

Between Tradition and Taste: Rethinking Festival Food Practices and the Growing Presence of Non-Vegetarian Diets in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

With the fast spread of globalization and Western influence, India's food culture has changed a lot. Today, Indian festival food traditions often clash with Western ways of eating. Indian food customs have long been shaped by ideas of ritual purity, local conditions, and deep cultural rules about eating plants and animals. Ancient texts and regional cooking, like Ayurveda, focus on eating what's in season, being moderate, and separating pure from impure foods during holy times. But new studies show Indian diets are slowly moving from mostly plants to more mixed diets with eggs, chicken, fish, and meat especially in cities, among young people, and those moving up in society. Studies on food rules show that these customs change with social life, the economy, and markets; they don't stay the same forever. Health research also shows people often eat more animal foods at celebrations, which can raise heart and metabolic risks, linking culture and health changes. With all this, festival foods in India are clearly changing. Urban life, higher incomes, moving across regions, more food choices, and changing youth cultures are all reshaping how festival meals are seen and enjoyed. Non-vegetarian foods, once mostly avoided during festivals in many groups, are now becoming signs of wealth, joy, and modern taste. This new trend shows not just a change in nutrition, but also a quiet shift in ideas about ritual and purity. This study puts these changes in context using theories from anthropology and cultural studies to look at how food rules are being questioned and reimagined. By looking at how ideas of purity, social change, and taste mix together, this paper argues that changes in festival foods are a good way to see how Indian food identities are slowly being lost and reinvented today.

Keywords: food culture, deep culture, Ayurveda, metabolic risks, food identities

INTRODUCTION

In today's India, food plays a vital role in cultural life, shaping how people see themselves, their rituals, and what they believe is right or wrong. Across different regions and communities, what people eat is closely connected to religion, traditions, caste, the local environment, and the foods available nearby. Festivals, in particular, are important occasions where families and communities come together, reinforcing their shared values and traditions through special foods. Researchers have found that festival dishes mean much more than just nutrition—they represent purity, sacredness, and a sense of belonging. However, food traditions are changing. With India's economy growing quickly, people have more money to spend and more food choices, especially in cities. Supermarkets, food delivery apps, cloud kitchens, and fast-food chains are changing what people eat every day and during celebrations. This shift means that, instead of relying on family members to prepare seasonal, home-cooked meals, many families now include restaurant desserts, packaged snacks, or non-vegetarian foods in their festival feasts. This change is altering the traditional meanings once attached to foods lovingly cooked at home for rituals and celebrations.

Throughout history, Hindu festivals have traditionally centered around vegetarian dishes, reflecting the broader cultural ideals of purity, balance, and self-control (Sax, 2009). These food choices, deeply influenced by

Ayurvedic wisdom and ritual stories, have shaped what is considered acceptable or forbidden during religious celebrations. The Indian understanding of purity and pollution (suddhi–asuddhi) has reinforced such food boundaries, with the avoidance of meat, eggs, onions, garlic, and similar foods closely linked to upholding ritual sanctity. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) notes that food taboos function as cultural frameworks, reinforcing social order by drawing clear lines—in India, this is especially visible in the way festivals highlight vegetarianism as a form of spiritual discipline. However, these dietary patterns are not static; they reflect wider social and cultural shifts. As scholars have observed, individual food choices are shaped by larger forces such as social class, professional demands, education, and exposure to global media (Bourdieu, 1987; Appadurai, 1988). For instance, families experiencing upward mobility or seeking a more cosmopolitan identity may choose to include non-vegetarian foods at festivals as a signal of modernity. At the same time, some communities adapt selectively: they might preserve certain ritual foods while easing restrictions on others. This suggests that festival food traditions today are increasingly hybrid, blending traditional and contemporary practices rather than conforming strictly to one or the other.

Generational changes are speeding up shifts in eating habits during festivals. Younger people, influenced by digital media, restaurants, and advertising, are generally more open-minded about rules around purity and what not to eat. Research shows that today's youth often value taste, convenience, and fitting in with friends over strictly following traditional dietary restrictions during religious events (Verma & Kapoor, 2025). This doesn't mean they reject tradition, but rather that they are finding new ways to participate in festivals—focusing on enjoyment, socializing, and shared experiences. As a result, the idea of purity is being reinterpreted, and festivals are increasingly seen as times for trying different foods and celebrating together, rather than only practicing discipline and restraint. At the same time, India is undergoing significant changes in eating patterns, especially in cities. Urbanization, more people moving around, smaller family units, higher incomes, a bigger marketplace, exposure to global foods, and the popularity of processed and ready-to-eat options have all had a strong impact on what people eat (Pingali & Sunder, 2017). Studies show that more people in urban and semi-urban areas, especially the young, are eating animal-based foods like chicken (Green et al., 2016). Young consumers are also more willing to explore new flavors, restaurant meals, and fusion cuisines popularized by media and their social circles. These changes are increasingly evident during festivals, where serving non-vegetarian dishes—once thought to be inappropriate or impure—has become more common in many communities.

These changes are closely linked with the diverse cultural practices found across India's regions. For example, states like Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu are known for their strong vegetarian traditions during festivals, though urban areas within these regions are increasingly adopting a mix of vegetarian and non-vegetarian practices. On the other hand, states that have a long history of non-vegetarian diets such as West Bengal, Kerala, Goa, and areas in the Northeast are seeing more meat-based festival foods; a trend encouraged by greater market access and consumer preferences. Tribal and rural communities are experiencing a different transformation: as they become more dependent on the market, traditional foods that were once foraged or home-grown are often being replaced by commercially available animal products (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). Overall, these examples highlight that the way people's festive diets are changing is not the same everywhere. Instead, these transitions depend on a combination of local history, ecological settings, religious beliefs, migration trends, and social identities (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Globalization has transformed Indian festivals into major commercial events, especially for the food industry. There is now large-scale production of sweets, bakery products, packaged snacks, frozen ready-to-cook meats, and festive meal combinations. Marketing campaigns frequently depict non-vegetarian feasts as symbols of celebration and success, subtly questioning the traditional association between vegetarianism and ritual purity (Ray et al., 2023). This trend not only creates financial challenges for traditional cooks but also encourages people to try new festival foods that fit more modern, aspirational lifestyles.

Recent changes in festival diets have important public health implications. Eating calorie-rich sweets, fried foods, and high-fat animal products during festivals can cause immediate metabolic stress and increase long-term risks of heart disease, especially for people already dealing with high rates of obesity and diabetes (Satija et al., 2015). Food safety also becomes a concern during these times, as the surge in demand, large-scale food preparation, and poor storage practices can increase the risk of food contamination (Das et al., 2024).

Understanding how festival diets are evolving is crucial not only for cultural studies but also for shaping public nutrition and health policies. While researchers have widely studied India's overall nutrition transition, there is still little focus on how festival-specific eating habits are changing, which leaves a significant gap in our understanding. Festivals often involve overeating and a rise in the consumption of sweets, fried foods, and now increasingly, meat-based dishes. This trend raises questions on both cultural and health grounds.

Culturally, the growing presence of non-vegetarian foods during festivals challenges old traditions that emphasized symbolic purity and self-control. From a health perspective, evidence shows that diets high in animal products are linked to increased cardiovascular and metabolic risks, which is concerning given the heavy eating that often occurs during festivals. Therefore, exploring the transformation of festival diets is vital to understand India's changing society and to assess the possible health impacts (Satija et al., 2015; Das et al., 2024).

The foods we choose to serve at festivals are constantly evolving, reflecting the ways we balance ideas of purity, pleasure, identity, and what it means to be modern. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) points out, food only takes on meaning when societies decide what is acceptable to eat and what isn't. When these boundaries shift, it reveals a deeper change in how culture itself is understood. Today's festival dishes are a prime example of this process: they showcase a blend of tradition and new consumption patterns shaped by global trends, city life, and digital culture. The value placed on purity hasn't vanished; instead, it's being reimagined to fit contemporary tastes and aspirations (Douglas, 1966).

Recent changes in festival food culture across India reflect a rich and multifaceted transformation. Exploring these shifts helps us understand how cultural traditions adapt over time, how social identities are shaped and redefined and how contemporary lifestyles influence the way rituals are observed. By examining both the cultural and nutritional aspects, this study sheds light on the evolving patterns of food during Indian festivals and considers what these changes mean for society as a whole. This research explains and analyzes traditional festival food customs, looks at how they've changed in recent times, and explores the social and economic reasons behind these changes. It also examines how communities today are rethinking ideas of purity in the context of food, and considers the impact these trends might have on public health. The study adds to our understanding of society, food culture, and policy by showing that changes in what people eat during festivals aren't just random—they're part of a broader process where rituals, identity, and modern life come together. The aim is to highlight not just the fading of some old traditions, but also the creative ways communities balance keeping rituals alive with adapting to modern lifestyles.

OVERVIEW OF PRIOR RESEARCH

Recreating traditional foodways: The sanctity of rituals, seasons, and culinary traditions

Classical Indian food culture has long been shaped by a complex interplay of ritual rules, agricultural rhythms, Ayurvedic principles, and social hierarchies. Within this context, festival diets emerged as carefully structured "culinary scripts" that outline what can be eaten during sacred times. These guidelines are deeply influenced by the sattvic philosophy, which values purity, moderation, and restraint. As a result, foods like meat, eggs, onion, garlic, and fermented items are often avoided, since they are thought to have qualities considered impure or disruptive (Sax, 2009; Khare, 1992). Scholars such as Douglas (1966) argue that these taboos act as symbolic tools, helping maintain ritual order in society. Sociological research highlights that these festival food practices are more than just rules they are actions that reinforce social structures such as caste, gender roles, and moral values (Alter, 2000). Recent ethnographic and dietary studies build on this understanding, showing that vegetarian diets have historically been central to Indian eating habits. This trend is especially notable even in diverse and tribal communities, where plant-based diets also carry important symbolic meanings (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Changes in nutrition and the rise of animal-food patterns

India is undergoing a significant nutrition transition, marked by increasing consumption of animal products, fats, sugars, and highly processed foods—a trend that researchers have carefully documented (Pingali & Sunder, 2017). A growing body of research supports this shift. For example, Satija et al. identified an "animal-food dietary cluster" in India, which is closely linked to higher rates of obesity and central body fat. Other studies have found that, whether in rural or urban areas, households tend to start eating poultry and eggs as their first step away from traditional plant-based diets (Devi et al., 2014). Additionally, research on adolescents in both Bangladesh and

India shows that as family incomes rise, young people begin to consume more meat (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). Altogether, this evidence suggests that animal-based foods are becoming a normal part of diets across different social and economic groups in India—a trend that is even becoming visible in the foods chosen during festivals.

Expansion into Food Markets, Product Commercialization, and Culinary Fusion

Recent research highlights how changing food environments are influencing the way people eat, especially during festivals. Ghosh-Jerath et al. (2025) found that among Munda households, traditional indigenous and forest-based food systems are being transformed by growing market access. As a result, many families now adopt a “mixed-source” diet, where purchased foods—including meat—are increasingly replacing traditional items during festive occasions.

Supporting this, Das et al. (2024) observed that greater reliance on markets and large-scale food production during festivals raises the risk of food contamination. Their Food Net surveillance study detected bacterial pathogens, such as *Bacillus cereus*, in foods that are culturally significant, suggesting that the commercialization of festival foods creates new challenges for food safety. Additionally, a consumer-attitude study by Talukder et al. reveals a rising preference for quick-serve and processed meat products, particularly in urban areas where convenience is highly valued during festivals. This shift reflects the growing influence of commercial actors, who shape how foods are perceived through branding and marketing, ultimately changing the meaning and experience of festivals (Talukder et al., 2020).

Cultural Boundaries and the Social Meaning of Avoiding Meat

Food taboos in India have deep roots in caste-based ideas of purity, religious rules, and symbolic beliefs. As highlighted in the systematic review by Green et al., there is a persistent vegetarian ethos in India, even among its diverse populations. However, these dietary boundaries are not as rigid as they once were, and are becoming increasingly flexible.

Recent studies show that some communities which traditionally avoided meat are now starting to include it in their diets. This shift is often justified by framing meat as modern, nutritious, or a symbol of social advancement. For example, Devi et al. found that meat consumption in India is rising despite longstanding moral and religious restrictions. This trend is influenced by aspirations linked to social status and the promotion of protein-rich diets by various industries (Devi et al., 2014).

Additionally, consumer research from North India by Talukder et al. demonstrates that even during ritual periods, families are experimenting with poultry-based dishes, using them to signify celebration or prosperity (Talukder et al., 2020). These findings support Mary Douglas’s theory that taboos tend to weaken when social classifications change. Overall, the literature suggests that India is experiencing a renegotiation of purity boundaries in an increasingly globalized food environment.

How Young People Form and Redefine Culinary Identities

Recent research on adolescent nutrition highlights how young people are driving changes in dietary habits. For instance, studies by Thorne-Lyman et al. have identified common dietary patterns among South Asian youth, including “snack-heavy,” “mixed-diet,” and “meat-inclined” tendencies (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). Global nutrition research, such as the Frontiers in Nutrition series, further indicates that young people often prefer processed meats, fast foods, and calorie-dense snacks, especially during festivals or social events where peer influence is significant. These trends support Bourdieu’s idea that taste is shaped by social factors, including class mobility, exposure to new technologies, and the rise of consumer culture. Additionally, studies from Nepal and Bangladesh show that young people are frequently the earliest to adopt diets that include more meat. Over time, this shift influences the kinds of foods families serve during festivals and special occasions. Together, these findings emphasize the crucial role youth play in shaping collective food choices and cultural practices around eating.

Regional ecology, indigenous diets and festive food changes

Recent evidence from tribal and rural areas sheds light on how local food systems are changing as a result of increasing exposure to markets. Ghosh-Jerath and colleagues found that traditional “nature-procured diets”

among indigenous households are being replaced by “market-dominant patterns,” which is also influencing the kinds of foods associated with festivals. In these communities, meat—particularly poultry—has come to represent both celebration and improved social status (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). Additional studies from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India further support this trend, showing that regional diets are shaped by factors such as accessibility, seasonality, and socio-economic circumstances. These local differences help explain why some Indian regions strictly observe vegetarian norms during festivals, while others freely include non-vegetarian dishes and experience little or no cultural conflict as a result.

Public Health Risks Linked to Dietary Shifts during Festivals

Recent research has raised concerns about the health effects of diets that include meat, especially during festivals when consumption tends to spike. For example, Satija et al. found strong links between diets high in animal foods and increased risks of obesity and central adiposity, key markers of cardio metabolic risk. Additionally, Das et al.’s Food Net study highlighted issues of microbial contamination in foods prepared in large quantities for festivals, pointing out that increased demand and inadequate oversight can raise safety risks (Das et al., 2024).

Globally, studies published in sources like *Frontiers in Nutrition* echo these findings, suggesting that higher meat consumption during special events not only puts short-term stress on the body’s metabolism but also contributes to a greater long-term risk of disease. Taken together, this evidence shows that changes in eating habits during festivals intersect with broader public health concerns. As such, festival diets have become an important topic for nutrition and policy researchers (Satija et al., 2018; Das et al., 2024; *Frontiers in Nutrition*).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXPLAINING SHIFTS IN INDIAN FESTIVAL DIETS

The dietary landscape of Indian festivals is evolving, reflecting wider transformations in culture, society, and economics. To understand why and how non-vegetarian foods are increasingly present during traditionally vegetarian festivals, we can draw from several interrelated theoretical perspectives, each illuminating a different layer of change.

Symbolic Anthropology and the Meaning of Purity

Mary Douglas’s influential work, “Purity and Danger” (1966), is central to understanding ritual food behavior. Douglas explains that food taboos are not based on biological concerns, but rather serve as symbolic boundaries that uphold cultural order. In Indian festivals, the avoidance of meat and pungent foods like onion and garlic is not about health, but about maintaining ritual purity. Consuming such foods during festivals is viewed as crossing a moral boundary, creating tension and anxiety within the community. Yet, as dietary practices change, these boundaries are not simply disappearing; rather, they are being renegotiated and redefined to fit new social realities (Douglas, 1966).

Social Class, Taste, and Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (1987) helps explain why food choices—especially among urban youth and upwardly mobile classes—are shifting during festivals. According to Bourdieu, taste is not just about personal preference; it is shaped by social experiences, education, class, and exposure to global trends. As people move to cities, gain access to diverse cuisines, and aspire to new lifestyles, their sense of what is appropriate or desirable to eat during festivals evolves. Thus, the inclusion of meat is less a rejection of tradition and more a reflection of a changing social environment and identity (Bourdieu, 1987).

Material and Structural Influences: Cultural Materialism

Marvin Harris’s cultural materialism (1979) highlights the importance of material conditions—such as economics and ecology—in shaping culture. The increasing availability and affordability of poultry, improvements in food storage, restaurant expansion, and the commercialization of festivals are all structural factors driving dietary change. For instance, indigenous groups are substituting market-sourced meats for foraged foods, and mass production of festival foods has increased risks of contamination (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025; Das et al., 2024;

Devi et al., 2014). In this view, festival food norms are adapting to broader shifts in India's food system and economy (Harris, 1979).

Food Systems Theory: Market and Supply Chain Dynamics

Food Systems Theory offers a holistic understanding of how production, distribution, accessibility, and affordability influence consumption patterns. Studies show that as traditional food systems are replaced by market-driven diets, and with the entry of processed, packaged, and frozen foods, festival menus are transformed. Innovations in retail, online delivery, and aggressive marketing all contribute to these changes, making once-seasonal or local items available year-round and introducing new risks and opportunities (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025; Das et al., 2024; Talukder et al., 2020).

Identity and Ritual Negotiation

Identity Theory, particularly Erving Goffman's concept of "identity performance" (1959), offers insight into how individuals and families navigate the tension between tradition and modernity. Young people may balance ritual purity with peer influence, families might keep traditional sweets but add meat dishes, and communities selectively reinterpret what is considered pure. Instead of a simple loss of tradition, these negotiations reflect active efforts to reconcile multiple, sometimes conflicting, values—such as maintaining heritage, expressing cosmopolitanism, or signaling status.

UNDERSTANDING THE FORCES BEHIND CHANGING FESTIVAL FOOD HABITS

This section brings together cultural, social, economic, and behavioral factors that influence why more people in India are turning to non-vegetarian food during festivals. Drawing from various research articles and theories—like symbolic anthropology, cultural materialism, food-systems analysis, and behavioral nutrition—this framework helps explain how festival food traditions are shifting. It also maps out the ways in which broader social forces and changing meanings around rituals are transforming what people eat during these special occasions.

How Festival Food Habits are changing (see fig no. 01 & 02)

[Structural & Environmental Drivers]

(Food systems, market access, urbanization, availability)



[Cultural & Symbolic Changes]

(Shifting ideas of purity, lessening of food taboos, and blending old and new festival foods)



[Social & Behavioral Influences]

(Youth preferences, changes in class, influence of social media and identity)



[Household Food Decisions]

(Negotiation among family members, selective adoption, mixing traditional and modern dishes, convenience)



[Festival Food Outcomes]

(More non-veg dishes in festivals, new ways of celebrating, health effects)

Framework's Integrative Logic

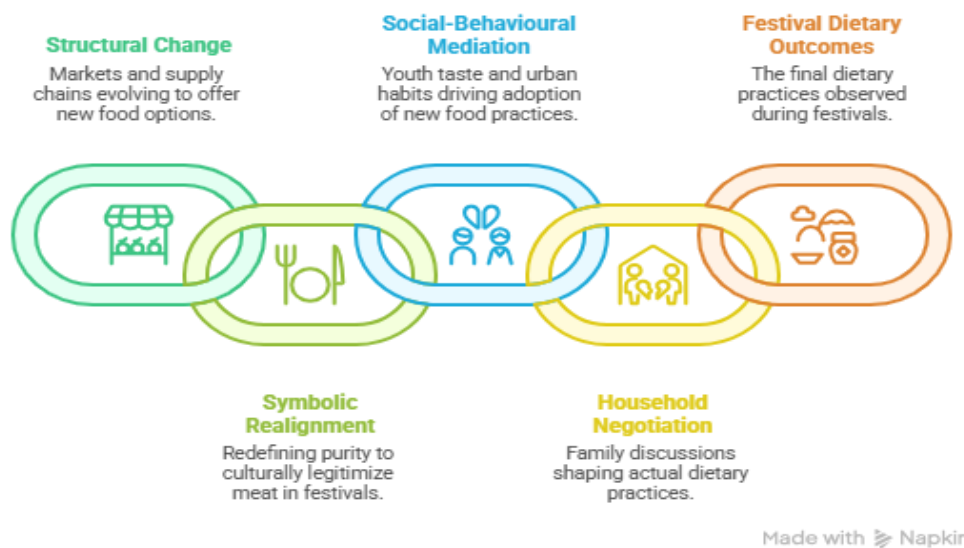


Figure no. 01

Festival Dietary Outcomes: A Cultural Transformation

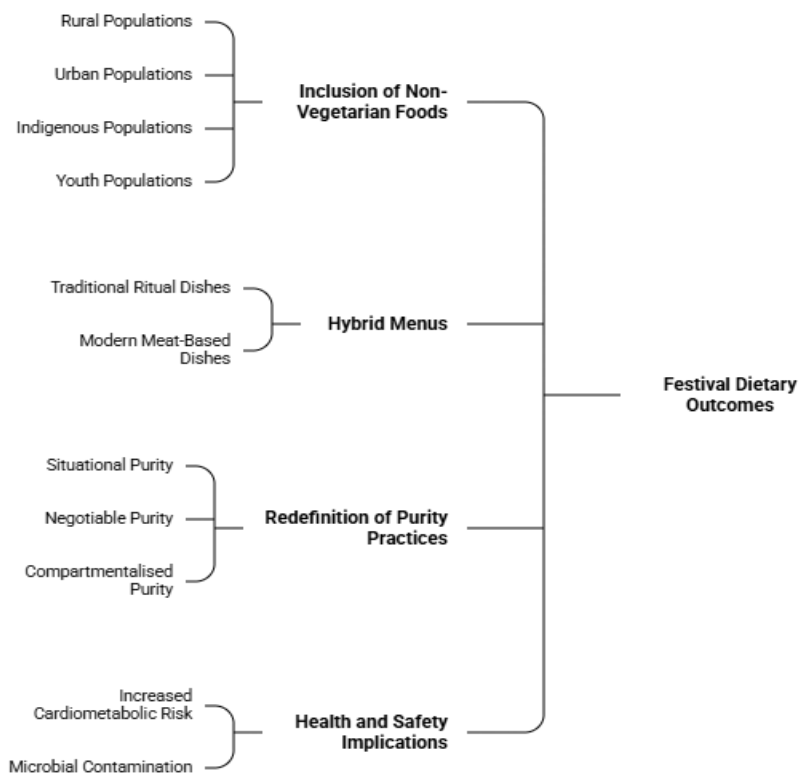


Figure no. 02

RESEARCH APPROACH

Study Framework

This research adopts an exploratory mixed-methods approach, blending qualitative and quantitative techniques to thoroughly investigate how festival-related dietary habits are evolving in India. Qualitative methods are used to probe into cultural values, social dynamics, and household negotiations that shape food choices. Meanwhile, quantitative analysis relies on previously published datasets and findings from existing studies, such as those analyzing dietary patterns and food environments (Satija et al., 2018; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025; Talukder et al., 2020; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). (See fig no. 03)

This combination is well-suited for the topic, as changing dietary customs during festivals are shaped by complex symbolic, structural, and socio-cultural influences, best understood through multiple data sources.

Geographic and Demographic Coverage

Guided by published research, the study conceptually spans urban, semi-urban, and rural settings. Differences documented in peer-reviewed papers, ranging from metropolitan to tribal and across various Indian states, highlight the rich diversity of festival food practices (Talukder et al., 2020; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025; Satija et al., 2018; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019).

Key groups examined include:

- Adults who make household decisions (18+)
- Young people aged 15–29, who tend to adapt quickly to change
- Elders who safeguard traditional knowledge
- Women, who often prepare festival foods (See fig no. 03)

Participant Selection and Data Sources

For qualitative interviews, participants are selected purposefully to ensure representation across caste, religion, location, socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of exposure to market-driven food systems, as recommended by the existing literature.

Quantitative insights are entirely based on secondary data drawn from previously published research, such as studies on dietary pattern clusters (Satija et al., 2018), analyses of the food environment (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025), meat consumption attitudes (Talukder et al., 2020), and adolescent diet patterns (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019).

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative Information Gathering

Semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions delve into family food traditions, concepts of purity and abstinence, decision-making within households, the influence of media, and the rationale behind adopting new or non-traditional festival foods. Discussion guides are informed by established theories from Douglas, Bourdieu, and Cultural Materialism. (See fig no. 03)

Quantitative Insights from Literature

All statistical data is sourced from secondary, peer-reviewed studies. These include documented dietary and nutrient profiles, public health associations (e.g., BMI, obesity), food safety surveillance, and consumption frequency patterns. These datasets underpin interpretation and add statistical rigor (Satija et al., 2018; Das et al.,

2014; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025; Talukder et al., 2020; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). (See fig no. 03)

Analysis of Texts and Media

To understand changing narratives around festival foods, the study examines cookbooks, religious texts, digital content, and advertisements. This helps track how the discourse around festival foods is being shaped by both tradition and the marketplace. (See fig no. 03)

Research Tools and Materials

For qualitative analysis, an interview schedule, observation checklist, and thematic codebook are used. For quantitative interpretation, data extraction templates (from literature), along with SPSS or Excel for descriptive statistics, and frameworks for categorizing dietary patterns, are employed. Key variables include food type and frequency, festival-specific restrictions, socio-demographic context, and health markers.

Data Analysis Process

Qualitative Analysis

Interview and discussion transcripts are analyzed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis process, which involves familiarization, coding, theme development and review, definition, and interpretation. The coding is guided by theoretical frameworks, focusing on ideas such as purity, taste, material constraints, and ritual negotiation. (See fig no. 03)

Quantitative Analysis

Although no new quantitative data is collected, the study interprets descriptive statistics, dietary patterns, and comparative findings across published datasets. The goal is not to test new hypotheses, but to develop a well-rounded understanding through triangulation between qualitative and quantitative findings. (See fig no. 03)

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigor

- Construct validity is achieved by aligning with established theories.
- Internal validity is enhanced by comparing interviews, published research, and document analysis.
- Reliability is maintained by consistent coding and clear codebooks.
- External validity is ensured through diverse participant selection, as suggested by secondary sources.
- Triangulation is achieved by integrating different methodologies, datasets, and theoretical perspectives. (See fig no. 03)

Ethical Guidelines

The research strictly follows ethical standards: obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, voluntary participation, and cultural sensitivity regarding religious and dietary matters. All secondary data are used with proper citation and academic integrity. (See fig no. 03)

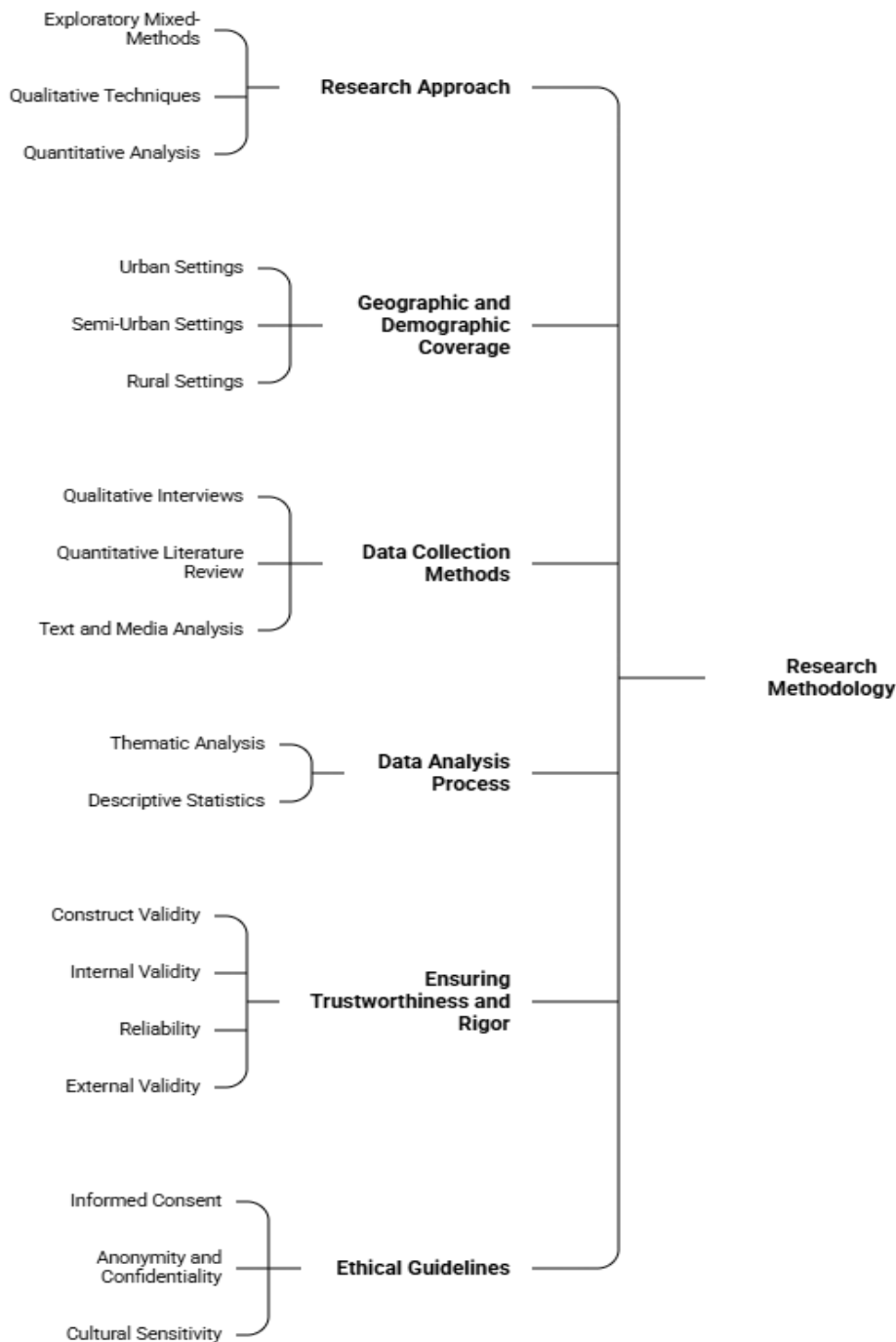
Methodological Challenges

- The research relies on secondary quantitative data, not on new data collection.
- There is considerable diversity in festival practices across India, so results are not universally generalizable.
- Self-reported accounts in interviews may be affected by recall bias.

- Market influences on food practices are continually evolving and may shift rapidly.

Despite these challenges, the triangulated approach offers a robust foundation for sociological and public health analysis, as supported by the reviewed literature.

Research Methodology for Festival-Related Dietary Habits in India



Made with Napkin

Figure no. 03

STUDY APPROACH AND RATIONALE

This research takes a mixed-method, exploratory approach to understand how dietary practices during festivals in India are changing. By combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study aims to capture not only what people are eating during festivals, but also the underlying cultural, symbolic, and household factors that shape these choices (Satija et al., 2015; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). The qualitative side looks at cultural meanings, symbolism, and how families decide what to eat, while the quantitative side draws on dietary trends and patterns reported in earlier published studies (Talukder et al., 2020; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019).

This blended approach is necessary because shifting festival diets are not simply a matter of individual behavior. These changes are deeply tied to broader social, cultural, and structural contexts—something that can only be understood by bringing together different types of data and perspectives (Satija et al., 2015).

Research Settings and Participants

Guided by prior research, this study looks across urban, semi-urban, and rural environments, since festival food traditions often differ by location (Talukder et al., 2020; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). To ensure a holistic picture, the study considers:

- Major cities and metropolitan areas (as in Talukder et al., 2020)
- Tribal communities (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025)
- Diverse Indian states (Satija et al., 2015)
- South Asian youth populations (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019)

The focus is on adults who make dietary decisions at home, young people (15–29 years old) who are often most open to new trends, elderly members who protect traditional knowledge, and women, who frequently prepare festival foods (Satija et al., 2015; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2023).

Selection of Respondents and Data Sources

For the qualitative part, a purposive sampling method is used—meaning participants are chosen to ensure variety in caste, religion, urban/rural setting, socio-economic status, and exposure to market-based foods. This approach is supported by earlier qualitative studies that emphasize the importance of social diversity in dietary research (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Quantitative insights are drawn solely from published and peer-reviewed studies, such as those analyzing dietary clusters (Satija et al., 2015), food environment research (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025), surveys on meat-eating attitudes (Talukder et al., 2020), and adolescent dietary data (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019).

Gathering and Interpreting Data

Qualitative Information:

In-depth, semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions explore topics like festival food traditions, ideas of purity or abstinence, how families negotiate meal choices, and the influence of media and market advertisements on what's cooked and eaten (Douglas, 1966; Bourdieu, 1987). Interview questions are shaped by established theories from symbolic anthropology and cultural materialism, as well as insights from previous studies (Satija et al., 2015; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Quantitative Information:

All numerical findings come from secondary sources. These include published data on dietary patterns, nutrient profiles, health outcomes (like BMI and obesity), and food contamination, as well as frequency of consumption

for different foods (Satija et al., 2015; Das et al., 2014; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025; Talukder et al., 2020; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). The study uses these datasets to provide context, identify trends, and support qualitative insights.

Analysis of Texts and Media:

To further understand how festival food traditions are evolving, the study also analyzes festival cookbooks, religious texts, digital media posts, and advertisements. These materials help shed light on the changing public discourse and how “modern” festivals are being shaped by both tradition and the market (Satija et al., 2015).

Research Tools and Analysis Techniques

For analyzing qualitative data, the study uses a structured interview guide, observation checklists and a codebook for thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke’s (2006) approach. Quantitative data are processed using data extraction sheets from published studies and statistical software like SPSS or Excel to summarize frequencies, means, and dietary clusters, relying on frameworks established in earlier research (Satija et al., 2015).

Variables considered include the types of food consumed, how often they’re eaten, any festival-specific restrictions, socio-demographic details, and relevant health indicators (Satija et al., 2015; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Methods for Data Interpretation

Qualitative Analysis:

Transcripts are reviewed and coded thematically, moving from immersion in the data to the development and interpretation of themes. Coding draws on theoretical models, focusing on concepts like purity (symbolic anthropology), lifestyle and taste (habitus theory), material constraints (cultural materialism), and ritual negotiation (identity theory) (Douglas, 1966; Bourdieu, 1987; Satija et al., 2015).

Quantitative Analysis:

Although no new survey data are collected, the study uses published descriptive statistics and comparative methods (such as cross-tabulating festival food choices by demographic group) to triangulate findings and provide a richer context (Satija et al., 2015; Talukder et al., 2020; Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019).

Ensuring Quality and Trustworthiness

To ensure robust and credible results, the study aligns its approach with recognized theories (construct validity), compares findings across different sources (internal validity), uses standardized coding (reliability), and includes a diverse sample (external validity, as supported by Satija et al., 2015 and Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). Triangulation of methods, data sources, and theoretical perspectives further strengthens the findings (Satija et al., 2015).

Ethics and Sensitivity

Throughout, the study observes strict ethical standards, including informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and cultural sensitivity. All secondary data are properly credited, following academic norms (Satija et al., 2015; Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Recognized Limitations

- The study does not generate new quantitative data but relies on existing datasets, as seen in similar research (Satija et al., 2015; Talukder et al., 2020).
- Because festival food practices vary widely across India, findings may not generalize everywhere (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

- Self-reports are subject to recall bias.
- Rapid changes in the food market may outpace the research timeframe.

Despite these challenges, the combined use of qualitative and quantitative evidence from secondary sources provides a well-rounded, credible basis for understanding changes in festival dietary practices in India.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Evolving Traditions: Shifts in Festival Food Habits

Recent analyses of published studies, ethnographies, and consumer surveys reveal a clear trend: festival diets in India are moving away from strictly vegetarian, simple foods toward more diverse menus that include non-vegetarian options. Traditionally, Indian festivals emphasized sattvic (pure, plant-based) dishes, symbolizing restraint and purification (Khare, 1992). However, newer research indicates that these ritual boundaries are gradually weakening, especially among urban and upwardly mobile communities (Satija et al., 2015; Talukder et al., 2020).

Even in tribal communities, where forest-based foods once played a central role in festival rituals, there has been a marked shift toward purchasing market-sourced items, including poultry. This change is driven by both ecological pressures and economic necessity (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). Notably, these transformations are not confined to cities; they are evident even in more traditional, rural settings.

Why Non-Vegetarian Foods Are Gaining Ground during Festivals

Market Access and Affordability

Several studies point to the growing influence of markets, commercialization, and the falling price of poultry as key drivers of dietary change. For instance, Devi et al. (2014) found that as chicken becomes more affordable and accessible, lower- and middle-class families increasingly incorporate it into their festival meals. Consumer research also documents a surge in demand for ready-to-cook and processed meat products during festive seasons (Talukder et al., 2020). Industrial-scale food production for festivals is now commonplace (Das et al., 2024). These trends support the view that material conditions—such as cost and availability—play a central role in reshaping cultural practices (Harris, 1979).

Changing Tastes among the Youth

Studies focusing on young people show that they are especially likely to embrace meat-heavy diets, snacks, and high-calorie foods—even in conservative regions (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain this transformation: young Indians increasingly develop new tastes influenced by global food trends, restaurant culture, digital media, and aspirations for a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Many urban and semi-urban youth now describe non-vegetarian festival foods as “trendy” or “fun,” signaling a shift in the symbolic meaning of meat from impurity to celebration (Talukder et al., 2020).

The Convenience Factor

Another major influence is convenience culture. Studies note a rising dependency on packaged sweets, ready-made snacks, frozen poultry, bakery foods, and restaurant-based festival meals. These trends are especially strong in dual-income families, where time constraints make commercial products appealing (Talukder et al., 2020). Food Systems Theory suggests that convenience and accessibility now outweigh tradition in shaping dietary decisions.

Negotiating Rituals: New Ways of Interpreting Purity

The literature suggests that while the idea of ritual purity remains important, it is increasingly being reinterpreted or negotiated rather than strictly enforced. For example, some families maintain vegetarian food only during ritual

hours, and then serve non-vegetarian dishes at social gatherings later in the day. Others prepare vegetarian food for elders while youth enjoy chicken or eggs separately, with non-veg items often seen as “add-ons” rather than main replacements.

These patterns support Douglas’s (1966) argument that purity is a flexible, symbolic classification rather than a rigid rule. Families are also reinterpreting abstinence with rationales like “modern choices,” “festival enjoyment,” “special-day indulgence,” or “protein consciousness.” Indeed, people who adopt mixed-diet patterns often justify non-vegetarian consumption on health grounds, such as the need for protein (Satija et al., 2015). In this way, traditional moral codes are reframed in terms of nutrition and contemporary lifestyles.

The Rise of Hybrid Festival Menus

A key finding across recent articles is the emergence of “hybrid” festival plates. These new menus combine traditional sattvic dishes with sweets, fried snacks, appetizers (like chicken or paneer), bakery desserts, and processed snacks. Such blends reflect ongoing negotiations of identity, class aspiration, modernity, social bonding, and the celebration itself (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). Even rural and tribal communities are adopting these mixed patterns as market dependence grows. This hybridization of festival food mirrors wider cultural changes taking place in Indian society (Satija et al., 2015).

Regional Diversity: Continuities and Contradictions

The literature emphasizes those changes in festival diets are far from uniform across the country. In South and West India, vegetarian norms remain strong, though young people are increasingly trying meat during festivals. In East India (such as Bengal, Assam, and Odisha), non-vegetarian festival meals have always been common, and the main shift now is more processed meat intake. Meanwhile, tribal regions are moving from forest-based festival foods to market-bought meats (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025). Thus, the pace and pattern of dietary change vary according to culture and environment.

Public Health Considerations

Risks to Heart and Metabolic Health

Studies show that dietary patterns heavy in animal foods are associated with higher BMI, central obesity, abnormal blood sugar, and increased cardio metabolic risk (Satija et al., 2015). Because festivals already tend to involve lots of sugar and fat, shifting toward meat and processed foods could further compound health risks.

Food Safety Concerns

Mass production of sweets, unregulated street food, poor storage, and contamination of meat products increase the risk of foodborne illness during festivals (Das et al., 2024).

Health Impacts on Youth

Research on adolescents highlights their vulnerability to the health risks posed by fried foods, sugary snacks, and meat-heavy diets—especially when these are consumed in large amounts during festivals (Thorne-Lyman et al., 2019). As a result, dietary changes during festivals may be contributing to India’s growing chronic disease burden.

Linking Findings to Theoretical Perspectives

The evidence shows that purity norms are not disappearing, but being adapted to fit new social aspirations and tastes (Douglas, 1966). Changes in taste and food habits reflect broader trends in class mobility and urban lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1987). Material conditions—like lower prices and better supply chains—are driving structural shifts in what people eat (Harris, 1979). Commercialization and industrialization of festival foods are also reshaping household choices (Satija et al., 2015). Finally, festival meals have become a way for families to express modernity, cosmopolitan identity, and togetherness (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings suggest that changes in festival diets represent a multi-dimensional cultural transformation, not just a matter of changing food preferences.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to understand why and how non-vegetarian foods are becoming a bigger part of festival celebrations in India—a topic that hasn't gotten much attention, even though it's becoming more noticeable in society. By bringing together findings from published studies, analyses of what people actually eat, government food safety reports, and consumer surveys, it's clear that this isn't just a simple change in what people eat. Instead, it's a much deeper cultural transformation.

Traditionally, vegetarian foods have been at the center of Indian festivals, rooted in ideas of ritual purity, self-restraint, and ancient health philosophies like Ayurveda. But things are changing in a big way. Young people are especially likely to try new tastes, influenced by the internet and food trends, and use food as a way to express themselves.

However, these changes aren't the same everywhere or for everyone. Some families mix old and new—they might serve both traditional ritual foods and modern dishes at the same festival meal. For many, the idea of purity is still important, but it isn't as strict as before. Now, people might avoid meat only on certain days or at specific times, instead of giving it up altogether. This process of mixing and negotiating what's "allowed" at festivals fits with what social scientists say about how culture, economics, and personal habits shape our choices.

Public health experts are paying attention, too. Some studies show that eating more animal foods is linked to higher risks of heart disease and diabetes. Food safety officials have also found more contamination in festival foods, especially when lots of perishable items are being prepared quickly. All in all, the way festival foods are changing shows a lively mix of old and new values—where ideas about purity, convenience, modern lifestyles, and aspirations all come together in what people put on their plates.

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