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Pazhaiya Saatham: The Menu as Archive and a Culinary Memory

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Abstract

The present paper examines how a dish called Pazhaiya Saatham that is included at a restaurant in Pondicherry acts as a site of culinary memory and cultural archive. By using the theory of Sasha Gora and Pierre Nora, the paper will analyse how the menu operates beyond the commercial purpose as a commodity to become a symbolic archive of food heritage. The findings of the study will suggest how the incorporation of Pazhaiya Saatham (which was once in everyday food practice) becomes a marker of our lost/forgotten heritage and culture and will recall the menu to recontextualize the lived memory within a culinary space. While many studies have been done on food as a cultural artefact, this study will demonstrate how a contemporary culinary space actively participates in shaping the culinary/cultural memory with a hands-on example.

Pazhaiya Saatham: How a Forgotten Bowl of Rice Is Finding New Life in Pondicherry

Pazhaiya Saatham, a forgotten bowl of fermented rice is doing the rounds today in *The South Indian Kitchen*, one of the restaurants in Pondicherry, even amidst the competing innumerable cafes serving crepes, croissants and cakes. The restaurant's special menu item 'Pazhaiya Saatham' has indeed brought back to life a dish that many grew up eating every day, but of which the younger generation have the least awareness. Once a staple of Tamil households, this humble preparation is now re-entering public dining spaces, carrying with it stories of sustainability, health, and cultural memory.

A Dish Rooted in Everyday Life

Pazhaiya Saatham, when literally translated, is 'old rice' and it was in fact never a food of grandeur and fancy. In the olden days, especially in traditional homes, if there was leftover rice, then it would be soaked overnight in water and left to ferment naturally. By the next day morning, the rice becomes sour and is ready to be consumed with accompaniments such as shallots, green chillies, buttermilk, pickle and karuvadu for non-vegetarians.

For a long time, Pazhaiya Saatham was considered the most cooling meal, a food of necessity, and an energy - giving food for the farmers and labourers who toiled hard in the hot days. But gradually, with the invention of machines such as refrigerators, the urban kitchen replaced the concept of fermentation with refrigeration, and

thus food such as the Pazhaiya Saatham became outdated and furthermore was looked at as the poor man's food, since not having fridge was equated with poverty, failing to realize the nutritional concept behind the food. Pazhaiya Saatham was thought of as the food of the common man not of the royalty.

Why It Matters Today

While it seems like the socio-economic condition of the family determines the kind of food that they intake, yet we can also witness how modern food conversations do focus on gut health, probiotics, sustainable eating, and reducing food waste. Modern food practices connect itself to nutritional science. But the fact is that, long before this attempt made by the modern nutritional food science technology, traditional diets have framed themselves with all these nutritional benefits. One such traditional dish is Pazhaiya Saatham which supports gut health and digestion due to fermentation, reduces glycaemic load, making it gentler on blood sugar levels, improves Iron and vitamin B absorption and the meal acts as a cooling agent especially for those in tropical climate. Author and academician Krishnendhu Ray, Associate Professor of Food Studies at New York University rightly pointed out in an article on the growing popularity of pazhamkanji and how certain microbes, yeast, and mould, are all necessary for our health.

From Home Kitchen to Restaurant Table

By including Pazhaiya Saatham on its special menu, *The South Indian Kitchen* is doing more than serving a traditional dish. The restaurant by including the menu item Pazhaiya Saatham aims at reframing tradition as choice, instead of compulsion. Anything when compelled only invites resistance, but when offered as a choice only grabs attention and invites curiosity. When a restaurant offers a forgotten dish such as the Pazhaiya Saatham (which if otherwise given in a household situation would point blank be rejected on the lady's face as old stuff), it is not thought as a dish made from leftovers but as a food of traditional value presented into the commercial space with much awe and dignity. The young diners feel a sense of staying connected to their roots in trying the forgotten dish. The so-long held perception of Pazhaiya Saatham shifts from that of the old stuff to curious choice.

A Lesson in Sustainable Enterprising

While we have talked about Pazhaiya Saatham's nutritional benefits and how when given as a choice it is experimented with, rather than being resisted, we also need to understand the powerful entrepreneurial idea embedded in this dish. In the locavore age where artisanal and fermented foods are often imported concepts, Pazhaiya Saatham reminds us that South India has always practiced these ideas efficiently. By having Pazhaiya Saatham as a signature and a special menu item, *The South Indian Kitchen* demonstrates how traditional knowledge can inspire modern food businesses. This is because they have tried to equate the concept of sustainability with cultural remembrance and heritage; and tried to prove that local food practices and heritage recipes can coexist with the contemporary dining culture. This is precisely we find the management of the restaurant addressing the consumers that they take pride in celebrating the diverse flavours of authentic South India and that they have a deep passion to preserve the region's culinary heritage, which to them is the future of tradition.

Bridging Generations through Food

The South Indian Kitchen by enterprising an age-old forgotten food creates a bridge between the old and younger generations making it a memory to one and discovery to another. By not

lecturing about the practice of eating the Pazhaiya Saatham, but by introducing the flavour of the dish, the forgotten dish is made to evolve by itself and proved to be relevant in today's time, which otherwise had so long been kept frozen.

Research Question

The present paper will delve into the question as to how the inclusion of Pazhaiya Saatham in the menu of *The South Indian Kitchen* functions as a site of culinary memory and cultural archiving. The appearance of Pazhaiya Saatham in a contemporary restaurant menu marks a significant shift from that of a lived communal practice to curated public representation in the menu card. By framing Pazhaiya Saatham within a structured menu format, the restaurant participates in archiving a community's food memory, making the forgotten into a visible and consumable item in the modern/urban/touristic context (since Pondicherry is a tourist attraction place). The restaurant mutes the dish's agrarian household background and foregrounds the aspects of health, heritage and culture, offering the dish as a curious choice, thereby making Pazhaiya Saatham to act as a preservative mechanism and as a site of reinterpretation of cultural memory. As Gora rightly puts it,

They are also archives. Menus document historic foodways—from lost ingredients to forgotten dishes—and transformations in taste. They are memories of appetites past. This makes them rich primary sources, and so a menu analysis is a compelling research method for food studies. (Gora "Reading menus")

Theories that may Fit in the Research Reading the Menu as Cultural Text

N. Sasha Gora in her influential essay "Today's Special: Reading Menus as Cultural Texts", argues that menus should be understood as cultural artefacts that encode ideology and identity. To her, menus are carefully constructed texts that frame how food is imagined, valued and consumed. Gora shifts attention from the food itself to its representation. She says, that "menus just don't simply present dishes..."

A restaurant menu is about a lot more than food. Menus reveal more than the daily specials and how much a burger costs. Like other forms of print media, they are narrative devices. Menus tell stories. (Gora "Reading menus")

Gora's argument that the menus are narrative devices stands true. The evidence to which is the language used in description, categorisation, and pricing, evoking a sense of nostalgia, authenticity, the consciousness of health and even a sense of pride, thereby shaping the diner's perception of the dish even before its on their table. Language plays its role and therefore food becomes a textually mediated experience.

If according to Gora, menus construct meaning through narrative organisation, then surely the description of the menu Pazhaiya Saatham demands close reading. In the context of Pondicherry, where tourists flock in numbers, the menu Pazhaiya Saatham served by *The South Indian Kitchen* is a curated version of South Indian tradition to contemporary diners ranging from domestic to international tourists. The menu description of *The South Indian Kitchen* categorizes Pazhaiya Saatham under "Special Saatham" giving details such as Fermented Rice accompanied by chinna vengayam, mormilagai, thovaiyal, karuvadu, meenkulambu, pickle. The textuality of the menu helps in performing the cultural work. Certain aspects of Pazhaiya Saatham are foregrounded. This foregrounding takes place using Tamil language which gives a regional touch; through words like fermented and mentioning the regional accompaniments pointing to antiquity, arousing curiosity to those who look for health benefits and its connection to tradition, completely muting the other agrarian associations of the past.

Reading the Menu as a Site of Memory

While Gora looks at menu as Cultural text, Nora treats menu as *Lieu de Memoire*. Nora's concept of *lieu de memoire* or sites of memory talks about modern society trying to preserve and organise memory, because *milieux de memoire* or the living environments of memory, where sustained traditions and practices were happening through everyday life is no more. During the *milieux de memoire* times, memory was habitual, but in the modern society, these living environments of memory have been replaced by symbolic sites such as monuments, museums, archives etc. To preserve all that no longer organically remains sustained.

Nora's concept of *lieux de memoire* can be aptly employed to study the inclusion of Pazhaiya Saatham as a special food menu in *The South Indian Kitchen* restaurant. Traditionally Pazhaiya Saatham was there in Nora's *milieu de memoire*, sustained through everyday eating practice. The menu didn't need any kind of documentation or preservation mechanism, because it was a part of daily lives. However, in the modern times, where the food is completely forgotten, it reappears as a special menu, with special descriptions and special price. There is a shift from living environment to symbolic site of memory. That is why Nora says, "There are *lieux de memoire* because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*". (Nora pp7) The menu thus functions as a site of culinary memory, because its organic social /living environment has weakened. By including Pazhaiya Saatham in the restaurant's menu, the menu operates as a *lieu de memoire*, wherein a culinary past is reinterpreted and made symbolically present within modernity.

Conclusion

By examining the inclusion of Pazhaiya Saatham in the menu of *The South Indian Kitchen* through the theoretical lens of Gora and Nora, the article puts forth the statement that the restaurant menu becomes an archive in preserving and reshaping culinary memory for contemporary consumers. We see how in a world of changing food trends, it is sometimes nice to turn back to what we had and served in the past and this very act of remembering the past is enterprisingly done by a modern food space such as *The South Indian Kitchen*.

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