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An Exploration of the Cultural Significance of Traditional Foods in Rural Punjab: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The present research study discovers the cultural significance of the traditional foods in rural areas of Punjab, Pakistan through qualitative lens as the food practices in rural areas of Punjab are deeply knotted with the region's agricultural traditions, the community life and cultural heritage. The main focus of this research is on understanding how traditional foods contribute to shaping local identities, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing the agricultural ties. The data were collected by semi-structured interviews and the participant observation in a rural village reflecting the preparation, consumption and the communal aspects of the food. Findings of the study reveal that food is not only a means of sustenance but a vital cultural tool that connects people to their heritage in rural Punjab. The themes identified including the preservation of cultural identity through food, role of food in maintaining social bonds and the significance of food in marking religious and cultural rituals. This study also highlights the economic connection between food practices and the local agriculture, depicting how seasonal ingredients shape meal preparation. The research emphasizes the significance of traditional food as a means of cultural expression and community unity in rural Punjab suggesting that food plays a vital role in sustaining both individual and collective cultural identities.

Key words: The traditional foods, cultural significance, community bonding, agricultural practices, rural Punjab, cultural identity, qualitative study, Punjabi cuisine, food heritage, food practices.

Introduction

Food plays a vital role in the cultural fabric of societies across the globe. In agricultural region of Punjab, food is not only a means of sustenance but a reflection of the region's cultural, social, and historical contexts. Punjab is often considered the "breadbasket" of Pakistan and its traditional food practices are deeply linked with the agricultural lifestyle that has sustained the region for centuries (Bhatti, 2021). The traditional foods in rural Punjab including dishes like "sarson da saag" with "makki di roti" and "tandoori" style cooking are more than just nourishment; these are an embodiment of local heritage, community values and cultural continuity (Sood, 2017).



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The traditional food in rural life extends far beyond the act of eating. The food practices are a medium through which people maintain their connection to their land, preserve their cultural identity and promote social cohesion within communities in rural Punjab, (Khan, 2015). For example, the communal activities like cooking together around the tandoor reinforce social bonds and contribute to a collective sense of belonging (Khan, 2015). This shared food practice is often passed down through generations ensuring the continuity of cultural knowledge and customs. Significance of food in rural Punjab can also be observed during religious and cultural events. The festivals, wedding and other communal celebrations often involve the preparation of special dishes marking the importance of food in religious observance and community rituals (Zaman, 2022). Acts of preparing and sharing food in these contexts become a ritualistic expression of identity, belonging and unity. The foods are closely tied to the agricultural cycle with seasonal ingredients dictating meal preparations further reflecting the connection between people and their land (Sood, 2017).

Despite its apparent cultural richness associated with food in rural Punjab, still there is a lack of comprehensive academic research focusing on cultural significance of food practices in this region. The previous studies have touched upon role of agriculture in shaping culinary traditions and have explored food-related practices in isolated contexts, there is no qualitative exploration that examines the multifaceted cultural, social and agricultural significance of traditional foods in rural Punjab. The research study aims to fill this gap by investigating how traditional foods in rural Punjab play a role in the preservation of cultural heritage, fostering community bonds and reinforcing the social and agricultural fabric of the region. Moreover, this qualitative study emphasis on rural communities in Punjab using interviews and participant observation to explore how traditional food practices are tied to social cohesion, cultural identity and agricultural life. By observing the role of food in everyday life, social gatherings and cultural rituals, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of cultural significance of food in rural areas of Punjab.

Rationale Of The Study

In agrarian societies, the cultural significance of food has often been understated in the academic research. Food is not only a basic human need, it is also a powerful cultural expression, a means of social interaction and an important part of community identity and heritage. In the rural areas of Punjab, Pakistan where agriculture plays a vital role in shaping the economy and lifestyle, the food practices are intricately associated with both the land and the people. Rationale behind this study is grounded in the need to understand food practices in rural Punjab as more than just nutritional habits but as critical cultural markers that sustain the community ties, express the regional identity and reinforce the cultural traditions. The rural Punjab is home to diverse food practices and many of which are passed down through generations and are an integral part of everyday life. The traditional dishes like "makki di roti" with "sarson da saag" or meals prepared using tandoori cooking methods are symbolic of the regional identity and cultural continuity. Yet, their comprehensive role in maintaining social harmony, celebrating cultural rituals and connecting people to their agricultural heritage remains under-researched.



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Cultural significance of food in rural Punjab is crucial for many reasons. Firstly, food practices in rural areas contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. As the globalization and the urbanization continue to influence rural areas, the traditional food practices face challenges of adaptation or erosion. Through investigating how food is woven into social and cultural fabric of rural life, this study aims to reflect the importance of preserving these practices for future generations. Secondly, the food plays a central role in promoting social cohesion in rural areas as in many parts of rural Punjab, food preparation and consumption are communal activities that foster social bonding. The communal activities like cooking together around the tandoor help in maintaining strong social networks and reinforcing local values of cooperation and togetherness. Given the rising pressures of modernization, understanding how food fosters social cohesion becomes critical for the preservation of rural social structures.

Thirdly, the food is important link to the agricultural cycles that define rural life in Punjab. The food practices in this region are deeply connected to seasonal harvests and the local agricultural landscape and are not only important for providing sustenance but are also symbolic of the symbiotic relationship between people and their land. As changes in agricultural practices occur due to technological advancements, understanding the role of food as a cultural and social medium within agricultural communities can offer valuable insights into rural resilience and sustainability. Moreover, while there is a growing body of research examining the role of food in urban settings, the rural food practices remain largely overlooked. The research studies focusing on rural Punjab are particularly sparse. So the main purpose of this study aims to fill that gap by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of how food practices contribute to cultural identity, social interactions, and community life in rural Punjab.

Objectives

- To explore how traditional food practices in rural Punjab contribute to the cultural identity and heritage of the region.
- To analyze how traditional food practices foster social cohesion and strengthen community bonds in rural Punjab.
- To dig out relationship between traditional food practices and agricultural cycles in rural Punjab. To explore how food is integral to cultural and religious rituals and celebrations in rural Punjab.

Review Of Literature

Cultural importance of foods has been a focal point of anthropological and sociological research for decades. In many societies, the food practices extend beyond mere sustenance to encompass deep social, cultural and economic meanings. The food practices are deeply embedded in the local agricultural and social systems serving as a means of preserving cultural heritage, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing community values in rural regions. The literature review examines important themes related to the role of food in rural Punjab reflecting studies on food culture, social practices, agricultural influences and the impact of globalization on traditional food practices.

The Food: A Cultural Identity and Heritage

The food is seen as a primary means of expressing cultural identity. Food



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practices are a key aspect of regional identity in rural areas of Punjab reflecting the traditions, beliefs and history of the community as Bhatti (2021) argues that traditional food in Punjab is an essential marker of cultural identity where the dishes like "makki di roti" with "sarson da saag" or "daal chawal" are not merely meals but symbols of the cultural pride and the heritage. These foods are passed down through generations and are important for the collective memory of the region. Food becomes an anchor for preserving cultural continuity with its preparation and consumption representing the transmission of cultural knowledge. Sood (2017) notes that food in rural Punjab serves as an expression of the region's agrarian roots as the traditional foods highlight the seasonal availability of local ingredients such as wheat, rice, and vegetables which are grown in the fertile plains of Punjab. By preparing locally grown foods, Punjabis reaffirm their connection to land and their agricultural heritage which constitutes core part of their cultural identity.

The Food: A Means of Social Cohesion

Communal nature of food preparation in rural Punjab fosters strong social bonds within communities. Acts of cooking together, sharing meals and gathering around the tandoor not only provides nourishment but also plays a critical role in reinforcing community ties (Khan, 2015) and these communal food preparation is especially evident during festivals, wedding and other important social events where food serves as a central element in facilitating social interaction and solidarity. The study of Zaman (2022) reflects that traditional food practices in rural Punjab are deeply intertwined with social rituals and communal sharing of food during religious and cultural events is a powerful symbol of unity and togetherness. Food is often prepared in large quantities and shared with extended family, neighbors and friends reinforcing a sense of belonging and mutual support in rural areas of Punjab. These communal food practices are not only about nourishment but also about creating social cohesion ensuring that food is a medium through which relationships and community ties are nurtured. Apart from this, the food plays a vital role in gendered social roles in rural Punjab. Sood (2017) stated that females particularly the homemakers are the primary caretakers of traditional food practices and the preparation of food is often considered an important part of their social and familial roles. The involvement of women in cooking particularly in the preparation of festive or ritual meals is integral to the preservation of traditional food practices and social dynamics in rural communities.

Agricultural Impact on Food Practices

The diet of rural areas of Punjab is deeply linked to the region's agricultural economy. Availability of seasonal ingredients is an important determinant of the food preparation in rural areas of Punjab with different foods being prepared based on the harvest cycle. As Bhatti (2021) stated that agricultural calendar directly influences food practices with foods such as "makki di roti" and "sarson da saag" being prepared during the winter months when mustard greens are abundant. The rice and lentils form the backbone of many meals during the summer highlighting the seasonal crops available at the time. The preparation of food in rural areas of Punjab also highlights the community's relationship with the land. The traditional methods of food preparation like tandoor cooking stress



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the use of local, organic ingredients and cooking techniques that have been passed down through generations. Khan (2015) points out that tandoori cooking not only imparts a distinct flavor to food but also symbolizes the rural Punjab way of life where meals are prepared with simple, local ingredients in community settings.

The Religious and Cultural Significance

The food plays a vital role in the religious and cultural rituals. The festivals like Eid and harvest celebrations are marked by the preparation and consumption of specific foods that hold religious and cultural significance. Zaman (2022) points out the role of food during religious festivals in Punjab, noting that certain foods are prepared as offerings to deities or as part of rituals associated with specific religious practices. "Kheer" is often prepared during religious festivals as an offering symbolizing the purity and devotion. Moreover, the foods also play a key role in rites of passage such as wedding and funerals. The traditional foods are prepared for serving the guests during weddings symbolizing the prosperity and good fortune for newlyweds (Khan, 2015). The food becomes a medium through which cultural values are expressed and collective rituals are reinforced in these settings.

Impact of Globalization on Traditional Food Practices

The globalization and modernization pose significant challenges to the preservation of these food practices. Increasing availability of processed foods, the rise of fast food chains and the spread of global food trends have changed food consumption patterns particularly among younger generations (Sood, 2017). Zaman (2022) observes that the influence of Western fast food culture and the convenience of modern food systems are gradually diminishing the prevalence of traditional food practices particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. Moreover, migration from rural to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities has led to a decline in the transmission of traditional food knowledge in younger generations and this threatens not only continuity of culinary traditions but also the social and cultural bonds.

Methodology

The present research used a qualitative research design to explore the cultural significance of the traditional foods in rural Punjab, Pakistan. The data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with the participants from diverse rural backgrounds including the farmers, the homemakers, the elders and local food artisans. By employing Yamane's formula (1967), a sample of 48 respondents was purposively selected from the rural areas of District Lahore, Jhang, Faisalabad and Sahiwal to ensure the representation of various age groups, genders and ethnic communities within the region. Interviews and discussions centered on the preparation, consumption and social practices surrounding traditional foods as well as their perceived cultural and symbolic meanings. The participant observation was used to document food preparation methods and rituals during community events and daily meals. The data were analyzed thematically with the key themes emerging through iterative coding and interpretation. The ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality and the cultural sensitivity were adhered to throughout



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the research process. Findings aim to provide nuanced understanding of how traditional food practices reflect and preserve cultural heritage in rural Punjab.

Results & Discussion

Findings of the study reflect the deep cultural significance of the traditional foods practices in rural areas of Punjab, Pakistan. Many key themes arose offering insights into how the traditional food serves as a vehicle for the cultural preservation, social cohesion and the identity expression. Preservation of the cultural heritage

The respondents stressed that the traditional food practices are deeply embedded in the agricultural and historical context of rural areas of Punjab. The food such as makki di roti (cornbread) and sarson da saag (mustard greens) was often cited as iconic dishes representing the region's agrarian culture. The elderly members in the community underscored the importance of passing down the recipes and cooking techniques to the younger generations by describing them as a means of preserving familial and cultural legacies. The same findings have been reported in studies such as Khan et al. (2023) which pointed out the use of wild food plants in preserving cultural knowledge in Punjab.

Social Cohesion And Community Bonding

The traditional foods preparation and consumption were found to foster social connections and reinforce communal bonds. The festivals, wedding and religious gatherings often revolve around shared meals where cooking and eating together strengthens relationships within the community. The respondents described communal preparation of foods like kheer and rogan josh as significant social rituals and these findings align with Kalra and Gupta (1986) who examined the role of food in social bonding across Indian subcontinental communities.

Identity And Symbolism

The foods were found to serve as a symbol of cultural identity and pride. Several dishes are reserved for the specific occasions like seviyaan during Eid and pinni during winter months reflecting a shared cultural identity and seasonal traditions. The participants frequently associated traditional foods with memories of their ancestors and the land reflecting a sense of belonging and continuity.

Effect Of Modernization

The elders noted a significant decay in the practice of slow cooking and the use of locally sourced ingredients attributing this shift to urbanization and lifestyle changes. Same concerns were highlighted by Singh et al. (2023) who documented role of the slow food movement in mitigating the impact of modernization on Punjabi culinary heritage.

Role Of Gender In Food Practices

Gender arose as an integral aspect of traditional food practices. Females were the primary custodians of the traditional recipes and cooking techniques reflecting their central role in preserving food-related cultural heritage. Some respondents highlighted the unequal distribution of food within households with men consuming larger portions of meat-based dishes. These observations align with



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the findings of Ahmad et al. (2023) who investigated the impact of cultural beliefs on food practices in Punjab.

The Culinary Tourism And Economic Opportunities

The respondents acknowledged growing potential of traditional foods in promoting culinary tourism. The local dishes like kulcha and lassi were viewed as not only cultural symbols but also opportunities for economic growth. Some participants stressed the need for government and private sector initiatives to promote rural Punjab's culinary heritage to attract tourists and generate income for local communities.

Discussion

Results of the study point out that traditional food practices in rural Punjab are a vital repository of cultural heritage and social values. These practices face challenges from modernization, urbanization and changing dietary preferences. The preserving traditional food systems requires multi-pronged approach including the community education, promotion of locally sourced ingredients and integration of traditional foods into culinary tourism. Study also explores the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in addressing food-related cultural dynamics, ensuring equitable participation in food practices. Moreover, the study also contributes to the broader discourse on preserving intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization. The future research should focus on intersection of traditional food practices and sustainable development to explore the innovative strategies for their preservation and promotion.

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