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## **The Impact of Covid-19 on Tourism in the Sigiriya area**

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**Abstract:** This research paper investigates the multifaceted effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in Sigiriya. It has long been celebrated for its ancient rock fortress, attracting a significant number of domestic and international tourists. However, the pandemic, coupled with previous challenges such as the Easter attack, has inflicted substantial damage on the tourism industry in the region. This study employs a comprehensive approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the decline in tourist arrivals, economic implications for businesses, employment losses, and future prospects. Sigiriya experienced a significant decline in visitor numbers since the onset of the pandemic. This plummeting trend has had far-reaching consequences, leading to the closure of many businesses and a subsequent rise in unemployment. The study also reveals the profound economic impact on local communities, as tourism-related revenues constitute a significant portion of their income. To revive tourism in Sigiriya, several crucial measures are recommended. Providing financial support and Enhancing security measures to regain tourists' trust is paramount, considering the lingering concerns following the Easter attack. Improving infrastructure, including transportation and accommodation facilities, is essential to enhance visitor experiences. Furthermore, promoting sustainable practices can contribute to the long-term resilience of the tourism industry in Sigiriya. Therefore, stakeholders can work together to rebuild and sustain the tourism sector in Sigiriya. It is imperative to formulate

a comprehensive recovery plan that addresses the immediate challenges and establishes a foundation for future growth.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Sigiriya, Covid -19, Pandemic, Economic, Community

## **Introduction**

### **History of Sigiriya Tourism**

According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Board (SLTDA) report in 2017, Sigiriya is ranked as the fourth top tourist attraction in Sri Lanka. It holds the distinction of being the first recorded tourist destination in the country (Perera, 2008, p. 54). The author of the Mahawanshaya (Great Chronicle) describes Sigiriya as the magnificent palace or *Alakamandawa* of Kuwera the Great, emphasizing its picturesque qualities. Sigiriya stands at an impressive height of 1193 feet above sea level and 183 feet from ground level (Silva, 2014). Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that Sigiriya established settlements dating back to centuries before the 5th century AD, with monks residing in the area. From 477 to 495 AD, King Kashyapa chose Sigiriya as his palace and kingdom for 18 years and attracted many tourists from different regions and countries. The discovery of approximately 1175 Roman coins at Sigiriya further confirms its popularity as a destination for foreign trade (Bandaranayake, 2005). The arrival of local and foreign tourists to Sigiriya is well documented in the Sigiriya Graffiti, which dates back to the 8th century AD. In the 19th century, Sigiriya received visits from local and foreign tourists who were particularly interested in viewing its paintings and frescoes, showcasing the allure of the site through natural beauty and artistic creations.

While ancient Sri Lankans traveled primarily for religious purposes, especially Buddhist worship, visits to Sigiriya were more focused on aesthetic and entertainment motives, distinguishing it as Sri Lanka's first recognized tourist destination. The historical understanding of Sigiriya has been reconstructed through archaeological research conducted by H.C.P. Bell and Prof. Senerath Paranavithana. In 1982, Sigiriya was included in the Cultural Triangle and subsequently designated

as a World Heritage Site with the aim of raising the standard of living of the local population by developing the surrounding area. With this goal in mind, tourism was promoted in the region. Although Sigiriya has been a tourist destination since ancient times, this development was followed by a revenue-oriented tourism plan. In 2003, new villages were established in Sigiriya along with the establishment of tourist trade zones, which further increased the appeal of Sigiriya as a tourist destination.

### **Corona Pandemic and Tourism in Sigiriya**

Tourism in the Sigiriya area, which is very popular with both local and foreign tourists, was severely affected by the Easter attack and further fell in its aftermath with the Covid 19 pandemic. Despite the upswing it experienced for some time after Easter Arrack, as most people in the area engage in tourism or tourism-related professions, the decline of tourism, which was the main source of income, has been a great burden for many people. Those who obtained bank loans for tourism investments could hardly repay their loans. Many hotels in the area, both small and large, have had to lay off staff. Most of the workers who are villagers in the surrounding areas are clueless and have no work to earn a living. Since Sigiriya is a tourism-focused area, a decline in tourism has direct effects on their economies, which can burden them with debt and drive them into the depths of poverty.

### **The Problem Statement**

The subject research problem involves an in-depth investigation of the profound and complex impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in the Sigiriya region, a region known for its cultural and historical significance in Sri Lanka. The aim of this research is to comprehensively explore and understand the specific implications facing the tourism industry in Sigiriya, with a focus on uncovering the complex dynamics that have developed as a result of the global health crisis. One of the key aspects that this study seeks to delve into is the decline in the number of visitors to the Sigiriya area. By analyzing pre-pandemic, during-pandemic and post-pandemic data,

the research seeks to reveal the extent of the decline in tourist arrivals and clarify the patterns and trends associated with these fluctuations. This analysis will provide a detailed understanding of the immediate and lasting impacts of the pandemic on the tourism landscape in Sigiriya.

In addition, the research will delve into the economic implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism-related businesses in the Sigiriya area. By examining factors such as revenue generation and profitability, the study was based to assess the financial losses suffered by these businesses during the crisis. In addition, the research will examine the strategies and adaptations undertaken by tourism businesses to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic on their operations, shedding light on the innovative measures taken to ensure the safety and well-being of tourists while maintaining economic viability. Another crucial aspect that needs to be explored is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment opportunities in the tourism industry in Sigiriya.

This research will analyze the extent of job losses and the socio-economic consequences faced by the local workforce as a result of the crisis. By examining layoff and unemployment rates, the study was carried out to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by individuals who rely on the tourism industry for their livelihoods and explore potential avenues to support and revive their economic well-being. In addition, the research will not only examine the immediate consequences of the pandemic, but also delve into the future prospects of tourism in the Sigiriya area post-pandemic. By identifying and analyzing potential strategies and initiatives, the study seeks to offer recommendations to stakeholders, including government authorities, tourism agencies and local communities, on how to revive and sustain the tourism industry in Sigiriya. This forward perspective provides a blueprint for a resilient recovery and a sustainable future for tourism in the region. In conclusion, this research problem seeks to reveal the complex and far-reaching impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism in the Sigiriya area. Through a comprehensive analysis of visitor numbers, economic implications, employment dynamics and future prospects, this study aims to contribute valuable insights and recommendations for

stakeholders to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic and build a resilient tourism industry in Sigiriya.

**General Objective:**

The general objective of this research is to comprehensively investigate and understand the profound and multifaceted impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in the Sigiriya region, with the aim of providing valuable insights and recommendations to address the challenges faced and build a resilient tourism industry in Sigiriya.

**Specific Objectives:**

To analyze the decline in tourist arrivals to the Sigiriya area during the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, and identify the patterns and trends associated with these fluctuations.

To assess the economic implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism-related businesses in Sigiriya by examining factors such as revenue generation, profitability, and financial losses incurred during the crisis.

To examine the strategies and adaptations undertaken by tourism businesses in Sigiriya to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic on their operations and ensure the safety and well-being of tourists while maintaining economic viability.

To analyze the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment opportunities in the tourism industry in Sigiriya, including job losses and socio-economic consequences faced by the local workforce.

To explore potential avenues to support and revive the economic well-being of individuals relying on the tourism industry in Sigiriya by examining layoff and unemployment rates and identifying measures to mitigate the impact.

To investigate future prospects of tourism in the Sigiriya area post-pandemic and provide recommendations to stakeholders, including government authorities, tourism agencies, and local communities, on strategies and initiatives to revive and sustain the tourism industry in Sigiriya.

To contribute valuable insights and recommendations to stakeholders to address the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and build a resilient and sustainable tourism industry in the Sigiriya region.

### **Methodology**

The data collection process for this study focused on three specific villages within the Inamaluwa Korala Division: Sigiriya, Thalkote, and Kalapuraya. These villages were selected due to their higher level of involvement in the tourism industry compared to the other twelve villages in the division. The researcher recognized the value of qualitative analysis in anthropological research and opted for this approach over quantitative analysis. Instead of sampling 10% of the entire population, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ten key informants to gather qualitative data and gain insights into the local attitudes towards tourism promotion in Sigiriya, with a specific emphasis on cultural heritage. These interviews proved to be highly valuable in understanding the actual state of tourism in and around Sigiriya.

To supplement the qualitative data, a semi-structured questionnaire was also utilized. The questionnaire was distributed among 160 participants using a random sampling method. This approach ensured a diverse range of perspectives and allowed for the collection of quantitative data that could be analyzed in conjunction with the qualitative findings. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods enabled a comprehensive examination of the research topic. Furthermore, various secondary sources were consulted to enhance the research. Research papers, books, newspaper articles, and scholarly articles sourced from the internet were reviewed to gather additional information and support the findings. These sources contributed to the broader context and theoretical framework of the study.

The collected data were analyzed using various tools and software. Graphs and charts were employed to visually represent the data, providing a clear and concise presentation of the findings. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software and Microsoft Excel to generate

descriptive statistics, and inferential analysis, and identify any significant patterns or relationships within the data. This analytical approach allowed for a systematic examination and interpretation of the collected data.

In summary, the data collection process for this study was comprehensive and utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with key informants to obtain qualitative data on the attitudes towards tourism in Sigiriya, while a semi-structured questionnaire was employed to gather quantitative data from a larger sample. Secondary sources were consulted to supplement the primary data. The collected data were analyzed using graphs, charts, and statistical software, enabling a rigorous examination of the research topic.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the research provide valuable insights into the history of Sigiriya tourism and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in the region. The findings highlight the significance of Sigiriya as a tourist destination and shed light on the challenges faced by the local community and tourism industry due to the pandemic.

Historically, Sigiriya has been recognized as the first recorded tourist destination in Sri Lanka, attracting visitors for its aesthetic and entertainment value rather than religious purposes. The archaeological and historical evidence suggests that Sigiriya has been a popular site for centuries, with settlements dating back to before the 5th century AD. King Kashyapa chose Sigiriya as his palace and kingdom in the 5th century AD, which further increased its popularity and attracted tourists from different regions and countries. The discovery of Roman coins at Sigiriya indicates its popularity as a destination for foreign trade. Sigiriya Graffiti, dating back to the 8th century AD, provides evidence of local and foreign tourists visiting the site, particularly interested in its paintings and frescoes.

However, the tourism industry in Sigiriya has faced significant challenges in recent years, particularly due to the Easter attack and the Covid-19 pandemic. The Easter attack had already impacted tourism in the region, and the subsequent Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated the decline in tourist arrivals. The pandemic has had a severe negative impact on the local economy, as tourism is the main source of income for many people in the area. The decline in tourism has led to financial difficulties for tourism-related businesses, including hotels that had to lay off staff. The local workforce, particularly villagers in the surrounding areas, has faced unemployment and economic hardships due to the decline in tourism.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to address the challenges faced by the tourism industry in Sigiriya and revive the sector. Firstly, providing interest-free loans or compensation to individuals in the tourism sector through state or private banks can alleviate financial burdens. Loan payment schemes can be restructured to support businesses and individuals. Prioritizing national security and establishing a secure environment is crucial to attract tourists. Improving the road system, addressing damaged and dusty roads, and enhancing public facilities in Sigiriya and nearby villages are essential to cater to the needs of tourists. Facilities for disabled tourists should also be improved to ensure inclusivity.

The security of tourists, especially foreign tourists, should be ensured by enhancing tourist hotels and restaurants to meet high-quality standards. Developing key economic zones in Sigiriya and implementing standardized name-boards would benefit tourism and the local community. Improving English language proficiency among those in the tourism industry and conducting regular inspections of tourist guide licenses can enhance the quality of services provided. Implementing efficient waste disposal methods, installing an elephant fence for safety, and establishing a proper street lighting system contribute to sustainable tourism goals. Increasing police patrols during nighttime and establishing a separate bus stand for Sigiriya can enhance safety and convenience for tourists.



However, the Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected tourism in Sigiriya, following the already challenging aftermath of the Easter attack. The decline in tourist arrivals and the subsequent economic implications have had a profound impact on tourism-related businesses and the local workforce, leading to job losses and financial struggles. The dependency on tourism as the main source of income has placed a heavy burden on individuals and communities in the Sigiriya area, pushing them into debt and poverty. To address these challenges and revive tourism in Sigiriya, several recommendations can be considered. Firstly, providing financial support such as interest-free loans or compensation to individuals in the tourism sector can help stabilize the local economy and improve living conditions. Restructuring existing loan payment schemes can also alleviate financial burdens. Furthermore, prioritizing national security is crucial to restore confidence in travelers and attract visitors to Sigiriya. Enhancing the road system, improving public facilities, and expanding existing amenities within the Sigiriya site are essential to enhance the overall tourist experience and cater to the needs of tourists. Additionally, improving the quality of tourist hotels and restaurants, developing key economic zones, and implementing standardized name-boards will contribute to the promotion of high-quality tourism. Strengthening English language proficiency among tourism industry professionals and ensuring the qualifications of tourist guides through regular inspections are vital for effective communication and visitor satisfaction. Implementing sustainable practices such as efficient waste disposal and the installation of an elephant fence near the wildlife sanctuary will contribute to preserving the environment and achieving long-term sustainability in tourism.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The current state of tourism in Sigiriya has been severely impacted by both the Easter Attack and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, it is crucial to develop and implement a permanent and immediate plan to revive tourism in the area. The people involved in tourism and related employment have been particularly affected, experiencing high levels of unemployment and

accumulating debt. To address these challenges, one potential solution is to provide interest-free loans or compensation to individuals in the tourism sector through state or private banks. Additionally, existing loan payment schemes can be restructured to alleviate financial burdens. These measures would contribute to stabilizing the local economy and improving living conditions, at least temporarily. During the study, it was evident that the majority of participants emphasized the need for establishing national security as a fundamental priority. By ensuring a secure environment, tourists will feel more confident and willing to travel to Sigiriya. Previous research on the impact of terrorism on tourism in Greece supports this viewpoint, emphasizing the significance of establishing a secure atmosphere to attract visitors. Therefore, prioritizing national security is crucial when promoting tourism in Sigiriya. Furthermore, special attention should be given to improving the road system, including both urban and suburban roads, as tourists are present in these areas. Addressing issues such as damaged and dusty roads is essential to ensure safety, sanitation, and food hygiene. Moreover, there is a need to enhance public facilities in Sigiriya and nearby villages to cater to the needs of tourists. This includes the development of public latrines, provision of clean drinking water, improved restaurants, resting areas, and other necessary amenities. The existing facilities within the Sigiriya site should also be expanded to meet the increasing demands of tourists. Establishing a special bus service that allows tourists to explore nearby villages and experience the local cultural heritage would enhance the overall tourist experience and benefit the local communities. Additionally, it is essential to improve facilities for disabled tourists to ensure inclusivity and attract a broader range of visitors.

Ensuring the security of tourists, particularly foreign tourists, is crucial to minimize any difficulties they may encounter and maintain a positive image of Sri Lanka. Therefore, measures should be taken to enhance tourist hotels and restaurants in the Sigiriya area to meet high-quality standards. Additionally, key economic zones in Sigiriya, such as Kimbissa junction, Hathare Kanuwa, Nawahandiya, Sigiriya Rest House, and Sigiriya Hotel Junction, should be developed to directly

impact tourism and benefit the local residents. Implementing standardized name-boards, commonly used in global tourism promotion, would assist tourists in reaching their destinations easily, enhancing the overall tourist experience.

Improving the English language proficiency of those engaged in the tourism industry is crucial for promoting high-quality tourism. Effective communication plays a significant role in facilitating better understanding and satisfaction between travelers and service providers. Regular inspections of tourist guide licenses are necessary to ensure that only qualified individuals provide services, minimizing potential risks. Efficient waste disposal methods and programs should be implemented and further improved in Sigiriya to preserve the environment and achieve sustainable tourism goals. Additionally, considering the proximity of the villages to the wildlife sanctuary, it is necessary to install an elephant fence to enhance the safety of tourists and prevent any potential negative incidents. Furthermore, implementing a proper street lighting system, preferably solar-powered, would improve the sense of security for tourists who prefer to explore the natural environment at night. Increasing police patrols during nighttime and establishing a separate bus stand for Sigiriya would also will be very beneficial for promoting tourism in difficult situations. Finally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Sigiriya tourism has been significant, but with strategic planning, collaboration between stakeholders, and the implementation of the recommended measures, the tourism industry in Sigiriya can be revived and made resilient. It is crucial to prioritize the well-being of the local community, ensure visitor safety, and maintain the cultural and natural heritage of Sigiriya for future generations to enjoy. By adopting a sustainable and inclusive approach, Sigiriya can regain its position as a thriving and sought-after tourist destination in Sri Lanka.

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