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Food system and culture of eating in India

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Abstract

India has one of the oldest civilizations in the world with a rich cultural heritage. In the sacred book of the Hindu called 'Bhagavad Geeta', foods are classified into three categories based on property, sanctity and quality – Sattvika, Raajasika and Taamasika. Sattvika food, which denotes food for prosperity, longevity, intelligence, strength, health and happiness includes fruits, vegetables, legums, cereals and sweets. Raajasika food, which signifies activity, passion and restlessness includes hot, sour, spicy and salty foods. Taamasika food is intoxicating and unhealthy.

Keywords: health, food, diet, vegetarian, non- vegetarian, regional foods

1. Introduction

Hindus are traditionally vegetarian but many non-Brahmins are non- vegetarians. Brahmin Hindu's do not eat garlic, onion and intoxicants. Ethnic Indian foods have social importance for celebrations particularly during festivals and social occasions. The Indian food is spicy and salt is added directly by cooking seasoning such as soy-sauce and mono sodium glutamate are never used. The Dietary culture of India is a fusion of the Hindu-Aryan culture and the Tibetan-Mangolian culture influence by the ancient Chinese cuisines with modifications based on ethnic preference and sensory likings over a period of time.

Use of fingers to grasp food items for feeding remains a traditional features of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim dietary cultures in India. The practice of washing hands and mouth prior to and after meals, which was common during the Vedic period (1500-800 B.C.), was part and parcel of the dietary rules, and etiquette of the Hindus. There is no mention of use of table cutlery or chopstick in the ancient dietary culture of the Hindus and Muslims.

2. History of Indian fermented/leaven foods

Indian foods have been well documented even before 3,000 B.C. based on historical documents and archeological evidence. Jalebi, a fermented cereals-based pretzel-like product, has been known as northern Indian areas since 1450 A.D. and is probably of Arabic or Persian origin. The Tamil poet Chavundaraya has historically described the preparation of Idli, a fermented cereal-le-gume food, in 1025 A.D., Dosa a traditional fermented pancake food made from rice and black gram, was first noted in the Tamil Sangam literature in India in 6 A.D., Dhokla a fermented mixture of wheat and Bengal gram of western India, was first mentioned in 1066 A.D., Idli and Dosa are the cultural foods of Tamil, Telgu, Malayalam, and Kannada people of Dravidian origins in India. Besides its uses as breakfast, South Indians eat these cutulral foods in every religious and social occasion. Dhokla and Khaman are socially attached to the food culture of every Gujrati in India elsewhere. Siddu, a fermented wheat food of Himanchal Pradesh in India, is served hot with ghee (butter) or chutney (pickle) in rural areas as a special dish during customary occasion. Chilra, an ethnic fermented buckwheat or barley, is traditionally prepared during marriage ceremonies and festivals in Himanchal Pradesh. Marchu, a traditional fermented wheat flour product in the from of flat bread, is eaten during local festivals (phagli, halda) as well as religious and marriage ceremonies in Lahaul in Himachal Pradesh.

Among Hindus, cows are regarded as sacred animals, and their milk and milk products are used in every religious and cultural function. Development of dairy system in ancient India has been mentioned in some of the historical records. Mention of cows and the importance of milk products can be found in Rigveda, the oldest sacred book of the Hindus. Veda and Upanishad mentioned the origin of dahi and fermented milk products during 6000-4000 B.C.

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one of the oldest fermented milk products of the Hindu. The preparation and consumption of Dahi has been recorded since 2000 B.C. in India. It was well known in ancient Indian history Dahi, butter milk, and ghee (butter) were widely consumed milk products during Lord Krishna's time (about 3000 B.C.). Dahi plays an important part in the socio-religious habits in India and is considered a sacred item in many festivals and religious ceremonies celebrated by Hindus and Buddhists, many Indian ethnic fermented milk products have cultural aspects in the dietary system and have been consumed for more than 3000 years. Lassi, butter milk, is a by product obtained in the preparation of butter (ghee) from dahi using traditional methods, and is the most common nonalcoholic refreshing beverage during the hot summer months in India. Misti Dahi (*sweetend dahi, mishti doi, Lal dahi or payodhi*) is a sweetened fermented milk product of Bengali in India. Shrikhand is an ethnic concentrated sweetened fermented milk product of Gujrat and Rajasthan. Rabadi, an ethnic fermented milk based, thick slurry-like product, is prepared by fermented cereals and pulses including wheat, barley, maize and pearl millet in the North and Western parts of India. For both Hindus and Buddhists, ghee or butter is a sacred item in all religious ceremonies, and it is used in birth marriage and death rites and is an important component in prayers and sacred offerings. Somar, an ethnic fermented milk product from Cows or Yaks, is generally consumed by Sherpa highlanders in the Himalayas to increase the appetite and to cure digestive problems. The Aryan-Hindu pastoral system has influenced the preparation and consumption of milk and dairy products in the early settlement in the Indian Himalayas.

Indian fish products are slightly different and mostly dominated by dried and smoking processes. Fermentation of fish is restricted to Ngari and Hentak in Mainpur and Tungtap in Meghalaya in India, and sidal in Tripura; the rest of the fish products, which are dried or smoked, include sidra, sukuti, and gnuchi of Darjeeling hills and Sikkim in India, and Karati, lashim and Bordia of Assam in India. Fermented fish foods, which are deeply associated with the food culture of the Meitei in Manipur, are prepared and eaten in every festival and during religious occasions.

A sizable number of people in India are meat eaters however regular consumption of meat is too expensive for a majority of the poor people. People slaughter domestic animals (Goats, Pig, Cow, Yaks and Sheep) usually on special occasion such as festivals and weddings. During festivals goats are ritually sacrificed after the ceremony and then fresh meat is cooked and eaten as a family feast, the remaining meat is smoked above the earthen oven to make Suka-ko-masu for future consumption. In Indian Himalaya's people slaughter Yaks occasionally and consumed the fresh meat; the remaining meat is smoked or preserved in the open air (called Satchu). The ethnic people of the western Himalaya's in Uttarakhand, Himanchal Pradesh and Laddakh in India prepare Chartayshya, a fermented meat product especially made during festivals and make an offering to their ancestors, prior to eating.

Alcoholic drinks have continued to be widely consumed in India since pre-Vedic times and specific reference to their consumption among tribal people was mentioned in the Ramayana (300-75 B.C.), During the Vedic period to Indian history (2500-200 B.C.), based originally around the Indus river system, Wine was worshiped as the liquid God Soma,

because of its medicinal attributes. In Vedas Soma was credited with great medicinal power. Soma is originally thought to have been the fermented Juice of an East Indian leafless wine (*Sarcostemma, Acidum*) and other wild indigenous grape wines. There are brief description of ethnic alcoholic drinks in historical documents during the British rule in Indian Hills of Darjeeling and then Sikkim kingdom.

In India, the production technique of ethnic starter culture to make alcoholic beverages is usually kept secret and the indigenous knowledge of processing is not easily passed on. However the protected hereditary right of making ethnic mixed starters is passed by mother's to daughter's who in turn pass the indigenous knowledge to in-laws after marriage. Traditionally women exclusively perform the preparation of ethnic mixed starters. For example Marcha is prepared by the Limboo and Rai caste of the Nepali. Marital status is a strong determinant in the preparation of Marcha by the Rai caste of the Nepali, who allow only widows are spinsters to make Marcha. Jaanr and Raksi are essential to solemnized the marriage ceremonies of non-Brahmin Hindu, Nepali and the Buddhist tribes. Elopement is a common practice in the Himalayas. Traditionally relatives of the boy -usually after three days- visit the girls, parents bringing bottles of locally prepared ethnic distilled liquor Raksi to hear and respect the verdict of her parents and pay the penalty for elopement. Once the parents of girl grants their consent, freshly prepared Raksi is served to signify the union of two families and the marriage is thus solemnized. Such practice of bridging between to families by a bottle of alcoholic drink is common only among the Himalayan people, mostly the non-Brahman Nepali. Ethnic alcoholic beverages have a strong ritual importance and are offered to family God's and ancestors and are also used in spirit possession rituals.

3. Diversity of ethnic fermented food in India

Very few people have realized that India is the centre of diverse food culture comprising more than 1000 major and minor ethnic fermented and non-fermented foods and alcoholic beverages. Diverse micro-organisms ranging from filamentous fungi to enzyme and alcohol producing yeasts and lactic acid bacteria bacilli, micrococci are associated with fermentation and production of ethnic foods and alcoholic drinks and some of them have health benefits. Ethnic foods are fermented naturally accept the alcoholic beverages, which are produced by using a consortia of microorganism in the form of dry, cereal based starter. The Daily per capita consumption of ethnic fermented foods and alcoholic beverages in Sikkim was 163.8 g representing 12.6% of the total daily diet. However no such information is available for other states of India. Ethnic fermented foods and beverages prepared and consumed in India are categorized as follows:

1. Fermented cereals foods
2. Fermented cereals - legume mixture foods
3. Fermented legume/Soybean foods
4. Fermented milk foods
5. Fermented vegetable foods
6. Fermented and traditionally preserved fish products
7. Fermented meat products
8. Amylolytic starters and
9. Alcoholic beverages and drinks,

Some of the ethnic Indians fermented foods and alcoholic beverages have been studied by several researchers at various Indian Universities and research Institutes. Some of them have been locally and

globally marketed such as Nan, Dosa, Misti, Dahi, Rasgulla, Papad & Idli.

4. Conclusion

The diversity of ethnic fermented foods and alcoholic beverages in India is related to the diversity of ethnicity with unparalleled food culture of each community. Indian ethnic fermented foods and beverages have biological functions that enhance several health promoting benefits owing to the functional micro-organisms associated with them. Most of these ethnic fermented foods are prepared in household's by women, who unknowingly exploit the capabilities of micro-organisms there by increasing in the shelf life of these foods. However rapid urbanization and modernization have affected the time tested traditional technologies for preparation of fermented foods.

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