

FOOD AND CULINARY CULTURE AT AKBAR'S COURT: A STUDY OF THE *AIN-I-AKBARI*

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Abstract: This article examines the food culture of Mughal India using the information provided in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, written by Abu'l Fazl during the reign of Emperor Akbar. The text offers valuable insights into the organisation of the Mughal kitchen, the management of food supplies and the regulations governing food preparation at the Mughal court. It also describes a wide variety of dishes, including vegetarian preparations, rice-based dishes and meat dishes cooked with different spices. In addition, the work provides information about fruits, beverages and the classification of flavours, revealing the diversity of ingredients used in Mughal cuisine. These details highlight the close relationship between culinary practices, agricultural resources and courtly culture in the Mughal Empire. Overall, the *Ain-i-Akbari* serves as an important source for understanding the richness and sophistication of Mughal food traditions.

Keywords: Mughals, *Ain-i-Akbari*, cuisine, Mughal kitchen, Food culture, Dishes.

INTRODUCTION

Food offers a useful way of understanding the everyday life and culture of a historical society. The kinds of food people consumed, the ingredients available to them and the ways in which meals were prepared were closely connected with agricultural production, regional resources and social practices. In Mughal India, food occupied an important place in courtly life, particularly under Akbar, whose imperial kitchen developed into a carefully organised establishment.

The *Ain-i-Akbari*, written by Abu'l Fazl during Akbar's reign, provides valuable information about this aspect of Mughal life. Its detailed account of the imperial kitchen describes the officials responsible for its management, the procurement and handling of food supplies, and the precautions followed during the preparation and serving of meals. At the same time, its descriptions of different dishes, ingredients, fruits and beverages reveal the variety that characterised food at the Mughal court.

The present study examines these different aspects of Mughal culinary culture through the evidence provided in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. It focuses on the organisation of the imperial kitchen, the supply and management of ingredients, cooking and serving practices, and the variety of dishes prepared at the court. It also considers fruits, beverages and ideas associated with taste and flavour, showing how culinary practices were connected with the wider administrative and material life of the Mughal court.

1. The Mughal Kitchen as an Administrative Institution

The *Ain-i-Akbari* presents the Mughal kitchen as a highly structured and disciplined department of the royal household. Abu'l Fazl emphasises that Emperor Akbar personally paid attention to the functioning of this department because proper nourishment was considered essential for maintaining both physical strength and mental balance. According to the text, the equilibrium of the human body and the ability to enjoy worldly and spiritual benefits ultimately depended upon the proper selection and preparation of food. This statement reflects a

broader intellectual tradition in medieval Islamic and Persian thought, where diet and health were closely interconnected.¹

Akbar's personal dietary habits present an interesting contrast to the elaborate culinary arrangements maintained at the Mughal court. Abu'l Fazl's account indicates that the emperor practised considerable moderation in eating, despite the abundance and variety associated with the royal kitchen. This aspect of Akbar's food habits has also been noted by Rizwan Ahmad, who highlights that the emperor generally consumed little food and, on certain occasions, restricted himself to a single meal a day.² Akbar is further reported to have ended his meals before feeling completely full. His modest approach to food thus differed considerably from the elaborate and richly organized culinary arrangements of the Mughal court.³

This moderation in eating was also linked to certain religious influences at Akbar's court. Badauni attributes Akbar's reduced intake of food to the influence of jogis and lamas, who believed that eating less could considerably prolong human life.⁴ His dietary preferences also underwent changes with regard to the consumption of meat. Abu'l Fazl notes that Akbar at times refrained from eating meat because he was increasingly reluctant to allow animals to be killed merely for food.⁵ It is, however, difficult to say whether meat was completely excluded from the imperial table. Badauni further records that Akbar also avoided garlic and onions and associates these dietary restrictions with Hindu influence.⁶ These practices, however, may have been more closely connected with Jain traditions.

The organisation of food within Akbar's household extended beyond the imperial kitchen itself. Different aspects of food and drink were managed through specialised departments. The Matbakh functioned as the imperial kitchen where food for the emperor was prepared, while the Abdar Khana was concerned with drinking water and beverages. Fruits were managed through the Mewah Khana. The existence of these specialised establishments further demonstrates the administrative organisation that surrounded food provision at the Mughal court.⁷

The administration of the kitchen was headed by an official known as the *Mir Bakawal*, who acted as the master of the kitchen and supervised the preparation and distribution of food within the Mughal household. His position was of considerable importance because the success of the entire department depended upon his efficiency and vigilance. The *Mir Bakawal* was assisted by several other officials, including treasurers responsible for managing cash and stores, tasters who examined food before it was served to the Emperor and clerks who maintained records of supplies and expenditures.

This administrative structure reveals the extent to which food preparation was integrated into the bureaucratic system of the Mughal state. The presence of treasurers and clerks indicates that food production at the Mughal court involved significant financial resources and required systematic accounting. At the beginning of each year, officials prepared an estimate of the kitchen's expenses and received the necessary funds. Storehouses and money bags were sealed by responsible officers, and monthly statements of expenditure were recorded and verified.

From a historical perspective, this elaborate system of accounting demonstrates the Mughal emphasis on administrative order and financial transparency. The Mughal kitchen was not simply a place where food was prepared but an institution that reflected the organisational principles of the Mughal state. The management of food supplies, labour and expenditure within the kitchen mirrors the broader administrative practices of the empire.⁸

The efficiency of Akbar's Mughal kitchen is also evident from the way it catered to the emperor's needs. As Akbar had no fixed time for his meals, the kitchen staff had to remain ready to prepare and serve food whenever he wished to eat. Shireen Moosvi points out that more than a hundred dishes could be prepared within an hour. This gives some idea of the scale on which the royal kitchen operated and the large number of people involved in preparing and serving food at the court. It also suggests that careful planning and coordination were essential for its smooth functioning.⁹

2. Procurement Networks and Supply of Ingredients

Another significant aspect of Mughal culinary culture highlighted in the *Ain-i-Akbari* is the procurement of food ingredients from different regions. The Mughal kitchen drew upon agricultural products from widely dispersed regions of the empire, reflecting the geographical diversity of Mughal territories.

The text records that different varieties of rice, ghee and vegetables were collected from specific regions. For instance, varieties of rice such as Sukhdas, Dewzira and Jinjin were procured from different parts of the empire, while vegetables were obtained from regions such as Kashmir. Such references indicate that the Mughal kitchen drew upon food supplies from widely dispersed regions of the empire.

Livestock used for meat was also carefully managed. Sheep, goats and poultry were fattened before being slaughtered, indicating the considerable care taken in preparing animals for the Mughal kitchen. Slaughterhouses were located outside the city or military camp, usually near rivers or tanks, where the meat was washed before being sent to the kitchen. The meat was transported in sealed sacks and washed again before cooking, indicating the care taken in the handling and preparation of meat.

Water used for cooking was treated with equal care. Water carriers poured water from leather bags into earthen vessels whose openings were covered with pieces of cloth and sealed, and the water was allowed to settle before being used. This procedure indicates the care taken in the storage and preparation of water before its use in the Mughal kitchen.¹⁰

These details illustrate the logistical complexity involved in supplying the Mughal court with food. The procurement of ingredients required coordination between agricultural producers, merchants and court officials. In this sense, the Mughal kitchen can be seen as a central point where the agricultural wealth of the empire was transformed into courtly cuisine.

3. Regulation, Hygiene and Precautionary Practices in the Mughal Kitchen

One of the most striking features of the *Ain-i-Akbari*'s description of the Mughal kitchen is the emphasis placed on regulation and safety during the preparation and serving of food. Elaborate procedures were followed to maintain cleanliness and ensure careful supervision of food before it reached the emperor.

During the cooking process, strict precautions were observed. When the food was taken out of the cooking vessels, the cooks rolled up their sleeves and held their hands before their mouths and noses. The food was first tasted by the cook and the Bakawal and subsequently by the Mir Bakawal before being placed in the serving dishes. These measures ensured careful handling and supervision of the food before it was served to the emperor.

Once the dishes had been prepared, they were carefully sealed and labelled. The Mir Bakawal attached his seal and recorded the names of the contents, while the clerk of the pantry prepared a written list of all the vessels and dishes. This procedure ensured that none of the dishes could be changed. The dishes were then carried by the Bakawals, cooks and other servants, while mace-bearers accompanied them to prevent people from approaching during their transport.

The serving of food at court also followed a specific procedure. Various kinds of bread, curds, pickles, fresh ginger, limes and greens were sent from the pantry along with the other dishes. Before the emperor began his meal, a share of the food was set aside for dervishes. The *Ain-i-Akbari* also provides information about the different types of vessels used in the Mughal kitchen. Gold and silver dishes were wrapped in red cloths, while those made of copper and china were wrapped in white cloths. The maintenance of utensils also formed part of the kitchen routine. Copper utensils were tinned twice a month, while those belonging to the princes and others were tinned once a month. Broken vessels were given to the braziers,¹¹ who made new ones.

These detailed procedures indicate that the Mughal court attached considerable importance to discipline and order in the preparation and serving of food. The kitchen functioned not merely as a place of culinary production but as a carefully regulated space governed by well-defined practices and strict supervision.

4. Culinary Diversity and the Classification of Mughal Dishes

The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides a detailed account of the variety of dishes prepared in the Mughal kitchen, together with the ingredients and proportions used in their preparation. Abu'l Fazl arranges cooked food into three broad categories, providing ten recipes under each. This classification offers valuable insight into the diversity of food prepared at the Mughal court and the range of ingredients and methods involved in its preparation.

The first category consists of dishes described by Abu'l Fazl as those in which no meat was used, referred to as *sufiyana*. The recipes listed under this category include *Zard Birinj*, *Khushka*, *Khichri*, *Shir Birinj*, *Thuli*, *Chikhi*, *Badinjan*, *Pahit*, *Sag* and *Halwa*. These preparations made use of a wide range of ingredients, including rice, wheat flour, pulses, vegetables, milk, ghee and sugar. Spices and flavouring ingredients such as fresh ginger, saffron, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, pepper and cumin were also used in different preparations. *Zard Birinj*, for instance, was prepared with rice, sugarcandy, ghee, raisins, almonds, pistachios, saffron and cinnamon. *Khichri* combined rice, mung dal and ghee, while *Sag* was prepared from spinach and other greens. Although Abu'l Fazl introduces this category as one in which meat was not used, some variations mentioned in the recipes could include meat; *Chikhi*, for example, could be prepared with different kinds of meat. This suggests that recipes were not necessarily fixed and could be adapted in different ways.

The second category includes preparations in which meat and rice, among other ingredients, were used. Abu'l Fazl lists *Qabuli*, *Duzdbiryani*, *Qima Pulao*, *Shulla*, *Bughra*, *Qima Shurba*, *Harisa*, *Kashk*, *Halim* and *Qutab*. These recipes show considerable variation in their composition. While dishes such as *Qabuli* and *Qima Pulao* combined rice and meat with ghee, onions and spices, other preparations made use of wheat, gram and vegetables. *Harisa* and *Kashk*, for example, were prepared with meat and crushed wheat. *Bughra* contained meat along with flour, gram, onions and a variety of vegetables and spices. The recipes therefore demonstrate the extensive combination of grains, meat, vegetables, ghee and aromatic spices in courtly food preparation.

The third category consists primarily of meat preparations with spices. The ten dishes listed by Abu'l Fazl are *Biryani*, *Yakhni*, *Yulma*, *Kabab*, *Musamman*, *Dupiyaza*, *Mutanjana*, *Dampukht*, *Qaliya* and *Malghuba*. Meat was combined in these recipes with ingredients such as ghee, onions, ginger, saffron, pepper, cumin, coriander, cardamom and cloves. The recipes also point to different methods of preparing meat. *Yakhni* was a gravy or broth, while *Qaliya* was prepared with minced meat and a comparatively thick gravy. *Dampukht* involved slowly cooking meat in a vessel whose lid was sealed with paste, illustrating the use of controlled slow cooking in the Mughal kitchen. Some preparations could also be adapted to different kinds of meat; *Mutanjana*, for instance, could be prepared with sheep, fowl or fish.

The recipes recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari* reveal considerable variety in the ingredients used in the Mughal kitchen. Rice, wheat, pulses, meat, vegetables and dairy products were combined with ghee and a wide range of spices and flavouring ingredients. Saffron, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, cumin, ginger, almonds, raisins and pistachios appear in different recipes, while certain dishes combined sugar or sugarcandy with savoury ingredients. The precise quantities recorded for many ingredients also indicate the attention given to proportions and methods of preparation.¹²

Bread also formed an important component of food consumed at the Mughal court. The *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to different methods of preparing bread and to the ingredients used in its preparation. Some varieties were prepared in an oven with ingredients such as milk, ghee and salt, while others were cooked on iron plates and served hot. Fine wheat flour was used at the court along with coarser flour and bran. These references indicate that culinary diversity at Akbar's court extended beyond elaborate rice and meat preparations to different varieties and methods of preparing everyday staples such as bread.¹³

Taken together, Abu'l Fazl's account provides valuable evidence for understanding the diversity and organisation of food preparation at the Mughal court. The range of dishes, ingredients and methods recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, together with the different varieties of bread prepared at court, demonstrates that Mughal cuisine encompassed both everyday staples and more elaborate preparations involving numerous ingredients and carefully specified proportions.

5. Fruits, Beverages and the Culture of Taste at the Mughal court

The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides detailed descriptions of various fruits and other food products found in India, offering valuable information about the diversity of agricultural produce known during the Mughal period.

Among the fruits described in detail, the mango¹⁴ occupies a particularly prominent place. Abu'l Fazl praises the mango for its colour, smell and taste, describing it as unrivalled in these qualities. He notes that its shape could resemble an apricot, quince, pear or melon and records several varieties differing in colour and taste. Mangoes were found throughout India, particularly in Bengal, Gujarat, Malwa, Khandesh and the Deccan. They were comparatively rare in the Punjab, although their cultivation increased after Akbar made Lahore his capital. The text also provides information about their ripening, preservation and use in pickles and other preparations.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* also describes several other fruits. Pineapples, referred to as *kathal-i-safari* or travelling jackfruits, are described as resembling an oblong orange in colour and shape, while their taste and smell were compared to those of a mango. Oranges are described as having the colour of saffron and the shape of quinces and are counted among the best fruits available in Hindustan.

Sugarcane also receives considerable attention in the text. Abu'l Fazl records different varieties of sugarcane and explains that the harder variety was used for preparing brown sugarcandy, common sugar, white candy and refined sugar, which were used in different kinds of sweetmeats. Sugarcane was also used for preparing intoxicating liquor, although brown sugar was considered more suitable for this purpose. The text describes the process of fermentation and also records different methods of distillation used in the preparation of arrack. These descriptions provide valuable evidence of the techniques employed in processing sugarcane and preparing alcoholic beverages.

Jackfruit and plantain are also described in detail. Abu'l Fazl comments on the large size and distinctive appearance of the jackfruit and records features of its tree, fruit and ripening process. Plantains are described as growing in large clusters, with a single cluster consisting of numerous fruits. Such descriptions further illustrate the variety of fruits recorded by Abu'l Fazl in his account of Hindustan.¹⁵

Coconut¹⁶ is another fruit described in detail in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. The coconut tree is described as resembling the date tree, though it was larger. The fruit contained a milk-like juice that had a pleasant taste and was frequently consumed with sugar during the summer. The coconut also had several practical uses. Its shell was used for making spoons, cups and *ghichaks*, a kind of musical instrument, while the bark of the tree was used for making ropes, including large ropes used on ships. These details indicate that coconut was valued not only as a food product but also for the practical uses of different parts of the fruit and tree.

Another important element of Mughal culinary culture was the widespread use of betel leaves (paan). The *Ain-i-Akbari* describes several varieties of betel leaves and explains how they were prepared with betel nut, lime paste and aromatic substances. Chewing betel leaves was considered beneficial for digestion and oral health, as it strengthened the gums and improved the breath. Betel leaves were often served after meals and thus became an integral part of Mughal dining etiquette.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* also provides an interesting explanation of flavours, showing that food was understood not only through cooking practices but also through ideas about taste. The text explains that flavours are influenced by different qualities such as heat and cold. Heat produces tastes that are sharp or pungent, bitter and brackish, while cold creates flavours that are sour, astringent and tart. These qualities were considered the basic elements from

which different tastes in food developed. Some people classified flavours into four main types: sweet, bitter, sour and salty. However, the text also suggests that most flavours are created by combining these basic tastes. For instance, a flavour known as *basha 'at* is described as a mixture of bitter and sour tastes, while *zu 'uqa* represents a combination of bitter and brackish flavours¹⁷. This explanation indicates that Mughal food culture included a thoughtful understanding of taste and flavour, and that cooks were aware of how different ingredients could be combined to create balanced and varied flavours in dishes.

From a historical perspective, these descriptions illustrate the richness of the Mughal food system. Fruits, beverages and flavourings played an essential role in shaping the sensory experience of Mughal cuisine. The wide variety of ingredients and the emphasis on taste and aroma demonstrate that Mughal culinary practices were highly refined and deeply connected with the agricultural resources and cultural traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Taken together, these descriptions reveal the remarkable diversity of food products and tastes known at the Mughal court. The variety of fruits, beverages and flavouring practices recorded by Abu'l Fazl reflects a culinary culture in which taste, aroma and variety occupied an important place. The account also provides valuable insight into the close relationship between the agricultural produce of India and Mughal courtly food culture.

Conclusion

The information presented in the *Ain-i-Akbari* offers valuable insights into the culinary practices of Mughal India. The text shows that the Mughal kitchen was a highly organised institution within the Mughal court, managed by specialised officials and governed by strict regulations regarding the procurement, preparation and serving of food. The presence of officers such as the Mir Bakawal, along with detailed systems of accounting and supervision, demonstrates that food preparation formed an important part of the administrative structure of the Mughal state.

At the same time, the variety of dishes described in the text reflects the richness and diversity of Mughal cuisine. The classification of dishes into vegetarian preparations, rice-and-meat combinations and meat-based dishes illustrates the wide range of ingredients and cooking techniques used in the Mughal kitchen. The detailed recipes and methods of preparation further reveal the variety and careful organisation that characterised culinary practices at the Mughal court.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* further highlights the importance of agricultural resources in supporting this culinary system. Its descriptions of grains, vegetables, fruits and beverages demonstrate the diversity of food products available during the period. Fruits such as mango, pineapple and coconut, as well as products such as sugarcane and betel leaves, further illustrate the range of ingredients that formed part of Mughal food culture.

Overall, the *Ain-i-Akbari* provides a rich account of the food culture of Mughal India. Its descriptions of kitchen organisation, culinary practices and agricultural produce reveal how food was closely connected with Mughal administration and regional resources. The imperial kitchen was therefore not simply a place where food was prepared, but an organised part of courtly life that reflected the wider material and administrative structure of the Mughal Empire.

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⁸ Allami, Abul Fazl, *op.cit.*, pp.59-60

⁹ Moosvi, Shireen, *op.cit.*, p.101

¹⁰ Allami, Abul Fazl, *op.cit.*, p.60

¹¹ A metalworker or coppersmith engaged in the manufacture and repair of copper and other metal vessels.

¹² Allami, Abul Fazl, *op.cit.*, pp.61-64

¹³ Ahmad, Rizwan, *op.cit.*, p.173

¹⁴ The Persians refer to the mango as *Naghzak*.

¹⁵ Allami, Abul Fazl, *op.cit.*, pp.72-74

¹⁶ The coconut is also referred to by the Persians as *Jawz-i-Hindi*.

¹⁷ Allami, Abul Fazl, *op.cit* pp.77-78

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