

Chapter 9

Indigenous Gastronomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Study on the Application of Information Technology for Tourism Development



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Abstract Nowadays, Information Technology is an effective tool for tourists to choose how they enjoy their pastimes in the postmodern world. Information and communication technologies provide a prospect to promote gastronomy in the tourism industry. Indigenous gastronomy is one of the major attractions to the tourists beyond globalized common cuisine. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is the area of inhabitants of eleven indigenous communities, and characterized as the districts of cultural diversity, multi-ethnic food and beauty of natural settings in South Asia. In CHT, indigenous food culture is currently an utmost desirable cuisine to the tourists whenever they sensitize it as a “primitive” dish. Hotels, motels, and restaurants exhibit different indigenous traditional food items in their menus to draw the attention of the visitors. They distribute leaflets and hang banners by addressing traditional food lists of indigenous communities. Many tourist agencies advertise the hotels, motels and restaurants with indigenous food items to drag tourists in local and national print and electronic media. Thousands of webs, online groups, and pages are found comprising indigenous gastronomy and showing its special appearance for the national and international tourists who have a keen interest in local cuisine especially traditional indigenous culinary. Some motel and cottage owners appoint indigenous people in their offices and restaurants to get tourists’ attraction. So, the chapter will travel around the application of information and communication technologies to promote the indigenous gastronomy in the CHT. Moreover, it will also illustrate how social media are playing a contributing role to the development of indigenous gastronomy in this tourist hub of Bangladesh. Methodologically, the ethnographic approaches were employed to collect data from the field.

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Introduction

Information technology is currently an effective tool for tourists to choose how they like to enjoy their time. Information and communication technologies (ICT) provide a prospect to promote gastronomy in the tourism industry. Indigenous gastronomy is one of the major attractions to the tourists beyond globalized common cuisine. Food not only provides essential energies and nutrients for the body but also relates people with other social, cultural, and political entities (Nandy, 2003). Food consumption bears a symbolic significance for the hosting country (Mak et al., 2012). Further, eating food is not the only consumption after visiting any tourist area rather food is a special feature of tourist action that pleases the five senses of the human body such as sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch (Kivela & Crofts, 2006), which offers the tourists a sense of pleasure and experience that enriches their experience. Therefore, foods play an important role in choosing the tourist places. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is the area inhabited by eleven indigenous communities, and characterized as the districts of cultural diversity, multi-ethnic food and beauty of natural settings in South Asia. In CHT, indigenous food culture is currently an utmost desirable cuisine to the tourists whenever they sensitize it as a “primitive” dish. Even tourists spend one-third of their expenditure on food consumption in the CHT where they are mostly attracted to the indigenous agricultural production and local cuisine.

Hotels, motels, and restaurants exhibit different indigenous traditional food items in their menus to draw attention of the visitors. They distribute leaflets and hang banners by addressing traditional food lists of indigenous communities. Many tourist agencies advertise the hotels, motels and restaurants with indigenous food items to drag tourists in local and national print and electronic media. Thousands of websites, online groups, and pages are found comprising indigenous gastronomy and showing its special appearance for the national and international tourists who have a keen interest in local cuisine especially traditional indigenous culinary (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Some motel and cottage owners appoint indigenous people in their offices and restaurants to get tourists’ attention. Due to the development of virtual communication and homogenous identity of McDonald’s and other imperialist cuisines (Ritzer, 2000), demand for the indigenous local cuisine and foods is created. New gastronomic attractions for the tourists become the new challenge for the mainstream food items. Though many experts assumed that McDonaldization and globalization pose menace to the local gastronomic identity and image (Torres, 2002), but the variety of the local food items and ethnic dishes play contributing

roles to face this threat. Ram (2004) believes that McDonaldization did not make any harm for local food culture rather contributed to the local gastronomic revival.

So, the chapter travels around the application of ICTs to promote indigenous gastronomy in the CHT. Moreover, it also illustrates how social media is playing contributing roles to the development of indigenous gastronomy in this tourist hub of Bangladesh.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and based on descriptive analysis. The approach of this study is likely descriptive with various aspects of the gastronomy in the context of tourism. To understand the holistic nature of indigenous gastronomy, data were collected from the three hill districts of the CHT. These districts predominantly belong to indigenous people. The study concentrated on the application of ICT for the development of tourism. Methodologically, ethnographic approaches were employed for data collection. In this study, a substantial number of informants was selected both as indigenous people and tourists. For selecting the samples, non-probability sampling and convenient sampling method were followed. Methods such as Key-Informant Interviews (KII), unstructured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), Case Study and Content Analysis were applied for data collection. In this study, participants from different cultural background defined the cuisine experience as attractive, dependable, colorful, romantic and prehistoric. Moreover, this research also states that tourists are actively seeking new experiences, have a taste for diverse and multicultural foods with ‘primitive’ combinations.

The CHT as a Tourism Destination

The CHT is one of the lucrative tourism spots for the local and foreign people. Over the years, especially in the winter and rain, people usually visit the CHT for leisure. Three hill districts such as Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban are distinct in their respective beauties and attractions. Rangamati is sophisticated for its eight indigenous groups. This district is although majorly lived by Chakma people with their distinct culture, food habit, language, and lifestyle. In the last few years, it has become the major tourist attraction due to the renovation of the tourist spots and improved communication. People frequently visit Rangamati for enjoying some attractive places such as Kaptai Lake, which is artificially created for producing electricity during the regime of Pakistan. Beyond, it has some beautiful tourists’ attractions such as an indigenous museum, Hanging bridge, Beranna Lake, Borgang,

Shuvolong fountain, Sajek Valley, Naval picnic spot, Renna Tugun, Kaptai national forest, Karnaphuli hydraulic project, Kaptai dam, Mejang Restaurant, Birsrestha Abdur Rouf memorial, Karnaphuli paper mill, Betbunia satellite station, Panorama Jhum restaurant, Peda Ting Restaurant, Tuktuk Eco Village, Banasri Tourist Complex, Aronnok Resort, Happy Island, Pollwell Park, DC Banglo and Lake view Island, etc. Nowadays, Sajek Valley is popular in this area as it combines artistic sceneries, cottages and restaurants, and other facilities. Thousands of tourists visit the valley every year to get entertainment with rain and clouds. The valley is surrounded by indigenous villages and therefore, indigenous foods are great attractions to tourists. Commutation and security are also ensured effectively. Beyond, Kaptai Lake has its special features that attract tourists and visitors to travel the whole lake with boats either by individual drive or by the engine, and accordingly, the whole devious lake is succinct with green trees and grassy terrains. Some people wish to watch the Hanging bridge and numerous fountains in Rangamati while roaming around Rangamati. Other spots also have amused beauties and arts.

In the CHT, Khagrachari is distinguished for its natural and artificial tourist spots and some hills have become the remark of this district. It is also full of green and natural resources which get many indigenous communities in the area. Some of the celebrated spots are Alutila Terang Toikai Risang fountain, Alutila Terang Chumui, Alutila cave and spot zone, Zila Horticulture park, Matai Pukur or God Pond, Toiduchora Fountain, Mayabini Lake, Shantipur Aronno Pukur, Dighinala Dighi and so on. It seems that Alutila cave is the first tourist spot in Khagrachari which is still the main attraction. In this area, most of the spots' names are related to the indigenous language. For example, Terang Toikaly Rechang Fountain is a combination of two indigenous languages where the first two words are borrowed from Tripura and Marma. There are many facilities for the tourists in surrounding areas. Roads and communication are updated and hotels and restaurants are also decorated with modern arrangements.

The next, Bandarban is probably the most lucrative spots for the tourists which is full of springs and high hills. In the rainy and winter season, people can enjoy fogs and breeze in this area which make these spots special and valuable. Bandarban is the south-eastern district of Bangladesh and it is the lowest densed area in Bangladesh. The famous tourist spots in this area are Neelgiri, Shawrna Mondir (Golden Temple), Meghla, Shoila Propat, Neelachal, Milanchori, Chimbuk, Shango River, Tajing Dong, Keukara Dong etc. Many other amazing spots make Bandarban engaging for people and tourists. Tourists cannot be capable to visit all the places together in Bandarban as these are situated in distant areas. Security and protection are also remarkable issues. Those who visit Bandarban with families like to stay around the city and visit the nearest places. Neelgiri is the highest peak of Bandarban which is around 3000 feet tall. Further, many indigenous groups, especially Mru community people live in surrounding Neelgiri hill. It's fascinating that in the rainy and winter seasons, tourists can watch and enjoy the sunrise and sunset from this hill. Another alluring spot in Bandarban is the Golden Temple of Buddha which is colored golden and a piece of real gold sets on the peak of the temple. Although the temple is a little bit difficult to ride by the old and children, people never want to

miss the beauty of the temple. The ‘God’s Pool’ on the hill is amazing to enjoy. It is a pond on the hill with water. The beauty of Bandarban is that indigenous women work in all the shops, stalls, hotels, and restaurants and it makes Bandarban exceptional than others.

Factors Influencing Tourism in the CHT

In Bangladesh, the CHT is different with many features such as different people, different cultures, different food habits, different locations, and beauty. It has almost no similarities with the Bengali mainstream land area and people. So, generally, people like to visit the CHT to have some leisure time. In this way, tourists do not visit solely to see the beautiful locations. Many indigenous food items are offered in hotels and restaurants in the CHT. These are not available in any other corner of the world. Now-a-days, tourists want to taste different cuisine, especially local and indigenous items where they pay a visit. Likewise, tourists who visit the CHT prefer indigenous food items along with modern meals and foods. In Rangamati, restaurant owners provide local indigenous food to tourists and the demands are growing. Many hotels and restaurants appoint indigenous boys and girls to impress tourists. To take food in any restaurant, tourists prioritize cleanliness, healthy food, local food, and safety. Some accept indigenous foods as fashion and some just visit the CHT for having a look on them. It must be saying that indigenous foods are not only delicious but also contain healthy ingredients. Indigenous items are more natural and have limited spice which composed of natural taste with safety.

In the CHT, pig’s meat is more popular among all the indigenous communities. It turns into a public demand in tourist spots though some Muslims ignore this meat. Khagrachari hotel and restaurant owners announce special discount for the tourists on the indigenous food items as it becomes the market demand. In the CHT, foods are very healthy and safe as there is no mixing of formalin and chemicals. The restaurants and hotels collect raw materials of the food items from the indigenous sources. Local meats are also available in the hotels at a higher price. Tourists are fond of Khagrachari food items for freshness, traditionality, and formalin-free character. However, Bandarban is the most desirable place for tourists as it has many spots together. Besides, common Bengali and modern foods, indigenous items are popular among the tourists especially green vegetables, local fish, and chicken. People choose Bandarban due to its natural attraction and seasonal beauty.

Multi-ethnic Food Items

Modernity has its influence all over the world. The CHT has changed a lot due to modern facilities and technologies. Once upon a time, it was very difficult to enter the CHT (Barua, 2001) and tourism was not popularized to the people. It was the

place of fear, tear, and conflict among the multiple stakeholders. After the “Peace accord” in 1997, tourism in the CHT opens a new window for the common people. In this process, many Bengali businessmen started their business in the CHT. Modern hotels, motels, and cottages were inaugurated with the help of local administration. Therefore, the CHT becomes the business hub and commercial attraction to national and international food sellers. Both local and national businessmen are maintaining their activity. Tourists can enjoy both indigenous and modern food together. Many indigenous hotels and restaurants sell their special indigenous food items. Normal restaurants also sell indigenous foods. In Rangamati, the indigenous common foods that are available in the market are “Jerang” (cooked in the bamboo pipe), “Hebang” (cooked in banana leaves), “Banshkorol”, Snail, frog, crab, “Tara” (Chakma language), pig’s meat, deer meat, dry fish, varied vegetables, banana tree, lake fish, etc. The main choices of tourists are “Hebang” and “Jerang”. In the CHT, the majority of the people are Chakma although Marma and Tripura also live there. Hence, most of the food items come from the Chakma community and some other items are from Marma and Tripura. The restaurant owners admitted that there is a change of taste of the indigenous food items when cooked for commercial purposes. What indigenous people use in their house, is lesser spice and healthy and on the other hand, restaurants use more spices to increase taste which attract tourists. On the contrary, some different items are found in Khagrachari though lots of similarities exist between the districts. The main food items that are available for tourists from indigenous communities are the bamboo chicken, bamboo fish, bamboo shoot, mushroom, “Kebang”, “Appreng”, “Gudak”, “Chakhai”, fried-fish mash, “Thankuni” mash, bamboo shoot fry, “Marfa” salad, etc. These indigenous food items are available in both indigenous and common restaurants.

In Khagrachari, the food items are mainly collected from Marma and Tripura communities though there are many Chakmas live there. These food items are not from any specific indigenous community rather they are supplied from all of the communities and the names are changed after changing community. For example, the same boiled food is “Appreng” to Marma and “Rojak” to Tripura. Yet, the most common indigenous items among Chakma, Tripura, and Marma are bamboo chicken, bamboo fish, bamboo shoot, mushroom, dry-fish fry, etc. Bandarban looks different compared to Rangamati and Khagrachari. There are not many popular indigenous food items like Rangamati and Khagrachari. Bandarban is the habitat of Marma community and they are not such developed as Chakma and Tripura. Very few Marma restaurants are found in Bandarban. Still, many of the indigenous items are discovered in the restaurants. Some of the items are “Tojah”, local pig’s meat, “Appreng”, “Bunlesh hilsa”, river crab, chicken, “Bashkorol” cook, dry-fish vegetable, Chicken curry, bamboo chicken, Sango river fish and “Pahari” vegetable, etc. People search the halal food in this area. So, the restaurant owners present foods from the indigenous group that are common among tourists such as bamboo chicken, bamboo fish, bamboo vegetable etc.

When Gastronomy Becomes the Identity

In the CHT, it is evident that indigenous food items have become a symbol of identity and dignity for the indigenous people as they become popular among the tourists. Indigenous people in the CHT are genuinely sophisticated with their cultures, food habits, dress codes, languages, religions and customs. Tourists visiting the CHT may forget to taste international cuisine but they hardly can forget the flavor indigenous foods. Even many tourists visit the CHT only to taste indigenous foods. Nowadays, these food items are not only representing the indigenous communities of the CHT, but becoming popular in the larger cities of Bangladesh. People usually like to consume these items of indigenous origin and these items hold indigenous identity. Very specifically, some of the popular indigenous food items like bamboo chicken, bamboo fish, bamboo vegetable and local wine, etc. represent the indigenous identity before the tourists.

Bandarban district official database shows that more than 58 hotels and 47 restaurants are operating in this small city that was not possible even ten years ago (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Furthermore, many indigenous people work in hotels and restaurants permanently or temporarily and get economic benefits in multiple ways. Some have opened shops and showrooms of indigenous products in the tourist spots to sell the traditional items. Many indigenous young male and female sell their assorted products as mobile vendors such as cakes, crafts, clothes, toys, dolls, and so on. Also, many indigenous people sit in a place to sell ‘Pahari’ fruits to the tourists. Sometimes fruits are served by mixing indigenous spices which add taste, flavor and aroma. Another impressive feature is the time when tourists intend to visit distant places without accommodation and food, indigenous people commonly provide them accommodation and food facilities in exchange of money. Tourists can stay at indigenous houses along with food services where they spend immaculately beautiful moments with nature, hills, forests, and fountains.

In general, indigenous people are treated differently by the mainstream Bengalis mainly for their individual ways of life and livelihoods. Such distinctions make the tourists attracted to the indigenous people, culture, dress, foods, and so on. Whenever tourists come to visit the CHT to enjoy natural beauties, fountains, lakes, and hills, they want a variety in their cuisine besides the national and international food items.

With the popularity of indigenous cuisine, socio-economic changes are happening in indigenous communities. They tend to get new sources of income and work. By capitalizing this indigenous cuisine, many people especially ethnic youths have started small-scale businesses in tourist spots and some sell indigenous products such as foods, clothes, and crafts to the tourists. Tourists usually prefer ethnic items though sometimes these are not sustainable or modern but has exceptional qualities.

Factually, tourism and development in the CHT promote indigenous products and items among tourists which create employment for many indigenous male and female. Notably, the CHT has become the supreme tourist attraction in Bangladesh and thousands of tourists come to visit every year from almost all over the world.

But this cuisine comes closer to the tourists with the help of ICT. Tourists get updated information and data about the local cuisine whenever they visit any spot. Thus, tourists ask restaurant owners about the indigenous food items. Eventually, hotels and restaurants started to store and exhibit indigenous food items on their showcases. In this process, indigenous cuisine has become a part and parcel for the tourists. Also, this cuisine turns into the identity of indigenous people. This identity contains indigenous values, culture, customs, practices, and traditions.

Therefore, indigenous food items that once met demands of only a particular indigenous community or group, become the appetite suppression for thousands of tourists. The journey of indigenous cuisine was not so easy among many luxurious Bengali and international food items. The government agencies are also having efforts for improved communication, developed infrastructure, and increased use of social media and ICT etc. Hence, steadily but surely, the CHT is going to be a famous tourist destination and commercial hub in coming years.

Technological Application

Technology is the root of social change in the twenty-first century. Technology has reached every corner of the world irrespective of culture, creed, caste, and religion. The world without technological items is not only difficult but also impossible. The tourism industry in Bangladesh is also evolved with the development of technology. Bangladesh is now experiencing the fifth generations of the Internet speed and it plays a great role in the development of tourism (The Daily Star, 2018). ICT centers are inaugurated in districts of Bangladesh. In Rangamati, hotels are booked online from all over the world and restaurants also accept online food orders from customers. Although they mainly use Facebook as a networking site, many of the hotels found in this area use websites and other social media. The hotels and restaurants maintain their Facebook pages and personal accounts where they update regular cuisines, schedules, and orders. The owners believe that tourists are their main network because many people visit Rangamati after hearing from friends and families.

Some restaurants sometimes maintain less familiar social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp for publicity and open pages and groups. They include food items, prices, features, location, facilities, and so on and details about how to reach Rangamati. Both the Bengali and the English languages are used to comprehend readers. Though many hotels and restaurants do not have websites, they maintain society or association. They use websites and all hotels and restaurants have links.

Khagrachari hotel and restaurant owners do the same as Rangamati. Indigenous owners do not campaign online rather they make it more offline. But the common restaurants who sell indigenous items use social media to provide an update to tourists. They write online about prices, food items, orders, and more especially offers and discounts. In Bandarban, most of the indigenous owners do not make any campaign for their restaurants through mainstream online facilities. They make a

campaign about their products and prices along with offers alike Rangamati and Khagrachari. Some hotels and restaurants upload different indoor and outdoor and food images to attract tourists. They also describe item characteristics and qualities with price and discounts. In the CHT, mainstream hotels, restaurants, and resorts are more interested in technology and campaign. The online campaign is mostly conducted with mobile, laptop, tablet, and desktop computer. They also use local and national electronic and print media to circulate food items. They use mobile networks such as Robi and Wi-Fi stream to do their circulation. Many restaurants are connected to food suppliers such as food panda and Pathao to spread the campaign. In this joint venture, they use their institution's nameplate, visiting cards, food menus, offers, and discounts. They use the English language online to attract foreign tourists. On the other side, the Bengali is used in offline, print, and electronic media to capture the national audience. Indigenous people said that due to technological array, indigenous food which was once consumed only by indigenous people now becomes one of the attractions in the CHT for tourists. One section of the tourists visits the CHT to have indigenous foods and cuisine. Restaurant owners confirmed that 80%–90% of bookings and sales occurs online and customers book their place in advance. Since all the audiences use mobile and devices with the Internet, it becomes easier to communicate with tourists by technological devices.

Conclusion

This study descriptively reveals the interests of tourists' visit and how they chose a destination related to cuisine experience. It identifies the salient factors that influence tourists' visit intentions in the context of culture and cuisine experience. The finding of this study clearly indicates that people find gastronomy of the CHT to be a rather dominant determinant in tourism destinations. A travel destination as the CHT with satisfactory gastronomic experience is found enough to brand the entire travel "satisfactory". It also indicates that gastronomy is the sole reason to choose the specific traveling destination in the CHT. Gastronomy and cultural diversity of the CHT contribute, influence and motivate tourists' experiences. However, the gastronomy of the CHT is yet an unexplored and less exposed business for international tourists. It is a prerequisite to understand and meet the needs and wants of tourists in the context of gastronomic experiences. The local and national authority can play vital roles to make these areas more comfortable and safer for the tourists. The roads and vehicles could be updated to ease the movement of tourists along with secure Internet. To fill the desire of the tourists and to connect the indigenous gastronomy with international cuisine, communication channels should be renovated together with the application of ICT for the development of tourism in Bangladesh.

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