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Financial Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic—An Analysis of the Hotels in Aizawl Municipal Coporation Area, Mizoram, India

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ABSTRACT:

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (also known as "Covid-19") was discovered for the first time in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on December 31, 2019. The WHO subsequently classified Covid-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Since its emergence, the pandemic has caused extensive loss of life and severely disrupted major global economic sectors, affecting even the most isolated regions. In Mizoram, a remote state in India, the services industry has been notably impacted due to the frequent and strict lockdowns that restricted movement and mobility. The financial repercussions of the pandemic have been more severe for the urban population compared to their rural counterparts. As a result, this study aims to assess both the pandemic's impact on the hotels of Aizawl Municipal Corporation Area, Mizoram and their subsequent recovery and development.

Keywords: Covid-19, financial impact, hotels, Aizawl Municipal Corporation area, recovery

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1. Introduction

The Spanish Flu of 1918, considered one of the deadliest pandemics in history, affected around 500 million people, roughly a third of the global population at that time. Reports estimate that the pandemic resulted in over 40 million deaths, representing about 2 percent of the world's population. Of these, approximately 20 million fatalities occurred in the Indian subcontinent, which equates to about 6.4 percent of India's population. The Spanish Flu is recognized as particularly catastrophic for India, where the death toll from the pandemic exceeded the global casualties of World War I. One reason for the underestimation of the pandemic's impact was that most deaths in India happened in rural areas, far from major news centers (Chinmay Tumble, 2020).

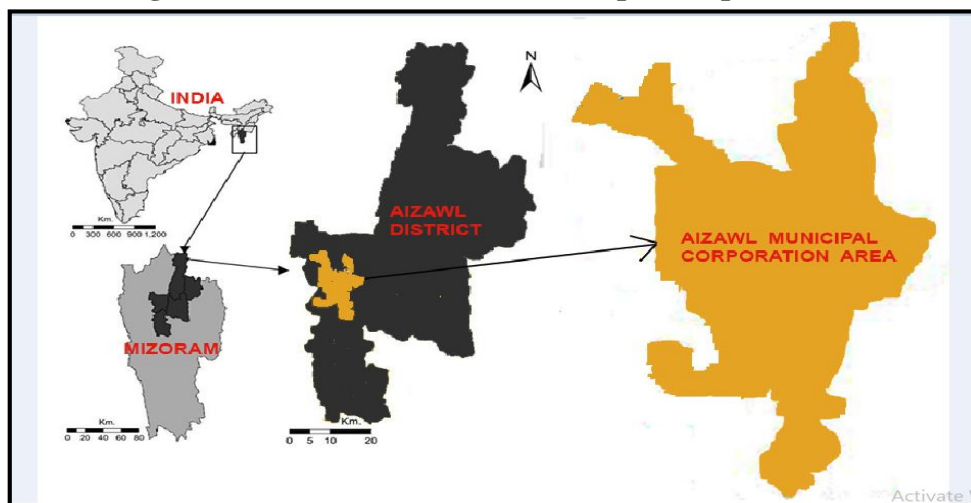
The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (referred to as 'Covid-19'), caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, and reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on December 31, 2019. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. Since its emergence, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused extensive loss of life and major disruptions across global economies. Its effects continue to be felt, with many major economies still grappling with its consequences.

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been akin to that during the Spanish Flu of 1918. However, it is believed that the current pandemic may result in fewer global fatalities due to significant advances in modern technology, which facilitate real-time information sharing and life-saving measures. To curb the spread of Covid-19, countries worldwide have implemented lockdowns, resulting in the closure of offices, businesses, schools, places of worship, and recreational facilities. These lockdowns, except for essential services, have had a severe impact on the global economy.

Background of the Study Area

According to the 2011 Census, Mizoram, a state in northeastern India, had a total population of 1,091,014. Among its districts, Aizawl had the highest population, with 404,540 residents, including the largest urban population of 314,754. This clearly indicates that Aizawl and particularly the Aizawl Municipal Corporation Area are home to the majority of Mizoram's urban population. Therefore, this paper focuses on the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area. The Aizawl Municipal Corporation manages the city of Aizawl, which has a population of 293,416 and covers an area of 129.91 square kilometers. The AMC is divided into 19 wards and includes 83 local councils.

Figure 1: Location of Aizawl Municipal Corporation



It is important to highlight that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a more severe financial impact on the urban population of Mizoram compared to the rural population. During the extended lockdowns, rural residents often assisted their urban counterparts by supplying essential items like vegetables and fruits. In his address on the “State Report of Mizoram” at the Conference of Governors at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on November 11, 2021, the Hon’ble Governor of Mizoram, Dr. Hari Babu Kambhampati, acknowledged that despite facing natural adversities, various challenges, and the Covid-19 pandemic, farmers have continued to sustain agricultural production. This statement underscores the notion that the financial strain of the pandemic has been less severe for the rural population, who primarily work in agriculture and related sectors, compared to their urban peers.

2. Methodology

This study primarily relies on primary data collected through survey questionnaires distributed via Google Forms to hotel owners in the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area, Mizoram. The questionnaires consisted mostly of close-ended questions and utilized a ranking system. Google Forms was also used to design a comprehensive questionnaire for the Mizoram Hotel Owners' Association, the main organization representing the state's hotel owners. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives from the Tourism Department, the Department of Planning & Programme Implementation, and the Department of Disaster Management and Rehabilitation of the Government of Mizoram. Secondary data was also incorporated, drawn from scholarly publications, books, and government records.

Analysis

To contain the spread of Covid-19, the entire state of Mizoram was under total and partial lockdown for more than two years, beginning from 25th March, 2020 till 31st March, 2022. In turn, this prevented the state's business economy from returning to normal for those numbers of days before the lockdown was ultimately lifted. On account of the significant movement restrictions caused by the lockdown, practically every area of the state's economy suffered. Hotels, in particular, were not an exception in the hospitality industry. The hotels eventually encountered severe financial difficulties as a result of the zero occupancy seen in the hotels for a protracted period of time.

The paper seeks to assess the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the hotel sector, one of the hardest hit sectors by the pandemic, within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area, Mizoram. For the study, the scopes of hotels include hotel having restaurant facility, hotel having restaurant and banquet hall as well as homestay. Government owned accommodation facilities located within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area, Mizoram has also been considered to truly comprehend the extent of impact of the pandemic in the sector.

Government Owned Accommodation Facilities in Aizawl Municipal Area

The Tourism Department, Government of Mizoram is known to have only two Government Accommodation facilities namely, Tourist Lodge, Chaltlang and Berawtlang Tourist Complex, within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area. The data obtained, represented in Fig. 2 indicate that the pandemic has adversely affected the revenue collection of its two facilities during the pre-Covid years of F.Yrs.2018-19 & 2019-20 vis-à-vis the Covid years of F.Y.2020-21 & 2021-22. This fact is further supported by the sharp decline in the inflow of tourists to the state of Mizoram observed during the relevant period as evident in Table no.1.

Fig. 2: Revenue collection of Tourist Lodge, Chaltlang and Berawtlang Tourist Complex during pre-pandemic years and pandemic years

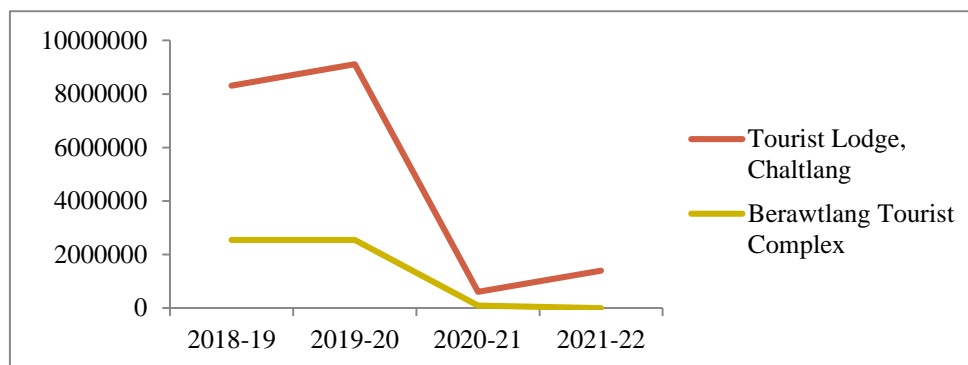


Table 1: Data on Inflow of tourists to the state of Mizoram during pre-pandemic years and pandemic years

F.Y.	TOURISTS INFLOW		
	INDIAN	FOREIGN	TOTAL
2018-19	88122	1644	89766
2019-20	159534	2143	161677
2020-21	20474	90	20564
2021-22	132099	517	132616

Hotels in Aizawl Municipal Area

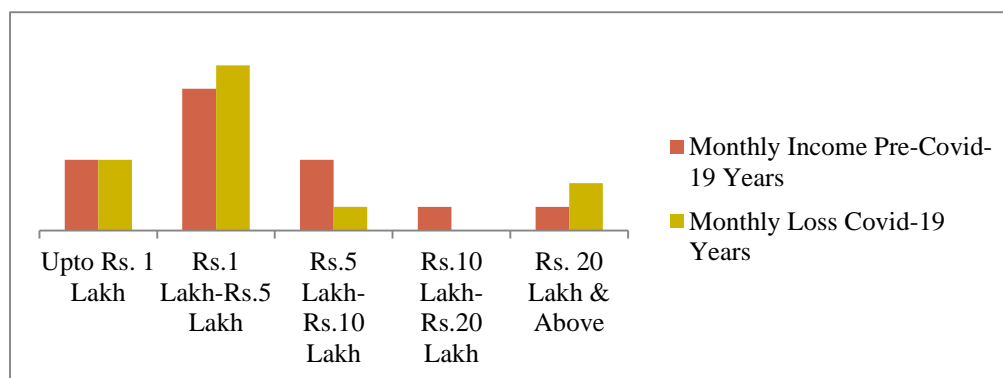
The Mizoram Hotel Owners Association has total number of 51 registered members. Out of this, 35 members alone belong to Aizawl district which are all situated within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area. The association members do not include home stay owners. Accordingly, data on home stay owners was obtained from the Tourism Department, Government of Mizoram. As per data registered with the Tourism Department, the total numbers of home stay owners situated within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area are 7.

3. Results

Decline in Revenue Income

For the study, individual questionnaire using Google Forms was shared with all the 35 hotel owners and 7 home stay owners in the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area. Out of total numbers of 42 hotel and home stay owners, 14 hotel owners and home stay owners responded to the questionnaire. All respondents to the questionnaire barring 1 home stay owner have acknowledged that restrictions on travel imposed due to lockdowns from time to time, have severely affected the hotel owners of the study area. Due to the drastic reduction in hotel occupancy rate, the hotel owners reported severe revenue loss during the pandemic years vis-à-vis the pre-pandemic years. As per the Mizoram Hotel Owners Association, since the middle of March, 2020 when the first lockdown was imposed, the monthly loss incurred (gross) is estimated to be Rs.2 Crores which is considered to be a significant amount especially in view of the fact that Mizoram is not considered to be a popular tourist destination. According to the association, 90% of the travelers visiting Mizoram are business travelers while the remaining 10% are tourists.

Fig. 3: Revenue Monthly Income of the Hotel/Home Stay Owners prior to Covid-19 Pandemic.



In the study conducted, the self-ownership of the hotel properties was affirmed by every respondent to the questionnaire. Therefore, they were fortunately, not obligated to make monthly rent payments. However, some respondents had taken out loans to finance their business operations. Despite the fact that their businesses could not operate due to the lockdown, these respondents still had to make monthly loan payments. The lack of loan waiver schemes exacerbated their financial difficulties, as they were burdened with loan repayments while facing reduced or no income.

During the lockdown period, respondents reported being hit with substantial electricity and water bills despite not availing these services due to zero occupancy. This situation added to their financial strain, as they faced growing expenses and the stress of potential Covid-19 exposure, all while experiencing a significant drop in revenue. They also noted that they did not receive any assistance from the state government, such as waivers for utility bills. As a result, 42.9 percent of the respondents considered permanently closing their businesses due to these overwhelming challenges.

Loss of Employment

The hotel industry is a crucial source of employment globally, including in the state of Mizoram. During the pandemic, the financial strain on hotels in the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area led respondents to make the difficult decision to permanently lay off their employees. This decision affected both local and non-local workers. Local employees, who had permanent addresses in Mizoram, and non-local employees, who resided temporarily in the state for their jobs, were both impacted by these layoffs. This action highlights the significant financial toll the pandemic took on the industry, not only affecting business operations but also leading to job losses for many individuals.

Employees who were permanently laid off as a result of COVID-19 experienced two repercussions. The first consequence was that the hotel's proprietors had to lose experienced and qualified staff and operate with little assistance from the rest of the workforce. Following COVID-19 pandemic, they were faced with the predicament of whether to operate their hotels with a severe personnel deficit to make up for the revenue loss or hire new additional staff who would need to undergo extensive training.

The second major effect was the severe financial hardship experienced by the families of the laid-off employees. In addition to the trauma caused by the pandemic, these families faced the challenge of finding new employment in a difficult job market. Many workers struggled for months to secure new jobs, often finding it hard to meet even their basic needs during this period. Moreover, the zero hotel occupancy during the Covid-19 lockdown had a ripple effect on the local economy. Nearby small businesses such as petty shops, convenience stores,

vegetable markets, and local transportation services that relied heavily on the hotel industry also suffered significant losses. The downturn in hotel activity led to reduced income for these businesses, compounding the economic challenges faced by the community.

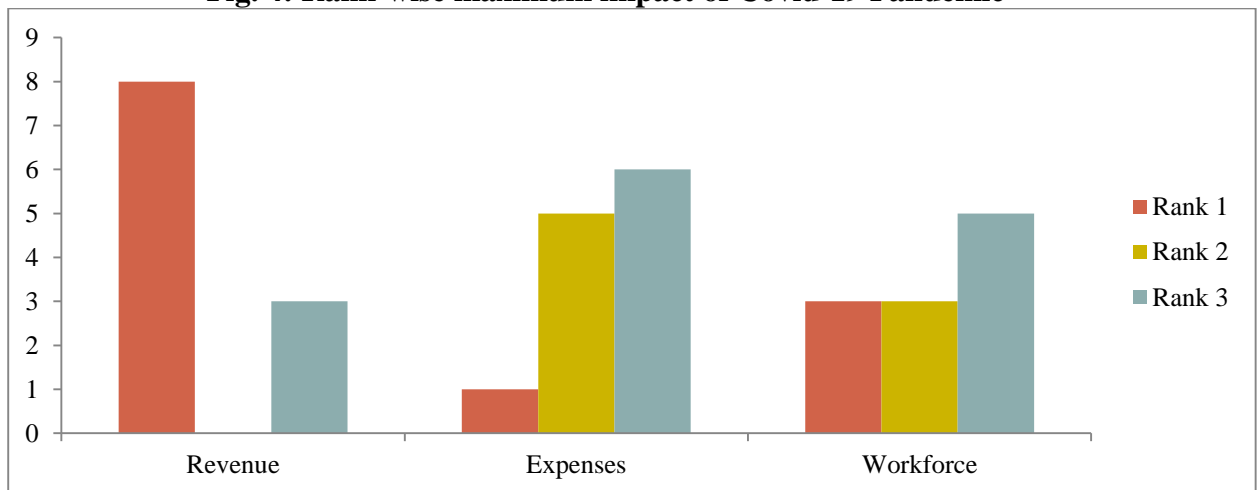
Increased Expenditure

The prolonged imposition of lockdown restricting travel and mobility as a precautionary measure to control the spread of Covid-19 reduced the hotel properties to a dilapidated state. As a result, in addition to suffering huge financial loss, the hotel owners also had the onerous task of maintaining as well as upgrading their existing facilities with limited available funds and resources. In this regard, to revive their business and for their continued survival in the hotel industry, the respondents expressed their desire for a Soft Loan Assistance Scheme from the State Government for preserving and enhancing their current facilities.

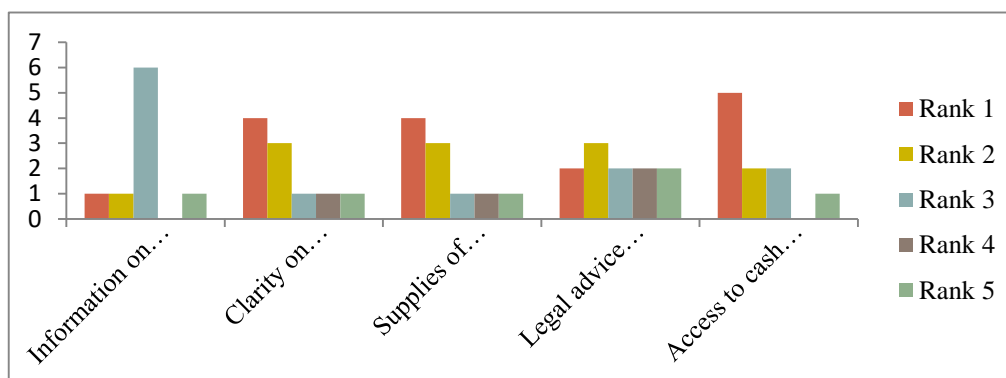
4. Discussion

The rank wise maximum impact of the prolonged lockdowns to contain the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in the study area based on the results of the survey questionnaire conducted amongst the hotels of Aizawl Municipal Corporation area is demonstrated in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4: Rank-wise maximum impact of Covid-19 Pandemic



The study's respondents were asked to rank their expectations of the government in terms of highest priority in order to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 and to prepare for similar future occurrences (Fig. 5). From the table, it is evident that access to short-term cash/finance ranked the highest amongst the hotel owners in terms of support expected from the State Government to minimise the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

Fig. 5: Rank-wise form of support expected from the Government to cushion the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The hilly and remote state of Mizoram in North-East India is heavily dependent on the Government of India. The state's main sources of revenue are Tax, Non-tax Revenue and Grants from the Central Government. The finances and development of the state of Mizoram is a direct function of the circumstances at the Centre and its financial robustness, hence, more so vulnerable under the present circumstances. To substantiate this claim, the state's sources of revenue reported for the last three years are represented in Table no. 2.

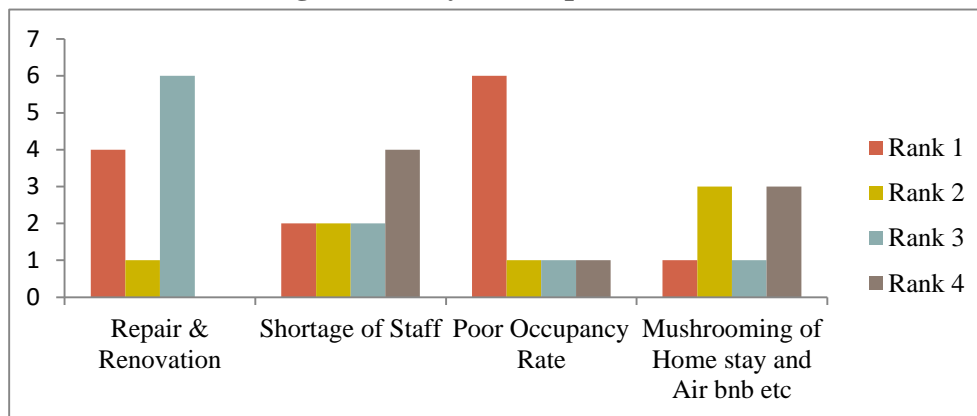
Table 2: Mizoram State's Sources of Revenue

Sl No.	Items	2018-19 (Actuals in Rs.Cr.)	2019-20 (Actuals in Rs.Cr.)	2020-21 (Actuals in Rs.Cr.)
1.	State's Own Tax Revenue	726.70	730.98	647.56
2.	State's Own Non-Tax Revenue	449.95	522.35	561.76
3.	Share in Central Taxes & Duties	3502.96	3017.80	3010.55
4.	Grants-in-aid from Centre	4359.88	5387.13	3520.80
TOTAL REVENUE RECEIPTS		9039.49	9658.26	7740.67

(Source: Economic Survey 2021-22)

As reflected in the data, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a noticeable decrease in Revenue Tax Collection in Mizoram. Consequently, the state government's ability to extend the Soft Loan Assistance Scheme, as requested by hotel owners to aid in business revival, is constrained by limited funds and resources. Without additional financial assistance from the Central Government, the state government has been unable to provide incentive schemes such as waivers for electricity bills, water bills, or monthly loan installments.

To alleviate the financial burden on hotels and manage the Covid-19 situation, the state government implemented a temporary measure by utilizing hotels in the Aizawl district as quarantine centers. This arrangement provided a short-term financial relief to the empanelled hotel owners, offering them a temporary source of income during a challenging period. The easing of lockdown regulations has significantly benefited Mizoram's economy, including the hospitality sector. Nearly 50 percent of the hotel owners surveyed reported that their businesses have returned to pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels. When asked to rank the biggest challenges or issues they faced in their recovery, the results were compiled and are illustrated in Fig. 6.

Fig. 6: Rank wise challenges faced by the respondents on their business recovery.

As shown in the table, even after the removal of lockdown regulations, poor occupancy rates remain the most significant challenge for hotels. This issue is particularly notable in Mizoram, where business travelers constitute the majority of visitors. Given that Mizoram is not a major tourist destination, attracting travelers to the region presents an ongoing challenge. To tackle this problem and stimulate the hotel industry's recovery, the government has a crucial role to play. Efforts to revitalize the sector should focus not only on the Aizawl Municipal Corporation Area but also on the entire state. This could involve targeted marketing campaigns, incentives for travelers, and investments in tourism infrastructure to make Mizoram a more attractive destination for both business and leisure travelers.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The goal of the study is to analyze and pinpoint strategies for reviving the struggling hotel sector in the post-pandemic Aizawl Municipal Corporation area, Mizoram. It is highly likely that the Covid-19 pandemic would not be the last one to be faced in human history. The lockdown regulations imposed for two long years had a doomsday effect on most of the hotel owners. It is recommended that the hotels be given permission to operate under rigorous Government regulations rather than having to completely shut down operations to prevent a repeat of such a circumstance. Those who disregard government laws may be made to face harsh punishment, especially in light of the virus's propensity for rapid transmission. Accordingly, strict periodic inspections should be conducted by the Government representatives to ensure that the hotels follow Government guidelines.

A major difference between the Covid-19 pandemic and the past pandemics such as the Spanish Flu lie in the speed of information dissemination. There is a strong possibility that due to the enormous advancements made in information and communication technologies, the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on a global scale could be significantly reduced. As a result, in the post-pandemic setting, the study area's hotels should concentrate on allocating resources to the advancement of information and communication technology and promote the use of online platforms. Due to the world's gradual shift toward online commerce, such an investment would also make it convenient for hotels to conduct business. Given the potential that pandemics will recur in the future, the government should embrace the current Covid-19 pandemic as a learning opportunity to prevent major crises while also educating stakeholders on how to respond calmly and wisely in the event of such a catastrophe. In the context of the hospitality sector, the Government should strive to provide correct information on the transmission and spread of the virus, clarity on the official guidelines and measures to contain the virus etc. Mizoram, being heavily dependent on the financial performance of the Centre, extension of soft loan scheme to the hotel owners for repair and maintenance of their facilities may not be possible. However, the government on

behalf of the hotels could attempt to assist such soft loan programmes with reputable Banks. In the event that such pandemics recur in the future, regular interactions between government representatives and hotel owners are essential for any responsible government to provide the crucial support in such tough times. The Government in their commitment to contain the pandemic should endeavour to find ways to utilize the hotel facilities.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the restoration of the hotel sector in Mizoram's Aizawl Municipal Corporation area depends heavily on the expansion of the state's still-emerging tourism economy. In addition to helping the hotel sector recover from the pandemic, this sector's expansion would also help create employment, particularly for the state's youth, in the food and beverage business, adventure tourism, the transportation industry, the entertainment industry, etc. However, for such a scenario to materialize, rapid infrastructure development, notably the construction of roads, is urgently required. Roads provide the connectivity that trains and airplanes might not be able to provide; hence the state's road conditions require immediate attention and improvement. The state government should consider consulting with leading organizations in sustainable tourism, such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, Transformational Tourism Council, and Rare India. These organizations can offer valuable insights into developing tourism infrastructure that respects the environment and supports local communities.

Given Mizoram's favorable climate and pristine natural landscapes, ecotourism could be a highly suitable approach for the state. The Champhai district, known for its natural beauty and proximity to the Myanmar border, is a prime candidate for tourism development. Notable attractions in this district include:

- **Mualnuam Meadows:** A picturesque area ideal for nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts.
- **Keilungliah Dam:** A tranquil spot offering scenic views and potential recreational activities.
- **Tlangsam Winery:** Managed by the Champhai Grape Growers Group, this winery showcases local agricultural efforts and could attract visitors interested in regional wine production.
- **Zokhawthar:** the well-known border village of Champhai district, separated from Myanmar by the Tiau River. This village plays a significant role in the region's border trade and cultural exchange between the two countries.

Religious or spiritual tourism is another promising avenue. Mizoram's predominantly Christian population features distinctive church architecture that blends modern design with regional aesthetics. These churches, found throughout localities and villages, could become significant attractions for tourists interested in religious and cultural heritage. By focusing on these areas and integrating sustainable tourism practices, Mizoram can enhance its appeal as a travel destination while supporting local communities and preserving its natural environment. The primary aim of this study is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on hotels in the Aizawl Municipal Corporation area of Mizoram. It is hoped that this information will be valuable for the state, enabling informed decision-making and better preparedness for future crises. By documenting the challenges faced during the pandemic, this study aims to provide insights that can help the government, key stakeholders, and the general public avoid repeating past mistakes. The lessons learned from the pandemic are intended to guide logical and measured responses in the event of future health emergencies. Ultimately, this documentation seeks to educate stakeholders, improve crisis management strategies, and prevent severe repercussions from similar pandemics.

‘Statements and Declarations’

Declaration of conflicting interests:

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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