

Indian Food and Cuisine- a historical survey

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Today every very well-known Indian dish is the product of a long history of invasion and the fusion of different food traditions. The food that we Indians have been eating has been, over the millennia, steadily evolving both in variety and taste. The food habits and preferences of Indians have changed in stages over the last 4000 years, from the Indus Valley days through the Vedic times and after the influence of Buddhist and Jain thought, and their impact on the Dharma Sutras and Arthashastra of around 300 BC, to Mughals, Europeans and British.

The Indus Valley Civilization:

At the various sites in Mohenjodaro and Harappa we have found wheat and barley. They were also familiar with chickpea, Masur dal and horsegram, Chana. They were also familiar with fruits like pomegranate, coconuts and banana. Wheat was used by making into stew, soup or flat bread called chappati.

While pounding platforms were used for large scale operations by the state, smaller pounders were employed in homes. Flat metal and clay plates resembling modern *tavas* have been found in plenty from at Harappan sites, suggesting that baked chapattis may have been known. The Indus Valley people used numerous clay vessels for boiling barley and rice. Chulhas of U shaped with front opening and three raised knobs to support the cooking vessels have also been found. Small mud plastered oven resembling the modern day tandoors have been found in North western part of India.

The Aryans:

Coming of Aryans also did not change the food structure of India. Whereas the Harappan civilization was an essentially urban one, the vedic was agricultural, pastoral and Philosophical, keenly alive to the forces with in and with out that effect human equanimity and comfort. A prayer from the Yajurveda, composed about 800 B.C. reads like this, “ May for me prosper, through the sacrifice, milk, sap, ghee, honey, eating and drinking at the common table, ploughing, rains, conquest, victory, wealth, riches. May for me prosper, through the sacrifice, low grade food, freedom from hunger, rice, barley sesame, kidney beans, vetches, wheat, lentils, millets, panicum grains and wild rice. May for me prosper,

through the sacrifice, trees, plants that which grows in ploughed land and that which grows in unploughed land”

The Rig Veda mentions neither rice, nor wheat but only barley. The Yajurveda mentions all the three besides panicum cereal, oil seed and pulses such as masha(urad),masura(masoor), mudga(mung)and Kalya(matar). Cattle were an integral part of the Vedic culture. There is a lot of reference to the milk of cows, though that of the buffalo and goat also finds mention. Dadhi (present dahi) or curds was eaten with rice, barley or Soma Juice. Curd folded into fresh milk constituted a popular drink, the solid portion being termed as amishka and the liquid portion as vajina. Shikarini, the modern Shrikhand, using strained curds, crystal sugar and fragrant herbas was used. The solid part of the cow gree was called manda. Butter milk was in wide use and it was turned into seasoned dish called saga.

The date (Khajura) and Bilva(ber) are mentioned in the Yajurveda. Amara or mango is first mentioned in the Satapatha Brahmana. The Rigveda mentions vegetables like lotus stem(visa), cucumber (urvaruka) followed by in the later Vedas lotus roots(shaluka), bottle guard(alabu) and singadha(mulali sapahaka). Honey is the earliest sweetner that is know to the Vedic civilization and Rigveda states that the honey from the small bees was much better than that from large bees. It waqs used to sweeten apupas but was forbidden to students and women. Guests were welcome in the household with madhuparka, a honey sweetened concoction of curd or ghee. Sugarcane is not mentioned in the Rigvedic period. Honey however receded in the Buddhist period and is replaced with jiggery(guda).

The Aryans cultivated barley wheat rice, melons and cotton and kept their crops in a central storage in each city. They kept cow, pigs, buffalo and sheep. They lived in banks of rivers and fish were caught from river with fish hooks. They ate both vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods. Their main food was products of wheat served with barley or rice along with fish or meat. Vegetarian food (strictly excluding animal and fish meat) became the norm for as much as half of the population after the coming of Buddhism.

Food to the Aryans was not simply a means of bodily sustenance, it was part of a cosmic moral cycle. The Taittiriya Upanishad states, From earth sprang herbs, from herbs food, from food seed, from seed man.....Man thus consists of the essence of food....from food are all creatures produced, by food do they grow...The self consists of food,of breath, of mind, of understanding , of bliss.” The Bhagvad Gita also states, From food do all creatures come into being. Hence in the great Aryan cosmic cycle, the eater, the food he eats and the Universe must all be in harmony.

It was during this period that the concept of pollution became intimately woven to the cooking and eating practice. It would be unthinkable for a cook or house wife to taste any dish during the course of its preparation. Water must never be sipped from a tumbler but

poured into the mouth from above since one's own saliva is polluting. Water used for rinsing the mouth must be cast out never swallowed. In many rituals sprinkling of water has a strong connotation of purification on the leaf before eating.

The Buddhist Period:

Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism crystallized out of a Hindu matrix. In terms of food and food practices they had many features in common with the Hindu ethos but also some distinct elements. In the Lankavatra Sutra, Buddha is recorded as saying, "I enjoy the taking of food made out of rice, barley, wheat, mudga, maha, masura and other grains, ghee, oil of sesamum, honey, molasses, sugar, fish, eggs and others which are full of soul qualities but devoid of faults, they were consumed by the Aryans and by the rishis of yore". Monks were advised to eat solid foods only between sunrise and noon and nothing between noon and sunrise the next day as this would subdue passion and lead to spiritual strength. Buddha himself favoured non injury and was strongly opposed to ritual sacrifice, yet even he permitted his followers animal flesh on occasions if the killing had been unintentional.

The Empires:

By 300 B.c. with the coming of Mauryans, many people became vegetarians though eating of meat not given up completely. Strong philosophy that animal sacrifices added to your karma and did not relieve you from cycle of reincarnation. The emperor Ashoka in his edicts not only preached non killing powerfully but himself practiced it. The Girnar stones in Gujarat state, "No living being may be slaughtered for sacrifice, no festive gathering may be held. Formerly slaughtering in the Kings kitchen was great, now it has almost been stopped".

By 650 A.D. worship of mother goddess came into prevalence. Cow came to be worshipped. Hindus stopped eating beef completely. In the Gupta Empire, they mostly ate vegetables, cereals, fruits, breads, and drank milk.

According to the traditional Indian medical system Ayurveda, food is of three kinds.

1. **Satvic:** Sattvic food is most simple and easiest to digest type of food. The food contains most of its nutritional values as it is cooked by using minimal heat and modest processing. It provides the necessary energy to the body without taxing it. It is also considered as a foundation of higher states of consciousness, that is why saints and seers survive on sattvic foods. Sattvic food should be taken fresh or immediately after it is prepared. Fresh juicy fruits, vegetables (that are easily digestible), milk and milk products, whole soaked or also sprouted beans, grains and nuts, many herbs and spices consumed in their natural and near-natural forms are good examples of satvik food.

Common spices like ginger, turmeric, coriander, cardamom, cinnamon, and aniseed are highly recommended in Sattvic diet while the vegetables like onion, garlic, red chilies and black pepper and such other pungent and astringent spices.

2. **Rajasik** :Rajasik food is rich in flavour but heavy to digest. It is suitable for people who do arduous physical work. Vegetables cooked in excess butter, with spicy and strong flavoring agents, are typical example of rajasic preparation. Cooked fresh, rajasic food is rich in nutrients with minimum dilution with water. Such food is heavy on salt and sugar and takes longer period to digest than sattvic food. It calls for extended sleeping hours and is sexually stimulating. Sattvic foods that have been fried in oil or cooked too much or eaten in excess, specific foods and spices that are strongly exciting, bitter, pungent, hot and dry are examples of rajasic food. A rajasic food eater is usually aggressive and overflowing with energy as the rajasic food increase the speed and excitement of the human organism

3. **Tamasic**: Tamsic food is considered the worst among all types of food. Dry, unnatural, overcooked, stale, decaying and processed food makes for a Tamasic diet. Tamaasic diet consumes a large amount of energy while being digested. Refined food - be it cereals, oils or hydrogenated butter, stimulants and beverages like tea, coffee and soft drinks, fast and ready-to-cook food, canned or frozen food, precooked and warmed food items like burgers, pizzas, pastries, and chocolates, incompatible food as well as intoxicants like tobacco and alcohol are tamasic examples of tamasic food.Tamasic diet is foundation of ignorance, doubt, pessimism and leads a person to sick and painful life. A tamasic person always at serious discomfort with himself and forgets to lead healthy a happy life

Food of Royalty:

We get a lot of information on food served to the royalty in the Sanskrit and regional literature from 1000 to 1500 A.D. King Somswara III the Western Chalukya king ruled from 1126 to 1138 A.D. To him is attributed the Sanskrit work, Abhla-sahitartha-chintamani better known as Manasollasa, meaning the refresher of mind. It consists of 100 chapters grouped in to 5 equal books. In the chapter on Annabhoga, it gives recipes, some fairly detailed others less for the preparation of a variety of dishes that are even now current in Kannada, Marathi and Tamil areas, such as idli, disai, vadai, dahi vada, poli, wadia, shrikhand, pheni and Laddu. However the king pays much more attention to non vegetarian food preparation. He says even though food preparation served in earthen vessel tastes well, kings must be served in vessels made of gold.

In King Someswara's book, meat items have a pride of place. Liver was carved in to a globular shape of beetle husk, which were then roasted on charcoal and then fried with spices, eventually to be placed in curds, on a decoction of black mustard. Roasted tortoise, seasoned fish and fried crabs were other dishes relished. In one recipe pieces of meat are mixed with a paste of gram pounded with spices and fried. To this were added tender hyacinth beans, certain berries, onions and garlic and the whole mass was taken up in some sour juice and flavoured.

There were many tastes in a royal meal. These are madhura (sweet), amla (sour), lavana (salty), kata (pungent), tikta (bitter) and kasaya (astringent), as prescribed earlier on by Sushruta (around 600 AD). The Bhavissayattakaha (of AD 1000) describes the royal meal of King Shrenika thus. First were served fruits that could be chewed (grape, pomegranate, ber), then fruits to be sucked (sugarcane, oranges, mangoes). Food that could be licked came next and in the fourth course came solid sweet items such as sevaka, modaka and phenaka. Rice followed next and the sixth was of broths. Curd preparation made the seventh course and the eighth ended with thickened milk flavoured with saffron. Items such as parpata (papad) and vataka (vadai) were common.

Coming of Islam:

By 1100 A.D. many people stopped eating Pork because it was not allowed by the Koran.

This had an adverse effect on environment because Pigs do not destroy the forest in which they live but sheep and goats do. Roti, dhal and cereals are easily grown in the dry arid atmosphere where there is less of green vegetables. This food continued from this period to the present.

Ibn Batuta describes the food served in the tables of the rich. The dinner consists of bread, roasted meat (shiwawoon), round pieces of bread split and filled with sweet paste, rice, chicken (dojaj). Even Amir Khusru describes the food eaten by the nobility. Their food consisted generally of shrbat-i-labgir (a very sweet sherbet), naan I tunuk (light bread) nan-i-tanuri (chapattis cooked in tandutrs) samosas (prepared from meat, ghee, onions etc), mutton, flesh of various birds such as quails, sparrow (kunjshakka) etc. halwa and sabuni sakar. They were also accustomed to drink wine. After the meal they used to take tambol (beetle leaf) for refreshing the palate. Frequently nobles would eat together and the unconsumed food would be distributed to fakirs and beggars.

Firoz Tughluq laid a large number of mango gardens. With coming of Islam people started eating more fruits. Citrus fruits like lemons and oranges grown from now onwards and eaten.

The Islamic cuisine in India reflects egalitarianism derived from Islamic ethos and also the Afghan heritage. The food from North India also traces its descent from Persian ancestors and then more definitely from the 16th century Mughals. Central Asian nomadic influence is apparent in meat dishes and communal eating due to tent life of the warriors. The Mughals brought with them Persian and Afghan cooks who started North Indians on the rich and fragrant Persian rice dishes, such as pilafs and biryanis (meat-based pilafs). Garnished with pounded silver (vark), these dishes along with spicy kormas (braised meat in creamy sauces), koftas (grilled spicy meatballs) and kababs used to grace the tables of emperors.

Babar was also very fond of fruits and laid many orchards. Babar lived for only 4 ½ year after coming to India. He lamented the fact that this country had no grapes, musk melons or first rate fruits, no ice or cold water, no bread or cooked food in the bazaars. The chironji is a thing between the almonds and the walnut not bad, he comments. The flesh of the Hindustani fishes is very savoury, they have no odour or tiresomeness (meaning probably the lack of bones). But at heart Babar remained an alien to India's food.

While Babar remained aloof to the Indian supper-tables, his son Humayun took to them easier and also introduced a few new items to it. He even gave up animal flesh for some months when he started his campaign to recover his throne. After much reflection he decided that beef was a food not for the devout.

It is with Akbar, and through the book *Ain-i-Akbari*, that we know of many new dishes, ovens and recipes that came into India through the Mughal court. The *Ain I Akbari* describes three classes of cooked dishes. The first called safiyana, consumed on Akbar's day of abstinence, no meat was used and the dishes are those made with rice(zard birinj, khushka,

Khichiri and sheer birinj) wheat(chickhi),dhals,palak sag,halwa, sherbats etc. The second class comprised of those in which both meat and rice were used such as palao,biryani,shulla and shurba or meat and wheat (harisa, haleem, khushka, qutab (samosa). The third class was that in which meat was cooked with ghee, spices, curd, eggs etc. to give such dishes as yakhni, kabab, do-pyaza, dumpukht, qaliya and malghuba. Bread was either thick made from wheat flour and baked in an oven or thin baked on iron plates using dough of either wheat or khuskha. The delicious cold kulfi was made at court by freezing a mixture of khoa, pista nuts and zafran essence in a metal cone after sealing the open top with dough. (The only modification today is to use aluminium or plastic cones with their own caps).

Jahangir, unlike his father, enjoyed meat, but kept up his fathers schedule of abstentions, adding thursday to them. He seems to have given up fish altogether. He will be remembered for popularizing falooda (a jelly made from boiled wheat strainings mixed with fruit juices and cream).It was the Mughals who introduced rich gravies, pilafs and non-vegetarian fare such as kebabs, resulting in Mughalai Cuisine as well as such fruits as

apricots, melons, peaches and plums. The Mughals were great patrons of cooking. Lavish dishes were prepared during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

The Nizams of Hyderabad state meanwhile developed and perfected their own style of cooking with the most notable dish being the Biryani, often considered by many connoisseurs to be the finest of the main dishes in India.

During this period the Portuguese introduced foods from the New World. They brought potato, tomato, tapioca, groundnuts, corn, papaya, pineapple, guava, avocado, rajma (kidney bean), cashew, sapota (chiku), and of course capsicum and chilli in all its forms. Perhaps the cauliflower and cabbage came from Europe or Latin America too, but certainly a particular form of cottage cheese did come from the Portuguese. The Portuguese word for grain, *grao*, was taken up to describe Indian pulses as Bengal gram, horse gram and other grams. It was this that became the *chhana* of Bengal and Orissa — the base for many Bengali sweets (Sandesh in its modern form, and of course inventions called Rasogolla, Khirmohan, Mouchak, Pantua, Sitabhog, Chhena Puda, and so forth).

While the Arabs and Central Asians brought bajra, jowar, lobia and forms of bread (roti) into India, the Portuguese enriched Indian food through their diverse introductions.

When we eat Aloo-poori, we partake of the richness of the produce of people from West Asia and Latin America!

The British:

Early European Officials in India had lavish tables. Mandelslo in 1638 noted, 15 or 16 dishes of meat, besides the dessert in the home of the President of the English merchants of Surat. In 1780, Mrs. Eliza fay, a lawyers wife and herself a dressmaker wrote, "We dine at 2, o, clock in the very heat of the day, a soup, a roast fowl, curry, rice, a mutton pie, four quarter of lamb, a rice pudding, tarts, very good cheese, fresh churned butter, excellent Madeira(that is very expensive but eatables are very cheap). To prepare and serve these array of dishes a whole array of servants and Kedmutgars were in attendance. This was followed by a siesta, evening visits and a light dinner at night. By the turn of the twentieth century eating habits had changed. The mid day meal had become lighter. By 1910, a lunch consisted of pea soup, roast chicken and tongue, breadsauce, potatoes, cheese macroni and lemon pudding. The main meal had moved to seven or eight in the evening and in 1909, Maud Divers declared, India is the land of dinners and England is the land of five o, clock teas..... all India is in a chronic state of giving and receiving this form of hospitality.

Indian food, whether the robust fare of Punjab and the North East Frontier or the delicate, light flavours of the South Indian cuisine, remained essentially the "food of the natives" who, according to the foreign rulers, ate pungent, chilli-spiked curries and rice or rotis like some

uncivilised pagans. The British were not in India to learn. They, as well as other Europeans, were here to "civilise" the backward masses of India and their looking down on the food of India was but a natural corollary. The *memsahibs*, whether they were British, French or Portuguese, employed Indian *khansamas*, cooks and bearers but taught them their own cuisines rather than eat Indian meals at their innumerable parties or in their family meals. The accent had shifted to English style soups, roasts, baked pies and puddings.

Most British officers and civil administrators who came to India, looked upon the native cuisines of India as unhygienic and unpalatable because of the high content of spices and herbs. British made little contribution to Indian food. Fish and chips or Yorkshire pudding pale in comparison to what we got from the Arabs, Portuguese and Moghuls, but the British did sensitize us to at least one fruit, namely the apple.

Local varieties of apple are recorded to have occurred in Kashmir (called amri, tarehli and maharaji), and Dalhara in 1100 AD talked about a "ber as big as a fist and very sweet, grown in North Kashmir", which is likely an apple. But it was the colourful Britisher Frederick "Pahari" Wilson who established a flourishing apple farm in Garhwal, where they grow red and juicy Wilson apples to this day. In these days of American imports into India such as Pizza, Burgers, French fries and colas, it is well to remember the best import we have had from these, namely apples and express our gratitude to the American Mr. Stokes. He settled in Kotgarh near Simla in the 1920s and started apple orchards there, and helped in the proper grading, packing and marketing of the fruit.

Colonial rulers have never been known for their linguistic accuracy and no one knows for sure where the British got this one. "Kari" is a South Indian word for sauce and "tarkari" is a North Indian dish. The only concession they made was when they attended the shikar feasts of the *maharajas* or ceremonial royal meals in the opulent, chandeliered dining halls of the *riyasatis* where food was served by turbaned waiters from gem-studded gold or silver vessels.

Throughout the colonial period too many new, hybrid cuisines developed because the *khansamas* of the *memsahibs* innovated food which combined some of the flavours of India with those of Britain, France or Portugal. Thus, as a legacy of the Raj era, we have the remnants of an Anglo-Indian, Indo-French or Indo-Portuguese cuisine. These flourish in parts of India and in Britain or Europe where nostalgic memories of the Raj linger on.

Clearly the sahibs and memsahibs fell in love with the flavors of India. When they returned to the homeland, they had their cooks grind up a mix of spices to sprinkle on their staid British staples. The world now knows this as "curry powder" and whatever is cooked with it is "curry." In the British Raj, mini revolutions occurred in food and eating habits in the higher echelons of Indian society.

Affluent, Westernised Indian families ate at dining tables with forks and knives and added to their menus, at least some western goodies such as baked dishes, cakes, puddings and ice cream. Their food, though cooked in their own style, also included a few acceptable western items in their daily diet.

The Chinese had their influence too, though not to the extent of the Portuguese and the Moghuls. Mulberry, blackberry and the litchi fruit came to us through them. Of Chinese origin are also the sweet cherry and the peach.

China also developed the leafy variety of *Brassica juncea* (rai), which we in India use as a vegetable. Camphor is a Chinese import and introduction (it is even today called chinakarpura). The soybean was imported from China into India in 1908 for cultivation, though it caught on widely only after the U.S. variety was introduced in 1970s. And the most precious introduction of China to India (and to the world at large) of course their cha or teh, namely tea. Just imagine what we do first thing in the morning — we pay obeisance to the Arabs with a cup of coffee (they brought it to us in the 1600s) or to the Chinese with our steaming cuppa.

However, the large mass of the highly caste and-religion-riddled Indian society continued to maintain its original food barriers and ate community or regional food which was their legacy for generations. Caste and religion were the main dividing partitions of society and food and eating habits reflected these divisions clearly.

Only when Independence came, did Indians realise that they were one nation and that they would have to work above all towards a homogenous culture, lifestyle and national awareness. The divide and rule days of the British were at last over.

The French had vacated Pondicherry, Mahe and Karaikal and the Portuguese were soon to be forced out of Goa, Diu and Daman.

The first signs of the imminent, massive food revolution were visible when Mumbai, the most cosmopolitan city of India, welcomed hordes of Sindhi and Punjabi refugees who migrated to the city. They entered the building and film industries and began to assert their culture in the metropolis. Punjabi *dhaba* food from the North West Frontier became popular in Mumbai in the Sixties.

Mumbaites, who had hitherto relished non-vegetarian food in the many street-corner Irani restaurants and *khanawals* serving the fish and meat dishes of the Konkan coast and Goa, pounced on the luscious *kebab* and *tandoori* cuisine which was new and exciting.

In addition to the pronounced use of spices, common culinary threads unifying local cuisines include the prominence of flatbreads and a far greater use of dairy products than anywhere else in Asia.

Breads are made with wheat, rice and ground legumes depending on the part of the country while dairy products include milk, cream, yogurt, buttermilk, sour cream and cheese.

Beyond that, the differences take over. Northern Indians tend to use their spices ground while Southerners start out with them whole and grind them to a paste with cooked onions and other ingredients. The South is the land of rice while Northerners rely on wheat and other grains -- except for Kashmir, high in the Himalayas, which produces some of the best rice in the world. Cooks of the tropical South make heavy use of coconut milk, an ingredient rarely seen in the North. Areas with access to waterways rely more heavily on seafood. Thus Bengal is a region of fish-lovers, preferably the fresh water variety

Undoubtedly the strongest influence defining Indian food is religion. Centuries of Hindu practice and the profound belief in reincarnation have resulted in the most delicious vegetarian cuisine to be found in the world. For protein, vegetarians rely on a wide range of legumes, both whole and split. Mixed with grain, boosted by vegetables and dairy products, and spiced to the max, they provide a wholesome, varied diet.

Just as Japanese sushi relies on the freshness of the meat and Chinese food relies on the various sauces to impart the right flavor and taste, Indian food relies on the spices in which it is cooked. Spices have always been considered to be India's prime commodity

Most of the spices used in Indian food have been used for their medicinal properties in addition to the flavor and taste they impart. Ginger is believed to have originated in India and was introduced to China over 3000 years ago. In India, a knob of fresh ginger added to tea is believed to relieve sore throats and head colds, not to mention its aphrodisiacal properties. Turmeric is splendid against skin diseases and neem leaves are used to guard against small pox.

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