

# Indian Food & Culture Fact Sheet

The Indian population consists of over 1 billion people.<sup>1</sup> About 2.5 million Indians have immigrated to the U.S., making up < 1% of the American population.<sup>2</sup>



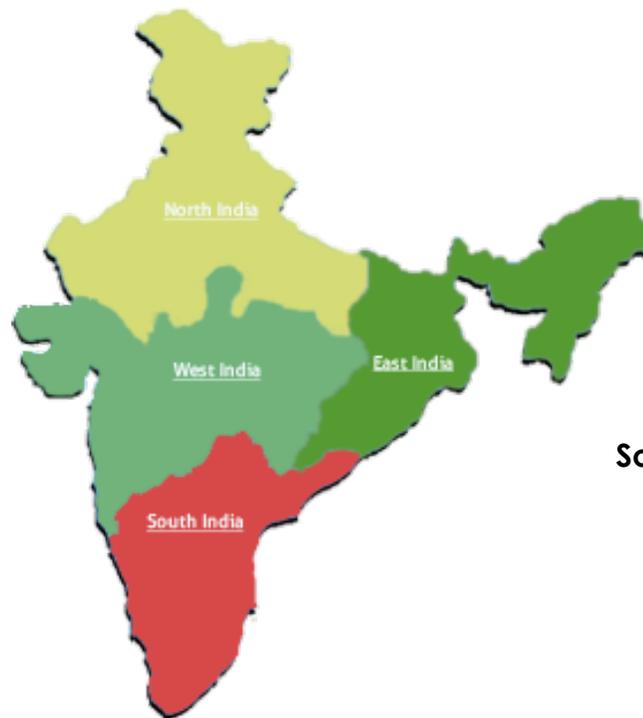
Regional differences, religious beliefs, and diverse cultural influences from other countries have shaped the food practices and preferences among the Indian population.

## North India:

- Cook with ghee<sup>1</sup>
- Rice is main component of many meals<sup>3</sup>
- Popular foods:
  - Saag* – dish made with wilted greens<sup>3</sup>
  - Naan* – flat bread<sup>3</sup>
  - Chapati* – flat wheat bread<sup>3</sup>
  - Samosa* – snack, spicy turnover stuffed with potato/pea<sup>4,5</sup>
- *Tandoor* (clay oven) used to bake breads<sup>4,6</sup>
- Goat & lamb meat<sup>4</sup>

## West India:

- Seafood commonly consumed (fish, prawns, shellfish)<sup>4</sup>
- Both rice & wheat used<sup>3</sup>
- Popular foods:
  - Dal* -dish made with lentils<sup>3</sup>
  - Vindaloo* – popular curry dish<sup>3,4</sup>
  - Achars* – pickles<sup>3</sup>



## East India:

- Rice is staple grain<sup>1,4</sup>
- Known for sweets<sup>4</sup>
- 5 spice mix used<sup>1</sup>
- Fresh fish & vegetables in abundance<sup>1,3</sup>
- Popular foods:
  - Khaar* – curry made with raw papaya and pulses<sup>3</sup>
  - Maasor tenga* – fish curry<sup>3</sup>

## South India:

- Coconut and tamarind are common flavors<sup>1,3,4</sup>
- Popular foods:
  - Dosa* – flat rice pie<sup>3,4</sup>
  - Puttu* – dessert similar to rice pudding<sup>3</sup>
  - Idlis* – rice cake-like snack<sup>3,5</sup>

## Common Themes:

- ✓ Alcohol usually not consumed<sup>3,7</sup>
- ✓ Popular beverages: *Lassi*<sup>4,5</sup> (blend of yogurt, fruit, spices), *chai* tea<sup>4,5</sup> (tea leaves boiled with spices)
- ✓ Spices used: saffron,<sup>3,4,5</sup> cumin,<sup>1,4</sup> turmeric,<sup>4</sup> ginger,<sup>4</sup> garlic,<sup>4</sup> fenugreek,<sup>1,4</sup> chili pepper,<sup>1,4</sup> curry leaves,<sup>1,4</sup> mustard seeds,<sup>1,4</sup> cardamom,<sup>4,5</sup> coriander<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Staples of diet: pulses<sup>4,8</sup> and grains (rice, millet, wheat),<sup>8</sup> savory pickles and chutneys<sup>8</sup>

## RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

A large percentage (80%) of Indians are Hindu.<sup>1</sup> The Hindu value of non-violence and belief that the cow is sacred has resulted in many Indians practicing vegetarianism.<sup>4,9,10</sup> There are seven periods of fasting in Hinduism, with the most popular being *Ekadashi*, a 36 hour fast starting after sundown on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the moon and breaking on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> day.<sup>11,12</sup> Not all Hindus participate in fasting.<sup>3,11</sup> Some Indians are Muslim (~15%)<sup>1</sup> and adhere to the Islamic rule that eating pork is forbidden and “unclean.”<sup>3,5,10</sup>

## EATING PATTERNS & ETIQUETTE

It is common in Indian to forgo cutlery and eat with the right hand.<sup>5</sup> The left hand is considered unclean.<sup>5</sup> Bread is often torn and used to scoop food.<sup>4</sup> Food is sometimes served on a *Thali*, or a large plate with samplings of different dishes.<sup>4</sup> Food is meant to be eaten socially or enjoyed in groups.<sup>5</sup> A typical eating pattern including three meals a day with dinner being the largest and eaten later at night.<sup>5</sup>



## HEALTH BELIEFS

Ayurvedic medicine is one of the world's oldest medical systems and remains one of India's traditional health care systems.<sup>13</sup> Ayurvedic treatment involves the use of spices and plants for a holistic approach to healing and health.<sup>13</sup> Saffron, from the stamen of the crocus plant, has been used as an herbal remedy for various ailments, including cancer.<sup>3</sup> Ginger is used to treat colds and headaches and is believed to have antifungal properties.<sup>3</sup>



## HEALTH CONCERNS

Indians have three times the prevalence and risk of coronary artery disease compared to the general population.<sup>7</sup> Indians are more insulin resistant and have higher rates of hyperinsulinemia compared to the white population.<sup>7</sup> Because of these risk factors, they have a higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes mellitus than any other ethnic minority in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

Acculturation upon living in the U.S. typically results in a diet higher in processed foods, meat, and sugar-sweetened beverages.<sup>15</sup> This American-ized diet is caused by replacing traditional foods, which are typically unavailable,<sup>15</sup> with higher calorie foods, which are more affordable and accessible.<sup>14,16</sup> Traditional cooking methods are often abandoned and replaced with preparation of convenience items, like canned and microwaveable dishes.<sup>15</sup> Overall the diet shifts to contain more saturated fat and less fiber.<sup>15</sup>

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