

Nepalese Food and Its Sociocultural Climate: Changing *Dāl-bhāt* Inside and Beyond Nepal



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Abstract Nepal is located on the southern face of the Himalayas; as a result, geographical and cultural diversities have nurtured its unique gastronomic culture. It is difficult for people living in remote areas to obtain fresh vegetables and meat because of a lack of transportation and electricity, and these restrictions have sparked several local gastronomic cultures. For example, to preserve vegetables and meat, people living in rural areas tend to dry and smoke them. In Nepalese Hindu society, there are taboos on the consumption of certain food and drink, such as meat and alcohol. Recent data suggest that Nepalese people began to eat meat because of economic development and globalization. These sociocultural changes and the development of transportation networks have together promoted homogenization of food throughout Nepal. However, people also seek locality and “authenticity” in their food. For example, *dāl-bhāt*, an “authentic” Nepalese food, has been particularly prevalent in Nepal since the development of transportation services. Furthermore, as Nepalese people have begun traveling abroad, *dāl-bhāt* has spread even beyond Nepalese national borders.

Keywords Nepal · *Dāl-bhāt* · Globalization · Sociocultural climate

1 Introduction

Nepal is located on the southern face of the Himalayas, a region that is heavily influenced by monsoons. Because of its geographical location, the country experiences a variety of climates, which allow for many types of vegetation, and the topography ranges from subtropical plains (Terai) to snowy mountains (the Himalayas). The particular environment of the Himalayas, featuring deep gorges and sharp ridges, has prevented people from easily traveling between the east and the west. This climatic variation has encouraged environmentally based cultural

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diversity throughout the country, which has nurtured Nepal's unique gastronomic culture.

Dāl-bhāt, which consists of *dāl* (bean soup) and *bhāt* (rice), and is usually accompanied by *tarkārī* (vegetables, leafy greens, and sometimes meat and fish) and *acār* (pickles flavored with hot and sour sauce), is one of the most common dishes in Nepal. Although Nepalese people generally eat *dāl-bhāt*, its geographical and cultural diversity has been developed across several different localities.

In contemporary Nepal, which was a Hindu kingdom until 2008, approximately 80% of the citizens are Hindus.¹ Hindus tend to avoid eating meat, especially beef because of cultural taboos.² Even individuals who do not hold religious taboos against eating meat still avoid eating beef, as eating it was forbidden within Nepalese Hindu society. Even among Hindus, there are non-vegetarians who eat meat and fish. When Nepalese people do eat meat, they choose specific meats that they believe fit with their sociocultural conventions. Therefore, it can be said that people eat *dāl-bhāt* in accordance with their natural environments and cultural identities, which results in a significant variety of *dāl-bhāt* dishes.

Owing to their geographical and cultural diversity, Nepalese people leading different lifestyles cook and eat *dāl-bhāt* in numerous ways using a variety of ingredients. Thus, this chapter explores the Nepalese sociocultural climate through the common Nepalese dish *dāl-bhāt*.³

2 What is *Dāl-bhāt*?

Figure 1 features an example of *dāl-bhāt*.⁴ *Bhāt* is first placed on a dish, topped with *dāl* and served along with many kinds of *tarkārīs*. *Bhāt* usually means boiled rice; however, before the development of food delivery services, *bhāt* was often substituted with other grains, such as *kodo* (millet), *phāpar* (buckwheat), or *makai* (maize), especially in hilly and mountainous areas where rice crops were difficult to grow and food grain markets less developed.

¹Nepal was the Hindu monarchical state that had built a hierarchical society based on caste, ethnicity, race, and gender. The nation's remoteness had also brought about other diversities in Nepalese society. Since 2006 there have been increasing demands for restructuring the modalities of establishing a multi-cultural, multi-social, multi-linguistic, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic federal state. This chapter will examine the transformation of food and its sociocultural climate in this context.

²Indeed, some Buddhists of Nepal also have religious taboos against eating meat.

³Other than *dāl-bhāt*, there are interesting studies referring to changing gastronomic cultures especially among young people in Kathmandu (see Liechty 2010; Thapa 2016).

⁴This is an example from a local restaurant in a tourist area in Kathmandu. Guests who came here to eat *dāl-bhāt* were usually Nepalese people; therefore, this set of dishes can be understood as a local type of *dāl-bhāt* for native Nepalese, not a "Nepalese ethnic cuisine" for international tourists.



Fig. 1 *Dāl-bhāt* set at a local restaurant in Kathmandu

Dāl is a kind of soup prepared from beans, which serves as an important source of textured vegetable protein, especially for vegetarians. *Dāl* is seasoned with salt and masala containing *jīrā* (cumin seeds), *jimbu* (leaf garlic), and other kinds of Himalayan herbs. Sometimes *ghiu* (melted butter) is also added. People make *dāl* using a variety of beans, such as lentils, black gram beans, green gram beans, kidney beans, and dried peas; different beans are sometimes mixed in a single dish. When people eat *dāl-bhāt*, they first pour *dāl* over *bhāt* and then mix them. The mixture is eaten along with *tarkārīs* and *acārs* (spicy pickles).

Figure 1 shows a variety of *tarkārīs*, including (counter clockwise from the top) *masu ko jol* (meat soup), *khasī ko masu* (goat meat curry), *ghiu* (melted butter), stir-fried *ālu simī* (potato and kidney beans), and stir-fried *rāyo sāg* (broad leaf mustard greens); three kinds of *acārs*: a mixture of fresh tomato, onion, and chili (similar to salad flavored with spices), radish *acār* (hot and sour radish and mustard seeds, which is a mixture for preserving pickles), tomato *acār* (fresh crushed tomato flavored with spices, including *ṭimmur* (Sichuan pepper) and lemon); and salad (carrot, radish, and cucumber). Sometimes, *dāl-bhāt* is also served with *dahī* (yogurt) and *mahī* (part of the milk that remains after purifying *ghiu*). The specific *tarkārīs* and *acārs* eaten with *dāl-bhāt* are often influenced by the geographical environment and the sociocultural climate.

3 Influence of Geographical Differences on Food

As Pathak pointed out, until the middle of the 20th century, when Nepal formally opened its doors, the country's cuisine was characterized by particular foods that people had been eating for centuries, and which they continue to eat, especially in remote areas (Pathak 2008). The country's isolation may have contributed to the development of numerous regional gastronomic cultures. However, for centuries, Nepalese cuisine has also been influenced by the cuisines of its neighbors, Tibet and India. The potato, which is very popular for *tarkārīs*, was introduced to Kathmandu around the end of the 18th century (WFP 2010). It is a staple food crop widely grown in Nepal in regions ranging from 100 m in elevation in the southern plains to as high as 4000 m in the northern mountains.

Compared with the potato, rice is not as widely cultivated because of the geographical and climatic needs of the crop. In places where rice is not easily produced, people eat grain instead. *Dhīdo*, a grain powder that is boiled and stirred until it thickens, is a staple for people inhabiting hilly and mountainous areas. *Dhīdo* is considered a substitute for rice and is recognized as a typical food for the poor in rural areas; however, it has recently been recognized as a more authentic and traditional food that is served in Nepalese restaurants both inside and outside of Nepal. Some people prefer *dhīdo* to *bhāt* because *dhīdo* is considered to be healthier than rice, which is not good for diabetic people. For these reasons, some people living in urban areas have begun to eat *dhīdo* instead of *bhāt*. Simultaneously, people living in remote areas have gained greater access to rice, thanks to the development of highways. As preserved foods, such as rice and beans, become easier to transport to remote areas, more Nepalese people are able to partake of true *dāl-bhāt* (i.e., rice and bean soup).

Figure 2 illustrates the gap in prices per kg of coarse rice in Nepal. Regional market hubs in the Terai, such as Birgunj, are well integrated and governed by established market mechanisms influenced by trade to and from Indian commodity markets. On the other hand, transit markets, such as Kathmandu, are connected by highways to regional market hubs in Terai. Therefore, the prices in these markets tend to follow both the price trends in the Terai market and local consumer demand. Rural market prices in hilly and mountainous areas, such as Jumla and Dolpa, are governed more by transportation costs than by market forces or supply and demand (WFP 2007). The closer markets are located to regional market hubs or large Indian markets, the cheaper coarse rice becomes. As Fig. 2 illustrates, although both Jumla and Dolpa are located in the Himalayas, the market price in Dolpa is more than double that in Jumla. Jumla is connected by highway to regional markets in the Terai, while Dolpa still lacks a well-developed transportation network.

As shown in Fig. 3, the price of coarse rice is higher than previously reported in Kathmandu, Birgunj, Jumla, and Dolpa. During 2015, daily food and necessities, including rice, rose in price following an informal blockade of Nepal's border with India (The Himalayan Times 2015 Oct 10). The effect on Jumla and Dolpa was greater than in other areas. The price of coarse rice in Birgunj is comparatively

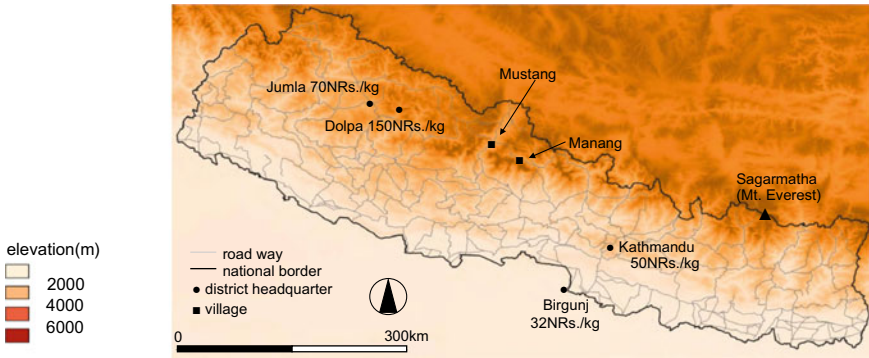
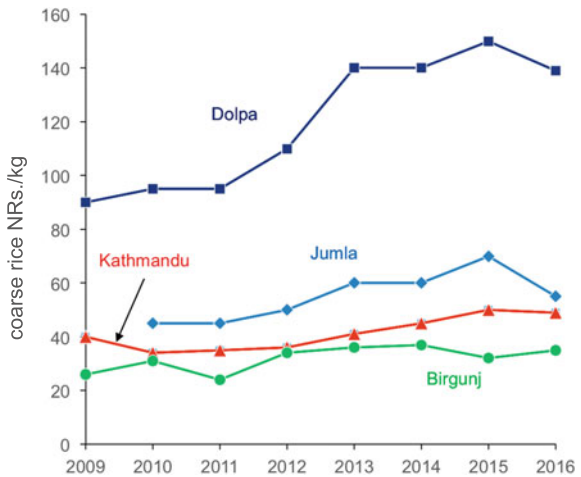


Fig. 2 Price of coarse rice in Nepal (World Food Programme Nepal 2015)
 Note ● district headquarter, ■ village, USD 1 = NRs. 73 in August 2011

Fig. 3 Prices of coarse rice in December (World Food Programme Nepal 2009, 2011a, b, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)
 Note As data for 2010 were unavailable, data for January 2011 were substituted for 2010 data



stable, but has increased in Dolpa. One reason may be that prices in Dolpa are determined by factors, such as the condition of transportation services and fluctuations in local crop production.

Even in remote areas—places taken for a week by foot from the nearest highway—people have access to rice delivered by helicopter or pack-animal, such as mules. Transportation networks carry food and related commodities to the places where people need them (Figs. 4 and 5). Thanks to mule transport, *dāl-bhāt* is available even in remote areas such as Manang, whose central village is a three-day walk from the highway in 2009. There are also several restaurants and lodges located along trekking trails. During a summer 2009 visit to the villages in Manang and Mustang, *dāl-bhāt* with meat cost between NRs. 300 and NRs. 350. This price was controlled by a non-governmental organization created for nature conservation in



Fig. 4 Pack animals carrying gas cylinders along the Annapurna Circuit



Fig. 5 A caravan of pack animals in Mustang

the Annapurna Circuit. At the same time, *dāl-bhāt* with meat cost approximately NRs. 150 at local restaurants in a Kathmandu tourist area. The *tarkārīs* in Manang had less variety than those in Kathmandu, but they were much more expensive because of transportation costs. Such costs are also influenced by the political situation and natural disasters that may obstruct highways and cause slow transportation. Therefore, the price of *dāl-bhāt* is determined by accessible transportation to regional food markets.

Basic national infrastructure, such as transportation services and highway networks, are not yet sufficiently developed, especially in rural areas where fresh vegetables and meat circulate within local markets mostly during harvest season. Nepalese cuisine has distinctive geographical characteristics because the lack of transportation services has created price disparities across the cities of the Terai, the hills, and the Himalayas. The development of electricity has also caused regional food peculiarities. Because fresh foods cannot be preserved or transported without cold storage facilities, people frequently purchase fresh vegetables and meats at local markets or even pick vegetables cultivated in their own fields. The people living in Terai and the mid-hill areas find it easier to access a variety of fresh vegetables, compared with those living in mountainous areas. Therefore, mountain-dwellers tend to dry or ferment vegetables to preserve them for the winter season (Fig. 6). For example, *gundruk* (fermented and dried green leafy vegetables, such as broad leaf mustard greens and radish leaves) are often cooked into *tarkārī*, *acār*, and soup. *Gundruk* is a very important preserved vegetable, especially in areas where people cannot access fresh vegetables during the winter.

During a visit in summer 2009 to the village of Manang, the main vegetables used for *tarkārī* were local potatoes, cauliflower, cabbage, green leaves, and wild mushrooms picked in the woods nearby. Radishes are also cultivated in local fields to be made into *acār*, or preserved pickles. Yak meat is dried and smoked over cooking ovens to make preserved meat, *sukutī* (Fig. 7), because electricity services for preservation are not available. During the dry season, aviation services are available for food deliveries, if the weather is good. Sometimes people bring fresh vegetables and meat from the cities because they are much more expensive in rural areas.

Given these circumstances, people have developed local food knowledge and a diverse gastronomic culture rooted in geographical differences. Although life in remote areas is not easy, daily staple foods, especially *tarkārīs*, are circulated by local supply and consumption, resulting in an environmentally friendly and diverse way of life.

4 Sociocultural Changes and Food

As previously mentioned, Nepalese people—both Hindu and non-Hindu—follow cultural norms based on Hinduism, such as avoiding the consumption of meat. Although different religions, geographical areas, and economic groups have unique



Fig. 6 Drying green leaves for preserved vegetables in Manang

customs in terms of eating meat, both meat-eating and vegetarian practices are prevalent throughout Nepalese society. Some non-Hindus avoid consuming meat, while some Hindus eat a variety of meats. Certain Hindus eat meat because they belong to the untouchable castes⁵ who traditionally consumed it. In fact, they eat any meat they believe is allowed for consumption, as long as it is available and affordable. During the “People’s War,”⁶ some Maoists began eating beef,⁷ which

⁵Formally, there are no more untouchable castes; however, discrimination based on the Hindu caste system still exists in Nepal.

⁶In 1996, the Maoists had launched a “People’s War,” which lasted for ten years, to overthrow the political establishment, including the monarchy of the Kingdom of Nepal.

⁷Other than the Nepalese, Nepal has imported frozen beef from Calcutta since the 1970s for foreign tourists to consume.



Fig. 7 Drying and smoking meat over an oven in Manang

was strictly forbidden because of its sacred stature, to protest Hinduism in Nepal. Therefore, the decision to eat meat, as well as the type of meat, depends on the sociocultural, political, and economic factors affecting Nepalese society.

On the other hand, because of economic development and globalization, which have led to sociocultural changes, people can now afford meat for *tarkārī*. As Hindus have typically sacrificed goats to the gods, Nepalis prefer to eat buffalo meat, followed by goat, chicken, and pork. In 2014, buffalo meat, locally called “buff,” represented 58% of total national meat production and cost NRs. 300⁸ per kg on average, which was 60% cheaper than goat meat, locally called “mutton.” The average price of mutton, which accounts for only two percent of the country’s

⁸One US dollar was worth approximately 96 Nepalese rupees in 2014.

demand for meat, was NRs. 700 per kg during the same period. Fish has witnessed a notable increase in demand amid growing health consciousness among consumers.⁹

Recently, meat consumption has increased rapidly. People who did not previously eat meat have begun eating it in response to recent sociocultural changes in Nepalese society. Based on national production figures in 2015, Nepalis ate an average of 11.35 kg of meat annually. In 2000, per capita meat consumption was lower at 9.7 kg. Further increases in meat consumption are expected, driven by demand from the Nepalese middle class. This trend is evidenced by the rapid rise in the domestic poultry market.¹⁰ Furthermore, an increase in meat consumption means a greater variety of available *tarkārīs*.

Even in remote areas where the primary means of transportation are pack animals, rice and beans are available for purchase so that people can prepare *dāl-bhāt*. People have also begun to consume various other products, including Coca-Cola, chocolates, and instant noodles. In urban areas, on the other hand, people have access to many imported products and a variety of cuisines, such as Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Italian. These trends reflect both the homogenization and globalization of Nepal.

However, differentiation and localization have also occurred in Nepal. In tourist areas, restaurants serve Nepalese cuisine to international tourists, signifying that Nepalese food has become recognized as an ethnic tradition. In tourist restaurants, *dāl-bhāt* is often cooked with catsup and fewer chilies to suit international tastes. At the same time, the number of Thakali-style¹¹ *dāl-bhāt* restaurants has increased, allowing local people to enjoy regional and ethnic differences inside Nepal (Morimoto 2015).

5 The Dispersion of *Dāl-bhāt* Inside and Beyond Nepal

The ingredients in *dāl-bhāt*—namely, rice and beans—can be transported by truck along highways to urban areas, and then carried by pack-animal along mountain paths to rural markets. Through modernization and the development of transportation, people inhabiting hilly and mountainous areas have been able to eat true *dāl-bhāt*, if they can afford rice and beans. However, even when rice and beans are available, it is very difficult for people living in remote and isolated areas lacking

⁹e-Kantipur (2014). <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2014-05-16/per-capita-meat-consumption-up-11-kg.html>.

¹⁰Excluding fish, meat products include buffalo, goat, sheep, pork, and poultry. The world's average annual meat consumption is approximately 42.5 kg per person, while in developing countries it is approximately 32.4 kg per person. Nepal is still far behind other developing countries (e-Kantipur 2015).

¹¹The Thakali, whose *dāl-bhāt* has a reputation for being delicious, are an ethnic group from Northwest Nepal.

transportation to obtain fresh vegetables and meat year-round. In such limited circumstances, people have developed gastronomic cultures suitable to their specific environments. In places where rice crops cannot be grown, people often eat *dhīḍo* made from grains, such as *kodo*, *phāpar*, and *makai*. Such meals are recognized as poor and are typically only eaten in rural areas. *Gundruk* is also considered a food representative of in hilly and mountainous areas. These foods have recently been recognized as typical rural foods and, consequently, have become known as “authentic,” traditional (and healthy) foods served in Nepalese restaurants inside and even outside of Nepal. Throughout the country, people eat *dāl-bhāt*, *dhīḍo*, and *gundruk*. Thus, it can be said that homogenization is overcoming geographical limitations and cultural differences.

As Nepalese people now travel abroad more frequently, *dāl-bhāt* has spread beyond Nepal. Nepalese restaurants located outside the country are attractive to traveling Nepalese people as both places to enjoy their own ethnic foods and to seek employment. For example, there are approximately 3000 Nepalese-owned Indian curry restaurants in Japan.¹² Competition is fierce because there are so many Nepalese restaurants, so they must attract customers through the promise of tradition and “authenticity.” Recently, some Nepalese restaurants have begun to market themselves as “Thakali” restaurants, despite not belonging to the Thakali ethnic group, because their *dāl-bhāt* has a reputation for being delicious. Others serve Newari,¹³ whose *tarkārī* is famous for its varieties, including those with meat. Thus, it can be said that various Nepalese ethnic cultures have begun to be commodified and represented as “authentic.” The availability of local cuisines outside of Nepal illustrates a case of food localization in keeping with globalization. As Nepalese people have dispersed *dāl-bhāt* throughout the world, people are able to enjoy “authentic,” local Nepalese food both inside and beyond Nepal.

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¹²According to Kharel (2017), Tokyo has the largest concentration of Nepali-owned restaurants, with over 500 distributed throughout the metropolitan area.

¹³The Newar are an ethnic group from Kathmandu.

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