

From Babur to Aurangzeb: Tracing the Development of Mughal Cuisine

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Abstract: *The Mughal Empire, which ruled India from the early 16th century until the mid - 19th century, contributed significantly to the subcontinent's cultural landscape. Among the many legacies they left behind, one of the most remarkable is their culinary influence. The Mughals, originally from Central Asia, brought with them a rich tradition of Persian and Central Asian cuisine. However, their time in India led to the blending of these influences with local Rajput culinary traditions, creating what we now recognize as Mughal cuisine, which is renowned for its richness, complexity, and use of spices. This paper explores the evolution and development of Mughal cuisine, examining how Persian, Central Asian, and Indian culinary traditions blended during the Mughal Empire. Beginning with Babur's early encounters with Indian food, the study traces the culinary innovations under key Mughal emperors, including Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. The paper argues that the Mughals not only embraced and adapted local Indian culinary practices but also created a distinct fusion cuisine that left an enduring legacy on the Indian subcontinent's food culture.*

Keywords: Mughal emperors, cuisine, food, cultural fusion

1. Introduction

The Mughal Empire was one of the largest and most influential empires in Indian history, lasting from the early 16th century to the mid - 19th century. Founded by Babur in 1526 after his victory at the Battle of Panipat, ¹ the Mughal dynasty brought together a rich blend of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian cultures. The empire's influence extended over much of the Indian subcontinent and played a significant role in shaping the region's political, cultural, and social fabric.

At its height, the Mughal Empire was renowned for its centralized administration, military prowess, and monumental architectural achievements, including iconic structures like the Taj Mahal. The Mughals embraced a policy of religious tolerance, particularly under emperors like Akbar, who promoted inclusivity and sought to balance the interests of the empire's diverse religious communities. This policy helped maintain peace and stability within the empire, enabling economic prosperity and the flourishing of arts, literature, and science.

Mughal rulers were also known for their patronage of the arts, which led to a golden age in painting, music, and literature. The empire's cultural impact extended to architecture, with the development of the Mughal architectural style, which blended Persian, Indian, and Central Asian elements. The era also saw the emergence of Mughal cuisine, a culinary tradition that combined Persian, Central Asian, and Indian cooking techniques, creating a unique food culture that continues to influence Indian cuisine today.

This paper explores the evolution and development of Mughal cuisine, particularly focusing on the food and drinks

consumed by the emperors themselves, as described in contemporary Persian sources and travelogues.

The Mughals' Early Encounter with Indian Cuisine

The story of Mughal cuisine begins with Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire. Babur, who hailed from the region around present - day Uzbekistan, initially expressed contempt for the food in Hindustan (present - day India). He complained about the lack of quality bread, fruits, and cold drinks, calling the land "unromantic." ² However, as his empire expanded, Babur was introduced to Indian culinary traditions, largely through the hospitality of local Indian Muslims and other invited guests. Despite his initial reservations, he developed a taste for Indian food, even employing cooks from Ibrahim Lodi's kitchen to prepare dishes for him. ³ Unfortunately, one of these cooks attempted to poison Babur, but the emperor survived after vomiting the poisoned food. ⁴ This event did not restrain Babur from further exploring Indian culinary traditions, although he became cautious about employing Hindustani cooks thereafter.

Babur's successor, Humayun, continued this culinary exploration. Humayun, who spent time in Persia during his exile, developed a taste for Persian cuisine and brought Persian cooks back to India upon his return. ⁵ These Persian influences blended with Indian culinary practices, leading to the development of a fusion cuisine at the Mughal court. Dishes such as *pulao*, with its fragrant rice and meat, became staples in the imperial kitchen. It is clear that while the Mughals initially had reservations about Indian cuisine, over time they came to appreciate and integrate it into their own culinary culture.

² Babur, *Baburnama*, tr. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1970, p. 518.

³ Ibid, pp. 590, 654.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 541-43; Gulbadan Bano Begum, *Humayunama*, tr. A. S. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1983, p. 108.

⁵ JauharAftabchi, *Tezkirah-al wakiat*, tr. Stewart, Delhi, 1972, pp 73-74.

¹ R. C. Manjumdar, *An Advanced History of India*, Macmillan India, Delhi, 1973, p. 420.

The Imperial Kitchen under Akbar

Under Akbar, the Mughal kitchen became an institution. Akbar, who reigned from 1556 to 1605, established a highly organized system to manage food preparation.⁶ According to the court historian Abul Fazl, Akbar's administration was divided into several departments, each responsible for different aspects of the emperor's life, including the food. The *Matbakh* or imperial kitchen, prepared the meals, while the *Abdar Khana* ensured the quality of drinks and water. The *Mewah Khana* oversaw the fruits and sweet preparations. This organization was a reflection of Akbar's understanding of the importance of food for both physical health and spiritual well-being.⁷

Akbar's focus on food was not limited to its preparation; he also made conscious decisions about his own dietary habits.⁸ Over time, he reduced his food intake, reportedly eating only once a day, and even renounced meat consumption at one point, possibly influenced by the *jogis* and *lamas*, who claimed those who ate less lived three or four times longer than ordinary people.⁹ His shift away from meat can also be viewed as an expression of his humane policies, though it is worth noting that this was not a strict prohibition; instead, it was a personal choice that aligned with his broader philosophical and political approach to governance.

In terms of the actual food prepared in the Mughal kitchen, Abul Fazl categorized it into three types: *sufiyana* (meatless), *gosht babirinj* (meat and rice), and *abazirin* (meat cooked with spices).¹⁰ The diversity of these dishes illustrates the wide range of tastes and preferences that existed at the Mughal court. Bread, too, was a crucial component of the Mughal diet. Akbar's kitchen baked various kinds of bread, including the thin *chapati*, a thicker, richer *khajura*, and the luxurious *mithirughani*, made with ghee and sugar, enjoyed by the elite.¹¹

Jahangir and the Refinement of Taste

Jahangir, Akbar's son, was known for his elevated taste.¹² He was highly particular about the quality of food, especially meat.¹³ He was known to inspect animals before they were slaughtered to ensure the meat was of the finest quality. Jahangir's taste extended beyond meat, as he also developed a fondness for *khichri*, a dish made of rice and lentils.¹⁴ This dish, which was originally a commoners' food, found its way to the royal table during Jahangir's reign, suggesting a wider participation of culinary practices within the Mughal court.

Jahangir's reign also saw the introduction of new ingredients and cooking techniques. He was an early proponent of

dopiaza, a dish made with meat, onions, and a mix of spices. His appreciation for fine food extended beyond Indian dishes, as he was also fond of *rohu* fish, a regional delicacy, and black partridge, showcasing his wide-ranging tastes.¹⁵

Shah Jahan and the Peak of Mughal Cuisine

Under Shah Jahan, who ruled from 1628 A. D. to 1658 A. D., Mughal cuisine reached its zenith. The techniques of *tandoor* and *dum* cooking were refined during his reign, leading to the creation of iconic dishes such as *seekh kebabs* and *biryani*. The *tandoor*, a clay oven, allowed for cooking meats and breads at high temperatures, imparting a distinct smoky flavor. *Dum* cooking, on the other hand, involved slow-cooking dishes in sealed pots, allowing the flavors to blend together. This technique became consistent with *dum-pukht* dishes like *biryani* and *pulao*, which are still widely enjoyed today. These innovations in cooking, alongside the continued focus on the quality of ingredients, reflect the high status of Mughal cuisine during his reign.

Aurangzeb and the Limitation of Culinary Splendour

Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughal emperors, is often portrayed as a ruler who rejected the indulgences of his predecessors, including extravagant feasts and luxuries.¹⁶ His ascetic lifestyle led him to abstain from both meat and alcohol, which had previously been enjoyed by his predecessors. However, even in this period of austerity, the Mughal court maintained its culinary traditions, albeit in a more restrained manner. Aurangzeb's preference for *khichri-i-biryani*,¹⁷ which had been popularized by Jahangir, illustrates the continued influence of Mughal culinary traditions, even in more conservative times.

The Enduring Legacy of Mughal Cuisine

Despite the many changes in the Mughal Empire, Mughal cuisine evolved and adapted, leaving a lasting impact on the culinary landscape of India. The fusion of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian ingredients and techniques created a cuisine that is both unique and diverse. This legacy endures in the form of iconic dishes such as *biryani*, *pulao*, *seekh kebabs*, and *dum-pukht* preparations, all of which continue to be enjoyed across the Indian subcontinent.

The Mughal Empire, with its remarkable legacy of cultural synthesis and innovation, profoundly shaped the food culture of India. While the Mughals are often remembered for their architectural splendor and administrative achievements, their culinary contributions are equally significant in the historical narrative of the subcontinent. The evolution of Mughal cuisine—from Babur's initial encounters with Indian food to the flourishing culinary practices under Shah Jahan—reflects not only the imperial tastes and preferences but also the broader process of cultural exchange and adaptation. The fusion of Persian, Central Asian, and local Indian culinary traditions under the Mughal Empire created a distinctive food culture that transcended royal courts and influenced the broader population.

⁶ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. Blochman, Calcutta, 1977, pp. 59-61.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 57-59, 61.

⁸ Ibid, p. 59.

⁹ Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh*, tr. Lowe, 1973. Vol II, p. 335.

¹⁰ *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 59.

¹¹ Sebastien Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique*, tr. C. E. Luard, Oxford, 1926, p. 199.

¹² M. A. Alvi & A. Rehman, *Jahangir- The Naturalist*, National Institute Science of India, New Delhi, 1968, Introduction, pp. 4-14.

¹³ Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, tr. Roger, Delhi, 2006. pp. 55, 414.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 419.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 275, 414.

¹⁶ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, tr. V. Ball, New York, 1889, p. 313.

¹⁷ Aurangzeb, *Letters of Aurangzeb*, tr. Bilimora, Delhi, 1972, pp. 12-14.

Under each Mughal emperor, food was not merely sustenance but a symbol of power, status, and cultural refinement. Babur's early reluctance to embrace Indian food evolved into an appreciation for local culinary practices, while Akbar's organizational reforms in the imperial kitchen institutionalized Mughal cuisine, making it a symbol of imperial authority and governance. Jahangir's refinement of taste, coupled with his introduction of new ingredients and cooking techniques, further developed the richness of Mughal food culture. Shah Jahan's reign marked the zenith of Mughal cuisine, with innovations such as the tandoor and *dum* cooking becoming integral to the empire's culinary identity. Even during Aurangzeb's more rigid rule, Mughal cuisine retained its core elements, illustrating its enduring significance within the Mughal court.

The Mughal commitment to culinary sophistication reflects a broader cultural philosophy that prized the blending of traditions and the creation of something new and unique. This merging of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian food practices did not only enrich the Mughal court but also laid the foundation for the future of Indian cuisine. Iconic dishes such as *biryani*, *seekh kebabs*, and variety of *pulao*—which emerged during the Mughal period—continue to be enjoyed across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, attesting to the lasting impact of Mughal culinary heritage.

In addition to its culinary contributions, the Mughal Empire's approach to food exemplifies the broader processes of cultural exchange that defined the era. The Mughals, by engaging with local traditions and integrating them with their own, helped shape a culinary culture that was at once cosmopolitan and uniquely Indian. These culinary innovations not only satisfied the tastes of the imperial court but also contributed to the social fabric of the empire, bringing together diverse communities through the shared experience of food.

Thus, the legacy of Mughal cuisine goes beyond its royal origins. It stands as a testament to the transformative power of cultural interaction and the enduring influence of the Mughal Empire on the food traditions of India. Today, Mughal dishes continue to hold a central place in Indian cuisine, with their flavors and cooking techniques passed down through generations. As such, the Mughal contribution to food culture serves as a lasting reminder of an empire that, through its culinary innovations, helped shape the identity of modern Indian cuisine, leaving a legacy that continues to nourish both body and soul.

In conclusion, the Mughals did more than just conquer territory; they transformed the culinary landscape of India. Through a careful blending of their Persian and Central Asian culinary traditions with Indian ingredients and techniques, they created a distinctive cuisine that continues to shape the food culture of modern India. The Mughal emperors, in their culinary pursuits, were not merely adopting foreign practices but were actively engaging in a cultural exchange that enriched both their empire and the local population. Thus, the Mughal era represents a remarkable chapter in the history of Indian cuisine, one marked by innovation, adaptation, and fusion.