

# Visitor's Perception and Destination Branding of Kashmir Region



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## Abstract

Whether a place is landlocked or has a turbulent history, unless tourists believe that it is worth visiting it not become a tourism destination. While much tourism research has focused on well-known tourism destinations, less research has considered conflict-ridden areas, which have much greater challenges to achieve success objectives. Recognizing the greater importance of destination marketing and its programs research within the tourism marketing context needs to extend current knowledge on destination marketing in problematic conflict-ridden places. In these conflict areas and regions, tourism is not seen as the first priority to develop and grow. What, then, would a destination marketer need to do to introduce these destinations in conflict and improve their image in the eye of potential tourists? Is it a need to start crafting a tourism destination marketing strategy right now or to wait for the first unknown time of the peace agreement? Conversely, tourists visiting destinations in conflict areas like to be able to form an opinion about the communities and their memories through interacting with them who are living in the conflict region.

**Keywords:** Tourism Destination, Destination Marketing, Strategy, Jammu and Kashmir.

## Introduction

Tourism is an important, even vital, source of income for many countries. Its importance was recognized in the Manila Declaration on World Tourism of 1980 as "an activity essential to the life of nations because of its direct effects on the social, cultural, educational, and economic sectors of national societies and on their international relations." Tourism brings in large amounts of income into a local economy in the form of payment for goods and services needed by tourists, accounting for 30% of the world's trade of services and 6% (source:wikipedia) of overall exports of goods and services. It also creates opportunities for employment in the service sector of the economy associated with tourism. The tourism industry of India is economically important and is growing rapidly. The World Travel & Tourism Council calculated that tourism generated INR 6.4 trillion or 6.6% of the nation's GDP in 2012. Indian tourism industry is one of the fastest growing sectors, offering diverse products to tourists. India has 26 world heritage sites. In spite of such inherent advantages, if India has not been adequately 'sold' to the foreign visitor and its full tourist potential has not been realized, and then the blame must be shared by the authorities and the people alike. While other countries which are more prosperous have been quick to capitalize on the vast potential of tourism as a lucrative trade even hoteliers and other businessmen in India who would stand to benefit from a significant increase in tourist traffic have shown a singular lack of imagination and enterprise in promoting tourism or creating an atmosphere conducive to a boom in tourism. The result is that while other countries (having much less to boast of either by way of sites of historical interest or wonders of nature) have taken dynamic steps to provide conveniences and facilities for the visitor, India continues to lag behind. A news item reporting that Italy had built or expanded more than three thousand hotels in three years symbolizes the sincerity and purposefulness with which other nations are taking steps to boost tourism. Kashmir is one of the important tourist destinations of India and has unique place in the economic development of state economy. Jammu Kashmir is the first Himalayan state of India, but it's not another hill land of India. Jammu and Kashmir has three regions: the foothill plains of Jammu; the lakes and blue valleys of Kashmir rising to alpine passes, the high altitude plains and starkly beautiful mountains of Ladakh, which lies beyond those passes. It's enough to move one to poetry. Kashmir is one of India's most beautiful and touristically popular regions and has been since the time of the great Mughal emperors. It's probably most famous for the houseboats on picturesque Dal Lake, but

there's a lot more to the Kashmir Valley than just lazing on board. Around the capital, Srinagar, there are a number of interesting mosques, temples and forts and, of course, the delightful Mughal Gardens - laid out in formal patterns hundreds of years ago and every bit as beautiful today. But one has to get away from Srinagar, up to the hill stations around the valley, to really enjoy Kashmir. Pahalgam, Gulmarg and Sonamarg are all delightful in themselves, but they also serve as the jumping off points for Kashmir's many Trekking possibilities. Tourism industry in Kashmir had a major setback as the valley has been badly affected by the turmoil especially during the last two decades. (Journal of Business & Economic Policy (Vol.1, No.1; June 2014). Despite of gaining popularity as a major tourist destination, the last two decades have hindered the smooth growth of tourism industry because of political instability, which has discouraged travelers for visiting India's most beautiful tourist destination (Chauhan&Khanna, 2005). Recently it has been recognized that: "Destinations with strong infrastructures, sufficient investments, positive images and different products gain much more shares from the market." (Aksoy&Kiyici, 2011, p. 478). Destination image is a key marketing tool that can have a powerful influence over tourists' decisions about where to take vacation (Echtner&Ritchie, 2003). Destination image is one of the most researched and discussed concepts in the study of modern tourism (Echtner& Ritchie 2003, Pan & Li 2011). Image has been defined in a number of ways: as a person's set of beliefs, opinions and impressions about an object, a consideration of all information gained from different channels or a mental connotation the person has about something beyond physical perception (Aksoy& Kiyici, 2011). Lopes discuss how a destination with a strong image is more easily differentiated from its competitors, and that tourists are more likely to consider and select destinations with stronger and more positive images (Lopes, 2011). Ultimately researchers agree that destination image is a valuable concept with regard to tourist destination selection process (Baloglu&McCleary, 1999; Beerli& Martin, 2004). It has been argued that tourists' perception of a destination can be more important than its tangible attributes and that '...the tourist goes to a destination to see the image rather than the reality' (Krippendorf, 1982, p. 149). This is why destination image is such an important part of a destination brand. When Ekinci (2003, p. 22) states that "A destination that forms a clear identity in tourists' minds can be easily branded" he is referring to the power of the organic image, the branding of that destination may be easy but creating a positive image and information to be portrayed by the destination (Aksoy&Kiyici, 2011) requires skillful use of communication techniques and product development to build a personality for a tourist destination (Lopes, 2011; Ekinci, 2003). Several studies have been carried out in recent years and theories developed about how far destinations can control their image and to what extent conflicts have an impact on the consumer travel decision process. Even, the international community has widely accepted that the success of the tourism industry is directly linked to its ability to offer tourists a safe and pleasant visit. It does not make sense to spend

millions on marketing campaigns if the potential tourists are afraid to visit the country or region selected. Thus, it can be inferred that countries facing security problems affecting tourists should make a serious effort to resolve the main obstacles and problems (Inter American Travel Congress, 1997). In recent years, researchers have become interested in understanding the relationship between tourism and terrorism and its impact on tourist destinations. In fact, the researches about the relationship between tourism, terrorism and criminal acts affecting tourist's safety perceptions have pointed out that "safety and security of tourists" is a prerequisite for a prosperous tourist destination. Sonmez (1998) in her research on "Terrorism and Tourism" has pointed out that the introduction of risk into touristic decisions has the potential to disrupt routine decision-making. In contrast, tourism as a mechanism can contribute positively towards overall peace building process. It is said that tourism has the potential to promote social development through employment creation, income redistribution and poverty. This study considers the various aspects and theories developed around destination image and how they can be applied to one particular destination. J&K is a unique case because: "Tourism have been defining features of the economy but the recent tourism industry has been brought to a standstill due the political and social unrest that started in 1989, it is imperative to examine the current level of tourist flow to the region and the possible future trends. How has the unrest affected the tourism development in the region and at what stage of tourism development does the valley stand? What types of tourists are coming to visit the valley and what are their attitudes towards the tourism and how J&K can overcome the unique challenges to its tourism industry through using the power of branding and marketing to build a sustainable and favorable destination image.

#### **Research Aim & Objectives**

1. To evaluate the impact of conflict on the image of a tourist destination.
2. To identify the factors that influence tourist destination choice.
3. To examine the current projected image from within J&K tourism agencies.
4. To evaluate the potential for improving destination image of Kashmir through powerful branding and marketing.
5. To suggest measures to promote a positive destination image.

#### **Conclusion**

Most writers reference the following 7-stage theory (Gunn, 1988) with regard to the formation of destination image:

1. Accumulation of mental images about vacation experiences
2. Modifications of those images by further information
3. Decision to take a vacation trip
4. Travel to the destination
5. Participation at the destination
6. Return home
7. Modification of images based on experience (as quoted in Echtner& Ritchie, 2003)

Over the years the significance of destination image on tourists' decision-making process has been increasingly analyzed and it is generally considered to be a significant factor in building a brand. However research into destination branding is still evolving. As observed by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) most research around the topic of destination image has concerned itself with the attributes of the destination and less about its holistic aspect. So there is a need to combine both aspects and examine the concept from both the angle of the projected image by the destination and the perceptions of the visitors in order to contribute to the fuller theory of destination image within the global marketplace. As the J&K tourism industry is little studied because of the prevailing conflict. The unique challenges existing in J&K provide the opportunity to assess the impact of conflict on destinations, and evaluate the importance of visitors' perception and ideas received through the media and news in terms of the overall image. It has been noted that the tourism industry in J&K has not been the subject of a great deal of research but the uniqueness of the situation there provides an opportunity for an intriguing study. While J&K is rich in natural, cultural and historical attractions but at the same time it suffers from the ongoing negative image due to conflicts prevailed over the years. Therefore applying the concept of destination image to the tourism industry in J&K and examining the perception of the visitors visiting J&K as a holiday destination and evaluating the importance of visitors' perception from ideas received through media and news in terms of the overall image will certainly help to build strong destination brand. The need is also to study projected image and how J&K can overcome the unique challenges to its tourism industry through using the power of branding and marketing to build a sustainable and favorable destination image.

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