

## Culinary Tourism and Livelihood Strategies in North East India: Potentiality and Prospects

RUPAM GOGOI

Department of English  
North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous),  
North Lakhimpur, Assam  
India

BUBU BORUAH

Department of Geography  
North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous)  
North Lakhimpur, Assam  
India

### Abstract:

*The tourism sector has made appreciable progress in India in the last few decades. Tourist movements have spread geographically to reach practically all countries of the globe, becoming for many of them an important economic sector in terms of income generation, foreign exchange earnings and employment generation. Therefore tourism is one of the most significant sectors demanding result-oriented strategies and implementation for the sake of a strong economy. It is pertinent that the numerous factors that sustain the 'marketability' of a tourist spot are dealt with seriously.*

*The tourism sector could not remain indifferent to the sustainability challenge of our times. This is why the World Tourism Organization (WTO) focuses its advisory and technical assistance services on policies, development guidelines, management techniques and measurement parameters that allow national and local governments, as well as the tourism industry, to incorporate sustainability principles into their decision making process and day-to-day operations.*

*North East India has the potential to be one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. Surveys suggest ecotourism, historical tourism, cultural tourism and adventure tourism to be some of the most prospective sectors. The paper would deal with the prospect and sustainability of culinary tourism in North East India and is based on the premise that though a tourist does not*

*visit a place to merely eat but it is food that often makes a mark for the places and as such it can guarantee economic self sustenance to the local populace. Various case studies and secondary sources shall be referred to and information and data analyzed during the course of the paper and concrete suggestions ascertaining development of culinary tourism in the region would be figured out.*

**Key words:** Tourist, Culinary Tourism, Ethnic Cuisine, Self-sustenance, Marketing Strategy

Eating connects us to our histories  
as much as it connects our souls  
to our bodies, our bodies to the earth. (Evan D.G. Fraser)

## **Introduction:**

India's North East, situated between 21°57' North to 29°30' North latitude and 88° East to 97°30' East longitude with an area of 262185 sq. km, has the potential of drawing universal attention towards it through its rich and diverse art and culture, customs and beliefs, handloom and handicraft, flora and fauna and food habit. The pristinely beautiful eight states of the region – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and the latest entry into the fold Sikkim— have tremendous potential to attract both international as well as domestic tourists – the Paradise Unexplored as the Government of India slogan campaigning for growth of the tourism sector in the region reads. The region has witnessed a steady flow of tourists over the years except Sikkim where tourism is one of the major sources of livelihood for the locals. No doubt below national average development in the field of transportation, the impression of being militancy infested region and which is not without reasons are some of the reasons that prevent some people from coming to this region. There are also certain legal bindings like the requirement of Inner Line Permit and Special Area Permit for

both domestic as well as international visitors to visit certain areas of the region. In the same time one cannot also deny non-aggressive advertising behind the lack of interest in the tourists for travelling into the region. The World Tourism Organization defines tourist as:

people who "travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for more than twenty-four (24) hours and not more than one consecutive year, for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited. (The Report of the Working Group on Tourism for the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, 6)

Javier Blance Herranz has classified the motivations of tourists into two broad categories – the *internal stimuli* or the *push* and the *external stimuli* or the *pull*. According to him:

The former are considered from the perspective of demand, and they lead the tourist to travel to gastronomic tourism destinations that often includes desires as well as psychological, social and ego-centric needs such as escapism from the daily routine, relaxing with family, rest, exploration and social interaction and affective or emotional bonding. The resources considered pull factors are cultural and natural attractions, special events and festivals, experiences with food products in the destinations and other opportunities for leisure and entertainment, value, friendliness of residents, gastronomic diversity and variety, attributes or the characteristics of the destination such as proximity etc. (Herranz 8)

Tourists, when in a space having cultural heterogeneity, often exhibits two aspects: he/ she searches for spaces where the ambience creates a pseudo image of his / her home and hence the caption 'home away from home' as used by most hoteliers who want to exploit one's sentiments associated with the word 'home'; he/ she desires to peep into the life and culture of the people of the place that has been visited and such people are ready to leave aside for the time being the impressions of 'home'

to discover something never seen and heard before and hence the popular saying encouraging one to behave like Romans when in Rome. The implication is clear – whereas some cannot outgrow the limiting influence of ‘home’ some others go out searching for fresh experience. The second category of tourists referred to above are best suited to appreciate cultural tourism, one of the most prospective areas for attracting tourists in North East India, as they have the interest to have a view of a new way of life. When using the term ‘culture’ many factors that determine and shape the identity of a race or a community comes into view and one very important factor is cuisine. Whether one looks at the subject of food from the perspective of a philosopher, an economist, a nutritionist or a historian one thing must be accepted that food shapes the cultural identity of a race. Albert Sonnefield has said:

Man forges in the smithy of the fire the created consciousness of human environment, his mythology, his history, his economy, and his gastronomy. (Dutta x)

In the case of North East India in order to steady and sustain the growth of tourist footfalls special steps are warranted that would enable the tourists to live ‘among the people and like the people’ which can be one of the Unique Selling Propositions (USP) of tourism in the region and in turn be a source of decent livelihood of the stakeholders.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

Though cuisine is not often the first factor prompting tourists to visit a particular place but food can be one of the highly rated products of niche tourism. The study aims to figure out the prospects of ethnic cuisine of the region in enhancing the quality of tourist stay and at evolving ways to sustain culinary tourism in North East India which in turn can be a major source of livelihood for the local population.

## **Methodology:**

This study is qualitative in nature. The researchers made field visits to Dilli Haat at New Delhi and NEDFI Haat at Guwahati besides visiting tourist festivals like Dhemaji Utsav and Majuli Utsav in India. The researchers also resorted to analytical approach for critically analyzing the secondary data collected from various sources- journal articles, newspapers etc. Project Reports, Policy papers and Action Plan for growth of tourism during the 12<sup>th</sup> plan period of the Government of India and the governments of the states under study would be taken into purview for arriving at result oriented suggestions for enhancing culinary tourism and by extension livelihood of the people.

## **Culinary Tourism:**

While showcasing the rich and magnificent culinary culture of north east India in *Food Trail: Describing Food Culture of North East India* the writer and editor Aiyushman Dutta says:

For a visitor to the region, the first thing to strike him would be the deep importance of food in the lives of the people. A visitor is often looked as a good luck sign, even in the plains of Assam where honouring a guest is regarded as honouring God himself. For a guest to leave one's house without partaking the family food is regarded as ill manners on the part of the host and is even believed to call upon bad luck. (Dutta XI)

Understanding the sense behind such an assertion in the whole of India in general and the prospect of culinary tourism in India the National Tourism Policy of India, 2002 states that attempts should be made to:

Capitalize by packaging India's unmatched variety of traditional cuisines that are today becoming increasingly popular in the world. The linkages and ripple effects created by a rapidly expanding restaurant sector can have dramatic

implications for the Indian economy, implement private-public partnership of the Culinary Institute of India that will research and document ancient culinary traditions, create a highly skilled workforce of culinary professionals that can populate not only hotel and catering establishments in India, but also internationally through a non-traditional medium, and encourage Indian entrepreneurs to establish restaurants of Indian ethnic cuisine internationally, by conceiving an innovative incentive scheme. (National Tourism Policy 2002, 14-15)

Niche or specialty tourism that is fast catching up has been among the thrust areas of all nations of the world and culinary tourism can be a significant inclusion in the list. The Report of the Working Group on Tourism of the Government of India for the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan Period identifies certain areas for niche tourism: Adventure; Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Exhibitions (MICE); Cruise; Medical; Wellness; Golf; Polo; Pilgrimage/Spiritual Travel; Film; Tea/ Coffee; Wildlife; Caravan. Culinary tourism does not find a mention here. The list is definitely not exhaustive and it has technically kept the option open for future inclusions by identifying fresh niche products. Carmina Fandos Herrera, a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Zaragoza attempts to arrive at a definition of gastronomic (culinary tourism) much according to the idea propagated by C.M. Hall and L. Sharples in their essay *The Consumption of Experiences or the Experience of Consumption? An Introduction to the Tourism of Taste* (2003):

...food tourism is an experiential trip to a gastronomic region, for recreation or entertainment purposes....acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the qualities or attributes related to tourism products, as well as culinary specialties produced in that region through its consumption. (Herrera 6)

World Food Travel Association (WFTA) defines culinary tourism as the search for inimitable and memorable eating and drinking experience. The American Culinary Traveller Report,

2013 published by the American travel market research firm Mandala Research has a few interesting findings:

- Travelers are most interested in local and authentic foods and culinary experiences that are different from those they can get at home.
- Most travelers combine culinary activities with other activities, also participating in culture, heritage and nature-based activities.
- Increasing reliance on reviews and recommendations of friends makes getting the word out through social media and other user content sources critical for destinations.
- Festivals motivate culinary travelers, so destination marketing organizations should consider hosting a beer, wine or culinary festival to feature local fare, products and unique food activities like chef demonstrations and samplings.
- Foodies want to be educated when traveling. Eighty-three percent enjoy learning about the local culture and cuisine of the destinations they visit. And the same percentage says they will spend more money on food and drinks while traveling.

In the North East India context it needs to be seen, first of all, whether the food of the region can really draw connoisseurs towards it or not. In this regard it will be pertinent to look at certain statements made by certain writers from the region and there can be little doubt that the statements can very well be part of a brochure informing the tourists about the impressive culinary list of North East:

Moreover Assamese cuisine has an extra edge over other types of Indian cuisines due to its simplicity and nutritive values. Low in calories and fat content, a typical Assamese fare is cooked in very little oil and with minimum spices. (Das 6)

I think one has to drink, taste and consume the many moods of Manipur to get the ultimate culinary experience. (Pouriangthanliu 11)

It has often been said that one has to have an acquired taste

to Mizo chawhmeh in order to love it. But it is just that in order to appreciate authentic Mizo food, you just need to be an authentic person. (Ralte 20)

Naga food is an acquired taste, which can be enjoyed only with an open mind and an experimental taste bud. (Ao 39)

A classification of tourist types would come handy while planning strategies to draw tourists towards the cuisine of a place (territory). According to Inaki Gaztelumandi the place or territory that a tourist visits is a very important component in the tourism machinery. For him:

The territory is the backbone of gastronomic offerings. The terroir is an element that differentiates and is the source local identity. It encompasses environmental and landscape values, history, culture, traditions, the countryside, the sea, the own cuisine of the place. In this regard, the conversion of the territory into a culinary landscape is one of the challenges of tourism destinations. (Gaztelumandi 11)

Nikhil Mukherjee has made 5 categories of tourists on the basis of their activities, requirements and indulgences in the territory that they arrive in – explorers, backpackers, special interest tourists, general interest tourists and mass tourists. Another category can be made in the context of North East India though the range and scope is limited as making an impact in culinary tourism is concerned – religious tourists or pilgrims as the prime motive of travel for such travelers are not leisure and pleasure. A detailed look at Mukherjee's classification stands to help the policy makers and the local populace to draw more people towards culinary tourism thereby creating livelihood avenues for them:



Sl. No.	Category	Typical Characters
1	Explorers	Tourists requiring no special facilities. They are low budget travelers and include bird-watchers, trackers and climbers.
2	Backpackers	Tourists having limited budget and use local facilities. They are often excluded from visiting remote areas because of expense.
3	Special Interest Tourist	Tourists dedicated to a particular hobby and prepared to pay to indulge in it. They require specialized services and travel in small groups.
4	General Interest Tourist	Tourists preferring group holidays. They are wealthy and require good facilities.
5	Mass Tourists	Tourists preferring large groups. They need good facilities and the high priority is comfort.

**(Table: Classification of Tourist Types, Source: Mukherjee 2008)**

The stakeholders of culinary tourism are to methodically target belonging to the categories that comprise of tourists ready to indulge in fresh experiences like the local cuisine. The Special Interest Tourist(s) and General Interest Tourist(s) are potential consumers. This would in turn bring in greater professionalism in all those involved directly and indirectly with the tourism machinery. That culinary tourism can be a major revenue earner for the states of the region can be presumed from the increased tourist footfalls in the region during the last few years. Media reports say that Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland have seen a growth of 20%-29% in foreign tourist arrivals while Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have seen 36%-41% increase in the inflow of domestic tourists from 2011 to 2012. The number of foreign tourists received by Nagaland increased from 2,080 in 2011 to 2,489 in 2012, an increase of 19.6%. Domestic tourism has also soared in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. Indians travelling to Arunachal increased from 2.3 lakh in 2011 to 3.1 lakh in 2012 recording a 36% growth while Nagaland saw 41% growth, from 25,391 to 35,915 tourists. As per Ministry of

Tourism, Government of Manipur data the number of foreign tourists travelling to Manipur increased from 578 in 2011 to 749 in 2012, reflecting a 29.5% growth while Tripura government records show an increase from 6,046 to 7,840 tourists in the same period, growth being of 29.67%. Directorate of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya reports show an increase in the number of domestic tourists visiting the state from 652756 in 2010 to 667504 in 2011 while the count of international tourists increased from 4177 to 4083 during the period under consideration. The data provided by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam indicates an increase in the number of domestic tourists from 4127447 in 2010-11 to 4408336 in 2011-12 and of international visitors from 15633 to 16660 during the same period. According Government of Sikkim (website of Sikkim Tourism) data the number of domestic tourists shows a decline from 700011 in 2010 to 552453 in 2011 because of the devastating earthquake that rocked the state on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2011 and marginally increased to 558538 in 2012 whereas international tourists numbered 23945 in 2011 and 26489 in 2012. If we are to trace popular tourist spots the list would be topped by Tawang, Shillong and its vicinity, Kaziranga National Park (not strictly in the given order). Such places can be convenient zones for initiating steps to popularize culinary tourism. Aggressive marketing of indigenous food products is very necessary to start with. The model of two states of India can be taken in this regard—Goa and Kerala. Goa aggressively markets Feni (a locally prepared alcoholic brew prepared either from cashew or coconut) and cashew while Kerala markets its spices. The North Eastern states must come up with its list of products that can attract the tourists. The website [www.igougo.com](http://www.igougo.com) tries to draw tourists towards Goa by saying it to be the 'land of beach, hot sun and heady Feni' but look at the supreme appreciation of the lesser known alcoholic brew of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh which has failed to become a tourist delight by Micah Hansen:

I've sampled numerous home-brewed alcohols throughout Asia, in general, most are palatable at best, but the Adi rice beer with its complex flavour and smooth finish was by far the most superior home-brewed beverage I have tasted. (Hansen, 97)

The strategies adopted in marketing of spices in Kerala can be used for marketing pickles that are exclusively produced in the region. Pickles of the world's hottest chilli found exclusively in states like Assam and Nagaland can be much sought after souvenirs to take back home. The forceful marketing of Darjeeling tea needs to be reciprocated in the case of Assam tea as well. For this it must be made available to the tourists by setting up adequate outlets selling quality tea. The places in and around the Kaziranga National Park stands put to be the most profitable beneficiaries in such an exercise. As of now only Hatikhuli Tea Estate has its own company retail outlet in the vicinity of the on the National Highway 37 in addition to some other individual establishments. Assamese sweetmeats and pancakes that are not easily perishable can also be take away souvenirs for a visitor.

Growth and development of tourism marketing involves attention on four salient features: Attraction (sites of historical interest or natural beauty, manmade structures and monuments, museums, parks, spaces of socio-cultural attraction etc), Accommodation (Hotels, Resorts, Guest Houses, Motels, Home Stays etc.), Accessibility and Amenities (eateries, souvenir shops, tourist information bureaus, security, guides and other facilities covered under the head of niche tourism). Amenities are of utmost necessity for a tourist and are factors that can pull a tourist towards a particular destination again in future. The Word-of-Mouth promotion is far more effective in generating interest regarding a tourist destination among the acquaintances of a tourist than cost-intensive advertisements in the media and tourist literature. This is primarily because of the notion that advertisements usually cover-up the unsavoury

sides of a destination. In the context of culinary tourism which can be included in the fourth category of necessary features of the growth and development of tourism a proper result-oriented marketing strategy is very vital. S.M.Jha opines that marketing strategies in the tourism sector involves going for strategies intended to offset challenges or to utilise the prospect available in what he calls the “(four Ps of marketing), e.g., alter the product, the price, the promotional campaign and the place.” (Jha 238). For those involved in the promotion of culinary tourism tremendous focus is to be laid on the second and the third parameters as exorbitant pricing is a potential customer dispelling factor. Tourism planners and managers emphasize on sustainable tourism which concentrates on the maintaining socio-cultural identity on the face of the cultural aggression of the tourists (specifically in terms of attires, life-style, material possessions, exhibited habits), mitigating any unsavoury economic because of the cash inflow from tourists and physical impact which is the change in the physical features of a destination because of tourist inflow. This makes determining the Tourism Carrying Capacity of a particular region that witness tourist footfalls a major exercise for all the policy making agencies in the field. This is the capacity of a tourist spot of bearing tourist inflow without any undesirable impact on the social, cultural, psychological, environmental, legal, economic and other factors that are linked with the sustenance of the people and distinctiveness of the place. Growth of ethnic culinary tourism is inextricably related to maintaining standard levels of Tourism Carrying Capacity as an unmaintainable spurt in the number of tourists would lead to gradual dilution of the quality of the menu which is nothing less than a faulty representation of a region’s socio-cultural life.

One recent trend in the hospitality industry of North East India is the growth of interest in ethnic food. While talking of ethnic food and traditional cuisines Felipe Fernandez-Armesto in his book *Near a Thousand Tables: A*

*History of Food* remarks:

Traditional cuisines are always definable in terms of a few staples and seasonings which are readily available in the places concerned: these seep into collective tastes and inform palates which remain saturated in memories of them, and commonly, become indifferent or intolerant toward other flavours. Even methods of preparation can become cultural characteristics or badges of identity within regions where the same foods are available throughout. (Fernandez-Amesto, 137)

Lalthansangi Ralte in her essay *Mizo Chawhmeh: The Belly Rules the Mind* comments:

Nowadays, a new fad has started amongst the youth whereby they believe that preference for traditional Mizo food makes a person more 'authentic'. There have been a lot of instances when people of the younger generation look at the people refusing traditional food with surprise as though eating that 'authentic' dish is a part of gaining the identity of 'Mizoness'. (Ralte, 20)

On analyzing the comments we would find that changing cultural trends of a society can be noted through its food. The ethnic restaurants are spaces where one stands to notice the impact of the forces of modernization on the society and attempts to outdo all those. Such culinary spaces are also showcases of gastronomic richness of a society and can be significant spots of culinary tourism. With the popularity of theme restaurants soaring, ethnic food in an ethnically designed environment can leave a lasting mark on the tourists. Establishments like the famous Dilli Haat at New Delhi may be established initially in the state capitals of the region on experimental basis where exhibitions and fairs on ethnic food could be held occasionally.

However, the development of ideas like that of the global menu is to be dealt with caution. Two lines of argument run in this regard: whereas for some global menu or the

homogenization of cuisine across the world does not affect the local menu, others are apprehensive of such a development. Culinary tourism and mere dining while being a tourist are different ideas. Commentators believing in the first concept cite examples of innovations that international fast food chains like McDonald's make in various countries in its attempts to trap the commercial prospects of local cuisine without apparently hampering its native attributes: McKabab, Chicken Maharaja-Mac and McAloo Tikki in the case of India. But going by experiences of the highly Indianised versions of Chinese food in a huge number of restaurants and fast food joints in India the view cannot be accepted at face value. Authentic presentation of ethnic food needs to be made at the various festivals and fairs that are organized in various places of the North East (the Hornbill festival of Nagaland, the Dihing Patkai Festival of Assam, the Ziro Festival of Arunachal Pradesh etc.) and they should be scheduled during the tourist season. The authors visited two such festivals showcasing the culture of the area concerned in particular and the state of Assam in general – the Dhemaji Utsav and the Majuli Utsav. Gastronomy was not the primary thrust of the organizers but the food stalls catering local delicacies seemed to attract considerable crowd though the menu was limited. Instead of offering a complete palate the focus remained on a few products. A more professional approach in the culinary dimension can translate such festivals into cultural spaces that can be utilized for benefit of the local culinary entrepreneurs.

The economic plane of culinary tourism cannot be ignored for the entrepreneurs in this field and the employees working in their establishments are basically locals. Most of them lack a substantial seed capital and the slightest of downward slide in tourist inflow endangers their future prospects. Moreover the lean season when there is very little tourist footfall is a major worry for them. In such a situation the Government authorities should come up with measures like

tax holiday on the hoteliers, suitable modification of rules pertaining to service tax and luxury tax so that the entrepreneurs can sustain themselves at least by catering to the local populace or those out for a weekend break.

### **Suggestions:**

On the basis of the observations made so far the following suggestions may be given for improvement of culinary tourism in North East India:

- 1) Recognition and protection of local culinary products in a systematic manner and its rational elevation with focus on sustainability.
- 2) Culinary tourism to be given greater thrust as a product of niche tourism.
- 3) 'Hunar se Rojgar' (from skill to employment) programme should be more focused on honing the culinary skills in ethnic food of the region.
- 4) Aggressive marketing strategies at national as well as international levels should be implemented to attract tourists to have a view of the destination's cultural uniqueness through various aspects, the current focus being on the cuisine.
- 5) Authentic presentation of cuisines during food festivals etc. in such a way that global cuisine or mainland cuisine (in case of North East India) does not cover up the unique characteristic features of ethnic cuisine of the cultural space wherein they are rooted.
- 6) Souvenir shops selling ethnic and locally available processed food products should be encouraged.
- 7) Establishments like the famed Dilli Haat of New Delhi be established at least in the state capitals of the region initially which can later be extended to the popular tourist places.
- 8) Festivals, fairs and exhibitions of ethnic food to be

conducted during the tourist season.

- 9) Exorbitant pricing should be checked. For this the owners of stalls selling ethnic cuisine, hoteliers and restaurateurs of a particular area may consider standardization of rates of products. In case of fairs and exhibitions the organizers may take initiatives for preventing exorbitant pricing.
- 10) Culinary tour circuits can be created in line with the existent tourist circuits. The focus should be on providing tourists the opportunity of discovering the regional culinary diversity and its richness.
- 11) Tax holiday be given to hoteliers and restaurateurs serving ethnic cuisine.
- 12) Service Tax and Luxury Tax laws should be suitably framed not to burden the hoteliers and restaurateurs catering more to the needs of budget category travelers.

## **Conclusion:**

Tourists are gradually pouring into the North East but most states of the region are still faring below the national average and as such there is no space for complacency. Tourist circuits are few and facilities concentrated on a few places. Despite odds culinary tourism can be a gainful source of livelihood for the people and for this the culinary richness of the region needs to be showcased effectively for the prospective international tourists and domestic visitors from outside the region and in discovering the richness of it one will discover the culture of the land. A combination of entrepreneurship skill, favourable government policies and constructive public co-operation can elevate culinary tourism into a major factor mobilizing tourist entry into the region and livelihood generator for the locals. As of today only a handful of tourists travel primarily for gastronomic delight but this select category is open in making sizeable expenditure on quality indigenous products and an



increase in their numbers would further help in enhancing livelihood avenues. Another highly possible outcome can be the development of other areas of niche tourism which can further open up fresh avenues of employment generation in the region. About the relation that exists between food of a region and its relationship with the citizens, the American writer Jonathan Safran Foer has rightly commented, 'Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity.'

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