

Food Habits and the Changing Social Scenario in the Urban Kerala

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Abstract

One of the visible impacts of globalization in Kerala is the transformation of the food habits of urban population, particularly the youth. The urban dietary pattern visibly shows that there is a conspicuous shift from traditional foods to fast foods. Along with that is the larger consumption of processed foods and packaged fruit juices. The objective of this paper is to keep the youth population informed about the values of home cooking, like fostering the importance of family bonding, ensuring good health, saving substantial amount of money and above all catering mental satisfaction. Market influence and advertisements of transnational corporations play a vital role in accelerating the junk food culture. The influence of global business interest should not be allowed to clash with the secure social life and health of people. Most of the health problems detected today are, by and large, born out of the intake of undesirable food and unsafe eating patterns coupled with a sedentary lifestyle. The present food pyramid looks inverted, with the base on top and crest pointed downward. Oil, fat, sugar and salt, which ought to occupy the crest, indicating minimum consumption, have now moved to the base, suggesting maximum consumption. The article informs about the necessity of educating, encouraging, enlightening and empowering the new generation for sustaining our age-old food values. Food is our regional identity, for it symbolizes health and social well-being.

Keywords

food habits, dietary pattern, lifestyle, family bonding, Kerala

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Introduction

One of the visible impacts of globalization in Kerala is the transformation of the food habits of urban population, particularly the youth. Some of the traditional items, like rice gruel, puzhukku, erusseri, jackfruit curry, inchi curry, bitter gourd thoran and nadankozhi curry, the culinary delights of the Malayalee of yesteryear, have, by and large, disappeared from the day-to-day menu of city dwellers. Puttu, the predominant breakfast dish, rated as world's best breakfast by the National Geographic Traveller, is fast giving way to sandwiches, burgers and colas. Maybe people would like to eat puttu along with meat curries of different sorts, flavoured with artificial tastemakers in restaurants, not as a staple dish with payar and pappad for daily breakfast. How can our banana chips, fried jaggery-coated banana, jackfruit chips, tapioca chips and the crispy pappad be a match to French fries or branded chips? Customary food, like Sadhya, has now been virtually confined to prominent social and religious occasions.

Fast food has increasingly taken over the cuisine of urban Kerala. The urban dietary pattern shows that there is a conspicuous shift from cereals to processed and packaged foods. There has also been an increased tendency to substitute fresh fruits, like mango, jackfruit, guava and gooseberry, which have rich antioxidants, with packaged fruit juices. Market influence and advertisements of transnational corporations play a vital role in accelerating the junk food culture. Ajinomoto, mayonnaise, cheese, wine and vinegar in place of asafoetida, mustard seeds, curry leaf, coconut oil, coconut grating and tamarind have spoiled the taste buds of Malayalees. Are the erroneous food habits a matter of deep concern? Why is it that even people who are healthy and who do not lead a sedentary lifestyle are severely affected by diseases, like type II diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases and cancer? Where have we erred in safeguarding the social and physical health of the public? Social workers should be able to find out satisfactory answers to these questions.

The influence of global business interest should not be allowed to clash with the secure social life and health of people. What can a social worker do to make a healthy change in the mindset of people? This article is an attempt to understand the importance of food habits. The purposes of this paper are the following: How to encourage Malayalees to foster conducive food values well suited to the social, economic, geographical and environmental conditions prevailing in Kerala? How to enlighten the masses about the detrimental effects of junk food/fast food/freaky food?

How to inspire people to turn to organic vegetable farming? How to promote home cooking?

Food and Family Ties

Food and family relations were very much related to each other in Kerala. Preparing healthy meals in one's own kitchen was earlier a practice, which facilitated family members to come closer and, more so, to spend more time in home. Home cooking was essentially a matter of pride. The culinary skills of cooking ethnic foods transmitted from one generation to another often influenced family ties. The exceptional taste of seasonal foods made of jackfruit, papaya, breadfruit, yam, tapioca, etc. did have a strong bearing not only on family relations but also on community relations. Home cooking, to put it briefly, had a number of benefits, such as fostering the importance of family bonding, ensuring good health, saving substantial amount of money and above all catering great mental satisfaction. Just compare it with the modern lifestyle of eating out regularly or taking junk foods habitually or visiting every now and then expensive restaurants for consuming exotic items. Ill health, psychological stress, failing family relations and loss of faith in one's kitchen, over and above skyrocketing family budget, are the direct causalities of the changed food habits of the new generation.

Unlike the old familial kitchen, which has ever been the abode of family bonding and the pride of mothers, sophisticated kitchens of modern houses do not woo family members to come together for making homely or healthy meals. Contemporary food items cooked with new appliances have only enabled the families to worsen the body mass index (BMI) status.

Children are obviously the worst affected victims of the present-day dietary habits, for they have a predilection for artificial flavours. Besides causing grave health problems, unconventional food seriously impinges on the socialization of children. What to eat, when to eat, where to eat, how to eat and how much to eat are cardinal questions in the socialization of a child.

Every day, by assembling around the dining table and sharing the delectable homemade foods at a certain specified time, preferably during supper, family members actually avail of an opportunity to come closer to each other. That practice is now fast ebbing away from modern families. What is notable is that eating in the company of friends or relatives regulates the intake of food, besides making the individual contented.

The youth population today has an inclination to mix “taste” with “habits.” The younger generation prefers to have snacks, like chicken shawarma, pizza, beefsteak and hot dog, with branded soft drinks regularly from KFC, McDonalds, Pizza Hut and Subway in place of an appetizing native meal cooked in home. Geethu Shetty, an IT professional from Uduppi, working in Trivandrum for the last three years, told me that her favourite food items are fried or baked chicken recipes, pastries, ice cream and chocolate. A short description of the food she had last month reveals that there was hardly a single day without deep-fried chicken, potato chips, pastries and coffee. Traditional items, even tea for that matter, do not figure a prominent place in her day-to-day food choice. But she is neither against traditional food nor a protagonist of exotic food. She candidly says, “My diet is heavily taste oriented and not exactly good for health, but I can’t stop eating it because it is tasty and readily available.”

Obviously, the new dietary habits are not instrumental in building up strong family relations. It is not only a question of food habits, but it is also a question of food culture. The new food culture gives no respect, regard or space for family affiliations. Of course, food too like any other thing is not free from the onslaught of changes. But whatever change that occurs should be for something better. Healthy food should invariably become a vanguard of progress and improvement, capable of making a desirable and healthy social change.

In ancient days, the kitchen of an average family unfailingly had supplementary stock of food, reserved in effect for the sake of unexpected guests. It was regarded as a great gesture of hospitality and family duty to provide food to guests at whatever time they reach a home. The food culture prevailed in those days often encouraged family members to give importance to collective phenomena, like social gathering and social fidelity. Society thereby enjoys the benefit of community cohesiveness. The present-day families, unlike the earlier ones, are hesitant to prepare sufficient food even for the regular members. It looks as though each member waits for an opportunity to have food outside so that home cooking and home food can be conveniently avoided. If for any reason an unexpected guest visits the family or wants to stay with the family for a day or two, the householders will have a tough time. The only way to overcome the contingency is either to take the guest out for food or buy food. Either way, it is inconvenient, unpleasant and incurring extra money.

Conventional foods do keep people fit and happy physically, emotionally and intellectually. Also they help people combat the adversities of seasonal changes and make them socially adaptable and economically viable. Food habits, to a large extent, are heavily dependent on environment and geographical conditions. The new generation is now too much lured to the tang of Western cuisine such that their palate is being attenuated to relish local food. The penchant for alien food is not only a cause for ill health but also a cause for social differences.

Strangely, even for the usual family get-together, many Malayalee households now depend too much on junk food, a practice in vogue. On earlier occasions, family members would flock together in kitchen and make use of their expertise to cook some of the mouth-watering local delicacies. Those were some of the priceless moments of the families of yesteryear, which strengthened relationships. Customary food was ever a binding factor, which brought relatives nearer and nearer to home, whereby they could enhance their social responsibilities substantially. The charm of indigenous cooking somehow has disappeared from the outlook of an average Malayalee. It is a matter of concern that the youngsters are fast drifting away from social values. The situation demands urgent social work intervention.

Purchasing Power and Changed Food Habits

The growth of the IT industry has unequivocally raised the purchasing power of common man in Kerala. In recent years, the living standards have gone up perceptibly. Prodigious consumerism, domination of branded products in local markets, high dietary intake and propensity to Western cuisinere some of the direct outcomes of the lofty lifestyle of the younger generation. It looks as though the order of the day has sent out a spiky cue: “affordability” versus “social ill health.”

True that the per capita consumption expenditure in respect of National State Domestic Product (NSDP) of Kerala is comparatively poor. But consumerism is found to be surging incessantly. The spending power of people, particularly those working in the IT sector, has increased remarkably such that they are often beguiled by extravaganza, like frequently eating out in high-profile restaurants and buying costly dresses. Obviously, cash-rich consumers prefer to use extra money for having luxurious food and branded soft drinks. In fact, the making of a food should be regarded as

the direct impact of consumerism created by high-income households. Remittance of a substantial amount of foreign money by Keralites working abroad is another factor, which influences their purchasing power. Apparently, such a circumstance gives rise to food inflation. On the one side, when the government tries to strengthen the Public Distribution System (PDS) and work out market intervention for combating the escalating prices, the privileged sections do enjoy an extravagant life. It can only lead to a highly despicable social condition of rich becoming richer and poor becoming poorer. The situation not only distorts the food culture of the state but also creates possibilities for food deficit. To be simple, the spending power of one group should not become antagonistic to the buying power of another group. That is how the Social Worker in the Economist, nay the Economist in the Social Worker, contemplates the issue.

The social problem of changing food habits has another dimension, which is connected with poverty and low purchasing power of a sizeable population. The per capita food grain production is found to be steadily declining over the years in the state. It is essentially due to the recession on employment, which has very much hit the food market. Perceptibly, such a situation leads to low dietary intake of the below poverty level (BPL) category. Consequently, these people have to depend on cheap or substandard foodstuffs, which are detrimental to social and physical health. Food as such palpably creates two classes, the privileged and the underprivileged sections. In other words, food has become instrumental in widening the gap between BPL and above poverty level (APL) categories. It may be realized that just by enacting a food security bill or reviving the PDS, the impact of changing food habits cannot be addressed. Indeed, it requires committed social intervention. Lifestyle change, as a matter of fact, demands a great amount of social scrutiny.

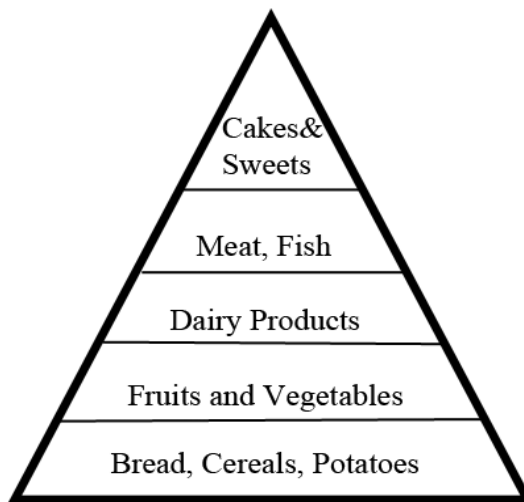
It is significant to take note of the findings of Maneesh and Shaharbanthat the “poor, who spend large shares of their income on food, are most adversely affected. Since rising food prices command a larger share of a limited budget, the poor are forced to shift their expenditures to cheaper diets with less proteins and micronutrients”(2015:1).

Health Issues

Most of the diseases and health problems detected today are, by and large, born out of the intake of undesirable food and unsafe eating patterns. The

food pyramid now looks very much inverted, with the base on top and crest pointed downward. Oil, fat, sugar and salt, which ought to occupy the crest, indicating minimum consumption, have now moved to the base, suggesting maximum consumption. Rice, wheat, grains, vegetables and fruits positioned at the base and middle rungs, which ought to be consumed more, have incongruously shifted and confined to the crest, leaving a large space for fish, meat, eggs and milk, not good for too much of use.

Figure 1. Ideal food pyramid



Added to this is the fact that our day-to-day menu is subjugated by hormone-injected broiler chicken, fake chicken eggs and pesticide-sprayed vegetables/fruits. What more is required to worsen the health conditions of a Malayalee? In the best interest of health, it is imperative that we switch back to our traditional foods and develop a new culture of self-farming.

Obesity of children and adolescents is another major health problem, which is often related to unhealthy food choices. The damage created by deep-fried items, sweetened and aerated cold drinks, canned juices and sweetened beverages, which are poor in micronutrients and dietary fibre, is beyond repair. Shyama Rajagopalsays, “to eat out means to have something exotic that one does not find in one’s own kitchen. The number

of such exotic kitchens in the new restaurants being opened in the cities is an indicator of what the people are looking for or what makes the youth's palate tickle. The changing tastes and patterns have actually started reflecting in the health of the population. There has been a mushrooming of many eating joints" (2012).

More dangerous are the modern consumption habits. The youngsters, particularly employed women, by virtue of their hectic and hasty routine activities, hardly get time to eat food in a relaxed mood. It is common to find that these women just gulp breakfast and drink beverage so that they can reach their workplaces on time. Such unhealthy eating practices can only help create severe adversities. Another bad habit of Malayalees is eating while watching TV or attending phone; it does create a predisposition to overeat. Ayurveda advocates that there should not be any kind of disturbance while we eat. It is worthy to remember that Ayurvedic concepts did ever have an influential role in traditional cooking.

Educating the social dimensions of the health issues, such as opting for right food choice or adopting appropriate eating patterns, is far more important than any other concerns in life. This is a challenging task, which should be urgently taken up by social work practitioners at all levels. In an age of IT era, we must make use of the burgeoning social media to teach the masses about the social determinants of health (SDH) to the best possible extent. SDH indicate the conditions in which people are born, and people grow, live, work and age. Look at the concept of SDH stated in the report of the WHO (2005) that "social determinants reflect people's different positions in the social 'ladder' of status, power and resources. Evidence shows that most of the global burden of disease and the bulk of health inequalities are caused by social determinants." Food and nutrition are precious links that connect and balance the health of family, community and environment.

Social Work Intervention

The health graph of the youth population of urban Kerala is plummeting day by day. The new food culture and erosion of family values are fundamentally responsible for the problem. Social workers should take a proactive role to arrest further deterioration of the social and physical health of people. Some of the efforts detailed below elucidate the responsibilities

of a social worker for the restoration of safe and sound food habits:

- Initiate public debates on a large scale about the choice of food and current eating habits and patterns. Let people awaken from deep slumber and realize the gravity of fostering healthy food values.
- Make use of social media to the best possible extent to highlight the detrimental effects of junk/exotic food.
- Educate the masses about the items of food which are healthy and those which are unhealthy.
- Organize seminars/workshops as possible to disseminate the worth and importance of traditional/ethnic foods.
- Encourage home cooking and thereby facilitate family members to come together for sharing food and love. Bear in mind that healthy families make a healthy community.
- Empathize with the socially and economically backward people by promoting ethnic food and showing solidarity with them. That is the most effective way of reducing food expenditure, whereby the purchasing power of the BPL category can be enhanced substantially.
- Individual, family, community and society constitute the SDH. Help people establish the link between food and SDH.
- Empower the urban households to build up organic vegetable farming in every house. Eating fresh, toxic-free vegetables and self-grown vegetables is the right practice of cultivating healthy food habits.
- Educative programmes on nutrition should be included in school curricula so that children right from early ages realize the gravity of maintaining unique food standards.
- Widely disseminate health messages on how to bring down the use of oil to a bare minimum and how to increase fibrous food to the maximum.
- Educate youngsters about the deleterious effects of freaky foods, which may be yummy, succulent and enticing. Help them overcome irresistible temptation to undesirable food, however gratifying they may be.
- Cooking is not just the responsibility of women; men too have an equal accountability in preparing food. Launch a powerful campaign for persuading men to involve in all household activities and support women enthusiastically.
- Social work agencies should come forward to propagate the necessity of restoring the distinctive food culture of Kerala.

Conclusion

Needless to say, the lush greenery and the great heritage of Kerala explicitly justify the portrayal of our state as “God’s own country.” But how far that title suits the health scenario of the state is questionable. The food revolution that is being witnessed over the recent years, if not judiciously checked, is bound to end up in a severe catastrophe. Not that we should spurn outlandish cuisines, but let not these items take over the space of age-old food out and out. Our customary food may ever be seen as a benchmark against which the nutritional management should be assessed and brought to practice. Food is our regional identity, for it symbolizes health and social well-being. It is worth remembering what William Shakespeare says, “Our bodies are our gardens, our wills are our gardeners.”

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