Exploring Indian Culture through Food

By Tulasi Srinivas

Food and Identity

Food (Sanskrit—bhojana, “that which is to be enjoyed,” Hindi—khana, Tamil—shapad) presents a way to understand everyday Indian culture as well as the complexities of identity and interaction with other parts of the world that are both veiled and visible. In India today, with a growing economy due to liberalization and more consumption than ever in middle class life, food as something to be enjoyed and as part of Indian culture is a popular topic. From a 1960s food economy verging on famine, India is now a society where food appears plentiful, and the aesthetic possibilities are staggering. Cooking shows that demonstrate culinary skills on television, often with celebrity chefs or unknown local housewives who may have won a competition, dominate daytime ratings. Local indigenous specialties and ways of cooking are the subjects of domestic and international tourism brochures. Metropolitan restaurants featuring international cuisines are filled with customers. Packaged Indian and foreign foods sell briskly in supermarkets, and indigenous street food and hole-in-the-wall cafés have never been as popular. Yet lifestyle magazines tout healthy food, nutritious diets, locally sourced ingredients, and sustainable and green alternatives. India’s understanding of its own cultures and its complex historical and contemporary relations with foreign cultures are deeply evident in public conceptualizations of food as well as in culinary and gastronomic choices and lifestyles.

As Harvard anthropologist Theodore Bestor reminds us, the culinary imagination is a way a culture conceptualizes and imagines food. Generally, there is no “Indian” food but rather an enormous number of local, regional, caste-based ingredients and methods of preparation. These varieties of foods and their preparation have only been classified as “regional” and “local” cuisines since Indian independence in 1947 yet have enjoyed domestic and foreign patronage throughout most of India’s history. Because of this diversity and its celebration, most Indians appreciate a wide array of flavors and textures and are traditionally discerning consumers who eat seasonally, locally, and, to a large extent, sustainably. However, despite some resistance in recent years, the entry of multinational food corporations and their mimicking by Indian food giants, the industrialization of agriculture, the ubiquity of standardized food crops, and the standardization of food and tastes in urban areas have stimulated a flattening of the food terrain.

In the recurring identity crises that globalization seems to encourage, one would expect that food would play a significant part in dialogues about nationalism and Indian identities. But food in India has been virtually absent from the academic discourse because of the diversity and spread of the gastronomic landscape. Things are different on the Internet. In response to the forces of globalization and Indian food blogs both teaching cookery and commenting on food, are mushrooming in cyberspace.

India has several thousand castes and tribes, sixteen official languages and several hundred dialects, six major world religions, and many ethnic and linguistic groups. Food in India is an identity marker of caste, class, family, kinship, tribe affiliation, lineage, ethnicity, and increasingly, of secular group identification.

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As the eminent pioneering anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss noted, there is a sharp distinction between cooked and uncooked foods, with cooked or processed food capable of being contaminated with pollution easier than uncooked food. For upper-caste Hindus, raw rice is deemed pure even if served by a lower-caste person, but cooked rice can carry pollution when coming in contact with anything polluting, including low-caste servers. Religion also plays a part in dietetic rules; Muslims in India may eat beef, mutton, and poultry but not pork or shellfish; Christians may eat all meats and poultry; and Parsis eat more poultry and lamb than other meats. However, as many scholars have noted, because of the dominance of Hinduism in India and the striving of many lower-caste people for social mobility through imitation of higher-caste propensities, vegetarianism has evolved as the default diet in the subcontinent. Most meals would be considered complete without meat protein.

History and the Culinary Imagination

India sought to define itself gastronomically in the face of colonization beginning in the twelfth century. First, Central Asian invaders formed several dynasties known as the Sultanates from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Then, the great Mughal dynasty ruled from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The British came to trade as the East India Company, stayed as the Crown from the eighteenth century until 1847, and then had their heyday as the British Raj from 1857 to 1947. The Mughals brought new foods to the subcontinent from Central Asia, including dried fruits, pilafs, leavened wheat breads, stuffed meat, poultry, and fruits. The Mughals also brought new cooking processes such as baking bread and cooking meat on skews in the tandoor (a clay oven), braising meats and poultry, tenderizing meats and game using yogurt protein, and making native cheese. They borrowed indigenous ingredients such as spices (cardamom, pepper, and clove) and vegetables (eggplant from India and carrots from Afghanistan) to cook their foods, creating a unique Mughlai haute courtly cuisine.

From princely kitchens, the cuisine has made its way over the centuries to restaurants in major cities. In Delhi, the capital of Mughal India, as food writer Chitrita Banerji informs us, the Moti Mahal Restaurant claims to have invented the tandoori chicken. In neighborhood Punjabi and Mughlai restaurants in metropolitan centers, the menu usually consists of dishes of meat and poultry that are heavily marinated with spices, then grilled and braised in thick tomato or cream-based sauces and served with indigenous leavened breads such as naan and rice dishes with vegetables and meats such as pav and biryani. These foods, in popular, mass-customized versions, are the staples of the dhabhas (highway eateries) all over India.

The British and other Western powers—including most importantly Portugal—came to India in search of spices to preserve meats, but the age of empire the officers of the Indian army and British-Indian club menus. “Military hotels”—from the Tamil most meals would be considered complete without meat protein.

The Indian Meal

The Indian meal is a complex and little-understood phenomenon. “Typical” meals often include a main starch such as rice, sorghum, or wheat; vegetable or meat curries that are dry roasted or shallow wok fried; cured and dried vegetable dishes in sauces; and thick lentil soups, with different ingredients. Condiments might include masalas (a dry or wet powder of fine ground spices and herbs) plain yogurt, or a vegetable raita (yogurt dip, also called pachchadi in south India), salted pickles, fresh herbal and cooked chutneys, dried and fried wafers and salted papadums (fried lentil crisps), and occasionally dessert (called “sweetmeats”). Indian meals can have huge variations across the subcontinent, and any of these components in different orders and with different ingredients might constitute an Indian meal.

When a multi-dish meal is served on a large platter in north India, the serving utensil is usually made of silver for purity. A banana leaf might be
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The main platter for a south Indian festival. In either case, there are various small bowls for each dish. This kind of meal is called a thali and is named for the platter on which it is served. The meal is eaten first with a sweet, followed by all the dishes served simultaneously and mixed together with the rice, based on the eater’s discretion. The meal ends with yogurt, which is thought to cool the body, and then followed by sweets and/or fruit. Festival meals usually end with a digestive in the form of a paan (betel leaf and nut folded together), which again has regional variations of style and taste.

Rice is a powerful symbol of both hunger and want as well as fulfillment and fertility. Until the late nineteenth century, however, only the wealthy ate rice, and most Indians consumed millet and sorghum. Nevertheless, the powerful symbolism of rice as a sign of fertility for many castes makes it part of marriage rites. Welcoming a new bride to the family home includes having her kick over a measure of rice to indicate that she brings prosperity to the household. A traditional test of a worthy daughter-in-law is her ability to “wash” the rice properly and to gauge the right amount of water it draws while cooking. Rice is still a symbol of wealth, and those families who have access to “wetland” where rice paddies grow are still thought to be wealthy and well endowed. Long grain scented basmati rice is India’s most popular variety and is valued in foreign markets as well. Efforts of the Indian government to protect Indian basmati rice failed, and now two types of American basmati exist, a situation many Indians consider shameful.

Gastronomic Calendars, Rituals, and Seasonality

In India as elsewhere, food culture is shaped by climate, land, and access to natural resources. The food system emphasizes eating agricultural and natural produce “in season,” such as mangoes and local greens during the summer, pumpkins during the rainy monsoon months, and root vegetables during the winter months. This emphasis is based upon a belief that in-season foods are more potent, tastier, and of greater nutritional value, although the yearround availability of many foods due to technology are beginning to change eating habits.

Cooks who are native to India are aware of culinary cycles and of multi-dish recipes using fruits and vegetables of the season, some deemed “favorites” within caste groups and families. For example, prior to the ripened mango harvest of May and June, tiny unripe mangoes are harvested and pickled in brine. The ripe mango and the pickled mango are the same species but are clearly different culinary tropes with different characteristics that are sometimes attributed with fortifying, healing, auspicious, and celebratory values, based on taste, color, and combination. Connoisseurs are aware of desirable foods in local areas and sometimes travel great distances to acquire the first or best product of the season. Seasonality and regionality are also part of wedding celebrations, funerary rites, and domestic feasts. The winter peasant menu of the Punjab sarson ka saag, a stew of spicy mustard greens believed to “heat” the body, and makki ki roti (griddled corn flatbreads), are imported to haute tables in Delhi restaurants as “rustic” fare.

Religious festivals also align with culinary cycles, festivals, or sacred periods of the year that are often associated with offerings to the gods and feasting on certain foods. The south Indian Harvest festival of Pongal in February is accompanied by a feast of harvested rice cooked with lentils in three different dishes, shakkarai pongal (Tamil-sweet), ven pongal (Tamil-savory), and akkara vadashal (Tamil-milk), accompanied by a stew of nine different winter vegetables and beans, offered first to tutelary deities and then consumed as consecrated food. Temples, especially those dedicated to the Hindu God Vishnu, have a long history of developed culinary traditions and food-offering aesthetics. The Krishna Temple in the south Indian temple town of Udupi is known throughout India for the distribution of free seasonal meals to thousands of devotees. Other temples are known for offerings of certain sweets or savories of that region or enormous and detailed menus of offerings from the land.

The Globalization of Indian Food

Although it has never had a standardized diet, India has traditionally “imagined” its cuisine with respect to the incorporation and domestication of “foreign” influences. In the past two decades, with India becoming an economic powerhouse, a variety of multinational fast food companies have entered the previously protected Indian culinary landscape. They include Pizza Hut, McDonald’s, KFC, PepsiCo, and, most recently, Taco Bell. These companies have had to “Indianize” and self-domesticate to conquer the notoriously difficult-to-please Indian palate. Today, urban fast food chains in India have become common and are transforming the middle class diet.

At the same time, local food purveyors have taken complex regional recipes and modified them for ease of industrial production, leading to a packaged food boom in India. The Indian food market of $182 billion is believed to be growing at a rapid clip of 13 percent. Indian precooked packaged foods empires such as MTR, SWAD, Haldirams, and Patalks have gone global, available wherever Indians now live, leading a quiet yet unrecognized revolution in eating habits. Formerly, the focus was upon rural, natural, fresh, and prepared on-site food. Now, there is a shift in emphasis to industrialized, processed food. These developments are partially reengineering local and caste-based specialties for mass production, distribution, and consumption, changing past notions of what is traditional or valued.

Another aspect of globalization is the phenomenon of branding an Indian cuisine, largely the product of curry houses in the United Kingdom. Curry itself is not a dish but a category, comprising both dry and gravy vegetable dishes spiced variously with specific masalas (spice and herb mixtures) and is said to derive its name from the usage of the south Indian “curry leaf,” a citrus leaf used as a flavoring agent. Indian food, as it is billed outside India, is the reimagined second-tier fare of north Indian eateries, a blend of Punjabi and Mughlai cuisine modified to suit the local taste. In the US, Indian restaurant menus mostly tend to be the same, and the diversity of the nation’s cuisine is greatly underrepresented. As Lizzie Collingham’s evocative history of curry has shown, the spread of Indian eateries in the United Kingdom has been viewed by some commentators as a political response by the Indian diaspora to centuries of colonization and the incorporation of British food in India. Whatever the larger motivations and readings, it is clear that the spread of South Asian restaurants and curry houses in the UK has brought with it welcome changes in the British diet.

Some scholars have suggested that Indian food is filtered through Great Britain to the world, though diasporic Indian groups have also contributed. North American eaters serve curries and rice, tandoori chicken, naan, and chicken tikka masala (said to be invented in Glasgow), while the Japanese make karai and rice, demonstrating the attractiveness of “exotic” India’s cultural power and reach.

The cultures of contemporary Indian cuisine, including the politics, food processes, production, and consumption, are simultaneously changing and exhilarating. Further innovation and increased attention to Indian cuisine will almost certainly occur and promises to be an exciting area of innovation and critical research in the future.
**TULASI SRINIVAS** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Emerson College, Boston. Her research focuses on the cultural politics of identity and the complex links to the processes of globalization and knowledge construction in and of South Asia. She is the author of *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement* (Columbia University Press, 2010) and with Krishnendu Ray, *Curried Cultures: Globalization, Food, South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Her research has been supported by national and international grant-giving bodies including the Pew Foundation for Religious Research, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**NOTES**


**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 3/4 cups plain yogurt
- 1/2 lemon, seeded for juice
- 2 onions, finely chopped
- 4 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons peeled and grated fresh ginger root
- 2 teaspoons garam masala
- 1 tablespoon fenugreek leaves (difficult to find in the US)
- 1 teaspoon each of salt, pepper, ground cumin, coriander, turmeric, and cayenne pepper (or chili powder)
- 1 teaspoon red food coloring (optional, for color)
- 4 to 5 pound chicken
- 1/4 cup yogurt
- 1 chopped small green chili (less for milder taste)
- 1 bunch of cilantro
- 1/2 lemon, seeded for juice
- 1 4 to 5 pound chicken
- 2 teaspoons garam masala
- 1 chopped small green chili (less for milder taste)
- 1 bunch of cilantro

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Make deep cuts into the meaty parts of the chicken.
2. Combine the marinade ingredients.
3. Rub the marinade into the cuts, under/over the skin, and inside of the chicken cavity. (*Note: If you like a spicier chicken, mix 1 teaspoon of chili powder, salt, and lemon juice together and rub this into the cuts prior to applying the marinade.*)
4. Cover the chicken and let rest in the refrigerator for 24 hours.
5. Next day: Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
6. Place chopped onions and garlic in bottom of a baking pan, sprinkle with lemon juice and vegetable oil.
7. Put sliced lemons inside the chicken cavity, and pour a couple tablespoons of vegetable oil over the chicken. Place chicken on a roasting rack over the onions and garlic in the baking pan.
8. Cook in the 450 degree oven for 20 minutes.
9. Reduce heat to 350 degrees, baste chicken with pan drippings every 30 minutes or so until chicken is done—about 75 minutes, or internal meat temperature of 165 to 170 degrees.
10. Garnish with cilantro and lemon slices.

**Marinade—Combine the following in a mixing bowl:**

- 1 3/4 cups plain yogurt
- 1/2 lemon, seeded for juice
- 2 onions, finely chopped
- 4 cloves of garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons peeled and grated fresh ginger root
- 2 teaspoons garam masala
- 1 tablespoon fenugreek leaves (difficult to find in the US)
- 1 teaspoon each of salt, pepper, ground cumin, coriander, turmeric, and cayenne pepper (or chili powder)
- 1 teaspoon red food coloring (optional, for color)

**For baking pan and chicken**

- 2 small to medium onions (chopped)
- 3 cloves of garlic (crushed)
- 2 lemons, 1 sliced and 1 for juice
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, 1 for pan, 2 for the chicken

**Chutney—Blend in a food processor after the chicken has baked:**

- 1 bunch of cilantro
- 1/4 cup yogurt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 chopped small green chili (less for milder taste)
- Add onions, garlic, and juice from the baking pan
- Add hot green chilies to taste (optional)

**For a video of this Tandoori Chicken recipe see Desi Home Cooking—Adventures of a Real Indian Kitchen, http://tiny.cc/1bgil.**
The plant arrived in India through a circuitous route – from South America to southern Europe, then to England and finally to India in the 16th Century courtesy of the British. Srivastava argues that restaurants and hotels have popularised red curry sauce as 'Indian' in the last 100 years. “This has now started changing the palate of people,” she said. However, the food eaten after the religious shraadha rite showcases the indigenous biodiversity of the Indian subcontinent. It's a rich medley of unripe mangoes, raw bananas, cluster and broad beans, sweet potatoes, banana stems, taro roots and a succulent called pirandai (veld grape). These ingredients are flavoured with pepper, cumin and salt, while soft yellow mung dal provides much of the protein.