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# Food Choices and Food Culture in South Asia and Their Convergences with The Global South: A Cultural, Literary, and Empirical Analysis

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## Abstract

*Food culture constitutes a crucial dimension of social identity, historical continuity, and economic structure, particularly within societies of the Global South. South Asia, with its deep-rooted agrarian traditions, religious philosophies, and colonial encounters, presents a complex culinary landscape that shares multiple convergences with food cultures across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. This article explores food choices and food practices in South Asian countries and examines their structural, cultural, and symbolic similarities with other Global South regions. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines cultural studies, literary documentation, and secondary numerical data, the study highlights staple dependence, plant-forward diets, ritualized food consumption, and traditional knowledge systems. Graphical and numerical representations are employed to illustrate comparative patterns of staple consumption, vegetarian prevalence, and dietary transitions. The paper argues that food cultures of South Asia and the Global South reflect shared historical trajectories of colonialism, subsistence economies, and cultural resilience, while also undergoing transformation under globalization and urbanization.*

**Keywords:** Food Culture, South Asia, Global South, Dietary Practices, Literature and Food, Staple Foods

## Introduction

Food is not merely a biological necessity but a cultural text through which societies express identity, hierarchy, belief systems, and historical memory. In the Global South, food practices are deeply embedded in social structures shaped by agrarian economies, religious traditions, colonial histories, and ecological constraints. South Asia—comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives—offers a particularly rich context for studying food

culture due to its diversity and continuity of culinary traditions.

The Global South, broadly understood as regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America historically subjected to colonial domination and economic marginalization, exhibits remarkable similarities in food systems. Staple dependence on cereals or tubers, reliance on plant-based proteins, communal modes of food consumption, and the symbolic role of food in ritual life are common across these regions.

**This paper seeks to analyze:**

- The dominant food choices and food culture of South Asian countries;
- Their similarities with other Global South food systems;
- Literary and ethnographic documentation of food practices; and
- Numerical and graphical representations that demonstrate shared patterns.

By situating South Asian food culture within the broader Global South framework, this study contributes to interdisciplinary debates in cultural studies, food anthropology, and postcolonial studies.

**Conceptual Framework: Food Culture and the Global South**

The term Global South does not merely denote geographical location but refers to regions historically shaped by colonial extraction, uneven development, and cultural resistance. Food systems in these regions evolved under conditions of scarcity, climatic uncertainty, and social stratification, leading to adaptive and resilient dietary practices.

**Food Culture Encompasses**

- Material aspects (staples, ingredients, cooking techniques),
- Symbolic meanings (ritual purity, taboo, identity),
- Social practices (communal eating, gendered cooking roles),
- Knowledge systems (traditional nutrition, fermentation, preservation).

South Asia and other Global South regions share a historical emphasis on subsistence agriculture and local food economies, which continues to influence dietary preferences despite increasing globalization.

**Food Choices and Culinary Patterns in South Asia**

**Staple Foods and Regional Variations**

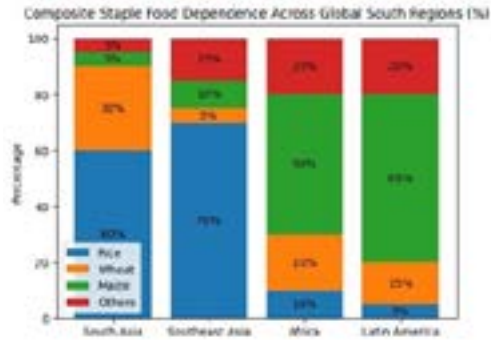
South Asian diets are predominantly cereal-based. Rice and wheat form the backbone of daily meals, supplemented by pulses, vegetables, dairy, and spices.

Rice dominates in eastern and southern India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal's lowlands.

Wheat is central in northern India and Pakistan.

Millets such as ragi, jowar, and bajra have historically sustained arid regions.

Pulses (lentils, chickpeas, pigeon peas) provide primary protein sources, particularly in vegetarian populations. Dairy products such as milk, curd, and ghee hold nutritional and ritual significance.



### Religious and Ethical Influences on Food Choice

Religion plays a defining role in South Asian food practices. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam prescribe specific dietary norms that shape everyday consumption.

Vegetarianism is widely practiced, especially among Hindus and Jains.

Food taboos, such as avoidance of beef or pork, structure social boundaries.

Fasting and feasting cycles regulate consumption throughout the year.

These practices parallel religious food laws in other Global South regions, such as Islamic halal traditions in Africa and indigenous ritual diets in Latin America.

Food Culture in the Global South: Comparative Perspectives

### Plant-Based Diets and Economic Rationality

Plant-forward diets dominate much of the Global South, not solely due to ideology but also economic necessity. Pulses and legumes serve as affordable protein sources, while meat is often reserved for festivals or special occasions. This mirrors South Asian food habits, where everyday meals prioritize cereals and vegetables.

### Food in South Asian Literature

South Asian literary texts frequently use food as a symbol of memory, identity, and social hierarchy. Classical texts, regional folklore, and modern novels document everyday food practices, ritual meals, and famine experiences.

Rice and gruel often symbolize sustenance and survival.

Spices represent trade, colonial encounters, and cultural exchange.

Communal eating reflects caste and gender dynamics.

Such representations find parallels in African and Latin American literatures, where food signifies resistance, poverty, and cultural continuity.

### Traditional Knowledge and Fermented Foods

Fermentation is a common culinary practice across South Asia and the Global South. Examples include:

Fermented rice batters in South India,

Fermented fish in Bengal and Southeast Asia,

Fermented grains in African cuisines.

These practices enhance shelf life, digestibility, and nutritional value and are rooted in indigenous knowledge systems transmitted orally across generations.

### **Globalization and Dietary Transitions**

Urbanization, migration, and global food industries are transforming traditional diets across the Global South. Processed foods, fast food chains, and refined carbohydrates increasingly replace traditional staples, leading to nutritional transitions marked by rising obesity and lifestyle diseases.

Despite this shift, traditional food cultures persist as symbols of identity and resistance, especially during festivals, rituals, and rural life.

The comparative analysis reveals that South Asian food culture is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader Global South pattern characterized by staple dependence, plant-based diets, and cultural regulation of food. Literature and traditional knowledge systems preserve these practices even as economic and social changes challenge them.

Food thus functions simultaneously as sustenance, cultural memory, and political expression in the Global South.

### **Conclusion**

South Asian food choices and culinary traditions reflect historical continuity, ecological adaptation, and cultural resilience. Their similarities with other Global South regions underscore shared experiences of colonialism, agrarian livelihoods, and social organization. Understanding these convergences through literary, cultural, and empirical lenses enriches discussions on food sovereignty, cultural identity, and sustainable diets in the contemporary world.

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