

Food, Culture and Gender representation in a Chambyali Folksong

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Abstract

The relationship between food, culture, and gender is a complex and influential one. In many religious and cultural events, food plays a significant role, symbolizing traditions and beliefs. This paper focuses on a Chambyali folksong called "Aaya Basoya Maaye," which is sung during the Basoya festival in Chamba. Basoya is a celebration held on the third day of the Suhi Fair, and it is known for a traditional dish called pindri, specifically made for daughters in the family. The objective of this paper is to explore the interconnections between culture, gender, and food through an analysis of the folksong. By examining the ritualistic depiction of the native dish "pindri" and its association with women, the paper aims to highlight the representation of food, culture, and gender in the select folksong.

Keywords: Food; Culture; Gender; Basoya; Pindri

Introduction

Chamba, established by Raja Sahil Verman in the tenth century, faced a water scarcity issue during its early years. To resolve this problem, Queen Sunaina, the wife of Raja Sahil Verman, made a sacrificial demand. She requested an annual fair in her memory, where only unmarried daughters from the royal family would participate in the rituals. She also requested that all her belongings be given to her daughter, Champa, and that on the final day of the fair, known as basoya, Champa should receive special treatment from her father. King Sahil Verman accepted these demands, and thus, the tradition of basoya was established, where daughters are worshipped and served traditional dishes like pindri and khichdi. Basoya has since become an important cultural festival in Chamba.

The folksong "Aaya Basoya Maaye" is a conversational song where a daughter expresses her disappointment to her mother for not receiving an invitation to basoya. She expects either her father or her brother to invite her, but her mother explains that her father has grown older, and her brother is too young to fulfill this responsibility. The daughter becomes upset and asks her mother to eat pindri and send her the remaining leaves, as well as to drink gudaani (a jaggery-based drink) and send her the remaining water. She also reflects about women who don't have brothers and how they might feel left out during this festival. The song concludes with the daughter feeling unlucky and blaming her mother for being selfish.

The song is specifically sung during basoya, a festival celebrated on the last day of the Suhi Fair in Chamba. Pindri, a traditional dish made with kodra flour wrapped in its leaves, holds great significance during this festival. It takes three days to ferment properly and is prepared by women for their daughters, as well as distributed among relatives. Along with pindri, khichdi is also prepared as a complementary dish. Basoya has been and is still celebrated in Chamba for generations as a harvest festival, with Queen Sunaina and King Sahil Verman playing key roles in establishing its importance.

Food and Culture

Food and culture have a long history of intertwining, with food often serving as a means of identifying and representing a particular culture. Claude Levi-Strauss, in the first volume of his mythologies titled "The Raw and the Cooked," argues that food preparation reflects the society's culture. For instance, the gaddi culture in the lower part of Himachal Pradesh is symbolized by babru, a dish made of fermented bread that is fried in hot oil. Babru is a staple in religious ceremonies in this region and is considered essential to their completion. In contrast, upper Himachali culture is associated with Pakein, a stuffed fried bread. These distinct food traditions, along with various other aspects such as tribal specialties, food acquisition methods, preparation techniques, requirements, and serving styles, contribute to the differentiation of cultures.

The act of eating, both what we consume and who we share meals with, can strengthen connections between individuals and communities. Certain families prioritize eating together and eschew the use of utensils, believing that eating alone is disrespectful. Brahmins, for example, traditionally eat with their hands and avoid solitary dining, as they believe that their bodies are connected to the elements of nature and that their hands possess a certain power. In contrast, families influenced by Western culture often prefer dining at tables and emphasize dining etiquette, considering eating with hands to be unhygienic and time-consuming. They opt for utensils such as forks, spoons, or chopsticks.

Ingredients also play a significant role in cultural festivals. For instance, Milk is a core ingredient in many dishes prepared during Janmashtami, an important Hindu festival. Butter, kheer (rice pudding), and malai (cream) are some other examples. Ganesh Chaturthi is associated with the preparation of modak, stuffed and steamed dumplings, without which the festival's ceremonies are considered incomplete. Thus, numerous cultural celebrations share a deep connection with specific foods and ingredients, making them integral to these events.

Culture not only influences food but also impacts individual food choices. South Indians, for instance, favor curd and rice, a combination readily available in every street. They enjoy a variety of curd and rice dishes. In contrast, this combination might seem unfamiliar or unusual to North Indians, who tend to prefer spicy food, particularly dal (lentils) and rice. Similarly, in the upper regions of Himachal Pradesh, people prefer natural vegetables and simple food, such as Siddu (stuffed dumplings) and ghee. Siddu is particularly popular in Kullu and Shimla and is believed to provide warmth during winters. Upper Himachalis also relish guchi (Himalayan mushroom) with rice or roti (bread). In contrast, the lower Himachalis prefer regular mushrooms and enjoy stuffed bread and roti. The temperature difference between the upper and lower parts of Himachal Pradesh contributes to the distinct food cultures in each region.

Food carries various cultural and civilizational values. Some states are known for their distinctive food habits, such as Himachal Pradesh, which is known for its "Dham." Dham is a type of feast that includes dishes like madra, sepu badiya, mahani, chane da khatta, kadhi, mithe chawal (sweet rice), and dal. Although the specific items may vary across districts, Dham remains an essential component of every

ceremony in Himachal Pradesh. Similarly, biryani is closely associated with Hyderabad, known for its Hyderabadi spices and flavors. Kerala is famous for its "idli" (fermented rice balls) and "sambar" (vegetable stew). These examples highlight how food plays a significant role in defining and representing cultural identities.

Food and Gender

Gender has a different significance when it is associated with food. Gender can be correlated to multiple things in context of food like agriculture, preparation, intake, and contribution. It is not wrong to say that women share a strong connection with food. Women are more likely to go to fields, sow vegetables and nourish them. According to 2022 Indian Oxfam report "Agriculture sector has employed 80% women in India" (web n. pg.). Also, the Oxfam Economic survey of 2017-18 notices that with socio-cultural isolation, 'feminization' of agriculture sector has been witnessed. The term Feminization of agriculture refers to "the quantifiable increase in women's contribution in agriculture sector in the progressing world" (web n. pg.). Feminization in agriculture has broadened the roles of women, they are active cultivators, entrepreneurs, and labourers too.

Denise Sajdl suggests that there is a perception that females are both food preparers and food consumers, while males are only categorized as consumers (Sajdl, n.d., para. [page number]). Traditionally, it has been expected that females take on the responsibility of preparing food for the family. Numerous beliefs are associated with this notion. It is widely held that "a female's duty is to cook food for the family, while a male is expected to provide financially" (web n.p.). These long-standing beliefs have contributed to the establishment of a "women as housewives" culture within society. This culture restricts women to household chores such as housekeeping, childcare, grocery shopping, cleanliness maintenance, cooking, and tending to the family's other needs. Christopher Muscato highlights in his work, "The Changing Role of Women in Food Consumption & Production," that women have made significant contributions in processing and preparing food products for consumption (Muscato, p. 28).

Women have historically maintained a deep connection with food, exhibiting flexibility in their roles related to it. In the past, their involvement ranged from gathering and providing sustenance for their families through agricultural activities to ensure the necessary income for food purchases. While times have changed, this bond remains intact in a different context. Nowadays, rather than tending to fields, women are increasingly found in offices, yet their objective remains unchanged: to secure sustenance for their loved ones. Today, many women have taken on the role of primary breadwinners, just as they once provided nourishment through agricultural pursuits.

Select folksong portrays a long-lasting connection of 'pindri' with 'Chambyali culture' and with the females of Chamba. It does not only signify the eating habits of the folks of the city but also gives an identity to them. It is only prepared and celebrated by the tribes of Chamba. The tradition of inviting their daughters and preparing pindri on basoya started with King Sahil Verma who adhered to the wishes of his wife, Rani Sunaina. In the folksong, the speaker says

"Aaya basoya maaye panje satte ,Minjo ghare da saada ni aaya ho"

(The festival of basoya has come, yet I have not received any invitation!)

The speaker is expressing her grief to her mother and asking her that she hasn't been invited for basoya. These lines clearly represent the culture of invitation and its role. She doesn't want to come on her own but wants her to be invited by her parents. Invitation culture was and is still a dominant part of folk. In this culture, people are generally invited by the hosts of the function. Going without invitation is

considered an act of shame. Invitation is not only a formal process of bidding on someone, but it is a way of showing gratitude and respect to the invitees. This culture also has so many aspects like food invitations, occasional invitations, festive invitations and many others. Following the same culture, the speaker is sad for not receiving any invitation from her parents and considering it shameful to go on her own.

Pindri is directly associated with basoya as it is prepared with the newly harvested crops and is concluded with this festival. Many other items like 'charodi' (a roti in the shape of net, made up of wheat), 'laddu' (wheat molded in spherical form), and 'kodre ki roti' (bread made up of kodra's flour) and 'khichdi' are prepared amongst which pindri is the prominent dish. Pindri is usually served with gudaani (mixture of jaggery, milk and water).

"Pindri ta pindri maaye apu khaaye, minjo pindri de pathe ta bheje ho"

(You eat pindri yourself, just send me the leaves)

In the given lines, the speaker's emotions and sentiments are clearly expressed. The speaker appears to be highly irritated, as indicated by the line "you eat pindri yourself." The speaker directs her anger towards her mother, expressing a desire for her mother to consume the pindri herself and send only the remaining leaves. Despite feeling upset about not receiving the complete pindri dish, the speaker still values the significance of the festival and wants to participate in some way. This demonstrates a strong connection between the speaker and her culture.

The lines also highlight the deep connection between women and food. In this instance, the speaker is specifically requesting her mother to enjoy pindri, without mentioning her father or brother. Furthermore, the speaker expresses sadness over not having received pindri herself, which underscores the strong association between females and this food item. These lines reveal that women not only play a crucial role in the preparation of pindri, but they are also its primary consumers within Chambyali culture. It is customary for daughters to be the main consumers, while elder female family members are entrusted with its preparation.

Conclusion

The paper explores the genre of oral literature, specifically focusing on folksongs. It examines a popular folksong called "Aaya Basoya Maaye," which holds great significance among the people of Chamba.

The introduction of the paper provides important background information to understand the cultural importance of the song. It begins by discussing historical events from the early eleventh century, shedding light on the socio-cultural context of the city. The introduction highlights the roles and contributions of King Sahil Verman and Queen Sunaina, who played pivotal roles in shaping the culture of Chamba. Queen Sunaina's selfless sacrifice not only brought water to the barren city but also enriched its culture.

The paper initiates the discussion by exploring the link between food and culture. It argues that culture has a direct influence on people's food choices, tastes, and identities, emphasizing the inseparable connection between food and culture. Furthermore, the paper highlights the close association between women and food, asserting that despite changes in agricultural practices over time, women's connection to food remains integral.

The latter half of the paper analyzes the folksong and examines how it represents the themes of food, culture, and gender within its selected lyrics. The song explicitly portrays the association between "basoya" and females with "pindri," indicating that "pindri" is not only a crucial component of "basoya" but also holds significant meaning for women.

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