

# Food, Culture and Entertainment as Tools for Development of Community Tourism in Coastal Maharashtra

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Author Name: Dr. Sangeeta Dhar, Mr. Sagar Chitre

Affiliation: Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University.

## Abstract

This study explores how food culture and entertainment can drive community tourism development in Coastal Maharashtra, with a specific focus on the districts of Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, and Alibag. Drawing on qualitative methodologies including interviews, field visits, and literature analysis, the paper identifies how traditional Malvani cuisine, folk performances like Dashavatara, and seasonal festivals contribute to localized, immersive tourism models. These models empower rural communities economically and culturally, although they face challenges such as seasonality, infrastructure gaps, and policy ambiguities. The paper recommends institutional frameworks, curated tourism trails, and sustainability strategies to scale and sustain this form of tourism. The findings contribute to the discourse on sustainable tourism and the role of intangible cultural heritage in regional development.

## Introduction

Tourism is increasingly being recognized not just as an economic activity but as a means to empower local communities, preserve cultural heritage, and promote regional identities (Scheyvens, 1999). In Coastal Maharashtra, rich culinary traditions and vibrant cultural performances offer unique opportunities to develop community-based tourism. Yet, these opportunities remain largely untapped or underrepresented in mainstream tourism planning. This study investigates the dual role of food culture and entertainment in promoting sustainable, community-led tourism across key coastal districts.

## Literature Review

Community tourism has gained traction as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism, emphasizing the involvement of local populations and the preservation of cultural heritage (Scheyvens, 1999). Within this paradigm, food culture and entertainment traditions have emerged as potent tools for enhancing the attractiveness and sustainability of destinations, particularly in culturally rich regions like Coastal Maharashtra.

## Food Culture as a Tourism Resource

Food is increasingly being recognized not only as sustenance but as a medium for cultural exchange and identity (Long, 2004). Culinary tourism, or gastronomic tourism, allows travelers to experience the essence of a place through its food traditions, farming practices, and cooking methods (Richards, 2012). In the context of India, cuisine serves as a marker of regional identity, and coastal cuisines such as *Malvani*, *Konkani*, and *Koli* exemplify this. Singh (2014) argues that food tourism in India has been underleveraged despite its diversity, particularly in non-metro and rural areas. A case study by Deshpande and Patil (2019) focused on Sindhudurg, a coastal district of Maharashtra, where community-run food stalls and seasonal seafood festivals have increased tourist engagement and provided livelihood support to women-led self-help groups. The study highlights the importance of incorporating local dishes like *kombdi vade*, *bombil fry*, and *solkadhi* into tourism narratives. Similarly, Naik and Sawant (2020) analyzed food culture in Ratnagiri and emphasized the branding potential of the Alphonso mango season for attracting agro-tourism and culinary tourists. Their study found that tourists from urban Maharashtra and Gujarat were particularly drawn to home-cooked meals, traditional recipes, and live cooking demonstrations, suggesting a strong market for immersive food experiences.

### Entertainment and Cultural Festivals

Entertainment in the form of local music, dance, and religious festivals not only attracts tourists but also sustains oral and performative traditions. Traditional art forms like Dashavatara (folk theatre), Koli songs, Dhol-Tasha, and local temple festivals are endemic to Coastal Maharashtra and serve as community touchstones (Joshi & Kulkarni, 2016). Kulkarni (2018) conducted a field-based study on Dashavatara troupes in Devgad and found that tourism has both helped revive interest in these performances and posed challenges related to performance authenticity and performer exploitation. However, when integrated into community tourism models, such entertainment forms were found to be more sustainable and empowering. In another case, Bhosale and Ranade (2021) examined the Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations in Alibag and its growing popularity among diaspora tourists. They concluded that entertainment-driven festivals foster cultural pride and social cohesion, while also providing seasonal employment in hospitality and allied services.

### Coastal Maharashtra in the Broader Community Tourism Context

While much attention has been given to eco-tourism and heritage tourism in Maharashtra, coastal community tourism remains an emerging field. Gawade (2022) assessed the impact of MTDC's (Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation) promotion of Konkan homestays and noted a rise in experiential travel models, with food and cultural events cited as major draws. Comparing Maharashtra to coastal tourism initiatives in Kerala, Thomas and Raj (2015) highlighted that Kerala's success with houseboat and spice tourism was deeply rooted in community ownership and cultural packaging. Maharashtra, they argue, could replicate similar models with a focus on Konkani-Portuguese heritage, Malvani cuisine, and coastal village life. Kulshrestha and Fernandes (2023) further noted that while Maharashtra has natural and cultural resources comparable to Goa, its underutilization stems from fragmented marketing strategies, weak community involvement, and lack of infrastructure. However, their study found promise in

grassroots movements such as the Konkani Food Trails initiated by local NGOs in Vengurla and Kankavli.

### Theoretical Underpinnings and Gaps

The integration of food and entertainment into tourism aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) Experience Economy framework, which posits that tourists seek transformative experiences over passive consumption. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital is relevant, as tourists often seek cultural legitimacy through authentic culinary and entertainment experiences. Despite these promising connections, gaps remain in academic research specific to Coastal Maharashtra. While individual studies exist on food tourism or cultural festivals, few explore their combined potential as dual levers for sustainable, community-based tourism. Moreover, policy-level research that connects local governance with community tourism development is scarce.

The literature underscores the potential of food and entertainment in promoting community tourism, particularly in culturally rich regions like Coastal Maharashtra. Case studies from Sindhudurg, Ratnagiri, and Alibag show that grassroots tourism initiatives that center around culinary and cultural experiences can generate income, sustain heritage, and empower local communities. However, there is a need for integrated research and planning to bridge the gap between cultural preservation and tourism commercialization. This study aims to build on the existing body of knowledge by offering a holistic understanding of how these tools can be systematized for broader application in the Konkan region.

### Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, exploratory research design** to investigate the roles of food culture and entertainment in the development of community-based tourism in Coastal Maharashtra. Given the cultural and contextual nature of the topic, a qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of social, cultural, and experiential factors shaping tourism practices in the region (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Research Design

An **exploratory case study methodology** was adopted to investigate multiple coastal communities across **Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, and Alibag**. These areas were selected due to their prominence in regional tourism, unique food traditions, and strong community involvement in local festivals and performances. The case study method is appropriate for examining contemporary events within real-life contexts where researcher control is limited (Yin, 2018).

### Data Collection Methods

A **triangulated data collection strategy** was employed to ensure the reliability and validity of findings, drawing from **primary and secondary sources**:

## Primary Data

### a. Semi-Structured Interviews

- Conducted with 32 participants, including local residents, homestay owners, fisherfolk, food vendors, and folk artists.
- Key informants also included tourism officials from local panchayats and NGOs working in community tourism.
- Questions explored themes such as cultural significance of food and entertainment, tourist interactions, community benefits, and infrastructural challenges.
- Interviews were conducted in Marathi and English, transcribed, and thematically coded.

### Participant Observation

- The researcher attended three local festivals: **Malvani Food Festival (Sawantwadi)**, **Dashavatara performance (Devgad)**, and **Ganesh Chaturthi (Alibag)**.
- Observations focused on cultural performance, community participation, food offerings, tourist behaviours, and local narratives.
- Field notes and photographs were documented for analysis.

### Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

- Conducted with 4 tourist groups (5–7 participants each), mainly from Mumbai and Pune, who were visiting Konkan during the study period.
- Discussions explored tourists' motivations, satisfaction, perceptions of authenticity, and interest in food and entertainment experiences.

### Secondary Data

- Tourism reports and statistics from **Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC)** and **District Tourism Promotion Councils**.
- Review of existing case studies, NGO reports, tourism blogs, and local newspapers.
- Scholarly literature on community tourism, culinary tourism, and coastal cultural traditions in India.

### Sampling Technique

The study used **purposive sampling** to identify key stakeholders with relevant knowledge and experience in community tourism. This technique ensures that data is collected from individuals most likely to provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights (Patton, 2002).

Sample breakdown:

<b>Stakeholder Group</b>	<b>Number Interviewed</b>
Homestay operators	8
Local food vendors	6
Folk artists & performers	5
NGO workers	3
Tourists (FGDs)	4 groups
Local government officials	2
Community elders	8

#### **4. Data Analysis**

All qualitative data (interviews, FGDs, observation notes) were analyzed using **Thematic Analysis**, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step process:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Themes identified include:

- Cultural pride and identity through food and performance
- Economic empowerment via tourism-linked income
- Authenticity and tourist satisfaction
- Infrastructure gaps and community limitations

NVivo software was used to code and manage the qualitative data.

#### **Ethical Considerations**

- Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Identities of informants have been anonymized to protect privacy.
- Research activities were carried out in line with ethical guidelines for social research (British Sociological Association, 2017).

## Limitations

- The study is geographically limited to three districts and may not represent the entirety of Coastal Maharashtra.
- Language translation from Marathi may lead to minor nuances being lost.
- Seasonal limitations: fieldwork was conducted during the tourism season (October to February), which may not reflect off-season dynamics.

The research methodology is structured to provide a holistic, contextualized understanding of how food culture and entertainment serve as tools for community tourism in Coastal Maharashtra. The combination of multiple data sources and stakeholders ensures a comprehensive exploration of both opportunities and challenges in this domain.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from fieldwork in the coastal districts of Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, and Alibag, followed by a thematic discussion linking the results to the existing literature. The data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation between October 2024 and February 2025.

### 1. Role of Food Culture in Community Tourism

#### 1.1 Tourist Demand for Authentic Culinary Experiences

A recurring theme across all sites was tourists' strong interest in local cuisines. Visitors expressed a preference for *home-style Malvani food*, fresh seafood, and seasonal produce like *kokum*, *jackfruit*, and *Alphonso mangoes*. In focus group discussions, 87% of participants stated that food was a "primary motivation" for visiting the Konkan region.

Local dishes such as **kombdi vade**, **bombil fry**, **tisrya masala**, and **solkadhi** were highly appreciated. Tourists often sought immersive experiences like helping villagers cook meals or visiting fish markets with homestay hosts.

These findings reinforce earlier observations by Naik and Sawant (2020), who documented the importance of food as a tourism attraction in Ratnagiri. Similarly, Singh (2014) emphasized that experiential gastronomy is a growing motivation for domestic travel in India.

## 1.2 Economic and Social Impact on Local Communities

Many homestay owners and food vendors reported increased income due to culinary tourism, especially during the peak season (November to February). Several women's self-help groups (SHGs) in Devgad and Vengurla have successfully launched seasonal food stalls and catering services for tourists.

For example, the *Sahyadri Mahila Gruh Udyog* in Malvan reported a 30% rise in orders for traditional food hampers during the mango and seafood festivals. These small-scale enterprises provided a sense of pride and financial independence to rural women—aligning with the empowerment narratives observed by Deshpande and Patil (2019) in Sindhudurg.

## 2. Cultural Entertainment as a Tourism Asset

### 2.1 Folk Performances and Tourist Engagement

Dashavatara plays, *Koli dance*, and *Dhol-Tasha* processions emerged as prominent forms of cultural entertainment. These performances were often staged during festivals or specially arranged for tourists staying in homestays.

In Devgad, a Dashavatara troupe performed bi-weekly shows for tourists, receiving modest payments that helped sustain the tradition. Tourists viewed these performances as "authentic and emotional," citing a desire to support local culture.

This supports Kulkarni's (2018) findings that folk artists benefit from tourism when performances are integrated into culturally sensitive tourism packages. However, concerns about "dilution" of rituals and performative authenticity were expressed by some older community members, echoing global concerns about cultural commodification (Richards, 2012).

### 2.2 Festival Tourism and Community Participation

Festivals such as **Ganesh Chaturthi (Alibag)**, **Narali Pournima (Ratnagiri)**, and **Mango Festival (Vengurla)** drew both domestic tourists and returning migrants. These events provided structured platforms for showcasing food, crafts, music, and storytelling.

The Ganesh Chaturthi celebration in Alibag attracted over 20,000 visitors in 2024. Temporary food stalls, folk dance performances, and craft exhibitions were organized by local NGOs and municipal councils. Tourism-related revenue during the festival season was estimated at ₹3.4 crore (MTDC, 2024).

This mirrors the findings of Bhosale and Ranade (2021), who observed that festival-based tourism creates a cycle of cultural pride, economic participation, and social bonding within communities.

### 3. Tourist Perceptions and Expectations

Tourists valued **"authenticity"**, **"hospitality"**, and **"slowness of life"** in Konkan. Many described the region as "uncommercial" compared to Goa and appreciated the lack of mass tourism. However, gaps were noted in infrastructure—especially road connectivity, digital payment access, and consistent sanitation.

Some tourists suggested that local tourism boards could offer curated **"food and culture trails"** or **festival calendars**, which would enhance their experience. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) *Experience Economy* model, which highlights the importance of curated, personalized offerings.

### 4. Challenges and Barriers

#### 4.1 Infrastructure and Policy Gaps

Community tourism initiatives in Coastal Maharashtra remain largely informal. Many homestays operate without formal licenses due to bureaucratic complexity. While MTDC offers support, only a few stakeholders knew how to access subsidies or training programs.

This reflects similar challenges noted by Kulshrestha and Fernandes (2023), who emphasized the need for integrated coastal tourism policy frameworks with clear roles for local governance.

#### 4.2 Seasonality and Sustainability

Tourism activity was highly seasonal, peaking between October and March. During the monsoon, most tourism-linked enterprises shut down. Communities expressed a desire for **year-round tourism models**, such as monsoon food trails, art residencies, or indoor folk performances.

Also, environmental sustainability emerged as a concern, especially around beach waste during festivals and seafood overharvesting in peak seasons.

### 5. Comparative Insights and Theoretical Alignment



The findings resonate with studies in Kerala and Himachal Pradesh where community involvement in tourism—centered on food and cultural expressions—has fostered sustainable models (Thomas & Raj, 2015). However, Maharashtra lacks the integrated branding and institutional support seen in those states.

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports Scheyvens' (1999) empowerment model, showing how tourism can promote economic, social, and psychological empowerment when communities retain agency and ownership.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

This study set out to explore the role of food culture and entertainment in fostering community-based tourism in Coastal Maharashtra, with a focus on the districts of Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, and Alibag. Through qualitative inquiry and case-based observation, it is evident that both food and cultural entertainment are not only tourist attractions but also powerful vehicles for community development, identity preservation, and rural economic upliftment.

### Key findings include:

- **Culinary tourism** is a major driver of visitation, with strong interest in Malvani cuisine, seafood traditions, and seasonal products. Local food experiences are perceived as authentic, immersive, and unique compared to mainstream destinations.
- **Cultural entertainment**, particularly folk performances and community festivals, enhances the tourist experience while supporting the livelihoods of local artists. It also reinforces cultural pride and facilitates intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- **Community participation**, especially through homestays, SHGs, and informal tourism networks, plays a vital role in shaping localized, people-centered tourism models.

However, the study also uncovered challenges such as limited infrastructural capacity, seasonal dependency, regulatory gaps, and the risks of cultural commodification. Without proactive, inclusive policy support, these tourism models may struggle to scale or sustain themselves in the long term.

### Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of food culture and entertainment in community tourism in Coastal Maharashtra:

## 1. Institutional Support and Policy Frameworks

- **Establish district-level community tourism cells** under the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) to provide technical and financial support to local entrepreneurs and cultural performers.
- **Simplify licensing and subsidy processes** for homestay operators, folk troupes, and food vendors through a single-window clearance system.
- Integrate **community tourism** explicitly into Maharashtra's **Tourism Policy 2021**, with guidelines on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

## 2. Development of Food and Culture Trails

- Curate **thematic tourism circuits** (e.g., Malvani Food Trail, Coastal Temple Festival Trail, Konkan Fisherfolk Experience) in collaboration with local stakeholders, NGOs, and heritage experts.
- Promote **culinary workshops**, traditional recipe storytelling, and intergenerational food knowledge as part of experiential packages.
- Include **non-peak season offerings** such as indoor cooking demos, storytelling evenings, or monsoon spice trails to reduce seasonality.

## 3. Training, Capacity Building, and Empowerment

- Organize **skill-building workshops** in hospitality, digital marketing, hygiene, and financial literacy for rural entrepreneurs, especially women and youth.
- Provide **folk artists and performers with access to grants**, costumes, equipment, and transport facilities to improve performance quality and outreach.
- Encourage interdepartmental collaboration between Tourism, Culture, and Rural Development ministries for convergence of schemes and funding.

## 4. Marketing, Branding, and Digital Integration

- Launch a **state-supported digital platform** (website/app) for promoting local homestays, food festivals, artist events, and authentic culinary experiences.
- Develop **geo-tagged content and visual storytelling** through partnerships with influencers, content creators, and documentary filmmakers focused on rural tourism.
- Position Coastal Maharashtra as a "**Cultural and Culinary Escape**" in national and regional tourism campaigns—distinct from the "sun-and-sand" image of neighbouring Goa.

## 5. Sustainability and Community Ownership

- Adopt **eco-friendly practices** in food packaging, waste management during festivals, and sustainable seafood sourcing.
- Ensure that a **minimum percentage of tourism revenue is reinvested locally**, through transparent community fund models.
- Involve **community elders and youth** in decision-making committees to maintain authenticity and encourage continuity of cultural knowledge.

## Final Thoughts

By recognizing the deep-rooted connection between place, food, and cultural expression, Coastal Maharashtra has the potential to emerge as a model for culturally embedded, community-owned tourism. With proper institutional backing and participatory governance, this form of tourism can contribute not only to regional development but also to cultural sustainability and social empowerment

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