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PASSENGER AMENITIES OF INDIAN RAILWAYS: A LUXURY OR NECESSITY

Dr. KATHAKALI BANDOPADHYAY
HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
SUBARNAREKHA MAHAVIDYALAYA
JHARGRAM

HENA AFROZ
POST GRADUATE STUDENT
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
ASUTOSH COLLEGE
KOLKATA

ABSTRACT

Passenger Amenities is the most refined index-cum-marker of any stakeholder within the transport sector of which Indian Railways is no exception. For a mixed economy like India, emphasis on Passenger Amenities has been regarded as luxury by a certain section, where the primary objective of commutation is not satisfactorily fulfilled. A Public Sector Undertakings like Indian Railways is expected to have benchmark of amenities like other modes of transport. However, finding an answer to the question-whether it is a necessity or luxury is the crux of the study. A study to find the economic reality have been endeavoured to decode passenger amenities at railway stations connecting a metropolis like Kolkata with other towns and cities. Furthermore, the established models of RAILQUAL have been applied to this study to explore the binary- luxury or necessity.

KEYWORDS

RAILQUAL, Kolkata, Indian Railways, passengers' amenities.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian Railways is the largest Public Sector Undertaking responsible for discharging its function as the national carrier for the country. The oldest railway facilities in India dates back to mid-1800s. During Post-Independence, India has maintained the monopoly on railways services. Indian Railways is plagued with notorious delays in schedules, frequent accidents and lack of infrastructural developments. In fact, the entire Transport Sector in India lags behind in terms of modern 21st century across the globe. Air India, the national airway carrier has been left impoverished and attempts to disinvest it by the Government of India depicts the sorry plight. Road Transport which has multiple authorities faces similar issues.

Passenger Amenities has emerged as the vital cog in the wheel in the Transport Sector since the second half of the previous century and India has been slow to catch up with it. There has been very little discourse or concern until recently. However, the tides have turned as Indian Railways have acknowledged this gap. A number of researches from the academia also have been ventured in the last twenty-five years.

Having said that, it becomes imperative to explain the interrogative nature of title: There is a constant dilemma of indulging in such a study for a Socialist and Developing Nation like India and finding a conclusion.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the need or requirement of Passenger Amenities for railways like developing country like India.
2. To identify the variables or/and factors concerning Passenger Amenities at Terminal Intercity Railway Stations connecting a metropolis like Kolkata in Eastern India.

METHODOLOGY

In a first, attempt was made to represent the official data of Indian Railways and at large concerning Passenger Amenities. Then the economic aspects have been weighed and explored. Subsequently, preferences of commuters and emergence of any trend of shift/pattern, if any have been traced. The established model of SERVQUAL through a Pilot Survey have been undertaken and elaborated with its finding and limitations. A remodelled version of it with variables & factors- as identified by the respondents of the Pilot Survey- have suggested and taken forward with. Lastly, an overview of Final Survey is tabulated and figured.

ANALYSIS**RAILWAYS AND PASSENGER AMENITIES OVER THE WORLD**

Even though Railway services in India was one of the earliest to begin with in comparison to other European nations, over the years India lost the impetus of expanding its coverage or improving the services. The reasons for it are both political and financial. Until the Indian Railways was re-organised to its current structure under British control, it had little scope of expansion. After Independence, India was left financially impoverished and the thrust was on Agriculture. By the time, India had shift focus to the development of infrastructure, the world had moved ahead.

While most Developed nations in terms of extensive network coverage and the standard of the service rendered had progressed in light years, India was left to battle the colonial hangover.

TABLE 1: BASIC FACTS OF RAILWAY NETWORKS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

Countries	Year of establishment	Network Length in km	Status	Yearly Ridership
China	1950	127000	Nationalised	2.35 b (2017)
Great Britain	1825	17732	Both	1.71 b (2016)
Germany	1855	43468	Both	2.01 b (2016)
India	1845	67368	Nationalised	9.11 b (2017)
Japan	1872	27268	Private	7.58 b (2014)
U.S.A	1827	25722	Private	490 m (2017)

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IS.RRS.TOTL.KM>

IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE QUALITY AND PASSENGERS' AMENITIES

Rathmell (1966) distinguished goods from services stating “Goods are produced; services are performed” and a very late interpretation of Lovelock (2007) notes services to be “processes (economic activities) that provide time, place, form, problem-solving or experiential value to the recipient.” In economics, service is a transaction where no physical goods are transferred between the buyer and the seller. Service here means a system supplying or fulfilling public need. The primary objective of IR is to serve commutation, connectivity to two different places. While service quality is understood to be how well a service is rendered. Assessment of service quality is done to improve service, identify problems and ensure customer satisfaction. As assessment of service quality in IR should comprise of how well the service of commuting is being done and its auxiliary services of providing modern amenities.

IR changed its approach towards the service quality after Liberalisation of Indian Economy. Therefore, in this ever waging tariff war from all other stakeholders of air and road transport, passenger amenities are the vital cog in the wheel for not only IR but all modes of transport providers.

Service management and subsequent marketing gets into the picture. Unless proper marketing is done, IR would be lagging behind. Air and Road transport thrives upon intelligent service management and marketing. Dynamic pricing, peak fare, festive season offers, early booking offers channel the air and road transport providers to edge past IR. IR being a public sector organisation, therefore is at the brink of a vacuum created. This can only be fulfilled by improve service quality viz. a viz. passenger amenities.

TABLE 2: GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES FOR PASSENGER AMENITIES AT RAILWAY STATIONS

SL. NO.	AMENITIES	A1	A	B	C	D	E	F
1.	Booking windows	15	10	6	4	4	2	1
2.	Drinking Water (taps/PF)	20	20	20	6	8	2	
3.	Waiting hall area (sq. metre)	250	125	75	50	30	15	10
4.	Seating arrangement (seats/PF)	150	125	100	75	50	10	-
5.	Platform Shelter	500	400	200	200	50	50	Shady trees
6.	Urinal	12	10	6	4	4	1	-
7.	Latrines	12	10	6	4	4	1	-
8.	FOB	1 with cover	1 with cover	1	1	-	-	-
9.	Water coolers	2 per PF	2 per PF	2 per PF	2 on main platform	1 on main PF		
10	Fans	For covered platforms having width 6-9 m one row of fan in the centre. For covered platforms more than 9 m width fans should be in rows						
11.	Lights	Solar energy based lighting to be introduced in Non-Electric Traction areas.						

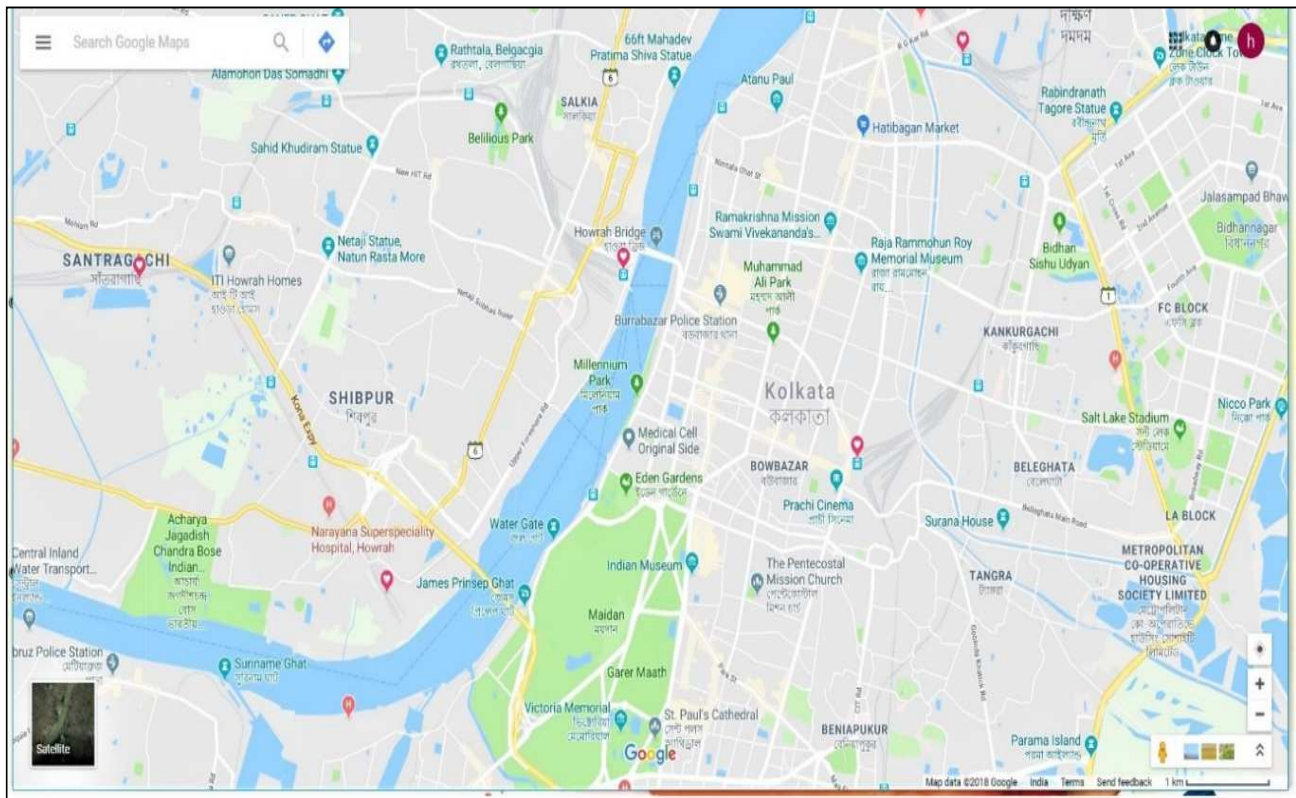
Source: Comprehensive instructions for provision of Passenger Amenities, 2012

TRENDS OF VIABILITY & PREFERENCES

To understand that whether in the Indian context it’s a necessity or luxury a case study was required. However, it would have been futile to cherry pick an organisational unit of Indian Railway- a Zone, a Division or even a Railway station. A Zone or Division would have been macroscopic while a single station would have been too microscopic as well as biased.

Rather from a point of view of commuters, choosing a city or a metro which provides a source of livelihood for millions day in and day out was a more logical one. Kolkata (22° 34'N, 88° 22' E), once a capital of British India and now capital of the State of West Bengal, is the largest city in the Eastern India.

FIG. 1: INTERCITY RAILWAY STATIONS CONNECTING KOLKATA



- * 1. Howrah Junction (22°34'54"N 88°20'32"E)
- 2. Sealdah Railway Station (22°34'03"N 88°22'15"E)
- 3. Kolkata Railway Station (22°36'6"N 88° 22'59"E)
- 4. Shalimar Railway Station (22°33'23"N 88°18'53"E)
- 5. Santragachi Junction (22°35'02"N 88°17'03"E)

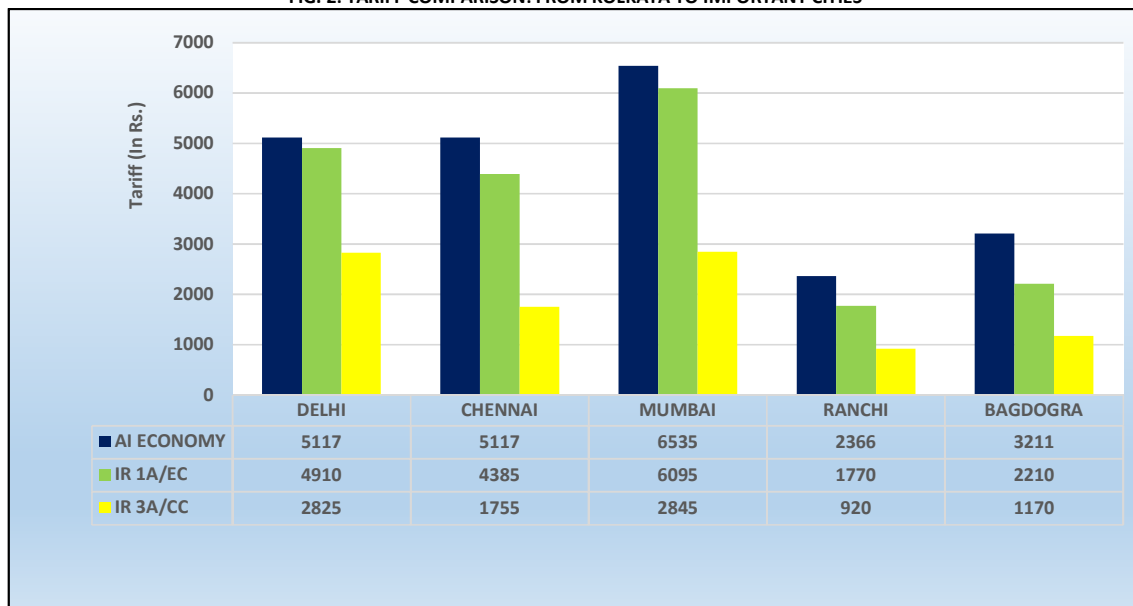
Source: <https://www.google.co.in/maps/@22.5626228,88.3586088,14z?hl=en> Last accessed on May 17, 2018

The study area- Kolkata is connected by all modes of transport there is stiff competition from all corners. Therefore, it finally boils down to the prices- how reasonable or how much is it worth to avail the primary objective, i.e. travelling and commuting. No stakeholder can ignore what the other is offering as there would be a swing of passengers preferring one over the other. So despite factors like reliability and connectivity, the price war over tariff is a vital element in the sector of Transport. Having said that, it is also pertinent to mention here that few are willing to pay more, if the service quality is up to the mark.

As highlighted in Figure 2 one can safely conclude that the tariff for availing 3rd Class AC of IR, is one notch higher than the Economy Class fares of Air India. Therefore, traditional railway passengers tend to shift from Indian Railway (3AC) to Air India (Economy Class). If IR has to retain such passengers, they must lower the tariff. More importantly if a prospective passenger does not mind shelling few extra, services should be stressed upon and improved. The same goes for inter-town links through roads. As gathered from Table 3, the AC Volvo prices are much lower and per head cost of App-based Cabs are at par with the EC fare of IR. Hence, IR is under threat from both accounts and must find a fine balance in between the road and airway with regard to fare prices and service quality.

Here lies the significance and answer to the dilemma put across at the very inception of this study. India Railways is indeed at a crossroad where it has to do the fine balancing act of adhering to the international standards of the transport sector & cost-effective economic edge over other stakeholders of the sector and the politico-constitutional obligation to remain socialistic preferring on the basic facilities of transportation. Passenger Amenities thus is a necessity but with asterisks. It must identify the immediate and mid-term assessment amenities are concerned.

FIG. 2: TARIFF COMPARISON: FROM KOLKATA TO IMPORTANT CITIES



Source: <https://www.irctc.co.in/nget/train-search> & <https://book.airindia.in/itd/itd/Air/>

TABLE 3: TARIFF COMPARISON: FROM KOLKATA TO IMPORTANT CITIES WITHIN WEST BENGAL

Destination Towns	West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC)		Indian Railway		App based cabs (Uber Intercity)
	AC/Volvo Tariff (in Rs.)	Non AC Tariff (in Rs.)	EC Tariff (in Rs.)	CC Tariff (in Rs.)	Premium (4 seater) Tariff (in Rs.)
Asansol	370	150	1035	525	4710
Malda	650	260	1475	765	N.A
Digha	300	125	1045	555	3768

Source <https://www.uber.com/en-IN/cities/kolkata/> & <http://transport.wb.gov.in/>

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Pilot Survey was conducted on April, 2018 on one of the Terminal Intercity Railway station connecting Kolkata. The sample size was 10 and the survey was based on the application of SERVQUAL model and GAP theory. As it was found that the mean GAP Score of Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy and Responsiveness were 1.32, 1.75, 1.65, 1.0 and 0.92 respectively. The weighted SERVQUAL score (SQS) was 26.12. Greater the value of SQS, greater is the GAP between expected and perceived score and vice versa. As the total importance weightage point is 100, SQS is effectively 26.12%. Therefore, there is a gap of 26.12% in between the expected and the perceived dimensions.

However, this approach being too numerical and not highlighting any variables or/and factors concerning Passenger Amenities, an alternative and remodelled version of RAILQUAL has been applied to a better effect.

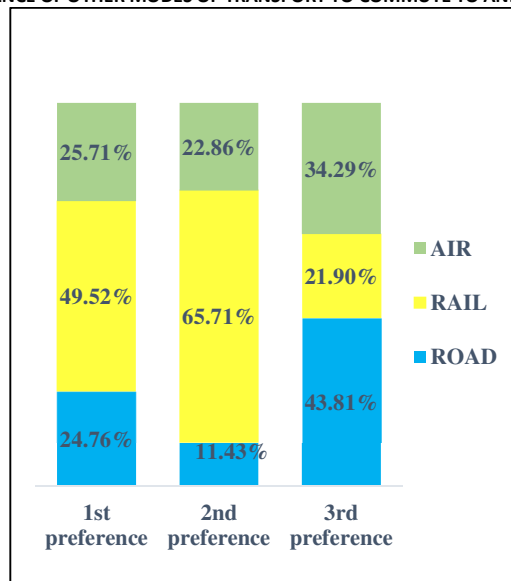
The Study is based on 5 major stations spread across two IR Zone- Eastern and South-Eastern Railway and three Divisions- Howrah, Sealdah & Kharagpur, namely Howrah, Sealdah, Santragachi, Kolkata, Shalimar- connecting Kolkata. The survey was conducted in May 2018. The total number of respondents were 105 (Howrah, Sealdah & Kolkata stations-25 each and Santragachi & Shalimar-15 each).

The largest bracket of age group falls in between 30 to 60. Nearly 60% of the respondents fall in this group which hints at the fact that the respondents in this group are out for a livelihood. Again a fair percentage of respondents are educated. So the fact that the passengers are aware of the government initiatives regarding passenger amenities should be an impetus to accept this report in positive light.

Approximately 60% of the respondents are either salaried or business men or professional. For livelihood, these respondents frequently travel mostly by rail. Frequency of travel is an important index as each travel group has their respective needs. Like a daily traveller would be more concerned about punctuality while occasional railway passenger would be interested at the comfort level of the journey.

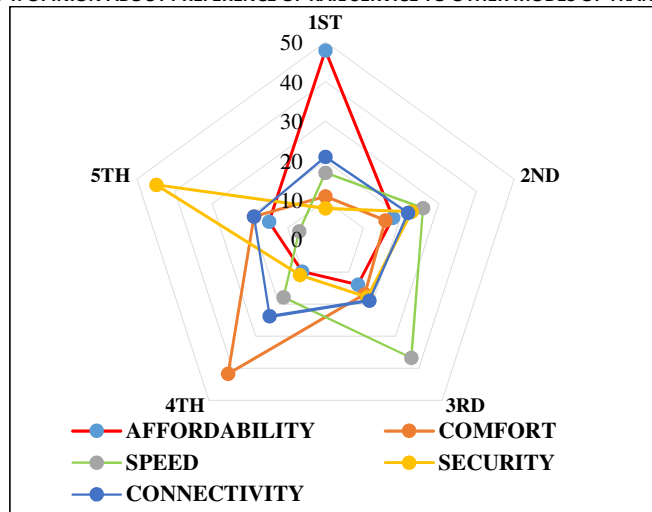
Purpose of the journey is most critical and important aspect of passenger (respondent) profiling. For example, the student group or the younger generation is likely to lay greater emphasis on modern amenities like internet/hotspot and elevators. Respondents who are on business trip would prefer security over other amenities an overwhelmingly 50% and 65% of the respondents have preferred rail as first and second preference respectively. This is highly indicative of the dependence on IR. Come what may as the IR is the lifeline of the nation and therefore they are still dependent on railways. However, another 50% have preferred Air and Road as first preference.

FIG. 3: PREFERENCE OF OTHER MODES OF TRANSPORT TO COMMUTE TO AND FROM KOLKATA



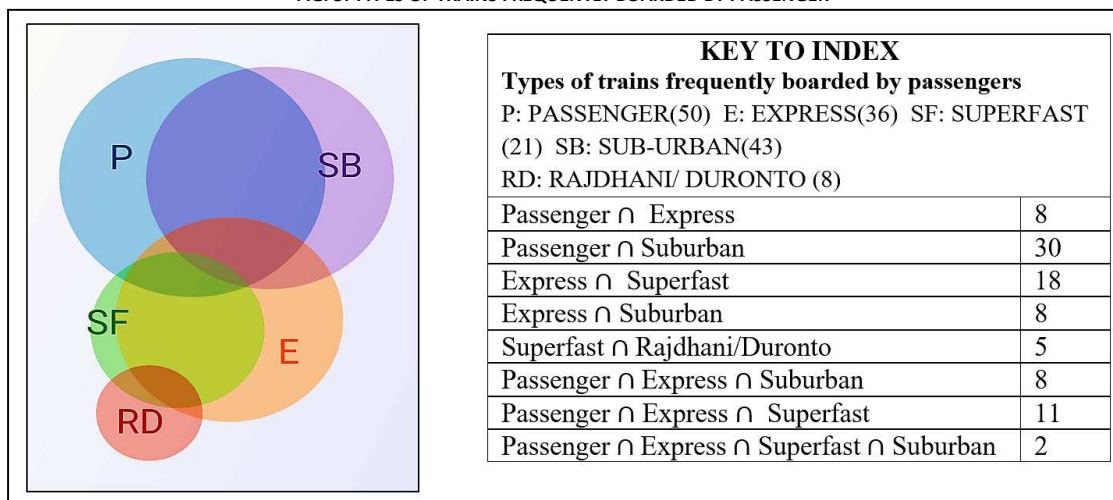
Source: Based on Primary Survey, May 2018

FIG. 4: OPINION ABOUT PREFERENCE OF RAIL SERVICE TO OTHER MODES OF TRANSPORT



Next in terms of preferring Rail over other modes of transport they have ranked affordability as the reason. However, if this affordability factor is negated by the other sectors of transport, then IR would be handicapped. Having dealt with the first preference, it is glaring to report that there is hardly any unanimity on the second preference as all figures for the second preferences are below 25%. Therefore, if the affordability factor is taken out of the context then the only way to hold on to the passengers to Railways is by improving Passenger amenities.

FIG. 5: TYPES OF TRAINS FREQUENTLY BOARDED BY PASSENGER



Having assimilated the perception scores of all respondents, the two values- mean score and standard deviation- for variables have been tabulated in Fig 18. Colour scale has been used to highlight the mean score and for standard deviation, greater than value of 1.1 have been set accordingly. A Mean score of 3.0 or more has been considered high, otherwise deemed low.

Five variables with highest mean score have been identified along with its respective SD values. A greater mean score reflects greater level of satisfaction and vice versa. Plotting this score with its SD value would establish its consistency as elaborated in Table 4.

FIG. 6: MEAN SCORE AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF VARIABLES USING COLOUR SCALE AND DATA BARS

VARIABLES	MEAN SCORE	STANDARD DEVIATION
Cleanliness	3.21	0.85
Security	3.45	1.06
Ticket booking counters	3.60	0.94
Drinking water	3.58	0.99
Waiting & Cloak rooms	3.51	1.07
Seating	3.48	1.08
Fans and Lighting	3.61	1.06
Public Announcement System	3.55	1.05
Access to platform premises	3.56	1.15
Toilets	2.30	1.05
ATM facility	2.68	1.66
Refreshment	3.09	1.47
Signage	3.25	1.36
Digital display board	3.29	1.31
Access to travel information	3.32	1.29
Footbridge	3.13	1.17
Elevators and escalators	1.99	1.16
Availability of Porters	3.17	1.25
Medical Assistance	3.25	1.08
Facilities for differently abled	3.33	1.17
Mobile Charging	3.45	1.14
Internet	3.56	1.18
Entertainment	3.13	1.18
Digitalization	3.07	1.22
Response of Railway Staffs	3.19	1.29
QR TEAM	3.18	1.07
Lost item section	3.17	1.09
Swachh Bharat	3.38	0.95
Parking Facility	3.44	0.96
Availability of Taxi/Cab	3.34	0.93
Beautification-Modernisaton	2.99	1.00

Source: Based on Primary Survey, May 2018

TABLE 4: OVERALL SCORES OF TOP FIVE AND BOTTOM THREE VARIABLES

Sl. No	Variables	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Scenario
1.	Fan & Lighting	3.61	1.06	1
2.	Ticket Booking Counter	3.60	0.94	1
3.	Drinking water	3.58	0.99	1
4.	Access to Platforms	3.56	1.15	2
5.	Internet	3.56	1.18	2
6.	Elevators & Escalators	1.99	1.16	3
7.	Toilets	2.30	1.05	4
8.	ATM Facility	2.68	1.66	3

Here the first five variables have recorded highest mean score across all stations and the latter three bore the poorest of the mean scores. Now here are four scenarios with the explanation:

1. Mean score is high but SD value is low implies greater number of respondents have agreed upon the high score deviating less from the mean score
 2. Both Mean score and SD values are high implies greater number of respondents have agreed upon the high score deviating more from the mean score
 3. Mean Score is low but SD value is high implies greater number of respondents have agreed upon the low score deviating more from the mean score
 4. Both Mean score and SD value are low implies greater number of respondents have agreed upon the low score deviating less from the mean score.
- Therefore 'Scenario 1' is the most ideal or desirable while 'Scenario 4' the most undesirable. 'Scenario 2' and 'Scenario 3' fit somewhere in between the previous Scenario 1 and 2.

CONCLUSION

Passenger amenities concerning railway are based on variables rather than dimensions or items. Established model of SERVQUAL falls short of analysing the variable based passenger amenities concerning railways. RAILQUAL is a conducive model to assess Passenger amenities in comparison to SERVQUAL. Variable based Study is the most appropriate for quantifying the level of perceived scores of satisfaction level.

There is a stiff competition from other modes of Transport due to a continuous price war between Air, Road and Railways. Due to the competition, passenger amenities have taken the centre stage of the Transport Sector in last one decade in India. To restrict the possible migration of passengers to other modes of transportation, Indian Railway must emphasize on Passenger amenities. It is required to conduct periodical assessments regarding the amenities and satisfaction level as it is a continuous process. Guidelines issued by the Indian Railways regarding Passenger amenities must be updated and implemented accordingly.

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