

# Acculturation and Changing Food Culture in Kerala

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**Abstract-** Indian Food Culture cannot be accounted as a single homogenous one. It varies with states, religions, castes, economic status, geographical peculiarities, availability of products etc. Globalisation and the increase in migrant population have brought in changes in the food patterns of Indians. Each community/ethnic group in India has specific foods which are passed on to their future generations. They are symbolic of the culture and tradition of that particular group. Indian Cuisines are noted for the use of spices and flavours. Kerala, the land of spices has a food culture different from the rest of India which is a combination of multiple cuisines. With the Western, Eastern and other regional influences, food culture in Kerala has underwent many alterations. Acculturation in India has a history which spans from the colonial period under Britain to this period of large corporations. With the merging of cultures, there happens a modification of the diet by retaining traditional food culture and incorporating new food patterns. This diet substitution can affect the health, economy, environment and culture itself adversely. The changes in food culture as a result of acculturation and its consequences form the crux of the paper.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Cuisines, Food Culture, Globalisation, Migrations.

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"Food touches everything and is the foundation of every economy, marking social differences, bonds, and contradictions—an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships"(Introduction 3) affirms Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik in *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Food is an integral part in one's life; a basic necessity. Man's dependence on food for sustenance has provided him with a varied food culture. Culture being the lived experience of people, man's life and his culture are intertwined with food. On individual level, people attach great importance to the cuisines in their culture since they grow up by attaching personal values and feelings to it. Habits and values inculcated in a child from his/her family is carried on in life. Food and the memories associated with it from the childhood can bring comfort and peace along with a longing for the past in a person. Individuals following food patterns of their culture in their daily life, thus feels a sense of belonging to their family and culture. Mary Anne Schofield in her work *Cooking by the Book: Food in Literature and Culture* says about this alternative function of food in a person's life: "Food cooked, eaten, and thought about provides a metaphoric matrix, a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty, the ineffable qualities of life" (Preface 1). On a larger scale, food denotes the values, lifestyle, traditions, beliefs and history associated with an ethnic group, a state or a nation. Food can bind people together in a community or group as it has a role in shaping one's identity. Traditional cuisines are passed on to generations and people carry with them the legacies and traditions of food wherever they move.

Indian society and culture forms a concoction of pluralities. It is difficult to assign one single identity to an Indian.

Shashi Tharoor in his essay *The Idea of India: India's Mosaic of Multiplicities* calls Indian culture 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, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast"(114). People belonging to different states, ethnic groups, religions, speaking different languages coexist in India. Though each culture retains their unique cuisines, there has been an interchange of traditions associated with food. Indian food culture has marked influences of ancient religions and rules of different empires, especially the British Empire. Colonisers have also used food as a tool to dominate natives by trying to erase their indigenous food cultures and introducing the western cuisines. Tea drinking was introduced in India by British, which more or less replaced the traditional drink Coffee. Indians have also contributed to the western cuisines and 'curry' is one such dish.

Indian cuisines are well known for the use of spices. Kerala cuisines follow the suit though there are differences in taste and texture, with only slight variations in cooking methods. Staple food in Kerala is rice which is used in many forms to prepare a variety of dishes. Geography of the place has also contributed to the food culture. Abundance of coconut trees in the state has resulted in the integration of coconut in most dishes. Kerala being a coastal area has no deficiency in seafoods and also fishes from the rivers and backwaters are also palatable dishes. These cooking styles and methods have evolved with time and they are preserved for future generations. In Kerala also, different religions, castes, ethnic groups, tribes etc. maintain their own styles and patterns of

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cooking which form a part of their identity. Food culture expanded with increase in experiments and skills within the group along with interchange of food patterns between the groups. Different places and cultural groups in Kerala have their own moreish foods which range from thalassery dum biriyani, manjali halwa, ramassery idli, ambalapuzha palpayasam, aranmula vallasadya, kuttanad duck curry and fish, spicy food served in toddy shops, malabar pathiri, vishu kanji and vishukatta prepared by hindus on vishu festival, kalthappam of northern Kerala which is a delicacy in muslim families etc. Tourism industry has benefitted appreciably because of the appetizing variety of foods in Kerala.

Apart from the contributions of different religious, ethnic and regional groups within Kerala, there are external influences on Kerala cuisine. Keralites carry with them their exquisite tradition of food while they migrate to places outside Kerala and India. They also never fail to bring home new cuisines and trends in food culture. People migrate to places outside Kerala in search of jobs and having spend some time there return to their homeland with a hybrid culture. Also the migrant population in Kerala have brought in changes in the food culture. For example, with the rise in the number of migrant labourers from Bengal, shops selling the bengali foods are springing up in Kerala. Majority of Indians in Gulf countries are from Kerala. They can be held responsible for the growing interests of Keralites towards arabian foods. Globalisation also plays a major role in acculturation in Kerala.

Cultural transactions between groups accelerated with innovations in transportation and communication as part of globalisation. Neo-liberal policies enhanced cultural diffusion among nations and the world has turned into a 'Global Village'. The world is getting homogenised. The western culture has great influence on the developing countries like India. American culture finds an easy way into the third world nations with the policies of privatisation and liberalisation. In the capitalised society, culture seizes to be a lived experience. It has become a commodity; something to be produced and consumed. Food has also been transformed from something which satisfies hunger to a commodity. Multiple brands and varieties of food substances available in the markets succeed in creating desires in consumers, especially youth and thereby controls them. Advertisements have a crucial role in creating these desires and their choices are in a way engineered, making them stereotypes. Large corporations determine the food habits of the population in the capitalised society. Restaurant and mall cultures, fast foods, processed foods etc. make people obese affecting their health adversely.

Though globalisation has altered the food habits in Kerala to an extent, the traditional food practices are also promoted and marketed. The instant foods like pickles, chutney powders, spice mixes, Kerala porottas etc. find a huge market outside Kerala. It has become easy to share the knowledge and recipes of foods of the indigenous cultures to the outside world. Thus food globalisation has triumphed in producing a sense of rootedness, identity and nostalgia for the diaspora. Foreign cultures are also modified to suit the native cultures (heterogenization) in the case of mixing of cultures. For example, the Chinese food sold in Indian restaurants are not authentic Chinese. They are Indianised to suit the taste buds of Indians.

Roland Barthes in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* claims that food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (Food and Culture 29). Food can act as a language with its properties of taste, smell, sight, touch and sound. The way of consumption of food and the type of food consumed can provide information about a person. Like sharing food creates a bond, eating together can also help in building relations. Now a days social media acts as a platform to share the bonds formed over food patterns. By sharing the pictures of food prepared and consumed, one is unconsciously becoming part of a communication. The Facebook groups like 'Eat Kochi Eat', 'Eat at Trivandrum', 'Kochi Foodies' etc. offers space for foodies in Kerala to share their dining experiences and to meet people of the same kind, thereby propagating a novel food culture in Kerala.

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