

## REGIONAL FOOD CULTURE OF INDIA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract:**

Evolution of human culture is a perennial process resulting from their encounter with nature and the aspiration to explore ways to live more effectively. From the prehistoric times, the needs to survive hunger and the challenges of nature have led to innumerable inventions. Human progressed from hunting-gathering nomadic beings to food producing, food processing and food trading beings in the long run. The environmental conditions, availability of fauna and flora in the habitation had contributed in the formulation of agricultural practices and food culture of every society and this culture are ever evolving. This paper explores into the diversity of food culture across regions of India in a historical perspective and argues that it is the habitat setting that fundamentally formulate the food culture of a society.

**Key words-** *food culture, regional flavors, diet and environment, society*

The vast landscape of India consists of regions with varied cultures, languages, life styles, social systems as well as food habits. Every region developed its particular culinary preferences based on the food habits are part of the community's culture that mutually compliment in its development. The earliest cultivated food grains in India are millets and cereals. Eventually, the native population cultivated barley, rice and other grains. The geographical and environmental conditions and availability of fauna and flora were influential in the choice of ingredients and their preparation. The coastal, riverine, plains, valleys, arid, semi- arid and hilly regions have food crops native to its environmental conditions and accordingly the food habits of its people also developed. Though there exist a strong sense of nativity, many of the grains and vegetables currently popular in India were introduced to India from outside in the course of centuries through trading and cultural exchanges and in recent past through the colonial rule over the land. The long presence of ingredients like potato, tapioca, tea, coffee, cashew etc. have made it inevitable part of the local diet, it is difficult to realize its foreign origins.

It was in the Neolithic times that human started food production and eventually departed from the food gathering subsistence pattern of livelihood. The calendar knowledge and their close interaction with nature has enabled effective agricultural practices, nutritional awareness and dietary practices. Indus Valley Civilization have revealed evidences of eggplant, sesame and humped cattle as part of their diet. There are also evidences for cultivation of turmeric, cardamom, black pepper and mustard. In the Vedic period the diet must have mainly consisted of vegetables, fruits, meat, grain, dairy products and honey (Krishnakumar, 2019). From the early historic period itself India had long distance trade links with places from across the world which resulted in exchange and introduction of different food grains, oils and cuisines. The maritime connection with the Greeks, West Asians, South East Asians, Arabs and Egyptians has contributed into the food and dietary practices of India.

The major impact on Indian native food habits have been through two significant phases- Colonial rule and the Globalization. The earliest texts on India published and circulated in the Europe had paid detail attention on extravagances of Indian cooking as well as role of food in Indian culture and the role of food and its consumption played in mapping out the social order (Berger, 2013). The European Colonial rule have introduced new foods, cuisine as well as agricultural practices. The tea and coffee plantations in India were started by the British. The baking and consumption of the baked food, like bread, biscuits, cookies are also British introduction. Their stay in India required supply of the raw materials to cook their cuisine, and thus many ingredients started to be cultivated. The British food culture has so deeply merged with Indian culture it is difficult to distinguish from each other. So much so, there are native names for things like bread as *paav*, biscuits as *biskoot* etc. and they are consumed as staples on a regular basis.

Similarly, the opening up of the national boundaries for global economy and market in the early 1990s have resulted in deeper cultural shifts in its every branch, including food. The globalized scenario introduced the foreign food and they were made available in India. Once again, the adaptation and assimilation of these into Indian food culture is extensive and deep, that is has become a part of the native cuisine. These two waves of incoming food culture have not only added into the already existing diversity of Indian cuisines, but also it pushed the earlier native food sensibilities into an almost oblivious state.

This centurieslong process of mixing and assimilation of varied cuisines from across the world, along with the existing regional diversity has created a wide spectrum of food habits and food culture in India. As earlier, it still is in a phase of evolution into the next.

Though globalization has created an *almost* uniform culture across the nation, the food habits' adaptation of these external inputs still retained its regional identity and flavor. Hence, it is possible to trace taste zones/ regions in India based on the culinary practices as Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bengal adjacent to Assam, the heartland north of the Vindhya mountains, Kashmir and the eastern and western sea board (Pant, 2013). North Eastern hilly region of India must be an addition to this list. Just like any other cultural zones, these taste zones also merge and overlap each other on the boundary area.

The major differences in these zones can be identified based on their choice of cooking oil, staple food, choice of vegetable variety, method of cooking, consumption of dairy products and meat. It is possible to trace historical roots and reasons for the choices that each region made. The role of local environmental conditions and the availability of the raw materials along with the ethnic identity also contribute in making such choices.

**Oil-** Currently sunflower oil is the most popularly used cooking oil in India. However, that was not the case nearly half a century ago. Sun flower oil has received its current popularity through commercial intervention. There exist a wide variety cooking oils in India. The mustard oil is preferred across the plainlands of northern India extending from Punjab to Bengal coast. The sesame/ gingelly oil is more preferred in the North Eastern region of India. The Deccan and further south, except Kerala and the west coast, widely use ground nut/ peanut oil. In the West coast of south India, Kerala, and the southern Tamil Nadu the only cooking oil used is coconut oil. Its discernible here that the raw materials used for production of these oils grow widely in these respective regions and hence the choice was involuntary and organic. Despite being introduced to the glorified olive oil, all regions across India still continue to prefer their native oil for cooking. The clarified butter/ ghee is a substitute for cooking oil, used on special occasions or for specific dishes, that has presence across every region of India.

**Staple grains-** As stated earlier, millets were the earlier staple grains of India. Barley, fox tail millet, sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet, porso millet, kodo millet, barn yard and little millets were part of staple food long ago across India. With the expansion of rice cultivation south and wheat cultivation in the north, these millets were replaced by the new grains. The finger millet/ raagi and sorghum/ jowar are the only millets that still continue to be the staple meal along with rice or wheat. In south India, except Kerala, the finger millet constitutes the major portion of meal. It is consumed as cooked into a ball, or as porridge with sweet or spicy flavor. Sometimes its flour is converted into dough/ batter and cooked into bead/pan cakes. In Kerala, the consumption of finger millet is limited to infant food. A semi liquid formula is prepared with the millet flour to feed the infants.

In the arid and semi-arid regions of India, the sorghum millet is the most staple food material. In parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka the *rotis* made of Sorghum is the most staple meal. It is the most cultivate food grain of these regions as well. It is noticeable that this food is suitable for the body to cope with temperature and humidity conditions of the region.

Rice is a staple food in the coastal and hilly regions of India. Some pockets of north Indian plains like parts of Bihar and Bengal also consume rice as staple meal. There are hundreds of varieties of rice that's is traditionally grown in India. In the Kerala and further west coast of south India, the par boiled rice is the staple meal. Wet land cultivation method is more popular in this region. In the plains of northern India, the staple meal is prepared from wheat. There are varieties of preparations using the wheat flour, which is parallel to the sorghum millet.

Vegetables- The consumption of subterranean vegetables like roots and tubers constitute major part of diet in the hilly regions and coastal regions of India. There exist a wide variety of these vegetables and their preparation. These are mostly consumed after boiling and seasoning with oil and spices. Sweet dishes are also prepared from the tubers. Tapioca, a tuber introduced from the western world, is a still a staple food of Kerala, sometimes it replaces the rice even. The potato, another tuber with foreign origin, is an inevitable component of north Indian cuisines. Carrots, taro, radish, yam, sweet potato etc. are some of the other popular tubers used in Indian meals.

The consumption of leafy vegetables and greens is common in cuisines all over India. Various gourds and other vegetables are also are part of regular diets. These vegetables are consumed more in the coastal, hilly and humid regions than the dry arid regions. The arid regions' diet includes more pulses and cereals than the others. The dry preserved pulses are essential part of the arid regions' diet as the climate conditions favor it than the green vegetables.

Diary products, poultry, meat and fish are also major part of Indian food culture. The diary products have larger consumers in the arid regions than the coastal and hilly regions. The fish and seafood are a staple diet in the coastal and riverine regions of India. Poultry and bovine meat are consumed in all the regions of India.

The role of native climate conditions in determining the diet of its inhabitants is crucial. The availability of the materials and its right consumption is a knowledge that human have acquired through ages of living with nature and evolving themselves in that long process.

Social status of a given community in its given milieu also determined its dietary practices, despite they coexisted with other communities in the same climatic and environmental condition. As much as there exist a *food culture*, the exiting culture and belief systems of every society has its own role in formulating the food culture. This is specifically applicable to the choice of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food; vegan is still a new idea in Indian society. Milk, curd, butter, butter milk and clarified butter is used throughout India, but in the past, these products were part of the agricultural settlement related and land-owning communities' diet and less among the cultivating communities. Rice and wheat have become staple meals of India not long ago replacing the millets. The millets being the regular grains, rice was a rare and luxury product. Food in India is an identity marker of caste, class, family, kinship, tribe affiliation, lineage, religiosity and ethnicity.

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