

An Inquisitive Gastro-Political Survey of Tribal Foodways in Pushpamma's *Kolukkan*

Sreelakshmi K.P.*

Abstract: The paper tries to analyze the diverse politics involved in food transactions in the tribal narrative *Kolukkan*. The novel is a repository of the life and history of the *Urali* tribal community in Kerala. The author Pushpamma molds food habits and culinary practices as an integral part of her community's culture. A close reading of these habits and practices points to the hidden meanings of social hierarchy, ranking, privilege, power, and agency at the intersections of age, caste, class, and gender. Food is an effective cultural lens that magnifies human evolution, existence, and interactions. Drawing inspiration from the methodological framework of Arjun Appadurai's 'gastro-politics', the paper elucidates the layers of politics embedded in the foodways within and outside the *Urali* tribal community. The various stages of foodways: procurement, preparation, distribution, consumption, and disposal create harmony, and unity as well as tensions and conflicts among people. It is potent enough to unite and separate people. Though tribal communities are widely studied centering their customs, practices, belief systems, folklore, and socio-economic backgrounds, research on their culture through foodways is minimal. Hence, the reading is significant as food is one of the richest sources of cultural expression.

Keywords: tribes, gastro-politics, foodways, hierarchy, exploitation, *Kolukkan*

INTRODUCTION

The lynching of Madhu, a tribal man from Attapady in Kerala accused of stealing food gathered attention at the national level. The images and video of the heinous act went viral on media platforms. He was brutally beaten up by non-tribals on charges of alleged theft in February 2018. The cause of his death was internal injuries due to beating. To put it in gastronomical terms, Madhu is the victim of

* Sreelakshmi K.P. (✉)

Department of English and Cultural Studies, Christ University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

e-mail: sreelakshmi.kp@res.christuniversity.in

gastro-politics in its extreme. As Arjun Appadurai (1981, 495) writes, gastro-politics is the “conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food”. These conflicts exist in every culture. The paper analyzes explicitly the instances of gastro-politics in *Kolukkan*, a tribal narrative published in 2021. The novel could be celebrated on two grounds: it is the first written literary production from *Urali* tribal community; penned by Pushpamma, the novel unfurls the unheard and unseen difficulties and turmoil of *Urali* women, the bearers of the multifaceted disadvantages and discriminations in the society. Along with the writings of Narayan, C K Janu, and Mayilamma, *Kolukkan*’s entry to the countable tribal writings is commendable.

Many cases related to hunger, malnutrition, and, consequences of assimilated food habits are reported from various tribal settlements in Kerala in the last couple of years. Kerala is home to thirty-six tribal communities. Each tribal community is distinct in its culture, traditions, practices, belief systems, and lifestyle. It is painful to realize that, tribal communities, who once lived in harmony with nature, have been undergoing noticeable transitions in their lifestyle, especially in foodways. Food is more than fuel; it is a potent tool for contemplation. Food practices are connected to culture and hence, identity. Belasco (2008, 10) writes, “food choices are the result of a complex negotiation among three competing considerations: the consumer’s identity (social and personal), matters of convenience (price, skill, availability), and a sense of responsibility (an awareness of the consequences of what we eat)”. It connects and splits people regionally, socially, and culturally. “Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group members and to set groups apart” (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 109). Food studies span health, nutrition, economy, business, marketing, and so on. Talking about the compartmentalization of food studies in the academic realm, Amy B Trubek (2019, 198) opines:

Food production was constrained by agronomy. Food transformation and distribution tended to get owned by engineering and business. Food consumption was brought into the realm of sciences by the disciplines of nutrition and food science. But the *meaning* of food, in and around the requirements of organizing ways to make food and provide it to individuals and societies, often was ignored and marginalized.

The emergence of Critical Food Studies facilitates varied opportunities to critically analyze foodways and culinary practices. The area discusses and contemplates food's role in culture, identity, race, class, caste, and gender realms. "The study of food, cooking, and eating, once a subject limited to nutritionists and a few anthropologists studying the symbolic importance of foodways among 'natives', has expanded to include sociology, history, philosophy, economics, and the interdisciplinary fields of Women's Studies, American Studies and Cultural Studies" (Avakin and Haber 2005, 1). Foodways explicate the hidden layers of any social structure and its functioning.

METHODOLOGY

Arjun Appadurai coined the term gastro-politics to show the eruption of conflicts over food transactions. He looks at food as a semiotic system in a particular social milieu. He elaborately discusses the term in the South Indian Tamil Brahmin context. He scrutinizes the term in three layers: the conflicts erupt over food transactions at home, at a marriage feast, and in a temple. Appadurai (1981, 498) vividly explains three situations that engender conflict over food at home: "when one or more of the relevant principles is inherently ambiguous; when two of the principles are in apparent contradiction in a particular context and when though the principles are clearly grasped, incumbents of key roles are in conflict over actual gastronomic compliance with the expectations associated with these roles." Talking about the marriage feast, the problems for the core host (bride's parents) are deciding who should be given preference in seating, and who should be fed in which session of a particular meal. On the contrary, food transactions in temples are fundamentally different, it does not function on kinship, but on the collective participation of worshippers. He notices distribution of *prasadam* (leftovers of the divine meal) in the temple premise features conflicts, "transvalued leavings of the divine meal is perceived not simply as emblems of honor, but as constitutive features of the rights, roles, and ranks of donors, priests, temple servants, and worshippers at-large" (Ibid., 506). The non-Brahmins confronted utter humiliation through food distribution. They were not allowed to use the plates used by Brahmins; they were made to stand while Brahmins were seated during eating. Most importantly, *prasadam* was tossed at them as if they were 'dogs and cattle'. The gastronomic dishonor was part of the plan to exclude non-Brahmins from their rightful share in the worship of the

deity. All these readings point to the politics involved in food transactions at the intersections of age, caste, class, and gender.

GIST OF THE NOVEL

Kolukkan is not a linear plot documenting a single person's life journey, instead, it is an effort to bring forward the unnoticed and unseen lives of the *Urali* tribal community. The novel unleashes the history and sufferings of the community through countless characters. The main stories are narrated through the memories of Chemby who is on her deathbed. The community's beliefs, customs, agriculture, hunting, puberty rituals, death rituals, displacement, intrusion, and exploitation by non-tribals are brought to light through the novel. One of the poignant elements of the plot is the plight of women in the community. It is customary that girls get married before even attaining puberty, that too, to men of thirty and above. There is a special place called *pallapuram* where women stay during menstruation and childbirth. Nobody would accompany or assist a woman during childbirth. She had to take care of everything including cooking those days. Continuous pregnancies and improper care led to the untimely death of many girls and women in the community. The reader gets astonished at the expertise through which every girl handles different stages in her life cycle, especially childbirth. The women became a puppet at the hands of the head of the tribe. He fulfilled his sexual fantasies neglecting all resistance. Nobody dared to question him. His power and authority were spread in every part of the settlement. The novel ends with the death of many people including Chemby at stretch. Nobody understood the real reason for mass death. The community accepted nature's will and moved on at destiny's hands.

DISCUSSION

Gastro-politics within the community

As Mary Douglas (1972, 61) puts it, "if food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed". The different stages in foodways procurement, preparation, distribution, consumption, and disposal carry layers of meaning. Meaning can refer to "its significance; the purpose behind preparing or consuming it; the identity or beliefs expressed through it; the associations or emotions attached to it; the thing or idea it refers to; the use of food to demonstrate create status; and its representation of larger, historical, social and cultural patterns" (Long 2017, 205). It is a

universally acknowledged and challenged statement that the kitchen and cooking are women's domains. "Traditionally food processing was women's work. Women have been involved in cleaning, grinding, and powdering grains and condiments: cleaning, salting, and drying fish once it comes ashore: and preserving fruits and vegetables" (Desai 1996, 107). In *Kolukkan*, Kanikkaran's (head of the tribe) first wife oversees distributing rice to everyone on special occasions. It is customary to keep groceries in the tribal head's house and the distribution is supervised and done by Nechi (the head's first wife). During *Vishu*¹ Kamalakshi (the head's second wife) came to collect rice for the next day. Her request for rice created tension between the two. Nechi replied "it would be good if everyone acts wisely. Otherwise, there would be utter poverty in *Karkidakam*² and nobody would be able to see a single morsel" (Pushpamma 2021, 80). Kamalakshi did not like Nechi's authority over food stock and her reply was an insult to her. She left the place without uttering a word, but her face conveyed her dislike. Appadurai talks about the whims and fancies of senior women toward other women through food transactions; how they show power and authority through the kitchen domain: "The hearth is under the direct control of the women of the household, who are under the supervision of the senior female or the senior daughter-in-law" (Appadurai 1981, 497). He continues, "hierarchy between women is expressed in the management of the cooking process, which is organized on principles of seniority and affinity among women" (Ibid., 498). Here, Nechi shows her agency and authority over others through her hold on food stock. Though Nechi is a powerless, submissive character in most of the other parts of the novel, she decides the quantity of the grains distributed to everyone during special occasions in the settlement. Her statement "nobody is willing to listen when we talk sense" (Pushpamma 2021, 80) suggests her command over others since she oversees rice distribution.

The hierarchy in eating is a vivid way of expressing ranks in a society or any given community. There are some elemental sets of widely shared principles concerning the handling of food. Appadurai (1981, 497-498) writes, "social precedence in the food cycle is based on age and sex grading with primacy generally going to the older and

¹ *Vishu* is celebrated on the first day of *Medam* (a month in the Malayalam calendar following in Kerala) symbolizing the beginning of spring and harvest.

² *Karkidakam* is the last month of the Malayalam calendar following in Kerala.

male members of the hearth group. Domestic food transactions express the superiority of men largely through their priority in being served food, the positions which they physically occupy, and their disengagement from the cooking process”. If we look at the novel, the status or position of a person plays a vital role in determining the hierarchy in eating rather than age and sex. It is compulsory and customary that *Kanikkaran* eats first on special occasions and gatherings. Even kids in the community are aware of these rules. Pushpamma (2021, 82) writes, “they [kids] very well know that nobody would get anything to eat until *Kanivaliyappan*³ finishes his food”. The rules of eating during any celebration are as follows: the freshly prepared food would offer to Gods and forefathers, *Kanikkaran* would eat after that and finally the kids and other members could eat. *Kanikkaran* displays his status and authority over others through eating. He knows many hungry stomachs including kids are waiting for food. But he does not even care about them. He enjoys it lavishly, “he was eating slowly, neglecting all the looks. All others waited so patiently without sharing their pain and hunger” (Ibid., 83). *Kanikkaran*’s possessiveness of his culinary tools is mentioned in the narrative. He owns a plate, a big brass basin, two pots, and a clay pot. He does not like anyone touching them, including his wives. Sometimes, he scolds his wives for touching his possessions. As kids started crying because of hunger mothers moved away from there taking them. They know, “they might not get food if *Kanikkaran* turned angry” (Ibid.). It is striking to note that, kids always complained to their mothers, not their fathers when they are hungry, “started stomach ache because of hunger, give something to eat mamma” (Ibid., 82). Sudhir Kakar (1996, 81) writes “an Indian mother is inclined towards a total indulgence of her infant’s wants and demands whether these be related to feeding, cleaning, sleeping or being kept company”. On the other hand, kids would eagerly wait for their fathers to return from the forests with food. The notion of the father as the breadwinner of the home and the mother as the ‘fostress’ is reinforced in these contexts. At the same time, there are many instances in the novel in which men and women go together to the forest in search of food. But feeding the kids remains largely a ‘woman’s responsibility’

³ *Kanivaliyappan* / Grandpa, the word kids used to address the head of the tribe with respect.

and kids are also aware of the fact that mothers administer kitchen affairs.

The relationship between people of the same community and other tribal and non-tribal communities is explicated through food transactions. The transactions declare the degree of intimacy they share with others. There is a famous line from *Taittiriya Upanishads*, ‘*Atithi devo bhava*’ meaning ‘guest is god’. Guest should be considered Gods and treated with utmost respect and politeness. *Urali* tribal community considers *Mannan* tribal community as lower in strata. Once a *Mannan* family arrived at the settlement. The head of the tribe instructed Chemby to ‘give’ them food, “Give something to eat, Chemby. Don’t touch them” (Pushpamma 2021, 195). Chemby and his friends looked at the *Mannan* family eating corn gruel under the tree. They are not even allowed to enter the yard. Vellan, Kelan (from another *Urali* settlement), and some non-tribals paid a visit to *Kanikkaran*. They were allowed to enter the house only after sprinkling consecrated water on them (to purify them). Nechi served hot gruel to them inside the house. On another occasion, another *Urali* family visited the house of Veluppi in the settlement. Veluppi, the hostess wholeheartedly said, “I will prepare rice. Kids can have tapioca once it is cooked” (Ibid., 273) and started preparing crushed chillies realizing the need of the kids. The different ways in which the guests are served food point to their relative status, rank, and intimacy with the community. In Appadurai’s (1981, 501) words, “food can be made to encode gastro-political messages by manipulating the food itself (in terms of quantity or quality) or by manipulating the context (either in terms of precedence or of degrees of commensal exclusivity). This can be achieved by abbreviating the meal in terms of the number of courses or the quantities of particular food items, by altering the serving order or the seating order”. The *Mannan* family was served food under the tree away from home and the close-knit relatives were given food inside the home, that too multiple courses including tapioca and rice.

Gastro-politics outside the community

One of the important stages in foodways is procurement. Tribal communities have their distinctive way of procuring food in the earlier days. Hunting, fishing, and agriculture were the main ways of finding food. In addition to that, they would buy countable items from outside. The *Urali* community is no exception in this regard. Their food-procuring methods find a decent space in the plot. The author

poignantly narrates the encroachment and exploitation by the British and non-tribals in the settlement. The earliest tribal history of India furnishes the aftermath of colonialism in tribal life. Virginus Xaxa (2005, 1363), one of the leading scholars of Tribal Studies in India opines the idea of ‘tribal’ itself as a ‘colonial construct’: “The use of the term ‘tribe’ to describe people who were different from those of the mainstream civilization has been viewed as a colonial construction”. The Europeans found people living in the forest with a distinct way of life, language, and culture. They categorized these groups as ‘uncivilized tribals’ as part of their documentation and census data.

The *Urali* tribal community faced many difficulties with the arrival of the British. Displacement is one of the hardships. An analysis of the statistics of displacement across the world illustrates tribal communities are the most displaced sections due to various Government and Corporate developmental projects since they live in resource-rich areas (Mohanty 2005). The *Urali* is one of the displaced tribal communities due to the construction of the Mullaperiyar dam (novel’s blurb). In the novel, the head says, “The disturbances of *Sayip*⁴ started with the construction of the dam” (Pushpamma 2021, 179). The community’s attachment to their ‘homeland’ is emotive, “our forefathers died in this forest. Where should we go leaving this place”? (Ibid., 153). A forceful shift from one place to another led the community to utter starvation and incurable psychological trauma.

There is a compelling narration of a gastro-politics instance marking the brutality of the British towards the meek and submissive community. The community was accused of trapping and killing a barking deer. They were asked to leave their settlement. It is disheartening to note that it was the time of harvest and they were not even allowed to reap their month’s toil. The head of the tribe requested,

kindly allow us to take this year’s harvest. It is *puthari*⁵ in the next ten days. It is better to leave the place after *puthari*. Our kids would be in utter poverty. There is no point in living if we cannot take the harvest (Pushpamma 2021, 151).

But the reply was beyond imagination, “obey what is said. If you are asked to leave, do it. Giving you two-day time. You should leave the forest within that. The situation would be different if you are seen here

⁴ *Sayip* is a colloquial term for a White Foreigner.

⁵ *Puthari* – literally means ‘new rice’. It’s a celebration after paddy harvest.

again” (Pushpamma 2021, 157). The mighty ruler’s (head of the tribe) eyes welled up for the first time in his life. *Kanikkaran* was so proud that his proper supervision was the sole reason for good yield.

The instance can be analyzed on two grounds: firstly, the community was accused and punished for a crime committed by non-tribals. The barking deer was trapped by the *Thevar* community (a dominant caste in the Tamil Nadu district of India). Vellan, a member of the *Urali* tribal community witnessed that. But, to Vellan’s misfortune, the Whites saw him at the crime scene. The people were unjustly punished for somebody else’s crime. Secondly, the intensity of the punishment was more painful. They were forced to leave their ‘place’ by giving up a year’s food. The verdant field and other products were the results of backbreaking hard work. Shifting to another place without harvest means, utter poverty is in store for the future days. Everyone including kids had to suffer each day. They lost hope. “Life is moving from starvation to utter starvation” (Pushpamma 2021, 153). The actions of the Whites on the third day when they came for evicting the community were unpardonable. They entered the huts and threw whatever they saw at their sight. It included pigeon peas and other necessary edibles they saved from the last year’s harvest. They became dispossessed in a single day. They lost produce from the last harvest and could not take the year’s yield. The community is destined to face utter poverty for somebody else’s crime. The Whites left the place rubbing out everything and took two pots of *ganja* (cannabis) as well. The incident is more than a mere tension or conflict. The Whites ruthlessly denied the community’s right to reap their months of hard work. A similar situation happened in the novel in which the community was asked to leave their settlement. It was under the order of a nameless Queen. The Whites destroyed their food stocks without any mercy. Though there are no clear indications in the novel, it can be assumed that the agricultural yields might have been taken by the Britishers and non-tribals in both situations.

Non-tribals found trade as an effective medium to exploit the uneducated tribals. Tribals who did not know measures, numbers, and calculations became victims of laymen’s greedy hands. In the novel, there were Muslim vendors who came to sell clothes, culinary, and agricultural tools in the settlement. They did not ask for money, instead, they demanded agricultural produces in return. *Kanikkaran* was willing to give whatever the Muslim vendor asked for in return. These include rice, honey, millet, and most importantly *ganja* and

tobacco. Even if he sells entire clothes and vessels in the settlement, it would not be a loss for him. During a sale, the vendor suggested, “you can take all these things and give paddy and other things in return next time”(Pushamma 2021, 195). The head of the tribe nodded his head in happiness without realizing the gravity of the loss they had through a single sale.

CONCLUSION

Food is an indispensable part of human existence. It is metamorphosing into a mighty tool to dissect society’s evolution, existence, culture, interaction, and well-being with the emergence of Food Studies and Critical Food Studies. The representation of foodways in literary works is useful in analyzing the lost and forgotten cultures, especially that of marginalized and diasporic communities. The countable tribal narratives from Kerala are rich sources of their distinct and varied culture. The reading of *Kolukkan* clearly states that foodways and culinary practices proclaim a wide range of human emotions: happiness, sadness, sharing, power, possessiveness, and envy. The food transactions in the narrative not only show their cultural identity but also explicate the class and gender politics in and outside the *Urali* community. Within the community, food acts as an instrument for ‘graded inequalities’, whereas it turns out to be an instrument to exploit the community members by non-tribals and the British. As Appadurai’s notion, the food itself is a manipulating system pointing to the hierarchy, status, rank, power, and agency in any given society.

REFERENCES:

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia. *American Ethnologist*, 8(3): 494–511.
- Avakian, Arlene, and Barbara Haber. 2005. *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Belasco, Warren.2008. *Food: The Key Concepts*. Berg: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Desai, N. 1996. “Women’s Employment and their Familial Role in India.” In A.M. Shah, B.S. Baviskar and E.A. Ramaswamy (Eds.), *Social Structure and Change: Women in Indian Society*, pp. 98-113. Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Douglas, Mary. 1972. Deciphering a Meal. *Daedalus*, 101(1): 61–81.
- Kakar, Sudhir. 1996. *The Indian Psyche*. Viking Publications.
- Long, Lucy M. 2017. “Meaning-Centered Research in Food Studies.” In Janet Chazan and John Brett (Eds.), *Research Methods for Anthropological Studies of Food and Nutrition*, pp. 204-217. Berghahn Books.

- Mintz, Sidney W., and Christine M. Du Bois. 2002. The Anthropology of Food and Eating. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 99–119.
- Pushpamma. 2021. *Kolukkan*. Kottayam: DC Publishers.
- Trubek, Amy B. 2019. “Introduction to Food Studies Methods.” In Janet Chrzan and John Brett (Eds.), *Food Culture: Anthropology, Linguistics and Food Studies*, 2, pp. 197–203. Berghahn Books.
- Xaxa, Virginius. 2005. Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(13): 1363–1370.