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## A Study on Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction of Rural Tourism in India

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### **Abstract**

Rural tourism is a subset of tourism that would consist of wide range things such as farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism. Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Rural tourism is essentially an activity that takes place in the countryside. Rural tourism creates experiences for tourist who enjoys locations that are sparsely populated, it is predominantly in natural environment, and it meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions. Rural tourism has become quite admired since the last few years.

Owing to the customer-oriented service endeavours, tourism enterprises, either private or public, need to improve service offerings by determining the needs of their target groups. They have to understand the customer expectations, word of mouth, customer current knowledge, past experience, in order to improve the service quality of the firm. Within this context, this study aims at explore various factors that can impact the current service quality level of rural tourism services in India. This paper endeavours to evaluate the customer overview related to rural tourism quality in India.

**Keywords:** Rural Tourism, Service Quality, Tourism Service Quality, Tourist Satisfaction.

### **Introduction**

Tourism is currently the world's largest industry and the fastest growing sector of the market. Tourism is usually viewed as being multidimensional, possessing physical, social, cultural, economic and political characteristics. "Definitions of tourism share a range of common elements" (Dowling 2001, p24). Mathieson and Wall (1982) that tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations out of their normal home and workplace, the activities undertaken during the stay, and the facilities created to cater for their needs.

Tourism is the fastest growing industry in the world. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) tourism is the world's largest industry generating 12% of the global gross national product and it employs around 200 million people worldwide (WTTC, 1995).

Worldwide tourism is ranked second highest revenue-generating industry next to the oil industry. It is necessary to differentiate between different type of tourists to understand and analyse their purpose of visit. There are different ways to attract domestic and foreign tourists, we need to understand what types of services are required to attract and retain the customers. There is a large potential market for rural tourism especially for foreign tourists, which has not yet developed because government has not taken up any systematic approach to attract foreign tourists.

### **Rural Tourism in India**

The basic concept of rural tourism is to benefit the local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, conservation and development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage (Mishra, 2001). Rural tourism will bring people of different cultures, faiths, languages and life-styles close to one another and it will provide a broader outlook of life. It will not only generate employment for the people but it can also develop social, cultural and educational values. In Asia, especially in India, rural tourism in its true form is relatively new. The potential for rural tourism to be a major force in rural economic development resulting in poverty alleviation is yet to be realized to the fullest extent. Tourism growth potential can be harnessed as a strategy for Rural Development. The development of a strong platform around the concept of Rural Tourism is definitely useful for a country like India, where almost 74% of the population resides in its 7 million villages. Rural Tourism is one of the few activities which can provide a solution to these problems. Besides, there are other factors which are shifting the trend towards rural tourism like increasing levels of awareness, growing interest in heritage and culture and improved accessibility, and environmental consciousness. In the developed countries, this has resulted in a new style of tourism of visiting village settings to experience and live a relaxed and healthy lifestyle.

### **Complexity of Tourism Quality**

The tourist product has been transformed over time from being completely dominated by mass tourism to an industry that is quite diversified and caters more to the individual needs of its participants, for example, the niche market has become an important factor in the tourism industry reflecting the need to diversify and customize the industry and ensure the sustainability of the product. The main niche markets such as sports travel, spa and health care, adventure and nature tourism, cultural tourism, theme parks, cruise ships, religious travel and others hold great potential and are developing rapidly. So, suppliers will have to pay more attention to the way people think, feel and behave than they have done hitherto. The increased travel experience, flexibility and independent nature of the new tourists are generating demand for better quality, more value for money and greater flexibility in the travel experience.

Tourism market is highly competitive, a tourism enterprise has to make sure to provide the product or services that the tourist wants so that they get right quality at right time. This

leads to customer satisfaction and achieving desired profit. Quality service leads to more repeated visits by the tourists and greater sales revenue. This enables staff on performance related pay to earn more and enhance the quality of their service to the customer. The extra profit generated can be reinvested in upgrading facility, new projects and in training schemes.

### **Problems Identified in Quality Rural Tourism**

The main reasons behind the complexity of measuring quality in rural tourism could be summarized as follows:

- Rural tourism is a subset of tourism sector with a complex product which depends on an extremely fragmented supply such as villagers, NGOs, govt. organizations, travel agencies, tour operators, carriers, hoteliers, restaurateurs, etc which links like a chain to one another. All the above factors determine tourists' experiences and the quality of the service. The tourist destination is the main place of consumption of tourist services and identifies the product with both the businesses providing a service and the destination visited.
- The quality of rural tourism is dependent on psychological and social influences. If service of one link in the chain is affected the whole tourism value chain suffers the consequences. For Example recently a murder incidence in Goa gave a chance to media to paint a picture of Goa as Sex and drug destination to the immediate detriment of the tourism industry.
- Rural tourism is extremely diverse in natural and cultural resources, tourist facilities, the communications infrastructure, accommodation and restaurants are the basic resources of a tourist destination. This makes rural tourism quite complex due to inadequate facility at rural area.
- No quality assurance instruments could be applied like certificates and rewards. No proper tools to monitor and to get feedback from tourists visiting rural area.

The problem becomes even more complicated in view of the fact that tourists consume other elements of the total tourism product during their overall tourism experience, mainly at the destination area. With the large number of destinations that tour operators deal with and offer to the customers, an individual tour operating company is not in a position to control the quality of all the elements of the total tourism product offered by the providers operating at the host area. All the more reason that many of these elements are offered by the public sector e.g. infrastructure, security, police, urban transport, education. Moreover, the human aspect of the product is of utmost importance for total tourist satisfaction, and this can be confronted only at the time of tourism product consumption. This implies that, even if several tourism companies make an effort to establish effective relationships with their suppliers, many of the components of the total tourism product that influence customer satisfaction are beyond their control. This lack of control results in customer dissatisfaction, since the standards promised or implied in advertisements are not matched by the reality of the visitors' experience during their stay.

The discrepancy between the views of the tourists expectation in respect to the quality of the tourism product can be termed as the tourism quality perception gap. While tourists

perceive quality as satisfaction with the complete tourism experience from the time they leave home to the time they return.

This paper will consider a service quality view from host population that is from villager perspective. For simple reasons that Villagers are the major stakeholder, the day they are convinced of quality rural tourism as an attractive alternative source of income rural mass can bring revolution. Observing the challenges and opportunities that government has implemented in tourism service quality in rural India.

### **Bridging the Gap of Tourists' Expectation and Satisfaction**

There is no suitable system for encouraging people to be creative (or to be innovative) and create different service delivery processes. More important is the weakness of rural woman empowerment levels within tourism business enterprises creating a major problem in service delivery. The style of family business management overwhelm tourism business sector in India and this put obstacles in the way of creativity and innovation. What kind of training structure does government employ? Is it a formal training procedure? Are rural women involved in tourism? Government need to involve and focus on rural women as main constituent of service delivery.

Now rural Women are coming out of the shadows of men. They are becoming more vocal about how they feel and their circumstances are making more decisions in the family and are not taking anything from the men-folk lying down. Conventional approaches to women's empowerment are based on the twin assumptions that alleviation of poverty will automatically lead to their empowerment and that the major constraint on programmes for upliftment is monetary. The result of five decades of planning, however, has shown that economic assistance by itself does not necessarily improve the status of rural women. However the more vital inhibiting factors leading to the disadvantaged position of women are their ignorance, powerlessness and vulnerability.

### **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**

Women have started organising themselves into Self-Help Groups, which are a very powerful tool that they have to empower themselves on their own. How this system operates is also very simple: 15-20 women can get together and pool in their resources. It is primarily for savings and credit.

This system impacts the women in the following ways:

- It helps women develop an identity for themselves independent of their husbands/fathers.
- It provides them economic independence; they do not have to go to their husbands for every rupee. At the family level, women in the Self-Help Groups discuss domestic violence and alcoholism, sometimes mediating between families and family members. Young married girls are far more able to deal with violent husbands or hostile in-laws if they have the public support of their Self-Help Group. At the community level, field workers support group

members in dealing with authorities on problems like open drain, poor sanitation or electricity. Yet most remarkable is the growing confidence of individual women. Before joining a Self Help Group, many would rarely, if ever, leave their homes; now they assert their rights to attend meetings and training, speak out publicly, and confidently stand up to police and other authorities.

### **Panchayati Raj Institutions**

It has single handedly changed the face of women's empowerment with the introduction of reservation for women in local bodies. In 1993 one of the most important step for the empowerment of women and increasing their participation in decision making was taken by reserving 33% seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions. This paved the way for election of around one million at the village, block and district level.

There is a gap of service quality pertaining to external communication. Major challenge for government is to convince rural population in regard to importance of service quality. Biggest challenge in this area remains media that can be chosen by government. TV as a media is still beyond the reach of rural India. Electricity is not yet accessible to many, if not, most people in rural areas. Also community viewing is a common practice in the villages. This then ensures neither a regular audience nor a fully attentive audience.

Answer to this problem of communication in rural masses is folk music. Going back to the times of kings and queens, folk art was patronized by the courts. Along with entertainment, the media was used to communicate royal messages, court orders and warnings about wars and the onset of epidemics. In the 1940s, Indian people's theatre association, the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, used folk forms like 'Jaatras', 'Bhavai' and 'Burrakatha' in the states of Bengal, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh respectively, to seek people's participation. Similarly, other forms like 'Alha' of Uttar Pradesh, 'Lavani' of Maharashtra, 'Gee Gee' of Karnataka, 'Villupaattu' of Tamil Nadu, Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh, and 'Kabigaan' of Bengal were also used to generate public consciousness against British rule.

In nutshell government as stakeholder must understand the media that is effective in rural masses on account of reach, interaction, credibility, persuasiveness, product suitability and costs to promote rural tourism.

### **Conclusion**

The main conclusions of this paper can be summarized as follows:

To improve tourism service quality it is necessary to achieve three requirements: villagers' satisfaction; tourist's satisfaction; and the efficiency of processes. However service quality gaps can be bridged by appreciating villager's perspectives. For government, to deal with rural tourism service quality challenges successfully and to be able to measure quality, it is necessary to take the four factors into consideration when deciding tourism quality strategy viz: the fundamental role of information, knowledge and its dissemination; the need for competent human resources motivated by medium and long-term prospects; the integration of

environmental policy and the promotion of sustainable tourism; the need for a network of the stakeholders involved and a generalized partnership, particularly between those in the field to ensure implementation of all the recommendations.

It is necessary to involve the rural masses in internal operations by incorporating villagers' feedback into improving tourism product or service. To achieve this rural woman can act as change agent. This would empower the rural woman also and their participation in decision making processes.

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