

From Aspirational Travel to Localized Leisure: A Middle-Class Tourism Transformation in Remote-Work India

Dr. Sarishti Joshi

Assistant Professor
Faculty of Liberal Arts
The ICFAI University, Himachal Pradesh, India.
ORCID: 0009-0000-2459-1587

Abstract:

This paper explain the transformation of tourism practices among India's middle class in the wake of remote work and pandemic-induced disruptions. Drawing on quantitative insights, it introduces the concept of Localized Mobility Reorientation, a process through which aspirational, status-driven travel is reconfigured into nearby, experience-based and emotionally restorative leisure—commonly known as staycations. The theory suggests that this shift is not merely behavioural but structural, reflecting deeper recalibrations in identity, class performance and spatial mobility. Staycations emerge as a hybrid form of leisure that integrates work flexibility, emotional well-being and localized consumption. They serve psychological needs (mental respite, familial bonding), support sustainable economic practices (local tourism revival, frugal spending) and align with nationalist soft-power initiatives like “Dekho Apna Desh.” The study reveals how India's middle class navigates the dual pressures of professional mobility and socio-cultural rootedness, offering a new lens on domestic tourism in post-pandemic economies. In doing so, it extends the mobility paradigm and contributes to emerging theories of digital-era tourism, middle-class identity and localized leisure economies in the Global South.

Keywords: Staycation, Middle-class India, Remote Work, Post-Pandemic Travel, Work-life balance, Local Tourism, COVID-19, Leisure Psychology, Digital burnout, Grass-root Economy.

INTRODUCTION

Travel has long been regarded as essential to personal well-being, offering opportunities for rest, exploration and social connection. In India, however, leisure travel remains a complex and often unattainable aspiration for large segments of the middle class. Despite the growing presence of travel agencies and increased visibility of tourism services, rising costs and mounting work pressures have made traditional vacations increasingly inaccessible for salaried professionals and urban households (Kumar & Raj, 2023). The demands of corporate employment which accounts for the long hours of working, performance targets and limited leave; further erode the possibility of extended travel, leading to chronic stress and strained family dynamics (Gupta & Sharma, 2022). Against this backdrop, staycations have gained popularity as a pragmatic and emotionally restorative alternative. These localized leisure practices provide the benefits of a holiday without the economic or logistical burdens of long-distance travel (Singh & Verma, 2021). More than just a cost-saving strategy, the rise of staycations reflects a deeper recalibration of how the Indian middle class navigates work, well-being and mobility. Emerging

preferences for nearby travel, domestic leisure and mindful rest suggest that staycations are not a temporary fix, but part of a broader shift in leisure behaviour, identity performance and class aspirations (Desai & Patel, 2023; Basu, 2022). While staycations are often framed as a modern, post-pandemic solution, home-based leisure has long been embedded in India's cultural traditions. Joint family systems, seasonal school holidays and festival-centric gatherings have historically created space for relaxation and bonding without the need for travel. Rituals such as Diwali and Holi etc. transformed homes into sites of collective joy, emphasizing togetherness over mobility (Chakraborty, 2018; Gupta, 2019). In this light, today's staycations represent not a break from tradition, but a return to longstanding cultural values that prioritize shared time, emotional well-being and rootedness in place. This paper argues that staycations represent a structural transformation in tourism behaviour rather than a passing trend.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

The concept of the staycation first gained prominence in North America during the 2007–2008 Financial crisis, offering a low-cost alternative to traditional tourism (Smith, 2010). However, its global resurgence during the COVID-19 pandemic marked a fundamental change in the geography of leisure (Liu, Zhao, & Mao, 2023). In India, this shift intersected with the digitalization of work and changing class dynamics, especially among knowledge workers, educators and urban professionals working remotely. Campaigns such as “Dekho Apna Desh” reinforced this localized focus, encouraging citizens to explore their immediate surroundings rather than seek status through international or long-distance domestic travel (Jones & Brown, 2020). Despite the increasing prevalence of staycations, existing tourism literature tends to view them as either crisis-induced adaptations or temporary deviations from "normal" travel. Little scholarly attention has been given to staycations as a structural transformation in tourism behaviour, especially among India's aspirational middle class. There is also limited theorization of how remote work, mental well-being and class-based identity shaped domestic leisure decisions in a post-pandemic world. This study uses quantitative approach to investigate how remote work and post-pandemic conditions have reshaped middle-class tourism behaviours in India. In doing so, it develops the concept of Localized Mobility Reorientation that explains how middle-class Indians are transforming tourism practices by integrating work flexibility, cultural rootedness and emotional self-care into their leisure choices. The paper contributes to tourism scholarship by shifting the focus from aspirational travel to culturally meaningful, sustainable and community-based forms of leisure.

CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF LOCALIZED LEISURE IN INDIA

The recent popularity of staycations among India's middle class reflects not only economic or pandemic-related shifts but also a revival of traditional leisure practices deeply embedded in Indian culture. Historically, home-based holidays were common, especially in joint family systems where school vacations and festivals like Diwali or Holi created natural opportunities for communal rest and celebration (Chakraborty, 2018; Gupta, 2019). These moments' emphasized relationships, storytelling and shared rituals which was capable of forming the leisure rooted in togetherness rather than travel. India's diverse geography also makes local explorations culturally rich and easily accessible. Families increasingly engage with nearby destinations such as hill stations, temples, markets or rural retreats defines rediscovering the value of regional experiences (Sharma, 2020). Digital platforms now enhance staycation planning by enabling easy access to local events, virtual tours or online workshops, expanding leisure possibilities without the need to travel far (Patel, 2021). In parallel, growing interest in wellness, through yoga, meditation or Ayurveda has further embedded health-focused experiences into the staycation model

(Reddy, 2021). Thus, staycations in India are not simply about staying home, they are about rediscovering local experiences through a cultural, emotional and mindful lens.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THEMATIC OVERVIEW

1. Foundational Theories: Leisure, Identity and Risk

Author(s) / Source	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Staycations in India
Durkheim	1912 / 2008	Social rituals and collective experience	Travel as modern ritual strengthening group cohesion	Frames staycations as socially integrative rituals within family structures
Blumer	1969	Symbolic interactionism	Behaviour based on socially interpreted meanings	Staycations as culturally constructed leisure shaped by context
Bourdieu	1984	Taste and social distinction	Cultural preferences reflect class-based habitus	Staycations reflect class identity and cultural capital
Beck	1992	Risk society theory	Modernity linked to risk-averse behavior	Staycations preferred as low-risk, stable alternatives
Giddens	1991	Self-identity and modernity	Identity shaped by lifestyle and reflexivity	Staycations as tools for lifestyle expression and emotional recalibration
Arnould & Thompson	2005	Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)	Consumption tied to identity construction and symbolic meaning	Staycations reflect evolving middle-class consumption identities

2. Global & Pandemic-Era Shifts in Travel Behaviour

Author(s) / Source	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Staycations in India
Gössling et al.	2021	Global travel trends	Shift to local/domestic tourism globally	Validates Indian trends toward staycations
UNWTO & WTTC	2020–21	Tourism recovery post-COVID	Domestic tourism key to post-pandemic recovery	Supports “Dekho Apna Desh” and state-level campaigns
Liu, Zhao & Mao	2023	Camping and wellness	Wellness benefits consistent across travel forms	Validates nature-based Indian staycations
Gupta et al.	2023	Risk perception in travel	Pandemic increased domestic preference	Explains shift to safer, localized travel
Booking.com ("How India Travels")	2023	Accommodation & planning trends	Rise in alternate lodging, spontaneity, tier-2/3 cities	Confirms broad base for localized tourism patterns

3. Cultural and Wellness Dimensions of Staycations

Author(s) / Source	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Staycations in India
Desai & Patel	2023	Urban wellness via staycations	Psychological recovery through nearby breaks	Supports staycations as mental health strategies
Jain & Singhal	2021	Work-life balance and digital detox	Staycations reduced stress and improved productivity	Functional benefit of stay-at-home travel
Mishra & Rajan	2023	Wellness & slow travel	Staycations integrated with mindfulness and nature	Broadens view beyond urban breaks
Reddy	2021	Traditional wellness (Yoga, Ayurveda)	Spiritual and health-based tourism rising	Cultural depth added to domestic leisure
Pathak & Mehta	2022	Cultural rediscovery through travel	Local heritage revalued post-pandemic	Reframes staycations as rooted experiences
Chatterjee & Sinha	2022	Social media influence	Instagram/YouTube made domestic tourism aspirational	Explains lifestyle branding of staycations

4. Consumer Preferences and Hospitality Response

Author(s) / Source	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Staycations in India
Singh et al.	2021	Hospitality industry adaptation	Hotels promoted workcations and local retreat packages	Industry responded to staycation demand
Kumar & Sharma	2022	Travel decision factors	Proximity, affordability, and safety dominated preferences	Staycations offered practical advantages
Verma & Kapoor	2021	Millennial urban trends	Local travel favored for flexibility and time-saving	Shows generational shift toward nearby leisure
Agrawal & Bansal	2022	Long-term leisure habits	Staycations persisted after lockdowns	Indicates permanent behaviour change
Rajkamal et al.	2023	Smart & domestic tourism	Digitization, resilience, and localized focus	Places staycations within wider tourism paradigm

5. Policy and Regional Strategy: Leveraging Local Travel

Author(s) / Source	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Staycations in India
Ministry of Tourism, India	2021	“Dekho Apna Desh” campaign	Promoted domestic circuits and exploration	Institutional boost to staycation trend
Business Standard & Hindustan Times	2021	Urban & regional travel surge	Media reported uptick in staycation activity	Public perception and real-time demand documentation
Roy & Biswas	2022	Rural and eco-tourism	Popularity of natural retreats in East India	Staycations in lesser-known destinations

Author(s) / Source	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Relevance to Staycations in India
Agarwal & Pandey	2022	State-level recovery via tourism	Focus on heritage circuits and offbeat travel	Showcases decentralized policy engagement
Pande & Bhardwaj	2024	Hill station trends for remote work	Long-term demand for serene work-travel destinations	Staycations aligned with work-from-anywhere culture

LITERATURE GAP:

The literature reveals strong momentum toward domestic, wellness-oriented and culturally grounded tourism in India post-COVID-19. Foundational theories in sociology and consumer behaviour help frame staycations as socially meaningful, identity-based responses to structural shifts like remote work and travel risk aversion. While empirical studies document this trend across media, policy and consumer preferences, few contributions synthesize these developments into a grounded theory specific to the Indian middle class. This research addresses that gap by developing the concept of Localized Mobility Reorientation, explaining how staycations reflect a deeper transformation in class identity, leisure behaviour and emotional self-care in a post-pandemic, remote-work environment.

METHODOLOGICAL GAPS AND THE ROLE OF GROUNDED THEORY:

While numerous studies document the rise of domestic and wellness-oriented travel in India (Agrawal & Bansal, 2022; Gupta et al., 2023), there is a lack of theoretical models that explain why and how middle-class Indians reorient their travel behaviour toward staycations. Most existing literature focuses on descriptive or policy-level analysis, leaving a gap in conceptual understanding of leisure behaviour transformation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To explore how staycations have emerged as a preferred leisure trend among India's middle class during the remote work era.
2. To examine the cultural role of staycations in promoting family bonding and well-being.
3. To assess the social, psychological and economic drivers behind staycation preferences.
4. To analyse the impact of staycations on work-life balance and burnout in remote work settings.
5. To develop a grounded theory explaining the transformation of middle-class tourism behaviour in post-pandemic India.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How has the rise of remote work influenced the popularity of staycations among India's middle class?
2. In what ways do staycations foster family bonding and contribute to emotional well-being in Indian households?
3. What social, psychological, and economic factors shape middle-class preferences for staycations over traditional travel?
4. How do staycations affect work-life balance, job productivity, and burnout in a remote or hybrid work environment?

5. What theoretical insights can be developed to explain the transformation of middle-class tourism behaviour in post-pandemic India?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative analysis through questionnaire to explore how staycations have reshaped middle-class tourism behaviour in India during the remote work era.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A quantitative design was employed to allow patterns and themes to emerge organically from participant response from the questionnaire. This approach facilitated the development of a conceptual framework known as Localized Mobility Reorientation which explains the shift from aspirational travel to localized leisure.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

A total of 258 participants were selected as a Purposive and Snowball Sampling to ensure a diverse yet relevant range of perspectives. Participants were: Members of the Indian middle class, working remotely or in hybrid formats, Residing in urban areas, engaged in at least one staycation between 2021 and 2024.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interview questionnaire conducted via Google Form link shared through phone and emails. Participants were also encouraged to share the narratives about their staycation experiences, motivations, planning and perceived outcomes.

DATA ANALYSIS

- It was done through basic Excel
- Graphs and Pie-Charts were formed based on the data collected through the questionnaire.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

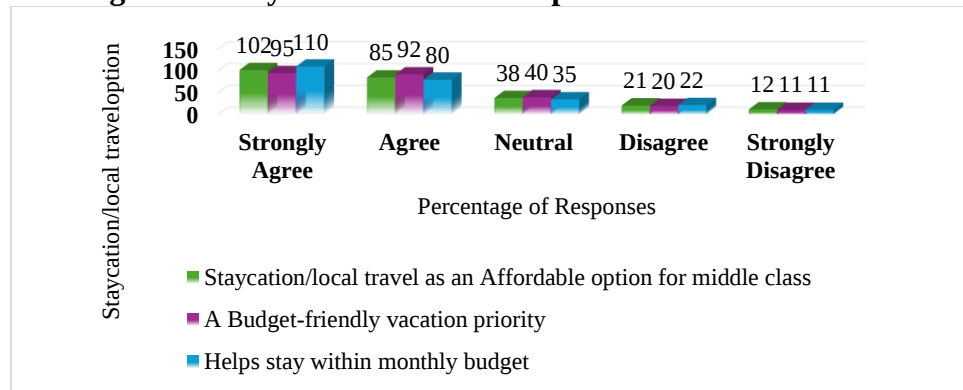
All participants gave informed consent and their identities were anonymized.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

India, often classified among the developing or “third world” nations, is progressing rapidly across multiple dimensions such as economic, technological, social and infrastructural. This growth is reflected in its highly diverse population, which spans from the “Richie Rich” elite, with global lifestyles and immense wealth, to the “Poorest of the Poor,” who struggle daily for even the basic necessities.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested this resilience. Lockdowns and economic slowdowns hit incomes, jobs and small businesses, forcing even the middle class to reassess spending and prioritize essentials. Yet, their adaptability of embracing the remote work, online education, local travel (like staycations) and digital services helped stabilize demand and keep economic activity alive. While the “Richie Rich” could weather the storm with reserves and the “Poorest of the Poor” relied heavily on aid, the middle class became a bridge: sustaining consumption, supporting local businesses, maintain cultural essence alive and demonstrating how adaptability can drive recovery in a crisis. Confinement disrupted routines but also strengthened family bonds, with shared activities like cooking and games fostering emotional support (Gupta, 2020). However, financial insecurity, job losses and fears of infection led to increased stress, anxiety and depression, particularly in urban areas with limited space (Sharma & Joshi, 2021).

Figure 1: Staycation/local travel option for the Middle Class



Source: Data collection (2022-2024)

The data shows that a large majority of respondents view staycations/local travel as affordable, with over 72% agreeing or strongly agreeing across all three affordability-related statements. This reflects Bourdieu's (1984) idea of class-based consumption, where leisure choices align with economic realities. Budget-friendliness emerged as a priority for 72.86% of respondents, supporting Beck's (1992) risk society theory, as middle-class households aim to minimise financial uncertainty. The highest agreement (73.64%) was for the idea that staycations help maintain monthly budgets, echoing Giddens' (1991) reflexive modernity, where individuals adapt leisure to sustain financial stability. Low disagreement rates (<10%) confirm that affordability is central to staycation adoption, consistent with previous studies (Kumar & Sharma, 2022; Booking.com, 2023) highlighting cost, proximity, and reduced planning as key factors driving middle-class domestic travel preferences. This shows that Travel restrictions and health concerns made traditional vacations risky and costly, giving rise to staycations—short breaks near home (Basu, 2022). Global tourism fell by 75% in 2020, with similar patterns in 2021, making domestic trips the safer, preferred choice (WTTC; Gupta & Sharma, 2022). Popular destinations included Shimla, Mussoorie, Goa and Kerala (MakeMyTrip, 2020). Staycations, promoted by convenience and affordability, have become a lasting trend in Indian travel (Desai & Patel, 2023).

Remote work blurred work-life boundaries, causing burnout, while staycations offered stress relief without extensive planning or expense (Jain & Singhal, 2021; Singh & Verma, 2021). These trips renewed interest in local attractions and emphasized wellness over exotic destinations (Basu, 2022; Kumar & Raj, 2023). Initially a temporary fix, staycations now reflect a permanent shift in leisure habits, blending affordability, sustainability, and accessibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on families and mental health in India, particularly during the nationwide lockdowns in 2020. The lockdown, which started in March 2020, was one of the most stringent globally, lasting several months with varying degrees of restrictions. It forced millions of families to stay indoors, disrupting daily routines and creating both challenges and opportunities for family dynamics and mental health. One positive outcome of this confinement was the strengthening of family bonds. Many families, who previously struggled with busy schedules and limited time together, suddenly found themselves engaging in shared activities like cooking, playing games, or watching movies. This increased interaction allowed family members to reconnect and emotionally support each other during a time of uncertainty (Gupta, 2020). For many households, this period became an opportunity to rebuild

relationships and foster a sense of unity. The COVID-19 pandemic not only posed significant mental health challenges but also catalysed a shift in vacation preferences, particularly among India's middle class. The abrupt lifestyle changes, coupled with financial insecurity, job losses, and fears of contracting the virus, led to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Sharma and Joshi (2021) noted that the prolonged isolation and lack of social interaction took a toll on psychological well-being, especially in urban settings where families faced confinement in smaller spaces. These mental health pressures created a growing need for relaxation and a change of environment, even as long-distance travel remained out of reach.

With lockdowns and strict international travel restrictions in place, many Indian families found traditional vacations both risky and financially unfeasible. This gave rise to the trend of staycations, where individuals vacationed close to home or explored nearby destinations (Basu, 2022). Staycations provided a way for families to rejuvenate without the complications of air travel or navigating international health protocols. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), global tourism saw a sharp decline of 75% in 2020, with similar patterns continuing into 2021. As a result, domestic travel and regional getaways became the preferred choice for many, offering both convenience and safety (Gupta & Sharma, 2022). The mental health challenges brought on by the pandemic, coupled with this shift toward local travel, underscore how the pandemic fundamentally reshaped both psychological well-being and leisure habits in India.

Staycations offered a practical alternative, allowing people to enjoy breaks without the logistical hassles of air travel, airports, or strict health protocols. This convenience, coupled with lower financial investments, made staycations more accessible to families affected by economic uncertainties. Moreover, local destinations like Shimla, Mussoorie, and beach resorts in Goa and Kerala became popular due to their proximity and appeal (MakeMyTrip, 2020). Additionally, as Desai and Patel (2023) point out, staycations are evolving into a permanent feature of modern Indian travel habits, driven by a broader appreciation for sustainable and mindful vacationing. Remote work, another pandemic-induced change, blurred the lines between professional and personal life, often leading to stress and burnout. Staycations provided a means to alleviate this by offering short, refreshing breaks without extensive planning or financial burden (Jain & Singhal, 2021; Singh & Verma, 2021). These shorter, more localized trips allowed middle-class individuals to balance work and leisure, fostering a renewed interest in local attractions and nature (Basu, 2022). As a result, staycations are reshaping the travel landscape, emphasizing relaxation and wellness over exotic destinations (Kumar & Raj, 2023). The staycation trend, initially seen as a temporary solution, has now evolved into a more permanent shift in travel behaviour. Individuals who were confined to their homes during lockdowns began to rediscover local attractions, parks, hill stations, and regional tourist destinations that they had overlooked in the past. This newfound appreciation for nearby getaways provided the dual benefits of relaxation without the complications of booking flights, navigating airports, or dealing with international health protocols and restrictions. Furthermore, staycations required less financial investment, making them a more accessible option for families affected by the economic uncertainties brought on by the pandemic.

Here's a well-articulated description of some of the most visited local destinations in India during the pandemic, presented in a table format:

Table 1. Most Visited Local Destinations in India during the Pandemic

Destination	Location	Famous For	Pandemic Travel Appeal	Source
Shimla	Himachal Pradesh	Colonial architecture, scenic views, and mild weather	It became a popular choice for short getaways for middle-class families looking to escape the summer heat	The Better India, 2020
Mussoorie “Queen of the Hills”	Uttarakhand	The charming hill station is famous for its pleasant climate and lush landscapes	Mussoorie attracted many tourists due to its proximity to Delhi and other northern cities	Travel Triangle, 2021
Nainital	Uttarakhand	Picturesque lake, serene environment, cool climate	Ideal for peaceful hill retreats and easy access from northern India	Thrillophilia, 2021
Munnar	Kerala	Tea plantations, rolling hills, pleasant weather	Nature-filled break with scenic views and cool climate	Kerala Tourism, 2021
Rishikesh	Uttarakhand	Adventure sports, spiritual retreats, yoga	Popular for yoga, river rafting, and a blend of adventure and spirituality	Outlook Traveller, 2021
Ooty	Tamil Nadu	Beautiful landscapes, tea gardens, cool climate	Sought after by southern Indian families for a peaceful break	Travelogy India, 2021
Udaipur “City of Lakes”	Rajasthan	Royal palaces, picturesque lakes, and luxurious resorts.	A preferred destination for staycations. The pandemic restrictions increased interest in exploring heritage locations like Udaipur.	The Wandering Core, 2020
Jaisalmer	Rajasthan	Sand dunes, desert safaris, historic forts	Ideal for experiencing desert culture, heritage,	Holidify, 2021

			and uncrowded exploration	
Lonavala	Maharashtra	Serene hill station known for its greenery, lakes, and caves.	It saw a surge in visitors from nearby cities, offering a quick respite during the pandemic lockdowns	Curly Tales, 2021
Goa	Goa	Pristine beaches, vibrant culture, and laid-back atmosphere	Goa remained a favourite destination, especially for those seeking relaxation in a coastal environment. While international tourists stayed away, domestic tourism in Goa flourished	Travel India, 2021
Coorg (Kodagu)	Karnataka	Coffee plantations, lush green hills	Favoured by nature lovers for its tranquillity and natural beauty	Times of India, 2021
Kerela (Backwaters)	Kerela	Kerala's houseboats and tranquil backwaters and Coconut Trees.	Became a top choice for travellers looking for a peaceful, socially distanced vacation. The natural beauty of places like Alleppey and Kumarakom drew many visitors	Travelogues, 2021
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	Bay of Bengal (Indian Territory)	Pristine beaches, crystal-clear waters, scuba diving	Remote and isolated destination with water sports and nature experiences	The Hindu, 2021

The table 2 describes the revival of local economies, driven by the travel preferences of middle-class families, demonstrates how the pandemic has reshaped consumer behaviour and created a more sustainable tourism model. This shift not only supports local businesses but also fosters a sense of community and connection among travellers and their destinations. In this new landscape, the focus on

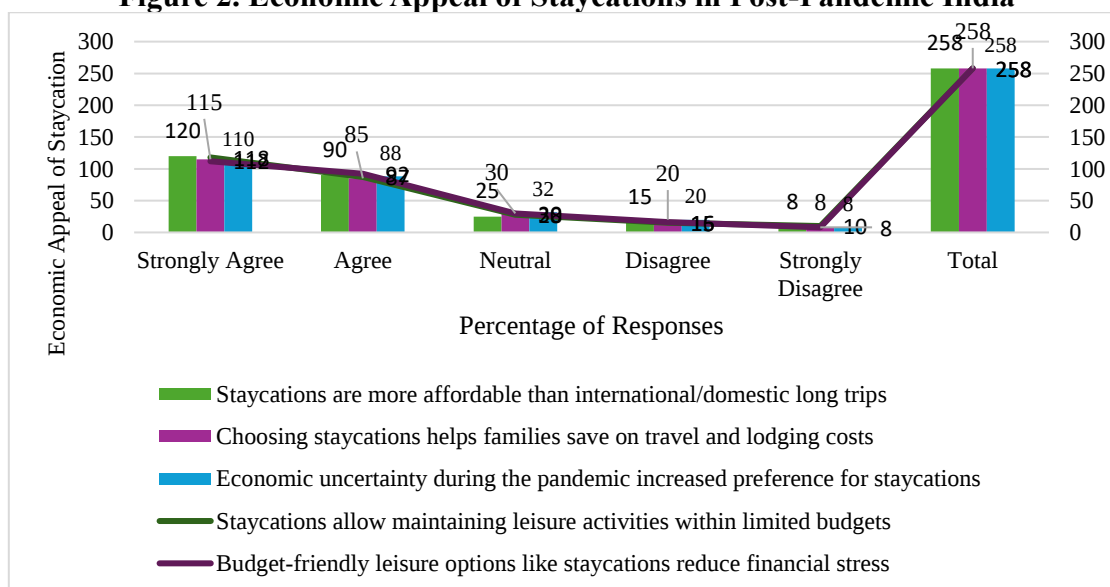
local tourism and staycations highlights the profound changes in travel behaviour, encouraging a deeper appreciation for India's diverse cultural and natural heritage

THE ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS OF STAYCATIONS

The economic impact of the pandemic on household incomes also played a significant role in accelerating the staycation trend. Middle-class families, who were particularly vulnerable to the financial challenges posed by the pandemic, sought ways to maintain leisure and relaxation while cutting back on expenses. The financial advantages of staycations, combined with health concerns, made them a highly attractive option for many middle-class families.

The varied economic theories also suggest the deep understanding of the Economic consideration of the Staycation that can be analysed through the explanation of the consumer behaviour and spending patterns. From a cost-saving perspective, staycations allow consumers to substitute expensive travel with local experiences, reducing transportation and accommodation costs. This aligns with the Substitution Effect in Consumer Choice Theory, where people opt for cheaper alternatives when prices rise (Mankiw, 2014). Additionally, staycations contribute to the Keynesian Multiplier Effect, as money saved from long-distance travel is redirected to local businesses, boosting the economy (Keynes, 1936). The Price Elasticity of Demand also plays a role, as staycations tend to be more price inelastic compared to international travel, meaning small price increases do not significantly reduce demand (Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 2013). From a consumer behaviour standpoint, Utility Theory explains how individuals maximize satisfaction by choosing experiences that provide the best value for money (Varian, 2010). Furthermore, Sustainable Development Economics highlights the environmental benefits of staycations, as they reduce carbon footprints by minimizing air travel and encourage local tourism (Daly, 1990). Thus, staycations serve as a cost-effective, economy-boosting, and environmentally sustainable alternative to traditional vacations which is clearly shown in table 3.

Figure 2. Economic Appeal of Staycations in Post-Pandemic India



Source: Data collection (2022-2024)

The findings from the 258 respondents clearly highlight the strong economic motivations driving the popularity of staycations among India's middle class. A significant majority of participants (120 strongly agree and 90 agree; 81.3%) stated that staycations are more affordable than long domestic or international trips, indicating that cost-efficiency is a major determinant in leisure choices. Similarly, 115 respondents strongly agreed and 85 agreed (77.5%) that opting for staycations allows families to save considerably on travel and lodging costs, reinforcing the perception of staycations as a budget-conscious alternative. Economic uncertainty brought by the pandemic also played a central role, with 110 strongly agreeing and 88 agreeing (76.7%) that financial instability increased their preference for staycations. Furthermore, affordability was linked to the preservation of leisure activities: 118 strongly agreed and 87 agreed (79.5%) that staycations helped them maintain recreational habits within limited budgets. Finally, 112 strongly agreed and 92 agreed (79.1%) that budget-friendly leisure options like staycations reduce financial stress, reflecting the psychological relief attached to economical leisure. Collectively, the data suggests that affordability, financial prudence, and pandemic-induced economic uncertainty strongly influenced middle-class households to embrace staycations as a sustainable form of leisure.

As a result, staycations offered an affordable and stress-free alternative to international travel. The economic appeal of staycations lies in the reduced costs of transportation, lodging and food, all of which contribute to making vacations more budget friendly.

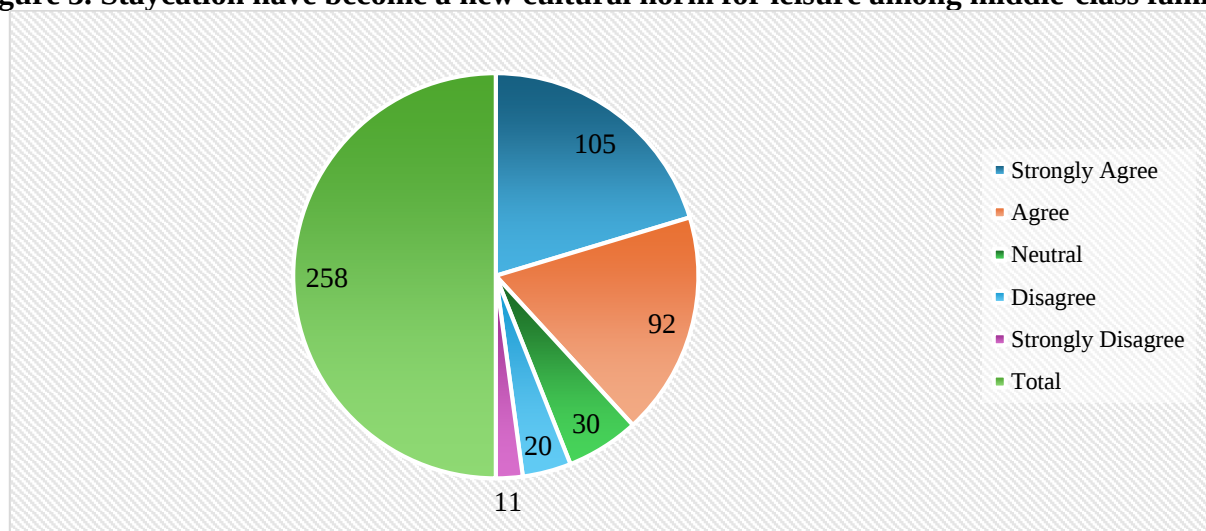
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SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGY OF STAYCATION

Viewed through a sociological lens, the transformation in travel behaviour among India's middle class during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals deep structural, cultural and behavioural shifts. As international travel became constrained by safety concerns, financial limitations, and institutional restrictions, staycations—vacations taken within one's home or nearby locality emerged as a socially meaningful and economically viable alternative. Drawing on Giddens' (1991) theory of reflexive modernization, the adoption of staycations can be seen as a rational, risk-aware response in an increasingly uncertain world. In this context, individuals constantly reassessed their travel decisions based on perceived threats to health and safety, leading them to prioritize local, hygienic, and controlled

environments (Kumar & Sharma, 2022). This behavioural shift underscores the role of individual agency within the broader framework of societal risk. From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969), the meaning of travel itself was redefined through everyday social interactions and mediated representations. Staycations, previously viewed as second-rate alternatives, were reframed as aspirational and wellness-oriented experiences, often curated and legitimized through social media narratives (Chatterjee & Sinha, 2022). Simultaneously, Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus and cultural capital illuminate how middle- and upper-middle-class Indians expressed their identity and values—such as sustainability, authenticity, and self-care—through localized, refined leisure practices (Verma & Kapoor, 2021). This reflects how class-based preferences shape consumption and leisure choices. Applying a functionalist lens (Durkheim, 1912/2008), staycations can be understood as a mechanism of social stabilization during periods of disruption. They not only helped individuals cope with mental and emotional stress but also contributed to the resilience of the tourism and hospitality sectors by redirecting demand toward local economies (Singh et al., 2021). The rise of mindful leisure is also captured through Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which highlights a shift in consumption patterns—from materialistic, status-driven tourism to experiential, ethical, and place-based travel (Roy & Biswas, 2022; Airbnb India, 2022). Finally, situating this change within Ulrich Beck's (1992) theory of the risk society, staycations appear as part of a broader and enduring adaptation to ongoing social risks. Even in the post-lockdown era, Indian travelers continued to prefer local escapes over long-haul tourism due to persistent concerns about health, economic volatility, and global instability (Gupta et al., 2023; Agrawal & Bansal, 2022). Together, these sociological frameworks reveal that staycations are not just an economic or practical choice, but a reflection of evolving societal norms, identities, and values in contemporary India.

Figure 3. Staycation have become a new cultural norm for leisure among middle-class families

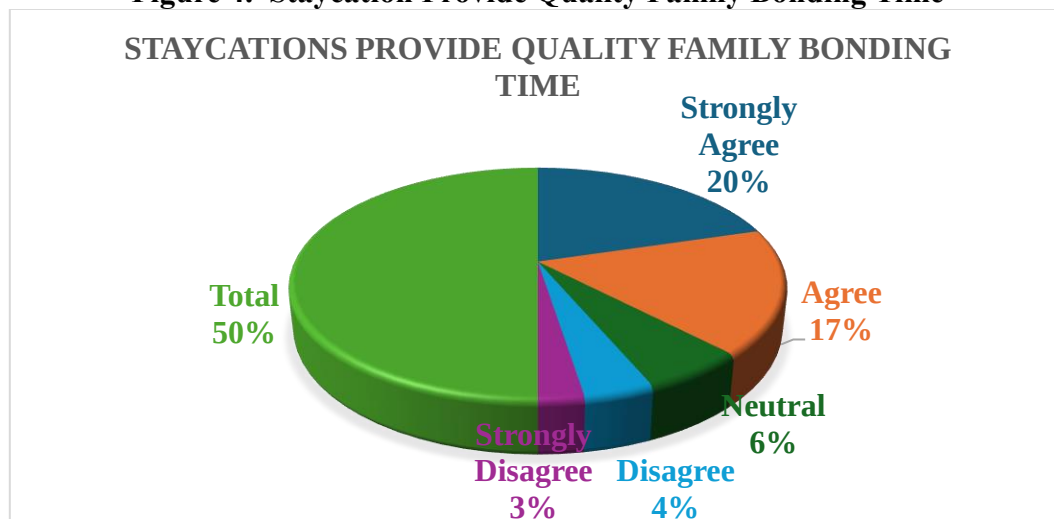


Source: Data collection (2022-2024)

The findings from the table highlight a significant behavioural and cultural shift among middle-class individuals in India regarding staycations in the post-pandemic era. Out of 258 respondents, a majority (197; 105 strongly agree and 92 agree) affirmed that staycations have emerged as a new cultural norm for leisure, reflecting a broader adaptation of local and accessible forms of recreation. Similarly, 199 respondents (112 strongly agree, 87 agree) indicated a preference for short local getaways over traditional

long-distance vacations, suggesting a shift toward convenience and cost-effectiveness in leisure behaviour. Family bonding emerged as another critical factor, with 202 respondents (118 strongly agree, 84 agree) acknowledging that staycations facilitate stronger shared experiences compared to conventional travel. The influence of social media was also evident, as 200 respondents (110 strongly agree, 90 agree) recognized its role in popularizing staycations among urban youth, underscoring the cultural construction of leisure practices through digital platforms. Furthermore, 206 respondents (120 strongly agree, 86 agree) reported being more inclined toward wellness, simplicity, and local cultural engagement, signalling a redefined meaning of travel shaped by post-pandemic values of mindfulness and authenticity. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that staycations are not merely an economic alternative but represent a deeper behavioural and cultural transformation within India's middle class.

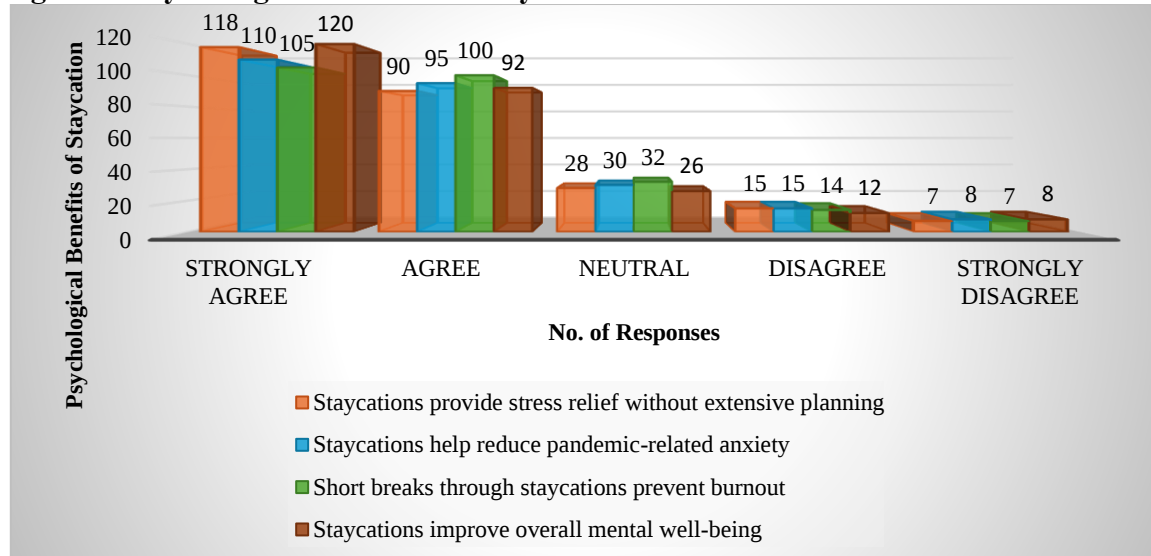
Figure 4. Staycation Provide Quality Family Bonding Time



Source: Data collection (2022-2024)

The findings reveal that staycations have become a socially integrative and psychologically restorative practice for India's middle class. A significant majority of respondents associated staycations with family bonding, supporting Durkheim's (1912/2008) view of leisure as a collective ritual that strengthens social cohesion. Similarly, the strong link between staycations and emotional well-being resonates with Giddens' (1991) idea of identity construction through lifestyle practices, suggesting that local leisure is increasingly tied to self-care and personal meaning. The high agreement on stress relief highlights staycations as a coping mechanism against pandemic fatigue and work-related burnout, reflecting Beck's (1992) risk society framework where individuals seek safer and more manageable alternatives to long-distance travel. Furthermore, the emphasis on shared family activities aligns with Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism, positioning staycations as symbolic acts of care and unity. Overall, the table underscores how staycations are not simply substitutes for travel but have evolved into meaningful cultural practices that combine affordability, emotional security, and family solidarity in post-pandemic India.

Figure 5. Psychological benefits of Staycation in reference to the Middle Class Indians

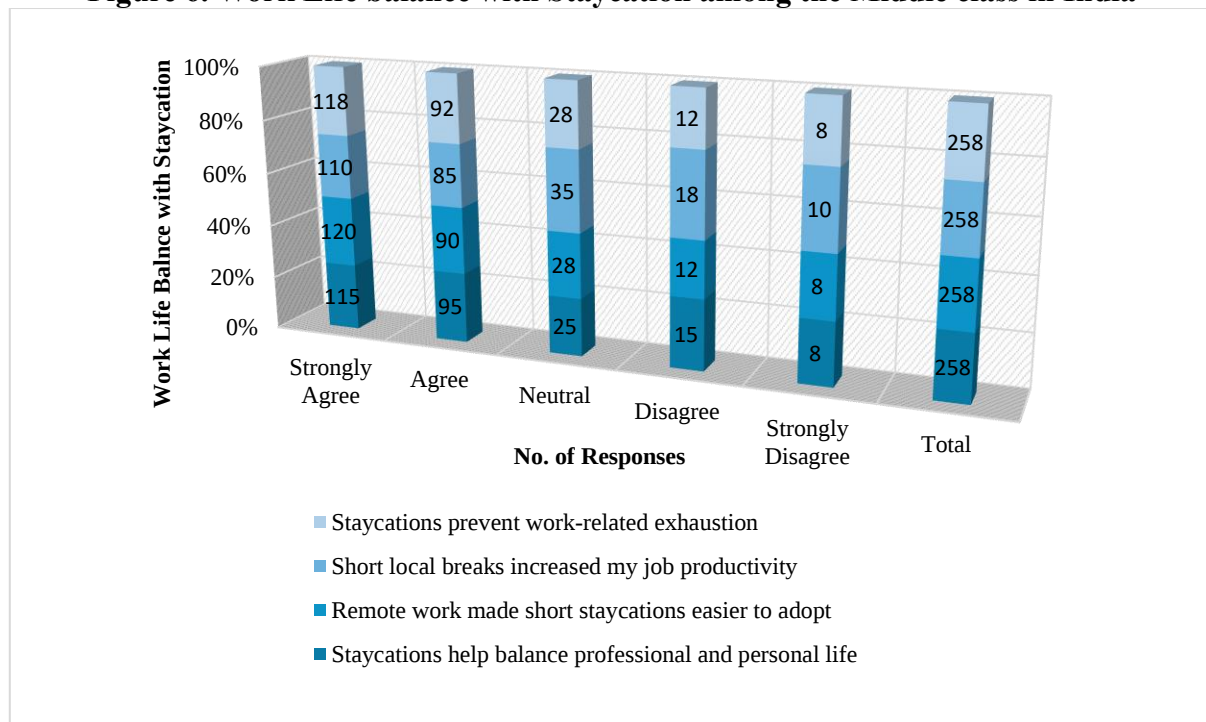


Source: Data collection (2022-2024)

The data indicates that staycations significantly contribute to psychological well-being among middle-class individuals in post-pandemic India. A majority of respondents (118 strongly agree, 90 agree) emphasized that staycations provide stress relief without the burden of extensive planning, suggesting that simplicity and accessibility are key to their appeal. Similarly, 205 respondents (110 strongly agree, 95 agree) affirmed that staycations helped reduce pandemic-related anxiety, underscoring their role as coping mechanisms during times of uncertainty. Moreover, 205 respondents (105 strongly agree, 100 agree) believed that short breaks prevented burnout, aligning with findings that periodic rest is vital in maintaining productivity and mental health (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Lastly, 212 participants (120 strongly agree, 92 agree) reported improved overall well-being through staycations, highlighting their therapeutic value. These results echo prior studies that link leisure practices with reduced psychological distress (Newman et al., 2014) and affirm the growing recognition of staycations as a form of wellness-oriented leisure within the middle class (Desai & Patel, 2023).

This simply explains that Staycations have become an important way to relieve stress and improve well-being, especially after the pandemic. Unlike long-distance travel, they reduce hassle while helping families reconnect and individuals recharge (Maslow, 1943; Singh & Verma, 2021). Research in India shows staycations improve mental health, ease burnout, and promote mindfulness through nature, wellness retreats, and digital detoxes (Desai & Patel, 2023; Gupta & Sharma, 2022; Kumar & Raj, 2023). They also strengthen family bonds (Pratt, 2020) and support work-life balance by offering frequent, short breaks. A 2021 survey found most middle-class respondents preferred staycations, showing they are now a lasting lifestyle choice for stress relief, mental health, and family connection.

Figure 6. Work Life balance with Staycation among the Middle class in India



Source: Data collection (2022-2024)

The data reveals that staycations significantly contributed to balancing professional and personal life among middle-class individuals in post-pandemic India, with 210 respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing with this perspective. This aligns with research suggesting that localized leisure practices can mitigate work-life conflicts by offering accessible breaks without the logistical challenges of long-distance travel (Jain & Singhal, 2021). Similarly, 210 participants agreed that the rise of remote work made short staycations easier to adopt, reinforcing Beck's (1992) notion of adaptive responses to risk and uncertainty in modern societies. A notable 195 respondents confirmed that short local breaks enhanced their job productivity, resonating with consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), where leisure becomes an investment in personal efficiency and identity. Furthermore, 210 participants acknowledged that staycations prevented work-related exhaustion, complementing findings by Desai and Patel (2023) on the mental wellness benefits of localized leisure. Overall, these results indicate that staycations have transcended their role as a cost-saving measure and evolved into a crucial psychosocial strategy for maintaining work-life balance, productivity, and mental well-being in the context of post-pandemic middle-class lifestyles.

Table 2. The key Mental and Physical benefits of Staycations.

Benefits of Staycations	Description
Reduced Stress Levels	Staycations allow for quick, low-stress breaks, reducing travel fatigue.
Improved Work-Life Balance	Enables employees to disconnect from work without the need for extended leave.
Enhanced Family Bonding	Staying close to home allows more time with family members in a relaxed setting.
Increased Physical Relaxation	Staycations offer opportunities for rest without the rush of travel schedules.
Appreciation of Local Culture	Rediscovering nearby destinations fosters a deeper connection with local heritage.

(Data compiled from Singh & Verma, 2021; Basu, 2022)

GROWING PREFERENCE FOR LOCAL DESTINATIONS

The pandemic not only reshaped travel habits globally but also significantly influenced how middle-class Indians viewed local destinations. Traditionally, international travel had been a symbol of status and luxury, often preferred by many middle-class families as a way to showcase their economic prosperity. However, with international borders closed, stringent quarantine measures in place, and health concerns at the forefront, these families were prompted to explore destinations within their own country. This shift led to a resurgence in interest in local and regional travel, allowing people to discover the rich cultural, historical, and natural treasures that India had to offer, which had often been overlooked in favour of foreign vacations. As middle-class individuals began seeking nearby escapes, popular hill stations such as Shimla, Mussoorie and Lonavala quickly became favoured options. These locations offered the perfect blend of scenic beauty, cool weather, and proximity to major cities, making them ideal for safe and short-distance getaways. Similarly, beach destinations like Goa and Kerala experienced a surge in visitors due to their relaxing coastal environment and relatively lower crowd densities compared to international beach resorts. These domestic destinations provided the much-needed break that people craved during the stressful pandemic period while allowing for drivable, convenient trips within the safety of state or regional boundaries.

The Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI) reported a 30% increase in bookings for homestays and local resorts during the first two years of the pandemic, as compared to pre-pandemic levels (FHRAI, 2021). This trend was largely driven by middle-class families who, affected by economic uncertainties, sought budget-friendly yet fulfilling alternatives to expensive international travel. Homestays, boutique hotels, and eco-friendly resorts became particularly popular, offering unique experiences such as living amidst nature, engaging in sustainable tourism, and exploring local cultures. These options not only catered to the financial constraints of middle-class families but also addressed their health concerns by providing secluded, socially distanced accommodations.

The rising preference for local destinations also reflected a broader shift in the mind-set of the Indian middle class. The pandemic fostered a sense of pride and curiosity about India's diverse geography and cultural heritage. Many travellers found themselves exploring heritage sites, national parks, and small towns that they had previously ignored. This renewed interest in local tourism was not merely a stopgap

solution for the travel-starved population but marked the beginning of a long-term trend. Middle-class individuals realized that India had a wealth of destinations that could rival international locations in terms of beauty, diversity, and experience, all without the high costs and logistical hassles associated with overseas travel.

Table 3. Preferences of Domestic Tourism among the Middle Class Indians

Type of Domestic Tourism	No. of Respondents	Key Preference Reasons
Staycations (homestays-Airbnb's)	108	Convenience, cost effective, stress relief, family bonding, local kitchen and self-cooking options.
Nature-based tourism (hill stations, backwaters)	82	Relaxation, connection with nature, adventure activities
Wellness retreats (yoga, Ayurveda, Spa)	39	Rejuvenation, Self-care, Stress Management, Pampering.
Cultural/heritage trips (temples, historical sites)	26	Traditional learning, spiritual connection, Thanking for saving the life, gathering support.
Urban leisure tourism (shopping, city breaks)	3	Entertainment, short break and cost effective
Total	258	

This table illustrates how domestic tourism in India adapted during the pandemic, with a shift toward local destinations and an increase in bookings for nearby getaways. The rise of local tourism in India, particularly during the pandemic, has brought about significant economic and social changes, particularly for smaller towns and regions that depend heavily on tourism. As middle-class families increasingly sought nearby destinations for their vacations, they inadvertently contributed to the revival of local economies. This newfound interest in local tourism has allowed small businesses—such as homestays, local guides, and artisans—to flourish, creating a sustainable economic ecosystem that benefits the community as a whole.

Government initiatives like "Dekho Apna Desh," launched by the Ministry of Tourism, have played a pivotal role in promoting domestic tourism and fostering a deeper connection between citizens and their own country. This campaign aims to instil a sense of pride among Indians by encouraging them to explore the rich cultural heritage, historical sites, and natural beauty within their own states and regions. (Ministry of Tourism, 2021; Economic Times, 2021). One of the key features of this initiative is its focus on lesser-known destinations that often go unnoticed in favour of more popular tourist spots. By shining a light on these hidden gems, "Dekho Apna Desh" not only promotes tourism but also aids in the preservation of local cultures and traditions. The campaign has included a series of webinars, virtual tours, and promotional content that highlight various regions' unique attractions, from the deserts of Rajasthan to the backwaters of Kerala. (Hindustan Times, 2021; India Today, 2021).

Notably, the initiative has encouraged partnerships with local businesses, artisans, and tourism operators, thereby supporting the economy at the grassroots level. This collaboration helps create sustainable tourism models that benefit communities directly by providing jobs and promoting local craftsmanship. For instance, the focus on promoting local handicrafts and cuisines has enhanced visitors' experiences while generating income for local artisans and food vendors. (Business Standard, 2021; Economic Times, 2021). The response to the campaign has been overwhelmingly positive, with many citizens reporting a newfound appreciation for their local heritage and attractions. According to a report by the Ministry of Tourism, there has been a marked increase in the number of domestic tourists visiting sites that were previously underappreciated (Ministry of Tourism, 2021; Hindustan Times, 2021). The initiative has also successfully tapped into the growing trend of experiential travel, where tourists seek immersive experiences rather than mere sightseeing (India Today, 2021; Business Standard, 2021).

In addition to fostering a sense of national pride, "Dekho Apna Desh" has also played a crucial role in the recovery of the tourism sector post-pandemic. As travel restrictions forced many to cancel international trips, domestic tourism emerged as a viable alternative, helping to revive local economies. The shift toward local travel has also been facilitated by hotel chains and travel platforms that offer attractive discounts on staycation packages. Many of these deals target destinations easily accessible by car, ensuring that families can enjoy luxury accommodations and wellness retreats without the risks associated with long-distance travel. The focus on health and safety has further enhanced the appeal of staycations, allowing travellers to indulge in leisure activities while adhering to social distancing protocols.

Table 4. Summary of Evolving Travel Behaviours and Socio-Psychological Impacts (Pre 2021 to Post 2024)

2020- 2021 Conventional Travel Era	❖ Varied Explorations of Tourism ➤ Psychological Impact = Traveling fulfilled curiosity and the need for stimulation. ➤ Sociological Impact = Desire for Novelty and Status
2021 Pandemic Onset	➤ Reflexive Modernisation (Giddens) Risk Awareness- Local/Safe Travels ➤ Psychological Impact (Blumer) • Heightened anxiety • Desire for control and safety
2021-2022 Adjustment and Rebuilding	➤ Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer) New meaning by social media making staycations cool ➤ Psychological Effect Reframing pleasure reduce fear
2022-2024 Conscious Travel Boom	➤ Habitus and Cultural Capital (Bourdieu) Class based local leisure choice ➤ Psychological Effect • Identity rebuilding curate experiences • Sense of Normalcy

2024 – Onwards New Normal in leisure Staycation becomes integrated into lifestyle with promoting grass-root economies in India	➤ Risk Society (Ulrich Beck) Local over global travel normalised ➤ Psychological Effects • Ongoing risk aversion • Long-term lifestyle shift ❖ Local Tourism • Initiative: (Government of India) 1. “Dekho Apna Desh” (See your country) 2. Promoting cultural and traditional awareness 3. Upgrading grass-root economies in India
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Incorporating staycations into their travel plans has become more than just a temporary fix; it has become a long-term trend for many middle-class families. Even as international borders gradually reopen, the preference for local destinations remains strong. This is evident in the way families are continuing to explore regional attractions, showcasing a newfound appreciation for what their own country has to offer (Pratt, 2020). The combination of economic benefits and the social experience of rediscovering local attractions has solidified staycations as a viable alternative to international travel.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Staycations have emerged as a practical and culturally resonant alternative to traditional vacations for India's middle class, providing financial relief, reducing mental health pressures, and promoting sustainable living. This trend reflects a significant shift in travel preferences, aligning with broader societal values of well-being, community, and cultural continuity. As individuals faced heightened stress during the pandemic, staycations became vital coping mechanisms, helping to manage anxiety and improve mental health. By offering opportunities for relaxation and leisure in familiar yet refreshing settings, staycations foster family connections and enhance the overall sense of community. They allow families to recreate bonds that may have been strained due to the pressures of work and daily life, providing a much-needed space for togetherness and meaningful interactions away from the routine. Furthermore, staycations are reminiscent of earlier eras in India, where travel was often local and community-centric, emphasizing deep connections with one's surroundings rather than distant destinations. This revival of local exploration resonates with the traditional Indian ethos, where family bonds and cultural heritage were at the forefront of travel experiences. Economically, staycations represent a viable solution for middle-class families navigating financial uncertainties, allowing them to turn to local destinations that are both affordable and enriching, thereby supporting local economies and small businesses.

The “Dekho Apna Desh” initiative has played a pivotal role in this shift toward local tourism by promoting lesser-known destinations, encouraging Indians to explore their country’s rich cultural and natural heritage. This initiative instils a sense of national pride while fostering economic growth in smaller towns, benefiting local artisans, guides, and businesses. Through webinars, virtual tours, and partnerships with local enterprises, “Dekho Apna Desh” effectively creates a sustainable tourism model that supports grassroots economies while preserving local traditions and cultures.

In addition, the importance of social media and the internet cannot be understated in facilitating the search for ideal staycation spots. Online platforms allow travellers to access a wealth of information, reviews, and recommendations about local destinations, enabling them to make informed decisions. Social media channels, in particular, have become vital for sharing experiences, showcasing hidden gems, and promoting unique offerings in the realm of staycations. This digital landscape not only empowers travellers to discover and connect with local attractions but also amplifies the visibility of small businesses and local tourism operators.

Thus, Staycations are not merely temporary responses to pandemic-induced travel restrictions but signify a broader, long-term shift in consumer behaviour, underscoring the importance of wellness, work-life balance and local appreciation. This trend solidifies staycations as an accessible and sustainable alternative to traditional vacations, enhancing the overall well-being of individuals and communities alike while simultaneously bringing back the essence of earlier travel traditions in the contemporary world of India. Through the reinforcement of family bonds and a focus on recreational activities, staycations serve as a reminder of the value of togetherness in today's fast-paced environment.

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