

# Food Habits in Ancient India before the Arrival of Aryans

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**Abstract:** The excavation of the Mehrgarh period sites around 8000-6000 BC throws some startling facts about ancient Indian food habits. The domestication of plants and animals are reported in the subcontinent during that time. Wheat, barley and jujube were among crops cultivated, sheep and goats were among the animals domesticated for food. In the Neolithic period roughly 8000-5000 BC, agriculture products were the dominant mode of food products. Agricultural communities became widespread in Kashmir valley around 5000 BC. As early as 4530 BC and 5440 BC wild Oryza rice appeared in the Belan and Ganges valley regions of northern India. The earliest evidence of food in ancient India comes from excavated sites in the Indus Valley Civilization. The Indus Valley civilization grew wheat and barley as their staple food. Besides this, they also grew peas, sesamum, lentils and other pulses. In some places, particularly Gujarat, they also grew millets. It has not been proved if they consumed rice or not. Though they fed wild rice to their cattle, rice does not become an important crop until post-Harappan phase. Fruits were also included in their diet, notably, melon, pomegranate, coconut fruit and banana. The people of the valley were habituated in creating ornaments in the shape of various fruits which were found during excavation. Dates, grapes and melons were also grown by farmers. The people of the Indus Valley civilization were not all vegetarians. Meat formed an important part of their diet. Included in this list are chicken, mutton, beef, pork, fresh local fishes and dried fishes from the sea coast. Buffaloes, sheep, goats and cows were reared for milk too. Along with that, they also hunted deer, antelopes and wild boars.

**Keywords:** -Munda, Nisada, Nimbu, Haldi, Barley, Wheat, Nimbu, Arisi, Shakkara, Dhals, Mung, Urad, Massor, Savanin, Punjistha.

**Introduction:** About two million years ago man emerged in his modern shape and form, called *Homo sapiens*. They left various implements that come to light at times. The large apes, from whom man is descended, were and are vegetarians, but the excavated tools tell us that early man soon became a hunter of animals. The earliest tools were huge, blunt stones called chopping tools which were in use about half a million years ago. In the next stage of his development, man started collecting food for his use. In next stage man stopped foraging for food, and started to grow his own. Animal bones were found

in every archaeological site that has ever been excavated in India, but later, as man progressed, meat eating was combined with the use of agricultural crops.

The earliest Indian culture was the Indus Valley civilization, the cities of which flourished on the banks of many rivers in Punjab, Gujarat, Haryana and Rajasthan from 2500 BC for about thousands of years. The bones found at these sites showed that beef, mutton, turtles, small India alligators, and river and sea fish were all eaten in addition to foods like wheat and barley. While the bones of domestic fowl have been found at these sites, some sort of taboo against eating it has persisted right down the centuries.

It can also deduce what early Indians ate from the paintings that they left behind on walls of the caves in which they lived. About forty kilometers from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, a series of such rock shelters have been discovered on the Vindhya Hills at a place called Bhimbetka. In the wall paintings in cave, many animals are shown being hunted, obviously so that their meat could be eaten. These include the elephant, wild boar, tiger and rhinoceros. Surprisingly, even the giraffe and ostrich are shown very clearly.

During Stone Age, meat of many kinds was thus eaten, probably supplemented with wild fruit, vegetables and greens that could be collected from neighboring forests. In fact, even today, many of our tribal people live in exactly that same way. That catches all kinds of animals, even small mice, lizards, crocodiles and snakes to supplement the many edible fruits, leaves and roots which they collect from forest trees and plants. Both the tools left by those people, and the pictures that they painted, tells us quite a lot about the kind of food, which was eaten long ago.

All languages evolve and grow, some of the words that we use today are thousands of years old, and when such a word is located, we can be sure that the object existed thousands of years ago. The early inhabitants of India are loosely spoken of the *Mundas*. The Aryans referred to the *Mundas* by various uncharitable names, one of which was "*Nisada*". This comes from two words; "*nisa*" meaning turmeric and "*ad*" meaning to eat, so we do know that turmeric or *Haldi* existed long before the Aryans come to India. One tribe of *Mundas* was described as "*Svanin*", which means dog keepers, and another as "*Punjistha*", which means fowlers, so both the dog and the fowl had been domesticated by that time. The word for the lime, which was first *nimbuka* then *nimbaka* in ancient times and now *nimbu* is widely used. The very word *chaval* for rice is supposed to come from *chom-la*, which itself derived from *Munda* word *jom* meaning 'to eat'. Then Sanskrit word for rice is *vrihi* or *varisi*; from *varisi* came the Tamil word *arisi* which went along with rice itself from south India to Europe, and gave rice to the word rice. Sugar is an Indian food first developed in this country, and the original name was *shakkara*, which became today's sugar.

In the first quarter of twentieth century, excavations of some large mounds of earth in Punjab (now in Pakistan) area brought to light wonderful cities hidden below. In course of time nearly fifty sites of urban culture civilization were found in this way, stretching all over Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat. Through the surveys and excavations it is find that, domestication of goat, sheep and buffaloes, the use of barley,

wheat and cotton and the storage of food grains, were existed on large scale. At Mohenjodaro, food storage took the shape of twenty seven storage blocks arranged crosswise to ensure good air circulation, which is very important for long term food –grain storage. Thus food-grains were available all year round for feeding the people. Near the storage were found a large number of circular grinding platforms made of bricks, laid edgewise. Grains of brunt wheat and husks of barley were actually found still lying in the crevices of these platforms.

Use of large circular grinding stones made of granite, in which the top piece revolves above the lower one, were found at Harappa and Mohenjodaro, showing how old are food practices in North India. Both at Mohenjodaro and Lothal were found tandoori ovens used for baking, exactly as it is done today in Punjab area.

The bones of many animals have been found, like cattle, sheep, turtles, tortoises, gharials, and river and sea fish. The bones of fowls have been found. The beautiful seals of Indus Valley, which were probably used to stamp traded goods, carry representations of humped-backed zebu cattle and of water buffalo. It is, therefore, likely that all these were eaten by the dwellers then.

Wheat and barley seem to have been common foods all over the area of Indus Valley culture. Rice was grown only in the more southerly towns, such as Lothal and Rangpur in Gujarat. At certain southerly sites, ragi and Italian millet have been discovered, as well as crops like *jowar* (a millet). A large number of *dhals* with which we are now familiar have been excavated at the Indus Valley sites. These include *massor dhal*, *urad dhal*, *mung dhal*, horse gram and garden peas (*matter*). All these are foods that North Indian still eats at large scale.

The oil found in the meat of animals that were killed must have been used for cooking in the Indus Valley, as they were everywhere else in the world. These include tallow from mutton and beef, lard from pork, and fish oil. It is also likely that the ghee from milk was used. However at this early stage, vegetable oils were being used in the Harappan cities. A lump of charred sesame seeds was found in archeological excavation in Harappa. At other Indus Valley city sites, mustard seeds and linseed have been found. It is likely that oils from these seeds were known too. Both sesame oil and mustard oil are important cooking oils in India even today.

There are plenty of evidences that many fruits were available then to the dwellers in the Indus valley cities. Both lemons and melons were known. Dates, pomegranates and probably bananas were eaten. It is very likely that the coconut was known, though perhaps it was not very abundant in regions so far north.

**Conclusion:** Thus, in the Indus Valley civilization, we find that grinding stones and saddle-querns were used exactly as they still are in Indian kitchens. Deep-frying vessels found in Mohenjodaro and Harappa,

are exactly like those which Indians used today. Tandoori ovens have been found in these cities. In certain cities of Indus, a cooking *chula* with three raised knobs to place the vessel on, has been found. Portable metal *sigris* have been around for thousands of year. Cooking vessels of various functional shapes remain unchanged over centuries. An equipment called *ghani* or *kolhu*, used for crushing oil from oilseeds.

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