Rating Methodology – Hotels & Resorts

[Issued in July 2022]

Overview

The Indian hospitality industry along with tourism, which has been one of the key segments driving the growth of the services sector in the Indian economy, has witnessed massive setbacks since the pandemic hit India. However, with successful vaccination drives and easing of travel restrictions, the sector saw a strong recovery in 2021-22. In CY2021, the Indian travel and tourism sector contributed about $178 billion (around 5.8% of the country's GDP), down from $194 billion during CY2019 (contributing 6.8% of the country's GDP), according to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC). The contribution of the sector in CY2020 had dropped significantly to $121 billion.

The hotel industry is driven by factors such as the prospects of the Indian tourism industry (which is dependent on the overall economy and disposable income), business and leisure travel, foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) and the trend of meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE).

The risk profile associated with the hotel industry is high given the fact that the industry is highly seasonal as well as cyclical in nature and exhibits high volatility in its revenue and profitability depending on the economic cycle. During the economic boom, the industry is positively impacted, and witnesses higher spending and better margins backed by healthy operational parameters, while in the case of economic downtrends, the industry is adversely impacted and struggles in terms of revenue and profitability. The fact that the industry is characterized by high capital cost, coupled with a long gestation period also puts pressure on its cash flows in times of economic downtrends.

Rating Methodology

CARE Ratings has a standard methodology for the credit rating of entities belonging to the service sector. It encompasses an assessment of the various risk factors which could potentially affect the credit risk of an entity such as economy and industry risk analysis, business risk, financial risk, and management quality. However, considering the size and diversity of the service sector, CARE Ratings has devised methodologies specific to various industries within the sector. These methodologies attempt to point out factors, over and above those mentioned in the broader methodology devised for the service sector, which is considered while analysing entities belonging to the particular industry. The following is a list of such additional factors, along with their analytical implications, considered by CARE Ratings while arriving at the rating of an entity that operates in the hotel sector.

A. Promoters/Management Analysis

Experience and track record of the promoters in the line of business is given utmost importance while evaluating management competency and quality. CARE Ratings assesses management's ability to run the business efficiently while addressing the inherent business risk associated with hotel operations and undertaking judicious expansion. Considering the capital-intensive nature of the hotel business, a company with financially strong promoters enjoys an advantage over others as its ability to infuse and/or raise funds in a timely manner is better. Moreover, given the long gestation of the hotel industry, active involvement of promoters in the operations of the company and ability to support by way of infusion of funds in the initial stages operations becomes important.

In case, hotel companies are part of conglomerates, the extent of linkages, and support of the parent company or group in terms of financial and/or operations is also analysed (refer to CARE Ratings' Methodology- Notching by factoring linkages in Ratings which is available on our website www.careedge.in).

For more details on management evaluation, please refer to CARE Ratings' 'Rating Methodology - Service Sector Companies' which is available on CARE Rating's website

B. Business Risk Analysis

i. Evaluation of business model

Hotels can be owned/leased, franchised, or managed. A healthy mix of revenue from different business models would be favourable from a credit perspective. The selection of business model depends on how experienced and financially equipped a promoter is to independently own and operate a hotel under its own brand. Owned and franchised models require initial investments which leads to significant borrowings. However, due to agreements with established hotel chains in the franchised model, they attract higher occupancies from the initial phase itself. Entities who are not financially sound or tend to avoid huge capex generally opt for leased models, thereby leading to lower borrowings but higher lease rent obligations.

ii. Brand strength

CARE Ratings favourably views hotels operated under renowned and established brands as it helps in higher visitation and pricing power leading to better revenue visibility and maintaining market share even in an increasing competitive scenario. Operational risk is lower in hotels operated by a renowned hotel chain vis-à-vis hotels operated by a hotel operator/owner with little or no prior experience in operating hotels.

iii. Scale

While assigning the rating, CARE Ratings considers the scale of business operations in terms of room inventory and other infrastructure. The scale of operations is an important rating consideration as it provides the entity with competitive advantages such as the ability to influence pricing, economies of scale with better operational efficiency and financial flexibility.

iv. Revenue diversification

While scale provides a hotel with various competitive advantages, it is diversification which ensures the stability of cash flows. CARE Ratings views companies with geographical diversification with a large number of properties more favourably as compared to companies with a single property.

CARE Ratings also analyses the revenue concentration of an organization in terms of customer type, region, or service type. The industry is composed of three sub-segments, viz, luxury/upscale

segment, mid-scale segment and economy/budget segment. Revenue per available room (RevPAR) of the luxury/upscale segment is more vulnerable to cyclicality vis-à-vis RevPAR of mid-scale and economy hotels. However, during high demand, the luxury/upscale segment has higher pricing flexibility as compared with mid-scale and economy hotels. While analysing hotel companies, CARE Ratings examines their presence in various sub-segments. Companies with a presence in multiple sub-segments have higher business stability. Moreover, as they cater to different customer segments across various price points, they enjoy a larger customer base.

v. Operational performance

CARE Ratings analyses performance indicators of hotels such as ARR (Average Room Rent), Occupancy ratio and RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room). RevPAR is a derivation of ARR and Occupancy levels, which are, in turn, dependent on many factors like location, demand-supply dynamics, brand, sub-segment, economic scenario and others. For an operational hotel, CARE Ratings evaluates movement in RevPAR in the past and the ability of a hotel to charge ARR at a premium over industry ARR without compromising on occupancy levels. CARE Ratings also evaluates the mix of revenue from room rent vis-à-vis food and beverage (F&B) /banqueting and their interdependence.

vi. Location analysis

The location of the property portfolio is important in determining the volatility and relative level of a hotel's earnings. The strategic location of a property near a place of interest/commercial area helps attract more and repeat customers and is viewed positively. At the same time, competing properties in the vicinity would tend to exert pressure on pricing.

The properties can be categorised as business and leisure destinations. At times, the two are not mutually exclusive as some locations have a fair mix of business and leisure travellers. The demand dynamics are quite different for both segments. Properties located in leisure destinations are likely to have significant seasonality in occupancies and ARR and high gestation period. Similarly, the chains with a higher dependence on foreign travellers are likely to be affected more severely during extraordinary events like economic slowdown, terrorist attacks and other events. Location at gateway cities, key business centres and popular leisure destinations may provide some buffer during periods of economic slowdowns as occupancies may not decline as sharply.

C. Financial Parameters

i. Revenues & Profitability

In the case of a hotel company, the degree of stability to revenues and profits is of high importance. Healthy sales and profitability are a direct derivation of higher RevPAR. Higher RevPAR indicates strong market positioning of the hotel, whereas healthy profitability reflects the ability to generate cash accruals to support business operations and fund ongoing maintenance, expansion if any. Revenue and profitability in the sector are seasonal as well as cyclical in nature and CARE Ratings takes the same into cognizance. While revenue is skewed towards the second half of a year, expenses are spread more evenly impacting the profitability. Furthermore, during the economic

boom, the industry is favourably impacted by higher disposable income while the same struggles during economic downturns.

ii. Leverage and Debt Servicing

The hotel industry is highly capital intensive and is characterized by a long gestation period. Hotel entities also regularly invest in upgradation and expansion to remain competitive in the industry. Therefore, CARE Ratings evaluates the capital structure of a hotel entity to determine its ability to service the debt to evaluate its financial flexibility. The extent of leveraging determines the possible level of stress on operational cash flows, particularly in cyclical downturns. CARE Ratings while computing the leverage also factors in the lease liabilities as part of total debt. High leverage reduces the financial flexibility of a hotel company, thereby, its fund-raising ability in case of any future capex plans or any shortfall in cash flows during adverse market conditions.

CARE Ratings evaluates total debt position vis-à-vis the level of gross cash accruals to ascertain the adequacy of its cash flows to service debt repayment obligations. Furthermore, while evaluating future cash flows, capex requirements (usually for new properties and renovation of existing properties) and its funding pattern are also factored in. Given the fact that hotel entities have high initial investment and long gestation periods, repayment schedules of longer tenors are preferred so that they are mapped adequately with the expected cash flow of the hotel to avoid any liquidity stress. Any significant interest rate change may have an impact on the debt servicing capabilities of hotel entities and the same is considered in the analysis by CARE Ratings.

During economic downturns, the companies with lower financial leverage may be able to withstand some moderate weakening in operational performance due to relatively lower debt servicing requirements and relatively better financial flexibility.

For more details on financial ratios, please refer to CARE Ratings' methodology on 'Financial Ratios Non-financial Sector Entities' available on our website.

D. Project Risk

Some additional factors are accounted for while rating companies that are in the project stage or are undergoing expansion. CARE Ratings considers the management's past track record of executing projects with a judicious mix of debt and equity components and without any cost/time overruns as a critical factor. The facilities being offered, competitive positioning, relative cost structure, capital cost per room, funding sources, debt structure of the project and accessibility of various sources of funding are assessed. The hotel industry is cyclical, and projects have a long gestation period; hence, the timing of setting up a new hotel or expansion is of critical importance.

While examining new/expansion plans, CARE Ratings evaluates the rationale of the project, its strategic importance in the company's business plan, marketing-cum-management tie-up, and the magnitude of the project vis-à-vis the net worth/asset size of the company. CARE Ratings also evaluates the location demandsupply situation at the time of project completion and analyses its impact on the company's financials and future cash flows. In the case of inorganic growth, CARE Ratings analyses the cost of

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acquisition vis-à-vis the benefits of synergies. While examining an ongoing project, CARE Ratings examines the stage of approvals, licences, governmental clearances agreements with contractors and consultants and their impact on the possibility of time and cost overrun.

Conclusion

The rating outcome is ultimately an assessment of the fundamentals and the probabilities of change in the fundamentals. CARE Ratings analyses each of the above factors and their linkages to arrive at the overall assessment of credit quality by taking into account the industry's cyclicality. While the methodology encompasses comprehensive financial, commercial, economic, and management analysis, the credit rating analysis is ultimately an overall assessment of all aspects of the issuer focussed on assessing the timely debt servicing ability of the issuer.

[For the previous version please refer to 'Rating Methodology – Hotel Industry' issued in July 2020**]**

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