



A study on the Impact of Covid-19 on Houseboat Tourism Industry Among Local Communities in Kumarakom, Kerala

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Abstract: Houseboat tourism is a core segment of backwater tourism in Kumarakom. The uniqueness of this leisure expedition has eventually made Kumarakom a prominent Houseboat destination in Kerala's itinerary. This research study is an attempt towards the revival of the houseboat tourism industry in the forthcoming period. Due to the Novel Coronavirus outbreak, the entire industry is facing an extremely hard situation to meet up the necessities of the big mass of labor force which is thoroughly reliant on this potential business sector. As it is a lively connected industry with different sections of the economy in both monetarily and service perspective, there is urgent need to address these issues to revive the industry at the earliest. This study focusses on the corona outbreak and its impact on the operations of Houseboat Tourism in Kumarakom and attempts to identify how covid-19 affected the rural people's life who are part of Houseboat Tourism. The study uses a simple random technique with a structured questionnaire to collect data, where an exploratory research method is carried out while employing both quantitative and qualitative tools for assessing the data in order to generate accurate study results. The effective responses from the industrialists, service providers, various other stakeholders, and other operating bodies in Kumarakom are much in need to examine the present socio-economic barriers affecting the livelihood of the local public. The study outcomes explain the economic challenges faced by the local residents and houseboat tourism industry due to the pandemic outbreak.

Keywords- Houseboat Tourism, SOPs, Covid-19, Local Community, Rural Tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

The protracted struggle of the tourism industry after the flood in 2018 in Kumarkom still continues with the onset of Covid pandemic. Around 80 percent of houseboat owners have converted their salaried employees in to daily wage workers citing the collapse in their business. Since the onset of Covid-19 pandemic from the mid of March, this sector has recorded zero business and didn't generate a single penny for all these days, affecting the dependent people who are there in Kumarakom. The catastrophe is not for the workers alone, but the pandemic has put houseboat owners, who invested a considerable amount in business by availing bank loans, in severe financial predicaments. In Kumarakom, houseboats with variant capacities are available it stretches from single bed to seven bed facilities; the quote for the boat also varies according to the comforts and luxuries it provides to its customers. As per a rough estimate, each boat entails an initial investment of Rs. 35 lakhs to Rs. 1.15 crore.

Excepting a few, most of the owners have bank loans. Since banks don't accept houseboats as a mortgaged property, many of them have taken loans from cooperative banks on high-interest rates, pledging their land or house, says the former secretary of the Houseboat Owners' Society, Kumarakom. The houseboat industry was marked to kick start from the drastic influence of Nipah in 2018, followed by back-to-back floods in 2018 and 2019. The Covid-19 hit created global economic disturbance, where the tourism industry has to pause their operations as it more comprehensively depended on transportation and individual mobility. (Chandran, A. 2020) In the meantime, as per rough estimate, the lockdown has made an aggregate loss of Rs. 9 Cr. in the houseboat business in Kumarakom single-handedly. As per the Times of India, reports there are around 120 houseboats in Kumarakom, which charge Rs. 6500 to Rs. 50,000 per day. Approximately, houseboats operate nearly 25 trips per month. Moreover, April-May, the peak season tends to create progressive records year by year.

According to the primary reports collected, a crisis in the houseboat industry will have a direct impact on the local economy as a large mass of the employees are belonging to the local area. Apart from direct employees, who earn Rs. 800-850 per trip, others like persons who offer laundry services, have also lost their revenue. Since houseboats are idle, fuel pumps have lost revenue of Rs. 1 lakh in Kumarakom alone. Thus the pandemic has produced unexpected hit for the overall local economy and makes it prudent to analyze those impacts in Kumarakom on a micro basis to understand the socio-psychological disturbances created for the working population.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a tremendous break in the supply chain of the tourism sector and as this pandemic disease reached every corner of the world, it resulted in the reduced movement of people as they are asked to stay back at home and to be self-quarantined. As it is projected, global tourism will be reaching 1.6 billion in 2020. Health-related precautionary measures should be a concern of both political Administration and responsible authorities otherwise it'll result negatively in the growth of the world tourism sector by reducing the movement of tourist to various destinations. (Buckley, R., King, N., & Zubrinich, T. 2004).

This reduced movement of people, directly and indirectly, resulted in both the International and Domestic tourism sector exclusively travel divisions, booking agencies, airline sector, and various other hospitality services. The above-mentioned may affect the life of the common public working in the tourism sector drastically not only their personal life but their family life as well. Loss of job or reduced salary of the common public drastically results in socio-economic balancing in the society. From January 2020 cases are being reported from various parts of the world and in India as well, but it was nominal in numbers. When we look at the numbers reporting day by day that makes all the stakeholders think seriously about what could be the next. With this, the study focuses on suggesting certain measures which can be implemented immediately to help out various stakeholders to maintain their livelihood as striving to live.

Anyhow coronavirus is a new kind of virus that is affecting human life and spreading drastically. But the factors show that even before the spread of such diseases and studies conducted regarding the need for vaccinations to block the chain and block the spread of those diseases. The study focuses on the need for vaccinations against different spreading diseases since tourists travel across various continents and countries. Precautionary measures must be organized in a good manner and that should be implemented in a systematic way otherwise smooth conduct of tourism may be a major challenge, Loscher, T., Keystone, J. S., & Steffen, R. (1999). The tourism industry is one of the industries where human beings are interacting face to face not only in the booking stage but also at the operational level.

There were studies regarding the spread of HIV in connection with sex tourism practiced by few countries in the world and that also resulted in reduced mobility. Worm, A. M., & Lillelund, H. (1989). When it comes to the ground operation local service providers, restaurants, and accommodation facility providers forced contact with tourists and this cannot be avoided to a certain extent. But in this pandemic situation unfortunately industry could not take up any such decision immediately for leisure travel within the country or internationally.

Another study focuses on trends issues in connection with international travel and their ethical concerns and the role of public administrators to prepare various strategies to address the health-related concerns of both guest and host community. Richter, L. K., & Richter, W. L. (1999). There should be a standard operating plan which can help both tourist and service providers and all other stakeholders to have a better time. This study focusses on various suggestions and strategies which can be put forward for the betterment of the tourism sector as soon as possible.

Research Question and Statement of Problem

The literature study and the gaps observed in the management of pandemic lead us to the following questions: Why there is still a stand-outfall in demand for houseboat tourism in Kumarakom after the release of relaxation guidelines of Covid-19 SOPs? how the local community depending on houseboat tourism is coping with constraints pawed by the pandemic? and what are the measures taken up by the authorities for the revival of this industry and its dependent community?

Tourism is playing a massive role in Kerala's GDP, where Kumarakom is a stand-out contributing unit. This attempt is mainly focused on the identification of factors that are hindering the progression of houseboat tourism in Kumarakom. The magnitude of catastrophes faced by the management and the stakeholders due to the loss of the market is significant. Hence the study attempts to identify the key issues involved and to find out the possible way outs for revival.

Objectives

To identify the major challenges faced by the houseboat service providers and residents in Kumarakom during the pandemic.

To examine whether Covid-19 protocols are creating any hurdles for the houseboat tourism operations in Kumarakom.

To understand the confidence and reassurance level of the local public because of the measures taken by the state government for the revival of the houseboat tourism industry in Kumarakom

III. METHODOLOGY ADOPTED

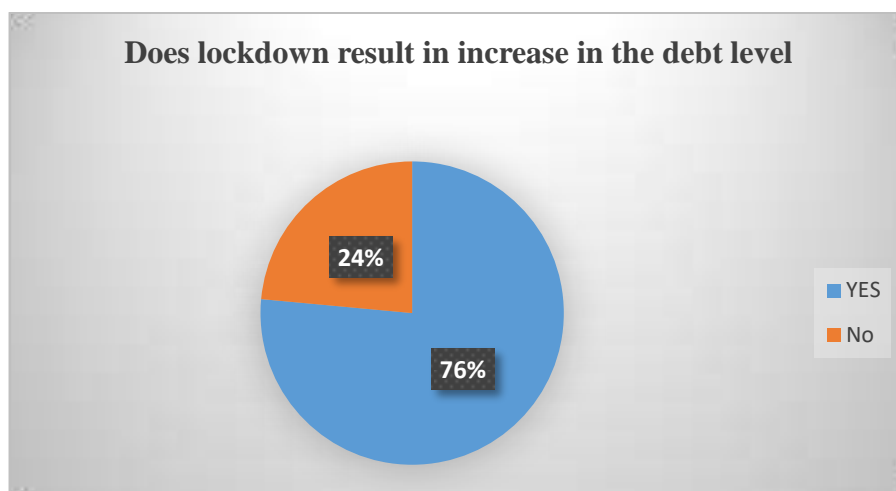
The Study design adopts an exploratory research approach for assessing the main barriers existing in the major tourist destination “Kumarakom” in Kerala. Primary data have been collected from the connected persons in the Kumarakom backwaters region. The Sample Size is restricted to 50 samples due to the obvious constraints of pandemic. Convenient Random sampling method is preferred for the formulated study.

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) is used to analyze the data. In addition to Descriptive statistics with percentage analysis, Chi-Square Test, Independent T-test and One-way ANOVA are initiated for the data analysis

Data Analysis and Inferences

Table 1. Community’s Vulnerabilities with Respect to Debt Level

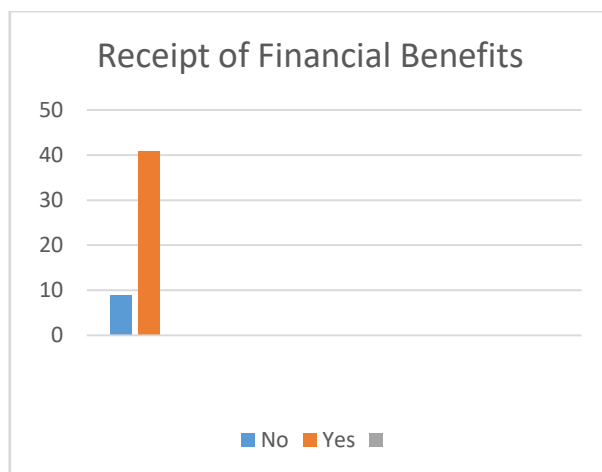
Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Debt Level Increased due to Pandemic	No	12	24
	Yes	38	76



The generated pie chart from the frequency table elucidates the setbacks of the community’s earning sources and the progression of their debt level. As a stand-out destination, the majority of the population may depend on tourism allied activities for their livelihood. The evidence from the chart indicates the intensity and about 76% of the sample respondents are agreeing on the fact that these pandemic situations and the followed restraining factors have pushed up their debt level to a higher scale. This may adversely affect their quality of life.

Table 2. Community’s Receipt of Financial Benefits or Concession Received

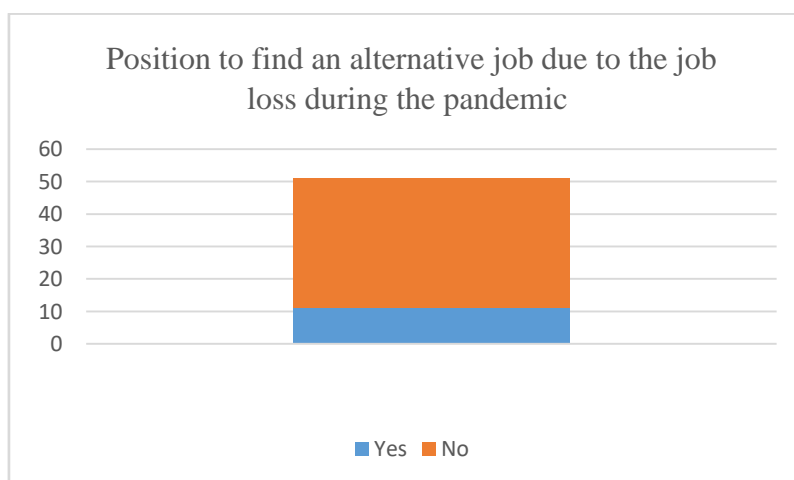
Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Financial Benefits or Concession Received	No	9	18
	Yes	41	82



From the given graph it is evident that over 80% of the community were not at all received any means of financial aid or pandemic-based concession in terms of monetary aspects. Whereas the houseboat management also suffers due to a lack of relaxed measures on tax slabs. Further, the SOPs and other regulations followed by the responsible authorities may contract the income flow of the community. During this extreme scenario, the stakeholders of houseboat tourism are expecting some sort of financial help from the authorities, but it seems the expectations remain unfulfilled and this ignorance pulls down the confidence level of the respondents in local self-governing authorities as well.

Table 3. Community’s Vulnerabilities with Respect to Find Alternative Job

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Able to Find Alternative Job During Pandemic	No	11	22
	Yes	39	78



The ability to find ancillary job opportunities which is divergent from normal tourism-linked opportunities has also been found to be very minimal except 22% of the sample respondents are only in a position to grab new opportunities. The remaining 78% of the population were unable to find an alternate job that is different from their natural course of living. This is one of the core issues that must be addressed because the community which is completely dependent on a specific arena for livelihood may find extreme difficulties to shift from that particular line of operations.

IV. HYPOTHESIS

4.1. Hypothesis: 1

H₀: There is no coherent association between faulty information spread and drop in demand for houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

H₁: There is coherent association between faulty information spread and drop in demand for houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

Chi-Square Result for faulty information spread and drop in demand for houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

Chi-Square	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	102.425	4	.001

The test results generated the Chi-Square value = 102.425 with significance < 0.05, here the p-value is .001 which is highly reliable and easily advocates nullifying the null hypothesis. Thus we could infer from the above analysis that the propagation of faulty information regarding covid-19 protocols and anxiety creating information in and around the destinations has led to the downfall of houseboat business. Misleading information and anxiety creating propagandas along with reduced means of marketing may increase the hardship of the cluster which is exclusively dependent on houseboat tourism.

4.2. Hypothesis: 2

H₀: There is no significant difference of opinions between SOPs introduced and their effect on drop in demand for houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

H₁: There is a significant difference of opinions between SOPs introduced and their effect on drop in demand for houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

Cross Tab for the difference in opinion in the means of Visible drop in demand for Houseboat tourism and SOPs introduced in tourism sector.

Count	SOPs are beneficial for the revival of houseboat tourism					Total
	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	
Visible drop in demand for Houseboat tourism	21	20	1	2	1	45
	1	2	0	1	1	5
Total	22	22	1	3	2	50

Independent T-test result

Variables	Visible drop in demand for Houseboat tourism	N	Mean	T	Significance
SOPs are beneficial for the revival of houseboat tourism	Yes	45	3.127	5.138	0.00
	No	5	2.432		

From the above analysis, we could infer that the local community and the houseboat management cluster have agreed on the fact about the standard operating procedures are convincing and provides enough flexibility to operate and revive the houseboat operations in Kumarakom. Meanwhile, it produces a contradictory outcome as there is a sound fall in demand for the houseboat tourism industry there in Kumarakom. Thus, at a very high significant value of 0.00 i.e. <0.05 we can reject the null hypothesis and can conclude that there is a predominant difference of opinion among the dependent and independent variables. It signifies that even though the relaxation policies given were beneficial for the industry but still there is a drop in demand due to other latent dimensions. Here more than 90% of the respondents are agreeing that there is a huge fall in demand for houseboat expeditions likewise above 80% of them expressed their positive attitude towards the SOPs introduced by the responsible authorities. This indicates that SOPs are not at all creating any kind of disturbances for the operations of the industry but the limited mass of visitors or the least demand for houseboat tourism increases the economic pressure

of the local stakeholders and it remains a major challenge for their mere future. There is a significant difference of opinion between different age groups regarding the initiatives taken up by the local self-governing bodies for reviving houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

4.3. Hypothesis: 3

H₀: there is no significant difference of opinion between different age groups regarding the initiatives taken up by the local self-governing bodies for reviving houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

H₁: there is a significant difference of opinion between different age groups regarding the initiatives taken up by the local self-governing bodies for reviving houseboat tourism in Kumarakom.

ANOVA test for assessing the difference in opinion among the means of the activities of the local self-governing bodies and different age groups

Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Activities of the local self-governing bodies	Between Groups	11.44	5	3.044	3.247	.000
	Within Groups	57.419	45	5.12		
	Total	62.521	50			

The inferential results can reject the null hypothesis at a significance level of <0.005 here the P-value is highly significant which is .000 with F statistics of 3.044. This explains that there is a momentous difference of opinion between different age groups regarding the activities and the initiatives taken up by the local self-governing body rather than the steps forwarded by tourism promoting authorities. The results show the lack of confidence of the community towards the operations of their local governing bodies. During the pandemic, it is a very difficult and hectic struggle for the cluster who is mainly focusing on tourism for livelihood. Such that the local governing institutions must back up these communities by motivating and provide support measures for an ancillary source of income that can meet bare subsistence for living.

V. FINDINGS

5.1. Visible Drop-in Houseboat Tourism Market: The study figure outs the comprehensive ultimatum for the houseboat tourism market in Kumarakom. The leading destination in Kerala's itinerary is facing an in-depth set back is explained by the study inferences.

5.2. Existence of Anxiety Creating Rumors: Misleading information spread in and around destinations is one of the key elements which withdraws the demand of the market for houseboats.

5.3 Covid-19 Protocols and SOPs are not creating much complexity: For the operations of the houseboat tourism industry in Kumarakom the formulated guidelines by the authorities were not creating any visible disturbance, as proved by the study outcomes.

5.4. Poor level of confidence in the operations of local self-governing institutions: While assessing the satisfaction level from the management and the local public regarding the activities and measures put forward by the authorities in connection to the revival of the industry, we interpreted the poor confidence level with respect to the above mentioned.

5.5. Severely Affected by the Local Community: The downfall of the level of visitors to the destination itself indicates the contractions of earning sources. This may adversely affect and hit hard their economic status and growth.

5.6. Increase in Debt Level of Both Management and Allied Stakeholders: Both the sections of the society are affected painstakingly by the pause in the flow of income. The study indicates that whereas the management has to keep the maintenance of cost while the allied stakeholders have to maintain their requirements for subsistence with the pause of flow in income during the pandemic. This would probably raise their debt burdens.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

6.1. Promote domestic tourism.

Every sub-sector of tourism is witnessing challenges in connection with the non-availability of tourists to avail various services. The study result clearly suggests that there is a huge drop in demand which has to be addressed for the survival of stakeholders who are completely dependent on houseboat tourism as means for their livelihood. Hence, it is advisable to shift the focus from only on foreign tourist visits in Alleppey - Kumarakom to focus to domestic tourists from nearby destinations, as the second wave of the pandemic is still contemplating. Many potential tourists are unable to explore the destination due to the non-availability of proper information and the significance of Kumarakom backwaters. Proper promotional activities and the implementation of innovative marketing strategies by targeting domestic tourists may help the revival process of houseboat tourism activities in Kumarakom.

6.2. Issue pandemic friendly packages

The confidence level of both guest and host community is another major challenge and its increasing as pandemic prolongs. The only option is to create unique packages which can be entitled as Covid / Pandemic friendly packages. Such packages can provide a better experience to the travelers, but efficient marketing initiatives and strategies should be taken by both public and private authorities. Arrival of tourists might help to improve the confidence level of the host.

6.3. Awareness programs for destination promoters and potential tourist

There are many rumors which are spreading across regarding the safety aspect in various tourist destinations. As per the report Houseboats and Homestays also follow COVID-19 protocols in Kumarakom (Official Correspondent, MalayalaManorama. 2020, November 17). There is a significant difference in the conduct of houseboat tourism and other types of tourism activities. Because there are only a limited number of people gathering at a time. Maximum public contact can be ignored, if the domestic tourists are traveling by their car and reach the destination and directly embark into the houseboat. Staff members of the houseboat also should take extra care and precautions when they are mingling with the public. It is necessary to create a set of guidelines regarding the safety procedures and social distancing among both parties. The special team can be appointed by the house owners to monitor the above-mentioned.

6.4. Expand tax exemptions for the management & stakeholders

The majority of the local community responded that their debt level increased during lockdown and pandemic. It could be the responsibility of the government tourism department and finance department to intrude in this issue. Houseboat owners and management are also facing issues about debt. This will affect the growth of houseboat tourism activities in the region. Unless and until the pandemic gets settled, extended support from the government is inevitable for the survival of tourism in Kumarakom.

6.5. Improve the effectiveness of local self-governing institutions and authorities.

The local administrative system in Kumarakom is always supporting the houseboat tourism sector and canal tourism as canals are the key attractions of the backwater in the Kumarakom region. Local administrative bodies are involved in the supervision of houseboats operations at various levels, and they might be aware of the challenges faced by the local community during the lockdown. If they can prepare an elaborate report on the problems faced by the stakeholders of houseboat tourism in the mentioned region. Such reports will be helpful for the higher authorities to understand the situation of the houseboat tourism and dependents sector. According to the report few from the local community received minor aids from the local grama panchayat but it was just for the namesake. It is the responsibility of government authorities to understand the significance of the industry and to involve by providing maximum support in all possible ways.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study and discussion is mainly about the revival of the tourism market in Kumarakom along with addressing the major cataclysm experienced by the community of those who are explicitly relying on houseboat tourism. The empirical tools adopted for the study are significant enough to generate reliable results and infers genuine findings. The core revelations are provided by the independent t-test which does not point at the covid-19 protocols issued by the authorities, but highlights the general bias that drop in demand is mainly because of stringent regulations. At the same time, it shows the visible flop in demand for houseboat tourism as well. There is scope for further investigations regarding the hidden factors responsible for the existing friction in the market. The study aims to provide convincing and considerable suggestions which can empower the market and are beneficial for all the stakeholders irrespective of certain sections of the society. The study conclusively arrives at the low confidence level of the public in authority's activities and addresses issues for feeble demand.

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