
INCLUSIVITY OF BABURID TRADITION: ADAPTATION OF INDIGENOUS FOOD PRACTICES



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INTRODUCTION

Pleasures may be divided into six classes, to wit, food, drink, clothes, sex, scent and sound. Of these, the noblest and most consequential is food; for food is the body's stay, and the means of preserving life. It is not prohibited to take delight in food, or to occupy oneself and specialize in it.¹

The above quote is from an early cookbook from Baghdad, which again draws its inspiration from the Holy Quran and proclaimed food as the 'the noblest and most consequential' among the six pleasures. Islamic theology thus acknowledges food as a primary pleasurable delight of life. This was in sharp contrast to traditional Hindu dogma which demanded austerity and abstinence from all kinds of pleasure, food being one of the very basic forms of it. Although variety of food, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian were in practice in the traditional Hindu society, however the satisfaction attached to food was considered rather too materialistic. Consumption in Hindu dogma was necessary merely for sustenance and never was an enjoyable fare. The gratification ensued as a consequence of eating good food was indeed a Mughal import. In fact, the non-vegetarian Indian food, as we know today had its precursor in Mughal cuisine. The stereotypical image of the Mughal cuisine, popularly known till date are about the variety of non-vegetarian/ meat preparations.

However, the following quote from the 16th Century *Ain-I- Akbari* echoed the belief in the efficacy of the Indic system of dietary pattern, which heavily lent towards vegetarianism and had influenced the dietary preference of the emperor Akbar.

His majesty cares very little for meat, and often expresses himself to that effect. It is indeed from ignorance and cruelty that, although various kinds of food are obtainable, men are bent upon injuring living creatures, and lending a ready hand in killing and eating them; none seems to have an eye for the beauty inherent in the prevention of cruelty, but makes himself a tomb of animals. If his majesty had not the burden of the world on his shoulders, he would at once totally abstain from meat; and now it is his intention to quit by degrees, conforming, however, a little to the spirit of the age. ⁱⁱ

The benefits of the Hindu diet, consisting mainly of vegetables, was thus being advocated by the Mughals. This essay hence focuses on the adaptability of the Indic vegetarianism by the so-called alien invaders of South Asia. Here it is argued that the Mughals advocated the harmonious adaptability of the Mughal cuisine with varied transcultural and transnational practices and upheld the message of syncretism.

Appropriation of the essence of the concept of *Ahimsa* by the Mughals

Emperor Akbar was profoundly influenced by the doctrine of *Ahimsa*, and issued numerous *farmans* or royal orders, forbidding the killing of animals and fish and discouraging meat-eating for up to six months in the ear.ⁱⁱⁱ *Ahimsa* emerged as a spiritual doctrine of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, which literally means non-injury and non-violence towards not only any kind of living creatures but as well as in words, thoughts and actions. Although, *Ahimsa* as an ethical concept traced its lineage to the sacred Vedas. However, the evolution of the concept of *Ahimsa* as a non-injury to animals developed in the later Vedic phase, particularly as settled agriculture came into force, instead of pastoralism. *Ahimsa* later became the central concept in the *Upanishads*. As pointed out by D. N. Jha in his *The Myth of the Holy Cow*,

The Upanisadic texts went so far as to question the efficacy of animal sacrifice and gave primacy to asceticism as means of achieving self-realization read new meanings in the sacrifice, and propounded the notion of *ahimsa*.^{iv}

The rise of Bhuddhism and Jainism from the eighth to the sixth century BCE and their stringent advocacy of *Ahimsa* further popularized the doctrine of vegetarianism among the masses. Akbar thus to respect the traditions of his majoritarian subjects tried to curb the indiscriminate slaughter of animals. This in a

sense was unprecedented in Indian history and he could be compared with the Mauryan King Ashoka, who also issued rock edicts banning the slaughter of animals. Ashoka, of course was bound by his Buddhist religious obligations to issue such order. Akbar, himself a devout Muslim, however was not under any such pressure to maintain such restrictions. Akbar, tried to maintain harmonious co-existence within his empire which was composed of various ethnicities and diverse religious affiliations. He even tried to restrict eating beef at his court and avoided other foods that would offend Hindus and Jains.^v He was rather inquisitive and wanted to know about other religions and often assembled scholars belonging to different religions including Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and even Jesuit scholars and engaged in serious spiritual interactions. He even tried to introduce a new faith, *Deen-i-Ilahi*, which combined the elements of different religions. He himself tried to practice what he preached and as mentioned by Abul Fazl, Akbar abstained completely from meat on Fridays and on his birthday on Sundays.^{vi} He fasted regularly and frequently and ate only once in the day.

In the course of twenty-four hours his majesty eats but once, and leaves off before he is fully satisfied; neither is there any fixed time for his meal. But the servants have always things so far ready, that in the space of an hour, after the order has been given, a hundred dishes are served up.^{vii}

Delectable Vegetarian Recipes from the Royal Kitchen

Abul Fazl chronicled the functioning of the imperial kitchen and classified three types of dishes. The first dish known as *Sufiyana* was comprised only of vegetarian delicacies. These included *Zard birinj* (Zarda/sweet rice), *khushka* rice, plain rice, *pahit* or lentils cooked with ghee, ginger, cumin seeds and asafoetida, mostly eaten with *khushka* rice.^{viii} While Sag cooked from spinach and other green leaves, fennel seeds, ghee, onions, ginger, pepper, cardamoms and cloves, was described by Abul Fazl as, ‘is one of the most pleasant dishes.’^{ix} There were also references of various kinds of sweets including several types of *halwa*. Halwa again was imported by the Mughals to India which reflect the diverse culinary influences adopted by the Mughals in Indian context.

Khichri was one of the major dishes of *Sufiyana*. In fact, *khichdi* a quintessential Indian vegetarian dish, became the favourite of the Mughal rulers. So much so Jahangir (1605-1627) the son and successor of Akbar, absolutely adored it. He particularly favoured the ‘bajra khichdi’ which he had encountered in western India. He recorded,

Of the food that is particular to the people of Gujarat, there is the bajra khichri, a mixture of split peas and millet boiled together. It is a kind of split grain which does not grow in any other country but Hindustan. It is cheaper than most vegetables. As I had never eaten it, I ordered them to make some and bring it to me. It is not devoid of flavour, and it suited me well. I ordered that on days of abstinence, when I partake of dishes not made of flesh, they should frequently bring me this khichri.^x

In fact as Francois Bernier, the French traveller and physician recorded *Khichdi* was the primary item of food of the masses during Jahangir's grandson Aurangzeb's reign.^{xi} The Mughals hence embraced the indigenous practices and customs including local delicacies. Jahangir, adopted many of his father's rituals. A treatise written by the Jesuit missionary Jeronimo Xavier, recorded that Jahangir, like his father used to begin his day with worshipping the sun.^{xii} He also imbibed the taste of vegetarianism from his father and it is said that he indulged only in vegetarian food for nine months of the year. He out of his reverence for his father, continued the custom of observing *ahimsa* on Sundays, the birthday of his father and on Thursdays to commemorate his accession to the throne. Even Aurangzeb (1658-1707) known for his religious orthodoxy and narrow outlook, chose to live an austere and puritanical life. He rarely consumed meat and mainly restricted himself to a vegetarian fare. He like his ancestors before him, had a passion for fruits, he particularly loved mangoes. Aurangzeb granted his father, Shah Jahan (1628-1658) to eat his favourite dish every day when he imprisoned him at Agra fort. Shah Jahan on the advice of the prison cook instead of any elaborate ingredient, chose chick pea so that he could eat a different dish out of it every day.^{xiii}

Acculturation of indigenous Food Practices

The adoption of Vegetarian fare was a conscious policy endorsed by the Mughals particularly from Akbar onwards, so as to strengthen the edifice of Mughal rule in India. The founder of the Mughal Empire Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1483-1530), in his brief stay in Hindustan never could accustom himself with the climate or food of Hindustan. Babur who hailed from Central Asia and grew up in Ferghana Valley, now shared between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, earned for the fruits and dried nuts from his homeland. His memoir *Baburnama* is full of description of the land and its opulent fruits. Babur lovingly recalled,

Grapes, melons, apples and pomegranates, all fruits indeed, are good in Samarkand; two are famous, its apple and its *sahibi* (grape).^{xiv}

Whenever Babur described any town of his homeland, he invariably mentioned its lush produce. Babur, for example while describing Bukhara cited the following,

Bukhara... it is a fine town; its fruits are many and good, its melons excellent; none matching them for quality and quantity... The Bukhara plum is famous; no other equals it. They skin it, dry it and carry it from land to land with rarities; ... Fowls and geese are much looked after in Bukhara. Bukhara wine is the strongest made... it was what I drank when drinking in those countries at Samarkand.^{xv}

Babur longed for his homeland, particularly its food. Although he made several attempts to regain Samarkand, he failed to control it permanently so, tried to recreate a part of his homeland by importing seeds and gardeners and built gardens whenever he could. So that he could at least savor the taste of Central Asian melons, peaches, apricots, pistachios, walnuts and almonds in his Indian sojourn. These ingredients played a significant part in creating a unique Mughal gastronomic culture. Babur thereby was a harbinger of the modern-day Mughlai cuisine, which his descendants adapted and crafted an enduring cuisine which redefined the cooking culture of the sub-continent. Many of these ingredients are still widely used in many Indian dishes including non-vegetarian dishes.

The ethos of Indian culture naturally entails syncretism as it came under diverse confluences from varied contact zones since its ancient past. In this context, India's culinary culture could also lay veritable claim to influence transcultural socialising and adaptability. Despite the mainstream understanding of the meat loving Mughals, there were instances where animal free diet was advocated and freely consumed. In fact, it is said that Humayan (1508-1556), the son and successor of Babur abstained from meat for several months while he laid siege to regain his throne of the sub-continent.^{xvi} Whether this act was undertaken out of reverence towards his majority Hindu subjects or was it observed just for his health in order to sustain the long and arduous campaigns remains debatable. However, it could not be denied that since Akbar, the Mughals tried to be more tolerant towards the indigenous gastronomic values for political reasons. Akbar, for instance abolished *Jiziya*, a discriminatory tax which the non-Muslims had to pay. He even encouraged translation of Hindu texts, including *Mahabharata* and various *Puranas* and *Upanishadas*. He appointed Hindus including Rajputs to diverse important administrative posts and established matrimonial relations with Hindu Rajput Kings. These measures were directed to include his majoritarian subjects within the umbrella of Mughal rule; it gave a message of syncretic inclusiveness from the Mughal emperors. In fact, his son Jahangir and grandson, Shah Jahan shared a Hindu lineage through their mothers. The Mughal culinary culture hence encompassed vegetarian diet within its ambit thereby enriching the already prosperous consumption culture of

the Baburid/Mughal legacy. So, India’s gastronomic journey can lay claim to be constituted by transcultural socialising and migration where the Baburid heritage left a lasting impact.

Conclusion

The Mughal royal house thus not only endorsed vegetarianism, they themselves practised it too. It also portrayed the disposition of the Mughals towards their conquered subjects. It was not all about and imposition of the Mughal cultural practices by suppressing the indigenous cultural traits, as mainstream understanding tends to represent. There was definite acculturation and adaptability of local customs and practices in everyday consumption habits of the Mughals. The adaptation of vegetarian dishes hence provided an alternative insight into the common understanding of the meat loving Mughals.

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