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Do We Serve Feast or Caste? The Social Politics of *Sadhya* in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper examines how to understand Sadhya not merely as a festive meal but as a historical site of caste politics, where inclusion and exclusion are enacted through culinary codes, spatial arrangements, and ritualised performances of purity. It explores how to read the Sadhya as both a cultural celebration and an instrument of social hierarchy, and reveals how food functions as a text through which Kerala's caste order is sustained and contested. Drawing on historical accounts and cultural and social movements, the study traces the transformation of Sadhya from a Brahminical ritual to a field of democratic resistance marked by Dalit reinterpretations such as the Ayyankali Sadhya. The analysis highlights how food traditions become fields of negotiation between power and identity, between inherited ritual and lived experience, showing that the Sadhya continues to signify belonging and exclusion in equal measure.

Keywords: sadhya, caste politics, Kerala culture, food and identity, Ayyankali Sadhya, ritual and resistance, culinary hierarchy

Introduction

Maribel Alvarez, in her lecture "We Are What We Eat," contends that "every loop in our social fabric involves food," identifying it as a medium through which humans construct belonging, nostalgia, safety, and identity (Deccan Herald). Food thus transcends biological necessity to become a site of meaning-making, emotion, and cultural expression. A favourite dish evokes not only taste but memories of family gatherings, shared laughter, and the warmth of

companionship explicating how food mediates collective and personal experience. Beyond nourishment, it connects individuals through shared rituals such as festive meals or daily dining, shaping emotions, memory, and identity.

While food sustains life through its biological role as energy and nutrition, it also operates within cultural and social frameworks. Distinct cuisines mark communities and nations, linking culinary practices to tradition and heritage. Turkey at American Thanksgiving or mooncakes at China's Mid-Autumn Festival signify cultural continuity and belonging. The act of eating together creates intimacy and community, turning a physiological need into a social event. Food choices influence both physical and emotional health that symbolizes harmony or imbalance in one's relationship with the body and society.

Food studies, as an interdisciplinary field, investigates these interconnections among food, culture, and society, drawing from anthropology, sociology, history, and art. It examines how eating reflects identity, power, and emotion. Hauck Lawson's idea of "food voice" articulates that dietary choices communicate identity and emotion beyond words, narrating stories of heritage, migration, and change. This framework transforms eating from a mundane act into a form of cultural text that reveals how individuals negotiate belonging and resistance through food.

Globally, public fascination with food has expanded, seen in television, cookbooks, and debates around health and sustainability. In India, cuisine reflects a deep historical layering of philosophy, religion, and colonial influence. The concept of *Guṇa* divides food into *sattvic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic* types, while *ahimsa* shaped vegetarian traditions. Later, Mughal and European influences further diversified culinary practices, producing a cuisine of hybrid forms and symbolic meanings.

Kerala's food culture exemplifies this complexity which amalgamates religion, class, and caste. Hindu dishes such as *sambar* and *avial* reflect ritual vegetarianism, while Muslim cuisines,

rich in meat and spices, centre on celebratory feasts like *Eid*. Christian food, influenced by Portuguese and British traditions, blends indigenous and colonial elements in dishes such as beef vindaloo and chicken mappas. Caste distinctions historically structured dietary norms, culminating in rituals like *Sadhya*, the elaborate banana-leaf feast that embodies both sensory delight and social hierarchy. Once reserved for elites, *Sadhya* today remains a symbol of cultural identity and unveils how food practices in Kerala continue to negotiate power, status, and belonging.

In this context, this paper makes an attempt to analyse how *Sadhya* as a structured culinary event reveals its embeddedness within the hierarchies of caste and class, where the act of consumption is both ritualised and regulated by social stratification.

Caste, Ritual, and Social Boundaries in the *Sadhya* Tradition

Sadhya, the traditional Kerala feast, has long been upheld as a symbol of cultural unity, hospitality, and abundance. It is served on a banana leaf, featuring an elaborate array of vegetarian dishes arranged in a structured order, meant to cater to all sensory experiences. However, beneath this celebration of culinary heritage lies a history of exclusion and hierarchy. *Sadhya*, as it emerged within Kerala's temple and aristocratic traditions, has been deeply entangled with caste-based restrictions, denying Dalit communities the right to partake in or contribute to its preparation.

The origins of *Sadhya* can be traced back to Kerala's temple traditions, where it was initially offered as a ritualistic feast to deities and later distributed as *prasad* to devotees. Early references to grand feasts in Kerala appear in Sangam-era literature which describes elaborate meals prepared during temple festivals and royal ceremonies. These feasts, often vegetarian, were deeply tied to agrarian cycles and religious customs with the abundance of rice, coconut, and plantains in Kerala's landscape. Over time, *Sadhya* evolved into an essential part of social and religious gatherings, eventually becoming the central meal of *Onam* and other regional festivals.

During the early medieval period Kerala saw the rise of temple-cantered Brahminical culture, which played a key role in shaping the structure of *Sadhya*. Brahmin communities, particularly the Namboothiris, formalized the feast's vegetarian composition, emphasizing the idea of food purity. Temples such as Guruvayur, Sree Padmanabhaswamy, and Vaikom became important centres where *Sadhya* was offered as part of temple rituals. These feasts followed strict serving orders, where dishes were arranged in a specific sequence on banana leaves, with the codified dietary practices of upper-caste Hindus.

By the late medieval period, *Sadhya* was not only confined to temples but also became a staple in aristocratic households, particularly among the Nair and Brahmin communities. Royal families in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar hosted grand feasts as part of weddings, religious celebrations, and coronation ceremonies. The rulers of Travancore, known for their devotion to Vishnu, integrated *Sadhya* into their courtly traditions, making it a symbol of hospitality and prosperity. Manuscripts and palm-leaf records from this era mention elaborate feasts consisting of multiple vegetable dishes, *payasams*, and pickles, served to guests in a hierarchical manner.

The evolution of *Sadhya* in Kerala is not to be separated from the colonial encounters that reshaped food practices, access to ingredients, and the social structures surrounding feasting. The arrival of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British introduced new ingredients such as potatoes, chilies, and refined sugar, subtly altering the composition of traditional feasts. However, while Kerala's upper-caste communities selectively included these elements, they continued to uphold strict dietary rules that marked distinctions between caste groups. The British administration, by institutionalising agrarian policies and controlling the spice trade, also influenced what was considered prestigious food, further solidifying the elite nature of *Sadhya* as a meal reserved for Brahminical and upper-caste celebrations.

At the same time, colonialism intensified the marginalisation of Dalit and Adivasi food

traditions by codifying caste divisions in economic and social spheres. Land reforms under British rule benefited dominant caste landlords while dispossessing lower-caste communities, restricting their access to agricultural produce that was central to elaborate feasts. While temples continued to serve *Sadhya* in ritualistic contexts, Dalits were often barred from these spaces, maintaining the exclusivity of the feast. However, colonial modernity also created contradictions. Newfound urbanisation and the emergence of print culture allowed for culinary documentation, leading to the first widely circulated cookbooks in Kerala, which largely excluded Dalit and Adivasi contributions. The evolution of *Sadhya*, therefore, reveals a history of selective adaptation, where colonial influences reshaped ingredients but did not disrupt the deep-seated caste structures that dictated who could take part in this grand feast.

Historically, *Sadhya* was primarily served in temples and the homes of the upper castes, clearly denoting caste distinctions in food culture. Brahminical ideas of purity and pollution dictated that only members of the dominant castes could prepare and serve these meals, while Dalits were relegated to the periphery. The caste-based division of labour ensured that Dalits were kept out of the ritual spaces of food, either as cooks or as guests. Utsa Ray states that "In many regions of India, the act of cooking is deeply tied to social hierarchy, with certain foods and preparation techniques being designated as 'pure' or 'impure' based on the caste of the person involved" (*Culinary Cultures in Colonial India* 47). This structural exclusion was not merely incidental but an institutionalized practice that dictated who could eat, who could serve, and who remained outside the system altogether.

The exclusion of Dalit communities from temple feasts was further legitimized through religious and cultural justifications. Temples in Kerala historically maintained rigid caste hierarchies, preventing lower-caste groups from even entering their premises. Consequently, the temple *Sadhya*, an extension of these spaces, followed the same discriminatory logic. Even when

Dalits were allowed to access food distributed from temples, they were often served separately or only after the upper castes had finished eating. This practice continues in some parts of Kerala, subtly perpetuating caste discrimination under the guise of tradition.

A case in point is the Shri Jatadhari Devasthanam, Swarga temple, Kasaragod, which has been at the centre of caste discrimination controversies. Historically, Dalits were not allowed to enter the temple through the main entrance and were forced to use a separate, less accessible path. During temple feasts, they were made to wait until the upper-caste devotees had finished eating, after which they were served separately in a different location. In 2018, the Dalit community demanded equal access to temple premises, including participation in the *Sadhya*. However, rather than allowing them equal rights, temple authorities shut down the temple completely, citing "disruptions to traditions." The temple remains closed, highlighting how caste discrimination can persist even when challenged. This case is particularly revealing because instead of reforming discriminatory practices, temple management chose to suspend religious activities altogether, demonstrating the unwillingness to break caste-based traditions. (Mathrubhumi.com.https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/kerala/kasaragod-jatadhari-devasthanam-temple-swarga-enmakaje-1.6186456).

Instances of caste-based discrimination, as in the aforementioned case, occur particularly around temple feasts. Many *Theyyam* performers are not invited to participate in the *Sadhya* after their performances. If food is provided, it is often given separately, and they may be asked to eat in segregated spaces. Additionally, during *Theyyam* festivals, accommodations provided to Dalit performers are often of much lower quality compared to those given to upper-caste temple functionaries. Certain temples refuse to allow *Theyyam* performers to take *sadhya* in the main dining area. Instead, they were given food in disposable packets outside the temple premises. This custom indicates how caste remains a structuring force in Kerala's cultural and culinary practices,

even when Dalits are essential contributors to these traditions.

One of the most striking examples of caste-based exclusion in *Sadhya* is the Aranmula Valla Sadhya, an annual feast associated with the Parthasarathy Temple. The event, organized as an offering to the temple deity, brings together devotees who partake in an elaborate meal served by traditional families. However, for centuries, Dalits were either barred from participation or subjected to segregated seating arrangements.

The notion of food purity plays a central role in maintaining caste divisions within *Sadhya*. The strict vegetarianism associated with the feast is not merely a culinary preference but a reflection of Brahminical notions of ritual cleanliness. Vegetarian food is upheld as superior, while non-vegetarian diets, particularly those including beef and certain seafood, have been historically stigmatized as "polluted" or "low-caste" food. Dalit communities, whose food practices include foraged greens, tubers, and meat, were thus positioned outside the dominant culinary narrative of Kerala.

This exclusion is evident in the continued reluctance of temples and upper-caste households to employ Dalit cooks for preparing *Sadhya*. Even today, in many temple feasts, the food is prepared by Brahmin or Nair cooks, and there exists an unspoken restriction against hiring Dalits for the same roles. The idea that a person's caste can determine the purity of the food they touch is an enduring form of caste-based discrimination. This notion is apparent when Gopal Guru argues in *The Cracked Mirror* that "The politics of food is not only about access but also about recognition-who is allowed to cook, who is deemed fit to serve, and who remains unacknowledged within the system" (82). This framework of recognition remains absent for Dalits in many public *Sadhya* settings.

Beyond the realm of temples, mainstream *Sadhya* celebrations in homes and social gatherings also embody exclusionary practices. In traditional Namboothiri and Nair households,

the *Sadhya* was once an occasion that reaffirmed caste norms, where Dalits were only permitted to serve or clean up but never to partake in the meal. While overt practices of untouchability have diminished in many urban settings, subtler forms of discrimination persist. The seating arrangements, the separation of spaces for different social groups, and the reluctance to acknowledge Dalit contributions to Kerala's culinary heritage all point to a continuing legacy of caste-based food politics.

The seating arrangements of *Sadhya* have historically reflected the rigid caste hierarchies of Kerala's social order. In many temple feasts, separate seating areas were designated for different caste groups, ensuring that upper-caste individuals did not share space with Dalits. Even when formal segregation was abolished, the remnants of these practices persist in subtle ways. For example, in some temple *sadhyas*, Dalits are served last or in separate batches, to maintain their marginalised status. Another example is the Vavar Swamy Temple sadhya in the town of Ernakulam, which serves a grand *Sadhya* during its annual festival. Here, Dalit devotees have reported being served after upper-caste individuals, with separate seating arrangements, even though there are no formal rules explicitly segregating the groups. *Sadhya* for Dalits is sometimes served on banana leaves in different locations, often later in the day after the upper-caste devotees have finished their meals. These ways of serving *sadhya*, while less visible and formal, subtly perpetuate caste-based distinctions and establish the power of religious hierarchy within culinary practices.

The presence of Dalit perspectives in Kerala's culinary discourse has led to gradual shifts in how *Sadhya* is perceived. Some temples have begun to introduce symbolic acts of inclusion, such as allowing Dalits to participate in cooking or serving *sadhya*. However, these efforts often remain more tokenistic than transformative, as they do not address the deep-seated caste biases that govern food culture. While modern interpretations of *Sadhya* attempt to present it as a meal for all,

the underlying structures of exclusion remain largely intact.

Brahminical *Sadhya* Versus Dalit *Sadhya*

It is in this context that Dalit food traditions present an alternative to the dominant *Sadhya* narrative, one that challenges the exclusivity of upper-caste vegetarianism. Dalit cuisine in Kerala incorporates ingredients that were historically considered inferior or unsuitable for the upper castes. Tubers like tapioca, foraged greens, dried fish, and meat-based curries form an integral part of Dalit food culture, offering a stark contrast to the polished aesthetic of *Sadhya*. The valorization of vegetarian *Sadhya* as the quintessential feast of Kerala erases the diversity of food practices that exist outside Brahminical norms.

The idea of Dalit *Sadhya* challenges the dominance of the vegetarian feast that has long been considered the epitome of Kerala's culinary tradition. While the mainstream *Sadhya* is tied to upper-caste rituals and temple festivities, Dalit *Sadhya* represents a parallel culinary narrative rooted in the lived experiences of historically marginalized communities. It brings forward an alternative food culture that has been overlooked, giving voice to dishes and ingredients that have sustained Dalit households for generations. By reclaiming their food traditions, Dalit communities have initiated a conversation about caste, authenticity, and the politics of culinary representation.

The exclusion of meat, fish, and foraged ingredients from the conventional *Sadhya* is a direct result of caste-based ideas about purity. The vegetarianism of temple *sadhya* became a marker of social hierarchy, rendering Dalit food practices invisible in the process. In contrast, Dalit Sadhya celebrates a wider range of flavours and preparation methods, including dried fish, fermented rice, pork, beef, and local greens. These ingredients reflect the adaptive strategies of Dalit communities, who have historically depended on foraging, preservation techniques, and collective cooking traditions for sustenance. Foods such as dried fish, fermented rice, and foraged greens emerged from necessity, as Dalit communities were often denied access to land ownership

and stable food sources. These culinary choices reflect a resourceful approach to nourishment, where preservation methods like drying and fermenting ensured sustenance during periods of scarcity. Unlike the rigidly structured vegetarian *sadhya* of upper-caste feasts, which are associated with purity and ritualistic control, Dalit *Sadhya* embraces a dynamic and adaptive relationship with the environment. The inclusion of meats such as pork and beef challenges the restrictions imposed by dominant caste traditions, reclaiming dishes that were historically dismissed or stigmatized.

Beyond ingredients, the cooking methods and communal nature of Dalit *Sadhya* stand apart from the upper-caste version of the feast. While mainstream *Sadhya* follows a structured preparation process often regulated by temple authorities, Dalit *Sadhya* embraces a more flexible approach, incorporating seasonal produce and regional variations. Women, who have played a crucial role in preserving these traditions, pass down recipes orally, ensuring the continuity of knowledge even in the face of social discrimination. The act of preparing and sharing these meals is deeply tied to collective memory and identity, making it more than just a form of sustenance.

Recent years have seen deliberate efforts to reintroduce Dalit *Sadhya* into Kerala's culinary discourse. Events such as the Dalit Food Festival and the Ayyankali Sadhya have created platforms for showcasing indigenous recipes that were previously dismissed as "inferior" or "unclean" by dominant caste narratives. These gatherings not only serve as spaces of cultural assertion but also challenge the ways in which Kerala's food history has been written. The inclusion of toddy, dried meats, and lesser-known foraged plants in these feasts disrupts the notion that vegetarian food is the only authentic representation of the region's gastronomic heritage.

At this juncture, Ayyankali Sadhya requires special mention. It is a powerful assertion of dignity and resistance, named after the renowned social reformer Ayyankali, who fought against caste oppression in Kerala. This feast stands in direct contrast to the upper-caste vegetarian *Sadhya*, which has long been associated with temple rituals and social exclusivity. Ayyankali

Sadhya is not just a meal but a statement against historical discrimination, inducting dishes that were traditionally looked down upon by the dominant castes. By serving beef, pork, dried fish, fermented rice, and foraged greens, this feast highlights the food culture of Dalit communities that has been systematically erased from Kerala's mainstream culinary traditions. It challenges the rigid notions of purity imposed by caste-based food hierarchies and reclaims the right to define one's own cultural heritage.

The origins of Ayyankali Sadhya lie in a long history of food-based discrimination, where Dalits were excluded from temple feasts and public dining spaces. Ayyankali himself led several movements demanding equal access to public spaces, including roads, schools, and markets. The *Sadhya* named after him serves as a reminder of these struggles, bringing together people from marginalized communities to celebrate their culinary identity without shame or restriction. Unlike the structured serving order of traditional *Sadhya*, Ayyankali Sadhya encourages communal participation, where food is shared without the barriers of caste-imposed seating arrangements. This act of dining together disrupts the legacy of segregation and reclaims food as a site of collective empowerment rather than exclusion.

Over the years, Ayyankali Sadhya has gained recognition as an important cultural event, held in different parts of Kerala to honour Dalit history and resistance. It is not only a celebration of food but also a call for social change, demanding that Dalit culinary traditions be acknowledged and respected. The event brings together activists, writers, and community leaders who use the occasion to discuss ongoing caste-based discrimination and the need for greater representation in cultural narratives. By reclaiming foods that were once stigmatized and creating a space for communal gathering, Ayyankali Sadhya continues to challenge the structures that sought to erase Dalit food heritage, asserting that every community has the right to celebrate its own traditions without discrimination.

Sadhya as a Cultural Text

Sadhya, as a grand feast in Kerala's culinary and cultural landscape, finds deep-rooted representation in folk narratives and oral traditions. While mainstream accounts highlight the temple-centered, upper-caste version of *Sadhya*, folk stories and oral histories offer alternative perspectives, often revealing the social hierarchies embedded in the act of communal dining. Many folktales associate *Sadhya* with prosperity and divine blessings, connecting to temple rituals and Brahminical traditions. However, in Dalit and subaltern storytelling, *Sadhya* is frequently depicted as a site of exclusion, where marginalized communities were either denied participation or served separately under humiliating conditions. These narratives provide a counter-memory that challenges the sanitized image of *Sadhya* as a universally inclusive tradition.

In several folk songs and oral retellings from Kerala's agrarian communities, *Sadhya* is depicted as a feast that marked special occasions but was not accessible to everyone. Stories of lower-caste agricultural workers labouring to prepare grand feasts for landlords, only to be denied a seat at the meal, are recurring themes in Dalit oral histories. These accounts indicate how *Sadhya* functioned as a spectacle of caste privilege, where the act of eating together became a marker of social status rather than an expression of collective joy. In contrast, Dalit folktales often celebrate alternative feasting traditions, where simple, foraged foods serve as symbols of community resilience, opposing the extravagant yet exclusionary nature of upper-caste *Sadhyas*.

Temple legends frequently feature *Sadhya* as an offering to gods, with mythological figures serving divine beings a meal of rice, curries, and *payasam*. These stories hint at the idea of *Sadhya* as a sacred act, emphasizing its association with Brahmin priests and temple kitchens. However, oral histories from lower-caste communities tell a different story-one where temple feasts were historically inaccessible, and those who attempted to partake in them faced severe punishment. The well-documented accounts of Dalit reformers like Ayyankali and Sahodaran Ayyappan reflect this

reality, as they led movements to break the barriers preventing marginalized groups from sharing food with the upper castes. These historical struggles are preserved in local storytelling traditions, where *Sadhya* becomes a contested space of resistance rather than a symbol of communal harmony.

In some folk narratives, *Sadhya* is also portrayed as an event of negotiation, where lower-caste groups challenged their exclusion through acts of defiance. Stories of Dalit workers demanding to be served the same food as their upper-caste employers, or tales of communities preparing their own versions of *Sadhya* with meat and fish, disrupt the idea of the feast as a static tradition. These narratives reveal how food would be used both as an instrument of oppression and as a means of resistance. By cooking and sharing meals on their own terms, marginalized communities redefined *Sadhya* beyond the temple and upper-caste household, asserting their right to feast with dignity.

Oral traditions from fishing and tribal communities in Kerala also document a different relationship with *Sadhya*. While these groups were historically excluded from temple feasts, they developed their own celebratory *sadhya* that entailed seafood, wild greens, and tubers. These narratives highlight a contrast between the rigidity of Brahminical *Sadhya* and the fluid, adaptive food traditions of Kerala's indigenous and working-class populations. The existence of these parallel traditions defies the notion that vegetarian Sadhya is the singular representation of Kerala's festive cuisine. Folk stories that depict grand meals featuring meats and fermented dishes serve as reminders that multiple histories of *sadhya* exist, even if mainstream narratives have sidelined them.

Despite growing recognition, challenges persist in bringing alternate *Sadhya* to wider acceptance. Institutional resistance from temples and cultural organizations continues to uphold the vegetarian *Sadhya* as the defining meal of Kerala, sidelining alternative food traditions. The stigma

attached to certain foods also remains a barrier, with upper-caste groups often viewing them as exoticism or rejection. Moreover, the growing trend of high-end restaurants integrating Dalit recipes without acknowledging their historical context raises concerns about culinary appropriation.

Literature and film have played crucial roles in documenting the significance of *Sadhya* specifically establishing its dominant narratives. More than just a meal, *sadhya* carries deep metaphorical significance, and represents abundance, community, cultural identity, prosperity, hospitality, nostalgia, and sometimes even social disparity. It also serves as a site where caste, class, and social structures become visible, making it a complex and layered representation of Kerala's socio-cultural fabric. Thakazhi Shivashankara pillai's novel *Kayar* presents *Sadhya* as a marker of social hierarchy, where the rich landowning families celebrate grand feasts while the lower castes and labourers are left out of the abundance. The meal, in such narratives, is not just about nourishment but about who has access to it and under what conditions. Folk narratives and oral traditions in Kerala also depict *Sadhya* in ways that draw attention to its deep connection to social and ritualistic practices. In stories associated with *Onam*, Mahabali's rule is often depicted as a time when grand *Sadhyas* were available to all, representing an idealised past of equality and prosperity. However, many Dalit and Adivasi oral narratives challenge this idealisation, pointing out their historical exclusion from these feasts.

In films like *Pavithram* and *Kalyanaraman*, the making of *Sadhya* explicates not only emotional and familial themes but also the upper-caste ideology embedded in Kerala's culinary traditions. In *Pavithram*, the preparation of *Sadhya* is portrayed as a sacred and hierarchical act, closely tied to hegemonic customs, where food becomes a symbol of purity and familial duty. The film puts forward the idea that traditional *sadhya* uphold moral and social order, subtly marginalising those outside the upper-caste framework. Similarly, in *Kalyanaraman*, the

protagonist's role as a wedding caterer adheres to the structured norms of caste-based occupations, where the preparation of *Sadhya* is depicted as an art exclusive to certain social groups, and "others" are either obscured or derided. Both films, while depicting Kerala's culinary heritage, suggest how upper-caste narratives dominate the representation of *Sadhya*, maintaining a certain exclusivity in who prepares, serves, and consumes *Sadhya*.

Sadhya is also a geographical pointer of Kerala's diverse culinary landscapes, shaped by regional variations, caste-based food traditions, and historical shifts in agricultural practices. While the Brahminical Sadhya of central Kerala is often considered the "authentic" version, different parts of the state have distinct interpretations of the feast. In northern Malabar, for instance, *Sadhya* integrates influences from the spice-rich *Moplah* cuisine, while in Travancore, temple feasts emphasise stricter vegetarianism and elaborate preparation methods. The availability of ingredients, shaped by Kerala's coastal and highland ecosystems, plays a crucial role in defining these regional differences. The widespread use of coconut, plantains, and yams across sadhya preparations explains the state's agricultural patterns, while the absence of certain foods in upper-caste versions of the meal underscores caste-based restrictions on dietary practices.

Beyond caste and region, *Sadhya's* territorialisation is seen through its adaptation in diasporic and urban settings, where its meanings shift according to space and context. In Kerala's cities, commercial *Sadhya* served in restaurants caters to a diverse clientele, often deviating from strict caste prescriptions, while Malayali diaspora communities have recreated the feast using locally available ingredients in places as far as the Gulf, North America, and Europe. The migration of *Sadhya* from temple courtyards and aristocratic homes to global banquet halls and commercial dining spaces marks a transformation in its cultural geography. However, despite these shifts, dominant narratives about *Sadhya* continue to centre upper-caste vegetarian versions, often overlooking the variations found in Dalit, Adivasi, and coastal communities, whose food traditions

have historically existed outside elite culinary documentation.

This caste politics of *Sadhya* illustrates how food is never just about sustenance. It is an indicator of power, hierarchy, and identity. As Dalit communities continue to resist and redefine their relationship with food, they challenge the deeply ingrained structures that have historically dictated who gets to eat and who remains outside the feast. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai assert in the book *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, "Food is not just material sustenance; it is social identity, and when access to food is controlled, access to dignity is controlled" (101). The struggle for an inclusive culinary identity in Kerala thus remains deeply intertwined with broader struggles for social justice and caste equality.

Conclusion

The study of *Sadhya* as a culinary tradition discloses that beneath its aesthetic presentation of abundance and unity lies a persistent social structure built on exclusion and hierarchy. What appears as a celebration of community and cultural continuity is, upon closer examination, a ritualised performance of caste order. From temple feasts that barred Dalit entry to household celebrations that demarcated purity through food and touch, *Sadhya* becomes an archive of Kerala's social stratification. The institutionalisation of vegetarian purity and the codification of serving practices show how culinary systems were historically used to preserve Brahminical dominance. The historical trajectory of *Sadhya*, from temple rituals to colonial adaptations and modern-day festivals, outlines how social discrimination evolves through cultural forms. Even when overt exclusion gives way to symbolic inclusion, the underlying ideologies of purity, pollution, and hierarchy remain embedded in Kerala's culinary consciousness. Thus, *Sadhya* functions as both a sensory delight and a social text that encodes the politics of belonging, reminding us that the act of eating together in itself can reproduce the very divisions it claims to transcend.

Yet, within this terrain of exclusion, resistance emerges through alternative food practices and counter-feasts such as the Ayyankali Sadhya, which reclaim dignity and challenge culinary hegemony. These acts of redefinition expand the meaning of *sadhya* from a Brahminical ritual to a democratic space of self-representation and cultural assertion. The inclusion of foraged greens, fermented rice, dried fish, and meats in Dalit *Sadhya* resists the sanitised notion of purity and celebrates the vitality of lived experience. By transforming the feast from a symbol of hierarchy into one of solidarity, such movements reclaim the political and emotional agency of food. The contemporary reimagining of *Sadhya*, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic diversification but a social intervention that questions who gets to define authenticity and whose tastes are validated as culture. In the end, the struggle over *Sadhya* is not about culinary form but about social justice, the right to sit at the same leaf, to serve and be served without hierarchy, and to taste equality itself.

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