



Stir trek:

What the Mughals added to our palate

Vir Sanghvi



If we are to assess the culinary and gastronomic legacies of the Mughals, we must begin by dispelling two myths.

The first is that today's so-called Mughlai food is authentic: it really has nothing to do with the Mughal empire, and no self-respecting emperor would have deigned to eat it. Over the past few decades, the term has come to be associated with greasy meat- and chicken-based dishes. Few, if any, of these existed in any form during Mughal reign, and though the term "Mughlai" is now a byword for "Muslim", some of these dishes were created decades after the last of the Mughals were gone, by Punjabi Hindu chefs.

For instance, butter chicken, that staple of the "Mughlai" menu, was created not in the 1600s or 1800s but in the 1950s, in Delhi, by Hindu refugees from West Punjab. No tandoori kabab can ever be of Mughal origin either. Tandoors were not used to cook meat in India during their rule. The practice only became widespread in the 1920s, when a restaurant in Peshawar owned by Mokha Singh invented tandoori chicken.

The second great myth is that the Mughals came to a vegetarian Hindu country, subjugated its residents and made them eat beef. This is wrong on so many levels that it is hard to know where to start.

As the food writer Colleen Taylor Sen has demonstrated, as far as back as the Mauryan Empire (c. 321-185 BCE), Indians were eating snakes, rabbits and frogs. We were no strangers to non-vegetarianism. Moreover, the Mughals were not great beef-eaters. There are few beef recipes in the very few cookbooks that survive from that period, and many of the emperors were largely vegetarian. (Avoiding meat was viewed as a mark of discipline and good health.)

The idea implicit in much of the myth-spinning is that India was a Hindu-ruled country until the Mughals got here. This too is untrue. Babur didn't win against a Hindu king. He won the first battle of Panipat in 1526 against Ibrahim Lodi, whose ancestors founded the Muslim Lodi dynasty in 1451.

Nor were the Lodis the first Muslim kings in India. Muhammad bin Qasim captured parts of Sindh as far back as 711 CE. India experienced centuries of periodic Muslim rule before the Mughals conquered Delhi.

All this is important because we tend to try to trace every gastronomic connection between India and West Asia to the Mughals, when the truth is that there were such strong links between South and West Asia that many of the dishes and ingredients we try to attribute to their influence — samosas, pulao, saffron, etc — got there long before Babur was born.

Unfortunately, so poor is our recording of food history that it is hard to ascribe exact dates to the introduction of different foods to the subcontinent. We rely largely on the accounts of visitors and travellers.

(Below) Detail from the Persian miniature *Nighttime in a City* by Mir Sayyid Ali; 1540. Dancers at the wedding of prince Dara Shikoh, son of Shah Jahan; c. 1640s. (Below right) A 1750 Bani Thani work from the Mughal-influenced Kishangarh school. (Right) A 17th-century painting of Nur Jahan holding a portrait of her husband, Jahangir. (Above) Detail from a miniature showing a gathering in a garden, by the court artist Bichitr, c. 1630s. The 1970s Cartier necklace featuring the Taj Mahal diamond inscribed with the name of Nur Jahan. (Inset right) An ornamental dagger. IMAGES: WIKIMEDIA; NATIONAL MUSEUM, DELHI; METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

For a sense of the changes the Mughals did bring about, we have Babur's words to go by. He wrote that there were "no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, muskmelons or first-rate fruits, no ice or cold water".

This led to one great culinary legacy: a wider array of fruits. The Mughals planted melons, apricots and a range of other produce that India was not familiar with.

As Taylor Sen records: "Ice, used for cooling drinks and making frozen desserts, was brought daily from the Himalayas by an elaborate system of couriers." That, in fact, is how the kulfi tradition sprung up.

Grand Mughal cuisine there still was not. When we write of the glories of their courts, we sometimes forget that Babur was a chieftain from Central Asia, a region with no tradition of gastronomy. It was his son Humayun who began to merge Indian traditions with West Asian influences to create something new.

Even when his rule was interrupted and he was exiled to Persia for 15 years (1540-1555), after battlefield losses to the Afghan Sher Shah Suri, legend has it he introduced the Shah to long-grained Indian rice, which then went on to feature in Persian cuisine.

Because Babur's descendants recognised that they had no great royal traditions, they embraced Persian culture, making Farsi the court language. Ironically, this would later confuse food historians, who would argue that because dishes had Farsi names they must have had roots in Iran; actually, many of these were invented at the Mughal court.

The Mughals combined Persian influences with the ingredients of their new home and began to incorporate a wide array of spices, for instance, into court cuisine.

Mutton do pyaza, which features in the 16th-century *Ain-i-Akbari*, uses spices to enrich what is essentially a simple recipe of meat and onions. Rogan josh, an Iranian dish, became completely Indian in flavour too, after spices were added.

Not that Akbar ate much of either. As time went on, his food habits became more Indianised. He banned cow slaughter, advised against garlic and onions, became largely vegetarian and drank Gangajal.

His son Jahangir, whom we would describe today as an alcoholic, discovered a bajra khichdi while travelling through Gujarat and liked it so much that he took the cook back to Delhi with him. Khichdi then became a staple of Mughal court cuisine and Jahangir's son Shah Jahan's cooks later made a fancy khichdi that was a signature dish at the court.

Though we like to think of the Mughal food tradition as being one of importing West Asian dishes, its defining characteristic was that it added flavour to these dishes with Indian ingredients and techniques.

A prime example is biryani, which moved away from the fancy Persian pulao to become a moister, spicier meal that could be made in large containers. Biryani became the food of soldiers and humbler people, while the delicate pulao remained a dish of the court.

How good was the food of the Mughal royals? It is hard to say, because few traces of the dishes survive.

Biryani may have been invented in Delhi or Agra, in this era, but nobody is quite sure what the original tasted like because the versions that have survived come from post-Mughal courts in Awadh and Hyderabad. Even Calcutta biryani came from the Awadhi court in exile in Metiabruz.

On the other hand, without the Mughal empire there would have been no Nawab of Awadh and no Nizam of Hyderabad. So perhaps that was the greatest culinary contribution of the Mughal emperors. They came to India as foreigners but by the end they had become so Indian that their influence spread to the cuisines of regions as far apart as Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal. The empire is gone but the legacy lives on.

Wear next?: Style's unbroken thread

Muzaffar Ali



Five centuries ago, on the plains of modern-day Haryana, Ibrahim Lodi of the Delhi Sultanate met the invading forces of Babur, who won and established the Mughal empire.

The victor, it turned out, had a passion for gardens. Babur missed the cool climes and lush landscape of the Central Asia valley he grew up in. This prompted him to introduce the formal quadrilateral garden, the charbagh, intersected by flowing water channels, dotted with pavilions.

Later Mughal rulers would build more such baghs across India. This is one of the ways in which the era shaped tastes and the evolution of a civilisational aesthetic.

The subcontinent was, at this time, the beating heart of global trade. The refined taste and sustained patronage of the Mughal empire's ateliers meant that this wealth now flowed to all corners, shaping craft, intellect and imagination.

Then, amid the gradual decline of the empire, authority loosened its grip on Delhi.

Culture, no longer anchored to a single imperial centre, began to travel. In that movement, Awadh emerged not as a successor but as a site of transformation.

Under the Nawabs, originally governors, the ateliers of Awadh cultivated sensibilities. Couture found its counterpoint in Kathak. Traditions such as chikankari evolved into an art of restraint, where white thread on white cloth held within it an entire philosophy of subtlety. Zardozi, carrying the legacy of imperial opulence, found a new discipline: gold that did not proclaim wealth but suggested it.

This refinement found its most complex expression in the feminine.

The angia or choli, until now overlooked, became the silent architect of proportion and poise. It held the grammar of the silhouette together: restrained, precise, almost whispered into existence. This era's fashion did not chase attention but negotiated dignity. In that discipline lay its seduction.

The body was never directly revealed, it was revealed through suggestion. That distinction is the cornerstone of Awadhi grace.

What emerged was a design philosophy rooted in continuity rather than disruption. The garments did not scream for reinvention. They evolved like poetry, line by line. The peshwaz flowed into the gharara, the dupatta conversed with the choli, and together they created a language that was both regional and imperial.

This was the true genius of the Mughal-Awadh synthesis: absorbing Varanasi's opulence, Kashmir's subtlety and Lucknow's refinement into a seamless narrative.

Fashion in Awadh did not arrive to me as a concept. It arrived in the form of my mother, who embodied it. Tall, composed, she would emerge draped in a deep green kaamdani dupatta shimmering with quiet opulence, a finely worked chikan kurta, and a light grey farshi gharara.

Years later, I found myself transmitting that same grammar of grace when directing the film *Umrao Jaan*, the story of a courtesan and poet in 1850s Lucknow.

The passing of my mother (Rani Kaneez Hyder of Kotwara, a former princely state near Lucknow) left a silence, and a resolve. My wife (architect and fashion designer Meera Ali) and I launched a living atelier of craft and couture. Sama Ali, my daughter and a designer, works with us. The three of us look at craft as the pinnacle of human effort and add our sensibilities as artists in an effort to sustain it.

In the Mughal imagination, the feminine was both presence and influence. Women such as Nur

Jahan, emperor Jahangir's wife, were arbiters of taste. Her intervention in textiles, perfumes and ornaments shaped courtly ethos in the 17th century.

Then, as the locus of culture shifted to Awadh about a century later, the feminine found a different, more layered articulation. No longer confined to the zenana, she emerged in the mehfil, in performance, in poetry, in presence.

This is where Umrao Jaan becomes inevitable: a reconstruction of a lost world. Umrao emerges not a passive subject of history, but as its interpreter.

Through her, we encounter a realm where art is survival. Where poetry is resistance. Where a courtesan, in the cultivation of herself, embodies an entire aesthetic tradition: music, poetry, etiquette, style, and the distilled essence of a civilisation.

In her, this inheritance finds both voice and vulnerability. The tragedy of her life mirrors the tragedy of Awadh itself.

The fragile ecosystems of patronage collapsed amid British crackdowns, following the First War of Indian Independence in 1857. Courts dissolved, ateliers scattered. But beyond loss too, there lies continuity.

In bringing Umrao to the screen, cinema allowed for a reimagining of textures of fabric, light, gesture, and silence. The feminine, once situated within specific historical constraints, could now traverse time.

The protagonist, as embodied by Rekha, became both historical and contemporary. Her stillness, her gaze, her articulation of emotion brought an entire lineage of refinement into the 20th century.

It is within this continuum that my work finds its place. At House of Kotwara, the exploration of crafts such as zardozi and chikan is driven not by nostalgia but by a recognition of their inherent philosophy. These are not techniques to be preserved. They are languages to be spoken anew.

The contemporary moment is marked by fragmentation. Identity is no longer inherited in continuity; it is assembled through encounter. In such a context, the role of design shifts. It must create coherence without imposing uniformity. It must evoke memory without becoming captive to it.

This is where the feminine, again, becomes central.

The figure of Nur Jahan returns, not as history, but as aspiration. She represents a synthesis: authority without rigidity, beauty without excess, power articulated through refinement. To engage with her today is to imagine a future where these values can be reconstituted.

In many ways, the dream of Nur Jahan is the dream of continuity itself, a way of bridging past and present, empire and individuality, memory and creation.

The journey from Mughal court to Awadh, Awadh to Umrao and Umrao to contemporary practice is not linear. It is recursive, layered and often fragmented. Yet, within this complexity, certain principles endure. Refinement is not excess, it is discipline. Beauty is not surface, it is structure. And culture is not static; it is lived.

What was once articulated in marble and manuscript, in embroidery and etiquette, now seeks expression in new forms. The task is not to replicate the past, but to engage with its intelligence, to understand the systems that produced such refinement, and to reinterpret them within the conditions of the present. The story, then, is not of decline, but of transformation. And in that transformation, grace persists.

(Muzaffar Ali is a painter, fashion designer, filmmaker. He directed the 1981 classic *Umrao Jaan*)

