

## THE IMAGE OF INDIA: VISUALIZATION BY PARTICIPANTS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDY TOURS TO INDIA

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**Abstract:** Destination image is one of the most widely researched themes in tourism literature. A positive destination image benefits the destination in many ways but particularly it helps advertise the destination through word of mouth narrations satisfied tourists usually indulge in. Thus knowing how visitors perceive a destination is important to understand their destination narration construct. This paper analyses how participants of international study tours to India visualize the country. Two methods were adopted - Content analysis of inbound study tour visitors' testimony from secondary sources and analyzing responses to a questionnaire survey of 131 inbound study tour participants (primary sources). The overall findings of this study conform to most of the findings of other tourism destination image researches done in the context of India-the positive perceptions of the country corresponding to its rich culture and history, attractions, great hospitality (people) along with negative descriptions of unhygienic conditions; traffic woes; rich-poor divide and pollution. However, some of the findings of this study are distinctive which can be attributed to the unique nature of such study tours. A positive change in the pre and post-tour perceptions of the visitors in this study was observed and 98% of the visitors were satisfied with their overall experience in the country. A sense of acceptance of India as a complete 'unit' with all its pros and cons was evident among this segment of visitors and the destination image construct can be concluded to be a positive and realistic one.

**Key words:** Destination image; International study tour; Positive perception; Negative perception

### INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of how visitors visualize a tourism destination is of paramount importance to the various product and service providers, destination planners and marketers. This visualization otherwise known as destination image may be defined as the mental representation of a destination formed from a set of impressions (Beerli & Martín, 2004) and it has a considerable impact on tourist behavior, tourist purchasing decision and action (Gunn, 1972; Gartner, 1994; Bigné, Sánchez & Sánchez, 2001; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Carballo, Araña, León, & Moreno-Gil, 2015). For a tourist yet to visit a destination, the type of destination image formed influences his/her destination selection and expectations from the destination. On the other hand, for those who are visiting or have visited the destination, the destination image they form depicts the experience and appraisal of the destination both during and after the trip. Depending on the type of input/ experience, the destination image may be a positive one or a negative one. The ultimate goal of any destination positioning strategy is to reinforce positive images held by the visitors, and to mitigate negative images or even create new ones (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Studies have shown that when the destination image formed is a positive one, it benefits the destination in many ways but particularly it helps advertise the

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destination through word of mouth narrations satisfied tourists usually indulge in. Thus knowing how visitors perceive a destination is important to understand their destination narration construct.

Destination image is one of the most widely researched themes in tourism literature. In the Indian context too, studying the perception of tourists regarding destinations in terms of positive and negative image formed is adopted by many researchers like Chaudhary, 2000; Rajamohan, Yen & Gama, 2007; Dwivedi, 2009; Chand, 2012; Khan, 2013; etc. India with a plethora of tourism attractions still has a long way to go to reach the level of tourist inflow equivalent with its potential. India's share in the overall international tourist arrivals worldwide has always been less than 2 %. In 2019, the arrival in India was 17.9 million and accounted for just 1.22 % of the year's 1465 million total international tourist arrivals worldwide. Since 2020, the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the travel industry has been quite prominent. In 2020, the total arrival fell to 405 million worldwide of which India received 6.3 million international tourist arrivals (19<sup>th</sup> rank and 1.53 % share). In 2021, the arrivals reached 7 million but it is again less than 2 % of the world's total, at 1.64 %. The Government of India realizes the huge opportunities that the tourism sector has for jobs and entrepreneurship and several proactive steps and measures have been taken through the years to strengthen the tourism and hospitality sector. Many specific segments like Religious tourism; MICE, Golf, Wellness, Cruise etc have been identified for focused development. A segment which has yet to catch the attention of the tourism planners, developers and marketers is the international study tour segment which refers to group visits of university/college/educational institution students and teachers to one or more countries for a duration lasting for a few days to 2-3 weeks. These tours/trips are based on experiential and contextual learning which take place in a real world setting outside the confines of a classroom (Porth, 1997; Miao & Harris, 2012; Scharoun, 2016). The trips may be subject/discipline-specific or general cultural exposures and may be credit-based or non-credit ones. Some unique features of international study tours include:

- Three distinct phases-pre-departure preparation also called orientation phase; on-tour phase at the foreign destination with visits and activities, which are educational in nature and post-tour phase where evaluation of the trip is done with integration of learning
- Allot time for touristic activities like sightseeing

Importance and benefits of international study tours in the teaching-learning process have been widely acknowledged (Abrams & Hatch, 1960, Porth, 1997; Miao & Harris, 2012, Douglas & Jones-Ridders, 2001; DeLoach, Saliba Smith & Tiemann, 2003; Tuleja, 2008; Cooper, 2009, Scharoun, 2016 but its linkage with tourism is still largely an unexplored area. Some of the researched areas in tourism are related to the design and marketing of study tour programmes (Reday, Counts & Zlielke, 2013); potential of study tours as a tourist source market (Akoijam, 2016) and its sustainability dimension (Kumar & Akoijam, 2017). For a travel segment to come into contention of being considered as a source market, information and research on various aspects is

mandatory. There has been no studies done on the destination image formation of this travel segment and therefore the focus of this paper is to address this issue. How do participants of international study tours to India visualize the country? Knowing this will have significant implications on whether inbound international study tour groups can contribute to Indian tourism.

**FORMATION OF DESTINATION IMAGE**

Being a widely researched theme in tourism literature, there are ample studies done on destination image components and their measurement (e.g., Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). Various factors have been attributed which influences the individual image formation.

Figure 1: Factors Affecting Image Formation

OUTSIDE FACTORS	INSIDE FACTORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A natural and cultural attraction of the destination</li> <li>-Political, economic and technological environment</li> <li>-Quality of product and services</li> <li>-Satisfaction during the travel experience</li> <li>-Intermediaries</li> <li>-Information at the tourism destination</li> <li>-Social (word of mouth, phone calls)</li> <li>-Weather</li> <li>-Presence of a brand</li> <li>-Media &amp; Internet</li> <li>-Marketing activities and advertising</li> <li>-Postcards and travel brochures</li> <li>-Movies</li> <li>-Events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Geographic origin</li> <li>-Social and cultural environment</li> <li>-Character</li> <li>-Motivation and expectation</li> <li>-Personal feeling (favorable vs. unfavorable)</li> <li>-Perceived risks</li> <li>-Familiarity with a destination</li> <li>-Previous experience in the destination</li> <li>-Compared to previous travel experiences in other destinations</li> <li>-Lack of information</li> </ul>

Source: Di Marino, 2008

However, in spite of many research on the theme, there is still no universally accepted method of measuring Destination Image and researchers commonly adopt three methods/approaches- first through qualitative study probing destination perception; second through a content analysis study of tourists travel testimonials (written material, photographs, videos etc) and third through the most common approach of analysing data collected from large samples of people rating the destination across a battery of attribute scale items (Pike, 2016). Pike’s own earlier study had found 71% of the total 262 studies on destination image (published from 1973 - 2007) adopting this third approach and in spite of a number of limiting factors, it is still the most common method in destination image measurement. One of the limiting factors observed by Pike in his above-mentioned study was the absence of a qualitative stage in questionnaire design in a majority of the studies. Attributes were usually selected from the literature in other parts of the world and applied on the study sample of a different location thereby running the risk of non-relevance which the author reasons

“just because a questionnaire is valid in one part of the world does not mean it will be reliable in other settings”.

Destination image measures typically try to find out what people know about a place, how they feel about it and how they plan to act on those thoughts and feelings (Tasci and Gartner, 2007). While developing a conceptual model of Tourism Destination Image (TDI) based on review of several empirical TDI studies and analysis of methodologies employed for its measurement, Gallarza et al (2002) considered a total of 20 most universal attributes; grouped into broad categories (Figure 2) along a Functional-Psychological continuum first proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1991). Functional and Psychological attributes can also correspond to the cognitive (knowledge and beliefs about a destination's attributes) and affective component (feelings for a destination or attachment toward it) of Destination Image respectively.

Figure 2: Common attributes in TDI research

<b>Functional</b>
Various activities
Landscape, Surroundings
Nature
Cultural attractions
Nightlife and entertainment
Shopping facilities
Information available
Sport facilities
Transportation
Accommodation
Gastronomy
Price, value, cost
Climate
Relaxation vs. massific
Safety
Social interaction
Residents' receptiveness
Originality
Service Quality
<b>Psychological</b>

Source: Gallarza, Gil & Calderón, 2002, p. 63

These attributes remain more or else consistent in later researches also with slight variations in the number and name of groups or categories they are assigned to; for example Beerli and Martin (2004) considered 9 categories- natural resources; tourist leisure and recreation; natural environment; general infrastructure; culture, history and art; social environment; tourist infrastructure; political and economic factors; leisure and recreations whereas Chi & Qu (2008) named their 9 categories as travel environment; natural attractions; entertainment and events; historic attractions; infrastructure, accessibility; relaxation; outdoor activities; price and value. The 20 common attributes identified above can, therefore, be considered as 'base attributes' for application to DI construct studies with the provision of deletion and addition of some other attributes

subject to the requirement of each individual study setting.

Choudhary (2000) studied the pre- and post-trip perceptions of foreign tourists about India as a tourist destination and observed that India is rated highly for its rich art forms and cultural heritage (**positive** perceptions) while the factors which dampen the spirits of tourists are irritants (**negative** perceptions) like cheating, begging, unhygienic conditions and lack of safety. Khan (2013) while exploring the image of India from the perspective of past visitors through consumer generated contents uploaded on a selected travel blog site had identified attributes corresponding to perceived **positive** (9 attributes-culture and history, diversity and vastness, natural beauty, people, intense, inexpensive, cuisine, alive, unique), **negative** (7 attributes- poverty, dirt and pollution, cheating, infrastructure, health concerns, climate, intimidating) and *overall* (4 attributes-experience, fascinating, unique, challenging) image of India and had generated corresponding indicator words against each attribute. Notwithstanding some unexplained assignment of attribute names like 'Intense' with corresponding indicator words ranging from 'experience', to 'funny' to 'inspiring', the said research paper had contributed in identifying attributes for India as a destination based on generally accepted tourism destination image attributes advocated by previous researchers most notably Baloglu and Mc Cleary (1999). Rajamohan et al (2007) had studied the relationships between perceived destination image and recreational needs of travelers from the USA to India. The study indicated that the perceived image of India consisted of culture and heritage, tourism infrastructure, nature resources, social environment, entertainment services, and lodging services.

**Method:** No exclusive destination image studies exist in the case of international study tours and therefore a need was felt to adopt a more holistic approach of measuring destination image construction during international study tours in order to contribute and help build a body of knowledge on this particular theme. This paper is part of a broader doctoral thesis on international study tours to India taken for critical analysis to assess its potential as a promotional tool for tourism. Here, in this study, aspects related specifically to destination image formation are considered and analysed. The methods applied are:

**i) Content analysis of inbound study tour visitors testimony from secondary sources**

The first step in content analysis is the preparation of data to be transformed into written text before analysis can start. Word files were created. One word file has 75 pages material from blogs and other testimonials from students visitors sourced from blog links of 8 foreign institutions [MIT Sloan (USA), Pennsylvania State University (USA), Victoria Business School (NZ), Columbia Business School (USA), Stillman School of Business (USA), University of Arkansas (USA), University of Melbourne (AUS) and Australia India Institute). Another word file has textual materials from 5 reports/ journals on study tours to India. The shortest report had 62 pages while the longest report had 130 pages. The choice of the content must be justified by what you want to

know (Patton, 2002) so only those materials which were relevant to the image of India were identified for this paper.

The following rules were applied to make the documents ready for analysis: firstly, all pictures and videos were deleted; secondly, only those descriptions or texts which are relevant to the themes/issues of the study were retained. This exercise of condensing the documents (data reduction) was a tedious one requiring many readings of the text files. Care had to be taken to retain the essence of the original text while being selective to reflect the issues to be addressed i.e study tours and India as a tourism destination.

Recurring themes (more than 3 mentions) which relates to the positive and negative perception of India were identified. The themes descriptors were cued from the expressions of the visitors themselves:

**ii) Analyzing responses to a questionnaire survey** of 131 inbound study tour participants (primary sources) which comprise 81 % students, 5 % faculty members and 14 % in 'Others' category.

The original questionnaire of the broader doctoral thesis had 37 questions covering five aspects- study tour participants' demographics; tour particulars; pre-tour aspects; on-tour aspects and post-tour aspects. Out of these, questions related to destination image formulation which is the focus of this current paper are as follows:

- One question probing the source of information about India prior to the trip. 10 pre-coded options were listed and the respondents were asked to tick as many attributes as applicable to them.
- Two questions regarding the perception of India, one pre-tour and the other as post-tour perception to enable comparison and change in perception, if any. Each of the question has eight pre-coded attributes along with an 'any other' option.
- One question with six (6) pre-coded attributes along with an 'any other' option to explore their dislike about India. Respondents were asked to tick as many attributes as applicable to them.
- One question pertaining to the measurement of study tour participants' satisfaction rating of destination attribute scale items. Here, out of the 20 common destination image attributes identified earlier as 'base attributes' for application to Destination Image construct studies, 7 fundamental attributes (accommodation, transportation, safety, residents' receptiveness, service quality shopping facilities and nightlife and entertainment) were rated for satisfaction level (The remaining 13 attributes were probed whether they form part of study tour itinerary/ programme but is not discussed in this paper). 14 Likert items were framed across these 7 attributes on a five point Likert scale. Respondents were given the option to select a choice of pre-coded responses (1=highly dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 4=satisfied, 5=highly satisfied). Cronbach



alpha reliability test was conducted for these items. With a high score of 0.832 the items were verified.

- One question regarding the type of individual/group the respondents had interacted during their visit to India
- Two questions regarding the intention to recommend India and revisit intention respectively
- At the end of the Questionnaire, the respondents were asked – “Any other thoughts you would like to share regarding your India Experience”. To understand the type of image formed, their responses were examined for words/phrases which relate to the positive and negative aspect of India:

There are no statistical data available on the total number of study tours to India. Thus the sampling technique adopted was non-probability sampling. Here purposive and snowballing were the sampling techniques adopted.

## FINDINGS

The findings based on both secondary data and primary data are presented below:

### 1. Findings based on Secondary Data:

#### *Positive Perceptions*

- **Culture and history** of the country is the core strength of India as a tourism destination. This is very much reflected with many references like, ‘India’s vibrant culture’; ‘Indian culture is very diverse and rich’; ‘taking in the rich history and culture of India through its incredible structures’; ‘incredible monuments’; ‘incredible architecture’ etc.
- **Great hospitality** is another aspect duly appreciated by visitors through comments like, ‘lasting impressions to stay with us relate to the hospitality received’; ‘extended to us a warm invitation to visit her home. Upon arrival was introduced to her family..... The hospitality was lively and cheerful like the country itself’; ‘attended an interactive session with the students. Again, the hospitality was unique’, ‘People are lovely’; ‘I was encouraged and uplifted by the kindness and lightness of the Indian people. „Indians are friendly, hospitable and curious’; ‘People will offer you food everywhere you go – in India it is seen as important as it will welcome you as a guest and a visitor’.
- **Outcome and impact of the trip** is yet another dimension of the tour members’ positive perception of the country and is most commonly conveyed as ‘a life-changing trip to India!’ As one student eloquently gives the biggest reason why it took him almost a month after returning from India to post his final thoughts about the trip on his blog page– ‘I have not felt up to the task of putting into words what an enormous perspective-altering experience the journey was. There is so much I could write, but nothing would do it justice’. Yet another opinion made during

the trip reads- *'Our group often takes time out of the day to reflect on all the amazing things we are seeing and doing and being exposed to. Almost daily, someone expresses a specific moment where he or she stops and just thinks, "I'm in India." This sort of awareness adds another whole dimension to this entire experience and dramatically increases the benefit we gain'*.

### *Negative Perceptions*

- The **chaotic traffic sense** in India is among the most commented aspects of India, at par with the rich cultural heritage mentioned above under the positive perception. Specific comments like *'...and after feeling the toll from train rides, crazy traffic...'; 'stuck in a gridlock traffic jam'* and *'noise polluted traffic'* gives a negative overtone while the rest of the comments on this aspect were made on lighter veins and as a general observation. However, a lack of proper traffic sense is a larger negative issue and should be considered as negative.
- An image of an **'income inequality'** as observed by many visitors can be considered as another negative perspective of the country's image. *'We have seen extreme displays of wealth (ex. Mukesh Ambani's 27-floor, \$1 billion dollar Antilla) and extreme realities of poverty (ex. The Dharavi Slum - a robust city within a city that houses about 1 million people in 1 square mile)'* is how a student frames it. Others refer to explanations like *'struck by the contrast of wealth and relative poverty'; 'homeless people'; 'a lot of India reminds me of how fortunate I have been. Unequal access to resources breaks my heart'; 'beggars and homeless people parked right outside grand opulent hotels, children walking around barefoot while tourists snap pictures of historical landmarks, etc. During slots scheduled for discussion during such trips a 'common discussion point was the stark gap between rich and poor and between rural and urban'.*
- **Pollution** is another issue evident in many of the visitors' accounts with entries like *'thick blanket of smog that floats over the city at various times of the day - sometimes blocking out the sun'; 'disappointingly high levels of environmental spoil and debris littered throughout the water and banks'; 'I need to remark on the change of air and quality as we left the plane- It was a discernable and noticeable difference.'* etc. A student even gave up on a free time scheduled for self-exploration- *'a group explored Old Delhi in tuk- tuks while others reposed at the luxurious hotel. To be honest, I stayed in the hotel because of the horrible pollution encapsulating Delhi'*. It was observed that the reference to pollution is always made in the context of big cities, in particular, Delhi and Mumbai.
- **Lack of social etiquette** is another negative perception. In the context of big cities like Delhi, there were comments like *'constant shoving of belts and watches in your face'* and *'being dragged into numerous photos with locals'*.

The most heartening aspect observed was that even the negative aspects identified above were never made in isolation. A sense of acceptance of the country as a complete 'unit' with all its pros and cons was evident in all the entries and text scanned. There



were comments like 'Now I really do think there is a charm to India's chaotic and bustling nature' or 'In India you need to go with the flow and become comfortable with not knowing and faith that things will get done in India time' or 'At times you will feel uncomfortable, unfamiliar, uncertain and overwhelmed – but those feelings will pass and are outweighed by the overall experience'. One visitor aptly puts it - 'In my experience, India challenged, surprised, shocked, and almost broke me....but most of all, the country changed me for the better'.

## 2. Findings based on Primary Data: Questionnaire survey

### A. Question probing pre-tour information source on India

The main source from where study tour visitors sourced their information about India prior to the trip was the pre tour counseling sessions (63%). Others sources are as listed below:

Table 1: Sources of pre-tour information on India

Source of Information	Percent
Pre tour Counselling session	63%
Books and Travel Guides	50%
Friends and Relatives	46%
India tourism websites	44%
Indian Embassy website	40%
Travel Blogs	37%
Earlier visitors to India	33%
Institution's website	24%
Indian tour operators website	07%
Websites of tour operators in your country	05%
Responses exceed 100% due to multiple responses	

### B. Questions probing destination perceptions (pre-tour and post-tour)

Regarding the perception of India before the trip, the highest percentage (84%) was attributed to 'rich culture' which is in tune with the overall image of India as a Cultural destination. An image of a traditional society and excellence in IT was also evident with 60 % and 44 % responses respectively against these options. 'A combination of traditional and modernity' and 'Friendly people' were both fourth in the options ticked. Under the 'Any other' option, responses include (segments of) poverty, dense population, gender issues, world's biggest democracy, amazing food, bad toilets, slums, poor people and unhygienic - a mix of both positive and negative opinion.

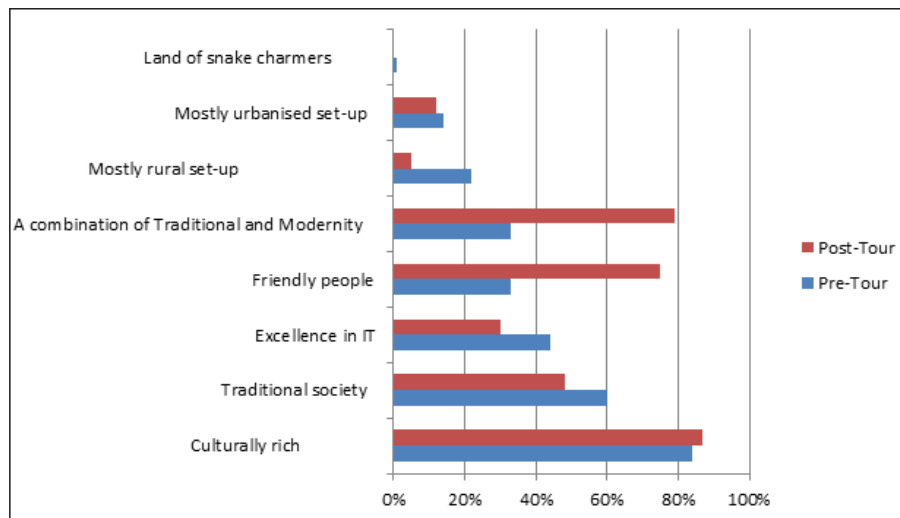
The same attributes were repeated to know the post-tour perception. Post tour, the most dominant view was a combination of traditional and modernity followed by a culturally rich image and friendly people. Traditional society concept came next.

Quite a few 'Any Other' responses reiterated the blending of modern day charm and ancient roots. One respondent stressed upon the spiritual dimension of the country while another stated India is not a bad place and that it is safe. A place with amazing food was another image given forth. A major finding is the change in perception as evidenced in the table below:

*Table 2: Pre and Post tour perception of India (Comparison)*

Pre-tour perception of India	Pre tour	Post Tour
<b>Increase</b>		
culturally rich	84%	87%
a combination of Traditional and Modernity	33%	79%
Friendly people	33%	75%
<b>Decrease</b>		
Traditional society	60%	48%
Excellence in IT	44%	30%
mostly rural set-up	22%	05%
Mostly urbanised set-up	14%	12%
Land of snake charmers	1%	0

*Chart 1: Pre and Post tour perception of India (Comparison)*

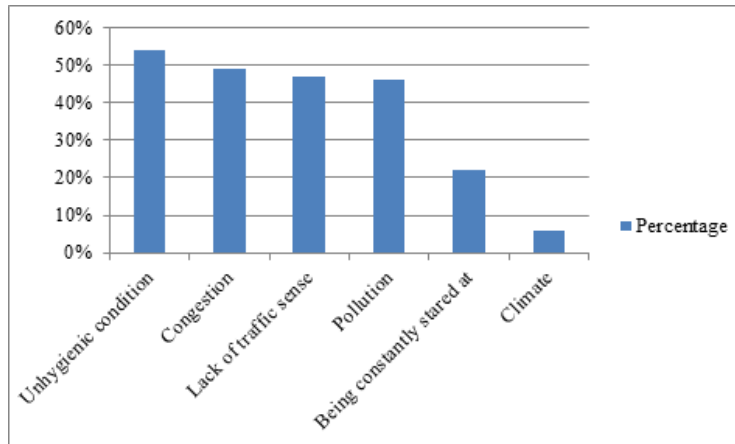


Out of the eight options, five show decreases in number of responses whereas the remaining three show increase in the number of responses. Culturally rich image was as expected the dominant responses both pre and post tour. More than double the increase in the post tour responses of two options- 'a combination of traditional and modernity' and 'friendly people' signal a positive change of perception.

**C. Questions which probed study tours participants' dislike about India**

Unhygienic conditions were what had bothered the majority of the study tour visitors during their trip to India followed by congestion, lack of traffic sense and pollution. Climate though was not a major issue.

**Chart 2: Dislike about India**



The 'Any Other' option in this question drew up a number of eye opening responses like lack of understanding of English by drivers and some of the service staffs; confusing transportation options when traveling long distances; poverty and the sizeable number of people on the streets without a home; lack of proper toilet; being constantly approached by drivers and various sellers offering their goods and services, hagglers and children begging. A heartening answer was given by a respondent who wrote 'None in particular'.

**D. Question regarding rating the satisfaction level of study tour participants'**

14 Likert items pertaining to seven Destination image attributes were rated for satisfaction through a five-point Likert scale (1=highly dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 4=satisfied, 5=highly satisfied).

**Table 3: International study tour participants' satisfaction rating**

Elements of Perception	Highly Dissatisfied (1)	Dissatisfied (2)	Neutral (3)	Satisfied (4)	Highly Satisfied (5)	Mode	Median
Welcome attitude and hospitality of hosts'	0	0	2	22	107	5	5
Quality of transportation means	0	7	39	52	33	4	4
Service and attitude of drivers	0	11	7	74	39	4	4

Public transport efficiency, if availed	7	18	37	58	11	4	4
Quality of accommodation Units	0	2	20	61	48	4	4
Service and attitude of staffs in accommodation Units	0	1	10	57	63	5	4
Services & attitude of Monuments' Guide	1	5	16	58	51	4	4
Services and attitude of Tour Escort	2	3	17	74	35	4	4
Clarity of tourism signposting	8	21	32	55	15	4	4
Shopping options	1	3	20	58	49	4	4
Nightlife	1	21	57	40	12	3	3
Entertainment Options	1	13	23	73	21	4	4
Safety measures	0	30	22	46	33	4	4
Your overall experience about India	0	0	3	39	89	5	5

The mode (the most commonly occurring value in a distribution) and the median (value at the middle of a distribution) for all parameters were either 4 (satisfied) or 5 (Highly satisfied) except for Nightlife which stands at 3 (neutral). The satisfaction level assessment therefore can be taken to be on the positive side since 'nightlife' or rather the lack of it is an overall major issue of Indian tourism itself and the neutral value found here is in line with it. What consolidates the positive satisfaction level assessment is the finding of the query, 'Your overall experience in India', which shows 39 respondent choosing 'satisfied' and 89 choosing the 'highly satisfied' options. Thus 128 out of the total 131 respondents i.e., 98 % of the respondents are satisfied with their overall experience in India.

***E. Question regarding the type of individual/group the respondents had interacted during their visit to India***

Out of the 6 options given, 'Interactions with faculty members' were ticked by 95% of the respondents followed by 'Interaction with students' at 90%.

*Table 4: Interaction at host destination*

<b>Interaction with</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Faculty/Officials of Educational Institutes	95%
Students	90%
State Dignitaries	54%
Non-Governmental Organisations	53%
Business leaders	42%
Entrepreneurs	37%

(Responses exceed 100% due to multiple responses)	
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#### F. Questions regarding the intention to recommend India and revisit intention

As regards whether they would recommend India as a tourism destination, an overwhelming 98 % of the respondents answered in the affirmative while 99% have revisit intentions.

#### G. Question on overall 'India Experience'

At the end of the Questionnaire, the respondents were asked – “Any other thoughts you would like to share regarding your *India Experience*”. About 40% of respondents shared their thoughts.

- **Positive Undertone:** Revisit intention, willingness to recommend India as a destination, new insights developed because of the trip, unexpected surprises' fruitful interaction with scholars, unique features of India' a trip unlike others

Generally, tourists use the term 'experience' to sum up a trip; here the same was also observed and 'experience' was used in conjunction with various adjectives like memorable (experience), amazing, wonderful, great, unforgettable, lovely, life-changing, challenging and best.

- **Negative Undertone:** Poverty and unhygienic condition are the two negative undertones but these are not standalone comments but made in the overall evaluation of the country. *“Yes, I saw pollution; yes, there are a lot of people; yes, there is poverty; these are issues that are found in any part of the world. India has such beautiful landscape, the people of India has a very simplistic way of life. I think people here in the West have lost a sense of being simple”.*
- **Other Aspects:** There were other noteworthy comments which reveal two important aspects- i) the importance of study tours and ii) change in pre and post tour perception

One visitor brings out the advantage of study tours through the following comment, *“Experiencing India through an organized tour probably made the difference in culture, easier to imbibe”.*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, certain common findings particularly the positive perceptions of the country corresponding to its rich culture and history, attractions, great hospitality (people) along with negative descriptions of unhygienic conditions; traffic woes; rich-poor divide and pollution are in tune with the findings of other destination image researches in the Indian context. One thing which stands out, however, is that the negative references international study tour visitors made were often general observations and not stand-alone comments and a sense of acceptance of India as a complete 'Unit' with

all its pros and cons was evident among this segment of visitors. Thus the destination image construct of participants of the international study tour to India overall can be taken to be a positive one. The image can also be taken to be a realistic one since they all have actually visited and personally experienced the country. Destination image will be affected and modified based upon firsthand information and experience (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003) and thus actual visitations tend to create a more realistic image due to firsthand experience (Gunn 1972, Pearce 1982, Gartner, 1989, Chon 1991, Baloglu and McCleary 1999). This study also records the shift in destination image formation based on real experiences as evidenced by the change in pre and post tour perceptions. Also, comments like **"It opened my eyes to a different reality. It was something else to think and something else to see for real"** reflects the change in perception of the visitors which also vindicates the notion that a realistic destination image is possible only when one actually visit a destination. This realistic image formation led a student organiser, an Indian herself to comment, *"I felt a sense of satisfaction that my batch mates really enjoyed the trip to India. Their image of the country changed for the better now"*. The shift and the narratives that participants of international study tours will share with others about India will be both positive and realistic.

Several research have found that tourist destination image is a critical factor in tourist satisfaction (Bigné et al., 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Qu et al., 2011; Chen & Phou, 2013; Lee et al., 2014); the more positive the image of the destination, the greater the level of satisfaction (Chi & Qu, 2008; Alcocer & Ruiz, 2020). In the current study, 98% of the respondents rating the overall experience in India as either 'satisfied' or 'highly satisfied' is a very encouraging finding; more so when the choice of the remaining 2 % respondents does not reflect any negative perception. Their 'neutral' stance can be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the need advocated by industry experts and tourism researchers alike for intense attention and improvement required to address the negative perception if India has to develop and compete as a world class tourism destination.

There are certain standard behaviors of satisfied tourists as seen across studies like revisit intention and willingness to recommend the destination. These behaviors are also evident among the international study tour participants. When seen together, it can thus be concluded that the overall findings of this study conform to most of the results of related research done on the tourism destination image of India. However, some of the findings of this study are distinctive. For example, 'cheating' and 'lack of safety' as reported in other studies are not evident in the case of the international study tour participants. This can be attributed to the nature of the international study tours. Participants of International study tour travel in a closely coordinated group; have a structured pre-tour conditioning at their respective country of origin; have pre-arranged scheduled itinerary which involves in most of the cases, presentation by experts and interaction with counterparts in educational institutions at the destination. Being part of a group instills a feeling of security and at the same time acts as a deterrent for outsiders to take advantage. India is a country with a huge population, loud noises and vibrant colours and tourists often report having cultural shock. If a visitor knows beforehand what he/she is likely to encounter in a new destination, it would help in minimizing



somewhat the cultural shock. For respondents of this study, it is best exemplified by the comment of one of the participants, "Experiencing India through an organized tour probably made the difference in culture, easier to imbibe".

Again, researches on destination image and tourist satisfaction have found that potential tourists develop their perceived destination image and consequently their expectations based on various factors and that the tourists are satisfied only when these expectations are met. The role of the information sources or the factors which influence destination image and expectations is thus important. While featured tourism promotion does have an impact upon the perceptions of travelers; other sources of information have a much greater bearing on the formation of destination image (Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007); one of the most reliable one being the narratives (word-of-mouth) of people who have a firsthand experience about the destination (Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007). All these underpin that tourism authorities need to understand the importance of relying on information sources that depict realistic images. International study tour participants fit the bill and can be pursued as a source of information for promotional campaigns as well as a potential market for inbound tourists to India.

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