

Tourism and its Associated Aspects in the River Island Majuli, Assam : A Study from the Perspective of Visitors

**Jacob Konwar*

*** Deb Kr. Chakraborty*

Abstract

The tourism industry, with an impressive growth rate across the world, is no doubt one of the fastest growing industries. Tourism is the largest sector in the worldwide export of goods and services, and accounts for 12% of the total global income. This paper intended to highlight differences in opinion among respondents before and after visiting the river island Majuli. Majuli is one of the potential tourist destinations of North-East India, and the approach towards the tourism industry needs a substantial upliftment, and focus needs to be placed on the community-based tourism model. To achieve positive results, efforts need to be made by the local authorities and communities so that visitors' word of mouth recommendations open new doors for prospective visitors.

Keywords : tourists, Majuli, SERVQUAL analysis, North East India

JEL Classification : L99, P25, P27

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Tourism is the largest sector in the worldwide export of goods and services, and accounts for 12% of the total global income (Anbalagan, Selvam, & Amudha, 2008). In sector wise employment generation in India, the tourism industry is playing the second most important contributing role with 47.5 % of the total employment generation after hotels and restaurants (Indiastat.com, 2013). The total contribution from the travel and tourism industry to the global GDP increased by 3% in the year 2012. This growth rate is believed to be much faster than the growth rate noticed in a number of broad industries like manufacturing, financial and business services, and retail. This growth rate made a direct contribution of US\$ 2.1 trillion to Global GDP in the same year, resulting in supporting 101 million direct jobs in the sector (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2013).

Tourism, as the world's largest business, is a complex system of integrated parts, and each of its dimensions receives attention at different times and locations, depending upon the specific purpose and interest of a study at hand (Murphy & Murphy, 2006). Tourism remains a term that is subject to diverse interpretation with a wide variety of definitions and descriptions proposed in the literature(s) (Sharpley, 2006). Tourism, being the largest industry in the world, significantly contributes to economic measures like gross output, value added, employment, capital investment, and tax contributions (Wheatcroft, 1994). As an emerging service based industry, the range and magnitude of tourism's positive impacts are difficult to estimate. It has undoubtedly helped to restore the cultural vitality of many indigenous groups and has helped to justify the preservation of the natural, cultural, and historical heritage in many countries (Murphy & Murphy, 2006).

* *Assistant Professor*, DHSK Commerce College, Dibrugarh, Assam - 786 001. E-mail: kjacob39@gmail.com

** *Professor and Head*, Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam - 786 004.

E-mail: dkchakraborty@rediffmail.com

Increasing awareness for the need of tourism and its associated aspects management is empowering many communities to empower themselves in developing successful tourism products that reflect and promote their goals and values (Baker, 1997 ; Mitchell, 2003; Macleod, 2006 ; Sharpley, 2006; Tosun, 2000). The WTO Manila Declaration on World Tourism states that :

World tourism can contribute to the establishment of a new international economic order that will help to eliminate the widening economic gap between developed and developing economies and ensure the steady acceleration of economic and social development and progress, in particular in developing economies (p. 1, UNWTO, 1980).

Domestic tourism markets are potentially important generators of income and jobs for the host state. Domestic tourism is, in fact, the backbone of tourism supporting the entire tourism structure and contributes relatively more to the growth tourism industry and the overall process of economic development (Lenka, 1998). Promotional spending in domestic tourism markets may have greater cost effectiveness than international marketing expenditure in both the short and long run, though it may not be universally applicable for all tourism destinations (Dwyer, Forsyth, Spurr, & Van Ho, 2003). The National Action Plan for Tourism adopted by the Government of India in May 1992 laid emphasis on the development of domestic tourism. Several plans and policies were envisaged in the action plan for the development of domestic tourism. These included schemes for the development of special tourism areas, paying guest accommodations, and religious (pilgrim) tourism. Numerous research studies have been conducted in the field of domestic tourism in India and across the world.

According to the latest estimates of the UNWTO, despite the occasional shocks in the market, international tourist arrivals have uninterruptedly grown - from 25 million in 1950, 278 million in 1980, 528 million in 1995, and 1035 million in 2012 up from 995 million in 2011. In the advent of such a remarkable growth rate of this industry, India is also putting efforts to improve its foreign reserves by attracting tourists to its periphery (Central Ground Water Board, Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Government of India, 2008).

This paper attempts to determine the opinion of the respondents before and after visiting the largest habituated fresh water river island in the world, that is, the Majuli Island in Assam .

Statement of the Research Problem

Over the past several centuries, Majuli has had a remarkable position in the lives of the Assamese societies. Majuli has its coordinates at 26.9500° N, 94.1667° E of Jorhat district of Assam, India. According to the 2011 population census, the total population of Majuli was approximately 1, 70,000 people. According to the 2001 census, the total population of Majuli was 1, 53,400, with a male population of 51.81% and female population of 48.19%. The male to female ratio was 1000: 930.

Around the world, various research studies have laid emphasis on island tourism, but there is a serious paucity of the concept of river cum island tourism in India, and more particularly, in the North-East Region. To identify the tourism industry related gap in Majuli, the study followed a systematic procedure of data collection both from domestic and foreign visitors who had traveled to Majuli.

Objective of the Study

The study is based on the following objective:

(1) To determine the difference of opinion among the respondents before and after visiting the river island Majuli.

Research Question and Hypotheses Formulation

In order to fulfill the objective of the study, the paper envisages the underlying research question and accordingly attempts to seek an answer to the same.

➤ **Research Question1:** Is there a difference in the opinion of the domestic and foreign visitors regarding the tourism aspects (products and services) in the river island Majuli before and after visiting it ?

Research Hypotheses

➤ **Ho:** There is no significant difference in the opinion of the visitor respondents before and after visiting the river island Majuli.

➤ **H1:** There is a considerable difference in the opinion of the visitor respondents before and after visiting the river island Majuli.

Research Methodology

According to the Majuli Cultural Landscape Region Act, 2006, there are 31 Sattras in the river island (The Assam Gazette Extraordinary, 2006). It had an all total of 40 Sattras in the past (Nath, 2009) but by 2005, the number of Sattras significantly reduced to 22 (approximately) (Das, 2010). The reasons for the drastic fall could be attributed to the devastating flood and erosion of the island. In spite of considerable reduction in the number of Sattras in the island, the unique features and attributes of the Sattras and of the island are an attractive tourism resource, not only for the domestic tourists, but also for the foreign visitors.

As the visitors often visit the island for a stipulated time frame, thus it was a daunting task to collect the responses immediately at the time of their arrival. To sort out this problem, we adopted two patterns of data collection from the visitors. First, a majority of the domestic cum foreign respondents were asked to respond at the time of leaving the island, that is, at the place of exit. Secondly, those respondents who could not participate in the study at the time of exit were asked to provide an e-mail contact or social networking site address. These respondents were later sent an online questionnaire. Considerable number of responses were also collected by using the “netnography form” (Ahmed, 2010). For the purpose of the study, the responses of 126 domestic respondents and 22 foreign respondents were considered. The combined response rate is reported to be 92%.

The research work analysis is based upon the responses collected from the domestic and foreign visitors. The time period of the study is from July 2011 up to March 2014. Responses from visitors were collected with the help of a questionnaire based on a 5 - point likert scale, with responses ranging from *highly-dissatisfied* to *highly-satisfied*. Due to extreme rainfall in the summers (April – July) every year, it was observed that the numbers of visitors considerably reduced during this period. This makes the industry seasonal to some extent. The responses of the visitor respondents were analyzed with the help of SERVQUAL analysis technique (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985 ; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1993). Analysis of SERVQUAL data can take several forms, such as:

(1) Item-by-item analysis (e.g. $P1 - E1, P2 - E2$);

(2) Dimension-by-dimension analysis (e.g. $(P1 + P2 + P3 + \dots + Pn/n) - (E1 + E2 + E3 + \dots + En/n)$, where $P1$

Table 1. Socioeconomic Profile of the Visitor Respondents (VR)

Sl. No.	Particulars	Domestic Tourist	Foreign	Tourist	Total Frequency
1	Gender	Male	92	16	108 (73.00)
		Female	34	06	40 (27.00)
2	Marital Status	Married	74	12	86 (58.10)
		Unmarried	52	10	62 (41.90)
3	Age	Less than 18 years	-	-	Nil
		18-25 years	07	02	09 (06.10)
		26-35 years	42	05	47 (31.80)
		36-45 years	35	06	41 (27.70)
		46-60 years	39	08	47 (31.80)
		Above 60 years	03	01	04 (02.70)
4	Educational Status	No formal education	-	-	Nil
		Less than 10 years of schooling	01	-	01 (00.70)
		Less than 12 years of schooling	21	02	23 (15.50)
		12 completed years of schooling	29	08	37 (25.00)
		Graduate	42	11	53 (35.80)
		Post Graduate	33	01	34 (23.00)
5	Employment Status	Business	22	06	28 (18.90)
		Service	63	04	67 (45.30)
		Unemployed	04	-	04 (02.70)
		Student	13	04	17 (11.50)
		Retired	03	05	08 (05.40)
		Homemaker	15	00	15 (10.10)
		Others	06	03	09 (06.10)
6	Tourist Category	Indian			126 (85.10)
		Foreigner			22 (14.90)

Note: Figures in parentheses represent percentages

to P_n , and E_1 to E_n represent the four perceptions and expectation statements relating to a single dimension ; and

(3) Computation of a single measure of service quality $((P_1 + P_2 + P_3 \dots + P_n/n) - (E_1 + E_2 + E_3 + \dots + E_n/n))$ (Buttle, 1995).

In the present study, two forms of analysis are considered, that is, “item - by - item analysis” and “computation of a single measure of service quality (Composite SERVQUAL SCALE)”.

Results and Discussion

The socioeconomic profile of the respondents is shown in the Table 1, which is self explanatory in nature. For the convenience of logical comparison, the values are also represented in percentage form.

We sought to obtain the opinions of the visitors towards various tourism elements in the river island Majuli

Table 2. SERVQUAL Gap Analysis of Tourist Respondents

Sl. No	TOURISM ATTRIBUTES	Servqual Scale (Domestic Tourist Respondent)	Servqual Scale (Foreign Tourist Respondent)	Servqual Scale (Total Tourist Respondent)	t - value
1	Shopping and Markets	- 0.16	- 0.18	- 0.17	1.146
2	Historical cum Cultural attractions	0.38	0.45	0.40	-6.352*
3	Food and Restaurants	- 0.08	- 0.05	- 0.07	.101
4	Night life	0.25	- 0.18	0.19	-2.297*
5	Safety and Security	0.50	0.64	0.52	-7.922*
6	Indigenous Art and Crafts	0.33	0.54	0.35	-5.677*
7	Roads	0.20	0.19	0.20	-3.069*
8	Drinking Water	- 0.08	- 0.13	- 0.09	.274
9	Cleanliness and sanitation	0.06	0.28	0.09	-1.622
10	Hospitality	0.61	0.86	0.65	-10.250*
11	Accommodation facilities	0.35	0.77	0.41	-7.335*
12	Services of tour operators	0.16	0.24	0.17	-3.194*
13	Transportation services to Majuli	- 0.11	0.00	- 0.09	.373
14	Transportation services in Majuli	- 0.15	- 0.04	- 0.13	.534
15	Communication facilities	0.00	0.37	0.06	-.799
16	Technical publications /brochure/ advertising and Island maps	- 0.08	- 0.05	- 0.08	.111
17	Attitude of Tour Guides	0.23	- 0.08	0.19	-3.693*
18	Ecology / Biodiversity	0.18	0.27	0.19	-4.676*
19	Attitude of administration	0.30	0.22	0.29	-4.669*
20	Overall observation about the Island and its diversity	0.43	0.27	0.42	-5.489*
Average (COMPOSITE SERVQUAL SCALE)		0.17	0.22	0.18	

Note: SERVQUAL SCALE = SERVAFTER SCALE - SERVBEORE SCALE.

* paired sample t - test (2-tailed Sig.) $p < 0.05$.

Source: Enumerated from Field Survey

(before and after visiting the river island). Greater customer satisfaction might result in a greater intention to repurchase or return and recommend the tourist place to friends, relatives, and peers (Batabyal & Das, 2013). A total of 20 items were taken to determine the variance in the opinion of the visitor respondents. With the help of SERVQUAL gap analysis (Parasuraman et al., 1985 ; Parasuraman et al., 1993) technique, difference of opinion is measured between respondents classified as domestic tourists and foreign tourists. With extensive focus group interviews, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) supported the notion that service quality, as perceived by consumers (expectation), is compared with their perceptions about the performance of firms providing the assets and services. Perceived service quality is ,therefore, viewed as the degree and direction of discrepancy between consumers' perceptions and expectations.

The Table 2 shows the SERVQUAL gap scale of the visitor respondents. Estimation of SERVQUAL gap scale was done by comparing SERVAFTER SCALE, that is, the opinion of the respondents after visiting the island and SERVBEORE SCALE, that is, the perceptions of the respondents before visiting the river island Majuli. Respondents' expectations and perceptions were measured on a 5- point Likert-type scale, where the higher the score, the greater was the expectation (perception) from tourism elements in the river island Majuli. The mean scores of visitors' expectations (SERVBEORE SCALE) ranged from 3.94 to 2.90 for

domestic visitors, and 3.64 to 2.82 for foreign visitors.

With respect to the expectations of domestic tourists, the lowest expectation item was “sanitation,” which indicates that the tourists did not expect to receive hygienic sanitation facilities. In case of foreign tourists, the lowest expectation item was “Technical publications/ advertising and island maps” and “Night life in Majuli”. These parameters indicate that the foreign visitors expected that island maps/promotional material/information brochures would not be available about Majuli ; in addition, the foreign tourists did not expect much in terms of "night life" on the river island. On the other hand, the domestic visitors' highest expectation was regarding the “Indigenous art and craft,” which was one of the important attributes expected by the domestic visitors from Majuli. Considering the opinion of the foreign tourists, they had the highest expectations from the “Ecology and biodiversity” of Majuli. Thus, considering the geographical location of the island, the foreign visitors expected more ecological and biodiversity variability on the island. The overall mean score of service quality expectation items for domestic tourists is 3.27, and for foreign tourists, the score is 3.14. This score indicates that the domestic tourists had high expectations from the tourism based activities on the river island Majuli as compared to their foreign counterparts.

The mean scores of domestic tourists' perceptions (SERVAFTER SCALE) ranged from 4.27 to 2.88. The lowest perception item score given by domestic tourists was for “Technical publications / advertising/and island maps” and “Roads of Majuli,” which indicates that there is a significant lacuna with respect to the availability of island maps/promotional material/information brochures in Majuli ; also, the condition of roads in the river island is also quite bad. The domestic tourists gave the highest mean score to the item “Indigenous arts and crafts of the island” (4.27) .

According to the results depicted in the Table 2, the composite SERVQUAL scale for foreign visitors (0.22) is higher than the average scale value (0.18) and scale value for domestic visitors (0.17). Thus, the results show that the perceptions of the foreign respondents after visiting Majuli island (3.36) were much higher than their expectations before visiting the river island (3.14). Similarly, the expectations of the domestic respondents (3.27) were lower than their perceptions (3.44) (experiences) after visiting the river island Majuli. Individual analysis of the SERVQUAL scale also shows that there are certain areas of thrust, where the quality of experience (perceptions) of the visitors (both domestic and foreign) was lower than their expectations (Table 2). The narrowest gap for the domestic visitors is for the attribute “Cleanliness and sanitation facility”. This low gap score implies that there is a small difference between perceived and expected tourism service. Thus, these attributes are close to the expected service quality. In case of the foreign visitors, the narrowest gap is noticed for the attribute “Transportation services to Majuli,” highlighting no difference in opinion in terms of perception and expectations. However, the widest gap in case of both the categories of visitors has been noticed for the item “Hospitality,” indicating that the visitors expected lower levels of hospitality and service from the host population. However, contrary to their expectations, the host population was keen and interested to promote tourism and tourism based activities in the river island Majuli, and the visitors were treated with great hospitality, and their stay was memorable.

An analysis of the Table 2 also highlights that elements like shopping and market facility, availability of ethnic and varied food products and restaurants, availability of clean drinking water, transportation services to and in Majuli, promotional campaigns like advertisements, island maps, technical publications, information brochures, etc. need to be improved, as the SERVQUAL scale noticed a negative gap score for these items. In these critical areas, the perceptions of the visitors after visiting the island (SERVAFTER) were lower than their perceived expectations before their visit (SERVBEFORE).

A comparison of the visitors' perceptions with their expectations about tourism elements in Majuli, using the paired sample *t*-test indicates a statistically significant difference in 12 variables out of the 20 tourism variables considered for the study. The biggest SERVQUAL score gap (“Hospitality”) is statistically significant (*t* - value = -10.250 < 0.05, *df* = 140). However, the narrowest gap for the item “communication facility” between expectation (SERVBEFORE) and perception (SERVAFTER) is not statistically significant (Sig. - 0.799). Thus,

as a part of answering the research question, from the results of the study (Table 2), it can be inferred that there is a significant mean difference in the opinions of the domestic and foreign visitors regarding the tourism related aspects (products and services) in the river island Majuli before and after visiting it. Hence, the hypothesis H1 is accepted.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the island considering various others aspects of the river island (Dutta , 2002 ; Kamat, 2011 ; Mahanta, 2011 ; Nath, 2012 ; Saikia, 1993 ; Saikia, 2004). Of the available resources on the topic, it was observed that there is a considerable gap in the existing literature for tourism based elements of the island, which justifies the necessity of undertaking such a study.

Policy Implications

Infrastructural development is one of the pre-requisites of tourism development aspects of a tourist destination. Majuli, as a tourism destination, needs serious improvements in the field of accommodation, transportation facilities, food and beverages, and so forth. In terms of accommodation facilities, need has been felt to have not only world class tourist hotels, but proper maintenance of such hotels and restaurants is also required. Cleanliness and hygiene are the crucial factors often considered by visitors while deciding upon a place to stay while travelling. India's transportation system is also in need of a serious overhaul. To support better and extensive service facility to the visitors, there is a need for a 24 x 7 dedicated tourism office providing basic services like information about the island and its tourism products, arrangement of tour guides, currency exchange facility, Internet and connectivity services, maintaining a database of the number of tourists visiting the island, and so forth.

Das (2014), in his study on eco tourism potentiality in Majuli, opined that the availability of tourism friendly workforce with excellent services, hospitality, and safety will be crucial in the long run to help in tourism development along with the preservation of local handicrafts. Necessary steps are needed to make Majuli a world-class tourist destination, and the need for such an overhaul is more essential in the backdrop of its claim for a World Heritage Site and as a potential tourism destination of North Eastern India.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges and problems on the island, Majuli still holds immense potential to be explored. Through the creation of attractions and provision of supporting infrastructure, and with the involvement of more people as entrepreneurs - these steps can effectively create its own demand of tourists (Saikia & Boruah, 2014). This island holds a unique range of demographic, cultural, religious, and natural resources, which are one of its kind, possibly rare to find in any other known place of the world. Adequate measures to improve the conditions of the island with the help of tourism and tourism based activities could bring long-term benefits not only for the economy of the island, but for the state of Assam as well. More particularly, the answers to the problems lie in a community based approach to tourism. Needs and requirements of visitors need to be addressed by the tourism destinations to make them more lucrative and sustainable for all round development of the economy. Efforts should be made by all local stakeholders to provide adequate support to visitors, so that their visit concludes with a positive note and opens new horizons for prospective visitors.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

No research work is complete in itself. During the process of conducting the study, considerable difficulty was faced while interacting with the foreign tourists. During field data collection, it was experienced that substantial number of foreign visitors were not well acquainted with the English language. Moreover, majority of the

foreign visitors visited the island in groups, and only one or two group members spoke lucid English. Thus, despite meeting a good number of foreign tourists on the island, majority of them could not be considered for data collection and analysis because of the language barrier. Moreover, it was found that there is no database available for the number of tourists who visited the island ; thus, the exact number of tourists visiting the island for the purpose of the study could not be determined, and as such, the sample size of the visitors was taken as and when it was available.

The present study was carried out with some predetermined set of guidelines. Thus, there is ample scope of performing further studies in the research area.

(1) From the review of literature available on the island, we noticed paucity of recommendable research work on tourism activities on the river island. Thus, apart from the present work, there is ample scope of undertaking tourism based research work on rural tourism, agri- tourism, tribal tourism, etc. with reference to the river island Majuli.

(2) Future research studies can be undertaken to ascertain the economic position or financial status of the inmates (*Bhakats*) of the *Sattras*, in the light of differences in the financial status of the *Sattras* in the island economy.

(3) As the results of the present study highlight only the behavioural opinion of the visitors, there is scope to consider some aspects from the host community's point of view also.

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