

INDIAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF RURAL WEST BENGAL AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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Abstract: Creating and selling cultural experiences, particularly cultural attractions, is a trend in the travel and tourism industry (Richards, 1996). However, little is known about the impact image has on the sale of cultural experiences, especially in rural settings within developing countries. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess the image of West Bengal, India, and to identify its strengths and weakness as a travel destination. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with graduate students whose home residence is India. The results indicated that the images of West Bengal were a mixture of both positive and negative perceptions and challenge commonly held assertions about the appeal of rural areas. Further, no differences in response were found between males and females. Differences were found with respect to home residence.

Introduction

According to the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA: 2003), in 2000 21% of domestic person-trips (business and pleasure) included a cultural activity, an increase of 10 % from 1996. One facet of culturally-based tourism-rural tourism-has contributed to this increase.

Rural areas attract tourists because of their mystique and their distinct cultural, historic, ethnic and geographic characteristics (Edgell & Harbaugh, 1993). As Meyer et al. (1991) remarked, in rural areas tourists get to experience life as it really is, to meet local residents, and to return to their roots. There is also a growing

interest in engaging in many of the activities associated with rural tourism, such as wildlife viewing, hiking and cycling. In a study of the North American eco-tourism market, Wight (1996) revealed that 77% of respondents had taken a vacation involving a nature, cultural, and/or adventure component. Perhaps this travel behavior is due to the fact that people tend to strongly believe rural areas are part of a better physical and social world-a world they would like to experience.

The image or "mystique" associated with rural areas affects whether or not individuals choose to visit. In fact, marketers who do not promote the unique attributes of their destination may fail to attract the interest of tourists (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Further, destinations with strong, positive images are more likely to be chosen in the travel decision process (Goodrich, 1978; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Do these theories hold true in developing countries, however? And, what factors comprise the image held by potential tourists? The purpose of this study was to explore the image potential domestic tourists have of a rural area in a developing country and to identify its strengths and weaknesses as a travel destination.

Rurality and Rural Tourism

What do we mean by the term "rural"? Willits, Bealer, and Timbers (1990) argued that there is not one commonly accepted definition for rurality. According to Derno (1991), rural refers to a non-urban territory in which human (land-related economic) activity is on going. Willits et al. (1992) conducted a survey in Pennsylvania, USA, which revealed that a substantial proportion of state residents held positive images about rural living, agrarian values, and wilderness areas. More specifically, their findings suggested that residents see rural people and places as good, wholesome and desirable. "Indeed, the positive imagery is so strong and so pervasive that it seems appropriate to speak of a 'mystique' of rurality" (p. 8).

According to Lane (1994), rural tourism is activity that takes place in the countryside. This simple definition, however, does not include the complexity of the activity and the different forms and meanings developed in different countries. Opperman (1997) argued that rural tourism can be defined as tourism in a "non-urban territory where human (land related economic) activity is going

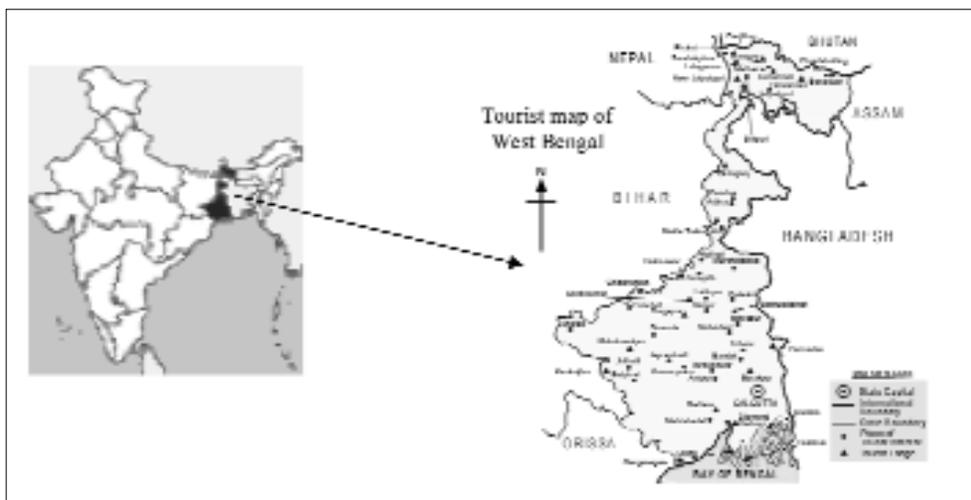


Figure 1: Maps of India (left) and West Bengal (right)

on, primarily agriculture...” (p. 109). Rural tourism is not new (Edgell & Dalton, 1993; Opperman, 1997) yet, according to Hunt (1992), it deserves special and renewed attention.

Despite the accolades attributed to rural tourism, Butler and Clark (1992) suggested that it is not necessarily a panacea to rural development due to income leakages, volatility and low pay. Given the differences in opinion regarding features of rural tourism, Page (1994) and Pigram (1993) recognized that identification and segmentation of the rural tourism market is probably the least researched and understood process in the rural tourism system.

Rural Tourism in India

There can be no denying the fact that rural tourism is of immense importance to the overall travel and tourism industry. Rural areas continue to attract increasing number of tourists and in many countries, including India, it is now one of the most popular forms of tourism. Early movers in adopting this concept in India have been the states of Kerala and Rajasthan.

The state of West Bengal, “the cultural capital of India,” is located in eastern India. It shares international boundaries with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan and domestic borders with the Indian states of Bihar, Orissa, Sikkim and Assam (see Figure 1). The state is bisected by the River Ganges and fed by her various tributaries and distributaries. Covering an area of 87,853 sq. km., West Bengal has a population of around 68 million. While West Bengal occupies only four

percent of the total land of the country, it is burdened with eight percent of the total population. About three quarters of the population lives in villages. It has 18 districts, including the famous city of Calcutta, which is the capital of the state.

Despite being the only Indian state that spreads out from the frozen Himalayas in the north to the temperate coastal plains in the south and having a wide range and variety of attractions and cultures, West Bengal has never done well in the tourism sector. In 1999, the inflow of foreign tourists into the state was only 200,000 of the 2,641,157 that visited India (Department of Tourism, 1999). Further, the tourism sector in West Bengal is growing at a rate of eight percent, which is not satisfactory (Department of Tourism, 1999). Among the four metro cities of India, Calcutta ranks last in foreign tourists arrival after New Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai, and the international airport in Calcutta is among the worst airports in India. In terms of domestic tourism, nearly five and one-half million people visited West Bengal in 1999, which is a meager three percent of the one hundred sixty million domestic tourists in the country.

Compounding the issue, the 25 year-old West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation incurred losses of US\$5.3 million from 1994 to 1998. The Department of Tourism (1999), Government of India (1999), attributed the Corporation’s losses to the fact that it had no master plan for the development or maintenance of facilities and attractions necessary to attract tourists.

Further, West Bengal’s poor performance in foreign and domestic tourism may be due to its negative image. West Bengal is generally thought to have

demonstrations, poverty, disease, over crowding and poor infrastructure. In addition, attributable in part to the media, Calcutta has been portrayed as a place of abysmal poverty, shocking filthiness and disgraceful overcrowding.

Taking into consideration the growth in rural tourism globally and domestically (i.e., within India), and the role that “image” plays in individuals’ decisions to travel for pleasure, it is imperative that research be conducted to substantiate the image tourists (domestic and foreign) have of rural destinations such as West Bengal. Few researchers have attempted to study tourists’ destination image; none have studied tourists’ image of rural travel destinations in India or West Bengal. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to explore the image potential domestic tourists (i.e., residents of India) have of rural West Bengal and to identify its strengths and weaknesses as a travel destination.

Destination Image

A destination image is the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977). Destination image, according to Etchner and Ritchie (1991), is composed of perceptions of individual attributes (e.g., friendliness of the people, climate) as well as more holistic impressions (i.e., mental pictures and imagery) of the place. Destination image may also be affected by the social meaning attributed to the environment in which the destination is located. For example, a destination located in a countryside may elicit very different perceptions and impressions than a destination located in the middle of a city.

Images held of destinations are important because they influence both the decision-making behavior of potential tourists (Crompton, 1979; Mayo 1975) and levels of satisfaction regarding the tourist experience (Chon, 1992).

Methods

This study was exploratory in nature because no image-based research currently exists on rural areas in India, specifically West Bengal. Consequently, instead of formalized hypotheses, the following research question guided the study: What image do potential domestic tourists (i.e., Indians) have

of West Bengal? This question was supported by a series of questions that were intended to uncover specific elements of the image potential domestic tourists had of West Bengal.

While this study was exploratory in nature there was a need for an overall framework to guide the study. First, graduate students from India, who were registered at a large land grant university in the northeastern section of the United States comprised the study population. They were deemed appropriate for the study population because they characterize potential domestic tourists. A list of 767 Indian students was obtained from the university’s Office of International Students and Scholars. Out of this list, six graduate students were selected for open-ended personal interviews. Three of the interviewees were male and three were female; three are from northern India and three from southern India. Males and females who were from different parts of India were selected in order to obtain different perspectives about rural West Bengal.

The primary method for data collection was in-depth interviews. We adopted a qualitative method that allowed us to understand phenomena associated with destination image in a different way from a positivist perspective alone (Bogdan & Biklan, 1982). Given that one of the co-authors had the dual roles of being a researcher and a resident of West Bengal, he had to deal with issues of researcher bias. Therefore, he constantly assessed his involvement as a researcher in the process and was quick to deal with any aspects that were a result of his bias. Further, his co-author and the interviewees were asked to review the transcripts and his interpretation of the data. This triangulation enhanced the validity of the results.

The interviews were formal and directed by pre-structured questions (i.e., What are your perceptions of West Bengal? What do you think about the people of West Bengal? and What do you think about the physical environment of rural West Bengal?). The interviews were also recorded and transcribed. At no time were names used; instead, each participant was given a pseudonym. Data analysis was inductive (Creswell, 1998). The themes highlighted in the results were constructed from the interview data and incorporate a review of literature that sensitized the authors to the subject matter.

Results

The results of this study supported the notion that images of a travel destination are a mixture of both positive and negative perceptions (Milman and Pizam 1995; Willits, Bealer, and Timbers 1990). In fact, they challenge Willits et al.'s (1990) contention that most individuals see rural people and places as good, wholesome and desirable.

In terms of the positive perceptions of West Bengal, the respondents recognized the "arts," "interesting customs and culture," "beautiful scenery," "variety of cuisines," "colorful festivals," "stable political situation," "pleasant climate," "Himalayas," "Darjeeling," and the "Royal Bengal tigers." Surprisingly, none of the respondents mentioned the 15 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 5 National Parks and 3 Tiger Reserves that exist in West Bengal. On the other end of the continuum (i.e., negative perceptions) five of the six respondents were aware of but knew very little about rural tourism in the state. They did, however, have specific comments about the people and infrastructure, which were perceived to be undesirable. For example, potential respondents argued that residents of West Bengal need a drastic change in their "work ethic," are "Calcutta-centric," and "impolite." And, local transportation, tourist-information centers, the number and variety of activities, and the pace of life, were perceived to be major hindrances to the development of tourism. The interviewees were either not convinced or ignorant about the level of accommodations and transportation in rural West Bengal.

No differences in response were found between males and females. However, the results did reveal that home residence (i.e., northern vs. southern India) is related to individuals' preferences for rural tourism areas, although the reasons for these differences are not readily apparent. For example, individuals expressed interest only in visiting rural areas that lie within the region (i.e., northern vs. southern India) of their home residence.

Discussion

Given the fact that some of the respondents were essentially unaware of what West Bengal has to offer, it is clear that the state's tourism advertising is not as well known or received as that of its competitors. Furthermore, because the West Bengal government has failed to create a strong,

positive image of the rural areas, which would distinguish the state from other destinations, other states are attracting more tourists with similar or less attractions. To attract potential visitors, the government must reinforce the positive attributes of the state. As Echtner and Ritchie (1993) have suggested, this approach is necessary for effective positioning of a destination.

Further, the finding that preferences for rural tourism areas differed based on home residence may be due to the fact that when respondents travel to India they do so for a short period of time. Hence, they may not want to travel outside of their home region, e.g., away from friends and family. This finding may also be due to the influence of "culture." In India there are significant regional differences in culture. Therefore, after having lived in the USA for months or years, individuals may want to spend their vacation experiencing the culture in which they were raised.

In summary, rural tourism in West Bengal is in its infancy. Therefore, at this exploratory stage tourism planners should utilize a qualitative approach to gain a more detailed picture and a deeper understanding of tourism in the context of rural West Bengal. As Babbie (1992) claimed, we can't solve our social science problems until we understand how they come about and persist.

Limitations

The sample population does not adequately represent all Indian students studying at The Pennsylvania State University or in the USA. Thus, the findings are not generalizable. In addition, the term "rural areas" was not precisely defined and as such each individual's interpretation of the term may have influenced his or her response to the questions in the interview. Finally, the questions used to probe individuals' perceptions of rural West Bengal may not have uncovered all components that comprise Indian students' images of rural West Bengal.

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Pages 116-120 in:

Murdy, James, comp., ed. 2004. **Proceedings of the 2003 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium**. Gen. Tech. Rep. NE-317. Newtown Square, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northeastern Research Station. 459 p.

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Published by:
USDA FOREST SERVICE
11 CAMPUS BLVD SUITE 200
NEWTOWN SQUARE PA 19073-3294

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July 2004

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