

## FOOD TOURISM AND THE CUISINE OF HIMACHAL PRADESH: A STUDY OF LOCAL GASTRONOMY IN SELECTED DESTINATIONS WITHIN THE REGION

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### ABSTRACT

Food tourism revolves around exploring a destination primarily to indulge in local cuisine. It is primarily a domestic tourism activity, as people seek diverse culinary experiences even when traveling within their own country for various purposes like work, shopping, or leisure. Dining plays a crucial role in travel, whether it involves savouring local cuisine at the destination or on the move. Himachal Pradesh, with its diverse culture, climate zones, demographics, and geography, provides a rich culinary experience influenced by its surroundings. As competition among tourist destinations intensifies within the booming tourism sector, the focus on food tourism, also known as the culinary tourist industry, has increased. This form of tourism entails journeys to destinations where the focal point is the local cuisine and beverages. Typically associated with domestic tourism, food tourism caters to the universal need for sustenance, whether for leisure, business, or other purposes. This research investigates the importance of regional cuisine in the development of destinations within the Himachal region. Data collection involved structured questionnaires, journals, edited books, and online sources. Findings suggest that the impact of cuisine on drawing international visitors to Himachal Pradesh varies to some extent. However, food remains a potent tool for destination development and serves as a distinguishing feature of a travel experience. Exploring local cuisine while traveling can create new levels of excitement for tourists. Himachali cuisine, influenced by the region's climate and topography, showcases a variety of cooking methods and signature dishes that vary from one region to another. The people of Himachal Pradesh have developed traditional food processing techniques using locally available ingredients, reflecting the region's ethnic diversity, agricultural climate, socio-cultural values, and religious practices. While everyday meals typically consist of dal, rice, vegetables, and bread, special dishes are prepared during celebrations. This study aims to explore how culinary experiences contribute to tourism, emphasizing the role of food as a significant factor in attracting tourists to different destinations within Himachal Pradesh.

**Key Words:** Food tourism, Culinary, Destination, Travel, Himachal Pradesh

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Tourism Organization's definition in 1994, travel refers to the "activities of individuals journeying to or residing in places outside their usual environment for up to one year, for leisure, business, or other purposes." Since 1950, the global tourism sector has emerged as the fastest-growing industry worldwide. In recent years, there has been a surge in research focusing on food tourism, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate destinations, tourists, and food safety concerns. The tourist industry has been a significant contributor to the growth of India's service sector. Its primary goals include expanding and enhancing tourism, maintaining India's competitiveness as a travel destination, and improving existing tourism services to create job opportunities.

Travelers are increasingly drawn to exploring different destinations to discover and savor local cuisines. Each region offers its unique culinary delights, contributing to its cultural identity and attracting visitors seeking authentic experiences (Ergul, Johnson, Cetinkaya & Robertson, 2011). Throughout the year, India welcomes a large number of foreign tourists who eagerly explore and appreciate the diverse culinary offerings of the country. Food plays a vital role in tourism, as it reflects the distinct eating habits and ethnic cuisines of each region in India. Tourism has long been acknowledged as a valuable avenue for fostering social, economic, and cultural ties throughout history.

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In present-day India, tourism serves as a vital source of livelihood for numerous individuals, catering to a diverse array of interests spanning entertainment, sports, religion, culture, education, health, and business. Food holds a significant role in showcasing the culture and heritage of a region, and grasping a nation's culinary traditions is pivotal in understanding its customs (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2002). Local cuisine stands as a pivotal aspect of a destination's allure, influencing tourists' selection of destinations and shaping their overall experiences (Symons, 1999). Tourism has become a notable global social occurrence (Smith, Melanie K., 2003), with numerous industries—including transportation, hospitality, and entertainment contributing significantly to the sector's revenue.

In 2015, the travel and tourism sector accounted for 8.7% of total employment in India, encompassing both direct and indirectly supported occupations. It is projected to grow by 3% in 2016 and further by 1.9% annually through 2026 (WTTC, India, 2016). As highlighted by Xia (2016), culinary tourism serves as a delightful and captivating activity that fosters unity among locals and plays a significant role in attracting tourists by bridging cultural divides across different groups. Consequently, many scholars emphasize the importance of promoting local cuisine as a key attraction for visitors, recognizing that dining out and experiencing national and regional culinary delights are enjoyable activities for most tourists. The incorporation of local and regional cuisine can enhance the appeal of a destination and contribute to its profitability.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The consensus among scholars is that the reputation of a tourist destination holds significant importance, as it shapes people's perceptions, ultimately influencing their behavior and destination choices (Allameh et al., 2014). Establishing and promoting a positive image to potential tourists in target markets can enhance a destination's competitive edge (Gartner, 1994; Konecnik, 2002). Local cuisine and culinary experiences play a crucial role in influencing destination choices and visitor satisfaction during their stay (Quan, Wang, 2004; Fox, 2007). Consequently, culinary tourism is rapidly gaining prominence as one of the most captivating and popular segments within the tourism industry (Kim, 2011). Food holds a central place in culture (Mak, 2012), and culinary tourism has the potential to enrich destination appeal due to its close association with local culture, cuisine, festivals, and heritage (Everett, Aitchison, 2008).

The promotion of native cuisine and cooking methods is deeply integrated into the marketing strategies of various destinations. Native food plays a crucial role in enhancing tourist experiences and adds value to a destination's appeal (Quan & Wang, 2004). The concept of "culinary tourism" was introduced by Long (2004) in 1998 to emphasize the idea of experiencing diverse culinary traditions while traveling. It is recognized as a sustainable means of distinguishing destinations (Hall et al., 2004; Nummedal and Hall, 2006; Okumus et al., 2007; Sims, 2009), with food being a key factor in visitor satisfaction and destination success. The popularity of food tourism has grown significantly over time, becoming one of the most competitive sectors in the tourism industry (Mintel, 2014). Regional cuisines contribute to local economic prosperity and promotional efforts (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Kercher et al., 2008). Culinary tourism reflects societal changes and higher living standards, turning dining into a means of enriching life beyond meeting basic needs. It not only diversifies tourism products but also enhances the attractiveness of destinations. The culinary richness and offerings of a destination significantly influence travelers' choices and overall satisfaction levels. The perception of a destination's culinary scene contributes to its long-term competitiveness and can positively impact its image (Fox, 2007; Smith et al., 2011). Cuisine serves as a potent promotional tool for destinations to highlight their distinctive features (Hjalager & Flagestad, 2002).

## **3. OBJECTIVES**

**Understanding the Concept of Culinary Tourism:** This objective aims to delve into the multifaceted realm of culinary tourism, exploring its underlying principles, components, and significance within the broader context of the tourism industry. By unravelling the concept of culinary tourism, this study seeks to elucidate the motivations driving individuals to embark on culinary journeys, the impact of

local cuisine on destination selection, and the various experiences and activities associated with culinary tourism. Through comprehensive research and analysis, this objective aims to provide insights into how culinary tourism contributes to economic development, cultural exchange, and destination branding. Studying the Importance of Himachal Cuisine on Tourism in Himachal Pradesh: This objective focuses specifically on the unique culinary heritage of Himachal Pradesh and its role in attracting tourists to the region. By studying the importance of Himachal cuisine, this research aims to uncover the distinctive Flavors, ingredients, and culinary traditions that distinguish the region. Additionally, it seeks to assess the influence of Himachal cuisine on tourist perceptions, satisfaction, and overall tourism experiences. Through in-depth exploration and analysis, this objective aims to highlight the significance of Himachal cuisine as a key driver of tourism in the state, contributing to its cultural identity, economic growth, and tourism competitiveness.

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study primarily relied on secondary data sourced from various newsletters, research papers, magazines, journals, and data collected by survey.

#### **5. SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The scope of this study encompasses a comprehensive exploration of culinary tourism, with a particular focus on the importance of Himachal cuisine in driving tourism in the region. It includes an examination of the motivations, experiences, and preferences of culinary tourists, as well as an analysis of the impact of local cuisine on destination selection and visitor satisfaction. Additionally, the study will delve into the cultural, economic, and social significance of Himachal cuisine within the broader context of tourism development in Himachal Pradesh. It will involve gathering data from various sources such as interviews, surveys, and existing literature to provide a thorough understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, the scope extends to exploring potential strategies and recommendations for leveraging Himachal cuisine to enhance tourism experiences and promote sustainable tourism development in the region.

The tourism industry has been acknowledged as a vital element of the state's economy, with tourism emerging as a fundamental catalyst for future growth. Tourism contributes approximately 7% to the GSDP of Himachal Pradesh. The state boasts essential resources necessary for the flourishing of tourism, including geographical and cultural diversity, a conducive climate, picturesque landscapes, sacred sites, historic monuments, and welcoming locals. Among the districts of Himachal Pradesh, Kullu receives the highest domestic tourist influx, while Kinnaur records the lowest volume of tourist arrivals, partly due to relatively lesser infrastructure availability compared to other districts. The presence of tourist destinations within the state underscores the necessity to enhance infrastructure to accommodate visitors with tourism-friendly facilities. Quality infrastructure serves as a fundamental requirement for the development of all industries within a state's economy. The state government actively encourages private sector participation through public-private partnerships (PPP) to establish a robust infrastructure foundation in the state.

#### **6. CONNECTION BETWEEN GASTRONOMY AND TOURISM**

Eating is not merely a necessity but also an enjoyable experience akin to recreation. Food experiences for tourists can evoke both obligation and pleasure. Therefore, experiencing ethnic cuisine at a specific restaurant becomes a significant aspect of a traveller's journey (Shenoy, 2005). Food serves multiple roles, fulfilling basic needs while also offering local and cultural experiences, as well as satisfying communal desires. However, there is a scarcity of experimental research regarding food experiences, particularly in the context of tourist dining attitudes (Jensen & Hansen, 2007). According to Tikkanan (2007), there exists a notable gap in understanding how tourists perceive their dining experiences due to differing cultures between service providers and guests. Food plays a crucial role in the tourism industry, and many researchers explore the relationship between food and destination tourism. Lin (2006) suggests that the connection between food, tourism, and destinations is complex and not fully understood, highlighting a need for deeper comprehension of the links between food and tourism.

Limited research exists on food behaviours and their association with tourism. Food also influences visitors' cultural experiences within the tourism sector (Ab Karim, 2006).

## 7. EXPLORING CULINARY DELIGHTS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

A customary communal dining experience known as "Dham" celebrated during functions and festivals in Himachal Pradesh. This lavish midday meal, primarily prepared by a special caste of Brahmins called "Botis," involves meticulous preparation starting the night before. The provided data presents the responses of individuals regarding the importance of food in influencing their choice of travel destination.

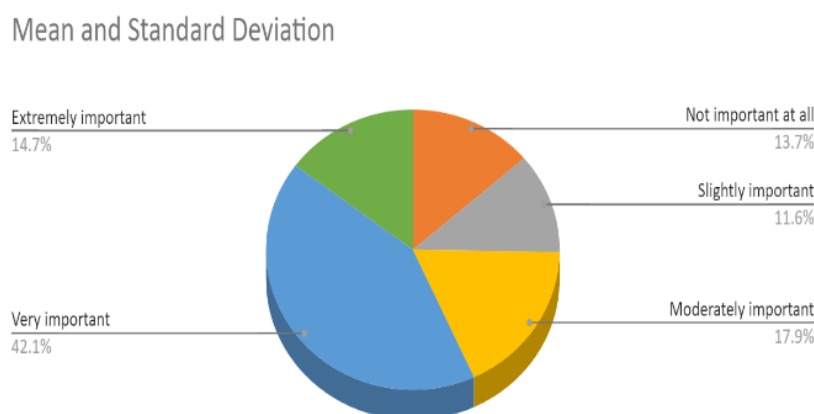


Fig. 1 - Food in Influencing your choice of Travel Destination

Each response category, ranging from "Not important at all" to "Extremely important," has associated mean values and standard deviations. The data indicates that a significant portion of respondents, with a mean of 40 and a standard deviation of 0.50, consider food to be very important when selecting a travel destination. This suggests that a sizable proportion of travellers prioritize experiencing local cuisine and culinary traditions when planning their trips. Moreover, the category "Extremely important," with a mean of 14 and a standard deviation of 0.36, also highlights a considerable emphasis on food in travel decision-making.



Fig.2 Cooking at Home

This indicates that while not everyone ranks food as the utmost priority, a notable segment of respondents highly values culinary experiences when choosing where to travel. On the other hand, responses such as "Not important at all" and "Slightly important" have lower mean values, indicating that a smaller proportion of respondents do not prioritize food significantly in their travel choices. Overall, the data underscores the importance of food as a determining factor for many travellers when selecting their destinations, with a substantial portion considering it either very or extremely important. It includes plain aromatic rice, pulses, vegetable curries, and condiments such as "Sepu Badi," "Kadhi," and "Moong Dal."



*Fig.3 Regional utensil*

Accompaniments like "Khatta," a sweet and sour condiment, and "Meetha," a sweet dish, complete the meal. The preparation and serving of Dham occur on special leaf plates known as "Pattals." Historically, Himachali communities relied on locally sourced seasonal ingredients and traditional food processing techniques due to limited transportation infrastructure.



*Fig.3 Traditional Way of Serving*

Pickles made from various fruits and vegetables, including mutton, chicken, and fish, are popular in Himachal Pradesh. Rural women, utilizing their indigenous skills, are primarily responsible for pickle production. Curd, called "Noo" or "Nuch" in the Kinnaur region, is a staple in most village households. Another traditional beverage, "Tchaku Chai," is unique to Lahaul Spiti and is made by boiling tea leaves with water, butter, milk, and salt in a traditional vessel called "Dongmo."

## 8. CONCLUSION

The importance of indigenous cuisine has been emphasized in the advancement of the tourism sector and the marketing of destinations, serving as a central element in shaping the traveller's experience. The study on the influence of food on travel destination choice reveals several key insights into the significance of culinary experiences in shaping traveller's decisions. Firstly, the data analysis indicates that a substantial portion of respondents consider food to be very important or extremely important when selecting a travel destination. This underscores the importance of culinary experiences as a determining factor for many travellers. Secondly, the findings highlight the diversity of preferences among travellers, with some placing a high emphasis on food while others prioritize other factors. This suggests that while food plays a significant role for many individuals, it may not be the sole determinant of their travel decisions. Furthermore, the study underscores the potential impact of food on destination competitiveness and tourism development. Destinations that offer unique and appealing culinary experiences may have a competitive edge in attracting visitors and enhancing their overall tourism offerings. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of recognizing and leveraging the influence of food in destination marketing and tourism strategies. By promoting local cuisine, culinary events, and gastronomic experiences, destinations can attract a broader audience of travellers and enhance their overall tourism appeal.

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