

Challenges of globalization on local cuisine: Brief study on the ethnic cuisines of Assam

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Abstract

The concept of globalization has kicked a longstanding debate about the advantages and disadvantages of tourism of local cultures. On the one hand, there is revival of the indigenous craft, cuisine, music and dance; in more metaphorical term, in turn; it is reasserting the rights of the particular social group through their cultural code. On the other hand, the revival only for the sake of tourist's 'gaze' and 'taste' is a kind of slow-poisoning which ultimately ends up in destroying the identity of the particular socio-cultural group. The present paper will examine the macro-level theoretical discussion of the 'globalizing the locals' through a telescopic study of the traditional and tribal cuisines of Assam. The cuisines of Assam are a mixture of different indigenous styles with considerable regional variations. The Assamese cuisines, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes are characterized by very little use of spice but a special strong flavor due to the use of endemic exotic herbs, fruits and vegetables – fresh, dried and fermented. A traditional meal of

Assam begins with *Khar* and ends with a *Tenga*. A recent research says that the combination of *Khar* and *Tenga* served on the brass metal utensils keeps some rare infection away from our body. In Assam, there are more than twelve varieties of rice and uncountable species of delicious fishes. Each Assamese dish has an ayurvedic end, thus in the time of junk food and fast food, the traditional Assamese dishes stand sharply against the world of unhealthy cuisines. The use of local ingredients with special treatments makes the Assamese cuisine very popular not only in North East of India but also it gains its momentum throughout the Northern India, recently.

Key Words: Globalization; Traditional Cuisine; Social Group

Introduction:

Globalization has kicked a longstanding debate about the advantages and disadvantages of tourism of local cultures. Globalization and tourism have become a

deadly mix for indigenous peoples. Tourism's impact on indigenous peoples' way of life and on their control of and access to their resources and environment has become more pronounced with globalization of the world economy. For several decades now, tourism has been a major source of revenue for countries, specifically in the Third World. Its growth has been nothing short of phenomenal. In the 1950s, 25 million people travelled to a foreign destination. In the 1960s, this grew to 70 million. By 1997, 617 million tourists had been reported by the Madrid-based World Tourism Organization to have travelled to foreign countries. It is no wonder therefore that cash-starved Third World countries view tourism as a shortcut to rapid development. Its potential to earn billions of dollars easily has resulted in it being viewed as a panacea for debt-ridden countries. But more than this, tourism has become part and parcel of multilateral financial institutions' package for financial bail-outs for countries in distress. Tourism is now being pursued as a serious development strategy for the Third World.

Commodification is rampant in the tourism industry. Peoples and cultures are put on display on postcards, promotional literature, and in their own homes when tourists arrive. The concept of "the right to a vacation" in industrialized countries (anyone with the

money to travel can purchase a week or two of another culture or part of nature) creates numerous and serious repercussions for host destinations and their environments. Tourism is deeply rooted in a history of colonization and unequal relations between people and regions. Therefore, the effects of tourism cannot only be measured in terms of employment generation, degree of pollution, infrastructure development, and loss of biodiversity.

Overview of Assamese Cuisine History:

The Cuisine of Assam is a mixture of different indigenous styles with considerable regional variations and some external influences. It is characterized by very little use of spices but strong flavors due mainly to the use of endemic exotic herbs, fruits and vegetables that are fresh, dried or fermented. Assamese cuisine is an adventure on its own even though meat dishes are hard to find in it. With mostly fish and vegetarian dishes, it is still a delicious and convenient cuisine. Historically, Assamese cuisine has brought with it many traditional and simple dishes. Many of these have been known for a long time, and their methods of preparation have hardly changed. In order to cook them, there are simple techniques employed that were practiced many years ago. If anyone keen to follow a good diet Assamese cuisine is

certainly low on calorie content because fish and rice are the staple foods. Vegetables and lentils are very commonly used in main course meals in addition to fish. Wide varieties of food including meat dishes may be included at times of celebration at banquets. Through time, Assamese cuisine has focused on its limited use of spices, and quantities of salt and oil used. It is known Assamese cuisine tends to use a minimum of these in order to produce simple dishes that taste nice. With this practice, one can say that food loaded with spices and salt or for that matter is not really required in order for it taste great. This is in fact a great quality of this food.

Sweets made during the festivals are usually made of rice paste. *Pitha* is a paper-thin pancake stuffed with sweet coconut paste or sweet black sesame seed paste. A traditional meal in Assam begins with a *khar*, a class of dishes named after the main ingredient, and ends with a *tenga*, a sour dish. These two dishes characterize a traditional meal in Assam. The food is usually served in bell metal utensils made by an indigenous community called *Mariya*. *Tamul* (betel nut, generally raw) and *paan* generally concludes the meal.

(a) Rice: Rice is the most important ingredient in this cuisine. The large varieties of rice found in the region have led to speculation

that the grain was first domesticated in the Assam-Yunnan region. The most popular class of rice is the *joha*. Rice is eaten in many different forms: roasted and ground (*xandoh*), boiled in its husk and flattened (*chira*), puffed (*akhoi*). There also grows a variety of rice that can be just soaked and eaten (*Komal Saul*). Rice is a part of all meals in Assam. A traditional breakfast consists of *chira* with yogurt and jaggery. Farmers eat cooked rice soaked overnight (*poita bhat*) garnished with mustard oil, onions, etc. Snacks would be *xandoh*, *Komal Saul* or *bora saul* with milk. For other major meals, rice could be boiled, steamed or wrapped in leaves and roasted.

(b) Fish: The next most important ingredient is the fish, harvested from the many rivers, ponds and lakes in the region. There is no traditional ethnic community in Assam that does not eat fish. Most traditional rural households have their own ponds for pisciculture. Some of the most popular fishes are the *rou* (*Labeo rohita*), the *illish* (*Tenulosa ilisha*) and the *chital* (*Chitala chitala*), though the varieties of fish available and eaten is very large. The discerning gourmand would be able to tell which region of Assam is known for which variety of fish. The most popular dish from Assam, the *tenga*, is an indispensable part of a proper meal in Assam.

Green vegetables: Assam is very rich in vegetation, and green leafy vegetables, called *xaak*, are an important part of the cuisine. Some of them are grown while others like the *dhekia* (fern) grow wild. There is a bewildering variety that is eaten and according to custom, one has to have a hundred different *xaaks* (greens) during Rongali Bihu. Locally available green leafy vegetables are: *Paleng* (spinach), *lai* (a family of mustard greens), *methi* (fenugreek greens), *khutora* (amaranth), *moricha*, *matikaduri*, *manimuni* (asiatic pennywort), *podina* (mint), *tengesi* (dichondra), *kolmou* (water spinach), *brahmi* (water hyssop), *dhonia* (celery or corriander), *bhedailota* etc.

Exotic foods: Assam has its share of exotic foods. One such delicacy is *eri polu*, the pupa of the *Eri* silkworm after it has spun its cocoon. Fermented bamboo shoot (*khorisa*) is another traditional condiment used in Assamese cuisine.

Appetizers: Appetizers in Assamese cuisine are a real treat. Soups may be commonly used as appetizers. However, there are smaller shies of lentils and pulses that are used as appetizers. Since appetizers can also be in the form of smaller portions of large sized meals, there is an even greater variety one may have. Now, this is considered to be quite a variety considering that somebody does not chicken

and meats used generally. Indeed, the most stimulating of these appetizers can be chosen. They are not spicy, but are just right for stimulating your gastric juices. At the same time, if you are extremely hungry, your stomach is soothed too. Assamese cuisine is truly a complete one with these kinds of appetizers and other main course meals.

Beverages: Beverages in a cuisine are important, and in Assamese cuisine has the same. It has the well-known ‘*chah*’ or tea that is popular throughout India. This can be made in various forms, depending on what anybody may like. Tea may be consumed at any time of the day, and it is also common to have it after meals. Aside from *chah* being an important beverage in Assamese cuisine, there is *sherbat*. This is a very popular sweet drink that is made of a number of ingredients. *Sherbat* may be made from ingredients like almonds and coconut with milk added to it or it may even have milk as the base instead of water. Often, to dilute the quantity of *sherbat*, water may be added to the *sherbat*. Otherwise it is consumed in its thick form. Also, vermicelli is added to it to make it a little different.

Soups: Soups are versatile portions of any cuisine. They may be used as appetizers in cuisines of any kind including Assamese cuisine. However, in Assamese cuisine, soups are normally had anyway one like. They are

considered to be nutritious and there are a lot of people who consume them simply to gain strength. Among some of the common soups, one will find the popular Vegetable Soup or Lentil Soup – These may be of different kinds, and have a certain degree of spice and salt too

Dessert: In Assamese cuisine there are a several desserts. As opposed to the lack of meat dishes in Assamese cuisine, sweet dishes are present and are of different types. Many of them are quite sweet and thickened milk confectionery. The use of cardamom and nuts is common in desserts. Yoghurt is popularly used as well. There are also sweets that are made from wheat flour, lentil flour, cheese and dried nuts. Not surprisingly, there are many desserts made of rice. For those who would like to avoid rice in their diet, a piece of beetle nut and paan is also commonly considered as an alternative.

Pickle : Pickles are there made of mango, indian gooseberry, hog plum, olive, Tamarind, star fruit, mangosteen, radish, carrot, elephant apple, Indian jujube, chilli, lime, garlic etc..

The way forward: the process model for the development of Cuisines of Assam as a tourism product:

As it is seen, the cuisines of Assam have great nutritional and medicinal values which have great potential for development of

tourism of the state and as a cultural tourism product. It has a chance of great appeal to both domestic and international tourists. Assam is the absence of a clearly defined systematic framework for the development, packaging and marketing of cultural tourism products.

It can be said that there is need for the development of a clearly defined process model which can be used in the packaging, presentation and marketing of cultural attractions of Assam in general and the marketing of the traditional and tribal cuisines in particular. In general terms, the process by which cultural manifestations, cuisines, arts and craft, and other forms of cultural artifacts are transformed into tourism products that are intended for the satisfaction of tourist consumption is usually referred to as the ‘Commodification process’. Thus, in order for any cultural centre to successfully develop and promote cultural tourism, it should have a clearly defined framework on how to transform identified cultural resources to meet specific tourist demands and expectations. The Commodification process model need not be static, but should be dynamic and capable of modification, from time to time, in order to meet changing cultural and socio-economic conditions and tourist expectations. The process model of cultural tourism product development should consist of the following

principal components, proper packaging, proper presentation and interpretation, and proper marketing and promotion.

Marketing of the cuisines:

It has been seen that Assam lacks an appropriate and well co-ordinated strategy to market the state's cultural attractions specially the varied cuisines. Consequently, over the years, no appropriate market research has been undertaken in order to find out the types of tourists who may be attracted to those. Thus in most instances, the marketing of the cultural tourism attractions is usually perceived as a 'one-stop' affair that mainly involves top government officials and private tourism executives. In addition to it, the marketing of the cultural attractions in the domestic markets is rarely done if it is done at all. The marketing of those ethnic cuisines therefore, should underline the whole approach of planning and management. It should involve clear understanding of what cuisines are to be sold, to whom and by whom. Most of the tourist comes to Assam attracted to visit the state for them state's unique wildlife attractions. Thus when marketing and promoting of cuisines of Assam, particularly in overseas tourist generating countries, the cultural attributions i.e. the cuisines and other resources and wildlife attractions should be jointly marketed

in order to present and position the country as a unique tourist destination.

Conclusion:

Assam has great potential for the development of cultural tourism; however it lacks a clearly defined cultural tourism product development strategy that can be used for the systematic packaging, presentation and marketing of the cuisines. Perhaps, the same can be said with regard to the development of cultural tourism in Assam in general. Thus, it can be said that currently there is no properly organized and systematic packaging of the unique and diverse cultural resources for tourism. The various stakeholders, particularly the representatives of local ethnic communities (whose cultural resources and cultural manifestations are used for the development of cultural tourism), private sector representatives, and members of professional and welfare groups are, most often, not involved in the process of Commodification in which existing cultural resources are transformed into cultural tourism products to be presented to tourists. Proper interpretation of the cuisines that are presented to tourists in order to enable visitors to conceptualize and have clear understanding of the presentations is also lacking. The conclusions of the study therefore suggest formulating a process model that can be used in the packaging and marketing of different traditional and tribal

cuisines of Assam. The representatives of the various stakeholders should be involved the Commodification process and the presentation of cuisines to tourists. Further, proper marketing strategy should also be built into the Commodification process in order to target the cultural attractions to specific market segments. Also, in the main overseas tourist/generating countries, the country's tourism image should broaden beyond the presentation and promotion of cultural tourism. In this regard, the Assam government should liaise with overseas tour operators and travel agents in the presentation of up-to-date and accurate promotional and advertisement information concerning the country's unique and diverse cultural attractions. In the domestic market, there is need for the establishment of local tour firms and travel agents who specialize in the promotion and marketing of the state's cultural attractions. These will lead to systematic and organized marketing and promotion of cultural tourism in the existing, potentially, lucrative domestic market.

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