

Influence of Tourism on the Traditional Dietary Practices: A Descriptive Analysis on the 'Lake City' of Uttarakhand, India

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ABSTRACT

Long-term tourism in a destination significantly shapes local socio-cultural behavior, influencing both economies and cultural landscapes especially in sensitive regions. One clear impact is the transformation of food culture, seen globally in tourist areas. Changes in food preferences, cooking styles, traditions, and culinary habits reflect this shift. The desire for novelty in cuisine, supported by economic liberalization, better transport and communication, rising living standards, and IT-driven globalization, has accelerated the blending of diverse food cultures. This study explores the influence of tourism; cultural and economic impact of tourism on traditional food habits in the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Nevertheless, due to the demands of the market and tourists, they have been compelled to focus on dishes that are quick to cook and more commonly known. With its rich culinary heritage rooted in the Garhwal and Kumaon regions, Uttarakhand faces both opportunities and threats in preserving its traditional food culture amid modernization and changing lifestyles. The research adopts a descriptive analytical approach, along with surveys and observational data. Findings suggest a high willingness among both residents and tourists to adopt or increase consumption of traditional foods. While tourism has enhanced the visibility and diversity of food options, it has simultaneously led to the modification and gradual decline of authentic local dishes.

Keywords: Uttarakhand, Traditional Dietary Practices, Tourism, Local Dishes, Local Food

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Until the late 1970s, in many parts of the world, tourism was viewed as a "harmless" lucrative source — an industry that generated substantial profits with minimal investment and little perceived harm to society or the environment (Kumar et al. 2023). With the advent of tourism and the expansion of hospitality infrastructure, Nainital's culinary landscape underwent significant transformation (Rastogi and Pant, 2023). However, with the expansion of tourism and hospitality infrastructure Nainital's culinary landscape has evolved. Restaurants in the town began offering Chinese and South Indian dishes alongside traditional Kumaoni fare. The town now features a mix of Kumaoni, North-Indian and international (for example, Tibetan, Italian) cuisines. At the same time, efforts by local communities and cultural organisations seek to preserve traditional Kumaoni recipes by organizing food festivals promoting dishes like *aloo ke gutke*, *bhatt ki churkani* and *madwe ki roti*. Yet this diversification raises questions about the preservation of old practices.

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Every nation's culture, identity, and heritage are significantly influenced by its traditional food products (TFPs) (Vanhonacker et al., 2010; Barska and Wojciechowska-Solis, 2018; Grubor et al., 2022). Traditional Kumaoni cuisine has always been deeply rooted in the availability of local ingredients. These are foods that are made with particular ingredients and unique cooking techniques that have been handed down through the generations (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2020). Due to the specific nature of their production process, TFPs are famous for their distinctive sensory and/or nutritional quality (Kalenjuk et al., 2023; Guerrero et al. 2010; Stošić et al. 2022). Millets such as *mandua* (finger millet) and *jhangora* (barnyard millet), pulses like *bhatt* (black soybean) and *gahat* (horse gram), and the liberal use of mustard oil define the indigenous palate. Dishes such as *Bhatt ki Churkani*, *Aloo Ke Gutke*, *Thechwani*, and *Bhang ki Chutney* reflect not just the ingenuity of hill cooking but also the community's close bond with nature (Juyal and Priyadarshi 2022; Bhanot and Negi, 2025; Walia and Kukreti, 2023). Festivals like *Nanda Devi Raj Jat* and *Harela* are marked by communal feasts, where food becomes a medium of cultural continuity and social bonding.

Historical influences that have shaped and transformed the food culture and eating habits in Nainital

Nainital's food culture has evolved through a blend of indigenous Kumaoni traditions and external historical influences. Originally, the region's cuisine was shaped by its mountainous terrain and agrarian lifestyle, relying on locally grown millets, pulses, and seasonal vegetables. The arrival of the British in the 19th century marked a turning point — Nainital became a colonial hill station, bringing with it Western culinary practices, bakeries, and tea culture. This period introduced bread, confectionery, and dairy-based items that complemented traditional meals. Post-independence, migration from the plains and the rise of tourism further diversified the region's cuisine. North Indian, Tibetan, and global dishes found a place alongside local staples like *Aloo Ke Gutke* and *Bhatt Ki Churkani*. Thus, Nainital's contemporary food culture reflects a historical fusion of Kumaoni heritage, colonial legacy, and cosmopolitan influences shaped by tourism and modernization.

Influence of social factors on changing food customs and eating behavior

Local cuisine is more than just sustenance; it embodies the identity, culture, and history of a destination. The growth of tourism, urbanization, and migration from different parts of India have introduced diverse culinary preferences and eating habits. Traditional Kumaoni dishes, once central to local diets, are now often reserved for festivals or special occasions, while fast food and multi-cuisine restaurants have become common due to changing lifestyles and time constraints (Bisht, 2024). Education, exposure to media, and an increase in disposable income have also encouraged experimentation with global cuisines (Ganguly, 2025). Furthermore, the rise of café culture and social dining among youth has shifted food from a purely nutritional need to a form of leisure and identity expression. As a result, Nainital's food culture today reflects a blend of tradition and modernity, shaped by evolving social interactions and contemporary living patterns.

Tourism, climate change, and globalization have collectively played a pivotal role in redefining Nainital's socio-cultural and culinary identity. The town's changing food patterns reveal an ongoing dialogue between preservation and adaptation—a reflection of broader transformations in hill society. The objective of our study was to assess the influence of tourism on the traditional dietary practices of Nainital.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

Nainital, often referred to as *The Lake City of Uttarakhand*, has long been an enchanting symbol of the Kumaon region's cultural, spiritual, and social fabric. Cradled amidst the foothills of the Himalayas, Nainital's identity revolves around the sacred *Naini Lake* and the *Naina Devi Temple*, which together form the spiritual nucleus of the town. Over time, Nainital's lake-centered culture has deeply influenced its traditions, festivals, and food habits. The blend of natural beauty, colonial heritage, and Kumaoni customs gives the town its unique character. Originating as a British summer retreat, Nainital developed a mix of Western and local influences reflected in its architecture, lifestyle, and cuisine. The simple, nutritious Kumaoni diet gradually adapted to modern tastes, leading to subtle changes in food culture. Nainital is thus selected as the study area for its high tourist influx, distinctive traditional cuisine, visible socio-cultural shifts, and economic reliance on tourism—making it ideal for examining tourism's impact on traditional dietary practices in the Himalayas.

Research Methodology

The study was based on the data taken from a survey entitled "Questionnaire on the Influence of Tourism on Traditional Dietary Practices in the Lake City of Uttarakhand, India". It was conducted in Nainital, the Lake City of Uttarakhand. Total 90 respondents were studied who were either a resident of the Nainital or visited Nainital for tourism purpose. The study comprised of three sections viz. Part A: Demographic information, Part B: Influence of Tourism, and Part C: Cultural and Economic Impact. Data was collected from each respondent using a semi-structured questionnaire that was distributed through e-mail. The data collection was done in the month of September' 2025. The collected data was tabulated and analyzed using standard statistical procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background information of the respondents

The results of the study are presented and discussed under broad headings viz. age, gender, education level, occupation, place of residence, permanent resident of the Lake City, and duration of stay in the city (Table 1).

Most respondents (44.45%) were aged 31–40 years, followed by 22.22% aged 21–30, indicating a primarily young to middle-aged group. Males (56.67%) slightly outnumbered females (43.33%). Over half (56.67%) were undergraduates, 30% postgraduates, and 13.33% had intermediate education. Students formed the largest group (46.67%), followed by private (23.34%) and government employees (13.33%). Most respondents (73.33%) lived in urban areas, with 53.33% being permanent residents of Nainital and 46.67% non-residents. Regarding duration of stay, 43.34% were lifelong residents and an equal share was short-term tourists. Overall, the sample comprised mostly urban, educated adults, with a slight male majority and a large proportion of students.

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Table 1. Distribution of respondents on the basis of demographic characteristics (n = 90)

Variables	Categories	f	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 20	10	11.11
	21-30	20	22.22
	31-40	40	44.45
	41-50	12	13.33
	51 and Above	8	8.89
Gender	Male	51	56.67
	Female	39	43.33
Education level	Primary/Middle School	-	-
	Secondary/ High School	-	-
	Intermediate	12	13.33
	Undergraduate	51	56.67
	Postgraduate	27	30.00
Occupation	Student	42	46.67
	Government Employee	12	13.33
	Private Employee	21	23.34
	Self-employed/business	9	10.00
	Homemaker	3	3.33
	Other	3	3.33
Place of Residence	Urban	66	73.33
	Semi-urban	6	6.67
	Rural	18	20.00
Permanent resident of the Lake City (Nainital or surrounding area)	Yes	48	53.33
	No	42	46.67
Duration of stay in the city	Less than 1 Year	6	6.66
	1-5 Years	3	3.33
	More than 5 Years	3	3.33
	Since birth	39	43.34
	Visited for Tourism purpose (Less than a week)	39	43.34

Impact of Tourism on Traditional Foods

Table 2 illustrates respondents' perceptions of how tourism has influenced traditional food habits, availability, and promotion in the study area.

According to Table 2, all respondents (100%) agreed that traditional food habits have changed over the years, indicating the impact of modernization, tourism, and changing lifestyles. Most (80%) believed tourism affects the availability of traditional foods, while 6.67% disagreed and 13.33% were unsure. Fast food (80%) was reported as the most common cuisine in local eateries, followed by North Indian or multi-regional dishes (50%) and international cuisines (40%). Only 16.67% observed frequent serving of traditional foods, showing a shift toward commercial and tourist-oriented options.

About 70% agreed that local foods are modified for tourist tastes, suggesting a loss of authenticity. Respondents also noted several disappearing traditional dishes such as

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Jhangora, Maduwae ki Roti, Bhatt ki Churkani, and Bhang ki Chutney, reflecting a decline in local culinary heritage.

A strong majority (76.67%) considered promoting traditional food to tourists highly important, and the rest (23.33%) found it important. None viewed it as unimportant. Overall, findings show that tourism significantly influences traditional cuisine—expanding food diversity but also diluting local traditions. Respondents strongly support preserving and promoting traditional foods as part of sustainable tourism.

Table 2. Distribution of respondents based on their views regarding the Impact of Tourism on Traditional Foods (n = 90)

Variables	Categories	f	Percentage (%)
Do you think traditional food habits have changed over the years in your area?	Yes	90	100.00
	No	-	-
Do you believe tourism has affected the availability of traditional foods in your area?	Yes	72	80.00
	No	6	6.67
	Not Sure	12	13.33
What kind of food do you see more frequently being served in local restaurants/cafés?	Traditional/local dishes	15	16.67
	North Indian/Multi-regional dishes	45	50.00
	Fast food (burgers, pizza, etc.)	72	80.00
	International cuisines (Chinese, Continental, etc.)	36	40.00
Do you think local food is being modified to suit tourist tastes?	Yes	63	70.00
	No	9	10.00
	Not Sure	18	20.00
Have any traditional dishes become less common or disappeared in the last few years?	Jhangora, Maduwae ki roti, Bhatt ki churkani, Jholi Bhaat, Gunke (Patode of Colocasia Leaves), Kukla Bhatia, Litua, Badi ki Saag, Maize flatbread, Bhang ki Chutney		
What is your view on the promotion of traditional food to tourists?	Highly important	69	76.67
	Important	21	23.33
	Not very important	-	-
	Not important at all	-	-

Cultural and Economic Impact on Traditional Foods

Table 3 presents respondents' perceptions of how traditional foods are influenced culturally and economically, particularly in the context of tourism.

A large majority of respondents (76.67%) strongly agreed and 20% agreed that preserving traditional food practices is important for maintaining cultural identity, indicating a strong collective belief in the cultural significance of traditional cuisine. Only 3.33% remained neutral, and none disagreed.

Half of the respondents (50%) believed that tourism has led to positive outcomes for local food culture, while 16.67% disagreed, and 33.33% were unsure. Among those who observed positive outcomes, several key themes emerged: innovation in the consumption forms of traditional foods, revival of traditional cuisine among people from the Pahad region

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returning from metropolitan areas, increased local employment, and the creation of new market opportunities for regional dishes. Social media, particularly Instagram, was also noted as an important tool in promoting traditional foods and attracting tourist interest.

Economically, a significant proportion (83.33%) felt that promoting traditional cuisine to tourists benefits the local economy, with only 6.67% disagreeing and 10% expressing uncertainty. Similarly, strong support was shown for initiatives aimed at reviving and promoting traditional food culture in the Lake City-83.33% were in favor, while 16.67% said their support would depend on the nature of the initiative. Overall, the table highlights widespread recognition among respondents of the cultural importance and economic potential of traditional foods, particularly as tourism continues to create new opportunities for preservation and promotion.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents based on their views regarding Cultural and Economic impact on Traditional Foods (n = 90)

Variables	Categories	f	Percentage (%)
Do you think preserving traditional food practices is important for cultural identity?	Strongly Agree	69	76.67
	Agree	18	20.00
	Neutral	3	3.33
	Disagree	-	-
	Strongly Disagree	-	-
In your opinion, has tourism led to any positive outcomes for local food culture?	Yes	45	50.00
	No	15	16.67
	Not Sure	30	33.33
If yes, please mention any positive effects observed	There has been innovation in the ways traditional food is consumed, and people from the Pahad region who live in metropolitan cities are returning to reconnect with their traditional cuisine and culture. This revival helps promote local food traditions. When tourists appreciate these traditional dishes, it leads to an increase in local employment opportunities. Tourism has also created a market demand for regional cuisine, which has encouraged several places to revive and promote their local food culture. Additionally, platforms like Instagram have played a key role in promoting traditional dishes, with tourists now actively seeking them out.		
Do you think the local economy benefits from promoting traditional cuisine to tourists?	Yes	75	83.33
	No	6	6.67
	Maybe	9	10.00
Would you support initiatives that aim to revive and promote traditional food culture in the Lake City?	Yes	75	83.33
	No	-	-
	Depends on the type of initiative	15	16.67

CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that the respondents who were primarily urban, educated adults with a strong student representation perceived tourism as a major factor influencing traditional food

practices in Lake City. While tourism has enhanced the visibility and diversity of food options, it has simultaneously led to the modification and gradual decline of authentic local dishes. The strong consensus among respondents highlights the need for deliberate efforts to preserve, promote, and integrate traditional cuisine within the tourism sector to ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of cultural and culinary heritage. It was also found that effect of tourism positively led to creation of new opportunities for preservation and promotion of traditional food products.

Suggestions

Future research could explore strategies for balancing tourism development with the preservation of traditional food heritage in Lake City and similar destinations. Comparative studies involving rural or less-touristic areas could provide a broader understanding of how different levels of tourism influence culinary practices. It would also be valuable to conduct longitudinal research to examine how perceptions and food traditions evolve over time as tourism continues to expand. Furthermore, future studies may focus on the role of local policymakers, culinary entrepreneurs, and community organizations in safeguarding traditional dishes while leveraging tourism for sustainable cultural promotion. Incorporating qualitative approaches, such as interviews with local chefs, food producers, and tourists, could also offer deeper insights into the dynamics between tourism and traditional cuisine.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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