
Economic Empowerment through Ethnic Food Tourism: A Critical Review and Conceptual Framework from Manipur, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Ethnic food tourism has increasingly been recognized as a driver of inclusive and sustainable regional development. This study critically examines its role in fostering economic empowerment in Manipur, India, with a particular focus on community-based livelihoods and women-led enterprises. **Methods:** Adopting a qualitative systematic review approach supported by contextual case insights, the study explores how indigenous culinary systems contribute to employment generation, income diversification, and micro-enterprise development. **Results:** The findings indicate that Manipur's gastronomic heritage characterized by organic practices, fermentation techniques, and ethnic diversity offers significant potential for tourism-driven value creation. The paper develops a conceptual framework linking culinary heritage with empowerment outcomes through tourism engagement and value chain integration. It further identifies structural constraints and proposes targeted policy interventions. **Conclusion:** The study contributes to the growing literature on food tourism by positioning ethnic cuisine as a strategic resource for sustainable economic empowerment.

1.Introduction



In the global tourism market, food has transitioned from a basic necessity to a primary “pull factor” for travellers seeking authenticity [8]. For the ethnically diverse state of Manipur, culinary traditions are deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and local ecology [21]. Despite this rich heritage, the transition from subsistence-based food practices to a structured tourism-led economy remains under-explored [6]. This study critically analyses how ethnic food tourism can serve as a pathway for economic empowerment, particularly for marginalized communities and women.

In recent years, the role of food within tourism has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a supplementary element to a key determinant of destination choice. Culinary tourism, defined as travel motivated by the desire to experience local food cultures and traditions, has gained increasing scholarly attention [14;8]. This shift reflects changing tourist preferences toward authenticity, cultural immersion, and experiential consumption [25; 24; 3].

The rapid expansion of digital media and global connectivity has further amplified interest in culinary experiences, enabling destinations to showcase their unique food heritage to wider audiences [28; 29]. In this context, Manipur presents a compelling case due to its rich cultural diversity and deeply embedded culinary traditions.

Despite its distinctive gastronomic identity, the role of food tourism as a driver of economic development in Manipur remains relatively underexplored, particularly in relation to local entrepreneurship and community empowerment [6; 4]. This study addresses this gap by examining the linkage between ethnic food tourism and economic empowerment. Against this backdrop, Manipur presents a compelling context for examining the intersection of food tourism and regional development. The state is characterized by a diverse socio-cultural composition and a rich culinary heritage rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and locally available natural resources. Traditional food practices in Manipur not only reflect ecological sustainability but also embody cultural identity and community values.

Despite increasing global scholarship on food tourism, limited empirical and conceptual attention has been given to India’s north-eastern region. This study contributes by bridging tourism studies with development economics, offering a region-specific framework that connects ethnic food systems with measurable empowerment outcomes.

This study makes two key contributions. First, it advances the conceptual understanding of ethnic food tourism by integrating it within an economic empowerment framework. Second, it provides a region-



specific analysis of Manipur, a relatively underrepresented context in tourism research, thereby contributing to the diversification of global food tourism scholarship.

2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship highlights the multifaceted role of food tourism in enhancing regional economies and reinforcing cultural identity [11; 19]. Culinary traditions serve not only as attractions but also as mechanisms for destination branding and differentiation in a competitive tourism market.

From a developmental perspective, tourism-driven economic activities can facilitate empowerment, particularly in marginalized and rural communities [21]. Food-based enterprises are especially relevant in this regard, as they often rely on traditional skills and locally available resources. Women, who are traditionally engaged in food preparation and informal trade, are key beneficiaries of such opportunities [27].

Despite these advantages, the potential of food tourism in India's north-eastern states remains underexplored, indicating a gap that this study seeks to address with reference to Manipur.

Recent studies emphasize that food tourism is increasingly embedded within sustainable development frameworks, particularly in regions characterized by indigenous knowledge systems and biodiversity. The integration of local food systems into tourism economies has been shown to enhance resilience, promote inclusivity, and support gender-based economic participation.

3. Methodology

Materials and Methods:

This study adopts a qualitative systematic review design, commonly used in tourism and cultural studies.

The methodology integrates:

Narrative literature review of peer-reviewed articles

Contextual case analysis from Manipur

Thematic synthesis approach

This study adopts a qualitative systematic review design grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm. The analysis integrates peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and contextual case-based observations relevant to Manipur. A thematic synthesis approach was employed to identify recurring



patterns and relationships between culinary tourism and economic empowerment indicators, including employment generation, income diversification, and entrepreneurial development. This methodological approach is appropriate for conceptual and exploratory studies where empirical generalization is not the primary objective but theoretical understanding is emphasized.

The study follows an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on understanding socio-economic processes rather than quantifying outcomes. Thematic coding was applied to identify recurring patterns related to employment, entrepreneurship, and value chain development.

4. Culinary Heritage as a Strategic Tourism Resource

The culinary traditions of Manipur are closely associated with its ethnically diverse population, including Meitei, Naga, and Kuki communities. This diversity has given rise to a distinctive food system that emphasizes sustainability, nutrition, and cultural authenticity [21].

The cuisine is largely based on locally sourced and seasonal ingredients, reflecting strong linkages between food practices and the natural environment. Traditional preservation methods, particularly fermentation, play a crucial role in enhancing flavour and extending shelf life [2]. Moreover, the limited use of oil and artificial additives distinguishes Manipuri cuisine as both health-oriented and environmentally sustainable.

Such characteristics enhance the attractiveness of the region as a culinary tourism destination, aligning with global trends where tourists seek authentic and culturally embedded food experiences [19; 8].

Illustrative Traditional Dishes:-

Eromba – a mashed vegetable dish combined with fermented fish and chili

Singju – a herb-rich salad with diverse seasonal ingredients

Soibum – a fermented Bambooshoot

Nganam – a delicately spiced steamed fish preparation

Chamthong – a light and nutritious seasonal stew

Chakhao Kheer – a traditional dessert made from aromatic black rice

These culinary offerings function as both cultural expressions and experiential tourism products.



5. Conceptual Framework

The relationship between food tourism and economic empowerment can be understood as a dynamic and multi-layered process in which cultural resources are transformed into economic opportunities. Culinary heritage serves as the foundational input that stimulates tourism activities such as food festivals, local dining experiences, and cultural interactions [11].

These activities contribute to the development of integrated value chains involving agricultural production, food processing, and service delivery [27]. As these linkages strengthen, they create opportunities for entrepreneurship, particularly among women and small-scale producers [20; 7].

Ultimately, this process results in broader economic empowerment outcomes, including income generation, employment creation, and enhanced social mobility [1; 4].

The framework conceptualizes this relationship as a continuum:

Culinary Heritage → Tourism Engagement → Value Chain Integration → Entrepreneurial Expansion → Economic Empowerment

At the initial stage, indigenous food knowledge and traditional cuisine serve as foundational resources that attract tourism interest. These resources are then translated into diverse tourism-related experiences such as food festivals, local dining, and culturally immersive culinary practices.

As tourism activities expand, they stimulate the development of interconnected value chains. These include agricultural production systems, food processing practices, and service-oriented sectors such as hospitality and local food enterprises. The integration of these components enhances local economic participation and strengthens supply-side linkages.

Subsequently, these dynamics create an enabling environment for entrepreneurial growth, particularly at the micro and small enterprise level. Notably, women play a significant role in this transformation due to their traditional involvement in food preparation, preservation, and marketing.

The final stage of the framework is reflected in broader economic empowerment outcomes. These include increased income levels, expanded employment opportunities, and improved social status, especially among marginalized groups.

Key Dimensions of the Framework:



- a. Tourism Inputs: Traditional cuisine, culinary events, and localized food experiences that attract visitors
- b. Value Chain Mechanisms: Linkages across agriculture, processing, and service delivery systems
- c. Entrepreneurial Development: Growth of small-scale and women-led enterprises within the food sector
- d. Empowerment Outcomes: Enhanced income, livelihood diversification, and social mobility

6. Results & Discussion

The findings suggest that ethnic food tourism in Manipur operates as a decentralized and inclusive economic system, wherein value creation is distributed across multiple stakeholders, including farmers, informal vendors, and small-scale entrepreneurs. This distributed model enhances economic resilience and aligns with pro-poor tourism frameworks, thereby reinforcing its potential as a tool for equitable development.

However, the increasing commercialization of ethnic cuisine presents a critical tension between economic opportunity and cultural authenticity. While market-driven adaptation enhances visibility and income potential, it may also lead to the commodification of traditional knowledge systems. Balancing authenticity with innovation remains a key challenge for sustainable food tourism development.

Manipur’s Culinary Assets as Strategic Resources:

The Manipuri food system is distinguished by its reliance on seasonal, organic ingredients and complex fermentation techniques (e.g., Soibum, Ngari). These attributes align with global trends toward health-conscious and sustainable consumption [16].

- a. Chakhao (Black Rice): A GI-tagged aromatic rice with high antioxidant properties, positioning it as a luxury tourism product.
- b. Ima Keithel: The world’s only all-women market, serving as a historic hub for ethnic food trade and female agency [7].

Table:1. Socio-Economic Dimensions of Impact

| Dimension | Description | Economic Impact |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------|
|-----------|-------------|-----------------|



| | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Employment | Direct/Indirect jobs in hospitality | Diversified income streams |
| Women's Agency | Market-based & home enterprises | Financial inclusion and social status |
| Agro-Linkages | Demand for indigenous crops | Rural development & biodiversity |
| Cultural Capital | Preservation of recipes/methods | Social sustainability |

N.B.:- Table 1 illustrates the socio-economic dimensions of impact from indigenous crops, linking human, agro-linkages, and cultural capitals to economic and social benefits in rural contexts.

This highlights how indigenous crops drive direct and indirect jobs in the hospitality sector, such as farming, processing, and culinary roles [6]. These opportunities stem from increased demand for traditional ingredients in hotels and restaurants, fostering local workforce engagement.

Agro market linkages also boost market demand for indigenous crops, enabling preservation of recipes and methods while generating diversified income streams [20]. This supports financial stability and social status for rural producers through expanded sales channels [6].

On the other hand, cultural capital preserves indigenous recipes and methods, contributing to social sustainability and biodiversity conservation [20]. Integrating these into hospitality menus maintains heritage while promoting eco-friendly practices.

This dimension underscores that ethnic food tourism is not merely a commercial endeavour but a mechanism for social sustainability and the revitalization of community identity in an era of rapid cultural dilution.

6.1. Case-Based Insights

Available observations suggest that food tourism activities in Manipur are distributed across both urban and rural settings. Urban centres such as Imphal function as key nodes for tourism due to better infrastructure and accessibility, while rural areas contribute by preserving traditional culinary practices and offering authentic experiences [6].

Local markets, often dominated by women vendors, play a vital role in sustaining food-based economic activities and promoting small-scale entrepreneurship [7]. Furthermore, the growing interest of tourists in ethnic cuisine has led to the increased commercialization of traditional dishes, thereby enhancing their economic value and market reach [16; 25].

Furthermore, the increasing interest of tourists in ethnic and indigenous cuisines has contributed to the gradual commercialization of traditional food items. This shift has encouraged the adaptation of local



dishes to meet market demands, thereby enhancing their visibility and economic value while simultaneously raising questions about maintaining authenticity.

6.2. Challenges and Constraints

Despite its potential, food tourism development in Manipur is constrained by several structural limitations. Inadequate infrastructure and the absence of standardized service quality hinder the region's competitiveness as a tourism destination [29].

Additionally, limited marketing and branding efforts restrict its visibility in broader tourism markets [16]. Financial constraints faced by small-scale entrepreneurs further limit business expansion and innovation [4].

A lack of formal training in entrepreneurship and hospitality management also affects service delivery and overall tourism experience [20].

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations:

To unlock the full potential of food tourism in Manipur, the following measures are essential:

- a. Capacity Enhancement: Skill development in food processing, hygiene, and business management
- b. Digital Integration: Promotion through online platforms and social media
- c. Financial Inclusion: Improved access to credit and funding mechanisms
- d. Institutional Support: Government-led initiatives and public–private collaborations
- e. Tourism Circuit Development: Linking culinary destinations across regions

Realizing the transformative potential of these four dimensions necessitates a paradigm shift in regional policy. Interventions must move beyond fragmented infrastructure projects toward integrated, context-sensitive frameworks that address structural inequalities. Protecting the intellectual property rights of indigenous knowledge holders and ensuring equitable access to digital marketing platforms are essential steps in creating a food system that is both economically productive and socially as well.

8. Recommendations:

- i. Develop a “Gastro-Tourism Circuit” connecting organic farms to ethnic restaurants.



- ii. Implement micro-finance schemes specifically for women food-entrepreneurs.
- iii. Leverage Digital India initiatives to map and brand local cuisines globally.

9. Conclusion

Ethnic food tourism represents a viable pathway for fostering inclusive economic development in Manipur. By leveraging its rich culinary heritage, the region can promote entrepreneurship, generate employment, and preserve cultural identity [19; 8]

However, the realization of this potential requires coordinated policy support, capacity-building initiatives, and effective market integration strategies [29; 4]. A holistic approach that integrates local participation with institutional support can significantly enhance the role of food tourism in achieving sustainable economic empowerment.

This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing ethnic food tourism as a pathway for economic empowerment within a culturally embedded development framework. The case of Manipur demonstrates that culinary heritage can function as both an economic asset and a mechanism for social inclusion. Future research should focus on empirical validation of the proposed framework using primary data and comparative regional analysis to further strengthen its applicability.

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