

A Study on the Consumer Preferences towards Ethnic Cuisines of the North-Eastern Regions of India with special reference to Guwahati City

Sneha Tumung¹, Dikshya Saikia²

¹(Royal School of Commerce, Assam Royal Global University, India)

²(Assistant Professor, Royal School of Commerce, Assam Royal Global University, India)

Abstract:

Background: India is a country with rich diversity and culture. Amidst this diversity lies a plethora of traditions with their own separate and unique cuisines. This paper specifically focuses on the cuisines based in the North-Eastern States of India. The main aim of this research is to study the consumer preferences of these ethnic cuisines of North-east India with respect to Guwahati City. The research was conducted during the time of the global pandemic in the year 2020.

Materials and Methods: The study was conceived through Convenience Sampling, taking a total of 100 random customers. The entirety of this study is based on accumulation of both primary and secondary sources of data. Here the respondents answer an array of questions which are carefully crafted while keeping the primary focus of the study in mind.

Results: The study analysis reveals various facts and figures such as the preference of cuisine differed upon the geographical index of the respondents. Also, respondents that preferred ethnic and traditional cuisines the most are between the age group of 16-25 but in general, majority of the respondents preferred to consume ethnic and traditional cuisines.

Conclusion: This study further discovered that the consensus of the respondents was fairly on point and justified the direction in which the study was steering into. Through this study, many such issues and scenarios have been highlighted which prior to this study appeared hidden and unnoticeable.

Key Words: Ethnic cuisines, Consumer preferences, Food habits.

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I. Introduction

Food is a very subjective aspect that satisfies one of our five major senses. The primary objective of food was to provide energy and sustenance to us humans, but as time has progressed, humans and civilizations have certainly evolved into surviving amongst a certain culture and society. The people surviving in these varied cultures have different ethnicities to which they belong. Food being subjective, received its scrutiny from people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This resulted in different cultures and ethnicities pertaining to food that not only portrays their culture but also embodies it in its taste. Through this, the genesis of ethnic food began.

Ethnic cuisines or ethnic foods are foods which are originated from the culture and heritage of an ethnic group or community, who use their comprehension and knowledge of local ingredients from plants and/or animal sources (Dae Young Kwon, 2015). These groups or communities collected the elements of local ingredients from plants and/or animals, recognized them, and made them into tradition. Moreover, local food resources are unique from region to region and are generally given a geographical label. Origin and spread of availability of ingredients provide a substantial understanding of the food habits followed within a country or region's resources. However, the term "ethnic food" or "ethnic cuisine" is vague. Thus, ethnic food can also be interpreted as an ethnic group's or a country's cuisine that is socially and culturally accepted by consumers beyond the particular ethnic group. For instance, Indian food, Korean food, Greek food, Italian food, etc. are all considered as ethnic foods besides their own countries. In addition to that, foods consumed by people based on different religions are also considered ethnic food. For example, traditional Hindu cuisine, Christian cuisine, Muslim cuisine, etc. are all included in the bracket of ethnic food.

Various ethnic cuisines are consumed by people all over the world today, regardless of their ethnicities and culture, because more and more people eat to appreciate the culture and ethnicity of the cuisine rather than for the mere purpose of survival. People from various regions and ethnicities are very keen to introduce their traditional ethnic foods to people from around the world. Every country's food has its own story, including its

history and its nutritional benefits. Ethnic food is being popularized today, and through that, we can certainly achieve a better understanding of cultural differences, history and food, and ultimately each other. This acknowledgment shows that ethnic food must be understood not only from the ingredients and its nutritional value but also from other aspects, such as culture, history, and environment.

Personal factors like culture, ethnicity, and religion vitally influence food choices and eating habits. Culture refers to how we do and view things in our group. It is basically the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. For example, a shared set of values, assumptions, perceptions, and conventions based on a shared history and language can make a certain group. Culture can hugely affect the choices and selection of the varied food that people make and eat, with respect to different beliefs within the culture. People from different cultural backgrounds eat different foods. The ingredients, methods of preparation, preservation techniques, and types of food eaten at different meals vary among cultures. The areas in which the families live and where their ancestors originated influence food choices. These food preferences result in patterns of food choices within a cultural or regional group. Different cultures may encourage or frown upon the consumption of different foods by individuals who belong to their groups (Dindyal and Dindyal, 2003; Sibal, 2018). Cultural influences lead to the difference in the habitual consumption of certain foods and in certain cases can lead to restrictions such as the exclusion of meat and milk from the diet.

Also, nations or countries are frequently associated with certain foods. For example, many people associate Italy with pizza and pasta, yet Italians eat many other foods and types of pasta dishes vary throughout Italy. Methods of preparation and types of food vary by regions of a nation. Similarly, in a country like India, which has quite a diverse culture dispersed throughout the country, food habits of people varies from region to region, based on their cultural backgrounds. However, these culture-driven food habits are amenable to change. When moving to a new country, individuals often adopt particular food habits of the local culture. In this process of immigration, food practices and preferences are imported and exported. Although, families bring their food preferences with them, they may use their old recipes with new ingredients, or experiment with new recipes, incorporating ingredients to match their own tastes.

Another factor affecting the choice and selection of foods is ethnicity. Different ethnic groups will choose and select different foods. This is because people who belong to ethnic groups will have been raised and brought up in a certain style and manner. This means factors such as their outlook and attitudes towards life and people, health and even food choices will be greatly influenced by their ethnic group. For example, African and Afro Caribbean groups will usually consume foods, which contain a lot of various meats and a lot of wheat and rice groups. Most of the Indian groups, on the other hand, will generally consume foods containing a lot of traditional herbs and different spices.

Religion also plays one of the most influential roles in the choices and subsequent selection of foods consumed in certain societies. For example, in the Hindu and Buddhist religions the consumption of both pork and beef is frowned upon. This is because it is considered to not be clean meat. Conversely, only the consumption of pork and not beef is prohibited for the same reasons in the Islamic religion and Judaism. However, all other meats consumed in these religions must be halal and kosher, respectively. In stark contrast, Christianity and the Catholic religion allow the consumption of any types of meat. Also at the other extreme to these religions, the Jain religion does not allow the eating of any meat and any vegetables grown beneath the soil (Dindyal and Dindyal, 2003).

As a result, it is necessary to appreciate and acknowledge the large impact that personal factors like culture, ethnicity, and religion has on food choices, eating styles, habits, and patterns.

In addition to personal factors, the particular geographical location and climate of the region also affect the kind of food or cuisine that people prefer. As India is considered a subcontinent on its own, the level of variation in geographical location and climate is considered to be at its extreme ends. This vastly affects the food styles and food preferences of people throughout the nation. For example- Pakora, a savory, deep-fried Indian snack made with pieces of vegetables such as cauliflower and eggplant is the most popular during spring when the locals enjoy fried foods to celebrate the monsoon season. Certain states due to their high humidity and temperature prefer to consume less deep-fried snacks such as 'Vada', a savory doughnut-like snack that traces its history in Tamil Nadu. This also points towards the wide availability of certain resources and pulses that are indigenous to certain states and locations, like 'Bamboo Shoot', an edible shoot of bamboo culms that come out of the ground of many bamboo species including *Bambusa vulgaris* and *Phyllostachysedulis*. It is mostly consumed by people residing near the coasts or within the north-eastern states.

The awareness and trying of ethnic cuisines have increased in the past decades due to the developing universal exchange of trade, movement of different ethnicities across the globe, tourist traveling opportunities, and globalization. Internationally, there is a trend towards "exotic" or ethnic food. The most involved ethnic food consumer segments are largely found to be the younger generation who work and live in big cities. Consumers' interests in Asian cuisines, such as Thai, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese, are increasing,

globally, and they are seeking bold and spicy flavors. With an increasing number of Asian-American grocery store chains, Americans are consuming more Asian food than ever (Ting, Tan and John, 2017).

In developing countries like India, the cross-culture cuisines like the Chinese and Italian cuisines are highly preferred by all the segments of the population. Restaurant chains that are serving the ethnic foods are increasingly diversifying their food service facility by preparing different types of ethnic cuisines, due to the development and innovation of taste among people. The increasing use of social media among the Indians and other developing countries are sharing their culinary experiences, urging consumers to try new food options and outlets, based on the reviews shared.

Consuming ethnic food provides the people not only adventure but also emotional mobility. It brings to mind memories of vacations to unique locations, and it reflects and reinforces affective ties and openness to new cultures.

II. Theoretical Background

Singh, Singh and Sureja (2007), in their study, discussed the diversity of ethnic foods of North-east India and its cultural significance. It mainly focused on the vegetable-based ethnic foods that the different communities and tribes of North-east India consume and how they are used for different medicinal purposes and the culture behind these traditional foods. In another study, Hoque and Taufique (2019) discussed about the various traditional cuisines of India and threw some light on the major causes of areal differentiation of cuisines.

There is a need to know the various ethnic cuisines of North-east India and therefore, it is relevant to study and provide the true and wholesome picture of the various ethnic cuisines prevailing in North-east India.

Sarmah, Saikia and Saikia (2019) significantly argued the commercialization of traditional foods like pickles, pithas, ladoos, etc. The study also discussed the profit of commercialization of these products and determined the steps to be taken to modernize the commercialization. Kadirvel et. al (2018) also stated the food production and consumption pattern of traditional meat products in North-eastern Hill Region. The study also analyzed the constraints and scope for commercialization and market potential of these products with respect to quality control, hygiene, standardization, packaging, branding, etc.

However, the commercialization aspect of these cuisines through various ethnic restaurants has not been covered. As a result, it is pertinent to analyze the degree of commercialization with regards to ethnic restaurants.

Bell et. al (2011), in their study, determined the awareness towards ethnic foods made with traditional spices among the United States and Thai consumers. Arsil, Sularso and Mulyani (2018) provided insight on the factors influencing consumer preferences for locally produced food when shopping. Roseman (2006) also studied about the consumers' reasons for choosing ethnic food when eating at restaurants based on some ethnic food types like Indian, Mexican, American, etc. These findings have implications in the development of marketing strategies and restaurant menus using ethnic foods.

Likewise, it is relevant to analyze the consumer preferences with regards to ethnic cuisines of North-east India.

III. Materials and Methods

Study duration: August 2020- December 2020

Sample size: 100 respondents

Subjects and selection method: Convenience sampling

Procedure methodology: A well framed questionnaire was circulated amongst 100 people within the city and the data was collected. The questionnaire included questions like their preferences of ethnic cuisine and restaurant, the frequency of ethnic food consumed by them, factors driving them to consume ethnic food and satisfaction level, etc.

Statistical analysis: The responses collected through the questionnaire were represented through charts, graphs and tables.

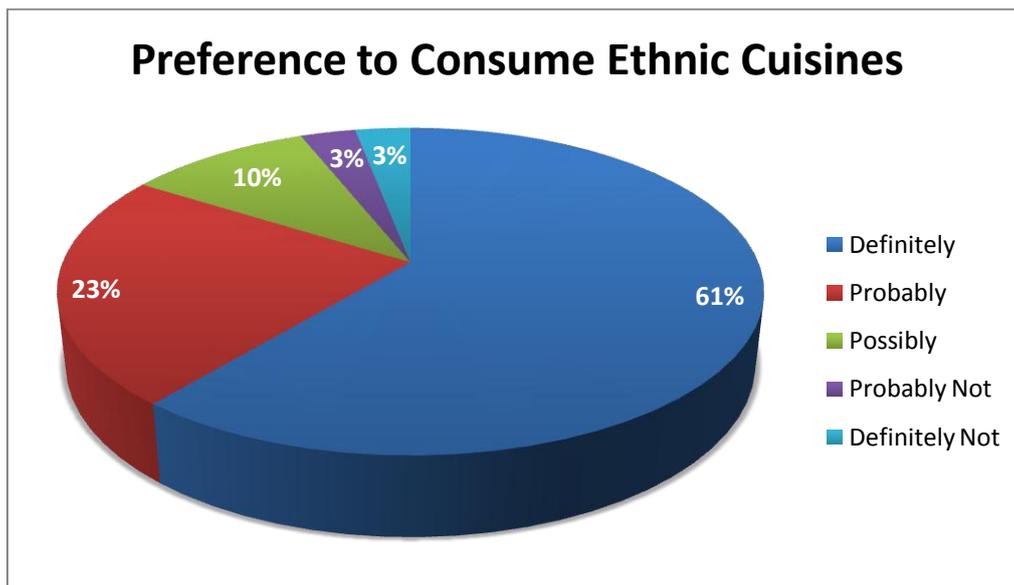
IV. Result

After 4 months of research, the data collected has been represented by charts and graphs. In view of the consumer preferences regarding ethnic cuisines, it was found out that majority of the respondents prefer to consume ethnic cuisines. The most popular ethnic cuisine among the respondents was Assamese cuisine, followed by Naga cuisine and the most popular ethnic restaurant in Guwahati that the respondents prefer to dine in was Heritage Khorika.

Table 1: This table shows the preferences of the respondents of the study to consume ethnic cuisines

Preference	Responses (in number)	Responses (in percentage)
Definitely	61	61
Probably	23	23
Possibly	10	10
Probably Not	3	3
Definitely Not	3	3
Total	100	100

Figure 1: Preference of respondents to consume ethnic cuisines

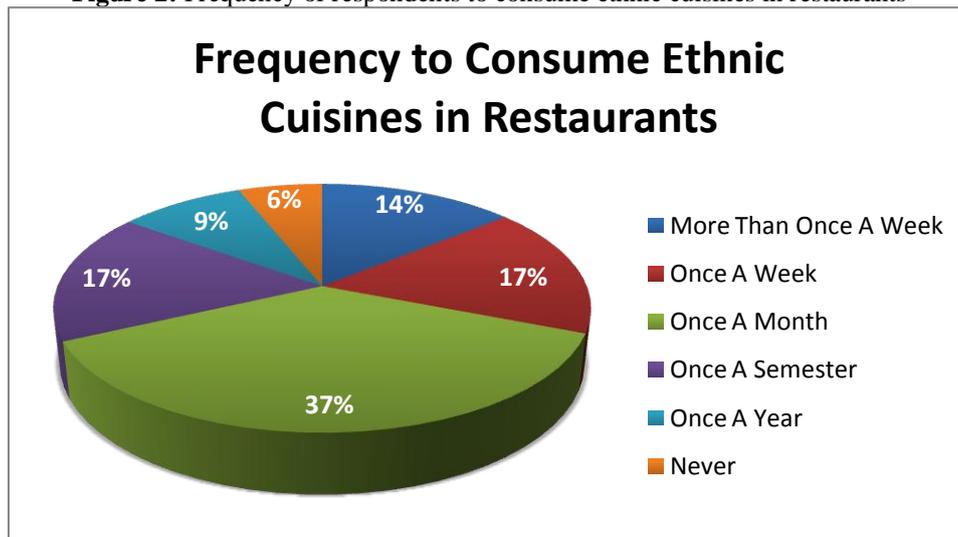


Interpretation: From the illustrated data, it can be observed that 61% of the respondents definitely prefer to consume ethnic cuisines, 23% of the respondents probably prefer to consume ethnic cuisines and 10% possibly prefer to consume ethnic cuisines while, 3% of them responded that they probably not and another 3% responded that they definitely not consume ethnic cuisines.

Table 2: This table shows the frequency of the respondents of the study to consume ethnic cuisines in restaurants

Frequency	Responses (in number)	Responses (in percentage)
More Than Once A Week	14	14
Once A Week	17	17
Once A Month	37	37
Once A Semester	17	17
Once A Year	9	9
Never	6	6
Total	100	100

Figure 2: Frequency of respondents to consume ethnic cuisines in restaurants

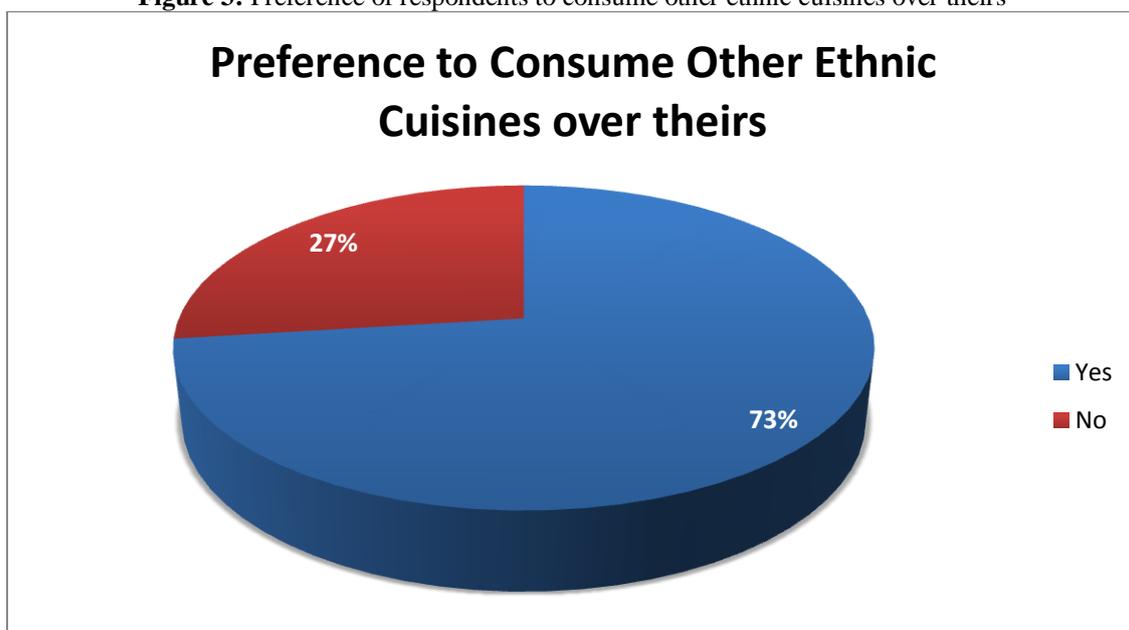


Interpretation: From the illustrated data, it can be seen that 37% of the respondents go to restaurants to consume ethnic cuisines once a month, 17% go once a week, another 17% go once a semester, 14% go more than once a week, 9% go once a year and only 6% never go to ethnic restaurants to consume food.

Table 3: This table shows the preferences of the respondents of the study to consume other ethnic cuisines over theirs

Preference	Responses (in number)	Responses (in percentage)
Yes	73	73
No	27	27
Total	100	100

Figure 3: Preference of respondents to consume other ethnic cuisines over theirs



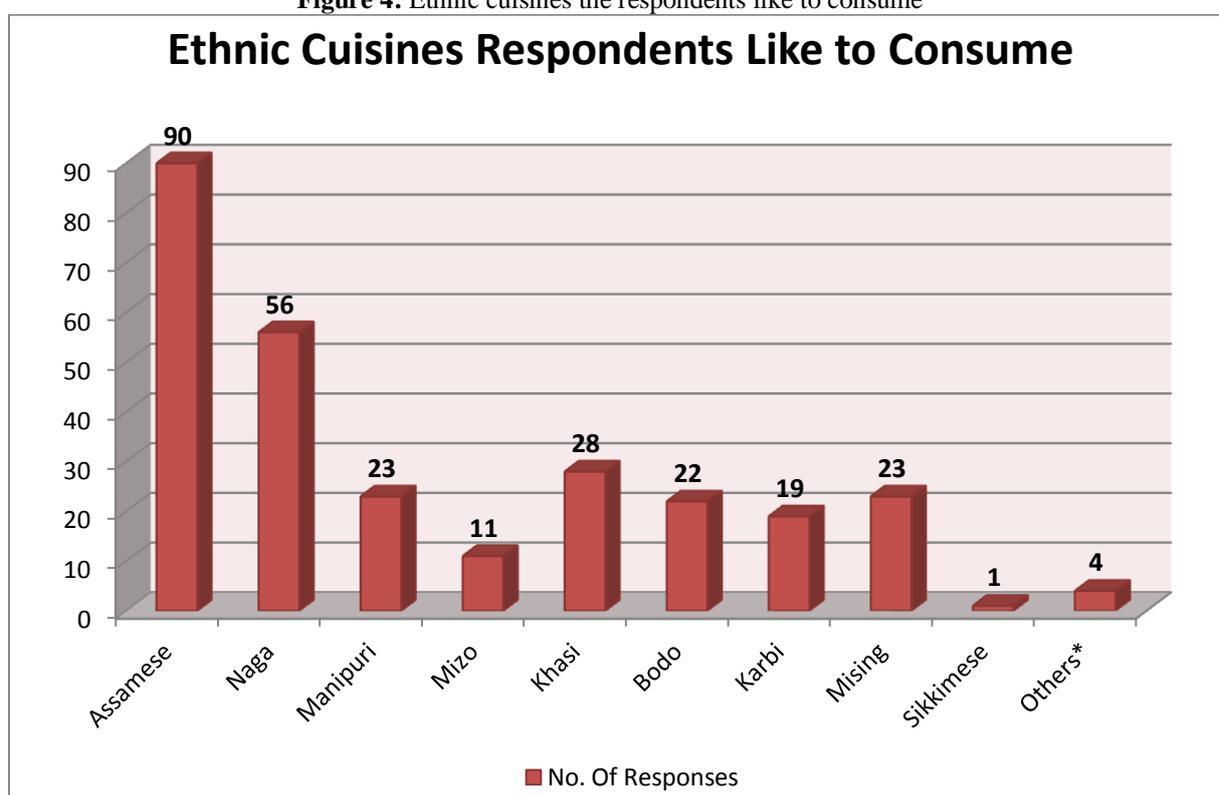
Interpretation: From the illustrated data, it can be observed that the majority, i.e. 73% of the respondents prefer to consume other ethnic cuisines over theirs whereas, 27% of them do not prefer to consume ethnic cuisines other than that of their own.

Table 4: This table shows the ethnic cuisines that the respondents of the study like to consume

Cuisine	Responses (in number)	Responses (in percentage)
Assamese	90	32.49
Naga	56	20.22
Manipuri	23	8.30
Mizo	11	3.97
Khasi	28	10.11
Bodo	22	7.94
Karbi	19	6.86
Mising	23	8.30
Sikkimese	1	0.36
Others*	4	1.45

(The respondents were asked to choose multiple answers for this question.)

Figure 4: Ethnic cuisines the respondents like to consume



Interpretation: From the illustrated data, it can be clearly observed that the majority of the respondents like to consume Assamese cuisine, followed by Naga and Khasi cuisines. 90 responses were accumulated for Assamese, 56 for Naga, 28 for Khasi, 23 for Manipuri, 23 for Mising, 22 for Bodo, 19 for Karbi, 11 for Mizo and only 1 for Sikkimese.

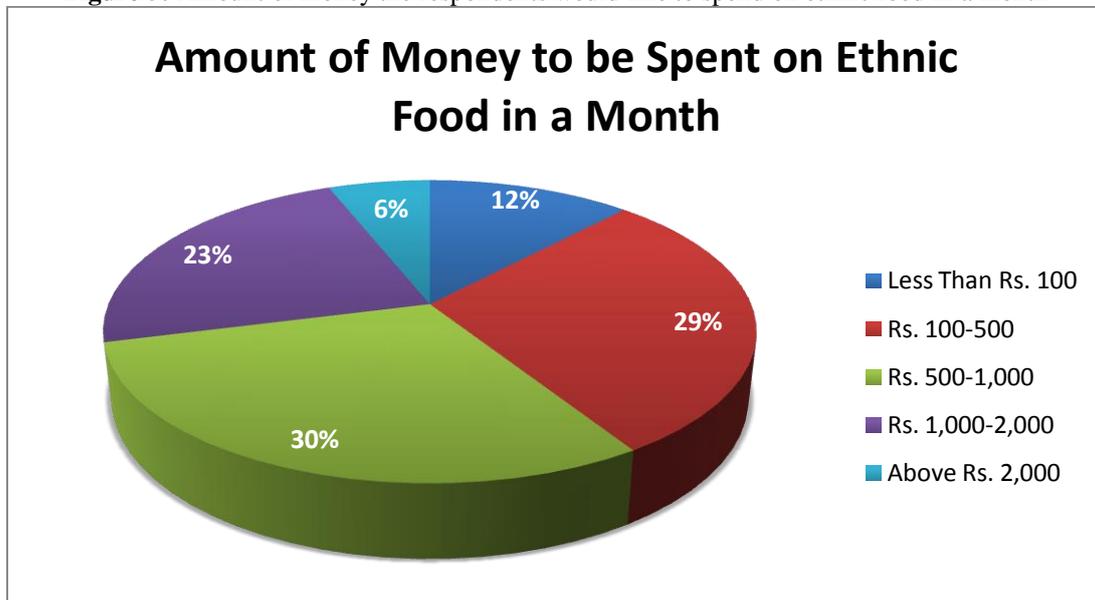
*Others: 3 North Indian Cuisine, 1 Rajasthani Cuisine (which do not fall under North-Eastern Cuisines)

Table 5: This table shows the amount of money the respondents of the study would like to spend on ethnic food in a month

Amount	Responses (in number)	Responses (in percentage)
Less Than Rs. 100	12	12
Rs. 100-500	29	29

Rs. 500-1,000	30	30
Rs. 1,000-2,000	23	23
Above Rs. 2,000	6	6
Total	100	100

Figure 5: Amount of money the respondents would like to spend on ethnic food in a month

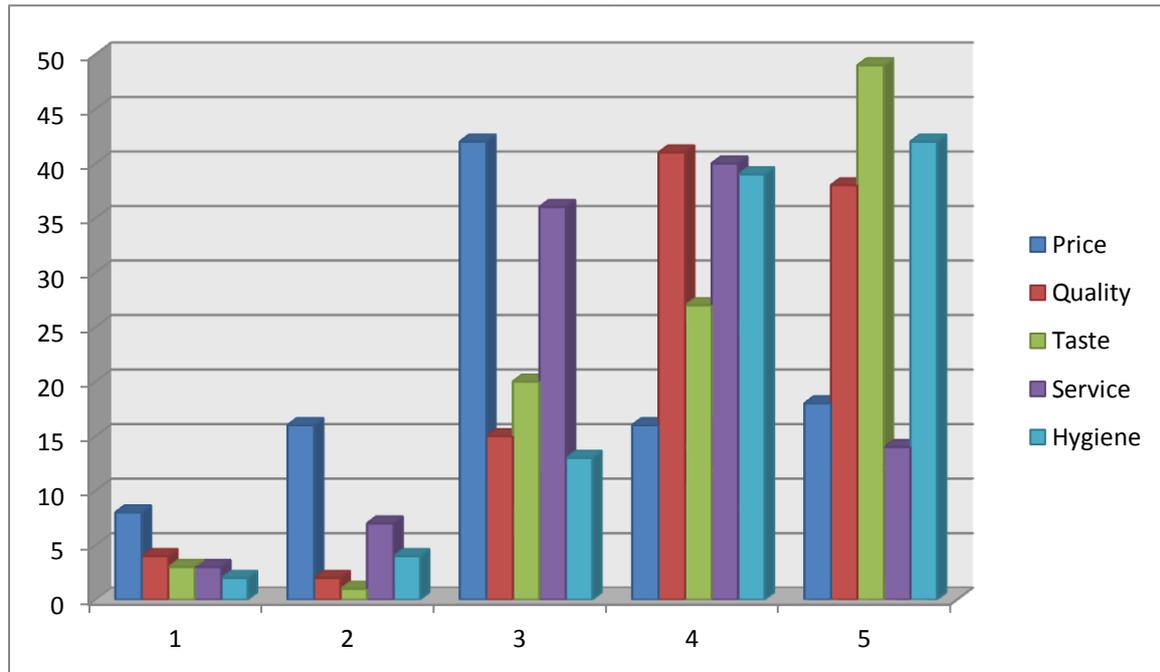


Interpretation: From the data illustrated, it can be observed that majority of the respondents prefer to spend around Rs. 500-1,000 on ethnic food, i.e. is 30%. However, the lowest percentage of responses was for above Rs. 2,000 with only 6%. 12% of the total respondents prefer to spend less than Rs. 100, 29% prefer to spend between Rs. 100-500 and 23% prefer to spend between Rs. 1,000-2,000.

Table 6: This table shows the rating of factors, i.e. price, quality, taste, service and hygiene by the respondents of the study in consumption decision for ethnic food

Rating (1-lowest, 5-highest)	Price Factor		Quality Factor		Taste Factor		Service Factor		Hygiene Factor	
	Responses (in no.)	Responses (in %)								
1	8	8	4	4	3	3	3	3	2	2
2	16	16	2	2	1	1	7	7	4	4
3	42	42	15	15	20	20	36	36	13	13
4	16	16	41	41	27	27	40	40	39	39
5	18	18	38	38	49	49	14	14	42	42
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Figure 6: Rating of price, quality, taste, service and hygiene factors by respondents in consumption decision for ethnic food



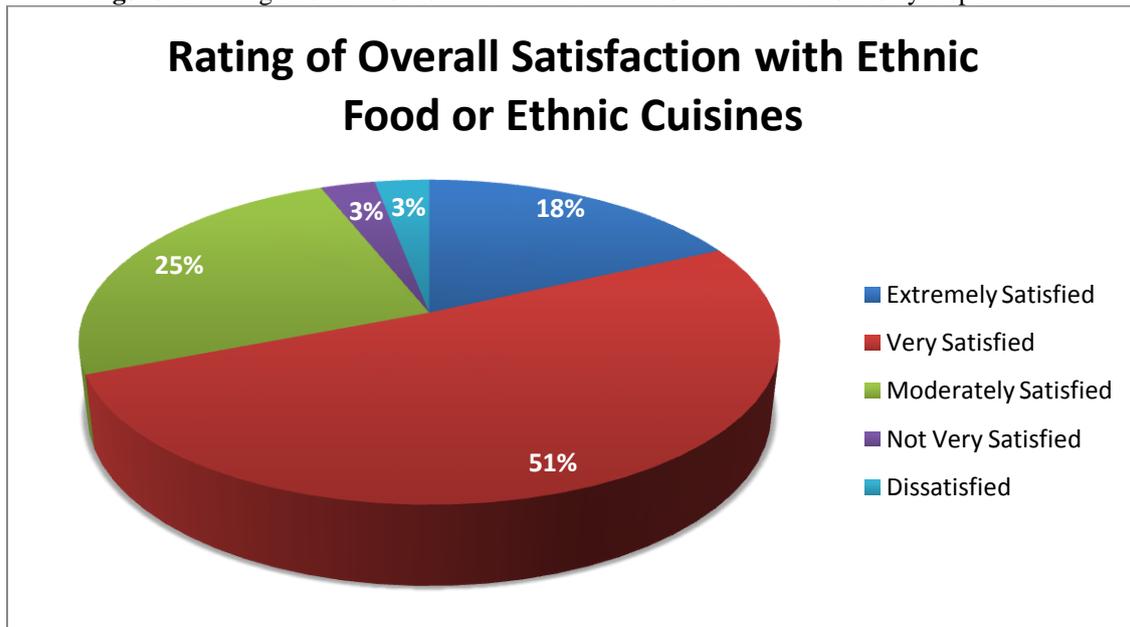
Interpretation: From the data illustrated, it can be clearly observed that:

- i. Majority of the respondents, i.e. 42% have given a rating of 3 for the Price of food affecting their consumption decision. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of the respondents take Price of food as a moderately significant factor while deciding to consume ethnic food.
- ii. 41% have given a rating of 4 for the Quality of food affecting their consumption decision. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of the respondents take Quality of food as a considerably significant factor while deciding to consume ethnic food.
- iii. 49% have given a rating of 5 for the Taste of food affecting their consumption decision. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of the respondents take Taste of food as an extremely significant factor while deciding to consume ethnic food.
- iv. 40% have given a rating of 4 for the Service of the restaurant affecting their consumption decision. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of the respondents take Service of the restaurant as a considerably significant factor while deciding to consume ethnic food.
- v. 42% have given a rating of 5 for the Hygiene of the restaurant affecting their consumption decision. Therefore, it can be said that the majority of the respondents take Hygiene of the restaurant as an extremely significant factor while deciding to consume ethnic food.

Table 7: This table shows the rating of overall satisfaction with ethnic food or ethnic cuisines by the respondents of the study

Rating	Responses (in number)	Responses (in percentage)
Extremely Satisfied	18	18
Very Satisfied	51	51
Moderately Satisfied	25	25
Not Very Satisfied	3	3
Dissatisfied	3	3
Total	100	100

Figure 7: Rating of overall satisfaction with ethnic food or ethnic cuisines by respondents



Interpretation: From the illustrated data, it can be seen that the majority of the respondents, i.e. 51% are very satisfied with ethnic food or ethnic cuisines and 18% are extremely satisfied. However, 25% of them are moderately satisfied, 3% are not very satisfied and another 3% are dissatisfied with ethnic food.

V. Discussion

The general consensus of the respondents was surprisingly in favor of consuming traditional ethnic cuisines over other cuisines which are readily available within the market. The majority of the consumers prefer to consume ethnic cuisines. Most of the respondents consume ethnic cuisine at least once a month. They are open to consume other ethnic cuisines over their own cuisines as well. That implies that the ethnic market is getting more popular and trendy day by day and the consumers are positive about consuming all kinds of local ethnic cuisines. This also encourages the heterogeneous culture of North-east India. The majority of the respondents lean towards consuming Assamese cuisine, closely followed by Naga and Khasi cuisine. Looking at the consumers' expenditure aspect, the general amount the majority of the respondents would like to spend within a month on ethnic cuisines lies between Rs. 500-1000. It should also be highlighted that there are various factors that influence the consumers to purchase or buy ethnic food. Some of them are taste, hygiene, price, quality and service. Out of these factors, it can be seen that taste is considered the most significant experience by the respondents while visiting an ethnic cuisine restaurant. Overall, the respondents seemed very satisfied over their experiences with ethnic cuisines. Therefore, it can be said that with this growing market and the present trends, the consumers, native as well as tourists, are more and more enthusiastic and curious to know about vivid ethnic groups, their culture and cuisines.

VI. Conclusion

The preferences of the consumers regarding ethnic cuisine are vastly depended upon their demographics like age, income, etc. and other personal factors such as their ethnicity, degree of satisfaction, outlook upon various cultures, etc. Depending on their judgments and experiences, it can be concluded that the respondents of Guwahati are positive about consuming different ethnic cuisines of North-east India, especially Assamese cuisine. They also prefer ethnic food according to the taste, hygiene, price, and quality, etc. but, mostly the taste and hygiene.

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