

Organizational Policy Implementation to Address Covid-19 Impacts: A Comparative Case Study on Thomas Cook Travels and Akbar Travels

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The pandemic made huge negative impacts on the travel business globally. Massive shakes in different parts of the travel industry led to the shutdown of different travel companies during the outbreak of Covid-19. This research identifies two prominent travel agencies for a detailed study. Thomas Cook Travels is the oldest travel firm, it underwent complete bankruptcy and was undertaken by forex holidays in 2012. Akbar Travels is another leading travel company operating in different countries. This study focuses on assessing the customer/tourist and employee policies made by Thomas Cook Travels and Akbar Travels. NOISE analysis is a strategic planning tool to identify the strengths and needs of the current state of business and it gives light on the Improvements, Opportunities, and Expectations. The study emphasizes the current strength, needs, opportunities, and improvements.*

Design: *This research adopted the case study method by using a descriptive research design. Secondary data has been collected and analyzed to find out the factors affecting the tourism industry after Covid -19. NOISE analysis was conducted to explore the travel business of Akbar Travels and Thomas cook travels and also to identify the features and excellence of each travel firm and the expected improvements for the smooth run of the business.*

Findings: *The study constitutes that Thomas Cook Travels is running on a strategy and focused on business research on a yearly basis analysis. Yearly annual reports which are published and have public access, are suggesting the best possible areas of development and recommended the removal of low-profit products and services. Travel products from Thomas Cook Travels designed with the changes in commercial environments made them suitable for the business. Competitive forex services were very well helpful for travelers during the time of the pandemic. Multiple sources of income helped Travels to survive in the time of covid. Comprehensive regaining of business after the pandemic made their position the second-best travel firm in India.*

Originality value: *This study includes a detailed analysis of the travel and tourism business and its operational excellence in the post-Covid scenario with special reference to Akbar Travels and Thomas Cook Travels. It also compares the functioning of Thomas Cook's and Akbar's travels.*

Paper type: *A case study*

Keywords: Tourism industry, Familiarisation trips, Tourism and pandemic policies, MICE tourism, NOISE analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Tourism has become a significant economic contributor around the world, but unfortunately, the future of tourism was in a weak stand for a few years as the world was hit by the pandemic. As tourism plays a major role in world GDP, any kind of disruption can have significant socio-economic impacts like covid 19. Tourism offers multiple types of jobs for skilled and unskilled people and they were suffering

disproportionally during the covid outbreak [1]. The pandemic made challenges to all the firms working in the tourism industry, like job loss, long-term debt, bankruptcy, and even complete closure. The pandemic majorly affected medium and low-scale firms more than the flourished firms. Established firms could manage the crisis by holding their employees and focusing on income-generating online services under strict safety policies and cost cuts [2]. The revival of the industry has its own risk elements rather than the level of public and private support. Some countries have established a policy of ‘starting from the bottom’ those countries plan to give importance to domestic tourism rather than international tourism so they could get benefits from the tourist spending in their country itself and that spending will definitely benefit them in overcoming the shake thrown by the global pandemic [3]. The highlighted attraction in that is discounted domestic travel with high safety and hygiene, focusing to turn the crisis into an opportunity. Policies have been rationalized for adapting to a strong sustainable and result-oriented tourism industry. Akbar and Thomas Cook are two predominant travel companies who support the tourism industry immensely to grow up. The policies and ways of operation of both firms during the pandemic are extremely appreciable [4]. The tourism industry was entirely still, during the initial outbreak of the covid 19, in other words, Tourism or travel is the first activity got stopped officially for the safety of covid outbreak. Both the travel companies made timely changes in their operating procedure and trained their employees as of the changes in the circumstances, following are some of the major challenges faced by the tourism industry during and after covid outbreak.

Table 1: Negative Impacts of Covid 19 in Tourism Industry:

S. No.	The negative economic impact of tourism due to Covid 19	Negative socio-cultural impact of tourism due to Covid 19	Negative environmental impact of tourism due to Covid 19
1	Loss of tourism revenue during and after the pandemic	Loss of social trust due to communicable diseases	The area of visual pollution increased due to a lack of proper maintenance.
2	Multiple industries got to break down throughout the lockdown	Social and cultural discrimination in guest and host	Improper usage of land
3	Bankruptcy and Limited income generation in tourist locations	Theft and crimes increased as the sources of income reduced.	Inadequate maintenance of structural facilities.
4	There was a huge amount of loss on structural coast due to not being in use example, special tourist buses in Wildlife sanctuaries and national parks	People prefer family trips rather than group tours	Drop in sales of farm special and seasonal products
5	The industry faced large-scale job Losses while and after the epidemic	Changes in preference of destinations	Theft of environmental products
6	None of the public transport was chosen by the public for a time period	Cancellation of cultural and social events	Zero investment in environmental protection
7	Extra cost inquired to restart the destination facility.	Educational institutions had to stop functioning	Overpopulation of many animals and insects

Source: Author

Table 2: Negative Impacts of Covid 19 in Travel Agency Business:

S. No.	The Negative impact of tourism due to Covid 19 on the Travel Agency Business
1	Loss of tourism revenue through tour operation and travel arrangements during and after the pandemic.
2	The cancellation of cultural and social events all over the world negatively affected travel companies.
3	Bankruptcy and Limited income generation in all travel firms.

4	There was a huge amount of loss on the structural cost due to not being in use example, office buildings travel products like vehicles, and the accommodation sector.
5	The industry faced large-scale job losses while and after the epidemic
6	None of the public transport was chosen by the public for a time period, that was zero business time for travel.
7	People started preferring family trips rather than group tours by public transport.
8	Changes in preference of destinations highly affected the travel business
9	Educational institutions had to stop functioning and educational tours and travels were at a standstill for two years.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

The tourism industry is flexible in handling perishable products like travel tickets, destination packages, and hotel reservations. There are many sponsored travels for travelogue writers, corporate companies, and guides to develop one new tourism location. MICE tourism is an important gateway to familiarisation trips. Since past studies are utilized for further research in the field of study, a systematic literature review to comprehend the current status of the Tourism Industry and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in this sector was conducted. The Covid pandemic received high attention from all industries and organizations due to the multiple impacts made by the lockdown in different areas of the world. There were lots of important analyses and study projects that took place about the impacts of covid outbreak.

2.1 Familiarisation trips:

Familiarisation trips or FAM tours are those journeys provided for the popular media, travel agents, or travel-related sellers to introduce a new venue, destination, hotel, or any other tourism product. FAM trips include trips offered by hotels to travel guides or tour operators to experience their service and help them in the selling of their products.

2.2 Tourism and Pandemic Policies:

Covid 19 pandemic made drastic changes in the operation of all businesses including travel agencies and tour operations. All travel agencies and tour operators came up with new travel regulations and tour operation policies in order to run their businesses aligned with government travel norms related to covid 19.

2.3 Meeting Incentives Conferences & Exhibition Tourism (MICE):

Most business travels are now designed as tour packages. There are Certain events scheduled yearly like an international conference on Hospitality & Tourism, National Tourism Day are accompanied by exhibitions and conferences. The MICE provide a single venue to experience all under one roof.

The following table shows the significant publications about Tourism, the covid impacts, and the methods experimented with to revamp the loss. The publication details and the data were acquired by using Google and Google Scholar. The list of publications includes journals from the year 2000 to 2021

Table 3: Publications related to covid impact in the tourism industry

S. No.	Focus	Contribution	References
1	Leisure travel behaviors of family, caregivers, and their care-recipients	Increase the number of participants from a family	Gladwell & Bedini, (2004). [5]
2	Negative and positive impacts	The introduction of IT in tourism is a rational decision	Lewis et al., (1998). [6]
3	Strengthening of the tourism industry in pandemic	Ensuring minimum revenue for all the firms	Devi, (2021). [7]

4	Effect of the Pandemic on Indian Tourism	Tourism reset should start from the bottom level	Kumar, (2020). [8]
5	Lowered-level participants in tourism	Equipment and special care can be introduced	Cole, et al., (2019). [9]
6	Virtual adaptability	Pressure for the changes made man to a transformation	Lam & Cheung, (2009). [10]
7	Qualitative and quantitative changes in tourism	Increased flexibility	Schröder & Widmann, (2007). [11]
8	Employees situations	Important differences depending on the methodology employed	Sellers-Rubio & Nicolau-Gonzálbez (2009). [12]
9	Virtual office study	Facility demand was more than service quality	Kaynama & Black, (2000). [13]
10	Technological advancement	Improvement in business	Barnett & Standing, (2001). [14]
11	Changes made in the concept of the tour during the lockdown	Home-based activities	Sivan, (2020). [15]

3. RESEARCH GAP :

Covid 19 lockdown brought tough years for the tourism industry altogether, the industry was struggling to grow and became inert for months. Different studies and business experiments were established to overcome the crisis but even though the biggest negative impact was financial, they had to offer even more financial discounts to get a start again for travel. There existed an immediate need to identify the policies and strategies implemented by Thomas Cook and Akbar travels to revamp the tourism business. The initiations that they put forward for the improvement of the industry must be remarkable and the comparative studies about the same will provide a result that others can implement in their firm and organization.

4. RESEARCH AGENDA :

The tourism industry is one of the first five Industries which got ruined by the recent pandemic Corona. different extraordinary business thoughts being established to revamp their customers [18]. This article studies the significant business strategies implemented by two travel agencies to restore their business. It also emphasizes the decision taken by the management about their guest as well as their staff and the way they sustain zero profit from the usual products.

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

- (1) To assess the impacts of – the 19 Pandemic on the tourism industry with special reference to Thomas Cook and Akbar’s travels
- (2) To conduct a comparative study using NOISE analysis.
- (3) To study the policies and strategies implemented by Thomas Cook and Akbar travels to revamp the tourism business.
- (4) To compare the policies made by the Thomas Cook firms and Akbar Travels as per the changes in the business environment

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

This research adopted a descriptive research design using the case study method to analyze the data that was collected. Specifically, this study used NOISE analysis, which is a strategic planning tool to identify the strengths and needs of the current state of business and it gives light to the improvements, opportunities, and expectations. The required data has been collected from secondary sources such as company websites, journal articles, magazines, and press releases. The travel business needs to be extremely powerful to beat a situation like a pandemic where the movability gets posed first. NOISE analysis takes place to understand the strength and expected growth of travel firms after covid 19 by inspecting Thomas Cooks Travels and Akbars Travels.

6.1 Noise analysis:

NOISE analysis is used as a tool to understand or study a business strategy. It is mainly used by decision-makers to improve the business [19]. By incorporating, this analysis teams can build upon their existing knowledge and overcome obstacles. This analysis is widely used to identify the needs and improvements required for an organization. NOISE analysis sets an expectation factor also in its model. NOISE analysis begins with the need of a firm or organization, it moves to the opportunities and that means the firm can make use of any external factors [20]. NOISE analysis continues through Improvements that is the changes that can be adopted to catch the use of opportunities. The analysis comes to an end by analyzing the strength of the business to understand how much the business is capable to adopt the changes to achieve a better position [21]. After all this, the model checks the expectation that the business seeks after using this model [22].

<u>Needs</u>	<u>Opportunities</u>	<u>Improvements</u>	<u>Strengths</u>	<u>Expectations</u>
What are the basic needs to achieve a better position in the present business?	Chances of getting benefits from external factors	What changes that the organization should come up for using the opportunities	What is the success rate of the organization	Present occurring elements out of the above four

Fig 1: Structure of NOISE Analysis

Source: Compiled by Author

7. COMPANY PROFILE OF THOMAS COOK TRAVELS :

Thomas Cook and Sons is the delightful endower of a visionary business entrepreneur Mr. Thomas Cook. He is popularly known as “The father of travel agency businesses”. Thomas Cook and Sons is the first official registered travel business in the world. It is one of the most prominent travel and travel-related service firm functioning in the world with 25 branches in different countries [23]. After committing bankruptcy, Thomas Cook (India) Group is a completely different entity since August 2012 when it was attained by Fairfax Financial Holdings (Fairfax), a Canada-based multinational investment company, through its wholly-owned subsidiary, Fair Bridge Capital (Mauritius) Limited holding 65.60%. Thomas Cook India is attentive to making enduring investors value since its incorporation in 1978. Thomas Cook India focuses its business on Forex, destination management specialists, corporate travel, holidays MICE, and investments [24]. This massive tourism-supporting firm stepped into the world by introducing one railway tour for Europe. It is officially established in the year 1841 and they initiated package tours to establish the business [25]. Like all other travel firms, Thomas Cook travels also got hit by the pandemic, which disrupted the firm on multiple levels. After making a detailed and in-depth study about all the aspects of loss and actions to cover up now the Travels is ready to adapt to the anxieties and effects of the pandemic, while further strengthening its customer focus and accelerating its transformation while continuing to focus on sustainable and gainful development [26]. Thomas Cook and the company never compromised in the quality of service when they were even running on unbearable bank loans [27].

8. NOISE ANALYSIS OF THOMAS COOK TRAVEL’S POST-COVID OPERATIONAL POLICY :

8.1 Needs:

- (1) Thomas Cook Travels needs to work on root levels of planning school/ college tours as the industry is phasing post covid time.
- (2) Thomas cook travels has a great legacy as the world’s first travel agency operation. A travel agency can utilize its reputation to build customer’s trust to prefer standard service during difficult times and by this Thomas Cook Travels can possess a good place in the world ranking.
- (3) Thomas Cook Travels had a very good number of corporate travel clients, the pandemic reduced the number and the complete work-from-home destroyed corporate travel. The company needs to revamp corporate travel.
- (4) Introduce multiple travel products at different rates/themes and for different age groups.

8.2 Opportunities:

- (1) Appropriate usage of promotion channels in definite intervals. Host and conduct different travel-related expos and functions in order to recultivate the travel culture.
- (2) Private franchisees and travel ticket agents can be appointed boost their business.
- (3) Commission-based remote working facilities can be initiated
- (4) Frustration of lockdown and immovability can be utilized for making more travel.
- (5) Reduction and offers in travel fairs in an attractive manner will be a pulling factor in case of travel.
- (6) Policies to introduce familiarisation trips to people of different ages and professions. familiarisation trips are key to improving travel, especially after the pandemic. Include corporate personnel in familiarisation trips organized by Thomas cook travels.
- (7) Awards and recognitions in the business phase are now mandatory and an easy business promotion method too.

8.3 Improvements:

- (1) Multilevel skilled staff to offer and receive products and payments respectively to work in difficult situations.
- (2) Thomas Cook's Google total review is 3.9 out of 5, it needs to be improved for a better future.
- (3) Appropriate usage of promotion channels in definite intervals. host and conduct different travel-related expos and functions in order to recultivate the travel culture.
- (4) People are more dependent on social media platforms to know about different places, travel companies can utilize this opportunity with more credibility and influence.

8.4 Strengths:

- (1) At the time of reopening after bankruptcy the new owners have retained all possible staff of Thomas Cook's previous company that help them to gain the business and establish in the marketing. In the same way during the pandemic, they retained their staff and monitor their staff not much affected by their monthly income.
- (2) Thomas Cook travels operating their business in 25 different countries, and their IATA-qualified staff helped in ground operations during the pandemic.
- (3) The travels achieved the advancement of technological services and Contactless payments in very less time to overcome any problematic situations.
- (4) Remote working facility through Mobile apps and identified a safe way to operate services and which was introduced with the intention to protect the well-being of their staff.
- (5) Thomas Cook firm has announced studies or research to understand the depth of the pandemic.
- (6) Complete automation did to the service procedures to overcome the shake given by the Covid 19 in all their offices.
- (7) Thomas Cook travels could safeguard the financial stability of the firm and staff.
- (8) Focused on profitability and finance with quality of service improved financial flexibility during and after covid 19.
- (9) Supporting talents and cost optimization helped to sustain the pandemic.
- (10) Most of the tour components are available with Thomas Cook firms was an advantage for operating their service during the lockdown.
- (11) Travel insurance is considered as an extra mileage along with strong and structured plans in the business.
- (12) Thomas Cook travels has an extra income from forex, which helped them to meet the financial cost of the day-to-day running.

8.5 Expectations:

- (1) Customer preference due to the quality provided after Covid.
- (2) Earnings of basic revenue in off seasons and pandemic.
- (3) Technological advancement and world ratings.
- (4) Series of promotional activities and varied products to inspire travel.
- (5) Thomas Cook Travels expects to work on root levels of planning school/ college tours as the industry is phasing post covid time.

- (6) Thomas cook travels has a great legacy as the world’s first travel agency operation. A travel agency can utilize its reputation to build customer’s trust to prefer standard service during difficult times. Thomas Cook Travels focus to maintain a good place in the world ranking.
- (7) Thomas Cook Travels had a very good number of corporate travel clients, the pandemic reduced the number and the complete work-from-home destroyed corporate travel. the company needs to revamp corporate travel.
- (8) Introduce multiple travel products at different rates/themes and for different age groups.
- (9) Thomas Cook Travels needs to do a strong focus on MICE tourism to recreate all the international conferences conventions and exhibitions to take place.

Table 4: Latest initiatives taken by Thomas Cook Travels to improve the service [28]:

S. No.	Latest initiatives by Thomas cook	Expecting results
1	Diversified Business Portfolio	Forex, Destination Management Specialists (DMS), Corporate Travel, Holidays, Mice, Investments
2	Transformational policy post covid	Customer Focus Innovative Products & Services Technology Drive Agile, Resilient, and Responsive Support for our People
3	Key initiatives across Business Segments:	A unique Virtual Branch mode,
4	Key developments	Integration of key functions of TCIL & SOTC-

Source: Thomas Cook (India)Limited-Annual Report 2020-2021

Table 5: Latest initiatives taken by Thomas Cook Travels to improve the service

S. No.	Renovation area in the business	Planned renovations
1	Technological strategies	Complete reimagining package
		Leveraging and scaling available virtual structure Digitisation & Automation
		Acceptance Alteration Building agile capabilities Cautiously managing costs Integration of key functions of TCIL & SOTC
		Upholding the well-being and security of our personnel Upskilling & Training
		Omnichannel Access Boost customer gratification Enhance care and connect with customers Accelerating business around specific customer needs
2	Renovation in tour packages or tour products	The Astra -A specially named program introduced by the team to focus on front-end service
		The canvas-Another program started to concentrate on backend services including ground operations.
		Corporate travel dedicated operations in the name of ‘on click to book’ and Forex
		Particular MICE operations
3	Campaigns	Student campaign to boot educational tours
		Study buddy to focus on education abroad
		Gharpeforex – sending currencies or cards or documents to the home during difficult times.

9. COMPANY PROFILE OF AKBAR TRAVLES :

Akbar Travels currently runs by the Chairman & Managing Director, Mr. Abdul Nazar. They proudly claim that they are the largest travel business group in India, in terms of their IATA-approved branches. Akbar Travels started its official business journey in the year 1978. Akbar travels mainly focus on religious travel during Umrah times. Currently, Akbar Travels operates through 57 IATA-approved and 40 non-IATA-approved offices in India. Their services include Akbar travels corporate services,

interstate bus services, airport ticketing countries, foreign exchange, foreign exchange, car rental services, international operations, awards and accolades, and sports and social welfare [29]. Akbar travels business has had a stable growth chart during these years. As with all other travels Akbar travels were also shaken by the pandemic [30]. Akbar Travels introduced virtual travel offices to sustain during and even after the pandemic. This travel agency has customer preference, especially for Muslim religious travel like Hajj and Umrah. following is the detailed NOISE analysis of Akbar travels.

10. NOISE ANALYSIS OF AKBAR TRAVEL’S POST-COVID OPERATIONAL POLICY:

10.1 Needs:

- (1) Akbar Travels needs to increase the sales of package tours post covid.
- (2) Akbar Travels plans to produce more customized tour packages for different age groups.
- (3) Identify promotion channels to introduce different products for customer awareness.
- (4) Group tour operations.
- (5) Akbar Travels aims to provide personalized service to its customers without contact.

10.2 Opportunities:

- (1) Establish more discount coupons and credit offers for all kinds of tours.
- (2) Concentrate on the special offer packages to identify potential customers.
- (3) Introduce more theme packages for corporate travels as incentive tours.
- (4) Introduce more inclusive religious packages like how Umrah packages are designed.

10.3 Improvements:

- (1) Akbar Travels Google’s total review is 3.4 out of 5, this needs to be addressed in the company meetings and should be improved in the future.
- (2) Promotions need to be done through sponsoring travel-related events nationally and internationally.

10.4 Strengths:

- (1) Akbar Travel operating over seven countries in the world is a strength of the agency to do chain operations and ground-level escorts.
- (2) MICE tourism Singapore based is a luxurious package in Akbar travels.
- (3) Akbar Travels uses a typical marketing tool called promo cards, which are popular among travelers.
- (4) Akbar Travels has wide verities of payment discounts including UPA payment with some of the banks and some days a week also provide options for financial offers
- (5) IRCTC agent with Akbar travels system more business to the travels.
- (6) Akbar travels new year travel resolutions ideas are more of business developing keys to improving the business in the post-Covid platform
- (7) Akbar Travels Football Club in 2003 and Akbar Travels cricket team can be used for business development.

10.5 Expectation:

- (1) Complete remote operations and virtual offices in all operating countries.
- (2) Attractive group tour packages need to be introduced to revamp the group tour concept as Covid resulted in the preference for family tours.
- (3) Akbar Travels aims to achieve a better position in the world ranking.

Table 6: Latest initiatives taken by Akbar Travels to improve the business [31]:

S. No.	Latest initiatives taken by Akbar travels	Expected results
1	Increased services	Sports and welfare, well-equipped offices, car rentals, and interstate bus services
2	Umrah packages	Affordable inclusive Umrah packages
3	IATA Approval	Focused to increase IATA approved branches

4	Cruise Lines	Operating cruise tours by using 13 cruise lines, through which the business is linked
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Source: www.akbartravels.com/utility/rules

11. MAJOR FINDINGS :

- (1) Thomas Cook had the biggest advantage through their outward remittance business during the lockdown. In the current scenario of the pandemic, the firm is able to manage its outward remittance 100% contactless.
- (2) Thomas Cook has a high advantage of cost negotiation as they hold transport and accommodation facilities on their own.
- (3) Private franchisees and travel ticket agents are getting appointed for Akbar Travels to boost their business.
- (4) Commission-based remote working facility can be initiated from Akbar Travels as they operate through private franchisees.
- (5) Akbar Travels can initiate sports events with their teams in different places, which will give them travel business and promotion.
- (6) Thomas Cooks Travels redeem its customer loyalty by conducting research on its customer's feedback and suggestions. They are publishing yearly reports of their financial growth, success stories, future plans, and new implementation on a public forum.
- (7) Ground operations for the guest on arrival and departure are very strong for Thomas Cook firms as they all operate by using the previous firm's root level.
- (8) Thomas Cook Travels has strong financial support from Fairfax Financial Holdings, and they target to build long-term shareholder value by achieving a high rate of compound growth. Which will definitely support the firm during unexpected off-seasons.

12. SUGGESTIONS :

- (1) The common suggestions to all businesses are to make a timely change in the business model and increase the branch of operations by improving the shareholders.
- (2) Google reviews contribute to one's decision-making powder these days in that scenario Akbar Travels needs to work on its Google reviews.
- (3) Travel agency business is mostly a mediator business tourism. The best mediator will be preferred, trying to give maximum travel benefit to the guest from the provider like airlines, hospitality, etc.
- (4) Akbar Travel's theme packages are attractive, they can provide more and all age groups concerning products.
- (5) As websites are the face of all businesses today, they can get modified by adding recognition and awards to create trust in customers.
- (6) It is worth representing your business on social media in any form.

13. CONCLUSION :

This research aimed at evaluating the customer/tourist policies made by Thomas Cook Travels and Akbar Travels to meet their business during and post-pandemic situations. The study found that Thomas Cook travels have an upper hand as their legacy in the travel field is quite reputed. Virtual service units are more important for the travel business to afford adverse situations like covid-19. Thomas Cook Travels maintains its business with a structured and innovative strategic plan with all possible updates. Their research team studies about all ups and downs in their business and provides suggestions at crucial points. The initial policies made to protect their employees and customers are helpful for them to sustain their business environment. Complete automation and timely training to the staff about the technological advancement supported them to shift their business into a revenue stage. This study shows that Thomas Cook Travels has a comprehensive travel ingredient and their operations are also exceptional in the travel field.

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