

## SOFT POWER THROUGH SPICE: TURKIC CULINARY INFLUENCE AS A TOOL OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA AND INDIA

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### Abstract

This paper will explore the role of Turkic culinary traditions as a form of “soft power” that facilitated cultural integration across Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. As Turkic peoples migrated and established empires in Persia, Central Asia, and India, they introduced signature dishes like kebabs, biryani, and pulao, alongside innovative cooking techniques such as the tandoor and *dum* (slow-cooking in sealed pots). These practices transformed Indian cuisine, blending Turkic flavours and aesthetics with local ingredients and vegetarian traditions. Turkic rulers, particularly in the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, used cuisine to consolidate social cohesion, showcasing their culinary heritage in feasts that bridged diverse linguistic and religious communities.

Food became a tool of cultural diplomacy, with elaborate banquets featuring luxurious ingredients—saffron, nuts, dried fruits, and aromatic spices—symbolizing prestige and refinement. Beverages like sharbat (flavoured syrups) and spiced milk drinks infused with saffron and rose water also spread widely, reshaping local taste preferences.

This paper, through historical accounts and culinary records will examine the evolution of Indo-Turkic cuisine as a fusion of Central Asian, Persian, and Indian elements, emphasizing how shared culinary experiences fostered unity.

The paper will also consider reverse influences of Indian flavours on Turkic cuisine, so as to underscore a dynamic two-way exchange that exemplifies the integrative power of culinary traditions.

**Keywords :** Soft power, Cultural integration, Culinary diplomacy, Cross-cultural exchange and Fusion gastronomy

### Introduction:

The Turkic peoples, an ethnolinguistic group originating from the steppes of Central Asia, have played a transformative role in the culinary and cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Emerging as nomadic tribes around the 6th century CE, the Turkic people gradually expanded their influence across Central Asia, Persia, and eventually into India through migration and conquest.<sup>1</sup> Their movement southward brought about significant socio-political changes and cultural influences, particularly with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206 and the Mughal Empire in 1526.<sup>2</sup>

Turkic rulers introduced signature dishes like kebabs, biryani, and pulao, as well as cooking techniques such as the use of the tandoor (a clay oven) and *dum* (slow-cooking in sealed pots). The Turkic use of spices, marinating techniques, and aromatic elements reshaped the culinary traditions of India, where previously vegetarian diets were predominant, particularly among the local Hindu population. As Turkic culinary practices mingled with Indian flavours, a unique Indo-Turkic cuisine emerged, symbolizing the broader cultural integration between the two civilizations. Food became an essential component of what Joseph Nye defines as ‘soft power’, the ability to influence others through cultural appeal and attraction rather than military or economic force.<sup>3</sup>

Turkic influences have left a lasting mark on Indian cuisine.<sup>4</sup> This paper explores the multifaceted influence of Turkic culinary traditions on Indian cuisine, highlighting key dishes, ingredients, and cooking methods while examining the impact of Indo-Turkic culinary exchanges on both cultures.

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<sup>1</sup>Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Germany, 1992, p.45.

<sup>2</sup> André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Brill, Leiden, 2002, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph S. Nye, ‘Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics’, *Public Affairs*, New York, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Razi Ahmad, ‘The Turkic Culinary Influence on Indian Cuisine’. *Journal of Historical Gastronomy*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2020, pp. 23-34

### **Historical Background:**

Turkic presence in India commenced with the arrival of the Central Asian Turkic tribes, who initially entered the region as traders and mercenaries. However, larger waves followed as these tribes expanded southward from the Central Asian steppes, attracted by the wealth of the region and its strategic position.<sup>5</sup> This movement significantly intensified with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the early 13th century. The Turkic ruler Qutb ud-Din Aibak, a former slave of the Ghurid dynasty, laid the foundation for Turkic rule in India, inaugurating a period of Turkic-led governance that would endure for centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The arrival of Turkic dynasties like the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughals brought not only new administrative and military systems but also diverse cultural influences, including art, architecture, language, and cuisine. The Mughal Empire, in particular, blended Turkic, Persian, and Indian elements, creating a unique cultural synthesis that reshaped Indian society and established enduring legacies in fields such as literature, music, and culinary traditions.<sup>7</sup>

### **Soft Power Engagement in Diplomacy:**

Soft power, a concept popularized by political scientist Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to shape the preferences and behaviours of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.<sup>8</sup> Cultural exchanges, education programs, media, and culinary diplomacy are some of the key channels through which nations engage in soft power diplomacy. For instance, international broadcasting networks, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), have served as platforms to share cultural narratives and promote national values globally, enhancing the UK's diplomatic influence,<sup>9</sup> while programs like the Fulbright Scholarship have been instrumental for the United States in building connections with future global leaders through educational exchanges.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic force, soft power draws on cultural appeal, values, and policies that resonate with foreign populations. This approach fosters goodwill and long-term partnerships, making it a valuable tool in modern diplomacy.

In recent years, the importance of soft power has grown, especially as countries increasingly compete to establish cultural influence in a globalized world. Through promoting cultural heritage, values, and knowledge exchange, it is possible for nations to achieve diplomatic objectives that traditional means might struggle to accomplish, strengthening alliances and creating a cross-cultural understanding.<sup>11</sup>

### **Historical Roots of Culinary Diplomacy**

Culinary diplomacy or the use of food as a means to foster international goodwill and build cultural connections, has deep historical roots. Since ancient times, food has played a symbolic role in

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion on the legacy of the Timurids, see, Stephen Frederic Dale, 'The Legacy of the Timurid's', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 8, No. 1 Cambridge University Press, April 1998, pp.43-58.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History*. Cambridge University Press, UK. 1999, pp. 10–12.

<sup>7</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge University Press, UK, 1993, pp. 25–28

<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Nye, op.cit., pp. 5–8.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency: American Public Diplomacy, 1989–2001*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 15–18.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Kaufman, 'Educational Exchanges as Soft Power: The Case of the Fulbright Program', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010, pp. 89–96. The scholar has also been a fellow of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) in 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye, 'The Future of Soft Power in U.S. Foreign Policy', *Global Asia*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2009, pp. 8–13.

diplomacy, bridging cultural divides and reinforcing social bonds between different peoples and nations. Banquets, feasts, and the sharing of local delicacies have often been used as tools to negotiate alliances, celebrate victories, and promote peace.

In ancient Mesopotamia, rulers would host elaborate feasts to honor foreign dignitaries and to display their wealth and generosity, signalling power and cultural sophistication.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the Persian Empire, known for its vast reach and diverse populations, would use shared meals to unify its territories and incorporate diverse cultural influences into its cuisine.<sup>13</sup>

The Silk Route, which connected East Asia with the Mediterranean, was another key avenue for culinary diplomacy, enabling the exchange of spices, ingredients, and cooking techniques among different cultures. This exchange was not only about food but also about fostering mutual understanding and collaboration between traders, travellers, and rulers along the route.<sup>14</sup> Mughal emperors used royal banquets to celebrate the fusion of Turkic, Persian, and Indian culinary traditions, symbolizing the empire's pluralistic ideals and multicultural identity.<sup>15</sup> These banquets served as cultural exchanges, where invited dignitaries from across the empire and beyond could experience the richness of Mughal cuisine, reinforcing alliances and promoting a sense of unity.

In medieval Europe, diplomatic feasts were similarly essential. The French King Francis I, for example, hosted grand feasts to strengthen alliances with neighbouring states, using French cuisine as a means to project cultural superiority and win favour among foreign envoys.<sup>16</sup>

### **Historical Roots of Culinary Diplomacy in India:**

In India, the use of food as a diplomatic tool has a rich and varied history, especially as the subcontinent became a melting pot for different cultures, religions, and ethnic groups. Indian rulers understood the value of hospitality and the strategic use of culinary arts to build alliances, reinforce social hierarchies, and project power.

With the arrival of Turkic and Persian influences during the Delhi Sultanate (13th–16th centuries) and the Mughal Empire (16th–19th centuries), India's culinary landscape underwent a significant transformation. The royal courts of the Mughals in particular emphasized lavish banquets to strengthen alliances with regional kings and foreign dignitaries<sup>17</sup>. Mughal emperors, especially Akbar and Jahangir, embraced Persian, Turkic, and local Indian culinary traditions, resulting in a sophisticated fusion that symbolized the multicultural ethos of their empire.<sup>18</sup> The Mughal court, especially under Emperor Akbar, employed food to foster unity across diverse subjects and to integrate Hindu and Muslim elites. Akbar's policy of *Sulh-e-Kul*, or "universal tolerance," extended to the royal kitchens, where chefs created dishes that blended Hindu and Muslim dietary customs.<sup>19</sup> Banquets for both Indian and foreign guests included dishes such as biryani, kebabs, and korma, which utilized spices, cooking techniques, and flavours from Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent. This culinary fusion showcased the empire's inclusive identity and its ability to harmonize cultural differences through food.<sup>20</sup>

Culinary diplomacy continued even after the Mughal era. During British rule, Indian food played an important role in cultural exchanges between British officials and Indian leaders. British colonial

<sup>12</sup> Mario Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society, and Economy*. Routledge, 2014, pp. 87–90

<sup>13</sup> Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis & Sarah Stewart. *The Age of the Parthians: The Ideas of Iran*. I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 33–36.

<sup>14</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*. Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 114–118.

<sup>15</sup> John F Richards, *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 156–159.

<sup>16</sup> Roy Strong, *Feast: A History of Grand Eating*. Harcourt, 2002, pp. 89–92.

<sup>17</sup> John F Richards, op. cit., pp. 156–159.

<sup>18</sup> Irfan Habib, 'The Mughal Administration and the State', *Studies in History*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1982, pp. 187–210.

<sup>19</sup> Sajida S. Alvi, 'Sulh-i Kull in Mughal India: The Political Ideology of Tolerance', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1986, pp. 42–45.

<sup>20</sup> Shireen Moosvi, *People, Taxation, and Trade in Mughal India*. Oxford University Press, UK, 2008, pp. 98–100.

officers adapted Indian flavours into Anglo-Indian cuisine, which was served at social gatherings that attempted to bridge British and Indian cultures, albeit within the constraints of colonial hierarchies.<sup>21</sup> In the princely state of Awadh, Nawabs refined Mughal culinary traditions and made them central to their diplomatic and cultural practices. Dishes like *galouti* kebabs and nihari were crafted with painstaking detail and were often shared at banquets with British officials, regional rulers, and foreign diplomats.<sup>22</sup> This practice of serving elaborate Awadhi dishes to guests became a hallmark of *Nawabi* hospitality and a way to establish the state's cultural prestige.

### **Culinary Impact and Legacy of the Turkic people on India:**

#### **Culinary Delights introduced by the Turks:**

Prior to the arrival of the Turkic invaders, Indian cuisine was largely vegetarian, rooted in local agricultural traditions and the dietary restrictions of various religious groups. The Turkic invaders, with their nomadic heritage and love for meat, especially lamb and mutton, transformed Indian food. Historically, Turkic nomads consumed a diet rich in meats, often cooked over open flames or in ovens, a tradition they carried with them. The introduction of meat-based dishes, especially grilled and roasted meats, was one of the most significant impacts of Turkic culture on Indian food. As they established themselves in the Indian subcontinent, they brought along dishes like kebabs, biryani, and nihari, which have become staples in North Indian cuisine.

In the *Bagh-o-Bahar* or The Tales of the Four Dervishes, a collection of stories by the poet Amir Khusro, who was the son of a Turkish officer in the service of Iltutmish, there are several references to food that came out of Indo-Muslim cultural influences. The merchants who came from Turkey mention dishes like fragrant *yakhni* and korma pulao and *do piyazah* or meat cooked with onions. Kababs feature in these writings in a big way.<sup>23</sup>

Kebabs, a quintessential Turkic dish, soon became integral to the royal kitchens of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal courts. Central Asian kebabs typically consisted of marinated chunks of lamb or beef, grilled or roasted. In India, these kebabs were adapted to local tastes by using Indian spices and cooking methods. Seekh kebabs, skewered minced meat, and *shami* kebabs, patties made from ground meat mixed with lentils, are direct descendants of Turkic kebabs. The refinement of kebabs in royal kitchens, particularly in regions like Awadh, led to the creation of soft, melt-in-the-mouth varieties such as *galouti* kebabs.<sup>24</sup> The practice of cooking rice with meat, spices, and aromatics, known as *pulao* or *pilaf* in Central Asia was also introduced by the Turkic people. In India, this dish evolved into the elaborate biryani, combining marinated meat, rice, and rich spices layered and slow-cooked to perfection. Mughal chefs enhanced the dish with Indian spices like cloves and cardamom, creating regional variations of biryani in places like Hyderabad, Lucknow, and Kolkata.<sup>25</sup>

The korma originated from Central Asia and was introduced by Turkic and Persian chefs who worked in the Mughal kitchens. This slow-cooked dish involves braising meat in a spiced yogurt or cream-based sauce. Mughal chefs adapted the dish with local spices, resulting in rich, creamy

<sup>21</sup> Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*. Oxford University Press, UK, 2006, pp. 112–115.

<sup>22</sup> Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877*. Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 43–46.

<sup>23</sup> *Bagh-o-Bahar*, translated from the *Urdu of Mir Amman of Delhi*, Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1852.

<sup>24</sup> K.T. Achaya, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*. Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 116–118. Also see, Pushpesh Pant, India: Food and the Making of the Nation, *India International Centre Quarterly*, Autum Vol. 40, No. 2, 2013, pp. 1-34.

<sup>25</sup> Lizzie Collingham, op. cit., pp. 74–78. Interestingly, the Mughals used at least 12 different varieties of rice in their biryanis and pulaos such as the Uzbek pilaf. See, Vir Sanghvi, Rude Food, 'Kababs, yes, but khandavi too' in *Hindustan Times*, Brunch, November 9, 2024, p. 13.

gravies that became the hallmark of Mughlai cuisine. Korma remains a staple in Indian cuisine, known for its subtle flavours and creamy texture.<sup>26</sup> Nihari, a slow-cooked stew traditionally made with beef or lamb shank, is a popular dish that traces its roots to the Mughal kitchens of North India. The name *nihari* is derived from the Arabic word *nahar*, meaning 'day,' as it was typically eaten as a hearty breakfast dish before sunrise, especially by Mughal soldiers and labourers to sustain them through the day.<sup>27</sup>

Turkic influence also brought a new emphasis on dairy products in Indian cooking. Yogurt was used as a marinade base for meats, helping to tenderize and add flavour, while cream was used to create rich, smooth gravies. This practice led to the development of iconic Mughlai dishes such as korma and butter chicken, known for their creamy texture and subtle flavours.<sup>28</sup> Although clarified butter was already used in Indian cooking, Turkic and Persian chefs popularized its use as a key cooking medium in North Indian and Mughlai cuisine. Ghee's high smoke point and rich flavour made it ideal for frying and preparing indulgent dishes.<sup>29</sup> These ingredients not only enhanced the richness of Indian cuisine that continues to thrive today.

Turkic influences on Indian cuisine helped shape what is now recognized as "Mughlai cuisine," characterized by rich gravies, aromatic spices, and elaborate presentation. This fusion of Central Asian techniques with Indian ingredients created dishes that remain central to Indian cuisine today, bridging culinary traditions across regions and centuries.

The tradition of baking bread, such as naan and roti, was also introduced by the Turkic and Persian people. Naan, made with refined flour and traditionally baked in a tandoor (clay oven), was a favourite in the royal courts and is still a popular accompaniment for Mughlai dishes. Other varieties of flatbreads, such as parathas, also trace their roots to the Turkic influence, particularly in their use of stuffing and layering techniques.<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, the ancestor of the samosas that Indians love, is a Middle-Eastern dish called the *sanbusak*. The word *sanbusak* is derived from the Persian *sambusa*, which means anything triangular. While a mention of this dish has been first found in an Iraqi text of the early 9<sup>th</sup> c, it is again seen in a 12<sup>th</sup> c recipe book.<sup>31</sup>

Turkic and Persian sweets also influenced Indian desserts, with *firni* (a rice flour pudding) and *halwa* (a dense, sweet confection) becoming popular in India. *Halwa*, which originated in the Middle East and Central Asia, was adapted with the use of ghee (clarified butter) and various local ingredients, resulting in varieties like *sooji halwa* and *gajar ka halwa*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Shireen Moosvi, op. cit., pp. 101–103.

<sup>27</sup> Nihari is made by simmering meat with a blend of spices, including cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, and nutmeg, resulting in a rich and flavourful gravy that deepens with long hours of cooking. See, Lizzie Collingham, op. cit., pp. 114–116.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 138–140

<sup>29</sup> Shireen Moosvi, op. cit., pp. 105–107.

<sup>30</sup> William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi, 1857*, Bloomsbury, 2007, pp. 67–69.

<sup>31</sup> Vir Sanghvi, *Samosas did not originate in India*,

<sup>32</sup> Alan Davidson, *The Oxford Companion to Food*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 351–353. *Firni* was introduced as a dessert made from milk and ground rice, often flavoured with cardamom and saffron, and served during special occasions. For a country by country survey of food language of Central Asia, including the diverse foods and changes over time with modernization and globalization, see the chapter on Food by Country in Paul Buell, E.N.Anderson et al (ed.), op. cit., pp.204-284. Also see, *Bagh-o-Bahar*, op.cit.



Interestingly, Turkic influence on Indian cuisine extended beyond food and into the realms of beverages, presentation styles, and the aesthetic use of colors, contributing to the richness and diversity of Indian culinary culture. Turkic and Persian cultures introduced several refreshing beverages to India, such as sherbet and kahwa. Sherbet, a sweet, flavoured drink made from fruits, herbs, or flowers, became popular in Indian courts, especially during the hot summer months. Kahwa, a type of green tea brewed with spices like cinnamon, cardamom, and saffron, was introduced from Central Asia and gained popularity in northern India, particularly in Kashmir.<sup>33</sup> *Falooda*, a cold dessert drink made from vermicelli, milk, rose syrup, and basil seeds, traces its origins to Persian and Central Asian drinks like *faloodeh*.<sup>34</sup>

Turkic-influenced dishes in India often incorporated vibrant colours, not only for flavour but also for visual appeal. The use of saffron, a valuable spice from Central Asia<sup>35</sup> became a hallmark of Mughal cuisine, imparting a golden-yellow hue to rice dishes like biryani and pulao. Additionally, garnishes of dried fruits, nuts, and colourful ingredients like pomegranate seeds and rose petals added both flavour and colour to the dishes, enhancing their appeal and aligning with the opulent style favoured in Turkic and Persian courts.<sup>36</sup>

Influenced by this, Mughal cuisine emphasized aesthetics, with dishes often garnished with edible silver and gold leaf (known as *varak*) to signify wealth and opulence. Feasts in the Mughal courts were arranged with meticulous attention to presentation, showcasing a variety of dishes in a visually appealing manner to impress dignitaries and guests.<sup>37</sup>

### **Cooking Techniques and Utensils:**

Turkic arrival in India also brought with it new cooking techniques and utensils many of which, became essential to Mughlai and North Indian cuisine and are still in use today.

The *degchi*, a round, deep cooking pot with a narrow neck, traditionally used in Central Asian and Persian cooking soon became a staple in Mughal kitchens, especially for preparing rice dishes like biryani and pulao, over low heat, essential for layering flavours in these dishes<sup>38</sup>. Also, the use of large, deep *kadhai* for frying and slow-cooking meat gravies was popularized with Turkic influences and thick-walled, circular, and shallow pot became vital for making rich, flavourful dishes, including curries and stir-fries in Mughlai cuisine.<sup>39</sup>

The most significant Turkic introduction, of course, was the tandoor. Originally used by the Persians and Central Asians, it became integral to Indian cooking during the Mughal era. This high-heat oven allowed for the preparation of naan and roti, as well as meats like tandoori chicken. The technique of cooking in a tandoor added a smoky flavour and texture that became highly popular across India.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lizzie Collingham, op. cit., pp. 83–85.

<sup>34</sup> Chitrita Banerji, *Eating India: Exploring the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007, pp. 128–130.

<sup>35</sup> Lizzie Collingham, op. cit., pp. 69–71. Saffron, originally cultivated in Persia and was introduced to Indian cooking by the Turkic and Mughal rulers. It became a signature ingredient in royal dishes such as biryani, pulao, and korma. The unique flavour and colour of saffron were highly prized and became associated with luxury in Indian cuisine.

<sup>36</sup> K.T. Achaya, op. cit., pp. 239–242. For details of how history has influenced foodways in Central Asia by creating flows of cultural influences that brought new foods from all directions following conquest see the chapter on Histories in Paul Buell, E.N. Anderson et al (ed.), pp.86-179. Also see, D. Narayanana, *Cultures of Food and Gastronomy in Mughal and post-Mughal India*, (n.d).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 135–137.

<sup>38</sup> K.T. Achaya, op. cit., pp. 78–80.

<sup>39</sup> Collingham, op. cit., pp. 65–67

<sup>40</sup> Chitrita Banerji, op. cit., pp. 142–144.

Turkic influence also brought a preference for using durable metals like copper and brass in cookware. The Mughals adopted these metals for various utensils, including pots, plates, and serving dishes, often adorned with intricate designs to reflect the elegance of courtly dining.<sup>41</sup> These utensils were not only functional but also symbolic, representing the luxurious dining culture of the Mughals and their Turkic roots.

### **Reverse Influence of Indian Cuisine on Turkic Culture:**

While the Turkic and Persian invasions introduced many new elements to Indian cuisine, the cultural exchange was not one-sided. Indian culinary practices and ingredients also influenced Turkic cuisine, particularly through the Mughal Empire's connections with Central Asia and Persia. Indian spices like black pepper, turmeric, and cumin made their way into Central Asian and Persian kitchens through trade and cultural exchanges with India. These spices were incorporated into traditional Turkic dishes, enhancing flavours and expanding the spice palette in Central Asian cuisine. The demand for Indian spices grew in the Middle East and Central Asia, impacting local culinary practices.<sup>42</sup> Indian cuisine's emphasis on vegetarianism, influenced by Hindu and Jain dietary customs, impacted the food culture of some Turkic regions. Although traditional Turkic cuisine was largely meat-based, Indian-inspired vegetable dishes and legume-based stews, such as dal (lentil curry), were gradually adopted. These vegetarian dishes added variety to Turkic diets, especially for those in proximity to Indian trade routes.<sup>43</sup> Indian sweets such as barfi (a dense milk-based confection) and jalebi (a deep-fried sweet soaked in sugar syrup) found their way into Turkic cuisine. *Jalebi*, known as *zalabiya* in the Middle East, was likely adapted from Indian culinary traditions.<sup>44</sup> These sweets were eventually incorporated into Central Asian dessert menus, showcasing India's impact on regional confectioneries.<sup>45</sup>

Although tea drinking has deep roots in Central Asia, the Indian adaptation of spiced tea, or masala chai, influenced tea culture in some Turkic regions, especially in urban centers and areas with strong Indian connections. The practice of adding spices like cardamom and cloves to tea became popular, marking a unique blend of Indian and Central Asian tea traditions.<sup>46</sup>

The reciprocal influences between Indian and Turkic cuisines demonstrate the dynamic cultural exchanges that took place over centuries. These culinary exchanges enriched the gastronomic traditions of both regions, creating a lasting culinary legacy.

### **Conclusion:**

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<sup>41</sup> Veena Talwar Oldenburg, op. cit., pp. 41–43. These metals have excellent heat retention properties, making them ideal for slow-cooked dishes

<sup>42</sup> Lizzie Collingham, op. cit., pp. 85–87.

<sup>43</sup> Chitrita Banerji, op. cit., pp. 149–151

<sup>44</sup> Vir Sanghvi mentions that the jalebi is so popular in India that we forget that its origins perhaps lies outside of our borders. The origin of the jalebi has been of great debate, and it is generally accepted today that our ancestors instantly transformed the Middle Eastern zalabiya and made it our own. And, as their descendants, we have kept that tradition alive. See, Vir Sanghvi,

We got the jalebi from the Middle East and turned it into a ...

<https://virsanghvi.com/Article-Details.aspx?key=899> (accessed on November 9, 2024).

<sup>45</sup> K.T. Achaya, op. cit., pp. 190–192

<sup>46</sup> Shireen Moosvi, op. cit., pp. 112–114.

The culinary exchange between the Turkic regions of Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent exemplifies how food serves as a powerful tool of soft power, transcending political and geographic boundaries. The Turkic introduction of spices, cooking techniques, ingredients, and food presentation styles into India was not merely a transfer of cuisine but a profound cultural integration that influenced art, identity, and tradition. This culinary legacy, which includes dishes such as biryani, kebabs, and desserts like *falooda*, has become an essential part of India's gastronomic landscape and continues to shape regional cuisines. Indian culinary practices, such as the use of regional spices and vegetarian dishes, also left their mark on Central Asian cuisine, a fusion that has prevailed over centuries. These exchanges reveal how soft power operates through the sensory experiences of taste and hospitality, embedding foreign influences within local contexts and strengthening cross-cultural ties.

In modern times, the Turkic-Indian culinary heritage continues to symbolize shared history and mutual influence, highlighting the role of food as a diplomatic bridge. The preservation and celebration of these culinary traditions show the depth of cultural integration that soft power can achieve, making food a force in shaping and sustaining bonds across diverse societies.

Today, the concept of culinary diplomacy has gained renewed attention as nations recognize the importance of food in nurturing international relations. Food festivals, cultural exchange programs, and culinary competitions serve as platforms for showcasing national cuisines and promoting cultural awareness. These initiatives not only celebrate culinary diversity but also facilitate dialogue and understanding among different cultures.

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