

Chapter 4

Edible Traditions: Pakhala and the (Re)Construction of Neo- Odia Identity in the Era of Hashtags

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ABSTRACT

The food that we consume everyday becomes part of our identity and existence. As we move and re-locate, we bring our traditional food with us, which undergoes numerous transformations in the new land. Traditional cuisines symbolize racial and ethnic distinctiveness and add flavors to the childhood memories. Traditional food not only provides necessary nourishment to the body, but also helps communities stay together and create transnational bonds. One such example of gastronomical legacy is Pakhala, an Odia cuisine prepared from cooked rice that is soaked in fermented water or fresh water. This chapter will engage in decoding the journey of this humble summer food from the coastal state of Odisha (India) to being the poster child of Odia identity on social media and beyond. The evolution of intangible heritage as Pakhala is a great example of how cultures change their form and create new discourses on tradition while bridging the gap between past and future.

INTRODUCTION

As the era of ‘skip intro’ unfolds itself, traditional cuisines not only dominate the trending reels but also create a scope to explore the relationship between food and culture. In a post-capitalist society, food no longer remains a necessity that is meant to quench hunger; it moves beyond that. Twenty-first century has consolidated the idea that food is politics, art, field of study, recreation, power, identity-marker, business, culture and much more. The food world is inextricably linked with public-private relationship, international regulatory practices, advancement in Information & Communication Technologies (ICT), shift in global political perspective as well as environmental and ethical dilemma.

For a fast-growing economy that homes widening economic inequality, the concept of food continuously brings forth newer questions related to sustainable production and safe consumer delivery. The

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-6217-1.ch004

ideological differences regarding consumption of food have given rise to numerous eating philosophies, each claiming their own supremacy¹. Bilateral equation between countries regulates availability and denial of specific food items within a designated geo-political boundary. The expansion of agricultural trade has resulted in contaminated materials² being carried in larger volumes from one part of the world and distributed at other parts in larger quantities leaving consumers exposed to numerous health hazards³. The rise of food artists, social media chefs and interest in fine dining has culminated in an unprecedented explosion of food culture market⁴ where food is promoted as form of self-expression and therapy. Experts have pointed out that food has become dearer by 83 times (Collier, 2008) since 2005. The rising food prices coupled with receding incomes, climatic changes, increasing refugee camps, is continuously disrupting hunger relief efforts and paving way for food crisis.

Somewhere amidst safety, availability, health, accessibility, sustainability, trend and tradition emerges Pakhala, a comfort food that has been filling hearts and bellies since antiquity. Pakhala, is an outstanding food that is prepared from rice and is consumed by both affluent and poor alike in the state of Odisha⁵. There is no specific date or year or even time frame that can be attributed to the origin of Pakhala. Although scholars generally agree that evidences suggesting Pakhala was already being served as offering to Lord Jagannath⁶ of Puri since around the tenth century AD. Through the journey of Pakhala, this paper will try to investigate the complex interrelationship that exists between ethnic food and identity creation, as the new generation renegotiates with traditional values, especially in the context of Odisha.

FOOD AS HERITAGE

In their essay 'Food & Foodways as Cultural Heritage' Giovine and Brulotte (2016) make an interesting observation about heritage. According to them, the emphasis on the concept of heritage is a direct result of European imperial expansions. These colonial programs that began as innocent exploration or business diversification plans eventually resulted in formation of colonies and witnessed dismantling of socio-economic fabric of local cultures. Thus, heritage became the foundation of both tangible and intangible goods that the community or society inherited from their ancestors and preserved it "in the present" and passed it "on to the future". These "goods" turned into "mediators", connecting devices, which bound the members of a specific society "through space and time" acting as "referential touchstone for a group's self-identification". Studied from this perspective, food with its ability to preserve gastronomical tradition is imbued with cultural symbolism and remains as one of the prominent indicators of cultural heritage.

Studies have shown that that cultural heritage as a concept has evolved due to the dynamic spatial and temporal changes that humankind has witnessed, whereas food heritage as a specialized area of academic focus has its roots in post-colonial and post- industrial revolution era that created a culinary universe which was based on a more liberated approach towards gastronomical preferences. Traditional gastronomic experience is inherently a curious mix of tangible⁷ and intangible⁸ heritage. These practices contribute to the intergenerational knowledge and cultural values associated with a specific food landscape. The need to identify food as heritage emerges from the knowledge that earlier ways of leaning and focusing on tangible structures and monuments was not sufficient to accommodate the essence of 'heritage'. Moreover, primitive methods of heritage study did not include the culture of the immigrant or marginalized communities, neither did they focus on the creole or diasporic culture that

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