

# Tracing the roots of Modern Indian Food Culture: A Historical Survey through the Ancient Indian Dietary Practices

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**Abstract:** This study, *“Tracing the Roots of Modern Indian Food Culture: A Historical Survey through the Ancient Indian Dietary Practices,”* investigates the ancient roots of Modern Indian culinary traditions. Utilizing literary texts, archaeological evidence, and historical treatises, it explores the impact of prehistoric foraging, Harappan agriculture, Vedic rituals, Ayurvedic principles, and South Indian regional variations on contemporary Indian cuisine. The research highlights the continuity and adaptability of these practices, emphasizing their relevance to health and sustainability. Indian food culture emerges as a dynamic blend of tradition and innovation, deeply tied to social, spiritual, and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** *Indian food culture, historical survey, Harappan diet, vegetarianism, Ayurveda, South Indian cuisine*

## Introduction

The food culture of India represents a dynamic interplay of historical, spiritual, and cultural influences that have evolved over centuries. This paper titled *“Tracing the Roots of Modern Indian Food Culture: A Historical Survey through the Ancient Indian Dietary Practices”*, seeks to explore the route of Modern Indian food culture from its ancient origins, emphasizing the enduring legacy of early dietary practices. Drawing on primary sources such as literary texts, archaeological evidence, and historical treatises, this study examines how prehistoric foraging, Harappan agriculture, Vedic rituals, Ayurvedic principles, and regional variations in South Indian cuisine have collectively shaped modern Indian culinary traditions. By delineating these threads, the study highlights the continuity and adaptability of Indian culinary traditions within the context of globalization. This exploration not only celebrates the preservation of ancient practices but also underscores their relevance in addressing contemporary challenges such as food security, health, and sustainability.

Food in India transcends its functional role as sustenance, serving as a cornerstone of social rituals, religious ceremonies, and cultural identity. The transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian civilizations established staples such as rice, wheat, and lentils, which remain integral to Indian diets. Furthermore, the integration of food into Vedic rituals underscores its spiritual dimensions, influencing dietary customs that persist in contemporary Hindu practices. This synthesis of tradition and innovation has rendered Indian cuisine one of the most diverse and influential culinary cultures globally. Through this academic inquiry, I am seeking to contribute to a deeper understanding of Indian food culture as a living tradition that bridges the past and present while remaining responsive to modern societal needs.

## Tracing the Roots: From Prehistoric Times to the Harappan Civilization

The story of Indian food culture begins in prehistoric times, where early humans relied on hunting, gathering, and fishing for sustenance. Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient Indians consumed wild fruits, nuts, roots, and meat from hunted animals, with fish playing a significant role in their diet. Over time, these practices gave way to agriculture, marking a pivotal shift in food habits. By 8000-6000 BCE, the Mehrgarh civilization had begun cultivating wheat, barley, and jujube, while domesticating animals like sheep and goats for meat and milk. The Neolithic period further expanded agricultural communities, with wild rice appearing in regions like the Ganges Valley by 4530-5440 BCE.

The Harappan civilization (3300-1300 BCE) represents a golden age in ancient Indian food culture, characterized by a diverse and sophisticated diet. Staple crops included wheat, barley, millets, rice, and pulses like chickpeas and peas, varying by region. Fruits such as melons, pomegranates, bananas, and dates, along with vegetables like onions and garlic, were commonly consumed. Meat played a significant role, with archaeological findings indicating the consumption of beef, mutton, pork, chicken, and fish. Dairy products from cows, buffaloes, and goats added richness to the diet. Advanced cooking techniques, such as the use of ovens and clay pots, suggest a refined culinary tradition, with evidence of curry-like preparations and ritual foods like multigrain laddoos.

Trade networks during the Harappan period introduced new ingredients and spices, enriching the culinary landscape. This diversity in diet, coupled with advanced agricultural practices, laid the groundwork for the rich and varied cuisine we see today. The Harappan legacy continues to resonate in modern Indian kitchens, where staples like roti and rice, as well as fermented dishes like idli and dosa, remain popular.

## The Philosophical and Spiritual Dimensions of Indian Food

The Vedic period (1500-500 BCE) marked a significant turning point in Indian food culture, as food became deeply intertwined with religious and philosophical ideologies. Rituals like yajnas and agnihotra involved offerings of ghee, grains, and sometimes animals to deities, reflecting the sacred nature of food. The concept of "annam brahma" (food is God) underscored its divine essence, with prasad (food offered to deities) being consumed as a blessing. These practices not only shaped dietary norms but also reinforced the spiritual significance of food in Indian culture.

The emergence of vegetarianism in ancient India was driven by the ethical principles of Jainism and Buddhism. Jainism, founded by Mahavira in the 6th century BCE, strictly prohibited meat, emphasizing the principle of ahimsa (non-violence). Similarly, Buddhism discouraged animal killing, allowing monks to eat meat only if it was offered and not specifically procured for them. While Vedic practices included meat consumption, the influence of Jainism and Buddhism led to a gradual shift toward vegetarianism, particularly among Brahmins. Texts like the Manusmriti advocated avoiding meat for spiritual purity, laying the foundation for modern vegetarian practices. Today, India is home to over 400 million vegetarians, reflecting the enduring impact of these ancient ethical norms.

Ayurveda, rooted in the Vedas, offers a holistic approach to food, linking diet to health and well-being. Central to Ayurvedic principles is the concept of balancing the three doshas (vata, pitta, and kapha) through seasonal and personalized diets. Foods are categorized by their tastes (rasas) and qualities (gunas),

guiding dietary choices based on individual constitution. For instance, Vata types benefit from warm, moist foods, while Pitta types thrive on cooling, light options. These ancient principles continue to guide health-conscious eating in modern India, with many people following Ayurvedic diets to maintain balance and vitality.

### **Regional Flavors: The Legacy of South Indian Cuisine**

Ancient South Indian food culture, shaped by geography and history, remains distinct yet deeply connected to broader Indian culinary traditions. Rice was the cornerstone of the diet, consumed in various forms such as boiled rice, kanji, and fermented dishes like idli and dosa. Lentils were used in curries and snacks like vada, while spices like black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, and coconut added depth and flavor. Regional variations highlight the diversity of South Indian cuisine, with Tamil Nadu's sambar and rasam, Kerala's appam and puttu, Karnataka's bisi bele bath, and Andhra's spicy curries each offering unique tastes and textures. The Chola period (9th-13th centuries CE) saw trade-driven culinary exchanges, introducing new ingredients and techniques. Portuguese influences brought chili peppers, which became integral to South Indian cuisine. Despite these external influences, the region's emphasis on rice, lentils, and spices has remained constant, with dishes like idli and dosa continuing to thrive globally. This resilience and adaptability underscore the enduring appeal of South Indian food culture, which seamlessly blends tradition with innovation.

### **Conclusion**

This exploration of early Indian food culture reveals the profound influence of ancient practices on modern cuisine. From the agricultural beginnings of prehistoric India to the sophisticated culinary traditions of the Harappan civilization, the rise of vegetarianism, Ayurvedic principles, and the distinct flavors of South Indian cuisine, the journey of Indian food culture is a testament to its dynamism and adaptability. Specific dishes like idli, dosa, and roti, as well as cooking techniques like tandoor and fermentation, continue to bridge the gap between ancient and contemporary culinary landscapes. Cultural practices such as eating with hands and festive feasts further underscore the continuity of Indian food traditions.

Key findings of the study highlight the role of ancient agricultural practices in shaping dietary staples, the integration of food into religious rituals during the Vedic period, and the transformative impact of Jainism and Buddhism on vegetarianism. Ayurvedic principles continue to guide health-conscious eating, while regional variations in South Indian cuisine reflect the diversity of ancient food practices. These enduring traditions enrich not only Indian cuisine but also global culinary heritage. In order to have a deeper idea on the contemporary food traditions of India, it is recommended to explore areas such as the impact of colonialism on Indian cuisine, the role of indigenous knowledge systems in sustainable food practices, and the globalization of Indian culinary traditions. Interdisciplinary studies combining archaeology, anthropology, and food science could provide new insights into the historical and cultural dimensions of Indian food culture. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to preserving and promoting this rich heritage for generations to come.

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