

Food Service Quality Comparison among North Indian Railway Catering Units: A study of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh

*Dr Naveen Chahal

Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (India)

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*Corresponding Author

Email: chahal.naveen[at]rediffmail.com

ABSTRACT

Service quality has become critical and unavoidable attribute for the success of any business be it tangible or intangible. The purpose of the present research is to evaluate the service quality provided by IRCTC franchised outlets at Indian Railway Stations under Northern Railway. The data were collected from 250 diners from 10 food plazas through modified questionnaire based on five dimensions and 29 attribute of DINESERV model. The data was analyzed with the help of SPSS 20.0. Service quality of each catering units was compared with the help of Service quality GAP analysis. The findings of this study would help IRCTC and management of railway catering units to identify the main reasons for the difference in service quality level among different catering units and to formulate suitable catering policies for better customer's oriented services.

1. Introduction

"A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favor by serving him. He is doing us a favor by giving us an opportunity to do so"

--Kenneth B. Elliott

In today's competitive world of globalization, service quality is an essential and major factor for taking a competitive advantage over other competitors (Palmer, 2008). From the last decade diners' expectations are evolving continuously due to health awareness, better education, increasing culinary awareness and changing cultural and social environment. Which makes the delivery of high level service quality, a hard task to be performed specially in service industry because of its intangible characteristics (Gummesson, 1998). The improved service quality also helps in generating measurable benefits like increasing revenue and cost savings, enhancing market share by improving corporate image and it also influence customers' behavioral pattern hence increases their return intention as well as encourages word to mouth publicity which in return affects the profitability and image (Qin & Prybutok, 2008; Kara et al., 1997; Cronin and Taylor, 1994).

Nowadays, food outlets are striving for higher and higher level of service quality in order to maintain their position in the market and maintain loyal customers and attracts new ones. Even the multinational companies like McDonald's, Dominos, KFC and Pizza Hut are competing hard to provide better and unique services and products to lure their customers. Therefore, timely assessment of level of service quality is important in order to match the continuously evolving needs of diners as well as to persuade them to revisit (Gilbert & Veloutsou, 2006). From the last decade, the railway passengers' demands had also increased regarding the level of services provided by Indian

Railway. Passengers starts comparing and complaining regarding the food service quality provided inside trains and on railway platforms. To fulfill these demands and enhancing the level of service quality, a new subsidiary IRCTC (Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation) was introduced in 1999 to address the tourism and hospitality related.

IRCTC was introduced on 27 Sept. 1999 with an objective to "Enhance customer services and facilitation in railway catering, hospitality, travel and tourism with best industry practices". Today it has become the pioneer in managing tourism and hospitality related services. It deals in four major segments of Indian Railway i.e. Internet Ticketing, Travel and Tourism, Catering and Hospitality services and packaged drinking water by the name of Rail Neer. IRCTC catering business deals in food plazas, janahars, e-catering etc. In 2014-15, IRCTC catering business provides 23% (332.5 cr) of the total revenues (departmental catering counts 18% and License catering 5%).

IRCTC has given franchisee to more than 200 food plazas on railway platforms. Currently it is handling on board catering of 59 trains and departmental catering of 33 trains. In 2015-2016, it managed 13 Janahars, 128 stalls and 05 Refreshment rooms under static catering. It also has 4 base kitchens in New Delhi, Noida, Patna and Howrah. Apart from this, it also managed E-Catering, Executive Lounges, E-bed rolls, special trains catering etc. It is looking after 2000 retiring rooms at 554 stations. Therefore, we can say that IRCTC handles crucial business of Indian Railway i.e. catering and hospitality.

Service quality and customers' satisfaction are considered as two faces of a single coin. Service quality is the most significant element in determining customers' satisfaction and vice versa. Be it IRCTC food plazas or any other catering or non-catering organization, service quality is very important. IRCTC hired five third party professional agencies for evaluating the level of service quality by taking customers feedback. In 2015-16 survey conducted on 179 catering units of food plazas

found that 77% of the customers were satisfied with the level of services provided at those food plazas.

2. Review of Literature

Parasuraman et al, (1985) explained service quality as the comparison between customers' expectation (what he wants to get) and actual experience (what he gets). This comparison can also be used for measuring service quality which is the gap between customers' expectations and perception. Larger the gap, lower the value of service quality and vice versa. In 1993, Zeithaml et al. stated that success or failure of an organization is largely decided by level of customers' satisfaction based on their real experience with that organization. Gronoos (1984) also supported the above description of service quality as comparison between expectation and experience through real service encountered. Service quality can be improved through better services, better customers understanding, enhancing functional process, identifying and resolving problems quickly which will improve economic condition, competitiveness and induce high reliability (Dehghan, 2006). Lewis & Booms (1983) stated that survival of hospitality organization largely depends on delivery of good quality services. Service quality can be defined as how well customer's needs or demands are met with their expectations.

Prasad & Shekhar (2011) introduced RAILQUAL, a comprehensive measurement scale based on SERVQUAL model to assess the quality of services provided by railway. The gap analysis reveals that South Central Railway (SCR) needs to frame strict management policies such as training programs for employees so that they become more responsive to passengers' needs and wants. Bureaucracy was also another hurdle for SCR to overcome. The study suggested that like Airlines services, the human touch is missing in railway passengers' services. Gite and Kumar (2014) also concluded that monopoly of IRCTC in railway catering is the major reason

behind lower quality food services. There is a greater need of improvement food quality as well as customers' services.

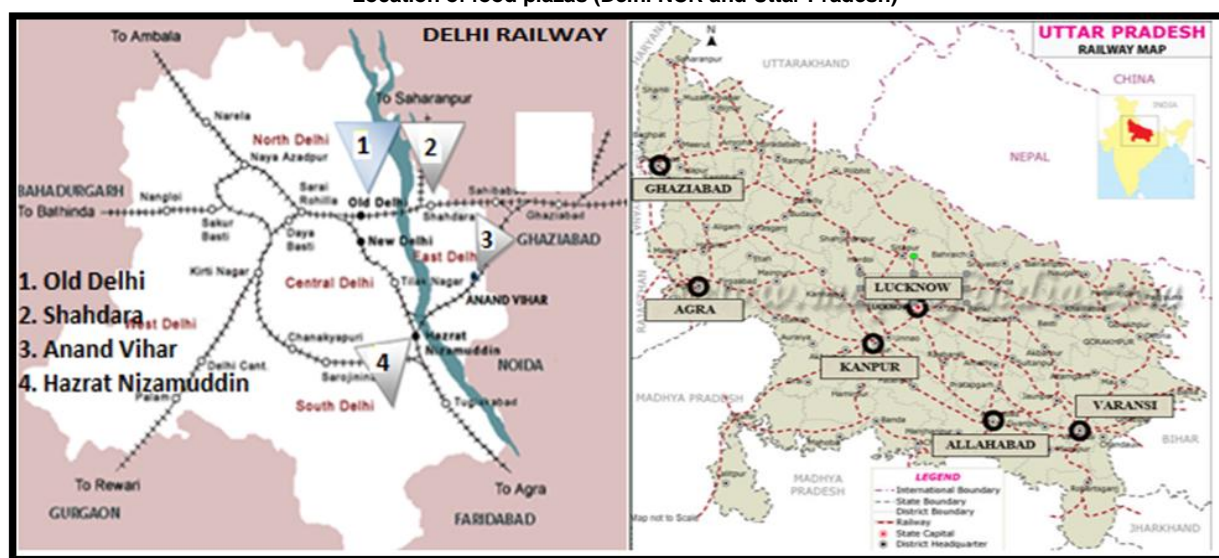
Surjeet and Naveen (2017) measured the food service quality provided by IRCTC in Delhi (NCR) region through service quality gap analysis. The results showed overall negative gap as the overall mean diners' expectation was higher as compared to overall mean of perception or experience. Though the research reveals some positive gap in Error free billing, responding staff and comfortable dining experiences but most of elements falls shorts of diners' expectations. Lam & Zhang (1999) view service quality as one of the biggest challenge for hospitality and also identified it as major factor for customers' satisfaction and retention.

IRCTC is also working continuously to provide high level of service quality. 131 food plazas franchised by IRCTC got ISO 22000:2005 certificate which is a mark of quality. It also take regular feedback, conducts food audits, tests food samples, surprise inspection and SOPs(Standard Operating Procedure)are followed to maintain service quality. It also organized food safety quality summit. But still food service quality remains the primary concern. It is one of the major challenge before IRCTC and Indian railway is to provide expected level of services to every passenger (Balkrishnan, 2012). Lam & Zhang (1999) also view it as one of the biggest challenge for all service organizations.

3. Research Methodology

The data was collected from 10 food plazas franchised by IRCTC located at different Railway stations in Delhi (NCR) and Uttar Pradesh. From each food plaza 25 respondents were contacted and in all 250 questionnaires were collected. The present study used stratified convenience sampling and data were analyzed with the help of SPSS 16.0. The locations of IRCTC food plazas are shown with the help of figure 1.

Figure 1
Location of food plazas (Delhi NCR and Uttar Pradesh)



A structured questionnaire was prepared with the help of DINESERV model (Stevens et al, 1995). In all, 29 elements were adopted and categorized into 5 dimensions (tangibility,

reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy). The level of expectation and experience was assessed using five point

likert scale, with anchors “Strongly Agree” as 5 and “Strongly Disagree” as 1.

The comparative analysis among different IRCTC food plazas was done with the help of service quality gap analysis which is the result of the differences of mean values of diners’ experience and expectation. In inferential analysis one way ANNOVA was also used to access the difference in service quality among different IRCTC food plazas.

4. Result and Analysis

Respondents’ Profile

The demographic analysis showed that 78% of the respondents’ age was below 40 years with majority of male respondents (70%) as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1
Profile of the respondents

Item	Percentage	Item	Percentage
Age		Gender	
15-25 years	34.8	Male	70
26-40 years	43.2	Female	30
41 and above	22.0		
Profession		Education	
Serviceman	35.2	Senior Secondary	12.8
Businessman	17.2	Graduation	49.6
Student	32.0	Post Graduation	30.0
Others	15.6	Above PG	7.6
Nature of Residence		Income	
Metropolitan	23.2	Upto 2 Lakh	44.0
Urban	36.8	2-5 Lakh	30.8
Semi-Urban	25.6	Above 5 Lakh	25.2
Rural	14.4		

In term of education, 87.2% of the respondents were above senior secondary which indicates that most of the respondents were well educated to understand the questionnaire and provide feedback. Majority of them were serviceman (35.2%), most of them were from Urban or Metropolitan location (60%) due to the location of food plazas. The majority of respondent showed low income i.e. below 2 lakh (40.7%) was due to large share of Students (32%) in profession.

Objective 1: Food service Quality Provided by IRCTC Food Outlets in Delhi and UP

For the above mention objective, descriptive analysis was conducted based on standard deviation and mean value. The mean values were used to measure the service quality gap by taking the difference of mean values of diners’ expectations and perceptions. The detailed analysis is given in the table 2.

Table 2
Food service Quality Provided by IRCTC Food Outlets in Delhi and UP

Attributes of IRCTC Food Outlets	Expectation		Perception		Gap
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
V1 Visually attractiveness	3.96	.705	3.74	.833	-0.22
V2 Staff grooming & their hygiene	3.76	.956	3.63	1.02	-0.13
V3 Good décor	3.89	.845	3.80	.920	-0.09
V4 Menu readability	3.93	.843	3.83	.983	-0.1
V5 Visually attractive menu	3.91	.880	3.82	.952	-0.09
V6 Spacious dining zone	4.04	.827	3.94	.951	-0.1
V7 Rest rooms cleanliness	3.83	.855	3.71	1.00	-0.12
V8 Clean sitting area	3.77	.954	3.59	1.05	-0.18
V9 Comfortable seats	3.82	.905	3.63	1.01	-0.19
V10 Phone/laptop charging facility	3.82	1.01	3.70	1.88	-0.12
V11 Timely Food service	3.88	.899	3.82	.996	-0.06
V12 Supervision of food service	3.79	.884	3.68	.981	-0.11
V13 Trustworthy service staff	3.63	.961	3.50	1.09	-0.13
V14 Food served as ordered	3.98	.861	3.88	.955	-0.1
V15 Error free billing	3.96	.871	4.01	.878	0.05

V16 Excellent coordination during service time	3.78	.921	3.72	.970	-0.06
V17 Promptness of service staff	3.72	.900	3.56	1.01	-0.16
V18 Address to special food requests	3.83	.810	3.70	.939	-0.13
V19 Responding Staff	3.80	.864	3.80	.940	0
V20 Feel of Comfortable and confident dining	3.86	.816	3.77	.927	-0.09
V21 Willing to give information about menu	3.67	.953	3.45	1.08	-0.22
V22 Make you feel personally safe	3.85	.848	3.70	.938	-0.15
V23 Well trained, competent, and experienced staff	3.81	.837	3.66	.930	-0.15
V24 Support to other members to work as team	3.75	.811	3.66	.939	-0.09
V25 Staff always rely on policies rather individual need/demand	3.79	.912	3.59	1.00	-0.2
V26 Make you feel special during dining	3.72	.877	3.60	.931	-0.12
V27 Anticipates individual needs and wants	3.73	.877	3.62	.915	-0.11
V28 Sympathetic and reassuring staff if something went wrong	3.67	.919	3.53	.986	-0.14
V29 Staff have the customers' best interests at heart	3.71	.870	3.59	1.05	-0.12
Overall mean	3.81		3.70		-0.11

The above table clearly indicates that mean expectations of diners ranged from 3.67 to 4.04. The highest expectations were for "Spacious dining zone (4.04)", "Food ordered as served (3.98)" and "Trustworthy service staff (3.63)", "Willing to give information about menu (3.67)" and "Sympathetic and reassuring staff if something went wrong (3.67)" were lowest expectations. The overall mean for IRCTC service quality expectations was 3.81. The mean score of respondents' perceptions ranged from 3.45 to 4.01. From the table 2, it is clear that "Error free billing (4.01)" was highly perceived and "Trustworthy service staff (3.50)" & "Willing to give information about menu (3.45)" were least perceived variables. The overall mean score of perception of service quality is 3.70.

Thus, from the above analysis, we can conclude that customers' expectations are high as compared to perceptions of food service quality in IRCTC food plazas of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. The overall mean of gap analysis also shows negative value (-0.098) which indicated lower level of service quality. The gap analysis also showed that there are only two variable

(Error free billing (0.05) and Responding Staff, 0.137) which shows positive values indicating better service provided in these areas. But still there are 27 variables showing negative gap which indicates IRCTC needs to put great efforts to improve the level of service quality.

Objective 2: Food and Beverage Service Quality Comparison among IRCTC food plazas in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh

From the table 3, it can be stated that only three restaurants shows positive gap (Allahabad, Lucknow, Kanpur) or matches the overall diners' expectations. Out of these three, food plaza at Lucknow (0.204) station shows the maximum positive Service Quality GAP showing highest level of service quality among IRCTC food plazas in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. Lucknow is followed by Allahabad (0.041) and Kanpur (0.010). The food plaza at Delhi Shahdara station showed zero gap resting in no difference in customers' expectations and perception. The comparative analysis of all 10 food plazas based on service quality gap is shown below.

Table 3
Food and Beverage Service Quality Comparison among IRCTC food plazas in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh

State/UT	Restaurant Location	Expectation (Overall Mean)	Perception (Overall Mean)	Service Quality GAP
Delhi	Hazrat Nizamuddin	3.45	3.38	-0.073
	Old Delhi	3.54	3.40	-0.144
	Delhi Shahdara	3.57	3.57	-0.001
	Anand Vihar	3.67	3.50	-0.177
Uttar Pradesh	Allahabad	3.70	3.75	0.041
	Lucknow	3.69	3.89	0.204
	Varanasi	3.98	3.85	-0.128
	Ghaziabad	3.95	3.80	-0.152
	Kanpur	3.73	3.74	0.01
	Agra	3.79	3.70	-0.088

The remaining six food plazas shows overall negative service quality as diners' perception fall below the customers' expectations. The maximum overall negative GAP is shown by Anand Vihar (-0.177) resulting in lowest level of service quality provided at this food plaza.

Hence from the above comparative analysis we can conclude that food plaza at Lucknow station provides best service quality followed food plazas at Allahabad, Kanpur and Delhi Shahdara stations. The remaining six restaurants have

lower service quality level with AnadVihar at lowest based on diners' expectation and experiences.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

Service quality is a vital component of success for any business. It becomes more important in food service sector as it involved both tangible and intangible products. Most of the Indian Railway catering business is handled by IRCTC which manages nearly 200 food plazas across the country. The present research focused on service quality provided by these food plazas in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Current study also compare the service quality among all these food plazas. The analysis shows that almost all variables (Except V15 and V19) falls short of customers' expectations resulting into overall negative service quality gap which results into lower level of service quality (Table 2). The comparative analysis showed that four of the food plazas (Lucknow, Allahabad, Kanpur, Delhi Shahdara) performs good as per customers' expectation but the rest (Six) falls short (Table 3).

Based on results, we can suggest that a central training program must be framed for employees working in different catering to enhance diners' experience. It must be ensured by food plazas' managers that during briefing session, service staff get aware about menu items, today's special and major ingredients. Also while entering in a food outlets, first impression is made with its architecture and interior design, so it would be better to take some professional help while designing. Providing charging points and Wi-Fi would positively influence the young generation as most of the diners visiting these outlets are young (table 1).Introducing a competitive index among IRCTC food plazas would also help in identifying performing and non performing outlets.

The present research would enable the authorities to enhance their understanding regarding diners' expectations and formulating a suitable policy for the same. These findings could also be proved useful for similar food outlets.

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