisis', with perceptions about careers and working conditions deterring potential recruits"

Vishwanath Joshi

EVP & Head – People & Culture (India), Great Place to Work

attractive career, much as sectors such as retail had done through branding, skilling and finishing programmes.

Nagar added that hospitality had become far more aspirational than it was a decade ago, but had failed to communicate that transformation. Suri cautioned against treating Gen Z as a homogeneous group. He said nearly 70% of The Lalit's workforce was Gen Z, but only about 20% identified salary as a key factor in employee surveys. Young people from smaller cities and disadvantaged backgrounds, he argued, often valued security, inclusion and a sense of belonging as much as rapid financial progression. "We need to change our mindset and look at the right set of people," he said. "We need to tell them that they are valued and they are important."

Suri said The Lalit's forthcoming book, Hospitality with a Heart, documented stories of employees from diverse backgrounds who had built careers in hospitality.

Saxena concluded that the industry itself needed to do a better job of selling hospitality as a career. He urged hotel companies to go to campuses and present the opportunities the sector offered, particularly when young graduates in other industries often began their careers in equally demanding working environments. **HAI**

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FROM HOTEL KITCHENS TO CULINARY EMPIRES



*India's leading chefs discuss the rise of stand-alone restaurants, the risks and rewards of entrepreneurship, the challenge for hotels to retain talent, and why lasting success is built on good food—not social-media fame. **Raaj Sanghvi**, CEO, Culinary Culture India, in conversation with Chef **Nikhil Nagpal**, ITC Grand Chola, Chennai; Chef **Naren Thimmaiah**, Karavalli, Vivanta Bengaluru; Chef **Doma Wang**, founder, The Blue Poppy, Kolkata; Chef **Amninder Sandhu**, Kikli, New Delhi; and Chef **Prateek Sadhu**, NAAR, Kasauli. Excerpts:*

Moderator of the session New Age Food & Beverage, **Raaj Sanghvi**, observed that about a decade ago, any list of India's top restaurants would have been dominated by hotel restaurants. Over the past few years, however, there has been a big change. Stand-alone restaurants are pushing boundaries, and today some of India's best-known chefs are running their own stand-alone restaurants. The interesting thing about the panel, he said, was that while all the participants were among India's top chefs and at the top of their game, each had taken a very different journey to get there.

Sanghvi asked **Naren Thimmaiah**, who has been at the same hotel for 35 years and has run Karavalli in Bengaluru for 34 years, why he had never left to start something of his own. Naren said he was at the right place at the right time, when the industry was opening up and the group recognised the importance of regional Indian cuisine. That was how Karavalli came about, showcasing the cuisine of India's southwest coast. Its longevity, he said, was the result of collective effort, clarity of thought and consistency—not merely in the concept or the chef, but in maintaining the supply chain day after day for more than three decades. He considered himself fortunate to have been part of

Karavalli and to have kept its core concept largely unaltered.

When Sanghvi pressed him on whether he was risk-averse, given that many of his contemporaries had left to open their own restaurants, Naren said it came down to priorities. He was happy where he was, and being from Coorg, a few hours from Bengaluru, with a family coffee estate back home, the arrangement worked well for both him and the company. But staying with one



"Don't worry about combinations, because that is how cuisine evolves"

Chef **Naren Thimmaiah**
KARAVALLI, VIVANTA BENGALURU

restaurant did not mean resisting change. While he wanted Karavalli to retain its identity, food and sourcing philosophy, he encouraged experimentation elsewhere. In the coffee shop, he told his team that only two things really mattered—the food should look good and taste good. "Don't worry about combinations, because that is how cuisine evolves."

Sanghvi asked Chef **Nikhil Nagpal**, who joined the pre-opening team of ITC Grand Chola, Chennai, in 2011, about Avartana, which opened in 2017 and has since expanded to four restaurants in India and one in Colombo. Nagpal said that when he first became involved, his focus was on getting the ingredients, cuisine and food right, while the larger vision of turning Avartana into a national restaurant brand was being shaped elsewhere. He realised the scale of that ambition only when the Mumbai restaurant opened. He credited the vision and support behind the expansion to Anil Chadha, MD, ITC Hotels, but added with a laugh, "Doing the groundwork, I'll take that credit."

Asked whether such rapid expansion would have been more difficult without the backing of ITC Hotels, Nagpal acknowledged that organisational support provided a strong foundation and resources that were difficult for a stand-alone restaurant to match. However, he believed scaling was possible in either model and depended on the entrepreneur's vision and willingness to take on pressure. Having himself left ITC for about eight months to experience the stand-alone restaurant business, Nagpal said it had been a valuable learning experience. In a large organisation, structures and support systems are already established, whereas building a stand-alone restaurant requires considerably more groundwork and hard work.



"In a large organisation, structures and support systems are already established, whereas building a stand-alone restaurant requires considerably more groundwork and hard work"

Chef **Nikhil Nagpal**
ITC GRAND CHOLA CHENNAI.



"I don't want to bite more than I can chew. I'm quite happy with what I have. Whatever we have is ours"

Chef **Doma Wang**
FOUNDER, THE BLUE POPPY, KOLKATA.

Sanghvi then turned to **Doma Wang**, founder of The Blue Poppy in Kolkata, whose journey was very different from that of chefs who came through hotels or culinary schools. Wang said she began cooking from home about 35 years ago, after the birth of her eldest daughter. With her husband in the armed forces and little support at home, cooking and delivering food allowed her to look after her daughter while earning an income. That modest beginning eventually led to three restaurants and a takeaway counter. As for her reputation as India's "Momo Queen", Wang was unequivocal: "I do agree that I make the best momos—in India, if not the world." Asked who made the second-best, she replied, "My daughter."

Asked why she had not expanded nationally or built a momo chain, Wang said it was a conscious choice rather than simply a lack of resources. "I don't want to bite more than I can chew. I'm quite happy with what I have. Whatever we have is ours," she said, adding that she had no investors and was unsure whether she would want to be answerable to one. She did, however, leave the door open to expansion, saying she would love to open small outlets in other cities so that more people could taste what she considers the "real momo".

Sanghvi then turned to chefs **Amninder Sandhu** of Kikli, New Delhi, and **Prateek Sadhu** of NAAR, Kasauli, whose journeys have followed similar trajectories. Both began in the hotel system at Taj Lands End, Mumbai, before moving to stand-alone restaurants and eventually striking out on their own. Both have also ventured into destination dining and are now moving into bars. Asked how different his career might have been had he stayed at the Taj, Sadhu said he would probably have followed the conventional path and become an executive or



"Working in five-star hotels gave me a solid foundation"

Chef **Amninder Sandhu**
KIKLI, NEW DELHI

corporate chef. Instead, ambition and the desire to build something entirely his own led him to leave the protective "umbrella" of a hotel and embrace the risks of entrepreneurship.

Sadhu said the transition was far from easy. Masque, which he left the Taj to open in Mumbai, was not an instant success, and running a stand-alone restaurant meant playing multiple roles. "Sometimes you're a plumber, sometimes you're a dishwasher, you're a chef," he said. His biggest regret was not learning enough about business while at hotel school or working in hotels. "It's very cool to run and own a restaurant. But at the end of the day, if you're not making money, the passion goes down the drain. Debt doesn't fuel your passion at all. That's a brutal reality." Losing a restaurant, he said, brought the real lesson—the importance of understanding numbers, profit and loss, and how to structure a company. "I'm still learning, and I'm excited for what comes next."

Sanghvi asked Chef Amninder Sandhu of Kikli, New Delhi, whether leaving the hotel system was a conscious decision to build her own identity and gain a bigger platform. Sandhu said that while she had thought along those lines early in her career, working in five-star hotels had given her a solid foundation. Starting out 20 years ago, she trained in tough, male-dominated Indian kitchens where women in positions of authority were uncommon. The experience quickly dispelled any notions that the profession was glamorous. "I didn't think that this profession was going to be hunky-dory, beautiful and glamorous. That was knocked out of my head early on," she said. But she had always wanted to own a business and "set up something from scratch, not run something that is already there".

Coming from a family of business owners gave Sandhu some understanding of business, although she said the real learning began after she moved into stand-alone



"Ambition and the desire to build something entirely mine led me to leave the protective 'umbrella' of a hotel and embrace the risks of entrepreneurship"

Chef **Prateek Sadhu**
NAAR, KASAUJI

restaurants. "Like Prateek said, I'm also learning," she said. Sandhu now has 10 restaurants and bars across four or five cities—she joked that she had "lost track"—with several more in the pipeline. She also confirmed that plans to expand outside India are under way.

Sanghvi asked Naren what hotels could do to retain chefs like Prateek and Amninder, and whether they needed to give chefs a bigger platform so they did not feel compelled to leave for stand-alone restaurants. Naren attributed the shift largely to generational change, saying hotels themselves now had much to learn from stand-alones. "The group hotels would also like to learn from the stand-alones now," he said. Stand-alone restaurants, he added, have been particularly effective at developing sharply defined concepts and taking them to market. Hotels, too, need to evolve, become more flexible and learn from this approach to attract different segments of diners.

Chef Nagpal said that wherever chefs worked, they simply had to put their heads down and work hard, and fame would eventually follow. It did not matter whether they worked in a hotel or a stand-alone restaurant. Ultimately, he said, it was the work that would speak for itself after years of hard work.

Chef Prateek said social media may offer instant gratification and make someone famous through a few viral videos, but that was not the goal. "The idea is to build restaurants, the idea is to build legacies," he said. "Even if you have zero followers on Instagram, your work will always be there."

Chef Doma, who is active on social media, said Instagram had its place, but followers were not the ultimate measure of a restaurant's success. "For us as restaurants and chefs, the biggest thing is to see customers coming back and enjoying the food. That is the end goal, whether we have a billion followers or not." **HAI**

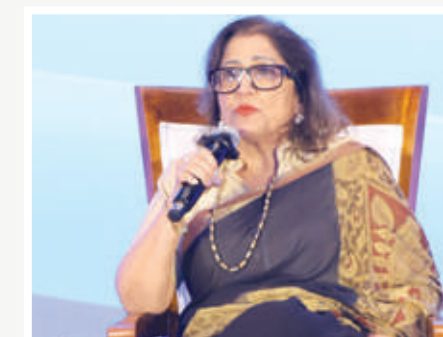


(L to R) Sonali Chauhan, Meena Bhatia, Amandeep Kaur, Asha Deep Sidhu and Preeti Makhija

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

Sonali Chauhan, General Manager, The Connaught, New Delhi – IHCL SeleQtions talks to four women general managers on evolving with the times, handling demanding guests, sweating the small stuff and creating space for more women to lead hospitality. Excerpts of the conversation with **Meena Bhatia**, Vice President & General Manager, Le Meridien, New Delhi; **Amandeep Kaur**, General Manager, ITC Gardenia, Bengaluru; **Asha Deep Sidhu**, General Manager, Vivanta Gurugram; and **Preeti Makhija**, General Manager, The Leela Palace New Delhi.

Sonali Chauhan, General Manager, The Connaught, New Delhi – IHCL SeleQtions, welcomed the audience and hoped the collective voices on the panel would encourage more women to join the hospitality industry, stay in it and thrive. "Women may still be a minority in hospitality leadership, but I hope today's conversations will bring us closer to a future where that is no longer the case," she said. Chauhan asked **Meena Bhatia**, Vice President & General Manager, Le Meridien, New Delhi, who has been with the hotel since 1991, what had changed most during her career and what had remained unchanged.



"What has not changed and should not change is the sense of hospitality and the fact that we work in a place where we need to provide to our customers comfort, well-being, and a sense that we are always there to support them. There's always a guest who will say, I need to speak to somebody"

Meena Bhatia
Vice President & General Manager,
Le Meridien, New Delhi

Bhatia said perhaps the biggest change had been in herself. "If we don't change with time, we don't make ourselves relevant enough for the time that we are working in," she said. The hospitality industry had travelled from the era of telexes to AI, with technologies and ways of working emerging and becoming redundant along the way. Guest behaviour, too, had changed significantly. Many guests today prefer to communicate online rather than speak to hotel staff, while traditional sales calls and business meetings have evolved into new formats.

But despite rapid technological and generational change, Bhatia said the fundamental nature of hospitality

remained the same. "What has not changed and should not change is the sense of hospitality and the fact that we work in a place where we need to provide to our customers comfort, well-being, and a sense that we are always there to support them. There's always a guest who will say, I need to speak to somebody."

Bhatia also sought to dispel the perception that a career in hospitality was all about glamour. People might see photographs of hoteliers with Hollywood stars or heads of state, she said, but rarely saw the enormous amount of work behind those moments. Teams could spend months preparing for a high-profile arrival, working overnight and attending to the smallest details. "You break your legs literally," she said, describing the long hours spent preparing and standing in hotel lobbies. The glamorous photograph, she added, rarely captured what happened behind the scenes—or the relief when the event was finally over: "Thank God it's over."

Chauhan asked **Amandeep Kaur**, General Manager, ITC Gardenia, Bengaluru, whether coming up through housekeeping had shaped the kind of general manager she had become. Kaur said it certainly had, teaching her that while attention to detail mattered, people mattered even more. Luxury hotels, she said, were defined by the small things that guests might not even notice because everything worked so seamlessly behind the scenes. Having spent years noticing details as minute as a painting frame being slightly out of alignment, she said it was now difficult to walk through a hotel without spotting a flower that could be fresher, a missing smile or a corner that needed attention. The experience had also given her enormous respect for every job performed behind the scenes. "I still trust what I see, what I feel and what I hear while talking to my team members and fellow colleagues who are actually at the front end creating the experiences," she said. Luxury, she added, also meant delivering



"Luxury means delivering experiences with a lot of warmth, love and humility"

Amandeep Kaur

General Manager, ITC Gardenia,
Bengaluru

experiences "with a lot of warmth, love and humility".

Chauhan then asked Kaur, who has been involved in several hotel openings as well as taking over established properties, which she would choose if given the option. Kaur said opening a hotel was an entirely different experience. "It's like a blank canvas. There's a lot of chaos, excitement, and it feels extremely rewarding because you are part of building a culture and setting the standards," she said.

Taking over an existing hotel, however, presented a more complex challenge. "It's like you are inheriting a story with an existing audience. It's a legacy that you have to protect while finding your own ways to write the next chapter," she said. A general manager inherits loyal guests, traditions and strong opinions, making the real challenge deciding what to preserve and what to redefine. "You have to evolve at times, but stay true to who you are," she said.

Pressed by Chauhan to choose between the two, Kaur opted for an existing hotel. Transforming an established property, she said, was more difficult than creating one from scratch because it involved protecting what had been inherited while taking it forward. For her, helping a great hotel "write a greater version of itself" was particularly satisfying.

Chauhan then asked **Asha Deep Sidhu**, General Manager, Vivanta Gurugram, what she did first on reaching the hotel, before meetings and emails took over. Sidhu said the first thing she did was to thank God she had reached on time after navigating the daily traffic. Once inside, however, she headed straight to the lobby. "That's where the heart of the hotel is," she said. She checks the list of VIP guests and any complaints from the previous day, but,



"A little girl sitting once noticed that I had greeted other families but not hers. Since then, I make it a point that during breakfast, I go and meet all the tables, and whenever possible, even scheduled business meetings there"

Asha Deep Sidhu

General Manager,
Vivanta Gurugram



"What began with the excitement and anticipation of welcoming the first guests has evolved into lasting relationships, with many guests now close friends. I have a little part of my journey in every corner of the hotel"

Preeti Makhija

General Manager, The Leela Palace
New Delhi.

more importantly, meet staff members before heading to the coffee shop to interact with guests.

She recalled an incident from her time at Sawai Mahal that reinforced the importance of meeting guests personally. One morning, she had inadvertently skipped a table during breakfast. A little girl sitting there noticed that Sidhu, "the woman in the sari", had greeted other families but not hers. "Since then, I made it a point that during breakfast, I go and meet all the tables," Sidhu said. Whenever possible, she even scheduled business meetings there. "That's how the day begins before the emails take over."

Asked what she obsessed about as a general manager, Sidhu said her team would probably say there were many things, but timelines topped the list. She was particular about follow-ups and ensuring that commitments were honoured. If the team made a commitment to a client or any other stakeholder, she said, it was their responsibility to respond and deliver on time.

Chauhan asked **Preeti Makhija**, General Manager, The Leela Palace New Delhi, who joined the hotel as a duty manager before it opened, whether she saw it differently because she had known it even before the first guest walked in. Makhija said being there when the hotel was still taking shape—when chandeliers were being installed and curtains put up—made her relationship with it particularly special. What began with the excitement and anticipation of welcoming the first guests had evolved into lasting relationships, with many of those guests now close friends. "I have a little part of my journey in every corner of the hotel," she said. Each corner held a story she could share with her team and guests, making it a special honour to now manage the hotel where she had begun her journey.

Asked what she could never walk past without noticing, Makhija said that after so many years she knew every nook and corner of the property. Whether a piece of furniture had been moved, a light changed, the fragrance was different or an amenity had been replaced, she would notice immediately. "That eye for detail is always there, and I think the team by now really knows that," she said. She joked that if she spotted a fused bulb, the immediate response would invariably be: "Ma'am, it was absolutely working fine; it just got fused."

Chauhan asked whether that attention to detail made it difficult to switch off while on holiday or staying at another hotel. Makhija admitted that she did not particularly like switching off and often found herself noticing ideas she could take back to her own hotel. "In fact, I start taking pictures if I like something and want to adapt it in my hotel," she said.

Having a nine-year-old son, however, had taught her to create a balance between work and personal life. Her most effective way of switching off was simple—playing FIFA on the PS5 with her son. "That is something that really makes me switch off from work," she said.

Chauhan asked Bhatia whether social media had helped hospitality by expanding its reach or harmed it by giving guests too much power.

Bhatia described social media as the press of a decade or two ago, only amplified in speed, reach and detail. It allowed hotels to promote themselves quickly and inexpensively, but also exposed them to instant public criticism. "It is good and bad both," she said. The difference today was that everyone, not just journalists, had a platform. Guests were also better travelled, more informed and clearer about what they expected. Hotels, therefore, had to adapt rather than simply fall back on "hotel policy".

Chauhan then asked Sidhu how she handled guests who demanded special treatment with the familiar question, "Do you know who I am?"

Sidhu recalled responding to one such guest: "I'm so sorry, I don't know. But I would love to know your story." Hospitality, she said, often involved managing egos and making people feel "wanted, needed, listened to and understood". Such encounters, she added, often became valuable learning experiences—and difficult guests sometimes ended up becoming good friends.

Chauhan concluded, "What stays with us most from the conversation and camaraderie is that there is no single path for a woman in leadership. Each of these remarkable women has led with her own instincts, style and strength, and in doing so has made the path a little wider for those who will follow. May we continue to create an industry where women do not simply find a seat at the table, but lead the conversation around it." **HAI**



Rohit Khosla with Samit Garg

THE BIG EVENT OPPORTUNITY

*India's MICE and wedding business is booming, but hotels and event companies need greater collaboration, flexibility and a sharper focus on experiences to unlock its full potential, **Samit Garg**, Managing Director, E-Factor Experiences tells **Rohit Khosla**, Vice President, HAI & Conclave Convener and Executive Vice President, IHCL.*

Rohit Khosla, Vice President, HAI & Conclave Convener and Executive Vice President, IHCL, opened the session by noting that India's MICE and wedding segments were at a pivotal stage. World-class infrastructure such as Bharat Mandapam, Yashobhoomi and Jio World Centre, along with expanding regional airports, was strengthening India's ability to compete for international conventions and mega exhibitions. At the same time, destination weddings, experiential stays and personalised celebrations were turning the wedding business into an increasingly important year-round opportunity for hotels.

Khosla asked **Samit Garg**, Managing Director, E-Factor Experiences, and a representative of the Events and Entertainment Management Association (EEMA), for his assessment of the opportunity. Garg said the events and experiences industry had gained greater recognition in recent years and was growing at around 17-18% annually. He estimated that weddings, MICE, corporate events, sports, concerts and government events together represented an opportunity of roughly Rs 5 lakh crore.

Breaking down the market, Garg estimated that MICE contributed around Rs 44,000-46,000 crore to the economy, while corporate events accounted for around Rs 79,000 crore. The sports business was approximately

Rs 49,000 crore including the IPL, while the ticketed concert and live-events economy had recorded sales of around Rs 14,800 crore. The government, he added, was one of the largest buyers of event services, publishing tenders worth around Rs 60,000 crore annually.

Khosla pointed out that hotels had to balance MICE with leisure, individual travellers and other business, while revenue managers were under pressure to maximise room rates, profitability and returns. He asked how hotels and event companies could work together to make India more competitive with destinations such as Thailand, Dubai and Singapore for international MICE business.

Garg said the issue was more complex than pricing alone. Hotels themselves were increasingly choosing the segments that generated the best returns. Some properties preferred weddings because of the higher

room rates they could command, while others focused on individual travellers or avoided MICE altogether. Corporate MICE also faced competition from overseas destinations because the decision was based not merely on hotel accommodation but on the overall destination experience.

India, he said, had a particularly strong opportunity in inbound MICE because of its culture and hospitality. "There is no hospitality like our country," Garg said. "But infrastructure has to develop more evenly, alongside hotel-room capacity, connectivity and skilled manpower. Rapid hotel expansion is already creating a talent challenge for both hospitality and the events industry," he said.

Garg also highlighted the mismatch between corporate budgets, event managers and hotel revenue expectations. Corporate clients often gave event managers fixed per-person budgets, while hotels sought to maximise rates. "It's a tricky situation; there is no single solution," he said, arguing that some issues could be addressed jointly by industry bodies, while others required policy intervention.

Khosla suggested that HAI and EEMA could work together on guidelines to improve understanding between hotels and MICE organisers and help India attract larger international events. Garg strongly supported the idea. "Growth will only happen if you approach growth in a collaborative way," he said. Short-term gains by individual businesses, he added, did not amount to sustainable industry growth.

The challenge was to ensure that decisions taken at the top translated into action across the industry. Garg cited music licensing as an example of how fragmented regulation could complicate the events business. The



"The events and experiences industry has gained greater recognition in recent years, growing at around 17-18% annually"

Samit Garg

Managing Director, E-Factor Experiences

larger problem, he said, was that different stakeholders continued to look at issues from their own perspectives rather than collectively. "We are not looking at it as India. We are looking at it as a hotelier, or I am looking at it as an event manager. Somebody else is looking at it as a caterer. That needs to be corrected."

Turning to changing event formats, Khosla asked how hotels should respond as corporate clients moved beyond traditional ballroom conferences towards experiential, wellness-led and smaller networking formats. Garg said many new hotels were already addressing this well through larger ballrooms, breakout rooms, glass houses and flexible spaces. He praised the hospitality sector for becoming increasingly mindful of such requirements while designing new properties.

On weddings, Khosla asked what hotels tended to get wrong when dealing with high-net-worth clients, including issues such as vendor access, technology, acoustics and transport restrictions. Garg said these problems were gradually diminishing and rarely resulted in hotels actually losing business. They could, however, make the process unnecessarily complicated. Both families and event managers generally managed to achieve what they wanted, but "the journey could have been more enjoyable".

Asked what Indian hotels consistently got right, Garg's answer was succinct: "Hospitality, quality of room inventories and food." On international benchmarks, he said Indian hotels generally exceeded basic expectations.

As for what hotels needed to improve to capture more MICE and wedding business, Garg said the biggest issue was mindset. Senior management often viewed decisions primarily through the lens of profit and loss, while those executing events on the ground were focused on guest experiences. "The person sitting in the boardroom is conversing about P&L. He is not conversing about experiences. The person sitting on the ground is conversing about experiences," he said.

Garg cited the Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur as an example of how flexibility could create new business without compromising a hotel's heritage or character. The property had once been highly restrictive about social celebrations, but dialogue eventually led to a format that allowed intimate events while protecting its decorum and heritage. The lesson, he said, was simple: hotels and event companies needed more opportunities to sit together, understand each other's constraints and find workable solutions.

Khosla concluded by highlighting the scale of a sector growing at nearly 18% annually and representing an estimated Rs 5 lakh crore opportunity, and thanked Garg for sharing his candid views. **HAI**

CLIMPS







WHERE MEMORY BECOMES LEGACY

At the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, technology and storytelling come together to offer a fresh perspective on India's leadership.

At the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya in Teen Murti Estate, a visitor recently asked a life-size, AI-powered avatar of Mahatma Gandhi a question that historians still

argue over: could Partition have been avoided? The room went quiet as 'Bapu' — rendered in real time through generative AI — answered in his own voice and cadence, neither evading the question nor offering an easy resolution to it. It is a small moment, but a telling one. It captures what the Prime Ministers Museum and Library (PMML) has set out to do: bring the citizen and the country's most difficult history into the same room, without letting either lose its seriousness in the process.

A HOUSE THAT BECAME A NATION'S MEMORY

Teen Murti House was built in 1929–30 by the architect Robert Tor Russell as the residence of the British Commander-in-Chief, and takes its name from three



ASHWANI LOHANI
Director, Prime Ministers' Museum and Library,
Teen Murti Estate, New Delhi



GARUD RAHUL DEELIP
Financial Controller, Prime Ministers' Museum and
Library, Teen Murti Estate, New Delhi

statues raised in 1922 in honour of the Jodhpur, Hyderabad and Mysore Lancers. In August 1948, it became home to independent India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, for sixteen years. After his demise in 1964, it was dedicated to the



nation as the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). In August 2023, the institution was renamed the Prime Ministers Museum and Library — a change that widened its mandate to preserving and showcasing, the lives, vision and contribution record of every Prime Minister of independent India. It is an editorial choice visitors notice: a museum curated without partisan favour, where each tenure is presented on the strength of its own record.

HISTORY, REIMAGINED

That expanded mandate found architectural form in the Pradhanmantri

Sangrahalaya, inaugurated on 14th April 2022 within the same campus. Its two blocks, of which block-1 houses the making of the Constitution, a dedicated gallery on Nehru, and the Toshakhana, where gifts received by successive Prime Ministers from world leaders sit as an unusual index of India's diplomatic history. Block-2 houses journey of all subsequent Prime Ministers. What sets the museum apart, however, is its insistence that visitors participate rather than simply observe. Augmented reality allows a 'Selfie with PM' or a 'Walk with PM,' placing the visitor briefly alongside a leader they





may know only from a textbook. A robotic writing installation produces a letter in a chosen Prime Minister’s hand, addressed to the visitor by name — a gesture that turns a museum visit into something closer to correspondence with history. The Holobox extends this further still: a conversation, rather than a caption, is now possible with a founding figure of the Republic.

None of this technology is decorative. It is deliberate scaffolding for a harder task — keeping history legible to a generation raised on screens, without letting it collapse into spectacle. School and college groups now visit in the hundreds each week, and a consistent pattern has emerged: augmented reality draws students in, but it is the Constitution gallery, the Toshakhana and the quieter archival rooms that hold their attention once they are inside.

A MUSEUM FOR EVERYONE

Inclusion at PMML is built into its architecture, not appended to it. Ramp access runs through both Sangrahalaya blocks, and wheelchairs are provided free of charge at the entrance, so that mobility is never the reason a citizen is kept from this history. The non-partisan



curation of every Prime Minister, irrespective of party or period, is itself a form of inclusion — a refusal to let the museum become a monument to one political inheritance rather than the shared one every Indian holds.

BEYOND THE GALLERIES

Culture at PMML extends well beyond its exhibition halls. The lawns that once carried the memories of Nehru’s morning walks now host Republic Day and Independence Day observances, Gandhi Jayanti programmes, and a running calendar of talks and heritage walks. Earlier this year, “The Archives of PMML” opened to the public, drawing on the institution’s own repository — among its exhibits, Mahatma Gandhi’s 1932 letter on spiritual unity and the original handwritten draft of Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” address.

A WINDOW TO THE COSMOS

The Nehru Planetarium, on the same grounds, remains one of the campus’s most-loved draws for cosmos enthusiasts of every age. Its centrepiece, the Aryabhata Gallery, traces India’s astronomical journey from the Surya Siddhanta to Gaganyaan, and was inaugurated in August 2025 by Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla, the first Indian to dock at the International Space Station — a fitting hand to unveil a gallery built on the idea that India’s story with the stars is far from over. Alongside the Soyuz T-10 descent module that once carried Rakesh Sharma home, and a full-dome 4K sky theatre, the gallery gives visitors a rare, tactile sense of a nation looking outward.

BUILT FOR THE VISITOR

None of this can be experienced well without the ordinary machinery of a good visit, and PMML has invested deliberately here too. CISF personnel, supplemented by private security staff, secure the campus without making its openness feel guarded. Ample parking, clear signage across both blocks, and on-site dining — including the cafeteria and the rooftop restaurant — keep a full day on campus comfortable rather than tiring. Free guided tours help first-time visitors navigate through history with context rather than confusion, and printed collaterals, from brochures to books on Prime Ministers, let visitors



carry a piece of the museum home with them.

THE ROAD AHEAD

These elements — architecture, technology, archive and inclusion — matter only insofar as they draw citizens in and bring them back. We have begun working with the travel trade toward that end, including a recent familiarisation tour organised with SATTE, PATA and ADTOI etc for travel professionals and media, and we measure our progress against a considered vision of a million visitors a year — not as a metric for its own sake, but as an indication of how many citizens are engaging directly with their own democratic story, rather than a textbook version of it. No other capital city hold an institution quite like this one: not a tribute to a single founder, nor a scattering of separate presidential libraries, but a single, walkable, non-partisan record of a democracy’s entire continuous journey, curated on the very ground where much of it was written.

A Holobox that answers questions with startling realism, a personal letter penned in the hand of one’s favourite Prime Minister, and a dozen such quiet inventions besides — these are small mechanisms in service of a larger idea: that a nation’s political memory can be made participatory, accessible and honest, all at once. That idea, far more than the memory of any single exhibit, is what we hope every visitor carries away from their visit, and holds onto long after. **HAI**

Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya

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90 MINUTES GUIDED TOUR

TIMINGS	
SLOT 1	12:00 PM – 1:30 PM
SLOT 2	2:00 PM – 3:30 PM
SLOT 3	3:00 PM – 4:30 PM
SLOT 4	4:00 PM – 5:30 PM

Visitors may wish to bring the Audio Guide Book before the tour begins.

Kindly Note: Please be seated at the designated time. Tours will start as per the scheduled slot.

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HIGH ROADS TO THE SACRED

The Char Dham and Amarnath Yatras are about more than arriving at a temple or standing before a shrine. They are journeys through some of India's most extraordinary terrain, shaped by faith but also by effort, uncertainty and the simple act of moving through the mountains.

By Riaan Jacob George



The modern Yatra sits at an interesting intersection: ancient pilgrimage on one side, contemporary tourism and infrastructure on the other

T

here are few journeys in India where the destination is only one part of the story. The road, the

weather, the altitude, the physical effort and the people encountered along the way all become part of the experience. This is particularly true of the Char Dham and Amarnath Yatras, two of the country's most important Hindu pilgrimages.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims make their way into the Himalayas towards sacred temples and shrines, travelling through landscapes that can be as demanding as they are beautiful. For many, the journey is an act of pure faith. For the towns and communities along the way, they also bring a season of heightened activity, business and employment.



The modern Yatra sits at an interesting intersection: ancient pilgrimage on one side, contemporary tourism and infrastructure on the other.

The Char Dham circuit takes pilgrims to four revered shrines in Uttarakhand—Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Traditionally, the pilgrimage follows this sequence, beginning with Yamunotri before moving to Gangotri, Kedarnath and finally

Badrinath. Each shrine has its own history and traditions, with the journey revealing a different side of the Himalayas along the way.

At Yamunotri, the temple is dedicated to Goddess Yamuna and sits at around 3,200 metres above sea level. The final stretch requires a mountain journey from the roadhead, making the physical experience an important part of the pilgrimage.



Gangotri, at roughly 3,100 metres, is closely associated with the River Ganga and its sacred origins. The temple town sits beside the Bhagirathi, surrounded by steep mountain slopes and forests.

Then comes Kedarnath, one of the most revered Shiva temples in India. At approximately 3,583 metres, it is also one of the most physically demanding stops on the circuit. The temple is reached from Gaurikund, and although improved roads, trekking infrastructure and helicopter services have made access considerably easier than it once was, the altitude and mountain

terrain remain serious considerations.

Badrinath, the final stop on the traditional circuit, is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Set beside the Alaknanda River at around 3,133 metres, it is one of the country's most important pilgrimage centres and has been part of India's religious landscape for centuries.

The pilgrimage season is dictated by the Himalayan climate. The shrines generally open during the spring and remain accessible through the warmer months before winter closes in. May and

June are particularly busy, while September and October can bring a different experience, with the peak summer rush behind the region but weather remaining an important consideration.

Today, however, planning a Char Dham Yatra involves considerably more than deciding when to travel. Registration is mandatory, allowing the authorities to monitor pilgrim numbers and movement and to communicate important information during the journey. The scale of the pilgrimage has made crowd management a central part of its administration.

The numbers from 2025 illustrate why. A report by the Social Development for Communities (SDC) Foundation recorded 51,06,346 pilgrims across the Char Dham pilgrimage sites during the 2025 season, a 6.4 % increase on 2024. What was particularly striking was not simply the overall number but when those pilgrims arrived. 72% of the year's footfall was concentrated within the

first 60 days, with 34% arriving in the first 30 days and another 38% in the following month. That creates an obvious pressure point.

The Himalayan pilgrimage season may extend over several months, but the movement of people is far from evenly distributed. The same 2025 analysis recorded 86 zero-footfall days across the five sites covered by the study, including 38 at Yamunotri and 35 at Gangotri. Weather, monsoon conditions and disruptions to mountain routes all contribute to these fluctuations.

It is a useful reminder that the Char Dham story is no longer simply about how many people make the pilgrimage. It is about how those numbers can be accommodated without putting undue pressure on the mountains themselves.

Infrastructure has expanded. Roads have been improved, medical facilities strengthened and emergency response systems developed along the routes. Digital

registration and tracking systems are now an integral part of managing the movement of pilgrims. Helicopter services have also changed the way some people approach Kedarnath, compressing what was traditionally a demanding trek into a much shorter journey. But greater access brings a more complicated set of questions around safety, sustainability and carrying capacity.

The Amarnath Yatra presents a similar balance between devotion and endurance, although the landscape and pilgrimage itself are quite different. The Amarnath Cave is situated at an altitude of 3,888 metres in Jammu and Kashmir's Lidder Valley. The shrine is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is particularly associated with the naturally formed ice lingam inside the cave.

There are two principal approaches to Amarnath. The Pahalgam route is the longer traditional route, while the Baltal route is significantly shorter but involves a steeper ascent. The Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board places the cave approximately 46 kilometres from Pahalgam and 14 kilometres from Baltal.





As with Char Dham, preparation is not optional. Pilgrims must register in advance and obtain a Compulsory Health Certificate. For the 2026 Yatra, registration has incorporated Aadhaar-based biometric eKYC, while registered pilgrims are also required to collect and wear an RFID card during the pilgrimage.

The 2026 Amarnath Yatra also demonstrates how closely pilgrimage management is tied to changing security and logistical requirements. The Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board announced that both the Pahalgam and Baltal axes would operate as no-flying zones during the 2026 Yatra, meaning helicopter services for pilgrim travel were not available within the Yatra area. Pilgrims could instead undertake the journey on foot or use ponies and palkis.

For visitors, these measures can sometimes feel like an administrative layer around what is fundamentally a spiritual journey. But at the scale at which these pilgrimages now operate, they are increasingly unavoidable. The mountains are not an ordinary tourist destination. Roads can close without warning, weather can change rapidly and medical emergencies at altitude can become serious very quickly. The infrastructure surrounding the Yatras therefore serves a practical purpose, even as it changes the character of the pilgrimage itself.



And then there is the environmental question. The popularity of the Himalayan Yatras brings substantial economic activity to local communities, supporting transport operators, accommodation providers, guides, porters, pony owners, small businesses and countless others whose livelihoods are linked to the pilgrimage season. At the same time, the concentration of millions of visitors in ecologically sensitive mountain regions places considerable pressure on roads, water, waste-management systems and natural habitats. The 2025 Char Dham data has brought that tension into sharper focus. The SDC Foundation has argued for a greater emphasis on safety, sustainability, capacity-based planning and environmental protection rather than treating rising pilgrim numbers as the primary measure of a successful Yatra.

Today, planning a Char Dham Yatra involves considerably more than deciding when to travel. Registration is mandatory, allowing the authorities to monitor pilgrim numbers and movement and to communicate important information during the journey

It is perhaps the defining challenge facing these journeys now. The appeal of the Yatra is unlikely to diminish. If anything, better connectivity and greater awareness are making these sacred landscapes accessible to more people than ever before. The task is to ensure that accessibility does not come at the cost of the very landscape that gives these journeys their meaning.

Because ultimately, the Char Dham and Amarnath Yatras are about more than arriving at a temple or standing before a shrine. They are journeys through some of India's most extraordinary terrain, shaped by faith. There are long roads, steep climbs, sudden weather changes, crowded stretches and moments of remarkable quiet. There are temple bells, rivers running through valleys, temporary camps and small roadside stalls serving pilgrims along the way.

That combination is what gives the Yatra its particular character. It is an old tradition negotiating a very new world — one in which millions can arrive where once only a fraction could, where a pilgrimage can be registered digitally before it begins, and where technology and infrastructure increasingly determine how safely people move through the mountains.

The challenge now is not to preserve the Yatra in some untouched version of the past. It is to allow it to evolve without losing sight of what makes the journey sacred in the first place. The Himalayas have always demanded a certain humility from those who travel through them. The future of the Yatra may depend on remembering that. **HAI**



CULTURE, HERITAGE AND TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES

We have entered the age of transformational experience where travellers seek cultural, emotional, and elevating experiences beyond physical.

M.P. Bezbaruah

Secretary General, Hotel Association of India

A recent Travel and Tourism Development Index report by World Economic Forum (WEF) states “communities with distinctive heritage often lack the visibility, infrastructure and/or resources needed to participate and benefit fully in the tourism economy. As a result, destinations with deep heritage might capture only a fraction of the tourism industry's potential benefits.” This could as well be the story of India—richly endowed with culture and heritage, and not fully harnessing the economic benefits of the same. UNWTO has reported that “today, cultural tourism is one of the largest and fastest-developing global tourism markets: an estimated four out of ten tourists choose their destination based on its cultural offering.”

A marked and definite change in consumer behaviour has influenced this growing importance of cultural tourism. Analysts point out that tourism, which was primarily a service industry, changed at the beginning of the new millennium to the experience economy. Now we have entered the age of transformational experience where travellers seek cultural, emotional, and elevating experiences.

Such change made it necessary to redefine cultural tourism to make it comprehensive. A survey by UNWTO showed that most of the countries were responding to this change and over 80% of them widened the definition to include even things like fashion, food and film. The WEF index was prepared on 17 parameters and culture was on top. As a result of the growing importance given by the countries the cultural resources have shown increase of 9.6% compared to 2024 figures. The rise is partly down to a global effort to safeguard cultural heritage, says the report, with UNESCO's World Heritage List increasing from 869 sites in 2,019 to 972 in 2026. But it also points to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage register, which recognises festivals, performing arts, craftsmanship and food culture, with the latter alone having become a \$16.1 billion gastronomy market.

UNWTO responded to the changing scenario by changing the definition in 2017: “Cultural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that

encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and tradition.”

Research highlights some key areas of intangible heritage being of pivotal interest to tourists, including gastronomy, social practices, rituals, handicrafts, and performing arts. These are resources in which India has great tradition, variety and uniqueness.

In such a transformed situation, management of cultural tourism in India also needs a fresh perspective, professional approach and a definite plan of action. First, is the need for sustainable management. The community should be an active participant in this management and guide development and should derive socioeconomic benefits from such participation. Two things are needed to enable the community to be active participant. First, to be empowered and second, to build strong public partnerships to support their capability.

Above all, we need a sustainable approach, which balances the need for economic benefits with the preservation of art, crafts, and local traditions. It is often said



Research highlights some key areas of intangible heritage being of pivotal interest to tourists, including gastronomy, social practices, rituals, handicrafts, and performing arts

that tourism and culture have a symbiotic relationship. While inherent value of culture to host communities provides economic benefits, tourism growth can be a potent force for the promotion and conservation of tangible and intangible heritage and encouragement for development and preservation of local arts, crafts and cuisine. At the same time, if not properly managed, tourism can have negative impacts on culture and heritage. As a result, not only the heritage can be affected, even the quality of life of the local community can be impacted. Ogilvy, the marketing professional, in his book "Ogilvy on Advertising" related how the Greeks prayed to the Almighty to spare them from the 'scourge' of foreign tourists. If overcrowding occurs, the host community and its infrastructure may feel under

pressure from visitors, which may change the rhythms of a community's lifestyle. It causes irritation to the community, which is often aggravated by the priority given to the needs of the tourists in respect of inadequate civic infrastructure. In tourism parlance such situations are referred to as the "irridex effect."

The primary objective of sustainable management of cultural tourism is to create a transformational experience for the tourists. Attention to few details will help to make such experience possible. First, attention needs to be given to the ambience of our heritage places and products. Way back in 1999, in my first book on Indian Tourism, I had raised this concern under the heading "Great heritage in a shabby surrounding?" Unfortunately, almost a quarter century later, the same question remains. Second, authenticity of experience is of utmost importance, both for tangible and intangible heritage, more in fact for intangible ones. Tourism has often been considered everywhere to be the enemy of authenticity and cultural identity. In respect of tangible heritage preservation, authenticity is often related to form and design, the context and the spirit, in materials and technology. Authenticity in intangible culture, performing arts etc., often falls victim to avarice, that is, compromises made to satisfy commercial interests. In

UNWTO has reported that "today, cultural tourism is one of the largest and fastest-developing global tourism markets: an estimated four out of ten tourists choose their destination based on its cultural offering"

the long run, such tendency can irreparably harm one of the essential elements of cultural preservation—continuity of the cultural tradition.

Third, tourists' experience of the culture of a place is enhanced and made meaningful by appropriate story telling. Trained and qualified guides are an integral part of creating unique experiences for the tourist. Similarly, each important tangible heritage should have facilities for orientation of the tourist even before (s)he experiences the heritage.

It is essential that the experience of tourists is hassle free and is not crowded out by souvenir sellers and touts.

Magnificent built heritages are witness to our civilization and culture, as are fairs, festivals, crafts and cuisine which define our identity. As the UNESCO World Heritage Centre said they are "our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritages are irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration." We have to ensure that heritage tourism development is responsible, inclusive and sustainable and that it contributes to the socio-economic development of host communities and improves their well-being by attracting tourists and creating for them inspirational experiences. **HAI**



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