

## INDIAN CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL FOOD HABITS: A STOREHOUSE OF GOOD HEALTH

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### ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era the technological developments and scientific innovations have transformed human lifestyle comprehensively. Ironically, the most unique thing about India, its culture and traditional food habits have undergone drastic changes. In fact, though the modern period brings with it comfort and convenience in lifestyle, it unfortunately lowers the quality of life in terms of health. The said unpleasant aspect of prevailing time springs up from replacement of healthy food to fast food. The advent of technology and modernity undoubtedly has facilitated human lifestyle but it is at the cost of health.

This research paper appreciates significance of Indian culture and traditional food habits. At the same time the paper explores the rich traditional food habits and its benefits. An attempt is made to shed vivid light on the Covid19 phase which was an eye opener for the entire world to rethink about health, life, habits and survival. The paper is concluded with suggestive recommendations to intertwine the traditional food habits with the modern lifestyle for a nourishing and happy life.

**Key Words:** Traditional Culture, India, Food, Health Habits

### INTRODUCTION

“India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only.”

--Mark Twain

Culture is an umbrella term which encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups (Merriam Dictionary). And it is an established fact that India is the most unique country in the world with distinctive culture and exceptional traditions. The Indian culture is a source of richness and strength, customary influences and the matchless traditional habits. However, unfortunately these conventional practices lost its charismatic implementation in the modern era due to the augmented impact of technology on human life, blindly following western lifestyle, divorcing ourselves from traditional values,

distrust on ancient practices, desire to refashion ourselves, consuming unhealthy food, etc. It is evident in the contemporary life, Indians who once upon a time followed their culture and traditions without any hesitation, today are carried away with the winds of western cultural waves. Apart from the obvious difference in the present generation of moral values, dressing style, lifestyle, thought process, etc, even the food habits have undergone a radical change. Indian traditional habits deeply enshrined in the culture were not just habits but were the shield of good health and a way living life. Health of a person is said to be physical wellbeing or absence of disease. Modern concept of health is a state of total physical, mental and social wellbeing.

The concept of health is the most central concept in medicine and in the health science in general (Gary L. Albrecht., Encyclopaedia of disability, 2005). There has been a reawakening that health is a fundamental human right and a world-wide social goal; that it is essential to the satisfaction of basic human needs and to an improved quality of life; and, that it is to be attained by all people (Park. K., Preventive and Social Medicine, 1995) Thus, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century access to quality health care is a basic human right (Gerald Kleisterlee, "Universal health Care: Access for All," 2007) Despite, health being one of the prominent fundamental right (Dr. D.D. Basu., Introduction to the Constitution of India, 2001) and a human right, we witness misery in India due to the glooming health issues which was never the case in the ancient period health crises has become a global issue including India. Whereas, India being a storehouse of traditional healthy food habits could have avoided the younger generation fall in trap of fast food but ironically it remained a dream.

During the primitive period Indian people practiced traditional habits which were based on health hygiene, purity of thoughts, lessons of good conduct, and peaceful society. Such lifestyle maintained the equilibrium immaculately of all the people leaving extremely deficient scope for health issues as compared to the present scenario. India has a century old heritage of medical and health sciences as far back 3000 B. C. (available at [nph.gov](http://nph.gov)) The philosophy of ayurveda for health was accepted universally to cure health care problems. But, paradoxically, the influence of patronising western imports such as new-fangled diets, fast food, dining in restaurants, cold drinks, etc., in the last five decades has penetrated the Indian society causing tremendous damage to the fabric of Indian culture, food habits and traditions followed by people, especially the food routine which has a direct impact on human health.

### **TRADITIONAL HABITS AND HEALTH BENEFITS**

The world may have labelled India has a mystic and orthodox culture in the past; nonetheless, presently the whole world has started following Indian traditional habits for good health. It is instantly recognizable that the entire globe is religiously following yoga, meditation, pranayam, etc., for an improvised health regime. In fact, it is a matter of pride for Indians that we hold the expertise in yoga and it was consistently followed as a part of our culture. Apart from yoga, food ingredients used traditionally in cooking not only have magical importance but hold medicinal value as well. For example, turmeric- a basic ingredient in daily Indian cooking, as per modern vitro studies reveals that it is a potent

antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimutagenic, antimicrobial, and anticancer agent (available at ncbi.gov). Needless to mention that turmeric is not just an ingredient for cooking but is used as home remedy too in case of injury, bleeding, etc.

The activities of turmeric include antibacterial, antiviral, antitumor, antioxidant, antiseptic, cardio protective, hepato protective, nephro protective, radio protective, and good for digestive activities (*Ibid*). Similarly, curry leaves another common ingredient used in Indian cooking daily, helps in treating dysentery, constipation and diarrhea (Health line) It also relieves morning sickness and nausea, eliminates bacteria, good for diabetics, good for eyesight, reduces stress, heals wounds, burns and skin eruptions too can be healed (*Ibid*). Likewise, mustard seeds used in cooking everyday are rich in a nutrient called selenium, known for its high anti-inflammatory effects and is a high source of magnesium which helps reducing the severity of asthma attacks and certain symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis and lowering blood pressure (Health benefits). Mustard is effectively used in reducing stiff muscles, painful joints, stuffed up phlegm, tumour as well as pneumonia; mustard is helpful for muscular discomfort, psoriasis, ringworm, contact dermatitis and respiratory disorders (*Ibid*.) The various parts of mustard plant have been used since earlier times for cancer, diabetes and detoxification of the body (*Id.*) The vegetables grown locally in India also imbibe immense health benefits. For example, amla (gooseberry) is highly rich in vitamin C and has numerous other health benefits, such as, improvement of skin and hair, better functioning of liver, kidney and heart. Likewise, green vegetables like Spinach, fenugreek are an excellent source of iron, carrots are known for being very high in vitamin A, which enhances eye health and protect skin from damage. It is an established fact that fresh vegetables are storehouse of dietary fiber, carbohydrate, sources of essential minerals like, Copper, Magnesium, Zinc, Phosphorous, Selenium, various nutrients, including potassium, dietary fiber, folate, vitamin A, and vitamin C that over help to maintain good health.

The list of ingredients used in Indian cooking and food is endless. Each ingredient contains not only relishing taste but encompasses astonishing health benefits. Whether it is cumin seeds, chilli flakes, fenugreek seeds, cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, bay leaves, cardamom pods, coriander seeds, anise seeds, etc., all a part of regular Indian traditional cooking which are not just ingredients to enhance the food aroma and taste but are truly miraculous in its effect on our health. Research across the globe today emphasises significance of being a vegetarian person. Indian culture holds vegetarian food foundational to human survival since the ancient period (Nutrition). It is scientifically proved that vegetarians consume greater amount of carbohydrates, vitamin C and folate and less fat, protein, vitamin B12 and zinc than non-vegetarians (*Ibid*.). It is also a matter of fact that vegetarians consume greater amounts of legumes, vegetables, roots and tubers, dairy, cereals, fruits, spices, natural fat, etc. (*Id.*).

Apart from food and yoga, it is exceedingly pertinent to highlight that Indian culture even valued the way we store and drink water. And this traditional practice of storing water in copper vessels and worshipping water was not a superstitious practice dominated by

religion but had a methodical and precise rationale in doing so. Copper has antibacterial effect against important diarrhoeagenic bacteria, including *Vibrio cholera*, *Shigella flexneri*, and *Salmonella Paratyphi* and many more (V.B. Preethi Sudha, *at. el.*, Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition, 2012). Several studies have shown the merits of copper surfaces for their use in improving hygiene in healthcare hence the potential use of copper for the purification of drinking-water has been scientifically established (*Ibid.*). Storing water in copper vessel was age hold practice which incongruously is replaced by stainless steel and plastic merely out of unreality. Research has also substantiated that water has memory; (Martin F. Chaplin, The Memory of Water: An Overview National Library of Medicine, 2007) it is so amazing to know that our rich culture already practiced it but peculiarly we believe it now as the scientific research says so.

The reason why Indian household worshipped water before consuming it is because water has memory, thus treat it with respect, value it before consuming it to get a positive effect on health. Likewise, plethora of habits, such as, sleeping early, waking up early, fasting, observing silence, pranayam, yoga, meditation, body postures while sitting, working, eating, clothing style, wearing ornaments, rudraaksh, tulsi beads, planting and worshipping tulsi, ringing temple bells, washing hands and feet before entering house, etc., were elements of Indian traditional lifestyle.

It is needless to say that today whatever the scientific research is proving good for health was already a vital fragment of Indian culture and traditions with respect to food and health habits. Paradoxically, Indians repositioned themselves from fact to fantasy at the cost of their health and shifted towards an unhealthy lifestyle lacking the pedestal of culture.

### LESSONS LEARNT DURING COVID19

During pandemic of deadly virus of Covid19, we all have witnessed extreme health crises for the first time in modern times. Governments worldwide have struggled to cope up with this monstrous pandemic, at the same time making best possible endeavours to invent a medical solution for the corona virus. The international lockdown had compelled us to rethink about our lifestyle and health routine. Today each nation has realized it is more important to spend on healthcare rather than nuclear weapons. The nations were not attacked on the borders with armed rebellion but were assaulted by a virus which is almost invisible. The entire mighty strength of powerful governments has suddenly become powerless. The only thing which sailed us through this catastrophe is our robust immunity. In order to boost our immunity we were compelled to take a twist, turn back and follow our rich culture embellished with marvellous traditions paired with splendid food habits in daily life.

It is pertinent to mention that universal access to quality health care is not only an ethical goal in itself but it is also an essential condition for economic development and social welfare. Even at international level, as a larger society, the right to health of the individuals hold the same significance (The Right to Health Care). The World Health Organisation (WHO), established in 1948, as a United Nations agency for health, ensures that “all people attain the highest possible level of health” (Health shares). As set out in the WHO’s

Constitution, health is defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease.” (*Ibid.*). In fact, the glorification of health by world Governments today appears to be illusory, as lacs of people are dying daily all over the globe despite the unprecedented advancement of medical science. Additionally, the only aspect which can save our lives from any disease, virus or ailment is only our health. Better the immunity more the chances to fight the virus and be healthy always. Thus, ultimately we have to learn to imbibe within ourselves the cultural and traditional food habits for good health.

## CONCLUSION

Medical science indisputably is a wonderful boon for human health but we always need to remember that medical science cannot make a person healthy it can definitely protect a person from being unhealthy by providing proper health care facilities. Medical science certainly cannot stop humans from contracting diseases completely but can cure disease and reduce suffering. It cannot be forgotten that medical science may save people from death but they still live with disease (Edgar F. Borgatta, Encyclopaedia of the Sociology, 2000). As the issue of health care reform builds to a legislative climax, (Lewis, ‘What Right to Health Care’) national and international laws make an attempt to protect and provide right to health as an unalienable right to every individual. Nonetheless, law cannot improve the quality of our health; it can only protect and guarantee right to health. Despite having a well-equipped set of laws and advanced medical technology today a tiny virus has threatened the entire world in the year 2020. India, as a developing nation has progressed by leaps and bounds in various sectors, but presently it is realized that we have not yet achieved the goal of ‘healthy India’. Achievement of this goal in India is not very complicated as our culture has always taught us to maintain a healthy routine. Though the surge of ultra- modern lifestyle has thwarted Indians from following the traditional habits but now the current situation is edifying on the magnitude of Indian culture and traditional habits for health benefit.

The creative role of the Indian culture needs to be highly appreciated and emphasise the same to the younger generation who are unaware of the phenomenal consequences of conscientiously pursuing the Indian culture, traditional food habits, etc. It is high time that Indian people reinvent their lifestyle with reference to eating habits and stop grazing blinding on pizza, burgers, Frankie’s, rolls, etc., which are loaded with high amount of fats as well as carbohydrates leading to massive destruction of health. The western concept of food habits inclusive of the fast food coupled with carbonated cold drinks which increase the sugar intake and are linked to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and excess fat, result in countless diseases and health issues. Under the mantle of vogue and western style we are ruining our own lives by embracing the fast food culture and overlooking the richness of our traditionally cultured food habits. It is inevitable to revitalize the culturally practiced food habits and stimulate the health benefits for each individual. The goal of healthy India cannot be achieved without ensuing and inculcating healthy habits which rest at the underpinning of Indian

culture and traditions. There is need to infuse the scientific developments with traditional food habits in practice to achieve the aspired goal of healthy India.

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