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Hotel industry seeks ease of doing business

KMC suspends FSSAI licences of 40 eateries over hygiene violations

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) has suspended the FSSAI licences of 40 restaurants, eateries and sweet shops following inspections that flagged poor hygiene standards, use of artificial ingredients and licensing irregularities.

The action was taken after KMC conducted inspections at 592 commercial food establishments, including hotels, restaurants, markets, malls and social clubs, during Food Safety Week from September 1 to 7.

The establishments facing action include outlets of several prominent brands and food businesses. KMC said some establishments held retail licences but did not have the required manufacturing licences.

Smita Pandey, KMC Commissioner, said the condition of several sweet shops was particularly concerning, with hygiene practices requiring improvement.

In addition to the 40 licence suspensions, KMC issued refrain notices to 89 establishments and Section 38 notices to 112 establishments. The affected businesses will have to address the violations and obtain the required licences before resuming operations.

During the week-long drive, KMC discarded 1,224 kg of food deemed unhygienic and collected 162 samples for further examination. The largest single disposal involved 520 kg of meat, seafood and other food supplies from markets including Hogg Market, Maniktala, Patipukur fish market and Tangra.

The inspections were undertaken ahead of the Durga Puja festive season, when Kolkata typically witnesses a significant increase in food and dining activity. KMC said the drive covered multiple segments of the food-service ecosystem to improve food quality and hygiene standards across the city. ■

Hotel brands shift focus to asset-light growth : Experts

Asmita Mukherjee | Varanasi

India's hotel companies are recalibrating their growth strategies around brand expansion, conversions, localisation and technology, while retaining human service as the core of hospitality, senior industry leaders said at Business Session II of the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention at Taj Ganges, Varanasi, on August 22.The session was moderated by Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director & COO – South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group.

Vikram Lalvani, MD & CEO, Sterling Holiday Resorts, said the company has moved beyond its timeshare legacy towards a broader leisure and hospitality play. "We moved from a timeshare legacy brand into predominant leisure or hospitality space," he said, adding that Sterling is increasingly targeting destinations where leisure and business travel converge.

Lalvani added that the company is pursuing growth without compromising financial discipline. "It's not just about expansion or adding numbers or putting dots in the country. I think it was far more intense and expectation," he said, adding that Sterling has built its balance sheet "very tactically and very strategically, step by step."

On brand building, Rahool Macarius, Market Managing Director, Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, said that future success would depend on balancing consistency with local relevance. "The brand is successful when you are able to standardize the invisible and localize the visible," he said.

Macarius said destinations, cuisine, wellness and community would increasingly become part of a hotel brand's intellectual property, with technology acting as the enabling layer. "Technology is and will be the orchestrating layer to growth," he said.

IHG Hotels & Resorts' Managing Director, South West Asia, Sudeep Jain, said the Holiday Inn family would continue to dominate IHG's India portfolio, with the segment expected to remain around two-thirds of the company's portfolio by 2030.

On consumer behaviour, Zubin Saxena, Senior Vice President & Regional Head – South Asia, Hilton Hotels, said loyalty remains influential but cannot override a compelling price proposition. "If the price value proposition is very distinct, then the customer will choose price over loyalty," he said. He added that service and loyalty, become critical in bringing customers back. The panel also pointed to growing consumer consciousness around sustainability. Macarius said younger travellers were increasingly treating sustainability as "a way of life", rather than a standalone hotel proposition. ■

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'India can build USD 3 Trillion tourism economy, but rooms, capital and connectivity remain key gaps': Puneet Chhatwal

Asmita Mukherjee | Varanasi

India has the potential to build a USD 3 trillion tourism and hospitality economy, but unlocking that opportunity will require a massive expansion in hotel supply, easier access to capital, better last-mile connectivity, new destinations and a more coordinated national tourism strategy, said Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer, IHCL (Taj Group).

Addressing the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention at Taj Ganges, Varanasi, Chhatwal said tourism and hospitality could account for 10% of India's projected USD30 trillion economy, compared with an estimated USD250 billion contribution today. He said every rupee invested in the sector generates around INR 3.2–INR 3.5 in economic value, making tourism one of the country's strongest engines of economic activity and employment.

"If 10% was to come from tourism and hospitality, that is USD3 trillion, and we today stand only at USD250 billion," Chhatwal said, underlining the scale of the opportunity.

He said India's economic expansion is already driving a structural change in domestic consumption, with rising spending power creating stronger demand for leisure, travel and hospitality. "For the first time India is experiencing a structural shift in the way it consumes," he said.

Chhatwal, however, said India's ability to capture this demand is being held back by a severe shortage of quality accommodation.

He pointed to Varanasi as a live example, saying large conventions and events can quickly exhaust the city's hotel inventory, forcing visitors to stay in surrounding destinations.

The supply challenge is not limited to Varanasi. Chhatwal said India could require around two million additional hotel rooms, while the country's branded room inventory remains far below what is needed to support the next phase of tourism growth. The industry, he added, could require around INR 1 lakh crore of capital to create the necessary capacity.

"Capital will not come if the returns are not attractive," he said, making a direct case for improving the financial viability of hotel projects.

According to Chhatwal, expensive land, high financing costs, multiple approvals and expensive utilities are collectively making hotel development less competitive than alternative investments.

"If land costs are among the highest, projects require more than 70 permissions, infrastructure status benefits are unavailable, and utility costs remain high, it becomes difficult for the sector to deliver competitive returns," he said.

He also pointed to the industry's tendency to demand lower hotel rates while dealing with rising construction and land costs. "Make larger rooms, more expensive land, and lesser rent. So this will not work," Chhatwal said

Chhatwal highlighted Uttar Pradesh as one of the clearest examples of tourism's economic potential. He said the state's spiritual tourism ecosystem, stretching across Prayagraj, Varanasi, Mathura and Vrindavan, could significantly increase tourism's contribution to the state's GDP.

He said Uttar Pradesh had recorded 156 crore tourist visits, with more than 90% driven by domestic travellers, describing the scale of domestic tourism as a structural trend rather than a temporary cycle.

"This is not going to come in cycles and go away. This is a trend. There is a structural shift," he said.

IHCL itself has expanded its commitment to Uttar Pradesh, with Chhatwal stating that the group has a portfolio of around 62 hotels in the state, with a significant number in the pipeline. He also pointed to new and expanded Taj properties as part of the group's investment in the state's tourism infrastructure.

Chhatwal said another structural weakness is the concentration of leisure tourism in a limited number of destinations.

"Today's 75% of leisure tourist activity is limited to 15 to 20 destinations," he said, calling for faster development of new tourism clusters.

He urged the government to accelerate the development of the 50 new destinations announced in the Union Budget, arguing that dispersing tourism demand would create new investment opportunities while reducing pressure on established destinations.

"Developing new destinations is a key. If we all keep going to the same spiritual sector, that's not going to help," he said.

He also called for a multi-activity tourism ecosystem that combines conventions, leisure, sports, adventure, wellness and other experiences

While acknowledging the government's significant investments in roads, airports and railways, Chhatwal said further improvements in last-mile connectivity would help strengthen access to tourism destinations.

"Our last mile remains. So there is this challenge of connecting," he said, advocating the development of satellite towns around major tourism centres where infrastructure and hotel capacity are already under pressure.

Reliability, he said, is as important as infrastructure creation. He cited his own travel disruption to Varanasi, where a cancelled flight forced him to alter his onward travel plans.

"We need more airports. We need better connectivity. We need more reliability of the infrastructure," he added. ■

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Room Crunch!

India wants more tourists, bigger conferences, more MICE business and more international events. But there is one very basic question we seem to overlook: where will all these people stay?

I have been thinking about this since I attended the FHRAI's 56th annual convention in Varanasi. Bringing the hospitality and tourism fraternity together meant finding rooms for around 1,500 people. The city's hotels had to absorb the demand across properties because there simply wasn't enough inventory in one place.

During peak pilgrimage periods, finding a hotel room in the city can itself become a challenge. With thousands of people visiting Kashi Vishwanath and other attractions, hotels can sell out quickly. When a major convention lands in the city at the same time, the pressure on accommodation becomes even more profound, and there has been a sharp increase in room rates. Now we can see the same story playing out in Delhi with the BRICS Summit. Hotel demand in Delhi has surged, availability has tightened and room rates have risen sharply. A major global event can expose within days what the industry has been warning about for years: India does not have enough branded and quality accommodation in several of its most important destinations.

These episodes point to a much bigger problem. India is creating demand faster than it is creating hotel rooms.

We keep talking about becoming a global tourism powerhouse. But tourism cannot grow on airports, highways and attractions alone. Visitors need a place to stay at the end of the day.

We need more rooms and that too - quickly. Not just luxury hotels, but thousands of well-managed mid-market, budget and economy rooms across tier-II and tier-III destinations.

Because ultimately, if we want India to welcome more visitors, we have to first make sure it has enough places to welcome them.

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Ease Of Doing Business | Culinary and Hospitality Business Growth Drivers 2026

By **Prof. Satish Jayaram,** PhD – Co-Creator | Cornell Certified CHRO Leader | Principal WGSHA

In 1986, 10-15 local municipal licenses fired up many owners, operators or proprietors to get culinary and hospitality businesses on the rails. Cut to 2026, that number is 60-85 licenses depending on the complexity of the business model one wants to incubate. Truth be told, the policy framework, environmental exigencies as well as regulatory boundaries, must keep pace with contemporary realities. But given the current brouhaha about being exposed, the key question to answer; remains how easily can we co-create solutions and resolve issues? While hybrid paths will emerge in time, here is a reality check. For a USD 65 billion business growing to over a USD 105 billion business in the next five years, what currently leads at a CAGR of 7.5%, has the potential to explode! ONLY IF… there is all round commitment to finding that sweet spot - where intangibility, perishability, inconsistency, separability are amalgamated into culture, values, integrity, safety and trust to gain from EODB policy.

1. **Operations Integrity Changes:** It is easier to get through 85 check boxes from single window clearances, also enabling sources of capital including a FDI red-carpet. Once brands and businesses start, their quality decline is truly a matter of concern. Is quality seen as a separate function? It is really every person's responsibility - both in their value chains and value delivery networks. Consider data integrity and privacy as an example, respect for individuals as a value, can easily address ongoing vulnerability, given high data porosity levels. But at a local level because jugaad trounces integrity, all processes invite regulation, to achieve elusive results! Certifying every operations talent for business and process integrity as a standard, can be a viable solution. To implement across a 40 million strong work force, is then a new job to do!
2. **Talent Empowerment Grows:** And if the workforce needs 15 million more talents, 3 million with skills alone, what better place to learn and get certified - than from a business, which runs each day as an example of best practice? Quality compliant businesses facing challenges can register as SKPs with MoE. Then certifying workforce generations to get things right could be a distinct possibility. Are talents currently empowered to take corrective action to maintain standards? Are business priorities restricting people ingenuity? Are we deploying hands where building strong minds, empathetic hearts and competent professionals must drive regulated environments? So before making investments in real estate, cloud kitchens and brand strategy, investing in people and talent as a means of addressing EODB issues is a top priority!
3. **Regulatory Frameworks Facilitate:** While perpetual licenses and revision of turnover thresholds are welcome, the rampant abuse of the decriminalization of minor errors is what has led to the current situation. And while we can celebrate culture and street food in one morsel, poor public infrastructure can derail an entire nation's health. Quality and trust are business integrity values and cannot be measured against regulatory compliance. NITI-AYOG research indicates opportunity for visioning, facilitating and digitizing EODB. Yet, ground realities need local enterprise self-governance. A lack of acceptance to use unified single health trade licences, single liquor license mandates, automated building scrutiny & security systems, with digitization need SMEs! Adopting NSWS can be a formidable solution to deploy.

The bottom line on creating conditions to develop EODB; charity needs to begin at home, despite regulation, with integrity. Unlocking growth in the Tourism and Hospitality sector cannot be restricted to being an inanimate report on business

shelves. Actionable insights need adoption by enterprises themselves - to improve their own working conditions! While there are islands of excellence, the vital few are also exposed, on account of being at the mercy of the trivial many in mediocre value delivery systems. Leading business solutions to create, maintain and deploy standards to value regulation, needs unsupervised accountability. Skilling academies led by businesses and leaders with high standards can co-build certification systems in the short term, preferably in easily accessible, hybrid modular mode. What will it take for academia and industry to develop 45-hour, 3 credit micro-credentials for each sector? A hybrid solution; digi-learning on mobile, lab-simulation networks, business immersion certifications and pre-employment testing. Is this worth investing in to enhance EODB conditions, rather than ongoing signature jingoism? ■

The views expressed within this column are the opinion of the author, and may not necessarily be endorsed by the publication.

News Bulletin

Sheraton Hyderabad adds 42 apartments, takes total inventory to 326

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

Sheraton Hyderabad Hotel has added 42 apartments to its long-stay accommodation portfolio, taking the property's total inventory to 326 keys, comprising 98 apartments and 228 rooms.

The expansion comes as Hyderabad continues to attract corporate activity from technology companies, global capability centres (GCCs) and BFSI firms, creating demand for accommodation that goes beyond the conventional short-stay hotel room. According to Cushman & Wakefield, Hyderabad recorded a record 12.44 million sq ft of office leasing in 2025, while CBRE has also reported continued demand from GCCs, technology and BFSI companies. The growth is creating a steady requirement for accommodation for professionals on project assignments, employees relocating to the city and families staying for extended periods.

Subhankar Bose, General Manager, Sheraton Hyderabad Hotel, said the changing nature of business travel was behind the expansion.

"Hyderabad's continued growth as a business and investment destination is creating stronger demand for stays that offer more space, more flexibility, and the comforts of everyday living," Bose said.

"As the city sees sustained momentum across office leasing and corporate activity, we see a clear opportunity in serving guests whose travel needs extend beyond the traditional short-stay format," he added.

The 42 new apartments have been added across three categories — Studio Rooms measuring 35 sq m, One-Bedroom Apartments measuring 61 sq m and Two-Bedroom Apartments measuring 88 sq m.

The apartments are designed to cater to different long-stay requirements, from individual business travellers and professionals on assignments to families and guests relocating to Hyderabad.

The units come with amenities including washing machines, dishwashers and potable water supply, addressing some of the practical requirements that become more important when a hotel stay stretches from a few nights to several weeks or months. The apartments also offer Garden, City and Outer Ring Road views.

Bose said the addition was aimed at making the long-stay offering more practical rather than simply increasing room inventory.

"With these 42 new apartments, we are strengthening our long-stay offering with accommodation that is practical, well-appointed, and aligned with how modern guests want to live while on the move," he said. ■

Radisson Blu Hotel & Suites GRT Chennai expands wedding push with multi-event venues

In a city where culture, connectivity and celebration come together, Radisson Blu Hotel & Suites GRT Chennai offers couples the convenience of hosting an entire wedding journey in one destination. Located on GST Road in St. Thomas Mount, around 10 minutes from Chennai International Airport, the hotel is particularly well placed for families welcoming guests from across India and overseas.

At the heart of its wedding offering is the pillar-less Royal Ballroom, accommodating up to 1,250 guests in reception style and 750 for a seated banquet. Designed for celebrations across traditions and communities, it can transition effortlessly from South Indian muhurthams and North Indian pheras to Christian receptions, Muslim nikahs and walimas, Jain and Marwari celebrations, as well as interfaith and multicultural weddings.

For celebrations that unfold across several days, flexibility is key. Royal Ballroom 1, 2 and 3 can be used individually for functions such as haldi, mehendi, sangeet, engagements and family dinners, with capacities ranging from approximately 150 to 500 guests, depending on configuration.

Royal Durbar, accommodating up to 200 guests in reception style and 150 for a seated banquet, offers a more intimate setting for engagements, nikahs, sangeets and wedding lunches. For smaller gatherings, Royal Summit, with capacity for up to 75 guests in reception style, lends itself to rokas, close-family ceremonies and intimate celebrations.

Among the property's most distinctive features is the Royal Mile, an expansive pre-function area with a dramatic 60-foot-high ceiling and natural daylight. Designed to complement the Royal Ballroom, it can accommodate approximately 400–500 guests on a floating basis with a pre-function setup, while providing an impressive canvas for elaborate wedding décor, floral installations, themed experiences and personalised guest welcomes. For couples looking beyond the ballroom, Runway Rooftop introduces an open-air dimension. The venue can be transformed for sunset mehendis, cocktail evenings, welcome dinners and after-parties, bringing together music, live culinary experiences and contemporary décor against an outdoor setting.

Culinary Expertise for Celebrations at Scale

Behind the venues is a dedicated banqueting and culinary team experienced in managing the complexities of large and multi-event weddings—from layouts and guest movement to service coordination and customised food and beverage experiences.

A key differentiator is the hotel's dedicated vegetarian banquet kitchen, enabling the culinary team to cater to large vegetarian celebrations with specialised attention. This is particularly relevant for Jain, Marwari and traditional South Indian weddings, as well as families seeking an entirely vegetarian celebration.

Menus can be tailored to the traditions and mood of each function, spanning South Indian wedding feasts and regional specialities to North Indian favourites, contemporary buffets and interactive live stations. This allows every event to have its own culinary identity.

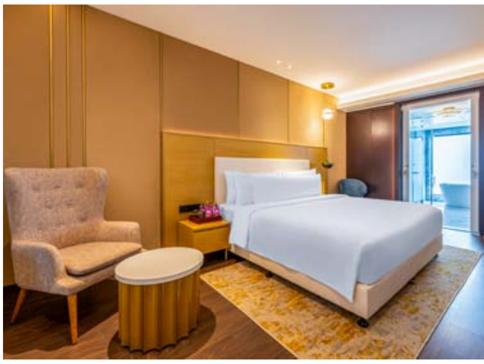
Stay, Prepare and Celebrate

For residential weddings, accommodation becomes part of the celebration. Biophilia, the hotel's exclusive 74-suite wing, offers a nature-inspired stay experience with privacy and space for couples, families and travelling guests.

The Presidential Suite and premium suites provide generous settings for wedding-day preparations, family moments and photography before the ceremonies begin.

At Bodhi Prana, bridal styling, beauty and grooming come together with spa and wellness experiences, allowing couples and families to prepare and unwind without leaving the hotel. The distinctive Turkish Hammam adds another dimension to the pre-wedding wellness journey.

From intimate ceremonies and rooftop evenings to grand receptions and multi-day residential weddings, Radisson Blu Hotel & Suites GRT Chennai brings together venues, accommodation, culinary expertise, bridal services and wellness in one destination—allowing every celebration to reflect the couple's traditions, personality and story. ◆



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FHRAI Convention puts tourism growth in focus

HBI Staff | Varanasi

The three-day 56th Annual Convention of the Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), themed "Ananta Kashi: Leading the Future of Tourism through Spirit, Culture, Cuisine & Craft," concluded in Varanasi with a strong call for greater collaboration between government and industry to unlock the next phase of India's tourism and hospitality growth.

Held at Taj Ganges, Varanasi, the convention brought together approximately 1,500 delegates representing 22 states including leading hospitality companies, hotel chains, tourism stakeholders, policymakers, government officials, international diplomats, investors, travel professionals, technology companies and hospitality students.

Surendra Kumar Jaiswal
President, FHRAI

The convention placed Kashi at the centre of a larger conversation on how India can transform its civilisational heritage, spirituality, culture, cuisine, crafts and natural assets into globally competitive, sustainable and experience-led tourism.

DAY ONE

'The future of tourism is about experience, not just destinations' : FHRAI President

The 56th FHRAI Annual Convention was inaugurated on August 21 in the presence of Chief Guest, Satish Mahana, Speaker, Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly; Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo, Deputy Chief Minister of Odisha; H.E. VithayaXayavong, Ambassador of the Lao People's Democratic Republic to India; Rohan A. Khaunte, Minister of Tourism, Goa; Ravindra Jaiswal, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Stamp and Court Fee, Registration, Government of Uttar Pradesh; Shriji Huzur Dr. Lakshyaraj Singh Ji Mewar of Udaipur, Patron of the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention; Dimitris Manikis, President & Managing Director – Europe, Middle East, Eurasia and Africa, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; K.B. Kachru, Chairman – South Asia, Radisson Hotels Group, and Ankita Jaiswal, Chairperson, Sustainable & Responsible Tourism, HRANI & UPHRA among other dignitaries.

The ceremonial inauguration was followed by the Presidential Address by FHRAI President Surendra Kumar Jaiswal, who positioned the convention theme as a statement about the direction in which Indian tourism is moving and the kind of hospitality ecosystem India needs to build for the future.

Welcoming delegates to Kashi, Jaiswal described Varanasi as an eternal city that has witnessed India's civilisational journey for centuries while continuing to reinvent itself.

He said the theme "Ananta Kashi: Leading the Future of Tourism through Spirit, Culture, Cuisine & Craft"goes beyond a three-day convention. According to Jaiswal, the future of Indian tourism cannot be defined merely by destinations, attractions, infrastructure or hotel rooms. It must increasingly be defined by experience by the stories a destination tells, the culture it preserves, the cuisine it celebrates, the crafts it sustains and the human connections it creates.

'A successful convention is ultimately about people'

In his Welcome Address, Garish Oberoi, Chairman, Convention Organising Committee, described Kashi as one of the most appropriate settings for India's hospitality industry to reflect on its journey and future.

He highlighted how Kashi demonstrates that heritage can coexist with modern infrastructure, spirituality can coexist with contemporary tourism, and tradition can find renewed relevance in a changing world.

'Indian Diaspora Feels More Respected Since 2014'

Chief Guest Satish Mahana, Speaker of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, said hospitality is deeply rooted in Indian culture through the philosophy of Atithi Devo Bhava. "Since 2014, the Indian diaspora has also received greater respect and recognition, and we all feel proud of this," he said. He added that Generation Z and Generation Alpha are the future of India, and that Kashi has an important role to play in nurturing them with values and cultural traditions.

'Laos and India Share a Deep Buddhist Connection'

H.E. Vithaya Xayavong, Ambassador of the Lao People's Democratic Republic to India, said Buddhism provides a strong civilisational link between India and Laos, with Varanasi serving as an important connection. She said bilateral relations have strengthened significantly in recent years and invited Indians to experience Laos.

'Kashi and Puri Can Become Strong Tourism Partners'

Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo, Deputy Chief Minister of Odisha, said Kashi is not merely a destination but a place where visitors experience spiritual energy. He highlighted the strong cultural and spiritual relationship between Puri and Kashi and expressed interest in strengthening tourism linkages between the two destinations.

'Kashi and Goa share a special tourism bond'

Rohan A. Khaunte, Tourism Minister of Goa, said Kashi and Goa are among India's best-known tourism destinations and share a special relationship, with Goa also being referred to as "Dakshin Kashi.

Ravindra Jaiswal, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Stamps and Registration, Uttar Pradesh, highlighted the contribution of tourism and hospitality to India's economic growth.

Maharaja Dr. Lakshyaraj Singh Mewar said Kashi has become a world of tourism in itself and that India's culture and traditions will remain among its greatest strengths in the 21st century.

Dimitris Manikis, President & Managing Director – EMEA, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, said that having travelled to more than 100 countries, he considered Indian hospitality unique because of its Atithi Devo Bhava tradition.

K B Kachru, Chairman- South Asia, Radisson Hotels Group highlighted how hotels are increasingly growing day by day. He also stated that this convention gives a most relevant platform to all the stakeholders of the tourism and hospitality sector.

FHRAI honour 15 maestros of Varanasi with the Bharat Gourav Awards

The convention honoured 15 eminent personalities associated with the music, art, literature and cultural heritage of Kashi through the FHRAI Bharat Gourav Awards – Honouring the Maestros of Varanasi.

The awardees included:

Bharat Ratna Late Shri Pandit Ravi Shankar; Bharat Ratna Late Ustad Bismillah Khan; Padma Vibhushan Late Kishan Maharaj; Padma Vibhushan Late Girija Devi; Padma Vibhushan Dr. Devi Prasad Dwivedi; Padma Vibhushan Pandit Chhannulal Mishra; Padma Shri Dr. Harihar Kripalu Tripathi; Padma Shri Dr. Rajni Kant; Padma Shri Rajeshwar Acharya; Padma Shri Chandra Shekhar; Padma Shri Pandit Ganeshwar Shastri Dravid; Padma Shri Pandit Shiv Nath Mishra; Padma Shri Mangala Kapoor; Upanyas Samrat Late Munshi Premchand; and Karpatri Ratna Dr. Nagendra Pandey.

The evening also featured performances showcasing the rich musical heritage of Kashi, including a sitar recital by Pt. Deobrat Mishra, Kathak by Pt. Rudra Shankar Mishra and Shehnai by Ustad Rizwan Haider.

DAY TWO

The second day began with delegates witnessing the sacred Mangala Aarti at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in the early morning, followed by special Sparsh Darshan, organised by the FHRAI team.

Uttar Pradesh's tourism image has changed: Jaiveer Singh

On the second day, Jaiveer Singh, Minister of Tourism & Culture, Government of Uttar Pradesh, said that the perception of Uttar Pradesh has changed significantly across the world.

Garish Oberoi, Chairman, Convention Organizing Committee, FHRAI; Rahool Macarius, Market Managing Director - Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; Nikhil Sharma, MD & COO - South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group; K Syama Raju, President, SIHRA; D.S. Advani, Chairman and MD, The Shalimar Hotel; Gyan Bhushan, IES, Senior Economic Adviser, MoT; Surendra Kumar Jaiswal, President, FHRAI

Zubin Saxena, Senior Vice President & Regional Head - South Asia, Hilton Hotels; Vikram Lalvani, MD & CEO, Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd.; Sudeep Jain, MD - South West Asia, IHG Hotels & Resorts; Rahool Macarius, Market MD - Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; Nikhil Sharma, MD & COO - South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

Balwant Singh, IAS, Commissioner-cum-Secretary, Department of Tourism, Government of Odisha; Ankita Jaiswal, Chairperson, Sustainable & Responsible Tourism, HRANI & UPHRA ; Pravati Parida, Deputy Chief Minister of Odisha; Surendra Kumar Jaiswal, President, FHRAI; K Syama Raju, President, FHRAI; Garish Oberoi, Chairman, onvention Organizing Committee, FHRAI

He said the state is working on 12 tourism and religious circuits and invited hospitality and tourism entrepreneurs to invest in Uttar Pradesh.

Uttar Pradesh sees strong tourism growth

Awanish Kumar Awasthi, Advisor to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, said Uttar Pradesh has recorded significant growth in tourism and that the presence of Kashi and Ayodhya among globally prominent tourist cities is a matter of pride.

Bhuvnesh Kumar, IAS, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, highlighted India's rapid tourism infrastructure expansion, noting the increase in airports from 74 to 170 and the role of highway connectivity in driving tourism.

Amrit Abhijat, IAS, Additional Chief Secretary, Tourism &

Hotel industry poised to drive India's tourism economy: Gajendra Singh Shekhawat

HBI Staff | Varanasi

Union Minister for Tourism and Culture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said the Indian hotel industry is poised to make a significant contribution to the country's economic growth as India's tourism sector enters a phase of expanding opportunities.

Addressing the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention in Kashi, Varanasi, Shekhawat said the Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI) has played a sustained role in addressing industry challenges and supporting the growth of the hospitality sector for nearly six decades. He said India's economic progress in recent years, coupled with a changing global perception of the country, has created significant opportunities for tourism.

"FHRAI has been continuously working for nearly six decades on issues, problems and possibilities related to the hospitality and hotel industry in the country," Shekhawat said.

According to the minister, the transformation of the Indian economy has created a favourable environment for the tourism and hospitality industry, placing the hotel sector at an important juncture.

"In such a situation, when our industry is standing at the doorstep of immense possibilities, our hotel industry is certainly ready to make another major contribution to India's economy," he said.

Shekhawat also highlighted the role of industry platforms such as the FHRAI convention in bringing together stakeholders to discuss emerging challenges, opportunities and technological developments shaping hospitality.

He said such forums are important for the industry to deliberate on evolving technologies and remain abreast of changes that could influence the sector's future growth.

The minister also underlined the significance of hosting the convention in Kashi, saying the event could have an impact beyond the industry and contribute to the growth of tourism in the city.

"Hosting the convention in Kashi is certainly even more important, also for Kashi's tourism," Shekhawat said. "FHRAI's meeting being held here will have an impact across the country and the world and will reach the entire industry. Certainly, Kashi's tourism will also grow because of this." The minister's remarks come as India's hospitality industry seeks to expand capacity and capture rising domestic and international tourism demand. The convention brought together hotel and restaurant industry stakeholders to discuss the sector's growth prospects, operational challenges and the technological shifts shaping the future of hospitality. ■

Puneet Chhatwal, MD & CEO, IHCL

Vikram Cotah, CEO, GRT Hotels & Resorts

Samir MC, CEO, Tamara Leisure Experiences

Culture Department and Religious Affairs Department, Government of Uttar Pradesh, presented an overview of the state's tourism development and opportunities.

International Cultural Exchange

A special interaction with H.E. Chavanart Thangsumphant, Ambassador of Thailand to India, focused on strengthening cultural and tourism exchanges. She interacted with Ankita Jaiswal, Chairperson, Sustainable & Responsible Tourism, HRANI & UPHRA, on strengthening tourism cooperation.

She invited Indians to experience Thai culture and highlighted the popularity of Banarasi sarees in Thailand, while pointing to opportunities for Indian travellers to explore Thailand's Buddhist cultural heritage.

A major highlight of the second day was the standalone Keynote Address by Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer, IHCL (Taj Group).

His address placed travel, tourism and hospitality at the centre of India's long-term economic ambitions and highlighted the sector's potential to become one of the country's leading engines of employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, investment and economic growth.

Delegates experience Ganga Aarti at Namo Ghat

The second day concluded with delegates witnessing the spectacular Ganga Aarti at Namo Ghat.

The evening continued at Hotel Hilton, Varanasi, with a wedding show by KamaKazi, followed by a singing performance by Rahul and Rohit Mishra.

DAY THREE

The third day began with delegates experiencing the spiritual splendour of the River Ganga, witnessing the mighty Ganges and Kashi's famous Ghats from a cruise.

Mountains and Nature are Himachal Pradesh's strength: Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu

Addressing the opening session on the third day, Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, said that the state's mountains and natural environment should not be viewed as a challenge but as its greatest strength.

Government–Industry collaboration at the core of India's tourism future

The Business Session 'Shaping India's Tourism Journey: A Government – Industry Dialogue' discussion complemented the broader messages emerging from the convention, including the need to Government – industry collaboration.

The session underscored that India's tourism ambition cannot be delivered by government or industry acting independently. The session was chaired Gyan Bhushan, IES, Senior Economic Adviser, Ministry of Tourism.The session was moderated by Pradeep Shetty, Past President, FHRAI, whose leadership and long-standing association with FHRAI brought an important industry perspective to the dialogue.

Sri Lanka calls for stronger tourism and investment ties

H.E. Mahishini Colonne, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to India, emphasised the close relationship between India and Sri Lanka.

While interacting with Ankita Jaiswal, Chairperson, Sustainable & Responsible Tourism, HRANI & UPHRA, she said, approximately 280,000 Sri Lankans travel to India every year, while around 500,000 Indians visit Sri Lanka.

Tourism industry is the growth engine of the nation: Gajendra Singh Shekhawat

The convention concluded with a valedictory session addressed by Chief Guest Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Minister of Tourism & Culture, Government of India. "The hospitality industry is a growth engine for the nation," he said.

Roots meets future at the FHRAI Convention

The 56th FHRAI Annual Convention demonstrated that the future of Indian tourism lies not merely in increasing tourist numbers but in creating deeper, longer, more meaningful and more sustainable experiences. Fromspiritual and wellness tourism to destination weddings, MICE, technology, hospitality infrastructure, skilling, travel trade, cultural exchange and government–industry collaboration, the three-day convention addressed the critical issues that will shape India's tourism economy over the coming decade.

With Kashi serving as the backdrop, "Ananta Kashi" emerged as a reflection of the larger opportunity before India.

The convention concluded with a renewed commitment from the hospitality and tourism fraternity to work alongside governments, destinations, communities and technology partners to build a tourism ecosystem that is modern in outlook, sustainable in practice and deeply rooted in India's identity. ■

Religious tourism emerges as a new growth frontier : Report

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

According to a report by HVS ANAROCK , religious and spiritual tourism is emerging as a significant growth driver for the global and Indian travel economy, with faith-led travel increasingly intersecting with heritage, culture, wellness and branded hospitality. The global religious tourism market is projected to grow at a CAGR of over 15% between 2025 and 2030, reaching USD 671.9 billion by 2030.

India presents a particularly strong opportunity. With an estimated 4.5 billion domestic tourist visits in 2025 and pilgrimage accounting for a substantial share, the country has a large underlying demand base. The Maha Kumbh 2025, which attracted more than 66 crore devotees over 45 days, demonstrated the scale of faith-driven travel.

Yet branded hospitality remains underpenetrated across these destinations. Religious and spiritual markets currently account for around 6% of India's branded hotel inventory, with approximately 13,100 keys across 190 properties. In contrast, the segment represents nearly 14% of the branded hotel pipeline, with about 19,760 keys expected across 190 properties by 2030.

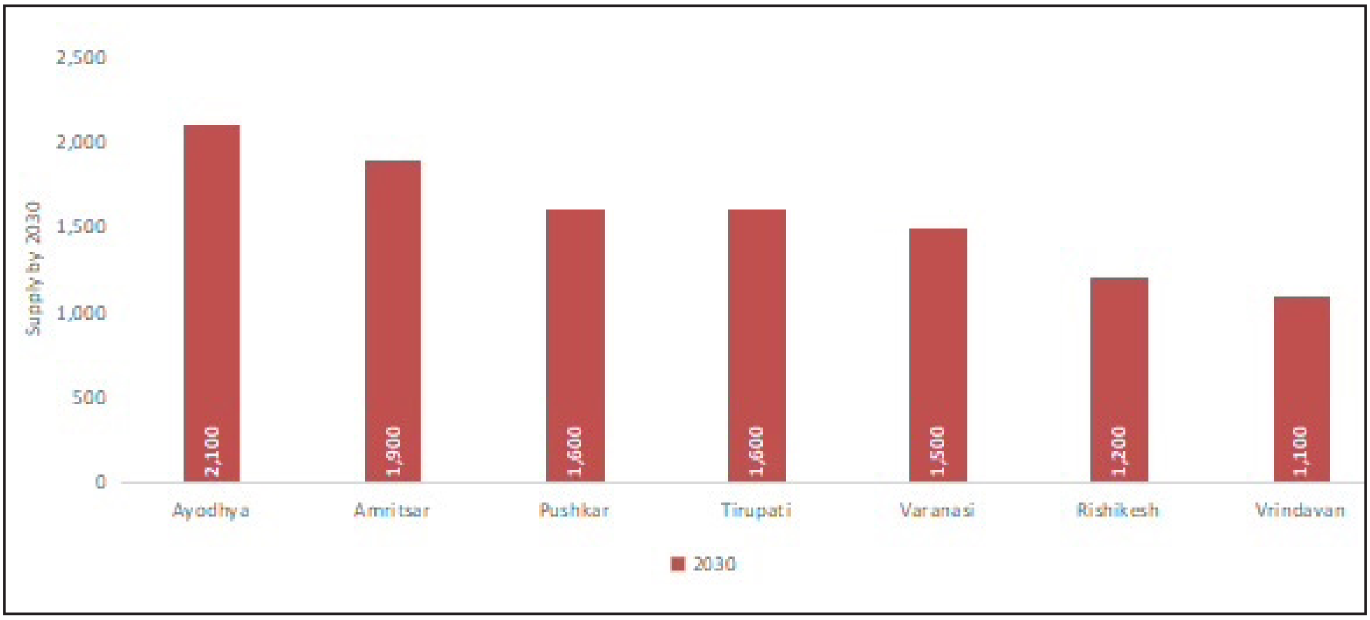
Improving infrastructure is supporting this shift. Government initiatives such as PRASHAD, along with investments in connectivity, public amenities and destination development, are creating conditions for longer stays and higher visitor spending.

At the same time, the religious traveller is evolving. Families and younger travellers are increasingly combining pilgrimage with leisure, wellness, heritage and cultural experiences, creating demand for quality accommodation, F&B, family-oriented facilities and reliable services.

Ayodhya illustrates the transformation. Visitor numbers have surged following the Ram Temple development, while destinations such as Varanasi, Amritsar, Tirupati, Pushkar, Rishikesh, Vrindavan, Ujjain, Haridwar and Dwarka are also attracting hospitality investment.

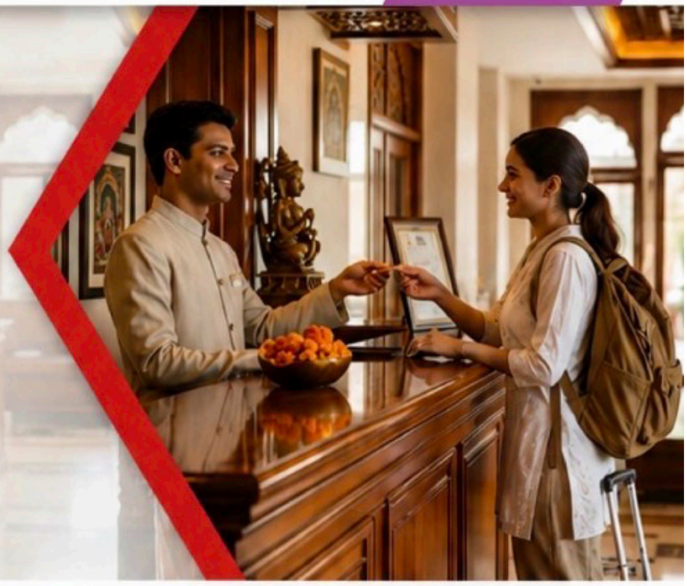
For hotel companies, the opportunity extends beyond adding rooms. Success will depend on understanding local culture, managing seasonality and crowd surges, and developing hospitality alongside transport, sanitation, public spaces and destination experiences.

Religious tourism could therefore become a major hotel development frontier, provided growth balances commercial opportunity with destination sustainability and cultural sensitivity. ■



The Rise of *Faith-led Hospitality* in India

India's next hospitality growth frontier



6% of India's existing branded hotel keys are in religious & spiritual destinations

14% of India's branded hotel pipeline is in religious & spiritual destinations

~19,760 branded hotel keys in the development pipeline by 2030 (across ~190 properties)

Recurring faith-led travel is strengthening hotel demand

Infrastructure upgrades are accelerating hospitality investments

WHAT'S DRIVING GROWTH?

Better Connectivity
Airports, expressways & rail networks improving access to faith destinations

Government Push
Investment in infrastructure & destination development

Branded Hotel Expansion
Growing interest from national & international hotel chains

Rising Domestic Tourism
Increasing pilgrim footfalls across destinations

Evolving Traveller Expectations
More focus on comfort, quality & experiential stays

EMERGING FAITH HOSPITALITY DESTINATIONS

Ayodhya
Spiritual revival & infrastructure transformation

Varanasi
Timeless heritage & strong pilgrim appeal

Tirupati
One of the world's most visited pilgrimage sites

Puri
Sacred significance with growing tourist interest

Shirdi
Year-round pilgrim footfalls & expanding accommodation

Ujjain
Spiritual significance & improving infrastructure

Ease of Doing Business for Hotels: Unlocking Hospitality's Full Potential

By **KB Kachru President,** Hotel Association of India (HAI) and Chairman – South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

India stands at an important inflection point in its tourism and hospitality journey. The country has the potential to emerge as one of the world's leading tourism economies, supported by an increasing disposable income, rising domestic travel, improving connectivity and increasing global interest in India as a destination for business and leisure.

However for India tourism to grow, it is imperative to fill the gap between the supply of branded quality hotel rooms which is currently , woefully lesser than the corresponding demand . This requires a review of the business environment in which hotels operate that has not evolved alongside the industry.

Hotels are among the most regulated businesses in the country. A hotel is simultaneously a place of accommodation, food and beverage, employment, entertainment, tourism and, they also serve as venues for conferences and events. This multi-dimensional nature often brings with it a multiplicity of licences, approvals, inspections, taxes and compliance requirements across central, state and local authorities.

The challenge, therefore, is about creating an environment in which investment in hotels becomes easier, faster and more predictable by making investments more attractive.

While substantial work has been done by the government in recent years on the ease of doing business, hotels continue to face multiple issues. Instead of being viewed as a sector that creates jobs across skill sets, and as basic tourism infrastructure, the sector has been labelled as elite . Hotel investments are viewed as investments in real estate by banks that categorise loans for hotel construction as high risk .

Another roadblock in hotel business is the elaborate and complicated licensing and approval framework. Hotels operate under a significantly more complex regulatory framework than other forms of accommodation. According to NITI Aayog's report on "Unlocking Growth in Tourism and Hospitality Sector", a hotel project can involve around 50 approvals over its lifecycle, covering everything from land and construction to operational requirements.

The industry would benefit from a genuinely integrated, time-bound single-window system that brings together key approvals and renewals across departments. Digitisation should go beyond simply putting existing forms online; it should create an integrated system where information submitted once can be used across relevant authorities, applications can be tracked transparently and deemed approvals can be considered wherever appropriate.

Ease of doing business is not only about approvals. It is also about what happens after a hotel begins operations. The sector faces a wide range of operational compliances covering labour, fire safety, food safety, environment, excise, municipal requirements, weights and measures, employment and other areas. Many of these are important and cannot simply be removed. The opportunity lies in making compliance smarter.

A risk-based regulatory approach can help distinguish between areas requiring frequent physical inspections and those that can be managed through self-certification, digital reporting or periodic audits.

The principle should be simple: regulation must remain strong where public safety and consumer protection are concerned, but compliance should not become unnecessarily repetitive or fragmented.

Hospitality is one of the country's most employment-intensive sectors. Every new hotel creates direct employment while generating significant indirect opportunities across transportation, food and agriculture, retail, entertainment and local services. Tourism has the potential to create 25 million new jobs, making hospitality a powerful engine of employment and inclusive economic growth across India.

A more enabling regulatory environment can therefore have an impact far beyond the hotel industry itself.

India's demographic dividend makes this especially relevant. The sector can provide large-scale employment opportunities for young people while developing skills in areas ranging from culinary arts and housekeeping to technology, management and customer service.WTTC's latest Economic Impact Research projects global Travel & Tourism growth of 3.2% in 2026, outpacing the wider economy's 2.4% growth, while supporting 376 million jobs, or one in nine jobs worldwide. Over the next decade, the sector could generate nearly 89 million new jobs, with its GDP expected to grow 3.6% annually, 1.5 times faster than the global economy. Sustaining this momentum will require investment in smart infrastructure, digital innovation, sustainable tourism, skills and cross-border connectivity, with AI and emerging technologies playing an increasing role in improving traveller experiences and operational efficiency. Policies that support skilling, apprenticeships, mobility of talent and greater participation of women can significantly strengthen this employment engine.

The objective of ease of doing business should not be to reduce the role of regulation. It should be to make regulation more effective.

For the hospitality industry, this means moving towards a model based on trust, transparency, technology and accountability. Industry should be encouraged to comply, while the government should ensure that the regulatory framework is clear, consistent and predictable.

Regular institutional dialogue between government and industry can play an important role here. Mechanisms for identifying regulatory bottlenecks, tracking their resolution and measuring the actual impact of reforms can ensure that ease of doing business remains an ongoing process rather than a one-time exercise.

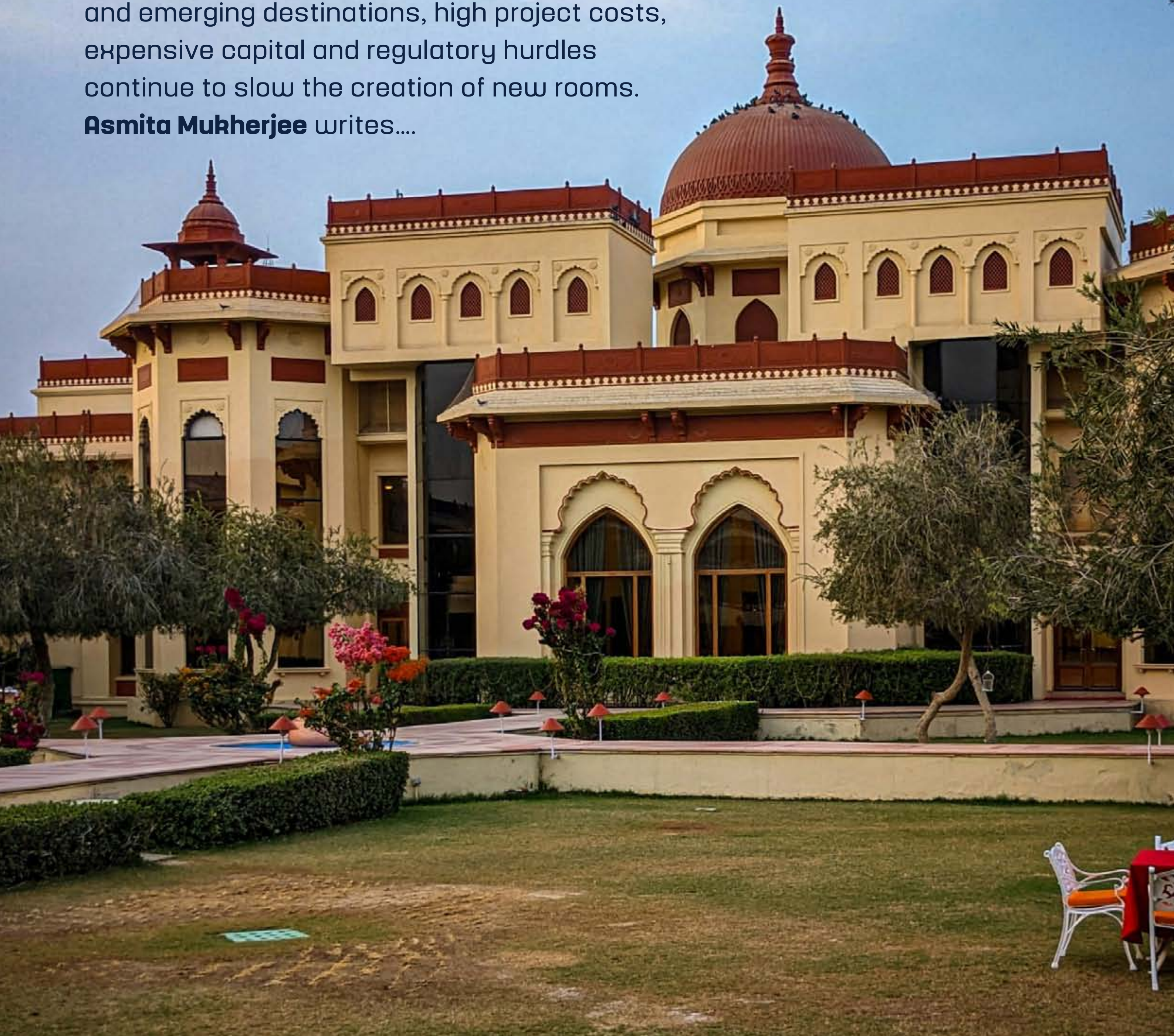
A coordinated reform agenda across taxation, visa facilitation, licensing, approvals, compliance, infrastructure, destination promotion, sustainability and skilling can unlock significant investment and growth for the hospitality sector.

India's tourism opportunity is immense. But capturing it requires more than demand. It requires capacity, investment and an enabling business environment. If we can make it easier to build and operate hotels, we can create more rooms, more jobs, more tourism infrastructure and more economic opportunities across the country. ■

The views expressed within this column are the opinion of the author, and may not necessarily be endorsed by the publication.

Hotel industry seeks ease of doing business

India's hotel industry is seeking policy reforms in regulation, financing, taxation and land use to speed up new hotel development. While demand is growing across business, leisure, pilgrimage and emerging destinations, high project costs, expensive capital and regulatory hurdles continue to slow the creation of new rooms. **Asmita Mukherjee** writes....



Supply pressure

India's hotel industry is increasingly identifying supply creation as the bigger constraint on growth. Hotel companies say demand across established and emerging markets is expanding, but bringing new rooms to market remains a lengthy and capital-intensive process. The challenge is particularly acute outside major cities, where developers are dealing with weaker infrastructure, higher logistics costs and a less developed tourism ecosystem.

Sumit Mitruka, Founder & CEO, Summit Hotels & Resorts, said the industry's focus needs to shift from simply assessing demand to examining why accommodation capacity is not being created fast enough in markets where demand is emerging. "India does not have a demand problem in hospitality; increasingly, it has a supply-creation problem,"he said.

Mitruka said the regulatory framework also needs to account for geography, project scale and destination maturity. A remote mountain resort faces very different construction conditions from an urban hotel, including shorter construction windows, expensive logistics and limited access to skilled manpower. "A 30-room mountain resort cannot always be regulated through the same lens as a large urban hotel," he said.

He said, the issue is particularly relevant to mountain, wildlife, pilgrimage and remote leisure destinations, where hotels can arrive before the wider tourism ecosystem has fully developed.

Approval reform

The regulatory challenge is not limited to the number of permissions required but also to the way different approvals interact during development. Land-use, building, environment, pollution, fire and utility clearances can affect the construction schedule, followed by operational permissions covering areas such as food safety, trade and excise.

Sarbendra Sarkar, Founder & MD, Cygnett Hotels & Resorts, said a delay in one permission can hold up an entire project, leaving developers to carry construction-period interest, lease obligations and pre-opening expenditure without operating revenue. "Fragmented approvals remain one of the biggest non-market risks in hotel development," he said.

For companies expanding across states, the problem is further complicated by differences in documentation, fees, clearances and timelines. Saurab Gahoi, Senior Vice President, Ramee Group of Hotels, said the absence of a common approach adds resources and time to every new market entry. "The biggest challenge is the absence of a consistent regulatory framework across states," he said.

The industry is consequently seeking a single-window system with common documentation, parallel processing, digital tracking, defined service timelines and an escalation mechanism. Gahoi said the effectiveness of such a system would depend on whether departments actually take coordinated decisions rather than simply receiving applications through one portal.

"A single window will be useful only if it provides coordinated decisions, rather than serving as a portal that merely redirects applicants to separate departments."

Sushma Khichar, General Manager, Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway, similarly points to digitisation, consolidated reporting and risk-based inspections as ways of reducing administrative friction while maintaining guest protection, food quality and hygiene standards.

"Fragmented approval processes can have a significant impact on project timelines and overall development costs. A more coordinated and transparent system, with clearly defined timelines and accountability, would provide greater certainty to the decision maker."

She said hospitality specific benchmarking framework could be valuable in encouraging states to continuously improve their investment and operating environment. "The framework could assess factors such as approval timelines, regulatory transparency, digital adoption, investment facilitation, infrastructure and ease of ongoing compliance. Such benchmarking would create healthy competition between destinations and provide investors with greater clarity when evaluating opportunities."

Investor risk

The impact of the regulatory process is ultimately reflected in investment decisions. Laksh Dembla, Founder, The Whispering Woods, said investors can factor a lengthy approval process into their financial models if the duration is known, but uncertainty around the process can materially alter the economics of a project.

"Investors do not mind a challenge or difficulty but they do mind surprises and uncertainty," he said.

Sumit Mitruka
Founder & CEO,
Summit Hotels & Resorts

Sarbendra Sarkar
Founder & MD,
Cygnett Hotels & Resorts

Saurab Gahoi
Senior Vice President,
Ramee Group of Hotels

Dembla said hotels can require anywhere from around 50 to well over 100 licences and registrations depending on the location and nature of the project. Several approvals can also be sequential, increasing the time for which developers have to service borrowed capital without revenue.

This is particularly relevant for smaller developers, who may not have the regulatory and liaison resources available to larger hotel companies. The result, industry executives said, can influence which destinations receive investment and which projects make it to completion.

Sushma Khichar
General Manager, Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway

Laksh Dembla
Founder,
The Whispering Woods

Capital costs

The financing structure of hotel development is another pressure point. Hotels require substantial upfront investment and several years to reach stabilised operations, while lenders often structure loans around considerably shorter commercial cycles.

Paritosh Ladhani, Owner, Taj Hotel & Convention Centre, Agra, said the mismatch can put pressure on developers well before a property reaches maturity. “Capital is patient in this business. It is not infinitely patient,” he said.

Ladhani said hotel projects can take four to five years to build and another five to seven years to stabilise, making the financing cycle a critical part of project viability.

“A hotel takes four to five years to build and another five to seven to stabilise, and it is funded with instruments designed for a three to five year corporate cycle.”

The industry is seeking broader infrastructure status, longer loan tenures and financing structures that reflect the actual gestation of hotel assets. Sarkar said infrastructure status could improve access to long-term capital, particularly for projects in emerging destinations, while Gahoi said lenders should place greater emphasis on operating fundamentals such as location demand, operator capability, brand strength and projected cash flows.

Dembla said construction and stabilisation periods should also be reflected in loan structures rather than assuming that a newly opened hotel will immediately perform at mature levels.

Tax burden

Taxation remains another structural issue for the sector, particularly around input tax credit.

Dr. Vikram Vidya Vithal Kamat, Founder & Chairman, The VITSKamats Group said the absence of input credit across significant sections of hospitality creates a cascading cost impact because hotels and restaurants purchase capital goods, services and operating supplies from a large vendor ecosystem.

He called for a simpler GST structure with input credit across the sector, saying the present approach affects not only hotels but a wider network of food-service businesses.

“A flat rate of 7% can be instituted with input credit across the board which would be beneficial for the entire industry,” Kamat said.

Industry representatives also want greater clarity around GST treatment and accommodation thresholds, with tax stability seen as an important factor in long-term hotel investment and operating decisions.

Compliance reset

The regulatory burden does not end once a hotel opens. Licence renewals, filings and inspections continue throughout the operating life of a property, and hotel executives said this is an area where technology and risk-based regulation can reduce administrative work without weakening safety standards.

Fire, structural safety, food safety, hygiene and guest protection, they said, must remain subject to rigorous oversight. At the same time, properties with strong compliance records could move towards longer renewal periods, consolidated reporting and fewer routine inspections.

Ladhani said the present system can consume significant management time without necessarily improving regulatory outcomes. “In our own properties, more management hours go into renewing licences than inspectors spend inspecting. That is not a safety regime; it is a paperwork regime,”he said.

Dembla said procedural requirements could increasingly be handled through self-certification and accredited third-party audits, while critical safety areas and high-risk properties continue to receive direct regulatory scrutiny. “Simplification and safety are not opposing goals here but rather the same,” he said.

A central digital compliance record covering licences, inspections, filings and violations could support this risk-based approach.

Land matters

Land policy is becoming increasingly important as hotel development expands into emerging tourism markets. Developers said unclear land classification, conversion requirements and development restrictions can make projects difficult to structure before construction and financing are even finalised.

Mitruka said policy should recognise hotels as part of destination-building rather than treating them solely as real estate developments. This is particularly important in remote markets, he said, where a professionally operated hotel can generate employment, support local businesses and contribute to the creation of a wider tourism ecosystem.

Dembla said designated tourism zones could provide clearer hospitality-use provisions, reducing the need for repeated project-specific conversions. Such a framework could also help smaller tourism markets attract investment by reducing the initial regulatory burden associated with land development.

State scorecard

The industry is also seeking measurable indicators to determine how effectively states are improving the business environment for hotels.

Sarkar said a hospitality-specific framework should track approval timelines, the number of licences required, digital processing, deemed approvals, land conversion, utility costs and renewal requirements. Ladhani said the metrics should also capture applications cleared without resubmission and whether promised deemed approvals are actually implemented.

Paritosh Ladhani
Owner,
Taj Hotel & Convention Centre, Agra

Dr. Vikram Vidya Vithal Kamat
Founder & Chairman,
The VITSKamats Group

Dembla said the assessment needs to reflect the experience of developers and operators on the ground rather than relying only on departmental reporting.

"It has to measure outcomes from the applicant's side as well."

Such a scorecard could give investors a clearer basis for comparing markets while encouraging states to compete on measurable improvements in hotel development.

Policy shift

Behind the industry's demands is a larger issue around how hotels are viewed by policymakers and financial institutions. Kamat said hotels continue to be associated heavily with luxury accommodation despite their role in supporting business activity, tourism, employment, industrial development and destination growth.

"Hotels are a place of Economy," he said, adding that the industry needs to move away from the perception that hospitality is synonymous with five-star accommodation.

"In India Hotels = 5 star."

The distinction is becoming increasingly important as hotel development moves into mid-market properties, smaller cities, leisure destinations and emerging tourism clusters.

For the industry, the ease-of-doing-business agenda therefore extends beyond faster approvals. Developers are seeking clearer land-use rules, financing structures suited to hotel gestation, a simpler tax regime and a compliance framework that concentrates regulatory resources on genuine safety and public-health risks.

The underlying demand is for a policy framework that recognises the operating realities of hotels and enables capital to move into new supply without unnecessary administrative friction.

As Ladhani put it, "Hospitality deserves the same discipline."

The industry's next growth cycle will depend on whether India can convert strong tourism and business demand into actual hotel supply and whether policy can ensure that new rooms reach the market faster and at a viable cost. ■

asmita.mukherjee@saffronsynergies.in

Amended e-Commmerce rules to come into force from Jan 1, 2027

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

The Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India, has informed that the amended Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2026 would come into effect from January 1, 2027. The government had amended Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020 through the Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) (Amendment) Rules, 2026, with the objective of strengthening consumer protection while facilitating a transparent and balanced regulatory framework for the e-commerce sector.

The amended Rules seek to address emerging consumer concerns in the digital marketplace while taking into account the need for Ease of Doing Business and a balanced approach that protects consumer interests without imposing unnecessary regulatory burdens on e-commerce entities.

As per the data, during 2025, the National Consumer Helpline (NCH) had received 17,71,622 grievances, of which 5,11,196, or around 29 per cent, related to the e-commerce sector.

A key provision of the amended Rules requires every e-commerce entity to become a partner in the convergence process of the National Consumer Helpline (NCH), strengthening the integration of e-commerce platforms with the national consumer grievance redressal mechanism.

The key provisions in the amended rules mandates every e-Commerce entity to provide the complainant with a copy of the complaint as recorded by its grievance officer. E-commerce entities shall not manipulate search results in a manner that misleads users or adversely affects the relevance of results to the user's search query. As per the amended rule, sponsored listings shall be identified through clear and prominent disclosures.

Where a price reduction is announced, the reduced price and prior price shall both be displayed. The "prior price" means the lowest price at which the goods or services were offered during the 30 days preceding the announcement.

E-commerce entities shall comply with the Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns, 2023, undertake a yearly self-audit and prominently display a certificate of compliance. Marketplace e-commerce entities shall provide key information, including best before/use before dates, return/refund, warranty, delivery and payment details, to enable informed consumer decisions.

Moreover, Marketplace e-commerce entities shall not use consumer information for specified purposes without express and affirmative consent. Such e-commerce entities shall not collect bundled fees for services unrelated to the e-commerce platform, subject to the specified exception for loyalty or membership programmes, the new rule stipulates.

Wherever imported goods are involved, Importer details and country of origin shall be disclosed prominently.

The Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020, notified under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the government claims, will provide the framework for safeguarding consumers against unfair trade practices in the e-commerce sector. The amended Rules will further strengthen this framework in view of evolving business models, digital practices and consumer expectations.

The amendments, according to the official information, seek to establish a more transparent, accountable and consumer-centric e-commerce ecosystem, while providing clarity to e-commerce entities on their responsibilities and enabling a level-playing field for businesses operating in the digital marketplace. ■

Tamara Leisure Experiences SVP Manoj Mathew launches book on nature and leadership

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

Manoj Mathew, Senior Vice President – Operations, Tamara Leisure Experiences, has launched his latest book, The World Is Carried Within – Eighteen Essays on the Natural World and the Working Life, bringing together reflections on nature, human behaviour, leadership and organisational life.

The book was launched on September 3 at the Verandah Boutique Lounge at Tamara Leisure Experiences' headquarters in Bengaluru. S.D. Shibulal, Chairman, Tamara Leisure Experiences and Co-Founder, Infosys, inaugurated the book and presented the first copy to Shruti Shibulal.

The book is Volume I of The Third Eye Series and comprises 18 essays inspired by wildlife photographs captured by Mathew across destinations including Coorg, Nagarahole, Gokarna and Bentota in Sri Lanka.

The essays use observations from the natural world to explore themes including human behaviour, organisational dynamics, leadership and working life. The book is structured across four sections—The Forest, The Organisation, The Shore and The Opening.

The launch also featured an in-conversation session between Mathew and Ian Faria, Mind Coach, Corporate Trainer and Leadership Consultant. Architect Mahesh Iyer, Principal & Founder, Iyer & Mahesh Architects, and Dr Tapas Mukherjee, former Head of the Department of English, Government College, Bori, also addressed the gathering.

Mathew brings more than four decades of hospitality experience across India, Zambia and Sri Lanka, including 33 years with the Taj Group. He currently oversees operations at Tamara Leisure Experiences.

Speaking about the book, Mathew said the essays emerged from observations captured through his photography, with the natural world becoming a lens through which he examined people, organisations and working life. ■

BRICS demand surge signals strong growth potential for India's hotel sector

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

India's preparations to host major international events are putting an increasingly visible strain on its hotel infrastructure, with the upcoming BRICS Summit in New Delhi offering a sharp illustration of a problem the hospitality industry has been flagging for years: demand is growing faster than branded room supply.

The BRICS Summit, scheduled for September 12–13 at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, has already tightened room availability in the capital's luxury hotel market. Several marquee properties have shown limited or no availability around the summit dates, while rooms still being offered at some hotels are commanding exceptionally high tariffs.

A check of booking platforms for September 11–13 showed no availability at properties including Taj Mahal and Taj Palace, New Delhi, while The Oberoi, New Delhi, was sold out for portions of the period. The Leela Palace New Delhi was also not accepting bookings for the specified dates. Available inventory at properties such as ITC Maurya and Shangri-La Eros New Delhi was being offered at significantly elevated rates.

For the hospitality sector, however, the BRICS effect goes beyond a temporary spike in room rates. Industry leaders say the pressure on Delhi's inventory reflects a structural mismatch between India's tourism ambitions and the pace at which hotel capacity is being created.

K.B. Kachru, President, Hotel Association of India (HAI) and Chairman – South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group, points to the scale of the gap. India currently has only around 200,000–220,000 branded hotel rooms, a level he considers inadequate for a market of India's size and tourism ambitions.

The requirement is becoming more urgent as demand for branded accommodation is projected to grow at 8–10% CAGR through FY28. Importantly, the demand is no longer concentrated in the major metros. Pilgrimage tourism, leisure travel, weddings and infrastructure-led business activity are driving hotel demand across tier-II and tier-III cities, creating the need for capacity beyond the traditional gateway markets.

K.B. Kachru
President, Hotel Association of India (HAI) and Chairman – South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

Nikhil Sharma
Managing Director & COO, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group

The current supply situation is particularly striking because capital availability is no longer viewed as the principal constraint. According to Kachru, the industry has moved into a phase where investor appetite and hotel development commitments are increasingly visible.

"Capital has arrived. Investor confidence in India's hospitality story is real and measurable," Kachru said, pointing to the signing of more than 550 new hotels by major hotel chains in 2025 alone.

Data from HVS ANAROCK further underlines the scale of the pipeline. As many as 14,199 branded rooms were added across 176 properties in 2025, while another 64,118 branded keys were signed across 586 properties for future development.

The challenge, therefore, is shifting from attracting capital to converting announced projects into operational rooms.

That distinction is becoming critical as India prepares for a calendar increasingly shaped by international summits, business events, conferences and MICE activity. Such events compress demand into specific periods, creating immediate pressure in markets where room inventory is already limited.

The BRICS Summit is a case in point. Its impact is being felt not only on summit dates but across the surrounding days as delegates, business visitors and associated travellers arrive early and extend their stays.

Varun Saraf, Chief Executive Officer, Juniper Hotels Limited, said the impact of events such as the BRICS Summit extends well beyond the delegates attending the core programme.

"Conferences of this scale drive a city-wide increase in occupancy and rates. Delhi continues to be a market with strong MICE, diplomatic and corporate transient demand. The upcoming BRICS Summit will lead to city-wide compression, which will have a positive impact on all hotels, including Andaz Delhi. In the run-up to and during such events, demand deepens across delegations, media, security and support staff, business partners, and accompanying travel, supporting occupancy and rates well beyond the core event days," he added.

"Delhi-NCR, with its established convention infrastructure and strong air connectivity, is well placed to capture such business in the long run. Juniper Hotels Ltd. has launched a hotel in Delhi with a capacity of 550 keys to capture this growing demand for large-scale MICE, diplomatic and premium corporate business and further strengthen its presence in the national capital."

Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director & COO, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group, said the effect is already visible in pricing across the company's portfolio.

"September is showing stronger momentum, with average room rates across our portfolio pacing more than 25% higher year-on-year," Sharma said.

He attributed part of the momentum to the BRICS Summit, particularly around the event dates, while also highlighting shorter booking windows as a factor supporting rate growth. According to Sharma, demand is expected to remain strong as the summit approaches, with more travellers potentially making last-minute bookings.

The surge also highlights the importance of revenue management in a market where hotel inventory is relatively fixed in the short term. While elevated rates can improve hotel performance during high-demand periods, they also expose the limitations of a supply-constrained market.

For travellers, the immediate consequences are straightforward. Tourists, corporate travellers and families with pre-planned visits to Delhi could face substantially higher accommodation costs, forcing them to either pay a premium for centrally located properties, shift towards hotels farther from key districts, change travel dates or move into lower-priced segments.

The wider industry concern is that such episodes could become more frequent as India attracts larger international events and strengthens its MICE positioning.

Rahool Macarius, Market Managing Director, Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, said the summit is creating a distinct demand pattern across Delhi-NCR, with location emerging as an important factor in how bookings are being distributed.

"The BRICS Summit is creating a distinct demand dynamic for Delhi-NCR, with incremental demand emerging across the region and location playing an important role in how this demand is translating into bookings. We are also seeing Wyndham Rewards members travelling to Delhi for the Summit, further highlighting the role of branded accommodation and trusted loyalty ecosystems in influencing booking decisions. At Ramada Encore by Wyndham Dwarka Expressway, this event-led demand is reflected in occupancy for September 12–15, currently tracking at 65%, significantly ahead of the broader market demand.

Varun Saraf
Chief Executive Officer,
Juniper Hotels Limited

Rahool Macarius
Market Managing Director, Eurasia,
Wyndham Hotels & Resorts

"More broadly, the event reflects a growing preference for branded midscale and upscale accommodation, alongside greater expectations around convenience, flexibility and seamless end-to-end arrangements. At Wyndham, we are closely tracking demand in real time and remain responsive to evolving booking patterns, while ensuring our properties are operationally prepared to deliver a seamless and consistent experience for both domestic and international visitors. Our strong distribution network and ability to respond dynamically to demand enable us to adapt as requirements evolve. As we move closer to the Summit, we expect these demand patterns to evolve further, making agility, operational readiness and real-time demand tracking increasingly important for hotels."

Kachru said that the policy focus now needs to move beyond making capital available towards accelerating project execution. Faster clearances, effective single-window approvals and rationalised state-level taxes and levies, he says, are essential to reducing development timelines and costs.

He identifies three key policy interventions: Industry Status to facilitate priority-sector lending and rationalise utility tariffs; uniform Infrastructure Status across hotel categories and city tiers, including tier-II and tier-III markets, to enable long-tenure financing; and enhanced Floor Space Index (FSI) in land-constrained metros to allow more rooms to be developed on existing land parcels.

"The difference between a pipeline on paper and rooms on the ground" will ultimately depend on execution speed, Kachru said.

The BRICS Summit has thus brought India's hotel supply challenge into sharper focus. The country has growing tourism demand, stronger investor interest and an expanding development pipeline. What remains uncertain is whether the industry and policymakers can move quickly enough to translate those commitments into operational inventory.

For Delhi, the immediate test is the summit. For Indian hospitality, the larger test is whether the country can build enough rooms before the next demand surge exposes the same gap again. ■

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'The biggest operational challenge in managed corporate dining is demand planning'

India's managed food services sector is changing rapidly. Corporate cafeterias, once judged primarily on the cost of a meal and the efficiency of operations, are now becoming an important part of the overall workplace experience. For food service operators, this shift is making the business far more dynamic and demanding. Success today depends not just on serving good food at scale, but on accurately forecasting demand, planning menus, maintaining stringent food safety standards, managing manpower efficiently and keeping costs under control through technology and data.According to **Bhupendra Jha, CEO, ICM & Nibble Food Services, an ICM Group company**, one of the biggest changes has been in the way clients now look at corporate dining.

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

How is the corporate dining market evolving, and what are clients demanding beyond traditional cafeteria services?

The corporate dining market is shifting from a procurement-led, price-per-meal model to an employee experience-led approach, with HR and workplace teams increasingly focused on participation. Clients now expect greater variety reflecting diverse regional preferences, consistent food quality and data on actual consumption rather than meals served. Operators are also competing with food-delivery platforms for employees' dining choices. To address this, Nibble uses regional menu categories and fixed slot structures to offer variety while keeping production and costs predictable. For customised programmes, formats are designed around specific client requirements. The emerging model is clear: greater choice and relevance for employees, combined with consistency, predictability and cost control for clients.

What are the biggest operational challenges in managing large-scale corporate cafeterias and food courts today? How do you see the competitive landscape evolving in India's managed food services sector?

The biggest operational challenge in managed corporate dining is demand planning. Food must be produced within a narrow window, while procurement decisions are made days in advance. Overproduction leads to wastage and margin pressure, while underproduction immediately impacts service quality. Food safety is another critical challenge, requiring daily discipline across sourcing, cold chain, preparation, delivery and service, backed by clear documentation. Meanwhile, India's managed food services market is becoming increasingly organised and competitive. Consistency, rather than scale alone, will define future success. Standardised processes, defined control points, records and escalation mechanisms enable operators to replicate quality across locations. Companies dependent on individual founders or chefs will struggle to scale sustainably.

How are technology and data helping Nibble improve menu planning, food production, service efficiency and customer experience?

Technology at Nibble goes beyond billing to focus on costing, planning and operational efficiency. Its recipe master of around 950 dishes captures standard grammage and current input costs, enabling menus to be accurately priced before service. Changes proposed by chefs can be evaluated for their cost impact within minutes. Manpower planning is also linked to live meal counts and menu complexity, recognising that fresh preparation and live counters require different staffing levels. The model has been validated across client operations ranging 30-fold in site size, maintaining single-digit accuracy. Consumption and feedback data further help Nibble track dish preferences, waste and performance, enabling continuous menu optimisation, better resource allocation and improved customer experience.

With rising food and operating costs, how are you balancing pricing, quality, food safety and margins?

With rising food and operating costs, the focus is on controlling costs through menu planning while maintaining quality and safety. Meal costs are assessed at the recipe level, considering standard grammage and current input prices, with menus adjusted when required to maintain viable margins rather than compromising portions or ingredients. Since inflation affects ingredients differently, substitutions within categories can help manage costs without significantly changing the overall meal experience. Food safety remains non-negotiable, with cold-chain management, shelf-life controls, retention samples and hygiene standards built into operations. Margins are primarily protected through better wastage management, procurement planning and manpower productivity, rather than by reducing ingredient quality or service standards.

How important are customisation, nutrition and wellness in shaping corporate dining programmes today?

Customisation, nutrition and wellness are increasingly important as corporate workforces become more diverse in food preferences, dietary requirements and work patterns. However, greater choice also brings higher complexity, preparation requirements and potential wastage. Effective programmes therefore need to balance variety with operational practicality through structured menu rotation. Nutrition is also becoming more individual, with employees seeking options based on preferences such as portion size, protein, carbohydrates and cooking methods. Rather than treating wellness as a separate offering, healthier choices can be incorporated into everyday meals through balanced ingredients, grains, salads and appropriate cooking methods. Ultimately, nutritional options need to retain taste and appeal, as employees are more likely to make healthier choices when the food remains enjoyable and satisfying.

What growth opportunities do you see for managed food services across corporate offices, institutions and mixed-use developments over the next 2–3 years? Are there any specific geographies or markets you are looking to expand into?

Managed food services offer growth across two distinct segments: contract catering for corporate offices, plants and institutions, and food courts within mixed-use developments. Contract catering provides recurring demand, while retail food courts depend more on footfall, tenant mix and consumer spending. Over the next 2–3 years, growth is likely to come from deeper penetration of organised workplaces and institutions, alongside integrated food operations in large mixed-use projects.

Geographic expansion will depend less on distance and more on achieving sufficient scale. Central kitchens involve significant fixed costs, making committed volumes and operational density critical to viability. Markets are therefore likely to be entered where an initial anchor contract can support kitchen utilisation, followed by expansion around that base. Existing facilities-management relationships can also create opportunities to add managed food services within established client accounts. ■

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Holiday club ordered to refund INR 95,000 over lower-category hotel stays

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

The Chandigarh District Consumer Commission has directed Park Club International Pvt Ltd to refund ₹95,000 to a customer who paid ₹1.10 lakh for a five-year holiday membership but was allegedly offered hotels below the promised category and asked to pay additional charges.

Mandeep Kumar Garg purchased the membership on February 6, 2024, which promised 36 nights at 4- and 5-star properties across India for four adults, along with breakfast, dinner and other facilities.

According to the commission order, Garg sought accommodation at a five-star property in Manali but was instead offered a three-star hotel and was asked to upgrade his membership. He later alleged that bookings in Kasauli were offered at one- or two-star properties, with additional charges for stays and meals.

In one instance, the company confirmed a booking at The Fern Surya Resort, Kasauli, but allegedly sought a ₹2,000 non-member charge and did not provide the promised breakfast and dinner. Garg subsequently incurred additional expenses on meals during his stays.

Park Club International, formerly known as Grand Royaltaj Club International, did not appear before the commission despite being served notice and was proceeded against ex-parte.

The commission, comprising President Pawanjit Singh and member BM Sharma, said the customer had submitted membership documents, payment records, correspondence, booking confirmations and meal bills, and found the evidence unrebutted. It held that the company had failed to provide services in accordance with the representations made when the membership was sold.

The commission also noted that Garg had used the membership for stays in Manali and Kasauli. It therefore deducted ₹15,000 as the reasonable value of services already availed and ordered the remaining ₹95,000 to be refunded.

The company has also been directed to pay 9% annual interest on the refund from September 9, 2025, along with ₹15,000 towards mental agony, harassment and litigation expenses. The order is to be complied with within 45 days of receipt of its certified copy. Failure to comply will attract 12% annual interest on the principal amounts until realisation. ■

Ashvana Resort, by Vibez Estate

Agro-hospitality emerges as India's next experiential leisure frontier

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

India's leisure travel market is moving beyond destination-led holidays towards experience-driven stays, opening a new growth avenue for agro-hospitality, plantation residences and farm-based resorts.

"The Indian leisure traveller has shifted from destination-led travel to experience-led travel. A decade ago, the question was where to go. Today it is what one will feel, taste and take back," said **Ashwin Kumar, Founder & Managing Director, Vibez Estates**.

The trend is particularly relevant for plantation destinations such as Sakleshpur, Chikmagalur and Coorg, which are within comfortable driving distance of Bengaluru. The demand is there, but the organised supply is still developing. While these markets have plenty of homestays, professionally managed properties that combine the character of a working plantation with predictable hospitality standards remain limited.

Kumar sees this as one of the biggest opportunities for the segment. "These destinations have never lacked natural endowment. What they have lacked is trust, consistency and institutional standards," he said.

The guest profile is changing too. Urban fatigue is pushing travellers towards quieter, nature-led breaks, while hybrid work has made longer stays easier. Families and small groups are also increasingly looking for villas and private spaces rather than conventional hotel rooms.

"The modern traveller is not seeking stimulation; they are seeking the absence of it. Silence, altitude, canopy cover and clean air have become premium commodities," Kumar said.

The experience does not stop at the room. Guests increasingly want to understand where their food comes from, walk through coffee plantations, see harvesting and learn about the processes behind what they consume. "Farm-to-table is no longer a menu description — it is the reason for the trip," he added.

Branded model

The next phase of the market could see more hospitality brands entering plantation destinations through partnerships rather than traditional hotel development.

For owners, professional management can address some of the practical challenges of maintaining a second home or plantation residence. For travellers, it can bring greater consistency in service, housekeeping, food, safety and maintenance.

"A recognised operator brings standardised housekeeping and F&B protocols, trained manpower, guest safety systems, distribution reach and, critically, accountability," Kumar informed.

Vibez Estates is pursuing this model through its alliance with Sarovar Première. Its 40-acre Vibez Kaira coffee estate in Sakleshpur combines managed plantation land with residences and hospitality operations, reflecting an emerging proposition that sits somewhere between a second home, a farm asset and a leisure property.

But the success of such projects will depend on how carefully the land is developed.

Keeping the plantation alive

For agro-hospitality, sustainability cannot simply be an amenity or marketing message. The land itself is the product, making its long-term health central to the business.

"The plantation must remain a working plantation. The moment the agriculture becomes decorative, the proposition collapses — ecologically and commercially," Kumar said.

That means keeping construction density low, retaining cultivation and natural canopy, using agroforestry systems, managing water carefully and working with the terrain rather than against it. Local employment is another part of the model, particularly for estate maintenance and supervision.

The larger challenge is carrying capacity. If too many resorts and residences enter the same fragile landscape, the very attributes attracting visitors- quiet, greenery and clean surroundings could disappear.

"Every destination has a threshold beyond which the very quality that attracts visitors begins to erode," Kumar said.

ROI

The investment proposition is another reason the segment is attracting attention. Managed plantation assets can combine agricultural output with potential hospitality income when residences are placed in rental programmes, while the underlying land provides a longer-term asset component.

But Kumar is careful not to position the model as a guaranteed-return investment.

"Returns in this segment are market-linked, not guaranteed, and land is an inherently long-horizon asset," he said. Buyers, he added, need to undertake proper title diligence and understand exactly what their management agreements cover.

That distinction could become increasingly important as more developers enter the space.

Next five years

Over the next five years, agro-hospitality is likely to become more organised as hospitality brands look beyond conventional resort markets and infrastructure improves connectivity to emerging leisure destinations.

"Plantation and farm destinations are a logical frontier, and partnership structures with landowners and developers will be the primary route in," Kumar said.

Greater professionalisation could also bring clearer expectations around safety, food standards, service quality and environmental practices. At the same time, better connectivity around South India could bring more plantation destinations within practical weekend reach of Bengaluru, Chennai and Hyderabad.

The opportunity is significant, but the sector will have to resist the temptation to overbuild. For agro-hospitality, the landscape is not a backdrop, rather it is the core asset. Protecting it may ultimately be the difference between a short-lived real estate trend and a sustainable hospitality category. "If the industry holds its discipline on carrying capacity and land stewardship, agro-hospitality can become one of the most durable and distinctive segments in Indian leisure travel," Kumar concluded. ■

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News Bulletin

Sacred weddings move from spectacle to experience as planners bet on India's heritage advantage: Experts

Asmita Mukherjee | Varanasi

India's destination wedding market is shifting from the traditional "big fat Indian wedding" towards smaller, experience-led celebrations rooted in culture, spirituality and place, industry leaders said at the FHRAI 56th Annual Convention at Taj Ganges, Varanasi, on August 22.

Speaking at the session "Sacred Vows, Spectacular Venues: The Future of Destination Weddings in India," curated by Shriji Huzur Dr. Lakshyaraj Singh Ji Mewar of Udaipur, and moderated by Rajiv Kapoor, General Manager, Fairmont Mumbai and Roswyn, A Morgans Originals Hotel, panellists said couples are increasingly prioritising meaningful experiences over guest numbers.

Jueta Hemdev, Founder, Yolo Events, said a wedding with 92 guests at a temple had cost "five times" what a 500-guest palace wedding would have cost. "Experience is the new luxury. Luxury is all in the details," she said, highlighting personalised guest experiences and meaningful rituals.

Dr Jaideep Mehta, Founder, True Events, said that sacred destinations such as Kashi are gaining relevance as younger generations seek to reconnect with their roots. "Palaces are great, grandiose is great, experiences are great. But getting married at sacred places like Kashi, is truly momentous," he said.

The panel also debated whether sacred experiences can be recreated inside urban hotels. While Hemdev said "sacred is a feeling which cant be recreated," Mehta said that the authenticity of the destination remains irreplaceable.

Divya Chadha, Founder & Director, A Klass Apart, said India's strongest competitive advantage lies in its combination of destinations, experiences and hospitality. "You will never get the same sort of hospitality when it comes down to it," she said. The discussion also put sustainability and local economic participation at the centre of destination weddings. Mehta said the "third win" must be for the destination itself, stressing the need to prevent mega events from burdening or polluting cities.

Hemdev added that local suppliers and talent are essential to creating an authentic destination experience. "What you get from the local suppliers and local talent is what creates the true experience of being at that destination," she said. ■

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Guest-facing roles drive higher English proficiency requirements in India's hospitality workforce: Report

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

English proficiency requirements in India's hospitality sector are driven more by job responsibilities than seniority, according to a new study by ETS (TOEIC programme) and the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI). Launched at the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention in Varanasi, the report, Job-Relevant English Communication Needs for Hospitality Roles in India, establishes role-specific English proficiency benchmarks for six positions across Front Office, Food & Beverage and Housekeeping.

The study found that some junior, guest-facing employees require stronger English skills than senior colleagues in more internally focused roles. Junior housekeepers, for instance, require higher Listening, Reading and Speaking proficiency than senior housekeepers, reflecting their greater direct interaction with guests.

In Front Office and Food & Beverage, however, senior roles showed higher writing requirements, linked to responsibilities such as policy documentation and occupancy reporting. Speaking emerged as a

Percentage of the average CEFR levels aligned with tasks across the three AI tools per skill

To facilitate the crosswalk from "can-do" statements to TOEIC Link score recommendations, we converted CEFR level classifications into numeric values. We also weighted each "can-do" statement using the Phase 1 SME importance ratings (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important) to key requirement across guest-facing positions, particularly for handling guest requests, complaints and real-time interactions.

Food & Beverage roles recorded the most complex communication requirements, spanning guest service, staff supervision and client interactions.

Surendra Kumar Jaiswal, President, FHRAI, said the findings provide the industry with a common reference point for developing hiring criteria, training programmes and career-development frameworks based on the actual communication requirements of individual roles rather than job titles.

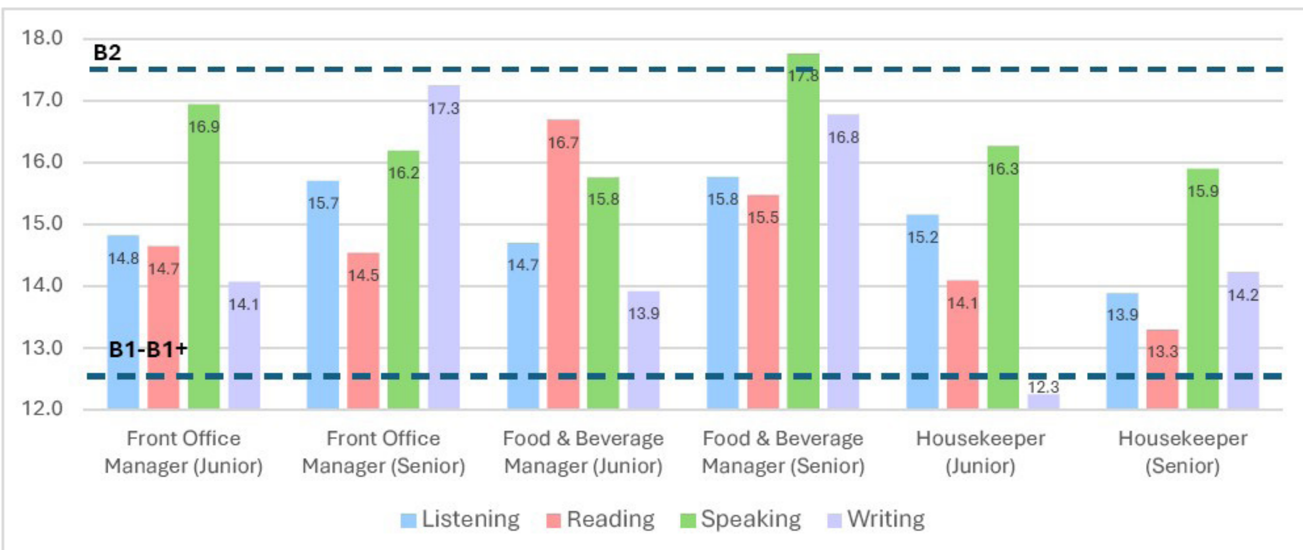
The study involved 27 hospitality subject matter experts, with an average of 21 years of industry experience, who evaluated the English-language tasks required across the six roles. Their findings were further validated using TOEIC Link scores from 331 hospitality employees working in the roles studied.

Ratnesh Jha, Global General Manager, Institutional Products, ETS, said the benchmarks could help hospitality organisations align recruitment and training decisions with the actual language demands of individual positions.

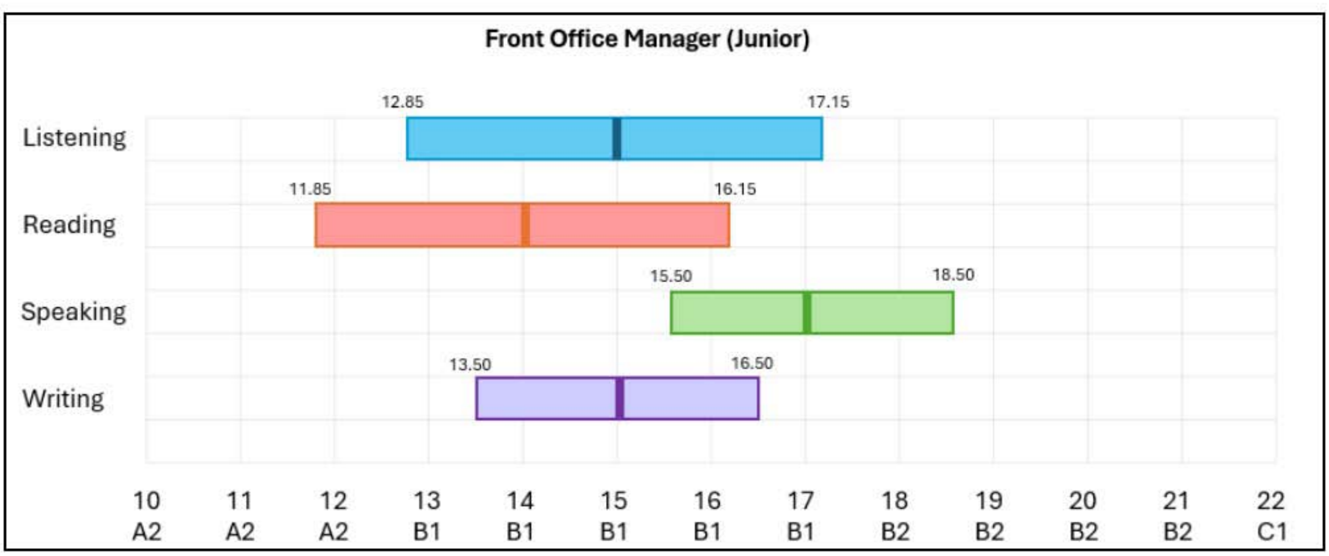
Ajay Pratap Singh, Regional Director – South Asia, ETS (TOEIC), said the research translates the sector's communication requirements into precise, role-specific English standards by combining FHRAI's industry expertise with TOEIC's language assessment capabilities.

The study recommends that hotels incorporate role-specific English expectations into job descriptions, recruitment assessments, interviews and training curricula, enabling organisations to match language capability with the operational and guest-service demands of each position. ■

Average of the TOEIC Link score for each job position



SEM-based adjustments to recommended TOEIC Link scores for Junior Front Office Manager



'Our investment in India will be phased and opportunity-led '

As India's luxury hospitality sector moves towards more personalised, design-led guest experiences, global furnishing brands are increasingly eyeing the market for growth opportunities. US-based FabricaKraft, a custom soft-furnishings company known for its zero minimum order quantity (MOQ) model and made-to-order approach, has identified India as a strategic market in its global expansion plans. The company sees rising demand from luxury hotels, resorts, boutique properties and premium dining destinations for bespoke furnishings that combine aesthetics, functionality and sustainability. In an interaction with **Asmita Mukherjee, Neha Khanna, CEO & Co-Founder of FabricaKraft**, shares the company's India growth strategy and explains how customisation and ethical manufacturing are driving its approach to the evolving hospitality market.

Why did FabricaKraft choose India as its next growth market, and what opportunity do you see in the country's luxury hospitality sector?

India's luxury hospitality sector is moving beyond imported aesthetics and catalogue-led décor. The new generation of hotels, resorts and restaurants wants to create a distinct sense of each place; spaces that are memorable, locally relevant and designed around the guest experience.

That shift made India a natural growth market for FabricaKraft. Luxury hospitality here is expanding rapidly, but the more interesting opportunity is the growing demand for personalisation without compromising performance. A beautiful cushion or furnishing must also withstand intensive use, changing weather conditions and demanding maintenance cycles.

FabricaKraft sits at this intersection of design and functionality. Our made-to-order approach, bespoke sizing, outdoor-performance fabrics and ability to execute project-specific requirements allow designers and hospitality brands to create something distinctive rather than settle for standardised products. We believe the next chapter of luxury hospitality in India will be defined not by how expensive a space looks, but by how thoughtfully and individually it has been created.

What is your planned investment for India, and how do you intend to build your presence over the next 3–5 years?

Our investment in India will be phased and opportunity-led. Rather than committing capital simply to establish a footprint, we want to invest where it directly improves what architects, designers and hospitality brands need most: greater product choice, faster project support, dependable customisation and the ability to execute small-batch requirements without compromising quality.

Our focus will be on building strong relationships with architects, interior designers, hospitality groups and procurement partners. As demand grows, we intend to expand our product portfolio for Indian conditions, strengthen local project coordination and develop a more responsive supply and fulfilment system.

Over the next three to five years, our ambition is for FabricaKraft to become a trusted custom-furnishings partner for India's premium hospitality sector, not merely another supplier entering the market. We see India as a long-term growth region, and our investment will grow alongside the network, capabilities and demand we build here.

Which hospitality segments and geographies are you targeting first - luxury hotels, resorts, boutique properties, or branded restaurants?

Our initial focus will be on hospitality businesses and premium homes where furnishings are not treated as an afterthought, but as an important part of the guest experience. This includes boutique hotels, resorts, premium homestays, design-led luxury properties, serviced apartments, branded restaurants, cafés, villas & luxury homes.

These segments are moving away from standard, catalogue-led products. They need cushions tailored to unusual spaces, outdoor furnishings that can withstand demanding conditions, curtains and table linen aligned with the property's design language, and small-batch solutions that can be customised without the constraints of mass production. That is precisely where FabricaKraft can add value.

Geographically, we will initially focus on major design and hospitality markets, along with high-growth leisure destinations where premium properties are being developed or renovated. Rather than spreading ourselves thinly across India, we want to build strong clusters of relationships with architects, interior designers, hospitality groups and procurement partners. Our strategy is to establish credibility through distinctive projects and allow those partnerships to drive expansion into the next set of markets.

Your zero-MOQ model is unique. How does it solve procurement challenges for independent hotels and boutique hospitality brands?

There are so many unique situations where not having access to low MOQ vendors. It is a huge constraint, like custom cushions for just one pool deck lounger, table linen created for a particular dining concept, or many times a designer may need to experiment with a new look in a few rooms before extending it across a property.

FabricaKraft allows properties to procure exactly what a project requires in the appropriate size, fabric, finish, and quantity. This reduces upfront expenditure, avoids surplus inventory, and makes phased renovations or design trials far easier to manage.

Most importantly, it enables smaller hospitality brands to access the level of customisation usually accessed by large client groups.

They do not have to choose between individuality and commercial practicality; they can create a distinctive guest experience one space, one collection or even one piece at a time.

How do you plan to work with hotel chains, architects, interior designers, and procurement companies in India?

We want to engage with hotel chains, architects, interior designers and procurement companies at the project-brief stage, before the major design and sourcing decisions have already been made. FabricaKraft's role is not simply to supply products from a catalogue, but to translate a project's design intent and operational requirements into made-to-order soft furnishings.

That begins with understanding how each space will be used: the dimensions, aesthetic direction, fabric performance, maintenance needs, quantities and delivery schedule. We can then develop custom cushions, covers, curtains, table linen, outdoor furnishings and other soft goods specifically for the property.

For architects and interior designers, our value lies in helping them bring their ideas to life that standard sizes and catalogue products cannot do. For hotel chains, the priority is consistency across rooms or properties, specifications that are easily repeated, dependable quality and the flexibility to manage order quantity ranging from a single bespoke product to a wider rollout.

We want to function as an extension of our clients project team like a trusted partner capable of delivering to the design vision while also meeting the practical demands of each project.

With ESG becoming a procurement priority, how does your ethical manufacturing model create value for hospitality businesses?

For hospitality businesses, ESG commitments are increasingly being tested at the procurement level. It is no longer enough to publish a sustainability statement; brands must be able to demonstrate how products are made, who makes them, and whether their sourcing decisions reflect the values they communicate to guests, investors, and corporate clients.

FabricaKraft's ethical manufacturing model makes the ESG responsibility tangible. Our attention to inclusive production, women-led craftsmanship, and responsible working practices gives hospitality partners a credible sourcing story behind the finished product—not simply an ESG claim created for marketing.

Our made-to-order model also reduces the need for speculative purchasing and surplus inventory. Clients are free to place orders according to their project needs, minimising material wastage, unnecessary stockpiling and the monetary burden.

In a sector where luxury is increasingly judged not only by looks, but also by the values behind it, ethical manufacturing is the genuine point of differentiation.

What are your growth targets for India in terms of partnerships, projects, or revenue over the next few years?

Our ambition is to become one of the most trusted custom soft-furnishings partners for the country's premium hospitality sector.

While we would prefer not to disclose specific revenue targets at this stage. Our growth will be driven by three priorities: building long-term partnerships with architects, interior designers, hospitality groups and procurement companies; establishing FabricaKraft through distinctive, high-visibility projects; and converting successful collaborations into repeat business across multiple properties.

Over the next few years, we want to work with designers, architects, boutique hotels, luxury resorts, branded restaurants and design-led properties where customisation, performance and responsible production influence procurement decisions. We want to build credibility through a carefully selected portfolio of meaningful projects. For us, the strongest indicator of success will be when a designer or hospitality group that works with FabricaKraft returns to us for its next project. Revenue will follow, but repeat partnerships, project credibility and becoming a preferred name for premium custom soft furnishings will be the more important measures of our progress in India. ■

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Air India, IHG link loyalty programmes in new partnership

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

Air India and IHG Hotels & Resorts have entered into a loyalty partnership connecting Maharaja Club and IHG One Rewards, allowing members of both programmes to earn and exchange points across airline and hotel spends.

Under the partnership, Maharaja Club members earn 2 Maharaja Points for every US$1 spent at most IHG properties worldwide. Stays at Candlewood Suites, Staybridge Suites, IHG Residences and IHG Army Hotels earn 1 Maharaja Point per US$1.

IHG One Rewards members can convert 1,000 IHG One Rewards points into 200 Maharaja Points, with 1,000 points being the minimum conversion threshold.

The partnership links IHG's portfolio of more than 7,100 hotels across over 100 countries with Air India's network across India and five continents.

As part of the launch, Maharaja Club members can earn 3x Maharaja Points on qualifying IHG stays from September 15 to December 31, 2026, subject to registration. ■

Essentia Hotels bets on affordable luxury as smaller cities drive hotel growth

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

Essentia Hotels & Resorts is betting on growing demand for branded hotels in India's tier-II and tier-III markets, positioning itself between traditional mid-market and luxury hospitality.

The company plans to expand across a mix of business and leisure destinations, including Bengaluru, Tirupati, Surat and Wayanad. Mohammed Parvez, CEO, Essentia Hotels & Resorts, said the focus over the next three to five years will be on measured, asset-light growth.

"Essentia's proposition is affordable luxury with a strong sense of place—combining contemporary design, warm Indian hospitality, quality dining and reliable service at compelling value," Parvez said.

According to him, the brand is targeting travellers who want a higher-quality hotel experience but are not necessarily looking to pay luxury-hotel prices.

"The aim is to offer guests a premium experience without the premium price, making Essentia a smart choice between mid-market and traditional luxury hotels," he said.

The strategy comes as hotel demand in India continues to spread beyond the major metros. Tier-II and tier-III cities are seeing increased demand from business travellers, domestic tourists and the wedding segment, while consumers in these markets are also showing greater acceptance of branded hotels.

"Tier-II and tier-III cities offer Essentia strong growth potential due to rising business travel, domestic tourism, weddings and increasing demand for quality branded hotels," Parvez said.

But expanding into these markets comes with its own challenges. For hotel companies, finding skilled manpower, maintaining service standards and managing supply chains can become more difficult as properties move into smaller and more dispersed markets.

"The biggest challenge is maintaining consistent service standards, finding skilled talent, managing supply chains and adapting each property to local demand while keeping the brand proposition consistent," Parvez said.

Essentia is also looking at different operating models depending on the market and the opportunity.

"We aim to pursue disciplined, asset-light expansion across high-potential business and leisure destinations," Parvez said.

The company plans to use a combination of management contracts, leases and selective ownership. According to Parvez, the mix will allow Essentia to expand without committing the same level of capital to every property.

"The strategy will be a mix of management contracts, leases and selective ownership, allowing us to scale faster while maintaining control over brand standards, guest experience and long-term asset value," he said.

As the portfolio grows, maintaining consistency across properties will become another test for the brand. Essentia is therefore looking to strengthen its operating systems through standard operating procedures, technology and employee training.

"Essentia is focused on building strong SOPs, technology-enabled processes and robust training systems to ensure consistency as we scale," Parvez said.

However, Parvez does not see technology and standardisation as substitutes for people. For a hotel brand trying to establish itself in the affordable luxury segment, the service experience remains central to its proposition.

"Hospitality is fundamentally human," he said. "We empower our teams to personalise interactions, understand guest needs and create genuine connections." For Essentia, the challenge will be to maintain that personal connection while operating a larger and more geographically dispersed portfolio.

"The goal is to combine operational consistency with personalised service," Parvez said.

The company is also broadening its focus beyond rooms and accommodation as guest expectations change. Food, design, wellness and local experiences are increasingly becoming part of the decision-making process for travellers, particularly in leisure-led destinations.

"Essentia is moving beyond accommodation to create complete lifestyle experiences," Parvez said.

The brand is looking to bring contemporary design, destination-led dining, wellness, events and local experiences into its hotels. The approach reflects a broader shift in domestic hospitality, where travellers are increasingly looking for experiences linked to the destination rather than a standardised hotel stay.

Parvez expects this demand to grow further as domestic travel expands.

"The next phase of Indian hospitality will be driven by experience-led travel, domestic leisure, wellness, culinary tourism and demand for personalised, tech-enabled stays," he said.

For Essentia, the immediate opportunity lies in serving this changing customer without moving into the traditional luxury price bracket. Its expansion into emerging markets, combined with a mix of operating models, is aimed at building a brand that can deliver a more premium hotel experience while remaining accessible. ■

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Sterling Naman Bastar, Jagdalpur

Sterling Holiday Resorts has entered the Chhattisgarh hospitality market with the launch of Sterling Naman Bastar, Jagdalpur, taking its resort portfolio to 80 properties across India. The 45-key resort, located on Chitrakote Road, marks the company's entry into Bastar and adds to its focus on developing a presence in emerging leisure destinations.

Spread across approximately 3.21 acres, Sterling Naman Bastar comprises 45 rooms across five categories, including garden-facing rooms, suites and a private pool villa. The property also features an indoor swimming pool, spa and recreation facilities, along with lawns and banquet spaces designed to cater to leisure groups, celebrations and events.

Rae by Tamara, Kumbakonam

Rae by Tamara arrives at a time when India's faith tourism economy is entering a new phase of growth, accounting for over 60% of domestic travel.

The Kumbakonam property, formerly operating under the Lilac Hotels portfolio, has been reimagined as Rae by Tamara, reflecting an entirely new philosophy of hospitality rather than merely a change in identity. At its heart is the belief that no two pilgrimages are alike, and neither are the people who undertake them. Whether they are families introducing children to the stories and traditions of a sacred destination, elderly pilgrims seeking comfort and accessibility, solo spiritual seekers, groups, or guests visiting for temple weddings and religious celebrations, Rae is designed around an intuitive understanding of the modern faith traveller and the many ways in which people experience a place of worship.

Lemon Tree Premier, Vadodara

The upscale hotel features 94 rooms and suites, a multi-cuisine restaurant, banquet hall, meeting room, swimming pool, spa and fitness centre. The property is managed by Carnation Hotels, a wholly owned subsidiary of Lemon Tree Hotels.

The opening further strengthens the group's presence in Vadodara, where it already operates three properties under the Lemon Tree Hotel, Keys Lite and Keys Select brands. With the addition of Lemon Tree Premier, the group is expanding its offering across corporate, leisure and social travel segments.

Taj Tadoba Resort & Spa, Nagpur

Spread across 17 acres, the resort features 35 private villas, an all-day dining restaurant, Machan, Panorama Bar, J Wellness Circle spa, swimming pool and fitness centre. It also offers meeting and event spaces for corporate and social gatherings.

The resort is positioned as a base for exploring Tadoba, with curated experiences including jungle safaris, birdwatching excursions, stargazing and forest-view sundowners.

Amrut Distilleries launches AmrutKranthi Single Malt

Bengaluru-based Amrut Distilleries has expanded its premium portfolio with the launch of AmrutKranthi, a new Indian single malt whisky positioned as a celebration of India's growing influence in the global luxury spirits market.

The latest expression from the pioneering Indian single malt producer is bottled at 40% ABV and builds on the company's legacy of crafting internationally acclaimed whiskies using Indian barley and maturation techniques tailored to India's climatic conditions.

According to the company, AmrutKranthi is the result of years of research, global benchmarking and expertise in whisky maturation and flavour development. The launch comes at a time when India's single malt segment is witnessing strong growth, with the category now estimated at nearly 700,000 cases and valued at around ₹1,000 crore.

Wadi Surgicals launches Enliva Active for the HoReCa sector

Wadi Surgicals Pvt. Ltd., owner of the Enliva nitrile glove brand, has partnered with Hubertus Medical Products Pvt. Ltd., Andhra Pradesh to launch Enliva Active, a black, food-safe nitrile glove developed specifically for the HoReCa (Hotels, Restaurants and Catering) sector. India's foodservice industry is one of the country's fastest-growing consumer sectors. The black colour provides a practical advantage in food handling, offering clear visual contrast against food and helping identify glove fragments in the event of accidental tearing. Production of Enliva Active has commenced at approximately 60 lakh gloves per month, equivalent to 7.2 crore gloves annually, with plans to scale production to approximately 1 crore gloves per monthin line with growing demand. Wadi Surgicals also plans to develop export markets for the product.

LG, Marriott partner to build smarter hotel rooms

LG Electronics and Marriott International have joined hands to develop a cloud-based technology platform that aims to move the hotel television beyond its traditional role as an in-room entertainment device and make it part of a wider connected guest-room ecosystem. The companies have signed a memorandum of understanding at Marriott's global headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland, to advance the jointly developed platform, which will combine smart hotel TVs, cloud technology and connected-device management. The initial rollout will cover 40 participating Marriott hotels across the United States and Canada, with the companies evaluating a wider deployment across participating Marriott brands globally. At the centre of the partnership is a shift in how hotel rooms are managed digitally. Instead of operating televisions as standalone devices, the new platform is designed to connect entertainment, hotel content and selected room functions through a common technology layer.

JLA Hospitality launches Nomad home bath accessories line

Engineered for boutique resorts and premier hotel brands alike, the new Nomad Home® bath accessories line brings modern design and Fuze antimicrobial technology to guest bedrooms.

Created specifically for the hospitality industry, the new collection combines contemporary retail-inspired designs with the durability required for a daily hotel operation.

Today's guests expect the hotel bathrooms to offer the same level of comfort and style that they enjoy at home. At the same time, hoteliers need products that can be put into frequent use without compromising on appearance. The Nomad Home Bath Accessories line has been developed to meet both expectations, offering elegant and functional accessories suitable for a wide range of hospitality spaces, from boutique hotels and luxury resorts to large metropolitan properties. Besides bath accessories, the company also offers an extensive portfolio that includes bedding, decorative bedding collections, soft furnishings, and pet-friendly hospitality products.

INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS GROUP

Apoorv Jawa, Director of Operations, Six Senses Fort Barwara

With over a decade in luxury hospitality, Apoorv Jawahas pretty much seen it all — from concierge and guest services to front office and rooms operations, from city hotels to resorts in far-flung corners of the world.

For Apoorv, great operations are not about guests noticing how well everything works—quite the opposite. The best compliment is when they don't notice at all. It is about anticipating needs, creating seamless experiences, keeping teams engaged and making sure that all those tiny details guests may never see are quietly doing their job.

He believes great hospitality is as much about people as it is about processes. Strong teams, genuine connections and just enough room for spontaneity can turn a perfectly well-run stay into one that people actually remember.

Varun Goel, Director of Sales & Marketing, The Aarlis Hotel Panchkula, Vignette Collection by IHG Hotels & Resorts

With over 16 years of hospitality experience, Varun Goel joins The Aarlis Hotel Panchkula, Vignette Collection by IHG as Director of Sales & Marketing. Having built his career with IHCL, Taj Group of Hotels, Lemon Tree Hotels, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, and IHG Hotels & Resorts, he has led commercial initiatives across key markets including Bengaluru, Delhi, Gurugram, Amritsar, Jaipur, Chandigarh, and Dehradun.

At The Aarlis Hotel Panchkula, Vignette Collection by IHG, he will focus on establishing the hotel's market presence, driving strategic partnerships and positioning the property as a preferred luxury destination in the region.

Hilton Hotels

Anuj Chaudhry, General Manager, DoubleTree by Hilton Bengaluru Airport

Bringing over two decades of hospitality experience across leading brands and diverse markets. With a career spanning hotel operations, business performance and brand transformation, he joins at an important stage of its journey following its opening in January 2026.

In his new role, Anuj will lead the hotel's overall operations, with a focus on driving business performance, strengthening guest experiences, building a strong service culture and developing a high-performing team. His experience in leading property transitions and strengthening brand experience will be particularly relevant as the hotel builds on DoubleTree by Hilton's signature warmth and hospitality while strengthening its position in Bengaluru's growing airport corridor.

Harshad Nalawade, Hotel Manager, Conrad Pune

Bringing more than 24 years of experience across India's luxury and upper-upscale hospitality sector, Nalawade will oversee hotel operations and support the property's continued focus on guest experience, people development and business performance.

With over 24 years of experience in India's luxury and upper-upscale hospitality sector, he brings expertise across hotel operations, pre-openings, revenue growth, food and beverage and team leadership. Prior to joining Conrad Pune, he served as General Manager at DoubleTree by Hilton Goa-Panaji, where he led the property's operations and focused on strengthening guest experience, team engagement and business performance.

ACCOR HOTELS

Henna Punjabi, Director of Marketing and Communications, Raffles Udaipur

In her new role, Henna will lead the hotel's marketing strategy, brand positioning, communications, digital initiatives, and strategic partnerships, further strengthening Raffles Udaipur's presence in the luxury hospitality landscape.

With over a Decade of experience in marketing and communications, Henna brings a strong track record of shaping distinctive brand narratives and delivering high-impact campaigns that connect meaningfully with guests and media. Her career across globally renowned hospitality brands, including Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, Marriott International, and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, has given her extensive expertise in brand strategy, integrated marketing, digital communications, and strategic partnerships. Bringing this breadth of experience and a strong focus on compelling brand storytelling, she will further strengthen Raffles Udaipur's visibility, guest engagement, and continued growth in the luxury hospitality space.

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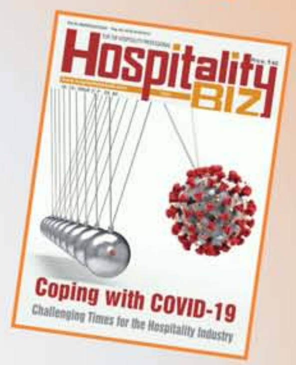

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