

ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 31

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 16 print issue 31 December 2022



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Department of Cultural Affairs
Government of Kerala-India
December 2022

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2022 ഡിസംബർ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

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മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ

മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി

കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638

ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

ഇശൽ പൈതൃകത്തിൽ പ്രസിദ്ധീകരിക്കുന്ന രചനകളിലെ ആശയങ്ങൾ മാപ്പിളകലാ അക്കാദമിയുടേതോ, സംസ്ഥാന സർക്കാരിന്റേതോ, സാംസ്കാരിക വകുപ്പിന്റേതോ ആയിരിക്കണമെന്നില്ല. - എഡിറ്റർ

Ishal Paithrkam

ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

UGC Listed

Quarterly

Bilingual

Issue: 31

Online issue: 16

Devenember: 2022

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Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Publisher

Mahakavi Moyinkutty

Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Kondotty, 673638

India.

Ph: 0483-2711432

www.mappilakalaacademy.org

www.ishalpaithrkam.info

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Culinary Culture in Coastal Malabar The Practice among Deprived Castes

Dr. U.V.Shakkeela

Culinary culture differs from society to society. Each caste practised its own culinary culture. Food is an important factor in keeping the caste identities intact. The Upper castes who also form the class of landlords determined the dietary habits of the Deprived castes. The paper examines the diets followed by the Deprived castes and probes into the circumstances that forced the Deprived castes to stick on to particular culinary culture. The exploration enriches the information on the already constructed image of the nature of caste society.

Key Words: Diet, culinary, segregation, caste, disease

Socio-economic, environmental and cultural factors determine the food habit of a society than the nutritional value of food. The taste, odour, aroma, ingredients and flavor pertained to food seemed to be secondary. This view is particularly relevant in the caste ridden society of India. Food was one of the factors that a caste is segregated from the other. The instinctual urge for food was absent or denied to the slave castes. The paper examines the food that was consumed by the deprived castes of Coastal Malabar in the nineteenth century, and the factors that forced the deprived castes to follow particular dietary habits.

Historical texts seldom looked into the diets that ‘kept alive’ the deprived/slave castes. At the same time, it was almost a custom among historians to provide a picture of the life of each caste

separately to introduce the readers a glimpse of the Kerala society. The description usually consists of the portrayal of the miserable life of the deprived castes. Low wages that they received, their sale as slaves, the distance they keep from the castes above, marriage custom and, their conversion to Islam and Christianity etc formed conventionally part of the description of the deprived castes indicating their wretchedness. The description, more or less followed the same pattern. The observation of P.K.Gopalakrishnan gives a glimpse of the typical portrayal of the Deprived castes' life style. He wrote thus:

They were not allowed to walk in the public road....if an untouchable happened to walk without leaving the permitted distance; he would be hacked to pieces. Untouchables were not allowed to wear clothes above their waist to differentiate them from the Savarna. Sandals, umbrella, costly cloths, ornaments of precious metals are not allowed. Even under torrential rain, an untouchable is not allowed to have the protection of umbrella. Untouchable women show respect to upper caste male by uncovering their breasts.¹

Deprivation of food was rarely forms part of these kinds of descriptions. In fact, hunger of extreme sort was part of their daily life. The description of Pulayas often consists of their habit of eating animal carcasses. By these kinds of descriptions, historians meant only to reveal their strange dietary habits different from that of the castes above them followed. The description did not have the least intension of indicating the food scarcity shared by the bottom castes. On the other hand, a reader is induced to come to the decision that each caste has the primacy to follow their diet and there is nothing wrong if bottom castes had carcasses as food befitting to their low status in the caste hierarchy! What matters is the status of caste in the hierarchy. The details of how to cook the animal carcasses was not seemed part of the humpty number of culinary books published off late in Kerala nor are they bothered to have a glimpse of food cooked and consumed by the bottom castes. One thing is sure it did not form the culinary culture of modern Kerala. The circumstances that led the deprived castes to follow particular food habit are missing in the historical writings. The observation of P.K.Balakrishnan about the dietary habits of the marginalized castes enables partially to look

into the inequality celebrated in the caste ridden society. He pointed out the circumstances that forced the Pulayas to eat rats and chameleons.² Pulayas were not allowed to die (due to lack of food) as they could be used for work till their death for the service of the *jenmi*

Coastal Malabar is like any other modern society in the nineteenth century; but, in terms of food, it shared the characteristics of tribal society. The Deprived castes had made food out of whatever is available to them from the surroundings. Roots, tubers, marine-riverine creatures etc were part of their food. Their food must be diverse and, since they depended on the tubers, roots and living creatures freely available and grown in nature according to seasons, they could survive. A change in the culinary habits was noted with the arrival of European companies on the Malabar Coast. They employed the natives on the Coast for various purposes including cooking their meals especially Thiyyas on the Coastal Malabar were employed as cooks. The European culinary habits were free of caste ideals and their food culture is devoid of tribal elements. Nevertheless, it can be seen that the food structures used to sustain their lives were quite different. Even under colonial rule, they were built on foods on caste equations. Within the caste-constructed hierarchies, even food had a caste in Kerala (as part of the Indian caste system). It was within its structure that food preparation was restricted even though a colonial food culture was in vogue in Malabar. It implies that caste was deeply rooted in India. By examining it at that level, it is possible to reach the practicality of pre-modern food preparation of the lower castes in the Malabar coastal areas.

The life(s) of those times in Malabar coastal areas was inconsistent and incoherent. Their life was complicated. They had no fixed income or savings. The availability of food depended on the level of employment or the weather. Food was found from the meagre income available from wage labour or work in the homes of the native landlords. It is even doubtful whether wages were properly paid as the landlords engaged them in labour according to their own will. As far as the weather is concerned, there are many people who were involved in fishing in those parts. Resources were available to them only when seas or water bodies give in. This affected the developments in the life of the lower castes. Along with that, landlessness,

homelessness and lack of education took their toll. Those who were economically superior stood higher in caste as well. They had big houses and kitchens. There were many servants. The lower castes had no house or kitchen. They had to cook what they could find in the huts and on the stone slabs in the fields.

The practice of cooking food at night seems limited in this society because there was no oil available to light the lamp at that time. Gingili oil was used for bathing and oil of Punna tree was used lighting in the night. The use of this must be limited among the *savarna*. The machine to make oil is not allowed for the downtrodden. So it is doubtful whether there was a night meal among them. All these affected normal life. They did not know the place of home in everyday life. The shelters they used then had no use for the house. These huts were only a place for them to rest at night. Till 1825, only *Kovilakams* and temples had tiled roofs; the rest of the buildings were thatched with palm or coconut leaves.³

The lower castes lived for the life goals of their Land Lords. The foragers were given food of no use because if they got something, their hunger would be satisfied. Due to this, ill health affected them. The coastal inhabitants of Malabar, who had to live synonymously with misery, therefore started eating stale fish and vegetables, which affected their health. Certain diseases were also caught due to lack of good food in these areas. In the observation of William Logan, the District Collector for Malabar, the diseases in the Malabar Coast were related to climate, food and poor living condition. He writes thus: Dysentery is very common. ...the reason for it is June, July and August and the cause is the climate. The hot and dry months of April and May are succeeded by the very wet ones of June and July. . The houses of the poor are mere huts, thus exposing the inhabitants to damp and cold. Children suffer terribly from this. ... but what I refer to is acute dysentery, the result, as said of damp and cold or sometimes from eating bad fish.⁴ The skin disease called Malabar itch was attributed to eating fish. Logan said that elephantiasis is common in Malabar. Various causes are said to be assigned for this diseases- air water, and food- and it generally occur near the sea. Eating fish has

been said to be a cause for it. I think that poor living has a good deal to do with it.⁵

They tried to maintain the status quo despite this morbidity. Because they had no other options in life and in addition to it, they internalised the caste norms set by the Brahmins. This is amply demonstrated by the abstinence of Pulayas from consuming buffalo milk. So they had to live as animals.' Through it, the caste lives of that time are revealed. The continuum of which, is seen deep in history and are present in modern times as well. But as a modern society people hide these things. Although these people ate lowly animals, they had a sense of caste pride. So they did not eat certain animals which were anathema to Caste Hindus even if there were none in the dwellings.

How did this happen among the lower castes as a practice of caste? The answer to this question suggests the influence of caste Hindus or similar religious institutions. Since this practice was from early times, even the lower castes could not get away with it. As Ambedkar would say, this is the influence of caste itself. Caste and religion can deeply influence food and faith. But they could not think of what change they wanted in their own lives. Therefore, they had to be slaves of work and slaves of food.

But they could find a different life from the slavery they had to experience in their lives. It is doubtful whether they tried to empathise with their partners. It seems to be understood from this situation that the female partners were eating leftover food that the male partner was eating or food that the man did not want. In fact, the character of the male landlord is repeated by the lower caste male. It is clear from this that the function of savarna is also effective among the lower castes. They also have the character of power if nothing else. Mental mimicry of man is the reason for morality in this way even among the lower castes. This is also seen in modern times. The tendency to change continuities succeeds to some extent but then becomes impossible. Even though there are some changes in the diet, there is no change in the pattern of the basic human nature. When this is marked, the characteristics of the old life do not come

out. In fact, it should examine the new era. Or it needs to be modified. But the situation in Kerala is completely different and it is becoming older than the old one.

Even going back in time, one has to think about the use of coconut oil which is popular across Kerala today. The use of coconut for food preparation was limited to upper caste kitchen. Why didn't the lower castes use coconut oil in Kerala? Old fashioned coconut oil extraction was denied to the Deprived castes. Though the leaves, outer shell of coconut and wood were used by the low castes for various purposes including hut construction, they did not have the permission to use coconut oil; and because of this coconut was not part of their food. It is clear that the position of authority of these crops should be the elders in the caste.

Another thing that can be seen like this is the case with rice. Rice was not cultivated in the coastal areas but was cultivated in the inland areas. Caste Hindus used to cultivate paddy with the labour of lower castes for their own needs but it was not enough for them. So they bought the rice they needed from the neighbouring areas by exchanging the spices that were produced. Though rice assumed to be the staple crop and food of the people of Malabar, the Coast always confronted paucity in the production of paddy, opined N.M.Nambutiri.⁶ Rice was always imported to Malabar. He also quotes the observation left by Wang ta Yuan about the existence of a special warehouse for rice in Calicut port. N.M Nambutiri concluded that production was not for staple food. The sand was not suitable for rice cultivation. Whatever commodities produced in Malabar was exchanged for importing rice. During the time of Krishnadevaraya, the Vijayanagara king, people of Malabar brought their products like spices, coconut, palm jaggery, and palm toddy to the Canara region, and brought back rice in exchange of the commodities produced indigenously. Malabar pays for much of the grain consumed by the people out of the money obtained for its special products- coconuts, coir, coconut-oil, arecanuts, coffee, pepper, ginger cardamoms, timber etc.⁷William Logan also observed that Malabar does not produce grain sufficient for the consumption of the home population, and this has been more especially, the case since, by the introduction of European coffee cultivation into

the Waynad Taluk , the jungle tribes, and other servile castes, who used to cultivate the rice fields in that region have been attracted to the more profitable employments on coffee estates.

It is interesting to note that Nambutiries and other related castes were the main consumers of rice and the working class toiled mainly for the rice cultivation and consumption of the Nambutiris. Rereading of the texts produced on Kerala history indicates that production was organized around paddy cultivation. Brahmin settlements were concentrated on the paddy cultivating areas. And they also abstained from trading centres and related markets and the *parambu* based commercial cultivation areas. Naturally their influence was less in the Coastal areas of Malabar. The description of the organization of rice cultivation induces one to ask certain pertinent queries. Can one assume that production was organized mainly for Nambutiries by mustering the assistance of the labour of the downtrodden? If rice was never sufficient or not meant for the consumption of the whole population of Kerala/Malabar, how could one consider rice as the staple food of the Malabar.? By looking at the food consumption of the Nambutiris only, can one decide the staple food of Kerala/Malabar? What was the pattern of the food consumption of the downtrodden? From this it can be understood that rice was not the staple food of Kerala. And the lower castes who used to grow rice could not consume it. It raises the need to construct the dietary habits and culinary culture of the bottom castes. If those who produce food do not have the right to it, how can they survive? They could not have survived with the watery gruel served to them by the Nambutiri jenmies and Nair kanakkars as wage for their daily labour.

The dietary patterns of the lower castes have been adopted by the modern society in general. It may be considered as a kind of recognition of that society but does not appear to adhere to public practices. It is seen as the method of accepting and avoiding. Although it is common, it has a place only in views. Since it is so common, should it not be introduced into our regular diet as a token of democratic society?

End Notes

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