

Sustainability & Eco-Friendly Practices: Sustainable Sourcing

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Abstract

Indian cuisine is a vibrant representation of its diverse cultural and geographical landscape. This paper delves into the traditional cuisines of three regions – Agartala in Tripura, Manipur, and Meghalaya – focusing on their unique cultural and geographical identities. By examining the influence of history, geography, and ethnicity on food practices, this study explores how food becomes an important cultural artifact that connects people to their land and traditions. This paper provides insights into how traditional foods contribute to the cultural heritage and social cohesion of these regions. The research reflects on the broader implications of food as a means of cultural preservation in the face of modernization and globalization.

Key words: Traditional Cuisine, Cultural Geography, Agartala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Regional Food Identity, Culinary Heritage, India, Indigenous Foods, Food and Culture, Local Traditions.

Introduction

Context and Rationale

The diversity of Indian cuisine is shaped by various factors, including geography, climate, religion, and ethnic communities (Achaya, 1998; Pollan, 2007). Agartala (Tripura), Manipur, and Meghalaya are regions that have retained their traditional culinary practices despite the pressures of globalization. These regions serve as a microcosm for understanding how food reflects broader cultural and geographical dynamics in India. By examining the cuisines of these regions, this study provides insights into the intersections of culture, geography, and identity.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the cultural significance of traditional cuisines in Agartala, Manipur, and Meghalaya.
- To explore the geographical influences on food choices and preparation techniques.
- To understand how traditional cuisines serve as markers of identity for these regions.
- To analyze the challenges these cuisines face in a globalized world.

Literature Review

Cultural Geography of Food

The relationship between geography and food practices has been widely discussed in cultural geography studies. Sauer (2008) asserts that culinary practices are not merely functional but are deeply rooted in the landscapes and ecosystems they emerge from. Pollan (2007) argues that traditional food systems are expressions of a region's cultural identity and ecological heritage. Recent

research (Kavitha and Ravi 2024) emphasizes the need to document these practices as they face threats from industrialized agriculture and globalization (Bhardwaj, 2024).

Regional Food Studies in India

Indian cuisine's diversity has been extensively studied, with Achaya (1997) providing a foundational understanding of its historical evolution. However, the Northeast's culinary traditions remain underrepresented in mainstream discourse (Chatterjee et al. 2022).

Studies by (Ramashankar 2015) and Sen (2019) shed light on the unique ingredients, preparation methods, and cultural significance of northeastern cuisines, emphasizing the region's distinctiveness within India's broader culinary landscape.

Food as Cultural Identity

Food serves as a tangible representation of cultural identity, as noted by Appadurai (1988). In regions like Tripura, Manipur, and Meghalaya, traditional food practices are deeply intertwined with local customs, festivals, and daily life (Sen, 2019). The symbolic meanings of dishes – whether spiritual, health-related, or community-focused – highlight their role in maintaining cultural continuity. (Kavitha and Ravi 2024) also points out that food can act as a site of resistance against cultural homogenization, particularly in indigenous communities.

Role of Fermentation in Culinary Practice

Fermentation is a significant technique in northeastern cuisines, with dishes like Eromba in Manipur and fermented bamboo shoots in Meghalaya exemplifying this tradition (Chatterjee et al. 2022) & (Kharnaier & Tamang, 2022). This process not only preserves food but also enhances its nutritional value and aligns with the

ecological conditions of the region. Studies by (Chourasia 2024) link fermentation practices to broader themes of sustainability and resource utilization (Kapoor et al., 2022).

Challenges in Preserving Traditional Cuisine

Globalization and urbanization pose significant threats to traditional food systems. Achaya (1997) notes the increasing preference for processed and globalized foods, which often leads to the erosion of indigenous culinary knowledge. (Ramashankar 2015) highlights efforts by local chefs, historians, and organizations to document and promote traditional recipes as a countermeasure (Tamang et al., 2021). These efforts underscore the importance of community involvement in preserving culinary heritage.

Food Tourism and Economic Potential

The role of food tourism in preserving and promoting traditional cuisines is gaining attention. Studies by (Kavitha and Ravi 2024) and (Chatterjee et al. 2022) suggest that integrating traditional foods into tourism initiatives can provide economic benefits while fostering cultural pride. The case of northeastern India, with its unique culinary offerings, presents an opportunity to develop sustainable tourism models that celebrate local traditions (A. P. Singh & Mizoram University, 2019).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach based on secondary data collection. Sources include academic literature, historical records, culinary documentation, and regional studies on food and culture. The analysis synthesizes existing knowledge to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and geographical significance of cuisines in Agartala, Manipur, and Meghalaya.

The Cultural and Geographical Significance of Cuisine in Agartala

Historical Background

Agartala, the capital of Tripura, reflects a fusion of indigenous tribal and Bengali culinary traditions. Historical accounts suggest that the region's cuisine developed as a result of cultural interactions facilitated by trade and migration (Chourasia 2024). The royal influence of the Manikya dynasty further enriched the culinary landscape, introducing elaborate dishes that combined local and Mughal flavours. The integration of diverse communities over centuries has made Agartala's cuisine a mosaic of culinary practices, each representing a chapter of its history (Chatterjee et al. 2022).

Key Dishes and Ingredients

- **Muya Bong and Bamboo Shoot Curry:** These dishes emphasize the use of locally sourced ingredients

such as bamboo shoots, fish, and wild greens (Ramashankar 2015). The preparation techniques, passed down through generations, reflect a deep understanding of sustainable resource utilization.

- **Rice and Fish Dishes:** Rice remains a staple, paired with various forms of fish, reflecting the agrarian lifestyle of the region (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Fish is often cooked with mustard, turmeric, and green chilies, creating a flavour profile unique to the region.
- **Wahan Mosdeng:** A pork-based dish that highlights the Tripuri community's preference for bold, spicy flavours. The dish is prepared with simple yet flavourful ingredients like green chilies, garlic, and fermented fish paste (Ramashankar 2015).

Cultural Relevance

Agartala's food represents a blend of traditions, symbolizing the coexistence of multiple ethnic identities. Traditional recipes are often associated with festivals and rituals, underscoring the cultural significance of food (Chourasia 2024). For instance, the Buisu festival of the Tripuri community celebrates the harvest season with an array of traditional dishes, symbolizing prosperity and gratitude (Sen, 2019). Additionally, food plays a central role in community bonding, with dishes prepared and shared during communal events and family gatherings. The culinary practices also serve as a repository of cultural knowledge, encapsulating the environmental wisdom and resourcefulness of the region's inhabitants (Kavitha and Ravi 2024).

Traditional Cuisine of Manipur A Study of Indigenous Practices

Cultural and Historical Influences

Manipur's culinary landscape is shaped by its ethnic diversity, martial traditions, and geographical features. The state's cuisine has evolved to reflect the symbiotic relationship between its people and the natural environment.

Historical texts indicate that Manipuri culinary practices date back to ancient times, where food preparation was closely aligned with social hierarchies, religious customs, and ecological sustainability (Sen, 2019). The Meitei community, the largest ethnic group in Manipur, has played a pivotal role in shaping the region's food culture through their integration of spiritual and everyday practices (Chatterjee et al. 2022).

Key Dishes and Ingredients

- **Eromba:** A dish made from fermented vegetables and fish, reflecting the Manipuri emphasis on fermentation and preservation techniques (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Eromba is often consumed with rice, highlighting the

nutritional and cultural balance in traditional meals (Tamang & Lama, 2022).

- **Nga Thongba (Fish Curry):** This curry uses fermented fish and local herbs, showcasing the integration of traditional knowledge and natural resources (Ramashankar 2015). Its flavour profile – a blend of spicy and tangy – is characteristic of Manipuri cuisine.
- **Chak-hao:** A unique black rice variety indigenous to Manipur, used in both savory and sweet dishes. Chak-hao has gained recognition for its nutritional value and has become a symbol of Manipuri identity (Kavitha and Ravi 2024).
- **Singju:** A traditional salad prepared with seasonal vegetables, aromatic herbs, and roasted sesame seeds. Singju embodies the simplicity and health-conscious nature of Manipuri food culture (Chourasia 2024).

Cultural Significance

Manipuri food is deeply intertwined with the state's social and religious practices. Meals are often prepared in alignment with traditional festivals and ceremonies, such as Lai Haraoba, a ritual dedicated to local deities, where specific dishes are offered as a mark of respect (Sen, 2019). Additionally, food preparation and consumption in Manipur emphasize community participation. Traditional kitchens, or "Umang Laisang," serve as spaces for storytelling and intergenerational knowledge transfer, ensuring the continuity of culinary traditions (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Manipuri cuisine also reflects the state's ecological ethos, with an emphasis on seasonal and locally sourced ingredients. This approach not only ensures sustainability but also fosters a deep connection between the people and their natural surroundings (Ramashankar 2015). Furthermore, the dietary practices in Manipur align with the principles of Ayurveda, emphasizing balance and harmony in food consumption (Kavitha and Ravi 2024).

Meghalaya A Culinary Landscape Shaped by Hills and Tribes

Geography and Climate Impact

Meghalaya's hilly terrain and abundant rainfall play a pivotal role in shaping its culinary traditions. The region's unique topography supports the cultivation of indigenous crops like millet, maize, and a variety of vegetables, which form the staples of its diet (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Additionally, the climate fosters an environment conducive to fermentation, which is a common preservation method in local cuisine. The Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes, the main ethnic groups in Meghalaya, have developed distinct food practices that reflect their adaptation to the hilly environment and reliance on forest resources (Chourasia 2024).

Key Dishes and Ingredients

- **Jadoh:** A Khasi dish prepared with rice and pork, often cooked with turmeric and black sesame. This dish symbolizes the Khasi community's connection to their agrarian lifestyle and cultural heritage (Ramashankar 2015).
- **Dohneiong:** A pork curry made with black sesame paste, highlighting the unique flavour profiles of Khasi cuisine. This dish exemplifies the tribe's emphasis on robust and earthy flavours (Kavitha and Ravi 2024).
- **Bamboo Shoot Dishes:** Widely used by the Garo and Jaintia tribes, bamboo shoots are often fermented or fresh, lending a tangy flavour to various dishes (Chatterjee et al. 2022).
- **Tungrymbai:** A fermented soybean dish that serves as a protein-rich staple. This dish is a testament to the ingenuity of preservation techniques in Meghalaya's cuisine (Chourasia 2024).

Cultural and Spiritual Significance

Food in Meghalaya is deeply tied to tribal customs and rituals. During festivals like Wangala, celebrated by the Garo tribe, specific dishes are prepared to honour the harvest and community's spiritual connection to the land (Sen, 2019). Meals are often communal, fostering unity and reinforcing social bonds within and between tribes (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Moreover, the use of local ingredients symbolizes the tribes' respect for nature and sustainable practices, with food serving as a medium for passing down traditional ecological knowledge (Nongrum & Syiem, 2022). The dietary practices in Meghalaya also reflect a harmony between health and tradition (Acharya et al., 2023). Many dishes are designed to be nutritious and balanced, incorporating medicinal herbs and natural remedies. This holistic approach to food aligns with the broader cultural ethos of living in harmony with the environment (Kavitha and Ravi 2024).

Modern Influences and Adaptions

In recent years, Meghalaya's cuisine has seen influences from global food trends and urbanization. However, efforts are being made to preserve traditional recipes through culinary festivals, documentation, and tourism initiatives. The integration of traditional foods into modern dining experiences is helping to sustain and revitalize these culinary practices for future generations (Ramashankar 2015).

Comparative Analysis of Regional Cuisines

Commonalities and Differences

Despite their differences, the three regions share common ingredients such as rice, fish, and fermented vegetables. These ingredients reflect the regions' agrarian lifestyles and reliance on natural resources (Acharya, 1997).

Cultural Preservation Through Cuisine

Traditional recipes are passed down through generations, functioning as a medium for cultural expression and identity preservation (Appadurai, 1988).

Food and Identity

The cuisine of each region serves as a marker of cultural identity, highlighting the interplay between geography, history, and culture (Sen, 2019).

Modern Challenges to Traditional Cuisines

Impact of Globalization

The incursion of global food chains and processed foods threatens the survival of traditional culinary practices. Younger generations are increasingly adopting modern dietary habits, contributing to a decline in traditional food consumption (Ramashankar 2015).

Preservation Efforts

Initiatives such as food festivals, culinary schools, and recipe documentation aim to preserve traditional cuisines. These efforts underscore the importance of safeguarding culinary heritage in the face of globalization (Chatterjee et al. 2022).

Urbanization and Changing Diets

Urban migration has led to shifts in dietary preferences, often at the expense of traditional food practices. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to promote traditional cuisines (Chourasia 2024).

Socio-cultural Changes

As these regions face increasing urbanization and the spread of global food chains, sociocultural changes are rapidly altering traditional food practices. Younger generations, often influenced by global trends and urban migration, are distancing themselves from indigenous culinary practices. This shift has led to a decline in the transmission of food knowledge, with younger people preferring faster, processed food options over their culturally significant traditional dishes. Additionally, the incorporation of foreign cuisines into everyday meals may be diluting regional food identities, resulting in a loss of cultural heritage.

Efforts to revive and promote traditional cuisines, through initiatives like culinary festivals and educational programs, are crucial to counteract this shift and reconnect younger populations with their roots, fostering a sense of pride and cultural continuity. This evolving relationship between food and identity reflects broader sociocultural transformations in Northeast India, where food is not only sustenance but a symbol of heritage and belonging.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The study reveals that traditional cuisines in Agartala, Manipur, and Meghalaya are deeply connected to their geography, history, and culture. These cuisines serve as markers of identity, offering insights into regional heritage and environmental adaptations (Achaya, 1997; Sen, 2019). Each dish and culinary practice reflect the intricate interplay of historical influences, ecological adaptability, and cultural values, making the preservation of these traditions vital for understanding the region's socio-cultural fabric.

Traditional cuisines in Agartala, Manipur, and Meghalaya embody principles of sustainability that align with environmental conservation. The emphasis on locally sourced ingredients, seasonal produce, and traditional preservation techniques such as fermentation and drying not only minimizes the environmental impact but also supports biodiversity (Saikanth et al., 2023). These food systems are inherently aligned with ecological cycles, utilizing resources efficiently and fostering a deep connection to the land. Additionally, the use of wild herbs, fish, and native grains promotes the conservation of indigenous species and helps maintain the ecological balance of the regions. As the world grapples with the environmental challenges of modern food production systems, the sustainable practices embedded in traditional cuisines offer valuable lessons. Governments and communities can leverage these practices to create food systems that are both culturally rich and ecologically viable, promoting a sustainable future for both food security and the environment.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies could examine the commercialization of traditional foods and their role in urban foodscapes. The potential of food tourism in promoting regional cuisines globally remains an underexplored area (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Further research could also investigate the socio-economic impact of preserving traditional cuisines, focusing on how food heritage initiatives can empower local communities and promote sustainable development.

Policy Recommendations

Incorporating traditional culinary practices into cultural heritage policies and promoting indigenous food tourism could sustain and revitalize these food traditions. Educational programs emphasizing traditional cuisine could also foster appreciation among younger generations (Ramashankar 2015). Collaboration between government bodies, local communities, and culinary experts is essential to create comprehensive strategies that safeguard these culinary heritages while adapting to contemporary contexts. Emphasizing the inclusion of these cuisines in global culinary platforms could further enhance their recognition and preservation.

In addition to the recommendations for cultural heritage policies, government initiatives should include the establishment of dedicated programs that support the sustainable development of regional food industries. This could involve offering financial incentives and technical support to local communities for the preservation and promotion of traditional food practices. Public-private partnerships could be encouraged to create platforms for showcasing indigenous cuisines both nationally and internationally, helping these food practices gain wider recognition. Furthermore, educational policies should integrate the study of local food cultures and sustainable culinary practices into school curricula, fostering awareness among younger generations. Governments could also collaborate with local farmers, chefs, and food historians to document and protect traditional recipes and cooking techniques, ensuring that they are passed down through generations. By developing policies that promote the integration of traditional foods into modern markets while safeguarding cultural authenticity, the government can play a pivotal role in the survival of these culinary heritages.

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