



# Panorama of Bangladeshi Culinary Tourism: Prospect and Challenges

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## Research Article

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The main purpose of this study is to explore the potentials of Bangladeshi Culinary Tourism (CT) and to identify its challenges.

**Methods:** It is a qualitative research based on primary data collected through interviewing different stakeholders of CT including academicians, experienced professionals in the hospitality industry, and government officials.

**Results:** According to the findings of the study CT has a great prospect in terms of entrepreneurship development and employment generation in Bangladesh. However, CT could be threatened due to the lack of skills and entrepreneurial initiatives.

**Implications:** Chefs with innovative skills and sound investment of the entrepreneurs can reveal the potential growth of CT in Bangladesh. Hence, human resource development interventions and time befitting culinary marketing initiatives may facilitate the faster growth of this potential wing of the hospitality and tourism sector.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Culinary Tourism, Food Tourism, Bangladesh.

## 1. Introduction

Culinary tourism (CT) is relatively a new area in the field of hospitality and tourism research. It is considered as a specific tourism experience where people will travel to enjoy different foods of different places. The concept of CT was first coined by Erik Wolf in 2001 and gradually it became popular (Karimi, 2014). The scope of this type of tourism includes one of the most important attractions of traveling experience, and that is food. It is an essential and integral part of any tourism experience for every traveler (Henderson, 2009; Long, 2013). CT is a new way of positioning a tourist destination and may add value to create a competitive advantage for a country. Bangladesh is rich in culinary arts and culture and famous for her different indigenous foods. The culinary treasures of Bangladesh can unveil immense opportunity in the world tourism market if it is developed and promoted with due diligence. This study endeavors to

explore the potentials and possibilities of CT of Bangladesh and extract the challenges related to it.

The term culinary tourism is usually cited as food tourism in many pieces of literature. According to Wolf (2006), CT is a recreational journey to enjoy exclusive and unforgettable local and overseas eating experience. It is a special traveling experience where tourists can acquire the idea of different foods of different locality & culture and eat varieties of food and beverage (Long, 2013). CT is commonly considered as a part of cultural and destination tourism (Wolf, 2006) as the cuisine is one of the expressions of indigenous culture and heritage. It is a fundamental economic driver of every tourism industry. The World Food Travel Association (2016) projected that 93% of tourists of the global tourism market travel for CT. It has become a central attraction of the modern hospitality and tourism industry all over the world and rapidly progressing as an essential sector of tourism (Shalini & Duggal, 2015).

Every country has a unique potential to explore this area because of geographical, natural, and cultural diversity. Variety and exclusiveness of human food habits always make this sector a prospective area of sustainable economic development. According to Meler & Cerovic (2003), one-third of overall global tourism expenditure is related to food and beverage items. So, CT has an extraordinary impact on the overall tourism market and the world economy. As diversity is evident in human food culture, CT has become an essential element of every tourism experience and should be promoted with due diligence for development & expansion (Beer, Edwards, Fernandes & Sampaio, 2002; Sharples & Hall, 2004). It can create differentiation to the tourism industry and capable to offer a unique set of value propositions to the tourists (Horng & Tsai, 2010).

CT is also an excellent asset for countries with a sustainable competitive advantage in the global tourism and hospitality market (Sharples & Hall, 2004; Du Rand & Heath, 2006). However, it is not only an important issue for economic interest but it also offers scope for research and higher studies as well (Hall & Mitchell, 2002; Hjalager & Richards, 2002). However, the issues of CT are sporadic in hospitality & tourism literature. The principal aim of this study is to explore the potentials of culinary tourism in Bangladesh with proper orientation to its necessity and the factors related to success. It also focuses on the impediments related to CT in Bangladesh.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Tourism is a very fast-growing industry of the global economy, to some extent surpassing the growth of many hefty industries like oil and automobiles (Shalini & Duggal, 2015). It creates mass employment and keeps motion in economic activity (Shamsuddoha, 2004; Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016). According to Huda et al., (2012) tourism and hospitality industry is a sector of the national economic importance to Bangladesh and has the potentials to stand beside the RMG, the largest sector of this country in terms of socioeconomic contribution. Bangladesh is also blessed with many dimensions of tourism with the potentials to contribute to the GDP (Das & Chakraborty, 2012). At present, the contribution of this industry is 4.4% to the GDP. It earned \$ 1 million in the year 2013, and it is expected to reach nearly \$ 2 million by 2024. Food is one of the essential contributors to tourism export (Roy & Roy, 2015).

According to Hall & Mitchell (2004), the development of culinary tourism largely depends on the interventions of government and other stakeholders of this industry (Table) and CT could be promoted in Bangladesh considering her rich cultural heritage (Tuhin & Majumder, 2011). Zahra (2012) has coined that the distinctiveness of the Bangladeshi tourism industry largely depends on distinct food and cultural diversity. Its culinary is one of the most essential preconditions to attract international tourists in Bangladesh (Das & Chakraborty, 2012). Culinary Tourism is a new paradigm in the world tourism industry and yet to be popular in Bangladesh as a mainstream tourist attraction. Hence, research on Bangladeshi CT is very rare in the existing literature. This study will search for the potentials of Bangladeshi CT with special reference to its opportunities and challenges. Apart from that, this unique paper will also open a new window of future tourism research in Bangladesh.

### 3. Review of Literature

Raising the global economy has created ample opportunity to extend the scope of CT as an essential element of the tourism industry and the experience of diverse culinary culture has succeeded to meet the demands of tourists. It can play a more significant role in the development of any local, national, and global economy (Richards, 2012). CT is one of the most critical dimensions of the hospitality industry as stated by many researchers like; Dittmer & Griffin, (1993) and Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie (2016). It can be considered as a strategic aperture of national tourism development interventions (Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010). According to Karimi (2014) and Shenoy (2005), the critical function of CT is to promote an experience-based touring that may help to explore indigenous food items of a selected destination and create an opportunity to gain idea & knowledge of food history, culture, food tasting, and cooking in an affordable package deal.

The practice of CT is mostly related to the term "gastronomy", the art, where the science of culinary custom had become a key determinant of incremental progress of tourism industry (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012). However, national distinctiveness of a country and a region can be created and maintained through effective CT programs (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). CT can be extended to a different segment like creating a prospect of learning for the tourists through attending culinary institutions, participating in different events, seminars, fest and competitions (Ignatov & Smith, 2006). According to Horng & Tsai (2012); Boyne et al. (2003) and many others, culinary tourism initiative should be developed under a national strategic framework to gain the competitive advantage in attracting tourists, and the culinary product should be attributed with indigenous culinary culture & effective promotional campaign.

Lin et al. (2011) tried to explore the relationship of Taiwan's culinary with the scope of destination tourism branding issues. They suggested creating a unique identity of food in many dimensions to attract foreign tourists. The theory of the Regional Branding program was coined by Spilková & Fialová (2013) to brand the rural culinary products and suggested to offer a special bundle to promote CT. Indigenous culinary plays a vital role in sustainable tourism development if the tourists experience an authentic food product of that particular locality (Sims, 2009; Boyne et al., 2003). CT is one of the most significant components of tourism marketing strategies to motivate

travelers towards a specific destination rich in culinary arts and culture (Khanam, 2016; Hassan, Yazeed & Abdullah, 2020). Therefore, formulating useful marketing policy frameworks is essential in planning & managing CT schemes and it should be adapted to understand the tourists' behavior, product life cycle development, and effective direct & online marketing programs (Boyne et al., 2003).

Sidali, Kastenholz & Bianchi (2015) and Shenoy (2005) proposed to follow niche marketing philosophy and tools to promote unique rural foods and maintain the authenticity of history, culture, and tradition of indigenous culinary. An exploratory research conducted by Everett & Aitchison (2008) suggested that a sustainable framework of CT is essential to increase tourism spending the travelers through the promotion of environmental sustainability, the celebration of local food culture, protection of indigenous knowledge & custom, and intelligent segmenting & extending of tourism seasons, etc. Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán (2012) conducted another exploratory research in Cordova, Spain, and found only 10% of the tourists visit with the desire of enjoying local cuisines. They also recommended developing strategies to promote gastronomy, to create special culinary routs for the tourists and socioeconomic intervention to patronize rural food culture.

Prospecting CT as a mainstream tourism product cannot be developed in an isolation, rather it should be integrated into other issues of tourism destination in a holistic approach (McKercher et al., 2008). An online survey made an interesting discovery that food image is an important determinant of prospecting CT and tourism decision is highly influenced by the effectiveness of information sources (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). As stated in the article by Smith et al. (2010), the attraction of tourists towards CT is highly influenced by word of oral behavior and repeat purchase intention. Retention of tourists vastly depends on experiencing the unique gastronomy of a tourist destination (Kivela & Crotts, 2005) and there is a positive correlation between tourists' choice of safe and quality food with the visit and revisit to a destination in Bangladesh (Azam, 2010).

In the literature review section, the study tried to discover the prospect and dimensions of CT. It is revealed through the literature review that most of the authors like Boyne et al. (2003); López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares (2012); Spilková & Fialová (2013); Du Rand & Heath (2006) and many others did their research on CT mostly in the developed countries like UK, Finland, Spain, Canada, European Block, South Africa, Czech, Hong Kong, and Australia within their cultural and social context where CT programs are mostly found in general with destination tourism and tourism marketing issues. From the literature review, it is also evident that most of the researchers worked on exploring the potentials of CT in the national economy based on reviewing secondary literature and the opinion of the critical stakeholders of this industry was evaded in their discussions. On exploring the literature, no reference was found exclusively on CT in Bangladesh and most of the articles are broadly on the importance of tourism. This paper is an endeavor to fill the research gap by conducting a more extensive range of opinion-based arguments on CT to the context of Bangladesh.

#### 4. Research Methodology

The exploratory research method was found to be appropriate to this study as it is going to search for CT as a new paradigm of tourism in Bangladesh. The underlying principle for selecting the research approach is to aid in the exploration of the prospect and challenges of CT with special reference to Bangladesh. In-depth analysis of literature and exclusive unstructured interview with different stakeholders of CT (Table 1) i.e. academicians, hoteliers, and government officials were allowed to collect the insights of CT of Bangladesh. These in-depth interviews helped to answer the research question and to provide qualitative interpretation to develop a theoretical framework of CT.

An unstructured open-ended questionnaire was developed to carry out interviews with five academicians, ten hoteliers working as senior managers of star-rated hotels having long experience in the tourism industry of Bangladesh. Three government officials of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, the apex body of tourism development were selected as they are directly involved in the development of tourism in Bangladesh. The open-ended question facilitated the discussion on the issues relating to the prospect of CT in Bangladesh; the potential challenges to develop this type of specialized tourism in this country and the potential interventions to facilitate this sector through CT. The data was recorded in a cell phone recorder and coded manually parallel to the research questions of the study.

The thematic content analysis method of qualitative data analysis was used to identify the common pattern of responses by the respondents across the data set. The research gathered the familiar responses by the respondents, coded the texts, and made a list of most frequent opinions and arguments. Hence, those common opinions were narrated in the findings and discussion part. The following research questions were developed, and the responses were summarized in the findings section accordingly.

- a. What are the prospects of culinary tourism in Bangladesh?
- b. What are the Potential Challenges of CT in Bangladesh?
- c. What are the reasons that CT is not being explored as mainstream tourism?
- d. What Interventions are appropriate in this regard?
- e. Who can be the potential target customers for culinary tourism?
- f. Which indigenous food item/food product mix of Bangladesh could be projected in the international arena to promote CT.?

#### 5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are drawn based on the most frequent comments provided by the respondents. Common opinions on the potentials and challenges of CT of Bangladesh are discussed below.

##### 5.1 The prospects of culinary tourism in Bangladesh

According to the respondent, culinary tourism has a huge prospect in Bangladesh. It has an enormous contribution to the hospitality industry and the national economy as well. As Bangladesh has a deliberate verity of food items, the future of CT is prospective if food quality

and safety issues are maintained properly. Some respondents highlighted on creating fusion in local foods with western touches to make it palatable for international and local guests. On the other hand, CT has a great prospect in terms of employment generation. A planned expansion of this section of the tourism industry will create job opportunities for chefs, waiters, managers, and supervisors. However, a window of hospitality entrepreneurship will be open for the potential entrepreneurs to start creative ventures of local foods. It will also create a responsible food industry if regulated with due diligence.

## **5.2 Potential Challenges of CT in Bangladesh**

According to the respondent, to put Bangladeshi culinary on the world map is very challenging due to many reasons like; lack of skilled manpower, lack of initiatives to prepare and present food innovatively, the inertia of traditionalism, and rigidity to remain unchanged. Many respondents tried to connect these issues with the incompetent academic curriculum that failed to foster tourism education and impeding the growth of the CT and tourism industry at large. However, few of the respondents pointed out the lack of modern infrastructure and adequate facility of food supply chain management as a potential challenge of fostering CT. Lack of branding initiatives and negligence in maintaining international standardization with regard to health & hygiene could negatively influence the growth of CT in Bangladesh.

## **5.3 Reasons for failure to explore CT as mainstream tourism of Bangladesh**

According to the respondents, lack of initiatives from hospitality entrepreneurs in Bangladesh is the main reason for becoming a failure to consider CT as mainstream tourism. Usually, the entrepreneurs are interested to put their money in accommodation facility development like; rooms, lobby, swimming pool, etc. in comparison to the culinary side of a hotel business. However, most of them lacking knowledge of CT, and their perception is narrowed within the technicalities of the cooking and kitchen department which is compromised with the art side culinary function. They ignore the art of cooking as an interesting side that demands creativity and innovation. Hence, human resource development interventions such as training, management development programs, performance management, etc. in this regard are also missing in this industry. The research found only one dedicated tourism institute offering limited courses.

Few public and private universities are offering courses on a limited scale with many shortages and inadequate infrastructure preparedness. Apart from that, lack of initiatives by the hospitality entrepreneurs to develop international standard kitchen and negligence in maintaining food safety compliance is also a leading reason for failure to take it in the conventional tourism of Bangladesh. Some respondents pointed out that, the price hike of ingredients is also a factor that fails the expansion of CT in Bangladesh as it impacts the cost of food preparation. Lack of international marketing initiatives by the government and hospitality entrepreneurs is also remarked by some respondents. The findings mentioned above were also cited in the articles of Alam (2018) and Rahman (2017).

#### 5.4 Interventions to explore CT in mainstream tourism of Bangladesh

Skilled manpower development could be the key intervention to explore CT in mainstream tourism of Bangladesh as CT demands innovative and creative skills. Our kitchen workers should be competent in food presentation and creating fusion in local foods. Nearly all the respondents focused on the necessity of learning and development opportunities on culinary art and inclusion of new culinary curriculum in the mainstream education system of Bangladesh. The hospitality entrepreneurs must come forward to invest in developing an international standard food processing unit and kitchen. On the other hand, framing extensive promotional strategies by public and private hospitality-related organizations is a mandatory intervention to explore CT in mainstream tourism of Bangladesh. However, this finding is also mentioned by Shamsuddoha (2004); Jakir (2006) and Hossain (2016) in their research.

#### 5.5 Potential target customers for culinary tourism

According to most of the respondents, specifying the target customer of CT is difficult as it varies destination to destination and culture to culture. The choice of food is conditional to taste and individual choices which are influenced by culture and territorial diversities. CT could be primarily classified into a domestic and foreign category. Hence, the segmentation could be based on international, national, and occasional social events and festivals like, "Panta-Ilish", a popular food of Bengali New Year, and many others. Segmentation could be made based on seasons as Bangladesh has six seasons in a year and some seasons are special for specific food choices like during winter, people mostly take different items of cakes (Pitha) made of rice and date plum sugar. We have to identify the uniqueness of our foods and promote those across the nations to attract foreign tourists. However, most of the respondents suggested remaking unique foods according to the world health standard and taste to enter into international CT.

#### 5.6 Indigenous and traditional food items that could be projected in the international arena to promote CT.

**Main Course:** Bangladesh culinary has different kinds of popular local recipes such as "Mezbani Beef" is one of the most famous local dishes traditionally offered during community fest. Most of the respondents recommended this cuisine to be promoted on an international platform. However, "Beef Kalabhuna" another famous spicy cuisine of Chattogram which is basically a deep-fried beef again "Chuijal Vuna" is also another famous beef curry of the Khulna region. "Shorshellish" is a very delicious and famous unique fish dish prepared with mustard and served with plain rice. Different types of dry fish curry are also suggested by many respondents. "Kalai Ruti", famous food of the northwestern zone of Bangladesh is also recommended by many respondents.

**Snacks and Desert Category:** Bangladesh has a wide verity of traditional cakes including "Vapa Pitha" (smoked rice cake with different creamy stuffing), "Chittoi Pitha" with sweet made of plum sugar or side dishes like boneless meat or dry fish past. "Patishapta Pitha" is also a unique sweet item commonly prepared with creamy stuffing which could be improvised using spicy stuffing. "Chungapora Pitha" is suggested by some of the respondents which are a famous indigenous

snack of the Sylhet region. "Bakorkhani" of old Dhaka, which is baked bread, is also famous all over Bangladesh as a healthy morning snack.

## **6. Recommendations and Policy Prescription**

The study endeavored to explore the challenges and opportunities for Bangladeshi CT. However, the prospect of CT vastly depends on opening the educational opportunity for the existing and potential culinary professionals and workers. On the other hand, the necessity of culinary marketing at the national and international levels is also a decisive factor for the growth of CT in Bangladesh. The public and private initiative should be encouraged to foster learning and development opportunities for human resources in the hospitality sector. Roy & Roy (2015) had also recommended opening tourism discipline at all the universities of Bangladesh and Shamsuddoha (2004) also emphasized initiating management development programs, particularly on tourism sales and marketing. An investment-friendly financial policy should be framed by the government to encourage the hospitality entrepreneurs to invest in food safety standard maintenance and development of the necessary facility in this regard. Food Safety Act 2013 should be enforced by law enforcing bodies of the government to safeguard the interest of the culinary tourism sector and open opportunities for future development. Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism (MOCAT) has taken some piecemeal projects for educational infrastructure development under the finance of the Annual Development Program (ADP) on a very limited scale.

CT of Bangladesh could be promoted in the international arena through event marketing initiatives by the MOCAT in association with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Opportunities should be created for Bangladeshi hotels and culinary artists to participate in international Food Fest and related Festivals. Bangladeshi Embassies and High Commissions can organize Food Feast and Festivals in respective countries to promote our foods and beverages. However, different competitions can be organized at national and international levels to develop culinary excellence among the professionals which may facilitate culinary innovation. Bangladeshi students studying abroad could be encouraged to be the ambassador or promoter of national culinary who could organize programs on national and international festivals to promote Bangladeshi food culture. The indigenous foods suggested by the respondents of this study could be presented through these events. Every Bangladeshi Embassy and High Commission should establish a "Bangla Canteen" at their premises which would be open for expatriates and the natives as well. Such initiative may create an affordable and effective global platform to connect our culinary culture with different nationals.

Besides the macro-level initiatives by the government machinery, private initiative at the micro stratum is obvious to ensure the growth of CT of Bangladesh. As most of the respondents indicated the marketing issues of CT, different promotional strategies could be framed and implemented by the management and culinary professionals. Positive media coverage on CT in social media sites is a critical factor to promote CT and Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube,



and other social engines could be used as a media vehicle to reach to the national and international tourists and foodies. Shamsuddoha (2004) also recommended the use of information technology to promote Bangladesh to international tourists. Financial incentive-based independent food bloggers could be encouraged and engaged in this regard. Independent foodies clubs or associations could also be used.

Effective digital marketing content is very essential to promote CT and food photography is a critical element of digital marketing which creates exceptional imagery to attract tourists towards food. Such an initiative will increase website traffic and will promote the food menu of a hotel and restaurant. Dedicated Mobile Apps could be introduced by Bangladesh Restaurant Owners Association to provide a one-stop solution to CT in Bangladesh. The mobile application should be packed with information and easy access to all kinds of local foods.

The association can organize and sponsor special training programs for armature or professional cooks facilitated by the “World Culinary Celebrity” or “Gurus of Cuisines” like Sanjeev Kapoor & Vikas Khanna of India, Jamie Oliver & Gordon James Ramsay of the United Kingdom, Gary Mehigan & George Calombaris of Australia and many other. International Cooking Game Shows (MasterChef Bangladesh) could be organized by the residential hotel and restaurant chains of Bangladesh associating with television channels where renowned International Celebrity Chefs could be invited as host, anchor, or member of the judge’s panel. However, documentaries on CT could be produced by independent producers and may invite the Celebrity Chefs to host the program or join as a special appearance. The programs stated above could be broadcasted on international television channels which may contribute to the growth of international culinary tourism of Bangladesh.

## 7. Conclusion & Directions for Further Research

Every nation has its unique pattern of food and that may act as a competitive advantage for the country. To create and sustain such a unique advantage, it is obvious for Bangladesh to develop its culinary through nurturing a culture of innovation and creativity among all stakeholders and institutions of the hospitality and tourism sector. Bangladesh as a nation must thrive to develop and promote its foods through the differentiated offer, value addition, food fusion and most importantly marketing initiatives. Apart from these initiatives, investment in culinary infrastructure and effective human resource development through T&D innervations may bring radical change in this important wing of the tourism sector. According to the results of the study, most of the Bangladeshi hotels and restaurants are still very traditional in conceptualizing the significance of CT. they are focusing on foreign foods, copying foreign recipes, and intend to offer foreign culinary like Chinese and Indian to make more profit from local CT market. Therefore, most of the chefs and cooks are sharpening their expertise on foreign foods instead of indigenous as the hospitality entrepreneurs are showing less interest in promoting local cuisine.

CT should not be limited to the idea of cooking rather it should be promoted as a culinary art. It demands investment in culinary innovation, learning & development opportunities, and entrepreneurial spirit to develop CT. However, lacking innovation is the prime impediment of the growth of our CT industry in Bangladesh, and such shortcoming of this industry will remain

alive if the government machinery and hospitality remain rigid to the traditional trend of CT. No research work is out of limitations and hence this paper also. However, it will not be coherent to anticipate the outcome of this qualitative research-work which vastly dependent on the opinion of a few stakeholders of CT. Researchers may come forward to explore the facts of CT of Bangladesh in regards to investment, marketing, and human resource development considering the larger participation of stakeholders from different categories (Table 1). The research also suggests projecting the opportunities of CT to the entrepreneurs and government agencies. Culinary researchers can take initiatives of conducting laboratory-based research to develop the indigenous culinary with fusion to make those more presentable and attractive among local and foreign tourists and which shall promote Bangladesh as a potential destination for CT.

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## Annexure

**Table: Stakeholders of Culinary Tourism**

	Direct Stakeholders	Indirect Stakeholders
1	Government	Brand Promoters
2	Entrepreneurs of Restaurant Industries	Event Organizers
3	Educational Institutions	Tourism Researchers
4	Employees of Hotel & Resort Industries	Press and Media
5	Food Producers	Diplomats
6	Tour Operators	
7	Airline Business	

*Source: Hall & Mitchell, (2004) and Authors*