

INDIAN CUISINE AND SOFT POWER

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ABSTRACT

Human beings across the geographical locations of the world and in every type of climatic condition adopt and consume food to fulfill the needs of the physiology of their body and to remain healthy. The food habits of individuals and society at large of any region has a great impact on their psychology and behavioral pattern to a large extent. There is innumerable texts/treatise right from the very beginning of civilization which talks about it In every group of believers, FOOD has often been considered at par with God and is worshipped. If one looks back in the history of mankind it can be seen in each era, that in many not-so-favorable situations cuisine has been found to impact/influence the thinking and approach of two opposing people. Gastronomic treats have been instrumental to bring people of different backgrounds and culture closure. In this paper, an attempt is being made to bring out how Indian cuisine has spread across the world and has cemented the trust, faith, and acceptance of Indian culture and its values in society's world over. Indian cuisine has left an inedible mark as a strong soft power tool to mold the opinion of people in those areas about India and its people.

KEYWORDS: India, Cuisine, Culture, Societies, Soft Power.

INTRODUCTION

The type of staple diet being taken by human beings does make an impact on the physical growth / maintaining a healthy body which in the long run shapes the inner strength as well as the psychological and emotional well-being of the individual(s). In ancient Sanskrit texts, the well-being of body, mind, and soul is life, and food is an important means of achieving this blissfulness. Positive thinking by a person influences the ones who are in proximity to that person. It has been observed that such a body of people makes a lasting impact on many more people or groups of people. A behavior that spreads happiness, confidence, and trust amongst people and societies develops everlasting positivity in different cultural setups. This further strengthens the feeling, belief, trust, and goodwill amongst people and societies of which they form part. It is often said that it takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.

EVOLUTION OF INDIAN CUISINE

Indian cuisine is unique. It has six basic tastes: sweet, salt, bitter, sour, astringent, and pungent. The preparations are a mix and match of ingredients with these different flavors. Interestingly, at a broad level, Western European cuisine harmonizes flavors while Indian cuisine creates a unity of opposites. The flavors “rub against each other” in different ways and create “unique, negative food pairings.” It is also worth remembering that, of the total unique ingredients

observed across the world, almost 200 are used in Indian cuisine. The variety is, therefore, staggering, and the palate to play with has several colors. (<https://swarajyamag.com/culture/a-brief-history-of-food-in-jambudwipa> Sumedha Verma Ojha, 03 Sept 2016)

In the Sanskrit literature written during the Vedic era, it has been established that most of the important texts on medicine, yoga, literature, religion, etc. e.g., Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, Charaka-Samhita, and the Upanishads, have discussed foods and their impact on the human body. The Vedas have univocally stressed the connection between spirituality and the choice of food without leaving behind the need for taste and good health. (Mehta:2013) During the Vedic period, the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent was occupied by Indo-Aryans. Most of the Aryans then were pastoralists i.e., their social organization was based on livestock rising as the primary economic activity. Milk is provided for their food and other products like butter and curd. The cultural values which Aryans attached to food were, they believed it to be a gift from God and a source of strength.

In the four Vedas, Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda, there are liberal and respectful mentions of the grains used during those times (Sarkar et al:2015) In the post-Vedic era (1000 to 600 BC), the descriptions of the Indian culinary culture are not dealt in detail with in any treatises as

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such. However, one can find these details in the memoirs of foreigners who traveled to India and wrote about their experiences during those times. Megasthenesa, an ambassador of Alexander and Chinese visitors such as Fa-Hsien and I-Ching, and Xuan Zang, a learned monk from China, have distinctly and sharply described sociocultural practices including food and drinks in great detail⁷. With the entry of Muslim invaders in India from 700 AD onwards till 1600 AD, not much changed and by and large no Muslim empire could sustain and flourish till the Mughals came to India in the Sixteenth Century.

Food has been one of the most potent tools, apart from language, divergent customs, and traditions to bind cultures together throughout history. It is no wonder many countries have adopted recipes and cooking styles from other nations, creating unique cuisines. After Muslim and Mughal rulers (700-1600 AD), with the entry of the British in the early Seventeenth century, Indian cuisine did adopt new cuisines and India is a perfect example of this phenomenon, as British colonization heavily influenced its cuisine during the 19th century.

FOOD CHOICE AND PERSONALITY

There is a famous adage that says, “*You are what you eat*,” which refers to one’s health, as it turns out, the saying can also be indicative of one’s personality. An individual’s food behavior influences his/her personality traits. According to the theory of the “Big Five Personality Traits,” the following five factors determine personality.

- Extraversion: outgoing/energetic
- Agreeableness: friendly/compassionate
- Openness to experience: inventive/curious
- Conscientiousness: efficient/organized
- Neuroticism: sensitive/nervous

Researchers believe several of these traits correlate with various aspects of food behavior and do make a lasting impact on personality. Now when we consider three distinctive types of foods i.e., Sati, Rajas, and Tames widely consumed by people in India, each type of these food categories does relate to the personality of people. People of society following the finer aspects of such food behavior become part of a very distinct type of social group in the larger context.

FOOD DIPLOMACY

Indian cuisine has a strong 5000-year history of fusion of various regional cultures within India as well as from other faraway shores of the world. Indian cuisine, since ages has

shaped the history of international relations. The story of Indian spices is more than Seventy Centuries old. Centuries before Greece and Rome had been discovered, sailing ships were carrying Indian spices, perfumes, and textiles to Mesopotamia, Arabia, and Egypt. It was the lure of these that brought many seafarers to the shores of India. This spice trade between India and Europe is often cited by historians as the primary catalyst for Europe’s Age of Discovery. Foreign traders bought Spices from India and traded around Europe and Asia. It has also influenced other cuisines across the world, especially those from Southeast Asia, the British Isles, and the Caribbean. As Indian cuisine influences those who traveled to India, so has Indian cuisine traveled abroad? Dishes have gained popularity or subtle influences through spices have seeped into cuisines and liking of people from divergent cultural backgrounds the world over.
(https://www.cgihamburg.gov.in/pdf/Food_Diplomacy_August_14_2014.pdf)

INDIA’S FORAY IN CUISINE CULTURE

World over, for every nation, power is a strong pillar for its respectful place amongst nations as well as its survival and respect towards its values and culture by others. The power of a country, like its monetary stability, creates ripples with its fluctuations. For an ordinary person, usually, for him, it is easy to identify the power of a nation with hard power i.e., size and depth of its defense forces, possession of the nuclear arsenal, capacity, and capability to use space power, military technology, and so on. However, the elements of soft power often prove to be just as effective as hard power is considered. And one of the most powerful pillars of Soft Power is culinary diplomacy. Sam Chopple-Sokol, something of a celebrated expert of Culinary Diplomacy describes it so: “Culinary Diplomacy is the use of food and cuisine as instruments to create cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation between countries. It brings about a diverse intersection between food, politics, and power. Most interestingly, culinary diplomacy envelopes not only the government but also citizens.” While formal government dinners extend government-to-government diplomacy in the backdrop of a carefully curated menu, the same diplomacy also finds itself in the hands of diplomat chefs to travel around the world, documentary filmmakers who capture food at its best and even reality shows like Master Chef Australia – which does wonders for Australia and its culinary identity. Here is a look at how Culinary Diplomacy makes its way around the world:

In the Indian context, Culinary Diplomacy was used first by Indian Royalty. In 1897, Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad of Baroda – a person well known for his royalty’s wealth,

passionate follower of cultural values along with great passion for the arts – then, invited the honourable Maharaja Scindiya of Gwalior for dinner. An exquisite menu of Pure’a d’Aspergesa, Cauliflower a la Hollandaise, and Pistachio Pudding among other delicacies boasts of an exclusively French spread for the Royalty of Gwalior.

In India, food habit changes geographically every 15-20 Km, it is natural that India’s political history has a rich tradition of culinary history.

INDEPENDENT INDIA, FOOD, AND POLITICS

It is a fact that Leveraging gastronomy is not a new concept in cultural diplomacy. “The natural effect of good eating and drinking is the inauguration of friendships and the creation of familiarity” notes the 17th-century writer, François de Colliers in *The Art of Diplomacy* (Freeman,1995).

Mango “King of fruits” has helped in sweetening ties among countries over centuries. South Asian countries India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have been using this delicious fruit as a way to smoothen political relations by taking part in “mango diplomacy.” It is a term subtly used when the famed fruits are used as a gesture of friendship and goodwill and presented as gifts by national or political leaders to each other. First Prime Minister of India Pt J L Nehru, in the deftest manner, used famous varieties of Indian mangoes as a fruit diplomacy. (Muskan Chandrapota-
<https://www.cntraveller.in/story/8-times-the-mango-played-diplomat-modi-manmohan-singh-nehru/>)

INDIAN FOOD DIPLOMACY IN THE LAST DECADE OR SO

With the commendable progress in the Indian Agriculture sector, today India can aid, support, and provide food grains to the needy countries of the world. In the sixth decade of the last century, the US supplied food grains to many countries under varied terms of agreements, tailored in favor of American interests. India alone imported from the USA nearly 24 million tonnes (MT) of wheat under PL-480 during 1964-66. However, in the recent past (in the year 2021), India showed the world an excellent approach to helping the needy wherein it supplied two Metric Tons of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian aid and one Metric Ton of rice to Sri Lanka against payment in a local currency like that under PL-480? It is a fine example of “Grain Diplomacy.” It can be symbolic of a new India that will not let anyone starve in South Asia¹⁶. India after taking over the G 20 Presidency aptly used the golden opportunity to showcase its culinary richness to visiting delegates from 19 different nations. As per reports, a diverse spread of meals, snacks, and beverages was on dining tables for

delegates during breaks between scheduled meetings and afterward (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/royal-meal-g20-delegates-to-be-served-rajasthani-delicacies-udaipur-2304830-2022-12-03>)

Further, now India is treading on a path of culinary diplomacy with much-needed focus and clarity in a decisive manner. Now whenever the Indian Prime Minister or other dignitaries visit other countries on official tours, Indian cuisine delicacy is finding a prominent place in the official lunch/dinner hosted by India. Deserts and Beverages served have never to be missed Indian imprint. (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/three-nation-asia-pacific-tour-pm-modis-cultural-culinary-diplomacy-on-display/articleshow/100421439.cms?from=mdr> 18-05-2023)

CONCLUSION

In this research paper, an attempt has been made to bring forward the history of Indian cuisine for ages. Also, effort has been made to understand the impact of the type of food being consumed on the personality and overall development of the psychology of a human being and the society of which he is an integral part. While researching our Indian culinary ingredients in use i.e., spices, food grains, beverages and so on it has been found how rich it is, which has been envied the world over and accordingly traded effectively through the millennium.

India, before and after independence has forayed into cuisine diplomacy successfully. This approach has strengthened diplomatic relations on many occasions in the past. Presently, it is well known that policymakers have taken a recalibrated relook and approach to leveraging Indian cuisine in a much more effective manner. However not to forget that Indian cuisine and culinary has been a very important part of soft power since ages and it must be used effectively in the future. Experts of International Relations and Indian Government policymakers must find many more positive ways and means to spread the reach of Indian cuisine worldwide as a tool of soft power in the interest of the nation. It is felt there is much more required to be done.

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