



# The Mughal Culinary Fusion: Blending Cultures in Cuisine

**Dr. Safia Shahzad,**

Al Barakaat College of Graduate Studies,  
Aligarh, India.

**Abstract:** The significance of food in portraying a high-quality life has been evident throughout human history. When the Mughals arrived and chose India as their home, they embraced many Indian values. In the process of settling, they contributed various elements, including architectural monuments, paintings, music, and a remarkable cuisine. The Mughals transformed the country's culinary landscape by blending Persian and Central Asian influences with Indian Rajput cuisine, resulting in the creation of the exquisite Mughal cuisine. Babur employed Hindustani cooks, Humayun introduced them to the Persian court, and Akbar, through alliances with the Rajputs, forged a remarkable fusion. Akbar's collaborations with the Rajputs played a crucial role in the amalgamation of both cultures, giving rise to the finest examples of Mughal cuisine. This cuisine featured a harmonious blend of Indian spices with Persian and Central Asian recipes, resulting in the creation of delightful delicacy.

The Mughals, who ruled around four centuries contributed significantly to India, introducing architectural buildings, artistic expressions through paintings and music, and an exquisite cuisine. They revolutionized the country's culinary landscape by merging Persian and Central Asian cooking techniques with Indian Rajput cuisine, resulting in the creation of the refined and delicate Mughal cuisine.

Mughals who came from Central Asia had prosperous cultural background. In 1526 A.D Babur established Mughal Empire in India, but initially he did not like Hindustan for some reason; this appears to him not a pleasant place, as

*“there is no ice, cold water, good food, good bread in the market, no quality of first rate fruits, no grapes, mask melon, etc.”<sup>1</sup>*

But during various invasions, Babur attended several banquets and invitation hosted by Indians and India settled Muslims in Indian manner.<sup>2</sup> Although he spent much of his time in fighting, still he had developed a taste for food. That's why he employed two among the six of Hindustani cooks from Ibrahim Lodi's kitchen. But one of them poisoned his food. While taking his meal he realized some sickness in his body and he vomited suddenly before the poison could take severe effect. People who were behind this, were punished severely.<sup>3</sup> After this Babur used to maintained precautions in keeping Hindustani cooks, but Humayun did not hesitate to keep Hindustani cooks. When throne of Delhi was occupied by Sher Shah for some time, Humayun went to Persia and there he presented Indian cooks to the Shah of Persia. Shah became fond of various Hindustani dishes, particularly *dal-khushla*.<sup>4</sup> Humayun also became fond of Persian cuisine and when he returned to India, cooks from Persia also followed him to his court at Delhi. Now, Mughal court savored the Persian dishes of different kind, such as various versions of *pulao* and various other Persian delicacies.

Akbar's era saw the Mughal imperial kitchen into a hub for Mughal culinary innovation and experimentation. Even Abul Fazl dedicated some parts to this in his *Ain-i-Akbari*.<sup>5</sup> He starts with the saying that

*“His Majesty (Akbar) even extends his attention to this department, and has given many wise regulation for it; nor can be a reason be given why he should not do so, as the equilibrium of man's nature, the strength of the body, the capability of receiving external and*

*internal blessings, and the acquisition of worldly and religious advantages, depend ultimately on proper care being shown for appropriate food. This knowledge distinguished man from beast, with whom, as far as mere eating is concerned; he stands upon the same level.*"<sup>6</sup>

Akbar divided his household into various departments with a separate staff to look after the work. The *Matbakh* or imperial kitchen, which prepared the dishes for the emperor; the *Abdar Khana* which supervised drinking water, beverages and wine; the *Mewah Khana* which provided fruits, arranged the food based drinks and fruits for the emperor under the trustworthy supervision.<sup>7</sup> Abul Fazal notes that as Akbar aged, his dietary habits changed; at times, he consumed only one meal and left the table before feeling fully satisfied.<sup>8</sup> Abdul Qadir Badauni attributed this change to the influence of *jogis* and *lamas*, who asserted that consuming less food extended one's lifespan three or fourfold compared to ordinary individuals.<sup>9</sup> There was a period when Akbar refrained from eating meat, a choice Abul Fazal attributes to the emperor's profound compassion towards the humanity, avoiding the unnecessary slaughter of animals for sustenance.<sup>10</sup> However, it remains unclear whether meat dishes were entirely absent from the royal table of Akbar. Badauni goes further, stating that Akbar not only abstained from meat but also avoided garlic and onions, attributing this dietary choice to Hindu influence.<sup>11</sup> Yet, it is likely that this influence derived from Jain practices rather than Hindu traditions.

Mir Bakawal, the appointed kitchen master, held the responsibility for overseeing all matters pertaining to food and its management. He served as the ultimate authority in the kitchen and assumed the crucial role of the final taste-tester. Additionally, when the emperor dined, *Mir Bakawal* stood by his side.<sup>12</sup> Akbar, as a customary preference, typically chose to dine in isolation.<sup>13</sup>

Before describing into the details of food, Abul Fazal categorized them into three distinct groups. Firstly, dishes that excluded meat were termed as *sufiyana*. Secondly, those incorporating both meat and rice were referred to as *goshtbabirinj*. Lastly, dishes where meat was combined with spices were labeled as *abazir*.

In the *Rikab Khana/Naan Khana*, commonly known as the bakery, a variety of bread was prepared.<sup>14</sup> There were two main types: one baked in an oven, varying in size based on requirements, and another cooked on an iron plate, offering a range of preparations. One such variant was the *chapatti*, made from *khushka*.<sup>15</sup> This bread, rich in '*maidah*,' constituted a substantial part of the royal table, being served hot.<sup>16</sup> Sebastien Manrique detailed three categories of bread. *Chapatti*, a thin bread, was a staple for the less affluent class. *Khajura*, thicker and as wide as a finger, was a white, high-quality bread favored by the rich people. *Rughani* and *mithirughani*, a type of bread made from flour, pure ghee, and sugar, were consumed by the ruling and elite classes.<sup>17</sup>

Jahangir was connoisseur in respect to food too along with the paintings and other artistic aspect. During hunting expeditions, he would personally inspect the slaughtered animals to ensure the meat was acceptable to him to consume. On *sufiyana* or abstinence days<sup>18</sup>, he took *khichri* called *laziza* to which he had taken liking during his stay in Gujrat.<sup>19</sup> This particular Gujarati preparation featured a blend of millet, pulses, and rice. Jahangir showed a keen ability to assess various meats, expressing a preference for black partridge, large quail, and *rohu* fish.<sup>20</sup> Among his favored dishes was *dopiazza*, a culinary creation made with *neelgai* meat.<sup>21</sup>

Shah Jahan's era is renowned for its flourishing architecture, literature, poetry, and, notably, cuisine. The art of cooking reached its zenith during his rule, prominently featuring techniques like *Tandoor* and *dum* cooking. *Tandoor*, a clay oven was extensively used for cooking on rods, exemplified by dishes such as *seekhkabab* and *botikabab*. *Dum* cookin, a method involved placing partially cooked ingredients in a pot, sealing it with flour dough, and applying very slow heat from both the top and bottom. This technique referred as *dum-pukht* and employed for dishes like *pulao* and *biryani* etc.

Since Aurangzeb sat over the throne showed no interest or preference for edible items. Tavernier mentions that since he became an emperor, he abstained from any kind of flesh and drink except drinking water.<sup>22</sup> The only reference is *khichri-e-biryani*<sup>23</sup> by Aurangzeb for which he requested his son Azam to send to the court *Sulaiman*, a famous *biryani* cook.<sup>24</sup>

Desserts played a significant role in the Mughal culinary offerings, although specific details about their recipes and preparations are somewhat limited in available sources. Ibn-e-Batutta notes the presence of '*luqaimat-al-qadi*' and '*qahiriya*' served at the court. Another sweet delicacy presented at the royal table was '*mithirughni*', a sweet bread made from a mixture of flour, sugar, ghee, and dry fruits. The imperial kitchen of the Mughals was known for crafting a diverse array of *Halwa*.

The great Mughals were preferred drank water from the Ganges river.<sup>25</sup> Along the riverbanks, reliable and esteemed individuals were appointed to ensure the emperor received sealed jars of Ganges water, regardless of his location. When Akbar resided in Fatehpur or Agra, the water was dispatched from the nearest point of the Ganges river. By the sixteenth century, a method of cooling the drinking water emerged, involving the addition of saltpeter. From 1586 A.D. onward, ice took precedence as the primary cooling agent. For the emperor's use it was transported from the northern hills through the *dak-chuki*.<sup>26</sup> In addition to water, the Mughals enjoyed a variety of beverages, including crushed ice mixed with fruit juices. These drinks were enhanced with the addition of rose water, sugar, and milk. Lime juice,

particularly during the warmer months, gained popularity as a favored summer drink among the Mughals. Notably, Humayun, during his travels, always carried a bottle of lime juice.

Throughout the Mughal era, there were vigorous efforts by the emperors to enforce stringent prohibitions aiming to discourage the consumption of wine among the masses.<sup>27</sup> Badauni mentioned details the imposition of severe punishments for excessive drinking.<sup>28</sup> Akbar, recognizing the medicinal uses, permitted wine only for medicinal purpose, and individuals could procure it solely with a valid medical certificate from the physician.<sup>29</sup>

Despite religious restrictions against wine in Islam, all Mughal emperors, with the exception of Aurangzeb, had a fondness for wine and other intoxicants like opium. Notwithstanding the imposed restrictions, courtiers were mandated to partake in drinking.<sup>30</sup> Court festivities were occasions where everyone was freely allowed to indulge in drinking.<sup>31</sup> Both Babur and Jahangir were particularly fond of wine,<sup>32</sup> and during Humayun's reign, no feast was deemed complete without it.<sup>33</sup> Akbar consumed wine occasionally,<sup>34</sup> while Shah Jahan, influenced by his father's choice, tasted wine for the first time and continued to take it occasionally.<sup>35</sup> Notably, Aurangzeb completely refrained from the consumption of wine.<sup>36</sup>

Opium was also favored by the Mughals. Babur and Humayun were fond of it.<sup>37</sup> Akbar was also took it.<sup>38</sup> Jahangir took it in place of wine.<sup>39</sup>

Fruit of various types contains significant position in the diet of Mughals. Babur, originating from Central Asia, consumed abundant quantities of fruits native to that region. However, upon arriving in India, he faced a challenge in enjoying them fresh, as the supply was not consistently uninterrupted though it was available.<sup>40</sup> Akbar regarded fruits as one of the primary blessings bestowed by the Creator.<sup>41</sup> He devoted considerable effort to fruit cultivation, resulting in a diverse range of top-quality fruits becoming accessible in the market.<sup>42</sup>

Delicious, affectionate, and sweet smelling musk melons, diverse variety of grapes and many other fruits like pomegranates, apple, peaches, etc came from Kabul, Badakshan, and Samarqand, for the *Mewah Khana*.<sup>43</sup> The fruits were categorized into different grades, determined by the lines drawn on the top of each fruit. The finest quality was distinguished by a single line, the second-grade by two lines, and so forth.<sup>44</sup> During Jahangir's reign, some new fruits were added to the list, like *sahabi*, *habashi* and Kashmiri<sup>45</sup> grapes, and melons from Yazd and Kirij.<sup>46</sup> Oranges from Bengal, apples from Bangash<sup>47</sup> were sent by the *dakchuki*. They arrived ripe and fresh and were excellent in flavor. Jahangir took great pleasure in consumption of fruits.<sup>48</sup> Among all the renowned Mughals, the mango, the most prevalent fruit in India, held the position of a favorite. Babur wrote "*Mango when good, are very good, but of the many which are eaten few ate first rate. ...Taking it together the mango is the best fruit of India.*"<sup>49</sup> Akbar encouraged its cultivation in Punjab.<sup>50</sup> It was Jahangir's favorite fruit.<sup>51</sup> Aurangzeb also had a fondness for it. When his son approached him with requests for naming numerous new varieties, he christened them as '*sudha-ras*' and '*rasna-vila*'.<sup>52</sup>

The Mughal emperors took pleasure in consuming *paan*. *Paan* comprised betel nut (*supari*), *katha*, camphor (*kafur*), and lime (*chuna*). A *paanbira*, crafted from two betel leaves, was prepared, and guests and courtiers were treated to scented *paanbira* infused with rose water.<sup>53</sup> Abul Fazal described various varieties of betel leaves or *paan*; *bilahari*, *kaker*, *jaiswar*, *kapuri*, *kapurkand*, *bangalah*.<sup>54</sup>

Hence, it appears that the Mughals had refined taste, diverse variety of foods, beverages, and fruits gracing their tables. Upon choosing residing in India, the Mughals embraced it as their homeland and adapted numerous Indian values. In many aspects, they identified more with being Indians than foreigners.

Babur enlisted the expertise of Hindustani cooks, Humayun introduced them to the Persian court, and under Akbar's guidance, an exemplary fusion emerged. Akbar's alliances with the Rajputs played a pivotal role in developing a rich blend of cultures, resulting in the creation of the exquisite Mughlai cuisine. This culinary artistry involved the amalgamation of Indian spices with Persian and Central Asian recipes, giving rise to delicacies such as pulao, today's mutton and chicken dishes, *masala*, *achari*, and the renowned Hyderabad *biryani*.

Interestingly, Aurangzeb modified the biryani by eliminating meat, introducing a purely vegetarian *khichri-i-biryani*. Jahangir was instrumental in elevating khichri from a commoner's kitchen to the royal table. In short, the Mughals not only introduced elements but also embraced and discarded various aspects, resulting in the creation of a multitude of culinary art.

<sup>1</sup> Babur, *Baburnama*, tr. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1970, p. 518.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 590, 654.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 541-43; Gulbadan Bano Begum, *Humayunama*, tr. A. S. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1983, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> *Dal-chawal*; Jauhar Aftabchi, *Tezkirah-al wakiat*, tr. Stewart, Delhi, 1972, pp. 73-74.

<sup>5</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. Blochman, Calcutta, 1977, pp. 59-61.

- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 59.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp 57-59, 61.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 59.
- <sup>9</sup> Badauni, *Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh*, tr. Lowe, 1973. Vol II, p. 335.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 59.
- <sup>11</sup> Badauni, pp. 312, 335.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 59.
- <sup>13</sup> Monserrate, *Commentary of Father Monserrate*, tr. Hoyland, London, 1922, p. 199.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 61.
- <sup>15</sup> Means flour; Ibid, p. 64.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 64.
- <sup>17</sup> Sebastien Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique*, tr. C. E. Luard, Oxford, 1926, p. 199.
- <sup>18</sup> Jahangir did not eat any kind of meat dish on Sunday and Thursday, and these days were called as *sufiyana* days; Ibid, pp. 184-85.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 419.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 414.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, Vol II, p. 275.
- <sup>22</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, tr. V. Ball, New York, 1889, p. 313.
- <sup>23</sup> Aurangzeb, *Letters of Aurangzeb*, tr. Bilimora, Delhi, 1972, pp. 12-13.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Bernier, *Travels of Francois Bernier in India*, tr. A. Constable, London, 1981, p. 221; Tavernier, Vol II, p. 116; *Ain-i-Akbari*, pp. 57-58.
- <sup>26</sup> Postal supply; Ibid, pp. 58-59.
- <sup>27</sup> M. Arif Qandhari, *Tarikh-i-Akbari*, tr. Tasneem Ahmad, Delhi, 193, p. 55; Badauni, Vol II, p. 311; Jahangir, p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Badauni, Vol II, p. 311.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 311-12.
- <sup>30</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. 53.
- <sup>31</sup> Jahangir, pp. 49,385.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 310.
- <sup>33</sup> M. A. Ansari, *Socio-Cultural Life of the Great Mughals*, Delhi, 2008, p. 35.
- <sup>34</sup> Nizamuddin Khwaja, *Tabqat-i-Akbari*, tr. Brajendranath, Delhi, 1992, p. 171-72; Qandhari, p. 199.
- <sup>35</sup> Inayat Khan, *Sahajahan Nama*, tr. Begly and Desai, New Delhi, 1990, p. 9; Jahangir, p. 306.
- <sup>36</sup> Tavernier, Vol II, p. 120.
- <sup>37</sup> *Humayunnama*, p. 137.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 69.
- <sup>39</sup> Jahangir, p. 308-09.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 309.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 68.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 68-69.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 68.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 69.
- <sup>45</sup> Jahangir, p. 5.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 270.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, Vol II, p. 207.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 349-50, 422, 435.
- <sup>49</sup> Babur, p. 503.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 72.
- <sup>51</sup> Jahangir, p. 5.
- <sup>52</sup> Aurangzeb, p. 4, 11, 12.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 77; *Humayunama*, p. 123.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ain-i-Akbari*, p. 77.