

THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE: MALABAR 'CONNECTION' IN CULINARY WAYS

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Abstract

Examining the cultural process of colonialism in Malabar, this paper tried to explore the colonial agrarian policies in British Malabar and how these kind of agricultural policies transformed the making of food and cuisine of the native people. The adaptation of new food crops from different region is generally known as 'Columbian Exchange.' 'Columbian Exchange' is not merely an exchange; it was a political imposition of the 'old world' towards the 'new world. The Columbian exchange made significant changes in culinary terrain of the coloniser and colonised.

Key words: *Colonialism; Columbian exchange; Carolina rice; culinary ways*

Introduction

The process of colonialism has been associated with political administration, economic exploitation and cultural imposition. Colonialism became an agency of changes have to be studied in the context of how it materialized the society and culture of the Colonized. The age of colonial rule in India has been a phase of drastic transition in terms of culture, politics and economy. Colonialism was only incidental to the history of development on the basis modern institution and technologies of power in the countries of Asia and Africa.ⁱ Nicholas Dirks observed that, colonialism was project of cultural control and the knowledge dispensed by the colonialism made new cultural forms in the colonies and further these cultural forms classified as 'traditional.' By this notion of knowledge new binaries were created in terms of colonizers and colonized in the name of European and Asian, Modern and traditional, West and East.ⁱⁱ In the nineteenth century, the supremacy of British power in India imposed an alien culture on the indigenous life of the natives.ⁱⁱⁱ Under colonial rule the society of Malabar slowly and steadily underwent a transformation, which is parallel to that of the Indian Society. The advent of British rule in different parts of the subcontinent marked a major moment in terms of governance in the history of the region.^{iv} The largest transformation was taken place in the realm of gastronomy. This paper tried to explore the colonial agrarian policies in British Malabar and how these kind of agricultural policies transformed the making of food and cuisine of the native people. The concept of hybrid cuisine was the result of new agricultural production, which affected the existing social structure of the society.

The transfer of food between the colonial states and colonized during Columbian Exchange had that much of powerful to make effective changes in the history of the World.^v The adaptation of new food crops from different region is generally known as ‘Columbian Exchange’. This historical revolution was a matter of study for various scholars. Historians like Alfred Crosby, Sidney Mintz, and recently James Walv studied the problem of ‘Columbian Exchange’ within the context of colonialism. In the work of Alfred Crosby described the exchange of commodities between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ world. Crosby’s work has been disputed by scholars like Sidney Mintz and James Walv. According to them ‘Columbian Exchange’ is not merely an exchange, it was a political imposition of the ‘old world’ towards the ‘new world.’^{vi} Mintz explains that the emergence of British consumption of sugar took place as a tool against the backdrop of overseas expansion and colonial conquest. Sugar, which was earlier a rare and precious imported medicine, became cheaper at the time of Columbian exchange with the plantation economy.^{vii}

Vascoda Gama’s journey through different regions towards India made significant changes in the culinary art of those terrains. Places enrooted as well as areas under Portuguese acted as facilitators of this exchange by their political control over these areas around the world. Historian M.N. Pearson observed that Portugal played the role of ‘converge belt’ between major markets of Northern and Central Europe.^{viii}

Many of the food producing plants introduced by the Portuguese became an integral part of the local flora, which altered the economy and food habits of the people. For instance; the popular chillies used in Kerala and Indian cuisine were introduced by the Portuguese. Chillies particularly the dried red varieties are used widely to add pungent flavour or texture. Rulers, merchants, missionaries, Portuguese women in India, played their own roles in the introduction of various types of food, food habits and recipes. The Portuguese cultural impacts greatly reflected among major cuisines in India.

The British colonial experiments in agriculture paved the way for the introduction of variety of seeds and vegetables in India. The tomato and cherimoya were introduced through seeds, which travelled well and were more convenient for distribution than plants. All these plants were widely distributed throughout the East, and that became useful additions to the vegetable diet of both Europeans and natives. The tomato is mentioned ‘as the most valuable acquisition to Southern India’.^{ix} Chayote was first introduced in India in 1879; during the initial stages the crop underwent lots of failures and in 1883 the extensive cultivation of the crop was accomplished. The Coco was introduced in Ceylon by means of a single plant, which survived the journey direct from Jamaica to Ceylon, in January 1885.^x Thurston pointed out that many cultivated plants of India during the period have been introduced from other parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. For example, cabbage, cauliflower, pomelo, peach, betel pepper, Niger seed, and Italian millet. Other plants like pineapple, custard-apple, guava, papaya; chilly, ground-nut, potato, sweet potato, and Indian corn were from America,^{xi} Maize and potatoes were from Indies.^{xii} These changes played an important role in the cultural and political discourses of colonial rule.

The colonial agrarian polices was highly commercialised one. The Europeans fostered the production of spices and other export items. The production of cash crops increased in this period. Marshy lands were used for cultivate plantation crops. In 18th

century external market for cash crops increased. The high commercialization of agriculture and its economic impact resulted for frequent famines in the Malabar. The frequent famines of the late 19th century forced the British to take interest in new food plants which might help to overcome starvation. The shortage of rice and the high price of necessary commodities were the main cause for the famine in Malabar. Government attention was an important part in the raise of production through the introduction of some new varieties of cultivation. The introduction of Carolina rice was the final result of these processes.

The migration of new seeds and plants promoted during this period. The introduction of Carolina rice was one important example for these experiments.

The history of Carolina rice traced back in South Carolina during 1690s by the 1720s it became a dominant product of export, South Carolina rice became an established product in the world market during 1690 to 1720 because of exogenous factors, which caused serious shortfalls in the supply of basic foodstuffs to Western Europe. Between 1740 and 1760, Carolina rice became a major product in the European rice market. The failure of regional harvest in the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe paved the way for the arrival of Carolina rice into the markets. The process of industrialization, commercialization, urbanization and increase in population resulted high demand of rice and food stuffs in European market.

In India the Carolina rice was cultivated in 1868 for the first time,^{xiii} 10 tons of Carolina rice seed was obtained by the secretary of state through Dr. Frobes Watson, the reporter of the products of India at Indian office London for experimental cultivation. The seed was arrived in India during the period between 1868 and 1867 and distributed to all presidencies like Madras, Bombay and Bengal for experimental cultivation but it was a failure.^{xiv} The proceedings of government of India in 1896 reported that the main reason for failure late recipient of the seed and unfavourable nature of the climate.

On the basis of the observation of these experiments, the government of India stated that failure of experiments was due to unfavourable condition of nature. In 1869 the government continued the Carolina experiments with fresh seeds. The result was positive in certain regions but in most of the areas the cultivation became failure. The experiment in Madras presidency was successful for a short period. During 1874-1875, the experiment was made only in the districts like Malabar and Coimbatore. The collector of the Coimbatore district informed that the result was only 15 percentage of yield. The condition of Malabar was also the same, only 2-26 percentages of yields were reported from this region. The government asked to collect the response of natives about these experiments. The report says that rice eating community namely Brahmins opined that the Carolina rice was the best and good to eat. In an article of diet they said that it's fine to see, white in appearance and desirable to serve up. This highlights the cultural justification of the foreign rice cultivation in India. Technically the experiment was an utter failure.

Another important product introduces in India was cocoa, these plants was cultivated in the hilly areas in India and primary experiments were carried out in Gangetic plains and hilly areas.^{xv} The government was tried to cultivate Cocoa plant at Wayanad in Malabar. The cultivation of this plant was promoted by the government in all ways. For example an advertisement issued by the collector of Malabar related to cocoa cultivation in agricultural

supplement of Malabar District Gazette in 1873 and the collector invited the attention of all those who are interested in the cultivation of cocoa. And gave them a chance to judge the appearance of specimen had been seen at Tellichery and elsewhere in Malabar. It was possible to grow it remuneratively in the shade of the cocoanut palm. About 100 acres of the forest had already been taken up for growing it. There are many thousands of acres of suitable Government land at the foot of Periah Ghat in the Kottayam taluk.^{xvi} But the final result of cocoa cultivation was also failure as same to the cultivation of Carolina rice cultivation of potatoes and sweet potatoes were extensively promoted by the government.^{xvii} Potato was considered as lower class food used by poor in England. To coup up with the shortage of rice, the colonial state concentrated on the cultivation of potato and sweet potato. These new vegetables used as the substitute one against rice, so the government take a constant initiative to promote the cultivation of these products. The government ordered to identify at least 3200 acres of land to the collector of Malabar for cultivating potatoes.^{xviii} Besides this, carrot and barely was also introduced, gradually these items altered the existing food habits of *Malayalees*. These new vegetables and fruits were not accepted by the upper caste people due to its foreign origin. Tomato and onion was not accepted by the Brahmins Malayatoor Ramakrishnan, a member of an aristocratic Tamil Brahmin family, in his memories explains about his father's attitude towards 'foreign' food, especially against onion and potato. Even though he ate egg (Brahmins were followed vegetarian diet) but not ready to consume 'foreign' vegetables like potato and onion. The use of animal bones as manure in the cultivation of these vegetables is the reason for this taboo by the upper caste Hindu Brahmin. But later this vegetable became one of the main ingredients in their cuisine. The middle class people received these new fruits and vegetables to elevate their social status. As the positive response against westernization the educated people accepted all these vegetables in their diet.

Apart from these colonial exchanges, large scale movement of population mainly as labours, from rural area to urban industrial sites and hilly terrains was a new geographical and cultural experience by the result of changes in the economy and society, which facilitated the entry of new tastes in the domestic sphere of colonized people.

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