DOI - 10.68648/ijte-q-2026-49-03-027

Traditional Cuisine as a Tourism Resource: An Assessment of Southern Districts of Tamilnadu

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ABSTRACT

Traditional cuisine is a vital aspect of the cultural identity and heritage of a location. In Southern Tamil Nadu, culinary traditions are intricately linked to local history, agricultural practices, religious customs, community life, indigenous ingredients, and traditional cooking techniques. Dishes made from locally sourced cereals, millets, pulses, vegetables, seafood, spices, and region-specific components offer unique culinary experiences for visitors. Nevertheless, despite the cultural and tourism potential of traditional foods, numerous regional culinary practices remain inadequately documented, promoted, and incorporated into tourism development strategies. This study investigates the connection between traditional cuisine and tourism development in Southern Tamil Nadu, focusing on the significance of authentic food experiences in enhancing tourist satisfaction, destination appeal, cultural awareness, and local economic opportunities. The research analyzes tourists' perceptions of traditional cuisine, the factors that influence their willingness to engage with local foods, and the impact of culinary heritage on destination image and tourism growth. Additionally, it examines the roles of restaurants, local food producers, tourism stakeholders, and local communities in the preservation and promotion of traditional culinary practices. A structured research framework that includes culinary authenticity, food experience, cultural heritage, tourist satisfaction, destination appeal, and tourism development is proposed. The study aims to illustrate that traditional cuisine can serve not only as a cultural asset but also as a strategic tourism product that supports sustainable destination development, local entrepreneurship, and heritage preservation in Southern Tamil Nadu.

KEYWORDS *: Traditional Cuisine, Culinary Tourism, Food Heritage, Tourism Development, Southern Tamil Nadu, Cultural Heritage, Tourist Experience, Destination Attractiveness, Local Communities, Sustainable Tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has progressively shifted from traditional sightseeing to experiential travel, where visitors seek meaningful engagement with the culture, lifestyle, traditions, and cuisine of their destinations. Among these cultural elements, traditional cuisine has become a vital aspect of destination identity and the overall tourism experience. Food transcends being a mere necessity for tourists; it embodies the history, geography, cultural practices, social connections, and identity of local communities. Tamil Nadu boasts a rich and varied culinary heritage shaped by centuries of agricultural, ecological, religious, and cultural influences. The southern districts of the state, such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Ramanathapuram, Virudhunagar, Sivagangai, Theni, Dindigul, Kanniyakumari, and Tenkasi, are home to unique food traditions. These areas are known for a diverse array of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, millet-based foods, traditional snacks, seafood preparations, indigenous beverages, spice blends, and festival foods. Traditional dishes like Kari Dosa, Paruthi Paal, Tirunelveli Halwa, seafood from Kanyakumari, traditional millet recipes, village-style meat dishes, and region-specific vegetarian options offer tourists a chance to immerse themselves in local culture beyond standard

attractions. The methods of preparation, ingredients used, serving customs, and the narratives surrounding these foods further enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience. The connection between cuisine and tourism is complex and multifaceted. Traditional food can boost the appeal of a destination, enhance its image, improve tourist satisfaction, promote local spending, and create opportunities for small-scale food enterprises and community-based initiatives.

Culinary tourism has the potential to aid in the preservation of traditional knowledge by generating economic value for local food practices. Nonetheless, various challenges may hinder the incorporation of traditional cuisine into tourism development. These challenges include the modernization of food habits, a decline in the transmission of traditional culinary knowledge across generations, limited documentation, a lack of standardized promotion, insufficient awareness among tourists, commercialization, and inadequate integration of local cuisine into destination marketing. Consequently, it is crucial to investigate the relationship between traditional cuisine and tourism development in Southern Tamil Nadu from both cultural and economic viewpoints. This study aims to explore how traditional cuisine can be leveraged as a tourism resource while also fostering cultural preservation, community involvement, and sustainable tourism development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2022) underscored the increasing significance of food experiences within the tourism sector, illustrating that local and genuine culinary offerings can enhance the appeal of destinations and enrich tourists' experiential value.

Ellis, Freeman, and Park (2022) highlighted the importance of culinary heritage in crafting authentic tourism experiences. Their study suggests that traditional food practices can effectively connect tourists with local cultural heritage when they are interpreted and presented appropriately.

Rachão et al. (2022) explored the intersection of food tourism and sustainable destination development, stressing the need for collaboration among local communities, producers, restaurants, tourism organizations, and other stakeholders. Their research indicates that culinary tourism can yield broader regional development advantages when local participants are involved in tourism planning.

Stone et al. (2023) examined the food experiences of tourists and their related behavioral outcomes concerning destinations. The findings reinforce the significance of authenticity, sensory experiences, cultural engagement, and memorable food consumption in shaping tourists' perceptions of various destinations.

Kivela and Crotts (2023) revisited the connection between gastronomy and tourism development, emphasizing how food can impact destination image, tourist satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Gastronomy was recognized as an increasingly vital component of destination competitiveness.

Björk, Prebensen, and Uysal (2024) highlighted the experiential aspects of food tourism, particularly the significance of authenticity, local engagement, and unforgettable experiences. Their research advocates for the integration of culinary experiences into frameworks for destination development.

RESEARCH GAP

Recent studies indicate that traditional and local cuisines can significantly impact tourist motivation, perceptions of authenticity, memorable experiences, overall satisfaction, destination image, intentions to revisit, and local economic growth. Nonetheless, there exists a considerable geographical and contextual gap regarding Southern Tamil Nadu. The majority of current research tends to concentrate on international destinations or well-known culinary tourism areas. In contrast, there is a relative scarcity of systematic empirical studies linking the traditional food heritage of Madurai, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Ramanathapuram, Sivagangai, Virudhunagar, Theni, Tenkasi, Dindigul, and Kanniyakumari to quantifiable tourism development outcomes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Southern Tamil Nadu boasts a rich culinary heritage that reflects its history, culture, agriculture, indigenous ingredients, and community practices. Nevertheless, traditional cuisine is still relatively underutilized as a strategic resource for tourism. Factors such as

modernization, evolving food preferences, insufficient documentation, lack of promotion, and a decline in the transmission of culinary knowledge pose threats to its sustainability. While tourists are increasingly interested in authentic local food experiences, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence regarding the impact of traditional cuisine on destination appeal, tourist satisfaction, intentions to revisit, and overall tourism development in Southern Tamil Nadu. Consequently, this study aims to explore the connection between traditional cuisine and tourism development, while also identifying opportunities to promote culinary heritage in a manner that supports local communities and fosters sustainable tourism.

OBJECTIVES

1. To recognize and record the prominent traditional cuisines and food customs linked to specific districts in Southern Tamil Nadu.
2. To investigate tourists' awareness and perceptions regarding traditional cuisine in Southern Tamil Nadu.
3. To evaluate the impact of traditional cuisine on the appeal of destinations and their overall image.
4. To explore the connection between culinary authenticity and the satisfaction of tourists.
5. To assess how traditional food experiences affect tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend.
6. To analyse the role of traditional cuisine in fostering local entrepreneurship, job creation, and economic opportunities within the community.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the key traditional cuisines and culinary practices linked to Southern Tamil Nadu?
2. To what extent are tourists aware of the traditional cuisine found in Southern Tamil Nadu?
3. In what ways does traditional cuisine enhance the appeal and reputation of Southern Tamil Nadu as a tourist destination?
4. What is the connection between perceived culinary authenticity and the satisfaction of tourists?
5. How does the experience of traditional food affect tourists' likelihood of returning to Southern Tamil Nadu?

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	112	56.0
Female	88	44.0
Total	200	100.0

Interpretation

Another way to express this is that among the 200 individuals who responded, 112 (56%) were men and 88 (44%) were women. Thus, the sample reflects a slightly elevated presence of male tourists.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25 years	42	21.0
25–35 years	68	34.0
36–45 years	46	23.0
46–55 years	28	14.0
Above 55 years	16	8.0
Total	200	100.0

Interpretation

The largest segment of respondents was individuals in the 25 to 35 age range, accounting for 34%, with the next largest group being those aged 36 to 45 years at 23%. This highlights that younger and middle-aged tourists made up the significant majority of the sample.

Table 3: Educational Qualification

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
School level	18	9.0
Undergraduate	62	31.0
Postgraduate	78	39.0
Professional qualification	42	21.0
Total	200	100.0

Interpretation

Postgraduates made up the predominant category at 39%, while undergraduate participants accounted for 31%.

This implies that the respondents generally exhibited a significant level of educational qualifications.

Table 4: Monthly Income

Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
Below ₹25,000	38	19.0
₹25,001–₹50,000	72	36.0
₹50,001–₹75,000	54	27.0
₹75,001–₹1,00,000	22	11.0
Above ₹1,00,000	14	7.0
Total	200	100.0

Interpretation

The highest percentage of respondents (36%) reported earning between ₹25,001 and ₹50,000 monthly. This distribution reflects the involvement of tourists from various income brackets.

Table 5: Awareness of Traditional Cuisine

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Low	12	6.0
Low	24	12.0
Moderate	58	29.0
High	72	36.0
Very High	34	17.0
Total	200	100.0

Interpretation

A total of 106 individuals (53%) expressed a high or very high awareness of traditional cuisine, while merely 18% indicated low or very low awareness. This reflects a significant level of awareness of traditional foods among tourists in Southern Tamil Nadu.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	Rank
Culinary Authenticity	4.21	0.68	1
Cultural Value	4.18	0.71	2
Food Experience	4.12	0.74	3
Destination Attractiveness	4.09	0.76	4
Tourist Satisfaction	4.06	0.79	5
Local Economic Contribution	3.98	0.82	6
Revisit Intention	3.94	0.86	7
Community Participation	3.87	0.88	8

Interpretation

The analysis reveals that all recorded variables achieved mean scores exceeding 3.80, reflecting predominantly favourable perceptions. The aspect of culinary authenticity received the highest mean score of 4.21, indicating that tourists highly value the authenticity of traditional cuisine. Conversely, community participation had the lowest mean score at 3.87, suggesting there is potential for enhanced engagement of local communities in culinary tourism.

Table 7: Tourists' Perception of Traditional Cuisine

Statements	Mean	SD
Traditional foods reflect local culture	4.32	0.66
Traditional foods provide an authentic experience	4.27	0.69
Local ingredients enhance food uniqueness	4.18	0.73
Traditional cuisine increases destination attractiveness	4.13	0.75
Traditional food is an important tourism resource	4.25	0.67
Traditional cuisine should be promoted to tourists	4.34	0.64
Overall Mean	4.25	0.69

Interpretation

The average score of 4.25 reflects a very positive view of traditional cuisine. The statement advocating for the promotion of traditional cuisine to tourists received the highest score of 4.34. This indicates robust backing for the inclusion of local food in tourism marketing strategies.

Table 8: Relationship between Traditional Cuisine and Destination Attractiveness

Statement	Mean	SD
Traditional cuisine makes Southern Tamil Nadu more attractive	4.15	0.72
Unique dishes differentiate the destination	4.20	0.70

Food experiences encourage destination exploration	4.06	0.78
Culinary traditions improve destination image	4.11	0.74
Traditional foods increase interest in visiting local areas	4.03	0.81
Overall Mean	4.11	0.75

Interpretation

The average score of 4.11 indicates that participants largely concur that traditional cuisine contributes to the appeal of a destination. The peak score of 4.20 suggests that unique regional dishes can set Southern Tamil Nadu apart from rival destinations.

Table 9: Tourist Satisfaction

Satisfaction Indicator	Mean	SD
Taste and flavour	4.24	0.68
Authenticity	4.18	0.71
Variety of traditional dishes	4.03	0.79
Presentation and serving style	3.91	0.83
Availability	3.82	0.91
Price/value for money	3.96	0.82
Hygiene	3.88	0.86
Overall Mean	4.00	0.80

Interpretation

The overall satisfaction score stood at 4.00, signifying a positive level of satisfaction among tourists. The highest score was attributed to taste and flavor, which received a rating of 4.24, while availability garnered the lowest score of 3.82. This implies that improving the accessibility and availability of authentic traditional foods could significantly boost tourist satisfaction.

Table 10: Correlation between Major Variables

Variables	r-value	p-value
Culinary Authenticity ↔ Tourist Satisfaction	0.682**	<0.001
Food Experience ↔ Tourist Satisfaction	0.721**	<0.001
Culinary Authenticity ↔ Destination Attractiveness	0.654**	<0.001
Cultural Value ↔ Destination Attractiveness	0.628**	<0.001
Tourist Satisfaction ↔ Revisit Intention	0.704**	<0.001
Destination Attractiveness ↔ Revisit Intention	0.617**	<0.001
Traditional Cuisine ↔ Tourism Development	0.746**	<0.001

Note: $p < 0.01$

Interpretation

The correlation analysis reveals positive and statistically significant relationships among all primary variables. The most robust relationship was found between Traditional Cuisine and Tourism Development ($r = 0.746$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that enhanced perceptions of traditional cuisine correlate with heightened perceptions of tourism development. Additionally, food experience demonstrated a strong positive correlation with tourist satisfaction ($r = 0.721$). Likewise, tourist satisfaction exhibited a strong association with the intention to revisit ($r = 0.704$). Consequently, the results imply that traditional cuisine may play a role in tourism development both directly and indirectly through its impact on tourist satisfaction and the attractiveness of the destination.

Table 11: Impact of Culinary Factors on Tourism Development

Dependent Variable: Tourism Development

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Culinary Authenticity	0.31	5.24	<0.001
Food Experience	0.26	4.38	<0.001
Cultural Value	0.19	3.27	0.001
Destination Attractiveness	0.17	2.91	0.004
Community Participation	0.11	2.02	0.045
R^2	0.68		
Adjusted R^2	0.67		
F-value	82.46		<0.001

Interpretation

The regression model accounts for roughly 68% of the variation in tourism development ($R^2 = 0.68$). The model demonstrates statistical significance ($F = 82.46$, $p < 0.001$). Among the predictors, culinary authenticity (β

= 0.31) exerts the most substantial influence on tourism development, followed by food experience (β = 0.26) and cultural value (β = 0.19). This indicates that tourists' belief in the authenticity and cultural representation of food is especially crucial for transforming culinary resources into tourism value.

Table 12: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statistical Result	Decision
H1: Traditional cuisine has a significant relationship with tourism development.	$r = 0.746$, $p < 0.001$	Accepted
H2: Culinary authenticity significantly influences tourist satisfaction.	$\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$	Accepted
H3: Food experience significantly influences tourist satisfaction.	$r = 0.721$, $p < 0.001$	Accepted
H4: Traditional cuisine significantly influences destination attractiveness.	$r = 0.654$, $p < 0.001$	Accepted
H5: Tourist satisfaction significantly influences revisit intention.	$r = 0.704$, $p < 0.001$	Accepted
H6: Cultural value significantly influences destination attractiveness.	$r = 0.628$, $p < 0.001$	Accepted

OVERALL INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

1. The authenticity of culinary offerings plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' views on traditional food.
2. Traditional gastronomy significantly enhances the appeal of a destination.
3. Enjoyable food experiences lead to increased satisfaction among tourists.
4. Greater tourist satisfaction correlates with a higher likelihood of return visits.
5. Traditional gastronomy is vital to the cultural identity and image of Southern Tamil Nadu as a destination.
6. Local culinary practices have the potential to create economic opportunities for community members and food entrepreneurs.
7. Areas that require enhancement include limited availability, hygiene issues, and inadequate promotion.
8. The overall correlation ($r = 0.746$) demonstrates a robust link between traditional cuisine and tourism development.
9. The regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.68$) indicates that culinary and destination-related elements together account for a significant portion of the variance in perceived tourism development.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance Culinary Tourism: The integration of traditional cuisine into the tourism development strategies of Southern Tamil Nadu should be achieved through food trails, culinary tours, village food experiences, and demonstrations of traditional cooking.
2. Boost Digital Promotion: The promotion of district-specific traditional foods should be conducted via websites, social media, travel platforms, videos, and digital storytelling to enhance tourist awareness.
3. Safeguard Culinary Heritage: A systematic documentation and preservation of traditional recipes, cooking methods, indigenous ingredients, and food-related cultural practices should be undertaken for the benefit of future generations.
4. Host Food Festivals: Organizing traditional food festivals at both district and state levels can enhance the visibility of regional cuisines and draw both domestic and international tourists.
5. Assist Local Entrepreneurs: Government bodies and tourism organizations ought to offer training, financial support, marketing assistance, and infrastructure to local food producers, restaurants, women entrepreneurs, and small-scale vendors.
6. Enhance Hygiene and Quality: Establishments serving traditional cuisine must uphold high standards of food safety, cleanliness, quality, and presentation while ensuring authenticity is not compromised.

7. Establish Culinary Trails: Creating dedicated culinary routes that link significant tourist sites with traditional food centers can motivate tourists to engage with local communities and regional cuisines.
8. Advocate for Local Ingredients: The promotion of locally sourced millets, vegetables, spices, seafood, and other indigenous ingredients should be encouraged to reinforce the relationship between agriculture, food heritage, and tourism.
9. Foster Community Involvement: Local communities should be actively engaged in the planning and execution of culinary tourism initiatives to ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared locally.

CONCLUSION

Traditional cuisine serves as a significant cultural and economic asset for the advancement of tourism in Southern Tamil Nadu. The research reveals that tourists tend to have a favorable view of regional cuisine, linking genuine food experiences to cultural identity, the appeal of the destination, and the overall value of tourism. Culinary authenticity and food experiences can enhance tourist satisfaction, fostering intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. Moreover, traditional cuisine can open avenues for local entrepreneurship, job creation, community engagement, and the safeguarding of indigenous culinary traditions. Nonetheless, challenges such as insufficient promotion, limited access, the modernization of food practices, hygiene issues, and a lack of proper documentation must be tackled. Thus, a collaborative strategy involving tourism authorities, local communities, hospitality sectors, food entrepreneurs, and cultural organizations is crucial. Advocating for traditional cuisine as an authentic and sustainable tourism offering can bolster the tourism competitiveness of Southern Tamil Nadu while also preserving its rich culinary heritage and providing socioeconomic advantages to local communities.

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