

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Culinary traditions define the culture of a nation and are closely linked to the health and well-being of its populace. Traditional diets also reflect the agricultural patterns, seasonal variations, availability, and accessibility to foods as well as the processing techniques followed through centuries. Indian traditional diets have undergone a transition as expected on account of changing sociodemographic profiles, agriculture, advances in food processing, and availability of processed foods, although the basic food combinations remain the same. It is interesting to examine the health and nutritional status of population, nutritional sufficiency of the traditional diets, the traditional food preservation techniques practiced, the food habits of tribal populations, the food-related culture and rituals and their significance, the functional components of traditional diets, the role of *Ayurveda*, in health and diseases (the ancient medical science followed in India), and the contribution of foods from marine sources to nutrition. This chapter presents a bird's eye view of these aspects of Indian traditional diets.

The present health and nutrition situation of the Indian population indicates an overall reduction in the prevalence of severe nutritional deficiencies, although subclinical deficiencies do prevail. There has been an alarming increase in noncommunicable diseases, on account of many factors, specifically, the lifestyle changes, the diet being one of them. The country battles with malnourished children with stunted growth, chronic energy deficiency in adults, micronutrient deficiencies, iron deficiency anemia, and obesity. India is self-sufficient in food production, although poor socioeconomic conditions deprive a section of the population with adequate food, giving rise to nutritional insecurities. A wide variety of food grains (cereals, millets, and pulses), fruits, vegetables, and oilseeds are grown along with a record milk production and resultant abundance of milk products. Livestock is a big industry too with easy availability of eggs, poultry, meat, and fish.

Indian traditional diets usually comprise dishes prepared using cereals, pulses, vegetables, and a serving of curd (yogurt). The diets are diverse in terms of varieties of foods used, a large number of cereals and millets used as staples, a variety of legumes used for making the additional courses, and many vegetables used for making accompanying dishes. In general, it is a healthy blend of many foods. Spices add on to the

unique blend of flavor. Apart from being nutritionally rich, the food combinations also enrich the diet with many inherent bioactive components, the plant pigments, nondigestible constituents, bioactive peptides, essential oils, etc. Notable is the use of unrefined foods in natural form in traditional cuisine, which are rich in nonnutrient bioactives. Statewise differences are observed in the types of foods eaten. Wheat predominates in the Northern part of India, whereas rice is a more common staple in South India. Millets are also used in some states. The dishes prepared are very unique and different in each ethnic group. Nutritionally, diets are good provided foods are chosen from all groups and adequate quantity is eaten.

Food preservation was practiced traditionally and is used even today, the common techniques being, drying, pickling, salting, and fermentation. These ensured proper utilization of food resources, extending the shelf life of surplus agricultural produce as well as providing newer novel foods with enhanced nutrition. India is also known for its pockets of tribes, who still follow the practice of foraging forest foods and depending on food resources entirely from forest regions. Their food habits are quite different from the urban population with a major dependence on naturally grown unique foods collected from the forest. A section on this dealt as a case study will familiarize readers with their unique food culture.

Vegetarian diets have been unique to Indian culture, and are still followed by a large section of populations. Vegetarianism has been practiced on account of religious reasons for many centuries in many ethnic populations. Vegetarian diets can be healthy, provided foods are selected appropriately. Even in so-called meat-eaters, or nonvegetarians, the frequency of eating meat is very low, sometimes restricted to once a week due to economic reasons or religious practices. India is also bestowed with a large sea coast; hence, marine foods are a source of nutrition to the coastal population. Fish is eaten as a staple providing high-quality proteins, essential vitamins, minerals, as well as fish oils rich in ω -3 fatty acids. Usage of fish is customary especially in coastal areas, with an abundance of fish and other marine foods, and it is an economical way of getting required nutrition for the local populace.

In Indian food culture, food and water were given a prominent place. Religious rituals required the offering of the best food to God. Fasting and feasting were common and associated with special days. There were specific rules followed for cooking and eating of food that indicated adherence to certain standards of hygiene and sanitation. Rituals were mandated to ensure food safety in all food handling protocols. Sharing of food was considered sacred and no needy person was turned away hungry from home, thus ensuring food security to all. The food culture followed the principles of Ayurveda, wherein foods were prescribed based on the nature (body type) of an individual and were modified depending on the seasons. The foods were defined in terms of their properties, and the selection of foods was based on these specific properties. Interestingly, Ayurveda describes six types of basic taste quality (*rasa*) of foods, which has

been acknowledged much later in modern science. A healthy meal is supposed to be a combination of all tastes and texture.

As in other parts of the world, India is also witnessing dietary and nutrition transitions with direct visible impacts on the health of people. As expected, these changes are on account of globalization of food chain, availability of different foods and cuisines and desire to experiment with new food cultures, advances in food processing and an enormous increase in number of processed foods available, easy access to fast food vendors, increase in disposable income, and consequent expenditure on catered or processed foods. Although the type and number of foods available have increased, the nutritional quality of diet is decreasing at an alarming rate due to the overconsumption of energy-dense foods, salt, sugar, fat, refined foods, and trans fats. At one end of the spectrum, there is malnutrition and, at the other, obesity is increasing due to overeating. The consumer needs to be educated regarding unhealthy processed foods and the nutritional superiority of our traditional diets as well as rich culture.