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Where The Flavours of The World Meet: Malabar As A Culinary Hotspot

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Asha Mary Abraham

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Calicut, Kerala.

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The pre-colonial Malabar was an all-encompassing geographical area that covered the entire south Indian coast sprawling between the Western Ghats and Arabian Sea, with its capital at Kozhikkode. When India was linguistically divided and Kerala was formed in 1956, the Malabar district was geographically divided further for easy administration. The modern day Malabar, comprises of Kozhikkode, Malappuram and few taluks of Kasarkod, Kannur, Wayanad, Palakkad and Thrissur. The Malappuram and Kozhikkod region is predominantly inhabited by Muslims, colloquially called as the Mappilas. The term 'Malabar' is said to have etymologically derived from the Malayalam word 'Malavaram', denoting the location by the side of the hill. The cuisine of Malabar, which is generally believed to be authentic, is in fact, a product of history and a blend of cuisines from all over the world. Delicacies from all over the world blended with the authentic recipes of Malabar, customizing itself to the local and seasonal availability of raw materials in the Malabar Coast. As an outcome of the age old maritime relations with the other countries, the influence of colonization, spice-hunting voyages and the demands of the western administrators, the cuisine of Malabar is an amalgam of Mughal (Persian), Arab, Portuguese,, British, Dutch and French cuisines. *Biriyani*, the most popular Malabar recipe is the product of the Arab influence. The Malabar cuisine is mostly non-vegetarian, preferring meat and seafood even on auspicious festival days, which is uncommon in most regions of Kerala. The proximity of sea is a driving factor behind the affinity for non-vegetarian dishes. The British believed *Halwa*, a sweet unique to kozhikkode to be meat, thus calling it 'sweetmeat', which resulted in the *Mittaiheruvu* of Kozhikkode to be named S.M. Street. The arrival of Vasco De Gama in 1498, the conquests of Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan, the four Anglo-Mysore wars, the immigration of the Tulu Brahmins and Syrian Christians were all decisive factors in shaping the Malabar cuisine as we taste it today. The paper seeks to explore the Western and Middle Eastern influences on the Malabar Mappila cuisine. It aims to trace the original cultural roots of Biriyani, especially Thalassery Biriyani, Mandi, Sulaimani, the practice of cooking Biriyani on Dum, giving heat from top and bottom, the practice of marination, the Malabari preference for stuffed meat and various derivatives of Dum Biriyani. The tastes have been preserved over years due to Malabar's preference for authenticity and ethnic purity. The paper is an attempt to culturally locate the Malabar cuisine, which is historically and culturally a thoroughly unauthentic cuisine.

Keywords: Malabar, Cuisine, Cultural Amalgamation, Biriyani, S.M. Street, Authenticity

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Of the many things that set human race apart from animals, the culinary varieties and experiments carried out on food varieties is perhaps a foremost distinguishing factor. While animals eat out of instinct and their will to survive, humans go beyond the primary purpose of food – to adequately provide life sustaining nutrients - they relish the taste and endeavor to develop new tastes. Food is more emotional than instinctual for humans. Beginning from being fed on breast milk, to the homely childhood smells that we relish, to the mouth-watery and titillating pictures of food, food plays with human emotions. This is the reason for the prominence of dining together, especially during the anti-caste struggles in Kerala, when the question of 'whom to eat with?' was of primary concern. It is very evident that the cuisines and eating practices are inextricably connected with the society and culture of the place. Food and dietary practices have multiple cultural connotations. Being an essential element of culture, the traditional cuisines of places is maintained intact and passed down the generations. Every unique cuisine has multiple tales to recount about the community, the country, the ethnicity, history, myths and values. With the trends of globalization, culinary practices and dietary habits tend to fuse, creating a cultural amalgamation. Cultural authenticity of the cuisine is always at question.

It is not just what one eats but also how one eats that matters. There was a time when the people of Kerala had not even heard of porcelain cookware. They cooked in utensils made of mud. Food was served to the lower castes in leaves or a hole dug in mud. Both the consumption and negation of food have equally important cultural and symbolic connotations, which are most often religious. People in India prefer eating sumptuous meals using their hands while the West prefers a clean, minimal meal, using spoon, fork and knife. The Indians prefer all their courses served together on the platter while the west prefers to have one followed by the next, starting off with appetizers and concluding the meal with desserts.

On a primary level, being quintessential for human survival, food is a common requirement, thus acting as a 'great leveler'. But on the other hand, food and dietary practices bring in distinctions among human beings, thus creating hierarchies and laying down many 'don'ts'. People who eat uncooked meat are considered primitive since the practice of eating raw meat predated man's basic culinary knowledge that cooked meat tastes far better. The same holds true with the binary between vegetarian and non-vegetarian dietary practices. The former is believed to be intellectually superior to the latter. The caste hierarchies play a great role here, since vegetarianism is primarily a Brahmanic, elitist dietary tradition. Veganism is considered to be an economically elite dietary practice. The same distinctions pass down to religious offerings too. Elite temples will have offerings like *Payasam* and *Laddu* while temples where raw meat or toddy is offered to the deity usually are branded to be the *Avarnaworship* places and the deity is ranked beneath the former. As an outcome of this symbolic and metaphorical relevance of food, food metaphors were often used in literature to simplify philosophical and didactic arguments. Elizabethan essayist Francis Bacon used the food metaphor of consumption in his *Of Studies* to educate the readers about the gradations in the process of reading. "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested (18). In order to communicate the inseparability of the Russian and the French revolutions, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar used the metaphor of *Puranpoli*, a more or less caste neutral Marathi dish of flatbread stuffed with jaggery. The French revolution constituted by the outer layer of paratha and the Russian Revolution constituted by the sweet stuff inside, in the absence of either, *Puranpoli* remains incomplete (Guru 6).

The present day food culture is not just limited to taste alone. It extends in all directions –to the presentation of food, associated to which the discussions about food porn rise, the economic factors behind a cuisine, the history and geography of a place and its influence on the cuisine, the semiotics of food and various other cultural implications of food. Culinary narratives and recipe books serve as great cultural documents. The historical records regarding culinary practices shed lights into the culture of the time. "The productive cross-fertilization between food studies, gender studies

and race-ethnic studies”(Carole and Esterik22) opened new vistas in the cultural analysis of food, culinary customs and dietary practices. Globalization of food raises questions about authenticity and historicity of a cuisine. The growth and flourishing of identity politics, feminism in particular, has changed the gender roles in cooking and dietary practices, almost subverting many of them. With the feminist movement gaining momentum and the kitchens undergoing a radical change, both culturally and architecturally, cooking patterns and eating habits change. With the popularization of the habits of dining out, trends of fast food and ready to eat food, Malayali's dietary practices underwent a radical shift that even led to a reorganization of the family structure into a more nuclear one. Food leaves long lasting impacts, not just on the taste buds, but also in all facets of human life.

The attempt made in the paper is to identify the shaping forces behind what is today called as the Malabar cuisine and identify the historical, geographical and cross-cultural factors that contributed to its creation. Malabar is an exotic location in Kerala, much sought after by food lovers. The term 'Malabar' is said to have etymologically derived from the word 'Malavaram', dignifying the geographical location by the side of a hill. Historically, 'Malabar' was an all-encompassing name and comprised of the whole South Western coastal area between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. The region was ruled by the Chera dynasty. Following the disintegration of the Chera dynasty, Malabar split into independent regions under the mighty chieftains such as the Zamorins of Calicut, the King of Travancore, the Kolathiris of Cannanore and the Valluvakonathiris of Valluvanad, to name a few. With the many foreign invasions that followed, the colonies set up by the British, the attacks of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, the Anglo-Mysore wars and the various migratory settlements were some of the historical factors that molded Malabar into the shape that we perceive today. The present day Malabar district with its capital at Kozhikkode, is part of the large sprawling area that Malabar once was. It comprises of the districts of Kozhikkode and Malappuram completely and few parts of Kasarkod, Kannur, Wayanad, Palakkad and Thrissur. The district is mostly inhabited by the Muslim population, often denoted by the name Malabar Mappilas.

Ever since the arrival of Vasco De Gama at Kappad in Kozhikkode district in 1498, every foreign invasion, ensuing wars, conquest and colonial ventures have played a considerable role in shaping the Malabar cuisine as we taste it today. Malabar had always been a prime destination for foreign invaders for many reasons. It had a long shore line, making it easy for the naval forces to anchor. Malabar was also a hotspot of all kinds of spices. Neolithic carvings have references of ships travelling to Musiris in search of exotic spices. A popular anecdote recounts Samoothiri's response to the lament that the British have plundered the spice wealth of Malabar. He is reported to have said that the British can take away only the pepper and not the *ThiruvathiraNajttuvela*, which will result in pepper vines sprouting afresh. Quite ironically, the Malabar pepper for which the invaders did not mind killing the Malayali natives is seldom used in any of the Malabar recipes. As an outcome of years of maritime trade with the West and the Middle East, the Malabar cuisine is an amalgamation of the Persian/Mughal cuisine, Arab, Portuguese, British, Dutch, Jewish and French cuisines, the predominant among them being the Arabic and the Persian influences. French cuisine blends into the Malabar cuisine when the French colonized the Mahe district. The cuisine of Malabar is dominantly non-vegetarian, given its proximity to the coastal regions. This curious blend of the cuisines from all parts of the world renders Malabar to be a culinary hotspot. The Malabar cuisine which is commercially marketed today as a highly 'authentic' cuisine of North Kerala is 'unauthentic' to a large extent.

The immigration of the Tulu Brahmins, today called by the name Embranthiris, in the 17th century, the Syrian Christian immigration led by the Persian merchant Thomas of Cana, popularly known as Knayithomma in Kerala and the immigration of the Gujarati merchants for trade on the streets of Kozhikkode had profound impacts on the cuisine of the North Kerala, Malabar in particular. The Gulf boom that resulted in mass emigration of the Malayali population of Kerala, particularly of Malabar, to the Middle Eastern Arab countries in the last decades of the 20th century also decisively shaped

the Malabar cuisine.

The most celebrated Malabar dish called *Biryani* is by itself a blend of cultures followed by local adaptations by the Mappilas and Thiyyas of the region. The etymological origin of the dish lies in the Persian root 'Birinj', meaning rice. *Biryani* is historically believed to be of Persian origin. It was a prominent dish of the Mughal kitchens. It was introduced to the Malabar Coast with the Islamic influences. Malabar *Biryani* makes use of the Khyma rice, which will keep the *Biryani* firm until the cooking process is complete instead of sticking together. Contrary to the other traditions of *Biryani* making, Malabar *Biryani* followed the Arab mode of Dum, cooking on heat from top and bottom, with burning charcoal pieces placed over the lid of the vessel. Rice and meat are cooked separately, then is layered alternatively and cooked on dum. To open the dum, known in the Malabar regions as *Dum pottikkal* is of utmost importance, carried out with culinary reverence. The classic Persian technique in *Biryani* making is that of marinating the meat in yoghurt. This is subverted by the Malabar Mappilas who adopted dum cooking as a means to render the meat soft. Serving *Biryani* with *Raita*, coconut *Chammanthi* and Dates pickle is also a blend of Middle Eastern and Kerala cuisines. The use of ghee instead of oil in the Malabar cuisines is also an after effect of the Arab influence. The Malabar *Biryani* was so popular in the Malabar regions, that the Thiyyas of Thalassery in the Kannur District adapted it in their own unique way, resulting in a variant of Malabar *Biryani*, popularly called today as Thalassery *Biryani*. Thalassery is hailed as the 'Mecca of Mappila cuisine'.

Malabar *Biryani* became extremely popular with the release of the 2012 movie *Ustad Hotel*, directed by Anwar Rasheed and scripted by Anjali Menon, telling the story of the growth, decline and resurrection of the Ustad Hotel, run by Karimkka, by the side of the beach in Kozhikkode, selling *Biryani*. The mouth watering presentations of the Malabar cuisine evoking positive gastronomical reactions from the viewers shot both the film and the cuisine of Malabar to International fame. Many Ustad Hotels mushroomed in different parts of Kerala following the success of the film. In contrast to the conventional generic classification of *Ustad Hotel* into a romantic family drama genre, the film also falls under the food porn genre, sensuously presenting the Malabar cuisine in its full glamour, with characters rolling their eyes and moaning in pleasure while eating. Ashiq Abu's *Salt and Pepper* had already proved that the Malayali sensibility was thickly interwoven with food, such that a gastronomically appealing cinema would sell. The film *Ustad Hotel* addresses two crucial questions: how to cook and why to cook. In his attempt to learn how to cook, Faizi starts seeing his Uppa and Vallyuppa in a new light and in his attempt to learn why to cook, he discovers himself. This discovery marks his coming of age. The extravaganza of food on screen, where even a glass of Malabar's special *Sulaimani* becomes unique in its own way leaves the audience mesmerized. When Faizi asks Karimkka what is the secret of the special *Sulaimani*, he replies that it is not spices, but *Mohabbath* added to the drink that makes it special. Drinking it should make you feel like the earth is slowly coming to a standstill.

It is a common belief that the people of Malabar are very broad-minded and hospitable, with the Epicurean principle of 'eat, drink and be merry' as their tagline. The film proves the same beyond doubt, when a nonprofit-minded Karimkka refuses to raise the price of the *Biryani*. It is not surprising that most of the Malayali restaurant owners all over the world hail from Malabar. Most of the diasporic business men from Malabar run small confectionaries to hotels to restaurant chains across the world. The abundance of hotels in and around Kozhikkode, Paragon, Rahmath, Bombay Hotel and Adaminte Chayakkada, to name a few is an indication of Malabar's affinity for food and their hospitable and warm nature.

Mandi, a ricedish, falling into the family of *Biryani* is quite popular in Malabar, in comparison to any other regions of Kerala. It is a spicy blend of rice and meat, said to have originated in Yemen. It is called *Kuzhimandi* in Malabar, since it is cooked in a deeply dug pit. Etymologically, the word *Mandi* is believed to be originated from the Arabic word 'Nada', denoting tender meat ([wikipedia.org/wiki/mandi_\(food\)](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/mandi_(food))). It also makes use of the dum technique and needs long

hours of cooking. The Arab traders who were used to a flatbread cuisine found Kerala's rice-based cuisine quite strange. The people of Malabar innovatively came up with *Arippathiri*, bread made using rice to resolve the culinary crisis. The most common drink that follows a *Biriyani* is a *Sulaimani*, an amber colored tea, devoid of milk with few lemon drops added. This concoction has Arab roots. Over time, the dates used in the Arab version of the tea was replaced by jaggery and then by sugar. The Arab version was said to be the favorite drink of Prophet Muhammed, which made the Malabar Mappilas name the drink as *Sulaimani*, 'Sulaiman' in Arabic, meaning peace. Alternatively, the word *Sulaimani* is said to be derived from *SulaimaniBohras*, a community of Saudi Arabia. A combination of sweet and sour flavors and with great digestive properties, *sulaimani* became part of the Malayali sensibility long before it was popularized by Vaikom Muhammed Basheer.

The Mittayitheruvu, popularized by the Malayali novelist S.K. Pottekkad in his novel *Oru Theruvinte Kadha* is alternatively called Sweetmeat Street, abbreviated as S.M. Street. Popular for its narrow lanes with shops selling almost anything, Mittayitheruvu takes its name particularly from the sweet shops. Bakeries such as Sankaran Bakery, Malabar Halwa stores and Oriental bakery are popular for the *Kozhikkoden Halwa* that they sell. The British called Halwa as sweetmeat, from which the street derives its name. S.M. Street serves today as a heritage spot in Kozhikkode. Middle Eastern influence is very visible in the Iftar feasts during the month of Ramzan. The dishes that adorn the table in the evening, to be consumed post the breaking of the day's fast has roots running deep into the Arab tradition. *Biriyani*, *Mandi* and *Sulaimani* are unavoidable parts of the Iftar dishes. Other dishes such as *Muttamala*, *Muttasirca* and *Aleesa* also share Arabian origins. The people of Malabar have a habit of attributing curious names to the dishes. They call a beautifully colored fish as the *Puthyappla Kora*, which means a new groom and mashed banana fry in the shape of a fruit pod as *Unnakkay*. *Muttamala*, a combination of sugar syrup and egg yolk cooked to a single thread consistency often serves as a starter to a many coursed Malabar meal. *Muttamala* is usually followed by *Aleesa*, the porridge with meat, wheat and spices and can act as a great appetizer. In the Middle East and in Pakistan, the dish is called *Harisa*.

With its affinity for non-vegetarian food, Malabar has the trend of inventing the non-vegetarian versions of popular vegetarian dishes. The *Ada* popular in the central Travancore gets adapted as *Irachiada*, *Puttu*, a common breakfast in Kerala gets adapted as *Irachpputtu* and dishes such as *Kunjippathiri* in chicken gravy and chicken *Samoosa* are common in Malabar. DhePuttu, a restaurant in Kozhikkode offers a wide range of *Puttu*, half of them being non-vegetarian variants. People of Malabar don't share the Travancore's taboo of consuming meat during auspicious occasions. They consume non-vegetarian recipes on festivals such as Vishu and Onam. Vishu is celebrated with more festivity than Onam in Malabar. The Malabar's affinity for stuffed meat also has its origin in the Middle East. With stuffed food being very popular, Arab cuisine had varieties of stuffed food, including egg stuffed inside a chicken, stuffed inside a camel. Following the trend, Malabar has recipes of *Kozhi Nirachath*, *Kozhi Kidakka* and *Nirach Porichath* as listed in the menu of Adaminte Chayakkada. Most Mappilas of Malabar necessitate that the meat they consume should be 'Halal', meaning 'sanctioned' in Arabic. Halal meat is prepared in accordance to the stipulations in the holy Koran. Koran mandatorily states that meat is edible only if the animal was killed with a recital of prayers. Many of the hotels and meat stalls in Malabar will have their bill boards specifying 'only Halal meat served here'. Malabar cuisine also finds close parallels to the Bagdhadi cuisine, the Soofi cuisine and the Iraqi cuisine. The ceremonial fashion in which the people of Malabar sit for a meal, or serve meals during marriages, with a large, common platter at the centre and people sitting in a circle, sharing food from it is borrowed from the Middle East. Even the language in which the Mappila songs are written is a blend of Arabic and Malayalam, called as Arabi Malayalam, a bridge language developed for communication.

Malabar had always been a culinary hotspot in history. As it happens with an ecological or linguistic hotspot, the more the number of people who visit a hotspot, greater are the chances for the loss of diversity (authenticity in the case of

the culinary discourse). Malabar had an influx of population from all parts of the globe for various reasons- to conquer and settle, to loot and plunder, to hire slaves, in search of the Tellichery Black Pepper and for geographical explorations. Hospitality being its trademark quality, Malabar welcomed all the visitors and their culture openheartedly, adapting itself in the process, resultant of which the traditional Malabar cuisine underwent a complete shift, blending in the cuisines of different parts of the globe. What is today called as the 'authentic' Malabar cuisine is the culturally amalgamated global blend, with the Middle Eastern influence highly prominent, adapted and made to suit the local availability of raw materials, thus rendering it quite 'unauthentic'.

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