



From Segregation to Integration: Tracing the legacy of Food Acculturation in Parayipetta Panthirukulam

Dr Reshmi Ravindran P¹ Anupama Murali² and Swapna N.R³

¹Department of English, MES Keveeyam College Valanchery (University of Calicut) Malappuram, Kerala, India

reshmiravindran2008@gmail.com

²Department of English, MES College Marampally (Mahatma Gandhi University) Kottayam, Kerala, India

anupamamurali.mes@gmail.com

³Department of English, MES Keveeyam College Valanchery (University of Calicut) Malappuram, Kerala, India.

swapnagayul987@gmail.com

Abstract. Human evolution is inextricably linked to the evolution of food, with culinary practices shaped by the available flora, fauna, and socio-economic conditions of different communities. In Kerala, settled within the luxuriant Western Ghats, the abundance of natural resources has given rise to a diverse and distinctive food culture. Much of this culinary heritage is preserved and transferred through oral traditions, often intertwined with rituals, customs, and religious beliefs. Parayipetta Panthirukulam, a renowned oral narrative particularly prevalent in northern Kerala, serves as a rich source of such cultural expressions. The tale reflects Kerala's food practices, deeply embedded within caste hierarchies and religious codes. Simultaneously it also depicts an inclusive approach that embraces both vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets. This study examines how the rigid, hierarchical food order historically constructed within the region is reimagined and contested in the narrative space of oral traditions. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital, the analysis situates food practices within the framework of society. The reading also highlights the subversive potential of oral literature to disrupt deep-rooted norms. By bringing in Bhaktin's carnivalization, the study reveals how narratives like Parayi Petta Panthirukulam also act as cultural mediators, which diminishes the social margins in Kerala's culinary identity.

Keywords: food, culture, society, hierarchy, tradition

1 Introduction

The history of food and humans are intricately and inseparably linked. More than being healthy, culinary customs can be seen as cultural expressions influenced by location,

culture, environment, and economics. Kerala has a rich culinary legacy that reflects its socio-political construct owing to its fertile soils, maritime trade routes, and lush Western Ghats. The variety of its ingredients such as rice, coconut, seafood, and spices, reflects the socio-political relationships and the rich geographical diversity the region is blessed with. For generations, social life in Kerala was controlled by rigid caste system that created hierarchy placing some to the margin and branding them as 'untouchables'. Kerala had put up with the most rigorous form of the caste system. This caste system was meticulously planned and ingrained in the culture. While many communities remained excluded from the privileged environment, a select few, such as the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Nairs, enjoyed exceptional advantages and constituted the elite class. The result of the discrimination was dehumanisation and humiliation of the lower castes; it went well beyond simple exclusion. They had to keep a physical distance from those in higher castes since they were viewed as less than human and unclean. This distance was not only symbolic but was severe and real. They had to cover their mouths while conversing to members of higher castes since it was believed that physical contact with lower castes was contaminating and that their breath may taint others. Upper caste members would have to perform cleansing rites if they approached too closely. Brahminical hegemony asserted that this marginalized group are away from their food practices, clothing style and life style. Forced assertion of being impure was asserted on them to naturalize their power tactics of control. They were compelled to dwell on the outskirts of society, forbidden access to public areas like ponds and highways, and kept out of temples and schools because they had to avoid caste members.

Life in Kerala remained dominated by the privileged upper class till these practices and thoughts were dismantled by the efforts of social reformers during the early nineteenth century. In Kerala, particularly in Malabar region the laws of hierarchy were enforced by feudal lords who were the dominant ruling class then. The hierarchical codes controlled all walks of life which also included food consumption. Through many narratives vegetarianism was naturalized as being brahminical or divine thus placing it in higher precincts, whereas consumption of meat was often valued with signs of impurity, and those who consumed meat were devalued as inferior or low. The judgement under the label of ritual purity denied all rights to non-vegetarian and they were marginalized as outcaste. They were denied the right to eat or cook the food of upper class which was judged as superior. The lower class were kept away from cooking or serving food for the upper class. Thus the culinary customs were dominated by the powerful that stood higher in the hierarchical line.

2 Parayipetta Pantheerukulam: The tale in discussion

The tale of Parayipetta Pantheerukulam in this context provides a dynamic platform through which the hierarchically structured food habits are reframed and revisited. The folk tales of Parayipetta Pantheerukulam which is well known in the northern districts of Kerala narrates the story of Parayi a low caste woman who gives birth to twelve children who later became the true voices of twelve different clans. The story of twelve abandoned children and their mother lays bare the reality of caste imposed restrictions

that dominated the emotions, interests and feeling during the time. The tale which probably originated during 12th and 13th centuries connects human minds in line of kinship subverting the regulations that distorts and divides human through false codes of culture and practices. Since the story got transferred from generation to generation orally, there are various narrations with minor alterations for the story. There's no original text for the narration and this study makes use of the version in *Aithihyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni.

Human nature is defined under the three gunas, Satvic, Rajas and Tamas according to Indian philosophy. Satvic guna which is more associated with peace and purity advocates vegetarianism as the part of purity. Brahminical traditions follow Satvic practices in their food as they define themselves as divine and closer to God. Manusmriti quotes the consumption of meat by Brahmins as sacred only if it is properly sanctified and ritualised in yaga. According to this ancient scripture Brahmins can consume meat once if it is dedicated as havis (offering) in yaga. Thus the rules propagated sanctity in food habits as a way of ensuring hierarchy. Those who eat unsanctified meat are considered outcast and Manusmriti warns that those brahmins will receive punishment in hell. The way in which the underprivileged sections were forced to consume the carcasses showcase the strategic ways followed by the privileged to ensure hierarchy. Naranathubranthan in Parayipetta Pantheerukulam disrupted these unlawful codes where he consumes meat claiming that it is part of ritual offering. Thus the established code of satvic, tamas and rajas that created the hierarchy in food culture got disrupted with Parayipetta Pantheerukulam. Brahminic codes considered non vegetarian as Rajasic or Ramasic which increases human aggression and passion. The promotion of Brahminic tradition being dharmic was linked as being vegetarian. Killing for food was considered as the violation of ahimsa and hence vegetarianism was encouraged as a way of attaining moral discipline. Strict vegetarianism along with ritual cleanliness was practiced by Brahmins, especially the Namboothiris. Temple culture formalised its diet, avoiding things like meat and toddy that were deemed tamasic or unclean. Nairs and other higher castes held a middle ground, occasionally eating meat but abiding by the idea of purity while dining in public or religious settings. Following this the lower caste like the Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas, and tribes in Kerala were only permitted to eat carcasses and were denied of having cooked food in ghee and oil. Despite their nutritious importance, these meat meals were culturally devalued since purity was socially manufactured rather than determined by material factors. They were denied of having or tasting sweet delicacies as it was believed that one human was born into a lower caste because of the abominable sins they had committed in their previous birth. They had to suffer in their present living a life shoddier than animals. As food historian Appadurai notes, "culinary maps of purity are ruled by social power rather than the biology of edibility" (Appadurai 5). If a person was lower in the caste hierarchy, they were considered as "contaminating"; the process of cooking itself became a ritual rank indicator. Food culture is used to reinforce status because it was forbidden for people of different castes to eat together, thereby serving as a continual reminder of positions. In order to prevent "polluting" the upper castes, some lower castes were prohibited from approaching them within a specific distance. Purity restrictions also applied to water, vessels, and even physical proximity.

Folklores conveyed popular perspectives that both mirrored and challenged caste authority, while traditional social systems maintained hierarchy. Folklores frequently revealed a cultural psychology of humour, sarcasm, and imagination, also serving as an instrument of resistance. Food taboos can be reinterpreted or reversed in this context. Parayipetta Pantheerukulam narrative connects different kulams from Brahmins to Dalits in single line of kinship subverting the difference in dietary culture. The members of Pantheerukulam follows different diets according to the rules of their kulams. As ruler, warrior, Brahmin priest, physician, merchant, and member of the artisanal and manual labour castes, each son represents distinct professional identities that are central to Kerala's social fabric. In the narrative, food is an important marker of inclusion and separation. Caste hierarchies are reflected in the culinary characteristics of the twelve children; the higher-ranking children are tied to vegetarian purity, while others are linked to lives that depend on fish, meat preparation, or toddy tapping. Agnihotri, the Brahmin boy, followed sattvic diet that is simple, vegetarian, and ritualistic and the food prepared with ghee, rice, pulses, and milk. In contrast, Naranath Bhranthan and Rajakan embody rajasic energy, with diets likely rich in spices and meats.

From the oral narratives perceived in the localities, it can be inferred that Valoon and Akavoor chathan could have possibly followed the *tamasik* tradition of eating fermented food and meat. Uppukootan the Muslim represents multicultural food habits which incorporate the traits of *satvic*, *tamas* and *rajas* tradition. In the tale food is a marker of their identity and the tale announces how cultural segregation is erased in culinary practices where food as means of livelihood turns all inclusive. The tale of Pantheerukulam (twelve clan) begins with a Brahmin unknowingly marrying a 'paraya' girl named Panchami. The story unfolds around the traditional dish 'Injipuli' (ginger-tamarind gravy) that she prepares while hosting Vararuchi as a guest in her household. Vararuchi was so impressed by the taste and wisdom reflected in her cooking, especially the popular saying that 'Injipuli' is equal to a thousand dishes where he accepted her knowledge and marries her. The cuisine of 'Injipuli' serves as a metaphor for universal acceptance, representing the harmonious coexistence with diversity. Later Vararuchi, a strict Brahmin realises the truth that he married a 'paraya' (lower caste) girl and couldn't accept his children born to a 'paraya' woman and these children were abandoned through the justified statement, 'God who gave life will give a way to live'. Vararuchi continues his ascetic journey to get freed from the pollution of getting associated with the lower caste woman.

3 Theoretical Analysis

The theoretical ideas of Pierre Bourdieu provide light on the processes in which food functions as a social regulator. Internalised tendencies, such as dietary rules, manners, and tastes that are reinforced by socialisation and class or caste structures are referred to as habits. Food preferences become naturalised manifestations of power; they are not arbitrary. Bourdieu argues: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Distinction 6). In Kerala, caste-based food functions exactly in this way. Historically, Brahmins and other upper castes have used vegetarianism as cultural capital, a symbolic resource that denotes ceremonial superiority. Temple feasts and rigorous kitchen segregation are examples of practices that create what Bourdieu refers to as "social reproduction,"

which guarantees that hierarchy endures through the generations. Conversely, lower castes, which are tied to meat, toddy, and foods related to labour, are not given the symbolic validity that "pure" diets do. These foods consumed by non brahminical communities were labelled impure foregrounding its socio-religious ideology and neglecting the nutritional aspects. Culinary identity thus turns into a hierarchical performance or identity.

The narrative also challenges the notion that habits are unchangeable. The idea that variations in eating habits are organic or predetermined by God is called into question by the shared maternal origin. The culinary differences between the castes become cultural artefacts rather than biological truths when they all come from the same womb. Thus, the folktale provides a conceptual framework for challenging the validity of cultural capital. Hierarchy can be narratively undone if it is a narrative product.

The carnivalization theory developed by Mikhail Bakhtin offers a potent means of comprehending the subversive spirit present in Kerala oral storytelling. Quoting from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization, the food culture in Pantheerukulam becomes a powerful site for dismantling social, cultural, and culinary hierarchies. Carnivalization, as Bakhtin describes, "involves the temporary suspension of all hierarchical norms, privileges, and conventions—a moment when the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure coexist and merge". Carnival, as Bakhtin writes, suspends hierarchy and celebrates "the grotesque body" — eating, birth, digestion, and laughter — to reveal the common humanity that social order suppress (Rabelais 19). Here, the culinary practices in Pantheerukulam subvert traditional notions of purity and order associated with food. The presence of inji (ginger), a common, cross-cultural ingredient symbolizes universalizing taste that erases caste, class, and ritual hierarchies. Food here is democratic where consumption unites rather than separates. This subversion mirrors Bakhtin's carnival world, a space where "officialdom is mocked, categories are blurred, and life is affirmed in its material, bodily essence." By giving birth, the Paraya mother interrupts the food boundaries. Her body becomes an agency that challenges authority. In this sense, the story is carnivalesque, subverting authority via comedy, satire, and creativity. Although carnivalization exposes hierarchy's dependence on narrative performance, order is not irrevocably destroyed. The laughter negotiated throughout the folktale, constructs what Bakhtin refers to as "a second life," a liberated mental space where equality and regeneration momentarily rule. In their cultural memories, Kerala still continues to find the same resonance in that laughter. The story's retellings evolve along with cultural norms, creating new opportunities to challenge culinary casteism.

4 Acculturation and Assimilation of culture through food

The story of twelve members of Pantheerukulam presents a harmonious acculturation in food culture. The manipulated framework of brahminical culture which segregates food as being pure and impure through the distorted interpretation of philosophy of

ahimsa is disrupted here. Pakkanar, who belongs to the dalit community in Pantheerukulam questions these imposed demarcation of purity and impurity in food. An incident in the narrative reveals how Pakkanar propagates the idea that every food is pure. The incident reveals as such. During the day of shradham(memorial feast) in Melathol Mana(the house of Melathol Agnihotri the eldest member of twelve siblings ,who is born as a Brahmin) Pakkanar brings a portion of dead cow as an offering to the feast. It is said that everything brought by the siblings should be served for the feast. Agnihotri asks his Antharjanam(his Brahmin wife) to cook the food. Instead of cooking and serving she buries the meat portion. During the feast Pakkanar asks about it where she says she cannot cook the corpse and hence it is buried. Pakkanar calmly asks her to go and check the place where it is buried. To everyone's surprise a climber full of ivy gourds was growing there. He asks her to go and cook it and therefore it can be included in the feast. This incident shows how the story disrupts the framed concept of pure and impure announcing the harmonious sustenance of nature. The philosophy of decay and regeneration as being a linear and continuous process that challenges the established superiority of vegetarianism as being pure is portrayed through the narration. The story of Akavoor Chathan, Naranathubranthan, Pakkanar and Pananar reveals how the established strategy of power in food habits can be dismantled through a harmonious acculturation. Naranathubranthan, though brought up as a brahmin, follows a mixed diet of vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism. He questions the sanctity in food servings and offerings where he cooks food using the fire from the burial place where cremations are done. The same food is given as offering to his deity through which he challenges the ritualistic codes in offerings. The life of Naranathubranthan presents an all-encompassing philosophy that me and you are one and food which is the basis of life shouldn't be placed in discriminated grounds.

The food culture of Kerala serves as a dynamic record of social and cultural history, where power, community and identity are constantly under debate. The combined theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Bakhtin make it clear that the Kerala cuisine oscillates between the establishment of cultural hybridity and the upholding of social hierarchy. On the one hand, the rules that define-who can eat what, who can cook and how food must be handled- based on the caste hierarchies of society, reasserts and maintains the old social hierarchies. On the other hand, stories passed down through the folktales and shared cooking techniques provide space for creativity and change. Through these people question, challenge and reshape those hierarchies. The ways through which culinary behaviour normalises inequality is stated by Bourdieu through his notion of habitus. Caste based dietary norms such as - which cooking vessel is used by whom, who handles the food- goes beyond mere tradition. These rules reaffirm social boundaries between castes, ensuring the caste hierarchy is regularly maintained and reaffirmed. According to Bourdieu "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier," (Distinction 6). This caste based dietary norms play a crucial role in determining who holds power in the socio-cultural-political space of Kerala. Purity, which is often tied to caste, becomes a form of symbolic capital that determines which group of people holds authority, respect and prestige to occupy positions of cultural leadership. Even though the hierarchies appear natural and inevitable as taste is seen as an innate quality,

in reality it is socially constructed and passed down through culture and tradition. Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization offers a framework for understanding Kerala's traditional customs, particularly in folktales like Parayipetta Pantheerukulam, which challenge and subvert the usual social norms and conventions.

These hierarchies appear natural, even inevitable, because taste is seen as an innate quality rather than a social construct—a "destiny" that is conveyed through food. Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization, in this context customs appear as imaginative subversions of conventional rituals. The world is upturned upside down in Bakhtin's funfair, the high and the low mix, the sacred becomes amusing, and the very materiality of the body mocks purity. In this context, food turns into a democratic medium that is consumed, digested, and expelled by all. The disproportioned body, according to Bakhtin, "celebrates becoming" as opposed to fixed identity (Rabelais and *His World* 26). The strict purity-pollution dichotomy at the heart of caste-based eating customs is undermined in the common imagination when eating and giving birth are viewed as radical equalisers.

5 Summation

Parayipetta Pantheerukulam represents the variability between these two modes, structure and subversion. The myth maintains multiplicity while rejecting the idea that dissimilarity must inevitably lead to exclusion or inequality by permitting each child to assume distinct caste-based responsibilities. What caste subsequently separates is united by the mother who makes their origin a shared one. As a result, the story participates in cultural negotiation by recognising societal hierarchy while maintaining that humanity comes before hierarchy. The same conflict is reflected in culinary identity, where caste-related food systems are valued beyond national boundaries and once-stigmatized foods are given respect in shared eating.

As a result, food becomes a place of collation as well as a means of communication. Kerala's culinary narratives demonstrate that taste can resist through storytelling, humour, earthly practices, and celebrations, even though it has historically been shaped to reproduce power. In this mixed cultural realm, hierarchy meets humour, popular imagination meets ceremonial authority, and purity meets embodiment. Kerala's culinary tradition ultimately nourishes not only bodies but also alternate futures that imagine social harmony without removing diversity. Kerala's culinary culture is shaped by caste and geography, which has long been used as a tool for social controlling. Food creates status, regulates relationships, and reinforces the boundaries between pollution and purity. Parayipetta Panthirukulam and other oral traditions demonstrate how these systems are culturally constructed and therefore open to interpretation.

By placing the narrative within Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and cultural capital, this study has demonstrated how caste hierarchy is based on eating habits. Through Bakhtin's carnivalization lens, it has also proved how the story may both imitate and challenge those same hierarchies. By reminding readers that hunger, sustenance, and life originate in the same manner in every human body, the folktale asserts a common human beginning. At the end of the day, Parayipetta Panthirukulam is a vigorous cultural facilitator that not only reflects but also continuously transforms Kerala's culinary traditions. Its persistence in Kerala's popular memory implies that food may unite rather

than divide, exclusion can be replaced by inclusion as the basis of cultural identity and narratives still hold an essential space in which existing hierarchies can be challenged.

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