

## From the imperial kitchens: Food fit for the Mughals

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influence on Mughlai cuisine is evident in the Ain-i-Akbari recipes," Collingham wrote. "They called for large quantities of saffron and asafoetida, favourite Persian flavourings, and the Mughals cultivated these plants in India to provide their cooks with a ready supply."

Interestingly, Emperor Akbar avoided meat to some extent; Fazl actually frowned upon the act of killing and eating creatures.

We may tend to associate Mughal cuisine more with meat based delicacies, but Ain-i-Akbari mentions vegetarian food as well.

"A place is also told of as a kitchen garden, that there may be a continual supply of fresh greens," Fazl wrote. Among the culinary delights mentioned, he commented that Saag was 'one of the most pleasant dishes.'



Mughal glory forward.

"In this atmosphere of opulence and conspicuous consumption, huge sums were spent on the imperial kitchens," Collingham wrote.

Collingham further mentions that Emperor Jahangir's Persian wife Nur Jahan is credited for the invention of some amazing dishes. The last of the 'great' Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb too had an indulgence for food, spending 1000 rupees a day on the royal kitchens and seeking out good chefs.

**MUGHAL CUISINE IN BANGLADESH** From rezala (perhaps derived from the name of a chef or his patron who went by the name Reza) to nihari to jilapi, there are various Persian or Mughal foods we have grown accustomed to. Even the concept of 'dopiaza' has Mughal hints.

But one may argue that there is no Mughal treat greater than

toes and the Bengal Goat, our kachchi is fabulous."

The delicacy mainly came along with the chefs who migrated in and around 1947,



The document also talks of breads and various fruits, and gives us a long list of prices of numerous ingredients. The writer spared no detail in describing culinary activities, from managing supplies to security issues to serving the emperor.

Read, if you are really into history, the voluminous Ain-i-Akbari, which is actually a part of the even more dauntingly voluminous Akbarnama.

But to narrow it down to gastronomy, Osman aptly summarised the glory of culinary pursuits in his book: "During Akbar's period, the royal kitchen became a laboratory for Mughal culinary experimentation." **AND IT THRIVED...**

Akbar's future generations continued his legacy. In a state of great fortune and magnificence, they carried the

kachchi biriyani, which has reached such a revered and celebrated status. This biriyani is the stuff of legends!

A stand-alone dish made with basmati rice, khashi (castrated goat), and potatoes, kachchi is made using the aforementioned 'dum-pukht' method. The meat is cooked together with rice. Its juices pour out and mix with the rice, producing a delicious treat for the consumer, and, before that, marking an enormous feat for the experienced chef.

The history of kachchi spans across Delhi, Lucknow, Kolkata, and Dhaka. "It was in Kolkata where potatoes were most likely incorporated in this dish," Osman informed. "But nowhere else is kachchi as delicious as we find in Bangladesh," he opined. "With pota-

he added.

In fact, before that, Osman says that most Mughal food in Dhaka was relatively limited to the nobility. And today, we take them for granted.

A wedding invite comes, to the food aficionados, with the hope that kachchi will be served; and that wish often comes true! Meanwhile, the narrow alleys of Old Dhaka host numerous eateries which have Mughal delicacies on their menu.

Today, when we think of Mughal food, I reckon that a sense of grandeur somehow comes into our mind. After all, many of the delicacies were perfected by royal chefs. What Emperor Humayun started with the introduction of Persian cuisine, the boost his son

Emperor Akbar provided, and the continued pursuits and patronisations of the latter emperors and aristocrats created the Mughlai cuisine we are today so fond of.

From their imperial kitchens came out food fit for the royalty. And from the royalty it trickled down – through the passage of time – to us today.

By M H Haider  
Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed  
Special thanks to Shawkat Osman for the interview which provided valuable insight for the write-up. Other sources are Recipes from the Rasoi by Shawkat Osman, Curry: A Tale of Cooks & Conquerors by Lizzie Collingham, and Ain-i-Akbari by Abu'l Fazl (translated by H Blochmann)

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