

Food as an Arena of Memory and Identity in Malayalam Songs

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Abstract

Kerala in its name itself (Land of Kera [Coconut]) bears a fruit which is inseparable from the consciousness and lifestyle of the people who reside in the state. As one of the social products, food becomes one of the apparatuses to observe culture and society. In a community grown and nurtured in an environment of art and cinema, folk songs and film songs are integral part of our cultural identity and thus reflect the versatile food habits, often used to invoke nostalgia and celebratory mode. Harvest songs and folksongs of fishermen community unveil the hidden politics behind food production and consumption. Folksongs were the expression of the downtrodden community's hard labour and protest against the feudal system. Songs associated with Onam, "Ambalappuzha Nadakashala Sadya" Aranmula Valla Saya etc shows another version of the society. Tea shops, toddy bars, hotels and kitchen are often repeated sets for Malayalam cinema that sets the tone of the movie, revealing the sociability of characters. Many films including *Angamaly Diaries*, *Salt & Pepper* and *Ustad Hotel* have songs exclusively for portraying the varied food culture. It is also interesting to analyse the food habits of each district and how film songs use this foodie aspect to explore the possibilities of the place. This paper is an attempt to analyse the Malayalam folk songs and film songs to see how food is a subject in it and to see how food becomes an essential part of identity and memory.

KEYWORDS: food habits, agrarian festivals, nostalgic atmosphere, festival songs of Kerala

The culture and tradition of any geographical area is determined and also reflected in the food habits of the place. The vegetative cycle depends on the climatic condition and availability of resources like water, most often evolving some myths and rituals around the concept of vegetation deity in ancient civilizations across the world. In nature worship, the growth cycle of plants signify birth, death and rebirth, thus constituting tales and songs celebrating fertility or regeneration. Diwali, Bihu and many other festivals in India announce the beginning or end of a particular season or harvest season. Kerala is no exception. Onam and Vishu are primarily agrarian festivals. Sadya is an essential part of these celebrations. A healthy and prosperous new year is assured through the display of grains and fruits in Vishu kani. The golden coloured cucumber, betel leaves, ripe areca nut, mangoes, jackfruit, coconut etc provides a visual treat to the family members. The celebratory songs of these festivals reassert the agrarian life style and forms a nostalgic atmosphere taking one back to nature and culture related to cultivation, sowing and harvesting. Thus the festival songs of Kerala are deeply connected to food production and rituals associated with it. The riddles, folk tales and nursery rhymes formed in relation with the celebration also uphold the agrarian life style and rhythms. In oral songs and tales, prosperity is always expressed in terms of the abundance of yield obtained from fields thus defining the essence of these practices. It is interesting to see how there is a

shift from that particular aspect to other areas, which can easily be traced through the visual narration of Onam songs in TV channels during the season.

This extensive link is not just limited to Onam and Vishu but extends to regional customs and practices including kaliyanu vaykkal, illam nira etc- the traditional rituals followed in some parts of Kerala just before or during the Malayalam month of Karkkidakam (associated with monsoon). It is the last month in the calendar and often seen as the dark month due to the heavy rainfall, diseases and death associated with it. A century ago, as industries were not there, man depended on land and soil and thus this was the challenging period with scarcity of food and may be floods that may destroy his/her entire crops in the field, making him to suffer a year completely. To get rid of black marks of Karkkidakkam and the worries associated with it, people read Adhyathma Ramayana at homes and this one month long renderings and chants together thus become a part of Hindu customs. Karkkidaka kanji and sukha chikilsa are also some healthy measures to have proper consumption of grains and other medically significant food to improve the condition of body.

Kaliyane Vilikal (Summoning of Kaliya) or kaliyanu kodukkal is a ritual art form popular in Malabar. It is performed for fertility on the samkrama day. People summon Kaliyan and ask him to bring prosperity to the entire family and community. Ladder made of vazhappola is placed at the bottom of a jack tree and people consecrate kuruthi, making choottu made of dry coconut, they start running and calling Kaliya. Most often children take the initiative, singing songs and dancing. The family as a whole circumambulates the tree, singing

*“Kaliya kaliyakoo..koo
Chakkem mangeim thannechu ponne
Aaleim adiyaareim thannechu ponne
Aala nirachum pashukkale tharane...Koo”*

The song literally means “ hey kaliya, when you go, give us back mango and jack fruit, give us back our people and fill our cowsheds with a lot of cattle”. Karkkidaka samkram is associated with ‘Chetta’ – the symbol of poverty of Karkkidakom month and ‘Shepothi’- the symbol of prosperity and wealth that means – Goddess Lakshmi. “*Chetta po... Shepothi vaa*” (*Go Chetta, Shepothi come in*) – The group of members of the family headed with the senior grandmother start rituals with this slogan. It is believed that the singing would bring prosperity and high yield from the fields next year. Thus the ritualistic arena of a village is closely connected with the agricultural side and food production, getting reflected in the folk songs and slogans. The “Illam nira” tradition is centuries old and is done on Sunday just after amavasi of Karkkidakam month. It is done to get prosperity and good harvest in farming. The farmer baths early in the morning and with wet clothes he goes to his paddy field. Then he picks a hand full of paddy grains and comes to his home, placing the paddy sheaves on his head. He recites a traditional song, ‘*Nira Nira Poli Poli*’. Then he hangs those paddy sheaves in the ceiling of his home here and there and those sheaves stay there for days.

The folk art forms like Theyyam or folksongs of the feudal period were the expression of repressed anger and disappointment in the system, the artistic representation of peasantry feelings and emotions. The sowing, planting, ploughing and harvesting- each stage in the process of food production opened up the melodious world of folk rhythms. Songs associated with agricultural activities have long been a part of a

number of traditions followed in rural India. Essentially, they are work songs that draw upon the images and metaphors such as the plough, wet clay and the young grain shoot swaying gracefully in the breeze, categorized as *koythu paattu*, *krishi paattu*, *njaattuvela paattu* etc. People give vent to their hopes, fears and aspirations through these songs. Later composers, music troops and musicians began to use these rhythms in films, albums, cassettes etc. Some famous ones include “*annam pinnam maya poyikkinu*”, “*punchappaadathe poonguyile*”, “*punchavayal cherayorukkaan*”, “*kathiru kathiru kondu vaayo*”, *ponjaninja punjappaadam*” etc.

Decrease in agricultural land, fragmentation of fields, mechanisation of agriculture etc have led to the extinction of many songs but an attempt is made from the side of scholars, folklore societies, government and Sahithya Academy to revive the old rhythms. They are recorded and kept for the coming generation to refer their ancestral artistic side. These songs are the cultural artifacts which could reveal to us the politics and power hierarchy of a particular period when a section of the society was denied equal status and dignity. The songs are not just about the process of food production but also about the politics of consumption-who produce and who consume is as important as the artistic aspect. The anger towards the class division, the injustice, caste system etc form the unconscious of these songs. The songs also get significance in a time when Kerala has become a consumer state where agriculture is no longer a major practice. The major focus of this paper is on the memory and nostalgia related to food, re instilled by these songs. The new versions in which we experience these songs as through various bands like *Aviyal* or music channels like *Kappa TV*, *nadan paattu* albums etc itself is a testimony to the fact that there is a deeper psychological attachment to such harvest songs. It is the atmosphere of agrarian past that we are trying to recreate in these new versions, not forgetting the hard labour and efforts of farmers.

Another major area which uses food as a mode to rejuvenate our senses is the films, especially some songs that celebrate food and consumption. Sharing and cooking food become festive in nature. Some songs set in toddy shops with rhythmic dance steps and friendly gestures provide the essential mood needed for the film. Songs help to convey the flavor intended by the director in few shots itself, most often setting tone of the movie. Focusing on aspects of food culture in movies was essentially to celebrate an occasion or to show the intimate moments of a family. The notable example for the songs will be from the classic *Chemmeen* which has songs that are inseparable from the storyline. The life and structure of fishermen community is shot with all its beauty and complexity in songs like “*Pennaale pennaale karimeen kannaaale*” and “*kadalinakkare ponore*”. The song matches with the pace of boats and rhythm of their life, especially the part visualizing their celebration and joy on receiving the “*chaakara*”...the lines being “*chaakara...kadappurathini ulsavamaayi...chaakara..*”. Their life is this harvest and all the myths and tales defining their life is that. Thus fish or sea- the provider is not just food for them but the signifying element of a community. The songs thus portray before us the dreams and aspirations, agony and strife of farmers and fishermen- the people who fill our dining table. *Amaram* movie directed by Bharathan also has some songs visualizing the fishermen community. Long shots and lyrics and melodious rendering can easily pass the emotions than dialogues. Thus the songs centered on food or food production play a crucial part in establishing the past and history of a community and the film demands it.

The evergreen hit song “*Ayala varuthathund..karimeen porichthund*” from the movie *Venalil Oru Mazha* directed by Sreekumaran Thampi, starring Sreevidya and Madhu has conquered Malayali hearts with its unique lyrics and the way the director presented the beautiful relationship between the couple in the background of a song that speaks of all our favorite dishes. The remembrance of the food items invokes affectionate emotions and love among the couple. Food is not just “food” here but a tool to soothe the anger. Food brings taste not just to our tongue but to our hearts as well. This may be one reason for the popularity of the song among Malayali audience. Another favorite would be from the movie *Pavithram*- “*Vaalinmel poovum vaalittezhuthiya..*” in which there are scenes of cooking and serving food, a celebration by the joint family and the scenes from the song can easily create a nostalgic leap to the past and the love for the characters is immediately formed. There are various songs on celebrations like Onam which also focuses on the dining table.

The change in our perspective on consumerism, the shift from socialism to the globalised super market culture where buying is a hobby rather than a need; the food we seek, the way we approach food consumption etc. are different. Food culture is a class symbol, parties, treats and birthday celebrations find space in middle class life style and the new generation is ready to travel miles to eat the food they crave for, no matter what it cost. From homely food to hotel food, from pakkodas to fast food, we witness the change. This is reflected in the movies from last decade. In Malayalam industry itself there were many movies whose theme was built around food. *Ustad Hotel*, *Salt and Pepper*, *Angamally Diaries*, *Kammath and Kammath*, *Spanish Masala*, *Mister Butler* etc are some examples. The song sequences in these movies are colourful with references of food and cuisines and thus spice up our movie watching experience. *Salt and Pepper* requires a big round of applause for the way it used food as a frame in to which characters and story fits in. The initial scene and the title song itself tantalized our taste buds with the sight of some exotic dishes.

In this globalised world, food industry is cunning enough to use this cultural connection that human hearts have with food , thus branding certain items as festival special, celebrating food and food festivals, making “eating” political and economy related. It is no wonder that songs, which are inevitable in Malayali’s cultural life, reflect and reassert the foodie that is Malayali.

CONCLUSION

Food can strengthen one’s identity and can recall memories associated with his/her past and songs which are good at evoking nostalgia make use of it. The increasing academic interest in cultural studies and the development of discourses related to ethnic, geographical influence in identity formation, make the “politics of food” a topic of relevance. In this globalised world, food industry is cunning enough to use this cultural connection that human hearts have with food, thus branding certain items as festival special, celebrating food and food festivals, making “eating” political and economy related. For the migrant community from Kerala, food is a bridge that connects them with their homeland. Food is not just a thing to fulfill the biological needs but is a part of cultural discourse. It is no wonder that songs, which are inevitable in Malayali’s cultural life, reflect and reassert the foodie that is Malayali.

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