

Myriad Aspects of Secular Thinking on Malayali Cuisine

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Food is one of the main requirements of human being. It is flattering for the preservation of wellbeing and nourishment of the body. The food of a society exposes its custom, prosperity, status, habits as well as it help to develop a culture. Food is one of the most important social indicators of a society. History of food carries a dynamic character in the socio- economic, political, and cultural realm of a society. The food is one of the obligatory components in our daily life. It occupied an obvious atmosphere for the augmentation of healthy life and anticipation against the diseases. The food also shows a significant character in establishing cultural distinctiveness, and it reflects who we are. Food also reflected as the symbol of individuality, generosity, social status and religious believes etc in a civilized society. Food is not a discriminating aspect. It is the part of a culture, habits, addiction, and identity of a civilization. Food plays a symbolic role in the social activities the world over. It's a universal sign of hospitality.¹

Kerala is the southernmost part of Indian sub-continent. The climatic condition and the natural beauty of the state are differed from other parts of India. Kerala showcases a culture unique to itself developed through accommodation, acculturation, and assimilation of various faculties of civilized lifestyle. The geographical condition, climate, socio – economic and cultural aspects and foreign influence are influenced the food culture of the society. The food of a society acted as a social indicator than nutrition of the peoples in a society.

The land of Kerala is considered as the ground of different caste and community. Each caste have their own believes and they also practiced their own food

in the society. Caste system played substantial role in a civilised society. The caste discernment is also seen in the food and food habit of the peoples in the society. The untouchability in the caste system is one of the severest structures of a society. It is as one of the basic phenomenon in the world. The untouchables have don't enjoyed any right in the society. They were considered as one of the polluted people in the society. They were not allowed to touch the people from four *Varnas* and not allowed to enter the house of the high class in the society. They have no right to enter worship centres. They have no right to use same well used by the *Varnas*. In the special occasions they were compelled to sit at a distance from the four *Varnas*. The societies have boundaries between high class and lower class. The high class enjoyed superior rights in the society at that period the circumstance of the subordinate session is very inferior. The higher session in the society used elite food items in their day today life but the condition of the weaker session in the community is un explainable and even they were in starvation and poverty.

Kerala is deliberated as the birthplace of different caste and communities. The Hindu society in Kerala is today structured on the basis of the caste system. The caste system had its origin in Kerala by about the 8th century AD.² *Namboothiri* Brahmins who were at the zenith of the caste ladder attained a position of prevalence in social and religious substances. Jainism and Buddhism had practically disappeared and Hindu society came to be organised on the basis of caste and sub-castes. The most striking feature of the society that emerged before long was the predominance of the upper castes and the relatively subordinate position occupied by the lower castes.³ The caste rules operated with the utmost rigour. The upper castes like the Brahmins, the *Kshatriyas*, and the *Nayar* observed them strictly as otherwise they would have been treated as outcastes and sold to Christians or Muslims under royal orders.⁴ The evil of untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability, were observed in the most irrational manner.

The *Namboothiris* are considered as most resembles to the God. They have only the permission to eat *nivedhyam* or *prasadam* from the worship centres. The *nivedhyam* consist of Aravana (ghee, rice and jaggery boiled), sugared cakes (*appam*), cooked rice, sweetened beaten rice, honey, fruit, tender coconut, betel leaves etc. The

Brahmins are used more vegetarian items in their foods. Many Hindu castes in Kerala abstain from eating meat and sea food, while some orthodox *Namboothiri* Brahmins will not even eat onions, gourd, garlic or any food cooked by anyone outside their household.⁵ They used all kind of vegetables, but potato and other exotic are eschewed by the orthodox that would not use English vegetables either.

The minor session in the society are considered as slaves. They were the agrarians and they worked the field of higher class people. But the lower class didn't enjoy the fruits from their effort. It is enjoyed by the higher caste in the society. The members of the lower castes had to keep a distance from the higher castes according to a prescribed schedule. Thus the *pulaya* had to keep a distance of 60ft. from the Nair while the *Namboothiri* would consider himself polluted even if he is seen by a *pulaya* or *nayadi*. The *avarnas* has no permission to serve the food items like pappad, jaggery, chips, sugar, etc. in their ceremonies.⁶ There is no permission to use musical instrument in their festivals. During the time of special occasions firstly they get permission from the king for preparing the food items.⁷ The *avarnas* are must use flesh and fish in their *sadhyas*. It is an essential item in their *sadhyas*. They used liquor for drinking.

The Brahmins must use the milk products in their food. The *avarnas* have permission to domesticate cows but they don't permit to use the milk products.⁸ The Brahmins used milk, ghee, butter, yogurt etc. in their daily food. The Brahmins are strict vegetarians and teetotallers. Rice is the staple articles of food and green grams and dhol enter largely in to their daily meal. They use all kind of vegetables, but onions, potatoes and other exotics are eschewed by the orthodox that would not use English vegetables either. Milk, curd, and ghee, and all vegetables are largely used.⁹ Milk is not generally taken except as porridge. It is scarcely necessary to add that liquor and animal food are forbidden. *Conjee* or rice gruel is the *Namboothiris* favourite luncheon. Of the *palaharams* or cakes, what is called the *kozhakkatta*, a bulbous – like preparation of boiled rice flour with coconut scarping put in to it is in great favour. They only drink water boiled and flavoured with coriander and dried ginger and cumin seed. Ghee is eschewed except on rare occasions and gingerly oil never enters in to their dishes. Every *Namboothiri* must bath and offer his Vedic

prayers before taking his meal. The food is generally served by the wife on a plantain leaf and before he rises from the meal she must by way of taking charge of the leaf touch it by her right hand, the husband touching it by the left hand. The person observing vows, as for instance during the *Diksha* and the *Brahmacharya* periods are prohibited from using certain articles of food stuff such as the drum – strict, chillies, gram, *dholl*, crisp cakes.¹⁰ Betel chewing is also a common habit among the people. Betel leaves mixed with pieces of arecanut, *chunam* and a piece of tobacco from the stuff used for chewing.

Dietary injunction for Muslims derives both from the Quran and the Sunnah, which embody the recorded words of the prophet Muhammad. Swine flesh is prohibited, but seafood allowed. Except for fish, it is mandatory to slaughter the animal ritually by halal, the jugular vein is cut, or a hollow pierced in the throat, using a sharp knife, while uttering the name of Allah. Alcohol is forbidden, along with games of chance, since according to the Quran ‘in both there is great sin and harm’. Islam enjoins that no food be wasted, even leftovers being saved and eaten; it also stresses zakat, the obligation to share food with others especially on Id-ul-Fitr. Fasting is enjoined on all the faithful during Ramzan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar year, with a meal before sunrise and one after sunset which should preferably commence by eating some dates.¹¹

The Christians also have their own food items. They used non- vegetarian items in their food. The Christians are used beef and pork in their food, but most don’t eat pork and other items forbidden by Islamic law. In addition to chicken and fish, Christians along with some section of Hindus and all Muslims in Kerala also eat red meat.

It can conclude that the discrimination in the name of food is one of the richest forms in a society during 19th century. In earlier period the Kerala witnessed highly discrimination in the name of food. Each caste had practiced their own food items. The higher session of the community enjoyed special privileges. At that time the weaker session doesn’t enjoyed any privileges in the society. Some of the food items are only allowed to some groups and it is not permitted to others. But the condition of Kerala is changed and there is equal right to use food items in each and

every caste. The caste was reflected in almost all parts of human life and even food was also under the control of castes. It brings boundaries in the society. Each caste had their own food varieties and even now they are continuing it in a certain limits. It was an inhuman character of the society to made discrimination in the society and people on the basis of caste and food. The discriminatory character also prohibited inter-dining and which gave all privileges to the upper castes and the lower castes were denied from all rights. In those days the food was not only means to the essential for life but for showing the status and prestige of the elites. Now the people of every society have equal right to use same food items in Kerala. The discrimination in the name of food is removed from the Kerala society.the caste was reflected in almost all parts of human life and even food was also under the control of castes. It brings boundaries in the society. Each caste had their own food varieties and even now they are continuing it in a certain limits. It was an inhuman character of the society to made discrimination in the society and people on the basis of caste and food. The discriminatory character also prohibited inter-dining and which gave all privileges to the upper castes and the lower castes were denied from all rights. In those days the food was not only means to the essential for life but for showing the status and prestige of the elites.

Notes and References

- 1 Helen Howtaluk, *Food For Today*, Tata Mcgraw – Hill Publishing Company Limited, Newdelhi, 2006, P.40.
- 2 Sreedhara Menon A, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, p.240.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.241.
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 - 10 *Ibid.*, p.253.
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