

The Dietary Patterns of Keralites - A Historical Analysis

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Abstract: Kerala, the “Land of Spices”, has a rich culinary heritage influenced by its geography, climate, culture, and historical factors. Kerala's cuisine is characterized by the use of spices, coconut, rice, and locally grown vegetables, fruits, and seafood. Rice is a staple food, and coconut is a prominent ingredient in Kerala cuisine. Kerala's coastline provides access to a variety of seafood, including fish, shrimp, crab, and mussels. The cuisine strikes a balance between heat and flavours, using a variety of vegetables and proteins. Keralites enjoy a variety of snacks, including sweet and savoury options. Kerala also offers a range of breakfast options, including steamed rice cakes, appam, string hoppers, and *dosa*. Ayurvedic principles influence Kerala's dietary practices, emphasizing the balance of flavours, nutrition, and health benefits.

Keywords: Diet – Keralites – Food Culture – Diversity - Westernization

Universal language defines civilisation as every facet of human interaction. As a result, learning about daily activities is necessary to understand civilisation. Through their day-to-day activities, it reveals their cultural relevance and establishes their historical significance. In social science research, food-related themes are essential to understanding a society in its whole. Food is essential to everyone's daily existence and serves as a window into the cultures it has encountered. An easy way to determine someone's ethnic identity of any age is to look at their eating habits. For this reason, we may assert with confidence that the history of food in a culture is its unwritten history.¹

One may argue that food plays one of the most significant roles in the development and evolution of a society. It is the most important and first item in a person's daily life. All living things can get the nutrition, protein, and energy they need to grow from food. People on the planet cannot exist without food. In addition to sustaining society, food also helps people's immune systems grow. Food not only provides nourishment, but it also promotes the cultural advancement of both individuals and societies. Food is one of the most important indicators for developing a cultural understanding. Either directly or indirectly, it affects every facet of human existence.² The methods used to produce food, the materials used, the tools, the cooking medium, etc., all reflect the culture of the people who inhabit a given community and household. Keralans follow a variety of regional eating customs, and interactions with individuals from around the globe have enhanced the state's distinctive gastronomic legacy. The food that people consume and the eating habits they have are

essential elements of the culture of a society. Among other things, it stands for discrimination, affaire, love, and caring. Sharing meals is considered a symbol of closeness in society. All facets of that country's culture, including its eating practises, are accepted and supported by the migrant communities. They do not, however, completely disregard the flavour and cooking technique that are inherent to human civilisation. Food, then, plays a critical role in defining a person's culture as well as that of a society. The dietary habits of Keralans have been influenced by several factors such as social, cultural, economic, geographical, and political aspects. These components vary from area to area and from one site to another. The crops that are grown in each location have a big impact on the food choices of the inhabitants. The soil fertility, climate conditions, and geographic variances all affect the dietary habits of the people in each place. The eating habits of individuals from different regions of the state or nation vary.³

One of the most important elements of a culture's social functions is food. It had an impact on people's social, cultural, religious, and economic lives. Food served as a means of maintaining connections, including those of love, affairs, friendship, and so on. For social gatherings such as weddings, memorial services, birthday celebrations, naming ceremonies, religious ceremonies, and others, food preparation and service are crucial. The cuisine changes based on the religious beliefs and holidays of the local populace.

The state of Kerala is located in the southernmost part of India. The cultural customs of the people living in Kerala are entirely different from those of other countries and regions. Three meals a day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—are mandated for them. They also regularly offer tea, pastries, and other items. For breakfast, people usually eat appam, dosa, idiyappam, puttu, etc. Rice and curries, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, are offered for lunch; dinner consists of chappathi, rice, or kanji. The coconut is one of the main elements in Malayali food. It's an essential part of Keralite cooking. Keralan cuisine has a particular flavour and scent that comes from coconut, coconut oil, coconut milk, and other coconut products.⁴ There are many different kinds of drinks available on the Malayalis table. Fruit and lime juices are very beneficial to people's health. The Malayali market has a variety of goods, including sarbat and smoothies.

Keralan culture is entirely different from that of the rest of the country and the world. Factors such as topography, climate, soil, irrigation, agriculture, crop availability, and others influence the food habits of the Keralite people. The peoples choose their crops mostly

according to what is suitable for the area and the season. Rice has become the staple diet of the Malayali people. Coconut trees are thriving in large quantities in Kerala. Consequently, coconut is frequently used in Malay cooking. The eating customs and cuisine of the Malayali people are closely associated with coconut products, such as milk, cream, and oil. The use of spices by the state's residents is another noteworthy feature. Cumin seed, coriander, turmeric, cardamom, clove, cinnamon, pepper, chile, and garlic are the main seasonings they use in their cuisine. Spices have a flavour and scent that appeals to all palates. The backwater areas, rivers, and coastline of Kerala are additional attractions. It provides a cultural framework that is unique from other states. The Malayali people use fish in many different ways, both freshwater and saltwater. It is one of the main non-vegetarian dishes served at dinner. Fish curries and fish cooked in the Keralan style are popular among tourists and foreigners alike. One of the most important rice side dishes in Kerala is the fish curry.⁵

People love cooking using the traditional methods. The ingredients used in traditional Malayali cuisine are determined by the crops that grow in Kerala. Onam is one of the most important holidays for Keralites. It is largely recognised as the Hindu festival of the state. But today, regardless of caste or tribe, everyone in every society celebrates it. The tranquilly among the people of Kerala is demonstrated by this equality. The main attraction of Onam is the onasadhya. It's a vegetarian's delight. But of days, North Keralans' Onam feasts also feature non-vegetarian fare. The wealth and culture of the state are reflected in the ingredients and cooking techniques of traditional cuisine. Apart from being served at Onam, sadhya is also given throughout all other Hindu holidays in the region. The kitchen is regarded as a sacred area in every house. Keralan kitchen construction is based on vashtushastram. Cleaning the kitchen is considered a daily chore. The elder generation followed it strictly. People nowadays, though, have forgotten these concepts.⁶

She is the centre of attention in every home. In Indian tradition, a woman's main household duty is to cook. They cook for other people as well as their spouses and children. This shows how much they love and care about everyone. The ladies spend much of their time in the kitchen, making meals for the whole family. Women are seen as symbols of purity as well. They follow purity to the letter during the fasting season. In every household, the females' principal duty is to uphold ritual purity.⁷

Women's health has become a major concern in Kerala lately. The introduction of fast food and junk food, as well as shifting eating patterns, new technologies, and contemporary

lifestyles, had an effect on Keralans' health. Like junk food, modern cuisine is devoid of nourishing foods that would be good for our health and is full of empty calories. The vital element sustaining the health of a family is women. Women are more likely than men to be diagnosed with specific diseases and to compete in exclusive health care competitions. Women now labour in many different professions and in the same industries as men. The majority of women in today's world are too busy to spend their time in the kitchen. For daily meals, they in this case rely on bakeries and eateries. Chronic illnesses and conditions like diabetes, cancer, and heart problems are among the leading causes of death for women. The women are the family's intellectuals. They establish the fundamental institutions of human society, such as its political, social, and economic consent. Stable fats are present in most modern fast food items. Fast food-based Keralite diets are linked to higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic illnesses.⁸

Kitchenware serves one of the most significant purposes in Keralan kitchens. The folks prepared food using traditional utensils including chatty, kudam, kalam, and thavi, among others. Nonetheless, the impact of colonialism on modern kitchen design and equipment selection has changed. Conventional utensils are often replaced by steel, aluminium, and non-stick cookware in Malaysian cuisines. Additionally, there has been a substantial alteration in traditional cooking approaches. Adupp was traditionally used by the Keralites to prepare food. But in contemporary kitchens, people use gas, stoves, induction cookers, etc. The culinary methods and approaches employed by different civilisations differ.⁹

The pattern of food consumption has changed according to gender. The differences in dietary preferences across genders are influenced by an individual's age, health, and other factors. Humans eat in a fundamentally different way from birth to death. They select a range of dietary types in order to maintain their health. A woman's eating habits are entirely different from other people while she is on her period, pregnant, or giving birth. Nowadays, ladies can prepare meals in a very beneficial way by following the traditional manner. The eating preferences of older children and babies are quite different. Only properly selected solid food is frequently offered to babies in order to simplify digestion. Just like with newborns, the sick, and the old, digestion is important. Consequently, what such people eat is also influenced by their physical and general well-being.¹⁰

One of the biggest factors influencing peoples' food preferences is also society. One important aspect of Keralan society is caste. Early Kerala history was significantly influenced by social prejudice. It is a mirror of every aspect of the human condition. As a result, it is evident in the meals that individuals choose to eat and consume. In society, it is not acceptable. In the lowest villages, the jannies had a strong discriminating mindset. They also considered the employees as slaves because they were employed in their field. At the same time, the janmies made use of the fruits of their labour. Their overlords grant them no rights. Food that has been prepared for upper sections is not theirs. Dinner is not shared by the upper and lower castes.¹¹

The arrival of Jains, Buddhists, and Brahmins changed the outlook of Keralan society. The social, economic, and cultural domains of Keralan society were greatly impacted by them. A culture concentrated on temples consequently developed here. The state of Kerala saw tremendous transformations as a result of the Brahmin population. The upper class and the lower class were the two social classes that comprised society. The caste society had a number of taboos and prohibitions. The cleanliness and pollution of the society evolved during this period. Because of its purity, the upper class in Kerala's caste-based system declines to drink the water or food that comes from the lower classes. The Brahmins were considered the elite class and devout vegetarians under the caste system. They stay away from gourds, gooseberries, onions, garlic, and similar things. The Brahmins are the majority in the lowest areas. "Onam vannalumunnipirannalumkoranukumbilil thane kanji" is a proverb that describes the condition of the lower castes in Kerala. Not only are members of the lower class subjected to discrimination when it comes to eating, but also when it comes to serving, cooking, ingredient selection, etc.¹²

The caste system in Kerala is entirely different from the national caste system. Brahmins make up a significant share of the population in Kerala. They relocated from different parts of the country to Kerala. They became the characters of those who are near to God. In Kerala, Brahmins are responsible for the temple-related tasks. The underclass people were seen by them as tainted individuals. They avoid them in society as a result. The Brahmins followed a completely different diet than anyone else. They only consumed vegetarian fare. The Keralan society placed great importance on the uttupuras. It is where Brahmins are fed most frequently. Feeding Brahmins was a highly significant practise for the peasants. They prepared an extensive array of delicacies for the Brahmins.

Kerala's social reformers used food as a weapon in the fight against social injustice. They put in place an inter-dining system throughout the whole state. Achieving parity in food consumption with other individuals was their main objective. Sahodharan Ayyappan, Sree Narayana Guru, Sree Kumara Guru, and other notable individuals have made a substantial impact in the struggle against caste discrimination in Keralan society. Their contributions also changed the preconceptions held by the society. Intercaste dining was outlawed by the unjust system, which also gave the upper castes all rights while denying the lower castes any benefits. Keralan society now is committed to equality in all spheres. This is evident in the cooking habits and tastes of the populace, irrespective of social class or affiliation. The development of the modern, inclusive food consumption system is a result of the work and commitment of these leaders to Keralan society. Caste was evident in almost every facet of human activity; castes even influenced the distribution of food. It established social limits. The cruel nature of the society led to discrimination on the grounds of caste and nutrition. Beyond being a basic need for survival, food was utilised back then to symbolise the status and position of the elites.¹³

Keralan society comprises various castes and communities. This presents an unusually nice view for the communities in other parts of the country. Numerous castes and subcastes are said to converge in Kerala. The three largest religious groups in the US are Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These groups cook and eat the dishes that are unique to them. Their cooking techniques and tastes are distinct. They also imitate several ritualistic customs from other civilisations. Thus, one of the most crucial roles in Kerala's caste- and community-based system is food selection. Every caste has special meal choices.

Hindus eat vegetarian meals during fasting and on significant holidays like Onam and Vishu. During the holidays, both Christians and Muslims eat non-vegetarian meals. They also observe fasts in connection with religious holidays such as Bakrid and Christmas. The tribes are among the most significant aspects of Keralan society. They have very different nutritional habits than other people in the neighbourhood. Most of the resources they use come from forested areas. For the tribes within the forest, it established a pattern of food consumption. The cooking materials used by the indigenous population include bamboo rice, animal flesh, mushrooms, jackfruit seeds, and other fruits.¹⁴

Kerala is the home of numerous customs and religions. The difference in castes has an impact on the role that food plays in ceremonial behaviour. Every community and caste has

its own distinct ritualistic specialities. They offer a variety of prasadam to please many gods. Particularly significant in Kerala's caste-based Hindu society is the food offering to God. The diets of the deities vary from temple to temple. People sacrifice fruits, milk, nuts, and other meals to the gods as part of their religious rituals. The custom of offering food to the priest is considered a holy ritual by all castes. Feeding the priest is considered by the populace to be feeding their deity. To provide food for the underprivileged and hungry in society, a spiritual ceremony known as the annadhanam is conducted. In the name of nerchas, the Muslim community also performs this annadhanam at mosques or at homes. It shows religious harmony as well as a close bond between god and people. India offers a vast array of regional culinary traditions. The diversity of the state's regions has an impact on some areas of its gastronomic culture. Kerala's distinct food culture is seen in the state-specific cuisine and regional specialities. Regional cuisines of a state have an impact on people's eating habits within a culture. The state's eating patterns varied regionally due to factors like geography, culture, religion, and physical, social, and economic conditions. People in the country and the state often have a diverse range of gastronomic preferences that differ from place to place and region to area. The northern and southern halves of the state of Kerala have different eating and cooking customs.¹⁵ The ingredients for the preparation could be the same, but the cooking methods and flavours differ from north to south. It illustrates how food varies by region, which is important for eating habits and dietary choices. Seasonal differences in crops influence the eating habits of the people living in each area. There are many who refrain from consuming particular foods throughout the natural world's seasonal changes. It contributed to the people's traditional beliefs and well-being.

In addition to historical diversity, excellent, mostly non-vegetarian meals brought by cultural influences—especially the large numbers of Muslims and Christians—have significantly improved Kerala cuisine. Fish is a mainstay of Malayali cooking. Kerala is well-known everywhere, but particularly in the coastal areas and at beach resorts. Kerala's historical ties to the Tamil-speaking region are responsible for the popularity of dishes like sambar, idli and dosa, vada, rasam, and other dishes influenced by Tamil cuisine. European influence can be found in the abundance of bakeries serving cakes, cream horns, and yeast bread, as well as in Anglo-Indian cuisine.¹⁶

The perspectives of the nation and its states were altered by immigration from Europe. Their attention was caught by the profusion of spices. They affected every country in the

country. Their efforts resulted in a dramatic shift of the food field and the food cultures of the people. Globalisation, urbanisation, modernisation, colonialism, and other factors all had a big influence on the development of the state's new culinary culture. Their influence was enormous in the field of technologies. These technological developments opened up a whole new world for cuisine and food preparation. Cooking as it was traditionally practised was changed. The effects of colonialism and modernisation changed the state's traditional food and culinary culture. Imperialism changed the way people thought about food. The customary dining manner and utensils were also changed by colonial modernism. New crops and hybrids of old ones were introduced, changing the dietary habits of the state's populace. The acceptance and promotion of any culture from anywhere is the main attribute of Malayalis. As a result, colonial drinks like tea and coffee are now often consumed among Malayalis. The nation's palates were altered when Europeans arrived. The state now sells cuisine influenced by Indo-Europeans.¹⁷

Kerala's fertile soils, mild temperature, oceans, and inland canals drew in a lot of foreign visitors. To Kerala, they brought their customs and culture. Dissatisfied with their existing eating habits, the Malayalis experimented with dishes from several civilisations, including Arabian, Chinese, and European. In these circumstances, foreigners brought a wide range of meals, agricultural products, drinks, etc. Eating contributed to the development of a culinary culture in Kerala, which was accepted in addition to customary eating customs. The Malayali has a preference for foreign food, yet foreign guests were eager to sample Keralan fare. One of the best things about Kerala was the variety of food options. There are options for both foreign and domestic cuisine.

Kerala has continued to have social, economic, and cultural connections both within the country and beyond. It makes intercultural communication possible. A varied culture is developed throughout the society as a result of these exchanges. The colonisation of Kerala is regarded as a pivotal moment in its history. Foreign food contributions to Kerala include tapioca, potatoes, tomatoes, cashew nuts, capsicums, chillies, papaya, and so on. In contemporary times, Malayalis drank a lot of tea and coffee in their daily lives. Foreign relations have also played a role. One additional important outcome of foreign contact has been the creation of the eating system. The chair and dining table arrangement was first seen in Malayali families' kitchens. The bakery and restaurant systems in Kerala are also gifts from international relations.¹⁸

The greatest impact of colonialism on Kerala society's culinary culture came from the lower classes' exploration of the issue of food-based social discrimination. It reduced or eliminated Brahmanical hegemony in all facets of food culture. Keralan society was therefore liberated from the social evils brought forth by food.

The fast-food culture in Kerala is also said to have been influenced by colonisation. The younger generations have to deal with this on a daily basis. Commercialisation had a big impact on developed civilisations. The flow of people in this area was a major influence in the development of the fast-food culture. Many regions of the country sent people here, and some of them later left in search of work or better educational possibilities. Their busy lifestyles forced them to eat fast food. The taste and scent of these dishes drew every patron into the eatery. Eating out is a common practise that is used to gauge one's social position. Keralan restaurants now provide Chinese, Italian, French, Arabic, English, and other cuisines. The media has a major role in the spread of fast food businesses throughout society. These days, social media and YouTube teach us many cooking methods, both foreign and traditional.¹⁹

People's dietary habits are greatly influenced by the Malayalam cinema industry. The modern Malayalam film industry has paid close attention to the food culture. For singles or couples, the tea houses, bakeries, restaurants, or motels are meeting spots. They start talking over tea, coffee, juice, ice cream, etc. Tea, coffee, tea, and grape plantations provided the backdrops for most of the song's compositions. The distinctions between country and urban cultures are emphasised in these films. Instead of hunger, eating is a symbol of a privileged life in modern films.²⁰

Tourism is one of the most significant facets of the food industry. Kerala is the most popular tourist destination in India. Thus, the level of business adjusted to take into account the food. Today's visitors desired to taste the real delicacies of Kerala. Pachanganji is one of the most well-liked foods that draw tourists. As a result, numerous stores have opened in different parts of Kerala. Most tourists think that the traditional flavours of Keralan cuisine are superior than those of western cuisine. It increases the traditional cuisine's importance in the travel and tourism industry.

Globalisation has caused significant changes throughout the entire planet. It also affects people's eating habits and cooking techniques. Globally, social media, television,

magazines, and other media outlets have an impact on the females. These days, there are a tonne of publications and cooking-related TV programmes accessible. Magazines like Grihalekshmi, Vanitha, and others continue to have a significant impact on Malayali women. These publications cover both traditional and modern cooking techniques. Housewives from Malay communities have had a great impact on these. Cookbooks and culinary shows helped them prepare cutlets, cakes, hamburgers, and pizza in the style of a bakery. A large selection of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian cuisines are offered by these media. Modern Keralans are used to experimenting in the kitchen on a daily basis.

It is impossible to overestimate the role that diet plays in preserving health. A nutritious diet provides the body with nutrients, protein, and other building blocks for growth and development. Eating a healthy diet promotes not only a person's physical growth but also their mental and emotional wellness. However, most people these days choose to live in a fast-food or junk-food society. It is the cause of high blood pressure, sugar, cholesterol, and cancer. Junk food is not as popular among younger generations as poor eating habits. They barely consider the dangers and adverse consequences of it. It's also destroying people's health and money. While eating a healthy diet improved digestion, consuming junk food made people's digestive systems malfunction.²¹

The emergence and dissemination of technology, including social media, have fundamentally changed the way that people view food. The amount of time that youth spend in front of these media is increasing. The advertising agencies take advantage of this tendency. Multiple new meals and beverages were promoted through advertising. They mostly draw attention to their product by using commercials. Because people lead busy lives, they choose packaged items and fast food. Most of the time, people are ignorant of the health risks associated with these foods. It doesn't mean that people have to completely reject or give up eating at restaurants and fast food. Stick to eating at home and buy as little food from outside sources as possible.

Health is one of the most precious things that one may own. Fruits and vegetables are high in nutrients and help individuals live longer and in better health. Food choices have an effect on health. The dietary habits of individuals in any civilisation are always changing. These days, this is a common social process. In society, the creation of habits happens gradually through time rather than all at once. To support all individuals in leading a healthy

lifestyle, good behaviours are promoted. It helps to promote the development and emergence of people's self-assurance, vigour, prevention, etc.²²

The eating culture of the Malayalis tells us a story of invasion and cultural exchange rather than adhering to tradition. It is a historical fact that a century ago, many of the items given to Malayalis were not on their menu. The Malay eating culture has incorporated all of these delicacies over time.

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