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Framing Famous Female Identity Through Food and Hospitality in Indian Society from Vedic Period: A Study Through the Revisionist Texts

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ABSTRACT

A classy food can win the heart of any living being on the Earth. A hungry person only, can understand the importance of food as well as the difference between life and death. A very famous proverb in Hindi “*Jaisaa Anna, Vaisaa Mana*” means the quality of food effects the mind, thought and the personality of a person.

Our country Bhārat (INDIA) is very wakeful, knowledgeable and prosperous for its elite and valuable recipes and culinary discourses. The importance of grains, farming, food and methods of cooking and eating food, all are mentioned in our Vedas, Purānas, Upanishads and the BhagvadGītā elaborately as well as very scientifically and systematically. Food is the source of life as well as the source of Identity. How to cook the food? what to cook and when to cook? What should be the proportions required for a rich, healthy and delicious food? Which combination shouldn't be cooked together? Which things can be eaten raw? Which grains or vegetables we can mix or should not mix for cooking? What we can eat with a curry and which edible things should be cooked dry? Which place is suitable for cooking? There are so many minute details and actions that effect the food, and reflect in the person, personality and its identity.

Our country is flourishing, very prosperous and rich in its customs and civilization. The attitude of Indian traditions is full of healthy and systematic behavior of human lifestyle. Our festivals, marriages, ceremonies, functions, events all are lackluster without the awesome, colorful and delicious food and dishes. Our country is the only place on this planet where we serve the food to our guests in the same manner as we offer *Prasād* (sacrament) to the God. There are various myths and mythical narratives related to our culinary culture. Actually, revisionists are also reworking on the culinary narratives relevant to cuisines and identity in their works. The epics Rāmāyan and Mahābhārat are overflowing with vibrant incidents as well as influential characters with whom we can reckon the purity and supremacy of food and culinary representation.

Here, the paper presents on the famous identities through culinary concepts and hospitality in the Bhārtiya (Indian) families as well as of the society in the Vedic Period. Mythical narratives are based on the traditional stories inscribed in the Vedas, Purānas, Upanishads, and so many clandestine, interesting ancient stories of Indian mythology. So, to facilitate this paper with the help of some revisionist texts to describe the thoughts on some familiar and famous female personalities as well as culinary narratives and discourses. The selected revisionist texts are – Devdutt Pattanaik's '*Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*', Vayu Naidu's '*Sita's Ascent*', Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's '*The Palace of Illusions*' and Pratibha Ray's '*Yajnaseni*'. In Valmiki's Rāmāyan and Ved Vyāsa's '*Mahābhārat*', the patriarchal culture is illustrated in the form of mythical narratives, but the culinary narratives are illustrated more in the revisionist texts. Food is not the medium to fill the stomach only, even it represents the complete persona of the person in all distinguished manners.

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The Earth and the Nature both have the supremacy as a Mother for all living and non-living things. But they are very mysterious too. They have hidden and preserved so many valuable and waste materials in her womb. Nature is blessed with many important herbs, shrubs and trees on the Earth. Forests, mountains, hills, oceans, seas, streams, rivers, ponds, farms, plains, plateaus, deserts, all have their prominent and very reasonable place on the Earth. As we know that human beings of stone-age ate raw flesh of any animals, birds or insects, but after the Invention of fire, culinary skills were introduced in the human society. Then, humans realized that some grains and vegetables they can eat raw and some has to be cooked before served to eat. And afterwards this world became aware of variety of medicinal plants, healthy fruits, tasty spices, useful grains, dals and cereals. They started making a myriad variety of edible food and cuisine with the help of natural resources.

Every country has its culinary narratives and discourses as well as variety of cuisines. In some countries, cooked food is eaten more, and in some countries, raw food is famous. Variety of cuisine depends on the climate and environment of a particular country. The geographical status of each country is different from each other and it affects their culture and all systems of that country.

India is famous for its diversity of religion and casts, languages and dialects, culture and traditions, customs and costumes, weather and climate, environment and atmosphere as well as culinary representations and foods, persona and identity. If we propound about the alimentary canal of India, the usage of ingredients and techniques for culinary cooking systems is substantially different in every state of India. Northern part of India eats very fried and spicy food and the south Indian food is just opposite of that. Vayu Naidu expounds in her book “Sita's Ascent”, about the south Indian custom of serving food. When Sita serves food to her husband in the south Indian style. She writes, “The banana leaf had been spread on the gold platter. The first morsels of lentils and rice drizzled with pure ghee was offered to the gods. The crows across the courtyard cawed with delight, acknowledging that they, who were visiting as the spirits of the ancestors, had been fed, and now the living could continue with their meal.” (*Sita's Ascent*, 23) South Indians love more boiled and natural food. They eat variety of cuisines made from rice and for that reason, coconut is used extensively as an appetizer. Western part of India consumes more non-vegetarian food, while Eastern India has various types of spices in the food.

Food for body or for thought, should be prepared with pure thoughts and with cleanliness. In the *Vedas–Purāns*, it is said that food is of three kinds – *Satoguni* (the food which is full of purity and divinity), *Rajoguni* (the food which is sometimes divine but sometimes spicy and fleshy) and *Tamoguni* (the food which has more spices and flesh). In the *BhagvadGītā*, Lord Krishna explains the types and impact of food, as A.K. Ramanujan elaborates:

“The BHAGAVADAGĪTĀ, 17.7–10

- (7) Threefold again is food – [food] that agrees with each [different type of] man: [so too] sacrifice, ascetic practice, and the gift of alms. Listen to the difference between them.
- (8) Foods that promote a fuller life, vitality, strength, health, pleasure, and good-feeling, [foods that are] savoury, rich in oil and firm, heart-gladdening – [these] are agreeable to the man of goodness.
- (9) Foods that are pungent, sour, salty, stinging hot, sharp, rough, and burning – [these] are what the man of Passion loves. They bring pain, misery, and sickness.
- (10) What is stale and tasteless, rotten and decayed – leavings, what is unfit for sacrifice, is food agreeable to the man of Darkness. (Zaehner 1969) (*The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 77-78)

In India, the kitchen is called '*Rasoi*', which means the food with *Ras* (taste). It is a place from where human beings begin their life. Cooking food with full dedication and devotion makes the food '*Amrit*', because only from food we can get all energy and strength for all parts of our body. To describe the grandness of kitchen and culinary discourses, revisionists

also propound their opinion about that. As Devdutt Patnaik writes, “The kitchen is the first yagna-shala, for the kitchen fire turns raw food into edible cooked food that nourishes the body and prepares the mind for intellectual enquiry. . . . Thus, Indian thought, while valuing thought, also values food. Food is nourisher, healer, as well as happiness provider. Thought may be God, but food is the Goddess. One cannot exist without the other. (*Sita: The Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, 22).

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury very sagaciously explains further in her paper “Demystifying Sita: A Study of the Portrayal of Valmiki's Heroine in Alternate Readings of *The Ramayana*”, referring to Pattanaik's observation: “In the Indian cultural scenario it is deemed auspicious for a newlywed bride to visit the kitchen on her entering her husband's house. Sita and her sisters too were taken to the kitchen and made to customarily touch the various utensils which were being used for cooking. With this initiation, Sita's link to food starts in her new household and she carries it forward to the forest too, where she spends a large part of her years In the forest, Sita is not just a companion, but plays an active role in providing nourishment to Ram and Lakshman. Her association to nature becomes manifold in the forest and she starts observing plants and animals minutely, learns how to communicate with animals, and thereby, discovers various hidden elements in nature”. (*International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities, Vol. 6, Issue 10, October 2018, 1016*)

Manu, who is known as the stabilizer of the Indian society in the ancient age, made rules and laws for everyone, for life and various aspects of society, but his laws made the mind of human beings as well as the society rootless. His possession for his own laws adheres for the food also. Most of his rules for culinary discourses impasses the society. To illustrate this impasse, in the book “*Laws of Manu*”, it is described that –

“Garlic, scallions, onions, and mushrooms, and the things that grow from what is impure, are not to be eaten by twice-born men. The red sap of trees, and any exudations from a cut (in a tree), the 'phlegmatic' fruit, and the first milk of a newly-calved cow – you should try not to eat these. (And do not eat) a dish of rice with sesame seeds, or a spice cake made of flour, butter, and sugar, or a cake made of rice, milk and sugar, if these are prepared for no (religious) purpose; or meat that has not been consecrated; or food for the gods, or offerings; and all foods that have gone sour or fermented, yogurt can be eaten, and all foods made with yogurt, as well as whatever is extracted from auspicious flowers, roots, and fruits.” (*The Laws of Manu*, 99-100).

The rigidity of these culinary narratives, from the ancient age, is still continuing in some parts of our country, but the *Vedic* age was more mature and affluent for its cuisines. The speculation is, that in the ancient age, most of the actions were governed by the position of the stars and planets. Most of the times, sages and their families, devoted their time to follow the directions of God, to become God. In short, ancient people were highly dedicated for penance or atonement.

In Indian culture, food is also the reflection of the societal status and identity. Food has many identities, such as rich food, dry food, boiled food, fried food, healthy food, unhealthy food, delicious food, tasty food, tasteless food, dulled food etc. Food influences the body, mind, behaviour, life-style and individual identity too. In the Hindu mythology, Goddess Pārvati takes transmutation in the form of Goddess of food, *Annapoornā* to fulfill the hunger of all living things on the Earth. In the Indian tradition, if a woman cooks great food and serves everyone with respect and honour, then she is known as *Annapoornā* in the society. In the epic Rāmāyan, Sitā, wife of the great King Rāmchandra, is very fond of cooking and serving, with her heart. Revisionists also accept the culinary narratives, representations and discourses of mythology and epics of our country Bhārat. A very well-known writer and a skilled craftsman of mythology, Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik explains in his book –

“Sita wondered: who fed the hundreds of sages who had made Mithila their home, The enquiry took Sita to her mother's kitchen. There she found Sunaina surrounded by grains and pulses and vegetables and fruits. Before long, Sita found her feet around the kitchen: peeling, cutting, churning, pickling, steaming, roasting, frying, pounding, mixing, kneading, experiencing various textures, aromas, flavours and chemistry. Her senses became familiar with the secrets of spices, and every kind of nourishment provided by the plant and animal kingdom.” (*Sita: The Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, 22).

Pattanaik elaborates very infinitesimal narration to prove that Sita is very exquisite for cooking. It extracts that her Identity as *Annapoornā* is true. even she doesn't care for her safety and cross the *Lakshman-Rekhā* to feed a hermit because 'she considered at the moment-If she feed the hungry over her own safety, would she do it again? Yes, she said to herself'. (*The Girl Who Chose*, 43) Pattanaik talks about the selfless and honourable service for the visiting guests at her home, especially a *Brāhman* vagrancy for alms. For Sitā the first priority is to serve the person who is hungry and needful. As such in our country, it is very aptly said “*Atithi Devo Bhavah*” (A guest is like a God).

Further, in his book, Pattanaik describes the culinary skills of Sitā. She is not worried about being a mere prisoner in Lankā, and only for her, the *Dharmayuddha* (the great war for righteousness) is going on. Here, in Lankā, the country of *rākshasas*, she thinks about their hunger and tries to prepare the food for them with full dedication and devotion; but she wants to cook tasty food with flavoured spices. She thinks that:

“People have to be fed during a war. And so, the kitchens of Lanka were busy. . . . Food had to inspire, comfort and stir passions.”

Even Trijatā, Vibhishan's daughter has become Sitā's friend and is also delighted with Sita's delicious recipes. – “The smell of rice boiling, vegetables frying, and fish roasting filled the city streets The aromas reached Sita's grove.” (*Sita: The Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, 224-225).

Devdutt expresses beautiful and thought-provoking conversations about the food and culinary recipes between Sitā, Trijatā and Mandodari (Lankāpati Rāvan's queen):

'Don't you like that smell?' asked Trijata noticing Sita's expression as she inhaled the vapours.

'If I was cooking, I would change the proportion of the spices,' Sita said. She gave her suggestions to Trijata, who promptly conveyed them to the royal kitchen. Mandodari followed these instructions and soon a different aroma wafted out of the kitchen.

So enticing was the resulting aroma that other rakshasa cooks came to the Ashoka grove and asked Sita for cooking tips. Without tasting the food, just by smelling what had been prepared, like a skilled cook, Sita gave her suggestions.” (*Sita: The Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, 225).

This explicates the identity of Sitā, who thinks about the welfare of even the *rākshasas* (demons).

Either Sitā or Draupadi, the outstanding epics Rāmāyan and Mahābhārat, written by a great and preacher sages Vālmiki and Ved Vyās, have specious fertile farming land for growing the extract for culinary narratives and representations. Revisionists also refer the greatness of Draupadi as *Annapoornā* in their works. Draupadi also serves everyone with pleasure and from the core of her heart, even though her life has been full of hellish incidents and circumstances. She marries with five brothers only to keep the words of her mother-in-law Kunti. She got divided between five brothers like alms, but her mental status is very high and divine. She does not think about herself at all, but only for others. She prepares variety of food and cuisine, on the inauguration of Pāndav's Kingdom Indraprastha. From the

morning, in the kitchen, she prepares various the types of scrumptious cuisines for guests, especially for the Kauravs. Pratibha Ray describes how Draupadi expresses her thoughts: “Yes, I had myself cooked for those hundred brothers and served them Cooking and serving was a pleasurable activity. I enjoyed it. Therefore, with great care I prepared delectable sweet dishes. (*Yajnaseni*, 129)

Her identity as *Annapoornā* is, that even in the exile, she takes care of others and serves the food to the tribal people, travelers and sages with extreme respect, honour and pleasure. She believes in the greatness of *Karma* to preserve the values of ancient traditions. Pratibha Ray beautifully cites about this greatness of Draupadi, when she explains her sentiments, “The inexhaustible vessel was in my hands, but the whole day I had to keep hungry. For after I have eaten, food in that vessel will be finished for that day. Therefore, until everyone had eaten in the morning, at noon and at night I had to remain fasting faithfully, waiting for unexpected guests till midnight. I was not sorry at all for that. If by one person remaining hungry, hundreds get fed then it is better for that person to fast.” (*Yajnaseni*, 268) Even Lord Krishna also called her *Annapoornā*.

After marriage with five brothers (who were in the disguise of Brāhman and lived in the potter house, Draupadi cooks brinjal on the order of her mother-in-law. Chitra Divakaruni's explanation about this incident looks very alive and engrossing, “Kunti didn't believe in using spices. Or perhaps she just didn't believe in letting her daughter-in-law have any. She'd handed me a pulpy brinjal, along with a lump of salt and a minute amount of oil and told me to prepare it for lunch. I asked her if I might have a bit of turmeric and some chilies. Perhaps some cumin.” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 107)

The scope of Culinary narratives, representations and discourses is infinite. This concept is very interesting and soothing for the mind because each living being – lives for food, because of food, and by the food. People earn in this world for getting food to survive. Some people earn for food, and some live for food.

In the consummation of my paper, I would like to portray some interesting and lucid lines from the collection of A.K. Ramanujan, “*Rasa* or taste (as in English) is also the basic metaphor for aesthetic experience: *ruci* or taste, *asvāda* or eating, and *rasika*, meaning both gourmet and sensitive man, are part of the technical vocabulary of poetics. As with food, Indian aesthetics would insist that the experience is in the experiencer: 'Just as a taste (like sweetness) is created by the combination of different ingredients, a *rasa* (aesthetic) “flavour” is created by the combination of different *bhāvas* or “affects”’. (*The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, 92)

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