

Analysing the Tour Guides' Perceptions About Gastronomy Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gastronomic activities like tasting of local cuisines, visiting of apple orchards, tea gardens, fruit marts, and attending cookery classes have always been an integral part of tour itinerary in Himachal Pradesh. Tourists rejoice it as a means of entertainment as well as cultural learning. The growing trend of gastronomy tourism and development of specific tourism policy under the theme of 'Agro/Organic Tourism' is certainly going to increase the demand for 'gastronomic tour guides' in coming years. Hence the present research tries to analyse the tour guides' perception about Gastronomy Tourism in Himachal Pradesh, their background knowledge, and opinion about the branding of Himachali Cuisine. Responses from 120 tour guides were collected through a survey instrument via convenience sampling. The analysis depicts the requirement of specialized food guide training programs, attracting young and women tour guides into the profession and emphasis on branding of Himachali Cuisine through listing of ethnic restaurants, preparation of gastronomic map, and organisation of culinary tours and events.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has always been a key driver of socio-cultural and economic development due to its unique potential for creating infrastructures, generating employment, earning foreign exchange and in overall contributing to World's GDP (UNWTO, 2017). In this regard, the cultural attractions around the globe have always played a substantial role in the development of tourism industry from very ancient times. Association of tourism and culture can be traced back to the era of Herodotus (of Ancient Greece) who wrote about the "7 Miracles" of the ancient World in 440 BCE. This association got a major boost during the 19th century as culture was an essential part of education for the wealthy scions. But the synergistic relationship between tourism & culture brought about a paradigm shift in the tourism industry during

the 2nd half of the 20th century, which led to a much developed segment of the tourism sector, termed as “Cultural Tourism” (OCHTP, 2009). But with the rising interest among the tourists regarding various aspects of culture like history, art, religion, food, costume, festival, etc, it has led to the development of various segments under cultural tourism like Heritage tourism, Pilgrimage tourism, ethnic tourism, cultural city tourism, gastronomy tourism etc (Csapó, 2012). Gastronomy tourism, alternatively termed as food tourism or culinary tourism refers to the “travelling of tourists to new destinations specifically for enjoying the local delicacies and learning new culture through these food preparations”. Hence a gastronomic tour in total comprises several activities like tasting the local delicacies, tour of vineyards & wineries, attending cookery classes, participating in food /wine events and cooking competitions, etc (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Kivela & Crotts, 2005; Karimi, 2008). Though food tourism was initially a part of cultural tourism, over the last few decades it has created a niche market for itself across the Globe.

As per the Global statistics related to gastronomy tourism, one third of the total spending of the tourists is incurred towards food consumption during the tour. Also it was observed that food is one of the key factors for deciding the travelling destination in the case of 25% of leisure tourists (UNWTO, 2012). Apart from several researches that highlight the role of food as a travel motivator (Enright & Newton, 2004; Sharlene, 2012), it (food) has also been identified as a key factor in shaping the overall experience of the tourists (Timothy & Ron, 2013). Further, now-a-days ‘gastronomic heritages’ of a region are also being used as a tool for marketing, promotion and destination branding (Rand, Heath & Alberts, 2003; Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011). Moving a step ahead, Cook & Crang (1996) stated that, as regional foods are associated with the geography & tradition of a particular place, hence they can be treated as a symbolic representation of the destination’s identity. So in several countries they use their unique culinary heritages for building national identity such as Taiwan (Chuang, 2009), France (Frochot, 2003), Africa (Cusack, 2000) etc. In the above regard, Corigliano (2002) stated that ‘Eno-gastronomic’ elements (Indigenous food products and production processes) are the major reason behind the prosperity of food & wine tourism, whiskey tourism, olive oil tourism, *tapas* tourism etc. According to a recent survey by UNWTO (2017) it was found that, majority (87%) of the nations (from America, Europe, Asia & Pacific, Africa) have considered gastronomy as a strategic element for destination branding and identity creation. Apart from the fact that 46.5% of the Nations who have a food tourism strategy, as a part of their Tourism Action Plan, 24.6% of them have allocated a specific budget for the same.

The above facts clearly illustrate the potential of gastronomy tourism (as an alternative form of tourism) and the consistent increase in food travellers around the world (UNWTO, 2012) stands testimony to it. According to the UNWTO’s report, ‘food tourism’ not only helps the rural communities to protect their heritage preparations (indigenous recipes) but also generates employment through ethnic restaurants, traditional chefs & local food guides. In this context, India being a culturally diversified country, is no way behind in capturing this food tourism segment and has capitalized on its culinary resources up to a great extent. This can be understood from the fact that the worth of ‘food tourism sector’ in India is estimated to be US\$ 2 Billion each year (Mohanty, 2014). India with a rich cultural heritage of more than 5000 years and varied geographical conditions (from mighty Himalayas in the North to the Peninsular South), has numerous varieties of ethnic delicacies to offer. Ranging from the highly developed cuisines of the *Chettinan* community in Tamilnadu (South Indian State) to the customary ‘*Wazwan*’ (Islamic Banquet) of ‘Jammu & Kashmir’ in north, each of them has been marketed as a part of Ethnic Food Tourism product (Laura, 2008; Sahoo, 2014). In a similar context, the simple, rustic and aboriginal style of preparations adopted in the North Indian state of Himachal Pradesh has the right mix of ethnicity and socio-cultural influence which is promoted as a part of the states’ unique gastronomic affair. Apart from the hilly ter-

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