

LOCAL INDIGENOUS FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN MEGHALAYA, INDIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTIVE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE EMERGING TOURISM LANDSCAPES

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INTRODUCTION:

From the very beginning, the quest for knowledge has been at the heart of tourism, dating back to the times of ancient explorers. This fundamental idea has endured through the ages, as modern travelers in the 21st century continue to seek out distant and hidden places primarily to deepen their understanding of the social, cultural, traditional, and culinary aspects of the regions they visit. Although bustling megacities and popular tourist destinations hold significant appeal, there is a growing interest in the charm of rural and remote scenic areas. The tourism boom of recent decades has allowed these far-off locations to present their distinctive sociocultural identities to a global audience.

The distinctiveness of the traditional food systems among the indigenous tribal communities underscores a wealth of cultural knowledge regarding their lifestyles, belief systems, spirituality, and overall wellbeing (Kuhnlein, Erasmus & Spigelski, 2009; Wangoola, 2000). The North- Eastern region of India has largely been overlooked and remains underutilized due to its complex social and cultural practices, which pose challenges for easy integration with mainland India. This region consists of eight states, often

referred to as the area of seven sisters and one brother, and it shares four international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, with 98 percent of its boundaries being international. The geographical and ecological diversity, along with its variety of communities and distinctive landscape, render this region exceptional when compared to the mainland. The total geographical area of the northeastern states is approximately 263,179 square kilometers, accounting for about 8 percent of the country's total geographical area. Among the 427 tribal groups in India, around 130 are residents of the northeastern region.

The north-eastern region of India is characterized by a rich tapestry of ethnic communities, each with its own distinctive culinary traditions that encompass growth patterns, cooking techniques, consumption habits, and preservation methods. Indigenous food specialties are vital to tourism, as they often serve as a significant attraction for visitors to a destination (Getz, Robinson, Andersson & Vujicic, 2014; McKercher, Okumus & Okumus, 2008). Meghalaya is frequently referred to as nature's gift to humanity, situated amidst a network of towering mountain ranges, lush green forests, expansive water bodies, and magnificent waterfalls, all contributing to a

verdant valley that provides an ideal environment for diverse flora and fauna. Known as the 'Abode of Clouds', Meghalaya stands out as one of the most advanced states in the north-eastern part of India, encompassing approximately 22,000 square kilometers and housing a population of around 2.5 million (Census 2011). The state is home to three primary tribal communities: the Khasis, the Jaintias, and the Garos. The Khasis inhabit the central region, the Jaintias are located in the east, and the Garos reside in the west. While these three major tribal groups have prominently displayed their cultural heritage, festivals, and traditions to both national and international audiences, their indigenous culinary practices have not received the same level of attention as their social and cultural customs. The primary staple for these tribal communities is rice; however, they also favor pork, chicken, beef, and various types of fish, including dried fish. Meat dishes are typically prepared using locally sourced spices and vegetables, and are served alongside rice (Blah and Joshi, 2013).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Food serves as a crucial component within the tourism sector, and recently, it has become evident that the culinary aspect is a significant factor in the promotion of a destination. Fields (2002) elucidates that food is integral to the overall satisfaction derived from the tourist experience. Telfer and Wall (1996) explored the complex relationship between food and tourism, noting that food can be perceived merely as a necessity or, at times, as a major attraction of a destination. In the past

decade, the role of food in tourism has been elevated from a mere input to a vital element of the tourism product. Indigenous food tourism presents substantial opportunities for destination marketing and enhancing tourist experiences. According to Jones and Jenkins (2002), the food component is an essential link in the promotion of tourist destinations. Food is consistently viewed as a significant tool for enriching tourist experiences. The local indigenous culinary specialties of a region reflect its cultural traditions, dietary practices, and biodiversity, thereby contributing to the identity of the place and fostering tourism development (Singh et al., 2007). There exists a diverse array of traditional foods among indigenous communities (Nongrum & Dohtdong, 2018); however, scientific documentation of the ethnic foods from northeastern communities is limited, with only a few local delicacies, such as Tungrymbai from Meghalaya, being noted (Sohliya, I. et al., 2009). Research indicates that many locals do not recognize local delicacies as potential tourist attractions, leading to their general undervaluation and infrequent inclusion in promotional and marketing materials for tourist circuits, especially when compared to natural and man-made tourism resources (Du Rand, Heath, and Alberts, 2003, pp. 99–101). Tribal regions are typically regarded as challenging climatic ecosystem zones. There appears to be a connection between consumption patterns and the cooking methods employed using iron-based utensils to mitigate anaemia within these communities (Albert, 2017). The ethnic groups residing in these difficult environments must utilize

diverse traditional cooking methods and storage techniques to maintain their food and preserve its aroma and flavor. (Anup Kumar Das, Nako Laling, and Wishfully Myllemngap, 2017).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

The aims of this research are as follows:

- To emphasize the traditional indigenous cuisines of the primary tribes in Meghalaya, specifically the Khasis, the Jaintias, and the Garos.
- To investigate and assess the factors contributing to the limited number of visitors to these local indigenous food courts.
- To motivate entrepreneurs to establish these local indigenous food courts in areas frequented by tourists and to adopt a more tourist-oriented strategy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The research is empirical, incorporating both primary and secondary data through a qualitative lens. Primary data was gathered via discussions with the proprietors and personnel of local indigenous food courts. The investigation focused on local indigenous food courts across four districts in Meghalaya: East Khasi Hills (including Shillong, Myllem, and Sohra), Ri Bhoi (Nongpoh), West Jaintia Hills (Jowai), and West Garo Hills (Tura). A total of 26 local indigenous food courts were examined. Through comprehensive structured interviews, the author was able to gain insights into the operational dynamics of indigenous food courts and the factors contributing to their

lack of tourist appeal. Additionally, some tourists were interviewed in popular tourist destinations such as Umiam (Ri Bhoi district), Shillong Peak, Myllem, Sohra (East Khasi Hills District), and Tura (West Garo Hills district). The secondary research involved a thorough review of journals, research papers, newspaper articles, and relevant literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Khasi delicacies: The culinary traditions of each nation, region, culture, or tribe are shaped by centuries of historical development. Factors such as climate, geographical location, and topography significantly affect the dietary practices of the local ethnic groups. The Khasi tribe boasts a rich variety of indigenous food specialties. The Khasis utilize local raw ingredients and traditional cooking techniques to preserve the authenticity of their indigenous cuisine. Historically, food was primarily prepared over firewood, imparting a unique flavor; however, such traditional methods are now predominantly observed during large social and community events. In the northeastern region, boiled dishes featuring bamboo shoots are quite common; nevertheless, in Khasi cuisine, boiled items do not constitute the primary indigenous delicacies, and bamboo shoots are typically utilized in pickled form. In addition to the main course, which usually includes a non-vegetarian dish served with rice and boiled sides, the community has a custom of enjoying rice-based snacks alongside their evening tea (Shylla, R.G. & Ramdas, S. 2014). The food can be categorized into traditional Khasi snacks (Jing bam) and

main courses. Khasi cuisine tends to emphasize meat over vegetables. Rice red sticky rice being the preferred known as Ja, and it forms the foundation of most traditional Khasi snack items, locally referred to as 'Ki Kpu,' meaning rice cakes, which come in various forms and are made using indigenous knowledge (Umdor, M. et al, 2016). However, meat, particularly chicken, pork, and beef, constitutes the essence of the meat delicacies; meat is referred to as Doh, while vegetables are called Jur. The preparation of food involves the use of basic spices such as pepper, ginger, garlic, turmeric, bay leaves, sesame seeds, and chilies.

Jaintia delicacies: The Jaintia Hills, located in the eastern region of Meghalaya, are primarily populated by the Jaintia tribes, who are locally referred to as Pnars. The culinary traditions of the Jaintia and Khasi tribes exhibit significant similarities; both groups share comparable dietary preferences, cooking techniques, and food selections. Traditional cooking methods employed include steaming, boiling, and sautéing, with a moderate level of spiciness.

Garo delicacies: The Garos represent the second largest tribal community in Meghalaya, following the Khasis. Primarily, the Garos inhabit the southern region of the state, which borders Assam; as a result, Assamese cuisine, particularly that of the Bodo tribe, has a significant influence on their culinary practices. The Garos exhibit a broad-minded approach to their dietary preferences, with meat and fish being central to Garo gastronomy. Nevertheless, they also consume a substantial amount of vegetables and roots, with bamboo shoots being particularly

serves as the staple food, with

prominent in their traditional dishes. Most indigenous Garo foods are enhanced by the incorporation of potash or cooking soda. Traditionally, potash or ash water is derived from the combustion of dried plantain stems or tender bamboos, locally referred to as Kalchi or Katchi. After burning, the ashes are collected, immersed in water, and then strained.

DATA ANALYSIS AND ITS FINDINGS:

The information gathered through comprehensive structured interviews with the proprietors and personnel of local indigenous food courts has unveiled numerous insights regarding the reasons these establishments have struggled to showcase their regional tribal delicacies on regional, national, and global platforms, as well as to attract tourists in general. To begin with, the local delicacies of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes have not been systematically documented or promoted at tourist centers. Notably, many of the A-category hotels in Shillong city lack dedicated restaurants specializing in tribal indigenous cuisine, despite the popularity of certain tribal dishes. Some front-line reception staff have reported frequent inquiries from in-house guests regarding local indigenous food options. Indeed, several guest comment cards have highlighted the absence of local tribal food delicacies or indicated that only a limited variety is available. Most authentic tribal indigenous food courts are situated in marketplaces, which primarily cater to local residents, resulting in a minimal percentage of tourist foot traffic, as these markets

primarily sell groceries, vegetables, meat, spices, and general goods. Another challenge faced by these indigenous food courts in general markets is the issue of space constraints, as noted by some stall owners; the rental costs in these marketplaces are prohibitively high, forcing them to opt for smaller spaces to keep operational costs manageable. Due to these spatial limitations, these food courts resemble small shops or stalls, where seating arrangements typically consist of benches or stools, accommodating patrons in close proximity to one another. Such seating arrangements may render tourists or visitors uncomfortable, thereby discouraging them from entering these food courts located within general markets. The menus available in these local food courts do not feature *ala carte* or *table d'hôte* options; instead, all food items are pre-cooked and arranged in display racks. Patrons must indicate their desired selections from the displayed offerings, which typically include a rice dish as the base, accompanied by a choice of vegetable, meat, or fish preparations, along with a wide variety of local indigenous chutneys. The food is served on steel oval plates using a ladle, and pricing is determined by each item served. The meals in these local food courts may be prepared on-site or at a different location. Generally, food items are sold out by the afternoon, after which cleaning and *mise en place* occur. These marketplaces typically close between 7 PM and 8 PM, although local indigenous food courts may close earlier or even shut down when food supplies are depleted. The primary visitors to these local indigenous food courts are the tribal

residents of the state. The quality of food served in these establishments is high, adhering to authentic recipes during the cooking process.

In the districts predominantly inhabited by the Khasi and Jaintia tribes, the marketplaces primarily feature Khasi and Jaintia indigenous food courts. Similarly, in Garo-dominated districts, one can exclusively find Garo indigenous food courts. It is quite uncommon to encounter a food court that offers all three types of tribal indigenous delicacies. Although a few tribal food courts have recently been established in tourist-oriented areas such as East Khasi Hills (Shillong), Ri Bhoi (Nongpoh), and West Garo Hills (Tura), the number of tourists visiting these locations remains relatively low compared to the local tribal population. These food courts typically feature a restaurant-like atmosphere, offering either an *ala carte* menu, a *thali* system, or a *combo* arrangement. Some of these establishments have also included a variety of Indian and Chinese culinary options alongside traditional indigenous tribal dishes in their offerings to attract a broader audience. The proprietors of these food courts in tourist hotspots have expressed similar sentiments, noting that visitors are generally unfamiliar with the local indigenous culinary specialties, with the exception of a few Khasi dishes such as *Jadoh*, *Dohkhleh*, *Tungrymbai*, *Doh nei iong*, and *Dohjem*. Upon further inquiry, these business owners indicated that Meghalaya has been effectively marketed as a tourism destination in the northeast, highlighting its picturesque landscapes, tribal festivals, handicrafts, ethnic

garments, accommodations, and dining options. However, the ethnic tribal indigenous cuisines of the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos have not received the same level of documentation and promotion as the scenic attractions of Meghalaya in both domestic and international forums. Given that most tourists lack knowledge about the local tribal delicacies, it is essential for both government and private agencies involved in the conservation and promotion of local tribal ethnic food to organize workshops with key tourism stakeholders, including hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, tour operators, transport providers, and entrepreneurs. This collaborative effort would help ensure that the tribal indigenous cuisines of the three tribes are preserved, promoted, and marketed effectively, thereby increasing tourist awareness of these unique culinary offerings and their availability.

One of the entrepreneurs has proposed that the tourist itinerary should incorporate a visit to the cottage industry where local rice-based snacks are made, and perhaps tourists could also engage in a hands-on experience of cooking these snacks. Additionally, the tour itinerary ought to include at least one or two lunch stops at traditional ethnic indigenous restaurants, which would encourage entrepreneurs to establish local tribal food courts in tourist-centric areas, ensuring a steady flow of visitors. Currently, there are numerous Indian and Chinese cuisine restaurants, along with small Maggie joints; if stakeholders are genuinely committed to promoting local tribal indigenous food, these same entrepreneurs could operate establishments featuring local tribal cuisine.

Furthermore, some form of local legislation is necessary to reinforce tribal interests. If stakeholders are earnest about advancing tribal indigenous food delicacies, existing or new entrepreneurs could be motivated to create tribal food courts with a pleasant restaurant ambiance, offering authentic tribal cuisine recipes. From discussions with tourists at several prime tourist-centric locations, visitors from Assam, Bengal, South India, and North India expressed significant interest in local tribal food, yet only a few had the opportunity to sample a limited selection of Khasi delicacies. Some tourists suggested that their itineraries could include lunch or dinner featuring tribal indigenous food. A few tourists also noted the absence of tribal specialty restaurants in tourist-centric areas, or perhaps the signage was inadequate and not visually appealing. Information regarding tribal indigenous food was largely unavailable to most tourists, and hotels or guest houses offered very limited food options.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on discussions with entrepreneurs managing local tribal indigenous food courts, as well as interactions with staff at these establishments and tourists visiting notable destinations in Meghalaya, the researcher has drawn several conclusions. It has become evident that there exists a disconnect between tribal indigenous food products and tourists. This gap suggests that the relationship between tribal food offerings and tourists can be improved through the following recommendations:

- Tourists should be informed about the

local delicacies available, and tribal indigenous food should be promoted alongside the region's scenic attractions.

- It is advisable to include food stops at tribal indigenous outlets within tourist itineraries.
- Language barriers represent a significant disconnect; staff at these tribal food courts often speak tribal dialects. Therefore, it is essential for staff to be more responsive to tourists' needs and inquiries. Capacity-building refresher courses should be organized by industry experts in collaboration with stakeholders to enhance the tourist-centric approach of the staff at these tribal indigenous outlets.
- Government stakeholders should provide special subsidies to local tribal entrepreneurs for establishing and managing indigenous food courts in tourist-heavy areas. Additionally, regular workshops should be held to preserve the authentic recipes of various Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo delicacies, while also exploring ways to adapt these recipes to enhance their appeal to tourists in terms of taste, flavor, and presentation.
- Small cottage industries that produce a variety of tribal indigenous snack delicacies should be integrated into self-help groups or cooperatives, allowing for a more efficient management of operational, production, and distribution processes. Additionally, these cottage industries could be promoted as tourist attractions within travel itineraries.
- Familiarization tours organized by stakeholders for travel agents, tour

operators, and travel writers should include traditional tribal indigenous cuisine, enabling travel agencies and tour operators to market these culinary delights alongside the state's scenic attractions at various events.

- Financial institutions, in collaboration with the directorate of tourism, ought to devise and promote initiatives that encourage local host communities to actively engage in the expanding tourism sector, thereby fostering more tourism entrepreneurs within the tribal food industry.
- Local food writers should be motivated to author books on indigenous tribal food delicacies to revive forgotten recipes and preserve the rich heritage of tribal indigenous food culture.
- Given the presence of government and private culinary institutes in the state, it is essential to integrate regional tribal indigenous cuisine into the educational curriculum, facilitating extensive research on tribal food and ultimately promoting local cuisine within the state's tourism circuits.
- A food festival showcasing local ethnic cuisines will be organized in conjunction with the primary traditional festivals of the state, thereby emphasizing the local culinary offerings to both domestic and international tourists.

CONCLUSION:

A tourist, visitor, or excursionist travels to a location distinct from their usual residence for leisure, business, or various other reasons. Regardless of the motivation

behind the journey or visit, food plays a crucial role; thus, it can often serve as a significant factor in the decision to visit a particular place. Traditional indigenous cuisine possesses immense potential to become a prominent tourism product; however, it has yet to attain the recognition it deserves, despite its uniqueness. One contributing factor may be the influence of globalization, convenience foods, and the evolving dietary habits of the general population. Nevertheless, within the tourism industry, travelers are typically eager and curious to sample diverse traditional indigenous dishes. It has been noted that traditional indigenous food courts are present worldwide and are quite popular among the local populace. Recently, an increasing number of tourists have shown a keen interest in experiencing traditional indigenous culinary delights, prompting many local tribal food courts to engage with tourists. However, a significant gap remains. The primary reason for the low number of tourists frequenting these indigenous food establishments is the language barrier, as many employees or owners are native tribal individuals who do not operate with a tourist-centric approach, primarily serving the local tribal community. Additionally, these indigenous food outlets often lack adequate signage, which may deter tourists from confidently entering and ensuring they receive value for their money. Lastly, it has been observed that these native indigenous outlets are typically located in marketplaces where the local tribal population predominates, resulting in less visibility and accessibility for tourists. Finally, another significant reason noted is that these native indigenous

outlets are typically located in market areas where there is a greater flow of the local tribal population compared to tourists. In Meghalaya, regional and local stakeholders, in collaboration with primary tourism providers, can develop concrete strategies to address this gap and promote the indigenous culinary specialties of the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos, thereby creating a robust tourism product that appeals to visitors through its food and scenic beauty.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPES OF STUDY:

The research focused on a select group of districts in Meghalaya, which was primarily influenced by constraints concerning time and the available resources. Despite this limitation, it presents a significant opportunity for researchers and various stakeholders to advocate for and support the indigenous tribal cuisine of Northeast India. Promoting this unique culinary heritage could be instrumental in boosting the tourism industry, not just in Meghalaya, but also in adjacent regions, ultimately leading to a deeper appreciation for the area's distinctive food culture.

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