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# FOOD AND HISTORY: A GASTRONOMIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF NERCCA

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Food is a necessity for human existence. Food has emerged as the largest industry in the modern world, owing to its importance in our human relationships and frequent indulgence. It has been used to communicate messages of group solidarity, status, gender, role, ethnicity, religion, identity, and other socially constructed regimes in every society on the planet since ancient times.<sup>1</sup> Feeding people has always been the primary concern of the human species, and finding, growing, and trading food products has been the primary catalyst in human history more than any other factor.<sup>2</sup> Food is life for humans, and it can be used to study and comprehend life.<sup>3</sup>

We know that each community has its own culture, which is very well expressed in the traditions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that members of a group and community practice and accept. Food, as a cultural product, serves as a lens through which a region or community can be seen and comprehended. Food practices serve as cultural criteria for determining a social group's cultural identity. As a result, it is an important concept in the development of cultural identity and community feeling. Ingredients, preparation method, preservation technique, type of food eaten, table etiquette, eating style, and so on vary by culture. Food reveals and shapes social relationships, connects the past to the present, and opens up possibilities for the future. In fact, food can help us understand a culture better.

Food can tell us a lot about the evolution of human societies, including how people lived and how they managed to create a food supply. Man's need and the quest for food date back to ancient times. Paleolithic people, who lived by collecting food and hunting animals, began to produce food and settle in one place with the advent of agriculture during the Neolithic period. Similarly, the role of cooking in the growth and evolution of mankind is immense. The Neolithic man began to cultivate and cook a variety of products that played a major role in the civilization of mankind. Even today, cooking plays a major role in defining the family as a unit of state. In the words of Peter Atkins, "Cooking is a moral process, transferring raw matter from nature to the state of 'culture' and thereby taming and domesticating it. Food is therefore 'civilized' by cooking, not simply at the level of practice, but at the level of imagination."<sup>4</sup>

Humans' desire for various foods prompted them to travel to various parts of the world. It is said that in ancient times, the Israelites came to the shores of Malabar on the ships of Emperor Solomon and Queen Sheba to collect spices.<sup>5</sup>

The Europeans used spices to preserve food and to prepare tasty food. This quest for flavorful spice has shaped the map of the world. It created opportunities for cultural exchange as well as colonial struggle in the modern era by opening up new trade routes, bringing people from all over the world together. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate how the redistribution of food products shaped political power in the ancient tamilakam. The Tamil Sangam contains references to the collection of food products from various sections by the muventers, and their redistribution caused the increase in their power. It is true that agricultural surplus production over time has resulted in the formation of power relations in societies. In the modern period, food became industrialized especially during the period of the industrial revolution.<sup>6</sup> Climate change in the twenty-first century has had a significant impact on the human species, prompting people to consider natural ecosystem conservation for all. Even today, as was evident during the cold war, cutting off

the enemy's access to food is the most effective way of defeating them. As a result, it is presumed that the food we eat changes history, and the history of food has always been inextricably linked with both human development and power structures.

One-way humans define themselves as civilized is through food. Identity (religious, national, and ethnic) is inextricably linked with food. Every group considers itself to be unique and exceptional and uses food to demonstrate this: "This is what we eat. That is what they [religion, ethnic group, country] eat. "Whether you drink your tea with cream, sugar, and small sandwiches in the afternoon; green in a special ceremony; ice cold; spiced and known as chai; or use the leaves to smoke foods or tell your fortune depends on where you live: England, Japan, the United States, India, China, or Turkey. Alcohol, like other drugs, is used differently in different cultures. Wine has always been an important part of the Jewish and Christian religions. In ancient Greece, wine was consumed after the meal at a symposium, a religious and political ritual attended only by men. In ancient Rome, men and women both drank wine with their meals. Because they couldn't wait for the meal, impatient Americans invented the cocktail.<sup>7</sup> "You are what you eat," as the proverb goes, encapsulates the concept of food and identity, and the process of selecting and consuming food includes psychological, social, economic, cultural, and biological factors, all of which play a role in the development of identity surrounding food consumption.<sup>8</sup>

Gastronomy is an emerging branch of food studies. It studies the connection between food and culture, as well as the art of cooking and serving delicious food. It discusses a particular region's cooking style as well as the science of its feeding habits.<sup>9</sup> In fact, gastronomy reflects the culture, heritage, traditions, and sense of community of different peoples. The gastronomic approach focuses on the practice, rules, norms, and meanings associated with good food. As a discipline, gastronomy encompasses the study of what we eat

and drink, and why we eat, from a historical, cultural, sociological, political, anthropological, and culinary perspective.

The Gastronomic Traditions of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar are an interesting topic to study. The Mappilas are the Muslims of North Kerala. They are either Arab traders' descendants or Hindu converts to Islam. From the fourth century AD onwards, the Malabar Coast became the primary center of Arab trading activity, and from the seventh century onwards, they began to settle in Malabar's port cities. The Muslim population in the Malabar region began to grow from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which is noted by scholars like Durant Barbosa and Shaik Zainudheen. During the colonial period, they had to shift from the coastal areas to the interior parts of Malabar. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the Mappila population became rural cultivators, landless peasants, petty traders, and tenants. Foreigners, Mysoreans, South Kerala Christians, and locals all have an impact on their food culture. Among the Mappilas, there are many gastronomic traditions related to Ramadan fasting, *salkaram* (customary feast), *nercca* (offering to God), marriage, death, and birth. Knowledge of these gastronomic traditions may help us to understand the link between Malabar Mappila and other regions and communities. It also helps us understand the role of food in shaping the Mappila community's identity. A study of the Mappila gastronomic traditions also aids in understanding how food fosters community solidarity among its members and how food practices help in the development of better human relationships with other communities.

Among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar's Gastronomic Traditions, practices associated with *nercca* or saint worship are significant because they reveal the syncretic tradition of mutual understanding and cooperation among the area's various religious communities. Stephen Dale and M. Gangatharan present *nercca* as the largest Mappila public festival in their article, which is actually a regional variation of saint worship found in most Islamic societies.<sup>10</sup> *nercca*, according to them, are expensive and elaborate ceremonies that mix

nominally Islamic features with aspects of local folk festivals, especially an adaptation of native Hindu festivals such as *vela* and *pooram*. These *nercca* festivals are held to honor a pir, shaykh, or shahid within a ritual framework. Malabar's most prominent *nercha* include Kondotty, Malappuram, Pukottur, Kuttayi, Mamburam, and others. Many other minor *nercca* were held in various parts of Malabar, and all played an important role in the formation of community feeling among the Mappilas of Malabar. One thing that all of these *nercca* have in common is the distribution of food to festival goers. Special congregations were held at mosques linked to *nercca*, specifically to recite of devotional songs. Here I describe the gastronomic practices associated with various *nercca* held throughout South Malabar each year.

Across Malabar, the annual *nercca* is organized by a committee formed under an important mosque or the shahid's name at various villages in Malabar. Detailed arrangements are made to organise the *nercca* with a procession, Mouloud, community prayers, and distribution of food. The committee raised funds for the *nercca* by collecting money from locals by providing beef meat and soliciting various types of voluntary contributions from the villagers. Traditionally, the villagers prepared *pathiri* (rice bread) and offered coconut, chicken, arecunut, and other items to the committee. Arrangements were made by the villagers to ensure their contribution to the *nercca*. The majority of their contributions were in the form of food. Almost all of the villagers, including non-Muslims, took part in the *nercca*, particularly by donating money and receiving food. According to Dr. P P Abdul Razak, "During the British era, Hindus actively took part in *nercha* held throughout Malabar..." Such a custom is still practiced today.<sup>11</sup> The food received by the committee was later mixed together, which was later combined with the delicious beef meat. Following *mouloud*, *mala* songs, and prayers, the committee distributed food to the assembled crowd around midnight. A long line could be seen everywhere to receive the food from the committee members.<sup>12</sup>

Offering the *nercha* feast to members of different religious groups is considered part of their religious responsibilities, and they assume that the almighty will reward them for their actions. Beef and *thengachor* (coconut rice) preparation was a common feature of this *nercca*'s gastronomic tradition. The committee made arrangements for the food to be prepared. A local cook volunteered to help prepare the beef and rice. Food was frequently prepared on the ground next to the mosque. There were also plans to distribute the cooked food from that location. Few people eat at the establishment itself. In the earlier period, the food was served on a large plate, and 6 to 8 people ate it while sitting around the table where the *nercca chor* was served.<sup>13</sup> The Mappila community felt a sense of unity and brotherhood as a result of this. The committee recently established new rules for food distribution. Each family sends one person to collect the food for the rest of the family. On occasion, representatives of the *nercha* committee pack food and deliver it to homes where nobody has been able to gather it. Nonetheless, they made certain that the food prepared as part of the *nercha* was distributed to every household in the village. In the modern era, *nercca* feasts are first served to contributors and then to those who have gathered in lines. Previously, food was distributed at night, but today it was distributed shortly after the noon prayer. The flavour of *nercca* feast is delectable. People, including non-Muslims, were drawn to the *nercca* feast for its delicious taste. The *nercca* provided villagers with a rare opportunity to enjoy a tasty meal, which they also consumed the next day. The previous generation remembers the *nercha* and many of its distinctive features evolving over time. The modification occurred primarily as a result of criticism from "reformist" Mujahids<sup>14</sup>. As a result, *nercca* are much more limited in scope, limiting themselves to the supply of food to people who visit and the reading of the Qur'an.

In conclusion, gastronomic practices associated with *nercca* can tell us the role of a tradition, which is important for the existence of a group or

community. The distribution of food at the time of the *nercca* festival plays a major role in bringing various religious groups under one roof. For Mappilas, it is an important occasion to foster community feelings and develop solidarity with other communities. Distribution of food provides them a chance to taste delicious food and also a time to spend in devotional ways. Nercca food is believed to be sacred to them, hence most care is taken while eating the food. Even food was served to domestic pets. The acceptance of *nercca* food by lining together is an occasion of patience and dedication. The preparation and serving of *nercca* food is also significant as it shows the community solidarity of Mappilas.

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