Visual Appetite

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Abstract

The matrix of the Indian cuisine is quite complex and beyond satisfying one's appetite. A serious effort needs to be made to make a person conscious and sensitive about the associations a dish can have within that culture. The concern of this paper is primarily on two major issues; a) whether menu cards in Indian restaurants are competent enough to verbally describe, the visual richness inherited by a meal b) How the traditional legacies of a cuisine culture can be revisited *(from a design perspective)* to blend them in the current context of technology, with a notion of preserving their existence.

Keywords: Cuisine, Culture, Technology, Communication Design

Cultural Journeys

The culinary art in India is spread across 28 different states each having an identity of its own, enriching the great Indian cuisine. Diversity of Indian cuisine is not just unique to a particular state, but also in the food items of a single meal. It is these complexities of regional food in India, which makes it very fascinating. The Indigenous tradition of meals in India, has given lunch and dinner a formal visual identity, linguistically represented by the lexical term *'Thali'*. (See Fig.1)

Various thalis in India: State / thali

1. Gujrat / Gujrati Thali

2. Assam / Assamese Thali

3. Punjab / Punjabi Thali

4. Rajasthan / Rajasthani Thali

5. Southern part of India / South Indian Thali

7. Northern part of India / North Indian Thali

8. Maharashtra / Maharashtrian Thali

A search for a true Assamese thali led to this picture. A native confirmed that the contents of this thali are very close to what a traditional serving offers, in comparison to other restaurants, who have diluted their menu. Commercialization has forced restaurant owners to adapt to the changing trends, leading to cosmopolitan versions of food, in turn affecting the visibility of true cultural cuisines.

Fig 1. Assamese Thali, অসমীয়া ব্যঞ্জন , Picture shot at restaurant " Akhaj ", Zoo Road, Guwahati, Assam, INDIA

Thali is a circular metal plate or banana leaf in which lunch and dinner is served in India. It consists of small bowls, each containing different delicacies harmoniously clubbed together to form a single meal. Eating from a *thali* is quite common in most parts of India and usually, name of the state precedes the word *thali* for it to be identified from that particular state for e.g., a *thali* from 'Assam' *(a state in northeastern part of India),* will be termed as *'Assamese thali'*. Having lunch or dinner from a thali in an Indian restaurant could be a more meaningful experience, if designers consider the ramifications of Indian cuisines, which can lead through cultural journeys, much and more beyond, than just serving one's appetite. Dinning can be made a more engaging experience, if we are able to sense and feel the traditional scents of Indian cuisine, which are currently void in the restaurant menu cards. The aim is of finding a way into the Indian cuisine and culture through a *thali*.

Manacles of Language

Every "name" has its own inherent strength to express what it signifies. With this strength, the name tries to encapsulate its meaning and picture in the viewer's mind. It often happens that we know someone by his name, but actually have never met him. Unless we meet him in-person, we keep on trying to visualize / guess his personality, which sometimes meets our expectations or leaves us surprised. This is quite applicable to anything, be it, a place, person or a thing.

A person normally encounters oneself with similar situations when he / she visits Indian restaurants and is greeted with *(bilingual)* Menu cards. Fig. 2 illustrates the act of a diner who visits a restaurant and orders a delicacy. It expresses his dilemma to visualize the actual dish, verbally, from the 'name' written in the menu card.
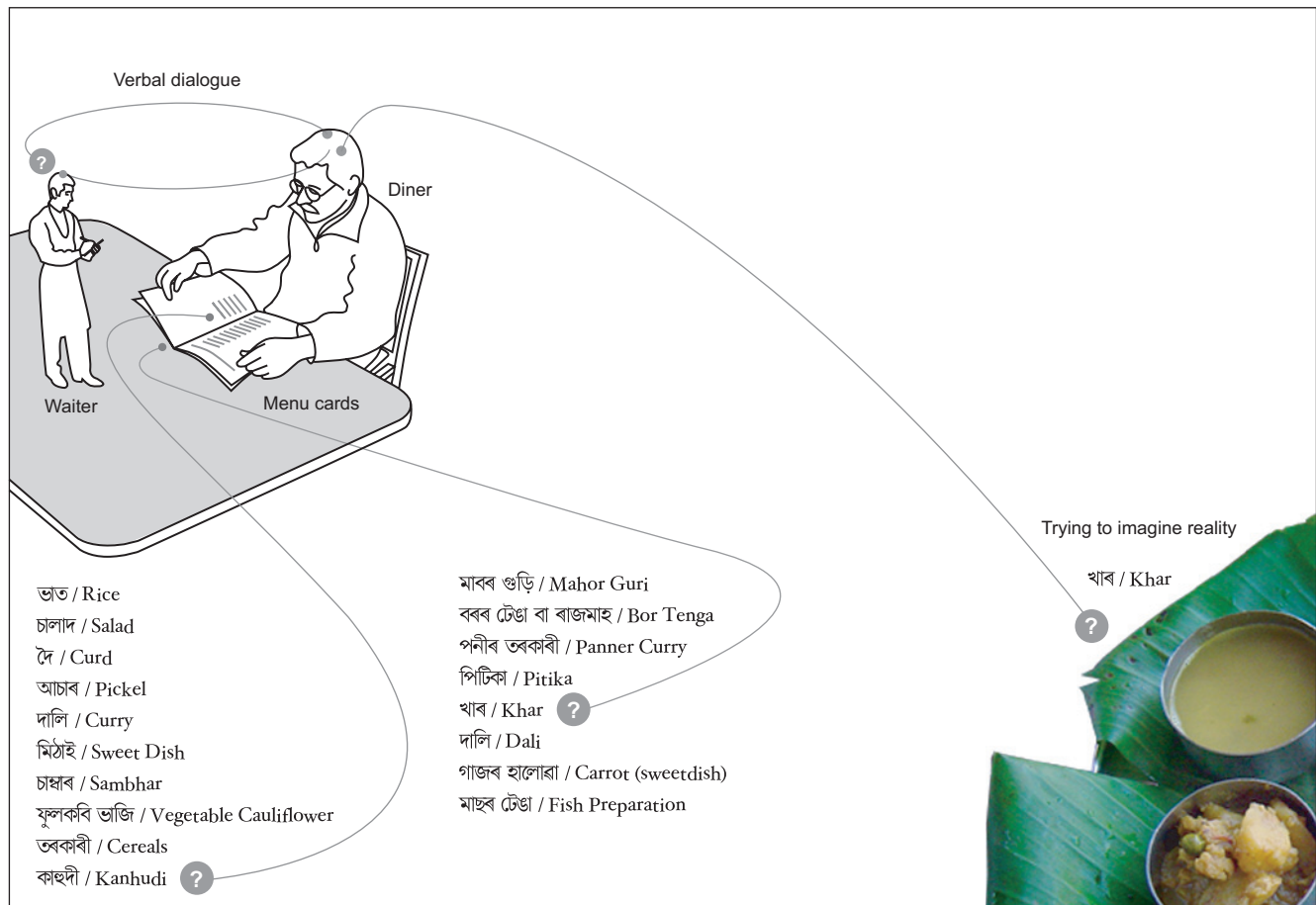

Verbal dialogue

Diner

Waiter

Menu cards

Trying to imagine reality

খাৰ / Khar

ভাত / Rice
চালাদ / Salad
দৈ / Curd
আচাৰ / Pickel
দালি / Curry
মিঠাই / Sweet Dish
চাম্বাৰ / Sambhar
ফুলকবি ভাজি / Vegetable Cauliflower
তৰকাৰী / Cereals
কাহুদী / Kanhudi

মাৰৰ গুড়ি / Mahor Guri
বৰৰ টেঙা বা ৰাজমাহ / Bor Tenga
পনীৰ তৰকাৰী / Panner Curry
পিটিকা / Pitika
খাৰ / Khar
দালি / Dali
গাজৰ হালোৱা / Carrot (sweetdish)
মাছৰ টেঙা / Fish Preparation

Fig 2. A diner at a restaurant struggling to visualize a food item in verbal medium *(menucard)* against the visual *(reality)*.
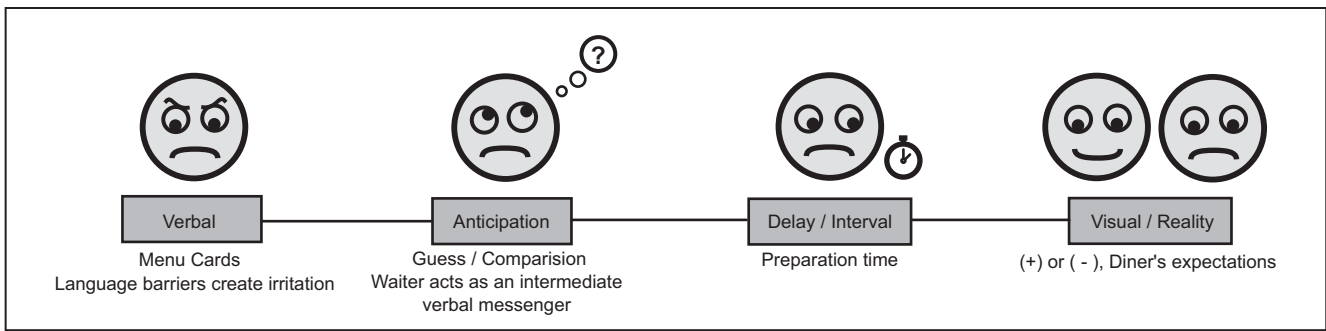
Fig 3. Sequential analysis from ordering to serving of the food at the Indian restaurants

The figure shown above translates the linear process from ordering to serving of the food at restaurants. Menu cards in restaurants are either English or at times bilingual *(English + local language).* They usually struggle to translate the lexicons of local Indian cuisine to the diner. Unsatisfactory explanation, leads to comparison with prior knowledge from the diner *(if he is a native)* and he tries to anticipate the dish to his best possible extent. The diner awaits the interval concerned with the preparation time of the delicacy, which would be finally served. The food when served might match the diner's expectations or leave him unsatisfied. He ends up eating the meal without being aware of the rich information hidden inside a country's cuisine and culture. Therefore, it seemed necessary to investigate, when the names in the Menu cards of restaurants were found to be handicapped in expressing themselves, emitting a scent 'alien' from their true form. This itself channelized the thought of providing justice to the lexicons of Indian cuisines, demonstrating the design scent of transforming meals into a quality experience for the diner. *"Visual appetite",* aims at respecting the complexities of regional foods, rituals, customs and practices, as well as sharing them across countries and cultures, releasing the diner from the manacles of language.
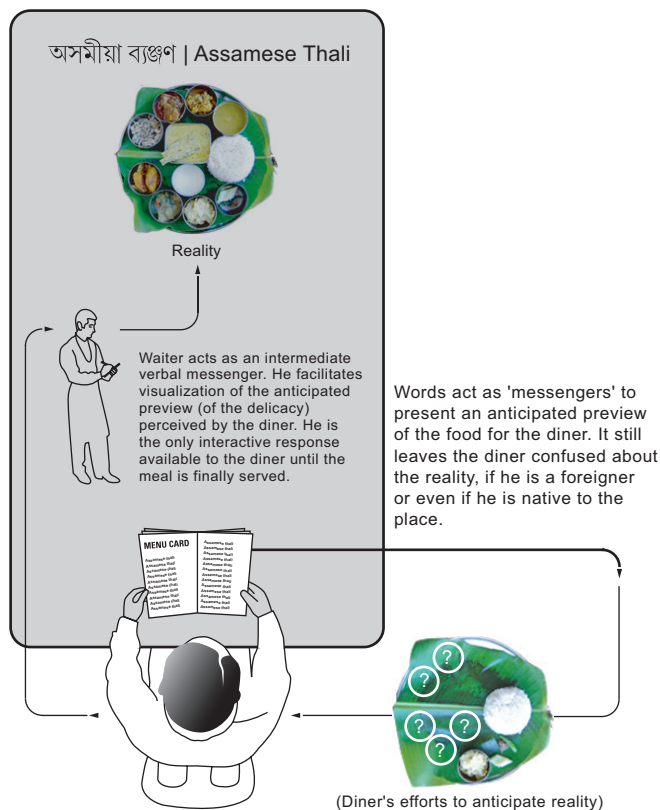

Fig 4. Current Scenario of having a meal in Indian restaurant.

Delayed Reality

Typographically menu cards might have adorned themselves to make food more appealing, but they are still not able to transcend the barriers of language. With 18 official languages and varied menus offered in each of the states, it becomes difficult for the first language English, to translate meanings of dishes into realities. *(See fig 4.)* Linguistic constraints and complexities of regional food, most of the times leave even a native unknown to these culinary traditions of his own country.

Words (names of the dishes) in menu cards are supported with adjectives like special or traditional trying to emphasize on uniqueness of each dish. Verbal explanations find it difficult to represent themselves in the diner's mind in comparison with the delayed reality (relating to the interval between ordering and serving of food). The concept attempts to explore boundaries of meanings, beyond words, for a native / tourist to savor his taste of culture and cuisine.

Information flowering

The idea is of envisaging a device, which will provide an interactive preview of the food for the diner. He will be able to navigate through dishes and understand the essence, for e.g. of a true *Assamese thali*.

Share cultures through interesting associations.

(Talatal Ghar)
A paste of a peculiar cereal, named as 'Mattiboro Dali' (which forms a part of the assamese thali) was used in construction of this fort at Sibsagar in 'Assam'.

Explore recipies through Interactive previews

Discover the palette of Indian aromatic spices that impart taste to dishes in a particular region.

Video Preview

Playback a video to know the preparation of a dish depending on the diner's curiosity levels.

Cross-cultural understanding for tourists and travellers.

Indians wash their hands before eating a meal as it is believed that food tastes better when eaten with one's hands.

Interactive preview

Bihu (Festival)

Explore relationships of delicacies with festivals.

Understand the significance of dishes made on special occasions.

Pitha (Rice cake)

Pitha is specially prepared on 'Bihu' Festival made out of rice welcoming the harvesting season.
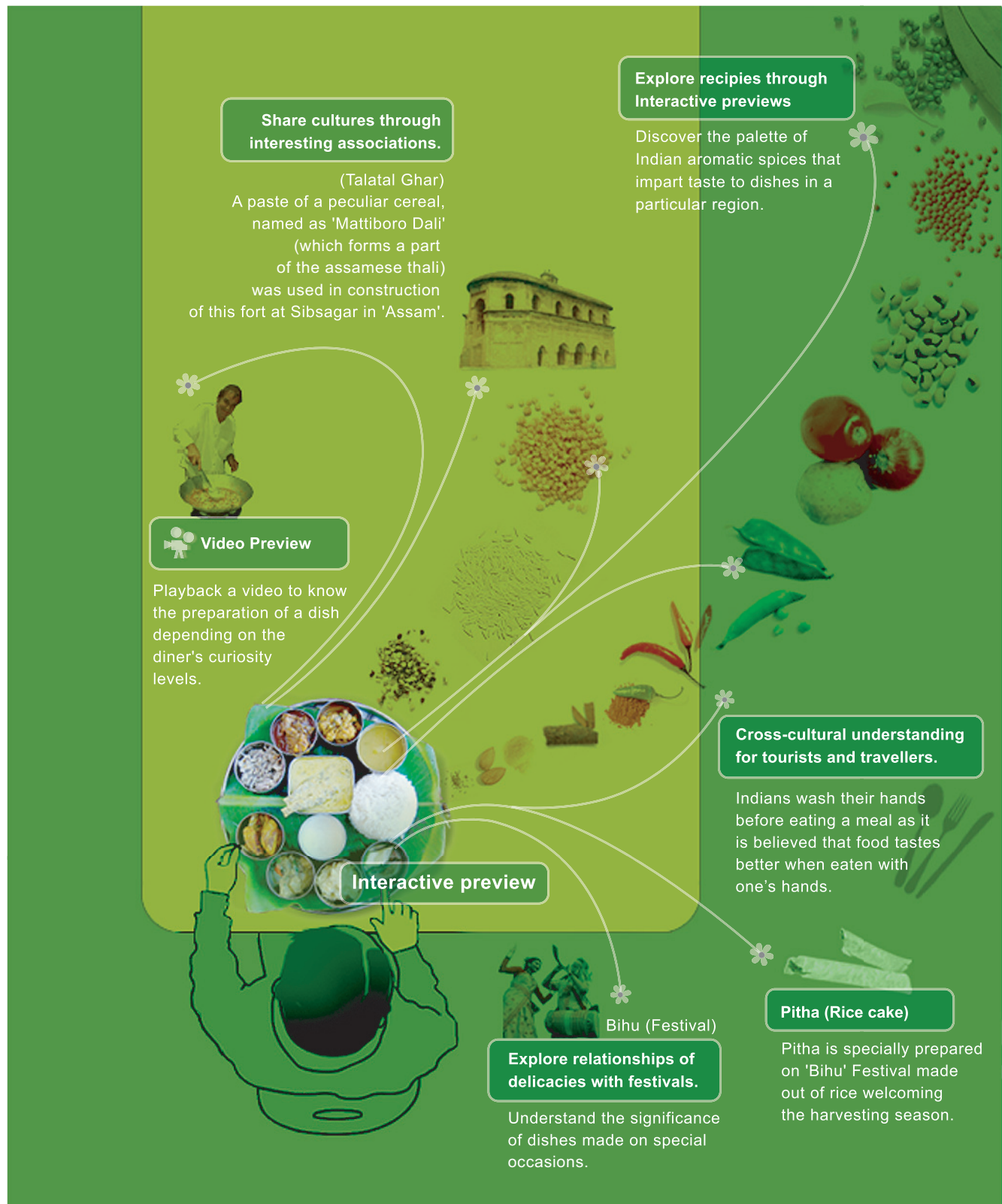
Fig 5. Unfolding the store of information within a traditional Assamese thali for a tourist or a native of the country

This preview will act as a visual expression of the meal, informing about each delicacy, on a tangible gesture upon the interactive surface, by the diner. If a certain dish evokes the diner's curiosity, he will be able to opt for a video preview of the same. The diner can also explore the palette of aromatic Indian spices, which are not only known for their medicinal properties, but also play a major role in imparting flavor and taste to the Indian food from centuries. The 'thali' will be able to create interesting associations and accentuate a dish, to the extent of sharing its relationship in history, e.g. the 'Mattiboro Dali' *(a kind of cereal in Assam)*, with rice and eggs was used as a mixture to substitute cement in the 17th century marvel 'Talatal Ghar', which still attracts lots of tourists to Assam. *(See Fig 5).*

In this world of globalization, such a device would help create deeper understanding of cross-cultural issues, For example: In the west food is consumed with fork and spoons, where as the Japanese rely on *chopsticks*[1] or to put it in better words "hashi", meaning bridge, to effect the transport from bowl to mouth. Indians believe that the food tastes good when eaten with one's own hands. Every festival in India calls in for an array of delicacies which are special to those occasions, e.g. Bihu *(harvest festival)* is celebrated in Assam with the preparation of 'Pitha' *(a sweet dish made out of rice)*, stuffed with sesame and coconut, very unique to this festival. Special dishes made on special occasions can now have their share in displaying and adorning themselves for the knowledge of the diner. He will be able to explore the multifaceted nature of Indian cuisine by opting for food from various states of India, since the food and language are peculiar of each state. It can offer him a wide range of options, where he can visually decide his choice rather than relying on his intuition. The concept here is to give an experience of the food item before it is ordered and also about the ritual in terms of which it should be consumed in every culture. It aims at rediscovering dining and guides the diner into an experience of a country's meal. As per Indian tradition one should not waste food and should eat a complete meal without any leftovers. In an interactive mode the diner will be able to predetermine the amount of food which varies from restaurant to restaurant. He will be able to approximate his likes and dislikes, and predetermine his needs. Similarly, *innumerous food and table manners in Asian cultures*[2] will be able to find blossom through such concepts, which otherwise remain silent.

Fragrance for the future

It is a fact that whenever a new idea is presented it raises more questions than answers. Visuals, dummy mockups, wax models, close to reality do exists as display menus in many other countries. In the past few years, Mac Donalds has launched their chain of fast food centers in India. A collage with visuals of high appetite value and price tags form their unique special identity. In such a case, any analytical mind would like to translate this paper as combining menu cards with pictures, with a sprinkle of technology to it. The concept *"Visual appetite"* does not mean a photogenic representation of food, but it resonates itself to interactive preview of food by providing information as needed at various levels of depth *(from the name of the dish to its recipe, to a video of it being made, to the sources of various ingredients, to the significance/associations/special stories attached to it, in cases of dishes made on special occasions)*. The main application is to safeguard visual and oral traditions of cuisines by creating cross-cultural understanding, developing respect and appreciation for each other's cultures.

1. The english word chopsticks is a terrible and ugly distortion since you don't chop anything ever with them. In China the word is "kuai-zi", which sounds like "fast fellows" because their use results in swift and agile handling and eating of food. Roland Barthes, in Empire of signs, eulogises the use of chopsticks: "... the instrument never pierces, cuts, slits, never wounds but only selects, turns, shifts, separates, unravels; they never violate food". *(source: Asit Chandmal)*

2. Li Chi, the Chinese Book of Rites, was written in the first century BC. already Detailed rules of etiquette and propriety had been formulated and published. You can get a flavour of instruction from the following admonition: on receiving the first(tiny porcelain cup) of wine look grave, at the second be pleased and respectful; and at the third look self possessed and prepare to withdraw. This applies to Japanese sake also, where you never help yourself but fill a neighbour's cup, and hope they do the same when your cup is empty. *(source: Asit Chandmal)*

Traditional version of a meal in India with immense intangible visual richness, inherited by its cuisine culture

Globalization is creating invasions over the rich visual legacies inherited by these cultures from centuries.

Fig 6. Traditional serving style (left) versus the modified serving style (right)

Fig.6 shows the deterioration of cuisine culture. Use of food templates for stacking, washing and serving food to ease a system and increase profitability seems the most logical for restaurant owners, when compared to the traditional serving styles. With the coming years most of these traditional styles will be lost or reoriented in a way more conducive to the commercialization prevalent in that time. Then issues related to cusine culture of such countries still existing, but of least concern in today's times will suddenly become an area of research. This can be considered as an opportunity to debate or a possibility to innovate.

Choosing the latter, I would like to present the idea as two fold, one at the concept level and the other at the context level. Concepts are thoughts concerned with a more holistic approach and sometimes feel the fear to remain as point of views, if not translated into business ideas. Where as business is always on lookout for contexts in which concepts can be applied or implemented. Therefore as a designer, it makes more sense for the concept to be presented within a framework of (context) business perspective to make it more comprehensible and acceptable. The paper further describes possible avenues where the concept can be applied as a business idea to preserve the old legacy in comprehension with the new.
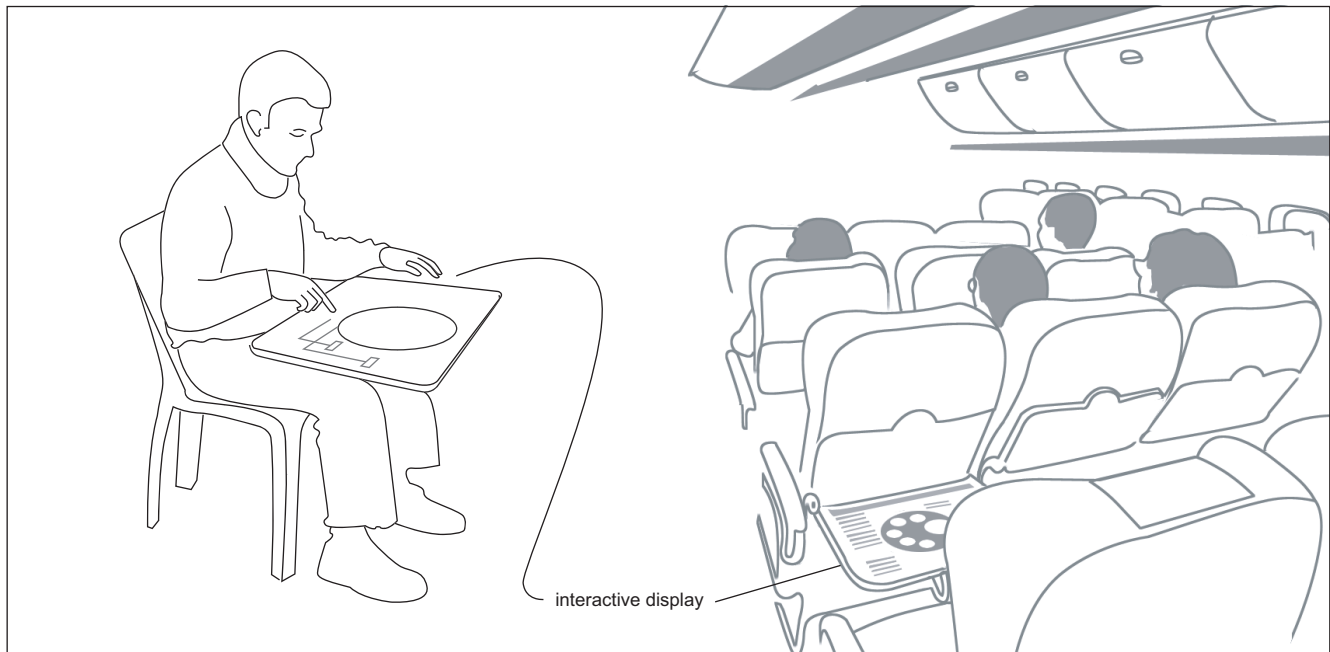

interactive display

Fig 7. Proposed scenario of interactive display in airplanes *(context for the concept)*

Default Menu	Diner's Preference	Airhostess	Food served
1 TouchScreen	**2** TouchScreen	**3** Seat No. 27 / Veg / Name : Mr. Shah / Country : India / Unique preference of the passenger / Orange Juice before the meal	**4** The desk of the passenger where food is served.
Customizable visual preview of the default menu provided by the airline.	Preferred choice is transfered as an image through a network to the pantry or kitchen.	After the order is placed by the passenger through a database, the pantry display screen is updated with the necessary details for the airhostess to serve the food.	Airhostess greets the passenger by his name and the food is served depending upon the choice, he had predefined on the touch screen interface.

Application of the concept in related contexts:
• Tourism Industry, (experiencing a meal)
• Service Industry, (self-service restaurants)

Airplanes: Early browsing through the default menu of the airline can be made possible and passenger knows his meal before he boards the plane (Mobile phone displays).
Health Care: Customized meals for (Diabetic patients) or (Heart patients) in turn addressing specific passenger needs. Information retrieved from the database, catering to each passenger needs. It may give a strong reason for a passenger to fly with a particular airline. Developing cross-cultural understanding about a country's cuisine before landing into a country.
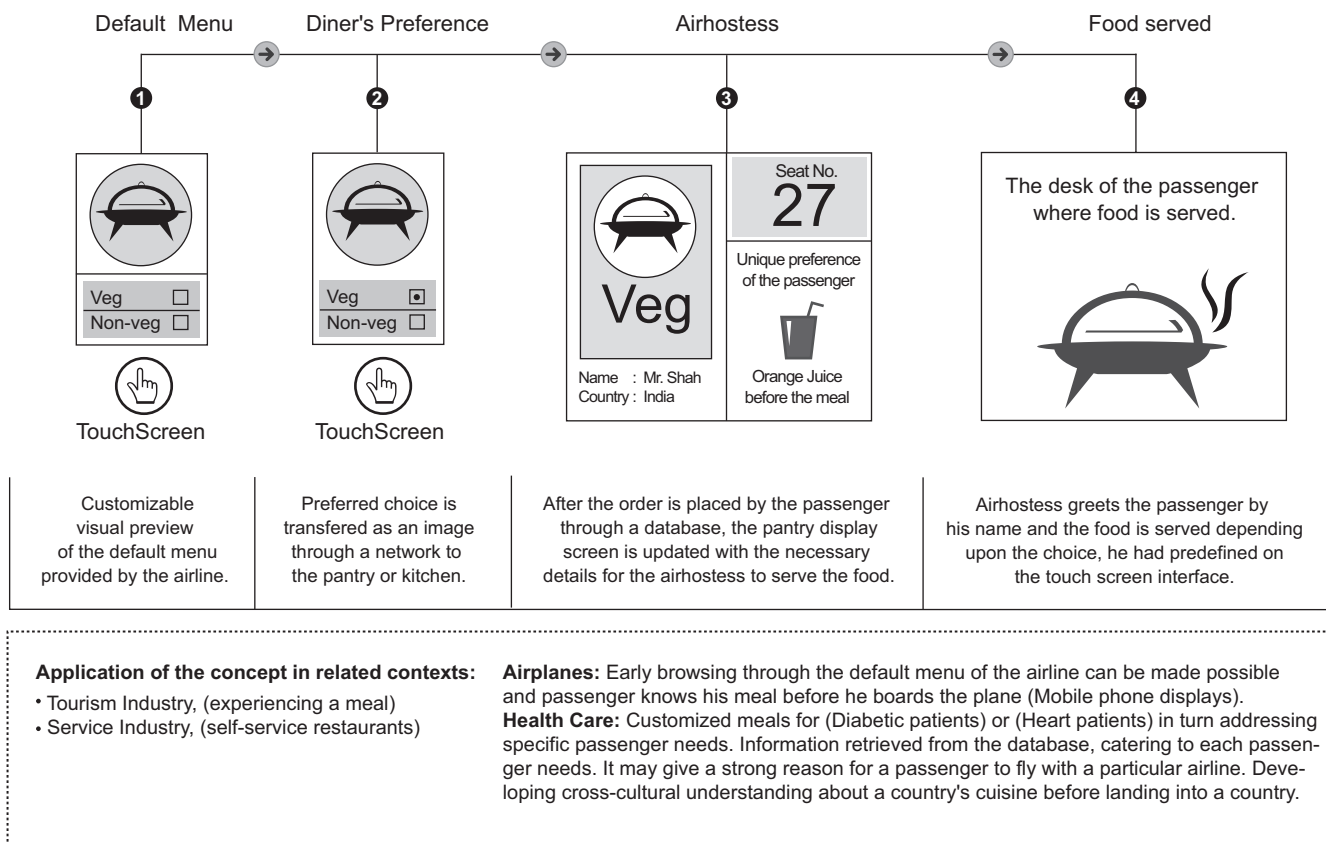
Fig 8. Proposed ideas for interactive Screens in an airplane.

An interactive preview would serve as a true representation for a traveller, who is unaware of the Indian cuisine and its delicacies. Design of such a visual experience could do justice to the unspoken information, hidden inside a country's cuisine, which otherwise would have gone unnoticed. The theme can be adopted in various contexts; where people from different cultures come together or where choices are to be made, *(e.g. interactive food service in an airplane, where minimum interaction is possible due to constraints of space or dining desks of restaurants in relation to the tourism industries, where a meal could create an experience to be carried back)*. All this may not sound untrue with the upcoming flexible polymer film based LCD screens which are so thin that they can be rolled like paper; they are expected to flood the markets by 2007. *(Prof. Sadagopan, S. 2003)*

Ideas may branch out commercially to find their place in tourism industry or service industry, but the main aim is to find solutions without destroying the legacies of the past *(our traditions)* as well as to merge smoothly with the coming future *(technology)*. Efforts should be made towards involving audiences in an inviting experience while eating a *thali* in India by maturing ourselves to get sensitive to these traditional scents of cuisines, which might get lost under the perfumes of modernization. It is our concern to nurture these traditions, revisit them, and preserve their aesthetic sense and beauty. We should envision the twenty first century as a fine balance of tradition and technology to create a fragrance for our near future.

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