






Survival of Folk Food in the Age of Digital Reproduction: A Study of Aditya Bal's "Lost Recipes"

Mayuri Bhakat¹   Sudipta Kumar Paul²  

¹Independent Research Scholar. ²T.G.T English, J.N.V. Barpeta, Assam

Abstract

What we eat determines who we are; it draws an invisible boundary line between 'us' and 'them' as well as unites 'us' with 'them'. Our cuisine and platters represent us even when Globalization claims to have erased the boundary between 'us' and 'them.' Traditionally, food is believed to be one of the intangible cultural capitals to trace the footprints of human life and community. In the quest to unearth the lost recipes of different communities and tribes in India, Chef Aditya Bal has travelled across the country and explored various lost flavours. All the episodes of "Lost Recipes" streaming on EPIC channel have been unearthing various lost recipes of our country and providing them wider viewers. Interestingly, this show has introduced some folk food habits along with royal recipes and recipes among a wider range of audience. 'Seeda Roti' from Garhwal, 'Suski' from Chattishgarh, 'Fish Alberas' by Bene Israelis, and Konkan's 'Katri' – all these lost folk recipes lead us down memory lane through their rich aroma and taste. Excavating and documenting the history of folk life and their distinct platters, which are gradually being lost, this programme is helping the extinct cultural identities to revive.

Walter Benjamin's idea of democratization of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction will be referred to re-read Aditya Bal's 'Lost Recipes'. How can folk culture be mediated to a universal audience while the aura remains unaffected? Does folk culture have an aura? Does democratization help folk culture in challenging the idea of 'aura'? – these questions will be critically addressed in this paper within a limited circle of folk, food, and lost history of India.

Keywords: Folk, Food, History, Aditya Bal, Lost Recipes, India.



Good health and well-being

In its epic search for various kinds of tangible as well as intangible cultural wealth of India, Epic TV has been painstakingly working and bringing forth the entire cultural heritage for a wider audience of the globe. Since its conception, it has been concentrating on Indian history, folklore, mythology, contemporary India, and its

Article History: Received: 06 Feb 2024. Revised: 10 Feb 2024. Accepted: 18 Feb 2024. Published: 22 Feb 2024

Copyright: © 2024 by the author/s. License Pine Press, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Citation: Bhakat, Mayuri & Sudipta Kumar Paul. 2024. Survival of Folk Food in the Age of Digital Reproduction: A Study of Aditya Bal's "Lost Recipes". *Journal of South Asian Exchanges* 1.1

< <https://saexchanges.com/v1n1/v1n106.pdf> >

wildlife; it airs various kinds of programmes like “Parikrama – Discovering Indian Temples”, “Wild Wild India”, “Raja, Rasoi Aur Anya Kahaniyaan” and “Lost Recipes”, etc. To research Indian culture, Epic TV can be the best reference. Therefore, for our venture in search of the rich aroma of folk cuisine of India, we have picked ‘Lost Recipes’ which deals with “the rediscovery of dishes dropped from the pages of history, and re-living the long-lost traditions and perhaps, reviving them” (Epic TV, 2016). Although this programme is not only concerned about the lost cuisine of any community, tribe, or region it also tends to capture the rich cultural diversity of our country.

From the royal dishes like ‘Parinda-E-Khaas’ of Bhopal or ‘Mutanjan – Sweet Chicken Pulao’ of Mughal Darwar to tribal platters like ‘Suksi Pudga and Pan Roti’ of Chattishgarh or ‘Pacha Do with Pork’ of Gangtok, which are almost lost from the written as well as oral version of history, it takes an initiative to bring all these cultural assets in front of the world. ‘Lost Recipes’ does not restrict itself to any specific class, caste, or creed rather it represents almost most of the lost tastes of India. Interestingly, half of the lost recipes had been brought to India and had been adapted by their users; for instance, ‘Bhujela-Bheeng’ used to be made by the Parsi people in Gujarat or Vindaloo was usually made by a limited number of Portuguese people in Goa. However, it might seem that such inclusion and adaptation of foreign cuisine into Indian culture conveys the cultural inclusivity of India. But, here the most important thing to understand is whether such adaptation has acquired a pan-Indian phenomenon or not. At the time of their migration from Iran to the Indian state of Gujrat, the Parsi community carried their movable properties so did the Portuguese people when they came to Goa. In most cases, it is seen that a regional or local cuisine hardly influences any other cuisine due to India’s rich cultural diversity. As a result, no such cuisine is found to have received remarkable influence from others; thus, it continues to hold its distinct texture, taste, colour, and aroma. Be it Hyderabadi ‘Kursi Miwane’ (Eggs Stuffed with Mutton Mince) or be it Lepcha dish ‘Monso Thatche’ (Pit Roast Chicken) – for ages these platters are serving distinct taste to their producers cum consumers. In no way, it suggests that the dishes we have just mentioned or will mention eventually remain intact in nature since their discovery. Some of them have certainly undergone a few alterations but we think that such changes remain restricted within the circle of the community. With this presumption, we desire to delve into the lost folk cuisine of India and to understand the revival of those long-lost traditional flavours and tastes in association with the programme called “Lost Recipes”. To engage in this project, we also take note of Walter Benjamin’s seminal text ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ (1935) and try to see the condition of folk cuisine in the time of digital reproduction. It triggers some questions in our minds which are as follows: Can mechanical reproduction help an extinct food recipe to survive? How do the distinct identities of folk recipes remain intact while capitalism tends to gobble them up? On the one hand, digital reproduction is a blessing for a work of art on the other hand it is a curse for another work of art. By reproducing a work of art it eradicates the aura, thus in the case of royal recipes digital reproduction can destroy the authenticity. Is it applicable to the lost folk recipes? Or is it a way of survival for the folk recipes?

Folk culture needs to be preserved at any cost as it is on the verge of extinction. According to Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of a work of art might eradicate the aura but it lets the ordinary men grasp the same; it democratically opens up a new arena and takes the work of art out of the custody of the elite people (Benjamin, 1935). Although "Lost Recipes" presents the rich variety of India's culinary heritage from north to south or from east to west and incidentally folk and tribal dishes are also documented along with the royal and elite dishes. Out of these varieties of dishes, we intend only to concentrate on folk and tribal platters and demarcate their spread in a limited circle through oral culture whereas the royal or elite cuisine had been practiced through the cookbooks and other writings. This is very important to understand that folk culture is mainly mediated through oral tradition and hardly receives access to other mediums to pass on to the next generation, in contrast to the elite and royal cuisine of India which have survived through several kinds of writings and cookbooks. Additionally, many cultural practices of various folk or tribal people are considered very low or sometimes treated as unfit to be part of India's cultural heritage. Such kind of hegemony of the dominant cultural ideology has often been occupying the room for marginal cultural practices. There is hardly any change in the existing cultural rubric of contemporary India and the present bearers of the tribal and folk tradition still pay complete ignorance towards their cultural roots. These reasons are deliberately underrating the folk as well as tribal tradition to survive. In this context the monopoly of the high culture is annihilating the rich cultural heritage of the country; this annihilation is highly inspired by monoculturalization. Despite being marginal, folk cuisine somehow paves its way to the present scenario. It has been possible chiefly because of the relentless efforts of the last generation of folk and tribal communities. On the other hand, the latest generation of these communities finds it inferior to be involved in the cultural practices of their roots. So we can argue that such kind of inferiority complex is the consequence of deliberate cultural hierarchy that is imposed upon the practitioners of folk culture and their descendants. Most of the episodes of the "Lost Recipes" deal with the lost royal recipes of India and the lamentation is made for the extinction of those legendary practices. Most importantly the remarkable thing is that the extinction of the royal recipes and their cuisine was inevitable with the decay of the monarchy. On the other hand, the lost recipes of the folk cuisine ensure the eradication of the existence of a particular folk culture. In the case of the former, the extravagant lifestyle and economic downfall are prime reasons whereas the case of the latter has been worsened by the cultural dominance of the former.

In the fifth episode of 'Lost Recipes – Season 2', we see that a person named Ashitey Dubey is introducing Shyamlal, a villager of Harwakodo, to us where the lost tribal recipe 'Suksi Pudga' and 'Pan Roti' are being prepared. In this episode, the tribal man remains almost silent while Ashitey Dubey keeps talking to Chef Aditya Bal. We find this episode very interesting as it unpacks the cultural hierarchy and evidences that Shyamlal requires a voice to represent his culture. In this context we desire to refer to Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's remarkable interrogation, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1985) Why does Shyamlal need a representative to talk about his indigenous recipe? What does he lack to represent himself? How can Ashitey Dubey, a non-tribal,

speaking about the reasons behind the extinction of the tribal recipe like 'Suksi Pudga' while he might be accountable for the ruin of the same? The answer is very transparent to us and it challenges the notions of high culture that dominates over the room allotted for cultural heritage. As long as there are grand narratives and their overarching network, folk culture will never raise its head. Cultural critic Maidul Islam asserted,

So, there is a connection between a postmodern critique of universalistic categories and the process of indigenization. Thus, both indigenization and postmodernism have a fascination for the textuality of knowledge; Postmodern methodologies are sensitive to the richness and complexity of local meanings of folk practices and beliefs and particularly sensitive to ironic meaning and intention" (Islam, 2006).

Following Islam's argument, we step further and desire to observe the gradual change of folk recipes and locate them in the digital age. With the digital reproduction and dissemination through Epic TV, some of India's folk recipes have largely become available. Such a worldwide circulation ensures the longevity of these folk recipes that would not have survived for a long unless there is this documentation of lost cultural wealth. Hence, the journey of folk recipes on the one hand is increasing the number of their users and on the other hand, this is confirming their transformations from one discourse to another. Some might argue that this kind of retrieval and worldwide circulation could erase the authenticity of folk recipes. For them, we recommend to have a look at Walter Benjamin's essay 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' where priority is given to the democratization of work of art through mechanical reproduction rather than the erasure of aura. Benjamin also elaborates that the fundamental idea regarding aura is a hindrance to the accessibility of works of art by the common people.

Folk recipes like Konkani's 'Katri', Kashmiri Pundit's 'Shufta', Lepcha's 'Monchu Thatche', Bene Israeli's 'Fish Alberas' and Udvada's Bhujela-Bheeng – all these names may sound strange but taste good according to Chef Aditya Bal. One of the interesting features of 'Lost Recipes' is it presents various types of lost recipes irrespective of the demarcations of class, caste, or creed. In the case of the episode on Chattishgarh, we see that a tribal recipe is juxtaposed with a royal recipe. Although it is not known to us whether this is intentionally done or not, it highlights the coexistence of two different tastes in a democratic platform. Anthropologists have studied that the food habits of a group of people sometimes divide them from the other group of people. In this regard, elites and upper-class people are quite sensitive and they have special disregard for the people having different cultural tastes. On the contrary, two lost recipes from Srinagar offer us another dichotomy – 'Shufta' used to be cooked by Kashmiri Pundits and 'Houk Sun' by Kashmiri Muslims. We are not concerned about communal politics but are interested to observe that the main ingredients of both recipes are dry and hint at a common thing which is excessive cold. During winter they cannot harvest, so they preserve vegetables by applying some unique techniques beforehand. This is how nature brings them on the same pedestal and the stories of survival suggest harmony of life at Srinagar. Moreover, the bearers of all these lost recipes indicate a few similar

points to address the reason for the extinction of the recipes. These are as follows: lack of time in a fast-food world and unavailability of ingredients. Apart from these two, the lack of interest among the present generation to carry forward the great tradition, the dispersal of the community members in different parts of the world, and the polluted environment are also accountable for the extinction of these recipes.

Throughout this paper, we have tried to discuss the survival of folk food in association with digital reproducibility. We must note that capitalism has offered an attractive alternative to traditional-time-consuming recipes with its discount-centric fast-food enterprise. We can call the consumers of this kind of enterprise 'fast-food generation.' In the heyday of this generation, traditional as well as folk recipes and their values are believed to be of no importance in comparison to the values of Coca-Cola and McDonald's. Instead of preparing a traditional platter, people are fond of ordering it from outside and sometimes they fail to avoid attractive deals from restaurants. That is why even during the time of any festival, most people prefer to have lunch or dinner outdoors. Earlier it was the home-made ethnic recipe that used to draw all of the family members closer and after that, they used to sit in a circle to listen to the elders about their family. Nowadays, age-old grandpa and grandma lament: gone are those days. It seems to us that nowadays the position of folk recipes is of doubly marginalised. Their struggles for existence are not only against the high cuisine and royal recipes but also against this fast-food culture. *Lost Recipes* is therefore unearthing all the underrated recipes, especially of various communities that have hardly any place in the world of fast-food generation.

However, the democratic zeal of mechanical reproduction as perceived by Benjamin is working in favour of folk recipes. On the one hand, when the fast-food enterprises of capitalism and grand narratives of dominant cultural ideology are 'aestheticizing the politics' (Benjamin, 1935), on the other hand, folk recipes in association with digital reproduction are 'politicizing the aesthetics' (Benjamin, 1935). Under the direction of Surabhi Chatterjee, Epic TV has posited folk and elite on the same plain, it has also tried to erase hostility between different communities by addressing the similitude in their platters. Finally, is that in the coming days, we anticipate more such lost recipes to be brought to us with the help of digital reproduction as foreseen by Benjamin.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1988). How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30(1), 3-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/179020>
- Benjamin, W (2008). The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version. In M. W. Jennings, (Ed.) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (pp.19-55). Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1935)
- Islam, M (2006). Postmodernized Cultural Globalisation: Threatening Folk Culture(s) in India. *Social Scientist*, 34(9/10), 48-71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27644170>
- Chattarji, S. (Director). (2016-2020). *Lost Recipes* [TV series]. Epic TV Productions.

Spivak, G. C. (2010). In R. Morris, (Ed.) *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections On the History of An Idea* (pp. 21-78). Columbia University Press.

Mayuri Bhakat, an M. Phil. in English from Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan has completed her Undergraduate and Postgraduate degrees from the same institution. In her M. Phil research, she has dealt with the writings of Memsahibs in Colonial India. Besides, her interest lies in Women empowerment and Gender Studies, Psychoanalysis, Folklore, Dalit Writings, Memory Studies, Partition, Film Studies, Uncanny tales etc. She has also taught as a Guest Lecturer in English in some colleges in West Bengal.

Sudipta Kumar Paul, currently working as T.G.T-English in Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Barpeta (Assam), has earned an M.Phil in English from Visva-Bharati and also completed his Undergraduate and Postgraduate degrees from the same institution. He has explored the relationship of Food, Memory, and Partition in his M. Phil dissertation. His interest lies in Memory Studies, Dalit Writings, Folklore, Film Studies, War Literature, Feminism, and Gender Studies, etc.
