



## A Culture that Communicates: An Ethnographic Study of Haryana's Traditional Food 'Raabdi'

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**DOI:** 10.5281/zenodo.8243108

### Abstract

*India is a vault of diverse cultures, languages, rituals and traditions. Every state has its own ethnic individuality evident in its material and non-material culture, viz. food, clothes, jewellery, customs, etc. Primitively, food is a basic biological necessity for sustenance, but, symbolically, it is enmeshed with varied connotations that are, more or less, indicative of a specific ethnicity. Thus, the present research study would closely look at 'raabdi', the traditional food of Haryana, to bring forth the semiotic and symbolic implications in terms of social, regional and cultural dimensions. It would also examine its transition with time and its contemporary relevance in the regions of Haryana. Moreover, it would analyse the myths and folktales associated with this traditional food that plays an indispensable role in making it a part of Haryana's culture.*

**Keywords:** Raabdi, Food, Social Identity, Culture, Ethnicity, Haryana.

### Introduction

India is a vault of diverse cultures, languages, rituals and traditions. Every state has its own ethnic individuality evident in its material and non-material culture, viz. food, clothes, jewellery, customs, etc. Material culture administers an integral role in the formation of social and cultural identities of an individual and, hence, is recognized as a tradition of that particular region. Primitively, food is a basic biological necessity for sustenance, but, symbolically, it is enmeshed with varied connotations that are, more or less, indicative of a specific identity or ethnicity. Ethnic food is such material culture which is characteristic of the identity of an individual and relates to the psyche of society through the associated myths. This research has correspondingly focused on the traditional food of Haryana, particularly 'raabdi'. There is not much documentation of it in history yet it is an indispensable part of the Haryanvi lifestyle and is kept passing on like an oral tradition. A peek at it is provided by James Tod in his treatise, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, where he gives a very brief account of raabdi being a part of Rajasthani traditional cuisine, "Rabri and *chhachh*, or 'porridge and buttermilk', form the grand fare of the desert. A couple of sers of flour of *bajra*, *juar*, and *khejra* is mixed with some sers of *chhachh*, and exposed to the fire, but not boiled, and this mess will suffice for a large family." (1295)

Raabdi is like other traditional foods that are on the way to becoming lost recipes. Several ethnic recipes are fading with the sands of time. So, there is a need to shed light on such traditional folk foods which are relevant in giving a peek at the folk life of a region or community. Thus, the present research would closely look at 'raabdi', the traditional food of Haryana, to bring forth the semiotic and symbolic implications in terms of social, regional and cultural dimensions. The study is based on fieldwork conducted at Nahri, a village located in Sonapat district, Haryana. It would also examine its transition with time and its



contemporary relevance in the Nahri region. Moreover, it would analyse the myths and folktales associated with this traditional food that plays an indispensable role in making it a significant part of Haryana's culture.

### **Raabdi: A Glimpse at its Antiquity**

Raabdi is an integral part of the traditional cuisine of Haryana and Rajasthan. More precisely, the staple food of Rajasthan because of its climatic conditions that are extremely hot during the summers. It is believed that the folks who commuted from Rajasthan to Haryana are the forerunners who introduced this meal to the inhabitants of Haryana. Besides raabdi, there are a few other eatables that are quite similar in the cuisines of Haryana and Rajasthan.

In Nahri, raabdi is prepared only during summer because of its cooling tendency. It is nutritionally rich as its chief ingredients are gram flour and buttermilk besides being affordable. As expressed by James Tod in *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* that animal husbandry was an important occupation of the people of Rajasthan in the early nineteenth century. Likewise, in Nahri, rearing cows and buffaloes is a very common practice in almost every household. It helped them in arranging for their daily food and drink and at the same time provides an earning by trading milk.

In earlier days, since there wasn't any provision for gas stoves, it was prepared over a chulha or earthen stove. To save time, women used to keep the mixture of gram flour and buttermilk in the sun for a few hours and it was put on the chulha to cook. With the technological advent, a transition came in its method of preparation. Earlier, it was prepared with buttermilk that was skimmed at home only which is now replaced with curd. Moreover, like earlier, it is not kept in the sun but is immediately heated on the gas stove. Even the manner of partaking in it is quite interesting and is connoted with a few myths shedding light on the psyche of the respective inhabitants.

### **Myths and Folktales Relevant to Raabdi**

Traditionally, it is eaten with buttermilk in the daytime while with milk at night. There lies a belief that buttermilk is tamasic in nature and, thus, has associations with murky energies. So, it is prohibited to drink buttermilk at night. Contrarily, milk is considered Saatvik in nature, so, its intake at night is regarded apt. Although, there are no scientifically proven facts regarding such beliefs yet people show deep faith in it. While, in some households, it is eaten only with milk irrespective of day or night because milk is considered a symbol of fertility. Some poor households, more particularly, the farming community who do not rear cows and buffaloes prefer to eat it with teekada; it is flat bread like a chapatti that is made of gram flour and spices. They take it for breakfast and lunch rather than for dinner as, according to them, it is a complete and healthy meal that can keep them going for the whole day. Similarly, there are two folktales relevant to raabdi; the first recounts its mythological affiliations while the other promulgates the prominence of domesticity to women.

According to the first folktale, there was a man who had a son and a daughter from his first wife. His second wife was not good towards the kids. Every day, when her husband goes off to work, she got the children to do all household chores. One such day, she asked them to go to the nearby forest to bring wood on the pretext to get rid of them. The kids, unknowingly, went as said and got lost in the forest. It was dusk but they couldn't locate the way back home. They started crying in fear. Fortunately, Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati came to stroll in the same forest and they heard the wailing of the kids. Goddess Parvati was overwhelmed seeing the kids and embraced them lovingly. And, eventually, she prepared



raabdi to soothe and feed them.

The other folktale, titled ‘Test of the Bride’, recounts that a long time back, there was a king and a queen. They had a handsome son of marriageable age and, hence, lots of proposals from prospective brides were coming each day. The queen's mother was worried about how to find the best girl in the lot. Finally, an idea struck her and she sent an invitation to all prospective girls. When all girls arrived, she conducted a test and asked them to make a dish with just a handful of gram flour which must satisfy at least ten married women. By evening, the dining table was brimmed with a variety of dishes but none could satisfy the queen except raabdi. Hence, the girl who prepared raabdi was selected as the prince’s bride.

Noticeably, both folktales revolve around women and domesticity. The first folktale centres on Goddess Parvati which manifests the antiquity of raabdi. Also, the reference to Goddess Parvati implies the significance attributed to this particular food by the Goddess herself who is an embodiment of Annapurna. While the second folktale is suggestive of the belief that a domestic woman should be skilled in gastronomy to be deemed eligible and desirable. Its further affiliation with satiating ten married women is a way to assign primacy to women folks which is hitherto denied to them in a patriarchal society. It is important to note that, in Nahri, these oral narratives are passed on from generation to generation among females. Thus, it would not be wrong to say that these folktales are a sort of kitchen heritage which every mother passes on to her daughter when she starts learning culinary skills.

### **The Communication of Food: A Sociological Interpretation**

Robin Fox in “Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective” relates food to a social impulse. Besides being a biological necessity, a “meal is a message” and, thus, plays a social role (Fox 5). According to Fox, food is a means of exchange of social bonds as it brings people closer. Mealtimes are moments when people sit together and exchange love and care. Also, food is itself an occasion which connects people socially and in harmony as one and a whole. He, thus, accords food a symbol of harmony, acquaintance and humanitarianism. He adds that food customs and habits display one’s social and cultural identity as “what we eat becomes a most powerful symbol of who we are” (Fox 2). Sometimes to get identified with the other person, one chooses to eat in the same manner, like, to eat by dipping the fingers or using a spoon. And mostly in such processes of achieving recognition, one accepts to eat the way he or she disapproves personally. Moreover, food distinguishes the position of an insider and an outsider; if a person is not acquainted with the conventional manner of eating a particular dish, especially a traditional one, then that person is marked as an outsider. On the other hand, an insider must know how to eat traditional food, “anyone wishing to integrate himself into a group must eat with (traditional manner)...there is no surer way of marking off those who are in and those out than by food etiquette” (Fox 3). Thus, eating choices and habits are labels of the cultural identity of a person.

On the other hand, Claude Levi-Strauss in “The Culinary Triangle” presents a completely different idea in consideration of a meal. His main emphasis lies on the preparation of food rather than the manner of eating. He interprets that cooked food is a connotation of nature and culture, “one can say that the roasted is on the side of nature, the boiled on the side of culture: literally, because boiling requires the use of a receptacle, a cultural object; symbolically, in as much as culture is a mediation of the relations between man and the world, and boiling demands a mediation (by water) of the relation between food and fire which is absent in roasting” (Levi-Strauss 37). He opines that boiled food is connotative of civilization and a product of culture as in the process of boiling there is an



intervention of a receptacle and a mediation which establishes the relation between food and fire. Similarly, the various constructions in the form of myths and folktales regarding preparation and manner of eating establish the relation between people and ethnic food. He then classifies between domestic and occasional meals. He opines that boiled food needs a receptacle, unlike roasted, thus, the former is suggestive of “concave” while the other of “convex”; the former is mainly prescribed for domestic use and shared among small groups, such as, family and is termed as “endo-cuisine” while the latter is served to guests and distinguished persons and is prepared occasionally, so, it is called “exo-cuisine” (Levi-Strauss 38). He then interprets food by ascribing masculine and feminine traits, “the roasted and the boiled will have respective affinities with life in the bush (outside the village community) and sedentary life (inside the village). From this comes a subsidiary association of the roasted with men, the boiled with women” (Levi-Strauss 39). In villages, women are entitled to domestic domain and that is why boiled has affiliations with them while men go out and are the breadwinners so roasted is associated with men. Levi-Strauss takes his argument ahead by calling food a mark of social status. He gives an example of ancient Maori “A noble could himself roast his food, but he avoided all contact with the steaming oven, which was left to the slaves and women of low birth” (Levi-Strauss 39). A difference is highlighted between elite and bourgeois as well, “boiling conserves entirely the meat and its juices, whereas roasting is accompanied by destruction and loss. One connotes economy, the other prodigality; the former is plebeian, the latter aristocratic” (Levi-Strauss 39).

Moving ahead, Roland Barthes in “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” interprets food as a communication system. He opines that food is a lot more besides being a need for survival. It is a form of communication which expresses different meanings concerning habits, cooking and consumption, “[Food] is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour” (Barthes 21). He further suggests that food presents a “social environment” in which the material or object, the custom or manner of cooking all point finger towards a sort of “signification” and this signification further paves the way for “communication” (Barthes 22-3). He postulates three groups of themes in this regard:

The first of these assigns to food a function that is, in some sense, commemorative: food permits a person...to partake each day of the national past. In this case, this historical quality is obviously linked to food techniques (preparation and cooking)...They are, we are told, the repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors...[and] food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society... In this manner, food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life...A second group of values concerns what we might call...feelings of inferiority were attached to certain foods and that people therefore abstained from them. For example, there are supposed to be masculine and feminine kinds of food...Finally, a third area of consciousness is constituted by a whole set of ambiguous values of a somatic as well as psychic nature, clustering around the concept of health. (Barthes 24)

The first theme expresses the nostalgic value of food; it is reminiscent of the past, history, and heritage and brings warmth that is missing in contemporary life. The second theme talks about differentiation in terms of masculine and feminine natures and superiority and inferiority. A similar opinion is expressed by Levi-Strauss that in some rural areas boiling is restricted to domestic use and is associated with women. The third theme, the most apparent



and rational one, concerns health or nutritional values. Thus, different cultures and regions signify different protocols concerning food reflecting the social psyche of society.

### Conclusion

Besides being a source of survival, ethnic food communicates the beliefs and ideologies of a particular community and region. It is a kind of identifier that distinguishes between an outsider and an insider. From its preparation to the manner of eating, food is enlaced with varied social and cultural connotations. As suggested by Fox, food is a social impulse; it brings people closer and reflects their social, economic and cultural backgrounds. While Levi-Strauss interprets that the method of cooking is symbolic of culture and nature where boiled food is a part and parcel of culture and is found analogous to femininity. On the other hand, Barthes postulates three groups of themes about ethnic food, i.e., commemorative, symbolism of superiority and inferiority, and nutritional value.

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**Author (s) Contribution Statement:** Nil

**Author (s) Acknowledgement:** Nil

**Author (s) Declaration:** I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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