India’s image as a tourist destination — a perspective of foreign tourists

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Abstract

The study was conducted with the purpose of determining pre- and post-trip perceptions of foreign tourists about India as a tourist destination. The sample numbered 152. A gap analysis between expectations and satisfaction levels was used to identify strengths and weaknesses of India’s tourism-related image dimensions so that necessary efforts can be made to ensure that tourists’ expectations are met. It was observed that India is rated highly for its rich art forms and cultural heritage. However, irritants like cheating, begging, unhygienic conditions, lack of safety dampen the spirits of tourists. India can be positioned on the world map only after these hygiene factors are improved along with other motivators. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Indian tourism has been facing the problem of not getting the expected number of foreign tourists despite extensive marketing efforts. The term ‘India’ has not been sending the correct signals to travel enthusiasts across the globe. In the view of this author India is regarded less highly than it deserves to be by the outside world. The image it portrays is that of mysticism, political instability, grinding poverty, illiteracy, terrorism, unemployment, communal discord, lack of social services, and corruption (Sarkar, 1997). To top it all, the year 1998 commenced ominously for Indian tourism with the United States Official Trade Guide declaring India to be a dangerous destination (Express Travel and Tourism, 1998) and progressed with explosion of nuclear bombs delighting its citizens and incurring the wrath of world community. This type of image plays a crucial role for tourists to avoid visiting India inspite of visiting neighbouring countries. Ahmed and Krohn (1992) have discussed this problem from the perspective of marketing prerequisite for India. Menon (1997), Seth (1996,1997), Travels Trends (1996), Narayanan (1995) and many others have considered India’s image to be an obstacle hampering its progress in tourism. This study was undertaken to measure the attitudes of foreign tourists and assess whether the visitors actually perceived these negative images. Although a lot of literature exists on tourists’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction hardly any study has been conducted in India. The studies conducted in other countries cannot be applied directly to India because of its entirely different social structure and environment. The purpose of the study was to assess foreign tourists’ expectations and satisfaction levels in relation to India as tourist destination and to identify the gaps between the two. Tourists’ groups have been compared with each other to identify the gaps between expectation and satisfaction levels.

2. Methodology

A survey of foreign tourists was undertaken to identify their expectations and to share their experiences. Structured questions were used to collect attitudinal and sociodemographic data. Since the purpose was to learn about attitudes on various attributes, multi-attribute approach has been used. Attributes were selected based on reports and articles about India in the media and also from a small survey of tourists where they were asked to describe India in their own words. Both tangible and intangible attributes have been adopted and the statements have been phrased in both positive and negative forms.
The study’s data collection phase was spread over a 2-year period to avoid the recency effect of any major disturbing event on the tourist attitudes. The responses were collected after the tourists had travelled or stayed in India and pre- and post-trip data were collected simultaneously. Two hundred tourists were contacted depending on their convenience at airports, hotels and destinations in Delhi, Pune, and Chandigrah. Of these 152 responded. A five-point Likert scale was used to collect data about tourists’ expectations and satisfaction levels. For the purpose of analysis, of the many approaches available for explanation of consumer satisfaction/dis-satisfaction, the one proposed by Oliver (1980) has been used. According to Oliver, consumers purchase goods and services with pre-purchase expectations about performance. Once the product or service has been used, outcomes are compared with expectations. When the outcome matches expectations, confirmation occurs. Non-confirmation occurs when there are differences between expectations and outcomes. Satisfaction is caused by positive confirmation and dissatisfaction is caused by negative confirmation.

Along with the overall comparison of the expectations and satisfaction levels of the total sample, three groups of tourists (German, British and Dutch) have been compared with each other to find whether these segments differ regarding India’s image attributes as measured in the study. These three segments were considered important markets by leading travel agencies.

3. Data analysis

A group mean t-test analysis was done to know whether there were significant differences between tourists’ expectations and satisfaction on 20 travel related attributes. The degree of confirmation–disconfirmation was operationally defined as the mathematical difference between a subjects score on each statement in the pre- and post-trip as follows:

\[ C/D = A(t+1) - A(t), \]

where \( C/D \) is the level of confirmation/disconfirmation, \( A \) is the statement about perception of destination, \( t \) the pre-trip and \( t+1 \) the post-trip.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to make a comparison among German, British and Dutch groupings.

4. Results

4.1. Tourists’ profile

It was found (Table 1) that most of the tourists were male, unmarried between the ages of 30 and 50. Only 16.1 per cent were below 30 and 8.6 per cent above 50. The largest proportion of tourists were from Germany followed by visitors from Australia, Britain, Sweden and Italy. Most of them did not provide information about their annual incomes. The majority did not avail the package tour facility and their main purpose was tourism by an interest and/or belief in different religious sects. It was found that more than half of the tourists received information about India from their friends.

4.2. Tourists’ expectations

The mean scores of tourists’ expectations on each of the 20 attributes were computed. For 10 positively
framed responses the mean scores were very high (Table 2), in “rich cultural heritage” (4.12), “close to nature” (4.06) and in the mid range for “variety of arts” (3.37), “tourist land-marks” (3.62), “hospitality of Indians” (3.12) “good transportation facilities” (3.33) and low scores were observed for “economical destination” (2.75), “inexpensive shopping” (2.43), “quality hotels” (2.75) and “reliability of train services” (2.81). For the 10 negatively framed responses, (Table 2) expectations were high in the cases of “unsafe place” (4.5), “cheating” (4.0), “beggars” (4.31), medium for “unsafe domestic airlines” (3.18), “poor guide services” (3.12), “unhygienic” (3.87), “unsafe drinking water” (3.62), “little night life” (3.0), “poor roads” (3.93) and low for “unethical practices in travel business” (2.87).

### 4.3. Tourists’ satisfaction levels

The mean scores (Table 2) of satisfaction exceeded expectation scores for positively termed responses in the case of four responses and were less for the rest of the responses. The high expectation (4.12) about “rich cultural heritage” seems to be satisfied well (4.75). Among the various expectations falling in the mid range, “variety of arts” and “good transportation facilities” were the ones where satisfaction levels exceeded expectations with the mean scores of 4.43 and 3.37.

For negatively termed responses, in seven variables paired mean difference show worse tourist facilities than expected, equal in one case and better for two. Only in the cases of India as an “unsafe destination” and “poor guide services” were satisfaction levels greater than expectation indicating that things were better than expected.

### 4.4. Expectation vs. satisfaction gap

A comparison of tourists’ satisfaction levels and their expectations using paired mean t-test indicated (Table 2)
non-confirmations (both positive and negative) in 17 out of 20 terms. The confirmed items were:

(1) India is an inexpensive destination.
(2) It has overall good transportation facilities.
(3) The roads are of poor quality.

The contradiction between (2) and (3) is explainable by the fact that foreign tourists in India prefer to take railways rather than roadways.

Following their visit to India, respondents perceived the outcome to be better in following cases:

(1) Variety of good arts.
(2) Rich cultural heritage.
(3) Unsafe from petty crimes.
(4) Poor guide services.

In the remaining 13, the outcome was less than expected.

4.5. Inference

The expectation–satisfaction gaps indicate that India overall is not perceived positively. Its two positive variables, “arts” and “rich heritage” are already being used as its main plank in promotional messages. However, other attributes that have been confirmed or that have emerged as being positive can be used to further boost its image. Since most of the attributes fall short of expectations, a lot of hard work need to be done before India can really be positioned as an important tourist destination on the world map.

4.6. Differences among expectations and satisfaction levels of German, British and Dutch tourists

The three important groups of tourists were queried to find out whether they have similar or different expectations and whether their satisfaction levels vary. From $F$ values in Tables 3 and 4 it is clear that the expectations and satisfaction levels of these groups of tourists do not differ significantly regarding different attributes. Probably, a larger sample may be more useful to reveal cross cultural differences in tourists expectations and satisfaction levels that can be used for targeted marketing with direct approach addressing more relevant concerns for each market.

5. Conclusions

The overall analysis indicates that India can develop its image as a cultural destination — an image which is fairly well established. It lacks a positive image mainly on the infrastructure and safety fronts. A well planned image promotion campaign with the necessary improvements in these areas can be helpful.

Nonetheless, these results can only be regarded as tentative as the data, are derived from a small sample. Hence, while the information is consistent with the author’s view, in itself such preconceptions cannot be said to be confirmed. Like many research notes, it can only be concluded that further study is required.
References


