

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

I. Nandhini Meena

Assistant Professor of English

St.Xavier's College

Palayamkottai

meenanandhini99@mail.com

and

Dr. Beneson Thilagar Christadoss

Associate professor

Department of English

St.John's College

Palayamkottai

Abstract:

Food, apart from its role in survival and human existence, signifies the cultural identity of the people and place. Gastronomy is a field of study which details the nutritional value, preparation, sensory perception and cultural value of the food. Travelling to different places provides a chance to encounter various sections of the people and their food habits. Many critics like Roland Barthes and Claude Levi Strauss point out that food is a language. This paper attempts to explore the cultural identity of certain foods in areas like Mughal Sarai, Itarsi, Jhansi and Shoranur. These places are travelled by the Indian travel writer Bishwanath Gosh. It has been recorded in his work named *Chai Chai*.

Keywords: Gastronomy, Cultural Identity, travel, tradition, food habits.

Gastronomy can be defined as the study of food and culture with a great emphasis on gourmet kind of food. Gourmet food is a kind of food which is made up of ingredients that are rare to be found. Gastronomy encompasses everything that can be related to food. For instance, it includes the way of cooking, the nutritional value of food, different kinds of tastes, and cultural perspectives of the food items. The term Gastronomy was first used in the title of the poem *Gastronomie* by Joseph Berchoux in 1801.

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

– January – March - 2023

From time immemorial, food and the process of eating is a necessary act for human existence. Without knowing the background and history of the food one cooks and eats it. There is no other thought about the food items one consumes. The elements of gastronomy gained its importance in the fast-moving twentieth century. The great Chinese philosopher Linyutang comments on food as follows, “What is patriotism? but love of the food you ate as a child” (Johnson). It gives a sense of belonging and it creates a connection with memories of home. Emilo F. Moran comments in the article titled *Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food habits*, “Man’s search for food is rooted in habits acquired through a lengthy process of acculturation” (169).

This study explores the cultural connections to food items in terms of travel. The role of food in travel is a predominant one. While travelling a traveler encounters different sections of the people and their different food habits. The traveler tastes the local foods or street foods which represent the dominant culture of the particular area. Food serves as their cultural identity. Chiaro and Rossato point out, “Food is intimately and irrevocably linked to culture” (Faber 155). Every state in India has its own food culture. Food can be considered as a basic tool to reflect the hospitality of the people. Some travel writers travel to different parts of the world to taste different foods belonging to different cultures. Roland Barthes comments, “The Communicative value of food lies in its appearance, preparation methods, eating habits, sensory perception and eating contexts” (FC 24). Food serves as a tool to learn about other people’s culture, history and customs. Hotels, motels, *dhabas* and restaurants are all gathering places for people belonging to different communities. Irrespective of caste, creed, race and religion people of different cultures meet over there. Some foods become the trademarks of a particular area. It has been stayed there for hundreds of years. Anthony Bourdain says, “Food is everything we are. It is an extension of nationalist feelings, ethnic feelings, personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, and your grandma. It is inseparable from those from the get-go” (Kachroo-Levine).

The concept of travel or wandering lies in every human being. People move or travel from one place to another for various purposes like trade, commerce, education, food and employment. During the eighteenth century, the concept of travel become more popular among the people. It becomes a part and parcel of a person’s education. A

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

- January - March - 2023

person needs to travel a lot to accumulate knowledge. Tabish Khair observes travel as, "Current definitions of both travel and travel writings are embedded in a distinctive cultural and historical experience" (5). Travel awakens the mind of the people, it kindles the inner human spirit. More than the sedantric man who is settled to a particular place, the man who travels gather a lot of knowledge. The traveller encounters various sections of the people and come to know about their vivid customs, traditions and lifestyle. It broadens his mind. Paul Fussell writes in his *The Norton Book of Travel* comments, "In order to acquire culture and sophistication, many young men of the upper classes took what was called, "The Grand tour" of Europe"(131).

The travel writers record their own experiences in the form of fiction, travelogue and memoirs. They portray the real essence of the places they have visited. J.G. Hamann, a German philosopher says, "When I rest my feet, my mind also ceases to function" (Hawker). Bishwanath Gosh is one such travel writer belonged to India. He is the author of the following works : *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began*, *Chai Chai*, *Longing, Belonging: An Outside at Home in Calcutta*, *Gazing at Neighbours: Travels Along the Line that partitioned India*(2017). He is a journalist by profession and he is served as an Associate Editor with "The Hindu".

In his work *Chai Chai* he travels to different connecting places of India like Mughal Sarai, Jhansi, Itarsi and Bharathapuzha. These places are known for their busy railway junctions. The author takes the reader into the small Indian towns where the real India lives. He has to eat the flavour-rich dishes of these towns. It gives insight into their culture. He keenly observes the ingredients, cooking techniques, textures and tastes of the food. Culture decides what should one eat and What one should not. In Ted Talks, Claudia Roden says, "people were celebrating their traditional, regional cuisines and local products with enormous passion...besides looking for recepies I was researching about the history of food because it arouses strong emotions because it touches on identity and ancestry" (Roden).

India is a diverse country where one can see different food habits. As a travel writer, Bishwanath Gosh explores various indigenous foods and comes to know about the culture of the place. To know other's cultures, their food habits play a major role. While Gosh is travelling on the train to Mughal Sarai, he has a chance to meet Marwaris, Tamils

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

– January – March - 2023

and Bengalis. He keenly observes their food styles and compares them with other people. Marwaris carry a piles of puris, sabzi and pickle whereas Tamil families carry Idlis and chutney powder. But Bengalis take travel as an excuse to eat outside. In his words, “The journeys are not just about the levelling, but also about getting acquainted with each other’s cultures, especially food habits” (2). Food communicates culture in various ways. Marwaris and Tamils used to carry their food wherever they go, they stick on to their traditional foods. Food represents the cultural identity of the place.

The writer first travelled to the place named Mughal Sarai. As he walks in the Grant Trunk Road, he sees a street vendor preparing Panipuri and Jalebis. His taste buds are kindled. He orders Panipuri and Jalebis, but he does not receive the plate first, the Chatwallah serves Panipuri to the native man who ordered second. He comments, “Nothing makes you lust for food more than when you see adjacent tables being served” (16). Not only in Mughal Sarai but also in Itarsi the writer eats Panipuri. Panipuri is also known as golgappa, batasha and phuchka.

The Chatwallah is an important person in North India. He represents a break from the normal routine of the daily life. Amidst the busy schedule of the mundane life, people from all walks of life take a break and eat in the street carts serving foods. The indigenous street food culture has been explained in the above passage. Street foods can be considered as taboo by Indian parents and elders due to their unhygienic preparation. It has a unique flavour, aroma and texture. Street foods are mostly the traditional dishes of a particular region. Kalyan Karmakar an author of *The Travelling Belly* describes eating panipuri as a “foodie adventure sport, restaurants cannot recreate the thrill of standing on the pavement, unperturbed by people jostling past. Your eyes are focused on the pani puri wala. You have to be ready to pop it in when your turn comes” (Charukesi). The above lines show the depth of love that North Indians has for panipuri. Panipuri, the street food has been spread to various parts of India due to the migration of the people. The writer finds the traditional street food culture of North India through travel.

The writer has developed a conversation with the person named Chhote Lal, who worked in the railway pantry department. He says, “Food in those days would be cooked in pure ghee” (30). Through this conversation, he comes to know that the people

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

- January - March - 2023

of Mughal Sarai cook their food with pure ghee. It was once their tradition. They give importance to ghee because of its medicinal properties like improving digestion. Generally, people cook their dishes with oil, but these people having known the medicinal properties of ghee, included it in their diet. Foods which are available in the railways are of low quality, but in those days, foods produced in the railway departments were made with pure ghee. It is evident from the above lines that the people of Mughal Sarai gave importance to nutritious meals in their food tradition.

In an article entitled *Exploring Indian Culture through Food*, Tulsi Srinivas mentions, "Food in India is an Identity marker of caste, class, family, kinship, tribe affiliation, lineage, religiosity, ethnicity and increasingly of secular group identification" (Srinivas 38). During Gosh's travel, he visits a small hotel in Mughal Sarai. He orders steamed rice and *alu matar*. Rice and *alu matar* are the staple food of the people of Mughal Sarai. *Alu matar* is prepared with potatoes and peas. Potatoes and peas play a vital role in North Indian cuisines. Though it is a vegetarian dish, it has the power to induce one's hunger than the meat dish. The writer comments, "Food, for some unexplainable reason, is simple and delicious in the small hotels. Hardly any culinary intricacy involved in the cooking of *alu puri* or *alu matar*, yet you want to go back to them over and over again" (34). This particular combination is enjoyed by almost all the people of Mughal Sarai during winter. It is extremely spicy and it is well suited to eat during winter or monsoon season. The writer gives an insight into the staple food of the people of Mughal Sarai.

The writer visits Jhansi which is situated in Uttar Pradesh. It is named after the warrior Jhansi Laxmibai. The writer notices that eating roasted peanuts in the winter season is a pastime in North India. The writer comments, "Winter is peanuts in north India. Eating roasted peanuts or *moong phali*, is a great pastime in itself, just like munching on popcorn at the movies" (59). At the *dhabas* in Jhansi, he observes that the expert cooks make dough into flat circles and make rotis. At the Mithai shop, he sees cooks who make sweets and savouries. As a travel writer, he closely observes how and by whom the foods are prepared. *Dhabas* are roadside restaurants in North India. Rotis are an everyday dish in many homes of North India. Their layers are prepared with more care as it is their tradition and culture passed from one generation to another.

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

– January – March - 2023

In Jhansi he is very curious about a farmer's meal, he points out,

I have always been curious about a farmer's meal, but I think I know what he eats: five or six rotis with a little *daal* and a large onion. When you are toiling in the fields from dawn to dusk, you earn a meal instead of being entitled to it, and in such a case, even dry *roti* and onion become a delicacy. And if you happen to drop some pickle or chutney on the bunch of rotis, it becomes a full-course meal. (72)

He comes to know about the food of a common farmer. It is different from that of the Elite people or middle-class people. For generations, he has been eating this kind of food. Eating *daal* is a luxurious one for him. People belonging to different sections of the society eat different foods. Food operates as a tool to identify a particular group of society. According to Levi-Strauss, "Food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment but is also a part of a sign system as it is strictly involved in the process of signification and interpretation. Specifically, it can be conceived as a language expressing social structures and cultural systems" (Strauss).

The writer finally visits the place named as Shoranur, Kerala. He tastes appam and mutton stew, the traditional foods of Kerala. He says, "The cook was a Garhwali, but the appam and mutton stew he had prepared was so delectable that he would have done Kerala proud in a food festival" (190). Appam is made with raw rice and coconut milk which is left fermented overnight. The Kerala cuisine is known for the usage of spices, coconuts and vegetables grown in their region. Coconut forms the chief ingredient in their foods. The writer comes to know about the Kerala culinary form and culture through his travel.

Food apart from the means of survival, serves as a cultural identity of the place. There is more connection between food and culture. One may eat food according to one's culture. Foods can also be associated with memories of the past, familial bonding, festivals, celebrations and personal value. Traditional values of food and the secret ingredients which provide wonderful taste to the food have been passed down from one generation to the other. Hence the cultural value of the food is preserved. Travelling to different parts of the country provides enough space to explore gastronomic aspects of the food, especially its culture. In the article *Exploring Indian Culture through Food*, Tulsi

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

– January – March - 2023

Srinivas says, “Domestic food tourism creates and sustains a vibrant culinary imagination and a gastronomic landscape, both within and outside India” (Srinivas 40). Tourism or Travel gives a space to explore different cuisines and how they could be associated with the people’s culture. This study provides an insight into the gastronomic aspects of the novel *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh.

Works Cited

Gosh, Bishwanath. *Chai Chai*. Tranquebar, 2009.

Claudia, Roden. “About Culture and Food”. TedxTalks, 7 Nov, 2015.

<https://youtu.be/is7gibSxE>.

Counihan, carole and Penny Van Esterik. *Food and Culture: a reader*. Routledge, 1997.

Faber, Pamela. “Food Terminology as a system of Cultural Communication”. Researchgate, Nov 2017, DOI: 10.1075/term.23.1.07fab.

Hawker, Lizzy. “When I rest my feet”. Wordpress, 05 May, 2008,

<https://lizzyhawker.wordpress.com/2008/05/05/when-i-rest-my-feet/>.

Johnson, Nathaniel. “Your Food is better travelled than you are”. Grist, 14 Jun, 2016,

<https://grist.org/food/your-food-is-better-traveled-than-you-are/>

Kachroo-Levine, Maya. “47 Anthony Bourdain Quotes that will inspire you to travel more, Eat better and Enjoy Life”. Travel+Leisure, 05 Feb, 2019,

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/travel-tips/celebrity-travel/anthony-bourdain-travel-food-quotes>.

Khair, Tabish. *Other Routes*. Bloomington: IndianaUP, 2005.

Moran, Emilio F. *Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food Habits*. Proquest Ebook central, 1976. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/inflibnet-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3040685>.

Ramadurai, Charukesi. “Panipuri: India’s favourite street food at home?”. BBC, 4 Jun,

Gastronomic Aspects in *Chai Chai* by Bishwanath Gosh

- January - March - 2023

2020, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200602-pani-puri-indias-favourite-street-food-at-home>.

Srinivas, Tulasi. "Exploring Indian Culture through Food". Vol.16, 2011, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/exploring-indian-culture-through-food/>

Stano, Simota. "Introduction: Semiotics of Food". Semiotica, 12 May, 2016, pp.19-26, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/sem-2016-0095/html?lang=en>.
