

MULLAPANDAL & KARIMPUMKAALA

The ethnic taste of God's own country - Case study in Services Management

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ABSTRACT

Mullappanthal and Karumpumkala, the two most famous ethnic cuisine food joints in the Gods own country Kerala situated at National Highway at Udayamperoor near Kochi and also at Kodimatha on the way to Alappuzha provide one of the best service offerings in the State for the tourists. The real ethnic food added with the rustic atmosphere as well as the service quality and the way in which they caters to the need of the customers make them special and sought after ones.

The case study of these two ethnic food joints deals with the various aspects of service products, the service quality as well as the service encounters and the way in which these two outlets have countered the stiff challenges from some of their competitors. They also have the credit of being the only such outlets where in fresh toddy is served and such a place which can boast of having a website of their own. The case is centered around a tourist who had the dream of traveling through the length and breadth of Gods own country.

Various issues dealing with this case are also being discussed in the last part.

KEY WORDS : Cuisine, ethnic marketing, service quality, service encounter

THE CASE OF MULLAPANTHAL AND KARIMPUMKAALA

1. Louie Paul's dream run kicked off

It was not the India that he had dreamt of. Louie Paul, a Professor of Management at a university in Mexico had just managed a two-week vacation. He himself a travel buff, Louie normally travels every year to places of scenic beauty with the idea of experiencing the traditional cuisine and culture as well as to get hands on information about each area.

And this time, he was on a whirlwind tour to his dream destination, India, the land of colors, tradition, and diversity especially to the Gods own country, Kerala. All that he had known about the Gods own country is just from the vivid descriptions from several writings of the prolific writer, bureaucrat turned Union minister, Dr. Shashi Tharoor from his books such as "Freedom from midnight to millennium", "The monk, elephant and cell phone" and several others. Travelling on National Highway on his way to Alappuzha (Alleppey), known as the Venice of the East, the highway was in no way comparable to any back home in Mexico. The hotels in Delhi where he had stayed during his arrival in India were among the best he had ever stayed in. But this was not what he was here for. A glimpse of exotic India especially his dream destination Kerala -its hospitable people, colorful villages, spicy food, elephants and cows and all the more the lush

green paddy fields and backwaters, ethnic drink - all these were still elusive. He was made to understand that India lives in its villages and the real beauty of nature could be visible in the Gods own country. Dropping in at a friend's place in New Delhi, Prof. Louie was disillusioned. It was the month of April and the daytime temperatures were soaring. His taxi driver admonished him for wanting to visit the traditional Kerala setting and have a gourmet of the Kerala cuisine. It would take away a lot of his limited time and, besides, the life in such a resort or hutment in Kerala in the summers would be taxing on him. Staying at such places would be very inconvenient either, Prof. Louie was told.

Travelling from a different part of the world to have a close look at the colorful and traditional life in the Venice of the East as well as having the taste of ethnic Central Kerala cuisine is a dream of many a foreign tourist. Yet, many have to go back with their dream remaining unrealized. Hostile climate and subsequent bandhs and harthals as well as poor food quality at some places often deter them.

2. The hole fall

In his immortal poem 'The Road Not Taken', the famous American poet Robert Frost mused over the moral dilemma of making choices in life, wondering whether to travel down one road "because it was grassy and

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wanted wear." As the irregular north-east monsoon continues to pour down on Kerala, the grass may have got greener in the State but people wanting to travel down its roads will surely think twice. Not only are most of the State's roads technically imperfect, many are in an abysmally bad state of disrepair and constitute potential death traps.

It was just a horrifying experience for Louie Paul traveling through the roads in Kerala and in his travel diary he wrote, "Road transport traffic is the most dangerous in Kerala and I feel if honest statistics were taken, will discover that the Kerala roads are tragic and the most hostile to the right to life."

Getting down at a "thattukada" for a cup of tea and "Parippu vada", Louie was so fascinated on seeing a bicycle and wanted to have a ride for a few minutes by the side of the Vembanad lake. And alas, it was just potholes, ditches, trenches dug up to lay cables and pipelines, uncovered manholes, and unkempt storm drains, not to mention the rubble, sand and metal piled up on the roadside for the Japan water supply scheme - all these were just a nightmare for Louie as he just fell down from the cycle and had a good hit on his back. That pot fall was just a horrifying experience for him to have started this year's trip.

While the spiraling heat in April and rugged roads had prevented the curious tourist from venturing into the heart of a typical Kerala inland, Mullapandal (MP) and Karimpinkaala (KK), the two most popular food joints or rather a resort offered a blend of the rustic environment and slightly modern amenities, making it an important stopover destination on the way to Alappuzha from Kochi airport. In Kerala, where the heat shimmers like phantom water, where the things you see are not really there, stands MP and KK, the ethnic village resort, where the exotic colors of Gods own country blended with the ethnic cuisine are presented to one and all in a traditional Kerala format and setting.

Louie Paul decided to have a day out at these two outlets just to keep him away from the nagging back pain and he proceeded towards these joints.

3. Louie's day out

While MP is at a rustic atmosphere at Udayamperoor from the centre of Kochi on the way to Vaikom, KK is situated on the right and left sides of the road just after the Kodimatha bridge towards Alappuzha. Away from the high rises of city, as one travels to the outlet, the feel of travelling to a traditional rural Kerala village

captures the imagination of a guest. Picturesque lush green lands and farms create a ready setting for a village experience. Being away from the city offers many problems of access and logistics, but the management considers it a cost for providing its guests with a near-real ethnic village experience. To add to the experience of the guest is the remarkable finesse with which the interiors have been done and the meticulous architectural details.

From bamboo net ceilings to the mud flashed floors with mud plastered walls, dotted with Kerala murals and paintings, all the structures are done in typical Kerala style, as village cottages. Each hut contains typical Kerala cutlery such as the "Chatti", "Kalam" and "Thavi" furniture and drapery. Keeping in mind the lifestyles of the guests, the Kerala backdrop is made comfortable by providing music, lamps, and houseboats etc., all blended well with the concept.

The inanimate details of the servicescape come to life with cordial hosts at MP and KK. Men clad in mundu-jubba⁴, often with colourful thoppis⁵ on the head, and women in meticulously done settu mundu⁶-chatta⁷

While waiting to be served, guests can engage themselves in having a view of the fishes and other mussels reared in these. They also have the joy of selecting the one which they want for being prepared as food. The guests are received with gaiety at reception. Terracotta lamps extend just the kind of experience a guest expects. As one crosses the reception, an insistent village boy is already waiting to offer kallu⁸, and leads the guests to the inner room or even a separate AC enclosure as per their wish. There are also the traditional fire places and hukkass for guests. Lanterns are used for lighting in the evenings and also in the houseboats. You are well connected with the world through phone facilities.

The flair of the evenings is meticulously genuine. Most of the customers are drawn from the nearby villages as well as passers by. Employees need no formal training as they are already familiar with village traditions. In fact, this ensures authenticity and there is not any need for histrionics. Not only this, they also offer useful inputs about the traditional village cuisine. This has two explicit benefits. One, the authenticity of a village feel is maintained and, two, the villagers from the nearby settlements identify themselves with the business proposition. They get employment. Free dinner is a part of the package and the enthusiasm of being a part of the resort. Interacting with guests from the city and abroad is another lead motivation. Villagers, thus, hold a

positive disposition for this business. The resort depends upon village craftsmen for creating an authentic ambience. The workforce is loyal and the resort evenings are now a part of their lives. Some training for handling the rooms and kitchen is sometimes provided.

4. Culinary extravaganza

With the traditional greeting of Namaskaaram begins a unique experience at MP and KK. It can even be the traditional dialects. With its ambience of a typical Kerala village, these joints offers not only the decent star comforts, but it is also fully equipped to handle all your family needs. All arrangements can be handled with professional efficiency and warmth of service, which is the hallmark of MP and KK.

It is a beautiful blend of the ethnic village and a culinary extravaganza, which is recreated every evening. Spread over a considerable acre of land which is beautifully landscaped for a rustic look, the MP has a view of the backwater also wherein boating in the traditional "Kettuvallam" (houseboat) is provided. It is dotted with chaarukaseraas (easy chairs) and platforms where various folk artists perform live before mesmerized guests, leaving no stone unturned to provide an authentic and exotic Kerala experience during special festive seasons.

Mullapandal and Karimpinkaala were basically started with the idea of providing a platform for the sale of "Akkani" for the people of Kerala for whom this drink is an integral part of their culture. Added to this drink was the ethnic cuisine such as "Thaaravu kari" (Duck roast), "Kakka", "Konju", "Chemmeen mappas", "Karimeen pollichathu", "Ayala ulathiyathu" and many more which were prepared in a different manner from the usual ones- the speciality being the use of spices and condiments specially made in these outlets and not being purchased from outside. MP and KK are India's first ethnic restaurants which also serve the traditional food and "Kallu" (Akkani) which also boasts of having the website (www.mullapanthal.com, www.karimpunkala.com). The resort offers an amalgamation of rich ethnicity and international standards of service to handle the diverse needs of business travelers as well as leisure clients. It is just a difficulty to get a seat to sit on holidays as well as on weekends when families throng here to have the taste of mouthwatering dishes.

Sea food comes from the shores of Alappuzha and

backwater beauties from Kumarakom. The Karimeen Pollichathu is considered as one among the chefs delight. Culinary descriptions of every kind namely . Kakka, Konju, Njandu, Chemmeen - they have it all! An array of mouth watering recipes that tickle the gourmets palette. The traditional fare of yore of Kerala and the modern designer versions.

While it is the "Inchippuli", "Thaaravu kari", "Kakka fry" (fresh water mussel) and "Puttu" with Kadala and karimeen are the sought after ones at MP, the home made mango pickle of the Karimpunkala family is another star attraction. The mid-day noon meals draw a huge crowd. The break fast attractions are: Puttu, Appam, Dosa and the rest of the Nadan desi delicacies. A few other exotic and rare dishes are also available on demand

At MP and KK one experiences the true flavours of Central Kerala, the warm hospitality in line with the Vannaatte irukku maashe1 tradition of rural Kerala.

Kerala food is the specialty of MP and KK, which is served in the typical style in the picturesque setting at the backdrop of the smell of jasmine flowers. The menu here changes every evening.

A visitor pays a fixed price for the fresh "Akkani" that he is provided which is also another speciality of this outlet. The dinner includes a wide range of Kerala food served with insistence, in true tradition. Guests line up in vari2 in the kitchen itself, and are served on vaazhayilas3. Young village boys are at service frequently and respectfully, insisting that guest should eat more.

5. Battling it out.....

For Louie and a group of similar travelers, it was yet another "riddle wrapped in enigma" as they were served the traditional food in Kerala style. Asked to sit on the mats laid on floor, Louie and his friends were served "kuthari choru" (local rice) with all side dishes both vegetarian and non vegetarian fish varieties in "vaazhayila" (plantain leave) and a short demo on how to eat the food was also shown. While the "desi" visitors enjoyed licking their fingers after taking the ""Payasam", "Moru kari" and other delicacies, "It's just a nightmare", according to Louie who said that it was hard for him to eat without spoon and fork. And to his surprise he found that the "vaazhayila" was torn into a few pieces as he used his own spoon and fork. Oh! How can I battle it out next time? Asked Louie while trying to eat with his hands but said he enjoyed it.

6. The Desi tourists

They are not tourists for the staff of MP and KK as they arrive and enjoy the delicacies with their families on weekend or on special occasions. Yes, the locals and people from nearby areas come here on various occasions to celebrate the birthday of family members, baptism ceremony house warming and also on other occasions. Added to this is the hustle and bustle of students too from the nearby institutions on holidays who throng here after being tired of their mess food.

It's just like a home away from home for them as they splash the water in the small pond and enjoy a day. Enjoying a pleasant bath in this natural pond is just at no extra cost. And for family, you have even special private enclosures. The traditional "kettuvalloms" are also there for you. For the desis who are tired of cooking food at their homes on holidays also, a change is there on the anvil here at MP and KK with the piping hot food. A days breakfast, "Kallu" and lunch comes for you at nothing more than Rs. 250 with a complimentary evening dish of "Kappa" with "Meenchaaru" and "Kallu"

The entire experience is led by the head chef and a handful of managers, who are genuinely proud of the ethnicity and believe that it is definitely a value proposition for guests from all over the world. The indisputably caring villagers offer a much personalized service, beginning with a warm welcome and ending with a fond farewell. Customer delight is anticipated and attended to. A safe and free parking, well-lit landscape, and thoroughness gives one value for one's money.

1. Means 'Welcome to my country (land)' and is the adopted from Traditional Malayalam language.
2. Vari is the typical Indian dinner arrangement, where people line up for food.
3. Vaazhayila is a local planmtain leaf that is disposable and eco-friendly.
4. Kurtha and Dhoti
5. Head gear
6. Traditional Kerala style saree
7. A dress which is mostly used by Christian women in Central Kerala
8. A drink made out of churned curd.

DISCUSSION ISSUES

- What is the service product at MP and KK? How are

the challenges of service characteristics met at MP and KK? Analyse their service concept.

- MP and KK have been witnessing some problems of logistics. Being far away from the city, it is often difficult for the stores to procure the inventory and for emergencies. Do you think that the decision to locate the resort far away from the city was a good one?

- Of late, some of the guests at MP and KK have reported difficulty with the arrangements for dinner. In the traditional set-up, dinner is laid on the floor (no tables and chairs are used). Also, guests have insisted that spoons, knives, and forks be provided. The management is now considering doing just that. A group maintains that by doing this the 'authentic ethnicity' position will be lost. Comment. What should be done?

- MP and KK has been successful in addressing the aspirations of the community around it, which is not hostile as it generally is to any other urban venture in the vicinity. Comment.

- There are a number of imitators in recent times, who are now offering similar products, which also address some of the customers concerns as mentioned above. They are located closer to the city, have a formal dinner laid out, with cutlery and other paraphernalia, in a somewhat ethnic services cape. What kind of competition can MP and KK expect in times to come?

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TEACHING NOTES

Mullapandal and Karumpumkala - The ethnic taste of Kerala

An Analysis of the Service Concept

A basic problem with services is that even the providers themselves fail to appreciate the service product in its entirety. This problem is partly a result of the intangible nature of the services, but it is also the presence and involvement of the customer on this process that creates a concern for a service experience. Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons have suggested that a service package should address at least dimensions:

Location

- Is it accessible (by transport)?
- Is it centrally located?

Interior Decorating

- Is the proper mood established?
- Quality and coordination of furniture

Supporting Equipment

- Does the dentist use a mechanical or air drill?
- What type and age of aircraft does the charter airline use?

Architectural Appropriateness

- Renaissance architecture for the university
- Unique, recognizable feature of the blue, tile roof
- Massive granite facade of a downtown bank
- Facility Layout
- Is there a natural flow of traffic?
- Are adequate waiting areas provided?
- Is there unnecessary travel or backtracking?

Facilitating Goods

The material purchased or consumed by the buyer, or the items provided by the customer. Examples are golf clubs, skis, food items, replacement auto parts, legal documents, and medical supplies.

Consistency

- Crispness of French fries
- Portion control

Quantity

- Small, medium, or large drink

- Selection
- Variety of replacement mufflers
- Number of menu items
- Rental skis available

Explicit Service

The benefits those are readily observable by the senses and which consist of the essential or intrinsic features of the services. Examples are the absence of pain after a tooth is repaired, a smooth running automobile after a tune-up, and response time of a fire department.

Training of the Service Personnel

- Is the auto mechanic certified by the National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence (NIASE)?
- To what extent are para-professionals used?
- Are the doctors qualified?

Comprehensiveness

- Discount broker compared with full service
- General hospital compared with a clinic

Consistency

- Airline's on-time record

Availability

- 24-hour ATMs
- Is there a website?
- Is there a toll-free number?

Implicit Services

This includes psychological benefits that the customer may sense only vaguely, or the extrinsic features of the service. Examples are status of a degree from an ITM, the privacy of a loan, and worry-free auto repair.

Attitude of Service

Cheerful flight attendant

Surly service person in a restaurant

Atmosphere

- Restaurant decor
- Music in a bar
- Sense of confusion rather than order Waiting
- Joining a drive-in banking queue
- Being placed on hold
- Enjoying a martini in the restaurant bar

Status

- Degree from IIM or B school
- Box seats in a cinema hall
- Sense of Well-being
- Large commercial aircraft
- Well-lit parking lot

Privacy and Security

- Attorney advising client in a private office
- Magnetic key card for hotel room

Convenience

- Use of appointments
- Parking lots

Participants may evaluate MP and KK on these lines. It is positioned to extend an ethnic village resort experience by providing a rustic ambience every evening.

Supporting Facilities

MP and KK is surrounded by villages and farms, which add to the concept of this village resort. Providers maintain that as a guest travels away from the high rises in the city centre and passes through the farms, the mood for an ethnic experience gradually takes over their imagination. They believe they are really travelling to a traditional Kerala localite. As they approach the resort, they find it a replica of a local hamlet, with mud flushed floors and bamboo net ceilings. Kerala art paintings and murals adorn the walls of the structures that are done in clay. The entire furniture is also genuinely rustic, with country designs, material and make. The resort has all the ingredients of a village -the pond,the backwaters, ducks, the chaarukaseras (the bed used for sitting and relaxing) and the kitchen and stores, and the dining hall. Done in clay and cow dung, the entrance is very welcoming. The entire lighting is done with oil lamps. The underground electrical wiring is not visible and there are also no electrical lamp posts or overhead wires, as is often the case in the rural interiors of Kerala.

For the convenience of the guests, there are STD-PCO booths, and adequate, well lit, and safe parking. Adequate waiting areas are provided. While waiting for dinner to be served, guests can entertain themselves in the village fair. There are facilities for carry home packs too. There are toilets and washrooms as well for the convenience of the customers.

Facilitating Goods

Most of the facilitating goods are in line with the intended feel of the resort- authentic ethnicity. MP and KK deploys a fixed menu option. Each evening a fixed meal is offered. A guest has to pay a fixed amount at the reception. This includes food and the other experience. In the true Kerala tradition, the traditional food is served here. This implies a hospitality tradition of insistence, where the host repeatedly requests, insists, and offers the guest all that he has at his disposal, especially food. The menu every evening is very comprehensive. As a customer gets into the resort, the young village boys approach them and offer the "kallu". Even as guests take their place on the floor of the large kitchen (the dining place) or in their seats, they are offered the genuine Kerala cuisine in vaazhayila or in plates made of dry leaves or in clay bowls. They sit on carpet strips on the floor. The food is served, with huge insistence and respect, and no limit on portions. The food is prepared by villagers, who are recruited from the neighbouring villages. The food and the preparation are thus genuinely local. Drawn from the village, the staff also makes suggestions about new dishes and the seasonal preparations.

Explicit Services

Coming face to face with an authentic ethnic experience is the explicit component of the service product. The success depends on how authentically the experience is recreated, using the evidence that is consumed (food) and the other, which is in animate. This includes a genuinely caring attitude of staff members, which begins with a warm welcome and a traditional greeting. One can find the paan wala (paan being the betel leaf that serves as mouth freshener and digestive supplement) as well as the mehndi artists on some occasions like the festival seasons.

The entire experience is meticulously mounted, with service personnel attired in their routine dresses. MP and KK does not provide uniforms to their employees. Instead they are expected to be dressed in their routine clothes.

No formal training is provided to the performers-the artists and the service providers. The artists and other personnel are recruited directly from the nearby village and their expected roles come naturally to them.

Employees in the adjoining resort need some training, as they should meet customers' expectation:

- Suitability of room assignment.

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- Comfort of furnishings.
 - Distinctiveness of facility.
 - Genuinely caring attitude of staff members.
 - Well-groomed and courteous staff members.

welcome, courtesy and respect of the service personnel, on-time delivery, anticipation and compliance, which

MP and KK are recreated as a comprehensive facility. It is spread over a spacious area on the highway and surrounded by villages. Beautifully landscaped, the outlet also has a shopping arcade and phone facility.

Implicit Services

This component of (the services at MP and KK includes the attitude of service personnel, i.e. the personalized services of a genuinely caring staff. Customers believe that they get value for money from the very warm