India Someday: weaving glorious memories amidst hurdles

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A sif Munshi on 28 July 2022, on the launch of Asia Someday, an extension of the travel venture India Someday, shared a moment of relief as he shook hands with his co-founder, Mr Harsh Shirodkar. While shaking hands, there was a sense of fulfilment, having been able to overcome the crisis that had grasped the whole world for the past two years. The pandemic had caused considerable harm to the tourism industry, but it had also fortified their entrepreneurial spirit, which inspired them to make a comeback with more dynamism and vigour and further strengthened the foundation of the endeavour. The expansion of their entrepreneurial venture marked the initiation of the second innings of their enterprise.

To boost the morale of his employees, the founders organized a relaunch party. Swirling the scotch on the rocks in his hand, he reminisced about the past busy business days, which seemed like a faraway dream while the whole world went into lockdown during the pandemic. With the withdrawal of the no-fly list and the gradual opening of borders, India Someday got a ray of hope. With no trips for more than a year, as evident from Table E3 given in Exhibit 1, the impact of the pandemic preoccupied Munshi's thoughts about the future steps of his dream venture. His thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing messages on his phone; emails from his previous clients started flooding in. Glancing through those emails brought a smile to his face, as it indicated the way ahead. Though there was a ray of hope, Munshi was worried about the future of the travel and tourism industry. It was possible that post pandemic, people would swerve away from places crowded with tourists and would embrace nature. Being apprehensive about the prospect of the travel and tourism industry, his mind became engrossed with the thought of inculcating ecotourism as a means of fortifying the future of his dream venture. Nevertheless, there was a sense of uncertainty regarding the portrayal of India as an ecotourism destination because India occupied a low rank in the global ecotourism scenario despite being rich in natural wealth [1]. The natural attractions of India were widespread owing to the affluence of fascinating natural presence encompassing pristine forests, snow-clad mountains, magnanimous grasslands, long-stretch of desserts, extended coastline, numerous rivers, lakes and huge wildlife. However, the question was whether the magnum flora and fauna would attract the foreign clients of India Someday[1]. How could India Someday orient their clients toward ecotourism? How should India Someday position itself in the present scenario of the tourism industry? Thinking of the consequences that India Someday might be facing, Munshi felt apprehensive and concerned about the future of their endeavour.

Global scenario of the travel and tourism industry

The revenue of the global travel and tourism industry tripled since 2000, contributing around 10.3% of global gross domestic product (GDP) [2]. With the COVID-19 outbreak, by

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mid-April 2020, travel almost came to a halt. The United Nations World Tourism Organization estimated a drop in international tourism by 22% in the first quarter of 2020, and that by 97% for April 2020, a loss of US$200 bn (UNWTO, 2020). The contribution of the travel and tourism industry to global GDP dropped from 10% to 5.3% in 2020. The 3% drop in 2019 caused a loss of 62 million jobs in this sector worldwide. However, the recovery began in 2021, as the contribution to global GDP reached 6.1% along with the recovery of 18.2 million jobs and recorded a growth of 30.9% compared to 2020 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022). In 2022, the share of contribution increased to 7.6%, with an expected peak of 9.2% in 2023 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023a). Table E1 in Exhibit 1 presents the share of international tourism in major countries of the world and India. In 2022, ecotourism globally generated US$77bn in revenue, which was 5%–7% of the overall travel and tourism market (Maximize Market Research, 2023), and constituted a substantial contribution in this sector.

Scenario of the travel and tourism industry in India

India's vast geographical and cultural landscape attracted tourists for several reasons, from business to leisure. In 2019, the tourism industry contributed approximately Rs. 194bn to India's GDP, with a record of 10.8 million foreign tourists, which accounted for a growth of 3.2% from 2018. The total employment in this sector was around 87.5 million. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused pan-India bankruptcies, unemployment and closure of businesses. India was a significant contributor to global GDP in the travel and tourism sector. In 2021, India contributed US$178bn, which, although less than that of US$212.8bn in 2019, helped improve India's rank from 8th to 6th at the global level. With the creation of 32 million jobs in 2021 and the opening of borders for international travellers (earnings of US $8.8bn), the travel and tourism sector of India experienced a growth trajectory and revived its contribution to both local and global GDP (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022). In 2019, India's share in international tourist arrivals was 4.97% and 1.56% in Asia–Pacific and the world, respectively. In 2020, the same was 10.71% in Asia–Pacific and 1.22% in the world, which increased to 28.23% for Asia–Pacific and 1.54% for the world in 2021. The details are presented in Table E2.

The increased share of international tourists arrival in India also suggested the government's role in supporting tourism in India. The Ministry of Tourism had initiated various programs, such as the Incredible India 2.0 campaign, which focused on niche tourism products, including wellness and adventure tourism. Additionally, investment into the industry through schemes such as the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive and Adopt a Heritage, proved efficacious in boosting the number of foreign and domestic visitors in India. Moreover, the government leveraged e-visa capabilities and extended them to 169 countries, thereby making it easier for individuals to visit our country. The impact of these initiatives was evident in the increase in foreign tourists' arrival from 2021 to 2022, as shown in Figure E1.

India, as an emerging economy, had a travel and tourism scenario comparable to other emerging economies such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Brazil, China and South Africa. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries emerged as potential tourism destinations among the developing countries. These countries were also experiencing the growth of tourism. As per the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) forecasts, Indonesia's GDP would experience an increase of 4.7% in 2023 (OECD, 2023). The contribution of travel and tourism in Brazil increased to 6.4%, which denoted an increase of 1 percentage point after experiencing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023b). Hence, the travel and tourism sector was revived, overcoming the pandemic in developing economies similar to India.

Ecotourism and India

Ecotourism was globally accepted as a way to conserve the flora and fauna of a country by developing alternative livelihood for communities dependent on the flora and fauna, as well as by raising awareness about its conservation among people and governing bodies. Ecotourism was seen as a probable way of generating sustainable economic benefits for associated communities while also encouraging them to conserve the natural assets for generating long-term advantages. The Ministry of Tourism drafted a National Strategy on Sustainable Tourism with the objective of protecting the biodiversity and wildlife while also promoting economic, social and environmental sustainability[1]. Ecotourism was considered one of the pillars of ensuring sustainable tourism through the conservation of the environment and augmentation of the well-being of locals. To ensure the development of the ecotourism environment within the country, both the central and state governments, along with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities and the private sector needed to join hands.

For encouraging the development of ecotourism in different states, the Ministry of Tourism decided upon implementing a ranking mechanism depending on the globally recognized parameters. In addition, the Ministry prepared customizable education and communication material for the state governments to sensitize and train stakeholders such as NGOs, local communities, government and private sector officials. This would help in improving operating quality and visitors' experience. Local communities would also benefit from the creation of jobs, such as tourist guides and natural science interpreters, and from the development of entrepreneurial activities, such as starting a homestay or setting up a small restaurant with local delicacies[1].

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change formulated guidelines for executing the progression of ecotourism. These guidelines are listed below:

- "Adopt low-impact wildlife tourism that protects the ecological integrity of forest and wildlife areas and secures the wildlife values of the destination and its surrounding.

- Highlight the biodiversity richness, their values and their ecological services to people.

- Highlight the heritage value of India's wilderness and protected areas.

- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.

- Facilitate the sustainability of ecotourism enterprises and activities.

- Provide livelihood opportunities to local communities.

- Use indigenous, locally produced and ecologically sustainable materials for tourism activities."[3]

To promote India as a destination for ecotourism, the states needed to plan their own promotional campaigns to showcase their unique offering. The destination for ecotourism would be considered depending on connectivity, tourist ecosystem, offerings of destination and future potential. To facilitate, it would be necessary to enhance basic facilities, such as the availability of drinking water, proper bathrooms, garbage disposal, of an ecotourism site, be it a jungle or a trail for mountaineering. Furthermore, certain sites that might become fragile with tourists from across the world could be restricted to preserve the natural and cultural heritage. All the stakeholders needed to join hands for the implementation of ecotourism in India.

India Someday

Established in 2009, India Someday was a fledgling travel company based in Mumbai, India. The team comprised passionate travellers who provided planning assistance for

those willing to explore India independently. The company provided customized, personalized and tailor-made trips to create a memorable travel experience for travellers with differing budgets and age groups.

Conceptualization of the company

It all started when two entrepreneurs, Munshi and Shirodkar, were colleagues at a marketing firm. Despite having no formal background (education and business-wise), they were both avid travellers and passionate backpackers. With their vast travel experience across India and through their interactions with foreign travellers, they realized that there was a major gap related to travelling in India.

India, unlike Europe or Southeast Asia, was difficult to manoeuvre. Indians were already equipped with the knowledge of the vast modes of transport, the way the system worked and had the added advantage of not getting tricked or cheated. India was a massive country with differing sights from the mountains to the deserts, visiting the Taj Mahal to scuba diving in the Andamans. However, the problem lay in the difficulty of navigating across the country.

For international travellers, the options for gathering information through online forums were limited. One could either spend a lot of time researching on Lonely Planet and do all the bookings and planning themselves or visit a typical travel agent who had rigid packaged tours (x days, x nights). India Someday saw the prevailing gap and decided to operate in the niche market. With India being a multi-layered destination, prescription of the usual five destinations would not have resulted in a memorable trip. They saw the need to offer a completely personalized service that could be designed through an exchange of ideas between the client and the team. Clients wanted their trips to be based on their ideas but required help to execute it. Munshi stated that,

> "We understand India, we travel around, we have the expertise. Tell us what your likes are, and we will make sure to fulfil them. If you like cooking, we will make sure you learn the art of cooking Indian cuisine. If you wish to be a volunteer, we can help you do that. No matter the age, if you are a teenager or a retired senior citizen, we will plan the trip accordingly. No matter the purpose, a client once wished to visit the destinations his great grandfather had lived during his years of service in colonial India, and we were happy to facilitate that".

The premise of India Someday was to provide an option to independent-minded travellers who did not have the time or the access to undertake the planning process all on their own, yet would not opt for a completely packaged tour.

Unique selling point of India Someday

India Someday worked closely with the clients to plan a personalized trip. Drawing from their experience of exploring the vast boundaries of the country, they applied their expertise to fulfil clients' desires and create memorable vacations. India Someday provided an indicative travel plan that entailed a complete breakup of the routes in the journey, hotel suggestions (with their respective websites and reviews from trip advisor), the different modes of transport to choose from, along with approximate costs for each. This upfront transparency resulted in building a certain level of trust with the clients, which in turn made them appreciate the candid advice from the avid travellers. The company was formed with the belief that every person had varied preferences, which should be considered while designing their solo trip, and hence, clients had complete control over planning their vacation. Munshi stated, "We provide recommendations based on our experiences, but it is up to the client to make the final call".

India Someday proudly believed that a visit to their country would leave one with memories for a lifetime. India could be claimed as a land of miracles owing to her ability of unifying

diversity. Experiencing the diversity in food, clothing, culture, language and an array of natural attractions ranging from mountains to long-stretching beaches would leave incredible memories with the visitors. They would give a helping hand to the people who wanted to travel independently but needed assistance at the same time. They imagined transforming India to be a dream holiday location through their highly personalized service without any hidden costs.

Major client segment

The target audience comprised travellers of all age groups and budget classes from abroad who wanted to visit India (inbound travel). The majority of clients included backpackers, solo female travellers, empty nesters and couples. Approximately 50% consisted of young backpackers, mainly college goers (18–26 years) and working professionals (26–40); 40% constituted empty nesters and retired people (40+ years) who desired to spend their time travelling and enjoying long holidays. However, the remaining consisted of couples with children, as India is not a child-friendly destination due to long distances, lack of infrastructure, absence of support system, etc. India Someday aimed to make any trip to India a memorable experience, as Munshi mentioned that it is a blank canvas – "Let us discuss, paint and do whatever you wish to".

They chose to market to the Western audience because of their strong belief that they are the ones who are privileged enough to travel and have the means to do so. They used online mediums for building clientele, which incrementally increased through word of mouth. They extensively used search engine optimization and search engine marketing to promote their travel venture. Finally, they also worked with influencers to build a pictorial experience related to travel, which helped them reach a wider audience. Presently, a major number of clients had previously travelled with them and also desired to book their future trips.

Company culture

India Someday believed in an open culture and maintained a loose hierarchy, with the founders at the top and the departments structured under them. The co-founders mainly initiated the ideas, but everyone's opinion was valued and appreciated. One of the oldest employees, being the head of bookings and client servicing, was aware of their sincerity with work because they catered to a certain clientele, which made it mandatory for them to provide top-notch service. In spite of being strict with their work, they always wanted their employees to enjoy their work and feel at home.

The founders wanted to create a greater purpose wherein everyone needed to work together to achieve it, which made their employees feel important at their jobs. Though the founders intended to give their employees a great amount of autonomy and freedom, they made sure that they ensured accountability of their work. They believed in the concept of shared leadership, where everyone worked diligently. Munshi stated, "We are all equal. Maybe by virtue of expertise and experience and through starting it, I have more foresight, so I can lead you in that direction".

Competitive scenario and differentiation strategy

With companies such as MakeMyTrip.com, Yatra.com and Cleartrip.com working in the field of flight booking, hotel reservations, holidays, weekend getaways in the present context, the competition took on a new level. In the initial days of India Someday, there was less competition. Nevertheless, competition would help them reach more clients through word of mouth, which could also have a snowballing effect. With the market being huge and not saturated by plenty of players, India Someday considered competition to be favourable.

Companies such as MakeMyTrip.com, Yatra.com and Cleartrip.com provided standard services such as booking flights, hotels, trains, buses, cabs, fixed packaged tours and large teams, whereas India Someday designed personalized curated trips where the customer is in control to make the final decision (see Table E3). Shirodkar stated, "We speak their language they speak to us, and they understand that this company knows exactly what I want". For most of the foreign visitors, the visit to India would be a lifetime experience. The founders wanted to ensure their clients had a great vacation by understanding them as a person and customizing their trips keeping in mind the client's priorities.

The mission was always to operate in a market of their own by offering innovative services and unmatched value propositions, wherein the company had achieved huge success. They acted as a bridge between India and their clientele sitting abroad. They ensured that the exchange between their client and the country should not be only monetary. Instead, it should be at multiple levels, which could be related to experience, culture and memories.

The core values had not changed much through the years. Teamwork and communication were essential for the smooth running of their venture and, hence, were part of the core values. Communication across different departments and tour guides all over India were vital for customer satisfaction. Serving their customers whole-heartedly had always been top priority, and the company took pride in themselves for excelling in these departments throughout. This could be seen from the number of trips conducted both before and after the pandemic (see Table E4).

Sustainable travel

Considering environmental sustainability as the need of the hour, India Someday recommended eco-resorts, provided environmentally conscious tips and planned eco-friendly trips, as well as pursued clients to avail the most sustainable modes of travel whenever possible. India Someday practised sustainable travel by working in collaboration with many homestays, farmstays, etc., owing to the low-carbon footprint and environmental impact of these locations. India Someday believed accommodation plays a huge role in the travel experience and chose to work with "soulful" places – small boutique hotels, homestays, farmstays, instead of tying up with other players in the industry such as five-star or seven-star hotels. In general, India Someday avoided five-star hotels, as these hotels caused huge environmental damage.

With respect to the modes of travel, they strongly recommended booking train tickets instead of a car for an entire 15-day trip because travelling by train would make their journey not only easy and comfortable but also memorable. In addition, India Someday planned cycling and walking tours in the city because of its low impact on the environment. India Someday also encouraged backpacking and off-beat destinations. They had also initiated a way of giving back to the environment by partnering with a non-profit organization – "Grow Trees", where they planted saplings for every ticket booked (one sapling per adult and two saplings per child). The clients were also free to plant more saplings voluntarily.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

With the sudden onset of the pandemic in March 2020 and the whole world entering lockdown, India Someday was dismayed because their calendar was packed with trips across India for different clients from abroad. There was utter confusion, as some trips were in progress and some more were scheduled. Their priority was to get their clients who were travelling in different parts of India safely back to their homes. With the borders closing down and flights getting cancelled along with different protocols that were set, it was difficult to have one single communication for everyone. In conjunction with aborting trips midway and getting clients safely back to their country, India Someday attempted to

reschedule the forthcoming trips instead of cancelling them. They reassured clients, offering a credit note for rebooking their trips at a future date with no extra cost. The founders urged clients to give India a second chance, as India provides a unique experience.

The pandemic severely affected the hospitality, travel and tourism industries. India Someday experienced the longest bleed period. An employee stated, "Our company being positioned to cater to international people travelling to India, our core was shaken with the closing of the borders and unavailability of tourist visas to India. We decided to be positive through the crisis and get through the hibernation period".

India Someday was optimistic that by September 2020, everything would be fine. From April to September, they acquired 30% of the business, and from October to March, they had 70% of the business. An employee stated, "In a way, when the crisis hit, we were like, Thank God, it hit us in the off-season. We thought during the off-season, instead of 30, we would get 0% business, and then everything would be okay. But things kept going wrong". The business decreased by 90% and led to the question of survival in the turmoil.

To keep afloat, India Someday started opening up for Indian clients and diverting to short staycations. They also focused on developing blogs and different content about India's culture, religion, weather, nature, spirituality, etc. Their attention was redirected toward making the most of when the lockdown ended and borders opened up. Nevertheless, along with preparing for the future, the venture needed to survive the crisis period, which led to many harsh decisions such as laying off employees (see Table E5), giving up the office space (INR 85,000 + 18% GST), etc., to cut costs.

Although travel was on hold and India Someday had suffered considerable losses, it persisted through the crisis. Munshi hinted at their farsighted and cautious decisions since the initiation of the company:

> "We have been prudent about how we spend our money right from the start. If we had not made those decisions, we might have been in debt right now with lakhs of rupees and might have had to shut down. Fortunately, we had that foresight, which was in our DNA, to be cautious in our spending and savings, allowing us to go through these tough times. Being resilient is mentally frustrating. Normally, business keeps us busy, not just monetary, but also allows us to meet wonderful people. Every year, we organize around 600 trips, we know that we have impacted 600 people, and they, in turn, have impacted more people".

Future travel? How will travel change as an industry?

The prior impact of India Someday would not go in vain. There was a slowdown in their influence on people through the arrangement of memorable trips. The swirling down of business also made them aware of their promptness in handling any future crisis. Through the initiation of Asia Someday, they took their prospective step in dealing with the unforeseen future. Though relieved with the start of people travelling, the future was uncertain and the founders knew that they had to be vigilant to successfully operate their venture.

With the COVID-19 pandemic on the horizon, the way of life changed. People avoided crowded places and preferred visiting solitary locations such as mountains. Travel gravitated more toward nature. To attract clients, it became important to position themselves as a sustainable travel partner owing to increased awareness of people about unsustainable practices and their consequences. Was it really possible to develop fully sustainable tourism packages for all destinations in Asia? How would the clients respond to such packages? Although India Someday had spread their wings and taken a leap in the future with the commencement of Asia Someday, the founders were worried about being able to maintain and further develop sustainable practices to encourage eco-friendly tourism.

Notes

1. Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2022, National Strategy for Ecotourism. Incredible India.

2. The World Bank Group, 2020. Covid-19 and Tourism in South Asia, Opportunities for Sustainable Regional Outcomes. Washington DC.

3. Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2022, National Strategy for Ecotourism. Incredible India.

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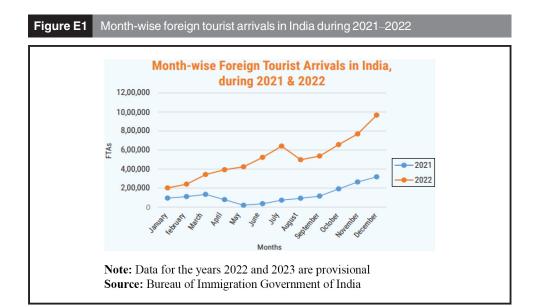
Exhibit 1

Table E1	Percentage share of international tourist arrivals		
	% share of international tourist arrivals		
Country	*2019*	*2021*	*2022*
France	6.20	10.61	–
Spain	5.70	6.84	7.45
USA	5.42	4.85	5.29
Turkey	3.49	6.56	5.24
Italy	4.40	5.90	5.17
Mexico	3.07	7.00	3.98
UK	2.69	1.38	–
Germany	2.70	2.57	2.96
Greece	2.14	3.22	2.89
Austria	2.18	2.79	2.72
India	1.22	1.54	–

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

Table E2	Percentage share and rank of India in international tourist arrivals in the world and Asia–Pacific during 2011–2022			
	% share and rank of India in the world		*% share and rank of India in Asia–Pacific*	
Year	*% Share*	*Rank*	*% Share*	*Rank*
2011	0.63	38th	2.89	9th
2012	0.63	41st	2.82	11th
2013	0.64	41st	2.79	11th
2014	1.15	24th	4.56	8th
2015	1.15	24th	4.84	7th
2016	1.21	26th	4.90	8th
2017	1.26	26th	5.19	7th
2018	1.23	23rd	5.03	7th
2019	1.56	24th	4.97	8th
2020	1.22	19th	10.71	3rd
2021	1.54	17th	28.23	

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

Table E3 Online travel players in India		
Travel agencies	*Year*	*Services*
Makemytrip.com	2000	Booking flights, hotels, trains, buses, cabs, fixed packaged tours, large teams, standard customer helpline
Yatra.com	2006	Booking flights, hotels, trains, buses, fixed packaged tours, large teams, standard customer helpline
Cleartrip.com	2006	Booking flights, hotels, buses, fixed packaged tours, large teams, standard customer helpline
Indiasomeday.com	2009	Booking personalized curated trips where the customer is in control to make the final decision, candid advice from a close small team, transparent pricing on the website, prompt support before and during the travel from a personal travel agent

Source: Authors' assessment of competitors' services

Table E4 Trips conducted by India Someday			
Month	*2019–2020*	*2022–2023*	*2023–2024*
April	34	28	47
May	42	26	35
June	26	12	30
July	50	25	35
August	60	33	26
September	43	46	0
October	71	68	0
November	73	52	0
December	49	47	0
January	59	52	0
February	52	42	0
March	3	30	0

Source: From India Someday

Table E5 Number of employees		
Pre-COVID-19	*During COVID-19*	*Post-COVID-19*
24 full-time	12 part-time	13 full-time

Source: From India Someday

Month-wise Foreign Tourist Arrivals in India, during 2021 & 2022

Note: Data for the years 2022 and 2023 are provisional
Source: Bureau of Immigration Government of India

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