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The Semiotics of Food in Indian Hanukkah Festival

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Abstract: This paper addresses the symbolic relationship between food and Hanukkah for three different Indian-Jewish communities (Bene-Israel, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews). This paper will examine how these three communities use culinary customs to represent aspects of their identity and to retain their ethnic memories, and to negotiate the process of adapting their Culinary Heritage to bring it into harmony with the local culture. Although the food of Hanukkah (latkes and sufganiyot) has had symbolic meanings assigned to it by Jewish communities throughout the world – that is, it represents the idea of strength, providence, and the miraculous nature of oil – these foods have been prepared and interpreted very differently than they have been in the Indian-Jewish context. This research project draws on discourse analysis, food studies theory, and the concept of culinary nationalism to identify how the (Bene-Israel, Cochin, and Baghdadi) Jewish communities of India (both Bene-Israel and Cochin) have adapted their Hanukkah Cuisine to reflect the environment, by utilizing the local ingredients, aesthetics, and traditional cooking techniques. The paper looks to illustrate the ways in which the cultural continuity through food transmission across generations is accomplished through the interplay of Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Halbwachs' theory of collective memory and innovation. Some examples that show ways in which hybridization between Jewish & Indian cultures have been made. Coconut and jaggery-filled sufganiyot, cumin and turmeric-flavored latkes and the traditional sweet malida all demonstrate hybrids of Jewish religious symbols and belonging to Indian culture.

Researching kitchen traditions via cookbooks, oral histories, community-generated stories, and the media demonstrates how the Indian Jews' Hanukkah food(s) showcases their adaptation of Jewish customs into another way of preserving an ethnic cultural identity through developing a hybridized version of these foods. Therefore, food is one of the most powerful semiotic systems available to the Indian Jews. It is their primary means of maintaining & developing their diasporic identities within Multicultural Societies.

Keywords: Hanukkah; Semiotics; Indian Jews; Culinary Nationalism; Diaspora; Food Studies; Cultural Identity; Hybridization; Discourse Analysis; Jewish Rituals

Introduction

Food represents the staple defended ground for cultural transfer, concerned primarily with the context of performed memory, religious identity, and symbolic meanings. When we take the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, marking the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, there is much to explore concerning the semiotic underpinnings within the diaspora connected with food. As Jewish communities such as the Bene Israelis, Cochin Jews, and Baghdadi Jews have mixed with Indian indigenous flavours over the years, the Hanukkah food custom in India has evolved. In light of this, this study will compare the traditional Israeli parallels of Hanukkah with the culinary semiotics linked with the holiday in India. Discourse analysis will be used in



the study to uncover the complex meanings concealed within these culinary customs. This research study will examine how Indian cuisine functions as a Jewish identity marker in the Indian sociocultural context, drawing on cultural and semiotic theories.

To deepen this analysis, the study will also engage with food studies theory, particularly from the perspectives of culinary nationalism and gastrodiploacy. The concept of culinary nationalism, as articulated by scholars like Appadurai (1988) and Pilcher (2012), explores how food functions as a marker of identity, allowing communities to negotiate their cultural heritage within a host nation. This lens will help examine how Indian Jewish communities maintain distinct Jewish food traditions while simultaneously integrating Indian flavors and culinary techniques. Gastrodiploacy, on the other hand, will offer insight into how food serves as a cultural bridge between Jewish and Indian identities, fostering intercommunal exchange and solidifying a sense of belonging within the Indian milieu.

Culinary practices will also be analysed through the lens of practice theory, particularly Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which helps in understanding how food-related customs are transmitted intergenerationally. In the case of Indian Jews, the adaptation of Hanukkah foods—such as latkes made with local tubers like sweet potatoes or sufganiyot infused with Indian spices like cardamom—demonstrates how culinary traditions are both preserved and transformed over time. These changes reflect the ongoing negotiation of cultural identity within a diasporic setting, as communities adjust their rituals in response to local availability and taste preferences while still retaining the symbolic significance of their foods.

Through discourse analysis, this study will further investigate how these food traditions are represented in community narratives, cookbooks, oral histories, and festive rituals. By examining how Indian Jewish Hanukkah foods are discussed in communal discourse, we can uncover the layers of meaning that these culinary customs carry. The integration of food studies theory, culinary practices, and discourse analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of Hanukkah cuisine in shaping and sustaining Jewish identity in India.

Research Objectives

- To explore the semiotic meanings embedded in the food traditions of Indian Hanukkah celebrations.
- To analyze how food functions as a signifier of cultural and religious identity within the Indian Jewish communities.
- To trace the historical evolution of Hanukkah food practices in India and their regional variations across different Jewish communities.
- To examine the impact of globalization and cultural exchanges on the symbolic meanings and preparation of Hanukkah foods in contemporary urban and diasporic Indian Jewish settings.

Proposed Outcomes

- Develop initiatives for documenting and teaching traditional Indian Hanukkah recipes through community workshops, digital archives, and social media engagement.
- Recommend strategies to promote the preservation of Indian Jewish culinary heritage through cultural festivals, interfaith events, and culinary tourism.
- Create a semiotic guidebook illustrating the symbolic meanings of Hanukkah foods within the Indian Jewish context and their connection to broader cultural narratives.

Literature Review

Food has always held a central position in Indian culture, bridging the spiritual and the material. Scholars have analysed its ritualistic, symbolic, and changing meanings across various contexts. This review organizes existing literature thematically to explore how food functions



as a cultural signifier in Jewish rituals and festivals, particularly within the Indian Jewish diaspora.

Foundational for tracing the historical development of Indian culinary traditions is K. T. Achaya's *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (1998), where Achaya delineates with meticulousness the origins of India's food culture and connects it with the history of religious practice, agricultural developments, and regional variations. Further in his masterpiece, he stretches this historical exploration with more focus on the sacred contexts of food practices—emergent from temple offerings and religious feasts.

On the other hand, T. Srinivas, in *Ritual Feasting in India* (2011), exhaustively explores the ritualistic role of food. He also sheds light on how food has been an offering to the gods while *Offerings* (2022) further cements this theme by showing how spiritual stories are woven into temple cooking, explaining the ritual implications of certain dishes.

In a Jewish context, David Kraemer's *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages* (2007) examines how dietary laws and food customs shape Jewish identity across different societies, including Indian Jewish communities. He discusses how adaptation and preservation of dietary laws sustain Jewish religious identity even in diasporic contexts. Judith Shulevitz's *The Sabbath World* (2010) explores communal kitchens and the role of shared meals in Jewish religious practice, focusing on the intersection of culinary traditions and communal bonding. Similarly, Hasia Diner's *Hungering for America* (2001) investigates Jewish food practices as a cultural bridge that connects diasporic communities to their historical roots while engaging with new culinary landscapes.

While Chatterjee's "Rituals and Repasts: The Semiotics of Food in Indian Ceremonies" (2017) adopts the semiotic perspective and attempts to show how food symbolism encodes religious meanings, similar semiotic frameworks can be applied to Jewish food customs in India. Together, these works illustrate the multifaceted relationship between food, ritual, and culture in Indian Jewish communities. The thematic intersections of history, ritual practice, symbolism, communal kitchens, and modern transformation demonstrate the enduring significance of culinary traditions in shaping Jewish identity within the Indian cultural landscape.

Methods and Methodology

This project adopted a qualitative approach, applying discourse analysis to examine the ways in which ceremonial food practices were represented, constructed, and perpetuated in cultural narratives. The study analyzed texts, conversations, and media representations to explore how language shaped the understanding of ritual foods within cultural and religious contexts. Primary sources included religious scriptures, historical texts, and contemporary cookbooks to identify recurring themes and discursive strategies that reinforced cultural values and social hierarchies. Additionally, interviews with cultural practitioners, religious leaders, and culinary historians across digital media provided insights into the lived experiences and evolving discourses surrounding ritual food traditions.

Historical and Cultural Context of Jewish Food in India

The Indian Jewish community, as small as it is, practises very strong ties with traditional dietary laws and cultural practices. Hanukkah is the Festival of Lights, focusing on foods fried in oil, symbolizing how that miracle oil lasted for eight days inside the Holy Temple. Such as latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly-filled doughnuts), take center stage in celebrations within Israel but far more integrated into both Ashkenazi and Sephardic culinary practices, while in India Jewish communities adopted and adapted to ingredients and methods with which to produce original dishes: fritters from fried rice; sweets in coconut; snacks savoury flavoured



through regional cuisine. This is particularly reflected in food made for Hanukkah by replacing olive oil with coconut oil, thereby visualizing the practical steps taken by Indian Jews to reflect religious connotations while embracing the culinary landscape of India.

Discourse Analysis of Hanukkah Food in India and Israel

From a semiotic standpoint, the foods of Hanukkah stand as signifiers of something larger than mere food when it comes to Jewish identity and collective memory. Latkes stand for resilience and resistance, embodying the narrative history of the Maccabean revolt, while round-shaped sufganiyot represent the cyclical nature of time and divine providence (Barthes, 1972).



Figure 1: Hannukah Dining Table

These foods, laden with cultural symbols, are more than just sustenance; they are performative markers of Jewish identity, as understood through the lens of collective memory (Assmann, 2008). In such an instance, the meanings embedded within them are socially constructed and formulated in the Indian context through the lens of local cultures. For example, regional spices like cardamom and saffron appropriate local identity within global traditions, resulting in a cross-cultural fusion, while jaggery, used as a sweetener in some Indian Hanukkah delicacies, carries connotations of prosperity and good luck in Indian culture (Appadurai, 1981).

The semiotic theory of Roland Barthes offers a helpful framework for understanding how the signifier (food) and signified (cultural meaning) vary depending on the location and culture. The evolution of Jewish culinary traditions in India is a clear example of how cultural indicators are constantly reinterpreted, according to Barthes (1972).

A good example of this play between tradition and innovation is the Indian Hanukkah delicacies, which still bear Jewish symbolism but now recast meanings in ways that incorporate Indian ingredients and preparation techniques. This shift in meaning is a form of cultural adaptation, which may be seen as a hybridization of global and local traditions (Homi Bhabha, 1994).

Cultural syncretism is further reinforced by the way Hanukkah dishes in India are presented and their texture, which reflects regional dining customs and aesthetics in addition to its symbolic meaning. The way Indian culinary traditions have been incorporated into Jewish rites is demonstrated by layered desserts like malida, a Bene Israeli offering made from flattened rice, coconut, and sugar. The idea of "creolization" (Hannerz, 1996), in which various cultural practices combine to produce new, hybrid identities, can be used to explain this blending of flavors and sensations. These foods serve as platforms for the expression of Indian and Jewish cultural narratives, making them more than just commodities.



Kosher consults to traditional notions of what can and cannot be eaten as well as how foods are prepared, which is central to Jewish culinary tradition. In Israel, observance of kosher is relatively straightforward as it has institutional support. In contrast, Indian Jewish communities had to adapt these culinary laws within a diverse culinary environment.

Analysis

Primary texts and resources such as Jewish cookbooks, magazines geared toward ethnic and cultural communities, and historical texts are helpful in understanding how Hanukkah cuisine evolved in India. Prominent publications like *The Jewish Food Experience*, *Jewish India: A Cookbook*, and articles appearing in *Haaretz* and *The Times of Israel* discuss culinary adaptations made by Indian Jews. These texts describe the process of fusing Indian spices into traditional Jewish recipes to create dishes that echo the spirit of Hanukkah while remaining rooted in local influences (Kramer, 2017; Krieger, 2013).

For instance, *Jewish India: A Cookbook* notes that Cochin Jews use rice flour and coconut milk to make a variant of sufganiyot, which is strikingly different from the flour-based doughnut usually eaten in Israel (Krieger, 2013). Similarly, interviews with Indian Jewish families in *Haaretz* highlight how generations have kept their culinary heritage alive for Hanukkah but have incorporated Indian elements such as frying in ghee instead of olive oil, reflecting local practices and preferences (Shavit, 2015). These texts speak with some authority about how tradition and adaptation go hand in hand in the Indian Jewish culinary history, demonstrating a process of hybridization that allows Jewish cuisine to adapt while still maintaining cultural and religious significance (Bhabha, 1994).

The frying of latkes signifies a retelling of the Hanukkah miracle, whereby a container of oil only lasted eight days in the rededicated Temple. In India, the Bene Israel Jews make latkes using potatoes and spices provided by the land, such as cumin and turmeric, which give a different flavor from the traditional East European preparation. Latkes are thought to symbolize the theme of continuity and unity in the festive spirit of Hanukkah.

Sufganiyot, commonly known as jelly-filled doughnuts, are yet another Hanukkah delicacy tied to profound symbolism. They are deep-fried and fruit preserve-filled pastries; they thus commemorate the miraculous survival of the oil, which embodies the central theme of the holiday. In India, however, there is more to making sufganiyot, inasmuch as the communities of Indian Jews often replace the conventional jelly filling with uniquely Indian ingredients such as coconut, jaggery, or even mango preserves. This host of modifications not only lends a more regional flavor to the dish but also imbues it with cultural meanings that are tied to the Indian culinary heritage. The round shape that sufganiyot takes affords it a subsequent persona of fullness and divine blessing, whereas the sweet nature of the dish embodies the joy and gratitude felt during the festival.

Malida is a unique sweet dish specifically prepared by the Bene Israel community on Hanukkah and other festive occasions. Made out of flattened rice, grated coconut, nuts, and dried fruits, Malida has strong cultural connotations of gratitude and divine providence. Malida presents a stark contrast to the oil-fried foods associated with Hanukkah, a unique representation of Indian Jewish culinary heritage blending local ingredients with traditional Jewish religious practices. Often prepared as an offering during thanksgiving prayers, they are an indication of the harmony of Indian and Jewish traditions.

In the coastal areas like Kochi, where fish is fresh and abundant, fried fish has become an integral part of Hanukkah fare. Fishes like pomfret and kingfish, which have fins and scales according to kosher guidelines, are first marinated in Indian spices-like turmeric, cumin, and



coriander. Before they are fried in coconut oil, this adaptation highlights the inventiveness of Indian Jews in keeping kosher while embracing local culinary traditions.

In Israel, latkes and sufganiyot play central roles in Hanukkah celebrations, often prepared with olive oil, symbolizing the miracle of the oil that lasted for eight days. These foods are typically prepared with a Mediterranean flavor profile, emphasizing simplicity and the purity of olive oil (Featherstone, 1990). In contrast, Indian Jews incorporate indigenous ingredients and cooking techniques to lend a unique twist to these traditional foods.

For instance, while olive oil is central to Israeli cooking for Hanukkah, Indian Jews use locally available oils like coconut oil, which carries cultural connotations of purity and auspiciousness, often associated with traditional Indian cooking.



Figure 2: Soufghaniyat

Reinvention of Tradition: The Evolution of Hanukkah Cuisine in India

The evolution of Jewish Hanukkah cuisine in India is not merely an adaptation but a reinvention of tradition, revealing the fluidity of cultural identity through food. Food theorist Sidney Mintz (1985) argues that culinary traditions are not static but are shaped by migration, trade, and interaction with local cultures. Indian Jewish Hanukkah dishes, such as malida and locally flavored sufganiyot, exemplify this idea, demonstrating how Jewish communities negotiate their cultural identity while engaging with regional food systems.

Local Ingredients and the Adaptation of Jewish Cuisine

One of the most striking elements of Hanukkah food in India is the way Jewish families have embraced indigenous culinary resources without losing the symbolic weight of the festival's traditional foods. While European latkes are made with potatoes, which were introduced to Indian diets through colonial trade, Indian Jews have historically used locally available tubers such as sweet potatoes and yams. The adaptation of frying these in ghee rather than olive oil is more than just a practical necessity; it signifies a cultural merger where the sacred symbolism of oil remains intact while embracing Indian culinary traditions.

Similarly, sufganiyot in India often diverge from their Israeli and European counterparts. Instead of being filled with strawberry jam or custard, many Indian Jewish families use coconut, jaggery, or mango preserves, reflecting the influence of South Asian flavors. The use of jaggery is particularly significant, as it is commonly associated with prosperity and auspiciousness in Indian cultural practices. By integrating these ingredients, Indian Jews both preserve and transform Hanukkah's culinary meanings, illustrating how food traditions serve as a bridge between cultures.

Hybridization of Cooking Techniques

Cooking techniques also play a key role in the hybridization of Jewish and Indian food traditions. In Israel and the West, deep-frying in olive oil is the standard method for preparing latkes and sufganiyot, reinforcing the festival's commemoration of the oil miracle. However,



in India, where coconut oil is widely used and considered pure in many local traditions, it has become a common substitute. In some cases, slow-cooking methods, steaming, and even sun-drying techniques are incorporated into Hanukkah recipes, reflecting broader Indian culinary customs.

A notable example of this hybridization is found in the preparation of malida, a Bene Israel sweet dish. Unlike sufganiyot or latkes, malida is not fried but consists of flattened rice mixed with coconut, cardamom, and dried fruits. Traditionally offered in thanksgiving prayers, malida represents an alternative way in which Jewish culinary traditions adapt to their environment while preserving the sacred elements of the ritual.

Kosher Practices and Indian Adaptations

The observance of kosher dietary laws presents another dimension of culinary adaptation among Indian Jewish communities. Unlike in Israel, where kosher-certified ingredients are easily accessible, Indian Jews have had to navigate a more complex food landscape. For example, while fish is a staple in many coastal Indian cuisines, only those species with fins and scales are considered kosher.



Figure 3: Malida

Meat preservation has also been an area of ingenuity. Without access to kosher butchers, some Jewish families have adopted methods such as curing and salting meats in ways that align with both Jewish dietary laws and Indian preservation techniques. The continued observance of kosher rules, even while integrating local ingredients and methods, demonstrates how Indian Jews maintain their religious identity through food.

Food as a Marker of Memory and Identity

Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) theory of collective memory suggests that cultural traditions persist through shared experiences passed down through generations. In Indian Jewish communities, Hanukkah foods are not only a means of nourishment but also a vital link to both religious history and family heritage. The golden-brown crispiness of a latke, the sweetness of sufganiyot, and the delicate texture of malida all serve as edible memories that connect families to their ancestors and their faith.

These dishes do more than just commemorate the past; they actively shape identity in the present. As younger generations of Indian Jews migrate or become more integrated into mainstream society, the continued preparation of Hanukkah foods reinforces a sense of belonging and continuity. Even in cases where exact recipes change, the act of making and sharing these foods sustains cultural memory.

The Role of Culinary Narratives in Diasporic Jewish Communities

Culinary narratives play an essential role in maintaining Jewish identity in the diaspora, especially in communities that are numerically small. Unlike large Jewish populations where



community life is centered around synagogues or schools, food serves as a primary cultural touchpoint for Indian Jews. Families pass down recipes orally or through handwritten cookbooks, reinforcing both tradition and innovation.

Recent Jewish cookbooks and media publications have also contributed to the documentation of these evolving foodways. Works like *Jewish India: A Cookbook* and *The Jewish Food Experience* discuss how Indian Jews have adapted Hanukkah recipes over time, incorporating new practices and ingredients while sustaining ritual significance.



Figure 4: Menorah

Conclusion

The food semiotics of Hanukkah in India signal a complicated dance among tradition, adaptation, and cultural identity. Food, through the means of discourse analysis, serves as a medium of continuity and change and as a vehicle through which the Indian Jewish community negotiates its dual heritage. The comparison between Indian and Israeli Hanukkah food reveals how food symbolism is dynamic, able to transcend geographical boundaries while holding onto core religious meanings.

As Indian Jews continue to balance the whole heritage and contemporary influences, food of Hanukkah stands as a depository of resilience and adaptability. Future research may further explore the changing nature of Jewish culinary circulation in India against a backdrop of globalization and shifting dietary habits. Ultimately, the study reaffirms the role of food as a potent cultural signifier that sustains identity, memory, and community bonds across generations.

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