

## Evaluating the Official Websites of SAARC Countries on their Web Information on Food Tourism

Dahiya Ashish\*, Duggal Shelley\*\*

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations are a potpourri of diverse religions, races and cultures with rich natural and cultural heritage but yet to tap the full potential of tourism. An investigation into the glorifying heritage of these eight SAARC nations pinpoints towards their rich food and culinary heritage that is yet to be explored to carve them as food destinations that would definitely help ameliorating tourism too. The Global Report on Food Tourism of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reveals results from a survey on food tourism marketing promotion, from which internet marketing tools, such as websites have been effectively utilized to promote food tourism in a particular destination. (UNWTO, 2012). Sensing the importance of the websites in the promotion of food tourism for any destination, the present study aims at the comparative content analysis of the official tourism websites of SAARC nations to evaluate their performance from the perspective of promotion of culinary heritage on world-wide web. The modified Balanced ScoreCard (BSC) approach is incorporated into the evaluation by taking into consideration four perspectives: technical, user friendliness and site attractiveness, tourism effectiveness and food tourism effectiveness. A set of 88 critical success factors representing these four perspectives is then used to examine the websites. The study reflects on the relative strength and weakness of the tourism websites of SAARC nations in promoting food tourism and as well help suggesting the remedial measures catalyzing the food tourism promotion through websites.

**Keywords :** SAARC Countries, Websites, Food Tourism

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\* Director and Associate Professor, Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management, M.D University-Rohtak, Haryana, India

\*\* Research Scholar, Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management M.D University-Rohtak, Haryana, India

## I . Introduction

The resilient nature of the travel and tourism industry over fragile global economic growth and macroeconomic tensions has carved it into fastest growing industry equalling or even surpassing that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. Travel has been proliferating in mature markets due to rising purchasing power of the middle class in developing economies. The number of international tourist arrivals rose by almost forty times from 25 million in 1950 to 980 million in 2011. Even between 2000 and 2010, which was a decade of boom but also grave economic and financial crises, severe pandemics and large-scale natural disasters; international tourist arrivals continued to grow at an average annual rate of 3.4 per cent. As growth has been particularly dynamic in developing and emerging regions, their share in interna-

tional tourist arrivals rose from 31 per cent in 1990 to 47 percent in 2010. (Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XIII) - Doha, Qatar, 20 April 2012). UNWTO forecasts a growth in international tourist arrivals of between 4% and 4.5% in 2014. It is one of the major export sectors of poor countries and the leading source of foreign exchange in 46 of 49 developing countries [Bolwell and Weinze, 2008].

<Figure 1> clearly shows that International tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) worldwide exceeded the 1 billion mark for the first time ever in 2012, with 1,035 million tourists crossing borders, up from 995 million in 2011. A closer analysis of the UNWTO report indicates swift growth in tourism sector in European Countries followed by Asia and Pacific Regions. Asia Pacific region has doubled its tourism industry during seven years as they received 85 million



Source: UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2013.

<Figure 1> INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS and INTERNATIONAL TOURISM RECEIPTS 2012

visitors in 2003 and 198 million visitors in 2010. But, during this period of growth, South Asia was able to grow on a marginal scale that also was not achieved among all countries of South Asia [UNWTO, 2011]. In the year 2010, South Asian countries were able to attract only 1.1% of the 898 million visitors from across the globe. Whereas, Europe received 53% of the total visitors from all over the world during the same year [UNWTO, 2011].

South Asia is abode of one third of the world's population. It comprises of one of the most fascinating diverse populations and kaleidoscopic hues of cultures which have worked as potential economic and geographical resources for several countries all over the world. The eight SAARC nations are a potpourri of diverse religions, races and cultures yet similar in many ways. The SAARC nations are rich in natural and cultural heritage but yet to tap the full potential of tourism. Table no.1 clearly indicates the SAARC nations have not utilized fully their potential as tourist destinations and also not able to mar-

ket their resources fully throughout the world.

This has made it imperative to delve deep into the reasons for such decline in the tourism rates in these SAARC nations and as well the measures to reimburse these declining rates. For promoting tourism in SAARC countries, World Tourism Organization was led by the Secretariat in Colombo in 1980 but the initiative could not do well owing to lack of appropriate support from the tourism sector of each SAARC country. Even the productive outcome is yet to achieve from the another attempt made by the SAARC Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) that began in Nepal with a promotional tagline "Magic that is South Asia" to improve the private sector of the SAARC nations. An investigation into the cultural and natural heritage of these eight SAARC nations pinpoints towards their rich food and culinary heritage that is yet to be explored to carve these SAARC nations as food destinations that would definitely help ameliorating tourism too. The need to improve the tourism in the SAARC nations focus-

<Table 1> Data showing International Tourist Arrivals and International Tourism Receipts (2010-2012) in SAARC Nations

Destinations	International Tourist Arrivals							International tourism Receipts			
	(1000)			Change (%)			Share (%)	(US\$million)			Share (%)
	2010	2011	2012	10/9	11/10	12*/11	2012*	2010	2011	2012*	2012*
South Asia	12,000	13,506	14,103	19.5	12.6	4.4	6.0	20,034	23,727	24,156	7.5
Afghanistan	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	53	..	..	..
Bangladesh	303	..	..	13.4	..	..	..	81	87	110	0.0
Bhutan	27	37	44	14.7	39.2	17.2	0.0	35	48	63	0.0
India	5,776	6,309	6,649	11.8	9.2	5.4	2.8	14,490	17,707	17,971	5.5
Maldives	792	931	958	20.7	17.6	2.9	0.4	1,713	1,868	1,873	0.6
Nepal	603	736	..	18.3	22.1	..	..	344	386	352	0.1
Pakistan	907	1,000	..	6.1	10.3	..	..	305	358	341	0.1
Sri Lanka	654	856	1,006	46.1	30.8	17.5	0.4	576	830	1,039	0.3

Source: World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

(Data as collected by UNWTO June 2013)

\*= provisional figure or data; = figure or data not (yet) available;

sing upon awaring the masses about their rich food and culinary heritage has led to undertake the present study. According to Global Report on food tourism 2013 by UNWTO, food tourism has gained increasing attention over the years. Gastronomy is becoming the cardinal part of the tourism experience. A survey was conducted among the UNWTO affiliate members to record their views on current situation of food tourism. The results indicated a good number of about 88.2% of respondents opining gastronomy as a strategic element in defining the brand and image of the destination. 68% of the organizations consulted carry out marketing activities or promotion based on Food Tourism. The marketing and promotional tools most used by these entities are: organizing events (91%), producing brochures and advertising (82%) and dedicated websites on food tourism (78%). The respondents also indicated about 30% share of gastronomy in tourism revenue generation which is quite significant. The survey also recommended various high quality and credible promotional tools like food guides, organizing events, the media, and use of internet and social networks. Owing to the tremendous potential of food tourism as a stimulator of local, regional and national economic development, many countries across the globe have taken the initiative to reinforce and market the celestial flavour of their domestic cuisine throughout the world. Singapore, Canada and France are marketed as a destination offering local cuisine, international cuisine, fine dining experience and nightlife entertainment on the world stage to improve tourism. So, SAARC nations may ameliorate their tourism statistics by inventing various marketing strategies and this present study is the premier step in the

same that undertakes the investigation of the official websites of the SAARC nations pertaining to information regarding food tourism.

Many countries across the world have tended to promote the attraction of food in tourism and treat it as an important resource. The SAARC nations have exquisite food heritage which if explored fully will result into efflorescence in tourism sector. The spicy, delectable and unique array of Sri Lankan dishes with an influence from Arab traders, Portuguese, Dutch and British colonists; Bangladesh platter with plenty of fresh vegetables, great varieties of pithas (rice cakes), Fish or meat Jhol (liquidated, may be with different kind of vegetables) with plenty of chopped spices; simple and subtle Nepali Food blended with Himalayan spices and herbs; splendid Bhutanese dishes embellished with ubiquitous chillies; richer, fuller mouth feel culinary experience of Pakistani food; rich assorted traditional cuisine of Maldives with foreign influence; Afghanistan cuisine with generous mélange of various foreign and native influences; and India's vast culinary culture reflecting influences of Persian, Middle Eastern, Central Asian and Southeast Asian cuisines have all to captivate the delicious culinary experience of tourists.

Despite being scrumptious and distinct array of cuisines, the South Asian cuisine is yet to mark its presence at the global stage of international cuisine. The reason is this extraordinary aspect has not yet been included as an important facet in marketing SAARC tourism. It is quintessential to nurture this aspect because food tourism is picking up pace all over the world. SAARC nations must include food promotions in overseas tourism promotions along

with other facets of tourism that allure tourists to the countries. Kivela and Crofts [2006] suggested that for developing the gastronomy tourism niche for tourists; it wasn't enough to simply offer a gastronomy experience while visiting a destination. The tourist must be made aware about the glory of the local cuisine and associated culture through media and internet. The capacity of government websites to introduce and advertise traditional and local foods, restaurants, gastronomic tours, recipes and culinary cultures was explored [Horng and Tsai, 2010]. Therefore, recently the researches regarding advertisements and marketing tools which were applied to culinary tourism development mainly contained the exploration of brochures and web-sites.

Sensing the importance of the websites in the promotion of food tourism for any destination, the present study aims at the comparative content analysis of the official websites of SAARC nations to evaluate their performance from the perspective of promotion of culinary heritage on world-wide web.

## II. Review of Literature

The website is taken as marketing collateral of paramount importance for hospitality and tourism industry. Schmidt and Spreng [1996] opined that information available to travellers should be pertinent to their travel intentions to help them making travel decisions. As an example, a website dedicated to promoting culinary tourism should not be limited to information such as culinary regions, ingredients, recipes, and culinary traditions, but prompt travellers towards action, that is consider booking a culinary-in-

spired vacation. Suggested itineraries, dates for key food festivals, and contact information for cooking classes are examples of information that can be included to tempt travellers to choose a culinary tourism destination. Subsequently, travellers tend to tap into direct information sources such as destination websites, travel collateral, and websites of tourism businesses located at the chosen destination. Mackay and Fesenmaier [1997] also underlined the influence of the websites on prospective tourists' minds citing that pictures given on the websites are an effective means of inducing imagery as these create expressions and a desire for image verification through experience. Kivela and Crofts [2006] have also opined the internet as the main marketing tool and source of knowledge about local food opportunities in destinations used by the tourists. Horng and Tsai [2010] cited that tourism websites, especially destination websites, have the potential to assist visitors in planning their trip and developing their opportunities for exposure to local food and cuisine. Horng and Tsai [2010] and Fahirani *et al.* [2011] further deliberated that Images are an important means to convey information about a destination's attributes and are extensively used by government tourism websites to make the "invisible visible, the unnoticed noticed, the complex simple, and the simple complex. Farahani *et al.* found that image-based data was overwhelmingly travellers' preferred type of information, followed by textual data and voice-based data. Therefore, they suggested that government agencies should create websites that are well-designed, eye catching, and yet present crucial information for travellers to make informed travel decisions.

Sigala [2011] assumed texts and visual representations displayed on websites play a major role in shaping and guiding visitors' behaviour and expenditure. Leung *et al.* [2011] assumed the crucial role of the websites in image formation and Jeong *et al.* [2012] also took websites as important agents of cognitive image formation. Therefore, it seems imperative for the government culinary tourism promotional websites to conceive attractive imagery showcasing signature culinary dishes and culinary assets of the destination. Singh, Milne, and Hull [2012] asserted that the content of tourism websites plays an essential role in enhancing linkages between tourism and local food in destinations. Thus, the manner in which the culinary asset of a destination is being promoted on destination website influences its consumption and formation of the linkage between the tourism sector and the producers of local food. The present study undertakes the evaluation of websites of SAARC nations on their web information on food tourism.

### III. Objectives

On the basis of the literature review, the following objectives are framed for the given model:

- To undertake content analysis of the official tourism websites of SAARC nations and group them into dimensions based on their thematic similarity
- To conduct an in depth search pertaining to food tourism and its promotion on the official websites of SAARC nations
- To compare the performance of the official tourism websites of SAARC nations
- To suggest the remedial measures catalyz-

ing the food tourism promotion through websites

## IV. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Population and Sample

The target population and Sample for the given study is the official tourism websites of SAARC nations. These are:

<Table 2> Name and URL Address of SAARC Nations

S.No.	Country	URL Address (web address)
1.	Afghanistan	<a href="http://moic.gov.af/en">http://moic.gov.af/en</a>
2.	Bangladesh	<a href="http://tourismboard.gov.bd/">http://tourismboard.gov.bd/</a>
3.	Bhutan	<a href="http://www.tourism.gov.bt/">http://www.tourism.gov.bt/</a>
4.	India	<a href="http://www.incredibleindia.org/">http://www.incredibleindia.org/</a> , * <a href="http://www.tourism.gov.in/">http://www.tourism.gov.in/</a>
5.	Maldives	<a href="http://www.visitmaldives.com/en">http://www.visitmaldives.com/en</a> , * <a href="http://tourism.gov.mv/">http://tourism.gov.mv/</a>
6.	Nepal	<a href="http://welcomenepal.com">http://welcomenepal.com</a> , * <a href="http://www.tourism.gov.np/">http://www.tourism.gov.np/</a>
7.	Pakistan	<a href="http://www.tourism.gov.pk/">http://www.tourism.gov.pk/</a>
8.	Sri Lanka	<a href="http://www.srilanka.travel/">http://www.srilanka.travel/</a> , * <a href="http://www.slttda.gov.lk/index.html">http://www.slttda.gov.lk/index.html</a>

Note) It is pertinent to mention here that India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka maintain two official portals for Tourism one for Perspective Tourists and Other for Stake Holders, Department and Ministry related information. Thus Portals marked with \* focusing on Tourists have been selected for this study.

## V. Method

The present study incorporates the modified Balanced Scorecard (BSC) approach to evaluate the performance of sample websites. It is one of the most popular tools and was developed by Morrison, Taylor, Morrison and Morrison in 1999 based on of Kalpan and Norton's work for website evaluation in hospitality industry. Morrison

*et al.* [1999] ascertained four balanced perspectives for the comprehensive evaluation of the websites of small Scottish hotels: technical, customer, internal and marketing having 25 Critical Success Factors. This was the first tourism study that utilized BSC approach in web site evaluation. This approach was thereafter implemented in evaluating the websites of various hospitality and tourism businesses in modified versions to fit the specific needs of different industrial sectors or geographical regions. So and Morrison [2004] also adopted modified BSC model in their study. Kline, Morrison, and John [2004] and Dahiya and Duggal [2013] also used modified approach in their studies for evaluation of websites.

For the present study, a structured questionnaire is developed consisting of various questions. These variables were drawn from the review of literature and then finalized using Delphi technique with useful and practical inputs of the representatives from industry and academia. The questions were set under the following perspectives:

1. Technical Aspect
2. User Friendliness and Site Attractiveness
3. Tourism Effectiveness
4. Food Tourism Effectiveness

It is pertinent to mention here, though the study focuses on evaluating the websites for food tourism, it becomes imperative to cover criterion one, two and three of above perspectives since, the effectiveness of the fourth criterion is also dependent on the first three perspectives. The set of 88 Critical Success factors is tailored, based upon the extensive web search and previous scales with genuine modifications. The website

evaluation form is a modified version of the forms developed by Mills and Morrison [as cited in Morrison *et al.*, 2004] and by Yuan *et al.* [2004]. The critical success factors are a compiled list of information services that are offered on the websites. Although, they outnumber those used by Murphy *et al.* [1996] and Morrison *et al.* [2004] and Yuan *et al.* [2004], many of them are similar to the previous studies. Owing to rapid growth in information and technology, this search tries to find and include as many information services as possible nowadays.

### 5.1 Technical Aspect Perspective

To evaluate the technical qualities of a website, objective measures like Net Mechanic ([www.netmechanic.com](http://www.netmechanic.com)) are easily available. It assesses the five criteria originally used by Morrison *et al.* [1999]. 5-point Likert scale with 5 being the best is used to rate these criteria. The Critical success factors under this perspective along with the technical rating scale are given in table no.3 in Appendix-1.

### 5.2 User-friendliness and Site Attractiveness Perspective

It comprises of three criterions: ease of contact, ease of navigation and site attractiveness with 25 items under them. From here onwards, for all the three perspectives The Morrison *et al.* [1999] measurements scales are changed from Likert formats to Dichotomous yes/no questions to indicate the presence or absence of critical success factors since it aids reducing the level of potential evaluator subjectivity. (Refer to table no. 4 appendix-1).

### 5.3 Tourism Effectiveness Perspective

To promote tourism, an effective website has to be informative and interactive fetching all the details about the tourist destination. With 35 CSFs, these are also evaluated with yes/no responses. (Refer to table no. 5 appendix-1)

### 5.4 Food Tourism Effectiveness Perspective

To promote Food tourism, an effective website has to be informative and interactive fetching all the details about the culinary tourism of tourist destination. With 23 CSFs, these are also evaluated with yes/no responses. (Refer to table no. 6 appendix-1). Each perspective, including the technical viewpoint, has weighted score of 25 points with a total weighted score of 100 points for the four perspectives combined. The above analysis has been conducted during period of May and June 2014.

## VI. Findings and Discussions

The weighted scores of the above mentioned eight SAARC nations are found out after evaluating their websites for the given four perspectives in <Table 3>. From the <Table 3>, it is clearly discernible that official tourism websites of six SAARC nations were found to be functional whereas Afghanistan does not have the official tourism website; rather they have the website of Ministry of Information and Culture that does not suffice the information needs of the tourists. And the official tourism website of Nepal that is meant for perspective tourists could not open and the one opened was of Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Nepal does not fulfil the information needs of the tourists.

On an average, the official tourism websites of six SAARC nations performed the best in User-Friendliness and Website Attractiveness Perspective with a mean score of 23.33 out of

<Table 3> Weighted Score Results of the Website Evaluation

SAARC NATIONS	Technical Perspective 25 POINTS	User Friendliness and Site Attractiveness Perspective 25 POINTS	Tourism Effectiveness Perspective 25 POINTS	Food Tourism Effectiveness Perspective 25 POINTS	TOTAL SCORE 100 POINTS
AFGHANISTAN	*	*	*	*	*
BANGLADESH	17	22	17.14	4.34	60.48
BHUTAN	10	24	17.14	2.17	53.31
INDIA	19	22	20.71	11.95	73.66
MALDIVES	09	23	15	0	47
NEPAL	**	**	**	**	**
PAKISTAN	15	25	15	1.08	56.08
SRI LANKA	17	24	22.85	2.17	66.02
MEAN	14.5	23.33	17.97	5.24	

\* Afganistan does not have the official tourism website., The above listing of Nations is in Alphabetical order.

\*\* The official tourism website of Nepal could not open with different browsers Mozilla Firefox, Google Chrome and Internet Explorer. During the evaluation period while conducting this research i.e May-June 2014.



maximum 25 points. The sample websites are attractive, interactive and embellished with good colour combinations, resplendent backgrounds that reinforce the text and uncluttered pages that help drawing the attention of users. Most of the websites are found to be user-friendly fulfilling the information needs of the stakeholders to ease the contact by giving telephone number, email address and also easily navigated with navigation tools on all the pages that not only saves the time of the stakeholders but also help them making quick decisions on instant browsing. Certain websites do not have the features like site map and FAQs to help satisfy the inquisitiveness of the stakeholders. The website of Sri Lanka is unique in providing a Hotline Number too at its homepage.

For a tourist willing to visit a new destination, the complete knowledge regarding the tourist destination circumscribing its history, geography, culture, seasonal activities, events, festivals, sporting activities, recreational amusements, maps, tour packages, tourist regulations, weather information and travel tips, visa regulations and multilingual brochures is of utmost importance. It is only through the official website of the country from where such type of information needs of the stakeholders be sufficed while making a decision to visit the destination. Under the Tourism Perspective, the effectiveness of the sample website to provide information on such above mentioned variables is measured. On Tourism Effectiveness Perspective, the websites performed relatively well with a mean score of 17.97. The website of Sri Lanka scored the highest points 22.85 closely followed by India with 20.71. The websites of Bangladesh and Maldives lack in providing information about "Travel Packages"

which is crucial while prospective tourists plan for travel to a destination. There is no "link to the destinations" available on the website of Maldives. Even the specifications regarding "Visa Regulations" and "Visa Formalities" not given on the websites of Maldives and Pakistan. The website of Pakistan could not able to open the link detailing Restaurant and Accommodation Information and even Maps and Direction are not found. The features like "Tourist Regulations", "Share Key" and "Emergency Services Contact/Information" are found missing from most of the websites.

The website of Sri Lanka has some unique features like "Emergency Numbers", "Travel Apps" and "Travel Blog" with tourists' feedback on various destinations. Indian website has the "Women Security Advisory" at its Homepage and is embellished with very interactive Maps and impressive "Virtual Tours" almost given on every destination link. It is also linked with every State Government Website that has all to cater to the tourist information needs. Indian and Sri Lankan website also has hyperlinks to "Ticket Booking" @ air, bus, car, rail and hotel to ease the travel for the visitors. "Management of the Websites" is the weakest dimension under Tourism Effectiveness Perspective.

A technically sound hassle-free website with negligible number of bad links, error free HTML base, great browser compatibility and less loading time is a neat platform to attract the attention of the navigators along with holding their interest as it fetches required information in just one click. On Technical Effectiveness Perspective, the website of India scored highest with weighted score of 19 and is found to be technically sound and the lowest on the scale was the

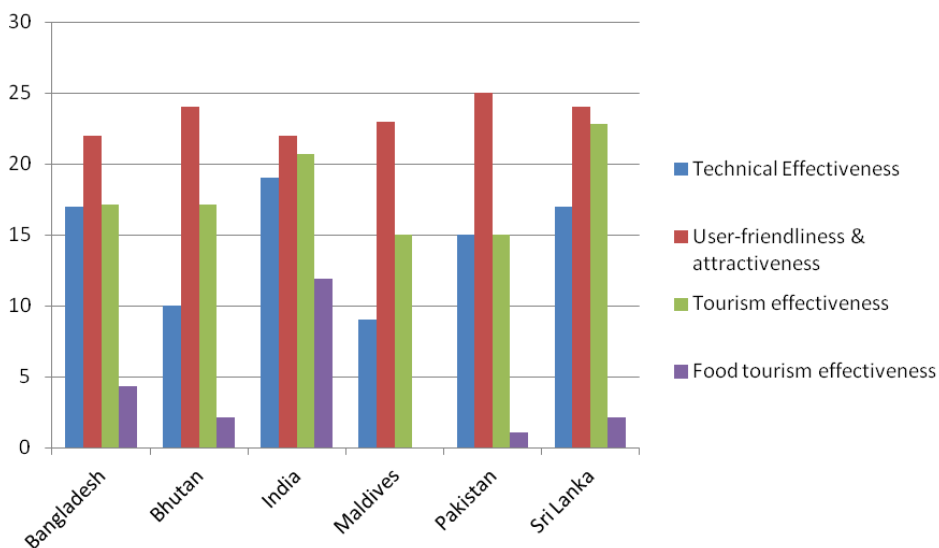
website of Maldives with just 9 points. Most of the websites have issues with browser compatibility and take much loading time.

On Food Tourism Perspective, the mean score of the six websites is merely 5.24, almost negligible and thus needs focus by the SAARC Nations to promote food tourism on the websites.

The SAARC nations are not only rich in natural heritage but also have exquisite food heritage which is if marketed and promoted properly through the official websites of the nations, will surely result into efflorescence in tourism. The information regarding traditional food/drinks, eating customs, food recipes, hygiene standards, food events, restaurants and famous eateries, and food shows along with attracting pictures and videos if given on the websites will surely suffice the information needs of culinary tourists across the countries and stimulate them to make buying decisions. While tracking the performance of websites of SAARC nations on the above mentioned variables of food tourism

perspective, the website of India only is found to score around 50%. It has dedicated rich texts, amazing pictures, glossary of recipes and amalgamated the glory of traditional food with food philosophy towards the food promotion to lure gastronomic tourists. Rest all show the negligible efforts made by the countries to ameliorate tourism from Food Promotion Perspective. The websites of Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan gives no reference and description of food. None of the websites has any description of the food, recipes, and links to celebrity chefs, food shows or food events information to promote their gastronomy assets at global platform.

So, from the above findings, it is clearly visible that the official tourism websites of SAARC nations failed miserably on providing information on food tourism. Though, these South Asian countries have mighty legacy of culinary wealth that if can be properly marketed on the websites may lead to unscrupulous growth in tourism industry in South Asian Region.



<Figure 2> Comparative Total Weighted Mean Score of all the Perspectives of SAARC Nations

## VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study is a modest attempt to add an exploratory data in the research field of food tourism. More empirical researches have been required to conduct on the food tourism from the different perspectives in order to add theoretical approaches, model and framework in the existing food tourism. The last few decades have witnessed tourism as main sector of global economy owing to its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product of different countries as well a platform for huge employment generation. The tourist consumer behaviour plays an important role while choosing for a tourist destination and the image of a tourist destination plays a crucial role in influencing the tourist behaviour. The present study pin points on enhancement of the image of a tourist destination online by supplying all the information regarding its tourism resources specifically focussing on food tourism and the culinary heritage of a destination so as to well inform the potential tourists and thus shaping their decision to make a choice for the destination. The consumer choice is affected by the brand image transmitted to the market and so the present study can be considered to be useful in destination management and development especially in the context of supplying all the necessary information regarding destination's culinary heritage and food tourism via its official websites. The study is also valuable for enrichment of curriculum of culinary tourism and marketing strategies. Also, the present study provides groundwork for further research focusing on food tourism, destination management, destination development, tourist attraction and its web presence.

Tourism is an information-based product. Internet plays a vital role in the distribution, promotion and marketing of all the aspects of tourism. There is no doubt that the promotion of the resources by the tourist destinations is a very crucial activity. The potential tourists make their decisions of visiting the tourist destinations in just one click sitting at their homes by mapping the contents and services offered online. The SAARC nations are rich in cultural, natural and food heritage but yet to tap the full potential of tourism. From the spicy delectable array of Srilankan dishes to Bangladeshi delicious platter; from Nepal's simple subtle flavours to splendid flavours and spices of Bhutan and Pakistan; from richly assorted Maldives cuisine to India's vast culinary cultures-may prove to be a gourmet paradise for culinary tourists but these are not marketed properly on the official websites of these nations. The lack of interactive services and functions might prove a serious handicap in the coming time. If the brand image of these destinations is amalgamated with various degrees of gastronomic values, these destinations will become influential and favourite amongst the tourists across the globe.

The comparative content analysis of the websites of SAARC nations is undertaken to find out their strengths and weakness pertaining to provision of information on food tourism. Overall, the sample websites perform below average leaving much scope for improvement specifically in the areas of tourism and food tourism effectiveness. Based upon its tourism policy and seeing the way, the European countries are exploring their tourism potential by global marketing on ubiquitous internet, it is suggested that Afghanistan should have an official tourism website incorporating all the features that

are fundamental to fulfil the information needs of the tourists to raise its economy through tourism. The official tourism website of Bangladesh stood third in overall performance amongst eight SAARC nations with total of 60.48 weighted score boasting its robustness in user-friendliness and attractiveness. The careful investigation into the website pin-points towards need of incorporating some vital features from tourism perspective like information regarding travel packages; tourist regulation; special local products and souvenirs; traditional and featured food with recipes; culinary assets and culinary traditions and links to culinary websites and celebrity chefs. It must be multilingual to cater to the needs of international tourists and has tourist brochure online with downloadable features. The official tourism website of Bhutan is found to be customer-oriented and attractive but technically weak with issues of browser incompatibility and more loading time. In order to explore its tourism potential to the fullest, it is suggested to conceive detailed information on its web portal regarding transportation, shopping and tourist regulations along with contact detail for emergency services for ensuring tourist security. It should not be merely limited to three language options i.e. English, Japanese and Russian but multiple language options to be accessible to global tourists around the world. It is also suggested to assimilate the detailed information about nation's food heritage, cuisines, recipes, food customs, and food events and shows as well quick links to culinary websites, renowned chefs and food forums to promote gastronomy tourism on international stage.

The official tourism website of India has performed the best in the comparative content analysis of the SAARC nations marking a total

of 73.66 points boasting to be technically robust, user-centred and attractive. Still it leaves the scope of improvement by inculcating certain features like "FAQ", "Sitemap" and provision of contact detail of Emergency services. In order to make a sound ground for culinary tourism marketing, it is also suggested to give details of international cuisines (ethnic/fusion cuisines), mobile apps for users, food happenings and on-line booking to food shows and events as well links to nation's culinary websites and celebrity chefs. The official tourism website of Maldives scored the lowest with less than 50 points on the scale and therefore, it is suggested to be technically sound, have better browsing compatibility with negligible spelling errors on its web portal. It is also recommended to give the detailed information about festivals, events, food shows, travel packages, shopping arcades, visa regulations and formalities. It should also have quick links to destinations with stimulating texts detailing the attractions with travel tips. It is also proposed to give in detail the information about food, recipes, culinary wealth of Maldives, representative chefs, food forums and food events and happening with impressive imagery on its web portal to satisfy the inquisitiveness of the tourists.

Though bragging for being user friendly and attractive, the official tourism website of Pakistan needs much improvement to be an effective an informative tourism website. It is recommended to assimilate the information and quick links to accommodation, maps, tourist regulations, travel tips, visa regulations and formalities. It should also provide emergency numbers and brochure request facilities. The information related to country's culinary wealth, recipes, food culture with quick links to culinary websites

will surely help promoting the food tourism if marketed properly on the official website. The official website of Sri Lanka scored total score of 66.02, a daunting second place after India. It has the ingredients to be user-friendly and attractive as well as tourism-informative but needs much improvement in promoting food tourism as there is hardly any information provided pertaining to Sri Lankan food, cuisines, recipes, food shows, events, food promotion news, food traditions, celebrity chefs, food forums and links to culinary websites.

Overall, the websites are recommended to improve by conceiving following generic suggestions:

- Management of websites with information of its up gradation and links to web partners;
- Decreased Loading time and zeroing the bad links;
- Browser compatibility, least spelling errors and technically sound;
- Emergency Services and FAQs;
- Comprehensive detail about destinations,

- travel packages, tourist & visa regulations;
- Facilities for downloading Brochure, tour guides;
- Quick links to ticket booking @ air, rail, car, bus and hotel;
- Information regarding food culture, food recipes, traditional, representative and featured cuisines;
- Stimulating photos of food and people enjoying food with rich texts;
- Quick links to celebrity chefs, culinary professionals and websites promoting nations' culinary assets;
- Information pertaining to food happenings, food shows and events and as well their online booking facility.

By adopting such remedial measures, these websites will definitely have all the ingredients of a successful website and thus cater to information needs of tourists striving for gastronomy, culinary and food tourism and other stakeholders more efficiently and effectively.

## ⟨References⟩

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## 〈Appendix-1〉

### 1. Technical Aspect Perspective

<Table 3> Critical Success Factors for evaluating Technical Aspect of Sample websites

Critical Success Factors	5-point Rating	4-point Rating	3-point Rating	2-point Rating	1-point Rating
Line Check	0 bad links	1 bad link	2 bad links	3 bad links	>3 bad Links
HTML Check	0 errors	≤ 6 errors	≤ 12 errors	≤ 18 errors	> 18 errors
Browser Compatibility	0 problems	≤ 4 problems	≤ 8 problems	≤ 12 problems	> 12 Problems
Load Time	≤ 13 Seconds	≤ 24 Seconds	≤ 35 seconds	≤ 46 seconds	> 46 Seconds
Spell Check	0 mis-Spellings	≤ 5% Mis-spellings	≤ 10% Mis-spellings	≤ 15% Mis-spellings	> 15% Mis-spellings

Note) 5 items to be tested with a maximum of 25 raw points. The maximum weighted score is 25 points. The form is modified from the standardized website evaluation form developed by Mills and Morrison [as cited in Morrison, Taylor, and Douglas, 2004] and by Yuan, Morrison, Linton, Feng, and Jeon [2004].

### 2. User-friendliness and Site Attractiveness Perspective

<Table 4> Critical Success Factors for evaluating User Friendliness and Site Attractiveness of Sample websites

Critical Success Factors	Yes	No
Ease of Contact		
Telephone Number		
Mailing Address		
E-mail		
Fax Number		
FAQ		
Site Map/Index		
Follow us		
Ease of Navigation		
Clear & Effective Navigation Tools on each pages		
Availability of Home Button on all pages		
Limited Vertical Scrolling		
Limited Horizontal Scrolling		
Availability of a search engine for website content		
Links to required plug-ins provided		
Critical Success Factors		
Site Attractiveness		
Clear and Readable text		
Clear and Uncluttered pages		
Sufficient contrast between background and text		
Effective and aesthetically appealing backgrounds		
Images reinforcing text content		
Use of color to improve the visual appeal of the site		
Effective use of web page space		
Hyperlinks Readability		
Good Quality pictures		
Audio		
Visual/Virtual Tour		
Photo Album		

Note) 25 items to be tested with a maximum of 25 raw points. The maximum weighted score is 25 points. The form is modified from the standardized website evaluation form developed by Mills and Morrison [as cited in Morrison, Taylor, and Douglas, 2004] and by Yuan, Morrison, Linton, Feng, and Jeon [2004].

### 3. Tourism Effectiveness Perspective

<Table 5> Critical Success Factors for evaluating the Tourism Effectiveness of the Sample websites

Critical Success Factors	Yes	No
Information Dimension		
Country Geography		
Country History		
Country Culture		
Tourist Attraction information		
Events/Festivals Information		
Restaurant/Accommodation Information		
Event Calendar		
Entertainment Information (Festivals/sports/recreation)		
Maps and Direction		
Travel Packages		
Travel Guides/Brochures		
Tourist Regulations		
Transportation Information		
Links to Tourist Destination		
Shopping Information		
Travel Tips and Facilitation		
Weather Information		
Special Local products and Souvenir Information		
Accessibility		
Visa on arrival		
List of Embassies		
Visa Formalities		
Communication Dimension		
E mail News letter		
Press Release		
Announcements		
Search Function		
Brochure Request Capabilities		
Share Key		
Destination Logo/Slogan		
Multilingual		
Links to Social Media		
Management of Website		
Last update		
Links to partners		
Help		
E-shop		
Website Feedback form		

Note) 35 items to be tested with a maximum of 35 raw points. The maximum weighted score is 25 points. The form is modified from the standardized website evaluation form developed by Mills and Morrison [as cited in Morrison, Taylor, and Douglas, 2004] and by Yuan, Morrison, Linton, Feng, and Jeon [2004].



#### 4. Food Tourism Effectiveness Perspective

<Table 6> Critical Success Factors for evaluating the Food Tourism Effectiveness of Sample websites

Critical Success Factors	Yes	No
Food Culture Information Dimension		
Traditional Foods/Drinks Information		
Representative Cuisines		
Featured Food and Drinks (seasonal/festive)		
Eating Manner/Local/Food Dinning Customs or etiquettes		
Representative of culinary professionals who have partly contributed to food culture identity of nation		
Food Information		
Information about representative cuisines		
International Cuisines (ethnic/fusion cuisines)		
Featured food recipes		
Mobile application		
Hygiene Standards related information		
Food Promotion via Marketing		
Texts and Articles for food tourism marketing		
Photos of people eating at restaurant		
Photos of food/Food Wall Papers		
Articles about promotion of food tour organizers		
News about food related happenings (food shows/ food festivals etc.)		
Links to celebrity chefs and websites promoting nations culinary assets		
Videos/Online channels promoting food		
Food Search Friendliness and Customer Orientation		
Easy search about type of restaurant		
Food categories (breakfast, lunch, dinner)		
Hotels and Popular Eateries		
Online booking to the food events / shows		
Links to regional dishes		
Food Discussion Forum		

Note) 23 items to be tested with a maximum of 23 raw points. The maximum weighted score is 25 points. The form is modified from the standardized website evaluation form developed by Mills and Morrison [as cited in Morrison, Taylor, and Douglas, 2004] and by Yuan, Morrison, Linton, Feng, and Jeon [2004].

## ◆ About the Authors ◆



Dr. Ashish Dahiya

Dr. Ashish Dahiya is Director, Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management (IHTM), Maharshi Dayanand University (MDU) Rohtak, Haryana. He has served as an Associate Professor at IHTM-MDU, Reader in Hotel and Tourism Management at HNB Garhwal Central University Uttarakhand and has been Founder Member of Department of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra Ranchi India and UAE Campus. He has four books to his credit. He is the Founder Editor of Journal of Hospitality Application and Research, has been Managing Editor of Journal of Tourism-An International Journal and Associate Editor of International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Systems. Having his Ph.D in Tourism and Hotel Management, he is Gold Medalist in M.Sc-Hotel Management as well as Post Graduate Diploma in Tourism and Hotel Management. He is also Master's in Tourism Management. He has been an alumnus of National Council of Hotel Management-an apex body under Ministry of Tourism, Govt of India and has attended FDP at Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode (IIMK). He has organized about thirty seminars and conferences, various workshops; FDP's and serves on International Board of Various Journals of Hospitality and Tourism in Malaysia, Australia, USA, Africa and India. He is a frequent figure in Seminars and Conferences and has many research papers to his credit. He has been associated with Oberoi Hotels and Resorts, Taj Hotels Palaces and Resorts, Indian Tourism Development Corporation and The Lalit of hotels Group in Industry. He serves on various boards/committees of Hotel and Tourism Management in leading universities in India such as IGNOU, Uttarakhand Open University, Kumaon University, Himachal Pradesh University, VMOU-Kota, University of Patanjali, Dev Sanskriti University to name a few. He has also been the member of various expert committees of UGC and AICTE. He has been conferred with 'Gem of Hospitality Award' by HNB Garhwal Central University, Recipient of Teacher of the Year Award by Pearson Teaching Awards 2013, has felicitations and appreciations from Vice Chancellor Uttarakhand Open University, Birla Institute of Technology to name a few. He is Jt. Secretary Indian Hospitality Congress, Life Member Indian Society for Technical Education and Life Member Indian Tourism Congress. He can be contacted on [drashishdahiya@gmail.com](mailto:drashishdahiya@gmail.com) or [facebook.com/drashishdahiya](https://www.facebook.com/drashishdahiya)



Ms. Shelley Duggal

Ms. Shelley Duggal-is Visiting Faculty and Research Scholar at the Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management (IHTM), Maharshi Dayanand University (MDU) Rohtak, Haryana. She is a university topper in M.Sc Hotel Management as well Gold Medalist in Diploma in French. She has attended many National and International Conferences and Seminars and also presented many research papers. She has many research papers of national and international repute to her credit. She has been awarded with "The Aspiring Researcher of Hospitality, Travel and Tourism Award-2014" by Indian Hospitality Congress. She is also an executive member of Corporate Communications Division of Indian Hospitality Congress. She can be contacted on [duggal2000@yahoo.com](mailto:duggal2000@yahoo.com) or [facebook.com/Shelley Duggal](https://www.facebook.com/ShelleyDuggal).

Submitted : June 21, 2014  
1st revision : January 09, 2015  
2nd revision : February 21, 2015  
Accepted : March 03, 2015