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## **Resilience and adaptability strategies in VUCA times: A case of City Explorers Pvt. Limited**

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**Abstract:** *The quintessential human lifestyle is rendered vulnerable in the pandemic world, with survival requiring creative resilience and adaptability skillsets. In an entrepreneurial world, entrepreneurs perceive opportunities when all others sweat in chaos. The story of the City Explorers Pvt. Ltd. (CEPL<sup>®</sup>) stimulates the dormant and hidden world of experiential tourism, revealing an opportunity for showcasing local cultural and heritage products. Sachin Bansal, the Founder and Chief Explorer<sup>®</sup> of the CEPL, believed that engaging individuals and communities in their heritage would positively sync the societal level and produce opportunities at the tourism front. With this imaginativeness, Bansal identified the value of cultural heritage tourism experiences, leading the industry with his foresight. The big question is how will the entrepreneurial venture of India City Walks<sup>™</sup> (ICW<sup>®</sup>), a pre-COVID brand with recognition and acclaim, navigate and survive the impact on the tourism industry amidst the emerging global economic lockdown and pandemic. Are strategies in place, or will there be an adaptive change? The case traverses on the principle of ‘survival of the fittest’ in the ecosystem of the local tourism industry. CEPL’s dilemmas included a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) business environment. Its trajectory was observed through qualitative research methodologies, including field observation, in-depth interviews and a phenomenological research approach. The journey unveiled entrepreneurial imaginativeness by sharing and unlocking the value proposition of Indian heritage in an open, realistic, responsible and sustainable manner. Sachin’s ideation, action, resilience, adaptability and foresight amidst dilemmas resulted in building city-specific exploration brands drawing at-site resources and capabilities in the entrepreneurial journey.*

**Keywords:** *Entrepreneurship, Imaginativeness, resilience strategies, adaptability, foresightedness, COVID-19.*

**Paper type:** *Teaching case*

## 1. Introduction

City Explorers Pvt. Ltd. (CEPL) were proud of their much-acclaimed India City Walks<sup>™</sup> (ICW) brand, which had thrice won the prestigious National Tourism Award for the ‘Best Heritage Walk’ and coveted ‘Hall of Fame’ awarded by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. The enterprise has also hosted high-profile individuals, including the New York Times Chairman, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Former Prime Minister of France, the Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium, the Chairman-National Geographic Partners, several Fortune 500 companies, and corporate businesses across India.

The co-founders’ entrepreneurial journey was on a dream run. The protagonist thinks like an immigrant, lives like a local, and acts cosmopolitically while transforming locals into Walk Leaders<sup>®</sup>, focusing on tourism opportunities. The social imaginativeness of this young entrepreneur, added to experiential delivery, has changed heritage exploration on the tourism map of India. His spouse and business partner (through equity holdings) has been a vital part of this enterprise since its inception. She takes care of the sales teams and operations, and supports him in delivering customer-driven solutions across a range of touchpoints. The challenges mitigated through various flagships in this sector lie in the enterprise successfully preserving destinations’ heritage, making them accessible to domestic and international travellers while safeguarding the economic interest of local communities. The business model adopted by the company thus distinguishes its existence from being christened as a travel agent.

The empathetic needs of customers were recognised based on ‘Indianness’ (local requirement). The model entails brainstorming with the team to assess businesses’ feasibility with win-win propositions for locals and visitors and thus providing opportunities for the locals to grow. The concept of city experiences ultimately amalgamates heritage, history, and tourism to explore India in a refined, experiential way.

The tourism sector in India is guided by the country’s unique endowments of biodiversity, forests, rivers, and rich culture and heritage. The tourism sector thus offers the potential of being a responsible and sustainable income provider. CEPL. introduced the concept of ‘No Footprints by City Explorer<sup>®</sup>’ to raise awareness and support for environmental conservation. The contemporary materiality and social shift created by social media, as a result of the

'no footprints' campaign have significantly influenced tourism. Visitors are consequently relatively more informed and possess knowledge of the history of the places they intend to visit.

The year 2020 created a severe downward slide in this sector due to tourism restrictions being imposed during the ongoing pandemic. CEPL. and its several flagships had to demonstrate resilience and adaptability during this stressful period and changed environment, and refocus on customer retention, offering an attractive bouquet of fresh product portfolios to keep stakeholders engaged during the pandemic. This case study provides insight into the resilience and adaptability strategies CEPL employed during these challenging and turbulent times.

## **2. The dilemma and the challenges**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) event, severely impacting the tourism industry, and ICW was not spared. Questions emerged on how they would survive this challenge and whether they had strategies in place to adapt to this change.

Experiential tourism is evolving and depends heavily on external factors. Ideally, this industry should provide people joy, yet it has diversified in multiple ways as it has grown. Some pertinent questions that have attracted attention are:

- How did ICW overcome the volatile regional competitiveness in the Indian market?
- The uncertainty COVID-19 created resulted in rapid changes that affected tourism. How did the co-founders experience this uncertainty?
- The current challenge posed by 'digitally inspired travellers' questions the veracity of a place. What strategies should CEPL. adopt to sustain their business?
- How ready was the fledgling enterprise to take up the ambiguous challenge, fostered by changing political dimensions in India?

## **3. Entrepreneurial imaginativeness**

In his working career between 1999-2010, Sachin juggled multiple roles effectively, with responsibilities in communication and accompanying foreign clients to tourist sites to present them with the city's flair after their official workday ended. He travelled extensively as part of his official visits to various cities in India and abroad, consequently founding the concept of entirely unorganised explorations of cities in India. As part of this initiative, Sachin accompanied clients himself.

The opportunity he sensed primarily emerged when he saw tourists depended on travel agents who restricted the satisfaction and perception of tourism through mere sightseeing and transportation. He noticed free-lancing individuals and certified professionals called 'guides' offered people an opportunity. however, appropriate narration, a powerful tool for enhancing tourists' experience, was missing. There was consequently a gap in creating and delivering experiential products backed by strong cultural values and social practices.

Sachin's idea started with the theme 'See Delhi From an Eye of a Delhiite™', which led to 'Exploring the City's Soul®' and 'Slow Experiences & Tales®', which consolidated into an anthem 'INDIA DEKHO HAMARE SATH, CHALO AAJ KAL KE SATH®'. This analogy translated delivery intent with a content-enablement model, 'Incredible Indian Stories®', where local immersion was key to knowing a city, and one could know the India of the past and future while walking with ICW. He pursued to forge a new and more complete way to design and produce brands such as 'India City Discovery™ (ICD®)', Regenerative Travel®, and Recovery Experiences™ with branded ecosystems. He also promoted entrepreneurship by involving aspirants as Tourpreneurs™ and refraining from franchisee management. Over the years, he has gained extensive experience incorporating identity development and cultural assimilation via transformation alongside intellectual properties. His frame of mind has been guided by nostalgia, particularly in creating good public forums to foster tourism.

Having insight into how visitors explored the cities, he focused on the experiential delivery of cultural heritage tourism by imparting training sessions and awareness campaigns around environmental stewardship to upskill his guides. Creating an edge through unique storytelling sessions and guided walk-through tours, a new rung in the industry was in the making. The heritage politics in India was well-exploited by creating heritage trails, which linked most historic sites in major cities.

Heritage tourism has evolved to explore the factual history of a geographic area and its remnant structures, incorporating the administrative-political-economic aspects of its times. The attempt to provide an experience of the overall social fabric from the yesteryears has kept the Sachin focused and aligned his thoughts on the different phases of tourism delivery as a business, nurturing his inherent love for the tourism sector.

In February 2012, he started a company called 'Creating Demand<sup>®</sup>', which had expertise in maximising firms' brand visibility and their products and services. He later introduced 'Yexplore<sup>®</sup>' and then City Explorers Pvt. Ltd. to the tourism sector with several flagships operating across India, delivering customers delight and accelerating opportunities to showcase the country's rich cultural heritage. During this time, several strategic initiatives propelled by passion kept germinating and are currently aligned with CEPL<sup>®</sup>.

As an entrepreneurial organisation, CEPL's value proposition has been to curate and deliver holistic programmes spanning history, culture, interests and skills to raise cultural awareness. Their 'Sustainable Achievements Championing Heritage Induced Network<sup>™□</sup>' incubator programme offers entrepreneurship support models to design meaningful discovery experiences for all types of travel and tourism businesses.

The company's resilience and adaptability during the recovery period from COVID-19 led to a transformation in the protagonist and his team's social imaginativeness to creative imaginativeness. This led to the incorporation of 'Regenerative Travel<sup>®</sup>', harnessing innovativeness, creating social cohesion by increasing footprints in the territory, and inspiring social change.

#### **4. Conceptualisation and the industry dynamics**

While cultural heritage tourism and immersive travel have always been an exciting component of the global tourism market, in India, this approach has been a distant thought. During its inception, the market for heritage tourism began slowly and was deemed a likely 'acquired taste'. Traditionally, the market had very few participants, as history was perceived as a subject of the past.

Creating a responsible approach to preserve historical perspectives and structural delights, CEPL revolutionised the way residents and travellers explored cities. Participatory engagement through thematic walks, events, trails, and storytelling sessions was the new approach. Forging into the space of digital storytelling was an appreciable move in the wake of 'social distancing' practices in the present day and is here to stay in Tourism.

Tourism is primarily an extension of leisure instead of exploration. The demand for tourism experiences that resonate with tourists' deeper emotional level was driving travel requirements. From backpackers to billionaires, savvy travellers of all ages wanted to experience the transformative journey of India in a holistic way that made them feel inspired by the places they visited and the people they met, while pushing past preconceived notions. In its complete offering, the heritage tourism industry has significant potential in India as this nation is diverse and vast.

India traditionally saw an influx of travellers seeking spiritual solace. The country offers multiple celebrations and festivals, monuments varying from the ancient to the modern, and stories of different eras. The influx of invaders during medieval times brought in layers of different histories and cultures, now depicted through tangible and intangible heritage sites in the CEPL's 'Story Living<sup>®</sup>'. The entrepreneur thus created a channel to represent cross-

cultural linkages at regional levels to promote socio-economic upliftment by being Socially Conscious™ and Honoring the Heritage®.

Sachin's simple theme and idea were to curate and deliver new strategies for people to hear the stories behind heritage objects. The personal belief that India is historically and culturally significant helped in the entrepreneur's foresight for future scenarios, offering 'Storycation®' during COVID-19 restrictions.

Sachin took travellers back to India's roots, drew their memories to the lost culinary delights and educated the traveller about the local geography. However, the entrepreneur also had concerns over perceptions of the Indian tourism industry and its dignity of labour. His enterprise thus took the initiative to promote self-respect in the labour employed in the industry, especially among the on-the-ground workforce.

The touristic sites adopted an integrated and inclusive approach spanning hospitality sectors to provide a wholesome experience to all age groups of travellers in a family. The intent was for guides to be passionate and proud individuals showcasing their culture and heritage to the globetrotter. In its journey of experiential tourism as a business venture, the enterprise started slowly and created space and structure. CEPL identified that the only way to function as the best in the market was to follow a structure adaptive to the changing times. This approach helped the enterprise to identify and address problems and offer engaging products of world-class quality.

However, the industry has transformed over the past few decades, undergoing a digital wave, leading to new challenges severely disrupting the industry's service delivery, with the primordial thought being to enhance pride among the locale's populace by increasing tourist footfalls. The rapid turbulence in the tourism industry due to COVID-19 also created an existential crisis in the enterprise, requiring resilience and adaptability to remain sustainable.

## **5. Building the brand**

Historically, the demand for tourism was largely affected by seasonal and regional stability factors. During the peak seasonal requirement, there was tremendous pressure on the ecosystem, including hotel accommodations, transport, and even local employment. The entrepreneur thus started an impact-driven movement of 'My Neighbourhood, My Heritage®', 'Heritage Heroes™' and 'India With Locals®' to create a knowledge bank of universal resources that could be used by all departments within City Explorers Private Limited as a single brand. The success of tourism products bolstered the entrepreneur's confidence to offer services that positively impact local communities.

According to Sachin, the cluttered digital spaces of the industry were dissected through the presence of flagship brands, and content was disseminated per the target audience. He always hesitated in spending money to promote visibility and believed in flagship brands with their individual identities leading income generation, clutter reduction and increased clarity. The branding was conceptualised keeping various target segments travelling to and residing in India in mind. A balance of brand visibility and brand integrity has been the focus since the organisation's inception. All brands were thus protected either as trademarks or wordmarks. Over time, Sachin planned to create a multilingual thesaurus and showcase enhancements within the experiential tourism sector.

The first brand initiative was established by winning the prestigious National Award for Tourism. CEPL has been the only heritage tourism brand to bring home three national awards in consecutive years and receive the prestigious HALL OF FAME awarded by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. CEPL is the only enterprise catering to prestigious state-level visits, integrated with top ministerial visits, embassies, corporates, residents of cities and travel agencies. While maintaining a connection to youths and offering employment, the firm has also synergised with sister flagships on social media to access and encourage locals to become 'Heritage Enthusiasts®'.

## **6. Disruptive innovations**

This entrepreneurial venture emphasised understanding the core business without losing a sense of the city's offerings that are rich in sensory dimensions, while taking profits and experiencing business benefits into account. This vision led the founder to identify a new dimension for the venture in expanding its product portfolio and acquiring customers. With time, the tourism offerings and inclusive growth reinforced each other through 'India Heritage Walks<sup>®</sup>' (IHW<sup>®</sup>). The objective of IHW<sup>®</sup> is to attain inclusive growth through heritage tourism and bring economic development to the locals.

While the focus has been to provide a wholesome mix of tourist circuits, served on a platter for ease of access, the regional competitiveness posed by the market was a challenge during the enterprise's inception. Numerous tour operators, certified and local guides and hospitality service providers have occupied the space for decades. The volatility of regional competition thus created operational and service clutter. Destination management, industrial cluster management, touristic management and situational condition management were the scenarios identified to meet regional competitiveness. The entrepreneur thus considered these potential scenarios, focusing on customers' lifestyles and needs. These customer demands were segregated into simple products with a high degree of innovation. Risks related to each scenario were overcome by disruptive innovations. An understanding was also required that culture was evolving and heritage was dynamic, and had to be interpreted constantly, with renewed expectations generated by public experiences. The aim was to deliver customer delights at every touchpoint and maintain quality tourism experiences with authenticity. The varying cultural products and target markets evolved cultural interests, with India as the constant.

The tourism sector potentially unlocked hidden value propositions for business growth, stimulating productive capacities from trade and employment linked to the value chain. It was necessary first to understand the local context, identify the needs of the community and travellers, and then accordingly determine the role that heritage could play in addressing these needs. Sachin's entrepreneurial vision was defined by the way he experienced and visualised India from an external perspective. As a progressive marketer, he found relevant tips and recommendations to rejuvenate the cultural heritage tourism industry to empower and reach various markets.

While operating the heritage walks and experiential tourism initiatives, CEPL found an opportunity for young people in rural areas to become trained and employed in the tourism industry across India. Identifying the gap between supply and demand, CEPL has created 'India Rural Walks<sup>™</sup>' to promote farmstead, pursue new tourism activities in the villages.

This approach unleashed the latent potential and distinctive capabilities that the brand possessed, influencing tourists' needs or desires for mediators to deliver city-based experiences. An attempt was made to link CEPL to local employment generation through aggregation-driven capacity-building in which the online platforms 'India With Locals<sup>®</sup>' and 'India Heritage Walks<sup>®</sup>' were introduced to include locals and entrepreneurs representing micro-small and medium enterprise community to connect to the initiatives. By CEPL

Being low on funds and remaining frugal, CEPL redesigned its processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Training, educating, and catering to the increasing demand for authentic experiences were facilitated. This helped build the enterprise's operational capacity, leading to its inclusive growth in the tourism sector.

Another innovation that the entrepreneur initiated was the concept of 'Heritage Heroes<sup>™</sup>' and 'India With Locals<sup>™</sup>', with an experience delivery mission of 'Experience Local by Locals<sup>™</sup>'. Sachin assigned residents to explore neighbourhoods and heritage monuments in their regions to map and understand the geography in a better way. This was an added opportunity for locals.

## **7. Capability and character reputation**

The counterfactual thinking of Sachin has been ironic! His philosophy is to offer uniqueness by empowering local individuals and vendors to orate stories of their land and traditional local products. A lot of the time these stories are unexpected and shared over casual yet focused conversations. These strategies offer intricate insight into the local culture and beliefs using the spontaneity of true cultural traditions rather than convenience-induced altered facts.

Nidhi Bansal, the Group CEO, was tasked with the organisation's capability reputation. She managed teams, created a vision to follow, and generated functional job profiles using outcome-driven approaches. Sachin intends to launch 'India City Heritage Institute®'. On the other side of the enterprise, Sachin has been working aggressively, charting timelines by linking quality tourism experiences delivered by locals and the quality of experiences gained by tourists. The lean team approach has been the key to increasing the enterprise's reputation and capability. The core team is empowered to take prompt decisions and actions on innovative ideas. This change management approach has remained flexible, with the employees displaying dynamic capabilities.

Having capitalised on opportunities by turning the enterprise's course towards them, the uncertainty created by a rapidly transforming urban landscape and growing population and the COVID-19 pandemic created a ripple effect on heritage site experiences. Global warming was a by-product of this change, negatively influencing the business. The pollution in cities like Delhi also created serious health concerns among tourists. Due to rapid global warming, the uncertainty in the minds of visitors to Delhi was addressed by offering a series of destinations that bypass a stay in the city. Tourists were thus guided through heritage trails to neighbouring states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh at regular intervals as a part of storytelling to portray destinations related to a particular kingdom or era. Moreover, adequate healthcare facilities were available to the visitors during their journey to heritage trails. These thematic trails were purposive and intentionally constructed to link historical sites. The 'Interactive City Discovery™ (ICD®)' model was also formulated, involving the local communities in storytelling. These theme-based experiences contributed extensively towards new employment generation, supporting the rising number of unemployed individuals in the regions across India. The enterprise has also helped address the challenges posed by the rising pollution in Delhi by promoting eco-friendly ways of traversing the city, either by walking or using e-vehicles, such as cycle rickshaws and motorised tuk-tuks.

This journey among uncertainties, as stated in the 'effectuation theory', prompted the founders to explore opportunities. Sachin remains committed to his product curation vision and views his enterprise as a delivery company with several flagship brands. The decentralisation task within CEPL was undertaken at multiple levels in different cities of India. Its group of adequately trained and qualified guides have delivered specialised walks and city experiences both professionally and with unparalleled expertise. It is not wealth, power, or unique expertise, but the inclusiveness of the business approach that has made the entrepreneur's intrinsically driven dream possible. 'Delhi Walks®' was the first passion brand initiated in Delhi between 2008-2012, which took time to unfold, chartering a visionary direction. Only after 2016 did the flagship brands start drawing attention, and the onus goes to the leader's vision for inculcating some zeal into every new team member to constantly strive to improve, align and create an everlasting impact.

The company has earned a reputation for customised operations and the founder's emotional connections, practices of introspection and improved mental fitness by rediscovering his strengths and weaknesses. Each customer is responded to appropriately to generate a delightful experience. Developing an educational experience through publicly visible content, authoring articles, and transferring knowledge and experiences has become a way of life for him and his team members. The company gains customers through referrals because of its reputation. Personalised thank you e-mails have also been a unique selling proposition ensuring the enterprise's reputation in the market. Moreover, CEPL. has positioned itself as a city ambassador contributing towards the betterment of society through 'Swachh Walks®', 'Water Heritage®', 'Monument Friends®' and 'I Love Heritage®' initiatives by the social programmes initiated by the Government of India.

## 8. Value-creation in business

The business grew from a proprietary entrepreneurial endeavour to a private limited organisation with multiple brands and full-time resources. CEPLs growth was primarily influenced by the effective interpretation strategies that the incumbent entrepreneur steered. The co-founders created a 'change model', identifying possible types of interventions and target groups, thus providing a framework to measure the business' short-, medium-, and long-term impact on individuals, and recruiting people eager to make a career in heritage. Aiming to create an empowered community through capacity-building has been relevant in this context.

The 'Shared Heritage™' dimension has been adopted with the team growing daily, representing visitors, owners, volunteers, professional practitioners, funders, and academics, demonstrating the strength and commitment of an independent heritage movement. The organisation structure being flat, individuals with their competence vacillate between requirements. CEPL encourages its team members to invest time in delivering sustainable products to promote an authentic experience, realising the power of India's heritage with a focus on tourists' experiences and fulfilment. The teams have maximised the advantages in the experiential delivery of cultural heritage products while building sectoral skills with added capacity.

Sachin has been instrumental in shaping each team member's value-creation process in reflecting on their performance. The enterprise's intelligent marketing has been driven by the entrepreneur's predictions of residents' perceptions of tourism. The enterprise has operationalised its complementary capabilities, matching the cultural and behavioural attributes of consumers with products. The business has witnessed the need to customise what others are practising in the trade to woo the customer, and the founder went further and explored super-personalisation to enhance the customer's delivery expectations.

One thing has remained fundamental to the protagonist when deploying products – 'not getting attached to what he has created'. He has keenly observed customers' behaviour, improvising and tweaking constantly. Furthermore, he has been adding value and benefits to the people and places with whom he has worked to increase mutual trust and promote the experiential tourism required to delight the traveller.

He has embraced the 'create fast and fail fast' concept. The business has formed a community with customer-experiential perspectives, an innate fabric of relationships with the customer in the centre. In addition, four value-creation areas led to the enterprise's growth.

The key inputs for value-creation were:

1. Knowledge creation: Sachin built his team by creating a good sense of cross-cultural awareness. He recruited people with different cultural and regional backgrounds and trained them to respect others equally. Knowledge of each heritage site was the primary consideration. Storytelling was based on the track that was laid with this knowledge.
2. Skilful communication: The use of humour and anecdotes replicated higher levels of satisfaction among customers. 'India City Walks™' took intense care in developing employees' soft skills. The clarity of the message being delivered, eye contact, gesture usage and vocal confidence were significant areas in which training was provided.
3. Enhancing spiritual intelligence: Customers' emotional sensitivity was keenly observed to chart their interpretations during site visits. An understanding of group dynamics and their spiritual orientation and expectations from the heritage walk was manifested. The interpretations that followed were based on this spiritual intelligence.
4. New offerings: Offset old routines by introducing new programmes and experiential products under 'Regenerative Travel®' as a brand identity showcasing India's diversity.

5. Passion towards service: The facilitator's sense of responsibility, friendliness, performance attributes and effective interpretation depended on the facilitator's passion for service. The attitude of service is innate in human beings, the reflection of which could be judged through behaviour.

### **9. Sachin's foresight**

A major question that heritage tourism poses the facilitator is, "Whose heritage are you talking about?". In a nation like India, with a history that falls beyond eras, it is relevant which layer of history the storyteller narrates! The heritage and city walks incorporate diverse aspects of the past, acknowledging the pride of the cultural soul, which the nation resembles. However, the current challenge is to change the political dimensions of heritage and history in India, as the President's House, Indian Parliament, and many more structures are to be rebuilt. Several architectures have been renamed based on the heritage that preceded the current story. This phenomenon adversely affects local communities' storytelling capacity and involvement in tourism projects. This dilemma remains unsolved.

Sachin reflected on how he started the business to create tourist experiences for travellers and gradually withdrew from operations and sales, creating additional space for the team's sustainability. The experience of 20 years enabled him to gain foresight and anticipate customers' needs. The company has been positioned to create services and products through intellectual properties and service delivery. The entrepreneur's imaginativeness has ultimately resulted in his recognition of heritage tourism opportunities in India. His radical, innovative approaches and incremental counterfactual thoughts have helped CEPL. to remain a forerunner in the industry.

Sachin has held the product portfolio to high governance, transparency, and ethics standards. Conversely, Nidhi, Sachin's wife has coordinated sales and operations departments in this flat organisational structure. Their customer-centric approach has been the key contributor to their growth in the long run. For this enterprise to remain adaptable and flexible, it would be conducive to offer a range of skill training programmes to those aspiring to be a part of this enterprise. The training should not be limited to content but primarily focus on customer service, knowledge transfer, and research improvements.

The proponent believes when societies are confronted with different emerging social and economic challenges, there is an opportunity to bring/create/offer solutions around culture. By enhancing cultural participation there will be a more open, inclusive society emerging in a digital world. The new product offerings possess the latent potential for marketing purposes as they intensify perceived value and foster customer engagement. It creates the possibility for tourists to tailor their visitation to their desires, needs and expectations.

The enterprise has established resilience in digital media and is prepared for yet another wave of disruption. The founder's imaginativeness has also managed technology-related user experiences within the business domain, mitigating flaws in internet security. The founder has been instrumental in creating various sustainability standards, including quality, economic, social and cultural aspects. The enterprise has resisted the urge to hard sell with teachings from the 'Gita' (the holy book) being applied, focusing on the saying: 'there is a time to sow and a time to reap'. When the times come to reap, the business and its employees will reap together. Sachin knew that easy selling and copying the dynamics of existing tourism models would destroy the brand. Moreover, considering digital technology's ability to offer real-life experiences came in handy as the world is taking the next steps in virtual exploration.

Building strong community relationships is a central task for the business to ensure its survival and sustainability, improving the brand's identity. Sachin also reiterates that the idea is to grow, be known as the best company to discover India and become an aspirational brand with which to work, in turn generating employment for people and garnering interest in the upkeep of cultural heritage. COVID-19 has changed the world and what we conceive of as important will never be the same again. Technology and processes are critical to upscale businesses around the

world, yet competent people must lead organisations. The organisational foresight and entrepreneurial spirit of this enterprise's founder have paved the path for the future. As an exponent wanting to benefit the local community, particularly rural or indigenous people (walk with tribe™) or those in small towns, contributing to their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their cultural and environmental assets, he encourages individuals to become more active in every aspect of cultural heritage.

The tourism industry suffers from these new circumstances in a world impacted by external factors. While the protagonist's readiness with 'digital storytelling' has been explored, it does not undermine the role of human factor, which is essential for a personal connect. However, the enterprise's core function is to build community involvement in heritage tourism initiatives and promote experiential tourism.

Sachin is confident that while it would require community participation through the digital space, the balance would be created by the role of the guide who would introduce additionally, something that visitors cannot obtain via any other media, access to an otherwise non-public terrain to encompass the intellectual terrain locked and otherwise inaccessible.

Being sustainable is of utmost importance when pandemics hit businesses. The entrepreneurs have been scanning the horizons for signals and patterns for ways and means to engage target customers and stakeholders, and integrate and innovatively manage tourism marketing services.

The discussion has illustrated how to respond resiliently to an unprecedented situation, adapt to vulnerabilities and remain sustainable in the context due to the protagonist's foresight.

## **9. Discussions**

ICW® has revolutionised and created an opportunity for legacy keepers and government stakeholders at various levels to understand how individuals explore cities, caring simultaneously for the infrastructure and societal engagements through walks and storytelling sessions. During COVID-19 and other pandemics, CEPL and its flagships offer safe experiences for travellers to discover India. The industry is volatile due to regional competitiveness, uncertainties created by urban landscapes and populations, complexities in heritage interpretations, and ambiguities formed by political dimensions of history. CEPL. has evolved as a tourism delivery company, creating delight among customers and revamping the Indian heritage tourism industry. It has been providing opportunities to experience the local culture through careful research, acquiring a deeper understanding of the destination being visited. The core ideas behind this business model were the feeling of belongingness and bonding with the site and programme, awareness towards historic preservation, saving energy and materials, and generating tourist revenue.

The principle of effectively interpreting destinations, adopted by CEPL., has succeeded in creating positive feelings and a meaningful understanding of the sites among tourists, increasing the likelihood of further tourist visits. Sachin was instrumental in inducing a sense of 'self in the past' in the minds of his customers. The financial infusion into the economy through growth capital demonstrates CEPL is a valuable social, environmental, and economic asset to be mutually harnessed. People, processes, and changes have been the triple bottom line mantra, creating fortunes for the leader and his team. The entrepreneur has demonstrated how heritage walks, storytelling sessions, cultural explorations, and holistic discoveries of India could be interlinked with an appreciation towards building legacies. The political dimension of history and heritage, however, poses a challenge for CEPL. Sachin emphasises it is always the team that matters. The enterprise claims, 'with us you can safely discover the India of now!™' and is prepared to deep-dive into the rich and vast history of India, which dates back ten thousand years and emerge with Mackenna's Gold.

## Teaching notes

### Executive summary:

The passion required to create an enterprise is immense, and resilience, tenacity and persuasiveness are absorbed, as highlighted in the study. The case of 'India City Walks™ (ICW®)' is an expedition to the endless world of opportunities in the heritage tourism sector (Timothy, 1997). Recently, the Prime Minister of India's re-branding of Mamallapuram (Rohit, 2014) and Kedarnath Cave (PTI, 2019) demystifies the hidden treasure of heritage tourism in India. Thus, it is imperious to understand the importance of tourism, and anyone engaged in promoting this industry must be applauded as it leads to the creation of micro-entrepreneurs, continuing the legacy of heritage cultures and economic development.

Personal interviews with the founder, the decision-makers and many others in the value chain were undertaken to triangulate the information. The findings revealed that the enterprise exhibited a strategic shift from local to an enhanced transformation, spearheading the fundamentals of entrepreneurship in promoting tourism at cultural heritage sites (Alberti & Giusti, 2012). The enterprise has harnessed inclusive engagement among people living in and around the identified sites and sustains the local communities by opening doors to employment. This entrepreneurial imaginativeness and effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2008) reflect heritage's promotion as a mechanism to discover India, conserve and protect natural, historical, and cultural resources, and provide meaningful economic opportunities to local communities.

The ideation to create a brand for the organisation and set industrial standards made the entrepreneur an innovator in the genre of tourism. A cohesive policy towards participation, inclusiveness and collaboration with community development boosted regional tourism, businesses, and employment opportunities for the venture, thus keeping competition at bay. The background of the entrepreneur, the VUCA (Abidi & Joshi, 2015) situations he faced during the initial days of his entrepreneurial journey, and the strategies he used to navigate as a decorated leader in the heritage tourism industry are illustrated in detail in this case. The entrepreneurial actions performed through radical innovations (Wallace & Barnard, 2019) were showcased in the later section of the case. The amalgamation of ideation, imaginativeness and actions has enhanced the entrepreneur's foresight to face uncertainties in the future.

### Research methods

Though nascent, entrepreneurship is a growing field that needs to be understood from several directions. The authors considered examining the phenomenon from a tourism perspective, where incumbent entrepreneurs have few initiatives. The study identified around 100 entrepreneurs in this sector and studied them closely via secondary published data in leading journals, magazines, trade journals, blogs, etc. Of the interesting ones highlighted via repeated international and domestic awards and recognitions, the authors studied the filtered ones from their respective company websites and pursued the research query. Meanwhile, the authors attempted to understand the context (research query) of entrepreneurial imaginativeness and foresight in start-ups (Chauhan et al., 2021) over the last ten years, examining their perspectives on counterfactuals. The authors found few to review, and from the cohorts chose to explore 'India City Walks™', a recognised brand of the City Explorers Pvt. Ltd.

Qualitative methods were deployed to capture the phenomenon via personal interviews at several levels, with the founding entrepreneur, his family, the networks, and the individuals in the organisation working as a winning team with the entrepreneur. Interviews and transcripts were conducted by one of the co-authors, while the others triangulated the information to reduce bias. Similarly, the co-authors studied the context and amplified their understanding of the enterprise, trying to bring coherence to the subject, i.e., entrepreneurial imaginativeness and foresight. The interviews and unstructured questionnaire were undertaken in person, via Skype, conference telephone calls, WhatsApp messages, etc, over 10 months from February to July 2023, triangulating at each point.

**Teaching objectives:**

1. Distinguish and explore the importance of entrepreneurial imaginativeness in recognising opportunities and orientation, leading to a new venture's creation.
2. Analyse radical innovations to remain competitive in the tourism vertical.
3. Discuss the significance of adaptability, resilience and foresight in mitigating VUCA challenges.

**Learning objectives:**

To comprehend:

- The entrepreneur's entrepreneurial imaginativeness skills.
- A successful entrepreneur's counterfactual thinking.
- Adaptability, resilience, and foresight mitigating VUCA challenges in the tourism industry.

**Intended courses/theories:**

- Entrepreneurship
- Innovation
- VUCA

**Suggested student assignment questions:**

1. How is entrepreneurial imaginativeness imperative to recognising opportunities for a new venture's creation?
2. How is counterfactual thinking important to incremental and radical innovation? Identify critical factors determining the success.
3. Which factors are associated with individuals, organisations and the business environment facilitating innovation?
4. Discuss the VUCA challenges the enterprise faced and the reflection displayed to overcome the phenomenon.

**Teaching plan:**

Students must be equipped with the case one week in advance. Guidelines for the instructor follows:

(5 min.): The instructor briefs students about the scope of the case.

(5 min.): Students are divided into groups for ease of deliberation.

(10 min.): Each group discusses their understanding of the learning objectives with the instructor's supervision.

(5 min.): The groups engage in open discussions based on case chronology.

(10 min.): The learning outcomes are enlisted by the group leader.

(10 min.): The group's comprehensive understanding is framed as a question, and the probable answer is brainstormed.

(30 min.): One group member presents the outcome along with a query session.

(15 min.): Concluding remarks are presented by the instructor, incorporating the ideas generated in the discussions.

**Suggested case discussion questions, with answers:**

1. How is entrepreneurial imaginativeness imperative to recognising opportunities for a new venture's creation?

Entrepreneurial imaginativeness refers to the process by which entrepreneurs (Gartner, 1988) can imagine (create) opportunities for a new venture. Imagination is used to create new ideas and demands for goods and services. "All great ventures begin with imagination" (Seelig, 2015). The protagonist is highly imaginative. He is a dreamer, an explorer and passionately makes mental images of various things that may not exist in real life, creating new opportunities. Social imaginativeness contributes to new ventures being created when an individual understands future needs and wants by being empathetic from multiple perspectives. This leads to the generation of new ideas and the recognising of new opportunities. The founder has put forward an altogether new idea of heritage tourism

and seeing a place through the eyes of a local, removing all taboos associated with such tourism. Creative imaginativeness is associated with the cognitive ability to envision something that is not there at present; thus, it is novel. This approach fuels divergent thinking and outcomes are innovative products and services (Kind, 2016), which are imperative to opportunity recognition (OR).

Practical imaginativeness is also cognitive and shapes new ideas into a venture with the willingness to bear the uncertainties and risks that follow (Dimov, 2007). The concept of heritage tourism has moved the industry to a new 'guest-friendly' approach, with an altogether new business model for travel agents. This had prompted a question of survival, to start with. Imaginativeness is a precursor to Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and opportunity recognition (OR). 'ICW' created the model of exploring cities in India in an organised manner, which was non-existent earlier. The founder acquired dynamic capabilities (Teece, 1998; Joshi & Srivastava, 2015) during the journey to becoming an entrepreneur and was creatively able to translate experiential knowledge to practice and overcome the VUCA wave (Chauhan et al., 2017a and b). It seems he mastered the art of not growing too fast and too furious (Joshi & Abidi, 2017) in a VUCA world (Joshi, 2019 a and b).

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) (Ramachandran & Ramnarayan, 1993) reflects on the entrepreneurial process, signifying the birth of an enterprise. Hills (1994) expanded on this concept and introduced OR. This OR is connected to the power of foresight (Abidi & Joshi, 2017), seeking to establish possibilities in the process of making gains, as a continuous cycle. Hills (1995) and Hills et al. (1997), acknowledge that knowledge is nascent on how entrepreneurs identify opportunities, though prior knowledge comes in handy. Thus, a business ecosystem's adaptability is promoted by the organisational mindset of EO and OR. Delineating the specifics, EO relates to the personality traits of a firm's founder(s). In addition, achievement motivation has been quoted as "behaviour towards competition with a standard of excellence" (McClelland, 1953). These become the founding pillars of entrepreneurship (Miller, 1983), thereby leading to the economic development of the region.

2. How is counterfactual thinking important to incremental and radical innovation? Identify critical factors determining the success.

Counterfactual thinking involves comparing actual events to "alternatives that are constructed ad hoc rather than retrieved from past experience" (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) and remains less explored in entrepreneurial research. Counterfactual thinking enables experiential thinking and drives the entrepreneur to envision innovative products and services (Karim, 2017) that could be better (upward counterfactual) or worse (downward counterfactual) than what is currently available. Herbig (1994) describes two types of innovations, namely incremental, as a lower-order one, and radical, as a higher-order one. The present case is that of a highly innovative firm reflecting and addressing an appreciation towards innovative practices in the entrepreneur's journey.

Each innovation has the ability to provide insight into customers' needs from the beginning. It is here at an early stage that the innovator foresees the market's potential. The venture pursued incremental innovations in making exploration deeply engaging and enriching for the customer and adopting a lean approach to business. Radical innovations emerge from such thinking, while entrepreneurs forge through uncertainties and develop new products (Cholakova, 2013). The critical factors that led to the radical innovation include:

1. The proponent approached problems from distinct perspectives.
2. The products were broken down to find alternate solutions.
3. Teams were created with cultural diversity, skill, and technological expertise.
4. There was timely collaboration with various stakeholders to develop partnerships and networks.
5. Principles, like effective interpretation, were applied to provide meaningfulness and insight.
6. The key focus was always on customers and their changing needs.

7. There was foresight to overcome the VUCA challenges.

Thus, it is evidenced that while operating in an ambiguous business environment, innovative firms benefit from the decision-making, as markets for their offerings do not exist openly.

3. Which factors are associated with individuals, organisations and the business environment facilitating innovation?

The important dimension of innovative organisations (Joshi, 2010a) is that they set standards for followers and craft unique strategies (Joshi, 2019a). Such innovative organisations demonstrate clear strategies after some deep thought (Kasparov, 2017), identify opportunities (Ozgen, 2003; Joshi, 2010b) and relentlessly pursue them. Highly innovative firms do not stop but continuously engage as a means to achieve self-set goals (Vesper, 1980) with renewed strategies for the venture to grow. Market leadership is an outcome of this continued innovation. As per Joshi (2010c), innovators are leaders. For example, Ford was among the top innovative firms in the car manufacturing sector but never emerged as a financially successful one and finally closed its operations. The firm could not envisage VUCA (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014; Abidi & Joshi, 2015), resulting in a failure eventually.

On the contrary, Abidi and Joshi (2018) claim that a critical component of any innovative firm is to provide its employees with the freedom to test their ideas and encourage them to fail. With this risky proposition, employees can harness their creative skill sets, knowing their employment is safe. This same approach would not be embraced by risk-averse organisational cultures that remain stagnant, dying in the long run. Organisations that cultivate innovation (Chauhan et al., 2017; Chauhan et al., 2019) create an environment laden with trust for their employees. Borckhaus (1980) states the degree of risk involved in innovation is high, yet these firms have foresight (Courtney, 2001; Chauhan et al., 2018 a and b). For ideas that embrace high levels of creativity, there is an equally high level of strategic management required in hostile conditions (Covin & Slevin, 1989). Employees who are ridiculed for sharing ideas that might be outrageous may be deterred from unleashing their creative genius and participation in preparing for the future. Their original ideas, which may be highly creative and distinct, need to be protected, as these could, in turn, be the soul of the innovative firm. This approach reflects the creative dimension of 'India City Walks™' and its passionate entrepreneur, the Montblanc of heritage tourism, Dr Sachin Bansal.

4. Discuss the VUCA challenges the enterprise faced and the reflection displayed to overcome the phenomenon.

The volatility in regional competitiveness was the primary VUCA challenge while forming the venture. The market was full of tour operators, guides, and other facilitators. The entrepreneur fostered cultural heritage and rejuvenated the industry through radical innovations. The focus always remained on customers' interests, needs and demands, and innovations continue as a strategy to deliver results.

The uncertainty created by rapidly transforming urban landscapes and a growing population had a ripple effect on the heritage site experience. Global warming was a by-product of this change, negatively influencing the industry. The pollution in cities like Delhi created serious health concerns among tourists, but Sachin strategically dealt with this VUCA challenge when planning heritage trails. The path of travel was routed based on the storytelling act. Neighbouring states were also included to create a heritage trail, and the customer could easily shift among the cities without staying in accommodation in polluted areas. Moreover, proper healthcare facilities were available during regional visit hours.

A lack of proper historical knowledge drove the complexity of the heritage tourism industry in India. Invaders' and the colonial force's tampering with the facts resulted in a distorted version of India's history being composed. The enterprise overcame this VUCA challenge through primary field observations and research work. The

enterprise helped tourists interact with the local people to find the truth and meaning in the visited areas. To enhance tourists' experiences by sustaining the perceived values of historic areas, the enterprise adopted effective heritage interpretations, delivered through value-creation activities.

Ambiguity remains in terms of the political dimensions of history and heritage in India. Changing narrations of history from past to present impacted tour facilitators' storytelling during 'India City Walks™'. The involvement of local communities in future tourism projects, coupled with the foresight of its co-founders had, to a certain extent, helped the enterprise surpass this challenge, but a lot remains to explore. The walk needs to continue unravelling the historical fabric of the country and stitch together the bits and pieces of tales galore to present the traveller with a memorable experience.

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