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Evaluation of homestay accommodation supply in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Homestay has been a significant topic in the contemporary tourism research. The demand side or motivation, perception and satisfaction of visitors have often been investigated. This paper investigate the supply perspective of homestay accommodation in the context of Sri Lanka. Qualitative approach was selected supported by ethnographic interviews. The population being all homestay operators in Sri Lanka, a sample of twenty seven homestay suppliers were interviewed all over the country representing nine homestay zones. Transcriptions were coded, analysed and structured into qualitative narrations. Source of income, business prospect, persuasion and experience, appeal of the area, personal appeal and availability of resources motivated homestay supply. The weaknesses of the exiting product, socio-cultural issues, and external disturbances, unethical behaviour of guests, guest complaints and poor capability of operators were of significant issues in homestay operations. Planning, marketing, research, increase customer service and sufficient allocation can ensure socio-economic advancement from homestay accommodation.

Keywords: Homestay, Qualitative, Supply, Sri Lanka, Tourism

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Cultural and heritage tourism focuses on the characteristics of tourists who visit cultural and heritage destinations. It has become a major new area in the tourism industry because of people's inclination to seek adventure, traditional culture, history, archaeology and interaction with local people (Hollinshead, 1993). Tourists seek out adventures that could immerse them in a culture or a place (Thompson, 1998). In the present context tourism has become a cultural linkage which connect different cultures and expose various cultural backgrounds to the world. According to the Secretary General of United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2012),

"...tourism is an economic sector based on human interaction, exchange and dialogue. WTD 2011 is a call to all those involved in tourism to act in a way that is conscious and respectful of culture, which promotes intercultural dialogue and ensures that local communities fully participate in, and benefit from..."

Source: Secretary General (UNWTO, 2012) The homestay which refers to a stay at a residence by a traveler or a visiting foreign student is viewed as a mean of culture and heritage tourism emerging with traditional houses and culture of residents achieving two goals at the same time: increasing the income of host country families and encouraging them to preserve their cultural heritage by presenting their traditional houses (Wang, 2007). Many tourists believe that the homestays they participate in represent a unique living in a new culture. Tourists seek authentic experience and architecture of the host culture. Homestays could provide the cultural experience and the sense of being at home. Through homestays, these cultural attributes often provide participants with such staged authenticity and acceptable satisfaction while hosts seek to offer tourists a genuine connection to the community. Residents' desire tourists to visit their houses because travelers bring economic benefits to their community while they are still maintain their traditional culture and heritage (Cole, 2007). The immediate requirement for rooms to feed the tourist industry with the rapid increase of tourists into the country has prompted the authorities to promote the homestay and bungalow concept. The recent past has shown that the rooms required to cope with the huge influx of tourists is far from sufficient. As a quick fix solution, the SLTDA has launched a programme, calling interested parties willing to provide accommodation to

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tourists to register with the Authority. According to SLTDA's Head of Standards & Quality Assurance and Investment:

"We are encouraging people from all over the country who are in a position to provide accommodation to tourists to register with us. However, we will see that all these places conform to the standards set by us as requirements. The tourists who wish to stay in home are the ones that want to experience the country and culture first hand." (Director, Standards & Quality Assurance and Investment, SLTDA, Personal Communication, July 04, 2011).

Homestays in Sri Lanka have become increasingly popular in the Sri Lankan tourism industry since 2009, and their development is expected to continue according to the tourism strategy of the Sri Lankan government 2010. From 2009 to 2010, SLTDA helped construct homestays in all the tourist zones in Sri Lanka (SLTDA, 2012). Previous researchers studied the relevance Thailand's heritage-based attractions to both international and domestic tourism, and provided several attributes to these attractions such as traditional villages, temples, and monuments (Peleggi, 1996).

1.2 Problem Statement

Homestays are viewed as a means of cultural and heritage tourism. During 2009 -2011, Sri Lanka's government announced these two years to be the year of Sri Lankan tourism by using the slogan of 'Refreshingly Sri Lanka' that has been used after the resolution of disputes. Because of this trend, the government helped cultural tourism investors to develop their business and supported Sri Lanka's homestay programs since 2009. Therefore, the sector of cultural tourism and the sector of homestay tourism were interested by tourism investor. To develop this market, desirable product attributes should be considered (SLTDA, 2011). Homestay operators need to consider which attributes influence tourists' motivation and satisfaction in order to develop strategies in attracting and satisfying the homestay participants. Although several researchers have studied the homestays in the region, e.g Masters, (2010), Anonymous (2007), Anonymous (2008), they did not certainly provide homestay issues, especially homestays in Sri Lankan context. The homestay is a new concept of Sri Lankan tourism but it is expected to continue with the support of SLTDA. Thus, this study could be applied to investigate what factors would motivate tourists to choose homestays in Sri Lanka and to predict tourists' overall satisfaction based on the product attributes. Further, the study endeavors to identify the real perceptions about homestay programme in the view of homestay operators. The general explicit objective of this research study is to explore the homestay tourism product the operators' perspective. Corresponding to the research questions, the following objectives are developed to achieve in order to answer the research questions; (1) to explore the perception on homestay of the host families and (2) to elucidate the possibilities of improvement of Sri Lankan homestay product in order to meet the demands of present and future visitors.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Homestay

Homestay refers to a visit to somebody's home in a foreign country which allows visitors to rent a room from a local family in order to learn local culture, lifestyle, or language. It is a living arrangement offered by a host or host family that involves staying in their furnished house or suite. The guest of a homestay would be staying in home-like accommodation with shared living spaces, facilities, and amenities. Utilities and meals are usually included and the length of stay could be daily, weekly, monthly, or unlimited unless specified otherwise by the host (Rivers, 1998).

Frederick (2003) also defines the homestay as a stay by a tourists or a visiting foreign student who is hosted by a local family. Homestay can occur in any destination worldwide; residents of homestay countries encourage homestays in order to develop their tourism industry. The concept of the home may be perceived to distinguish homestay establishments from other forms of accommodation.

Rhodri (2004) states that the distinction between homestay and hotel is boundaries of private area. The private space of homestay is opened to visitors that would not fall under the term of hotel. In other words, it may refer to a sector of homestay accommodation to distinguish the accommodation from other types which do not share all the characteristics to the same degree. Host of homestay is described as family who live on the premises, sharing their space which becomes public while other forms of accommodation, such as hotels where the host's (the manager or staff) private home is not on the premises and the boundaries of the private space are open to staff only (Lynch, 2003). According to the economic and social developing plan of the Sri Lankan government 2010 edition which decentralized power into local community, local organizations began to take interest in community income. Sri Lanka's Ministry of Tourism stated that one of the important ways to increase community income is raising local tourism by using various tourist attractions (SLTDA, 2009). Homestays are outstanding attractions which pull for the attention from operators. Moreover, homestay activities develop communities and increase community income while still maintaining the culture and environment of the local area. Simple lifestyles of local residents have become an important attraction which gains the attention of tourists. Sri Lankan homestays are established in every part of Sri Lanka (Western, Southern, North Central, Central, and the Northwestern part). Sri Lanka's Ministry of Tourism revealed that current homestays in Sri Lanka began to appear in late 2009.

2.2 Homestay: benefits, issues and challenges

Benefits of Homestay programme

Economic contributions from the homestay programme to the individual operators and to the homestay programme committee was examined by a case study in Malaysia in 2011 and the findings summarize as follows (Kalsom, 2011). According to one respondent of the interview, "... the money obtained from the programme is important, also not a lot of capital is really needed. Houseorations and toilet facilities we also can use since we are living in this hose..." (Kalsom, 2011).

As visitors frequently purchase locally produced goods such as herbal medication and handicrafts as souvenirs, the homestay programme is seen as an outlet for the local small scale producers of this type of goods. The village womens' group also benefits from the homestay as they provide catering service for the homestay guests during the local feast activity. They are also involved in local food display exhibition, which is in turn contributes to the preservation of traditional food and ways of cooking. Further, according to Kalsom, (2011), the rest of the groups who are beneficial form the homestay incomes are local caterers, the cultural show performers and other who assist in activities. Those ho are involved in local transport as well as those who are involved in managing services and logistics and coordination activities and overall the receipts from the homestay programme are distributed among villagers which are the major community benefit from the programme. Further the improvement of the local attitudes towards tourism industry and the way of their thinking towards guests' satisfaction and appreciation of local culture and other resources is stimulated by homestay programme according to Kalsom, 2011. As per her findings;

"I am excited and thankful to the government for introducing homestay to us... now we know the importance of tourism in developing the country... we know more about the tourist... because we are trained.. I' am proud to be a part of tourism...."

According to Jamil & Hamsah (2007) who studied the roles of women in homestays, women in the village were motivated by the programme since it promised them with some employment opportunities, new business opportunities and skills development as well as chance to secure greater control over local resources in their villages. However, the success of the programme is controlled by several factors such as training and guidance given by the homestay management committee of the village, government support and guidance, training for local operators as well as rewards and recognition and guest allocation priorities based on feedback records. The management of the programme has lot to do in securing a properly managed local homestay programme and the involvement of the government and continuous improvement while controlling g improper activities lead the success of a homestay programme. The Sri Lankan context to be explored by the second part of the study with interviews conducted with operators. Guest's point of view the cultural experience, low cost compared to hotel accommodation, living with local people are some benefits they can experienced form homestay. According to Kalsom, 2011, the cultural mingle and the experiential aspect of family living is of unique in term of guests' experience.

"my room mate I were asked to wear 'sarung', eat on the floor and without spoon, and sleep on the floor.....it is really a unique experience that we could find in any hotel at any place! No matter how good the services of a hotel, it will never give you the warm feeling of companionship, the feel of family..."

According to Rinchen (2007) benefits of homestay programme could be highlighted as follows. Income from Homestays more than doubled in most villages, especially the remote and poorer villages of Sku, Rumbak & Kaya.

Most women (who comprise the majority of providers and in some cases work as local guides, and who receive the cash payments) felt that the income from Homestays has made a significant change in their lives. The income has given them greater decision making powers at home that they hadn't had before. With the ability to exercise decision-making power over economic resources, a majority have used the money to send their children to better schools in urban centers. In other households, providers such as Yanjor, bought additional pack ponies to augment his meager income from weaving. Tourism activities and local participation: At present there are 98 Homestay operators, seven cafes (which benefit 70 households), 60 nature guides have been trained, and there are 30 additional families running related enterprises (solar-powered baths, pack ponies, etc). Homestay incomes have enable villagers to protect their livestock with funds invested in a community-run livestock insurance scheme and building predator-proof pens. Participation in the Homestays has strengthened the sense of pride local people have their culture, lifestyles, surroundings plus provided opportunities to interact with people from other countries.

2.3 Issues and Challenges of Homestay programmes

Conversely, (Anonymous, 2006), Ban Mae Kam Pong Homestay seemed to be more commercialized and changed due the concept of homestay promoted by the government. Some villagers have experienced a change in their way of life affected by the emergence of tourism and homestay in the village. The carrying capacity of the village still needs to be carefully considered in order to reduce the negative consequences and to reach the purpose of sustainable community development. Competition from other organizations/agencies: See the potential, other organizations such as SECMOL and Markha Association have entered the Homestay market (Wanna & Kevin, 2012). However, they adopt the underlying features and ideas but without committing to and following through with CBT principles, thus competing directly with Himalayan Homestay initiative by offering lower prices. Such mimicking of and capture of visitors is causing disharmony within the villages. Spiti & Zanskar: Remoteness of these two regions, with poor or virtually non existent (and certainly unreliable communication systems), makes CBT work challenging. Host communities lack communication skills that are important given that most of visitors are foreigners.

3. Materials and Methods

This study aims to explore the homestay programme of Sri Lanka with an eye to understand the issues, challenges and potentials with reference to both guests' as well as hosts' point of view. Obviously the research is socio-economically and culturally situated and requires a rich narrative description which would support both qualitative and quantitative methods. For these reasons both qualitative and quantitative methods have been adopted and the first analytical part was based on quantitative approach. Both primary and secondary data were utilized to meet research objectives. A qualitative approach, in the form of in-depth interviews, was adopted to address the research objectives related to socio-cultural issues in relation to host point of

view. Since the concept homestay results many effects the true feelings of operators need to be tapped. Such an approach was chosen as it offers the researcher adaptability in data collection, whereby ideas can be followed up on, responses can be further probed and motives and feelings can be further explored. As the interviews are conducted by the researcher with respondents at various locations at different times, standard semi-structured questionnaires were used to ensure coverage of the research objectives; they will act only as an interviewing guide and will not directly administer to the respondents. The population for this study being the total number of homestay guests and operators of a given time it was practically difficult to figure out exact number. Hence the sample was drawn using statistical standards suits such situations. The second part consists of homestay operators and for that purpose the researcher will conduct in depth interviews by using an interview protocol until the received information supports the interview protocol without repetition. Narrative discussions and critical evaluations in the form of descriptive analysis has been applied to present qualitative data where as tables, graphs and statistic supported calculations ad discussions were employed to present analyzed data whenever applicable. Moreover a detailed report on the methodological approach for this study is presented in the chapter three of this report.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Perceptions of Homestay by the Host Families

The fourth objective of this study is to explore the homestay programme from the perspective of its real operators. The methodology suggested to explore these socio-economic phenomena was the in-depth interviews and qualitative narrations based on the interview transcriptions. The following interpretations were drawn from the transcriptions produced with the interview results to materialize the aforementioned objective in order to elucidate the answers to set research question.

4.2 Motivation and Involvement of Homestay Operators

It was interesting to find that variety of factors act as motives for people to enter and run homestay business. Even though a business mainly focuses monetary and material objectives, homestay as a business has motivated operators by an assortment of aspects. Among them Source of income, Business prospect, Persuasion and experience, Appeal of the area, Personal appeal and Availability of resources were key points to understand the operator motivation factors for homestay.

4.3 Motivation and Involvement by Guests Toward Homestay

The motivation and involvement of guests in the homestay programme was observed in the operators' point of view. The major motives of guests to patronize for homestay programme were economic motives, desires, attractiveness of homestay, relaxation and freedom and company and association were major points.

4.4 Benefits of Homestay Programme to the Operator and to the Community

Homestay being an activity which has broad socio economic impacts, the benefits it offer also wide for all the stakeholders. However, the economic benefits of the homestay programme were discussed under the factors of motives and grounds for involvement. The following section focuses only on non-monetary benefits of homestay programme for operators as well as for the community.

Benefits to the Operator

Benefits to the operators from homestay programme were identified in key major areas such as, educational and social benefits. Educational benefits were the ones with some mental satisfaction or conditions with their mind set and new knowledge, experience or exposure. The social benefits were classified which emerge as a result of any social or human relations in between host, guest or community interrelationships.

Benefits to the Community

Homestay operators feel that the community also experiences a number of benefits due to the homestay business which were classified under material, social and which are discussed at length in the following section of this report.

4.5 Issues and Problems Encountered due to Homestay

The study also examined the issues and challenges encountered by homestay operators due to this form of accommodation rural areas and found a number of such issues. The weaknesses of the existing product, socio-cultural issues, and external disturbances, unethical behavior of guests, guest complaints and poor capability of operators were of significant issues due to homestay.

4.6 Weaknesses of Existing Product

Many operators viewed that the income they generate is just enough for their survival and to invest on product maintenance and improvement is difficult with the small income they made from homestay business. As such the product itself had issues in quality. E.g." ...not enough facilities....rooms sometimes insufficient... no money to develop too.." (Respondent 26, Personal Communication, April 23 2013). The other important issue homestay operators face is insufficient rooms particularly during the season. No space during season, hence I had to say no to many. E.g ." (Respondent 18, Personal Communication, December 20 2012). Cleanliness of the area and improper garbage disposal creates issues for operators and sometimes these were aggravated due to homestay business. In certain cases the collection and disposal is not acceptable and every where in the town and streets the garbage was dumped.

4.7 Socio-Cultural Issues Faced by Homestay Operators

Society and culture related issues faced by homestay operators were of immense connotation in this form of business. Particularly the barrier to communicate in an international language was a huge hurdle for many to run their businesses. Some of them they were managing English yet when it comes to other languages they found it difficult to communicate with e.g ..." language has been a major problem.." (Respondent 8, Personal Communication, April 25 2013). . Another socio-cultural implication was the

tendency of children getting into tourists customs or cultural and social alteration in the younger generation. This could be viewed as a very serious type of an issue which faced by homestay operators. E.g “ ... we also see that with our small kinds the culture we are experiencing from guest is not healthy for our kids...” (Respondent 8, Personal Communication, April 25 2013).

4.8 Poor Capability of Operators

Frequently guests request arranging rooms and homestays in other parts of the country for which the operators have to say no since they have no access to such facility. Hence it has been a constant issue the absence of a common mechanism or network among homestay Operators Island wide. The other significant issue under poor capability of operators is that their poor accessibility to markets. Here the marketing and promotion has to be done in other parts of the world. For small entrepreneurs it has been extremely difficult to come across this hurdle by effectively communicating their product to the potential customers. E.g “...We are unable to invest for hotels...yet need to give a good stay to guest..for that we need to have a good place...” (Respondent 7 Personal Communication, April 6 2013).

4.9 Suggestions to Mitigate Issues and Problems in Homestay Programme

In order to further explore the aforementioned issues the research probe into the views of homestay operators to find out applicable suggestions to mitigate such issues. The suggestions proposed by homestay operators are classify here in the axial coding stage to explain and understand them better. Accordingly, host guest understanding and awareness of homestay, improvement of facilities, Marketing and promotion, Enhancing operator capacity and better organization for the sector would be discussed as suggestions to mitigate above issues.

4.10 Host/Guest Understanding and Awareness of Homestay

The operators viewed that some of the issues need to mitigate by better understanding by both guests as well as operators. In this case the community and society has to be aware that the homestay tourists are too an important component of the system. Moreover, adjusting according to the situation particularly in the cases of some clashes between guests and hosts have to be solves by adjusting from both ends to come to a conclusion.

4.11 Improved Facilities

Lack of rooms and saying no to many homestay request was a key issue which in turn homestay operators proposed to expand the facilities. Moreover the quality and status of bathrooms could be improved by expanding the facilities. E.g ..” to expand and improve our houses with better facilities..” (Respondent 26 Personal Communication, April 23 2013). Better planning for homestay programme was another suggestion to mitigate many issues faced by homestay operators. Marketing to foreigners was another burning issue for many small scale homestay ventures. An ideal solution to this was the central web site hosted by the

government tourism body and may be a contribution charge collected from advertisers. E.g ...” a proper management programme should be introduced... homestay operators collective thinking...’ (Respondent 13 Personal Communication, December, 15 2012).The events and rates could be easily known for anyone and by this many problems could be avoided, particularly misunderstandings.

4.12 Stakeholder Roles and Responsibilities in Homestay Programme

The final section of the study shade light to elucidate the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in the homestay programme and identified that operators, guests, community and government (local and Central) are key stakeholders of the homestay programme. Hence, the different roles particularly, as expected by homestay operators are discussed with respect to the above four stakeholders.

4.13 Operators’ Role in the Homestay Programme

Homestay is not like any other tourism product and the authentic interaction of the host and the guest being the pivot of the entire experience, the host or in other words the operators of the business have an inestimable role to be played. As per the views of most of the homestay operators a good balance between their private family life and homestay business would pave the way to sustainable homestay programme while securing their socio-cultural values. Hence they need to reach well balanced homestay operations which need to come as a result of a deep understanding of consequences of the business. The other important factor is to follow and adopt a set of business ethics. That would again pave the way to a sustainable homestay business in turn.

4.14 Government’s Role in the Homestay Programme

Government being the central body above all stakeholders could play the facilitators role while formulating applicable rules, regulations needed to run an effective homestay business. Predominantly, government has to support and guide through its tourism bureau to set the applicable homestay product to be offered for guests. The required knowledge for marketing and product designing should be decided by diverse approaches of research. Among the key role the central promotional agent for the homestay programme and the assistance to site level promotions are predominant.

4.15 Community’s Role in the Homestay Programme

Community, the stakeholder who is much strong and being able to do a much bigger impact over the homestay programme is expected to play a tremendous role in the homestay programme to offer a better product to visitors. Particularly, community itself is a part and partial of homestay product. In terms of a host community, it has to play a crucial role for a better homestay experience to guests who visit them and their area. Correspondingly, the following comment explains the significance of tourists to the area. Community also need to understand the importance of tourist arrivals to the area, the significance of their

economic contribution by way of paying different charges during stay and so on. E.g “.. there should be activities for them ... they just don't come to see and go...we have events and we need to offer such events to tourists...” (Respondent 27, Personal Communication, April, 8 2012).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Objective: To explore the perception on homestay of the host families.

The in-depth interviews with homestay operators highlighted that most of the operators are small scale entrepreneurs who are running the business with few rooms at home. Earning an income for living, interest as well as investment option were key motivators for them to enter into this business. Inexpensive accommodation, freedom, away from home, experience local food and culture were key factors for tourists to come for homestay. Community benefits out of homestay were employment, business opportunities and relationships with tourists. The key issues of homestay operators' were lack of funds to improve facilities, cultural conflicts, and conflicts with the community. Different stakeholders' roles are different to make homestay programme a success.

5.2 Objective: To elucidate the possibilities of improvement of Sri Lankan homestay product in order to meet the demands of present and future visitors.

Central marketing, a directory for homestay units, set of rules and regulations to govern HS, financial assistance, better awareness and education for community and operators, strict rules and regulations to control abuse of guests are some improvements which could improve the quality and appeal of homestay tourism product of Sri Lanka. Although basic guidelines are in place for homestay programme development, access, bathrooms, hygiene and cleanliness, observations made of the homestay programme revealed that there is a lack of monitoring on whether the operators abide to it. This may result in the poor quality of experience given to the tourists. While satisfying tourists' interests and demands may be a top priority, it is also imperative to think about the residents' of the villages where the homestay programme located in. Efforts must be put in place to conserve the areas resources and prevent the saturation of destinations so as not to abuse the product and residents correspondingly. In sustainable marketing the focus should not merely be the tourists but a balance between the tourists' needs with the needs of the community. Homestay accommodation increases the visitors' awareness of sustainability. Proper participation of home stay operators also ensure in this regard. Homestay is potential business operation for the local entrepreneurs. This accommodation will ensure employment opportunities and economic advancement for the local people. There are some initiatives such as proper planning and marketing, research activities, increase customer service and sufficient allocation can ensure socio-economic advancement from homestay accommodation.

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