

Glimpse of Culinary Culture of Gujarat through Travelogues

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Abstract

Food is very important marker of cultural heritage of a nation. Regional food reflects geographical, social identity and culture. Gujarat is home to an extremely diverse human population, the result of thousands of years of intercultural contact, conflict, and exchange. A travelogue or an itinerary is a travel writing of literary value. In olden times accounts of travellers throw valuable light, give us an account of the prevalent social milieu and a deep insight into their culture and habitation, trade and economy. This research paper therefore aims to give a glimpse of culinary practices of Gujarat region of India through the accounts of foreign travellers. Gujarat is home to an extremely diverse human population, the result of thousands of years of intercultural contact, conflict, and exchange

Keywords: regional cuisine, travelogues, food, culture

Introduction

"The world is a book, and those who don't travel read only one page."

- St. Augustine

Every region of India has its own unique identity which is determined by various factors such as language, architecture, costumes, dances, music etc. One such factor is Food. However it is observed that not much attention is paid to systematic documentation of Indian food. Due to the paucity of sources for studying food history, one needs to explore less conventional sources of history. In present paper an attempt is made to study food practices of Gujarat region as mentioned in the travelers' accounts. Travelogues are a part of unconventional yet an important historical source which give us an account of the prevalent social milieu and a deep insight into the culture and habitation of the places the travelers visited.

The geographical position of Gujarat along with its easy accessibility from the north, north-west, west and south has been particularly responsible for its historic past.¹ Renowned archaeologist Dr. Hasmukh D Sankalia

states that, the proximity to the sea front and accessibility to inland routes served as a gateway from earliest times by way of commercial activities. This geographical setting of Gujarat provided easy accessibility to travelers, ambassadors, merchants, envoys to enter India via the sea ports. Their impression of the land and people were documented in their travelogues. Traveler's account of the agricultural products, trade activities, dietary practices and food taboos are of immense value to understand food culture of the region. In the absence of contemporary cookbooks descriptions of cooked food given in travelogues helps us to know the dietary habits of people of Gujarat. These travelers give vivid description of food of royalty as well as commoners, of the festivities and fasts. The present research paper, thus, tries to catch a glimpse of food practices of Gujarat through few travelogues.

Alexander's invasion of India opened not only new roadways to India but it also generated the curiosity about India. From 4th century B.C.E onwards many Greek travelers visited India and recorded their impressions. Noteworthy among them was an unknown author of the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea. According to the author of the Periplus of the Erythrean sea Bhr̥ gukaccha (Bharuch) was the principal distributing centre of western India from where the merchandise brought from abroad

End Notes

¹ Hasmukh Sankalia, 'Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology of Gujarat', Munshiram Manoharlal publishers, Mumbai, 1987, pp 156-159.

was carried to the inland centers. First Chinese pilgrim to visit Gujarat was Hiuen-Tsang (630-645 C.E.) His detailed description of 110 kingdoms that he visited has earned the title as 'Gazetteer of India'. Some of these kingdoms were from the Gujarat region. He describes different articles of food and fruits found on Indian plains. From the writings of Arab traders who came to India in the 9th and the 10th centuries one gets the impression of Gujarat as fertile and prosperous state. Al-Beruni(973 - 1048 C.E) historian of Takrikh I Hind travelled through trading centre of Asaval, on the AnhilvadaPatan route from Cambay². Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta (1332-1346 C.E.) in his '*Rehla*' described Cambay as the most important port accessible for the oceanic trade.

Asia was perceived as a land of myths and fables by the western world. It was only when travelers, beginning with Marco Polo (1292 C.E.) returned to Europe with their eye witness accounts that a new dimension and perception of India was brought to light³. Duarte Barbosa, (1500-1517) Portuguese traveller, visited Champaner and gave eyewitness accounts about the food habits of that region. By the 15th and 16th centuries, more European travelers began to arrive in India for trade as a result of the facilitation of transport. During Mughal reign many European travelers like Edward Terry, Francisco Pelsaert, Niccolao Fray Sebastian Manrique Manucci, Albrecht de Mandelslo, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Francois Bemier, John Fryer visited Gujarat. We find the travelers discussing the agricultural produce, trade, and food habits of the people. Ludovico-di-Varthema (1502-1508 C.E), Italian traveler visited India and reported his travel narratives in 'The king of Cambay'(Khambhat). Besides these travelers, three Englishmen; Henry Lord, Sir Thomas Herbert, Peter Mundy representing East India Company did also visit Gujarat in the reign of Shahjahan. The early Surat factory records gives glimpses of local culinary delights enjoyed by officers of East India Company.

² Elliot and Dowson, '*The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*', Trübner & Co., London, 1867, p.87.

³ Manuel Kamroff, '*The Travels of Marco Polo*', The Modern Library, New York, 1931, pp106-07

Cuisine of Gujarat

Talking about the food habits of Maitrakas during his visit to Saurashtra, Kachchh region, Hiuen Tsang, the most celebrated Chinese traveler specially observed the rich variety of rice. Among the varieties of rice, he mentions that *sali* is considered the best to eat.⁴ According to him wheat was another important food crop abundantly produced in the regions of Kheta (Kheda) and Anandapura (Vadnagar)⁵. He observes that the houses are filled with piles of charcoal, cotton, rice, fruits, vegetables during the Maitrakarule. Both Hiuen Tsang and I-tsing mentioned about oil seeds being extensively used for the preparation of different food items. ⁶Al Idrisi (1099-1165 C.E) and Al Masudi (896-956 C.E), Arab Geographers mention about Bhr gukaccha being the principal flourishing centre and wheat being the main crop for the trade.⁷ while describing the food of the people of Naharwala they say that they live upon rice, peas, beans, haricots, lentils, mash, fish and animals.

The use of rice was especially mentioned by almost all Arab travelers. Ibn Masah mentions that rice and cow's milk served as the main items in Gujarat. The Indians believed that the diet consisting exclusively of rice and cow's milk was beneficial for the maintenance of a sound and prolonged life. It was also useful for good complexion. Testifying to the same views Marco Polo (1292 C.E) the venetian merchant, documented in his famous book 'The Travels' that, the naked ascetics of Gujarat who ate nothing but a little rice and milk and live up to the age of 150 or 200 years. Duarte Barbosa, describes the diet of banias-(merchant community in Gujarat) mainly composed of rice, milk, butter, sugar, fruits, vegetables and herbs⁸. He further mentions that, milk and butter played an important role in their lives. As they married at a very early age, milk was given to girls to become mature

⁴ Thomas Watters, '*On Yuan Chwang's travels in India, 629-645 A.D.*', Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1904, p. 168-172

⁵ Ibid., p.168

⁶ Ibid, p. 178

⁷ Adhya B. Saxena, '*Urban Growth in South Gujarat: A Case Study Of Bharuch From Fourteenth To Mid-Eighteenth Century*,' Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 62, 2001, pp. 227-238

⁸ Dr. Sadaf Fatma, 'Urban life in Mughal Gujarat' unpublished M. Phil dissertation, <http://ir.amu.ac.in/8483/1/DS%204197.pdf>

and butter to the boys⁹. Ludovico-di-Varthema observed that Jains who are found in good number in the kingdom of Cambay subsist on the diet of milk, butter, sugar and rice and they also prepared number of dishes of fruits, vegetables and pot herbs.

Rice probably was cooked in different ways but one rice dish which these travelers find worth mentioning is *khichadi*. Even today this dish is eaten by the people in Gujarat across all sections of society. Ibn Batuta describes '*Kishri*' as -moong boiled with rice and eaten after adding ghee. He further mentions that this dish was prepared and eaten by the commoners in Gujarat. Varthema too, says that Gujaratis ate everything but generally they ate *khichadi* made of green pulse mixed with rice without butter and fish.¹⁰ *Dahi* (curd) was much liked by them with *khichadi*. French traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1658-1669 C.E.), who visited Surat frequently writes that *khichadi* made of green lentils, rice and ghee is the staple diet of the peasants and a most popular evening meal.¹¹ Portuguese traveler Sebastian Manrique (1629-1643 C.E.) in his bazaar accounts, describes rice dishes being sold in the Lahore camp bazaar, which he called "*Persian Piloes*", "*Mogol Bringes*" and a rice preparation with vegetables called "Gujarat or dry Bringe."¹² *Birinj* is a Persian term for rice and probably he is referring to the *khichadi* of Gujarat. Almost all travelers mention that most important dish of the banias was *khichadi*. Not only commoners', even kings and emperors were fond of this dish as the Mughal emperor Jehangir in his memoirs mentions his favourite Gujarati *khichadi* and calls it as *lazizan* which means tasty.¹³

If the meals of commoners described by these travelers seem simple and hearty, then the feasts served by the royalty and aristocrats were equally lavish and sumptuous. Accounts of European travelers, when they were invited by the aristocrats give glimpses of the food habits of the Muslim elite class of Gujarat. Use of many fresh & dry fruits in cooking especially non vegetarian

preparations is mentioned. Various types of dishes were served to them, but mainly of non-vegetarian as Muslims were very fond of it. Generally, the food was prepared with meat, rice, butter oil (*cinictissilvestris* and *sesamuni*'), saffron, raisin, almond, salt, pepper, garlic, cloves. Various types of dishes were served to these travelers. The foremost dish according to John Ovington (1689-1693 C.E.) was *pulao*. In his travelogue 'Voyage to Surat' he describes "palao that is rice boiled so artificially that every grain lies singly without being clodded together with spices intermixt and a boiled fowl in the middle, is the most common Indian dish and a dumpoked fowl that is boiled with butter in any small vessel and stuff with raisins and almonds is another."¹⁴ This was the delicious dish; much liked by the aristocracy and was eaten in different varieties with mutton. Peter Mundy (1628-1656 C.E.) was served a dish which he called as "dopease" (*dopiyaza*). Another important dish served to the travelers was dumpoked. Dumpoked was a method of cooking of recipes like pulao or meat dishes. In this technique the meat was steamed in its juices in a seal of dough. But not only fowl but all the fleshies were cooked in this style. Hobson Jobson¹⁵ mention the word 'dunpoked' was an Anglo-Indian pronunciation of Persian word *dumpakht*. Another dish *Kabab* was made of beef or muttons, which was first cut into small pieces, then sprinkled with salt and pepper and dipped with oil and garlic, mixed together in a pot. Then it was roasted on a spit. *Achars* or pickles were served to enhance the taste of the meal specially mentioned by the travelers Edward Terry, Peter Mundy, John Ovington and John Fryer.

Edward Terry (1616-1619 C.E.) who visited Gujarat and Malwa gives us comparative account of food of rich and poor in 'Voyages to East India'. He accounted that, in Gujarat the rich vegetarian bania merchants and nobles served him fifty dishes at a time. When Europeans were invited by a bania merchant for meals they were served sweetmeat, pulao, sharbat and lemon. Meal was served

⁹ Ibid., p.74

¹⁰ Ibid., 106

¹¹ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, '*Travels in India*', Vol. I, V. Ball (Trans.) , Oxford University press, London, 1925, pp.225-311

¹² Sebastian Manrique, '*Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique*', Vol. II, Routledge press, 2010, p. 187

¹³ Ibid., p.159

¹⁴ John Ovington, '*A voyage to Surat in the year 1689*' (Ed.) H. G. Rawlinson, Oxford University Press, London, 1929. P.231

¹⁵ Yule, Henry, A.C. Burnell, Hobson-Jobson, '*A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo Indian words and phrases*', Routledge, 2009, p.330.

upon the green leaves and after meal the leaf was thrown away to maintain hygiene. However, the ordinary class used to consume rice boiled in green ginger. Butter and salt pepper were added to make it tasty. Their staple food was made of thick round cakes made from coarser grain; he probably understood these grains as wheat of a different type. Which was actually millets breads (bhakris) roasted on iron griddle. There was a custom of offering *Pan* (betel) to the guests which gave a fragrant breadth and dyed their lips". This practice of eating *pan* after the lunch is prevalent in Gujarat even today.

Today Gujarat is known mainly for its practice of vegetarianism but it seems in medieval Gujarat meat eating was common among the Hindus especially the Rajputs. Duarte Barbosamentions in his travelogue that "Race of Heathen whom the Moors called *Resbutos* (Rajputs) dwelt therein, who in those days were the knights and wardens of the land, and made war whosoever it was needful. These men kill and eat sheep and fish and all other kinds of food: in the mountain there are yet many of them, where they have great villages and obey not they king of *Guzerate*, but rather wage daily war against him".¹⁶ The Aristocratic class preferred to eat beef, mutton, fowl, antelope, fish, chicken, pigeon etc. As observed by Terry, the meats enjoyed by the Muslim merchants included mutton, goat's meat, many types of fowl, such as chickens, pigeons, partridges, quails and varieties of waterfowl such as geese and duck. Beef as well as pork were eaten, even though subject to restrictions among certain communities. High caste Hindus abhorred the flesh of the cow whereas swine's flesh was forbidden for Muslims. Buffalo meat appeared to have been a common substitute for beef. Mutton was more expensive than goat's flesh, which is why the latter was more commonly consumed¹⁷.

While describing drinks of Gujarat the travelers make very interesting observation. Ovington recorded that the banias of Surat drank tea without sugar or sometimes they mixed it with small quantity of lemon. This type of tea

added with some spices was also drunk for medicinal purposes, he added. According to the letter from Surat facory dated April 2 1656 three Dutch ships from Ceylon brought Chinese tea along with other commodities. He also mentions that coffee became popular in the Gujarat province as it was consumed by the people who didn't drink wine on religious grounds. Virji Vohra the famous merchant of Gujarat made coffee popular in the region of Gujarat in 17th century. He bought some tea and coffee from China and Yemen respectively. By 17th century coffee became the important commodity for trade as documented by the English Factories in India.¹⁸ Demand for coffee for consumption as well as for sale probably was very high as it is mentioned that Surat occasionally faced scarcity of the supply of coffee. By asking Indian merchants trading with Mocha to supply coffee to the company in London the problem of scarcity was salved. The East India Company in 1663 ordered from the Surat agency around 20 tons of coffee and this request was fulfilled by Indian merchants who brought coffee from Mocha to Surat.¹⁹ From this observation it seems though tea as well as coffee drinking became more common in 19th century, Gujarat being important trading post both these beverages were introduced in this region long before it was commercially cultivated in India.

We have Periplus of the Erythrean Sea (variously dated between 100 and 300 C.E) which gives account of import of Arabian wine at Bhr̥gukaccha the principal distributing centre of western India.²⁰ Francois Bernier (1656-1668 C.E.) accounts describe that a type of wine called Shiraz was brought from Persia to the port of Surat through Bandar Abbas, from where it was sent to Delhi. Canary wine was brought by the Dutch from Canary Islands to Surat. It was then sent to Delhi. Both the Shiraz and Canary wines were the most expensive varieties. Indigenous alcoholic drink mentioned by travelers was arrack which was made by the locals from sap of palmyra tree. William Finch (1608-11C.E.) observes many palmyra trees at Vario near Surat. Arrack was Anglo Indian

¹⁶ Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, Vol. 1, Mansei Longworth Dames (Trans. & Ed.), Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989 (reprint), p. 192

¹⁷ William Foster, (ed.) *Early Travels in India 1583-1619*, Humphrey Milford, London 1921, pp. 296-297.

¹⁸ Satya Prakash Sangar, *Food and Drinks in Mughal Period*, Reliance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 105-106

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106

²⁰ Wilfred. H. Schoff, *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, Longmans Greens and Co., Calcutta 1912, p.214

translation of the Arabic word □arq' which meant sweat and by extension—extract.²¹ Arrack was consumed by the both locals as well as Europeans. It also finds mention in the records of the English factories in India in the seventeenth century, as it was often a part of the traders' and factors' supplies in Gujarat. One can easily conclude that above mentioned wines were consumed by Hindu and Muslim aristocratic class.

Conclusion

Gujarat witnessed influx of an extremely diverse population due to the result of thousands of years of intercultural contact, conflict, and exchange. The travelogue suggest that Gujarat was always been a host to the constant inflow of travelers since ancient times. An important contribution of travelogues to the regional history has been the description about the life of the common masses which usually does not find mention in historical documents. Consumption being one of the most taken for granted practices of everyday life, it too was not deliberately recorded as a part of history. Travelers' gastronomic experiences as mentioned in their writings provide a valuable source for understanding the ingredients, cooking style, recipes and food habits of the region. It throws light on the evolution of the food culture in the course of history in Gujarat region. One can understand from the travelogues that the people of Gujarat accepted the diverse food ingredients and style of cooking introduced in their culture from time to time. This brought about a rich amalgamation of culinary traditions which in turn helps us to get a complete picture of food culture of Gujarat in historical perspective.

²¹ Prasun Chatterjee, "The Lives of Alcohol in Pre-Colonial India", *The Medieval History Journal*, 8, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 191-225