

## Food In Mughal India-Travellers View

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### Abstract:

This study explores the cuisine of Mughal India through the eyes of contemporary travelers. The Mughal era, known for its magnificence and cultural fusion, significantly influenced Indian cuisine. Travelers from various regions documented their encounters with the rich and varied food culture, providing valuable dietary practices. These accounts highlight the fusion of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian culinary traditions that defined Mughal cuisine. The travelers' narratives offer a detailed description of the lavish feasts, the use of exotic spices, the significance of food in social and political manner, and the twisted cooking techniques of the time. By examining these firsthand observations, this study sheds light on the food practices of Mughal India, show how it has shaped contemporary Indian cuisine.

**Key Words:** Food Culture, Mughal India, Travellers Perspective, spices, variety and availability of food.

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### I. Introduction

Food from the very beginning of mankind have played very important role in expressing a socio-cultural life of the people. Many foreign travellers visited India during medieval period. Their travelogues gives lot of information about the place they visited, people they met, their values, customs, dressing, cuisine & many more things. Travellers provide a very valuable source of descriptive historical evidence for study. Their travelogue is a record of events, sights & personal feelings which a traveler experiences as they go from place to place.

In this paper, I have tried to discuss the diversity of food available & taken by the people in India during Mughal period. Information given in this paper is based on various travellers' accounts who visited India during medieval period. Various other Persian sources have also been consulted to support the facts given by travellers.

Royals have always taken an amazingly delicious variety of food. As far as Mughals are concerned, they also paid great attention to this particular aspect. Abul Fazl in *Ain-i-Akbari* says that very "wise regulations" were laid down for the royal kitchen.<sup>1</sup> Akbar usually ate in private<sup>2</sup>, whereas Sebastien Mantique mentions that Shahjahan ate with Asaf Khan (prominent noble) inside the *harem*.<sup>3</sup> Food was eaten on the floor. Sheets with fine stuff, spread over the floor were called *dastarkhan*. It was customary for the king, to set aside a portion of food for the poor before eating.<sup>4</sup> The emperor ended his meal with prayers.<sup>5</sup> *Mir Bakawal* or head of the imperial kitchen look after the every matter of kitchen. Many servants were employed for this department (kitchen) who were supervised by head. Many precautions were taken in preparing & presenting meal. Food was checked several times before it was served in dishes & then these dishes were sealed by *Mir Bakawal*. Gold & silver dishes were wrapped in red cloth & china ware in white cloth.<sup>6</sup> The food was taken to the king in the special procession with mace-bearers walking in front to clear the way; they were followed by *Bakawals*<sup>7</sup>, cooks & other servants. Father Monserrate mentions that, "*His (Akbar) tables were very sumptuous, often consisting forty dishes. They were brought to the chamber covered & wrapped in linen cloths which was tied up & sealed by the cook. These dishes were carried up to the doors of the dining chamber by youths with servants walking ahead & the master of the house-hold following them all. At the door, they were taken over by the eunuchs, who handed them over to the girls serving at the table*".<sup>8</sup> AbulFazl in *Ain-e-Akbari* says that, "*cooks from all countries prepare a great variety of dishes of all kinds of grains, greens, meats; also oily, sweet & spicy dishes, everyday such dishes are prepared as the nobles can scarcely command at their feast from which you may infer exquisite the dishes are which are prepared for his majesty.*"<sup>9</sup> Yearly estimate was drawn up at the beginning of each year, monthly estimate was also prepared separately & the receipts of monthly expenses were sealed by the *Mir Bakawal*.<sup>10</sup> Manucci mentions the expenses of the royal kitchen was one thousand per day during Aurangzeb.<sup>11</sup> Above descriptions show that great attention was paid to the royal kitchen.

Nobles, whether Hindu or Muslim lived luxurious life. Their food was also rich & full of delicacies. Thomas Roe, in his account mentions that around twenty dishes were served at a time on the tables of nobles.<sup>12</sup> Pelsaert, while describing the diet of upper class Muslims, says that, “*the food consist of birinj<sup>13</sup>, aeshalia<sup>14</sup>, poollaeb<sup>15</sup>, zueyla<sup>16</sup>, dupiaza<sup>17</sup>, also roasted meat & various other good courses serves on very large dishes with too little butter & too much spice for our taste...*”<sup>18</sup> Hindu nobles were mainly vegetarians but there were some sections who consumed non vegetarian dishes such as *Rajput*<sup>19</sup>. They ate all kind of meat except beef.<sup>20</sup> Other than meat, they also had a variety and richness in their diets. Their dishes were made of different kinds of cooked rice, bread, ghee, butter, vegetables, milky products, sweetmeats, fruits and many more.<sup>21</sup>

The middle class which includes shopkeeper, traders, bankers, physicians, engineers, merchants etc, had less richness in their food. General menu was based on bread, rice, vegetables, pulses, butter, milk, curd, cheese, pickles, and fruits.<sup>22</sup> They have meal thrice a day, breakfast in the morning, lunch in the noon, and dinner in night.<sup>23</sup> Meat was the main food of Muslims<sup>24</sup>, which provide more dishes and delicious taste to their meal. They added spices in it which enhance the flavor and stimulated the appetite.<sup>25</sup> Sebastien Manrique mentions a bread called *Khajura*, as thick as finger eaten by rich. It was white in color good in quality and taste.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the travellers mention that, the food of commoners was “*khichri*”, made of rice and green pulses.<sup>27</sup> Normal diet of common people in any region was based on food available in that particular region. Non-Muslims usually had rice, wheat, millet, vegetables, milk, and fruits.<sup>28</sup> Muslims also lived on the same diet as non-muslims except in the case of meat. They satisfied themselves with the beef and fish.<sup>29</sup> Fish was staple food of the people living in the region where it was easily available.<sup>30</sup> Sebastien Manrique mentions, paper thin bread used by common people.<sup>31</sup>

Pickles or *achar* was favorable item of all. Different types of pickles were available. Ibn-e-Batutta said that people of India made pickles of mango, ginger, and cluster of pepper.<sup>32</sup> Manrique describe several types of pickles which increases the appetite.<sup>33</sup> Pickles were also served to the guests.<sup>34</sup> Different type of mango pickles could be kept in good condition even for two years.<sup>35</sup>

Fruits of different kind, sweet, dry, green, ripe, and sour were an important item of diet of all the classes. Fruits of different kinds constituted an important item in the diet of Mughals. Fruits were imported in India from many parts of Central Asia, such as, Persia, Balkh, Bukhara, and Samarqand.<sup>36</sup> Almond, pistachios, walnuts, dates, quinces, pomegranates, raisins, apricots, fresh grapes, pears, apples, melons, and many more were imported.<sup>37</sup> These were very expensive & so, only nobles could afford them.<sup>38</sup> In India, musk-melons, water-melons, pine-apples, lemons, oranges, dates, figs, grapes, plantains, mangoes, apricots, coco-nut, papaya, jack fruit, and custard- apple, etc. were produce on a large scale.<sup>39</sup> Mango, was quite one of the most popular fruits discussed by most of the travellers. Even Babur, who came from Central Asia where fine grade of fruits were found in comparison to India said that, “*Mango when good, are very good, but of them many which are eaten few ate first rate. ...Taking it together the mango is the best fruit of India.*”<sup>40</sup> Best kinds of mangoes were produced in Bengal and Orissa.<sup>41</sup>

Drinks consisted of crushed ice mixed into fruit juices. Also, rose water, sugar and milk were added to these fruit juices.<sup>42</sup> Milk was also a drink of people.<sup>43</sup> Tea and coffee were most popular drinks in India from seventeenth century.<sup>44</sup> Tavernier mentions that, coffee was not much popular among all classes.<sup>45</sup> When *Baniyas*, got tired, they used to drink tea and coffee so to become active.<sup>46</sup>

All Mughal emperors tried to enforce strict prohibition in order to discourage the use of wine among the people.<sup>47</sup> Badauni mentions about the severe punishments for excessive drinking.<sup>48</sup> Akbar allowed wine only as a medicine. A sick person could get it only after producing the certificate.<sup>49</sup> Although wine is forbidden by religion for Muslims, but we find that all the Mughal emperors except Aurangzeb had liking for wine and other sort of intoxicants, such as opium. In spite of restrictions courtiers were ordered to drink.<sup>50</sup> Everyone was allowed to drink freely in the court festivities.<sup>51</sup> Wine had become important part of the luxuries enjoyed by the royals and nobles. Although, it was prohibited, but it was enjoyed by all rich people.<sup>52</sup> Peter Mundy says that no wine was available at any cost from Agra to Patna<sup>53</sup>. People were lovers of wine but no one was daring to have it because of severe punishments.<sup>54</sup>. People have another local intoxicant drink called “*toddy*”, which was one of the most popular and is described by many travelers. Edward Terry devoted a whole chapter to it and says that it was poor men’s drink.<sup>55</sup> Della Valle says that, “*...a hot wine, boiled with cloves, cinnamon, and other spices, which the English call the burnt wine, and used to drink frequently in the morning to comfort the stomach*”<sup>56</sup> It was sort of a sour juice of coco-nut, palm, and date trees, which was pleasant in taste and flavor and was popular in the whole country.<sup>57</sup> *Bhang* was another intoxicant used by Indians.<sup>58</sup> *Arack* was also a kind of alcohol & according to Ovington, it was as strong as brandy.<sup>59</sup>

*Paan* or betel leaf was most commonly used throughout India among all classes of people.<sup>60</sup> *Paan* was chewed mostly after meal but most of the people used it throughout the day.<sup>61</sup> *Paan* consist of betel-nut (*supari*), *katha*, camphor (*kafur*), and lime (*chuna*). Guests and courtiers were entertained with *paanbira* scented with

rose water.<sup>62</sup> Ladies also reddened their lips with it as betel leaves served them as lipstick.<sup>63</sup>Travernier says that, “especially ladies were in the habit of chewing betel throughout the day.”<sup>64</sup>

## II. Conclusion:

Thus, it seems that there was a great variety of food for royals; even the names of their dishes are so attractive that a person gets tempted to tryout different dishes. Nobles tried to follow their rulers. Middle class had some variety but common people lived only on some articles of food which were cheap and easily available in their own region. In short, food consumed by the people was based on economic status, religious customs, and availability of particular type of food in a particular region.

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