

Ceremonial-food Culture of Kashmir

M.Y. Mushoor

Kashmir is also known as an abode of plurality of faiths religious diversity and mutually respecting belief. Saints, Rishis and Sufis have been attracted to the calm and peaceful natural atmosphere of this paradise on the earth. Kashmiri society has always been inclined to the spiritual personalities and their dwelling places. Kashmiri masses prefer to behave themselves as most devoted disciples those who they think, pursue the spiritual goal or are dearer to God by virtue of their good deeds. Kashmiris are pre-dominantly religious and they interpret every phenomenon in terms of mysticism. They see the super-natural hand behind every event that occurs in the universe. They believe that God is all powerful and supreme master. Nothing can happen without his will. Therefore, the first and the foremost duty of every faithful servant of God is to seek His pleasure and invoke His mercy to perform his duty, Kashmiris, like all other believers offer mammal and verbal prayers as laid down in their respective theologies. In addition to the mammal prayers and verbal remembering they offer flags, wishing knots and ceremonial foods. The tradition of hanging sacred flags on and wishing tying knots to shrines, dargahas, graves, Sacred trees, bridges and mountain peaks can be witnessed anywhere in Kashmir. Even non-Kashmiris sometime find it very hard to resist the temptation during their stay in Kashmir. Some paramilitary personnel have been seen hanging wishing flags on the graves of those whom they earlier killed as their enemies hoping that they are not haunted by their *atma* (spirits).

The custom of offering prayer foods is motivated by various intentions and objectives and socio-cultural influences. The

institution of charity, benevolence, generosity, alms-giving and philanthropy is functional in Kashmir as in any religious society of the world. All religions stress on their followers to strengthen this institution. Feeding the hungry, clothing the cloth-less and helping the needy is made obligatory on every human being especially the faithful. It is in the backdrop religious teachings that in addition to the obligatory charity, some forms of discretionary charity have come into existence. Ceremonial food culture has developed in Kashmir to the extent of acceptability from each and every sect, group or class. Some people trace the sanction this practice to scriptures while others do it as a tradition from saints and holy men or consider it a custom regulated by its continuity.

Ceremonial food tradition of Kashmir is so old, so varied and so strong that anyone walking along the streets of Srinagar city or that of any town or village of Kashmir can see an elderly women or a men happily distributing food among passer-by who receive it as a sacred gift; cherish it as an appetizer and consume it as a favourite dish or a kind of *Mana-Salva* with their heads high and without the slightest notion of having begged for it. The principle of sincerity and no-injury is always present. These scenes are very common outside the shrines and grave-yards. The most common ceremonial food is *Taher* (Taher) or *Tiletaher*. It is prepared out of rice, edible oil, salt, turmeric and onion. Some people opine that mixing turmeric to the food shows its historical connection with Buddhist faith. In Buddhism Yellow-colour is regarded as sacred. One justification can be that turmeric has medicinal value and it makes the dish inviting. The world famous Kashmiri *Wazawan* has always turmeric in it as an essential ingredient. The motto behind all the ceremonial food is to feed the hungry, the way-farers, the needy and the orphan. Generally no one takes the risk of refusing His share of ceremonial food not even the so called radicals. Rather, there is an effective

element of the society that has been actively working for the promotion and popularization of this age-old aspect of the culture.

Some other forms of ceremonial food are briefly discussed one by one as under:

1. Mayar:-

It is prepared out rice and milk or curd adding the required quality of salt to make it taste good and some 'zera' to make it smell nice. This prayer food is usually offered during *Aashura*, it is also prepared on the occasion of the delivery by a cow, a buffalo and a goat. In this case it is preceded by the preparation and distribution of clustrum of the same milking animal. It has been observed that some people put a portion of argot by the side of a spring or on the bank of a brook as a share of Hazrat Khawja-Khazir. It is left to be consumed by hungry dogs, cats, birds and insects so that Gods pleasure is invoked in order to keep the milking animal safe and sound. The cooking pot or the large plate containing the food is carried to some spring or any other sacred place and some elderly person distributes the food among people who happen to gather there without having been extended any invitation or call.

2.Sus-Wugra

stands for rice and Wugra in Kashmir stands for over-cooked thin paste like food. This ceremonial food is offered soon after experiencing a dreadful dream or after finding a child feeling disturbed in his sleep or after a patient recovers from an ailment. This item is usually a mixture of seven ingredients including rice, milk, salt, edible, oil and some spices. It is why some people call it *Sat-Wagra*. It is served in a large plate to young children by the side of a river let, lake, spring or at any-other open space. The children jointly consume the food and then put some water in the plate to wash it clean while chanting in a chorus "*Luchh balayi Dafa*" which

means that many disasters stand avoided or the person for whose good the food has been offered shall be safe from all odds.

3. Toshe-

It is a typical variety prepared out of wheat – flour, ghee and sugar. A team of two or three peers join together to recite some chapters or verses of the Holy Quran or any other Sacred works imploring upon Almighty Allah to help the client in realizing his wish. The flour is backed into odd number of laves of bread which are later on ground and mixed with ghee and shaped into small balls. The balls are distributed among the passers and the neighbours and relatives. However, the peers who administer the prayer must get a lions share. It is a sumptuous dish and people cherish to enjoy it.

4. Kheytsar-

Through a general food variety yet it is offered as a prayer-food at the end of the chilly months of winter or *Chilai-Kalan* when salt is administered to cattle. On this happy occasion *Kheytsar* is prepared out of rice, pulses, salt, edible oil or ghee and onion. It is offered as a thanks giving for having survived the cruel winter season. This prayer food is usually consumed by the family members themselves. However, at times the Imam or any pious persons is invited to share the food and pronounce some prayer.

5. Yaihh Kum or Beiribal Bate-

It is a small scale agriculture festival usually celebrated by every farmer family separately. When food crops ripen and are almost ready for harvesting a fat Chicken, rice and all the available items of vegetable or pulses are cooked together. When the evening falls, a male family member is given a considerable portion of all the varieties in one and the single plate to dine to his capacity in the centre of the field. This ceremonial food aimed at seeking God's

help to save the crops from mice and enemy birds. In some areas the consumer of the ceremonial food plants a Lush-green bough of a particular kind of poplar tree in the middle of a patch of a peddy or maize field.

6. Dothe Ket or hillpot:

When the crops are ready for harvesting a village or habitation joins together in contributing money to purchase a goat or sheep. The animal is slaughtered calling Allah's name on it and its meat is cooked with great purity and passion. Every family donates a pot of cooked rice to the festival. The mutton and the rice is served to each and everybody present on the spot. The poor and the needy are given a special treatment. The intention behind this food is to invoke God's help in protecting the crops from natural climatic especially the devastating hail-storm.

7. Baile-tsochi or Seed Bread:

At the time of sowing seeds, an odd number of loaves is prepared from the rice- flour mixed with salt and the same are distributed among people present in nearby fields as a token of thanks giving and invoking Gods favour to save the expected crops from all devastating forces.

8. Poshe-tsochi or The flower bread:

When roses are in full bloom, people prepare a considerable quantity of loaves and cover them with fresh fragrant roses and take them to the graveyard where a recently expired kin has been buried. The loaves are cut into halves or even in 1/4th and served to everyone present around. Sometimes a pink-coloured tasty and warm salt tea from a *Samawar* is also served with the bread.

At the end a peer or a Molvi Sahib leads the Congregational '*Faeha*' in favour of the deceased. It is prayed to Allah that the soul of the deceased may rest in peace.

9. Funeral Kahwa-

On the fourth day or on the first Friday following the death of a family member Kashmiri *Kahwa* and *Kulucha* or '*Shirmal*' is served to each and every- person who visits the family to share the grief and to give them solace. After a group of visitors takes the Kahwa, the Imam Sahib leads the congregational prayers invoking Allah to bestow his mercy upon the deceased-in fact, all of them. This process goes on for the whole day.

10. Shutel Koker

or the small pore bird this custom was prevalent prayer to the elimination of the deadly disease small pore. When a child was in a grip of this disease the whole family beg for Allah its safe recovery. soon after the recovery would slaughter a big chicken and cook it well spiced and serve the same to the children of the family including the effected one. The children were asked to eat the food to their capacity so that the "Meaj" mother or the Bued, very old woman didn't visit the child again.

11. Masa-Naither:-

It is the post-natal food served to the poor including the nursing mother it is the platable and usually a non-veg food. This tradition is observed by plusling only.

12. Kah-Naither:-

it is just like Masa-Naither a post natal prayer food preparation and its distribution prevalent in Hindus only.

13. Bandara:-

Bandra is arranged by an ascetic and his followers out of the contributions made for common masses. On this occasion Sufiyana musical concert is also arranged and spiritual assertion of the devotees. The food is distributed not only among the devoties but also the passers-by and the needy.

Tail Peace:-

These are many more such items of prayer food which need to be discussed only in a next right up. However, it is in place to mention that ceremonial-food culture is an interesting aspect of our culture and an interesting area of study for researchers of students of sociology the role of this tradition in maintaining the social fabric is equally important. However one cannot resist the feeling that this tradition has created a class of parasites on the society and a huge number of professional beggars who breed crime and other social problems.