

## **When the Festival Drums Beat: Demystifying Festival Cuisine in Kerala**

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### **Abstract**

Food and culture are inextricably bound together. The food we eat carries the trait of our culture. Though unnoticed, the food that we eat every day and the special cuisine that we prepare for festivals, all reveal we are a part of the invisible cultural link. The cuisine of a region mirrors its history, tradition, culture and lifestyle. Kerala is often described as a “museum of races and cultures”. In Kerala Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are the main religions followed by a majority of people. A cursory look at the festival cuisine of these communities reveals a drastic difference in culture. While the Hindus stick on to vegetarian *sadya* on festival days, Christians and Muslims celebrate with non-vegetarian food. In an analogous geographic milieu, the gastronomic alterations of different communities provide an insight that food habits and culture are things that are kept intact to be handed down to generations. This paper tries to analyse the trajectories of history and culture that has moulded the food habits of the main communities in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Kerala Cuisine, Cross-Cultural Influences, Community Food, Festival Cuisine, Heterogeneity

Food is a cultural signifier. Just like our tradition, belief, indigenous knowledge, customs, food habits are part of our legacy which we wish to hand over to posterity. The food that we eat every day, the special cuisine that we prepare for festival days, the distinctive food during fasting days are all inextricably linked to our culture. According to Hauck-Lawson, “what one eats or chooses not to eat communicates aspects of a person’s identity or emotion in a manner that words alone cannot.” (24)

Kerala, a narrow strip of land between the Arabian sea and Western Ghats is well known for its traditional cuisine. Well-known as the spice garden of India, the indigenous spices of Kerala attracted traders all over the world as early as 3000BCE. Babylonians, Assyrians and Egyptians, Arabs and Phoenicians were attracted to Muziris, a sea-port in Kerala during the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE. Records testify that Kerala had trading links with China, West Asia, Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire. Literary works during the Sangam period describe how Roman ships loaded with gold arrived Kerala for the exchange of spices, especially black pepper. Jack Turner in *Spice: The History of Temptation* narrates

that inside the nostrils of the mummy of Ramses, one of the greatest Pharaohs who ruled Egypt from 1279 to 1212 BC, there were fragments of pepper, a native plant of Malabar coast. (32)

The land of Kerala has been a ground for cross-cultural influences. Some among the foreign traders who came to Kerala, settled and married native women thus creating a hybrid culture. In a society, where marriage outside the class and caste was a taboo, the foreigners married women from lower castes which changed their social status and acceptability. According to Manuel Castells hybridity and the resulting identity formation uses, “building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory...and from power apparatuses” found in any culture (7). Kerala thus became an abode of multi- layered pluralistic culture.

Kerala is well –known for its gastronomic specialities. The traditional Kerala food is mostly vegetarian. But being a land that borders the Arabian sea, fish delicacies are unavoidable in Kerala cuisine. Kerala is also famous for the beef and mutton dishes. Just as Kerala is known for its religious harmony, though culinary practices are different for different communities, a harmonious co- existence among them is noticeable.

Yoga Science and Ayurveda tell about the three Gunas – satwa, rajas and tamas which are classifications of quality of energy in all things. A Guna explains the predispositions of the mind and body. Sattvic means balanced, harmonious, pure, healthy. Rajasic means activity, stress and anger. Tamasic means lethargy, dullness and laziness. The food we eat has an impact on us physically, mentally and emotionally.

A Sattvic diet consists of fresh fruit and vegetables, fruit and vegetable juices, wholemeal bread, pulses, grains and sprouts, nuts, seeds, honey, herbs and milk. These foods inspire us to do good things in life, and nurture our creativity. A Rajasic diet is one which is exceedingly spicy or hot, includes food with onion and garlic, coffee, fizzy soft drinks, tea and sugary foods. These foods may give us a lift in energy but ultimately we experience a low or increased stress. A Tamasic diet consists of dead food such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs, stale food, processed food full of chemical additives, alcohol, cigarettes and drugs of addiction.

The influence of food on formation of one’s identity is very much significant. Jacinthe Bessière, a French scholar who has researched food’s impact on heritage and national identity shares a similar line of thought. According to Bessiere,

Eating is the integration or adoption of the qualities of the food you eat. On the other hand, ‘the eater becomes part of a culture.’ Both food and cooking, as they are culturally determined, place the eater in a social universe and a cultural order. Eating habits are the foundation of a collective identity and, consequently, of alterity. (24)

Based on the distinction of gunas, Kerala Brahmins or Namboodiris chose satwa foods and abstained from eating onion and garlic as they were rajasic foods. Tamasic foods were completely avoided because they induced baser instincts. Other than Namboodiris, people of other castes did not abstain from eating rajasic and tamasic food, except during special occasions

Roland Barthes defines food as “not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.” (24) Barthes expounds that food preparation, presentation, all contribute to identity-communication. These differences, manifested through regional ingredients, nationally and culturally constructed recipes, traditions and celebrations, and the historical heritage of food, an extremely important aspect of cultural identity is shaped. (26)

In an analogous geographic milieu, the gastronomic alterations of different communities provide an insight that food habits and culture are things that are kept intact to be handed down to generations. While Hindus prefer vegetarian cuisine on festival days, Muslims and Christians celebrations are carried out with a variety of non-vegetarian cuisine. People from Kerala normally use brown rice as their staple food . The difference is notable in the choice of accompanying side dishes.Spices play an important part in Kerala cuisine. Black peper, cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, green and red peppers, cloves, garlic, cumin seeds, coriander, turmeric are extensively used in Kerala cuisine.Coconut and curry leaves are two unavoidable elements in Kerala cuisine. Tamarind and lime are used to make sauces sour in Northern regions; the South Keralites prefer only *kodampuli* (*Garciniacambogia*), to make sour sauces.

### **Hindu cuisine**

Hindus normally celebrate festivals with vegetarian sadya or traditional feast. The number of dishes in sadya range from 13 to 28. A sadya is important because it combines the different tastes- sweet, sour, pungent, salty, caustic and bitter. According to legends, Sadya was founded by the 18th century King Marthandavarma of Travancore dynasty. The King ordered healthy and sumptuous meals for Brahmin priests for reciting the Four Vedas (holy books) in 90 days (Murajapa). This was done as an atonement for the death of innocent citizens while conquering the nearby smaller states to enlarge his Kingdom.

Sadya is a balanced as well as nutritious meal. It is usually served in plantain leaf. When hot food is served in plantain leaf, polyphenol, a cancer-preventing agent is emitted, which is good for health. People usually sit on the floor while eating sadya. This posture supports the lumbar region of the body and stimulates the secretion of digestive juices.

All the important dishes that are solid or semi-solid including pickles are kept on the plantain leaf. Traditional sadya is eaten with one’s hand. The Vedas explain that our fingers

and toes correspond to the panchamahabhoota (five components). The thumb is related to agni (fire), the forefinger to vayu (air), the middle finger to akasha (ether), the ring finger to prithvi (earth), and the little finger to jala (water).

Sadya begins when brown rice is served. This is followed by *parippu* (lentil curry) which is taken with *pappadam*. Dishes made of assorted vegetables and coconut like *avail*, *thoran*, *kuttucurry* are eaten alongside brown rice. *Sambar*, *Rasam*, *pulisseri* are liquid curries that follow *parippu*. *Payasam* is served as dessert. Sometimes two or more varieties of *payasam* are served in a sadya. For *payasam* sugar or jaggery is used. It is made in cow's milk or coconut milk.

On festival days, occasions like marriage, anniversary, birthdays and other religious ceremonies, Hindus prepare sadya. Onam, Kerala's own festival, is celebrated with Sadya. Vishu, another harvest festival of Kerala is also celebrated with sadya. Apart from sadya, *vishukkatta*, a traditional snack made of raw rice and coconut milk, is prepared by people of northern Kerala. Thiruvathira, another religious festival to commemorate the birthday of Lord Shiva, is celebrated with a special dish, *thiruvathirapuzhukku*, made of tubers of different kind like tapioca, yam, sweet potato, colocasia and chinese potato along with raw banana and coconut gratings. Cuisine during Navarathri celebrations shows a notable influence of TAMILIAN cuisine. *Choondal*, a dish of chickpeas and coconut, *sweet pongal*, made of rice and lentils, *unniappam*, a snack made of rice flour, jaggery and banana, *kesari*, sweet dish made of rawa and ghee are the commonly made dishes during navaratri festival.

### Muslim cuisine

The influence of Arabic cuisine is noticeable in the cuisine of Muslims of the Malabar region. As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, traders from West Asia reached Malabar, Northern part of Kerala. From then onwards, Malabar cuisine has been influenced by foreign delicacies. The indigenous *biriyani* of Malabar, *Thalasseri Biriyani* is indicative of Arab influences. The term "*biriyani*" is of Persian origin which means fried. *Thalasseri biriyani* distinguishes itself from other *biryani*s in the use of small grains. Unlike others, ingredients are cooked separately and then mixed in *Thalasseri biriyani*.

Another dish in Malabar named *Alissa*, a wheat and meat porridge, has its origin in the Middle East. In medieval Baghdad, it was called 'hareesi'. 10th century Baghdadi cookbooks like *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchen*, *Sufi Cuisine* mention about the recipe of 'hareesi' *Sulaimani*, black tea with lemon, is a common drink in Malabar area, which has its origin in Yemen.

Apart from influences from West Asia and Middle East, Portugese, Dutch and French influences are notable in Malabar cuisine. A delicacy made from egg yolk and sugar syrup, *muttamala* is akin to Portugese delicacy Portugese egg threads or *fio de ovos*.

The muslims in Malabar fast from early morning to evening during the month of Ramzan. After the evening prayers they break their fast with *iftar* and feast themselves with special cuisine. The fast is broken with *nombu kanji*, gruel made of meat and vegetables. During the month of Ramzan, about 200 special dishes are made that range from *unnakkai* (sweet dish made of ripe bananas), *Kunjurotti* –(rice dumplings), *eracchipatthiri* (meat stuffed dosa made of rice flour ), *petti patthil*, *chattipatthil* (variants of meat dishes), *eracchiputtu* (meat stuffed baked rice cakes), *muttamala* (a delicacy made of eggs) . . . the list goes on.

### Christian cuisine

It is believed that Christianity was established in Kerala in the year AD 52 with the arrival of Saint Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, at the ancient seaport Muziris. The cuisine of Christians consists of dishes made of fish, beef, mutton and pork. During special occasions, the Christian menu comprises of rice and curries along with non-vegetarian dishes. After their main meal, a mixture of sugar, plantain, curd, and rice is also served. In Northern Travancore, there was a practice called PaniVilambal or serving pani which is a sweet syrup made from a kind of palm, with a banana.

Then Mura is the name of traditional Christmas feast. It is served on a plantain leaf. It begins with serving cake and wine. *KuthariChoru* (Kerala Brown Rice) is served next along with an array of curries. The *MeenMaanga Pal curry* made with raw mangoes and fish is an important dish in the feast. *ErachiVarattiyathu* (Meat Fry) is another dish. Beef is usually used for this dish. This is followed by Chicken curry made with potato and coconut milk. In some regions, pork is also served. Banana is served with sugar and honey syrup as dessert.

Some dishes like Chicken roast, *pork piralan*, duck roast, *duck piralan*, duck cooked in coconut milk and liver roast are common in Central Travancore. Coconut milk is an important ingredient in the cuisine of Central Kerala. Christian snacks like *Achappam*, *Kuzhalappam*, *Cheeda*, *Vattayappam*, *Kinnathappam*, *Churuttuand Vellayappam* are prepared during festival days.

For Easter celebrations, Christians in Kerala eat rice with *beef ularth duck perelan* and chicken curry. Some prepare dishes with duck while others prepare pork. For breakfast, appam is prepared with chicken stew. *Pesahaappam*, a special bread made of rice flour is served in churches on Maundy Thursday.

Heterogeneity is a trademark of Kerala cuisine. Food plays an important role in constructing identities of different communities. It is a link that connect us to our past and our heritage. Knowing more about indigenous cuisine of one's locality and community, helps one to re-discover their food identities and food histories.

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