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A Comparative Study of State Tourism Websites with Special Reference to North Eastern States of India

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Abstract : Tourism development and the internet have led to changes in how people travel. It has become one of the most significant tools for both tourists and the host. Tourism websites serve as a center of information; state governments, tour operators, travel agencies, or even individuals run them. This study analyses and compares the official tourism websites of eight North Eastern states in India: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. The objectives are to determine the most preferred domain extension used and evaluate the websites based on key parameters like information availability, functionality, and ease of use. A total of 25 parameters are used to assess the websites. Key findings show that most states use the.gov.in domain, while content and features vary. Websites offering more comprehensive information and accessibility features like apps and online bookings scored higher. Recommendations include multilanguage support, updated content, and mobile optimization. The study provides insights to tourism boards on improving their digital presence to better promote their destinations online.

Index Terms **- Website Analysis, Tourism Websites, Domain Extension, India Tourism**

I. INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry provides both direct and indirect employment to millions of people, and making it one of the largest industries in the world. Globalization's effects have transformed the travel and tourism industries by promoting domestic and international travel. The global results for international tourist arrivals in 2022 have returned to 962 million (global and regional tourism performance, 2023). The report also indicates that India has the highest total employees in the tourism industry with 29,638 (in 1000s). The development of the internet and technology has led to changes in people's travel patterns. By facilitating greater access to information and significantly enhancing global communication, the Internet has played a crucial role in this revolution, and it is one of the most significant causes of the global tourism boom. The internet, on the other hand, has also become an essential tool for both tourists and businesses, simplifying the process of online bookings, including travel (flights, trains, and other modes of transportation), accommodation (hotels), and all other travel-related services. In today's world, creating a website is no longer an option, but it has become a necessity for all destination websites (Choi et al., 2007). Tourism websites serve as a centeR of information about a particular destination. These websites are made to help tourists plan their journeys by providing them with details about various travel-related topics, including attractions, accessibility, accommodation, activities, and more. They provide a practical approach for tourists to conduct research, evaluate options, and decide on their vacation itinerary. Effective tourism websites provide convenience to customers; they should have rich content, be dynamic, and be subject to constant updates, innovation, and proper management (Hoo and Lee, 2007; Lazarinis et al., 2008). Tourism websites may be run by official tourism boards, tour operators, booking services, individual bloggers, and numerous other businesses involved in the travel sector. When it comes to India, the Tourism Development Corporations of Indian states are repeatedly improving their destination websites, making them attractive, user-friendly, and other attributes that require spending a lot of resources (Kaur and Sharma, 2015).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Website evaluation

Several methods have been proposed and used in the evaluation of websites, not just tourism websites, different models have also been prepared to test the effectiveness of a website. Park and Gretzel (2007) evaluate destination marketing websites using a qualitative meta-analysis method. Information quality, ease of use, responsiveness, security and privacy, visual appearance, trust, interactivity, personalisation, and fulfilment are the nine factors involved. A number of studies have been done on the evaluation of

website effectiveness from the user's point of view (Zins et al., 2004; Hvannberg, Lai-Chong Law, & La´rusdo´ttir, 2007; Tanrisevdi & Duran, 2011; Satghare & Sawant, 2019). Bauernfeind and Mitsche (2008) also studied how the effectiveness of tourism organisations' websites can be evaluated using data envelope analysis (DEA). Dion and Woodside (2010) proposed a rubric for assessing destinations' websites and continuing to compare visa- and non-visa-tourist destinations of four destinations using 36 attributes. Their study includes government-run and Lonely Planets' websites for four countries: China, Poland, Russia, and Thailand. Their first proposition tested shows that countries that require visas lack quality and quantity in internet marketing compared to those that do not. The second proposition is that websites run by the government are comprehensive in detailing information compared to private websites. Based on the proposed rubric, Batisda and Huan (2012) analyse and compare four global destination brands: Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taipei, involving websites' quality and usefulness. Hong Kong's website is found to be the best, while Beijing has the most room for improvement. Giannopoulos and Mavragani (2011) conducted a relevant descriptive analysis based on a number of case studies from the European tourism market. The study provides a platform or a set of website characteristics for comparative analysis of websites. With an extensive review of the literature, five factors were identified: visual appearance, quality and variety of information, ease of use, interactivity, and personalization. These five dimensions were further analysed, and 19 characteristics were adopted from the previous work of Riganti et al., (2007).

2.2 Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs)

In order to promote specific destinations to potential travelers, Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) are established (Gartrell, 1994). Internet is used as a main marketing tool by these DMOs. Yet, there is no guarantee that a website would succeed in marketing activities by utilizing the Internet (Bell and Tang, 1998; Vrana and Zafiropoulos, 2006; Yuan el al., 2006).

Li and Wang (2010) finds gap on why there are only few studies conducted to study the effectiveness of Chinese DMO websites, rather than just using the Internet extensively as a marketing tool. The study results in constructing a model, i.e. ICTRT to test the effectiveness of 31 Chinese Tourism Administrations'(PTAs) website. The dimensions resulted are Information, Communication, Transaction, Relationship and Technical Merit. Among these dimensions, transaction and relationship were the weakest areas when comparing the said websites, there lies a great variation in the effectiveness among different provinces.

2.3 Website evaluation and analysis of Indian States

Chavali and Sahu (2008) highlight the importance of websites as an information source and in the promotion of tourism destinations. This paper establishes its comparative analysis focus on South Indian websites based on the parameters developed by Lu and Lu (2004). The authors conclude that although websites play a huge role in the promotion of tourism, they are not the only influencing factor for tourists to decide their next destination of interest. Kaur and Sharma (2015) describe how the Indian Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) and other state tourism corporations were using traditional marketing approaches. Their principle study examines the information on tourism websites of different zones of India on certain parameters. East Indian tourism websites are found to display less information and are far behind those in other zones. Prathapan et al., (2018) adopted the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model in digital marketing to compare the traffic of the Kerala government with that of its competing websites. The analysis shows that the Kerala Official Tourism website, KeralaTourism.org, shares the highest traffic share (98.7%) when the keyword searched is Kerala Tourism. This paper brought forward the need to improve the content quality of those websites with less traffic. Net surfers or potential tourists tend to spend more time on the interested web page, and this helps to measure the preferences of the website visitors. Satghare and Sawant (2019) evaluate the official destinations of Maharashtra, one of the leading tourism states in India. They developed and named the tool "the Destination Website Evaluation Scale." The scale measures the websites based on five factors, i.e., quality of information, ease of use, customization and interactivity, identity and trust building components, and online booking. The website evaluation depicts poor and disappointing results; there was a huge gap between the expected performance and the actual performance.

III. SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

With the increase in the number of tourism websites and the need to improve their efficiency as well as their evaluation, studies on the analysis of tourism websites based on content information, user's perspective, interactive features, responsiveness, etc. have been done globally. Meagre studies have been conducted in India with references only to top-performing tourism in Indian states like Maharashtra, South Indian states, and a few other non-governmental destination websites. This paper aims to compare and analyse the government tourism websites of the northeast states of India; no such previous work has been done in the region. The following eight North-East Indian states have been selected and are listed: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura.

Table 1. List of North-East India States and their website address

Sl.no.	State	Websites
1	Assam	https://assamtourism.gov.in

2	Arunachal Pradesh	https://arunachaltourism.com
3	Manipur	https://manipurtourism.gov.in
4	Meghalaya	https://meghalayatourism.in
5	Mizoram	https://mizoramtourism.com
6	Nagaland	https://tourism.nagaland.gov.in
7	Tripura	https://tripuratourism.gov.in
8	Sikkim	https://sikkimtourism.gov.in

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To determine the preferred website domain of northeastern states of India;
- To compare and analyze the northeastern states of India's tourism websites based on selected parameters; and
- To suggest ways and means to improve the northeastern states of India's tourism website in order to develop an effective destination tool.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The initial objective of the selection of state tourism websites was based on observation techniques; the data were collected from the official websites of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, and links from official state websites. The eight websites were classified according to their domain types on a tabular form. Assessment of websites is based on a rubric created by Dion and Woodside (2010), along with a modified classification by Batisda and Huan (2012), assessed according to 25 parameters grouped as: information/requirement tools for tourists before visiting the destination, during the trip, and the functionality of the website itself.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Categorization of Domain Extension

A domain name is a specific name or web address for how a visitor finds your website on the internet. In India, most government official websites have their domain extensions as ".gov.in." (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). Websites with such domain extensions can also be an instrument to check the genuineness of government websites. Nevertheless, other government and state websites also have other extensions like ".com" or ".in," which they use for their convenience. Hnamte and Ngurtinkhuma (2021) delve into determining the website domain preferred by 15 Medical College on Northeast India and identify the domain type (.in) has maximum usage in 4 colleges and (.org) have the least usage. Das (2022) evaluation of selected 15 web portals of state governments in India recognize 12 state portals use (.gov.in) as their domains. Table 2 shows the three types of domain extensions used by the eight states of the North East. Out of the eight states under study, five (5) state websites (i.e., Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim), which account for 62%, have '.gov.in' extensions. Websites of two (25%) states, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, have '.com' extensions, and another one (13%) remaining state, Meghalaya, has '.in' extensions.

Table 2: Domain Extension of State Tourism websites in North East, India

Sl. No.	Domain	No. of States
1	.gov.in	5 (62%)
2	.com	2 (25%)
3	.in	1 (13%)

6.2 Website Evaluation and Comparison

The selected 25 parameters to evaluate and compare the websites of the eight states are classified according to the three groups mentioned, as shown in Table 3. The table shows the findings using a rubric matched in accordance with the respective states. This study was observed and done during the months of May 2023 and October 2023.

Table 3: Website Evaluation of 8 States

Attributes	Assam	Arunachal	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Tripura	Sikkim

				Before Trip				
Hotel	Yes	Yes, few	Yes, few	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Online Booking	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Weather	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Itinerary	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Permit	Not needed	ILP	ILP	e-invite	ILP	ILP	No	PAP
Historical Information	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
VISA information	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Accessibilities	No	Yes	Yes, few	No	No	Yes, few	Yes	Yes
				During Trip				
Safety & Security	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Maps	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Attraction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Activities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Events Calendar	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Event details	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Tour Guide	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Brochures	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
				Website Functionality				
Membership	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Languages	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Cell phone Apps	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Videos	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Ease of Use	Easy	Easy	Easy	Easy	Easy	Easy	Easy	Easy
Social Media handles	TFIY	TFIY	TFIY	TFIY	TFIY	TFI	FT	FT
Interactive feature	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Content Update	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Visual appearance	Clean	Clean	Complex	Clean	Clean	Less Content	Complex	Clean
Total	**11**	**13**	**9**	**13**	**8**	**5**	**8**	**8**

*TFIY=Twitter (now known as X), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube

6.3 Information/Requirement Tools before the Trip

A key component in determining how effective a website is the information content it offers (Chavali and Sahu, 2008). Tourists rely on the sources they receive from the internet, such as web pages, YouTube channels, destination review websites, social media platforms, etc., have certainty in the accommodation lists provided on the official government websites, and trust the payment gateways available. Tourists also seek out ready-made travel information for effortless exploratory research. Although every state website provides details about the accommodations, such as names, addresses, and contact details, it merely provides the hotel descriptions as well as their rates and the services they provide. Only Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura have access to online reservation facilities, which is handy for tourists; others need to inquire through phone calls since most hotels do not have websites.

Mizoram and Nagaland do not provide details of their itineraries; the remaining states cater itineraries based on the number of days and nights, specific locations, their preferred activities, etc. The eight northeastern state tourism websites have their popular destinations with their historical information, but only Sikkim websites provide the weather information. The Inner Line Permit (ILP) is an official travel document that is issued by several state governments in India that permits an Indian citizen to visit that particular state for a period. ILP is necessary in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim. Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh require an analogous permit called a Protected Area Permit (PAP) for foreign tourists. The mentioned state websites allow tourists to seek the permit online through their websites with a payment of certain nominal fees before their entry to the states. Mizoram does not offer the online services but provides ILP on Arrival at the Airport through the Security Officer, and it can also be obtained from the Liaison Officer, Government of Mizoram, from the following cities: Kolkata, Silchar, Shillong, Guwahati, and New Delhi. Meghalaya requires an e-invite, which can only be obtained from their state tourism apps in an instant and for free. VISA information is not available on any of the websites studied.

Assam, Meghalaya, and Mizoram's websites fail to provide details on how to reach their states, such as the nearest airport or the frequency of flights, trains, etc., if available. All state websites provide details and information about their registered tour operators, travel agencies, and state-owned tourism development corporations, whose preferred itineraries and tour packages can be customized through them.

6.4 Information during the Trip

Brochures or pamphlets that contain descriptive information are tools that can help you gain more knowledge about the places. Arunachal and Meghalaya tourism websites provide such brochures to inform tourists about their trip and synchronise their knowledge accordingly. The Arunachal Pradesh website provides a link to their state police website, while the other states do not provide any information regarding the safety and security of tourists during their trip. With the advancement of certain navigation applications, Google Maps are easily accessible to navigate and browse through various places. Structured maps showing the most popular tourist locations are available to download for Arunachal and Meghalaya states only. Details of accessibility, which include transportation inside the states, can be seen only on a few state websites, which are not reliable as such. The Mizoram state website provides a detailed "Event Calendars" be provided on Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland websites; they are shown along with information about the event details. During the study, none of the websites had the facility to book their event online. Names of the registered tour guides and their contact information along with their ratings are provided on Mizoram's website; Assam and Sikkim's websites provide just their contact information and their addresses; Tripura's website publishes a list of approved tour guides' contact information, languages they speak, tourist spots covered, etc.

6.5 Website Functionality

All the northeastern states of India's tourism websites offer only one language, i.e., English. As for membership, the Mizoram state tourism website is the only one that offers the tourist the option to sign in and then proceed with the online services they offer, such as booking of hotels, etc. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Mizoram also have their own state tourism mobile applications supported for both Android and iOS users, making it easier and more efficient for tourists during their course of travel. The apps include most information from their websites as well as several other tourist reviews and photos. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Meghalaya display their unique destination videos on the front pages of their websites, while the others display normal image gallery slideshows. The website's functionality, user interfaces, and ease of use are easy, even for non-techy individuals. Yet, Manipur and Nagaland have very complex home pages, which are not appealing but very typical of government websites.

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are the most common social media platforms for tourism websites for destination branding. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram have managed to link their usernames and channels to their websites. Nagaland has failed to promote and link its YouTube channels. Tripura and Sikkim are the least active on social media, having only linked to Facebook and Twitter. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya updated their contents during the specific period; other states have very outdated contents. Arunachal Pradesh's website also has unique and interactive features in the form of Chatbots, which interact, send, and reply to messages through the website platform.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the past, the internet was not accessible to everyone. Thus, tourists depend on travel agencies, tour operators and to get recommendations from friends and families through word of mouth. Now that it is easy to access almost everything online, people can look into any destination through the palm of their hand. Websites have played an important role in creating themselves as an advertising and marketing tool for promoting their own states. For the study, eight northeastern states of India are taken and evaluated with 25 parameters carrying all similar values. Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya topped the chart and were most rated based on the above parameters. Meanwhile, the state of Nagaland had its position at the bottom during this period of study. The state departments can compare their portals with those of other states and make necessary changes by using these website evaluations.

The study also found its limitations as the information was gathered only at a specific point in time, as mentioned, and the paper only analysed the data provided on the websites. In addition, solely the researcher observes, and the levels of rating for some parameters might vary due to the course of time or certain factors. Based on this study, the findings can be used to highlight the need for extensive cooperative work with all the stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality sectors, such as hotels, travel agencies, tour operators, local taxi drivers, police, emergency hospitals, restaurants, etc., to provide their updated information on the websites. All the website content are only available in English, few websites even written in local languages. This leaves no room for international tourists who do not speak or understand English; the website should provide at least the official language of the country, i.e., Hindi, even for domestic tourists.

With the advancement of ICT, all states must develop and have their own mobile apps, through which the purchase of entry tickets should be made possible with easy transactions. All other information, such as weather conditions, the best time to travel, dos and don'ts, permits, taxi rates, etc., should be added to the websites. Tourists' experiences as well as testimonials can also be added along with photos to enhance their trust in the place. The government should also pay attention to the details of events happening in the state and update them regularly on their websites, not just on social media platforms. The engagements on social media platforms are high for the target audience of the state, but the government should also target tourists, at least from the neighbouring states.

Thus, if more attractive websites and detailed information are available, then tourists will find it more useful to visit the websites, thus creating more prospects of potential tourists turning into actual tourists and increasing the footfall of tourist arrivals. According to the study, the highest-performing states Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya have the highest number of tourist arrivals in the region.

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