

# Exploring Indian Culture through Food

By Tulasi Srinivas

## Food and Identity

**F**ood (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



Indian television super chef Sanjeev Kapoor. Source: <http://tiny.cc/7uvxy>.

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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, religiosity, ethnicity, and increasingly, of secular group identification. How one eats, what one eats, with whom, when, and why, is key to understanding the Indian social landscape as well as the relationships, emotions, statuses, and transactions of people within it.

The aesthetic ways of knowing food—of being a gourmand and deriving pleasure from it—as well as ascetic responses to it—are lauded in ancient scriptural texts such as the *Kamasutra* and the *Dharmaśāstras*. But historically in India, food consumption has also paradoxically been governed by understandings that lean toward asceticism and self-control as well. Traditional *Ayurvedic* (Hindu) and *Unani* (Muslim) medical systems have a tripartite categorization of the body on its reaction to foods. In Ayurveda, the body is classified as *kapha* (cold and phlegmy), *vaata* (mobile and flatulent), or *pitta* (hot and liverish), and food consumption is thus linked not only to overall feelings of well being and balance but to personality disorders and traits as well. Eating prescribed foods (*sattvic* foods that cool the senses versus *rajasic* foods that inflame the passions) and doing yoga and breathing exercises to balance the body, spirit, and mind are seen as very basic self-care and self-fashioning.

This appreciation and negation of gastronomic pleasure is made more complex by caste- and religion-based purity as well as pollution taboos. With some exceptions, since the early twelfth century, upper-caste Hindus, Jains, and some regional groups are largely vegetarian and espouse *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Often upper castes will not eat onions, garlic, or processed food, believing them to violate principles of purity. Some lower-caste Hindus are meat eaters, but beef is forbidden as the cow is deemed sacred, and this purity barrier encompasses the entire caste and religious system.

As the eminent pioneering anthropologist Claude Lévi-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 skewers 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 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 *pilafs* and *biryani*. These foods, in popular, mass-customized versions, are the staples of the *dhabbas* (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 dictated culinary exchanges. India received potatoes, tomatoes, and chilies from the New World, and all became an integral part of the cuisine. The British traded spices and provided the technology and plant material and even transported labor to produce sugar in the West Indies.<sup>1</sup> Indian food historian Madhur Jaffrey states that as the British Raj set roots in the subcontinent, the English-trained Indian cooks (Hindi—*khansama*) to make a fusion food of breads, mulligatawny soup (from the Tamil *mulahathani*—pepper water) mince pies and roasts, puddings, and trifles. These dishes were later adapted to the metropolitan Indian table for the officers of the Indian army and British-Indian club menus. “Military hotels”—restaurants where meat and poultry were served primarily to troop members and often run by Parsis or Muslims—became popular as the new concept of public dining gained popularity in urban India between 1860 and 1900. The oldest known cafe from this era is Leopold’s Cafe in south Bombay (now Mumbai), where military hotel culture first took root. Other “hotels” or eateries primarily served, as they still do, vegetarian domestic cuisine in a public setting. In Bangalore, neighborhood fast food eateries called *Darshinis* serve a quick menu of popular favorites such as *idli* (steamed rice dumplings), *dosa* (rice and lentil crepes), and *puri* (fried bread), while neighborhood restaurants called *sagars*—meaning

“ocean” but denoting a type of restaurant that has many varieties drawn from a commercial restaurant chain called Sukh Sagar, or “ocean of pleasure”—serve a wide array of dishes from both north and south India, as well as Indian, Chinese, and “continental food.”

“Continental food” in contemporary India includes a combination of English breakfast dishes such as omelette and toast; bread, butter, jam; meat and potato “cutlets;” an eclectic combination of Western dishes such as pizza, pasta, and tomato soup with croutons; bastardized French cuisine of vegetable baked *au gratin* with cheese and cream sauces, liberally spiced to make them friendly to the Indian palate; caramel custard, trifle, fruit and jelly; and cream cakes for dessert. Western cuisine is no longer just British colonial cuisine with these additions but a mosaic of specific national cuisines where Italian, and more recently, Mexican foods dominate, as these cuisines easily absorb the spices needed to stimulate Indian palates. Indian-Chinese food, another ethnic variant, owes its popularity to a significant Chinese population in Calcutta, who Indianized Chinese food and, through a number of family-run restaurants, distributed it throughout India, so it is now considered “local.” Street vendors serve vernacular versions of spicy hakka noodles, spicy corn, and “gobi Manchurian,” a unique Indian-Chinese dish of fried spiced cauliflower.

Despite this diversity, there are regional differences. Some observers contend that the Punjab—the Western region of the Indo-Gangetic plain of north India—is the breadbasket of the country. The region grows vast quantities of wheat that is milled and made into leavened oven-baked breads such as *naan*; unleavened griddle-baked breads such as *chapattis*, *phulkas*, and *rumali rotis*; and stuffed griddle-fried breads such as *kulcha* and *paratha*. These breads are often eaten with vegetable or meat dishes. In the south, by contrast, rice is the staple grain. It is dehusked, steamed, and often eaten with spice-based vegetables and sometimes meat-based gravy dishes. The one cooking process that seems to be common to the subcontinent is that of “tempering,” or flash-frying, spices to add flavor to cooked food.

Contemporary India celebrates cuisine from local areas and culinary processes. The history of India, combined with its size, population, and lack of adequate transportation, left it with a heritage of finely developed local delicacies and a connoisseur population trained in appreciation of difference, seasonality, methods of preparation, taste, regionality, climate, diversity, and history though largely in an unselfconscious manner until very recently. Though many regional delicacies are appreciated nationally, such as the *methi masala* (fenugreek chutney) of Gujarat or the fine, gauze-like, sweet *suther pheni* (a confection that resembles a bird’s nest) of Rajasthan, regional delicacies such as the Bengal River carp marinated in spicy ground mustard and cooked in strong-smelling mustard oil often seem exotic and sometimes strange to outsiders. Train travel in India is a culinary tasting journey with stations stocking local delicacies, making it incumbent on the traveler to “stock up” on legendary specialties. Domestic food tourism creates and sustains a vibrant culinary imagination and a gastronomic landscape, both within and outside India.

### 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 year-round 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, *shakkaraai 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The Indian food market of \$182 billion is believed to be growing at a rapid clip of 13 percent.<sup>4</sup> Indian precooked packaged foods empires such as MTR, SWAD, Haldiram's, and Pataks 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 eateries 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. ■

## NOTES

1. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
2. Krishnenu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas, eds., *Curried Cultures: Globalization, Food, South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
3. Tulasi Srinivas, "Everyday Exotic: Transnational Spaces and Contemporary Foodways in Bangalore," *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 10 no. 1 (2007): 85–107.
4. Aroonim Bhuyan, "India's Food Industry on the Path of High Growth," *Indo-Asian News Service*, 2010, accessed July 10, 2011, see <http://www.corecentre.co.in/Database/Docs/DocFiles/food.pdf>.

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## Tandoori Chicken

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 4 to 5 pound chicken

### 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) (substitute with celery leaves dried in the microwave)
- 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)

### 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 power, 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.
7. Garnish with cilantro and lemon slices.

Serve with chutney, jasmati rice, peas, and a side of sliced cucumbers, red onions, and tomatoes.

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 shraadh 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.