ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN A CONFLICT ZONE- A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON TOURISM ENTREPRENEURS OF THE VALLEY

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Abstract

Tourism plays a vital role in the economy of the valley and has direct as well as an indirect impact. Despite the challenges of the conflict situation, some tour operators persisted in the region over time, with some degree of success as well. The question is, how are these entrepreneurs adjusting their behaviour to deal with the challenging conflict environment that shapes their context? What helps them cope with the conflict environment? The study is qualitative in nature and is carried out through semi-structured interviews. All the respondents in the study have persevered through the conflictual environment with businesses intact some in profit others just surviving. The respondents were influenced by complex interactions of many factors, including family, business background and the composition of their networks, as well as their interactions with the current regime. The contribution of this research is twofold. First, the article provides difficult to access empirical evidence on entrepreneurial behaviour in a conflict environment. The second contribution is to the theory on institutional understandings of entrepreneurship in context, extending the existing literature to include conflict.

Keywords: Entrepreneur behaviour, Entrepreneurship, Conflict zone, Conflict in Jammu Kashmir, Tourism in Kashmir.

INTRODUCTION

The context of entrepreneurship has received significant consideration in recent literature (Bjornskov and Foss, 2013; Welter, 2011; Zahra et al., 2014). This study is based on tour operators from the tourism industry that have persisted over time, to develop an understanding of the affiliation among entrepreneurship and context in conflictual conditions. Despite the challenges posed by the conflictual conditions, tour operator business in the region has continued over time, with some degree of success. The question is, how are these businesses adjusting their entrepreneurial behaviour to deal with the challenging landscape that shapes their environment? This is the main question of this study because as entrepreneurship and small businesses are vital ingredients in developing economies (Audretsch et al., 2015; Puffer et al., 2010). This is so in Kashmir as well, where tourism provides the bulk of employment. It is estimated almost 50-60% of the total population of the new UT is directly or indirectly related to the tourism industry. Tourism contributes about 15% to 20% to Union Territory's GDP (formerly the state) (Mir, 2014). It can be challenging to 'do business,' particularly as a recognized, registered business with the government (Williams and Shahid, 2014), this can hinder entrepreneurship (Williams

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and Vorley, 2015). Conflict has an adverse effect on the inherent risks of a business and it leads to their increase and businesses face many new risks while working in a conflict zone. The biggest risk is not being able to serve their customers at the right time with the right quality. Businesses operating in conflict zones develop several coping strategies to get things done, flexible working hours being a prime strategy (Islam and Bhat, 2018). Even though there is a prospect for growth and development, and indeed many success stories of businesses, the common limitations in doing business are aggravated in regions with conflictual conditions, such as in the union territory of Jammu Kashmir.

The mass uprising in 2008, 2010 and 2016, the subsequent follow-up actions by the respective former state and central government led to a new conflictual environment between the two parties that is the people of Kashmir and the Indian central government (Mukherjee, 2014). In 2019 after the abrogation of 'Article 370', a muted response was witnessed from the people of the valley mainly due to a proactive approach by the central government of India. There was a widespread clampdown by the central government on communication, movement of the people, mainstream leadership, etc. Some of these measures are still in existence to date. Various authors over the years have highlighted the conditions of the people living in the valley (Dar, 2011; Kashani et al., 2003; Wani & Margoob, 2006; Yaswi & Haque, 2008). The disturbing outcome of conflict includes many psychological, social, economic, and environmental challenges for an individual and to the public (Pedersen, 2006). As Gaibulloev and Sandler (2008) point out, violence has the potential to limit economic growth through several ways, mostly through diverting funds away from growth-promoting actions, towards repairs and control measures. Furthermore, the fear and ambiguity created by the conflict can reduce investment, particularly from abroad, as potential investors seek less violence-prone regions (Abadie and Gardeazabal, 2008). Violence also increases the cost of doing business through repairs, costly insurance, and lost trade due to closure, as well as directly influencing sectors such as tourism (Abadie and Gardeazabal, 2003).

Thus, in this paper, the interplay between the conflictual environment and the entrepreneurial behaviours of the tour operators of 20 small businesses in an area, the Srinagar city is investigated. Welter and Smallbone (2012) recognize that entrepreneurship is influenced by external environments and circumstances, which can impact on personal situations, and on how entrepreneurs behave regarding opportunity recognition and development, and business strategy. This is important because the classic vocabulary around concepts used to explain entrepreneurship, such as the need to achieve success, motivation, and fulfilment for an example must be interpreted in the context in which they are used.

Literature review

Various authors debate that the environment in which entrepreneurship occurs influences motives and attitude of an entrepreneur, the availability of resources as well as the constraints and opportunities in the opening and running a business (Doern, 2011). Consequently, the

environment influences the growth, nature, scope of entrepreneurship and on their behaviour (Zahra et al., 2014). Numerous studies on institutional theory provides a valuable context for enhancing understanding of the association between the entrepreneur and their environment (Lang et al., 2014). The institutional theory puts significance on the diverse external societal, political, and economic influences on individual behaviour, admitting to different stages of institutions (Hoskisson et al., 2000). A society's institutional environment is viewed as having a strong influence on entrepreneurial activity (Acemoglu et al., 2012). An individual cannot be disconnected from their environment and that entrepreneurship emerges at the crossing amid an individual and the society (Spedale and Watson, 2014). Individuals, when faced with tough situations, follow typical schemes and previously tested progressive practices to adjust their behaviour. Nevertheless, a habit should not be rigid when faced with the occurrence of many opposing institutional logics (Spedale and Watson, 2014) which may present challenging claims and require varied courses of action, as an individual's pursuit to separate or differentiate themselves from others (Lounsbury, 2008). Navis and Glynn (2011) emphasize the significance of entrepreneurial behaviour being observed by people as valid in relation to the institutional setup in which they function. Warren and Smith (2015) argue that there may be unfriendly consequences if entrepreneurs fail to abide by the rules of the day.

Studies have argued that entrepreneurs respond through diverse means to challenging institutional contexts that are unfriendly in nature, excluding wars. Such environments can present uncertain and turbulent institutional frameworks. Hence, entrepreneurs may react by avoiding the formal procedures and forming new ways, even if it is informal and recognized as genuine by the people (Williams and Shahid, 2014; Williams and Vorley, 2015). Alternatively, if entrepreneurs want acceptability in a community, they can be encouraged to keenly support dominant institutions, to save their businesses in the face of any subsequent hostility (Lang et al., 2014). Again, as in more risky conflictual circumstances, the absence of various formal institutional procedures may nurture undesirable forms of entrepreneurial behaviour, if the established institutions are dysfunctional or crooked, but only as far as the informal institutions of the community allow, in terms of legality. In very dysfunctional setup, entrepreneurship may be conveyed negatively, for example exploiting, or provocative behaviour that may be initiated by, and add to a conflict situation rather than seeking to create more positive value (Abdukadirov, 2010). Welter and Smallbone (2011) highlight that entrepreneurs must also look towards what occurs when the fighting or conflict ends in terms of their constant need for legitimacy.

Brück et al. (2015), discusses that entrepreneurs are obstructed by conflictual situations in different ways and to different degrees due to the nature and scope of the conflict in question. Bullough et al. (2014), shows the significance of resilience and self-belief for entrepreneurs continuing through conflictual situations. Ciarli et al. (2015), argues that entrepreneurial activity can in fact increase in times of conflict, but the quality of outcome can be contracted, in that the growth-focused activities followed in peacetime can be substituted with survival

activities. In general, conflict can drain the capital stock of a region and its businesses; it can also drain the human capital, affecting the way people or societies perceive possibly lucrative prospects and create new value from these prospects.

Most studies on entrepreneurship have mostly dealt with economic development and growth in rather a stable environment, including where conflict has ended and restructuring has started (Brück et al., 2015). Circumstances, where nations or states get caught up in economic decline and ongoing conflict, tend to be neglected. Robert (2010), also notes that little research has been done in this domain. Most studies thus far have emphasized the impact of conflict on issues regarding security and rebuilding at the macro level, and with the role of the state agency (Cramer, 2006). There has existed less attention thus far in the microeconomic influence of conflict and the degree to which it discourages or defines entrepreneurial activities (Ciarli et al., 2015). Researchers have also begun to disclose the direct and indirect effect of a conflict situation on entrepreneurial activity (Justino, 2008; Bullough et al., 2014). If a conflict affects any business in a one-off, shock-like mode, the loss of employees may well end business in the short term. Later, though activities may resume, and a resilient business may reappear (Bruck et al., 2011). In contrast, despite the recognised tenacity of entrepreneurship in conflictual situations. Continuous, unremitting conflict may have a destructive impact on firm-level investment and growth over the long term, which may result in a growing number of business failures and economic decline over time (Bruck et al., 2011). While many agencies work towards a more peaceful climate for business in conflictual regions, there is no knowing if or when that will prevail, and it is, therefore, important to understand how successful businesses succeed in the short term. Despite all the contextual difficulties which impact on the likelihood of entrepreneurial success (Dollinger, 2003). Many businesses manage to not only survive but thrive. One reason could be that the conflict does not affect all the activities if a business similarly. It has more impact on some activities than others (Islam, et al.,2019). Research is needed to effectively understand the needs of entrepreneurs and SME owners in the conflict region, as they struggle to succeed.

The current conditions in the valley can be defined as not an all-out war. But, rather random armed encounters between security forces and insurgents and between security forces and masses from time to time. It is an ongoing situation with intense clashes that result in violence which could continue indefinitely. Thus, in this study, through defining an ongoing conflictual domain, the study contributes to entrepreneurship in challenging environments that afford the high risk, and ongoing uncertainty. Given the exacerbation of existing tensions between formal and informal institutions, and the introduction of new tensions, the question arises as to how entrepreneurs are coping with the changed environment. Welter and Smallbone (2011) note that not all entrepreneurs react to the same way to a challenging situation. They suggest three main groups of factors as important influences on entrepreneurial behaviour: contextual, venture and personal factors. In summary, then, this study addresses the overarching research question, that is, how are business owners orienting their entrepreneurial behaviour to a conflictual landscape?

Objectives of the study

- Understand the behaviour of an entrepreneur in a conflict zone especially with reference to the tourism sector.

- Effect of ongoing conflict rather than post-conflict scenario as is the case with many previous studies.

- Shed light on various concerns related to running a tourism business in a conflict zone.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and is carried out through structured interviews with the owners of 20 tour operator business. A sample of 20 entrepreneurs from the tourism industry. More specifically we selected tour operators, who deal with tour packages and other tourist-related services. We avoided operators who only deal with ticketing services. Crouch and McKenzie (2006), argue that less than 20 respondents in a qualitative study facilitate a researcher in building and maintaining a handy relationship and thus improve the overall exchange of information. Most of the tour businesses are around Khayam and Dalgate in Srinagar city. Only registered businesses were contacted with a high degree of visibility and formality for the interview (Williams and Shahid, 2014). The researcher once interviewed all 20 entrepreneurs. The longest interview was around three hours and the shortest one around 30 minutes.

The content of the interviews were guided by specific questions and focussed discussions with the respondents. The participants were questioned consecutively about the history of the business, perception about how the business was doing in the valley, how do they define success in their business, their management, and business development strategies and the effect of conflict on them, changes to an opportunity-seeking behaviour, the effect on networking and communication ability and perceptions of risk (Muhammad et al., 2016). Although the interviews were not piloted formally, it was felt that following a structured format may limit the responses of the participants. So, keeping that in mind one more question is added, which involved asking about the concerns/suggestions which an entrepreneur felt should be part of the study.

Findings

For the sake of avoiding repetition and brevity. We provide the summarized version of the various replies received during the structured interview process:

Antecedents of the entrepreneurs:

- Some entrepreneurs used to drive cabs in the same industry then later started their own tour and travel business.
- Formerly worked with various airlines like Jet Airways and accompanied tourists to various places in the valley.

- Some have been in this industry for generations, like House Boat business.
- Started as a salesperson with another tourism business.
- Some were interested in the industry.
- Some acquired the formal education of the tourism business.
- Various events like SKICC Nabrata festival, which informs about the opportunities in the tourism industry and encourages people to invest in it.

Business in the valley:

- Till 2016 business was doing well. Post it things started to get worse.
- From the last two years, they are doing only 10 % of business compared to the past (entrepreneur's estimate). They had to lay off employees. Sell assets, cars to remain in business. They are thinking about survival only.
- Business is down since the Burhan Wani incident, Demonetization and GST. Businesses are earning 2 to 3% compared to previous revenue positions (entrepreneur's own estimate).
- Some have a B2B model. They provide all type of services to other small operators. They are doing around 50% of business compared to past (entrepreneur's estimate).
- Business is not doing well at all but, expect to get better if conditions improve.
- Business is bad because of prevailing circumstances, thinking about switching to other business as well.
- According to some tourism business has a lot of potential in the valley but, conditions do not favour it.

Perception of success:

- To be able to treat tourists as friends and guests.
- To receive a positive word of mouth.
- Being able to provide quality service.
- Satisfied customer and building goodwill.
- If everything goes well, they call that success.
- Being able to remain faithful to the business.
- Recruiting more, investing in infrastructure, supporting more families.
- Getting Regular business, very often they think that they are just passing time.
- 5 packages a month is a success.

Strategy development:

- Promote products personally by visiting national markets like in Gujrat, Ahmadabad, Etc.
- Use social media like Facebook, Twitter.
- Apologise when there is a problem and act as victims of conflict themselves.
- Online focus, B2B, souvenirs to tourists, word-of-mouth.

- Used it for a lot of advance bookings but, that does not work now due to conflict.
- Regular meetings, handling queries, checking the health of supply chains, quality service, and pricing strategy.
- Dynamic as per the situation.
- Talk to agents to develop a strategy.
- Advertising, friendship circles, paid social media, national and international travel agent networks.
- Strong connection with travel agents.
- Focus on product quality, no support from the government, focus on quality transport, quality hotels, and convincing tourists of the safety.
- Fair pricing, advance booking at least price possible.
- Focus on positive reviews.
- Cross-selling and up-selling to tourists especially pilgrims.
- Focus on more product diversification like ticketing and foreign exchange.
- Create supportive teams.

Networking and Communication:

- These two forms the backbone of this industry.
- The conflict has an adverse effect on both.
- Sometimes the effect varies with variation in the conflict conditions.
- At times it leads to loss as well.
- Internet, as well as mobile, gets affected due to conflict.
- Networking gets affected due to the media image, etc.
- The conflict influences both networking as well as communication
- Blocking of internet and mobile has an adverse effect on the businesses.
- Even slow speed of the internet affects the business.
- Especially the networks with national travel agents. Some of them have stopped doing business with the agents from the valley.

Opportunity seeking behaviour:

- Some have become more responsible and patient.
- Change is the law, tourism is a respectable profession and we earn respect, build a reputation, people get to know you, develop networks.
- Learn to handle things well, and manage conditions better, learn to survive in business
- Gain experience becoming more mature in the industry.
- The conflict influences the behaviour as it leads to people becoming careless and aggressive.
- Extended participation in various events to promote tourism and products.
- Some have become soft, sober, and patient.

- They have created the ability to listen to customers.
- From B2B to B2C model, acquiring and providing more information, more ease due to technology, the personal behaviour remains the same, no dependence on one sales source we diversify.
- A lot of exposure affects language as well.

Risk-taking:

- Risk keeps on changing between low, medium, and high levels.
- There is a 100 % risk in the conflict zone. There is a chance you may lose all your capital in a glitch.
- Advance bookings are very dangerous.
- Regular lockdowns (hartals) and curfews have the same effect because a tourist does not know the difference.
- The risk is at the medium level if the business network is good.
- Limited risk till 2016 past the mass uprising I think before taking every step-in business.
- In Kashmir, the risk is always high, but we motivate ourselves to come to work every day.
- The risk is always high anything can happen in the valley.
- Subsequent to 2016, it has been high before that some would categorize it as low to medium level.
- There is a high risk due to conflict. They must be ready for last-minute changes to bookings and compensate tourists or give other benefits for bad experiences.

Social initiatives

- Share more experience on social media that helps.
- Meet various delegations coming from outside and or invited by the tourism department.
- They talk with tourists, take feedback and share, try to revive the industry.
- Bring tourism companies from outside to invest in the valley with the main motive to bring business.
- Educate people related to the importance of tourism and tourists for the valley.
- They are trying at their level best that the conditions should improve.
- Their only concern is the conflict. Indian and Pakistan should decide something at once and get over it.
- Help tourists in trouble even if it belongs to another operator.
- Share earnings, every stakeholder should earn, teach people how to behave with the tourist, talk with the current government regarding various initiatives.

Any other suggestion or concern

- Promote all the places of tourism in the valley.

- More infrastructure is needed to support tourist places.
- The government should work on the perception of tourists, like airlines should not announce "Welcome to the defence airport" instead of "Sheikh ul Alam international airport."
- There should be a fine system for littering at tourist places.
- Various government initiatives do not get implemented at the ground level.
- During peak season air ticket prices are increased. Tourists get lagged at the airport for hours.
- The tourism department should help with promotions. The department spends millions on meaningless promotions like music concerts, partying, etc.
- There should be a system for evaluation of promotional events or initiatives.
- Hope conditions improve it benefits all.
- RSS propaganda against Kashmir tourism.
- Tourist trust issues.
- Promotions are needed at the government level.
- Brand ambassador.
- Tourism department spending is the problem. The effectiveness of marketing initiatives should be evaluated. Individual initiatives by various stakeholders to bring business.
- Media needs to show the positive side of Kashmir as well.
- Political problems should be addressed in the first place.
- Tour operators were in competition from online portals.
- Government plays with tourists like they are football, especially pilgrims.
- Littering facility not enough, washrooms should be plenty at tourist stops,
- The firm decision by the government on news channel perception of Kashmir.
- Lots of wastage of financial resources by the tourism department.

Conclusion

This study has provided practical evidence on strategies entrepreneurs adopt to achieve success. In talking about a new perspective, the study should provide a theoretical foundation for providing new knowledge in the rarely-studied conflict zone opportunities, especially in the tourism industry. Of course, these results come from a small number of entrepreneurs engaged in an industry and from a location i.e., the Srinagar city of Kashmir region. So, inevitably that is a drawback on the generalizability of the findings, but it can still be useful in future research in the field of entrepreneurship or tourism. Various opportunities for further research have been identified. What changed in the tourism scenario of Kashmir after 2016? A researcher can identify the various causes responsible for that shift.

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