



From Appetiser to Multifaceted Dimensions: Manifestations of Food in Mollywood

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Abstract. The sustenance and existence of human life predominantly rely on the food of earthlings, the food culture they live in and the food style they have. Food not only serves as an appetiser but also embodies many other facets of human life. Sometimes people tend to have food not because of starvation but because of cravings. On some occasions, food may be taken out of emotional concerns. At some other moments, food is offered to reveal various class identities. In a nutshell, it is assured that food serves as an agent for presenting various perspectives on human nature, rather than merely quenching hunger. The manifestations of food in media, especially in movies, also depict these varied aspects of food and food culture. Concerning certain Mollywood movies, food items turn out to be symbols of certain emotions, class, and even discrimination. This study focuses on the various depictions of food that cater to the multifaceted dimensions of reality. The methodological approach of this study is qualitative and descriptive in nature. The Mollywood movies like *Bramayugam* (2024), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Spanish Masala* (2012) and *Proprietors: Kammath and Kammath* (2013) are taken for a thorough analysis in the aspect of 'food indications'. Culinary-based journals and articles are also considered for a deep understanding of the selected area of study.

Keywords: Mollywood Movies, Food Representation, Emotional Carriers, Socio-political Dimensions.

1 Introduction

Food, a vital source of existence, is intrinsically connected to identity, culture, tradition, roots and relationships. Types of food that individuals take, kinds of approaches that earthlings show towards food, and varied utilisation of food by humans are wholly dependent upon their environment and circumstances. Food sometimes caters to share

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love, initiate relationships, solve problems and hold power. It can even become an indicator of caste and creed. Since movies are said to be mirrors to society, numerous films have captured the broader aspects of food. The increasing curiosity to analyse the correlation between food studies and film studies potentially enhances both fields. In several Bollywood movies, including *Bramayugam* (2024), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Spanish Masala* (2012) and *Proprietors: Kammath and Kammath* (2013), these multifaceted traits of food are depicted (Baby, 2021; Jose, 2012; Sadasivan, 2024; Thomas, 2013). Each movie represents a genre of horror, realism, comedy and romance. The art of preparing food, serving food, and the associated services often embodies the representation of both the elite and the marginalised people simultaneously. This study examines the diverse perspectives on food and how Bollywood movies realistically portray these aspects.

2 Review of Literature

Food-focused films in India and beyond use cuisine as a powerful lens to explore identity, power, and emotion. Across these studies, food in cinema appears not just as sustenance or decor, but as a key narrative and symbolic device that reveals social hierarchies, gender norms, and national belonging (Siyana, 2025). The emerging concept of ‘cinegastronomy’ captures this systematic intertwining of gastronomy and cinematic language (Dogan, 2024).

In Indian cinema, kitchens and meals often expose patriarchal domestic structures and gendered labor. Contemporary films like ‘*The Great Indian Kitchen*’ and others reimagine culinary spaces as sites where women’s unpaid work, confinement, and resistance become visible, challenging hegemonic masculinity and redefining domesticity (George, 2024; J. Alex & Justin, 2023). Visual signifiers like utensils, bodily gestures and repetitive chores carry critiques of caste and gender, showing how ordinary domestic images can foreground broader discourses of inequality (Swamy D, 2022). Specific strands of Hindi cinema also negotiate ‘culinary otherness’ by denying or stigmatising meat, using the erasure or transgressive display of meat-eating to police national and cultural identity (Mubarki, 2020).

Beyond India, food-centered films and trailers mobilise nostalgia, emotion, and belonging, demonstrating how images of cooking and eating bind national communities and reach both domestic and foreign audiences (Kostopoulou, 2021). At the same time, sociological work on ‘dirty’ food in India shows how caste and racism structure ideas of purity, contamination, and dietary taboos, illuminating the wider cultural logics that underlie many on-screen food representations (Kikon, 2022)). Together, these perspectives suggest that cinematic food imagery is a dense semiotic field where gastronomic symbols, human-food relations, and visual metaphors converge to question, reinforce, or transform social norms (Dogan, 2024).

3 Objectives of the Study

- To explore the multifaceted aspects of food other than physical sustenance

- To investigate the socio-political norms of food in different genres of movies
- To dissect the power dynamics of subalternism and diasporia in cinema that is portrayed through food
- To analyse the correlation between food studies and film studies films

4 Methodology

This is a qualitative study done after a thorough evaluation of review of the literature. The study primarily focuses on dissecting the varied portrayals and recent changes in the representations of food and its related processes in Mollywood movies. Movies are selected from four different genres: horror, realism, comedy and romance. *Bramayugam*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Spanish Masala* and *Proprietors: Kammath and Kammath* are movies from the respective genres. Integration of multiple genres highlights the varied representation of food in culinary films. Textual and thematic analysis through the lens of culinary art is primarily focused.

5 Analysis and Discussion

Food regularly functions as a meaningful component of films' mise-en-scène. Filmmakers often rely on food imagery to communicate characters' personalities, cultural backgrounds, social status, and evolving interpersonal relationships. In the contemporary cultural context, food and cuisine have transformed from being merely associated with consumption into significant symbols of identity, class, and social belonging. This transformation has deeply influenced the representation of food in cinema. The selection of cuisine, methods of preparation, and patterns of consumption frequently indicate the identity and social positioning of characters. Food therefore emerges as an active and subjective cinematic agent rather than a passive visual element. Beyond cuisine itself, the labour and struggles associated with food preparation reveal both moral and immoral social structures embedded within everyday life. The relationship between food and characters consequently acquires political significance in the selected films, particularly in relation to gender, caste, class, and power structures (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016; Mubarki, 2020).

5.1 Bramayugam: Food, the Entropy of Feudalism

Rahul Sadasivan, the director of the movie *Bramayugam*, has utilised food to represent the difference between various caste divisions and power dynamics. In the initial phase itself, Kodumon Potti controls Thevan by providing food. Feeding food gives supremacy to Potti over Thevan. By accepting the food, Thevan, a lower caste individual, becomes the lifelong slave of Potti. Feudalism is established through the metaphor of food here. In fact, the mysterious nature of Potti is being untied to Thevan and the audience through the first hint of food. While having supper, Mammootty, as Potti, is having a chicken leg with porridge. It is believed that Brahmins are supposed to be vegetarians throughout their lives. But here, Potti is enjoying non-vegetarian meals along with an uncontrolled amount of alcohol. From this moment onwards, Thevan feels certain differences and awkwardness in Potti's behaviour, which eventually reveals that Kodumon Potti is actually not the real Potti, but the Chathan.

Also, Potti is enjoying the feast with chicken from a benevolent attitude, but the 'Paanan' is having food without chicken with a mindset that is shaped by generosity. Thevan unconsciously misbelieves that whoever provides him with food is superior to him. It is this food that brings him before Chathan. Thevan surrendered his life before Chathan for quenching his thirst. Cook, in this movie, does not enjoy cooking, but does so because he has no other way left. He has been trapped within the loop of Chathan. In one of the beginning scenes, it is shown that Thevan is taking a coconut from the surroundings of 'mana'. The cook furiously condemns Thevan for touching the coconut. Cook, in reality, belongs to the upper cast and Thevan, as mentioned, to the 'untouchable' creed. So, using the metaphor of the coconut, cook is claiming his class dominancy over Thevan. If Potti is controlling Thevan and the cook through food, the cook is also reciprocating the same to Thevan. Because both cook and Potti belong to the upper class. Thus, food becomes an indicator of the caste and creed of people.

5.2 The Great Indian Kitchen: Food, the Gauge of Patriarchy

Food turns out to be an agent of discourse in the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Here, men hold the power, and the toxicity of men is subjugating women. A scene that epitomises this power dynamics is when the husband and father-in-law put the leftovers on the table, not in the wastebasket or even on their plate. Women are supposed to take that phlegm with their hands and clean the table and the plates of their husbands. The indifferent authority of food towards women does not end here. Women also have food from their husbands' plates with the leftovers. The husband here does not even wash his lunchbox. From preparation to consumption, food does not bring happiness; instead, it brings more turmoil, both physically and emotionally. The primary topic of conversation between the husband and wife in this movie is food. He needs dosa with chammanthi and sambar for breakfast, meals for lunch and chappathi for dinner. Again, the rice should not be cooked in a pressure cooker but in a hearth. Preparation of food gradually evokes a self-hatred in her. Whenever the demand for 'freshly cooked meals' arises, the norms of patriarchy are again constantly reaffirmed.

The scene of the husband's cousin's visit to their home poignantly portrays how food becomes an agent of power in the hands of men. As this cousin and his wife visit the protagonists' home, the wife makes him a black tea. Sidhartha Siva, as the cousin, adamantly states his disapproval of the taste of the Black Tea. "What is this dear? You call this Black Tea? Is this what all of you were having as black tea so far? Black Tea is not just some tea powder and sugar in water." He humiliates her in front of every family member in a sugar-coated way. Then he takes a long lesson on how to make a black tea with clove and other 'essentials'. He does not end there, but inspects her until she makes him a black tea according to his commands. "Added cardamom, right? Now it has become tea! Now if someone asks you who taught to make good tea, what will you say? "You" (The Great Indian Kitchen 01:02:33-01:02:41)

This movie brings forth the patriarchy and toxic gender roles through the catalyst of food. The film begins with the preparation of certain snack items in the kitchen, and this opening scene is portrayed through showing the hands of a lady doing these household chores. Jeo Baby, the director of this movie, establishes the role of food from the very beginning. Food and cuisine become the only way of survival for almost all the female characters in this film. The life of the wife, played by Nimisha Sajayan, at her husband's home revolves only around the cooking, serving, and cleaning process. Most of the female characters are caught in the loop of cooking, serving and washing utensils. For Nimisha, food and its preparation become a tiresome phenomenon through which she becomes a slave to her husband's family. Not only Nimisha, but all other female characters are marginalised due to kitchen work. The 'servant' lady is yet another epitome of this marginalisation. On the other hand, for the husband, played by Suraj Venjaramood, food is one of the ways to control his wife. Not only the husband, but every man in this movie sees food in this way. These men do not even consider the physical and mental effort for food preparation. They need food for their sustenance only. The consideration towards the wife from her husband is literally based on her skill in cooking and managing kitchen duties.

Food is used to indicate the caste and creed of the characters in this movie. An example can be cited from the scene in which Nimisha and Suraj are going to a feast at one of their relatives' homes after the marriage. Though the feast includes beef cuisine, it is said that the beef has not been prepared inside the house, but outside. To highlight the religious as well as political aspects, beef is used here. "Beef?" "Yes, I made it outside." "We were eating beef only when we dine out. Now it has reached the courtyard. It will enter the kitchen soon" (00:13:36 – 00:13:45).

5.3 Kammath & Kammath: Caste and Commercialisation on Plate

In this movie, too, food becomes an indicator of the caste and creed of individuals. To reveal the Brahmin caste of Kammaths, the director Thomas K's first tool is vegetarian food. Kammaths earn their living and also prosperity through their business of vegetarian food, particularly Dosa restaurants. Meanwhile, Biriyani brings out the creed of Sulaiman Saheb. Saheb is yet another restaurant owner, running 'Malabar Paradise'. The director reassures the general notion of this creed divisions within food and this is evident through the dialogues of Deva Raja Kammath: "You muslims have a variety of food, biriyani, ghee rice, pathiri, mutton curry and many more. No other community can claim them" (Proprietors: Kammath & Kammath 00:50:40 - 00:50:47). The political incorrectness regarding communalism is also stated through the catalyst of food. A healthy relationship between Mahalakshmi and Kammath starts only after a dispute between them at the beginning of the cinema. So Raja Raja Kammath describes her words and deeds as 'like a meat eater'. "But you talk like a meat eater" (11:6).

Another aspect of the representation of food in this movie is the process of cooking and the technique of commercialisation. 'Who cooks, in what environment, and who eats' defines the motive of cooking. The general notion of 'women in the kitchen' is dismantled in this movie by placing Kammaths as the excellent cooks. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the kitchen is pictured as the epitome of struggles, but in *Kammath & Kammath*, the preparation of food is depicted as something pleasant. This is because, in the first case, cooking is done through the unwritten forceful patriarchal norms, but in the second case, they are doing it voluntarily and gaining income from that. The beneficiary in the *Great Indian Kitchen* is only the male characters, while in *Kammath & Kammath*, the brothers themselves become the beneficiaries. The brothers are finding happiness from their profession of cooking, serving and commercialising. If the brother attains resilience and power through the art of cooking, the wife in the *Great Indian Kitchen* attains the same only after rejecting the slavery of cooking. These two movies poignantly portray how the same culinary elements can be deployed to represent various identities and plights of characters.

5.4 Spanish Masala: Food, a Catalogue to Diasporic Love

Lal Jose, the director of this movie, puts forth the powerful aspect of love through the catalogue of food. The career, economic security, and even the love relationship of Kalabhavan Charlie are bound to food. The skill for preparing delicious dosas and its varieties helps Charlie to find a career. Though his initial days are filled with struggles, this profession lends him a hand to meet his love of life. This same vocation enables him to secure a place from the street to the palace. Food connects Charlie with his partner Camilla. Charlie and Camilia do not have the same background or culture or social status or even citizenship. But food paves the initial way for their union.

The title of the movie itself reveals cross-cultural aspects through the dish Spanish Masala. 'Spain' in Spanish represents the country, culture, and identity of Camilia. Masala represents the Indianness of Charlie along with his profession and identity. Charlie combines Indian elements and Spanish elements elegantly together to get a new variety of Dosa, the Spanish Masala. "A little bit of junipers, cherry soy and egg with a little cheese and mushroom on our dosa, and it becomes Spanish Masala." (Spanish Masala 00:26:15-00:26:22) This cuisine symbolises the new life of Charlie and Camilia, in which his Indianness and her Spanish are beautifully combined. The movie ends with the scene of asking a Spanish Masala by Camilia to Charlie. Since Spanish Masala symbolises the culture of Camilia and Charlie, at the end, both heroine and hero, in fact, accept and respect their partner's culture. The fusion of the dish represents the fusion of the characters with their new environments. The cuisine, Spanish Masala, turns out to be the indicator of the intercultural epitome in this movie.

The dining times become their main source of encounters. From just serving food that he had prepared, he started sharing the table with her. Whenever a downfall happens in their relationship, dining time often provides them with chances to meet again. One of the main ways that Charlie expresses his emotions is through the art of preparing food. Whether it is love or despair or disgust, Charlie goes to the kitchen and starts preparing various cuisines. During the moments of their rejoining, too, Camilia conveys her love through the metaphor of food. She never says 'I Love You', but says "I want Spanish Masala" (2:31:56-2:32:1). Camilia, at the beginning, gets attracted to Charlie because of his skill in preparing the Spanish Masala. So, to have this Spanish Masala regularly in her diet, she hires Charlie as her cook at her palace. This relationship gradually evolves into a love bond. Thus, the food item Spanish Masala becomes a symbol of their love.

Conclusion

Mollywood movies implement the validity of food for expressing various social, political, and cultural power dynamics of the society and family. Food catalysis to express diverse emotions, including love, hatred, happiness, grief, and despair. Culinary elements in Bramayugam amplify feudalistic and caste elements. When Thevan needs food for his survival, Potti (Chathan) leverages it for his power. In Great Indian Kitchen, it signifies the patriarchy and resilience. The entire kitchen and dining scenes throw light on the invisible hands and efforts of women. In Kammath & Kammath, food is represented by the elite class and from a commercial perspective, so that the presentation is done classically and attractively. Spanish Masala celebrates the food and skill of preparation for romantic consummation. The interdisciplinary approach of Malayalam cinema to the culinary cinematic narratives thus paves the way for dissecting complex authority gradients within the society.

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