



Anthropology of Food: A Study on the Feeding Habits of Kashmiri Muslims

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the culture by its food pattern has been the interest of anthropologists for a long period because food represents a form of cultural expression. What the people eat in a particular society is usually determined by its culture and same is the case in the Himalayan valley of Kashmir. Forming a blend of multiple ethnicities, there has been the diffusion of cultural traits between various culture circles and this process has led to the unique identity to the Kashmiri culture. As the Muslims are supposed to follow the Islamic way of life but elements of different cultures has diffused within this religious identity, which led to various changes in the Islamic attributes. One of the areas where we witness this change is the way Kashmiri Muslims eat food. So this paper aims to explain how and what the Kashmiri Muslims eat along with the effect of modern feeding habits on the health of people.

Introduction

The study of food habits has been the interest of anthropologists for a long period and this interest has led to the understanding of various aspects of culture as well. In the study of the anthropology of food, some of the notable works include the study of the Trobriand Islanders by Malinowski (1978) where he elucidates the meaning of the crops produced by the islanders and the role of food as one of the important elements of their tradition. Furthermore, Garrick Mallery's *Manners and Meals* (1888), Robert Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), and Levi Strauss' *The Culinary Triangle* (2003) were some of the pioneering works in the anthropology of food.

The Himalayan valley of Kashmir in India has got immense anthropological potential owing to its topography and the presence of multiple ethnicities from time to time. Originally settled by Hindus and Buddhists, the valley witnessed the first wave of Islamic culture back in the 14th century with its first Muslim ruler – Shah Mir (Asimov & Bosworth, 1999). Thereafter people from different regions and religions settled in the valley thereby transforming the homogenous culture into a beautiful blend of '*Kashmiri Culture*'. Due to the diffusion of cultural traits from one cultural identity to the other, Muslims in the valley adopted various cultural traits from Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh traditions as well. One of the important aspects of the culture that was affected by this diffusion are 'food habits'.

Food patterns in the valley are atypical and the feeding is governed more or less by the culture. What and how people eat are determined by the traditions and are religiously followed by all the groups present in the valley. The Muslims of the Kashmir valley although share various cultural traits relevant to food with their brethren from other religious groups like having salt tea for breakfast, Islamic teachings restrict the consumption of some foods that are enjoyed by the other ethnicities. Moreover, with the globalization of food items, this Himalayan valley is witnessing the shift in the patterns of feeding habits that are affecting all the groups present in Kashmir. With the introduction of fast food items and ready-to-go meals, Kashmiris have been facing various health implications from last several years. So this paper attempts to bring forth food patterns and the health implications faced by the people due to this introduction of modern feeding habits.

What we eat in kashmir

In addition to providing energy for daily activities and essential nutrients for the growth and normal functioning of the body, food is one of the pleasures of the life if eaten with a family. Kashmir is a closely-knit society of people sharing almost similar socio-cultural and economic environment. So what Kashmiris eat is similar throughout the region with some minor differences. For instance, the staple food in every nook and corner of Kashmir is rice, where the preference is given to the local grained variety (Husaini & Sofi, 2018). Boiled rice forms the basis of meals i.e. lunch and dinner. In addition to rice, other foods that are of prime importance among the locals include mutton, chicken and fish as they are rich in proteins and fats/oils that are necessary for the survival in cold Himalayan climate (Kearney, 2010). In addition to the animal products, meals are often complemented with green leafy vegetables, pulses, potato, tomato, radish etc to balance the diet.

In a common Kashmiri household, food in a family setting is taken usually four times a day. It includes breakfast, lunch, evening tea and dinner. Breakfast being similar in every family, traditional tea locally known as *noon chai* (salt tea) made of black tea, milk, salt and sodium bicarbonate is served and is pinkish in colour (Wani, et al., 2013). Tea is taken with either homemade bread made of wheat, maize or all-purpose flour or bread specially made by a baker (*kandur*) is used. It depends on several factors like the urban or rural setting where one prefers bakery made bread. Jam and butter could be used as per the liking and, to make their breakfast healthy, eggs and chickpea are also taken in the mornings. In the winter months, a specially prepared meat delicacy known as *harisa* is also eaten with the tea (Sen, 2004). Because of the light nature of breakfast in Kashmiri households, lunch is taken earlier than usual at around noon. Boiled rice locally known as *batte* is eaten with a curry made of either veggies or animal products. The type of complement taken with rice also depends on the season of the year where fresh vegetables are taken in summer months, and winters from November to March earlier dried-up vegetables are used. In winter months, pickle locally known as *anchaar* which is made of sliced vegetables can be found in almost every household irrespective of the geography and socio-economic status and is cherished by the Kashmiris. Being a Kashmiri, I have also visited different parts of India and tasted a variety of foods; it was easily observed that the Kashmiri do prefer spicy foods in their diet. Lunch is followed by an evening tea that is taken anytime between 3 pm to 5 pm according to the season of the year and is similar to morning tea. Dinner is taken after the sunset and timing is not uniform all over Kashmir. It has been observed that in urban areas people tend to eat their dinner late mostly after 9 pm while as in rural settings, timing ranges anytime between 8 pm to 9 pm, but this is not true always. Unlike other parts of the country, dinner in Kashmir is a heavy meal and consists of a diet similar to lunch. Many households cook enough food at lunchtime that can be then taken at dinner time as well, while some do the opposite where the food prepared for dinner is kept for next day's lunch. This trend is ever-changing and the majority of the population now prefers freshly prepared food at every meal. Deserts that form an important part of the dinner in Indian households are not preferred in the valley.

Food categories

Kashmiri diet consists of categories not different from other regions of the subcontinent, but the particular foods taken might differ in some way. In this Himalayan valley, some broad food categories include staple foods, fruits and veggies, animal products, fats and oils, and beverages. Each of the categories is discussed in detail.

Staple: Rice is the staple food of Kashmiris and has been so since times immemorial. Produced either locally or imported from other states of the country, it serves as an excellent source of potassium, magnesium, iron, fibre and folate. Rice is also a rich source of carbohydrate and vitamin B and helps in maintaining a balanced diet (Slavin, Jacobs, Marquart, & Wiemer, 2001). There is a saying that no matter what and how much a local Kashmiri eats, the rice should be in the diet daily. Meat, along with rice is the most popular food item in Kashmir. Eating a daily portion of rice is linked to improve all-round health.

Fruits and vegetables: Commonly eaten fruits in Kashmir include: a Kashmiri variety of apple (famous all over the world), figs, apricots, grapes, orange, pears, cherries, bananas, mango, etc. Because of the cold climate in the western Himalayas, some fruits like mango, oranges etc are not grown locally and are imported from other regions while the fruits like apples, almonds, apricots etc are grown in abundance and their export is preferred in the valley due to high market value. Everyone would like to eat a healthier diet. The freely available fruits of Kashmir form an important part of people's diet. Fruits are a good source of vitamins and minerals, and they are high in fibre. They also act an excellent source of potassium, vitamin C, and folate (folic acid) (Economos & Clay, 1999). Fruits rich in potassium may help to maintain a healthy blood pressure. There is a saying, "An apple a day keeps a doctor away" and this quote is relevant because the soluble fibre found in apples combines with fats in the intestine and controls the cholesterol level. Moreover, eating fruits can reduce a person's risk of developing heart disease, inflammation and diabetes.

Vegetables, such as radish, tomatoes, French beans (locally called *hemb*), spinach, peas, collard greens, onions, and potatoes are mostly eaten in Kashmir. Out of them, collard greens (locally called *haakh*) is the most consumed vegetable in Kashmir. Vegetables form good sources of potassium, dietary fibre, and vitamin A and C. Vegetable such as onions contain amino acids in addition to fibre, folic acid, and vitamin B, necessary for the normal metabolism and the production of new cells (Kader, Perkins-Veazie, & Lester, 2004). So, vegetables in the diet provide the essential nutrients for good health and normal functioning of the body.

Animal products: Kashmiris are more inclined towards animal products in their diet. Milk, cheese, mutton, beef, chicken and eggs are some of the animal products having a high consumer intake. Milk contains a good source of nutrients including vitamins, minerals, protein, antioxidants, etc and serves as an excellent source of energy as well, in addition to the maintaining a healthy blood pressure (Hoffman & Falvo, 2004). Being in the Himalaya, meat is cherished among the Kashmiris and is considered a high protein diet which increases metabolic rate, reduces rangel, and promotes fullness (Pereira & Vicente, 2013). Locally made cheese is made from cow milk and its consumption is also high throughout the valley as it is a great source of calcium, saturated fats and proteins. The consumption of cheese also helps in wound healing, promotes healthy bones and teeth (Walther, Schmid, Sieber, & Wehrmuller, 2008). Rich in vitamin E, D, and K, calcium and zinc, eggs also form part of the diet that can be consumed at any time be it breakfast or lunch or dinner and are essential in promoting a healthy skin.

Beverages: *Nun Chai* is the most common beverage taken among the Kashmiris all year round. Taken with traditional bread, it is enjoyed at breakfast and evening time. *Kehwa*, is considered as another traditional beverage of high cultural value that is prepared by boiling saffron and other spices usually cardamom along with dry fruits and is sweet in taste due to the usage of sugar (Akhter, Masoodi, Wani, Raja, & Rather, 2020). If *Nun Chai* is the salt beverage of Kashmir then *kehwa* forms its sweet counterpart. At times, milk is also used in the preparation of *kehwa*. It helps to build immunity, improves skin health and burns fat and acts as an excellent energy booster. Lipton Tea, a black tea with milk, is also taken. It is a delicious way of improving gut health and may help to reduce the risk of stroke (Dow, 2014).

Fats and oils: Commonly used oils in Kashmir are mustard oil, soya bean oil, coconut oil and refined oil. Mustard and soya beans are grown in Kashmir and oils thus extracted from the local traders are preferred over other oils. Cooking oils used in Kashmiri households act as healthy and versatile fat. Oils and fats are natural sources of fat-soluble vitamins. These vitamins are known to act as an antioxidant and protect the skin from scars (Papas, 1999). Homemade ghee has lots of dietary fats and is commonly consumed in Kashmir. Ghee and butter are also used for preparing various kinds of foods.

Culture and food

Culture plays an important role in the life of an individual. Kashmir, which is famous for its cultural heritage, has a diverse culture due to the presence of different cultural groups from time to time (Warikoo, 2009). Elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam have together paved a way for a beautiful blend based on the value of humanism and acceptance. In similar terms, various attributes of culture among the Muslims in Kashmir are composite of different traits and one of the areas where a difference is felt is in the way food is looked at. Taking into consideration the Islamic belief system along with the tradition, food habits among Kashmiri Muslims are different than those of the Muslims in other parts of the world. The Islamic dietary laws are prevalent whereby a food is checked for being halal or haram. Guidelines for the same are laid down in the Quran and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and are to adhere no matter what.

When a Muslim begins to eat, he should begin with the name of Allah by saying *Bismillah*. As Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, 'Oh boy! Mention the name of Allah and eat with your right hand and eat of the dish what is nearer to you.' (Al-Bukhari, 1996). Kashmiri Muslims adhere to this saying and wash their hands before eating the meals. In the majority of the households, food is taken while sitting on the floor and with the hands. Spoons and forks are used but not to a much extent. A piece of clean cloth known as *Dastarkhwan* (Turkic word meaning tablecloth) is spread before the meal. Used across West Asia, South Asia and Central Asia, it also refers to the traditional space where food is eaten. A meal is usually served by the eldest lady in the house or sometimes by other females as well, but men usually refrain from doing so. Some areas still observe the earlier tradition where the men of the household eat first and are followed by women and children. Recalling my own family around 20 years back, men used to eat in a separate room and were served with the best of food, and then the women used to eat food in the plates used by their husbands for eating. This trend is shifting now due to the disappearance of joint family systems, and in a nuclear family each member is given equal status, whereby men, women and children all eat food at the same *dastarkhwan* at the same time. When the meal is over, hands are washed in a water bowl which is followed by the conversations about politics, sports and family matters.

Modern food habits and their health implications

Globalization has greatly influenced the feeding habits of the Kashmiri people. A valley known for its traditional cuisines is gradually losing the charm to fast food items on home-grounds. Modern diet usually consists of high consumption of junk foods that may be prepared and marketed under unhygienic conditions and due to this fact the health of Kashmiri people has gone drastic changes in recent times. Incorporations of food items like Italian foods, Chinese foods, etc and Indian foods as well like *biryanis*, *momo* etc is increasing daily. People tend to take snacks as part of the regular meals and with the changes in lifestyle; demand for snacks is increasing day by day (Oniang'O, Mutuku, & Malaba, 2003). These foods have been found to have a high proportion of fat, starch and high sugar content that results in the emergence of various health conditions like diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, hypertension, hyperlipidemia etc among the locals (O'keefe jr & Cordain, 2004).

Studies show that a large number of people in Kashmir is suffering from diabetes due to the consumption of foods rich in sugars. With the prevalence of snacks, soft drinks and the increased consumption of sweet Lipton tea, the daily consumption of sugars has increases manifold. Moreover, with the heavy number of active as well as passive smokers, people with this condition are increasing by each passing day. Change in lifestyle and increased consumption of the foods high in fat and sugars is leading to obesity among the youngsters as well. It is also accompanied by other conditions like thyroid, cardiovascular diseases etc. One of the factors responsible for obesity and diabetes as well, is the delaying of meals by the people in the Himalayan valley. Due to the availability of the internet and television facilities, meals usually get delayed and are eaten when one is about to sleep, thereby paving way for these health issues. Only junk is not responsible for the health issues people are facing now in the valley of Kashmir. Increased intake of salt via *noon chai* is leading to hypertension. It is also closely linked to modern diets rich in cholesterol and fats. Furthermore, the consumption of snacks high in salts is also proving to be one of the reasons responsible for high blood pressure among the people.

Conclusion

Whereas Muslims are supposed to adhere to the norms laid down by Islamic law, the Kashmiri Muslims do share cultural elements with other groups present in the valley. What the Muslims in Kashmir eat is determined by both religion as well as culture and they go hand in hand. Moreover, with the urbanization and globalization, traditional feeding habits among all the religious groups in Kashmir has undergone a tremendous shift and the meals are being replaced by fast food items and snacks. With this, people are facing various health implications and if this trend continues, the health profile of the valley may see devastating results.

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