

From Bhutan, with Love : Exploring the Perceptions of Bhutanese Students Studying Tourism and Hospitality in an Indian University

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Abstract

The paper explored the perceptions of Bhutanese students studying tourism and hospitality in a private Indian university. Interviews with 21 students enrolled in 'Airlines, Tourism and Hospitality' degree program were conducted followed by focus group. The study explored the participants' perceptions about India, motivation to study tourism, viewpoints on the way of teaching, use of information technology in academics, and language at the place of study. The findings revealed that participants mostly held unfavourable pre-departure (prior) perceptions about the country, which eventually transformed to more favourable as the interface with the place of study grew. Participants' interest in the program could be attributed to the appeal towards tourism, especially in the hopes of a career in airlines. They also perceived the program to be more theoretical than practical and more inclined towards hospitality learning rather than tourism. Perceptions of information technology used in the university were positive and participants acknowledged challenges related to the language in the place of study.

Key words : perceptions, Bhutanese students, India, tourism, program

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The service sector is growing in India, so is the country's education sector (Chadha, Rai, & Dugar, 2016). Tourism and hospitality segments have unlocked vast opportunities for the youngsters to build and shape their careers. As a result, the number of institutions providing courses in tourism and hospitality subjects have also augmented. This proliferation is also stimulated by the encouraging figures of tourist arrivals (World Tourism Organization, 2014) and stress on the need of more skilled manpower for the tourism industry (Bagri, Babu, & Kukreti, 2010 ; Jithendran & Baum, 2000). Interest in private universities is increasing in the country (Burlakanti, Kumar, & Srinivas, 2014). Yeravdekar and Tiwari (2014) considered the reason for such interest as 'massification,' which results from the shift of higher education from 'elite' to 'masses'. Besides, India is

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considered to be among the least expensive countries to pursue university education for international students (Thakur, 1985).

Punjab is an Indian state that shares borders with other states like Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana, and international border with the neighbouring country of Pakistan in the West. Punjabi, a modern Indo-Aryan language (Bhatia, 1993) is prominently spoken in the state; however, conversational fluency in other languages such as Hindi (the official language of India) and English vary to different degrees (Beynon, Ilieva, Dichupa, & Hirji, 2003).

Bhutan is a neighbouring country of India (Singh & Phuntsho, 2014). It is a mountainous country and shares borders with India in the South and China in the North (Childs, Tenzin, Johnson, & Ramachandran, 2012). Maintaining a traditional integrity is significant for Bhutanese people. Education in Bhutan has experienced vital transformation since the 1950s, before which Buddhist monasteries were the major way of imparting formal education (Childs et al., 2012). Bhutanese consider the importance of education in development, also the quality of education has been gaining interest; besides, the curriculum development system in the country is influenced by its Indian counterpart (Maxwell, Rinchen & Cooksey, 2010).

The study is focused on students in a private Indian university located in the Northern Indian state of Punjab. It is known for its vast and diverse strength of students as more than 25,000 students are enrolled in different programs (the University offers more than 200 programs of study) including a large number of international students representing over 26 countries studying on a single campus.

Literature Review

The increase in the students' movement outside of their home countries in post Second World War period has been noted in various scholarly works (Barnett & Wu, 1955 ; Herman, 1996; Lusby & Bandaruk, 2010 ; Rumbaut, 1994 ; Spilimbergo, 2009). Focus on international students studying abroad augmented after the 1950s and resulted in the development of methodologies sans consensus on the use of consistent research instruments (Armfield, 2004). India's history of attracting students from various parts of the world like China, Greece, and Persia to name a few, can be traced back to the 5th century B.C., which even continues today, as higher education institutions draw students from several other developing countries of Asia and Africa (Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2014).

Limited access to education and expectations of raising the economic and social status motivate students from less developed countries to study in overseas universities (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In an empirical investigation, McMahon (1992) highlighted the weaker educational structure in the home countries and the urge to participate in a global economy as important factors in motivating students from the third-world countries to move to study centres in the United States of America. Kondakci (2011) pointed out that motivations of overseas students to study in Turkey were two pronged, first the private rationales (age, aspirations, lifestyle, likes-dislikes, gender, academic interests, etc.) that drove students from developed or Western countries and alternatively, the academic and economic rationales for the students from the East or other developing countries.

Choosing other countries for studies also exposes overseas students to different social and cultural environments. An encounter with a new culture often startles them, and it is important to consider their dealing mechanism. For instance, Pedersen (1991) proposed four distinct behavioural developments when international students are exposed to different cultures - first, the students may 'assimilate,' meaning that they abandon their own identity and move into a larger social framework ; second, the students retain their own cultural identity yet blend in the new society, termed as 'integration' ; thirdly, the 'rejection,' which happens when they withdraw from the larger society ; and lastly 'deculturation,' which pertains to students' total isolation from their own and host culture. Taking cognizance of the competing and contradictory roles, Pedersen (1991) underlined the need to prepare students to learn to deal with changes.

The number of tourism-related courses augmented globally from 1970s owing to increased demand from students (Dale & Robinson, 2001). The past two decades have witnessed developments in tourism education in the Indian context (Singh, 1997). Several institutions offer tourism and hospitality courses where students from India and abroad are enrolled in various degree and diploma programs. It is important to understand international students' engagement and career pathways in tourism (Walmsley, 2012).

Perceptions and expectations of international students have been analyzed from multiple perspectives. While analyzing perceptions of the overseas students, Liu, Liu, Lee, and Magjuka (2010) found that international students acknowledged the cultural differences that existed due to the dissimilarities in ethnicity and took them more positively. Huang (2005) studied the perceptions of Chinese international students studying tourism courses in UK based universities about the effectiveness of 'Program Based Learning' over conventional teaching styles. Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas (2000) used the Delphi technique to identify problems faced by international students studying in an Australian university and reflected on the challenges related to language comprehension, the desire of being accepted by fellow classmates, and the tuition costs. In a study conducted at the University of Queensland, Australia, Barron and Arcodia (2002) discovered that international students from select Asian countries, whom they referred to as students having 'confusion heritage culture,' shifted to activist learning styles while studying tourism and hospitality management at the university. Bontenbal and Aziz (2013) assessed the perceptions of students enrolled in tourism and hospitality program in Oman Tourism College and found mixed responses on their motivations to pursue study, expectations, and preferences about careers in the sector.

Rich body of literature exists that contemplates perspectives on international students like cultural viewpoints (Liu et al., 2010; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010), discrimination at the study place (Lee & Rice, 2007), language and financial issues (Sherry et al., 2010), and physiological & psychological needs (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). Langley and Breese (2005) suggested that increased interaction of international students with the host culture would lead to enriched cultural experience.

Ninnes, Aitchison, and Kalos (1999) observed that Indian students studying in an Australian Metropolitan University favoured rigid curriculum and considered teachers as instructors than co-learners and focused more on passing examinations in more formal settings. Burns (1991) studied students travelling for educational programs from Asian countries to Australia and noted that the overseas students reflected increased levels of stress than the local students. In yet another study in Australia, Baas (2006) identified motivations of Indian students to travel to Australia and accentuated their intention to secure permanent residence in the host country. Bae and Song (2017) also highlighted the intercultural sensitivity of international students in a South Korean university, and proposed tourism patterns predicated on their distinct intercultural segments.

Much recently, Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff, and Xiao (2015) added newer dimension to research in tourism education by accentuating on the quality aspects related to both the students enrolled in tourism programs and the institutions that are committed to running such programs. In a similar vein, institutions are accepting the idea of improving quality of education provided to international students in order to attract more pupils from the international education market (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016). The authors (Tran & Soejatminah, 2016) also suggested inclusion of work related learning for enhancing professional skills of international students.

Method

Although students from Bhutan are enrolled in various programs in addition to tourism & hospitality in the sample university, the aim was to study those who chose a tourism course. Total students enrolled in seven different degree or diploma programs running within SOHT (School of Hotel Management and Tourism) were 538. B. Sc. ATH (Airlines, Tourism and Hospitality) is a three year degree program. It focuses more on tourism with limited concentration on characteristic hospitality subjects. The tourism orientation of ATH curriculum chiefly differentiates it from other programs (which mostly focus on core hotel management subjects). This program

attracts students from India and abroad, as out of total strength of 167 students, 44 students were from Bhutan. The study was conducted in 2015 on select Bhutanese students who were due to complete their programs by 2015 and 2017. Structured interviews were used to capture the responses of 21 participants. Structured interviews follow a prescribed format of questions that are common for all the interviewees, giving better control to the interviewer, and the responses are likely to yield discernible patterns and themes (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009).

The interviews comprised of seven 1st year, five 2nd year, and nine 3rd year students. Focus group discussion was also conducted (with 13 participants who were also interviewed) to get more insights. It contributed towards reinforcing the study and also assisted the researchers in realizing the patterns and in readdressing some responses that were given during the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Interviews with the participants uncovered several facets that have been presented in this section. It is natural for the students to develop mental images of places they intend to visit for pursuing education. Hence, it was also felt important to explore students' impressions of the host country (India), which were manifested through questions on perceptions about India and experience with the language in the study place. Questions that aided in uncovering perspectives on tourism education included - motivation to study tourism and choosing India, pre-departure or prior expectations and experience with the program, career plans, and use of information technology at the university. Discussion on students' responses follows next:

(1) Perceptions of the Host Country, Place of Study, Program Motivations, Prior Expectations : Secondary images of a place are formed before one actually decides to visit it (Phelps, 1986) and primary images after actual visitation (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Interesting perspectives emerged about the participants' perceptions about India. It wouldn't be wrong to say, based upon the responses, that the image of India wasn't mostly favourable in the minds of the participants before they actually came to the country. Surprisingly, despite unfavourable suppositions, participants decided to come to India to study, which may be attributed to the emergence of the host country on various developmental fronts.

Face to face interaction during focus group discussion revealed that the perceptions about India among first and second year students differed from that of the seniors. Third year students had developed more favourable impressions about the place ; whereas, the initial experience of first and second year students wasn't that positive. This made us assume that with the passage of time and increased interaction with locals, the perceptions changed from unfavourable to favourable (to different degrees); however, sometimes, it was the other way round. This ambivalence signals at the support and criticism of contact hypothesis proposed by Gordon Allport that asserts generation of positive attitudes, improved relations, and prejudice reduction among individuals from different races or backgrounds through interpersonal contact (Sigelman & Welch, 1993). The favourable inclination of perceptions toward the place of study may also be attributed to the temporal increase in the proportion of overseas students in the university (Barber & Morgan, 1988).

Another possible explanation of this transformation in perception can be associated with the U-Curve theory of adjustment proposed by Lysgaard (1955). Lysgaard's U-Curve theory (1955) sums up four stages that an individual goes through during cross-cultural migration, namely, initial stage termed as honeymoon ; second, disillusionment and frustration ; third, the adjustment ; followed by the mastery stage (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). The theory helps in understanding the change in the perceptions of Bhutanese students over time.

The global image of India as a growing nation (Gupta, 2009) increases aspirations of the students and characterizes the first stage of initial infatuation. Secondly, the stage of disillusionment or cultural shock, which results from abrupt changes arising from interaction with the new culture of India and the multicultural university atmosphere. The third stage consists of adjustments students make to adapt to new conditions leading to the final

stage of mastery, when the individuals start to function more contentedly.

Some of the candid reflections of the participants on perceptions about India are as follows:

Participant B : “I thought [before coming to India] all [the] people weren't that civilized like we see ... no offence, but whenever we see [on] news channel and all, it... [is] generally crime - it shows crime most of the times, so I thought it's not safe out there - out here...but when I actually came here...it's not like we see from the outside world.”

Participant K : “Before coming to India, I thought, India was a - as it was being depicted in the television - it was like overcrowded and the people were getting robbed and there were various things that were kind of discouraging *[sic]* me to come to India. But, somehow, I came to India and I like what I felt and when I kind of cooperated with some of the Indians, they were good.”

Participant N: “First I thought it will be very dangerous for girls to come here [India]... coming here [India] my thoughts about India completely changed, people here are friendly and more welcoming.”

Among prominent factors that made participants choose tourism program and India included motivation from family and friends, dearth/absence of similar programs in Bhutan, and India's image as an economical option for education. Students seemed inclined toward studying tourism in the backdrop of a growing tourism industry in Bhutan. India is also geographically close, which makes it an ideal destination for higher studies. Other motivating factors included - conducive image of the Indian education system and culture, particular interest in airlines jobs, experienced teachers, university promotions, overseas education consultancies, self-interest, desire to explore the world and meet different people, and more job opportunities. International students aspire to gain benefits that their degree can provide in the form of employment and lifestyle (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

When asked about the motivation to study in India, Participant 'U' replied :

Participant U : “After 10+2 [final schooling class]... to get job in Bhutan, you have to do the degree but... if you didn't qualify for in-country college, then we prefer India as... a first choice so like India has lots of private schools, so that we can easily join in an - any kinds *[sic]* of school.”

When asked about the reason to choose studying tourism and hospitality, Participant 'F' answered:

Participant F : “I choose *[sic]* to study tourism and hospitality... because I have a strength to deal with the people and also, I love to travel a lot...”

Participants' responses reflected high expectations from the program before joining. It was evident from the responses that they expected a practically driven approach of teaching. Prior to joining the program, some participants either hoped to learn more about tourism or expected the program to be less challenging. On both the fronts, a number of participants reflected dissatisfaction. However, some found teaching balanced between practical and theory. As participant 'B' commented:

Participant B : “The teaching methods are both theoretical and practical... the thing

I like about theoretical is, we get to write everything and when the exams come, we can refer it as... quickly as possible and about practical... I don't like practical much because the grooming standards are considered more...it consumes study (laughs)..."

Participant 'T', interestingly, expressed an opinion on the way of teaching:

Participant T : "It's like a coin sir, every coin has its head and tail, if we focus more on practicals [*sic*] then we don't know about the theoretical, and if we focus more on theoretical then we need to learn practical also, so for me, it's better [to] keep theoretical as well as practical, both same."

Yet, disagreement was visible in many answers. To mention a few, the following participants are being quoted:

Participant P : "I thought it was a normal course... I think that tourism and all, are not for international students, as tourism which we have to study in India only, that we don't know some of the places' names when [*sic*] we are having difficulty [*sic*] for that."

Participant I : "The teaching is more in theoretical, and it is very hard - difficult to understand in theoretical, if they [teachers] teach in - if we are taught in practicals [*sic*] then we can remember anything that we can... relate with actual world."

Further dissatisfaction was with the content of the program as several of them mentioned it to be largely based on tourism education centered on Indian settings and lacked broader perspective. Some students considered curriculum to be less relevant to their career if they moved back to their home country (also visible in Participant P's response above). The widely held notion was that the tourism orientation of the program was limited and was hospitality content predominant ; especially the subject of 'Food and Beverage services' found repeated mention and participants considered it to be burdensome and of limited importance. This was also reflected in the focus group discussion where participants expressed their discontent with the cumbersome hospitality practical routines and additional compulsory OJT (on job training) hours that they had to complete at the hotel located within the university premises, and limited airlines related practicals. For instance, Participant 'N' followed by Participant 'J' stated:

Participant N : "Since the teachers are very experienced, I like the way of teaching. But in tourism class, the teacher spoke [*sic*] of more about India and it's very hard for me to cope-up with [put up with] the names and remembering the names, since some of them are very hard and you can't pronounce it [*sic*], also, I wish the tourism teacher could expand little bit more on the outside countries."

Participant J : "It's more theoretical than practical, in this course, we got only like practical for F and B [food and beverage service subject] and housekeeping only, we don't have more practical in Airlines subjects."

(2) Language in the Study Place, Information Technology, and Career Plans : Punjabi and Hindi are prominent languages that are often the reason for the issues of incomprehension and exasperation for international students.

However, participants also admitted that after spending time at the place and interaction with other students actually improved their understanding of local languages. Participant 'J' expressed:

Participant J : “The language I heard from here is Punjabi, because I am right now in Punjab, it's like *Sat Sri Akal Paajee, Ki Haal Hai, Vadhiya* [Greeting in Punjabi language], and then like Hindi is - I know very well, I can speak Hindi and I can understand Hindi also...”

Participant 'A' shared experience by saying:

Participant A : “When I just got over here for the first time in India or in Punjab, it was really kind of awkward moment for myself [*sic*]... I didn't know about their culture and languages, for the first time, the way how they speak, the way they (inaudible, 8.43), it was quite - totally different for myself - for me and after staying for... some years, I have learnt - I think [pause]... I feel that I have learned the language and now feel I am comfortable to stay over here...”

Some participants did mention usage of Punjabi and Hindi by teachers while delivering lectures. To get better insights, this was essentially brought up during group discussion and it was established that teachers used other languages (Punjabi and Hindi) to instruct, which was in addition to using English (which they always used) in order to reach those students who did not have a good command on the English language, but could comprehend Hindi or Punjabi.

The university has actively utilized information technology in its overall operations, which is visible from the internet based “management system” to disseminate and collect information, thereby assisting students by providing information related to their attendance, results, online assignment submission, etc. Also, for the safety and security purposes, CCTV cameras are installed in classes and around the campus. Considering the growing relevance of information technology in learning, participants were asked to share their experiences. Almost all of them extolled the information technology used in the university, especially the provision of Wi-Fi internet access and internet based “management system” found repeated mention. Students are greatly dependent on the Internet for educational purposes (Kiili, Laurinen, & Marttunen, 2008; Metzger, Flanagan, & Zwarun, 2003), however, one response from Participant P reflected a thoughtful perspective on Wi-Fi in the campus :

Participant P : “For the Wi-Fi, I want to say that it should be banned in the normal class hours as students might not be studying [*sic*] as they are playing the Wi-Fi, and for the projector, it's really beautiful that we get all the notes by looking at the boards and all, for the camera, I think it's useful for us also and teacher also, as the teacher can know [*sic*] what the students are doing in class...”

A number of participants showed willingness to get employment in the travel sector. Entrepreneurial motivation was also reflected in the responses when asked about their career choices. Cabin crew jobs in airlines were found to be of greater interest among several participants, however, they realized the challenges of clinching such job positions. Alternatively, the participants considered working in the travel sector, hotels, or pursue further education. Getting work experience in the industry seemed to be the primary requirement for many, and long term perspectives reflected willingness to start own travel businesses in their home country.

Participant 'J's thoughts on future plans were :

Participant J : “I have three future plans for myself, first thing is like - first I will go for airline industry and then I will be going to hotel industry and then, if not, then I would [*sic*] like [to] open my business...”

Implications

This work renders some pertinent implications, especially for the institutions running tourism programs and attracting international students. Teaching a class with students from different countries presents its own set of challenges, and the instructors should be able to reach and empathize with these students. Academic managers need to realize that the curriculum oriented toward tourism and hospitality studies is to be carefully designed, meeting the requirements of the industry and at the same time, containing local and thorough international outlook, principally for the institutions having international students. Besides understanding the expectations of the overseas students, they should be made aware of the course structure, objectives, instructional pedagogy, and the rationale of the entire program. Another broader implication relates to the projection of the country's image as an academic destination for cross border students, which shall carry messages and cues of competitive and conducive academic environment in the international arena.

Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to reflect the viewpoints of international students from Bhutan studying tourism in an Indian University. The chief motivational factors to study in India included better universities, cheaper education compared to other alternatives for higher education, geographical proximity, the absence of similar programs in home country, and growing opportunities in the tourism sector. Prior expectations of Bhutanese students weren't very favourable, which, however, gradually turned more favourable as they continued to stay in the host country. Students felt the challenges with the culture and language in the place of study. Also, the international students expected more practical-oriented subjects, which contrary to their expectations, were predominantly theoretical. Overall, the international students considered for the present study were content with the infrastructure that was in place in the form of information technology in the university premises, and finally, majority of the students showed career interests in the travel sector with a host of alternate plans in the event of not attaining the desired profile or career option.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to certain limitations. First is the limited generalizability of the research to a wider population as it is based on a single university program. It is recommended that the scope of enquiry is extended beyond a particular department, institution, or a country. Generalizability is also restricted because of the smaller sample size used in the interviews. It is also suggested that future research studies consider empirical investigations to substantiate the qualitative findings with a larger sample size. It is possible that the structured interviews may have restricted responses and emotions of the participants that could have been uncovered through unstructured in-depth interviews. Taking these factors into consideration, more substantial contributions can be made in this line of investigation.

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