

Published Date:	Thursday 30th September, 2021	Publication:	Hotelier India [National]
Journalist:	Vinita Bhatia	Page No:	1, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45
MAV/CCM:	6,343,750/5624.58	Circulation:	62,000

WPP license No. MR/Tech/WPP-73/North/2021-23. License to post without prepayment. Postal Registration No. MCN/98/2021-2023
 Published on 4th of every month. Posting date: 6th & 7th of every month. Posted at Patrika Channel Sorting Office, Mumbai-400001
 Registered with Registrar of Newspapers under RNI No. MAHENG/2009/34648

Total pages 48

Volume 13 | Issue 8 | September 2021 | ₹100

hotelier india

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL HOTEL MANAGEMENT

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GM'S DIARY

SUMEET SURI, GM,
JW MARRIOTT HOTEL KOLKATA

POWERLIST 2021

MEET THE LEADERS WHO TACKLED
 CHALLENGES POSED BY THE PANDEMIC
 HEAD-ON, LEVERAGING THEIR EXPERIENCE,
 PRUDENCE AND ETHICS TO HELP THEIR
 ORGANISATIONS RIDE OUT THIS STORM

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THE UNSHAKEABLE HEROES

BY VINITA BHATIA

Creating any listing, especially when it involves industry leaders, requires a lot of thought. And even after using a well-thought methodology, many will find fault with the process.

But then again, no one is perfect, and one can't please everyone. We, at Hotelier India, understand this quite well.

After all, we were the first in the hospitality sector to start the 'Powerlist', an annual process that we have unstintingly continued over the past 13 years. To ensure that it is unbiased and qualitative, we use the collective wisdom of our editorial board and some key members of our advisory board (who prefer anonymity).

One can rank companies by their market capitalisation and net value based on cash flows from the hospitality business. However, the 'Powerlist' has always steered clear of this approach.

The reason is simple - we want to highlight empathetic and forward-thinking leaders who manage the show despite numerous challenges. And boy, last year did throw plenty of that their way!

This is also why Hotelier India's Powerlist does not rank people. Instead, these visionar-

ies are listed in an alphabetical order - because we celebrate leadership excellence rather than fiscal dominance.

This year's Powerlist features industry stakeholders who weathered the rough times by leading from the front and worked hard to identify newer avenues to generate profitable growth. They took bold decisions to create value for all their stakeholders - employees, partners and guests - and tried to create an equitable environment to build the next rung of leaders.

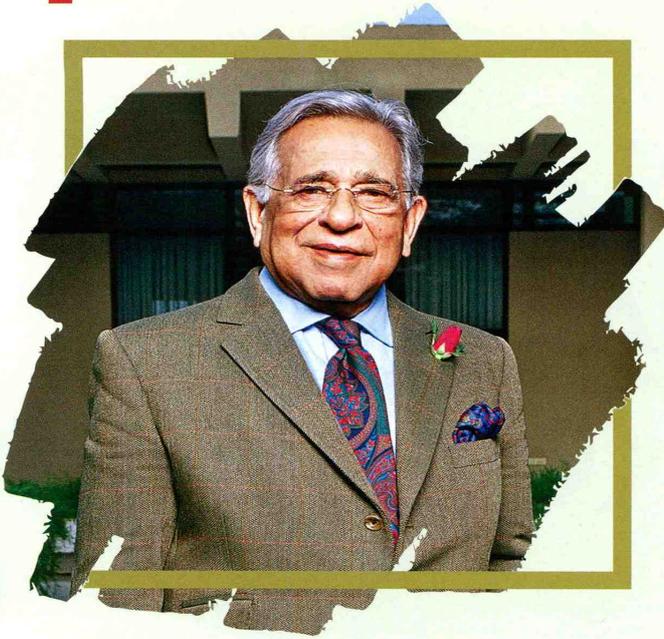
Some names are regrettably missing, like the CEO of IHCL, despite the insistence of our editorial colleagues and advisory board members to include the person in the Powerlist. However, the organisation chose to abstain as the company officials noted that that alphabetical positioning of thought leaders does not consider IHCL's stature or its valuation.

We applaud all members in 'Hotelier India's Powerlist 2021' for painstakingly attempting to shelter their companies from an unprecedented calamity of monstrous proportions, while striving to build a respected brand and a sustainable business. They have carved a special niche for themselves in the industry, and may their tribe increase.

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The Torchbearers

PRS OBEROI Executive Chairman, EIH Ltd



PRS Oberoi, lovingly called Biki by his family and friends, is a legend in the hospitality industry. The Executive Chairman of East India Hotels Limited (EIH), The Oberoi Group's flagship company, he is also the Chairman of Oberoi Hotels.

Having received his education in India, Switzerland and the UK, PRS gained a deeper insight into what extravagant comfort meant to global travellers. Since then, he pioneered the development of the 'Oberoi' brand, which is synonymous for elegant luxury.

Maintaining that a company is known by its people it keeps, PRS established 'The Oberoi Centre of Learning and Development' at New Delhi in 1966. This institution is considered amongst the best in Asia today, and is the gateway for many aspiring students keen to understand the hospitality industry's operations.

As a sprightly 92-year old, PRS remains actively involved in EIH's operations. He has been vocal about the need for the hotel industry to get an infrastructure status to overcome the battering that it suffered during the pandemic.

"Tourism continues to be one of the sectors hardest hit by COVID-19 and the outlook remains highly uncertain. Encouraging news on vaccines has raised hopes for recovery but challenges remain as seen during the subsequent second wave, the sector expects to remain in survival mode until well into 2021," he said.

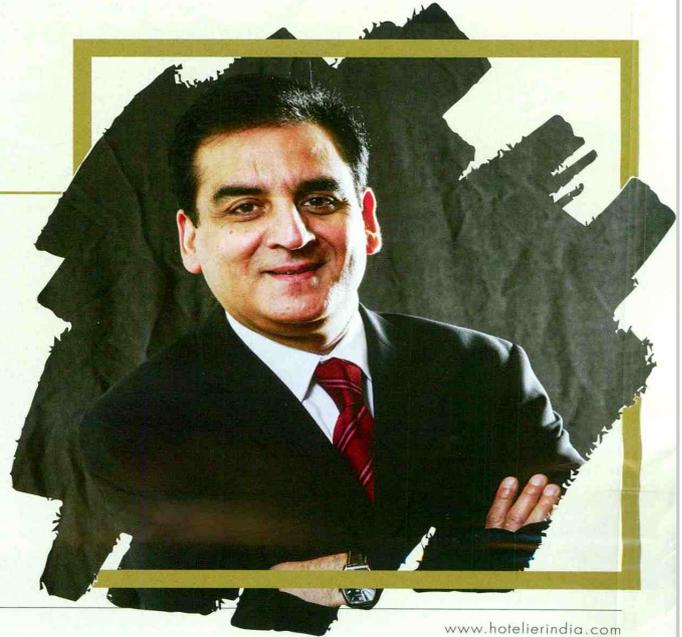
He added that more should be done to protect the livelihoods of people dependent upon the tourism sector. "Fiscal and tax policies should encourage further investments which are necessary at this time. More than ever before the government should consider providing infrastructure status to the industry," he added.

K B KACHRU Chairman Emeritus & Principal Advisor, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

KB Kachru, Chairman Emeritus and Principal Advisor-South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group (RHG) is an experienced hand in the hospitality industry. He not only brought the global chain to India two decades ago, he also built it into one of the leading hotel companies in the country.

Kachru succeeded by pioneering growth in metro cities and later venturing into tier II and III locations. "We recognised the potential of India's robust domestic tourism early on and focused on establishing a first-mover advantage in strategic cities across the country," he recalled.

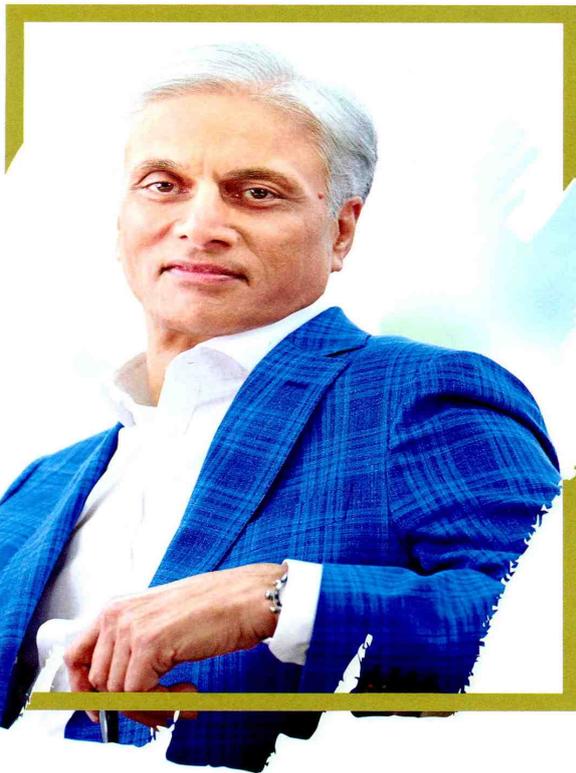
Moreover, he identified the right owners and partners and worked on driving value for them. This mindset yielded continuous opportunities for RHG. He is currently the VP of Hotel Association of India (HAI), and has been making representations to various government agencies to make hospitality and tourism a national priority.



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AJAY BAKAYA MD, Sarovar Hotels and Resorts



An instinctive leadership can help one survive the challenges posed by any calamity, irrespective how long it lasts. You have to clearly communicate your gut feeling to your team."

a problem, we will overcome it. This positive affirmation can work wonders," Bakaya opined.

ROLLING WITH THE PUNCHES

When the lockdown reduced guest inflow to a trickle, Bakaya realised it was critical to infuse flexibility in strategies immediately. By April 2020, Sarovar came up with various policies, including full refund on cancellation. "Many people wanted to wait for a couple of quarters before taking these decisions. However, our hotels were bleeding and we couldn't ask our owners to wait. So, we trimmed our costs dramatically wherever possible while making our policies even more guest-friendly," he explained.

Manpower was deployed on a rotational basis to avoid large-scale layoffs. While work from home for office staff was permitted, salaries were not deducted if employees did not show up to work. Instead, webinars and online sessions were organised to keep associates positive during these trying times.

Bakaya also called several hotel owners and general managers regularly to check on them and their family. This empathy helped Sarovar retain majority of its owners and key associates, and keep its 96 operating hotels with 7500 keys in India and Africa across 65 destinations functional.

Moreover, at a time when most companies were hunkering down to weather the pandemic, Sarovar forayed into Nepal. It currently has a pipeline of four properties under management contracts in the Himalayan nation – Sarovar Portico Birgunj, Sarovar Premiere Manakamna, Sarovar Premiere Janakpur and Tulip Inn Itahari.

FISCAL PRUDENCE

Sarovar, too, faced fiscal challenges during the past 18 months like its peers. Fortunately, it had minimal debt and could utilise the cash reserves it had steadily built over the last few years.

"When the chips are down and one has debt, sleepless nights are a given," Bakaya candidly said. "We were, thankfully, not in that situation and our business is already seeing green shoots of recovery. Our gross revenues in July 2021 were around 65% of that in July 2019."

While things are looking up, he is unwilling to throw caution to the winds, especially with the impending third wave. "Though we can't wish it away, another downturn will be tougher than the first and second wave. The industry has undergone prolonged hardship, but we are better prepared today than we were a few months ago," he summed up.

When the pandemic was at its peak, Sarovar Hotels and Resorts converted its Golden Tulip hotel at Gurgaon's Sector 29 into a COVID-19 care center for senior citizens. This required close collaboration with, 'I Am Gurgaon', Fortis Hospital, EMOHA Eldercare Services and the municipal corporation. But over and above, it needed the whole-hearted support of its staff.

That's when Ajay Bakaya, MD, Sarovar Hotels and Resorts decided to lead by example. "If I expect my staff to put themselves at risk by being on site, how could I work remotely?" he questioned. "While no one was forced to report to work, I was at the hotel lobby or back of the house, meeting associates and thanking them for their service."

This level-headed approach allayed employee fears, and inspired them more effectively than any official memo could ever have. "An instinctive leadership can help one survive the challenges posed by any calamity, irrespective how long it lasts. You have to communicate your gut feeling to the team, assuring them while there's

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ANURAAG BHATNAGAR COO, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts



We used this downtime to invest in people, technology and build a robust sales, marketing and distribution ecosystem."

offer real-time response.

"We used this time to invest in people, technology and build a robust sales, marketing and distribution ecosystem," Bhatnagar added. "We revamped our HR practices with associate benefits that are contemporary." This included rolling out a recovery plan to assist COVID-19 affected employees with benefits like paid leave during the quarantine period and financial grant to cover their health expenses.

On the brand side, the three-decade old company instituted key strategic partnerships. Designer Manish Malhotra became the brand ambassador of 'Weddings by The Leela', the butler service was revamped and ceremonial rituals were redesigned.

TIME WELL SPENT

Bhatnagar's focus the past few months has been on safely reopening Leela properties in a phased manner and carefully planning for the return of associates as these hotels scale back up. "Our business outlook and strategy has been concentrated on maintaining market leadership while remaining cautiously optimistic," Bhatnagar stated. "We are amongst the few brands that launched new properties amidst the pandemic to positive response."

He cited the example of The Leela Palace Jaipur, which opened in February 2021, and reinforced the company's ability to quickly convert from another brand and yet show market leading returns. The newly-opened The Leela Gandhinagar underpins its presence in the events space along with the upcoming The Leela Bhartiya City Bengaluru.

As the economy reopens, Bhatnagar has adopted a multi-pronged approach. "Safely reopening our hotels and carefully preparing our teams to return to work; gradually building consumer and associate confidence, reassuring them our hotels are the cornerstone of sanitisation; devising strategies to elevate guest experiences; driving demand through compelling offers around what matters most to our guests," he ticked off his fingers.

The pandemic underlined the unpredictability of the world we live in and how quickly things can quickly change to impact the entire world. This is where Bhatnagar relied on his inherent skill to be agile, adaptable and communicate effectively.

"To quickly to respond to an ever-evolving business environment, consumer behaviour and expectations without compromising on our service standards or the brand's core DNA placed us in good stead," he opined. A strong proponent of transparent, timely and effective communication, he believed that engaging with stakeholders and keeping them updated on the latest developments in a dynamic environment is the golden key to success.

Three months after he joined The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts as COO, the pandemic brought things to a standstill. That's when Anuraag Bhatnagar knew it was the ideal opportunity to creatively reassess the company's business approach and devise effective strategies to match evolving customer behaviour.

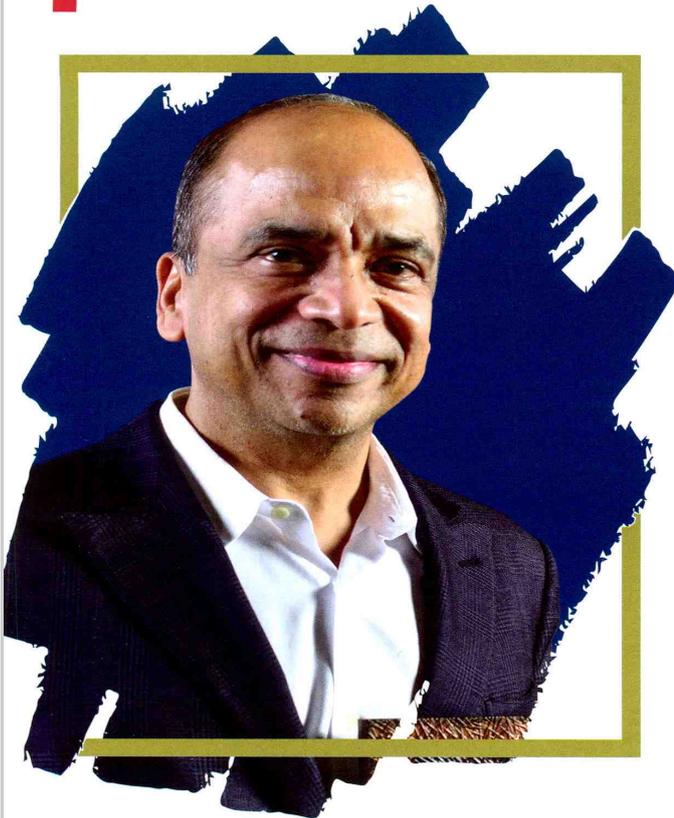
"Our focus shifted to 'Reimagine, Redesign and Reset'. We ensured that we not only met guest expectations, but exceeded them, while staying true to our brand value and delivered a true luxury experience," he stated.

This was also the time to highlight #LeelaCares for its 3,500 associates across 10 hotels, guests and communities. It partnered with Bureau Veritas India to launch the 'Suraksha' certification programme and undertook a vaccination drive for associates and their families. Moreover, it leveraged technology to alleviate guest experiences and empower its associates. Solutions like contactless check-in, digital menus, e-publications, guest feedback system and e-butlers with Whatsapp were integrated at a war footing to

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ARUN SARAF MD, Juniper Hotels



If somebody can do a better job of running my hotels with the right kind of branding and service, I will let them do it. I want to own profitable hotel assets, rather than having more dots on the map.”

He pointed out how lights and air conditioning would be left on in unoccupied rooms and meeting spaces, or gyms would be functional 24x7 in the off-chance that a guest might want to use it. This wastage was also reflected in the staff to room manning ratio, as hotels thought that having more people per room equated to better service. This resulted in under-deployed manpower and overly intrusive service.

COST CONSCIOUSNESS

Last year, Juniper Hotels, along with its hotel partners, drastically reduced operating costs. “There’s a difference between cost cutting and cost rationalisation; these measures should not impact the quality of service offered to customers,” Saraf explained.

This move resulted in all 12 Juniper Hotels closing their book of accounts without a gross operating loss. “Some even showed profit since they don’t have any borrowing,” Saraf added. “Hence, my biggest learning last year was that everything can be changed, if one has the courage to do it.”

According to him, the pandemic has also made people very tolerant and respectful – about their own needs and that of others – while seeking a better work-life balance. This explains why he has stuck to his decision of not running a vast chain of hotels.

“If somebody can do a better job of running my hotels with the right kind of branding and service, I will let them do it. I want to own profitable hotel assets, rather than having more dots on the map,” he claimed.

This is also why Saraf personally chooses the locations for each hotel and builds them for the long haul. For now, he is busy preparing for the opening of his Bodh Gaya resort and convention center, which is 85% complete and is slated to open next year.

In the 50 years that he has been part of the hospitality business, Arun Saraf, MD, Juniper Hotels has seen many calamities. While most were region-specific, the disruption wrecked by COVID-19 was universal. It compelled all industry stakeholders to adopt a collaborative approach to survive, while meting out some tough lessons.

“My biggest realisation was that we are inherently resilient and optimistic. The second learning was that we can do our business differently, if we so chose,” he stated. According to him, luxury hotels were trapped in a quagmire of wastefulness in their bid to offer alleviated guest experiences. However, the pandemic made most appreciate the merits of better cost management.

“Since luxury hotels were charging high room rates, they got into the habit of giving guests more to justify these prices, irrespective whether the customer wanted it. This started the culture of wastefulness in hospitality, something you do not see overseas,” Saraf explained.

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ASHISH JAKHANWALA MD and CEO, SAMHI Hotels



Room rates were stagnating, return on capital was dismal and there was no pricing discipline. So, we did have problems even before COVID-19.”

Jakhanwala explained, “Often, facing pressure from their shareholders, a public company may resort to more punitive cost savings to display a profit. As a private entity, we ensured that we treated our associates fairly and their motivation will be the principal driving point for recovery.” He would rather evaluate the IPO this year-end, when he is more confident about promising better business outcome to investors.

HOLDING ON

SAMHI Hotels had plans to fortify its portfolio in 2020 by opening a Holiday Inn Express, Kolkata and expanding its room inventory in Hyatt Regency Pune, Holiday Inn Express Bangalore and Fairfield by Marriott Sriperumbudur besides renovating Four Points by Sheraton Ahmedabad. While these are on hold, the company is keeping its plans ready so it can immediately execute the projects when the tide hopefully turns in 2022.

Fortunately, SAMHI has deep-rooted affiliations with its three operators – Marriott International, Hyatt Hotels and Intercontinental Hotels Group. “I believe the true test of any partnership is in bad times than in good, and we worked seamlessly with these three to deal with the current situation,” he stated. Moreover, he lauded the regional teams of these companies for doing all the heavy lifting when it came to course correction.

UNLEARN, RELEARN, REPEAT

The industry learned some tough lessons about economic sustainability last year. On revenue, it was the need to broaden the market segmentation to tap more customers, rather than rely on the RFP clients, especially for hotels in urban locations.

Jakhanwala pointed out that finding the right pricing was one of the biggest challenges for this heavily-discounted sector. “Room rates were stagnating, return on capital was dismal and there was no pricing discipline. So, we did have problems even before COVID-19,” he pointed out.

Realising that the industry was over-capitalised, SAMHI reoriented its strategies to upend this status quo. “We need to relook at our room to staff ratios and have multi-skilled talent. I hope that we come out much stronger post-COVID because we finally got our house in order,” Jakhanwala concluded.

Ashish Jakhanwala, MD and CEO, SAMHI Hotels would like to believe that the worst of the pandemic is behind us. After all, his company touched almost 50% occupancy across its portfolio of 27 hotels with 4,500 keys this August. 11 properties even touched 65% of pre-COVID revenues, which is a positive sign.

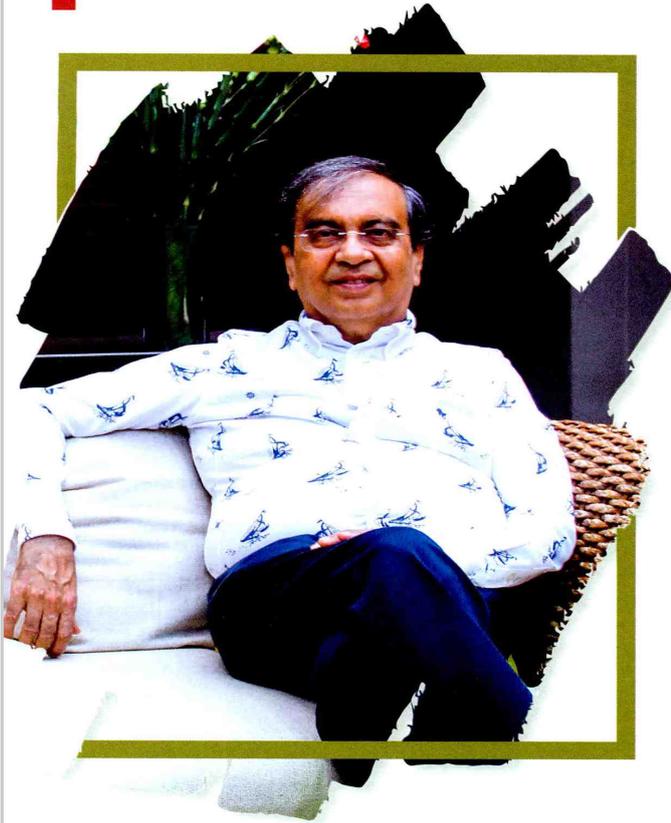
According to him, the pandemic had a transformational impact on the hospitality industry – no one knew how to deal with this global phenomenon or could predict how long it would last. However, Jakhanwala is proud that SAMHI chose an equable approach to the situation, rather than reacting to fear or frustration. “We did not have mass-scale retrenchment or shut down a hotel,” he asserted.

Of course, growth opportunities were stalled, as the company astutely decided to preserve its capital to meet future contingencies emerging from pandemic-related situations. This included postponing its plans to raise around INR 2,000 crore through an IPO slated for 2020.

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CHANDER BALJEE CMD, Royal Orchid Hotels



Thinking on our feet, we improvised our responses as government policies kept changing every fortnight. So, we took a short-term approach while dealing with challenges and opportunities when they presented themselves."

strategy across channels and markets in addition to creating a strong sales funnel to generate business by focusing on local markets. It also designed packages and offers for the right source markets and booking options.

The hotel chain closely worked with OTAs and other distribution partners to drive direct bookings, in addition to aligning with on-line food aggregators to maximise its F&B revenue. It also directed its focus on ancillary revenue streams such as workactions, co-working spaces, partnership with hospitals, bio bubble business, and the Vande Bharat mission.

"Unconventional problems require unconventional solutions. Thinking on our feet, we improvised our responses as government policies were changing every fortnight. So, we took a short-term approach while dealing with challenges and opportunities as and when they presented themselves," Baljee elaborated.

While the company had a coherent corporate strategy to deal with disruptions, it gave its employees lot of autonomy to experiment. According to Baljee moving away from a top-down corporate structure, empowered the teams down the ranks. This, in turn, speeded up decision making and as a result, the company could bag a lot of business.

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Royal Orchid began migrating towards a tech-centric and data-driven organisation long before the pandemic. It started with upgrading its PMS systems, booking engine, CRM, digital marketing and analytics platforms, and HRIS tools.

"This helped us understand our guest and employee journey at a granular level. We can now forecast demand, identify opportunities, develop strategies and automate a lot of activities," Baljee stated.

The ability to take decisive actions and honest communication went a long way in helping him wade through these troubled times. And while the pandemic might have set Royal Orchid back by a year, Baljee stated that it is well on its way to achieving all goals, including reaching the milestone of 100 hotels by December 2022.

FY 19-20 was a phenomenal year for Royal Orchid Hotels. It posted growth in revenue and profitability and with everything going in its favour, morale was high in the company.

For FY 20-21, its CMD, Chander Baljee outlined a gameplan to further strengthen the brand portfolio, expand to new markets and maximise shareholder wealth - and one of the chief goals was to reach the target of 100 hotels by December 2021.

The pandemic upended everything.

So, Baljee took substantial steps to preserve liquidity and mitigate the impact of low demand levels. "In addition to reducing our operating expenses dramatically, we revised our organisation strategy to become more agile. We also started several initiatives, including the Management Development Program and multi-skilling, to rationalise costs and improve customer experience," he explained.

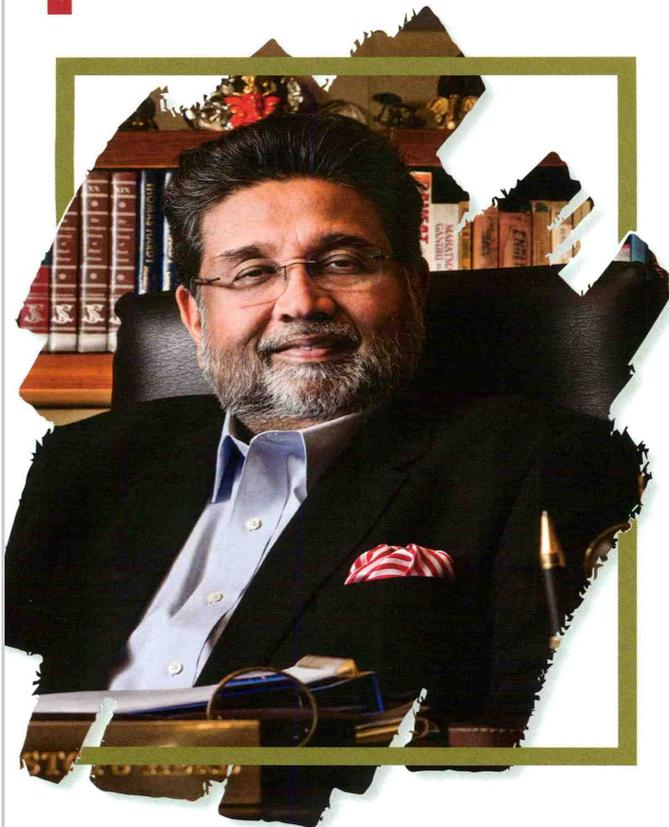
BEST FOOT FORWARD

Royal Orchid realigned its marketing and revenue management

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HARSHVARDHAN NEOTIA Chairman, Ambuja Neotia Group



We constantly sought newer opportunities to leverage our expertise and diversify our service offering to protect and rebuild our revenue stream. While we added new clients every month, it hasn't been easy."

week or month for quarantined patients.

"Another pivot was offering pre-cooked dishes with accompaniments using ingredients from our restaurants, which guests could prepare at home. We optimised our menus and introduced home catering services for smaller groups," Neotia stated.

Adopting flexibility as its business mantra, the real estate major decided to accept change rather than resist it. It partnered with the West Bengal government to convert 30 luxury bungalows at Ffort Raichak Resort into temporary quarantine centres and healthcare support stations.

As touch-free became the industry buzzword, the group also introduced contactless interactions at various touchpoints and adopted newer forms of payment technologies. Further, it updated its booking policies allowing guests to book future travel without worrying about cancellation fees and penalties. These moves buttressed the hospitality chain's bottomline during trying times.

LOOKING FORWARD

Ambuja Neotia Group implemented several cost-cutting measures and revenue-maximising strategies to recover losses incurred during the pandemic. Following a utility audit, it shifted to energy-efficient HVAC solutions to reduce cost. "While these temporary modifications may not have started out as a choice, these implementations will be a profitable long-term strategy," Neotia stated.

The group also partnered with IHCL where the latter would operate five hotels - Ambuja City Centre II (formerly Swissotel) and Eco Park in Kolkata, Ambuja City Centre Patna, as well as upcoming properties at Darjeeling's Makaibari Tea Estate and Gangtok. While the real estate company had pushed back some hotel launches in the past 18 months, these will be introduced when the economy reopens to help it cover lost ground.

Neotia hopes to launch the convention and lounge facilities of Taj Taalkutir at Eco Park Kolkata by March 2022, and make Taj City Centre in New Town operational by then. "Additionally, our hotels in Sikkim and Patna should be operational over the next two years and we hope to introduce hotels in Darjeeling and in Lataguri, Sunderbans, New Town and Digha," he optimistically stated.

2020 was a transitional year for Ambuja Neotia Group, where it re-evaluated revenue generation and allocation to increase the bottomline. Since corporate and MICE travel was expected to take a while to revive, it identified contemporary segments, like domestic tourists, to compensate the loss in corporate business.

"We constantly sought newer opportunities to leverage our expertise and diversify our service offering to protect and rebuild our revenue stream," said Harshvardhan Neotia, Chairman, Ambuja Neotia Group. "While we added new clients every month, it hasn't been easy. It took lots of effort and humility."

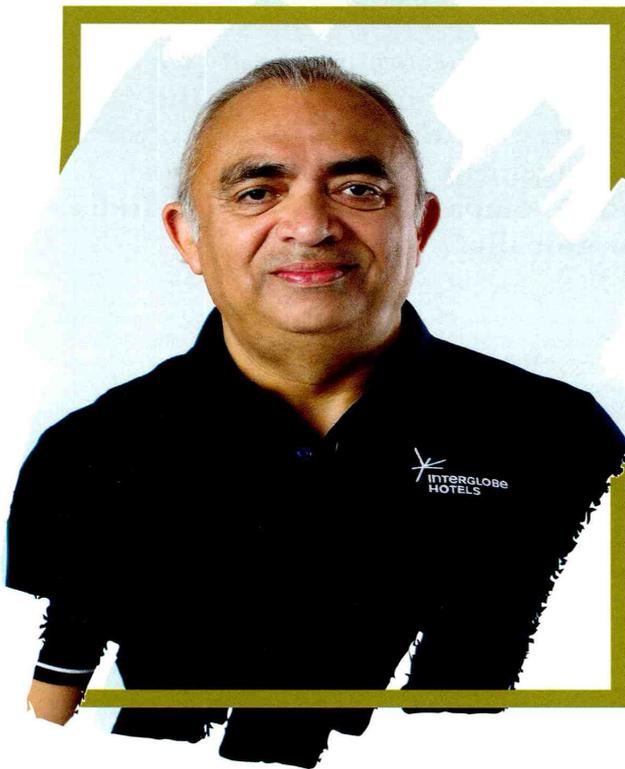
THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

As challenges surrounding COVID-19 mounted, the Group spun its business models for short-term survival and long-term growth. In addition to converting some of its F&B outlets to focus on home delivery, it started offering a flat rate for set number of meals per

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JB SINGH President and CEO, InterGlobe Hotels



In March 2020, we swiftly re-strategised our business plan. We predicted that the pandemic's impact on the industry would last over a 18 to 24 month business cycle, and that the first revival would be in September 2020."

it recently started the 206-Keys ibis Kalina Mumbai, The 249-key ibis Vikhroli will open in September 2021, followed by the 184-key ibis hotels in Thane and 154-key ibis Hebbal in mid-2022. "This will be followed by our second Goa property, the 142-key ibis Styles Vagator. We will also debut the 140-key Novotel in Bengaluru City Centre in 2023," Singh informed.

TRIMMING COSTS

Last year, IGH restructured and delayed its organisation by building efficiencies of scale and managed to resize manning from 0.6 to 0.4 per room, while maintaining and facilitating smooth operation in its hotels. While the pandemic did cause some liquidity issues, the company maneuvered through promoter commitment, banking relations, and infusion of required equity and debt to aid business growth. Singh stated that it now aims to garner sufficient investment opportunities and explore avenues for new acquisitions.

"The hotel industry got an opportunity to reflect and refresh its vision. We have leveraged our strong geographical presence to seize new customer trends to fulfill guest expectations. We evaluated opportunities in emerging markets in leisure, industrial and business environments, and diversified our product portfolio to accommodate the growing needs of the customer," he explained.

Colleagues at IGH were encouraged to develop new skills to contribute to changing business scenarios. The team came up with over 40 revenue generating ideas. While most are not implementable in their current form, Singh noted that this exercise made it clear that the industry has to revisit its business model and operating structures - something IGH had a headstart on.

With a vision centered around design, efficiency, and sustainability, InterGlobe Hotels (IGH) has added capacity at a 33% CAGR over the last five years. Today, with 17 operating hotels and six under development, it is committed to 4100 keys across India.

"We committed ourselves to augment customer experience and at the same time create a model that is operationally and financially efficient. Speed has been critical," said JB Singh, President and CEO, InterGlobe Hotels.

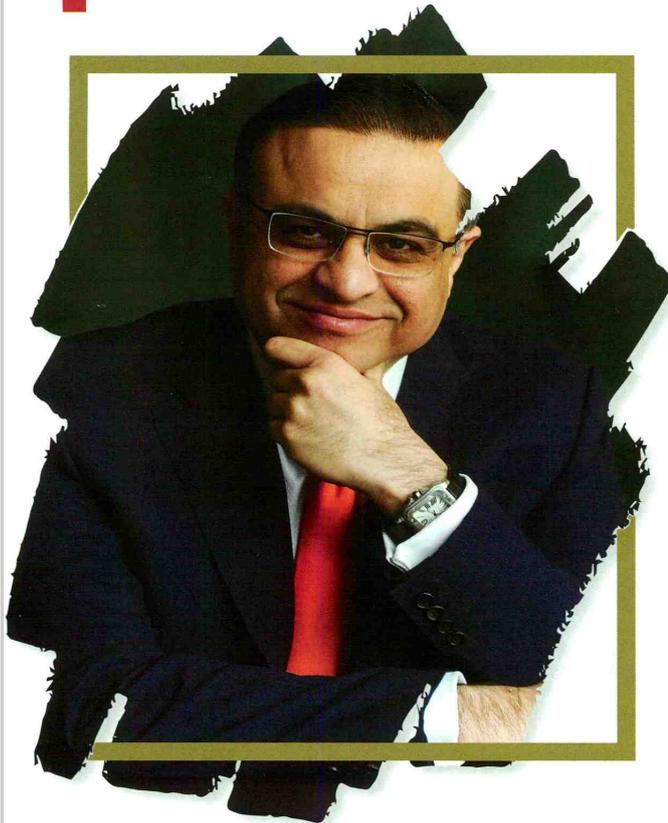
A business continuity plan triggered in February 2020 allowed the company to remain committed to its goals in COVID-19's context. "In March 2020, we swiftly re-strategised our business plan. We predicted the pandemic's impact on the industry would last over a 18 to 24 month business cycle, and that the first revival would be in September 2020," Singh stated.

The execution of this plan ensured that business damage was minimised and IGH's plans for ibis hotels are well on track. While

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MAV/CCM:	6,343,750/5624.58	Circulation:	62,000



KAPIL CHOPRA Founder and CEO, The Postcard Hotel



Our fee structure is actually three times of any hotel player in the country. We do not operate on the management structure that most hotel companies operate on in India or globally."

that all of TPH's six operational properties would not drop rates or compromise on their offerings. "We were the rate leaders in Goa with the highest ARR, as well as in Bhutan and also Galle, Sri Lanka," he emphasised.

He added that TPH had a 50% higher rate than any other luxury hotel in Goa. Yet, footfalls were good as guests appreciated the property and service differentiation. "It is not easy to run small hotels, which are at the highest level of customer centricity; many find it difficult to adapt to this way of life," Chopra pointed out.

From a distribution perspective, most brands often look at three ways of selling - their sales teams, travel agents and OTAs. TPH's distribution strategy goes above and beyond to reach customers directly. Chopra claimed that it is the only luxury hotel company in India with its own property management system. "Our data management is very advanced and functionally optimised as we do not work on outsourced tech systems," he elaborated.

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

Relying on his two-decade experience, Chopra constantly questions every single aspect of hospitality to have a long-term plan. According to him, people often think short term and lack a strategy growth roadmap to build on. In most companies, by the time a strategic roadmap is laid out the leadership has already changed and the organisation undergoes a big metamorphosis.

This approach saw the fortification of TPH's development pipeline. "Our fee structure is actually three times of any hotel player in the country. We do not operate on the management structure that most hotel companies operate on in India or globally," Chopra explained.

He added that TPH is amongst the most expensive operator because it can generate the highest returns for owners who want to tie up with it. Moreover, it has innovative financial models that allow it to either completely buy an asset or operate it on very different parameters from other hotel brands.

"Within three years, we have over INR 2000 crore worth of assets under management (AUM). I believe that within another three years, we would have over a billion dollars' worth of AUM and will be the first and fastest luxury hotel company globally," he stated with his trademark confidence.

When he started The Postcard Hotel (TPH) in 2018, Founder and CEO, Kapil Chopra believed that luxury hospitality's future lay in small experiential hotels with high levels of personalised service. Hence, the company's properties were best suited to fit the changed travel trends during COVID-19, when people preferred boutique upscale hotels.

"While revenues of most companies globally fell by over 70% in 2020 as compared to 2010, TPH's revenue grew by 51% despite being closed for four months. Our hotels were full from the time we re-opened till the second wave hit," Chopra stated.

While launching TPH, Chopra was clear about one thing - he would deliver what guests wanted, even if it meant disrupting the traditional service experience, anytime check in and check out or anytime breakfast. These were some things that no hotel chain had attempted to break before TPH came on the scene.

PRICING IT RIGHT

Another thing Chopra was clear about from the beginning was

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KAVINDER SINGH MD and CEO, Mahindra Holidays & Resorts India Ltd



Whether it was building new resorts, leasing properties or managing existing projects, we did not slow down, barring the couple of months of lockdown.”

When the WHO announced the pandemic in March 2020, Kavinder Singh, MD and CEO, Mahindra Holidays & Resorts India Ltd (MHRIL) decided the company needed to rely on alternative thinking to drive positive change. The team came up with the ‘5 C’s’ framework, with compassion as its central theme.

Guided by these principles, it opened up its resorts to healthcare workers and provided food and ration to affected people. It also encouraged its team to be creatively restless, by embarking on digital mode of working, which is now omniscient.

Moreover, it decided to virtually connect with its over 2.5 lakh members spread all over the world, informing them about the safety and hygiene practices rigorously followed at its resorts, keeping them posted about the latest travel advisories, and answering their numerous queries promptly.

“The fourth C focused on conserving our resources because we didn’t know how long this situation would last,” Singh recalled. This

move helped the company grow its cash position from INR 781 crore at the start of the year to INR 950 crore in June 2021. “Then we decided to parallelly build capability in terms of hospitality, multitasking, digitisation and contactless service to provide safety and build trust amongst our guests.”

CAUTIOUS APPROACH

Rethinking its business models helped the company remain financially stable and become more resilient. “We realised that investing in marketing, especially below-the-line activities, wouldn’t yield much value. We also decided to control our acquisition marketing budgets and costs,” Singh explained.

Hence, MHRIL concentrated on GoZest, its 3-year product, rather than the traditional 25-year membership. Given the ongoing unpredictability, it rightly figured that customers were likelier to opt for a low-transaction value and short-duration product.

Introspection helped the company find another indirect opportunity. Since most of its resorts were lease rentals, it translated into a significant fixed cost, which became a huge fiscal outflow when the properties were closed. Instead of reducing rentals or exiting the contracts, Singh worked out a lease waiver programme with most owners, to buttress MHRIL’s financial footing.

Moreover, unwilling to slow down its inventory additions even during the pandemic, Singh stayed in touch with owners with whom MHRIL was talking to pre-pandemic to lease their resorts. “There were some delays because we didn’t see any merit in opening some properties. However, we added about 10 resorts in nine locations, and an additional inventory of 465 rooms,” he added.

MHRIL also acquired land banks during the pandemic and is moving towards breaking ground on the new projects. “So, whether it was building new resorts, leasing properties or managing existing projects, we did not slow down, barring the couple of months of lockdown,” Singh explained.

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MANAV THADANI Founder Chairman, Hotelivate



Many independent hotels don't have the means to operate efficiently enough in the current environment. This is a tremendous opportunity, since COVID-19 has made hotel operations even more challenging."

most cases, these searches went through the entire process and candidates actually joined. Perhaps the fact that these executive search assignments were beyond hospitality helped us balance things at Hotelivate," Thadani mused.

THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Hotelivate, which had 19 clients for its revenue management practice during the first lockdown, had to close this division after almost all its clients shut operations for five months. It was on the verge of picking up a small portfolio in Indonesia, which also disappeared.

Meanwhile, asset management continued but at a slower pace than before. "The problem was that you need the hotels to be open, which wasn't the case during the first wave," Thadani explained. Hence, he learnt to operate with less. Following natural attrition in some divisions, he decided not to replace the talent or try to onboard people at lower costs.

Hotelivate decided to remain in the background in terms of external customers. It also avoided online conferences as it believes in physical events. "We attempted HOSI as a hybrid version, which was well accepted, and are now planning to organise HICSA by this month-end," Thadani revealed.

He firmly believes that if one can survive the current crises successfully, there will be tremendous opportunities to grow. He has also realised that the best time to start a new business is during crises, as its foundations are invariably stronger. While preparing plans for a new service line, he recently partnered with Zenetic to launch Hotelivate Energy Asset Management. This provides IoT-based solutions to control energy costs for hotels and large buildings.

Thadani is also exploring third party management contracts. "Many independent hotels don't have the means to operate efficiently enough in the current environment. This is a tremendous opportunity, especially since COVID-19 has made hotel operations even more challenging," Thadani said, revealing that Hotelivate will shortly invest in a company with multiple hotels under its belt.

The end of FY 2019-20 would have marked the second full year of Hotelivate in India, which was busy finalising HICSA last March. This event would have opened doors to another stupendous year of operations for the company.

"Due to the conference in early April, March is one of our strongest months every year. The lockdown, and subsequent shutdown, changed things. Instead of planning HICSA, we were refunding tickets to delegates when we had zero revenues from other businesses," Manav Thadani, Founder Chairman, Hotelivate recalled.

When business trickled down in AMJ 2020, Hotelivate's 36 associates across five offices channelised their energies entirely on cash flow management. "We picked up two very large strategic assignments in wellness for a new player and did some strategic work for a company that wanted to expand its Indian footprint," Thadani revealed.

Another piece of business that helped was Hotelivate's executive search practice, which saw a strong JFM 2020 business. "In

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MANDEEP S. LAMBA President (South Asia), HVS ANAROCK



“Since traveller preferences changed dramatically, we expect to increase our engagements in luxury villa sales and leases for the rapidly emerging homestay and vacation rental businesses.”

servicing would become a massive challenge in the sector, it worked closely with ANAROCK Capital Markets’ team to collate data on the quantum of debt and key borrowers.

“As per our research, India’s organised hospitality sector alone is dealing with a collective outstanding debt exceeding INR 500 billion,” Lamba opined. “Valuation assignments is a significant part of our services portfolio. But, we realised that the demand for debt servicing would become a key service during the pandemic.”

While most hotel companies adopted a wait-and-watch policy with respect to their expansion plans last year, they are reconsidering it now, especially in leisure destinations and tier 3 and 4 markets. Since feasibility studies are critical in helping determine a project’s viability, they are relying on HVS’ expertise in this domain.

At a time when few spoke about hospitality investments, HVS’ Consulting & Valuation vertical pivoted to secure multiple feasibility study assignments. Moreover, when no significant hotel transactions occurred across India, the team turned to selling luxury villas, after learning that the luxury residential industry was buoyant.

GEARING FOR THE FUTURE

HVS believes there will be a strong demand for valuations on account of greater risk assessment by lenders and a likely increase in transactions as several assets and asset owners face financial difficulties. They will also seek methods to exit or reduce debt.

“Since traveller preferences changed dramatically over the last year, we expect to increase our engagements in luxury villa sales and leases for the rapidly emerging homestay and vacation rental businesses,” Lamba pointed out.

He also expected asset management operating reviews to gain traction as hotel owners engage the company to maximise asset value and potential by optimising operational efficiencies to generate higher ROI and lenders look for enhanced risk assessment for the sector. HVS’ Executive Search vertical is successfully diversifying into additional real estate asset classes.

“We are charting out plans to provide strategic advisory services to the restaurant and food delivery sectors as more institutional investments are likely to increase for this domain,” Lamba stated. Additionally, HVS ANAROCK is planning to roll out Hospitality Overview Presentation & Exchange (HOPE) conference platform, which had its inaugural edition in August 2019, soon.

HVS ANAROCK was looking forward to wrap up a remarkable start last year in its 2.0 avatar when COVID-19 struck. While this did dilute its revenues, the impact wasn’t significant. It however, compelled the company to revise its growth plans for the next year, throwing a spanner in its aggressive 60% growth in revenue, and halting team expansion plans.

The pandemic was a double whammy for HVS as its business thrives on human interaction and travelling. “However, the status quo evaporated quickly and we had to think of new ways to conduct our business and interact with our stakeholders,” Mandeep S. Lamba, President (South Asia), HVS ANAROCK recalled. The organisation went virtual quickly, using tech to build and nurture relationships with clients by providing them strategic insights on how to manage the crisis and evolve with the changing environment.

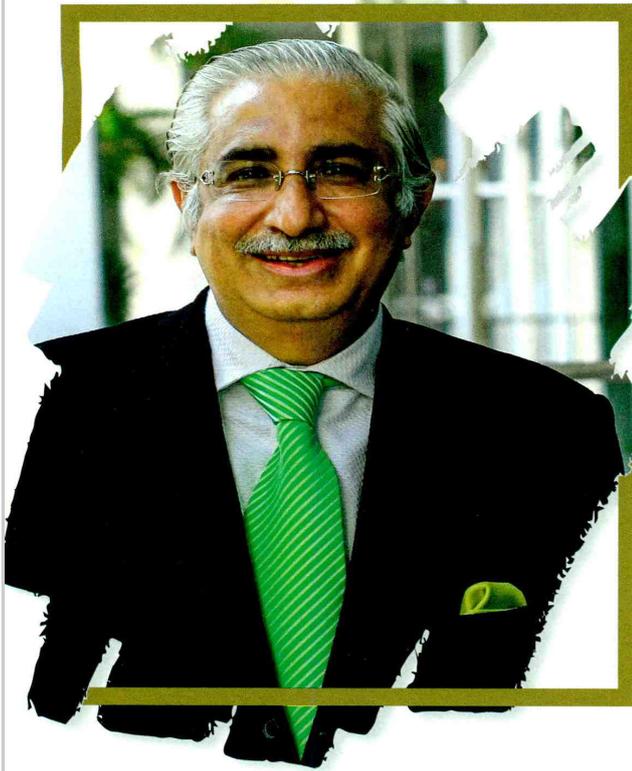
DEBT MANAGEMENT

HVS reviewed its offerings last year to explore if it could tweak or add relevant services during the pandemic. Realising that debt

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NAKUL ANAND Executive Director, ITC



When the changes are of such great magnitude, it may not be prudent to keep trying different angles. Instead, reinforce your strengths and reimagine solutions for the new order using these assets."

and also that of their family. This was followed by the DMC and Functional Heads at the Divisional level.

GROWING, GROWING, GROWN

ITC's hotel group operates under four brands - 'ITC Hotels' at the luxury end, 'WelcomHotel' in the five-star segment, 'Fortune' in the mid-market- to-upscale sector and 'WelcomHeritage' in the heritage leisure domain. Earlier this year, it launched, Storii, a collection of intimate-sized boutique upscale lifestyle properties for the new age traveller.

"ITC Hotels offers comprehensive hospitality solutions through over 100 hotels in over 70 destinations in India. Of these, 14 are part of ITC Hotels Luxury Collection, and 21 are WelcomHotel properties. These are a mix of owned and managed properties. ITC Colombo will be our first foray in the international segment," Anand elaborated. Having consolidated its position in the luxury segment, ITC Hotels is looking at expansion across all brands with an asset-right approach.

POSITIVE SIGNS

The easing of restrictions signals a positive trend as guests show increased willingness to travel and dine out again. Every hotel brand is keen to extend services that offer them a safe and holistic experience.

ITC Hotels got a jumpstart with 'WeAssure' which redefined its hotel operations along the lines of social distancing, well-being and contact light services. Incidentally, it is the world's first chain to receive the DNV Platinum Certification for the programme.

While COVID-19 poses key short-term and long-term issues, Anand noted that the industry will rebound quickly once the worst of the pandemic is over. Since this recovery might be tempered by prolonged economic performance, he suggested that hotels be prepared for multiple scenarios that might unfold. The key will be to react to the short-term issues that arise but then quickly pivot to long-term planning and identification of opportunities.

The biggest challenge that companies faced recently was uncertainty. So, how does one deal with it?

According to Nakul Anand, Executive Director, ITC, the golden rule in any critical or uncertain situation is to stick to the basics and let that be the source of all innovation. "When the changes are of such great magnitude, it may not be prudent to keep trying different angles. Instead, reinforce your strengths and reimagine solutions for the new order using these assets," he recommended.

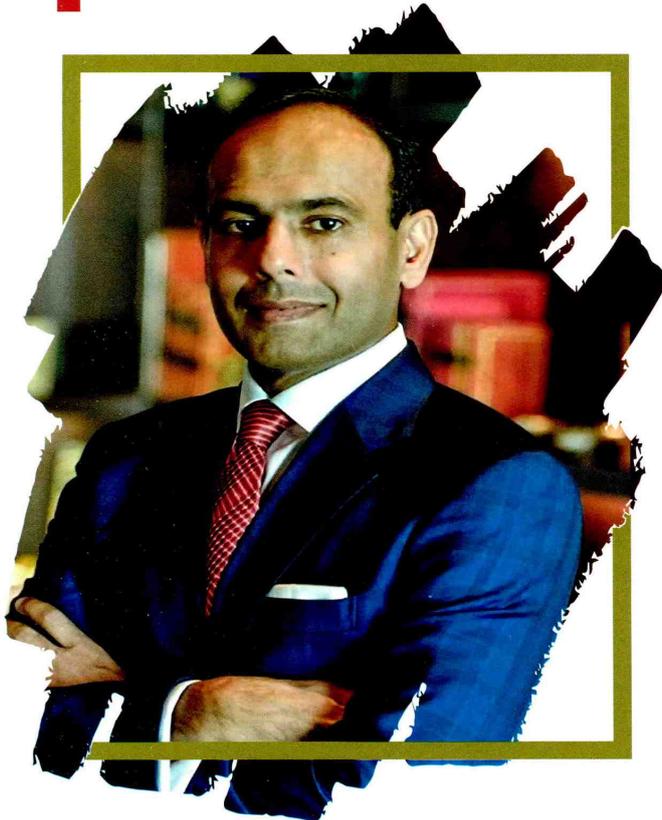
For ITC Hotels, the Gourmet Couch & Flavours and its F&B mobile app were clear winners. The challenges posed by the pandemic also reinforced the company's belief in 'Responsible Luxury'.

It also went the extra mile to ensure the wellbeing of its associates. In addition to vaccination drives and medical assistance to employees, it started the 'Conversations to Connect' initiative. Each HOD of a hotel made 5 to 10 calls daily to employees across various levels to stay updated about their well-being employees

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NAVJIT AHLUWALIA Senior VP and Country Head, Hilton India



Considering the future, we took several decisions that were in the best interests of the organisation, but some of these were extremely difficult as it involved our people."

remely difficult as it involved our people," Ahluwalia stated. His team tried to manage matters in as transparent manner a manner as possible to protect as many livelihoods as feasible.

A STEADY HAND

Hilton India took several measures to support its business partners and look after their investments in the hotel chain. Explaining how he did it, Ahluwalia said, "Empowering my team, having the courage to take a few difficult decisions in a transparent manner and having a steady hand on the overall operations during the most challenging times were key aspects of riding through that difficult period."

The company currently runs 21 hotels with an inventory of 3,500 keys in the country. While its journey has been largely passive in India till recently, things are likely to pick pace.

"With India set to become a \$10 trillion economy by 2035, as a leader in hospitality we need to be ready to capitalise on the growth that will come for our sector due to the massive growth in the Indian economy," said Ahluwalia.

The hotel major is keen to set up a flagship hotel in Mumbai or New Delhi soon, especially focusing on the 'big-box' format. In the US, Hilton has been successful in these complex projects that have large room inventory coupled with multiple convention spaces. Closer home, Hilton India has set its sights on 12 mega-projects and is scouting for partners who can help it achieve this goal.

While visiting Bengaluru recently, Navjit Ahluwalia, Senior VP and Country Head, Hilton India was told that the city would add nearly four times its existing capacity in convention space. This did not surprise him; not just since Bengaluru Airport is in expansion mode, but also because India is witnessing many infrastructure-related developments. "Better infrastructure means more visitors, be it for business or leisure," he reasoned.

This is a welcome change from the year gone by, when COVID-19 created unprecedented challenges for the industry at large, and Hilton in particular. The company learned to reengineer its business and realign priorities to capitalise on the Indian growth story over the next decade.

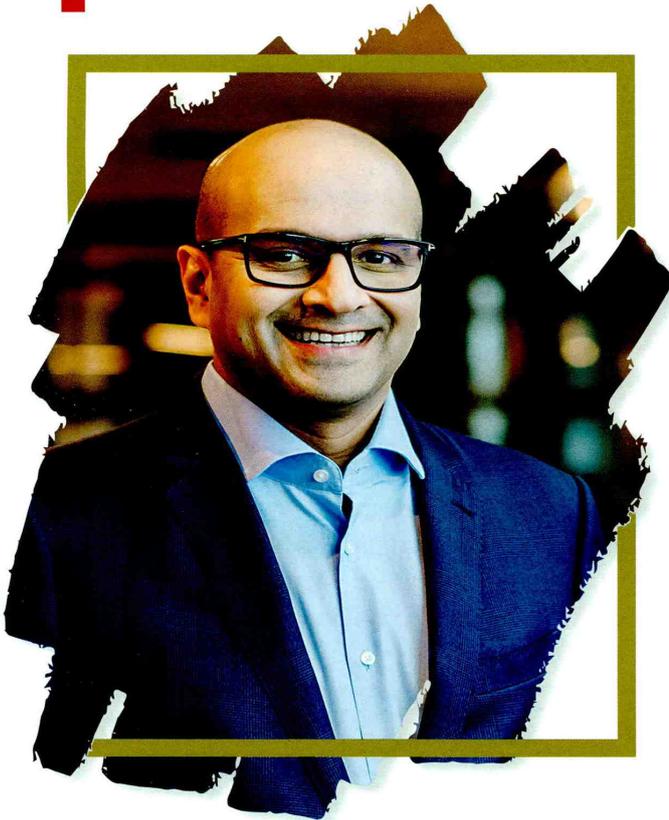
"We took a serious look at many aspects of our management and operational setup and strategy," Ahluwalia revealed. This included taking tough calls necessary for its business continuity.

"Considering the future, we took several decisions that were in the best interests of the organisation, but some of these were ex-

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NEERAJ GOVIL SVP Operations-APEC, Marriott International



Due to the flux, it is challenging to steer an organisation while focusing on revenue goals, maintaining service standards and maintain the physical and mental health of associates."

tivity on the conversion front, both in managed and franchised agreements. "It is logical to expect standalone hotel owners to consider switching to available flags of established operators to leverage the reputation of their brands, distribution channels and loyalty programme," he noted.

QUICK CHANGE

COVID-19 gave Marriott an opportunity to explore newer business avenues in a bid to maximise revenues with minimum resources. This included adopting options like staycations, food delivery platforms or limited time offers.

According to Govil, the contemporary business demands that one take decisions as a leader with a precision of a soothsayer. "Due to the flux, it is challenging to steer an organisation while focusing on revenue goals, maintaining service standards and maintain the physical and mental health of associates. Indulging in long-range planning is next to impossible," he emphasised.

While industry stakeholders found themselves in a vulnerable position with impending risks last year, they are better prepared this time around with greater confidence to combat unravelling situations. In the absence of a playbook, they had to rely on instincts, something that Govil has been doing to power this new way of functioning.

The company adopted astutely a multi-pronged approach, getting its SOPs right and leveraging the power of Marriott Bonvoy. "Our focus in the last 15 months has primarily been on the safety and security of our associates and guests, the ability to move from 'cosmetically clean to clinically clean', innovate ways to conserve costs without compromising on quality, thereby preserving the financial health of our company," Govil elaborated.

In the backdrop of multiple waves, the biggest challenge is operating in the short term with a large degree of uncertainty. Marriott reviews all variable cost heads at regular intervals to ensure there is financial prudence which it can extend to its ownership groups and support the overall business without compromising on service quality and safety of its guests and associates.

Marriott International typically opens 10 to 15 hotels in India annually, and its target in 2020 was to announce nine properties across the country. However, it recalibrated its approach as travel and business came to a standstill following the pandemic.

"It was unrealistic to not expect a slowdown in new launches," said Neeraj Govil, SVP Operations-APEC, Marriott International. "Developers were looking to conserve cashflows, there was unavailability of construction labour and delay in product deliveries due to supply chain breakdown coupled with lower demand than previously expected in most locations."

Despite this uncertainty and operational challenges, it opened the Courtyard by Marriott Nashik and its second Courtyard by Marriott in Ahmedabad. It now aims to close 2021 with six new hotels joining its existing portfolio of 126 properties in India.

Govil maintained that the pace of new signings has picked up considerably over the past few months and he expects more ac-

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NIKHIL SHARMA Regional Director, Eurasia,
Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, EMEA



Our franchise model helps independent hotel owners to convert their properties into world-renowned brands whilst leveraging Wyndham's scale, array of services and world class loyalty programme."

GOING ALL OUT

While the pandemic accelerated many trends that were already gaining ground prior to COVID-19, adoption of technology saw huge uptake in the hospitality industry. With guests seeking low-contact and seamless experiences, Wyndham decided that tech would emerge as the deal-breaker.

To attract domestic travellers in this new environment, it implemented several initiatives, including Wyndham Easy Book. This programme aimed at simplifying and promoting corporate bookings from small to mid-size businesses. It offered them simple ways to book and avail discounts on the brand's sites or through a selected travel management company.

It also designed a new hybrid meeting solution, which enables in-person meetings combined with elements of virtual engagement with attendees in other locations. Moreover, Wyndham launched its mobile app, combining intuitive design with personal experiences and gamification to provide a reimagined user experience.

Elaborating further, Sharma stated, "As part of our broader digital transformation strategy, we announced plans for a global rollout of the Oracle Hospitality OPERA Cloud Property Management, a mobile-enabled platform that allows for quicker innovation while helping hotels to enhance guest personalisation, avail lower costs and improve operational efficiencies."

He noted that the hospitality industry is a people-centric sector, and putting people first is paramount to what Wyndham does. "The biggest lesson learnt during this period has been solidarity. At some point, we were all together, sans competition or brand standing," he pointed out.

If there is one brand that appeared to be unscathed by COVID-19, it must be Wyndham. It registered 38 new hotel signings across EMEA and several openings in India and Nepal, including the Wyndham Ahmedabad.

With a portfolio of over 4,000 rooms in India, the team executed 18 new franchise agreements. 11 of these are under construction and expected to open over the next two years.

Talking about this, Nikhil Sharma, Regional Director, Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, EMEA said, "Our franchise model helps independent hotel owners to convert their properties into world-renowned brands whilst leveraging Wyndham's scale, array of services and world class loyalty programme."

He added that instead of just signing up hotels and growing, the company ensures a value proposition. In the next two to three years, this will be critical as the world will emerge a different place than it did over a year ago.

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PATANJALI (PATU) KESWANI CMD, Lemon Tree Hotels



Currently, we are seeing a very healthy build-up in demand and consumption that is strengthening on a month-over-month basis from June onwards."

strengthening on a month-over-month basis from June onwards," he said during an earnings presentation.

In fact, the company is working out details to open 23 properties in the next two years. This includes a 669-key hotel at the Mumbai International Airport, which will significantly boost its existing inventory of 8300 keys.

LIGHT AHEAD

One strategy that Lemon Tree Hotels has identified for its growth is the asset-light model. While it currently owns close to 70% of its properties, it plans to opt for management contracts for the newer hotels. This will free up the capital and reduce the strain on its operating costs, while allowing the company to achieve its goals.

While the hotel brand traditionally focused on mid-segment price-conscious customers, it launched Aurika Udaipur as an upscale brand 2019. The proposed property at Mumbai Airport will be the second one under this brand.

However, seeing the recent, and growing, impetus of leisure travel, it is eyeing this segment, with an inclination to acquire or manage more resorts. This will also meet the gap that currently exists in its portfolio, which is largely skewed towards the midscale Lemon Tree Hotels and upper midscale Lemon Tree Premiere.

Currently, Lemon Tree Hotels is developing three properties at a total estimated cost of INR 991 crore. Its proposed pipeline also includes 20 hotels under management contracts in tier-two cities like Bhubaneswar, Durgapur, Rishikesh and Agra.

The first wave of COVID-19 slammed the brakes on the hospitality industry's progress. The second wave tripped up things further by delaying the recovery steps that some brands had tentatively begun.

Lemon Tree Hotels was one of them. Its revenues were hit following the series of lockdowns and restrictions last year, which inhibited any possibility of growth in the domain.

As the COVID-19 cases rose, occupancy levels across its 84 hotels in 52 destinations went down from 75% in January 2020 to 20% by end of March 2020, when WHO announced COVID-19 a pandemic and the nation shuttered down. Overall, the hotel chain's consolidated revenues increased 3.7% year-on-year to INR Rs 42 crore, as per its Q1 FY22 results. RevPAR went down around 8% year-on-year and 53% sequentially to INR 700.

However, these figures have not dented the optimism of Patanjali (Patu) Keswani, CMD of Lemon Tree Hotels. "Currently, we are seeing a very healthy build-up in demand and consumption that is

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PRIYA PAUL Chairperson, Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels



Suddenly from a frenetic phase, we were down to zero occupancy during the lockdown. Things were changing really fast so we had to change the way we did business too."

'Flurys' a popular QSR brand with its origins in Kolkata.

DESIGN FIRST

What sets The Park properties apart is its design-led philosophy, pioneered by Paul much before boutique hotels became a buzzword. Eschewing a cookie-cutter model, she planned each establishment to be distinctive, reflecting the character of the local city to give a touch of individuality.

Paul also realised that location would be the clinching factor in success, and ensured majority of the hotels were situated close to financial districts to attract leisure and business travellers. This strategy worked, and its properties are popular with the corporate community, contributed 60% to occupancy rates pre-COVID.

ANTE UP

Talking about last year at an industry session, Paul announced her pride on the way her team mobilised and got down to business early on. "Suddenly from a frenetic phase, we were down to zero occupancy during the lockdown. The task force looked into everything from safety issues to revenue related matters. Things were changing really fast, so we had to change the way we did business too," she remarked.

The shutdown last year stalled occupancy rates in the first six months, causing significant losses to the company, though it picked up to 77% in November. With the ebbing of the second wave and the uptick in domestic air travel, ASPH is hoping that corporate bookings will revive.

Last March, ASPH got regulatory go-ahead from SEBI for its estimated INR 1,000 crore IPO. The net proceeds were to be used towards repayment and prepayment of its debts, which amounted to around INR 450 crore in 2020, and also for general corporate purposes. While the pandemic stalled this move, the company is likely to proceed with it soon.

Priya Paul learned hospitality from the ground-up, when she joined the family business in 1988 after completing her studies at Wellesley College. As a 21-year old she worked as a marketing manager at The Park New Delhi under the tutelage of her father, Surrendra Paul.

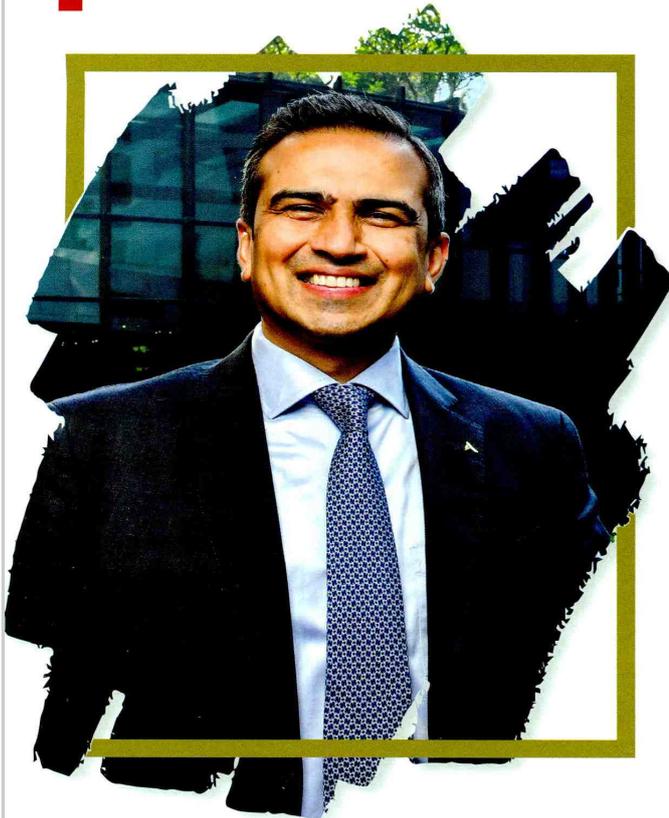
After his demise in 1990, a spirited young Paul took charge as chairperson of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels (ASPH), which operates The Park Hotels. This is when her hands-on training at the hotel company came in handy, as she could relate to most of the challenges and issues faced by the operations team and also find ways to overcome those.

Back then, the company had three properties in the country; today it has 20 operational hotels with two upcoming in Indore and Pune. Over the years, Paul steadily expanded the group's portfolio to include the flagship 'The Park Hotels', 'The Park Collection', 'Zone by THE Park', 'Zone Connect' – each catering to a different customer profile. It also owns and operates the eponymous

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MAV/CCM:	6,343,750/5624.58	Circulation:	62,000



PUNEET DHAWAN Senior VP Operations, Accor India & South Asia



Working with our partners, clients and with high level engagement, we prepared a strategy that would help us navigate in the new environment."

One of the biggest changes that Accor embraced was the adoption of technology at every level. Taking a renewed approach towards its existing partnerships and campaigns, it curated memorable guest experiences under the 'ALL - Accor Live Limitless' programme.

"We rolled out 'Vivaah at Novotel' which was conceptualised for contemporary virtual weddings and offered an array of customised and flexible packages," Dhawan noted. "We also collaborated with Microsoft to launch ALL CONNECT, a new hybrid meetings concept supported by Microsoft Teams."

But most importantly, the company managed to overcome challenges by regularly engaging with its team. Dhawan explained that team members were encouraged to display an entrepreneurial spirit, take risks and adapt to the changing local conditions. "We pivoted from the usual long-term plans to take a flexible approach while concentrating on business recovery," he added.

His biggest personal achievement was being able to bring the teams together in a collaborative way that allowed the company to move with agility and swiftness. Despite the unpredictable nature of the crisis, he strove to take care of the brand's assets and people in the region.

"We displayed a good performance by understanding and reading the sentiment of the market. Successful implementation of the ALL Heartist fund initiative across all our hotels was one of the biggest achievements in this period," Dhawan summed up.

When 2019 ended on a buoyant note, Puneet Dhawan, Senior VP Operations, Accor India & South Asia expected 2020 to be another blockbuster year. The pandemic deeply disrupted everything in multiple ways.

However, he viewed this crisis as a catalyst for change. He regrouped quickly and efficiently to put together a strategic plan on combating the situation. "Working with our partners, clients and with high level engagement, we prepared a strategy that would help us navigate in the new environment," he recalled.

QUICK OFF THE MARK

Having taken charge of his responsibilities at Accor band in the middle of the pandemic, Dhawan believed it was critical to build a robust and resilient system of communication with guests, owners, partners, and teams. "My first priority was to travel to most of our hotels in India, as it was important for me to understand first-hand their plight to show support and solidarity," he stated.

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RAHUL CHAUDHARY MD, CG Corp Global



In recent months, we operated our hotels, some with 100% occupancy, with 50% staff. This proves we can manage with the current staffing level and it also helps the overall cost structure, while boosting GOP margins."

mentation, cross streaming, source market, etc, he completely re-hauled the cost structure. This much-needed self-cleansing process was a long time coming in the hospitality industry.

"In recent months, we operated our hotels, some with 100% occupancy, with 50% staff. This proves we can manage with the current staffing level and it also helps the overall cost structure, while boosting GOP margins," he pointed out.

FLOURISHING IN ADVERSITY

This cost optimisation aside, CG Corp went all out with its expansion plans. It opened 15 hotels last year, despite the pandemic, and plans to launch another 16 properties this year.

Chaudhary explained that the company could manage this since its business model focuses on the mid-market segment, which is perfectly suited for leisure travel, which has seen a surge. "It is easier to restart these properties than a luxury hotel, because the cost involved is much lower. Moreover, developers and owners have become more value conscious and are willing to partner with mid-scale brands that ensure higher occupancies than upscale ones," he elaborated, adding that almost 75% of the company's properties were open throughout the pandemic.

The other quick move CG Corp Hospitality undertook was focusing on the domestic market, after international travel came to a standstill. Moreover, many properties, which earlier thrived on room rates started seeing more traction from F&B revenue.

Chaudhary's strategy for the next few years will be to survive, revive and thrive. The in-depth analysis of every penny spent, and saved, will help in achieving this long-term goal.

While chatting with his batchmates last April, Rahul Chaudhary, MD, CG Corp Global learnt that the consensus amongst these well-placed professionals was that COVID-19 was in for the long haul. It was time to prepare for business continuity in difficult conditions, for at least a couple of years.

The very next day, Chaudhary decided to deep-dive into the cost structure of all its 140 properties across 12 countries. "Due to our large portfolio, I usually reviewed a hotel's top line, major expenses, GOP, EBITDA and overall returns. After our revenues went to zero overnight, I started combing through every line item of our fixed and variable costs diligently," he revealed.

COST JUSTIFICATION

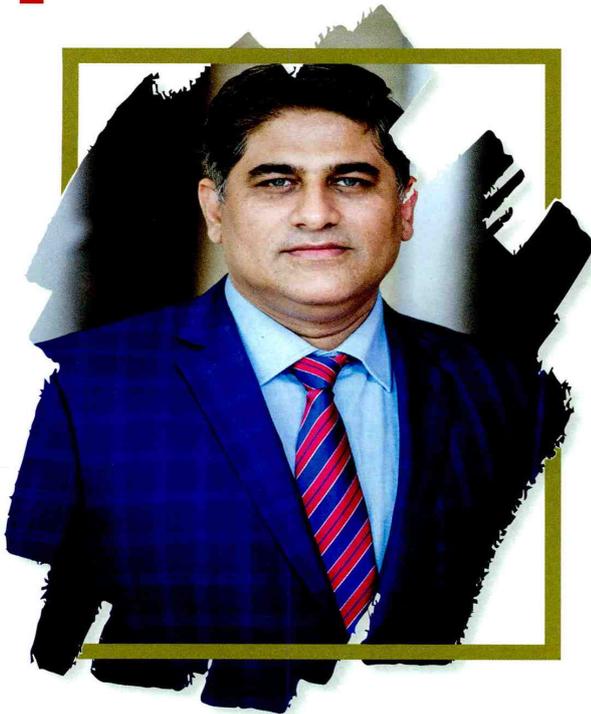
Following this introspection, the company started conducting zero based budgeting for every hotel. "We began looking at the yield per person, per square foot and per property," Chaudhary added.

After a closer look at fiscal outflow, revenue contribution, seg-

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RANJIT BATRA President-Hospitality, Panchshil Realty



The recovery phase will very much depend on the agility of hotel teams to create maximum value for guests coupled with their ability to manage resources innovatively.”

“As owners, our primary focus was to keep our hotels afloat and take care of our associates. We financially and morally supported our staff to fight this crisis. Panchshil Foundation successfully vaccinated all employees and their families across all levels, which boosted team confidence,” Batra added.

In an environment of dramatically lowered revenues, high fixed costs, lesser than optimal asset returns, and the need to conserve capital, Panchshil Realty began identifying areas to prioritise and invest in. Believing that flexibility is critical, Batra explained that the company swiftly and seamlessly adapted to societal changes by upgrading its cleaning practices and digitising payment processes and documents to ensure the safety and comfort of its guests.

With long-distance travel, conventions, trade shows, and other corporate events unlikely to return to any appreciable extent for at least another year, it focused on local and domestic travel markets. The hotel owner also trained its sights on city dwellers within a day’s drive seeking a close-to-home respite from the lockdown.

“The recovery phase will very much depend on the agility of hotel teams to create maximum value for guests coupled with their ability to manage resources innovatively,” he opined.

Pune-based Panchshil has always been synonymous with uber-luxury hotels, working closely with brands like Marriott International, Hilton Hotels and Resorts and Oakwood. When it started out in 2004, the company was clear about its goal for this sector – it would focus on metros with a strong corporate presence, where demand was bound to be high. This strategy has worked out well for the real estate major, which has over six up-scale properties in India.

From day one, each of its hotels was profitable, till the pandemic struck. The lockdown brought business to a standstill, contracting the economy. Occupancies nosedived as corporate travel trickled down.

Talking about this candidly, Ranjit Batra, President-Hospitality, Panchshil Realty said, “Of course, our hotels were affected just like the rest of the industry. However, we managed to financially steer the ship through rough waters towards safer shores, both for our assets and employees.”

SURVIVE, THEN REVIVE

The industry is currently in a survival mode with many players outlining strategies to revive. While sustaining itself, Panchshil Realty did its best to ensure job security for its workforce and safeguard its hospitality assets, which will give it a better shot at business recovery.

RECOVERY ON THE CARDS

Batra is confident that the economy will recover and the hospitality sector—from restaurants to hotels—will regain its footing. Companies that were nimble in adapting to the new normal will be better positioned to thrive in the years ahead.

According to Batra, a situation of unprecedented instability is generally a good occasion to execute exceptional measures as well as seek newer opportunities in the hotel and tourism industry. “Understanding how customer behaviour has evolved and responding effectively to these changes will be critical in enabling businesses to recover in the post-pandemic economy,” he pointed out. “Our hotels reimagined the guest experience and took deliberate action to build and maintain their trust.”

Since its inception, Panchshil Realty has aimed to open one property every year and its last project was Ritz Carlton Pune in October 2019. Its pipeline for 2022 includes The Amari Project in Maldives in collaboration with Onyx Hospitality. Going forward, it will concentrate on acquiring brownfield assets.

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RITESH AGARWAL Founder & Group CEO, OYO Hotels & Homes



Following deeper engagements with our patrons and acknowledging their feedback, we simplified deals with the best industry practices split commission structure."

LEARNING CONSTANTLY

Early on during the pandemic, OYO's leadership team came together to reflect and share feedback candidly. This exercise shifted their focus to solving problems with product and technology, instead of just letting it enable them.

"Our hotel partners were facing as big a crisis as us. We used every lever to boost occupancy and give them cash flows," Agarwal stated.

During the first wave, OYO partnered with over 24 state ministries, over 50 hospitals, 20 embassies and local authorities and provided 100K room nights as part of the OYO Care initiative. Approximately 73,000 repatriated Indians completed their institutional quarantine at its hotels across India.

During the second wave, OYO introduced VaccinAid, a self-declared vaccine visibility on its app to help owners and also tied up with multiple corporations to build quarantine centres in its hotels.

STACKED FOR GROWTH

Agarwal equates growth with being tech and product-first. "Our complete focus for the future is on strengthening our tech stack to increase revenues while making operations hassle-free for our patrons. For our customers, we want to ensure a seamless user experience," he added.

The Co-OYO and OYO OS apps enable its patrons to manage their bookings and inventory, process payments/ invoicing, adjust room tariff real-time, manage staff at the property, opt into revenue boost programmes, leverage analytics/reporting and access financial statements. Agarwal stated that more than 90% of its patron base uses these products daily to create more efficiency on the operations/yield management side.

"We have now entered a new phase of growth with a supply acquisition technology-driven strategy, which enables small hotels and homeowners to join the OYO family entirely digitally and seamlessly with our self-onboarding tool," he summed up.

If anyone appreciates the exigency of keeping pace with technological changes, it is Ritesh Agarwal, Founder and Group CEO, OYO Hotels & Homes. While the company has always been a tech-focused organisation, in the past two years it transitioned into a tech-first one.

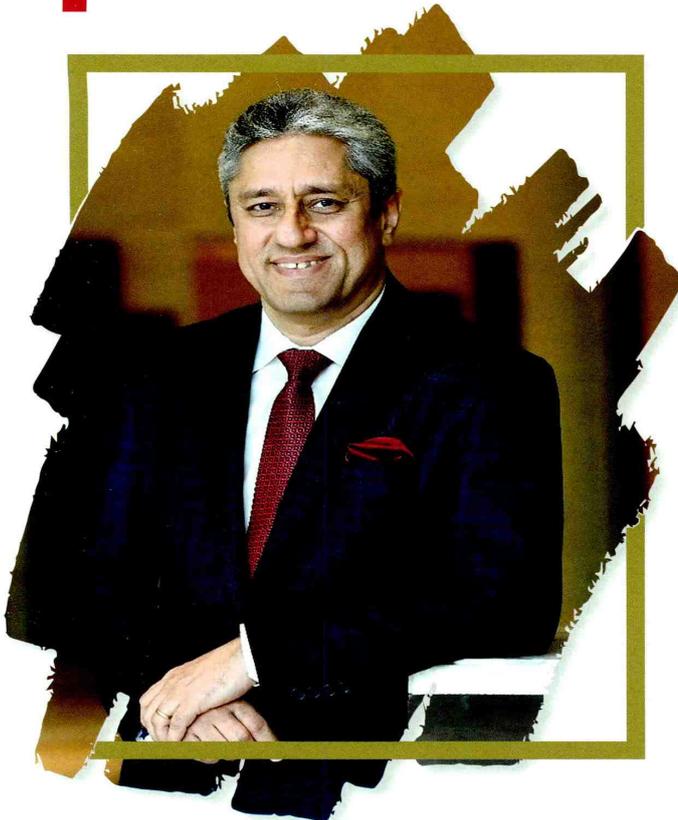
OYO strengthened its focus on technology which included a 60% increase in tech-related investment (people) between 2019 and 2021. Today, it works with over 170K hotels and homeowners globally, while utilising its technology and revenue growth capabilities to ease operations and build successful businesses for them.

"2019 and 2020 was about learning, improvement and resilience. It was about understanding problems-solving for stakeholders and building a future-centric business," said Agarwal. "We utilised the COVID downtime to improve existing, and introduce new, technologies and products for them."

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SANJAY SETHI MD and CEO, Chalet Hotels



The pandemic made us look beyond the traditional aspects defining business revenues and costs. All aspects of costs became opportunities to revisit and revise, which brought the fixed expenses down by 50% for FY21 without impacting guest experiences."

repatriating passengers from 'Vande Bharat' flights, film and web series shoots, sports teams, staycations, etc. F&B offerings were redefined by providing safe, luxury home dining experiences.

THE BALANCING ACT

While adapting to new business practices, there is tremendous pressure to be productive and deliver superior results. Demonstrating empathy by encouraging employee wellbeing and celebrating their success with guided leadership has always been Chalet Hotels' mantra to prevail.

"We focused on cross-training our people across functions, making them tech-savvy, and ensuring they are fully knowledgeable about the latest safety protocols. This helps them carry out operations swiftly and efficiently, while keeping health practices at the core of their activities," Sethi noted.

The use of technology in streamlining of logistics has gained significance in the company, whether through mobile apps or IoT, to ensure reduced physical interaction and enhance experience. With easy access to technology and ever-changing customer tastes and preferences, Chalet Hotels stayed nimble, adopting and offering services according to evolving customer requirements.

Apart from heightened attention to health and hygiene, Sethi believes that adoption of technology and customised solutions will drive future growth. Enhanced consumer awareness has led to diverse offerings within the industry such as boutique hotels, vacation rental, extended stay products, etc., which is an opportunity waiting to be harnessed.

Additionally, Chalet Hotels, with a key focus on return on investments, has been reviewing under-performing assets and looking at re-purposing some of them. For instance, it is transforming The Orb, a retail space in Mumbai into a commercial one with select F&B offerings.

The past year has been one of tremendous learning for Sanjay Sethi, MD and CEO, Chalet Hotels. At the beginning of the pandemic, the company adopted a two-pronged approach. Phase One had a strong focus on trimming expenses and conserving cash while protecting revenue and market share, while Phase Two concentrated on boosting revenues and stabilising costs.

"The pandemic made us look beyond the traditional aspects defining business revenues and costs," Sethi recalled. "All aspects of costs became opportunities to revisit and revise, which brought the fixed expenses down by 50% for FY21 without impacting guest experiences." He added that the company's hotels are now moving towards a more efficient future, led by higher degree of employee productivity, long-term focus on cost management and realignment of services offered.

To create more opportunities last year, it began looking at businesses from unusual avenues, ranging from quarantining guests, companies seeking business continuity plans (BCP), sea farers,

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SARTAJ SINGH President-Hospitality Business, Embassy Property Developments



We resolved to stick to our knitting and focus on the company's métier – building hotels that add value to the core business parks portfolio.”

prospecting of a national footprint including standalone projects and acquisitions.

SELF-REFLECTION

Post-pandemic, some thoughtful introspection by Virwani and Singh led the company to take a decisive assessment. “We resolved to stick to our knitting and focus on the company's métier – building hotels that add value to the core business parks portfolio,” Singh explained.

Also, since all operating and pipeline hospitality assets were transferred to the Embassy REIT, his role in the company was re-defined. He currently focuses on the development of future hotel portfolio for the parent company, builds and maintains brand relationships and strategises on relevant business models. He is also the wholtime director of Mac Charles India Limited, a listed company acquired in 2016 with the landmark Le Meridien asset in Bangalore's CBD.

Singh is also involved in devising robust revenue structures and product resource planning with the Embassy Group's growing verticals of clubs and leisure co-living brand, 'Olive', which was launched last year. The pandemic put the brakes on plans to introduce the shared accommodation outposts in Bengaluru and Chennai. The prevalence of the WFH culture saw fewer on-ground visitors to business parks, who are the target clientele for this brand.

“We are testing the waters with some brownfield projects in Bengaluru. Our long-term plan for 'Olive' doesn't change, though we might have a 500-key Olive Plus or a 100-key Olive Premium,” Singh explained, outlining how the company is adopting a flexible approach to keep pace with dynamic trends.

Change can be very challenging, but embracing it quickly can help organisations move in the direction of success. By constantly identifying new areas to operate in, Embassy Group has become smarter in anticipating changes and making space for evolved opportunities.

Sartaj Singh President-Hospitality Business of Embassy Property Developments calls himself an accidental hotelier! He joined the hospitality industry in 2015 at the invitation of Embassy Group's Chairman, Jitu Virwani after a corporate career spanning 35 years at blue-chip chemicals and agricultural MNCs including ICI, Cargill, Monsanto and FMC in India.

“We entered the hospitality sector in 2014 since it added value to our corporate parks by providing accommodation within the premises. This got our company better rentals,” Singh explained.

At Embassy, Sartaj was mandated to aggressively grow the fledgling hospitality vertical and lead the development of Embassy One project, which included the Four Seasons Hotel & Private Residences in Bengaluru. Under his leadership, the company's hospitality business grew 10X within five years with over 1650 keys and a pipeline that included South India's largest dual branded 620 key Hilton and Hilton Garden Inn at Embassy Manyata Business Park. During this phase, the group also initiated serious

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SATYEN JAIN CEO, Pride Group Of Hotels



Despite the ongoing situation, our target of reaching 50 locations by 2022 seems quite possible. This is largely because of the support of our fabulous team."

idea generators ensured a continuous flow of thoughts, in addition to effective implementation and regular guidance from the leadership team," Jain stated.

Structural interventions were put in place to enable these new revenue streams along with aggressive cost management at strategic and tactical levels. Focusing on the restless domestic travellers who wanted to explore newer destinations, the group launched offerings like 'India Dekho with Pride', promoting safe travel.

HIGHER, STRONGER

With each passing day, the company worked towards making its business more sustainable and digitally advanced. It rolled out energy efficient and green technologies, while also focusing on contact-free solutions. "Everyone in the industry wanted to adopt contactless in a big way. After the current scenario made it mandatory, this was implemented speedily and unquestioningly," Jain pointed out.

While Pride Group of Hotels' growth plan did slow down in 2020, this was a temporary pause. Its expansion remains targeted towards tier 2 and 3 cities, which have tremendous potential. "After recently signing up properties in Daman, Dapoli and Mussoorie, we are looking forward to add 10 more units as a part of our development plans," Jain stated.

The company will also announce the opening of its Udaipur property soon. On the business front, it is planning to scale up its operations to focus more on 'Pride Hotels' and 'Biznotel' brands, which are moderately priced, upscale, full service, business and leisure hotels.

While the pandemic disrupted the hospitality business, it gave the Pride Group of Hotels an opportunity to re-imagine its business models and emerge stronger. "Despite the ongoing situation, our target of reaching 50 locations by 2022 seems quite possible. This is largely because of the support of our fabulous team," said the company's CEO, Satyen Jain.

TRANSPARENCY ABOVE ALL

The most important initiative that Pride Group of Hotels undertook last year was to start off open communication with all stakeholders across the levels. The leadership team reached to every associate, reiterating the organisation's commitment to their wellbeing and also that of their families. It also encouraged them to share ideas on ways to grow business during those challenging months.

"We received some innovative ideas from our frontline team members who suggested few alternate revenue streams. The follow-up mechanism and awards and recognition of these bright

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SOUVAGYA MOHAPATRA MD-India, Nepal, Bhutan & Sri Lanka, Atmosphere Hotels & Resorts



Hotel companies are keener on the asset-light model now, but management contracts remain the most preferred arrangement for operational control."

charge of Atmosphere Hotels and Resorts' operations in India, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka as Managing Director this April. And he has already started leveraging his industry expertise to give the boutique resort brand a push up in the region.

As part of the executive council of industry associations like Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Association of India, Confederation of Indian Industry and Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry, he knows most key stakeholders, including hotel owners who would be happy to be a part of Atmosphere's growth story.

"Management contract is our strongest business model and most of our upcoming properties will follow this template," Mohapatra explained. "Hotel companies are keener on the asset-light model now, but management contracts remain the most preferred arrangement for operational control."

While this practice remains the company's preference, it is open to accommodating the concerns of hotel owners for a beneficial association. However, it shall focus on having its own properties at certain locations, provided it gets good support from state governments.

"We already have two active projects in Sri Lanka and our immediate priority is to complete them. Our development team is already identifying properties in potential destinations like Goa, Kerala, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kolkata, Guwahati, Bangalore, Ahmedabad etc. where we hope to debut our Ozen brand," Mohapatra added.

His mantra for scaling up Atmosphere's prospects is to evaluate the right investment opportunity in every region. "I will identify what the destination can offer to a prospective tourist, assess how it stands out from other places and gauge its connectivity with major cities. Lastly, I will check if a favourable business ecosystem is backed by a supportive policy framework," Mohapatra explained. If all these boxes are checked, he believed the place is ripe for investment.

A quarter of a century is a long time in any professional's career; especially when all these years are devoted to a single organisation. Soon after completing his hotel management course from Bhubaneswar's Institute of Hotel Management Catering Technology and Applied Nutrition, and MBA in Marketing from North Odisha University, Souvagya Mohapatra kickstarted his vocation in the hospitality domain at The Oberoi Group, before moving to Mayfair Hotels & Resorts in 1994.

Starting off as Manager-Operations of Mayfair Puri and Mayfair Rourkela, he gradually rose up the ranks to the office of Executive Director in 2012, a position he held till 2020. During this two-decade long period, he witnessed Mayfair Group's growth from just two hotels to 12 properties.

A FRESH START

After moving on from Mayfair in December 2020, Mohapatra took

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SUDEEP JAIN MD, South-West Asia, IHG Hotels & Resorts



Owners welcomed our market-tailored fee relief packages to defer payments. It provided the flexibility they needed to use cash in other ways that protected their business."

Before the pandemic, IHG Hotels & Resorts was registering solid performance across its portfolio and was on an accelerated growth path powered by its family of mainstream brand, constituting Holiday and Holiday Inn Express. At the peak of the crisis, however, many of its 6000 hotels globally, including India, ran at the lowest occupancy levels ever, and others had to temporarily close their doors.

Understandably, the company's performance and expansion plans in India also took a temporary hit. With the easing of restrictions, domestic tourism, business is gaining traction and its hotels are witnessing a significant increase in bookings and occupancy.

"Our growth momentum has also picked up as we sign and open more hotels in South West Asia (SWA)," announced Sudeep Jain, MD-SWA, IHG Hotels & Resorts.

PRUDENT DECISIONS

IHG wanted all its colleagues to feel comfortable going to work

knowing they have a safe environment to help guests have a wonderful stay. Its Global Cleanliness Board worked with partners including Cleveland Clinic, Ecolab and Diversey to implement new protocols and service measures in the properties.

Jain said that the hotel chain also made it a priority to provide the right support and protection for owners, alongside plans and programmes needed for a recovery. "At the peak of the crisis, owners welcomed our market-tailored fee relief packages to defer payments. It provided the flexibility they needed to use cash in other ways that protected their business during this difficult time," he stated.

Globally, the hotel chain paused renovations and relaxed its brand standards to help lower hotel operating costs for owners. Jain added that it also significantly reduced discretionary costs, marketing spends and capital expenditure, as it prioritised only what is needed to drive a recovery.

"Our continued commitment and effort towards taking care of our stakeholders, managing stable revenues, rationalising operating costs, and flexibility helped us steer through this challenging time and prepared us well for recovery," he noted.

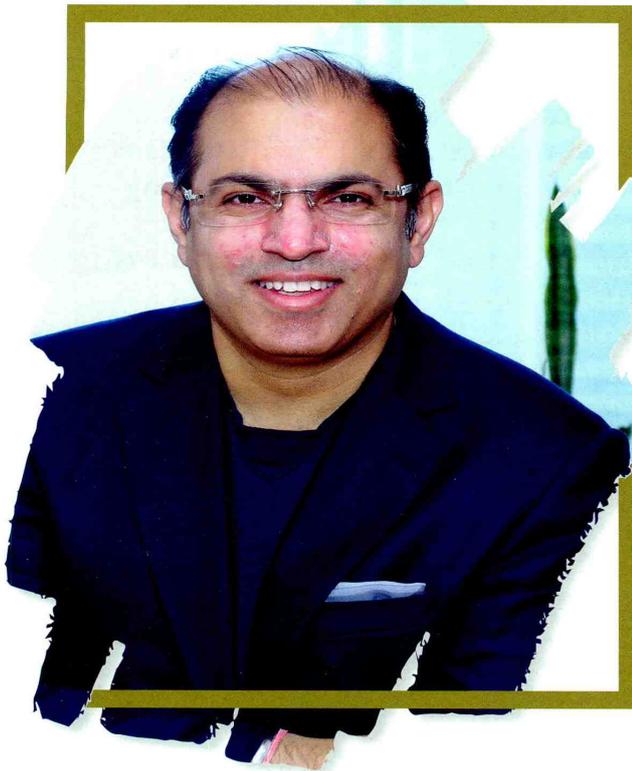
Sensing an opportunity in these challenges, IHG decided to be more agile, decisive and customer and owner-centric. While it was always focussed on capitalising on domestic tourism, during the pandemic, this segment became even more important for the hospitality sector, with international movement being restricted.

"In a rapidly shifting environment, we discovered how to maintain a flexible business approach, to be able to respond to real time market dynamics effectively," Jain summarised. "Our teams worked hard to understanding the changing customer needs and provide them with relevant solutions."

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SUNJAE SHARMA VP and Country Head – India, Hyatt



In July 2021, rooms occupancy stood at 45% in India. Our RevPar recovery stands at 207% of July 2020 and 53% of July 2019.”

LET'S GET CONVERTED

Apart from actively seeking new development possibilities, Hyatt India is focused on conversion opportunities, which are becoming more prominent in the present economy. Sharma is confident that effective brand recognition and owner relationships will assist the company in achieving its goal.

“I see challenges as opportunities and not failures. It is a mindset that I encourage amongst my colleagues as well,” he said. “One can either choose to dwell on failures—or learn from them to keep evolving.”

In a continued effort to revitalise and advance care to communities and small businesses recovering from the pandemic, Hyatt's work culture now includes involving hyper-local heights by inviting local makers and businesses to create and sell their products on property. Its 'Change Starts Here' commitment honours all aspects of diversity within the company, works to foster an inclusive culture, and advances its vision of a world where people understand and care for one another.

The last few months had seen an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases in India and Nepal. The hotel chain initiated an internal fundraising campaign to help colleagues most impacted by the pandemic at Hyatt-branded hotels.

The organisation made an upfront contribution of \$250,000 to the pool and has also pledged to match another \$250,000 contribution, which will be used for medical expense assistance, compensation for families of deceased colleagues, children's education assistance, and also the funding of oxygen concentrators.

When the heart is in the right place, the rest of the things fall in place, too. With its pro-people activities, Hyatt has not only won over its associates' loyalty, but also its guests' respect.

An optimist, Sunjae Sharma, VP and Country Head – India, Hyatt always prefers to see the glass as one that is half full. Rather than mull about the tumultuous year gone by, he is happy to note that the industry, and Hyatt India, is on the road to recovery.

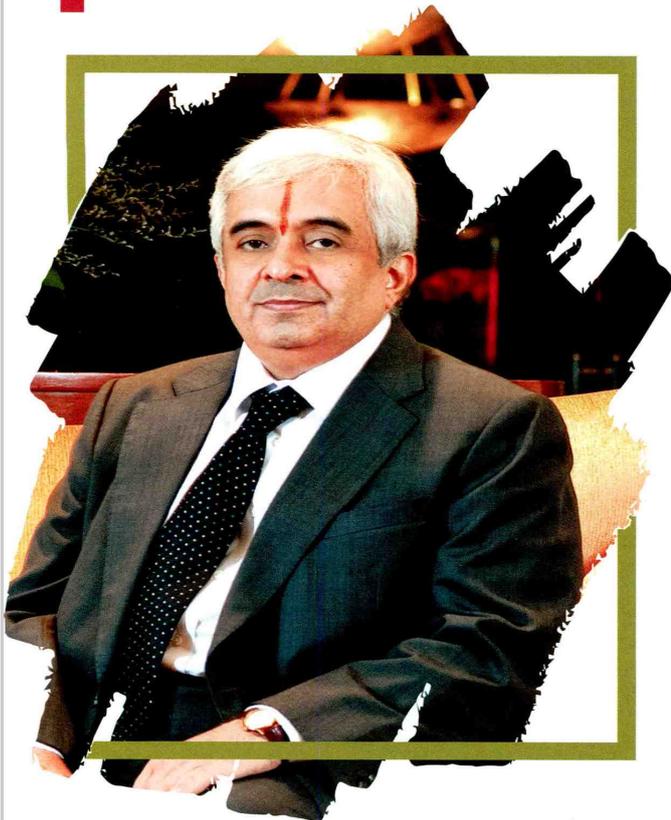
“In July 2021, rooms occupancy stood at 45% in India. Our RevPar recovery stands at 207% of July 2020 and 53% of July 2019,” he stated.

The company also has a strong pipeline of hotels scheduled to open over the next three years, leading it to have over 50 Hyatt-branded properties in India by 2023-end. This ambitious expansion in India is backed by an increasing demand for distinctive hotel experiences from guests, World of Hyatt members, customers, and owners. Sharma revealed that this year, the company will expand the presence of its Hyatt Regency and Hyatt Place brands in India, with a focus on establishing their presence in new markets.

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MAV/CCM:	6,343,750/5624.58	Circulation:	62,000



VIJAY THACKER MD, Horwath HTL



Conversions related advisory is an area of professional services that continued to remain healthy. Stress management advisory, including matters arising between owners and operators, required us to bring into effect all the years of our experience.”

OPPORTUNITIES BECKON

In the pre-COVID years, when India's hospitality landscape was seeing respectable growth, most consultants were busy offering services that included due diligence investigations, fiscal and tax structuring, drawing up joint venture agreements, reviewing partnership documentation, as well as negotiating transactions. Since March 2020, these opportunities significantly dried up.

However, Thacker opined that transaction related valuations, due diligence work and ancillary valuation projects gained traction. Moreover, clients were keen to restructure their financial plans after their properties were closed during the lockdown, and costs kept mounting. Horwath HTL was well placed to extend its expertise in this area.

“Conversions related advisory was another area of professional services that continued to remain healthy,” Thacker noted. “Stress management advisory, including matters arising between owners and operators, required us to bring into effect all the years of our experience.”

He also considered it necessary to provide inputs related to knowledge, balance and outlook to ongoing debates on industry actions and foreseeable actions in the future. Moreover, he made his opinions heard, and count, for support features that needed to be sought in the industry and practical responses when this support was not forthcoming.

As part of Horwath's larger advisory services, digital security, data privacy, third party risk, and remote based internal audit services provided potential for growth and continued client services. The company gained from material investments made in these areas. It also reaped the benefits of the technology investments it had made in 2019, centered on paperless audit, remote access and data management.

After going a thorough systems check to ensure Horwath HTL is primed for the road ahead, Thacker getting down to brass tacks once more, by seeking further opportunities amidst the uncertainties that continue to haunt the industry.

Vijay Thacker, MD, Horwath HTL, has been involved in hospitality and tourism consulting for over 35 years. However, the pandemic was amongst the worst industry disruptors he has seen in close to four decades.

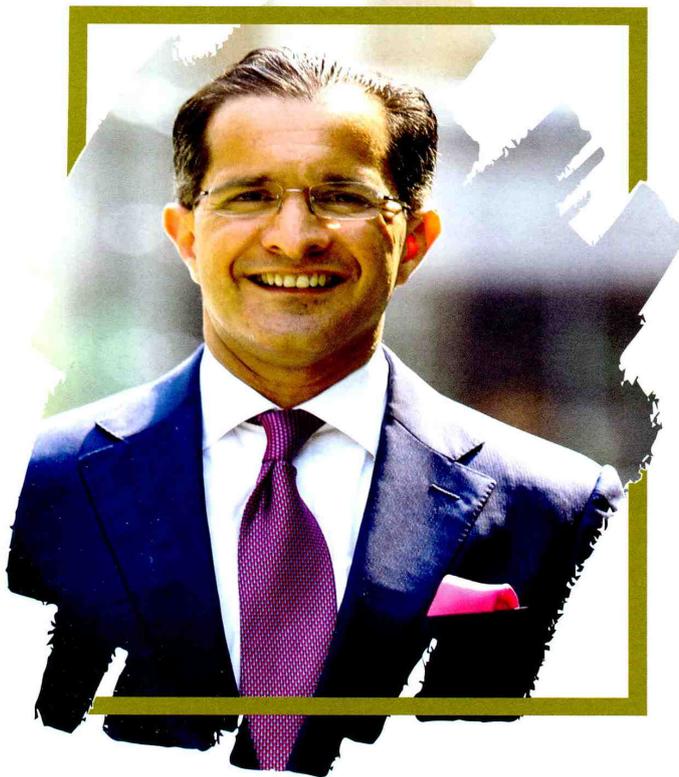
Since last year, majority of ongoing and scheduled hospitality development suddenly came to a grinding halt. Hence, in the initial few months of 2020, Horwath HTL found few takers for its development related advisory services. Thankfully, this vertical has gained slight momentum as a semblance of impact understanding gradually returned in the sector over the past few months.

Talking about navigating these challenges, Thacker said, “As consultants, we had to support our clients in strategy plans, impact assessment and guidance, cash flow projections, ongoing project restructuring and other business matters. Our organisation did this in a collaborative manner last year.”

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VIKRAM OBEROI MD and CEO, EIH Ltd



A start can be made with domestic travel with the fully vaccinated getting exempt from RT-PCR testing requirements on a uniform basis across the country.”

The biggest win for East India Hotels Ltd (EIH) during the pandemic was its ability to vaccinate all its eligible employees, both those directly on its payrolls and third party contractual workers. According to the company, COVID jabs will play a momentous role in reviving the travel and hospitality industry.

Talking about this, Vikram Oberoi, MD and CEO, EIH Ltd, the flagship company of the Oberoi Group said, “A start can be made with domestic travel with the fully vaccinated getting exempt from RT-PCR testing requirements on a uniform basis India. Once this goes well, the same should be replicated for international travel.”

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

When the pandemic was at its peak last year, EIH released a comprehensive set of hygiene and safety guidelines in May 2020, which would be religiously followed at its 28 hotels - 20 under the Oberoi Hotels & Resorts brand and 10 under the aegis of Trident Hotels. This detailed ready reckoner outlined sanitation practices

at the heart of house, swimming pool, laundry facility and even the medical room.

Moreover, the company made this document available to the entire industry, believing that the threat of the virus' transmission had to be tackled jointly, rather than in isolation. But then again, this transparency and empathy is what EIH has always been known for.

After the pandemic impacted business demand, the hospitality major recalibrated its strengths to enhance performance efficiency and save costs. In addition to promoting its open spaces for dining options, it engaged with corporate clients for virtual meetings where its hotels delivered business lunches to participating attendees.

The luxury hotel chain also launched Oberoi One, its guest recognition programme built on the pillars of special privileges and benefits for its loyal clientele. It entered into a strategic alliance with Mandarin Oriental Group to jointly curate exclusive guest experiences at properties of both brands across the world.

Despite exploring various opportunities for revenue growth, the unforeseen crisis wrecked by COVID-19 hit Oberoi Group's overall revenue hard, which stood at INR 1044.5 million for FY 2020-21 as compared to INR 2,580.6 million the previous year. Rather than be excessively troubled about this, the 87-year old organisation is steadily working on becoming a true digital entity.

“Our aim is to optimise data and use it as an accelerator to strengthen guest experiences and loyalty,” Oberoi stated. Fortunately, the company has a ready resource for this - The Oberoi Center of Excellence (OCE). This institution helps in channelising collective resources ensuring smart and efficient delivery of transactional services and driving expertise in finance, procurement, master data management, taxation, business transformation and budgeting.

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VILAS PAWAR CEO, Choice Hotels India



We operationally controlled costs and expenses on one hand, and on the other, scouted for newer business opportunities to earn revenue."

builds also saw more merit in brand association and were keen to sign up.

KEEPING THE FAITH

Faith building amongst guests and intermediaries was, and continues, to be of utmost importance to Choice Hotels India when it comes to business generation. "We operationally controlled costs and expenses on one hand, and on the other, scouted for newer business opportunities to earn revenue," Pawar noted.

Detailed property improvement plans were chalked out for independent hotels that did not meet its brand standards, to ensure that the brand promise was met. Pawar noted that a lot of value was extended to properties, taking into account the team's experience with operations, training, quality audits, financial advice with regard to reporting and systems, etc. "The hotel, in turn, could leverage the brand equity, connect with our sales office network across the country to harness sales and use our distribution channels to increase sales and profitability of the hotel," he explained.

The hospitality chain took the responsibility to support its stakeholders, including franchisees, employees, customers and vendors. It instituted a 'Choice COVID Health Fund' to provide for medical contingencies faced by its associates or their families. It took on the onus of vaccinating all its employees and their families and also made provisions for oxygen concentrators for team members, in case it was needed.

Choice Hotels India, a wholly owned subsidiary of Choice Hotels International, had a strong pipeline of projects under development last year, with over 18 hotels across the country at various stages of development in tier 3 and 4 markets. While COVID-19 affected its plans and delayed some of these, Vilas Pawar, CEO, Choice Hotels India said that it did not put a stop to the company's expansion plans.

However, the company had to take other tough decisions. "We had to reduce headcount in many areas, multitasking became the name of the game and salary revisions occurred across the board. General Managers and operators started looking for innovative practices to reduce operating costs and seek alternate avenues for revenue generation to pull through during the stringent lockdowns," he added.

The upside was that the company had an opportunity to grow its alternative channels. Existing independent hotel promoters started seeking brand association for improved growth started reaching out to the company, Pawar stated. He added that new

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VINEET VERMA Executive Director and CEO, Brigade Hospitality



Collective effort combined with excellent teamwork where all our associates without exception, went beyond their brief, has helped us tide over the crisis.”

Moreover, the real estate company wanted to justify manpower costs since this is one a major expense in hotels. “We put an immediate freeze on non-critical hiring, rationalised staff strength and staff to room ratios in line with reduced rooms and restaurant occupancies. Collective effort combined with excellent teamwork, where all our associates went beyond their brief, helped us tide over the crisis,” Verma added.

MAKING THE BEST OF THE WORST

Post June 2020, rooms business, though extremely limited, was mostly for repatriation and self-quarantine purposes. Since room rates were governed by government authorities, ARR rates were around 50% and even less the usual rates for the company.

With room occupancies dropping to single digits during the worst phase of the pandemic, the company sought several initiatives to augment its revenues. This included re-purposing hotel spaces and converting it into revenue generating areas.

People working remotely were invited to work from hotel rooms that were converted as temporary office spaces. A few floors were offered as extended stay options on a monthly/yearly package rates.

“Our entire effort was to ensure that our hotels could break even, if not achieve a GOP,” Verma said. In addition to food delivery, pop-up food counters at neighboring residential apartments were introduced with adequate social-distancing norms.

Hotels generally have an annual business plan when the going is smooth. Following the disruption, Brigade collaborated with its hotel partners to look at quarterly targets and revisit these monthly. Verma stated that by suggesting course correction based on ever evolving situation, we achieved a GOP in July 2021 in all hotels except for one. August 2021 looked even better though the company has yet to come anywhere close to its pre-COVID business levels.

At the start of 2020, Brigade Hospitality had seven operating hotels with 1,345 keys and a lineup of five projects with over 650 keys in the pipeline. The pandemic changed that.

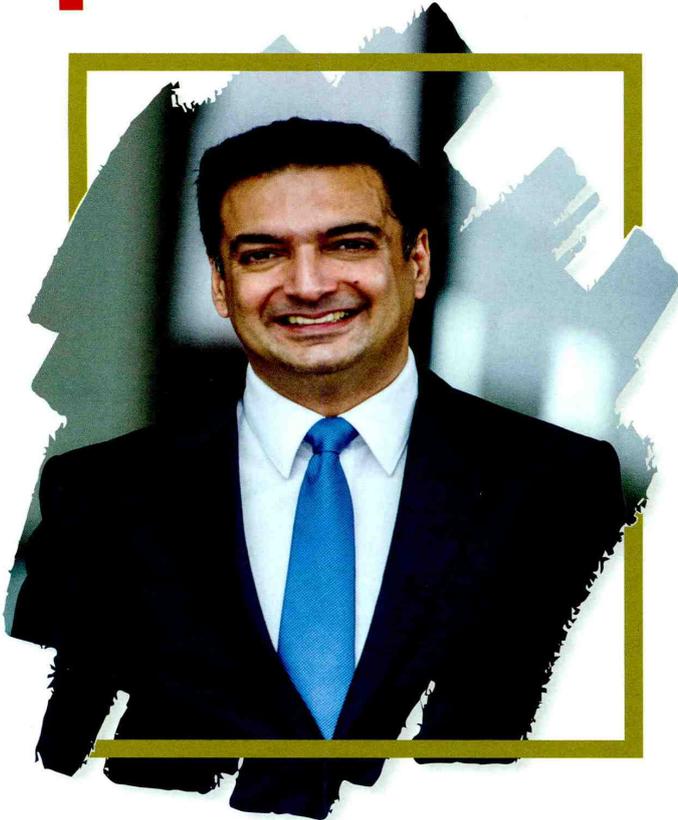
Vineet Verma, Executive Director and CEO, Brigade Hospitality recalled that while the company put its ongoing projects on hold, it managed to launch Holiday Inn Express & Suites Bengaluru OMR last October. This was because the property was in its pre-opening stage and a part of the Brigade’s mix-use project atop the Orion Uptown mall.

Doing more with less became the mantra at Brigade Hospitality. “To manage the cash flow, we immediately introduced measures to arrest expenses, including postponing of certain non-essential Capex spends, energy conservation through optimal utilisation, curtailing non-urgent spends, renegotiating with partners, land-owners and vendors, follow-ups with debtors, availing moratorium on banks loans, etc.” Verma elaborated. The company also reached out to the state government seeking relief on license fees and taxes.

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ZAID SADIQ Executive Director - Liasoning & Hospitality, Prestige Group



The second wave was most challenging and it affected a lot of our people. However, we could navigate the tough time due to great teamwork and a positive outlook.”

Zaid Sadiq, Executive Director - Liasoning and Hospitality, Prestige Group is excitedly looking forward to welcoming guests to the upcoming 301-room JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire Resort & Spa. Whilst the past few months have been tough, he believes Prestige Group has been fortunate to be surrounded by supportive stakeholders and management partners.

“The second wave was most challenging, and it affected a lot of our people. However, we could navigate the tough time due to great teamwork and a positive outlook,” he cheerily stated.

He is optimistic about the future of hotels in India. And why not?

The company is working on several new hotel projects across the country. Apart from JW Marriott at Nandi Hills, it has started construction of four more hotels in India and has more hotel agreements in the pipeline.

GOING WITH THE FLOW

The hospitality business is an intangible one, which requires

empathy and understanding, along with deep understanding of what guests and employees need. “Our pivot in the last few months has been ‘Growth in Adversity’. This helped our hotels grow market share, increase F&B revenues against competition and create new segments of business that we did not focus on in the past,” Sadiq said.

Rather than take any business decisions with short term gains, the company considered its long-term strategy and company culture, even if that had a short term negative impact on profitability. “I am proud that the teams are very agile, innovative and quickly adapted to the dynamic business environment,” Sadiq noted. “Our hotel management partners adapted to new models of business and market penetration. Our Marriott International partnership helped us get timely inputs on international trends, starting from food delivery, staycations to micro lavish weddings.”

He added that the company would focus not on cutting costs, but on cutting waste. “Our strategy for our hotels is on utilisation of space, wellness and sustainability. India for the next few years will be a key focus market for us,” Sadiq added.

The pandemic has underlined that the affluent Indian traveller is finally keen to explore their own country, an untapped opportunity for most hospitality players. Sadiq believes this is the perfect opportunity to make India a glorious tourist destination for domestic as well as international travellers.

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ZUBIN SAXENA MD & VP, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group



We are making a big push for expansion in tier-4 and 5 cities, formulating our plans and strategies in this direction to mark the next phase of business expansion."

person but takes the effort of every member of an organisation.

Moreover, while building hotels, immense thought is given to different aspects such as sustainability, hotel design, innovation and pioneering new concepts. One big shift in the hotel chain's approach with regards to its existing hotels and those under development is on sustainability. Saxena himself has been spending considerable time learning new concepts for hotel operations and design affecting sustainability.

The other big learning has been transparent and consistent communication. RHG connected with stakeholders by hosting monthly digital town halls, leadership sessions with guest speakers, newsletters with preventive measures of pandemic and more. It also ensured that none of its hotels closed. "Once the restrictions were lifted, we were able to visit all our hotels regularly and interact with people across levels," Saxena added.

GOING STRONG

The pandemic did not change RHG's decisions to develop more hotels. In fact, Saxena is proud that the company could achieve progress in adversity with a close eye on the balance sheet.

He added that the RHG would strengthen its presence in leisure destinations with the addition of six upper upscale resorts this year. Radisson Blu Resort, Dharamshala, Radisson Blu Resort Visakhapatnam and Radisson Resort & Spa Lonavala opened recently while resort additions in Goa, Pondicherry and Pahalgam are to follow. "We are making a big push for expansion in tier-4 and 5 cities, formulating our plans and strategies in this direction to mark the next phase of business expansion," Saxena revealed.

Another key focus area is F&B. RHG is making strategic plans to capture this segment in a big way and is keeping its eye out for talent, partnerships and investments. ■

When the hospitality industry bemoaned the disruption wrecked by the pandemic, Radisson Hotel Group (RHG) quietly went about its business. It introduced two new brands - Radisson Individuals in 2020 and Radisson RED this year.

Talking about this, Zubin Saxena, MD & VP, South Asia, RHG said that Classic Grande Imphal is the first member of the Radisson Individuals family while it is prepping up to announce Radisson RED Chandigarh, Mohali shortly.

"With Radisson Individuals, our newest affiliation brand, we have been equipped with speed to market. The brand will help us expand our portfolio and go into newer destinations and explore newer investor relationships. Radisson RED will support our repositioning efforts and usher in a new culture of unconventional, bold and unique hospitality," Saxena said.

SUSTAINABILITY ABOVE ALL ELSE

RHG leveraged the pandemic as an opportunity to enrich its culture with all its stakeholders, something it believes is not built by one