

Cuisine centric model for sustained tourism eco-system in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra

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Abstract. Saoji cuisine is style of cooking that got originated in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh region but with the passage of time got popularized in Vidarbha region of state of Maharashtra. The cuisine got its commercial identity based on the identity of Halba tribe. Vidarbha region is known for its forests and oranges. Tourist from all over the world visit Vidarbha for tiger safaris. So far, the region is not successful in retaining tourist beyond tiger tourism. This has created an opportunity loss for the economy of the region. The paper tries to answer the research question-How can Saoji cuisine boost up tourism and economic activity in the region? The focused group technique was used to generate quantitative data to arrive at conclusions. The research revolves around identification of key factors responsible for sustained tourism and tourism based economic activities with food at the center.

Keywords: Saoji Cuisine, Vidarbha region, Culinary tourism, Sustained economic activity

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1 Introduction

Vidarbha is relatively underdeveloped region on eastern part of Maharashtra. Nagpur is the leading city It is surrounded by forests and is known for its tiger safaris. Most of the tourists visit the forest for a day or two or week and return back although there is a possibility of formation of tourist circuit, ecotourism, culinary tourism, mine tourism, religion, temple and heritage tourism, the region, it's people and it's authorities have not made enough efforts to build an ecosystem to promote its food and culture.

In order to boost the tourist activity in the region, it needs (1) tourist spots, (2) local and distinctive cuisine and (3) local winery and wine products. The region of Vidarbha already has first two and the wine lovers' culture is fast developing.

Vidarbha has ample forests well known for tiger sighting. Vidarbha is also has a unique cuisine- Saoji. Saoji has made its mark even outside Vidarbha in Maharashtra and outside India in USA too. It has every potential to create niche for itself especially in non-vegetarian food. The wine lovers club in Nagpur has been functioning from last 7 years and the membership is growing fast. Nagpur is famous for oranges and is known as orange city. There are successful attempts to make wine from oranges.

The three-sum combination is expected to act as a feasible and sustainable driver for Vidarbha's economy and also will automatically ensure the authenticity of and spread of Saoji cuisine in years to come. The following section presents cuisine centric model for sustained tourism ECO-system in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra.

2 Saoji cuisine

In a large state like Maharashtra, food habits change significantly as you travel across the state. So, you have variations like Malvani, Puneri, Khandeshi, Kolhapuri, and Varadi in their cuisine where the ingredients, spices, and preparations change quite significantly. A niche cuisine from the Vidarbha region which is gaining popularity in other parts of India is the Saoji food. There are more than five hundred Saoji Bhojnalayas in the entire Vidarbha region. Even though the cuisine is popular in the region, it has not made its presence felt outside region. There is need to identify the factors that are responsible for this limited growth and popularity. Food is an important cultural marker which works as building stones of each cultural foundation. Food in India is an identity marker of caste, class, family, kinship, tribe affiliation, lineage, religiosity, and ethnicity and increasingly of secular group identification. It is also an integral part of Halba Tribe.

Saoji Cuisine supports the "Slow Food Movement". Slow Food is an international movement founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986. Promoted as an alternative to fast food, it strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisine and encourages farming of plants, seeds and livestock characteristic of the local ecosystem. It prevents the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions counteract the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us.

The traditional food of India has been widely appreciated for its fabulous use of herbs and spices. Indian cuisine is known for its large assortment of dishes that vary from east to west and from north to south. In the last few decades, as a result of globalization, a lot of Indians have traveled to different parts of the world and vice versa there has been a massive influx of people of different nationalities in India. This has resulted in Indianization of various international cuisines. Nowadays, in big metro cities one can find specialized food joints of international cuisines. There is a need to revive our traditional cuisines and promote it, to ensure it is not lost. Traditional foods are originally unadulterated and were designed for individual needs and are an important source of many nutrients. These recipes are formulated in a way that provides both, a balanced diet and required amount of nutrition according to climate, region, season, age, and gender as well as rich taste. Traditional foods provide a link to our past and culture and serves as a reminder of our rich food culture, particularly for young generation, as with the changing eating habits, lack of awareness about nutritional value of traditional food, and in absence of standard recipes, over time we have witnessed the loss of many traditional recipes and cuisines. One must aspire to promote by putting in efforts to recognize, revive and restore the hidden culinary gems spread across the length and breadth of the country at large. In order to promote tourism based around food that is culinary tourism, will need to have tourism ecosystem. The region of study is known for forests and food. It is an industrially underdeveloped region and needs some intervention for its development and sustained businesses. The study has socio-cultural, economic and entrepreneurial connotations. It not only looks into preservation of ethnicity and authenticity of the cuisine but also looks into development of an ecosystem having culinary tourism as its pillar.

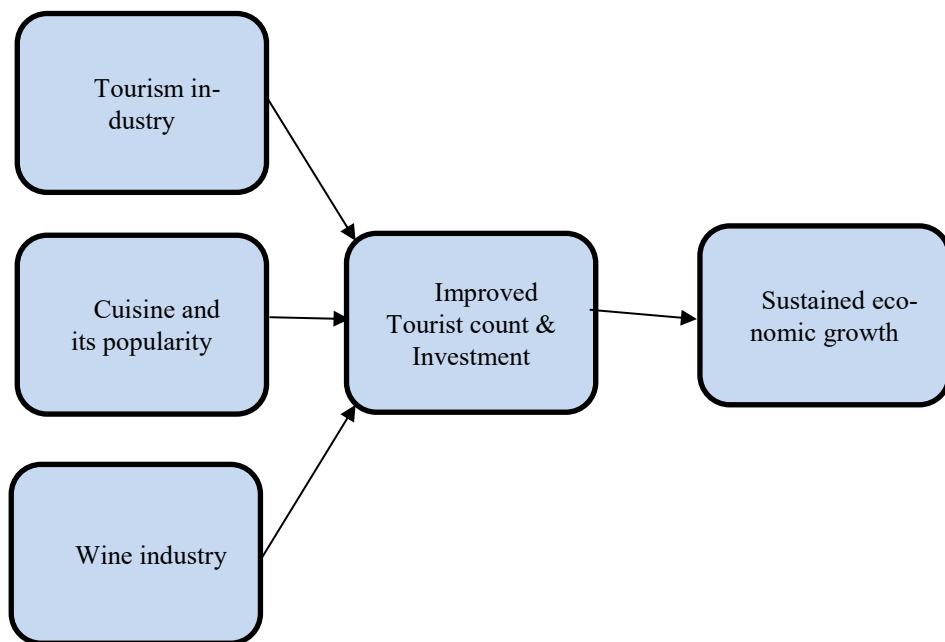


Figure 1: Model for sustained economic growth through culinary tourism

3 Literature review and validation of model

Diversity is synonymous with India; be it languages, religion, castes or for that matter food. Indian spices have travelled across continents from the era of Mughals and have made their presence felt in almost every country. So, when it comes to Indian food, one can safely say that the diversity of cuisine is unmatched. One can break down the flavors state wise or region wise; the local dishes change every 100 kilometers.

In this global village, where tourism has gained momentous rise, India is on top of the charts when it comes to culinary tourism. A product of both world history and contemporary mass culture, culinary tourism is a scholarly field of study that is emerging as an important part of the tourism industry. Also known as gastronomic tourism, tasting tourism, and simply food tourism, culinary tourism refers to adventurous eating, eating out of curiosity, exploring other cultures through food, intentionally participating in the foodways of another and the development of food as a tourist destination and attraction.

Ruth Dsouza Prabhu (2018) in her article has talked about how Indian dishes are now available on foreign platter. This has been possible due to Celebrity chefs who have made this transition possible. But what bothers is the fact that the “spicy” or “hot” nature of the cuisine which has kept the foreign tourist at bay from tasting it. She therefore emphasizes that if one must brand Indian food one has to work on it.

Akshay Kumar (2016) has brought about the fact that Indian culinary tourism has a long way to go. Though Indian food is very popular in world, it has been restricted to few dishes like butter chicken and naan being available in other countries. Every state in India has its own distinct cuisine and some of the cuisines are so authentic that travelers must visit a destination to gratify their palate. This has given rise to a segment of domestic culinary travelers. Food tours are the need of the hour to make the travelers accustomed to the local flavors.

Priyadarshini Chatterjee (2016) has brought out the local flavors of Nagpur in her writings. She has given a glimpse of what gastronomical delights are available for food lovers in Nagpur

Dhaval Kulkarni (2019) reports that as per the India Tourism Statistics 2018 report the State had 11.91 crore domestic tourist visits and 50 lakh foreign tourists' visits during 2017. He stated that tourists, who reside in the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation's (MTDC) resorts across the state often, complained of not getting authentic local cuisines at their resorts, with the state-run corporation preferring to hire contractors from different cities across the state to run their restaurants, which has forced them to look at other eating options. Now, the MTDC has decided to run these restaurants by recruiting local cooks to provide visitors an authentic culinary experience. This will give the tourists a chance to try the authentic local cuisine without having any fear of getting substandard food. This move will act as a measure to spread awareness among tourists about various cuisines available in Maharashtra.

Sakshita Khosla (2016) has made a list of top ten food destinations of India. In her list she has mentioned about Nagpur's Saoji cuisine and has urged her readers and tourists to try out this special cuisine known for its unique flavors and taste.

The Golden Sparrow (2016) has traced the Saoji cuisine and has chalked the rise of this cuisine. The cuisine is highly popular due to its unique flavor and homemade masalas which add distinct flavor to the dishes. The owner of an eatery in Pune has made it a point that he doesn't dilute the taste of the curry to adjust to the palates of the customers. Saoji cuisine is not for the faint hearted and must be eaten in the same way.

Thus, we can see that Saoji cuisine has a potential to act as a pillar for establishment of tourism ecosystem in Vidarbha. The literature also stresses on the need to preserve authenticity of food and also adapting to customer needs.

4 Focus group interview and validation of model

The experts from tourism industry, members of faculty from hotel and tourism management discipline were interviewed to gather views and suggestions on the proposed model for cuisine-based tourism eco-system.

Pre cursers for tourism development in Vidarbha region:

- Vidarbha need to embed the mine tours, Buddhist circuit, adventure tourism, and heritage tourism with forest / tiger tourism. The availability of tours needs to be popularized on tourism department websites. The culinary tours also need to be part of overall experience. Local authentic Saoji cuisine should be made available at resorts. Special Saoji breakfast options should be developed and popularized. Saoji culinary tours should be designed and popularized. The Saoji community cooks should be trained and employed at various eateries along tourist destinations. Saoji food should be made available at wine fests. Efforts need to be made in order to develop wineries and orange wine cluster in the region.
- Existing Saoji eateries must be modernized and keep hygienic ambience to attract the foreign tourists and foodies.
- Saoji youth need to master foreign languages to engage foreign tourists during culinary tours.
- All star hotels should employ Saoji chefs to serve authentic Saoji dishes to guests.

Factors affecting greater investment and greater footfall:

- Investment is the function of revenues for private players and the same should be ensured by creating a unique experience for the tourists. Government should develop the infrastructure to support its own ventures and also the private properties.
- There is need of offering 2&3star properties for tapping the growing middle class in the economy.
- The manpower development and skilling of Saoji community members for better service is a must.
- Region specific campaigns to be executed for creating awareness and attraction.

Elements of sustained economic growth:

- Saoji cuisine involves an element of secrecy in its preparation and this keeps the cuisine family specific. It also means that the standardization and documentation is difficult for Saoji cuisine. Community needs to take care of this in order to grow authentically.
- Variants like Saoji Poha, Saoji Idli need to be promoted.
- Saoji Masala in packed form should be available for purchase as souvenir.
- Local demand also needs to be developed whenever the forests are closed for safari.

The qualitative data suggests that the Model is feasible model and needs contribution from private players, state tourism department, wine industry and the Halba Saoji community members.

5 Concluding remarks

Saoji food is mostly consumed as lunch or dinner. The Saoji menu for breakfast is not yet developed. The region however has seen the growth in breakfast items like Saoji poha, Saoji Idli and so on. Saoji Masale (spices) are available in almost all the grocery shops throughout the region. The Tadoba Andheri tiger reserve (TATR) attracts huge number of tourists from across India and abroad. There is an urgent need to engage such tourists by carefully designing the mine tours, religious tours, culinary tours, adventure tours and so on. Local food like Saoji can play a vital role in attracting the tourists. When coupled with Nagpur oranges and local orange wine the tourists shall get a hundred percent regional flavor. To begin with, the tourism department is expected to design and offer tours based on proposed model and subsequent discussion. The economic activity shall bring the importance of Saoji cuisine on forefront and will automatically preserve the authenticity of the cuisine by providing respectful employment opportunities to persons belonging to Saoji community.

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