

SKILLING THE UNSKILLED: VIGNETTES FROM MESMERISING MAHABALIPURAM

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ABSTRACT

The continually growing travel and tourism industry in India has proved to be a huge economy booster and plays a particularly critical role in the socio-economic development of local communities. Rapid developments and advancements in tourism bestow innumerable benefits on the involved destinations. However, the actual potential and scope of tourism development in a particular area can be fully understood only after a thorough analytical study. In a bid to bring to light the significant elements that need additional attention for the promotion and development of sustainable tourism, the prominent historical tourist destination of Mahabalipuram, the city of architectural splendour situated on the Coromandel Coast of Bay of Bengal, in Kancheepuram district, Tamilnadu, is taken up for this investigative research study. It enjoys the historic distinction of having once been a flourishing port city and an important center of art, architecture, culture, and literature in the 7th century during the reign of the Pallava dynasty. Today, it is affirmably one of the city's iconic landmarks. As late as the 20th century, the architectural magnificence of its historical monuments was duly recognized by the Government as one of the significant tourist destinations in the country and it was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1984. From the 1990s onwards, the Ministry of Tourism focused its attention and efforts on promoting tourism, highlighting the city's glorious heritage and rich culture. Every year, both State and Central Governments allocate a definite fund for developmental projects, aimed at improving the available infrastructure and providing better facilities in Mahabalipuram. In tandem with such commendable tourism promotion measures, it is suggested that the host community or the local residents are sensitized to the need to sustain tourism in this destination by emphasizing the important role they can play in accelerating tourism development. Tourism can develop and grow in leaps and bounds by connecting guest travelers with the resident hosts and facilitating their interaction. The potential outcome of such community-based tourism is a better understanding of the prevailing socio-cultural identity, the local traditions, indigenous lifestyle, skilled art and handicrafts besides the natural environment. Indeed, the very livelihood of many communities may depend on tourism. Increased tourist footfall will then, in turn, boost the economic growth of the region. This exploratory paper is construed using a systematic compilation of rich primary data comprising of field visits, surveys, observation inputs, Government reports, etc.

KEYWORDS: Mahabalipuram, Tourism, Skills, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Mesmerizing Mahabalipuram – The Gateway to South India

The historical town of Mahabalipuram, replete with some of the oldest existing Dravidian style of monolithic architecture, enjoys the reputation of being a top tourist spot thronged by International and Indian tourists in equal measure. The stone-cut temples, monuments, and sculptures are fine examples of India's traditional past set on sandy shores fringed by casuarina trees against the backdrop of a shimmering sea, reason enough for it to be a hugely popular tourist haunt. This inviting picture-card perfect destination, bountifully blessed by Mother Nature stands proud and tall having withstood the ravages of time and the vagaries of nature -erosion by the wind and the sea.

Ideally located on the serene shores of the Bay of Bengal, it is hard to say what draws the tourists more, the natural splendor of the golden sands or the historical imprints in stone? Possibly both and the added fact that it is the repository of Indian heritage. The powerful Pallava Kings, under whose benign rule South India flourished, were patrons of art and architecture and constructed the ancient port town of Mahabalipuram during the 7th Century A.D.

The ride to Mahabalipuram along the coastline is a vastly enjoyable one, the panoramic view best enjoyed by traversing the scenic East Coast road from Chennai. Mahabalipuram has benchmarked itself as a must-see tourist destination and is a hugely favored weekend getaway destination owing to the unique charm and rich legacy of its architectural marvels (Arunmozhi and Panneerselvam, 2013, p. 87). The 'Rock-cut' monuments are a testimony to the sculpting skills, creativity, and workmanship of artisans of yore showcasing their artistry on large boulders, rocks, and granite, breathing life into stone. The credit of it being recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site must be rightfully attributed to King Narasimhavarman I also called as Mamalla (the great warrior) (c. 630-670), for his unparalleled legacy (Antony Ashok Kumar, 2016, p. 77). Named Mamallapuram or the city of Mamalla after the Pallava King, the grandeur of the art and architecture of this once prosperous port continues to enthrall visitors. The universally acclaimed 'Shore Temple', the oldest in South India, bears its name as it (is located right on the serene shores of the Bay of Bengal. Originally built as a complex of seven temples, only one remains today and it is conjectured by geologists and archaeologists that the remaining six were submerged by the sea.

The sculptural and artistic works, masterpieces of creative genius, are attributed to the legendary King Rajasimha. The fascinating fact is that they are monolithic in nature and have been built from the top to the bottom.



Figure 1: Piquant Pancha Rathas – A Rock-Cut Architectural Marvel

(Tour My India, 2018)

The rhythm of chisels giving shape to stone and working their magic in granite resonates in the coastal town of Mahabalipuram, which continues to be a much-favoured destination due to its historical value and spellbinding natural beauty. The Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation and Ministry of Tourism have evinced interest in sustaining its popularity and have taken a great deal of efforts and initiatives to foster the economic stability of the destination by rigorously promoting tourism activities on an ongoing basis, generating awareness of the cultural distinctiveness of Mahabalipuram, kindling the curiosity of visitors by showcasing the destination as an unmissable locale and crowning it with the epithet ‘Heart of Indian Temple Sculptures’. The majestic temples, historic pieces of art themselves, flaunt myriad art forms, finely chiseled intricate designs, engravings of mythological lore, spellbinding etchings, exquisite carvings and stand mute testimony to the exceptional skills of artisans from a bygone era. These invaluable treasures with their unparalleled artistry unfailingly captivate visitors, one of whom opined thus. In the words of Mark Tully, acclaimed former BBC broadcaster and eminent author,

“Art is unimaginable without a matrix of culture, even a parochial culture; it is inconceivable without a history; it cannot be separated from the properties of the materials of which it is made and these are themselves provided by that culture, history and by the physical world its people inhabit; All of these are elements of the web of language in which an art is expressed...”

Streamlining Success with Sustainable Skills

The development of tourism as an industry is largely dependent on the education, knowledge and skill sets of the local residents involved in proactively promoting tourism. As they play a pivotal role in tourism development, their inclusion will ensure tourism is successful and sustainable. Due efforts must be taken to educate them about the region’s natural, cultural, historical attractions, and how they relate to tourism. Their willingness to be involved in tourism planning and decision making, participation in formulating goals and strategies and support for tourism development activities will be more forthcoming once they are made aware of the potential of tourism to stimulate the local economy, the benefits of which will directly accrue to them.

In order to capitalize on the accelerated growth of tourism and to facilitate its further expansion, there is an urgent need for sufficient skilled workforce. Tourism relevant competencies must be fostered in them if the requirements of the tourism sector are to be effectively fulfilled. Human resource development is therefore important, in that the skills of the local residents must be aligned to fully meet the particular needs of the tourism industry. Bearing in mind the continued popularity of the destination in the future, this paper centers its' focus on the inculcation of such vital skills. Imparting tourism-centric skills has been noted to be closely linked to the increased economic development of a destination (Noon and Blyton, 1995). Significant outcomes of some of the earlier researches have led to the recommendation that at least vocational education be made mandatory, to assiduously cultivate essential skill sets that will ensure the needs of tourists are met in an efficient and professional manner. First and foremost are communication skills, particularly oral communication for the local people to uninhibitedly interact with incoming tourists, especially in hotels and restaurants (Ashton & Green, 1996).

The perception of skill is challenging in that, it is both relative and subjective (Riley et al. 2002). Based on a complete and comprehensive review of the work carried out by various researchers, it may be surmised that the criteria to define a skill must ideally explore all of the questions raised below:

- Should formal education be considered a necessary qualification?
- How much of time is required to be invested to effectively train a person for a particular job profile?
- After training the workforce, are the needs of tourists met in an efficient and professional manner?
- What must be done to develop the potential of a job-seeker to be a multifaceted personality, increasingly seen as an essential requirement in the job market?

It has to be borne in mind that owing to the diverse nature of human characteristics and different skill compositions, in terms of both horizontal and vertical, the skill set requirements and training needs tend to vastly differ. Horizontal diversity treats differences as merely variations. For instance, the variety that is found within a particular sector, namely restaurants, takeaway outlets, bars, mid-scale hotels, luxury resorts, lodges and so on make up the horizontal diversity. Vertical diversity, on the other hand, evaluates differences by categorizing them as either superior or inferior. Unskilled, skilled, supervisory positions, managerial levels, etc. fall under the category of vertical diversity (Baum, 2002, p. 345). At a global level, research studies on skills have been more frequently undertaken in the Food and Beverage sector (Mars and Nicod, 1984) with very few studies on accommodation. It must be noted that the key occupational skill sets deemed necessary in the hospitality sector are unique in the sense, such skills can be just as equally applied to any other related sector that helps boost the economy of the destination; it enjoys the distinction of wider application to a broad range of sectors (Lashley and Morrison, 2000). This advantage could be a double-edged sword and pose a significant threat to the hotel industry as staff are likely to be easily poached by other sectors and lured away with the promise of higher pay, better working conditions, and more attractive perks.

Moving over to the role of the hotel and hospitality sector in Mahabalipuram, it is discerned that the situation could be improved to entice more tourists to the region. A few of the popular hotels that can be categorized as 'formal' accommodation are Hotel Tamilnadu, Indeco hotel, Radisson Blu Resort, Ideal Beach Resort, Golden Sun, Mamalla Beach Resort, Mamalla Heritage and Hotel Veeras (Tamilnadutourism, 2018). It is to be noted that the eclectic range of the

hospitality sector not only covers hotels but also other unorganized sectors like snack vendors, tea stalls, food truck carts, street hawkers and the like. The debatable research questions to be considered for a better understanding of the situation are:

- How do hotels in Mahabalipuram source their staff?
- Is the manpower from the local community considered for the employment process?
- Have skill set gaps been rightly identified and promptly addressed?

Complete answers to all of the above queries can be obtained only subsequent to in-depth research into the matter.

Sourcing the Staff

A vast amount of quality research data is available in the field of staffing in the hospitality industry, some of which have dealt extensively with the unique challenges faced by the industry (Burns, 1997, p. 240). While sourcing well-trained, competent staff is in itself a cumbersome task, retaining them is nothing short of a herculean task, job-hopping being an all too common malady. This is attributed to the natural predilection of the staff to shift their focus and veer away to other sectors as they discover that the skill sets imbued in them are a good match with those required in any other industry added to which is the irresistible lure of better pay packages. Without an effective employee retention strategy to keep all employees on board, staff may come and go with alarming frequency. This universal problem has been acknowledged by the hotel managers across Mahabalipuram too. In addition to this year-round difficulty, a few other reasons that contribute to the high staff turnover are the tedious shift patterns that are not staff-friendly, low remuneration, poor working conditions, lack of job security, limited career development opportunities, ill-sketched career tracks, casual hiring practices, unstreamlined human resources practices and also the fact that it is primarily a male-dominated industry (Keep and Mayhew, 1998, p. 9). The hotels in Mahabalipuram have unfailingly had to contend with such challenges time and again. A few hotels that fall under the classification of star hotels prefer to source their staff through campus recruitments in an attempt to tap fresh talent and get the brightest young minds on-board (Venkatesan, 2018). The outcome of campus recruitment is often not as anticipated as youngsters prefer not to take up a job opening at a hotel located in Mahabalipuram, considering it a non-city location (Srinivasan, 2018). Moreover, at the actual time of joining, many do not turn up as they merely consider such job offer as a standby, something to fall back on as a last resort and not one of their first choices (Mahesh, 2018). It is also evident that despite offering world-class training programmes to the staff, it is very challenging to retain them (Ravi, 2018).

Engaging Local Communities

In an attempt to address/resolve this issue and identify a feasible solution, a few hotel managers were approached with the tentative suggestion that the participation of eligible people from the local communities may be actively encouraged. However, research studies reveal that hotel managers are skeptical about hiring the local people owing to a number of credible reasons. For instance, there was an unfortunate incidence when a few uncouth locals behaved in an inappropriate manner with foreign tourists during their morning beach walk, as an aggressive retaliation to not receiving the exorbitant sum of money demanded by them. The situation turned unpleasant and the assistance of the police had to be solicited before the issue was resolved (Muthusivan, 2018). In the light of difficulties like these, the reluctance to hire the locals is understandable, particularly in star hotels where foreign tourists form the major share of visiting clientele. The

laid-back locals too are strangely unwilling to take advantage of the job opportunities they could well use to better their lives. It is unfortunate that they do not inherently possess ethical human values such as gratefulness or loyalty (Varghese, 2018). Despite the fact that they owe their livelihood to the hotel industry, they are often quick to disrupt its smooth functioning by work stoppages, labor strikes and collectively challenging the management with their unreasonable demands and outlandish threats. The smaller hotels, the ones not classified or classified with a lower star rating, are not considered as either lucrative or promising job openings with good career prospects and they fail to attract qualified talent. Eventually, hotels are left with no other option than to recruit the local unemployed youth or hire school dropouts to fill the vacancies. This is best seen from the fact that as per the Government census for 2011, 59.3% of the population in Mahabalipuram was not employed (Citypopulation, 2018). Convincing local youth to work in hotels and motivating them to stay at their job necessitates a tremendous amount of time and effort. It is unfeasible and risky to hire youth who do not meet the basic requirements of the job. However, with no other options left, hotels continue to recruit the local youth and migrant workers and focus on training to equip them with the necessary skills to efficiently carry out their assigned tasks.

Bridging the Skill Gaps

There is yet to be a consensus in the debate over the process of categorizing the workforce as either 'skilled' or 'unskilled'. In large part, this is due to the changing paradigms in strategies that are formulated by the top management, in turn, owing to the fact that the needs of tourists are also constantly changing. The art of skilling is often unfavorably viewed as undue pressure placed on the workforce by higher level management. This is because mere skilling is insufficient, multi-skilling and cross-training resulting in a versatile workforce is the need of the hour in today's highly competitive, fast-paced world. As aptly noted by Ritzer (1993, p. 240),

“Working in such an environment requires more than just the ability to operate a cash register; emotional demands are made of employees to constantly be in a positive, joyful and even playful mood. An ability to cope with such demands must be recognized as a ‘skill’ par excellence...”

The challenge lies not in up-skilling the qualified but in training those who are employed with no formal education and integrating them into the workforce. The hospitality industry is peculiar in that, apart from the specific skills related to the job (communication, courtesy, discipline, resourcefulness, flexibility, self-confidence, adaptability, commitment, teamwork, creativity, and punctuality), it also additionally demands a lot of emotional skills or in other words, soft skills. This is an important aspect of the industry as these skills are difficult to inculcate especially when it comes to uneducated youth (Seymour, 2000). Formal education facilitates the understanding that a high degree of control must be exercised over emotional expressions at the workplace; in situations that warrant their expression due care must be taken to ensure that it is in a polite, formal, strictly inoffensive manner. Unless this trait is nurtured and a certain degree of self-control is possessed, courteous behavior cannot be expected from the staff, especially direct entrants with no education. Importance must be given to quality training for the overall development of new entrants. As a customer-centric industry, such employee development programmes, behavioral training, and staff training sessions are vital if the workforce is to be equipped with the attentiveness, personality and professionalism that visitors and guests will expect. However, this is easier said than done and it is in this realm of ensuring that the needs of tourists are met in an efficient and professional manner that hotels face a lot of difficulties.

Reverberating Reformations

Having discussed the spectrum of deficiencies and difficulties, the study highlights a few areas where formal training for critical professional skills and personal skills could be imparted to a select group of communities to bring the workforce up to the desired standard. The tangible outcomes of such training programmes are expected to be, a secure livelihood, greater employment opportunities in organized sectors, improved morale and enhanced proficiency in soft skills and interpersonal skills. The introduction of the following skill-based courses to improve the personal attributes of the workforce could greatly contribute to professional productivity, better career prospects and high levels of emotional intelligence.

Table 1: Courses for Inculcating Essential Skills for Career Opportunities in the Travel, Tourism and Hospitality Sector

S. No	Course	Target	Remarks
1.	Skill development training course for tourist guides	Graduates/Higher Secondary level local school children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locating authorized training centers and certified institutes that offer quality courses Identifying good trainers Offering employment/registration/certification assistance
2.	Lifeguard and first-aid training course for fishermen	Local fishermen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying potential candidates Identifying trainers and instructors for expert, professional training Practical training modules to prevent and respond to emergencies at the sea and ensure safety Practical training modules on first-aid Procedures and emergency care
3.	Art, souvenirs, knick-knacks, and handicrafts (utility and decorative value-added products)	Local Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying potential trainees Funding for material cost Engaging skilled demonstrators Employment assistance
4.	1 -day awareness program for street hawkers	Local street hawkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health and hygiene Sanitation Food quality Food safety practices / Safe food handling Eco-friendly waste disposal Entrepreneurship opportunities
5.	1 -day awareness program for street vendors	Street vendors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hygiene Sanitation Eco-friendly waste disposal
6.	3 -day local tourism awareness/ sensitization program covering 3 villages in the neighborhood	Host community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heightening awareness, appreciation of value, the importance of the iconic site and the economic significance of tourism Teaching the importance of the role as ambassadors to attract visitors and promote/boost tourism Need to extend support to tourism initiatives, facilities, and services Promoting traditional food Inculcating interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills Creating awareness of the unique heritage and culture of the locale

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging homestays
7.	2 -day awareness program for auto-drivers, taxi/cab drivers, rickshaw pullers	Local auto-drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of the destination • Communication skills and etiquette training • Safe driving practices • Extending first-aid to tourists

It is an undeniable fact that tourism can have positive socio-economic impacts on the local community by enabling them to reap the economic benefits of tourism. It is recognized as a tool that supports the development of formal and informal sectors. Imparting skills to the local residents will enable them to support and be actively involved in promoting sustainable tourism. Such partnership and collaboration are particularly important as the tourism industry is dependent on resident involvement and goodwill towards visitors.

Travelers today, increasingly seek authentic and meaningful travel experiences by opting for local products and services. Holidaymakers evince keen interest in varied local cuisine, customs, traditions, and languages. They prefer locally-run tours, buy local produce, choose small eateries and contribute to boosting the local economy. They seek to forge deep and personal connections with the people who reside in the destination. A positive attitude to tourism and readiness to enhance tourist satisfaction is, therefore, a vital element for successful hospitality and visitor care.

A marketing strategy must be formulated, after identifying the main components of tourism, namely accommodation, food and beverage, leisure, amenities, entertainment, and transport. The major destinations must be identified along with the available tourist facilities, resources, and gaps in local services. The information must be gathered on the avenues of interest to tourists such as values, attitudes, qualities and traditions which are likely to appeal to them. Depending on this, skills must be imparted to the locals empowering them to meet the needs of the tourists. While imparting skills to the locals is vital, it is equally important to enhance the tour experience of the tourists by incorporating a few changes, suggestions for which are given below;

- Re-introduction of Hop-on and Hop-off tour bus services will facilitate the comfortable and convenient sightseeing experience of tourists and enable them to enjoy the top tourist attractions at the destination.
- Tourism friendly measures such as detailed maps, interactive videos and setting up of a 24x7 toll-free Multi-lingual Tourist Helpline will greatly help in improving the tourist experience.
- Sufficient security arrangements must be in place at all prime locations to ensure tourist safety and to prevent any untoward incidents of misbehavior.
- Auto drivers must be friendly, enthusiastic and possess good communication skills; they must be knowledgeable enough to provide tourists with detailed information about the destination and to answer any queries they may raise
- Well-designed handouts such as flyers, teasers, leaflets, travel maps, travel guides and brochures with colorful pictures, travel tips, top locations and snippets of tourism infographics on Mahabalipuram should be handed out to auto-drivers to promote the destination. These can be distributed by them to attract visitors and awaken the wanderlust of prospective travelers.

- The participation and involvement of the local residents and communities as key stakeholders in tourism development must be actively encouraged. Tourism must be seen as a socially inclusive activity, particularly marginalized groups, disadvantaged groups, and women. The leading role of tourism in contributing to their social and economic well-being must be emphasized. Efforts must be taken to sensitize them about the importance of sanitation and hygiene.
- Hawkers and vendors add life and color to a destination by offering local delicacies at reasonable and affordable prices via small eateries on the streets. These informally self-employed people are often sadly neglected but are an indispensable part of the tourist landscape. These street-savvy businessmen are particularly favored by visitors seeking novelty. They must be sensitized to the importance of the food served to be safe and hygienic, through awareness programmes. Good oral communication skills will facilitate their easy interaction with diverse visitors. Public-Private-Partnership mode of operation could be initiated in the areas of tourism/hospitality projects for successful tourism initiatives and accelerating developments in the tourism sector. Such collaborations could throw open a plethora of employment opportunities and help develop and deliver tourism programmes designed to meet the needs and challenges of the tourism industry.
- Employee retention is a major problem, steps must be taken to meet manpower needs through effective recognition programs to boost overall employee satisfaction and morale, reduce turnover, and increase performance.

EPILOGUE

The dynamic tourism and hospitality sector has recognized the world over as the harbinger of development and inclusive socio-economic growth. It promotes many industries in the economy and generates employment in various areas such as hospitality, travel, entertainment, health, wellness, leisure, and other sectors.

The Ministry of Tourism has undertaken several initiatives to provide a further boost to the sector by improving the infrastructure and has taken steps towards preserving, enriching and actively promoting the cultural and heritage value of destinations to enhance the tourist attractiveness. Based on the findings of this exploratory research study, it is suggested that further improvements be undertaken in Mahabalipuram on the lines of better connectivity, improved accommodation options, revamping the local art-sculpture museum and popularising the stone sculpture industry, setting up shopping centres to promote the exclusive handicrafts by the local artisans (such as stone and wooden sculptures and seashell jewellery), provide the assistance of knowledgeable tourist guides, create convenient parking slots for visitors and construct a modern bus bay with all amenities. The Maritime Heritage museum featuring nautical maritime history and miniature models of various boats and ships; Lighthouse heritage museum that exhibits lighthouse equipment and devices like ship signalling used in lighthouses in the past; and Asia's largest Seashell museum which houses seashells, shark teeth, whale fins and marine fossils are special attractions of the place. The informative 3D shows, as well as the educative Sound and Light shows, provide excellent entertainment to visitors.

This one-of-a-kind tourist destination is a place that buzzes with activity during the annual December Mamallapuram Dance festival that lasts for an entire month. The festival, which adds value to the tourist destination, takes place in the open air and features various Indian classical dances by renowned dance artists from all over the country

amidst the backdrop of the ancient temples, sculptures and the sea. Mahabalipuram may be said to be at its best at this time of the year. For the adventurous traveler, it offers some great waves to ride in a scenic setting and is considered a surfing hotspot.

It is clear that there is no dearth of employment opportunities with the dire need for human resources in the labour-intensive travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors which have grown manifold over the years but are hampered by a severe shortage of a skilled workforce. Much can be done to increase tourist footfall to Mahabalipuram with the able assistance of skilled, proficient and qualified workforce. The focus must hence be on the priority areas of recruiting, training and retaining the competent workforce. Tackling the labor and skills issues by means of capacity building with improved professional training and skill development strategies will translate into a better skilled and committed workforce who will be capable of offering enhanced service quality and ensuring better tourism experiences.

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