



# KERALA'S TRANSITION FROM PURE VEGETARIAN MEAL HOUSES TO ARABIC FLAVOURS

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Food is an essential component that energises our body to survive in day to day life and it also contains a transformative power when it is converted into a cuisine. It is realised that food habits have a history that is deeply rooted in the culture of the place it originated from. The food culture of each country has a different narrative to share and thus it can be apprehended that food is a major attraction that invites people from the world over to places far and wide. Food can be identified as an element that marks the culture of a country and spreads the aroma of the land to foreigners and food lovers. As Roland Barthes rightly remarks in the essay titled "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption",

When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. That is to say that it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication. (*Food and Culture* 24)

The structure of this communication has often been delineated from the normal perception of language as it impedes the foodie in recognizing the history and message of a food item. Even something as simple as changing one's food habit will have a tremendous effect on his perspective and lifestyle. The ideas and ideologies inhibited by a person or a community tend to expose them into every aspect of their life, especially they will be perceptible in their food style. More importantly, food channels every facet of life that a producer has to offer and the receiver makes no effort to question the ideologies of the maker but they are more into the taste a food has to offer. Hence as Barthes states, "substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food" (25).

The determined change in taste or a food habit has something to say about the cultural change in the society. It may be dependent on the foreign culture that a native culture interacts with or through inspirations that stem from social media. The ideas travel at high speed in modern times and so do the recipes and taste of food. The important factor that influences the trend

of a particular food item is the expenditure of a food product. The popular food item of the society is always the one with less expenditure which takes less effort to produce and consume. It is to be noted that there was a huge spike in the consumption of fast food globally and the disease associated with it also rose in various parts of the world. The Indian states have a variety of tastes that have been carried on from a long history as the famed author Sasi Tharoor comments "If America is a melting-pot, then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate... That, to me, is the notion or metaphor of the Indian identity" (*The Guardian*).

A place like Kerala, which is rich with various flavours of food dishes of its own, has placed a significant mark on the world map. Tourists visit this small geographical boundary of India with various intentions. And the vivid reasons may be the coastal beauty, the ancient structures and most importantly the food culture. The food culture of Kerala is remarkable in the eyes of the Western world. The list of food items starts from the healthy tapioca and the sardine curry to the grand thali that is served as a feast to the eyes as well. Some people even visit the Kerala state to try these dishes and this search of tourists makes Kerala an important space in India when the food taste is the prime concern.

Such a space like Kerala has shown a shift in the consumption of food in recent years with the coming of the pandemic. The situations in the familial spaces had found enough time to experiment with food and its varieties. They have tried various things and one of the remarkable experiments was on the traditional food that can be prepared using the resources available around the household. There have been various recordings and videos which were promoting these ideas from each territory. The shared newfound knowledge was an inspiration to a lot of people and some people found this to be interesting as they took it as a creative idea. They were trying to recover the tradition that was long buried by modernity, and hence they wished to get back to the roots of their true traditions and to be part of the large communication system of their past. Barthes tries to emphasise this idea when he comments, "a coherent set of food traits and habits can constitute a complex



but homogeneous dominant feature useful for defining a general system of tastes and habits” (26).

The traditionality of Kerala is considered to be preserved in the meal shops within the state which serve a plethora of vegetarian dishes. The ‘pure vegetarian’ restaurants found abundantly in the state were a mark of pride for its inhabitants. The tagline ‘pure vegetarian’ was a hallmark of standard cuisine, and a badge which dauntlessly featured the authentic taste of the place. This does not neglect the fact that Kerala is also a spot famous for its seafood restaurants but the tagline ‘pure vegetarian’ was in itself a brand name. However, during the course of time, the traditional cuisines have begun to fade from the face of this small territory and they are slowly being replaced by Arabic cuisines. In the post-covid era there was a significant rise in the number of restaurants that served authentic Arabic dishes. From the very traditional idli, dosa and upma, people are now attracted to the tastes offered by a different cuisine that does not belong to India at all. Kerala holds a long history of people migrating to the Arab nations and after years of this practice, the Arabs have acquired a genuine space in the food habits of the state. Kerala is now home to meal shops that serve Mandi, Shawarma and Al-fahm, which is a drastic shift that the state witnessed from pure vegetarian to Arabic flavours. The people of the state have not just embraced the new flavour but also made space for an Arab domination in taste and flavour. But the question that now arises is of the native flavours that are slowly taking a backseat.

The modern trend also made awareness among the people that the people have lost all interest in the traditional cuisines and they can no longer carry the tastes of the native food styles. The trend of Arabic food began to uproot its regimes at this point and found a way to market itself through various forms. Marketing surpasses all those ideas or ideologies of space as the viewer is exposed to a new trend or a new model. This sudden change is having a lasting impact on the culture at a macro level. Roland Barthes states, “one could say that an entire “world” (social environment) is present in and signified by

food. Today we have a tool with which to isolate these themes and situations, namely, Advertising” (26).

The fast-food system that was on the roll destroyed one part of the Kerala traditions at a point as it was made cheap for the voyeur to taste the food on the road and satisfy the hunger and quench the thirst for unknown flavours. But the result of these new trends has impacted the relations of the Malayalee community with their native cuisines. The taste of the new food has made them forget about the traditional cuisines and their healthy nature. “The rise of fast food was inextricable from the de-skilling, racializing, and youthening of restaurant and food-processing work, making such work mindless at best and extraordinarily hazardous at worst” (Guthman).

Arabic food and fast food are the two foreign food practices that are colonizing the native culture in modern times. Neo-imperialism is growing at a high rate around people and society does not care about it as it does not touch them personally. But this neglect is destroying the indigenous culture and all its traditions related to food. The neglect of this same has burned the people once during the pandemic spread as we don’t feel the original taste anymore. On a serious note, it is also going to be more severe if the situation continues on the same path.

#### WORKS CITED

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