

A Comparative Study on “Heritage on a Plate: India and Turkey’s Culinary Culture”

Dr. Athiya Sultana

*HoD & Coordinator, Asst. Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Languages,
Khaja Bandanawaz University, Kalaburagi, Karnataka, India
khanathiya84@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative study of the food cultures of Turkey and India. It will investigate their historical trajectories, standard ingredients and styles of cooking, religious and social institutions, and contemporary influences in order to highlight similarities and difference. Indian food culture has been influenced by multiple streams of geography, religious practices and external (Persian, Central Asian, European) influences over the years. Turkish food, with roots in Central Asian Turkic history, developed quite differently under Seljuk and Ottoman Empire influences, while also reflecting Mediterranean, Balkan, Arab and; Persian influences. Differences in flavour profiles and food systems can be witnessed in dietary norms (e.g. India's vegetarianism standards vs. Turkey's meat and dairy), food-based rituals and, more recently, the influence of globalization on food culture. There are instances of convergence in meaning for both contexts (hospitality standards, shared meals and food's role in identity). This comparative paper adds to a broader understanding of how food is an agent of broader cultural, historical, and geographic forces and presents opportunities for additional avenues of scholarly engagement such as; urban food transitions, micro-histories on the regional level, and gastronomic tourism.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Food.

1. Introduction

Food embodies more than food; it embodies collective culture, identity, religion, environment, and history. India and Turkey are particularly rich landscapes for comparative food studies. Both share distant, historical timelines, vast geographic areas spanning multiple climate zones, religious pluralism (albeit differentially) and historic crossroads of trade, conquest and cultural exchange. At the same time, their cuisines yield strikingly different culinary and flavor outcomes, including staple ingredients, social norms and frameworks of meals and eating. The present study will compare the food cultures of both India and Turkey in the following ways: the historical development of culinary formation; food ingredients, methods of cooking, and flavours; the role of religion and religious food practices and social rituals while eating; street food and popular culture; the impact of modernization/globalization; and then finally end with some comparisons and contrasts of food cultures and possible research possibilities.

2. Historical Formation

2.1 India

The food culture of India has its origin in prehistoric and protohistoric times and is shaped by agricultural and pastoral systems, trade, and religio-philosophical systems that define "what is eaten, and how?" • The earliest references are Vedic and post-Vedic texts that mention basic staples of barley, rice, dairy products and mention ritual sacrifices with ghee, meat, and grain offerings. The issue of food practices stems from ideas of purity and pollution, vegetarianism

and non-violence on one hand, and rituals on the other (as in Jain and Buddhist vegetarian traditions). • As with any cultural element, food practice changed with political and cultural moments - the regional kingdoms of India, trade with Southeast Asia, the advent of Islam in India from the 7th -12th century onwards, and the Mughal empire introduced new ingredients and new techniques (e.g. refined meat dishes, nuts and dry fruits, saffron, pilafs, etc.), and merged with local traditions • Transfer of regional differences (e.g. Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, Gujarati etc.) influenced Indian food practice based on local climate, local produce and religious practices, as well as local traditions, and trade. European colonialism introduced new World crops (e.g. chillies, potatoes, tomatoes, maize, etc.) that also played a significant role in changing taste and food traditions.

2.2 Turkey

The food of Turkey likewise has origins amongst the pastoral lifestyle of the early Central Asian Turkic peoples, who lived almost exclusively on a diet that included meat, dairy and a few simple cereals. Over the centuries:

- As the Turks continued to migrate westward (in the Seljuk period and then again during the Ottoman Empire period) they encountered the food traditions of Anatolian, Byzantine, Arab, Persian and Balkan cultures.
- The Ottoman Empire, especially in the preparation of food by the palace kitchens, was very influential on the food culture of the Turks; the large scale administrative structure of palace kitchens (agriculture, market trade and agricultural production) had inevitably produced a more advanced version of food as seen by the complexity and ingenuity of elaborate recipes, ceremonial and celebratory meals, regiments for dessert, mechanical combinations of sweet-and-savoury, preserved fruits and vegetables, as well as innovations in beverage preparation and consumption.
- After the Ottoman period, the early Turkish Republic also experienced change (modernization, westernization, better contact with European cuisines and cultures), yet the traditional fabric of food culture remained quite intact, especially in regions in Anatolia.

3. Ingredients, Cooking Techniques and Flavour Profiles

3.1 Staple Ingredients

- India: India's many different climate zones (Himalayan, Deccan, coastal, and so forth) contribute to the huge diversity of food: many grains (rice, wheat, millet), various legumes (lentils, chickpeas), vegetables, dairy (milk, ghee, yogurt), spices and herbs (cumin, coriander, turmeric, chili powder, mustard seeds, cardamom, and cloves), fruits (such as mangos, tamarind), and oils (mustard oil, coconut oil, ghee). Many of these ingredients are also used for medicinal purposes (Ayurveda).
- Turkey: The main staples include cereals (wheat for breads, bulgur), legumes (lentils, chickpeas), dairy (yogurt, cheeses), meats (lamb, mutton, beef), olive oil - especially in

the west & Mediterranean, vegetables (eggplant, tomatoes, peppers), fruits (figs, citrus), honey, nuts, and a tradition of preserved foods. Mediterranean climate in many areas supports produce - olives, citrus and herbs.

3.2 Flavour and Spice

- India: Known for its robust spices, with a multitude of mixtures (garam masala, sambar powder, panch phoron, etc.); spicy (hot) heat derived from the usage of chili peppers; use of aromatic spices (cardamom, cloves, etc.); layering flavors (roasting, tempering, slow-cooking, marinating). There is also a sour/tangy agents (tamarind, yogurt, amchur), sweet (jaggery, sugar) flavor in certain dishes.
- Turkey: Flavors tend to be a bit more muted, in relation to what many would emphasize with the notion of "Indian spice" (less use of hot chilies), with emphasis on fresh herbs (mint, dill, parsley), balance with sourness (lemon, pomegranate molasses), use of olive oil especially in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions, sweet desserts and preserved fruit desserts (peach, apricot, etc.), use of yogurt for cooling/acidity. The grilled/charred/smoked flavors of kebabs and roasted vegetables also play a role.

3.3 Cooking Techniques

- India: Methods include tempering spices in fat (tadka), slow stewing, braising (curries), frying (deep and shallow), roasting (tandoor, ovens, hearths), steaming and fermenting (dosa, idli, pickles). Usage of wet and dry cooking is common; sauces and gravies are the focus in many regions. Large dependence on hands and traditional cookware (clay pots, brass, cast iron).
- Turkey: Grilling (kebab, shish, skewer), roasting, baking (bread, pide, börek), stews and casseroles (e.g. güveç), preserving (pickling, drying fruits), yogurt and dairy-based preparations, and soups. The Ottoman palace had distinct techniques for desserts, confectionery, syruped sweets, and careful service. There are archival palace kitchen records that depict a hierarchal system in the kitchen and kitchen ceremonies.

4. Religious, Social, and Ritual Influences

4.1 Religion and Dietary Norms

- India: The great religions of India—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism—all exert a significant influence. Many Hindus and Jains are vegetarian as a norm. Ritual purity has social requirements about what food can be eaten, by whom, and when. Festivals (e.g., Diwali, Holi, and Navratri) all have specific food traditions; people also eat particular types of food on days of fasting. Food taboos also are significant (e.g., beef in many Hindu communities and restriction on pork in Muslim communities). Certain groups use milk and avoid particular spices and ingredients (e.g., certain sects of vegetarian food avoid onion and garlic).

- Turkey: The majority of the country is Muslim, and dietary law of halal (e.g., no pork, specific slaughtering methods) is prevalent. Religious holidays, including Ramadan, introduce new customs associated with food (e.g., Iftar meals and sweet foods). Other religious minorities (e.g., Christians) and their food traditions also exist but have a limited influence on Turkish national cuisine. The court of the Ottoman Empire had food customs that went along with the religious calendar (e.g., Eid feasts and Ramadan meals). The beverage customs in the Ottoman palace involved flavored waters, sharbat, tea and coffee, and rituals associated with consumption.

4.2 Social Structure, Hospitality, Identity

- Food as social identity: in both countries, cuisine identifies regional, ethnic, caste/religious identity in India; regional identity in Turkey (Anatolian, Kurdish, Aegean, Mediterranean).
- Hospitality: treat your guest with generosity; sharing food is a responsibility. In India, one serves their guests, feeding guests ritual hospitality (guest is god` “Atithi Devo Bhava” concept). In Turkey, it is considered foundational to welcome guests with meze, tea or coffee, and bread. Tea/coffee culture is socially central, and coffee is especially recognized in Turkish tradition (UNESCO-recognized).
- Rituals, festivals, seasonal foods: India has elaborate festival foods, seasonal crops, fasting/feasting cycles (e.g. Pongal, Onam, Eid, Diwali). Turkey has seasonal dishes, festival sweets (the beloved baklava), and dessert specialties often tied to religious occasions. Ottoman palace cuisine held feasts and ceremonials; dining had court rituals built around etiquette to include table presentation; sharing food.

5. Meal Structure, Street Food and Popular Food Culture

5.1 Meal Structure and Dining Etiquette

- India: A typical meal is multi-component - staple grain (domestic-prepared rice or flat bread), vegetable based dishes ("sabzis"), legumes ("dal"), curry (vegetable and/or meat based), pickles, chutneys/spread, yogurt/raita, sweets; balancing taste (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, umami), textures and colors as presenting elements of the meal. Meals are generally eaten on the floor or low seating, often with hands to eat (in certain regional traditions). It is more common to share food. In India, a special meal is prepared for ritual or ceremony.
- Turkey: The meal structure often includes an order of fare; typically, a platter of appetizers (meze), followed by a soup (shorba), main entrée (meat, fish, or vegetable), sides (bread or rice), salad, dessert and beverages (tea, Turkish coffee). The social protocol of dining includes shared plates for communal food, placement of plates, presentation/serving. In more formal Ottoman dinner service, strict hierarchies and manners produced meal etiquette in table settings. Samancis doctoral research thesis documents the evolution of palace table manners from the Ottoman era through the 19th century. (BOUN Repository)

5.2 Street Food and Popular Cuisine

- India: Extremely diverse street food culture: chaat (various regional varieties), savory snacks (samosa, vada, pakora), regional pancakes/dosas/uttapams, biryani, kebabs, sweets (jalebi, gulab jamun), as well as many local specialties using local seasonal produce. The diversity of street food varies extremely widely region to region. Street comes mostly in the form of savory snacks and food that might best be described as spicy, tangy, and generally highly flavored and modified to be acceptable to local tastes.
- Turkey: Street food includes döner kebab, pide, simit (sesame bread rings), börek (filled pastries), köfte (meatballs), gözleme, roasted corn, chestnuts, lokma (fried dough balls), as well as a dessert stall with baklava and ice cream & strong tea or coffee vendor culture. Street food is often a focus on, grilled items, baked items, bread, dairy, simpler seasoning than street food in India.

6. Modernization, Globalization, and Culinary Tourism

6.1 Technological, Social and Economic Change

- Urbanization has had an effect on food habits (cooking less time, reliance on more processed and convenience foods). Middle classes in India are preparing meals quicker and going out to eat more often, and relying on ready mixes that simply need to be cooked (e.g. frozen). Turkey is likewise being transformed by urbanization - with more fast food chains and global influences on how food is prepared and consumed in urban centers. Technology has changed the culture of food consumption in Turkey, specifically food preservation, and aspects of food that become processed and packaged foods (DergiPark).
- Increase in mobility, both internal migration and diaspora, is also taking regional foods beyond where they were originally specific to. The Indian diaspora has taken Indian food around the globe, Turkish food travels to, through various channels related to tourism, and conversions in emigrant populations. In spaces where Indian and Turkish lands meet (such as the Middle East, Central Asia, etc.), intersections of Indian and Turkish foodways can be seen too.

6.2 Gastronomic Tourism and Revivalism

- In the context of Turkey, there is a deliberate revival of Ottoman palace cuisine associated with gastronomic tourism. For example, hotels and chefs in coastal tourist areas such as Antalya, are serving Ottoman cuisine and demonstrating a commitment to preserving certain older recipes, and in many cases, presenting them to tourists, frequently with special presentation or methods of service. (DergiPark)
- In India, there is a revivalist interest in traditional regional cuisines, for example, there is an increasing number cookbooks, media, and food festivals emphasizing "authentic" recipes, traditional techniques, and indigenous ingredients. "Authenticity" quickly becomes a contested term that is saleable and marketable. (IUScholarWorks)

6.3 Global Fusion and Adaptation

- There has been fusion in both cuisines: fusion in Indian cooking (e.g., Indo-Chinese, Anglo-Indian) and in modern Turkish restaurants that combine Italian, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and European techniques/flavors. There has also been cross-cultural exchange, and Turkish cuisine is more visible in India (restaurant, Turkish dishes, Turkish-style establishments). (Restaurant India)
- Global food media, cookbooks, and social media influence how people imagine “Indian” or “Turkish” food, usually by simplifying or reinterpreting traditional dishes for an international audience or other tourism menu.

7. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

In conclusion, India and Turkey both have rich, layered culinary traditions that reflect geography, religion, history, and social structure. They differ in many respects—spice levels, prevalence of vegetarianism, central staple ingredients, how meat/dairy figure in the average diet—but share many commonalities: hospitality, communal eating, layering of tastes, the importance of ritual, and adaptation through time.

Areas that merit further research include:

1. **Micro-regional Case Studies:** Deep studies of specific local cuisines (for example, Kashmiri in India, Southeastern Anatolia in Turkey) to better understand how microclimates, minority population cuisines, and local resources shape food.
2. **Urban Dietary Transitions:** How urbanization, migration, and modern life change diets, nutrition, health outcomes; how convenience and fast food are transforming traditional practices.
3. **Culinary Tourism and Heritage Preservation:** Analysis of how preserving old recipes (e.g. Ottoman palace cuisine or forgotten regional Indian dishes) is being done, by whom, with what authenticity, and what trade-offs are involved (cost, palatability, presentation).
4. **Comparative Study of Street Food Cultures:** How regulation, safety, urban planning, tourism affect street food; role of street food in immigrant / diasporic identity.
5. **Food, Identity, and Globalization:** How cuisines are transformed when they move across borders (diaspora communities, restaurants abroad), and how authenticity is claimed, adapted, or commodified.

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