

# LEVERAGING FOOD CULTURE IN INDIA TO PROMOTE NUTRITIOUS AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD PREFERENCES



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### SUMMARY

Food culture is often understood as the practices, beliefs, and traditions surrounding food and eating within a particular society or community. It encompasses various aspects of traditional dishes and recipes, culinary techniques and cooking methods, mealtime rituals, social aspects, and symbolism. Food culture is a critical factor shaping food choices by influencing eating and dietary norms and habitual behaviours. Given this, it is essential to clearly define the dimensions of food culture (particular to a country or region) if one is to seek to leverage its profound impact on individuals and communities. This working paper thus explores the multidimensional nature of food culture in India, emphasising its deep-rooted connections to cultural identity, social bonding, and well-being.

The study, based on comprehensive reviews and stakeholder interviews, identifies six core principles shaping food culture:

1. Selective Eating – Religious and caste influences on food choices.
2. Sharing – Social norms dictating collective versus individual eating.
3. Participation – Gender roles in food preparation and consumption.
4. Openness – Globalisation-driven acceptance of diverse foods.
5. Affluence – Economic disparities affecting food access.
6. Wellness – Health narratives influencing nutrition choices.

These principles are further shaped by globalisation, technology, and economic factors, impacting individual and societal food preferences. Considering India's current political and social landscape, the study prioritises wellness, participation, and openness and explores how a food culture programme can be designed using media engagement targeting India's youth.

### KEY MESSAGES

- Food culture is often overlooked despite its key role in shaping food preferences.
- It operates at both macro (societal norms) and micro (individual habits) levels.
- Understanding its core principles reveals how it influences society and individuals.
- In India, three key principles were identified: wellness, participation, and openness.
- The paper focuses on participation, highlighting its beliefs (food preparers as guardians), values (duty to nourish), and norms (meals fostering relationships).
- It explores how participation can be leveraged through youth and media to promote nutrition and sustainability.

### BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

Food culture is often understood as the practices, beliefs, and traditions surrounding food and eating within a particular society or community (1). It encompasses various aspects of traditional dishes and recipes, culinary techniques and cooking methods, mealtime rituals, social aspects, and symbolism. Food culture is influenced by ethnicity, technology, geography, climate, history, and individual food choices. It is also shaped by various macro-level factors shared across communities or societies and can be understood as a phenomenon functioning at a broader macro and micro scale.

At the macro level, food culture shapes our eating and dietary norms through established, socially understood rules and expectations. For instance, in India, eating with one's right hand and avoiding the left hand for meals is a deeply ingrained cultural expectation, reflecting broader societal values and norms around cleanliness and respect. At the micro level, food culture can influence habitual behaviours, such as preferences for various foods or meal structures (2). This macro-micro connection makes food culture a powerful driver of food system change. The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security (3) explicitly recognised the role of culture as a driver of food environments and consumer food choice behaviours, noting it as essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive food system outcomes.

However, food culture has been overlooked and misunderstood despite its critical role in influencing what is acceptable, desired, and preferred when it comes to food. Although food culture is synonymous with its most visible elements—traditional foods, dishes, and gastronomy—the historical, symbolic, social, and belief systems that underlie these are rarely identified. Given the precise role that culture plays in mediating food choices, it becomes essential to clearly define the dimensions of food culture (particular to a country or region) if one is to seek to leverage its profound impact on individuals and communities.

This working paper seeks to identify the typical dimensions of food culture in India. Cutting across the country's regional diversity in cuisine, these dimensions should represent core ideas built around beliefs, values, and norms that give rise to shared dietary practices among Indian society generally.

### METHODOLOGY

This review of India's food culture was commissioned by GAIN and conducted by Quantum Research. It used both secondary and primary research methods:

- **Secondary Research:** Review of government documents, academic papers, media reports, and other credible sources.
- **Primary Research:** interviews with experts from various domains, including the food industry, health and lifestyle sector, education sector, and government officials (see Annex for the list of interviewees and the interview guide).

The next sections present the results, including describing the country's current food culture. Since food culture is, in part, an expression of the history of a geography, Box 1 summarises these historical influences to provide context for the study's results. For a more in-depth discussion, see Antani and Mahapatra 2022 (4), which was the source used to inform Box 1.

### BOX 1. HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON FOOD CULTURE IN INDIA

From 3300-1200 BCE, the Indus Valley Civilisation established itself as an agricultural society, farming wheat, barley, green peas, lentils, chickpeas, and dates and rearing cattle, goats, and sheep for meat and milk. 1500 to 500 BCE was the Vedic era, with the settlement in the Indian subcontinent of Indo-Aryans, who were pastoralists and agriculturalists. Milk, including butter and curd, grains like rice and millet, and legumes and meats were consumed. The introduction of the caste system around 1000 BCE brought to the fore the spiritual ideas of purity and food's role in achieving purity. Animal-source foods, except milk and ghee, were *tamasic*. The upper-caste priests adhered to a vegetarian diet, while the lower caste group ate meat. These ideas form the basis of Hinduism and remain present in Indian cuisine today.

The Mughals (1526-1857) and the various dynasties introduced the Mughlai cuisine, rich in curries and spices, as well as new cooking techniques like marinades and new foods like yoghurt, flatbreads, and rice-based dishes like biryani. This cuisine, fit for rulers, was known for its sophistication and opulence. In 1498, the Portuguese arrived to trade and establish a colonial outpost in Goa. With them, they brought 'New World' foods like potatoes, okra, chillies, pineapples, papaya, cashew, peanuts, maize, guava, and custard apples. Portuguese dishes were adapted to local tastes and ingredients.

### CURRENT INDIAN FOOD CULTURE

The review found the following key principles of Food Culture in India:

- **Selective Eating:** Influenced by religion and caste, dictating food choices and rituals.
- **Sharing:** Social relations guiding collective versus individual eating habits.
- **Participation:** Gender roles defining food behaviour, from preparation to consumption.
- **Openness:** Exploration and acceptance of a wide variety of foods due to globalisation.
- **Affluence:** Economic differences determine ease of food access.
- **Wellness:** Healthy diet narratives shaping health aspirations and nutrition.

The review also highlighted commonalities across cuisine types in India, such as the use of a primary starch, although this varies from rice to wheat across regions, reliance on vegetables, lentils and other legumes, spices, and food presented on a *thali* (a round platter). It also found three main influencers of Food Culture in India:

- **Globalisation:** There has been an increase in the consumption of packaged and fast foods, along with the adaptation of global food items to Indian tastes.
- **Media and social media:** Both significantly shape food preferences and popularise global and regional cuisines.
- **Economic Factors:** Economic disparities affect access to nutritious food, with affordability being a significant issue.

The review noted three challenges and opportunities. First, increased **nutritional education** is needed, especially in rural areas, to combat misinformation and improve diet

diversity. Second, government ***policy and regulation*** can promote traditional foods, regulate trans-fats, and encourage millet consumption. Finally, post-COVID-19, there is a growing ***trend*** towards healthier food choices, but challenges remain in accessibility and affordability.

Of the six principles, the review identified three that have the most potential to influence and shape food culture in India, given the country's current social and political climate. These are listed in Table 1. The principles were further organised around beliefs (i.e., cognitive representations of knowledge or information), values (5) (modes of conduct or desirable end-states of existence), and norms (6) (socially shared expectations of specific behaviours).

**Table 1. Principles chosen to strategically influence India's Food Culture**

Principles	Beliefs	Values	Norms
<b>Wellness</b>	Food has more profound power connected to healing the body than just satiating hunger	Rhythm of body and seasons, including the food's connection to the earth	Balance
<b>Participation</b>	The custodian of food is the bridge between the food and the eaters	Custodian has the duty to nourish	Connecting
<b>Openness</b>	Consumption as a signal of upward mobility	Exploration, curiosity	Worldliness

The following subsections explore each of these three principles, and their associated beliefs, values, and norms, in detail.

## **WELLNESS**

### **Beliefs**

- **Food's Profound Power:** This principle emphasises that food is not just about satisfying hunger. It recognises food's deeper, more profound power in healing and maintaining the body. In the Indian context, where food is often seen as medicine, traditional Ayurvedic practices and holistic health approaches are prevalent. This principle aligns well with existing beliefs and can be leveraged to promote healthier eating habits.

### **Values**

- **Rhythm of Body and Seasons:** This value highlights the connection between food, the body's natural rhythms, and the seasons. It acknowledges that our food should be in harmony with nature's cycles. This value can drive a return to seasonal eating and local food practices, enhancing health and environmental sustainability.

### Norms

- **Balance:** The value of balance in food culture refers to achieving harmony in diet, incorporating a variety of nutrients, and balancing indulgence with moderation. In India, where dietary diversity is rich but also prone to extremes (like excessive spice or sugar), promoting balance can help address lifestyle-related health issues.
- **Connecting to the Earth:** Norms around connecting food to its source, understanding where it comes from, and appreciating its journey from farm to table can foster more sustainable food practices. This norm can encourage organic farming and reduce reliance on processed foods.

## PARTICIPATION

### Belief

- **Custodian of Food:** This principle views those who prepare food as custodians or guardians, bridging the gap between the food and those who consume it. This can elevate the status of cooks and farmers, fostering respect for their societal roles.

### Values

- **Duty to Nourish:** This value emphasises that cooking and preparing food is aimed at nourishing others—and nourishing the land. It can promote the idea that food preparation is a meaningful and respected activity, encouraging more people to cook at home, grow nutritious foods, and appreciating the efforts of those who do.

### Norms

- **Connecting:** Meals are expected to be shared to build and maintain relationships. Sharing can strengthen family bonds and community ties and encourage communal eating practices integral to Indian culture.

## OPENNESS

### Beliefs

- **Upward Mobility:** Consumption patterns are social mobility indicators. Exploring different types of foods, especially those considered luxurious or exotic, can signal one's social and economic status. This belief can drive interest in diverse and novel culinary experiences.

### Values

- **Worldliness:** This value promotes an appreciation for global culinary practices and ingredients, fostering a sense of worldliness and openness to new experiences (e.g., dishes, cooking practices, and ingredients). It can help integrate regional and international food trends into the Indian food culture, enriching it further.

- **Norms**

- **Exploration and Curiosity:** The expectation is to try new foods and be curious about culinary traditions. Exploration allows one to participate in the experience of

the upper classes. It aligns with the Indian spirit of hospitality and diversity, promoting a more inclusive and broad-minded approach to food.

By strategically focusing on these principles—wellness, participation, and openness—efforts to shape food culture in India can align with deeply held cultural beliefs and values while encouraging healthier, more sustainable, and more inclusive food practices.

### DISCUSSION & CASE STUDY

Rising incomes, increased urbanisation, exposure to global trends, and widespread media access have significantly influenced Indian food culture. These factors, coupled with the principles of selective eating and affluence, have fostered cultural values centred on aspiration and culinary exploration as avenues for social advancement. However, these macro influences have also potentially weakened other essential food culture principles, such as participation, sharing, and wellness. This shift has led to an erosion of the holistic view of food as a means of connecting with the body, nature, and community.

We aim to reconnect with food's holistic role, emphasising its power to nourish the body, the earth, and communities. By decoding these principles into specific beliefs, values, and norms, we can better conceptualise and design food culture interventions. We can also study these dimensions and translate them into actionable strategies.

In the following case study, which is focused on youth, we will demonstrate how we can use the principle of participation to address youth perceptions of custodianship, nourishment, and connections delivered in media and entertainment, one of the institutions that shape our relationship to food.

#### Case Study: Youth and Participation

In India, approximately 35% of the population is aged 15-34 (7) Youth are often considered the harbingers of change, adopting new technologies, lifestyles, and ideas much faster than older generations. For example, a study by Dasgupta and Mukherjee (8) highlights that younger generations in urban areas are more likely to support egalitarian gender roles than older generations.

Media plays a critical role in shaping youth identities, social norms, and values related to various aspects of life, including food, gender, and lifestyle. A report by IAMA (9) states that 66% of internet users in India are between 12 and 29 years old, highlighting digital media's significant reach and influence on youth. According to Statista (10), more than 70% of Indian youth use social media platforms daily, significantly influencing their health-related beliefs and behaviours. Social media serves as a primary source for meal inspiration, with visual and social cues from influencers and peers shaping food preferences and habits. Narula and Gupta (11) found that social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube have become crucial in shaping food trends and preferences among Indian youth.

Television remains a crucial medium, with shows and advertisements often shaping food habits and lifestyle choices. For instance, cooking shows and advertisements significantly influence viewers' food choices and cooking practices. A survey by the Broadcast

Audience Research Council (BARC) India (12) reported that food and cooking shows are among the top-viewed genres on Indian television. Cooking shows like ‘MasterChef India’ and ‘Namak Ke Saudagar’ have played a pivotal role in challenging traditional gender norms and reshaping identities in India. Historically, cooking in Indian households has often been seen as a woman’s responsibility, while professional culinary careers were largely male dominated. These shows disrupt these stereotypes by portraying cooking as an inclusive skill and a creative pursuit. For instance, male contestants on ‘MasterChef India’ have shared stories of how their participation has changed perceptions within their families, encouraging shared responsibilities in the kitchen. Similarly, an episode of ‘Namak Ke Saudagar’ highlighted a father learning to cook his daughter’s favourite dish to promote healthier eating, sparking discussions around caregiving and cooking as shared responsibilities. Nielsen studies and BARC India surveys reveal that such shows inspire male viewers to participate more actively in cooking, reframing it as an art rather than a chore and fostering gender equality in domestic and professional spaces. By normalising these shifts, cooking shows influence food choices while subtly reshaping societal expectations and identities.

Youth are an essential target audience in the context of food culture for several reasons:

- **Early Adoption of Trends:** Young people are more likely to adopt new food trends and technologies, making them pivotal in driving changes in food consumption patterns. According to a study by KPMG (13), millennials and Gen Z are the primary drivers of the food delivery market in India.
- **Influence on Peers and Families:** Youth often influence the eating habits of their peers and families, acting as agents of change within their social circles. A National Institute of Nutrition (14) study highlights that children and adolescents significantly influence household food purchases and meal choices.
- **Future Consumers and Leaders:** The food choices and preferences developed during youth can persist into adulthood, shaping future market trends and policies. A Nielsen report (15) indicates that millennials’ food preferences will likely continue influencing the food industry for years.
- **Shaping Narratives:** Shaping narratives is one strategy for food culture interventions. Media is an essential channel for showcasing narratives for *participation* and *wellness* (sustainability).

According to a report by McKinsey & Company (16), digital engagement among Indian youth has surged, making them a key demographic for digital marketing strategies. Within television and radio, one important narrative is around the belief that both genders are custodians, promoting shared responsibility for cooking nutritious meals that bring everyone to the table. As mentioned above, television series like ‘MasterChef India’ have already started incorporating family and communal cooking themes, which can be further expanded to include messages of sustainability and health. Another related narrative might focus on *safeguarding* food quality, avoiding the inclusion of additives and contaminants, and land use and fairness in food value chains. Community radio stations in rural India have effectively spread awareness about nutrition and sustainable farming practices.

On Facebook and Instagram, influencers can highlight the geographic origins of food and promote sustainable practices, asking questions like ‘Are we good custodians of the land?’ Influencers like Nandita Iyer (17) and Archana Doshi (18) have large followings and often

post about sustainable and healthy eating practices. Influencers can also emphasise the importance of eating together at home, promoting family bonding and communal meals. Campaigns like 'Cook for Good' by India Food Network (19) encourage families to cook and eat together, emphasising home-cooked meals and their social and health benefits.

Video games can also be a relevant channel. It may be possible to develop games that focus on themes of guardianship and sustainability, such as 'Guardians of the Indian Galaxy,' where players engage in activities promoting environmental stewardship and healthy eating. Educational games can be a powerful tool in engaging youth and teaching them about sustainable food practices.

## CONCLUSION

Conventional behaviour changes programming in nutrition focuses on influencing individual behaviour, often overlooking the intricate layers of food culture. A food culture-based approach, in contrast, addresses the complex interplay of cultural and social factors that shape dietary habits and preferences. This working paper has highlighted the multifaceted nature of food culture in India, emphasising its significance in shaping societal identity, promoting social cohesion, influencing health, and preserving tradition. The [Food Culture Alliance](#) has identified critical dimensions of food culture—openness, participation, and wellness—that can significantly impact consumer behaviour, societal norms, and environmental sustainability. Our case study shows how the *participation* principle could be leveraged to create new narratives in media for youth.

Understanding and navigating food culture is a nuanced journey that demands innovative strategies and collaborative efforts. The Food Culture Alliance, established in 2023, aims to address food culture as a driver for large-scale consumption changes. Culture is how we think about, feel about, and value our food. Our Alliance approach favours collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations, community leaders, educators, media professionals, and the food industry. Comprehensive reviews of food culture, identifying core principles and decoding them into beliefs, values, and norms, allow us to use food culture to tap into the collective identity and leverage ideas to bring about changes in food preferences and choices.

Ultimately, the journey towards healthier communities and sustainable food systems is a collective endeavour. It will require building partnerships, sharing knowledge, and co-creating solutions honouring cultural diversity while addressing contemporary nutritional challenges.

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**ANNEX 1. LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED**

Category	Details	Sample
Food industry experts (chefs, food manufacturers)	Chef and independent consultant	3
	Executive chef	
	Farmer and Founder of a development society	
Health and Lifestyle experts	Senior Adviser in an iNGO	4
	Associated consultant	
	Food Journalist	
	Director of Programmes in a Nutrition based organisation	
Education experts	Professor at a Government University	4
	Retired Professor at a Government University	
	Nutrition and Clinical Research Head	
Government officials	Assistant Director at FSSAI	2
	Executive Director, FSSAI	

## **ANNEX 2. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Discussion Guide Health, Lifestyle and Education Expert**

Based on the desk research findings, specific overarching food culture themes have been identified to collate expert opinions.

1. Shift in food trends and influences over time in India

What major global and regional food trend influences have been in India, and how have those shaped Indians' food habits? How has the Indian culinary landscape policy positioned itself vis-à-vis the shift in food trends? - 15 mins

2. Re-defining healthy eating, with a focus on nutrition

How is India's journey toward returning to its roots and eating nutritious food shaping up? What can help the Indian masses recognise the importance of adopting sustainable and healthy eating practices? - 20 mins

3. Expert-specific questions

Targeted questions to chefs/ caterers and food manufacturers to gauge how the respective sector has adapted to India's food culture shifts. - 5 mins

TOTAL - 45 mins

### **Discussion Guide with Food Industry Experts**

Based on the desk research findings, specific overarching food culture themes have been identified to collate expert opinions.

1. Shift in food trends and influences over time in India

What have been some major global and regional food trend influences in India, and how have they shaped Indians' food habits? How has the Indian culinary landscape policy positioned itself vis-à-vis the shift in food trends? - 15 mins

2. Re-defining healthy eating, with a focus on nutrition

How is India's journey toward returning to its roots and eating nutritious food shaping up? What can help the Indian masses recognise the importance of adopting sustainable and healthy eating practices? - 20 mins

3. Expert-specific questions

Targeted questions to chefs/ caterers and food manufacturers to gauge how the respective sector has adapted over time to shift in India's food culture - 5 mins

TOTAL - 45 mins

### **Discussion Guide with Government Officials**

Based on the desk research findings, specific overarching food culture themes have been identified to collate expert opinions.

1. Shift in food trends and influences over time in India

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What have been some of the significant global and regional food trend influences in India, and what is the role of the government in the same? How has the Indian food policy positioned itself vis-à-vis the shift in food trends? - 8 mins

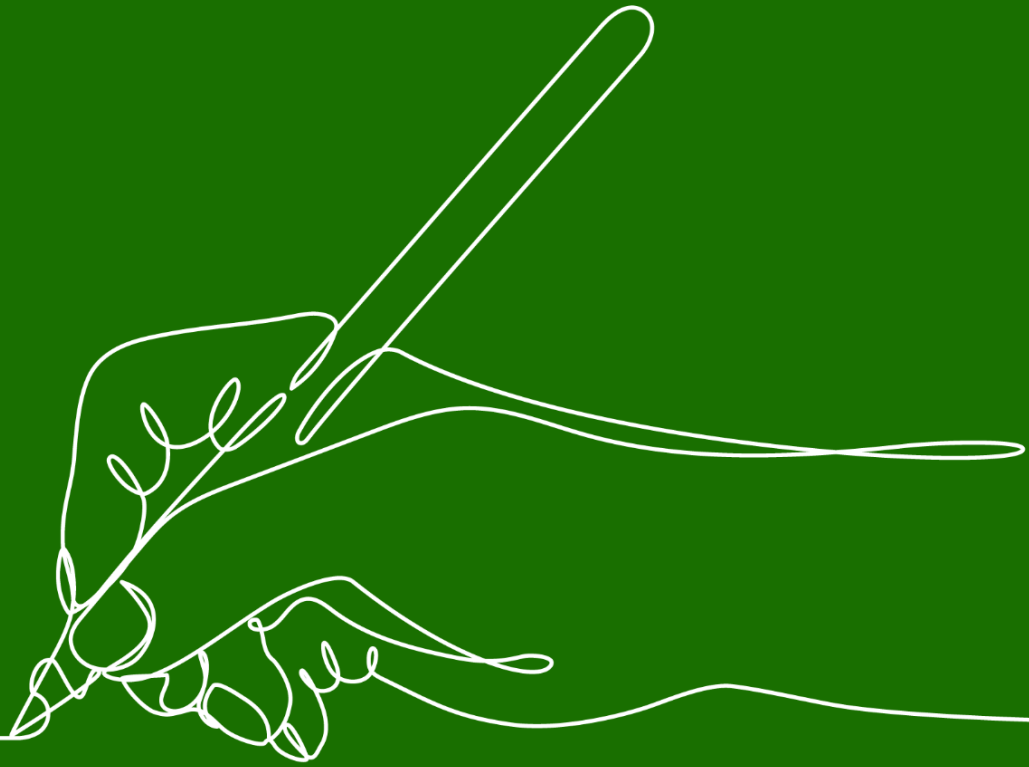
### **2. Democratization of food, changing food habits of Indians**

With globalisation, how have food options availability + access and, thus, food behaviour and choices of Indians changed? How did India's food policy inhibit or drive the democratisation of food? - 18 mins

### **3. Re-defining healthy eating, with a focus on nutrition**

How does the government in India recognise the importance of nutrition and planning for the way ahead? - 14 mins

TOTAL - 45 mins



## ABOUT GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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