

ANCIENT INDIAN CUISINE: A HISTORICAL RESEARCH PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Indian cuisine is among the oldest and most diverse culinary traditions in the world, with roots extending over five millennia. Its evolution reflects the interaction of agriculture, religion, philosophy, trade, migration, and imperial influence. This research paper examines the historical development of Indian cuisine from the prehistoric and Indus Valley Civilisation period to the Early Medieval era. The study identifies how staple grains such as wheat, barley, rice, and pulses formed the nutritional base of early societies, while indigenous cooking methods such as roasting, boiling, fermentation, and tandoor baking laid the foundation for later culinary systems.

The paper further explores the philosophical transformation of food habits during the rise of Jainism and Buddhism, when the principle of *Ahimsa* encouraged vegetarianism. Ayurvedic dietary classifications of Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic foods added a scientific and spiritual framework to eating habits. Later periods such as the Mauryan, Gupta, and Sangam eras contributed to regional diversification, temple cuisine, public kitchens, sweets, preservation techniques, and fermentation practices.

The study also analyses the adaptability of Indian cuisine to foreign influences. Mughal rule introduced refined courtly dishes such as biryani, kebabs, korma, and the slow-cooking technique of *Dum Pukht*. Portuguese contact after the sixteenth century transformed Indian cuisine further through the introduction of chilli, potato, tomato, and cashew.

Despite continuous external influences, ancient culinary techniques such as *tadka* (tempering), fermentation, grain-based staples, and ritual food traditions continue to define modern Indian cuisine. The findings reveal that Indian food history is not static but dynamic, blending continuity with innovation.

Keywords: Indian cuisine, Indus Valley Civilisation, Ayurveda, Ahimsa, Mughal cuisine, food history, regional cuisine, ancient India

1. INTRODUCTION

Food is one of the most significant markers of civilization, identity, and culture. In India, cuisine is not merely a collection of recipes; it is a living tradition shaped by geography, religion, trade, agriculture, and historical exchange. Indian food has evolved over more than 5,000 years and remains one of the most complex culinary systems in the world.

The development of Indian cuisine can be understood through four major historical phases:

1.1 Ancient Foundations

The earliest roots of Indian cuisine can be traced to the Indus Valley Civilisation (3300–1900 BCE), where archaeological evidence reveals cultivation of wheat, barley, rice, sesame, and

pulses. Clay ovens, hearths, pottery vessels, and grinding stones indicate advanced cooking practices.

1.2 Philosophical Transformation

From around 600 BCE onward, Jainism and Buddhism introduced the ethical principle of non-violence (*Ahimsa*), which strongly influenced dietary practices and encouraged vegetarianism. Ayurveda further categorized foods according to their effects on mind and body.

1.3 Imperial and Regional Expansion

During the Mauryan, Gupta, Sangam, and Medieval periods, food systems became more sophisticated. Regional cuisines emerged, temple kitchens expanded, sweets developed, and fermented foods gained prominence.

1.4 Global Exchange

The Mughal era introduced Persian and Central Asian influences, while Portuguese traders later brought ingredients such as chilli, potato, tomato, and cashew—now integral to Indian cuisine.

Thus, modern Indian food is the result of centuries of continuity and adaptation.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this research are:

1. To trace the historical development of Indian cuisine from ancient to medieval periods.
2. To identify staple crops and indigenous cooking methods in early Indian societies.
3. To examine the influence of religion and philosophy on dietary practices.
4. To analyse the impact of empires and foreign trade on Indian food systems.
5. To study the continuity of ancient culinary techniques in modern India.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding how food practices in Ancient India evolved through different civilizations, dynasties, philosophical movements, and cultural exchanges is the most important purpose of this study, as well as studying the historical evolution of Ancient Indian cuisine. The objective of the analysis was to look at the roots of basic foods, cookery techniques, diet practices, and eating habits during the prehistoric and Early Medieval phases. It intends to explore how agriculture, geography, religion, Ayurveda, trade routes, migration, and foreign invasions all converged to determine the emergence of the Indian food system during its many iterations through the ages and the different influences they exerted. Another of the further objectives of the research is to find long-standing ancient culinary traditions in contemporary Indian cuisine. Fermentation, roasting, spices, grain-based meals, and ritual food offerings all have influenced Indian cuisine in modern times. The thesis emphasizes, then, how Indian food successfully adjusted foreign ingredients and forms while keeping the authentic Indian identity. Finally, the study adds to the knowledge of Indian food history that may offer a deeper learning in one of the five traditions.

Scope of the Study

At present, the study is confined to the historical formation of Indian cuisine from the prehistoric era, such as the Indus Valley Civilisation, to the Early Medieval period within Indian history. It includes the Vedic Period, Mahajanapadas and Mauryan Period, Sangam Period, Gupta Period, and Early Medieval kingdoms. It deals with food habits, staples of food, cooking techniques, preservation modes, religious dietary influences, regional diversity, and institutional food systems like temple kitchens and royal kitchens. We cover a lot more than this, from that beginning on, by describing later external influences, and in particular the impact of Mughal and Portuguese; we explain how Indian cuisine became the diversified dish it is now. But the research does not feature detailed nutritional analysis, contemporary restaurant practices, or recent shifts in the food industry. It is based mostly on historical texts, and archaeological and literary sources as well as secondary academic research. The results aim to bring academic knowledge of the meaning Ancient Indian food had in historical and ethnic aspects.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Archaeological Foundations.

Archaeological evidence can provide the earliest, most reliable insights into the origin of Indian cuisine. Dispositions of crops, pulses, seeds, bones, aground and cooking materials from archaeological activity in India. These finds in Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Farmana, Lothal, Gujarat and beyond confirm the existence of agricultural crops in ancient India, with its huge number of agriculture techniques used. The findings indicate that early peoples depended on far more than hunting and gathering, and developed consistent agricultural systems.

Early diet was based on wheat, barley, millets, rice, lentils, chickpeas, and peas (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002; Fuller, 2006). Animal bones and residue analysed from pottery vessels have also shown that dairy products, fish and meat were also consumed in many settlements. Cattle, buffalo, goats, sheep, pigs and fish remains show mixed dietary patterns based on plant-based and animal-based foods. As early Indian people were likely more nutrient diverse, and were likely to have adapted their food choices to existing ecological conditions such as river channels, grasslands and cultivated lands (Shinde et al., 2020; Wright, 2010). Tools for grinding stones, querns, pestles and mortar found at excavation sites show that grain processing by humans involved flour and likely crushing spices or herbs. Clay ovens, hearths and tandoor-like structures suggested the use of hot roasting, baking, boiling and steaming. These results show that the preparation of food is not a very primitive but a systematic and technical process (Achaya, 1998; Kenoyer, 1998).

Decorated storage jars, cooking pots, and serving vessels, meanwhile, testify to food social and cultural significance. They suggest that specialized utensils are a result of storage management, communal eating arrangements and possibly ceremonial usage of food. As a result, the archaeological record provides strong arguments for the hypothesis that Indian cuisine was developed in ancient civilisations such as urban and rural settlements, together with a sophisticated food system (Possehl, 2002; Wright, 2010).

3.2 Religion and Vegetarianism.

The role of religion in the development of Indian nutrition was a major factor in the transformation of Indian foodways, in particular, influenced by the rise of Jainism and Buddhism in the 6th century BCE. They have been universally accepted that these trends contested ante-mortem rituals of animal sacrifice and advocated for non-violence against all living beings. Non-harm the principle of Ahimsa (non-maleficence) became predominant in food ethics and was pervasive with large sub-sections of public eating behaviour (Dundas 2002; Olivelle 1999). Jainism brought in one of the strictest vegetarian traditions in the world. In many cases, adherents steered clear of meat and fish, eggs and even root vegetables, as these foods had been shown to be harmful to living beings. Buddhism also promoted compassion and moderation, which is why lots of communities stopped eating meat or started abstaining from it.

These philosophies proliferated in the kingdom via royal patronage, monasteries, and official teachings and became ineluctably more significant in spiritual and moral values as vegetarian food was added to the Indian pantry (Spencer, 1995; Achaya, 1998). The spread of vegetarianism was socially and economically consequential as well. It promoted the promotion of pulses, grains, dairy products, fruits, nuts and vegetables as staple foods. As a result there was a huge breakthrough in the culinary art of preparing these protein-rich vegetarian dishes, many of which later served as regional staples. Indian cuisine thereby evolved not according to taste alone but by ethical and religious values as well (Sen 2004; Achaya 1998).

Vegetarianism is deeply rooted in Indian culture even to this day. These philosophical roots have inspired the temple cuisines, fasting foods, Jain meals, and sattvic diets all around the world. Therefore, the extant literature demonstrates that religion played one of the strongest roles in transforming Indian cuisine into a morally led and plant-based food culture (Collingham, 2006; Spencer, 1995).

3.3 Ayurveda and Food Science.

Ayurveda provided a scientific model and integrated food and foodways of Indian culture into the scientific, cultural and humanist context of medicine through the interconnection of diet and health, mind/body and well-being. Philosophical traditions also include the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita, which teach that food is medicine. Human body operates according to the principle of the harmony of three doshas Vata, Pitta, and Kapha according to the philosophy of Ayurveda and foods are supposed to assist in the life of these beings (Sharma, 1994; Wujastyk, 2003). Ayurvedic literature placed foods into categories based on their physiological and psychological importance according to their physical and psychological effects. Foods which are called sattvic, such as fruits, grains, milk and fresh vegetables, were believed to be smooth and pure and were described as sattvic and were used for their clarity and calmness.

Spicy, salty, or stimulating foods, such as spicy and salt food or anything that would induce some other type of feeling of exultation or action or stimulation, were all thought to promote rajasic energy. Tamasic foods, being stale, heavy, or intoxicating substances, were linked with dullness and lethargy. There were religious and social interpretations of health behavior as a result of this classification (Lad, 2002; Sharma, 1994). There are other details introduced also

by the texts, such as digestion, seasonal eating, food combinations, cooking techniques and the medicinal use of herbs and spices. Turmeric, ginger, cumin, coriander and black pepper were also recommended not just for flavor but for their therapeutic benefits. In this manner, Indian food created a unique alliance between food (taste) and scientific health (Achaya, 1998; Wujastyk, 2003). These principles influenced Ayurveda, and are still very powerful in modern India. Many homes still adhere to seasonal diets, detoxes, fasts and spices for digestion and immunity. Worldwide, modern wellness industries have resurrected Ayurvedic dietary principles. Thus, the literature shows that Ayurveda gave Indian cuisine a positive and lasting health-oriented identity (Lad, 2002; Sen, 2004).

3.4 Imperial Influence.

Imperial dynasties came across and significant culinary shifts to India happened, especially the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. They are all old world cultural elements that have been combined into the new order and are now considered as historical and modern traditions. Master chefs in Royal courts cooked an elaborately sophisticated, aristocratic cuisine, merging local ingredients with foreign techniques (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2004; Achaya, 1998). Artefact of the Mughal period included the production of aromatic rice dishes. Fragrant rice, saffron, nuts, dried fruits, and carefully spiced meats or vegetables were served in these dishes. Commodity gravies, for instance, korma, qaliya and shahi curries, were also served which were prepared thickened with yogurt, cream, almond paste or cashew (Pant, 2010; Sen, 2004).

The Mughals established sophisticated methods of cooking such as Dum Pukht, whereby food is cooked in sealed pots with low heat and cooked slowly. It retained aroma and flavour by this method, but achieved a complex texture. Kebabs, naan, roomali roti and tandoori variations also entered the stage during this period especially in North India where the kebab, naan and roomali roti developed (Collingham 2006; Pant 2010). Indeed, rather than replacing indigenous food traditions, the imperial impact did not usurp indigenous ones. Gradually this merging of Mughlai cuisine and regional sensibilities brought about Awadhi, Hyderabad, Punjabi and Kashmiri food styles, in its own right. Thus, academic studies have shown that the imperial patronage significantly enriched Indian cuisine, through luxury ingredients, refined techniques, and the fusion of artisanship and cuisine, with refined methods (Sen 2004; Achaya 1998).

3.5 Trade and Exchange of Ingredients.

International trade was a major factor in the modification of Indian cuisine--particularly after maritime contact with European powers. Post-sixteenth-century Portuguese workers entering India brought with them some crops from the Americas that changed Indian cuisine forever. Most important were chilli peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, cashews, papaya, pineapple and some beans (Collingham, 2006; Achaya, 1998). Before chilli entered the scene, Indian cuisines depended largely on black pepper, long pepper, ginger and mustard for pungency. Chilli, which was easier to grow, cheaper and more heat-provoking, caught on quickly. Within a relatively short period, it spread to the regional cuisines, emerging as a staple in curries, pickles, chutneys, and spice blends (Sen, 2004; Achaya, 1998).

Potatoes and tomatoes were also effortlessly entwined in Indian cooking. Potatoes were also woven into northern and eastern cuisine, such as aloo sabzi, samosa fillings and curries. Tomatoes added a new modicum of acidity and body to gravies, especially in North Indian

cuisine. Cashews became popular for sweets and complex sauces (Mintz, 1985; Collingham, 2006). This reflects the extraordinary versatility of Indian cuisine. Instead of pushing back against strangers' foods, Indian cooks embraced them and worked out new regional identities in already-developed culinary models. The Indian food history is a tale of inter-cultural exchange, innovation, and cultural openness throughout trade networks (Achaya, 1998; Sen, 2004), as evident from the above literature.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative historical research design** based on content analysis.

Sources of Data:

- Archaeological findings
- Historical texts
- Religious scriptures
- Culinary manuscripts
- Academic journals
- Secondary literature

Method:

1. Chronological division of historical periods
2. Classification of evidence into agriculture, cooking methods, beliefs, and trade
3. Comparative analysis across eras
4. Identification of continuity and transformation in food systems

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Prehistoric and Indus Valley Civilisation (3300–1900 BCE)

The earliest organized food culture in India emerged during the Indus Valley period.

Main Foods:

- Wheat
- Barley
- Lentils
- Chickpeas
- Sesame
- Rice (later stage)
- Dates, melons, mangoes

Animal Foods:

- Fish
- Goat
- Sheep
- Buffalo
- Pig

Cooking Methods:

- Roasting over fire
- Boiling in clay pots
- Tandoor-style baking
- Grinding grains into flour





These findings show a highly organized and nutritionally balanced food culture.

5.2 Vedic Period (1500–500 BCE)

Food became closely linked with rituals and society.

Key Features:

- Communal dining (*Pankti*)
- Offerings of grain, milk, and ghee to fire deity Agni
- Consumption of barley and wheat
- Use of curd, milk, butter, and ghee
- Meat in ritual contexts
- Use of black pepper, turmeric, and ginger

5.3 Mahajanapada and Mauryan Period (600–185 BCE)

This era marked the transition from ritual sacrifice to ethical food systems.

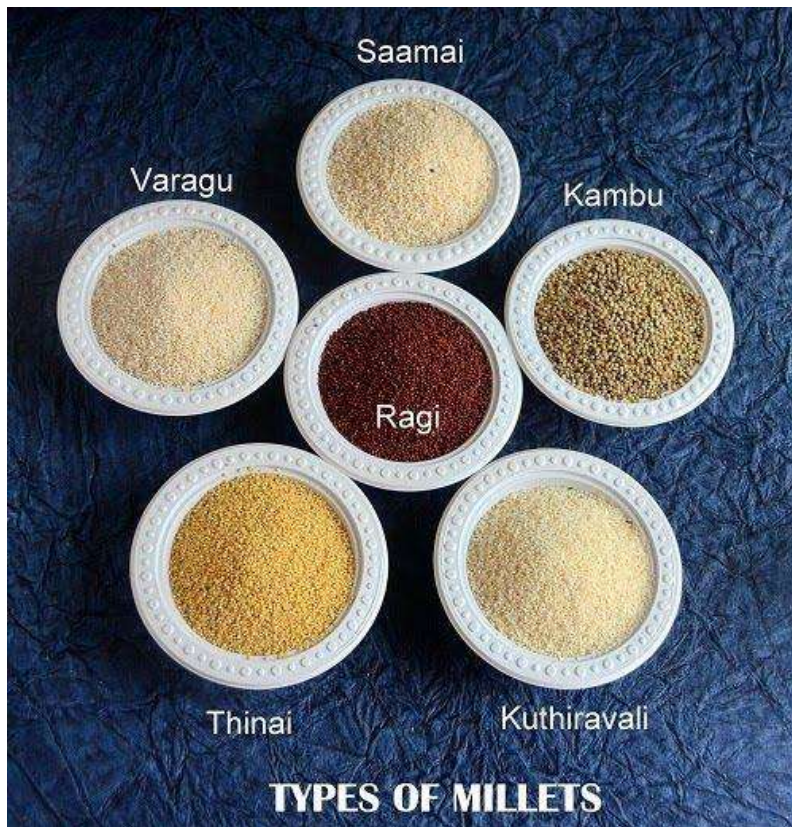
Major Changes:

- Spread of vegetarianism
- Regulation of slaughterhouses
- Rise of rice as staple grain
- Growth of dal culture (mung, urad, masoor)
- Pickles, sweets, jaggery, fermented beverages
- Inns and state kitchens

5.4 Sangam Period (300 BCE – 300 CE)

South India developed a unique ecological food culture based on **Tinai Theory**.

Landscape	Foods
Mountains	Honey, jackfruit, roots
Forest	Millets, milk
Plains	Rice, sugarcane, fish
Coast	Fish, salt
Drylands	Wild foods





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5.5 Gupta Period (320–550 CE)

This period formalized Indian food philosophy.

Ayurvedic Classification

Type	Meaning	Examples
Sattvic	Pure, calming	Fruits, milk, grains
Rajasic	Stimulating	Spicy, salty foods
Tamasic	Heavy, dulling	Meat, alcohol

Temple food systems and sweets such as *kheer* and *modak* became widespread.

5.6 Early Medieval Period (600–1200 CE)

Regional cuisines became strongly defined.

South India:

- Idli
- Dosa

- Tamarind rice
- Coconut curries

Bengal:

- Rice and fish
- Mustard oil

Maharashtra:

- Millets
- Puran Poli
- Chickpea dishes

Temple Kitchens:

Jagannath Puri developed one of the largest ritual kitchens in the world.

5.7 Mughal and Global Exchange

Mughal Contributions:

- Biryani
- Korma
- Kebabs
- Dum Pukht cooking

Portuguese Contributions:

- Chilli
- Potato
- Tomato
- Cashew





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6. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Indian cuisine evolved through both resilience and adaptation.

6.1 Continuity

Ancient staples such as rice, wheat, pulses, dairy, and spices remain central today. Cooking methods like roasting, tandoor baking, grinding, fermentation, and tempering continue in domestic kitchens.

6.2 Ethical and Philosophical Influence

Few cuisines in the world are so deeply shaped by spiritual philosophy. Vegetarianism in India arose not from scarcity but from moral and philosophical systems.

6.3 Regional Diversity

India's geography led to local specialisation: rice in humid regions, millets in dry zones, fish on coasts, dairy in pastoral zones.

6.4 Adaptability

Indian cuisine readily absorbed foreign ingredients and transformed them into indigenous dishes. Chilli, once foreign, is now inseparable from Indian cooking.

7. CONCLUSION

Indian food is among the oldest food systems currently around, as well as one of the oldest ever continuously evolving culinary traditions in world history. Indian food culture, from the grain stores and clay ovens of the Indus Valley Civilisation to the philosophical dietary systems of Ayurveda, to temple kitchens and royal Mughal courts, embodies an amazing mix of continuity and creativity. Contrary to many culinary traditions evolved spontaneously after an immediate break, Indian food took its shape in years of evolution with the absorption of new influences without ever losing its root. This thread of continuity is why ancient practices have retained their form and appearance in contemporary Indian households and commercial kitchens.

Its evolution was a combination of four big forces: ancient agricultural foundations, religious and philosophical ethics, imperial sophistication, and global trade with ingredient exchange. The first agrarian societies developed grain systems based on wheat, barley, rice, lentils, and millets. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and other religious traditions associated food with morality, purity, compassion, and health. It was when Imperial administrations -- particularly the Mughal period -- expanded upon Indian cuisine in respect of elegance, luxury ingredients and sophisticated cooking techniques. Subsequent global contact brought crop varieties like chilli, potato, tomato, cashew that were harmoniously absorbed in local cuisines.

Despite this historical momentum, the most crucial techniques are astonishingly unchanged over time. Such methods as tadka (spice tempering), fermentation, slow cooking, staple grains, use of medicinal herbs and fine spice balancing still reflect Indian popular culture. Whether in a farmhouse cooking millet bhakri, a South Indian kitchen fermenting dosa batter or a modern restaurant serving fusion biryani, these techniques highlight our ancestors' tradition of living the way of knowledge and knowledge systems.

This paradoxical combination between legacy and modernity is one of the best components of Indian cuisine. Indian food has reached new stage as a result of the influence of different components such as globalization, the health, environment and digital food culture along with others. Millets — traditional Indian grains that were once considered staple foods — are now being rediscovered as “superfoods” due to their nutritional and climate-resilient properties. Ayurvedic concepts are finding renewed strength in health and wellness movement with such themes as immunity, digestion, natural materials, natural products, and balanced eating. The plant-based culture, which has been a part of Indian vegetarian culture, and thus is increasingly fitting modern sensibilities with an emphasis on environment and ethics, is more than ever relevant. And so, many global eating trends are not, in part, new to India in themselves; it is part of the contemporary reappraisal of the ancient Indian ways.

Technology is transforming the way Indian cuisine is eaten and moved around the world. Delivery and cloud kitchens, cuisines and food travel services, social media foodencers and online recipe archives have spread Indian regional foods across the globe. Dishes that once were only popular locally are now known globally. By contrast, chefs and entrepreneurs seem to be dabbling to see where they might find the modern twists go over new cuisines -- millet pizzas, vegan butter chicken, probiotic kanji drinks, molecular pani puri or street food that is made with gourmet flavour. Such advances illustrate that Indian cuisine does not remain so static.

Another trend recently developing is the rising trend of sustainable gastronomy. Traditional Indian cooking has historically relied on seasonal food, local production, low-waste methods, fermentation, sun-drying and plant-forward nutrition. These tenets are very much in line with current environmental sustainability goals such as reducing food waste, saving carbon pollution and restoring biodiversity. Thus the revival of forgotten local crops (with indigenous vegetables and heirloom recipes), can contribute to future food production and cultural preservation too. At the same time, there are challenges.

Food diversity could also be endangered by rapid urbanization, the increased consumption of processed food, the commodification of taste and standardization of food, and the decline of more traditional home cooking. Until they have been recorded, taught and commercially supported, many indigenous recipes and community food practices are in danger of dying out. That is why to conserve Indian food we need to know how to be modern, but also to conserve its intangible culture. So Indian food is not just old, it's timeless, dynamic and future proof. "Its history shows nutritional concepts, sustainability and diversity that can contribute to global collaboration, while its present offers a product that brings innovation and global significance," she said. With the global interest in health, plant-based nutrition, local resources, and traditional cuisine on the rise, Indian food is here to make a mark on global food culture.

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