The Origin and Evolution of the Mughlai Cuisine in North India

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Abstract

Food, the indispensable element required for survival, has moved in ways concomitant with how human civilization has advanced, evolved and changed. In the midst of the many social and cultural indices marking one’s society, studies on culinary practices and consumption patterns have enabled a deeper insight into the socioeconomic climate, political turmoil, and gauge the balance between tradition and modernity of civilizations and nations. This paper, offers fascinating intertwined accounts of distinctive Mughlai cuisine of India embroiled with cultural musings and its people, of how the food practices mark the Mughlai Cuisine different from the other cuisines of India and world. Underlining the history, geography and politics of food, this paper presents a condensed historical trajectory of how the Mughlai cuisine came into being and what stirs the soul of the Mughlai gastronomical delights in the present scenario.

Keywords: Mughlai Cuisine, Central Asia, North India, Local Ingredients

Introduction

Like any other subject, the profession of cooking cannot be understood without first understanding the history of it. As a scholar of Cuisine, researcher realized that the concept has passed through, and continued through, different ‘eras’ of eating.

Cooking is one of the oldest of human activities; indeed it may be the oldest above basic animal survival. At the wandering hunter-gatherer level of society, cooking is very simple – kill something, throw it on the fire along with whatever vegetables and fruits were found that day, and eat. No one specialized in cooking. Throughout evolutionary history humans have prepared or transformed foods to make them edible. The preparation of food before consumption, which is the foundation of cuisine, has always been a part of the human behavioral gamut and helps define the species. Unlike most related mammals and primates that begin their digestion in the process of chewing their food, humans often begin digestive processes outside of the body, using tools for this purpose. In other words, that human do to food before eating it often transforms the food in ways that make it more digestible.

Abundant archeological evidence shows all kinds of tools used for food preparation throughout human evolutionary history. For example, ancestors from the genus Homo perfected tools that could cut a piece of meat more effectively than their canine
and incisor teeth. They found they could crush a nut or other hard seed pod more efficiently with a stone pestle than with their molar teeth. By the time Homo sapiens emerged, Human ancestors started controlled use of fire, so apparently the potential for pre-digesting food outside the body was well developed. From a biological evolutionary perspective, the continued use of tools and fire and the broad effects of the domestication of plants and animals have altered important aspects of the human food chain and have significantly affected the evolutionary dynamics that underlie the species. (Achaya K. T.2001).

Since the Neolithic era, agricultural practices have continuously improved the productivity of certain plants over others. This has led to an increased dependence on fewer plants to provide the bulk of most human diets. However, no single plant or any small group of plants, when consumed as raw products from the field, can satisfy all of the nutrient needs of the species. Hence, dependence on fewer plants could have produced nutritional problems. Thus the Neolithic agricultural diet, characterized by a narrow range of cereals and legumes, represented a substantial change from the Paleolithic diet, characterized by a great diversity of hunted and gathered foods. However, considering the history of every major civilization, it becomes clear that all depended upon the solutions to similar problems to survive and prosper. Thus, while it is possible to innovate new food technologies that may not have many or any negative consequences in times of nutritional abundance, the same practices may produce serious deficiencies during times of nutritional stress. Thus food preparation has substantial survival advantages, and undoubtedly significant wisdom resides in the related food practices that maintain food preparation traditions. A classic example of the evolution of cuisine practices involves maize or 'corn'. Corn is deficient in tryptophan. Fortunately beans have relatively high levels of tryptophan, and as long as beans are consumed with corn (maize), the diet is balanced. However, if beans and other regular sources of tryptophan or niacin are not available in the diet, the disease pellagra makes people sick with diarrhea, dermatitis, and ultimately results in death.

In this regard it is interesting to note that Christopher Columbus, who first introduced maize to the old World, only introduced the food and not the critically important recipe. Pellagra became widespread, resulting in a gradual decrease in the use of maize as a human food. Not until the discovery of vitamins beginning in the 1920s, over four hundred years later, was pellagra defined as a nutritional deficiency associated with the consumption of maize. The use of fermentation to enhance the nutrients of wheat and barley in the production of beer and bread is a classic example of how foods become staples of the diet. Fermentation of wheat and barley with yeast not only produces the alcohol in beer and, to a lesser extent, in bread; it also synthesizes nutritionally essential amino acids from nonessential ones, At the next level of society, subsistence farming, cooking is a little more complex. Agriculture increases the selection of food stuffs available and also increases the probability that any given foodstuff will be available when wanted. Subsistence farmers rely on grain for their calories
where hunters rely on meat, but grain requires considerable effort to convert to an edible form. As a matter of fact, it has been calculated that a farmer has to work harder for his calories than a hunter.

The relative abundance of food in a subsistence farming society compared to a hunter-gatherer society is at least partly offset by the amount of effort required to prepare the food. A settled existence allows the development of arts such as pottery and metal working, which in turn allows new cooking techniques such as baking and boiling. It is in subsistence farming societies that the regional cuisine begins to take shape. At the next stage of development of a society, central authority and trade begin to emerge. Central authority implies castles and palaces, a ruling class who like to indulge their whims and show off for their neighbors and subjects. The rulers need professional cooks, not only because they are too important to do their own cooking, but to provide them with the delicacies that only skill and experience can produce. Trade implies towns and cities, specialization of labor, exotic foodstuffs from far away, and processed food products. Taverns appear in the market place, and food is served, creating the first restaurant. The up-scale restaurants serving the lesser nobility and rich merchant classes often mimic the cooking of the palace. It is in the kitchens of the palaces and restaurants that sophisticated combinations of exotic ingredients are prepared with complicated techniques. It is in these kitchens that recipes are codified and written down.

**Introduction to Indian Cuisine**

India's cuisine is as rich and diverse as its people. Food is an integral part of India's culture, with cuisines differing according to community, region, and state. Indian cuisine is characterized by a great variety of foods, spices, and cooking techniques. Moreover, each religion, and caste has left its own influence on Indian food. Many recipes first emerged when India was predominantly inhabited by Vedic Hindus. Later, Mughal, Christians, British, Portuguese, and others had their influence. Vegetarianism came to prominence during the rule of Ashoka. In India, food, culture, religion, and regional festivals are all closely related. The specialty of Indian cuisine is lie between two dietary extremes vegetarianism and non vegetarianism. But the adherence to vegetarianism or "Satwik Diet" was not restricted to the, Brahmins from northern India orthodox Brahmin cal values and hence vegetarianism made its way beyond South. A vegetarian diet for them meant that their minds would be pure to conduct the necessary rituals. However not all Brahmins are vegetarian. A classical example would be the Kashmiri Brahmins who continued to pride themselves on their mutton dishes. There are also the Brahmins of Bengal who eats fish. Thus vegetarianism became more linked with the cuisines of South India rather than the North.

Muslims infiltration into the subcontinent caused a Gastronomic revolution. In fact it created a marriage between non-vegetarian fare of the Middle East and the rich gravies that were indigenous to India. Later on when Babur established his empire in India, He brought various ingredients and a special style of cuisine got originated in North India, that is popularly known as Mughlai cuisine.
Origin of the Mughlai cuisine and its journey

The journey of Mughlai cuisine from 16th century to the present day, have witnessed its evolution. This is the style of cooking food and various dishes originated in Medieval India at the centres of the Mughal Empire (Agra and Delhi). It is basically a combination of the cooking style of Central Asia and north India.

This cuisine was developed in the royal kitchens of the Mughal Empire starting from the rule of Babar who established the Mughal Empire in India in the 16th century. His autobiography called ‘Babarnama’ has mention of various food items including Kebab, Biryani, Saalan, Naan, etc. Babar was fond of fruits. He imported various fruits from central Asia and later started their cultivation in India. He hired Hindu cooks to prepare Persian dishes and encouraged the use of dried fruits, nuts, cream and curd in cooking. His successor, Humayun, was found of mangoes and khichri was his favourite. He coined a special word – laziza, for khichri. The thired Emperor of Mughal dynasty Akbar was not very fond of meat. He encourages vegetarian dishes and in later part of his life, he became complete vegetarian. So gradually mughlai cuisine developed here in Agra and Delhi and represents a mix of north Indian cuisines with that of the Central Asian cuisines.

The central Asian dishes already existed in India for more than three centuries prior to the introduction of Mughlai cuisine. The different Sultans of the Delhi Sultanate who ruled various regions of India from Delhi that include the different Turkic and Pashtun (Afghan) Muslim dynasties introduced the use of various kebab, Keema and Naan. Tandoor was also introduced prior to the Mughal dynasty. However with time these items became an integral part of the Mughlai Cuisine. The Turkic languages remained the native languages of the Mughals, the Persian language was adopted by the Mughal Empire as the official language, and thus many of the Mughlai Indian dishes bear names in these languages.

Among the most distinctive features of Mughlai cuisine are the unique use of combination of ground and whole spices and the distinguishing aroma that gives each dish a unique and exotic taste. Extensive use of milk, cream and butter in various gravies and curries makes the dishes even more appetizing. The different spices, saffron, dry fruits, ghee and other diary produces makes the traditional Mughlai cuisines rich. The Mughlai dishes are varied, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, starting from Biriyani, Pulao, Naan, Kofta, Kebab, Pasanda, to a wide range of sweet dishes like Shahi Tukra, Kheer, Kulfi and Firni.

The Mughal emperors were fascinated to this style of cooking. Lavish dishes were prepared especially during the reigns of Jehangir and Shahjahan. In miniature paintings of this period it can be seen that the vessels used in court banquets included ones of silver, jade and Chinese porcelains. Hindus and Muslims prepare their food differently. The Muslims and the Hindus usually take their meals individually. Although the Mughals didn't sustain for long, their food habit has been continued till today. India's culinary tradition is constantly changing in relation to vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism where by adherence to a specific food
habit, becomes a powerful symbol of cast, ethnic group and religious orientation.

Methodology

This section contains pieces of information about study setting, sampling and data collection methods and data analysis.

Study Setting

The empirical part of the study was carried out in old Delhi, especially in Delhi 6 considering huge number of tourists visiting the place for having Mughlai meals. There are hundreds of outlets of various categories and capacities that are serving Mughlai foods.

Sampling and Data Collection

We collected data through three major sources -

- The data was collected through a structured interview (fixed questionnaire) administered to a sample of Mughlai chefs and restaurant owners operating in the said area. Respondents were approached and informed about the purpose of Survey and were then asked whether they would participate in the survey. Respondent’s participations in the survey were strictly voluntary. Respondents were also told that their individual responses were anonymous and confidential.
- Noted historian Prof Zaidi was also interviewed and he shared valuable informations regarding the Mughlai food, the era of Mughals and Mughlai administrative services.
- Secondary Sources - The secondary sources of data collection were made from collection of data cited in the reports of Department of tourism, Govt. of India, Govt. of Delhi, bloggers, food walks etc. Apart from these some relevant books, journals, magazines and news papers were also studied.

Data Analysis

The research is grounded on a qualitative approach to the collection of data and analysis. A strong rationale exists for choosing a qualitative methodological approach to this research. First, the nature of the research questions in asking ‘What?’ or ‘How?’ necessitates a qualitative enquiry to describe ‘what is going on’. This is in contrast to quantitative questions which ask ‘Why?’ and then look to comparisons of groups or to cause and effect and statistical analysis.

Second, a detailed view of the situation was required and the topic also needed to be explored. For example, the literature review revealed the origin and the evolution of cuisine in pre – colonial era. Then there was the colonial era and now the post independent era. The data received through structured interview gave us the input that is basically depicting the current form of cuisine.

Therefore a qualitative approach was needed to have their valuable insights and experienced opinions. The researcher wanted to explore and build a ‘picture’ of the situation, rather than test a hypothesis. This was because many points of discussion needed to be defined by working inductively, rather than being provided by the researcher in advance. Working inductively enables a full and rounded humanistic understanding of a situation rather than a purely objective
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scientific quantification of a current situation. It also presents the opportunity to develop and build on grounded theory when there is a low theoretical base. Grounded theory refers to theory that is generated from data that is systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. The fieldwork was carried out in August, 2018 and September 2018.

Findings
The journey of Mughlai cuisine from 16th century to the present day, have witnessed its evolution. In 1526 Mughal emperors, Turks by origin but with Mongol and Persian blood in their veins, established the Mughal empire in India. And Mughlai cuisine is the style of cooking food and various dishes originated during their rule at the centres of the Mughal Empire (Agra and Delhi). It is basically a combination of the cooking style of Central Asia and north India.

This cuisine was developed in the royal kitchens of the Mughal Empire starting from the rule of Babar who established the Mughal Empire in India in the 16th century. His autobiography called ‘Babarnama’ has mention of various food items including Kebab, Biryani, Saalan, Naan, etc. Babar was found of fruits. He imported various fruits from central Asia and later started their cultivation in India. He hired Hindu cooks to prepare Persian dishes and encouraged the use of dried fruits, nuts, cream and curd in cooking. He made efforts to cultivate sweet grapes, melons, and pineapples in India.

The Mughals, who had an overwhelming impact on literature, music, painting and architecture, also revolutionized the culinary arts. It is a well-established fact that the Mughal emperors influenced both style and substance of Indian food. They turned simple Indian cooking into an art and patronized the art with passion. Their hospitality remains legendary.

His successor, Humayun, was found of mangoes and khichri was his favourite. He coined a special word – laziza, for khichri.

The third Emperor of Mughal dynasty Akbar was not very fond of meat. He encourages vegetarian dishes and in later part of his life, he became complete vegetarian. Among the Mughal emperors after Babur his grandson, Akbar, took a personal interest in the royal kitchen. He devised rules for the conduct of the kitchen staff and appointed high-ranking officers to administer the territory.

The Ain-i-Akbari, a gazetteer of the Mughal Empire, detailing every aspect of Akbar’s government written by his courtier Abul Fazl has a vivid and fascinating chapter devoted to the imperial kitchen. Abul Fazl provides a list of recipes of some of the dishes which reflect that Mughal diet heavily relied on rice, wheat, gram, barley, and some other lentils. Bernier describes how the shops were stacked with pots of ghee, rice, wheat and endless variety of other grains. The Central Asian and Persian influence is evident in the recipes listed in the Ain-i-Akbari.

Abul Fazl writes that the kitchen department was headed by Mir Baqawal (master of the kitchen), an officer of the rank of 600 horses (in Akbar’s reign). Hakim Humam held the post under the direct control of the vizier (prime minister). Mir Baqawal had under him an army of cooks, tasters, attendants, bearers, and a special officer for betel. The cooks
came from Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and from different regions of India.

**Hakim** (physician) of repute assisted in the preparation of the daily menu keeping in mind the temperament of the emperor and the nutritive value of the food served to him. Many recipes were given by the royal hakim as a remedy for indigestion, stomachache, to produce lustful feelings and increase vitality of the emperor. These recipes made with medicinal properties sharpened the intellect, made the eyes shine, gave a glow to the skin, and improved hearing.

The royal kitchen had its own budget and a separate account department. In the beginning of the year, the sub-treasurer made out an annual estimate and received the amount. Every month a statement of the expenditure was drawn and submitted to the vizier. Every day 1000 rupees was disbursed for the expense of the king’s table. Provisions for the royal kitchen were collected from various parts of the empire without regards to cost.

Fruits from Kabul, ducks, water fowls and certain vegetables were obtained from Kashmir, and water from River Ganges. Sheep, goats and fowls were maintained by the kitchen and were given special diet mixed with aromatic herbs, silver, gold, pearls, saffron marbles mixed with sugar, perfumed grass to get pleasant-smelling flesh from the animals to suit the royal palate. Cows were fed with cotton seeds, sugarcane, nutmeg, coconut, cinnamon, pulses, partridge eggs and bamboo leaves besides perfumed green grass. They were never kept for less than a month. Rice came from Bharaij, Gwalior, Rajori and Nimlah, and ghee from Hissar. Food was flavored by using aromatic herbs. Perfumes were made and developed by hakim by mixing fragrant flowers and leaves, like of sweet orange, bitter orange, mango, lime, sweet basil, and many more.

The Mughal emperors were by nature meat& grain-eaters; perhaps, the climate of Central Asia and the hunting habit needed them to be strong. Lamb was the most flavored meat, besides games and birds, under the guidance of shahi hakim (the royal physician), the expert cooks of the imperial kitchen prepared meat dishes which were light and digestible.

The use of gold and silver as well as pearls and other precious stones were used in cooking, as per their medicinal values. An area was demarked close to the royal kitchen where vegetables, enjoyed by the emperor, were grown with special care. The vegetable beds were watered with rose water and musk to get a special aroma.

**The Ain-i-Akbari describes three classes of cooked dishes.**

1. **Sufiyana**: consumed on Akbar’s days of abstinence, no meat was used and the dishes were those made of rice (sheer biranj, zard biranj, khushka, and khichda), wheat (chichi, essentially the gluten of wheat isolated by washing and then seasoned), dals, spinach and a few other leafy vegetables, as well as halwas, sherbats etc.

2. The second class comprised those in which both rice and meat or wheat and meat were combined.

3. The third class was that in which meat was cooked in ghee, spices, yoghurt, and eggs to create dishes.
like yakhni, kebabs, dum pukht, and malghuba.

This system of food continued throughout the Mughal domain but with the passage of time, many more classes were added to them.

The Mughals did not pay much attention to the adornment of dining place; their food itself was always rich, colourful and decorated with gold and silver leaves. Some items of food were made to look like gems and jewels, fruits were cut in the shape of flowers and leaves fruits were cut in the shape of flowers and leaves, dried fruits was glazed with Babool gum and added to pulaos, and ghee for cooking was colored and flavored. Yoghurt was set in seven colors but in one bowl, and cottage cheese was set in bamboo baskets.

Rice ground to flour then boiled and sweetened with candy sugar and rose water was eaten cold—perhaps, this is where the present-day kheer has come from. The flour of rice mingled with almonds made as small as they could and with some fleshy parts of chicken stewed with it, and then beaten into pieces, mixed with sugar and rose water, scented with amber was a popular dessert of the royal table. Various kinds of pickles, chutneys, fresh ginger, lemons and various greens in bags bearing a seal of Mir Baqawal, saucers of yoghurt piled up were also included in the royal menu. Pickles had medicinal value; it is learnt that the pickles made with fruit sharpened the appetite and hunger, ward off illness, and also helped in digestion.

Chewing of betel (paan) finds numerous references in the Mughal culture. It was important ingredient to end the meal. The emperor was given the bira of betel after he had washed his hands. The betel leaves were rubbed with camphor and rose water. Eleven leaves made one bira. The betel nut (supari) was boiled in sandalwood juice. Lime was mixed with saffron and rose water. Chewing of betel leaf (tambul) had many qualities. It made the tongue soft, the mouth sweet-smelling and was good for the stomach.

Tobacco and huqqa, the ubiquitous symbols of princely India in later times, was known in the Mughal courts in the seventeenth century.

Akbar set up a royal orchard and employed horticulturists from Central Asia and Persia. Their fondness for fruits made them take steps to grow fruits in the soil of Hindustan. To encourage farmers, horticulture was exempted from tax. They enjoyed mangoes.

Babur was not particularly fond of them but Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb found the fruit best in flavor and taste. The shops in Delhi were well stocked with nuts and dried fruits such as almonds, pistachios, walnut, raisins, prunes and apricots from Persia, Balkh, Bukhara and Samarqand. In winter, fresh grapes, black and white, brought from the same countries wrapped in cotton, pears and apples of three to four kinds, and melons were eaten, stewed or raw, and preserved in sugar and nuts. They were called murrabas and their use was advised by the shahi hakim.

A special department called Aabdar-Khana was in charge of water supply to the royal household, experienced water tasters were a regular unit of royal entourage and also accompanied emperors on hunting. For cooking, water from River Yamuna and Chenab was mixed with little water from...
the River Ganges or even rain water was collected and stored in the kitchen. In early part of Akbar’s reign, water was cooled with saltpeter.

In the later part of the Mughal era, with the arrival of Portuguese, potatoes and chillies were added to the food list. Excellently well-dressed potatoes, or potatoes cooked in several ways were added to the royal meals in the post-Jahangir period. Shah Jahan’s table had rich spicy food besides different kinds of qormas, qaliyas, breads, kebabs, and pulao s, a lot of Indian and some European delights also made their appearance on the royal dastarkhwan. With the passage of time, dishes like poori, Parantha, khandvi, kachori and many more savouries and sweets became part of the emperor’s khasa.

The most lavish table was that of Bahadur Shah Zafar. His table had every cuisine - Turkish, Persian, Afghani, and Indian – Kebabs of venison, partridge and fish, booranis, samosas, khandvi, dals, salans, and a variety of pulao s and sweetmeats. He enjoyed eating besan ki roti with rahat jani chutney, lamb qorma and dal badshah pasand.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is related to the time duration, in which the study was carried out, that is August, 2018 and September 2018. Second limitation is the research area. We can include Lucknow, Hyderab  ad, Kolkatta, Bhopal and other cities where Mughlai food or it’s variations are popular.

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The Origin and Evolution of the Mughlai Cuisine in North India
Dr. Saffruzama


