



# Gastronomy And Society In Mughal India

Safia Shahzad,  
Assistant Professor,  
Al-Barkaat College of Graduate Studies, Aligarh, India

**Abstract:** This study explores the role of food in Mughal India as more than just a means of sustenance. It argues that food was a powerful symbol of social identity, class, religion, and political power. By examining the eating habits of different social groups from emperors and nobles to the middle class and common people, the research shows how meals reflected and reinforced the deeply layered structure of Mughal society. Royal feasts displayed wealth and control, while noble dining habits expressed cultural pride and status. Middle-class meals balanced tradition and affordability, and the diets of the poor highlighted survival, regional influence, and shared local customs. Foreign travellers' accounts further confirm that food practices were tied to religion, region, and social class. Overall, this study presents food as a vital lens through which to understand the diversity, hierarchy, and cultural richness of Mughal India

**Index Terms – Food Habits, Society, Economic Status, Mughal India**

## I. INTRODUCTION

From the earliest times, food has been much more than just a basic need for survival. It has always been a powerful expression of social identity, cultural values, and even political power. This is particularly true in medieval India during the Mughal period, when cuisine reflected not only the diverse geography and population of the subcontinent, but also the deeply layered social structure of the time.

This connection between food and culture was especially strong in medieval India during the Mughal period. The Mughal Empire brought together people from many different regions, religions, and communities, each with their own food habits. At the same time, the Mughals themselves were known for their love of rich and luxurious food. Their royal kitchens became symbols of power and sophistication, carefully managed and filled with a wide variety of dishes from across the empire and beyond.

During this time, what people ate depended greatly on their social class, religion, and where they lived. Royalty and nobles enjoyed grand feasts, while middle-class families had simpler but still flavorful meals. Poorer people made do with basic food that was easy to find or grow locally. The variety of food, from pickles and sweets to fruit juices and meats, tells us a lot about how different groups lived, celebrated, and related to each other. In this way, food becomes a window into the rich and complex social life of Mughal India.

## Food and Power: The Royal Kitchens of the Mughals

In the Mughal court, food was a matter of prestige, ritual, and control. The royal kitchen was not merely a place to cook—it was a highly organized and strictly regulated institution. According to Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, wise rules governed every detail of food preparation for Emperor Akbar.<sup>1</sup> Meals were not just private affairs but ceremonial acts. For instance, Akbar often ate alone,<sup>2</sup> while other emperors like Jahangir and Shah Jahan occasionally dined with nobles inside the royal harem.<sup>3</sup>

Preparing and serving food in the Mughal court was a detailed and well-organized process that involved many people. Skilled cooks made delicious meals using special spices and ingredients. Bakawals, or food carriers, carefully brought the food to where it would be served. Eunuchs and attendants from the harem also helped, especially in the women's quarters, making sure everything was done properly.<sup>4</sup>

Food was usually served on the floor on fine cloths called dastarkhan. These were often made of fine fabric and decorated nicely. Before anyone started eating, a portion of the meal was always kept aside to be given to the poor,<sup>5</sup> showing kindness and charity. Cleanliness and safety were very important. Each dish was checked carefully and sealed to make sure it hadn't been touched or poisoned.<sup>6</sup> These meals were not just about eating—they were also a way to show the emperor's power and the richness of the empire.

These elaborate dining customs emphasize how food was used to project imperial power, reinforce discipline, and uphold a strict hierarchy. As Father Monserrate and Manucci both observed, the royal meals could consist of up to many dishes daily, including delicacies made from grains, greens, meat, sweets, and spices. The scale of expenses—one thousand rupees per day during Aurangzeb's reign<sup>7</sup>—shows how seriously the court took its cuisine.

### **Feasts of the Rich: How Mughal Nobles Dined in Style**

Mughal nobles both Hindu and Muslim tried to copy the royal way of life as much as they could afford. For them, food was not just something to eat it was a way to exhibit their wealth, power, and refined taste. Meals in noble households were grand affairs, especially during feasts and celebrations.

European visitors like Thomas Roe and Pelsaert wrote that noble feasts often included twenty or more different dishes.<sup>8</sup> These meals were usually full of spices and strong flavors, which impressed and sometimes overwhelmed foreign guests who were not used to Indian food. Wealthy Muslim nobles enjoyed a wide variety of rich dishes such as birinj (a type of rice dish), aeshalia, pulao (flavored rice with meat or vegetables), zuela, and du-piyaza (a dish with meat and lots of onions). Roasted meats were also popular in their meals.<sup>9</sup> Rajput nobles, who were mostly vegetarian, also had rich and tasty diets.<sup>10</sup> They avoided beef but did eat other meats.<sup>11</sup> Their meals included breads made with ghee (clarified butter), milk products like curd and paneer, lots of sweets, fresh fruits, and rice-based dishes. Even though their food habits were different, they also believed in serving a wide variety of dishes in a beautiful and generous way.<sup>12</sup>

The focus on having many dishes, rich ingredients, and attractive presentation showed that food was much more than just a basic need, it was a symbol of luxury, hospitality, and cultural pride in noble households.

### **Middle-Class Food Habits: Modest, Traditionally Rich and Simple Meal**

The middle class in society—such as merchants, traders, doctors, and artisans—may not have lived as luxuriously as the elite, but their food habits were still meaningful and well-organized. Their meals were simple and practical included a good variety. They commonly ate bread, rice, lentils, vegetables, butter, milk, and curd.<sup>13</sup> Meat was eaten less often, but some, especially Muslims,<sup>14</sup> included it in their diet occasionally. One could argue that even though their meals were modest, the middle class had a clear and regular eating pattern, usually with three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner.<sup>15</sup> This daily rhythm reflects a sense of structure and stability in their lifestyle.

Spices played an important role in their cooking—not just to improve flavor, but also to help preserve food.<sup>16</sup> This shows that even in modest households, people cared about both taste and practicality. Interestingly, even certain special foods like khajura—a fine bread praised by traveller Sebastien Manrique—were known and appreciated, though mainly among wealthier people.<sup>17</sup> This example highlights how food choices reflected both economic status and cultural preferences. Overall, middle-class food culture was shaped by a mix of practicality, regional traditions, and religious customs, proving that simplicity did not mean a lack of richness or variety in their daily lives.

## Everyday Food of Common People: Basic Diets, Regional Traditions, and Local Flavors

The food habits of the common people were shaped mainly by what was available in their region and what they could afford. Unlike the wealthy, their diets were simple and based on necessity rather than choice. A key argument here is that their meals reflect both survival and strong local traditions. One dish, khichri—a mix of rice and green lentils—was widely eaten across many areas and became a staple for the lower classes.<sup>18</sup> This shows that despite poverty, there was a shared food culture among the common people.

In addition to khichri, they also ate basic grains like millet and wheat, along with vegetables, milk, and fruits when available.<sup>19</sup> Muslims mostly ate the same food as non-Muslims, except when it came to meat. They usually ate beef and fish.<sup>20</sup> In areas where fish was easy to find, it became a regular part of the diet for many people.<sup>21</sup> These additions highlight how religion and geography influenced even the simplest meals.

Travellers like Sebastien Manrique observed clear differences in the types of bread eaten. He noted that poor people ate very thin, paper-like bread, unlike the thick and rich varieties enjoyed by the upper classes.<sup>22</sup> This detail is more than just about food—it shows how deeply food was tied to class and status. The kind of bread one ate could show their place in society.

Basically, daily meals of the lower classes were frugal but meaningful. They reflected both economic struggle and a deep connection to local culture. The food of the poor may have been plain, but it tells us a lot about social divisions and how people made the most of limited resources.

### Conclusion:

In Mughal India, food was far more than just a way to fill one's stomach—it was a powerful reflection of the society's structure, values, and identity. From the royal kitchens to the poorest homes, what people ate, how they ate, and who they ate with all carried deep social meaning. One can argue that food in the Mughal period was a symbol of power, class, religion, and culture, and it helped define people's roles and relationships within society.

For the Mughals and nobles, food became a clear expression of political power and royal identity. The amount of food served, the rare spices used, the number of dishes prepared, and the strict rituals followed all showed how food was used to maintain control, show off wealth, and impress others. These meals were more than just daily routines—they were public performances of prestige and order, proving that those at the top of the social ladder lived lives of discipline and luxury.

Among the nobles, food served a similar purpose. While not as extravagant as the emperor's court, noble families still tried to copy royal habits. Their grand feasts were used to show hospitality, refinement, and social status. Both Hindu and Muslim nobles used food to express pride in their culture, their generosity, and their ability to bring people together through shared meals.

In contrast, the middle class practiced a simpler but still meaningful food culture. Their meals showed a balance of tradition, religion, and practicality. Even without luxury, they maintained clear meal patterns and cared about both taste and nutrition. Their use of spices and attention to food preparation showed that they, too, valued food as part of a good and stable life. Their diet was a reflection of their cultural values and economic limitations, but also their adaptability and pride in heritage.

The common people, although facing economic hardships, also had a food culture deeply tied to local resources, religion, and seasons. Their meals, though plain, told a story of resilience and regional diversity. Dishes like khichri, millet roti, and seasonal vegetables reflected how people made the most of what little they had. Even small differences—like the kind of bread eaten—revealed the social divides of the time. Food among the poor was about survival, but it still carried cultural meaning and a sense of identity.

Religion, too, played a major role in shaping food habits across all classes. Dietary rules, fasting traditions, and what meat was allowed or forbidden created differences in what people ate and how they prepared food. These customs added another layer to how food expressed identity and belonging in society.

In the end, the story of food in Mughal India is not just about recipes or ingredients. It is a story of how people lived, what they valued, and how they related to each other. It shows us that food is not only about hunger—it is about who you are, where you belong, and how society sees you. Whether served in gold dishes in a royal palace or cooked in a clay pot in a village home, every meal carried a deeper meaning. Food was, and still is, a window into the heart of any society. And in the Mughal era, it clearly reflected a world rich in diversity, tradition, and hierarchy.

<sup>1</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. Blochman, Calcutta, 1977, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Monserrate, *Commentary of Father Monserrate*, tr. Hoyland, London, 1922, p 199.

<sup>3</sup> Sebastien Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique*, tr. C. E. Luard, Oxford, 1926, p 180.

<sup>4</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> It was a custom to take out part of food for poor; *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>7</sup> At that time expenses seems to have been greatly reduced due to the strict rules of the Aurangzeb. Manucci, *Storia De Moghul*, tr. Irwin, Delhi, 1907, vol III, p 332.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Roe, *Embassy of Thomas Roe to India*, Jalendar, 1993, pp. 224-25; Pelseart, *Jahangir;s India*, tr. Moreland and Geyl, Delhi, 2011, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> Fransico Pelseart, *The Remonstrance of FransicoPelseart*, tr. Moreland, and Geyl, Delhi, 2011. P. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Duarte Barbosa, *The Book Of Duarte Barbosa*, tr. and ed. M. L. Dames, New Delhi, 1989, vol I, P. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Pelseart, p.78; Manrique, vol II, p.157; Mandeleslo, *Mandeleslo,s Travel in Western India (1638-1639)*, tr. M. S. Commissariat, New Delhi, 1995, p.58.

<sup>12</sup> Abbe Carri, *Travels of Abbe Carri in India and near East 1672 to 1674*, tr. Lady Fawcett, ed. C. Fawcett and R. Burn, New Delhi, 1990, p. 247.

<sup>13</sup> Manucci, Vol III, p. 38; Duarte Barbosa, Vol I, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Duarte Barbosa, Voll, p. 232.

<sup>15</sup> J. Ovington, *A Voyages to Surat in the year 1689*, ed. Rawlinson, New Delhi, 1689, pp. 184-185.

<sup>16</sup> Manrique, Vol II, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.188.

<sup>18</sup> Pelseart, p. 60; Bernier, Francois, *Travels in Mughal Empire (1656-1668)*, ed. Constable, New Delhi, 2004, p. 301; Tavernier, J. P., *Travels in India*, tr. and ed. Ball, V., New York, 1889, p.391; Thevenot, *Indian travels of Thevenot and Carre*, ed. Surendranath Sen, New Delhi, 1949, p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> Manucci, Vol III, p. 39; Fryer, John, *A New Account of East India and Persia (1672-1681)*, ed. Crooke, New Delhi, 1992, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> Fryer, p. 296.

<sup>21</sup> Manucci, Vol III, p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Manrique, Vol II, p. 188.