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## Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Gods: Gastro-politics of Hindu Temples in Kerala

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### ABSTRACT

Food is an inherent part of culture as well as identity. The analysis of the food-serving and consumption patterns in the society reveals the underlying politics of it. As an important entity of culture, religion, too, is not free of the influences and interventions of food. The divisiveness created by food within a religion is most explicit in Hindu temples, especially those of Kerala where we can observe two distinct traditions in the temple food and offerings. This paper titled “Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Gods: Gastro-politics of Hindu Temples in Kerala” seeks to explore the politics of division created by food within the Hindu temples in Kerala and its repercussions in the society of Kerala. It intends to trace the origin and development of such divisiveness with regard to the history of state. In addition to this, the paper aims to explore the caste politics of such food traditions using the premises of cultural studies.


**Keywords:** Food, Gastro-politics, Temples of Kerala, Caste system, Critical discourse analysis.

### Introduction

Food is one of the basic necessities in every human being's life. Unlike animals, humans have an affinity for finer aspects of life which is reflected in their food habits as well. It must have been this affinity which made them explore the world of food where ingredients, recipe, technique, flavour and even the presentation can make a huge difference to the consumption and acceptance of food. Even the slightest of the changes make a huge difference and such differences are the ones that help a dish distinguish itself in terms of geographical region, class and caste, faith, and lifestyle practices. In fact, legal disputes have ensued in India in the past for patent rights and geographical indicator status of certain dishes.

Being an entity which stands very close to life, food has undeniable relations with culture. American anthropologist Clifford Geertz has defined culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by men of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (5). Thus, food becomes a signifier of the various cultural mores and values. This paper attempts to view the temple food in the Hindu temples of Kerala as a signifier of caste relations that exist in the Kerala society.

Food has always been an integral part of the Indian culture, and religion is no exception. “Classical Hindu thought....contains a series of important assumptions about food and its place in the cosmos. It [food] is thought to be the

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fundamental link between men and gods” (Appadurai 496). And as such, the social systems related to religion are also superimposed on the food production and consumption patterns.

Temples are of great importance in Hindu religion and the worship of the deities in the temples involves production and consumption of food in a number of ways. The deities are considered as living entities and are made to go through all the motions of a normal individual. They are woken up in the morning, given bath and dressed beautifully. Following the morning *pujas*, the deities are given *naivedyam* (*bhog* in North India) or the ceremonial food specially prepared by the priests within the temples. This is repeated at the afternoon and evening *pujas*. A portion of the same may be distributed as *prasada* to the devotees. In addition to this, in many temples the devotees are given *annadanam* or free meals sponsored by devotees or by the temple itself. Devotees also have the provision of submitting food items as offerings to the deities. This takes place especially during the temple festivals where women make *pongals* in honour of the deity as a token of gratitude for the blessings received.

In all of the above mentioned circumstances, the food is considered as holy or divine. It is in this context that the discussion of the temple food in Kerala attains importance. Food in Hindu tradition can be divided into three – *Sattvic*, *Rajasic* and *Tamasic*. These divisions are synonymous with the three *Gunas* or primary qualities of man. *Sattvic* food is purist and comprise of nuts, fruits and vegetables. *Rajasic* food includes meat, spices, garlic, onion and bitter and salty dishes. Such food items are believed to cause sorrow, anger and diseases. *Tamasic* food is the darkest and foulest of the three and is believed to make a person dull, sleepy and reckless. It includes fermented food as well as fish, meat, poultry and eggs (Rodrigues). The food that is usually served in temples are *sattvic* and include edible raw materials (coconut, fruits, milk, etc) as well as cooked food such as *payasam*, *chundal*, *modakam*, *vada*, *laddu*, etc. They are predominantly sweet in taste. *Tamasic* food is generally banned in the temples.

Contrary to this tradition, in the temples of Kerala we can observe the divergent practice of serving fish, meat, and even toddy to the deities. Some of the popular temples in Kerala following this tradition are the Muthappan temple at Parassinikadavu, Kuttichathan temple at Kalleri, Bhadrakali temple at Vellayani, Mandaikadu Bhagavathi temple near Colachel in Kanyakumari district, Avanangattil Kalari at Thrissur and Melamcode Amman temple at Kumaracoil. The offerings in these temples include fish, meat, and alcohol.

What is common among all these temples are that none of them are run by Brahmin priests. Here, the worship of the deities and their *pujas* are performed by men belonging to lower castes. Such a digression from the normative practices is validated using legends and stories. No substantial evidence for the same is available. But the fact that the difference in the food pattern has links with the caste system is undeniable.

*Keralolpathi*, the earliest of the available historiographical texts on Kerala, discusses the origin of the land. Though it relies on the myth of Parasurama as the source for the story of creation, it is helpful in explaining the caste system of the period to some extent. The original inhabitants of the land were Dravidians who were predominantly nature worshippers. Lord Parasurama was the one who brought Aryan Brahmins from northern parts of India and instituted them as the castes entitled to worship and knowledge. In the *Keralolpathi* it is mentioned that it was He who prescribed the rules of worship. As a result of this divinely ordained position, the Brahmins became the custodians of the land and occupied the topmost position in the caste system. They brought with them the pantheon of Hindu gods amounting to more than thirty three million. These gods were in accordance with the strict lifestyle practices followed by the Brahmins. They followed a *sattvic* diet and resided in temples. This system of religious worship was adopted as the mainstream faith by the people.

However, the monopoly of the Aryan gods was unable to wipe out the Dravidian forms of worship. Vestiges of the Dravidian worship exist in the form of worship of snakes, trees and nature spirits. The caste supremacy of the Brahmins

meant that the non-brahmins were considered as impure and were not allowed entry into temples. In fact, temple entry for all castes was made possible in Kerala only in 1936. This meant that the lower castes had to develop their own methods and places for worshipping the Almighty. They fell back on their nature-gods for this. In addition to this, they started worshipping many spirits like Kuttichathan, Madan thampuran, Yakshi, Vishnumaya, and Amman among others. The deities often resided at the foot of banyan trees, anthills, termite mounds, and serpent pits. These deities were considered as impure as they were worshipped by untouchable and impure castes and were a sort of resistance to the Aryanisation of religion. The non-Brahmins followed the *rajasic* and *tamasic* diet. Both they and their food were considered as polluting and impure. The same diet was followed in the religious worship as well.

With the passage of time, these places of worship were converted into temples and people from all castes began to visit them. But the practices and the right to worship were retained by the lower castes. Their food patterns were also retained in the temples.

The deity at Parassinikadavu in Kannur district is Sree Muthappan who is believed to be a manifestation of Shiva in the hunter form. The legends of Muthappan make it clear that he was born to a tribal community. The *pujas* are conducted by the Thiya community. Fish, meat, and toddy are the customary offerings to Muthappan (Menon 42).

The Kalleri Kuttichathan temple at Vatakara in Kozhikode district is home to Kuttichathan who was born of an illicit relationship between a high caste Namboodiri and a low caste lady. Kuttichathan is also known by the name Vishnumaya and has a demi-god status in the Hindu pantheon.

The Bhadrakali temple at Vellayani is managed by Nair families but the *pujas* are done by a Kollan (blacksmith) priest instead of the traditional Brahmin priests. Here, one of the main offerings is toddy and the daily afternoon *puja* is itself called *madhupuja* (*madhu* means alcohol).

Mandaikadu Bhagavathi temple near Colachel in Kanyakumari district and Melamcode Amman temple at Kumaracoil are part of the state of Tamil Nadu at present. But, they used to be a part of the erstwhile Travancore and are, as a result, popular among the devotees in Kerala. Mandaikadu temple dates back to seventh century B. C. and the deity is in the form of a five-headed ant-hill about twelve feet in height. Fish is the main offering in this temple. Melamcode Amman temple consists of two temples devoted to deities who are sisters. The auspicious offering here is the sacrifice of cocks. Devotees submit live cocks at the feet of the deity which are then sacrificed in front of the eyes of the devotees and cooked to make *prasad*.

Avanangattil Kalari at Thrissur is the home of Sree Vishnumaya who is the son of Shiva and a tribal woman. The name Vishnumaya comes from the legend that the child being born as a tribal assumed the form of Vishnu using Maya to gain entrance to Kailas. Here also, toddy is a main offering.

The above cited temples are testimonials to the fact that caste has a significant role to play in deciding the food which is served in temples. It is interesting to note that the deities and the temples where non-*sattvic* food is distributed are often considered as impure and are generally shunned by the mainstream Brahmins and other upper castes. However, attempts have been made by the Brahmin community to incorporate these divergent elements into the mainstream religious practices. Many of the indigenous deities have been included into the Hindu pantheon and but their food practices have been largely ignored. The only residue of this tradition in mainstream Hinduism in Kerala temples is the practice of Sreebhootha Bali or Bali where a symbolic sacrifice is made to appease the gods. Earlier, animal sacrifices used to be a part of worship but the practice was deemed barbaric and discontinued. No visible effort is taken to understand the practice of inclusion and exclusion in serving temple food.

Analysing this phenomenon from the perspectives of cultural studies, it is interesting to note the ways in which this gastro-politics translates into the real world. For this purpose, this paper makes use of Norman Fairclough's model of

critical discourse analysis where this divergence is studied at the level of text, interaction and context.

At the level of text, this phenomenon is very simple - there is the presence of two divergent styles of food practices in the temples of Kerala. This difference is created due to a difference in the belief systems of Aryans and Dravidians, and the caste supremacy of the Aryan Brahmins who deemed the Dravidian customs to be impure. *Sattvic* food is deemed to be the food of pure gods, and *rajasic* and *tamasic* food is attributed to impure or heathen gods. This discrimination has been perpetuated for generations.

On the second level or the level of interaction, the text (the difference in food practices) is consumed by all believers in the religious community without any resistance. The same beliefs are reproduced when this religious knowledge is passed on to the next generation.

Thirdly, at the level of context, this phenomenon is deemed to be the product of the socio-cultural and political conditions of the state of Kerala. The system of caste that existed in the state, the economic disparities, and the cultural supremacy of the Brahmins has all contributed to the existence and perpetuation of these beliefs. The implication of this phenomenon is that the caste system in Kerala still continues to be rigid and the discrimination on the basis of caste continues to exist in the society in subtle forms such as food practices as illustrated above.

Thus, the analysis of the food practices of the temples in Kerala reveals that the caste system in Kerala still perpetuates itself in the Kerala society in many forms, especially in the form of religious and ritualistic practices. Even the food one eats or offers to a deity becomes a symbol of how one perceives the world and communicates his/her idea of the world to others. And by selecting or rejecting one particular food discourse, one is unknowingly perpetuating the larger ideas of caste, discrimination and politics of lifestyle practices.

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