

GRAINS OF TRADITION: EXPLORING RICE-BASED FOODS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Rice (*Oryza sativa L.*) is one of the most important staple foods in the world and holds significant value in the daily diet and part of culture of Pakistan. Present review emphasizes the variety of rice-based dishes adored across the country, converging their social role, ingredients, and cooking methodology. Using a quality descriptive method, the research focusses on current history, culinary archives, and public vision. The study highlights traditional rice dishes, main meals such as biryani, pulao, and khichri including desserts like kheer, firni, and zarda. It also hints on fermented foods and extruded snacks made from puffed rice. By-products like rice bran oil and rice starch are also considered owing their nutritional benefits and potential uses in different local industries. Rice plays an important role in Pakistan's food ethos, there is astonishingly little literature on these traditional foods. Retrieving and publishing them will not only preserve this heritage but it will also expand the opportunities for innovation and value addition in this sector. Overall verdicts that rice is profoundly allied with nation's culture, civilizations and economy.

Keywords: Amylose content, biryani, bran oil, basmati, cuisine, rice

INTRODUCTION

Rice is a staple food for near half of the world's population and provides a key part of daily energy consumption. It is cultivated in more than 100 states of universe, with highest production coming from Asia region (FAO, 2021). Besides, Rice is an important source of food but also has strong social, cultural and economical value in southeast Asia especially. In Pakistan, rice is a major cash crop and acts as an integral part of the diet, however wheat is consumed more frequently. Pakistan produced about 9.86 million metric tons of rice in year 2023–24 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Rice is not just a diet, but it is closely related to society and tradition. Biryani, pulao, and firni are usually dished for commemorations, events and somewhere in daily meals. From nutritional point of view, it is rich source of carbohydrates and

delivers some essential protein, vitamins, fiber and minerals. Rice is naturally gluten-free food and a good option for people who cannot digest wheat or other gluten rich cereals (Friedman, 2013; Park and Kim, 2023). Numerically, it provides 80% carbohydrates, 3% fat, 7–8% protein and 3.0% fibre with trace minerals and antioxidants (Juliano, 2017). Despite all facts rice is not considered an ample food because it is deficient in providing essential amino acids i.e., lysine (crucial for cell growth).

This can be a harm for people who rely only on rice meal without considering well-adjusted food regime (Amudha *et al.*, 2011). Various rice types / varieties behave contrarily on cooking because of starch (amylose content). Some cultivars are sticky and soft i.e., japonica rice while some retain firmness and separate kernels even after cooking i.e., basmati. Likewise low amylose containing rice (12-20%) is frequently utilized for desserts or beverages preparation (kheer, firni), on other side intermediate

amylose carrying rice (21-30%) is usually chosen for main meals where a firmer texture is needed (Biryani, pualo) (Juliano and Hicks, 1996).

Ethnic cuisine is flattering popular as community expresses attention to traditional and healthy choices simultaneously (Smith and Thomas, 2022). In Pakistani culture, these dishes imitate history, regional diversity and distinctive cooking elegances. Currently rice dishes are in main course along with wheat-based foods like roti and naan in everyday table (Siddiqi, 2015; Riaz *et al.*, 2024).

Its importance is also highlighted in local traditions and cultural history. Yet, research has more focus on yield, production and trade rather emphasis on exploration of traditional foods. (Mishra and Kumar, 2019; Ejaz *et al.*, 2020; Saifullah *et al.*, 2024). Our local cuisine has been influenced by Mughals, Indians, Persians, Afghan traditions. As it is noticeable in the use of herbs, spices, dried fruits and nuts in rice main dishes to make more nice-looking and healthier (Das *et al.*, 2012).

Many locally processed and value-added products are regularly made from broken grains (popped rice). Reason for using low quality rice is its starch properties which make it appropriate for specific food preparations (Sharif and Singh, 2021). Though, majority of our farmers only sell rice in paddy or raw form even at low prices without knowing importance of adding value. Processing or minor innovations can improve their income and support to national economy (Dani and Masson, 1992; Ali and Hussain, 2022).

Literature shows that in Pakistani rice is consumed in less quantity as compared to some neighbouring countries, usually a few times a week rather than daily. Moreover, people mostly prefer

basmati rice in Indo Pak culture because of kernel length, taste and fluffiness. Documenting indigenous rice value added foods can help to preserve this heritage and open new horizons for innovations and innovative product development.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main goal of this study is to explore and document traditional rice-based items in Pakistan mainly focusing cultural value, cooking methods, ingredients and mealtimes. This helped in understanding the varietal and cultural status too.

Present study employs a simple qualitative slant to comprehend rice foods traditionally used in Pakistan. Evidence was composed from research articles, cookbooks, traditional recipes and folk stories. Some informal discussions were detained with rural people (familiar with old traditional cooking). Data was sensibly reviewed and clustered into groups, i.e., main dishes, desserts, fermented foods, extruded snacks, and by-products.

DISCUSSION

1. Rice-Based Desserts

Rice is fundamental ingredient in traditional desserts prepared especially during family gatherings, festivals and weddings.

- *Kheer* is an eminent dessert cooked slowly while adding mostly broken rice with milk, sugar and spices (cardamom and saffron) and topped with nuts and silver paper.
- *Firni* is similar to kheer but smoother consistency because of rice powder used usually. Serving in clay bowls make it festive.

- *Zarda* is a sweet yellowish rice made with ghee, ghee, dry fruits, nuts and saffron mostly served at celebrations.
- *Mutanjan* is a rich sweet dessert prepared with sugar, dry fruits, khoya, food colors and served with Gulab jamuns at weddings mostly.
- *Gur Wale Chawal* (jaggery rice) is an ethnic winter dessert made with fresh gur (jaggery), ghee, spices (cardamom) and served often with nuts. It is not only tradition but a healthy choice also.

2. Main serving Dishes made with rice

Rice is the main ingredient for many popular savory dishes in Pakistan.

- *Biryani* is one of the most loved dishes, made with meat, especially basmati rice, spices and herbs. It is main items in general public dining table.
- *Kabuli Pulao* is popular in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and widely spreading in all provinces. It includes rice cooked with meat, raisins and vegetables (carrots usually).
- *Chana Pulao* is a traditional nutritious rice made with chickpeas.
- *Yakhni Pulao* is prepared by cooking rice in a flavourful meat broth, giving it a unique mild taste. It is usually main course at the dining table.

3. Fermented Foods

Fermented rice items are not very common in Pakistan but are still used in some rural areas.

- *Kanji* is a traditional fermented drink made from rice with added vegetables and is known for its digestive benefits too.

- Fermented rice and lentil batter is used to make foods like idli and dosa in some areas of Balochistan.

4. Snacks

Light traditional snacks are made with Rice is also used to make

- *Puffed rice* (Chawal ke Phulian) is a rural snack frequently mixed with gur (jaggery), lentils and peanuts.
- *Rice Cake* (Chawal ka Maronda) is a sweet bar made by adding puffed rice with liquefied jaggery.

5. By-products

- *Rice bran oil* is extracted from the external bran layer of rice. It is highly nutritious because of antioxidants and fats. Our country has significant potential to yield bran oil, but utilization is still limited due to lack of awareness and stability challenge (Bashir and Awan, 2014).
- *Rice starch* is a thickening agent in foods i.e., sauce, soups and desserts. It is also used in specialty items like gluten-free dishes and skincare items (Haq *et al.*, 2020).
- *Rice bran* is rich in several nutrients and is utilized in bakery preparations and processed foods to improve nutrition and texture. It is also a good source of antioxidants (Maqsood *et al.*, 2017).

Several private corporations produce rice-based products like rice-starch, bran and husk. Famous groups such as Shafi Gluco Chem, Matco Foods, M.B Dyes and Chemicals manufacture commercial starch and animal feed too.

CONCLUSION

Rice is an imperative dietary part of traditional cuisine of Pakistan not only as food but also a cultural representation. Even if people consume rice less frequently compared to neighbouring countries but Pakistan is top rice producers and exporter of Asia especially basmati varieties (preferred due to quality and taste). People regularly choose rice-based food dishes for taste and nutrition rather bothering origin. Mostly consumers are not conscious of healthy foods. Rice is not just a bite it is jumble of traditions and nutrition. Though there is still a lack of research on regional rice dishes in Pakistan. Documenting rice-based food is important to preserve cultural heritage and to open potential opportunities for innovation in food sector.

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CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Farah Shamim: Concept of the study, literature review guidance, manuscript editing, and corresponding author responsibility; Mohsin Ali Raza: Data collection from literature sources, traditional recipes and cultural information, first draft of the manuscript; Sana-e-Mustafa: Compilation of references, proofreading, editing, and final review of the manuscript; Numaira Shahzadi: Methodology development, qualitative data analysis.

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