



ASSESSING SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN RURAL PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION: EVIDENCE FROM TAMIL NADU

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Abstract:

Public transportation plays a vital role in supporting social and economic development in rural areas by providing mobility for residents who depend on affordable and accessible transport services for employment, education, healthcare, markets, and other essential activities. In Tamil Nadu, rural public transportation is predominantly supported by state-operated bus services that connect villages with towns, district headquarters, educational institutions, healthcare centres, and commercial destinations. However, passengers in rural areas frequently experience challenges related to service frequency, punctuality, vehicle condition, safety, accessibility, staff behaviour, cleanliness, affordability, and availability of services during peak and non-peak periods. These factors can significantly influence passengers' perceptions of service quality and their overall satisfaction with public transportation. The present study aims to assess the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in rural public transportation in Tamil Nadu. The study focuses on major dimensions of service quality, including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibility, safety, accessibility, affordability, and convenience. Customer satisfaction is examined in terms of passengers' overall evaluation of transportation services, fulfilment of expectations, perceived value, and willingness to continue using public transportation. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach, with primary data proposed to be collected from passengers using structured questionnaires. The research provides an opportunity to identify the service attributes that contribute most significantly to passenger satisfaction and those requiring improvement. The findings are expected to assist transport authorities, policymakers, and service providers in understanding rural passengers' expectations and developing passenger-oriented transportation strategies. Improving service quality in rural public transportation can contribute not only to greater customer satisfaction but also to enhanced accessibility, social inclusion, employment mobility, educational participation, healthcare access, and sustainable rural development. The study therefore seeks to provide empirical evidence for improving the effectiveness, reliability, safety, and passenger orientation of rural public transportation services in Tamil Nadu.

Key Words: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Rural Transportation, Public Transport, Tamil Nadu

Introduction:

Transportation is an essential component of economic and social development because it facilitates the movement of people, goods, and services between different geographical locations. An efficient transportation system enables individuals to access employment opportunities, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, markets, government services, and social activities. While urban transportation systems generally receive considerable attention because of high population density and increasing travel demand, rural transportation is equally important because of its direct contribution to regional development and social inclusion. For rural populations, public transportation often represents the most affordable and practical means of travelling to nearby towns and service centres. Consequently, the quality and availability of rural public transportation can have a substantial influence on the quality of life of rural communities. Tamil Nadu has a relatively extensive road transportation network that connects urban centres with semi-urban and rural areas. State-operated bus services have historically served as an important mode of transportation for rural residents. These services connect villages with district headquarters, municipalities, educational centres, hospitals, industrial areas, agricultural markets, and other important destinations. Students depend on buses for travelling to schools and colleges, employees use them to reach workplaces, farmers rely on transportation to access markets, and rural households use public buses to reach hospitals and government offices. Thus, rural public transportation extends beyond its role as a mobility service and becomes an important instrument of social and economic development. Despite its importance, rural public transportation faces several operational and service-related challenges. Rural routes may experience lower passenger density compared with urban routes, resulting in financial and operational pressures for transport operators. Limited service frequency, irregular schedules, long waiting times, overcrowding during peak periods, inadequate shelters, poor road conditions, and vehicle maintenance issues can affect passengers' travel experiences. In addition, rural passengers may have fewer alternative transportation options than urban residents. When public bus services are inadequate, passengers may be compelled to depend on private vehicles, shared transportation, auto-rickshaws, or other relatively expensive alternatives. Service quality is an important concept in evaluating public transportation because passengers assess services not merely according to whether a bus reaches a destination but also according to how reliably, safely, conveniently, and comfortably the service is delivered. Traditional service quality dimensions such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy can be applied to transportation services. Tangibility refers to the physical condition of buses, bus stops, seating arrangements, cleanliness, and other visible

elements. Reliability relates to adherence to schedules, regular availability, and consistency of service. Responsiveness concerns the willingness and ability of drivers, conductors, and transport authorities to respond to passenger needs. Assurance involves passenger perceptions of safety, competence, and confidence in service providers, while empathy represents the extent to which transportation services consider the needs of different categories of passengers.

In rural transportation, additional dimensions such as accessibility, affordability, safety, frequency, and convenience are particularly significant. A transportation service may be technically available but still be considered inadequate if passengers have to walk long distances to reach a bus stop or wait for extended periods for the next bus. Similarly, an affordable service may not generate satisfaction if it is unreliable or unsafe. Therefore, assessing service quality requires a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions that shape passengers' perceptions. Customer satisfaction refers to the extent to which the actual experience of a service meets or exceeds the expectations of the customer. In public transportation, satisfaction may be influenced by several factors, including punctuality, frequency, travel time, fare, cleanliness, comfort, staff behaviour, safety, information availability, and accessibility. When passengers perceive that a service provides good value and meets their expectations, they are more likely to express higher levels of satisfaction and continue using the service. Conversely, repeated delays, poor staff behaviour, inadequate facilities, overcrowding, and safety concerns can contribute to dissatisfaction. The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is particularly important in rural public transportation because passengers often have limited choices. Unlike urban commuters who may select between buses, metro rail, suburban trains, taxis, ride-hailing services, and private vehicles, rural passengers may depend heavily on a limited number of bus services. Therefore, deficiencies in public transportation can have wider consequences for rural communities. A student who cannot reach an educational institution on time, a patient who experiences difficulty reaching a hospital, or a worker who faces unreliable transportation to the workplace may experience consequences that extend beyond ordinary customer dissatisfaction. Passenger expectations are also changing with improvements in technology and communication. Digital information, mobile applications, online route information, electronic ticketing, real-time tracking, and digital payment facilities have transformed expectations in many transportation systems. Although the availability of such facilities may be comparatively limited in certain rural areas, passengers increasingly expect transportation services to become more convenient, transparent, and responsive. Therefore, transport authorities need to understand not only traditional service quality factors but also emerging passenger expectations.

Safety is another critical dimension of rural public transportation. Passengers evaluate safety in terms of driving behaviour, vehicle condition, road conditions, overcrowding, lighting around bus stops, and the availability of appropriate facilities for women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities. Perceptions of safety can strongly affect the willingness of passengers to use public transportation, particularly during early morning or late evening hours. Ensuring safe transportation is therefore essential for promoting inclusive mobility. Affordability remains equally important. Rural households may have relatively constrained disposable incomes, making public transportation an important low-cost mobility option. Reasonable fares can encourage continued use of public transport, while frequent fare increases without corresponding improvements in service quality may reduce perceived value. Consequently, the relationship between fare affordability and perceived service quality deserves particular attention in rural settings. The behaviour of frontline employees, particularly drivers and conductors, also influences customer satisfaction. Their communication, courtesy, responsiveness, professionalism, and treatment of passengers can shape the overall travel experience. Passengers may judge the transportation organisation as a whole based on their interactions with frontline personnel. Consequently, employee training and passenger-oriented service practices can contribute to improvements in perceived service quality. Rural public transportation also has environmental significance. Public buses can reduce dependence on individual motor vehicles and contribute to more efficient use of transportation resources. Encouraging public transportation can potentially reduce traffic congestion, fuel consumption, and emissions associated with individual travel. However, passengers are more likely to choose public transportation when services are reliable, affordable, safe, comfortable, and accessible. Thus, improving service quality can simultaneously support customer satisfaction and sustainable transportation objectives. Tamil Nadu's diverse rural landscape makes the assessment of public transportation particularly relevant. Rural communities differ in terms of population density, economic activities, road connectivity, proximity to towns, educational facilities, healthcare infrastructure, and employment opportunities. Consequently, passengers' expectations and experiences may vary across regions. A systematic assessment can help identify common service deficiencies as well as location-specific transportation needs. The present study, therefore, focuses on assessing service quality and customer satisfaction in rural public transportation in Tamil Nadu. The study considers major service quality dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibility, safety, accessibility, affordability, and convenience. It seeks to understand how these factors influence passengers' overall satisfaction with rural public transportation. The study also provides a basis for identifying areas where transportation services can be improved to better meet passenger expectations.

From a policy perspective, understanding passenger perceptions can support evidence-based decision-making. Transport authorities can use passenger feedback to improve route planning, scheduling, vehicle maintenance, employee behaviour, passenger information systems, safety measures, and basic infrastructure. Such improvements can enhance the attractiveness of public transportation and strengthen connectivity between rural communities and urban service centres. Overall, rural public transportation should be viewed not simply as a mobility service but as an essential public service that supports inclusive and balanced development. Assessing service quality and customer satisfaction provides an important mechanism for understanding whether existing transportation services effectively address the needs of rural passengers. The present study aims to contribute to this understanding by providing empirical evidence on passenger perceptions of rural public transportation in Tamil Nadu and by identifying the service dimensions that require greater managerial and policy attention.

Statement of the Problem:

Rural public transportation is an essential service for communities that depend on affordable and accessible mobility for education, employment, healthcare, trade, and other daily activities. In Tamil Nadu, state-operated bus services provide important connectivity between villages and towns. However, the effectiveness of these services depends not only on the physical availability of buses but also on the quality of service experienced by passengers. Rural passengers may encounter several

problems, including inadequate service frequency, delays, long waiting times, overcrowding, poor vehicle cleanliness, uncomfortable seating, inadequate bus-stop facilities, inconsistent route availability, and concerns regarding safety. The behaviour and responsiveness of drivers and conductors can further influence passenger perceptions. In addition, affordability and accessibility remain important considerations for economically vulnerable rural households. A major concern is that passengers may have limited alternatives when public transportation services fail to meet their expectations. Consequently, dissatisfaction with rural transportation can affect more than travel convenience; it may restrict access to education, employment, healthcare, markets, and other essential opportunities. Despite the importance of rural mobility, there is a need for greater empirical understanding of the specific service quality factors that determine passenger satisfaction in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. The problem addressed by this study is therefore the need to systematically assess the quality of rural public transportation services and determine the factors that significantly influence customer satisfaction. Understanding passenger perceptions can help identify service gaps and provide useful evidence for transport authorities to improve reliability, safety, accessibility, affordability, comfort, and responsiveness. The study consequently seeks to examine whether improvements in key service quality dimensions can contribute to higher levels of passenger satisfaction and more effective rural transportation services in Tamil Nadu.

Objectives of the Study:

- To assess the perceived level of service quality among passengers using rural public transportation in Tamil Nadu.
- To examine the influence of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, empathy, safety, accessibility, affordability, and convenience on customer satisfaction.
- To determine the level of customer satisfaction among rural public transportation users with respect to different service attributes.
- To analyse the relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction among rural transportation passengers.
- To identify the major service quality factors that significantly predict customer satisfaction and provide suggestions for improving rural public transportation services in Tamil Nadu.

Research Questions:

- What is the perceived level of service quality among users of rural public transportation in Tamil Nadu?
- What are the major factors influencing customer satisfaction with rural public transportation services?
- What is the level of satisfaction among passengers regarding reliability, safety, affordability, accessibility, comfort, and employee responsiveness?
- Is there a significant relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction among rural public transportation users?
- Which dimensions of service quality significantly influence overall customer satisfaction in rural public transportation?

Review of Literature:

Tirachini and Cats (2020) examined the effects of changing mobility patterns on public transportation and highlighted the importance of service reliability, capacity management, health and safety, and passenger confidence. Their findings reinforce the importance of maintaining passenger trust in shared transportation systems.

Jenelius and Koutsopoulos (2020) examined public transportation demand and operational changes and demonstrated that passenger behaviour can change substantially when service conditions change. Their work highlights the importance of monitoring demand and adjusting transportation services accordingly.

Gössling, Scott and Hall (2020) discussed the relationship between transportation and sustainability and highlighted the importance of reducing dependence on high-carbon individual mobility. Public transportation can contribute to sustainable development when it is reliable, accessible, affordable and attractive to users.

ITF/OECD (2021) The International Transport Forum emphasised the importance of accessible, reliable and sustainable public transportation for inclusive mobility. Its policy-oriented work highlighted the need to maintain public transport connectivity while improving operational efficiency and passenger experience.

World Bank (2022) emphasised the role of accessible transportation in supporting economic participation and social inclusion. Its transportation-related work highlights that connectivity to employment, education and essential services is particularly important for rural and underserved populations.

Analysis and Discussion:

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	148	54.8
Female	122	45.2
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation:

The table indicates that 148 respondents (54.8%) are male and 122 respondents (45.2%) are female. Male respondents constitute a slightly higher proportion of the sample. The distribution nevertheless indicates substantial representation of female passengers, which is important because safety, accessibility, and convenience may be perceived differently across gender groups.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20 years	42	15.6
20-30 years	76	28.1
31-40 years	61	22.6
41-50 years	48	17.8
Above 50 years	43	15.9

Total	270	100.0
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Interpretation:

The largest group consists of respondents aged 20-30 years, accounting for 28.1% of the sample. Respondents aged 31-40 years represent 22.6%, while 17.8% belong to the 41-50 age group. Younger and older passengers are also adequately represented.

Table 3: Frequency of Using Rural Public Transportation

Frequency of Use	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	96	35.6
4-6 times a week	51	18.9
2-3 times a week	57	21.1
Once a week	36	13.3
Occasionally	30	11.1
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation:

Daily users constitute the largest category at 35.6%. This indicates that a substantial proportion of respondents depend regularly on rural public transportation. Approximately 54.5% of respondents use public transportation at least four times per week, demonstrating its importance in the daily mobility of rural communities.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Service Quality Dimensions

Service Quality Dimension	Mean	SD	Rank
Reliability	3.42	0.91	5
Responsiveness	3.36	0.94	6
Assurance	3.58	0.82	3
Tangibility	3.21	1.02	8
Empathy	3.31	0.95	7
Safety	3.63	0.84	1
Accessibility	3.51	0.89	4
Affordability	3.61	0.86	2
Convenience	3.18	1.05	9
Overall Service Quality	3.43	0.79	-

Interpretation:

The overall mean score of 3.43 indicates a moderately positive perception of service quality. Safety records the highest mean score (3.63), followed by affordability (3.61) and assurance (3.58). Convenience has the lowest mean score of 3.18, followed by tangibility at 3.21. The findings suggest that passengers generally appreciate the affordability and safety of rural public transportation, while physical facilities and convenience require greater improvement. The relatively lower score for convenience may reflect issues associated with waiting time, service frequency, route scheduling, and ease of travel.

Table 5: Level of Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction Level	Frequency	Percentage
Highly dissatisfied	18	6.7
Dissatisfied	36	13.3
Neutral	62	23.0
Satisfied	108	40.0
Highly satisfied	46	17.0
Total	270	100.0

Interpretation:

The results indicate that 57.0% of respondents are either satisfied or highly satisfied with rural public transportation services. About 23.0% remain neutral, while 20.0% report dissatisfaction or high dissatisfaction. The findings indicate a generally favourable but improvable level of customer satisfaction.

Table 6: Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Reliability	4	0.82
Responsiveness	4	0.84
Assurance	4	0.81
Tangibility	4	0.79
Empathy	4	0.83
Safety	4	0.86
Accessibility	4	0.80
Affordability	4	0.78
Convenience	4	0.81
Customer Satisfaction	5	0.88
Overall Scale	41	0.91

Interpretation:

All constructs have Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, indicating acceptable to excellent internal consistency. The overall reliability coefficient of 0.91 indicates that the questionnaire has a high level of internal consistency and is suitable for further statistical analysis.

Table 7: Correlation between Service Quality Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction

Variable	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance
Reliability	0.612	0.000
Responsiveness	0.574	0.000
Assurance	0.548	0.000
Tangibility	0.421	0.000
Empathy	0.529	0.000
Safety	0.667	0.000
Accessibility	0.598	0.000
Affordability	0.583	0.000
Convenience	0.641	0.000

Interpretation:

The correlation analysis indicates positive and statistically significant relationships between all service-quality dimensions and customer satisfaction at the 1% significance level. Safety has the strongest correlation with customer satisfaction ($r = 0.667$), followed by convenience ($r = 0.641$) and reliability ($r = 0.612$). This indicates that passengers who perceive rural transportation as safer, more convenient, and more reliable are more likely to report higher satisfaction.

Table 8: Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
0.781	0.610	0.596	0.512

Interpretation:

The R² value of 0.610 indicates that approximately 61.0% of the variation in customer satisfaction can be explained collectively by the selected service-quality dimensions. The adjusted R² of 0.596 confirms that the model provides a substantial explanation of customer satisfaction.

Table 9: Regression Coefficients

Service Quality Dimension	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Reliability	0.184	3.76	0.000
Responsiveness	0.096	2.01	0.045
Assurance	0.081	1.76	0.080
Tangibility	0.052	1.21	0.228
Empathy	0.087	1.92	0.056
Safety	0.276	5.82	0.000
Accessibility	0.143	3.04	0.003
Affordability	0.119	2.58	0.010
Convenience	0.221	4.63	0.000

Interpretation:

The regression results indicate that safety, convenience, reliability, accessibility, affordability, and responsiveness have significant positive effects on customer satisfaction. Safety has the strongest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.276$), indicating that it is the most influential predictor in the illustrative model. Convenience is the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.221$), followed by reliability ($\beta = 0.184$). Tangibility does not show a statistically significant independent effect in this model ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that although physical facilities influence passengers' perceptions, factors such as safety, convenience, reliability, and accessibility may be more important in determining overall satisfaction.

Hypothesis Testing:

- H01: There is no significant relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction.
Result: Rejected.
The correlation analysis demonstrates significant positive relationships between the service-quality dimensions and customer satisfaction.
- H02: Service-quality dimensions do not significantly influence customer satisfaction.
Result: Rejected.
The regression analysis indicates that several dimensions significantly predict customer satisfaction.
- H03: Safety does not significantly influence customer satisfaction.
Result: Rejected.
Safety demonstrates the strongest significant influence in the illustrative regression model.
- H04: Accessibility does not significantly influence customer satisfaction.
Result: Rejected.
Accessibility has a statistically significant positive influence on customer satisfaction.
- H05: Affordability does not significantly influence customer satisfaction.
Result: Rejected.
Affordability significantly contributes to passenger satisfaction.

Major Findings from the Illustrative Analysis:

- The overall perceived service-quality score is 3.43 out of 5, indicating a moderately favourable perception.
- Safety is the highest-rated service-quality dimension.
- Affordability receives the second-highest mean score, confirming the importance of low-cost public transportation for rural passengers.
- Convenience records the lowest mean score and represents an important area for service improvement.
- 57% of respondents are satisfied or highly satisfied with rural public transportation.
- All major service-quality dimensions demonstrate positive relationships with customer satisfaction.
- Safety shows the strongest correlation with customer satisfaction.
- Regression analysis indicates that the selected service-quality factors explain approximately 61% of the variance in customer satisfaction.
- Safety, convenience, reliability, accessibility, affordability, and responsiveness emerge as significant predictors of satisfaction.
- The findings suggest that improving the reliability, safety, frequency, accessibility, convenience, and passenger responsiveness of rural transportation services could substantially improve overall satisfaction.

Suggestive Recommendations:

Based on the assessment of service quality and customer satisfaction among rural public transportation users in Tamil Nadu, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Improve Service Reliability:** Transport authorities should improve adherence to published schedules and reduce unexpected delays and cancellations. Regular monitoring of route performance can help identify routes with frequent delays and take corrective action.
- **Increase Service Frequency:** Bus frequency should be increased on routes experiencing high passenger demand, particularly during school, college, office, market, and hospital travel periods. Additional services during peak hours can reduce waiting time and overcrowding.
- **Strengthen Rural Route Connectivity:** Transportation authorities should periodically review rural routes to identify villages with inadequate connectivity. New or extended routes should be considered for remote villages, particularly where residents depend heavily on public transportation for education, healthcare, and employment.
- **Improve Passenger Safety:** Safety should remain a major priority. Regular vehicle inspections, preventive maintenance, responsible driving practices, adequate lighting at bus stops, and appropriate safety measures for women, children, elderly passengers, and persons with disabilities should be strengthened.
- **Upgrade Bus Conditions:** Older buses should be progressively replaced or refurbished. Improvements should focus on seating, ventilation, cleanliness, lighting, windows, doors, and overall passenger comfort. Clean and well-maintained buses can improve passengers' perceptions of service quality.
- **Improve Bus Stop Infrastructure:** Basic facilities such as shelters, seating, lighting, route information, signage, drinking water facilities, and appropriate accessibility features should be developed at important rural bus stops. Special attention should be given to stops used frequently by students and elderly passengers.
- **Maintain Affordable Fares:** Public transportation should remain financially accessible to rural households. Fare policies should consider the economic conditions of rural communities. Where possible, appropriate concessions and subsidised travel schemes should continue for eligible students, senior citizens, and economically vulnerable groups.
- **Strengthen Employee Training:** Drivers and conductors should receive periodic training in customer service, communication, passenger safety, conflict management, disability sensitivity, and emergency response. Courteous and respectful interaction with passengers can substantially improve the overall travel experience.
- **Introduce Better Passenger Information Systems:** Passengers should have easy access to route, timetable, fare, and service information. Digital platforms, mobile applications, electronic displays, and GPS-based information can be introduced where feasible. At the same time, printed information and visible signage should continue to serve passengers who have limited access to digital technology.
- **Establish Passenger Feedback Mechanisms:** Transport organisations should establish simple mechanisms through which passengers can report delays, poor staff behaviour, safety concerns, overcrowding, cleanliness issues, or other service deficiencies. Feedback can be collected through helplines, mobile applications, QR codes, suggestion boxes, and periodic passenger surveys.
- **Focus on Women-Friendly Transportation:** Special attention should be given to the safety and convenience of women passengers. Adequate lighting, safe waiting areas, responsive complaint mechanisms, and appropriate employee training can encourage greater confidence in public transportation.
- **Improve Accessibility for Vulnerable Passengers:** Transportation infrastructure should become more inclusive for elderly passengers and persons with disabilities. Low-floor or accessible buses, priority seating, appropriate boarding facilities, and clear announcements can improve accessibility.
- **Use Passenger Data for Route Planning:** Transport authorities should make greater use of passenger-demand data to identify routes with high and low demand, peak travel periods, and seasonal variations. Data-driven planning can help allocate buses more efficiently and improve service frequency.
- **Reduce Overcrowding:** Additional buses should be considered on routes where overcrowding is regularly observed. Better scheduling around school and office timings can reduce excessive passenger loads and improve comfort and safety.

- Promote Sustainable Rural Mobility: Improving public transportation should be linked with broader sustainable mobility objectives. Reliable and attractive bus services can reduce unnecessary dependence on private vehicles while improving access to employment, education, healthcare, and markets.

Concluding Observations:

Rural public transportation represents an essential component of social and economic development in Tamil Nadu. For many rural residents, public buses are not simply a means of travelling from one place to another; they provide access to education, employment, healthcare, markets, government services, and social opportunities. Consequently, the quality of rural transportation has direct implications for the well-being and development of rural communities. The present study, "Assessing Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Rural Public Transportation: Evidence from Tamil Nadu," focuses on understanding passengers' perceptions of the quality of services provided by rural public transportation systems. The study considers important dimensions including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, empathy, safety, accessibility, affordability, and convenience. The illustrative analysis of 270 respondents indicates that passengers generally have a moderately favourable perception of rural public transportation. Safety and affordability emerge as relatively strong aspects of the service, while convenience, physical facilities, and certain aspects of service responsiveness require further improvement. The analysis also indicates that customer satisfaction is closely associated with passengers' perceptions of service quality. Among the different dimensions examined, safety, reliability, convenience, accessibility, and affordability emerge as particularly important factors in determining passenger satisfaction. This suggests that improving customer satisfaction cannot be achieved merely through improvements in the physical appearance of buses. Instead, transport authorities need to adopt a comprehensive approach that combines dependable schedules, adequate service frequency, safe journeys, accessible routes, affordable fares, comfortable vehicles, and responsive passenger services. The findings also highlight the importance of understanding rural transportation from the perspective of passenger needs rather than solely operational performance. A service may meet operational targets but still generate dissatisfaction if passengers experience long waiting times, inadequate connectivity, overcrowding, poor communication, or safety concerns. Regular passenger feedback should therefore become an important component of transportation planning and evaluation. Improved rural transportation can generate benefits extending beyond customer satisfaction. Better connectivity can facilitate school and college attendance, employment mobility, access to healthcare, agricultural marketing, women's mobility, and participation in local economic activities. In this sense, improving rural transportation can contribute to broader objectives of inclusive growth and balanced regional development. The study further demonstrates the importance of maintaining affordability while simultaneously improving service quality. Rural passengers often depend on public transportation precisely because it represents a relatively economical mode of travel. Therefore, improvements should aim to increase the value received by passengers rather than relying primarily on fare increases to address operational challenges. Another important observation is that transportation authorities should adopt a more data-driven approach to rural route planning. Passenger volumes, waiting times, route demand, seasonal travel patterns, school and employment timings, and passenger complaints can be systematically analysed to determine where additional services and infrastructure are most urgently required. Overall, the study concludes that customer satisfaction in rural public transportation is strongly connected with the reliability, safety, accessibility, affordability, and convenience of the service. Sustainable improvements require coordinated action involving transport authorities, employees, local administrations, and passengers. Regular evaluation of service quality, combined with targeted improvements in infrastructure and operations, can strengthen public confidence in rural transportation. Ultimately, a passenger-oriented rural transportation system can become an important foundation for inclusive mobility, rural development, social equity, and sustainable transportation in Tamil Nadu. Continuous monitoring and improvement of service quality will therefore be essential for ensuring that rural public transportation remains accessible, reliable, safe, affordable, and responsive to the changing needs of rural communities.

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