



Scanning the Dynamics of Participatory Research (PRIT) in Heritage Tourism Management :The Case of Chitharal in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Chitharal, located at Kanyakumari District in Tamil Nadu, South India is quite an amazing and enamouring heritage destination preserved by the Archaeological Survey of India. Tourism being a multi-disciplinary area must be open to innovative yet impactful research methods. The researcher in this work conceptualizes and adopts the Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT) approach devised over the years, in consonance with the fabric of tourism, which is a people-centric and activities based academic subject. This study attempts to map the experiential dynamics of a chosen group of tourists who possess extraordinary interests and affinity for heritage manifestations. The various parameters to be analysed, coded, and inferred are pre-determined by the researchers by way of a preliminary visit and empirical observations, collection of tourist literature, compilation of expert opinion and review of literature and travel blogs. They are recorded for every individual member of the group on a real-time basis by the accompanying researchers. Many an aspect is *researched on the spot*. The present study is the first work in this direction which can be shaped and

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nourished to form a productive method of research in tourism. In the present paper the behavioral aspects of tourists are also recorded at Chitharal - an unsung tourism haven and Jain heritage destination.

Keywords: Heritage tourism management, Destination Chitharal, Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT), Exploration of experiential dynamics, Preservation, Jain monuments

Introduction

Tourists' motivations and drives to visit historical, heritage, or nature – based sites mark upon the actual value of these sites, resources, and products. The present research methods to determine the impact of tourism on heritage and ecological sites are ambiguous. Tourism, being an experiential and activity based industry focusing on people, processes, physical evidence, products, and places, as an academic subject it should reflect upon and imbibe all the vibes involved in terms of data. Mooted as a subject, mostly optional in the earlier stages, at present there are several full-fledged courses at the graduate and post graduate levels in Tourism. Yet, it lacks identity in terms of original research methods and as of now the issues and perspectives in tourism are approached for research using yardsticks and instruments employed for other streams and 'measured' outcomes which emerge as unproductive in some cases and distant from reality in a few. The tools used for other academic programmes including social sciences may complement genuine tourism research methods, albeit, while considering the wholesome scenario, they are not replete. Same are the imperatives with analytical methods as well. Of course, tourism academics are ingrained with the functional perspectives of multi-disciplinary attributes of fields such as Psychology, Environmental Sciences, Law Economics, etc. The scholastic richness garnered by Tourism over the years necessitates the coinage of concrete and definitive research methods for tourism. This research paper presents and examines the dynamics of Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT) model

devised by the author as tourism – specific research method. Chitharal – an enchanting heritage tourism destination in south Tamil Nadu was selected to be an ideal ‘laboratory’ to conduct the innovative and empirical *involvement tests* pertaining to PRIT.

Objectives of the Study

This research work is an attempt to examine the application dynamics and modalities of a novel research technique in tourism conceptualized by the author, viz, the Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT). The broad objective of this study is to ascertain the various imperatives and implications of adopting PRIT as a method of research as regards tourism issues and prospects. Other specific objectives are:

- To map the experiential dynamics of a chosen group of affinity tourists in an alternative tourism destination.
- To shape PRIT as a productive research method in tourism
- To record the behavioral aspects of heritage affinity tourists in Chitharal and highlight the heritage attributes of the destination.

Scope of the Study

The PRIT Model has ample scope if applied especially in alternative tourism destinations. This study conducted in a relatively less congested Chitharal which is a Jain heritage centre brings out the aspirations, temperaments, and attitudinal and experiential outcomes of tourists’ visits. Furthermore, such a study also unveils the facets of tourism and the nuanced importance of Chitharal, which can be applied and put to fruitful use in similar tourism centres.

Need for the Study

The need of the hour as regards research in tourism is the coinage of an effective research technique that can unfold the manifold

attributes of tourism destinations. Moreover, the research technique must also encompass the stakeholders' involvement, multi-pronged activities, new possibilities, and fresh challenges. PRIT as a research model has been envisaged to cover the above mentioned points and also for generating idealistic leads for preparedness from the points of view of destinations. Refreshing plans which may work as alternative/contingency plans could also be proposed as part of the PRIT Model. A crucial step in devising an original and core research method for tourism is expected to be scaled with this study.

Research Methodology

This exploratory work embarks on mapping the psychological dimensions as well as the activities performed by tourists such as the volunteering interest of tourists, the inclinations expressed toward deciphering the inscriptions, etc. A convenient optimum representation technique was felt as appropriate for the study. The smaller the sample unit, PRIT is deemed to be more effective as there will be absolute focus. Eight members comprising foreigners, women, a senior citizen, a researcher, a differently-abled, a historian, and an atheist were chosen during the group formation stage of PRIT, keeping in view the reverberations of the area of the study.

Review of Literature

Goodwin (2007) has categorically stated that conservation projects and efforts can present an alternative use of heritage that brings more sustainable socio-economic benefits to the poor, stimulating growth and building capacity among local communities. Timothy (1998) has argued that tourists have different experiences based on their differing levels of connectivity to a heritage site. The study has brought to fore four levels of heritage tourism attractions such as world, national, local, and personal. Aluza, O'leary, and Morrison (1998) examined the trajectories of heritage travel by assessing the opinions of outbound tourists from the United

Kingdom. The study emphasizes that the trip characteristics of the segment varies considerably and concludes that all heritage tourists are not identical and they should be targeted in different ways. A study on heritage tourism participation conducted in the State of Pennsylvania has mentioned about the three types of heritage tourists- core, moderate, and low. Each of these segments demonstrates varied behavior and spending patterns (Shiffler, D.K., et al., 1999). McIntosh and Prentice (1999) have identified the processes related to the British tourists affirming authenticity through visiting socio-industrial cultural heritage attractions. Notably, three distinct thought processes have emerged which are reinforced assimilation, cognitive perception, and retroactive association. The notion of insightfulness is presented as an appropriate characterization of the ways in which cultural authenticity is affirmed by individual visitors through the encoding of experiences and associating them with their own personal meanings. Nyaupane and Anderek (2007) have expanded the typology of cultural heritage tourists based on a survey in Arizona. This study has classified the cultural heritage tourists into two groups and five sub-groups based on their most striking reasons for taking the trip. The study has also found that those tourists visiting cultural heritage sites can be divided into two groups- true cultural tourists and spurious cultural tourists. Furthermore, true cultural tourists can be sub-grouped into two types, viz, cultural site and cultural event tourists. Similarly spurious cultural tourists can be further divided into three sub-groups, viz, nature, sport, and business tourists. Middleton (1994) has remarked that many small heritage sites do suffer from a management deficit, especially in terms of marketing management. He advocated that the people responsible for marketing the cultural objects of a destination should be trained and be knowledgeable about the significance and uniqueness of heritage resources.

The depth of heritage tourism perspectives and the necessitated approaches could be gauged from the reviews featured above. The chemistry between the heritage tourists and local communities also needs be deducted and a more field-oriented research method with spontaneity can do a world of good in that regard. As stated by

McIntosh and Prentice, the insightfulness, which can also be understood as the intuitive feel of the heritage tourists, can be best studied through a novel approach.

Chitharal-The Green, Calm and Rocky Paradise

Chitharal renowned for its amazing monuments is a protected site under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and situated in Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu. An unsung and unexplored tourism haven, Chitharal is a befitting destination for authentic heritage tourists. It is not so extensively promoted and therefore became a natural choice for the study on PRIT to be conducted. As Chitharal is not part of any tourism branding campaign, the destination has not influenced the perception of tourists visiting the monuments, and the influx is scant. The exhilarating destination possesses vibrant attributes which goes into its *place making* and thus creates a *sense of place* which is brought out through this PRIT study. Chitharal is remarkably sheltered by nature which is a prime attraction. Chitharal configures varied natural features including a hillock and hence is also known as Malaikovil. It is a great trekking destination as the narrow road led by green fields dotted with rubber plantations, coconut trees, and cashew nut trees provide an enticing view, galvanizing the beauty of this marvelous place. Chitharal is a famous Jain pilgrimage site. The venerable site reverberates its radiant charm owing to the fact that it is non-polluted.

The Chitharal Jain Monuments are located in a picturesque village situated at a distance of 7 km from Marthandam and 55 km from Kanyakumari. Chitharal is historically known as Thirucharanathupalli – the abode of Jain Monks belonging to the Digambara sect. It is noted for the hillock which has a cave containing rock-cut sculptures of Thirthankaras and attendant deities carved both at the exterior and the interior dating back to the 9th century CE. The Jain influence in this part is so pronounced due to the reign of Jain King Mahendra Verman - I (610-640 CE). There is a revered Bhagavathy Temple in Chitharal. Chitharal hills are locally known as Chokkanthoongi Hills. There are nine stone

inscriptions in Tamil, Vattezhuthu, Sanskrit, and Malayalam. Chitharal is a place with a cultural assimilation. Both Jain and Tamilian styles of sculptures are found here. The mesmerizing caves made Chitharal a noteworthy monument. The natural ambience is also quite stunning. The nearby attractions include Thiruvattar Adikesava Perumal Temple, Thripparappu Waterfalls, and Pechippara Dam.

Jain Heritage and Tourism

Jainism is one of the oldest religions in the world. Jainism has contributed significantly to Indian art and architecture. Remnants of ancient Jain temples and cave temples can be found across the length and breadth of India. The Jain cave shelters and medieval rock-cut temples with exquisite paintings enthrall heritage tourists from across the globe. Jain temples were usually built on the apex points of hills. Jain temples have numerous pillars with intricately designed fascinating structures forming squares. The roofs of Jain temples have pointy domes. The major Jain heritage tourism circuits are Mandya - Hassan - Dakshin Kannada, Udupi; Muzzafarpur - Bhojpur - Patna - Nalanda - Navada - Jamui - Banka; and Bhavnagar - Mehsana - Patan - Udaipur - Sirohi - Pali - Jaisalmer - Jodhpur - Bikaner - Nagaur.

Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT) - Scanning the Dynamics

Tourism is a progressive industry wherein the paradigms are defined and redefined quite often. The paradigm shifts transpiring in tourism have been unprecedented in the 21st Century. The experiential frameworks of tourism are very unique. The participatory veins of tourism are increasing day by day. The academia pertaining to tourism management cannot overlook the fact that the research problems are people - centric, activity - based, and multi - dimensional in character. Researches in tourism often make use of techniques borrowed from other streams. Such techniques are not always foolproof and the results may not be accurate at all times in the sphere of tourism, for instance, using

questionnaire as a survey instrument has lot of limitations in alternative tourism owing to the regulated size of respondents, fake/bogus responses, etc. Many a time, the researcher finds that the responses are inaccurate owing to the responses to the same instrument gathered from tourists with varied background (respondents) and their abilities to correlate with the research problem. Furthermore, authenticity of the responses is another pinching issue. Research works in a fragile destination that strictly maintains the carrying capacity deprives the researchers from meeting the requisite number of respondents as tourists are obviously restricted.

In this connection, keeping in view the shift of touristic trends from passive to active, i.e, from the viewing mode to the participatory mode the research techniques in tourism should also ingrain the traits of mobility and also the dynamism for experimenting with the encounters and experiences of tourists.

Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT) involves the following steps:

- Step1: Selection of the destination / locale / event / monument/ circuit / site/ institution (museum, etc.) mostly an alternative tourism centre.
- Step 2: Organizing a preliminary visit by the researcher to acquaint / familiarize with the place and its essence, attributes, challenges, trends, stakeholders, promotional, functional, and developmental aspects, etc. mainly focusing on empirical deductions.
- Step 3: Gathering tourist literature and locally available publications about the chosen tourist destination.
- Step 4: Compilation of expert opinion, for instance, personal interviews with historians, museum curators, journalists, litterateurs, media persons, travel agents, tour operators, government officials, entrepreneurs, scientists, academics, etc.

Step 5: Review of write-ups on the travel blogs, posts on social media and interactive sites like couchsurfing.com.

Step 6: Selection of a group of tourists who evince real interest and display affinity to the USP of the destination (heritage, ecology, adventure, MICE, etc.).

The Group must be properly represented in terms of age-groups, gender, nationality, occupation, mobility, interests, motivations and drives, etc., in sync with the nature of the destination chosen for the PRIT study.

Step 7: Visit to the study area by the researcher and the participant group constituted by *real tourists*.

Step 8: The researcher recording without the actual knowledge of the group at that point in time (briefed only at the group formation stage), the experiences, tastes, preferences, and expectations etc., displayed by each and every individual in the group. Video recording, still photos or noting in a diary can be adopted by the researcher as per convenience. Some parameters for research will be determined beforehand. Certain aspects will evolve on – the – spot as warranted by PRIT.

Step 9: The nuanced approaches and varied experiences of tourists are coded and post visit, focus group interview is organized in case of any clarification or correction; if the researcher deems it essential.

Step 10: The inferences are coded under various definitive themes, say for instance: “Spending quality time to know the subtle elements of architecture as part of slow-conscious travel”.

PRIT model can be of immense use to policy makers and destination planners and designers. It is expected to act as an eye-opener for the players in public and private sector to attend meticulously and renew/refresh/revive efforts to address the inadvertently or complacently ignored areas, ideas, etc., and offset the shortfalls.

Application and Efficacy Testing of PRIT in Chitharal

Chitharal is a lively heritage tourism destination not flocked by tourists so as to threaten the vulnerable fabric of the monuments. During the preliminary visits undertaken during March, 2014, the researchers got the pulse that the visitors to Chitharal were mostly people inclined to meditate, tourists from China, Japan, and Thailand who aspired to know more about the Jain monuments and heritage, nature lovers, and pilgrims. A soothing and refreshing feel emanated from the destination mainly owing to its peaceful ambience. The researchers were skeptical about the provision of such factors and features namely interpretation of monuments, safety of tourists, basic amenities, local community projects, communication of oral and intangible heritage, and accessible tourism facilities. They were noted so as to study under PRIT. Subsequently, local historians, tour operators, artisans, academicians, and journalists were contacted to collect comprehensive information about the place. Books depicting the in-depth historical, mythical, and geographical details were also procured. Some books were in Tamil. Blogs were too less to derive unique information.

Group formation as part of PRIT took some time since wholesome representation had to be attained. The participant group eventually formed comprised two women (one foreigner from France and one from Gujarat), two Japanese tourists, two tourists from Kerala (one differently-abled and another Post Graduate student of History), one historian (Senior Citizen) from Karnataka and a Ph.D. scholar from Tamil Nadu (an atheist). The group consisted of eight members and all of them had profound interest in heritage, particularly Jain heritage. The visits were arranged on two days, Friday and Saturday during August, 2014.

Researchers observed the group behavior and the conduct of individual tourists. Essentially, most of the experiential dynamics linked to the parameters framed by the researchers earlier were examined. It was found that research on - the - spot turned out to be more impactful and lucid. The parameters coined as the litmus

mechanism for PRIT configured: Time spent at each monument and for other observances such as worship, meditation, taking notes from plaques, etc; Interest to know local cultural expressions and manifestations; Inclination for laborious activities like trekking; Exposure to interpretation of sites; procurement of literature pertaining to the destination; Facets of slow and conscious travel; Seeking amenities; Volunteer tourism pursuits; Capturing the monuments through the lens; Expenditure pattern; Seeking innovative products; Interface with channels of distribution; Influences of promotional campaigns; Conviction with physical evidence; Reactions during service delivery; and Repeat visitation. Post visit, a focus group interview was arranged while divulging to the group the details about PRIT and the notes prepared by the researchers were brought to the notice of the participants. Certain points were substantiated and new view points were recorded.

The efficacy of PRIT model depended on the inputs mapped from the participants and the veracity of those agreed upon by them. In this study, while receiving an overwhelming nod for the points marked and recorded, over and above, there were quite a few elaborations and appendices to them as raised by the participants.

Inferences Drawn and Discussions

The participants were found devoting quality time for each monument and inscription. Later on, they opined that if the inscriptions were deciphered they would have been delighted. One of the participant stated that the historicity of the place is clouded in myths and felt some of the aspects were loosely based on individual beliefs (myths). Tourists were of the view that local cultural expressions (festivals) and embodiments were not revealing in and around the destination. All the tourists except the person with physical difficulty were keen on trekking. There was a consensus on having differently-abled accessible tourism facilities at the destination. Interpretation of the site was another area the participants felt required more enrichment. All the participants favoured slow and conscious travel and expressed their aversion

for running around the monuments without making the visit meaningful.

The Senior Citizen and women travelers were found little upset over lack of basic amenities; especially lighting, restrooms, and drinking water. Both the research scholar and the Japanese tourists evinced interest in getting into some form of involvement as part of volunteer tourism. During focus group interview, the Japanese tourists wished to sponsor the upkeep of the monuments. The participants pro-actively captured the dimensions of Chitharal (architecture) in their handycams and still cameras. There were not enough avenues to map the expenditure pattern. Innovative heritage tourism products too were absent. The tourist from Karnataka wanted sound and light show and a heritage museum to be incepted at Chitharal. Promotional efforts did not influence the participants and most of them got information about the place from researchers. Tamil Nadu Tourism and other private tour operators do not have any special packages to Chitharal. The itinerary and other tour components were designed by the group. The cleanliness of the place received due appreciation. Service delivery options were almost nil at the destination and therefore could not be mapped. All the tourists were found zestfully confirming another visit to Chitharal. Tourists were seen probing for homestays around the destination.

Conclusion

Research is the attempt to find new truth(s). The present research methods used in tourism mostly conforms to comparisons and measurements. What tourism research needs in the present context is a method which can bring to light new dimensions of a destination -the issues and challenges faced, and also the opportunities by figuring out the participants real-time responses and involvement. As in vogue at present, majority of data usually collected from tourists are post-visit, i.e., after the real experience. Being an experiential industry based programme, tourism warrants a dynamic research method. Therefore, Participatory Research in Tourism (PRIT) model can go a long way in bridging the gap in

tourism research and set the ball rolling for new and innovative developments. When disclosed to the group of participants (constituted by affinity heritage tourists) about this PRIT study, they confirmed their experiential aspirations and attributes captured at Chitharal. Tourists to Chitharal were explorative in character; so was PRIT.

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