

Emerging Food Tourism in India : Are Foodscape Destinations Strategically Branded? A Perspective

*Sabari Shankar R.*¹

Abstract

Food tourism is becoming very popular in India as the country possesses a greater linkage of food with culture, tradition, heritage, health, and so on. Tourists across the globe prefer India as their choice for satisfying their food motives. This form of tourism is highly profitable and viable to promote the other tourism types. Though food destinations are branded effectively, a strategic approach of inculcating the critical aspects of sustainability, such as regeneration, rediscovery, and circular economy, in the branding process is unseen. This perspective note indicates the relevance and importance of including those critical factors in strategic food destination branding process for a sustainable future. The perspective evoked in-depth and doable thoughts of blending the sustainability elements in branding the food destinations based on the self-reflection inferences, research readings, and interactions with the destination management organizations and marketers.

Keywords : food tourism, sustainability, agri tourism, regenerative tourism, circular economy, strategic branding

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Food tourism, a lucrative sub-segment in the tourism market, has been witnessing a huge inflow of tourists across the globe (Mariani & Okumus, 2022). Nevertheless, the industry and aligning research outcomes have been focusing on the various paradigms of food tourism that would significantly contribute to the tourists' memorable experiences and changing expectations, perhaps in the highly volatile and competitive external environment. Food tourism has been linked to critical factors such as cultural values, heritage elements, varied emotions, people's lifestyles, and environmental changes. The pandemic has been fortified as a core element of other forms of tourism. That is, the food elements in the destinations determine tourists' overall tour experiences. Food, its types, and seasonality are often backed with historic and purposive stories, and mainly in a competitive tourism-intensive country like India, they are plenty. Foodscapes, though with varied scales of service operations in tourism, has been perceived with distinct value propositions and differentiation based on its locations. Food destinations in coastal areas, mountain chains, villages, cities, and other classified geographies, inculcate various emotions, culminating into memorable experiences. Tourists' consumption of tourism resources does imbibe food elements, and their destination choice process is also routed through the food attributes at times as tourists consider the local food as a critical element in their tour.

Perhaps, food also plays a compelling role in the destination image formation process. Many research evidences inferred this fact, and destination markers implied it in their marketing campaigns. Foodscapes, organized or unorganized, local or international, single segment specialization or full market coverage, fall into destination attractions and value delivery processes. Eventually, the pandemic has signified the food tourism market positively, with the emergence of tourists' motives associating food with health and, in turn, boosting the

¹ Assistant Professor (Marketing), M 208, Second Floor, SRM College of Management, SRM Institute of Science and Technology (SRM University), Kattankulathur Campus, Chengalpattu District - 603 203, Tamil Nadu. (Email : sabarishankar92@gmail.com) ; ORCID iD : <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2463-2355>

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tourism economies mainly with regard to traditional health-oriented food. However, the market is exploring various opportunities to expand food tourism avenues in India. With India being a country with bestowed food culture, heritage, and history, the likeliness of Indian food destinations catering to a sustainable future is yet to be explored. There are various causes that require destination marketers, researchers, and policymakers, mainly in the foodscape arena, to foster the emerging challenges, turn those into opportunities being agile for beneficial outcomes that not only enhance the industry's effectiveness in the VUCA environment but also escalate the economies of destinations and associated stakeholders. This perspective intends to analyze the potentiality of food tourism in India, mainly to brand those destinations strategically for a sustainable tourism future.

The term 'foodscape' connotes a wider meaning; 'food' describes the variety, taste, and methods of preparation, and 'scape' includes the people, place, and environment. There are many other forms of defining foodscapes. However, the ultimate perspective of the foodscape should be wider with the purpose more than elements of meaning. The tourism industry is confronting a huge sustainability challenge; researchers and destination marketers have attempted many reflective frameworks. One of the most essential characteristics of such reflection is the tourists' response to those sustainability attempts. Many strategic formulations have been considered business models and associated with social responsibility in managing tourism destinations. However, research has indicated that sustainability should also be achieved through investing thoughts in tourists' perceptions. If foodscapes inculcate the elements of stories, values, people, and the environment, could the sustainability thought be strategically included as an element in branding food tourism? This quest seems highly difficult as the Indian destinations possess varied organized and unorganized food venues. However, here exists an opportunity for the food destination makers that most of the unorganized foodscapes — mainly those in the tourism destinations representing culture, heritage, history, seasonality, and stories of those have significant viability to inject such perception. For example, tourists prefer local food at local foodscapes, which are distinctive from their routine economic class, to conceive a memorable tour experience. Fortunately, Indian destinations have a plethora of such unorganized food outlets specializing in one of those elements. Those food service providers might not have the grubstake bandwidth for investments in branding, however, they have high possibilities to inculcate the sustainability elements in their specialized food items of seasonality, tradition, culture, and stories.

While food tourism is also associated with the geographic units, many destinations though not branded, are known among tourists. This is mainly due to the penetration of digital sources of information. There are many geographic forms of tourism that are closely aligned with the food tourism segments, such as rural tourism, agricultural tourism, regenerative tourism, responsible tourism, and religious tourism. While religious and rural tourism possesses the core elements of food tourism, there is an opportunity for other forms of strategic branding as well. Agricultural tourism, a novel form of tourism for the niche tourist segment, caters to those who are motivated to seek experience by visiting agricultural farms or the areas to acquire the functioning of the agriculture processes and operations for recreation, education, and entertainment experiences. This form of tourism is emerging across the globe, colliding with the agriculture and tourism businesses that serve the diverse motive of tourists and evoke revenue generation avenues. Since agriculture tourism entails vegetation and crop cultivation, which in turn is associated with food, this paradigm of strategic branding of food tourism will enhance the sustainability reach in the tourist market. Vertical farming, organic agriculture, techno-agricultural production, etc., have attracted many tourists across the globe, and Indian designations have huge relevance and viability to competitively position with food image inculcated in agri-tourism. Thus, syncing food, agriculture, and sustainability require a strategic branding framework.

Value of destination offerings does not only inculcate tangible tourism attributes, but also includes the intangible attractions; the totality of tourism products (destinations). The pandemic has indicated a hefty emphasis on managing the sustainable value of tourism offerings as those are meticulously aligned with natural resources. Many research studies focus on the sustainable behavior of tourists and the perspectives of managing

destinations with sustainable thoughts. However, a new form of tourism that has an upright relationship with sustainability is yet to be explored in the Indian context, and perhaps, has huge relevance with food tourism.

A new tourism segment is characterized by the motive of visiting the destinations with the mindset to leave the destinations better than before the visit has evolved lately, which is known as regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2022). This form of tourism also intends tourists to participate rigorously in activities that help nature to retrieve its climate and to revive it to its original qualities. Regenerative tourism can also be identified in sync with rural tourism, agri tourism, and mainly, responsible tourism. In such a context, food tourism elements can be endured with regenerative aspects by imbibing health factors of Indian food destinations. One of the ancestral sayings in India is that food is the primary medicine for a cure, and this perfectly aligns with food tourists' motives as it inculcates the component of health. Here exists an opportunity to evoke medical tourism with regenerative and health components or regenerative tourism with health associations. Thus, a value-based tourism framework is possible with regenerative tourism (Becken & Kaur, 2022). However, this aspect of trying a novel tourism approach is yet to be explored and researched. With the growing regenerative motives of tourists to recover tourism vibrancy, food can be an integral aspect in strategically branding and positioning those destinations (Lai et al., 2018; Mariani & Okumus, 2022; Okumus et al., 2007). Such regenerative tourism mainly constitutes rural destinations possessing the most scarce natural resources. Food elements evoking responsible behavior would suffice in increasing the tourists' inflow in these niche tourists' segments and thereby pave the way to achieve sustainability.

As sustainability is becoming a critical issue in tourism marketing and destination branding, the other most significant form of strategizing the branding process is to foster a 'circular economy.' The current tourism consumption is highly linear in nature; whereas, the circular tourism consumption would definitely achieve sustainability by reducing the tourism resources' consumption and controlling on producing tourism wastes (Rodríguez et al., 2020). This arena could be complex to generate a trend in India with the existing tourists' awareness and behavior towards the sustainable and circular consumption of tourism resources. However, food tourism can contribute to a hassle-free circular economy. Perhaps, food waste, the use of plastic materials for packing and eating food, and non-disposable bottles and bags could be restricted as an initiative for transiting the current form of tourism to disruptive circular tourism. As stated in one of the research notes on sustainability (Sabari Shankar, 2021), destinations can also possess sustainable behavior, which clouts the tourists' behavior and attitude. If the food destinations reflect the circular economy elements in the food ingredients, food packaging and delivery, foodscapes, food branding, food culture and stories, etc., there exists the possibility of reaching the level of a circular economy, mainly in tourism ahead of the other countries. Yet, the research lacks evidence in this paradigm, and destination branding has a void in strategizing. This strategic branding of circular food tourism destinations is arduous with unorganized foodscapes; however, there is a massive opportunity in this segment with its given attributes of local food culture, traditional food items, the heritage and stories associated with the same, the colossal inflow of tourists, and its presence in the destinations for strategic branding of being the food destinations with circular and sustainable thoughts.

Among all these aspects of strategic branding of food tourism, how destination marketers can perform sustainable communication is the most critical quest. Unlike generic brand communication and empowerment for the sustainability of food destinations, the core crux of strategic food destination branding should focus on regenerative tourism and elements of building a circular economy for tourism. This complex marketing execution requires careful analysis of the tourists' perspectives of the emerging forms of tourism, the core motives of sustainability – referring to the regenerative thoughts and building a circular economy, thereby creating a strategic framework for branding the food destinations. This process integrates uncommon perspectives such as unorganized foodscapes, the unique characteristics of food tourism — the culture, heritage, tradition, stories; the need of the hour for the tourism industry — sustainability, regenerating motives, rediscovery, and circular

economy; tourists' characteristics — changing motives, behaviors, and demographics, and finally, the digital inclusions including the information sources, online branding, and digital marketing strategies. All these paradigms are at the initial stages of the research, and at the early stages of marketing and branding efforts; whereas, the intensity of all these is far ahead of the reality, and thus, this perspective has been produced.

Author's Contribution

Dr. Sabari Shankar R. is the sole author of this perspective note. This perspective has been prepared based on the sole research readings, interactions with the destination management organizations and marketers, and self-perspective reflecting inferences.

Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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About the Author

Dr. Sabari Shankar R. is a doctorate in marketing management. His research areas include destination branding, destination sustainability, food tourism, wine tourism, virtual reality in tourism, consumer behavior in market space and marketplace, and digital learning. He has worked with IIM Bangalore, IIM Kozhikode, and Christ University Bengaluru in various research and teaching positions, respectively.