

## Kitchen, Cuisine and Caste: Culinary Hierarchies in Sultanate and Mughal India

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**Abstract:** Food in medieval India was never merely about sustenance; it was an architecture of power, caste, and cultural identity. Kitchens and dining rooms of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire became much more than a place of cooking, as they became theatres of social hierarchy, religious negotiation, and symbolic politics. In such ways, food in these contexts was associated with thoughts of purity and pollution, hierarchy and privilege, and cultural exchange. For understanding this layered world, we turn to primary sources like “Ni‘matnāmah (Book of Delights)”, “Abu’l Fazl’s Ain-i-Akbari,” and “Ibn Battuta’s Rihla,” alongside secondary scholarship on cuisine as well as caste. The “Ni‘matnāmah,” commissioned in the Malwa Sultanate, where recipes, cooking methods, and eating rituals are portrayed to show the artistic side of culinary art, and also depict political display of the given attribute in politics. Preparation of food, in this regard, was a royal extension. The elaborate cuisine acted as a manifestation of the authority over resources and high culture of the ruler. Likewise, Ain-i-Akbari by Abu-l-Fazl diligently records the kitchen administration of Akbar, including the items that were included on the menu, and dietary control, among other regulatory provisions. The text poses the system of food as a bureaucratically controlled system of imperial order, to the point that even the amount of rice or bread was gathered to reflect the

hierarchy of ranks and positions of power. Caste coloured immensely who prepared food, ate, and were denied food. At the household level, women were the custodians of caste purity, and finally, they were the ones who had to cook food. Food, prepared by women, usually in highly circumscribed domestic environments, was not only the sustenance of families but of caste divisions themselves. At the imperial scale, though, male cooks were prevalent, and cuisine at cosmopolitan courts was influenced by a Persianate and Central Asian influence. The contrast of male-dominated and female-centred food production in the courts of law, as well as in the kitchens at home, shows that food was gendered work and a tool of visibility as well as invisibility. A politics of purity also took the form of commensal rules. Higher-caste Hindus did not like to eat meat cooked by Muslims, and the latter regularly made distinctions on the basis of halal laws of eating. Ibn Battuta, in his Rihla, reflects how the Indian hosts presented him with Indian delicacies- gestures of hospitality through which Perso-Islamic and Indic culture were mediated. Court banquets also became a place where Persian, Turkic, and Indian cuisines merged to create hybrids that embodied Mughal cosmopolitanism. Simultaneously, food distribution in royal Courts was a statement of power. Nobles were blessed when trays of food from the emperor's own kitchen were sent to their households. These were practices that reminded individuals to be loyal, show generosity, and symbolically show a bond between the ruler and the subject. Vice versa, the refusal of food or obligatory meal could humiliate, lower, and undermine hierarchies. Indian kitchens of the medieval times were therefore repositories of caste politics, gender in the kitchen labour, and hybridity. Food was an indicator of exclusion as much as a place of synthesis. By blending Persianate recipes with Indian ingredients, the Mughals articulated their vision of empire: rooted in conquest but sustained by cultural fusion. Through cookbooks, administrative texts, and travel accounts, we see that food was not neutral. It was an

idiom of sovereignty, a medium of negotiation, and a field where identity was performed and contested. In reconstructing these culinary worlds, we realize that the medieval Indian kitchen was as much a site of history as the battlefield or the court—an arena where taste, power, and culture converged to shape the fabric of society.

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**Keywords:** Cuisine, Caste, Sultanate, Mughal, Kitchen, Ni‘matnāmah, Ain-i-Akbari, Rihala, Food Hierarchy, Purity

### **Introduction – The Politics of the Kitchen**

The kitchen in premodern India was never merely a physical space. It was, as Arjun Appadurai reminds us, “Language and literacy, cities and ethnicity, women and domesticity, all are examples of issues that lie behind these cookbooks. In examining these issues in the Indian case, we can begin to sharpen our comparative instincts about how cuisines are constructed and about what cookbooks imply and create” (Appadurai, 1988, p. 4). Within the Sultanate and Mughal courts, the kitchen or ‘matbakh’ was a microcosm of empire, housing not only chefs and servants but also the unseen hands of caste and gender. Recipes, etiquette, and dining rituals codified the very structures of political sovereignty.

The Sultanate period (13th–16th centuries) brought with it the first sustained infusion of Perso-Islamic tastes into an already diverse Indic culinary landscape. Courtly cookbooks such as the Ni‘matnāmah of the Malwa Sultanate (c. 1500), commissioned under Ghiyath Shah and later continued under Nasir Shah, provide us with an extraordinary record of culinary experimentation. This manuscript, now in the British Library, contains recipes for sanbūsa (samosas), pilafs, fish

stews, halva, betel preparations, and sherbets combining fruits, sugar syrup, and aromatics, reflecting Persianate tastes adapted to Indian ingredients (Titley, 2004, Introduction, p. 9).

Such texts were more than kitchen manuals; they were cultural translation devices. By writing down Persian recipes in a Sultanate court of central India, the *Ni'matnāmah* testifies to the way elite cuisines crossed linguistic, religious, and regional boundaries. Food here functioned as a soft form of diplomacy: samosas and kebabs carried the prestige of Central Asian tastes, while sherbets were linked to the humoral theories of medicine and courtly indulgence. The manuscript also recorded practices of aphrodisiac cookery, aligning food with sexuality and power, for Ghiyath Shah's court was infamous for its opulent harem culture. Thus, the Sultanate kitchen embodied not just gastronomy, but the politics of pleasure.

If the Sultanate kitchen marked the entry of Persianate refinement, the Mughal kitchen amplified scale and spectacle to a level hitherto unseen. "Cooks from all countries prepare a great variety of dishes of all kinds of grains, greens, meats; also oily, sweet, and spicy dishes. Every day, such dishes are prepared as the nobles can scarcely command at their feasts, from which you may infer how exquisite the dishes are which are prepared for his Majesty" (Allami, 1873, pp. 57-58). These were not simply meals but political performances. Dishes were distributed according to rank, feasts staged abundance as a display of imperial prosperity, and the emperor's restraint in eating symbolized moderation, piety, and authority. The kitchen thus projected both material power and moral legitimacy.

Yet beneath this splendour lay the rigid fault lines of caste. As Ragini Kashyap has observed, "Food snobbery is a part of India, and the food that belongs to upper castes has always been more celebrated" (Kashyap, 2021, p. 219). In the Sultanate and Mughal kitchens, Brahmin cooks retained

ritual authority over vegetarian cuisines consumed by Rajput allies, while Muslim chefs dominated the meat-based delicacies. Dalits and marginalized groups, however, remained excluded: their food's offal, coarse grains like millet, dried fish, or animal parts, were stigmatized as "impure." In contrast, refined foods like saffron pulao, almond halva, lamb kebabs were consecrated as symbols of purity and prestige.

Food became a visible grammar of inclusion and exclusion. To sit at the royal dastarkhwan was to be recognized within the imperial order; to be excluded from it was to be relegated to the periphery of social existence. Ibn Battuta's travelogue makes this choreography clear when he describes Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq's dining: "In the Sultan's household there are two kinds of meals, the private meal and the public meal, where ushers process with the dishes, ranks are seated, and "a portion of every dish" is set before each guest, with no sharing of plates ( Gibb, 2017, p. 669-671). Here, the food's movements, from sultan to nobles, and eventually to retainers, are materialized hierarchy in edible form.

Moreover, kitchens were also sites of gendered exclusions. Elite women were rarely mentioned in court cookbooks, yet in domestic contexts, women's cooking was crucial in upholding caste purity. As Uma Chakravarti writes, "Women are regarded as gateways into the caste system," their domestic labour (especially in kitchens) helping to safeguard caste purity (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579). Thus, while Mughal chroniclers celebrated male chefs in imperial kitchens, the daily work of women sustained the very purity regimes that underpinned caste society.

To study kitchens, then, is to enter a dense web of politics. The Sultanate and Mughal kitchens embodied a paradox: they were spaces of cosmopolitan experimentation and hybridization, yet also spaces of caste rigidity and exclusion. They remind us that food is never "just food". It is

always entangled with questions of power, hierarchy, desire, and belonging. The kitchen was, quite literally, the empire on a plate.

### **Sultanate Kitchens – Recipes, Rituals, and Hierarchies**

The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) marked the arrival of a cosmopolitan culinary ethos shaped by Persian, Turkic, and Indic influences. When the early Turkic rulers established their courts in Delhi, they brought with them not just military and administrative systems but also culinary traditions from Central Asia and the Persianate world. Over 3 centuries, such traditions blended with local Indic ingredients and practices for creating layered food culture. Court kitchens had been meticulously organized and had been immense, utilising 100s of tasters, cooks, servers, and stewards who worked under carefully regulated hierarchies. The sheer magnitude of these institutions is evidence of the value of food as a medium of the enunciation of sovereignty. Only cooking and eating were not secretive acts but very public demonstrations of power. Our richest textual evidence for the Sultanate's gastronomic culture is the *Ni'matnāmah* Nasir al-Din Shahi (Book of Delicacies), produced under Sultan Ghiyath Shah of Malwa (r. 1469–1500). Unlike simple recipe manuals, this illustrated manuscript is both a cookbook and a political document, intertwining culinary instructions with visual depictions of courtly life. The recipes are wide-ranging, covering meatballs, samosas, pilafs, sherbets, and even medicinal pastes, revealing not just dietary preferences but the blending of pleasure, health, and ritual in the courtly kitchen.

One illustrative example from the *Ni'matnāmah* describes the preparation of samosas: “Make a hole in the samosa, fill it with the mixture and fry it in sweet-smelling ghee. Make the

samosa with the tender meat of mountain sheep. The method for samosas of this kind is the same.” (Ni‘matnāmah, fol. 3b, trans. Titley, 2004, p.1).

This recipe does more than teach cooking as it signals status. The mention of “mountain sheep,” a costly and selective meat, highlights exclusivity. The act of frying in “sweet-smelling ghee” also underscores luxury, since clarified butter was expensive and inaccessible to common households. In another recipe, the Ni‘matnāmah describes the preparation of sherbet: “Mince coconut and leave it (to soak) in sweetened water. Strain off the coconut milk and, if desired, put syrup in it and also mangoes if so wished.” (Ni‘matnāmah, fol. 66a, trans. Titley, 2004, p.26).

This sherbet recipe reveals the marriage of Indic tropical ingredients such as coconut and mango with the Persianate preference for flavoured, sweetened drinks. Beyond culinary curiosity, however, the text reveals a politics of indulgence. These recipes were less about feeding hunger and more about cultivating refinement and displaying sovereignty. To possess knowledge of such recipes and to command their preparation was to affirm one’s status as a ruler who could command both nature and culture. The Sultanate kitchen also reflected caste exclusion and ritual boundaries. Though Islamic courts did not grant Brahmins central positions, they were not entirely absent from culinary life. In many cases, Brahmins retained ritual authority over vegetarian cuisines consumed by Rajput allies and Hindu courtiers who served in Sultanate administrations. For these groups, adherence to purity rules remained essential, and their food had to be prepared within strict caste guidelines. Thus, while Muslim cooks dominated in the court kitchens with their Central Asian stews (yakhni), pilafs, and leavened breads, Brahmins maintained influence in the domain of vegetarian ritual food. Yet these same culinary luxuries were often inaccessible to the lower classes. The common population, both Hindu and Muslim, rarely partook of the lavish courtly dishes. Wheat-

based breads, richly spiced stews, and meatballs remained luxuries. Most rural households survived on millet, pulses, and seasonal vegetables. The Sultanate kitchen thus functioned as an enclave of privilege, reinforcing divides between elite and subaltern, urban and rural, noble and commoner. Food was not merely nourishment but a marker of belonging and exclusion.

Beyond caste and class, food also intersected with diplomacy and ritualized hierarchy. Courtly feasts and banquets were carefully choreographed events. Ibn Battuta, who visited Muhammad bin Tughlaq's court in the fourteenth century, provides one of the most detailed descriptions of these rituals. He notes that meals were displayed with immense pomp and strict order: "There is set before each person a portion of every dish of which the meal is composed; he eats of it by himself and no person eats with another out of the same dish." (Gibb, 2017, pp. 669-670). This observation is telling. In many Indic traditions, eating together from a single dish was a gesture of intimacy or equality. By contrast, the Sultanate practice of individualized portions symbolized hierarchy and separation. No one was allowed to share directly, preventing the mixing of ranks and emphasizing the solitary dignity of each diner. Yet, simultaneously, the sheer abundance of dishes of every person receiving multiple offerings demonstrated the ruler's wealth and ability to provide in excess. Excess and moderation were co-joined: greater amounts of food were offered with more limited amounts of food consumed, supporting principles of control despite excess. What is more, the redistribution of food served as a means of political influence. Any of the food that remained after the meals were royal banquets was distributed among the courtiers, guards, and attendants. To touch the plate of a dish handled by the royal kitchen meant that one had been incorporated into the royal family. It was the redistribution that strengthened loyalty and dependence. It also chimed with more ancient Indic traditions in which spiritual power was held to be contained in prasada (blessed food)

dispensed by temples. In the Sultanate courts, the reallocation of food had political as opposed to religious sanctity.

The diplomatic meetings, also, were made to centre on food in many cases. They made feasts in honour of envoys, allies, and vassals, and in these feasts, the dishes in particular were often a compromise of traditions. By serving sherbets made with coconut or mango, they were drawing attention to the abundance of Indic culture, and by serving pilafs of the Persian world, announcing the Sultanate was part of that greater makar-ness. Food was a diplomatic language, which could be used to mean accommodation, superiority, and hybridity depending on the circumstances in which it was communicated. Going altogether, the Sultanate kitchen turns out to be the theatre of power and a social reflection. It illustrated the richness of the ruler, supported caste and class levels, and filtered cultural interactions. The making of sampling samosas and sherbets was not always about food felicity but overt performativity: an indulgence to be seen, recorded, and recalled. The preparation of dishes like samosas and sherbets was not only about culinary delight but about performance—an indulgence meant to be seen, recorded, and remembered. Ibn Battuta's account, moreover, recipes of "Nīmatnāmah" together reconstruct a world where food implied choreography of power: abundantly served, consumed sparingly, hence redistributed for reinforcing hierarchy.

The culinary customs of the Delhi Sultanate foreshadow the more intricate procedures of the Mughal court, here, the "Ain-i-Akbari" would later catalogue kitchens having more complexity. But the foundations were laid in the Sultanate era: the blending of Perso-Turkic and Indic traditions, the persistence of caste boundaries, and the elevation of food into a symbolic medium of rule. Thus, food in the Delhi Sultanate was never neutral. It was a carefully constructed language through which rulers governed, courtiers demonstrated refinement, Brahmins guarded ritual, and commoners experienced

exclusion. By studying these culinary worlds, we see not only what people ate but how societies were ordered, by taste, by rank, and by power.

### **The Mughal Kitchen – Grandeur, Ritual, and Power**

With Babur's conquest in 1526, the Mughal court did not merely establish a new dynasty but transformed the very culinary imagination of India. Drawing upon Timurid traditions of Central Asia, infused with Persian refinements and gradually entangled with Indian tastes, the Mughal imperial kitchen became an institution that mirrored the empire's politics of hierarchy, abundance, and display. Food was no longer a private matter but a projection of sovereignty. To eat in the Mughal court was to participate in a ritualized performance of order, wealth, and cultural synthesis. By the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir, the matbakh (royal kitchen) was a vast administrative structure in itself. The *Ain-i-Akbari*, Abu'l Fazl's encyclopaedic chronicle, devotes an entire section to the organization of the imperial kitchen. High-ranking officials supervised its operation, with departments specializing in bread-making, confectionery, beverages, and stews. Cooking thus became an act of governance, reflecting not only the emperor's diet but the hierarchy and order of the court itself.

Abu'l Fazl records with characteristic detail:

“What dinner lies been prepared today?’ never passes over his tongue. In the course of twenty-four hours, his Majesty eats but once, and leaves off before he is fully satisfied; neither is there any fixed time for this meal, but the servants have always things so far ready, that in the space of an hour, after the order has been given, a hundred dishes are served up. The food allowed to the women of the

seraglio commences to be taken from the kitchen in the morning, and goes on till night.” (Allami, 1873, pp. 57–58).

This passage reveals several striking dimensions of Mughal kingship. First, the emperor’s restraint, eating only once and never to full, is signified by moral discipline, an important virtue in Islamic rulership. Second, the preparation of “a hundred dishes” at a moment’s notice underscored the empire’s logistical mastery. The kitchen was a microcosm of imperial order: everything was ready, abundant, and capable of being mobilized instantly. Finally, the distribution of food to the seraglio across the day reflected the gendered and hierarchical structures of the court.

This daily regimen of dishes was itself a performance. Food abundance conveyed imperial prosperity, while the standardization of dishes projected a sense of order. The inclusion of both Persian-inspired kebabs and local khichri signalled cultural synthesis under Akbar’s reign. The Mughal table thus reflected the broader policy of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace), where different traditions were harmonized under imperial authority.

By Shah Jahan’s era, court cuisine had reached even greater opulence. The *Nuskha-i-Shahjahani*, a Persianate cookbook compiled during his reign, lists more than thirty different kinds of pulao, each distinguished by its use of saffron, dried fruits, ghee, and nuts. Rice, already a symbol of prosperity, was elevated into an art form, transformed into jewelled dishes where colour, fragrance, and texture expressed refinement. According to historian Salma Husain, animals destined for the Mughal table were fed special diets to enhance their flesh. She notes: “Sheep, goats, and fowls were maintained by the kitchen and were given a special diet mixed with aromatic herbs, silver, gold, pearls, saffron, marble mixed with sugar, perfumed grass to get pleasant-smelling flesh from the

animals. Cows were fed with cotton seeds, sugarcane, nutmeg, coconut, cinnamon, pulses, partridge eggs, and bamboo leaves of herbs, saffron, and even pearls.” (Choudhury, 2021).

Such extravagance underscores the Mughal vision of kingship. To feed animals on pearls and saffron was to display a level of wealth that bordered on the miraculous. It blurred the lines between nature and artifice: the very flesh of animals was transformed by the imperial kitchen into something perfumed, luxurious, and symbolic of abundance. Food preparation thus became a form of alchemy, where ordinary ingredients were elevated into treasures through imperial patronage.

Dining etiquette, too, reflected these hierarchies. Nobles and courtiers sat cross-legged around the *dastarkhwān*, a ceremonial cloth spread on the floor, while servants and eunuchs attended in silence. The very arrangement of bodies around food signified social order. As Bharadwaj argues, “Early Mughal dining etiquette symbolized hierarchy, acted as a social differentiator, and buttressed prestige.” (Bharadwaj, 2016, pp. 63–65). To sit closer to the emperor or to receive dishes directly from his table was an honour, while others were seated at varying distances, marking rank and favour.

At the same time, ritual infused each meal with a spiritual dimension. Before eating, the emperor would recite the *Bismillāh* and customarily set aside a portion of food for the poor, an act that entwined kingship with piety. As Tandon observes, “Meals in the royal Mughal household began with the recitation of the *Bismillāh-e-Rahmān-e-Rahīm* ... It was customary for the emperor to set aside a portion of food for the poor before eating.” (Tandon, 2021, pp. 5–6). This ritualized generosity reflected the Islamic ethic of charity while reinforcing the emperor’s role as provider to his people. Food was not just nourishment but a form of piety, charity, and kingship. The Mughal feast was also a stage of diplomacy. To dine with the emperor, or even to receive food from his kitchen, was to be symbolically incorporated into the imperial household. As Abu’ l Fazl notes, the

distribution of food after royal banquets was deliberate: nobles received choice dishes, while commoners were given leftovers (Bharadwaj, 2015, pp. 257–258). Feasts thus became instruments of imperial inclusion and exclusion. To receive a tray from the emperor's table was an honour; to be excluded was a mark of disgrace.

In this sense, food operated as both a reward and a disciplinary tool. By granting or withholding food, the emperor reinforced loyalty, demonstrated generosity, and displayed authority. The Mughal feast was therefore a choreography of politics, where abundance was staged, hierarchy was performed, and order was made visible. A combination of these aspects of the Mughal culinary culture displays a more profound interpretation of the role of an incredible kitchen. It was not a mere cooking location, but an institution, which was a statement of how the empire saw itself. The kitchen was a bureaucracy, a theatrical place, a temple, and a diplomatic chamber all at the same time. Dishes like jeweled pulao as well as saffron-scented kebabs had been more than foods; they represented metaphors of imperial synthesis where disparate forms are integrated into a single, orderly whole.

Therefore, in the conquest of Babur, India had not only passed into a new political world, but also into a new culinary imagination. The Mughal court transformed food into an instrument of rule. Abundance conveyed prosperity, etiquette reflected hierarchy, rituals linked food with piety, and distribution turned feasts into diplomacy. Imperial kitchen, as defined in "Ain-i-Akbari" & "Nuskha-i-Shahjahani," had been a place of politics as much as a battlefield or palace audience hall. Food was very much politics, and eating in the Mughal world was to become a part of the empire.

### **Caste and Cuisine – Purity, Pollution, and Culinary Exclusion**

The popularity of Sultanate and Mughal kitchens, so pompous in their size and splendour, sometimes yet pointing at deeper and more troubling phenomenon, the endurance of caste in food practices. Even though in its doctrinal core, Islam denies hereditary hierarchy and claims all believers are equal in the eyes of God, the historical realities of South Asian Muslim communities were rendered through their interaction with the already established societal hierarchies.

This was nowhere more evident than in the realm of food. Dining practices revealed fault lines that divided not only Hindus from Muslims but also stratified Muslims among themselves. The Ashraf—Muslims of supposedly foreign and noble descent, whether Turk, Afghan, Persian, or Mughal—often maintained distinct eating spaces and codes of purity that set them apart from the Ajlaf, the communities of local converts, artisans, and service groups. Food thus became a marker of status within the Muslim community itself. Just as Brahmanical taboos had long governed who could cook, serve, and share food, Muslim elites in India adopted analogous distinctions that betrayed the silent persistence of caste logic.

Courtly chronicles and social commentaries offer hints of this stratification. Banquets in the households of high nobles were strictly segregated; it was unthinkable that a weaver or butcher, however devout, would share a dastarkhwan with an Afghan general or a Mughal prince. The symbolism of the dastarkhwan, that ceremonial cloth on which nobles sat to eat, carried within it an implicit logic of exclusion: only those recognized as socially equal could partake of food from the same spread. Servants, though present in abundance, attended silently and reinforced their subordinate status by their very distance from the meal. The etiquette of food-sharing thus became a language of hierarchy.

The politics of purity extended deep into the kitchens themselves. Cooks employed in the imperial matbakh were carefully selected; in many cases, only men of certain occupational or regional backgrounds were entrusted with preparing food for the emperor and his nobles. There was an anxiety, recorded in Persian manuals of etiquette and later Mughal texts, about the possibility of pollution through touch or preparation by those deemed ritually “impure.” To the imperial eye, the kitchen was not only about flavor or efficiency but also about social discipline. Such fears indicate the incorporation of caste logic into Islamic contexts, where the concepts of “jāti (birth-group)” intersected with notions of lineage, pedigree, and occupational prestige.

Even in the ranks of the Hindu allies and Rajput courtiers at the Mughal court, food customs were articulations of compromise and divisions. Brahmin cooks used to cook vegetarian food for Rajput officers, and meat dishes were cooked by Muslim cooks. Individual kitchens were occasionally kept so as to respect these sensibilities. In this manner, the Mughal kitchen was a negotiating platform between religious taboos and political affiliations, with caste as the silent but authoritative mediator. Alliances also brought politics, alliance politics, in which there was the need to accommodate, but accommodation never undermined hierarchy—it simply reaffirmed it in ritualistic ways.

The paradox was deep. The same kitchen that supplied hundreds of dishes a day to be distributed and to alms encoded the borderlines of inclusion and exclusion. Food could circulate outward in the name of generosity, as in Akbar’s langar-khānas or Jahangir’s vast cauldrons of khichri for the poor, but within the courtly spaces, rules of purity and hierarchy determined who could dine together and who must remain apart. The feast, therefore, mirrored the empire itself: outwardly universal in rhetoric, inwardly fractured by the stubborn survival of caste distinctions.

The question of what foods were prepared also carried social meaning. Ragini Kashyap observes: “The ghee-laden curries were the prerogative of upper castes, while Dalits shared food practices across India, often using animal parts that upper castes rejected.” (Kashyap, 2021, p. 220). The Mughal kitchen reproduced this logic in refined form. While pulaos and kababs signified opulence and refinement, coarse grains, dried fish, intestines, and foods associated with the poor were excluded from the royal repertoire. These absences were as telling as the inclusions: the very notion of refinement depended on excluding what was marked as lowly, polluting, or rustic.

Such exclusions also reflected deeper anxieties about taste and hierarchy. Refined food, with its saffron, nuts, and clarified butter, marked nobility and civility, while coarse food indexed poverty and servitude. The culinary distinctions of the Mughal court thus paralleled the social distinctions of caste and class. In effect, the kitchen became a stage where social inequality was rehearsed and reproduced daily.

In addition, food-sharing between courtiers was a rather subtle way to express inclusion or exclusion. To receive food from the table of the emperor was to be symbolically inducted into the very top of imperial loyalty. To be refused that honor, or to be given a different dastarkhwān to eat in, was to be reminded of one's lower status. In this sense, the politics of food could not be detached in any way from the politics of empire itself.

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However, food may be a source of restricted bargaining. As Rajputs and Brahmins defended their purity by vegetarian diets, they could also accept imperial hospitality in forms that could be reconciled with their codes. Other Muslim nobles, who were cautious about commensality, too, understood the political usefulness of sharing food with allies. These concessions, though, never destroyed the system of subordination- they only strengthened it in the name of bargaining.

The kitchens of the Sultanate and Mughal courts present a dual reality in the final analysis. On the one hand, they represented glittering wealth, hospitality, and cultural fusion, and produced hundreds of dishes that went into circulation through banquets, langars, and almsgiving. On the one hand, these also coded hard edges, perpetuating caste in new terms of etiquette and lineage. The universal rhetoric of the empire as applied to food distribution was highly contrasted with the reality of exclusion performed in courtly kitchens.

Therefore, food did not only serve as a source of nourishment in medieval India, but it was also a reflection of society. It showed imperial prosperity in its abundance; piety in its rites; and the obstinate survival of caste in its exclusions. The Mughal banquet with its flashing eyes was thus also a choreography of hierarchy. Outwardly generous, inwardly divided, it symbolized an empire that sought universality yet lived with enduring fractures.

**Table 1: illustrates the caste-food division**

<b>Caste/Group</b>	<b>Accepted Foods</b>	<b>Rejected/Stigmatized Foods</b>
Brah	Ghee, milk, fine rice,	Meat from “unclean”

Caste/Group	Accepted Foods	Rejected/Stigmatized Foods
mins / Rajputs	wheat breads	animals, onions, garlic
Ashr af Muslims	Lamb, goat, pulao, kababs, dairy-based sweets	Pork, certain fish, coarse grains
Ajlaf / Dalits	Offal, intestines, coarse millet, dried fish	Excluded from elite kitchens

**Source : Created by own**

This hierarchy was not static. The spread of biryani and korma to Bengal, Awadh, and Hyderabad shows how royal foods hybridized with local traditions. According to Lizzie Collingham, “the modern biryani developed in the royal kitchens of the Mughal Empire... and is a mix of the native spicy rice dishes of South Asia and the Persian pilaf.” (Collingham, 2006, pp. 94) Yet, caste determined who cooked, who ate, and who was excluded. As Kashyap argued:

“Who is cooking? Who is being fed? What are they eating? What are they excluding? And finally, who is forbidden from being at the table? Answers to these questions tell the story of an imagined structure that has dictated Indian food practices for over three millennia.”(Kashyap, 2021, 227)

### **Gender and the Kitchen – Women’s Labor and Invisible Hierarchies**

While Mughal and Sultanate courts celebrated male chefs and the dazzling spectacle of imperial kitchens, much of the actual culinary labour in society remained gendered, domestic, and

hidden from historical records. The matbakh of the palace was a male domain of professional cooks and tasters, whose names sometimes found their way into chronicles. These men, often Central Asian or Persian in origin, acquired prestige through their service to sultans and emperors. They were recorded in memoirs, administrative accounts, and even illustrated manuscripts, such as the *Ni'matnāmah* and the *Ain-i-Akbari*. Their artistry in preparing elaborate stews, pilafs, kebabs, and sweetmeats was praised as a marker of refinement and cosmopolitan identity. Yet, beyond these glittering kitchens of empire, the reality of daily sustenance was entirely different. In ordinary households, it was women who bore the responsibility of ensuring daily food preparation. This work is repetitive, constant, and crucial, was rarely recorded in chronicles, yet it shaped the very fabric of social life. The gendered division of food labour was stark: the court was male, spectacular, and public; the home was female, hidden, and unrecorded. This gendered division also intersected with caste boundaries. Women's cooking was not merely about nourishment, as it was the principal means by which ritual purity was upheld within households. Every act of measuring rice, separating vessels, or deciding who could be served first was coded with cultural meanings. Caste purity was not a vague abstraction but a daily practice, reproduced through food and cooking. Women's hands became the guardians of ritual discipline, their decisions determining who was fed, who was excluded, and under what conditions food could be shared.

Feminist historians have emphasized this dimension of power. As the NGO Inside Jharkhand notes, drawing upon the scholarship of Leela Dube, a renowned feminist anthropologist, women “play an important role in maintaining caste boundaries through preparation of food and in maintaining its purity. The job of safeguarding food, forestalling danger, and in a broad sense, attending to the rules which govern the relational idiom of food falls upon women. Women's

practices in relation to food play a critical role in the hierarchical ordering of castes.” (INSIDE JHARKHAND NGO, 2024) . Dube’s observation makes visible what traditional histories have ignored: that food was not simply sustenance but a field where gender and caste intersected, with women as the invisible enforcers of purity and hierarchy. By controlling who could enter the kitchen, who might accept food from whom, and under what conditions, women became the unseen arbiters of caste rules. This control could be subtle yet decisive. For instance, a high-born woman in a Rajput household might insist on separate cooking spaces for different categories of guests, or prevent lower-caste servants from handling food intended for ritual occasions. The kitchen was, therefore, not only a domestic place, but also a place of constant policing where caste boundaries were created and recreated through daily actions. The contradiction is dramatic. Women played a vital role in everyday meals, but not in the spectacle of courtly kitchens. Mughal and Rajput households’ High-status women cooked in purdah, out of view, but indispensable, to make sure that ritual prescriptions were observed, although their efforts would rarely be publicly recognized. In aristocratic families, women were frequently in charge of kitchen management without being directly present in the kitchen, trusting in servants who nonetheless were under their control over issues of cleanliness and service. This was a kind of unseen government: women, despite their non-presence in chronicles, defined the rituals at the households and upheld the caste honour by controlling food.

Imperial kitchens transformed cooking into an act of power- but one that left women out of the picture. Abu’l Fazl’s detailed account of the Mughal kitchen in the Ain-i-Akbari is one of the most elaborate descriptions of food systems in early modern India. He catalogues hundreds of dishes, departments of cooks, tasters, and officials who managed the logistics of food preparation. He writes with great precision about the quantities of rice, meat, spices, and ghee required, and the careful

organization of kitchen staff into hierarchies of rank and duty. The *Ain-i-Akbari* conveys the sense that the imperial kitchen was a bureaucratic system, as grand and organized as the army or the treasury.

And yet, as scholars have long noted, there is no mention of women in Abu'l Fazl's text. (Allami, 1873, pp. 57–58). Their complete absence is telling. It was not that women did not cook—on the contrary, they sustained the empire's social order through their daily food labour—but that their work was deemed unworthy of chronicling. The spectacle of food belonged to men; the substance of sustenance remained with women. This erasure underscores the broader silences of history. Women's work in kitchens was repetitive, cyclical, and embodied, and therefore not easily recorded in chronicles that prized novelty and spectacle. Yet, without this work, the elaborate rituals of purity and commensality that structured medieval society would collapse. The authority of caste was reproduced in kitchens, and women were the agents of its reproduction. At the same time, one must recognize the duality of women's position. On the one hand, they were confined to domestic spaces, their work unrecognized and undervalued. On the other hand, they wielded significant cultural authority. By controlling food practices, they regulated social relations. A woman who refused to cook for a certain caste or who imposed strict rules on food-sharing could determine the boundaries of community. In this sense, women's kitchens were political spaces, even if historians have rarely acknowledged them as such. The paradox of gender and food in the medieval period can therefore be summarized as follows: men monopolized the spectacular kitchens of empire, but women sustained the hidden kitchens of caste. Both were essential to the functioning of society. Without the spectacle, rulers could not display their wealth and cosmopolitanism. Without the hidden kitchens, caste would lose its daily reinforcements. In recovering the histories of women's food

labour, feminist scholars challenge us to rethink archives themselves. The Ni‘matnāmah and the Ain-i-Akbari give us dazzling accounts of dishes and organization, but they tell us nothing of the millions of women whose daily work sustained families and communities. Oral traditions, ethnographies, and anthropological studies like those of Leela Dube allow us to glimpse what chronicles ignored. Ultimately, the kitchen was both a site of oppression and agency. It confined women to repetitive, undervalued work, but it also gave them authority over the most intimate boundaries of caste and purity. This duality continues into the present, as women remain central to food practices that define community identity while still being marginalized in public narratives of culinary culture. Thus, the study of food in medieval India cannot remain limited to courtly kitchens and male chefs. To understand the full picture, we must also attend to the hidden kitchens of women, where caste was enforced, gender was embodied, and the daily rhythms of society were sustained.

### **Regional Variations – Deccan, Bengal, and Rajasthan**

The Sultanate and Mughal culinary encounter was far from monolithic. While the imperial court at Agra or Delhi cultivated a cosmopolitan cuisine of Persian stews, Central Asian breads, and Indian lentils, the subcontinent’s vastness ensured that regional variations reshaped and re-flavoured courtly foodways. Bengal, the Deccan, and Rajasthan stand out as case studies in how caste, religion, ecology, and politics created distinct culinary identities under the broad canopy of Sultanate and Mughal rule.

“Abu’l-FaZl describes Bengal Subah as extraordinarily fertile, with ‘abundance of rice, sugarcane, betel-leaf, fish, and dairy products’ (Jarett, 1997, pp. 134 -164). Its sweet-making tradition, embedded in the agricultural surplus, reflects both ecological richness and cultural ceremony.”

The Mughal conquest of Bengal in the late 16th century introduced Persianate dishes—pulao, korma, sheer khurma—into an already vibrant rice-fish cuisine. The Nawabi era would later crystallize the Bengali biryani, but even under Jahangir, the fusion of local produce with Mughal taste was underway. Francois Bernier said :

“It is important to observe, The knowledge I have acquired of Bengal in two visits inclines me to believe that it is richer than Egypt. It exports, in abundance, cottons and silks, rice, sugar, and butter. It produces amply—for its own consumption—wheat, vegetables, grains, fowls, ducks, and geese. It has immense herds of pigs and flocks of sheep and goats. Fish of every kind are in profusion. From Rajmahal to the sea is an endless number of canals ...” (Bernier, 1826, pp. 202).

Bernier's words are striking not only for their detail but for the picture they paint of everyday markets. He evokes a land where the riverine ecology sustained a dazzling abundance of food. Canals and distributaries of the Ganges turned the delta into a network of water highways, ensuring cheap transport and year-round fertility. The produce of Bengal overflowed into its bazaars: heaps of sugar, mountains of rice, baskets of butter, silks from Murshidabad, fish pulled fresh from the rivers, and endless poultry. To Bernier, accustomed to the scarcity of Europe, this seemed almost miraculous. He remarks that Bengal not only exported these goods abroad but also produced enough to feed its own population richly, with “fowls, ducks, and geese” crowding the markets, herds of pigs for local consumption, and “fish of every kind in profusion” gracing the daily tables of peasants and nobles alike. His description underscores the ecological syncretism of land and water that defined Bengal: rice paddies alongside fisheries, sugarcane fields alongside mulberry orchards for silk. Moreover, the comparison with Egypt was not casual. For Europeans, Egypt represented the archetype of abundance, feeding Rome through the Nile's regular floods. By insisting that Bengal

was even richer, Bernier elevated it to a global standard of prosperity, making the province central to European imaginations of India as a land of wealth. His lines later circulated widely in Europe, shaping the myth of Bengal as a “paradise of abundance” that drew merchants from the Dutch, English, and French East India Companies.

Caste distinctions shaped this abundance. For many Brahmins, fish was taboo, while lower-caste communities consumed it daily. Yet Mughal nobles prized fish curries as a delicacy. The symbolic irony was sharp: what was ritually impure for upper-caste Hindus became elite food under the Mughals.

#### **The Deccan: Fusion and Sufi Langar**

The Deccan Sultanates (Bijapur, Golconda, Ahmednagar) developed a cuisine shaped by their geography and cosmopolitanism. Persian influences met Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi foodways. Dishes such as haleem (a wheat-meat porridge) and the layered Dakhni biryani emerged as hybrids.

Eaton describes how Perso-Islamic cultural currents—including cuisine—moved into the Deccan along long-standing corridors, shaping regional lifeways (Eaton, 2005, p. 9). In practice, Deccani foodways emerged at the intersection of Sufi hospices, military households, and agrarian communities. he details the social roles of Sufi shrines in integrating diverse populations — feeding visitors through langar, hosting military retainers, and serving agrarian communities. This shows how religious, military, and agrarian spheres interacted, though Eaton doesn't call it “foodways.” (Eaton , 1978).

The actual foods used by the community carried a strong Islamic connotation, embodying both ritual significance and everyday sustenance. Among these, maleeda—a humble yet symbolically rich dish made of broken bread kneaded with sugar and ghee—was perhaps the most widespread. It functioned not merely as food but as ritual offering, distributed during births, deaths, and anniversaries, and shared in moments of communal devotion. From Delhi to the Deccan and even in coastal towns such as Nellore, maleeda was prepared to sanctify memory and bind community, reminding participants of continuity between sacred practice and the nourishment of the body. Alongside it were the more elaborate court-derived dishes that entered popular circulation: palao and biriyani, each reflecting the Persianate imprint upon South Asian kitchens. While palao (pilaf) signified the order and hierarchy of Mughal kitchens—rice grains separated, perfumed with saffron, and garnished with nuts—biriyani embodied the layered hybridity of the Deccan, in which rice, meat, and spices were slow-cooked together into a fragrant unity. Shola, a meat-enriched version of khichri, fused Indic traditions of lentil-rice porridge with Islamic dietary preferences for meat, creating a dish that straddled ritual, comfort, and festivity. Haleem, the labour-intensive porridge of wheat and meat, pounded for hours until it attained a silky texture, was both devotional and celebratory, especially during Muharram. Often eaten with roti, it symbolized collective labour and shared consumption, as families and neighbours gathered around steaming cauldrons. (Sen, 2015, pp. 201-204). Such practices challenged the rigidity of caste purity even while courts reinforced hierarchy. Courtly Deccani cookbooks, though less preserved than their northern counterparts, testify to innovations like the use of tamarind, coconut, and local spices in Persian stews. Portuguese contacts added chilies, tomatoes, and groundnuts, further enriching the region's palate.

### **Rajasthan: Rajput Kitchens and Mughal Alliances**

Rajasthan, a semi-arid land, produced a cuisine of scarcity and resilience. The cuisine of the Rajput courts focused on grains, such as bajra (pearl millet), on preserved foods, and on ghee-laden dishes. Dal-baati-churma, a dish of baked wheat balls, lentils, and crushed sweetened flour, came to be associated with Rajput hospitality.

The politics also influenced the Rajput kitchen. Since the Mughals were forming political alliances with the Rajput clans, kitchens became the place of cultural negotiation. On the one hand, Rajput nobles adapted to Mughal cuisines like kebabs and pulao as diplomatic cuisines; on the other, they continued their vegetarian religious food at home, cooked by Brahmin cooks. This ambivalence was derivative of caste control and political concession.

Rajsthani paintings (mandana and miniature art) occasionally showed scenes in the kitchen pots of ghee, women rolling out rotis, feasts prepared to entertain their lords, further underpinning the symbolic status of food as a signifier of wealth and ritual purity. Nobles differentiated between the ritual purity of the food cooked by Brahmin women and the staple foods brought in by the Mughal culture.

This practice of giving noblewomen such a “khichri” upon their departure helped erase the lines between food and treasure, sustenance and spectacle. Food was hence a means of transferring wealth and ensuring loyalty, as well as impressing the subjects with imperial grandeur.

In such a manner, food moved outward of the court as a material extension of royal presence. A dish of pilaf or a tray of fruit was not just nourishment but an edible symbol of imperial favour. To receive such a gift was to be acknowledged by the emperor; to be excluded from such largesse was to be reminded of one's marginality.

### **Food as Power – Diplomacy, Feasts, and Symbolism**

Food in the Sultanate and Mughal worlds was never just sustenance, and it was an instrument of sovereignty, diplomacy, and hierarchy. A feast was at once a public spectacle and a private negotiation: an edible performance of inclusion and exclusion, charity and authority. The act of eating, cooking, and distributing food was not neutral; it was always already bound up with the language of kingship. To dine at the imperial court meant entering a world where food was imbued with political symbolism and staged as part of the theatre of empire.

### **The Feast as Theatre of Kingship**

Abu' l Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* portrays the imperial kitchen (*matbakh*) as a well-structured department of the court, capable of preparing "a hundred dishes in an hour" (Allami, 1873, pp. 57–58). These dishes, ranging from Persian stews to Indian *khichri*'s, symbolized the diversity and abundance of Akbar's empire. In practice, this was less about sustenance than about spectacle: the preparation of a hundred dishes was meant to show the empire's control over resources, its ability to mobilize cooks, ingredients, and techniques from across regions. The *matbakh* was therefore an extension of statecraft, an administrative structure that mirrored the efficiency and discipline of the empire itself. The very act of feeding courtiers and guests was a declaration of prosperity. Food was not only consumed but displayed, performed, and recorded. Jesuit missionaries at Akbar's court, such as Father Monserrate, described elaborate banquets in which golden vessels, perfumed rice, and iced drinks were served with solemn formality. Their accounts stress the sensory excess of these feasts, like shimmering dishes, sweet scents, and cooling drinks, which are all arranged with ceremonial precision.

What is especially notable is how these feasts catered to the diverse constituencies of the empire. Vegetarian meals were prepared for Hindu Rajputs, halal meat for Muslim nobles, and wine was discreetly offered to European envoys. In one space, multiple cultural codes of eating could coexist, each respected and integrated into the larger whole. Thus, the feast embodied Akbar's principle of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace), where religious and cultural difference was not erased but harmonized. The *dastarkhwañ* (banquet cloth) was therefore a microcosm of Akbar's empire, where difference could sit side by side under the sovereign's supervision.

### **Rituals of Eating**

Every Mughal meal began with the recitation of the Bismillah. Shivangini Tandon notes: "Meals in the royal Mughal household began with the recitation of the Bismillah-e-Rahman-e-Rahim... It was customary for the emperor to set aside a portion of food for the poor before eating" (Tandon, 2021, p. 6). This ritualized piety marked food as not only a political tool but a religious act, binding kingship to divine sanction. By beginning with prayer and setting aside food for the poor, the emperor transformed eating into an act of piety. It was no longer mere consumption, it was a ritual of justice, in which the ruler symbolically acknowledged his duty to his people. Feeding the poor was not optional charity but a constitutive part of Mughal kingship. Thus, each meal reaffirmed the moral legitimacy of the sovereign.

Travelers confirmed the abundance of food available in Mughal India. François Bernier, during his travels in Bengal, marveled that "fish of every kind in profusion... rice, sugar, and butter" filled markets (Bernier, 1826, pp. 202). The richness of local food production provided the foundation for the Mughal spectacle of abundance. At the Mughal court, this abundance was choreographed into feasts where even the act of distributing leftovers carried meaning. As Abu' 1

Fazl describes, the choicest dishes were given to nobles while others received redistributed foods (Allami, 1873, pp. 57–58). This redistribution was not simply practical; it reinforced hierarchy. To receive a dish directly from the emperor's kitchen was a sign of proximity and favour. To receive secondary food still marked participation in imperial generosity, but in a different rank. Thus, even leftovers were political. Nothing was wasted, but everything was ordered according to hierarchy.

### **Diplomacy Through Food**

Food exchanges were central to diplomacy. Trays of cooked meat, baskets of fruits, or hunted game were dispatched to allies as tokens of favour. The circulation of food beyond the court extended the emperor's presence into the social and political landscape. Jesuit accounts describe Akbar sending food to monasteries and Sufi shrines, forging bonds with religious communities. In such gestures, food operated as a bridge between throne and faith, politics and piety.

Niccolao Manucci, writing of Shah Jahan's court, provides particularly vivid descriptions. He notes that "the king, princes and nobles, the ladies respond then to all the praises, which the singing women never fail to shower on them, by full trays of gold and silver coin which they throw to them. All the matrons receive sarapas (robes) and jewels, and their allowances are increased. The great ladies are well received upon their arrival; they also obtain costly sarapas (robes) and jewels. At the time when they say good-bye, their hands are filled with khichari, which is, in its literal meaning, a mixed dish made up of several kinds of vegetables. As to this, it must be remarked that the khichari of these queens and princes is not of that sort, but, on the contrary, a mixture of gold and silver coin, with all kinds of precious stones and pearls, large and small." (Manucci, 1907, pp. 339–346).

This extraordinary description captures the symbolic layering of food. Khichri, normally a humble dish of rice and lentils eaten across households, is here transformed into a container of jewels, coins,

and pearls. The metaphor was deliberate. A dish associated with simplicity and commoners was converted into a vehicle for imperial opulence. In gifting “khichri” filled with treasures, the Mughal court dramatized its capacity to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary, the simple into the magnificent. Food here was not nourishment at all—it was pure spectacle.

In this way, food travelled outward from the court as a material extension of royal presence. A dish of pilaf or a tray of fruit was not just nourishment but an edible symbol of imperial favour. To receive such food was to be acknowledged by the emperor, incorporated into his circle of loyalty. To be denied it was a form of exclusion, a reminder of distance from the throne.

**Table 2: Hierarchy of the Mughal Feast**

**Source : Created by own**

**Resistance and Hybridization – Folk, Sufi, and Bhakti Cuisines**

Amid imperial splendour and rigid hierarchies, alternative food cultures forged routes of social and

Rank/Position	Seating & Proximity	Dishes Served	Symbolic Meaning
Emperor	Seated at the centre or on a raised platform	Dozens of dishes, first choice of foods	Embodied sovereignty, abundance, divine blessing
High Nobles	Seated closest to the emperor	Choice meats, pilafs, sherbets	Reinforced political intimacy and loyalty
Lesser Nobles & Officers	Outer circles of the dastarkhwan	Standard pilafs, breads, some meats	Symbolized hierarchy and graded access
Servants & Retainers	At margins or fed later	Leftovers from imperial table	Reinforced distance, yet signalled generosity
Commoners & Poor	Fed through langar or after banquets	Alms: rice, pulses, bread	Projected imperial benevolence and piety

spiritual resistance. At Sufi shrines, langar operated as a radical kitchen: “food and drink are given to the needy regardless of social or religious background” (Wikipedia ). At Ajmer, imperial largesse—such as Akbar’s gift of giant rice cauldrons—enabled daily distribution from monumental kitchen utensils capable of feeding thousands (Wikipedia ). In these spaces, the sacred and the communal fused—entry was unconditional, and food became a medium of inclusion. As, Rumi said “The full one sees only more food, but the hungry person sees life, itself. To the hungry, this bread is a goblet, and the life it brings is wine. Such wine cannot be known except through hunger and yearning. Rumi said: “Whoever is loved is beautiful, but this doesn't mean that whoever is beautiful is loved. "There are girls more beautiful than Laila," they used to tell Majnun. "Let us bring some to you. ""I do not love Laila for her form," Majnun would reply. "Laila is like a cup in my hand. I drink wine from that cup. I am in love with that wine. You only have eyes for the goblet and do not know the wine. A golden goblet studded with precious stones, but containing only vinegar, what use is that to me? An old broken gourd with wine is better in my eyes than a hundred goblets of gold”. A person must be moved with passion and yearning for them to tell the wine from the cup. This is the same as someone who is hungry, who hasn't eaten for ten days, and another who has eaten five times a day. Both see a loaf of bread. The full one sees only more food, but the hungry person sees the, itself. To the hungry, this bread is a goblet, and the life it brings is wine. Such wine cannot be known except through hunger and yearning. Acquire this appetite so you will not only see the appearances of form, but will find the Beloved everywhere” . (Rumi, 2000, pp. 129-130)

Parallel to Sufi kitchens, Bhakti saint and poet Tukaram said : “HEAR my words, O saints ! I am a sinner beyond all men — why do you love me with such tenderness? My heart testifies within me, of a surety, I am not saved; men look upon me with honour, because I follow a track that others have laid

down. I was sorely troubled by my worldly business, I became a cattle driver, a twister of oxen's tails. Even so, I could not maintain myself, so I took to my present course. The little money I had was soon finished ; not that I renounced it, I gave it to Brahmanas and beggars. I cut myself off from wife, sons and daughters, and became of course a low, stupid wretch. I dared not show my face to the world; I crept into holes or retired to the jungle ; thus I entered on a solitary life. I was vexed by the cravings of the belly ; and I thought that God had no mercy. If anyone offered me a dinner, I readily said " Yes." My fathers served this God before me, this is why I worship him. Tuka says, Come, some of you, offer him faith and take him in exchange for it", (Tukaram, 1909, pp. 47)

At the margins of society—rural hearths, tribal communities, marginalized castes—the staples of folk cuisine carried sustenance and silent defiance. Millet gruel, foraged greens, dried fish—foods stigmatized by elites—nourished millions. In their survival, these foodways subverted exclusion and kept alive traditions often erased from courtly cookbooks.

Together, the langar, Bhakti poetry, and folk food embody a counter-culinary tradition: one where food transcends purity codes to become a vessel of equality, humility, and solidarity.

Ritual Act	Description	Symbolic Function
Bismillah recitation	Emperor recited before eating	Linked kingship with piety
Setting aside food for poor	Portion of food dedicated before emperor dined	Demonstrated charity, royal benevolence
Dastarkhwan arrangement	Cloth spread with concentric seating	Mapped social hierarchy onto space

**Table 3: Ritual & Symbolism in Mughal Feasts**

Ritual Act	Description	Symbolic Function
Distribution of leftovers	Nobles received choicest dishes; poor fed after	Reinforced gradations of power & inclusion
Gifted food (fruits, meats)	Trays sent to allies, vassals, Sufis	Political diplomacy through edibles

**Source : Created by own**

### **Conclusion**

The kitchens of Sultanate and Mughal India were not merely spaces of cooking; they were archives of power, memory, and social order. Each hearth and cauldron echoed with questions of who had the right to cook, who could be served, and who remained excluded from the feast. In their steaming pots and fragrant pilaf, we glimpse both the fusion of cultures and the perpetuation of caste and gender boundaries. The Sultanate kitchen, as preserved in texts like the *Ni'matnāmah* of Malwa, embodied indulgence, sensuality, and hierarchy. Recipes for samosas, sherbets, and aphrodisiacal dishes were not only culinary experiments but assertions of royal pleasure and authority. However, the fact that the labour of women is silent in such texts reminds us that the archive itself is mute about whose hands were stirring the pots. The unseen presence of women in the courtly kitchen is in direct contrast with their front-and-center presence in domestic hearths, where caste purity was monitored at every meal. Spectacle and sovereignty were enacted in the Mughal kitchen, which was institutionalized in Akbar's *Ain-i-Akbari* and Shah Jahan's *Nuskha-i-Shahjehani*. Festivals were staged as performances of hierarchy: the nobles sat by rank, dishes were served by closeness to the emperor, residual food was deliberately disbursed to express either inclusion or exclusion. Abu'l Fazl himself records how hundreds of dishes, several dozen per day, were cooked up at the royal table

alone and how trays of food could also act as protrusions of royal favour. Food was, therefore, a political language in terms of expressing loyalty, alliance, and subjection.

But this grandeur, as it were, never quite fitted with the logics of caste and gender. High-born women were veiled in purdah and cooked in secret but were not made visible. Women of low birth had served food in public, but their touch was stigmatized. Brahmin cooks kept an eye on ritual purity in Rajput kitchens, and Muslim cooks brought Persian stews and breads into Mughal kitchens. The similarity between these different kitchens was not egalitarianism but a specially enforced order of purity, service, and exclusion. Meanwhile, there are regional differences that make this picture complex. In Bengal, peasants as well as the Mughal elites were fed by rice and fish, creating friction between caste taboos and imperial palates. The Deccan is where hybrid cuisines developed as a result of meeting at Sufi shrines, military families, and agrarian villages. In Rajasthan, the shortages led to millet-based foods, whereas the Rajput courts were struck with a compromise between Mughal kebabs and Brahmin vegetarianism. The kitchen was therefore not homogenous but a patchwork-formed by ecology, politics, and culture.

But the history also keeps other counter-narratives of resistance. The Sufi langar, in which food was available free of charge regardless of caste and creed, became an egalitarian rethinking of the kitchen as a place of equality. Bhakti poets such as Kabir ridiculed caste restrictions on food, reminding the Brahmins that the same grains are the source of life to all. Folk foodways- millets, wild greens, dried fish - sustained marginalized people beyond the scrutiny of elite chroniclers and represented low-level resistance to hierarchies of taste.

These strands taken together indicate that kitchens were not neutral backgrounds to history; they were places where empire and resistance, hierarchy and equality, ritual and hunger crashed into each

other. By analysing them, we may gain a richer understanding of the way power operated in the small sphere of everyday life.

The kitchens of Sultanate and Mughal India, however, do become arenas of empire and caste, but also of hybridity and possibility. They also remind us that politics is not only discussed in courts or fought in battles, but also cooked in pots, served on feast tables, or withheld in acts of exclusion. Several possibilities may be found in studying these kitchens: to learn the politics of the past--to learn how food has been a way of dominating and dignifying, of oppressing and resisting.

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