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Exploring Culinary Traditions of South Asia in Children's Literature

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Abstract

The article delves into children's literature, particularly focusing on books that highlight culinary traditions from South Asia. These narratives not only introduce young readers to diverse cuisines and the significance of food, but also weave in themes of family, community, heritage, and growth. The central discourse emphasises character development within these stories and its impact on young readers. Through the lens of various books, the article elucidates how these characters reflect growth, teach empathy, establish values, and serve as role models.

INTRODUCTION

Culinary Traditions of South Asia

South Asia encompasses countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. It stands as a melting pot of various cultures, religions, languages and notably, culinary traditions. The richness of cuisines from such countries lies not just in the vastness of different cultures and traditions, but in the deep-rooted history that shapes them. South Asian cuisines offer an array of flavours from a vast culinary landscape.

In countries like India, one can find multi-cuisines co-existing.

Northern India boasts creamy curries like butter chicken, along with flatbreads, while southern India is known for dosa and sambar. The west, particularly in states like Gujarat, brings in a sweeter palate, and the east focusses on fish-based dishes, particularly in Bengal. On the other hand, a country like Pakistan emphasises meat dishes like *nihaari* and biryani. Grilled meat or kebabs are ubiquitous, and a special mention goes to the rich, flavoured tea called chai. In Bangladesh, fish, especially hilsa, is a staple; *panta bhat* (fermented rice) and *bhorta* (mashed vegetables or fish) are traditional dishes there.

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Sweets, particularly those made of milk, like *chamcham* and *rasgulla*, are renowned. Sri Lankan food is also rich in spices and flavours. Hoppers (a type of pancake) and *kottu* (a stir-fried dish) are popular. Curries made from coconut milk, tamarind, and a variety of spices define the island's cuisine. Interestingly enough, Nepali cuisine has Tibetan and Indian influences. *Dal bhat* (lentil soup with rice) is the main dish. Momo (dumplings) are widely loved, and their *thukpa* (noodle soup) is comfort food. Lastly, with an emphasis on chillies, Bhutanese cuisine is unique. *Ema datshi*, made from chillies and cheese, is the national dish. Red rice is predominant, often paired with meat or vegetable stews.

Though these countries share cultural and culinary elements, each nation has distinct practices and flavours shaped by its history, geography, and influences. As one navigates through the maze of languages, festivals, and foods, it's evident that while borders divide countries, culture and food often unite them. Through shared feasts and collective celebrations, South Asia remains a testament to the unity in diversity.

Culinary Art in Countries like India

Indian cuisine is as diverse as its culture, shaped by its rich history, varied topography, and myriad influences. From the rich, butter-laden dishes of Punjab to the coconut and seafood delicacies of Kerala, each

region in India has its distinct flavour profile. Indian food is synonymous with spices, like turmeric, cardamom, cumin, mustard seeds, and saffron. The traditional '*masala dabba*' (spice box) is central to an Indian kitchen, representing the essence of Indian culinary art.

Ayurveda, an ancient medicinal system, also plays a pivotal role in Indian cooking. Foods are categorised by their '*doshas*' (*vata*, *pitta*, *kapha*) and are believed to affect one's health and temperament. Balancing these '*doshas*' through diet is the guiding philosophy. From slow-cooked '*dum*' dishes to the stir-fried '*tadka*' (tempering), Indian culinary techniques are intricate and varied. Tandoori cooking, which uses a clay oven called a '*tandoor*', is another iconic method for producing delights like naan and tandoori chicken.

Many dishes are intertwined with religious and cultural rituals. '*Prasad*', an offering to deities, varies from *modak* for Lord Ganesha to *boondi laddoo* for Goddess Lakshmi. Fasting foods, consumed during religious observances, also form a unique subset of Indian cuisine having both sacred and ritualistic elements in it. The bustling streets of India offer a culinary journey of their own. From *pani puri* to *vada pav* and *dosa*, street food showcases flavours that are tangy, spicy, sweet, and everything in between. Indian culinary traditions emphasise communal dining, seen in practices like '*langar*' at Sikh *gurudwaras* or the elaborate '*sadya*'

feast of Kerala served on banana leaves. Such practices underscore the values of sharing and gratitude.

Given its religious and philosophical beliefs, India has a rich tradition of vegetarian cooking. Lentils ‘dal’, vegetables, grains, and dairy are innovatively used to create a plethora of dishes. The recent surge of veganism has also been seamlessly integrated into Indian culinary art, given its foundation in plant-based cooking. Indian sweets are a category unto themselves. Made from ingredients like milk, jaggery, and clarified butter (ghee), and often infused with cardamom and saffron, they are an essential part of celebrations. Gulab jamun, *rasmalai*, and jalebi are just a few delights.

CULINARY TRADITIONS IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

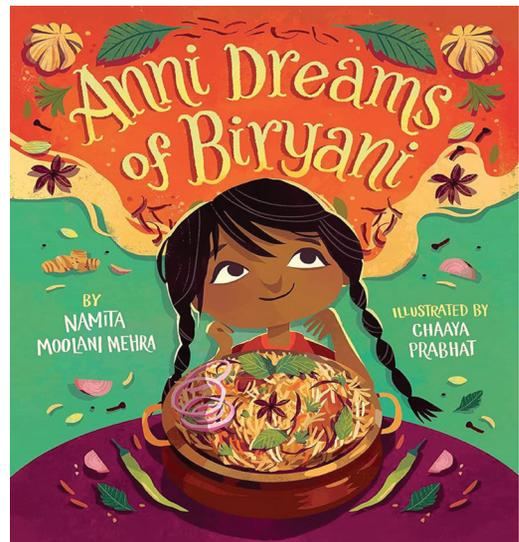
Culinary traditions in children’s literature serve as more than just delightful descriptions of food. They often anchor the narrative, adding depth to characters, defining cultures, and setting the tone for the story. Familiar dishes can offer a sense of home, and encountering exotic dishes in stories can be an adventure in itself. It can introduce children to various cultures and customs. The description of food can engage the senses, painting vivid images and evoking tastes, smells, and textures. This sensory immersion enhances the reading experience, making stories memorable. Such tales encourage experimentation and the joy of creation. It can transport

readers to different eras, offering historical insights.

Books Based on the Culinary Traditions of South Asia in Children’s Literature

There are various children’s books by Indian authors based on these culinary traditions:

1. *Anni Dreams of Biryani*

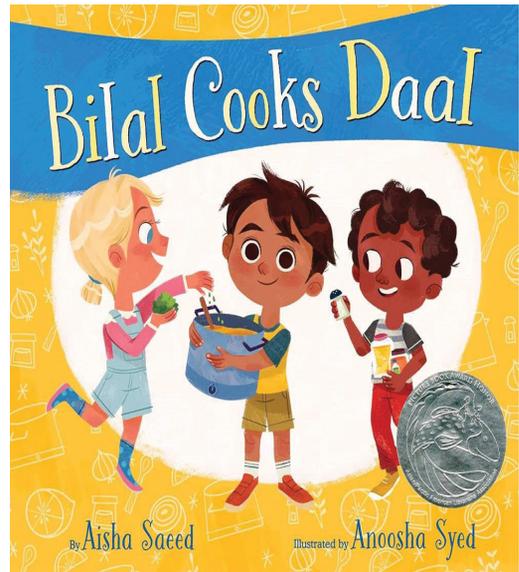


Very few books manage to capture the heart and soul of a dish as evocatively as *Anni Dreams of Biryani*, written by Namita Moolani Mehra and illustrated by Chaaya Prabhat. The author brings forth an enchanting and enlightening narrative, making it a read that resonates with food lovers, history buffs, and avid readers alike. It tells the story of Anni, a young girl from the city of Hyderabad, India. Anni discovers an old, handwritten

recipe book that belonged to her late grandmother. As she explores its pages, she is transported to various moments in time, experiencing the evolution of the iconic biryani dish. The book beautifully employs magical realism. Along with Anni, readers also delve into the pages of the recipe book, witnessing the historical and cultural evolution of biryani. Anni emerges as a relatable protagonist, and her journey feels personal. But it's not just Anni who shines; even secondary characters, like her grandmother and the ancestors she encounters, are fleshed out with intricate details.

One of the standout features of the book is its exceptional culinary imagery. The author paints such vivid pictures with words that readers can almost taste the biryani, feel its warmth, and savour its rich flavours. The description of the amalgamation of spices, rice, and meat is a treat for the senses. The book isn't just about food; it's an exploration of culture, tradition, and history. It also delves into the idea of food as a form of memory, a legacy passed down through generations. The transitions between the past and present are smooth, ensuring that readers remain engaged without feeling disoriented. This book serves as a delightful reminder of how food, history, and personal narratives are often deliciously interwoven. It's a gastronomic and historic feast that leaves readers satiated, yet yearning for more.

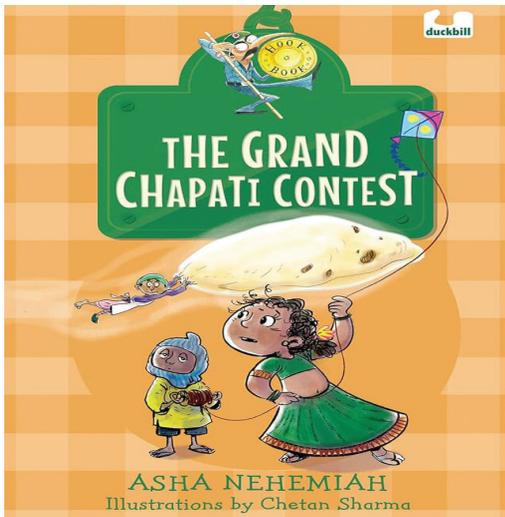
2. *Bilal Cooks Daal*



Bilal Cooks Daal, written by Aisha Saeed and illustrated by Anoocha Syed, is a story that revolves around a young boy named Bilal, who is excited to share his favourite dish—dal (lentils) with his friends. As the day progresses, Bilal and his friends gather ingredients, measure spices, and watch as the lentils simmer on the stove. The process of cooking daal becomes an adventure in itself, teaching the children patience, collaboration, and the joy of sharing a meal together. Bilal's eagerness to share his favourite dish with his friends underscores the value of friendship, sharing, and inclusivity. The slow cooking process of daal serves as a metaphor for patience. It teaches children that good things often take time and that waiting can be rewarding.

The vibrant and colourful illustrations complement the narrative beautifully. Many children, especially those from immigrant families, will find Bilal's story relatable. It touches upon the challenges and joys of sharing one's cultural heritage with friends. The book can serve as a conversation starter about different cultures, foods, and traditions. It's a great way to introduce children to the concept of diversity. Aisha Saeed's writing is simple yet engaging, making it easy for young readers to follow and stay invested in Bilal's culinary adventure. It's a must-read for children and adults alike, offering a window into the beautiful traditions of South Asia and the universal values that bind us all.

3. The Grand Chapati Contest

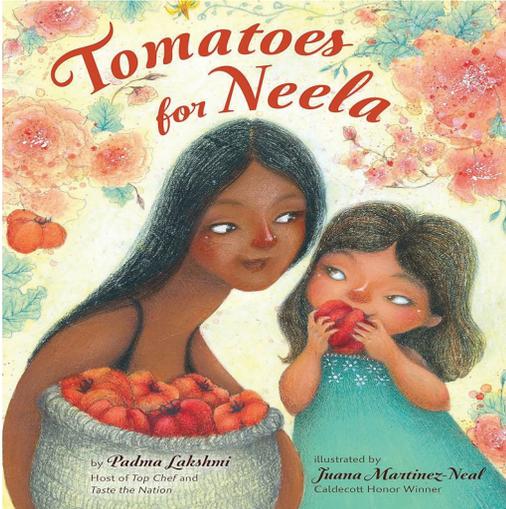


The Grand Chapati Contest by Asha Nehemiah weaves humour,

adventure, and cultural elements into a captivating narrative. The story is set in a bustling Indian town where the announcement of The Grand Chapati Contest has made everyone excited. The challenge is simple: to make the softest, roundest, and most delicious chapati. As the townspeople, each with their unique style and secret ingredient, prepare for the contest, the chaos and the comedy ensue. The protagonist, a young and enthusiastic participant, navigates through the challenges of making the perfect chapati while encountering various amusing obstacles and characters along the way. The book celebrates the rich culinary tradition of India, using the humble chapati as a symbol of cultural pride and unity.

Despite the challenges faced in the contest, the protagonist's determination and resilience shine through, teaching young readers the value of perseverance. The contest brings the entire town together, highlighting the importance of community, collaboration, and friendly competition. The vibrant illustrations capture the essence of the bustling Indian town and the comedic elements of the story. The book offers readers a glimpse into Indian culture, traditions, and the significance of food in bringing people together. Asha Nehemiah's masterful storytelling makes it a must-read for children and adults looking for a light-hearted yet meaningful read.

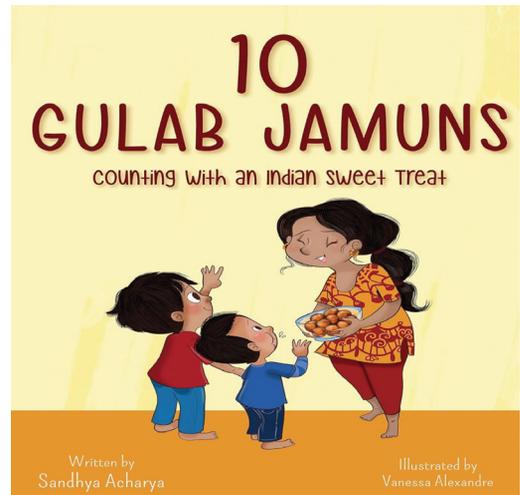
4. *Tomatoes for Neela*



Tomatoes for Neela, written by Padma Lakshmi and illustrated by Juana-Martinez-Neal, beautifully intertwines family, culture, and the joy of cooking. It follows the story of a young girl named Neela and her mother as they embark on a culinary journey to prepare Neela's grandmother's famous tomato sauce. As they gather ingredients and cook together, Neela's mother shares stories of their family's heritage, the significance of the tomato season in India, and memories of Neela's grandmother. The narrative beautifully captures the bond between generations, the passing down of traditions, and the way food can connect one to their roots. Through the lens of tomato sauce preparation, the book offers readers a glimpse into Indian culture, traditions, and the significance of seasonal cooking. The act of cooking becomes a medium to remember

and celebrate Neela's grandmother, showcasing how memories can be kept alive through shared activities and stories. Juana Martinez-Neal's illustrations are evocative and detailed, capturing the warmth of the kitchen, the vibrant colours of the ingredients, and the emotions of the characters. Padma Lakshmi's story telling is engaging, making it a delightful read for children and adults alike. The book introduces children to the concept of seasonal cooking, the journey of ingredients from farm to table, and the importance of sustainability. Many readers, especially those from immigrant families, will find the themes of memory and the connection to one's roots deeply relatable.

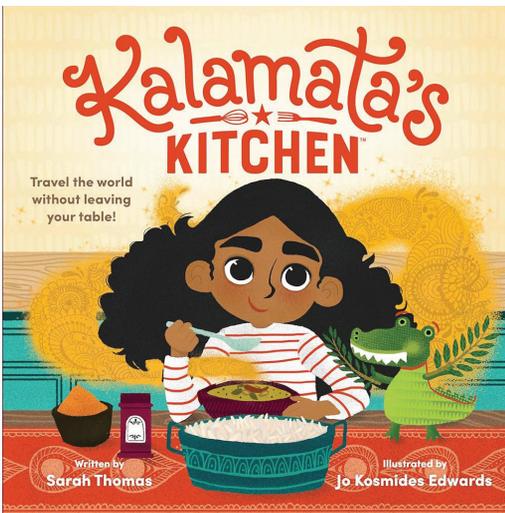
5. *10 Gulab Jamuns*



10 Gulab Jamuns written by Sandhya Acharya and illustrated by Vanessa Alexandre combines elements of culture, family, and a touch of mischief. The story revolves around two young

brothers, Idu (Ee-doo) and Adu (Aa-doo). When their mother makes ten delicious gulab jamuns, a popular Indian dessert, for a dinner party, the aroma is too tempting for the boys to resist. One by one, they sneakily eat the gulab jamuns, thinking they can replace them before anyone notices. As the number of gulab jamuns dwindles, the boys' antics to cover up their mischief become more creative and humorous. The story culminates in a heart-warming conclusion that emphasises the joy of sharing. The playful antics of Idu and Adu capture the essence of innocent childhood mischief. Vanessa Alexandre's illustrations are vibrant and colourful. Sandhya Acharya's storytelling is both engaging and humorous, making it a delightful read for children.

6. *Kalamata's Kitchen*



Kalamata's Kitchen written by Sarah Thomas and illustrated by Jo Kosmides

Edwards, takes readers on a culinary adventure, celebrating diverse cuisines and the joy of exploring new foods. The story follows a young girl named Kalamata and her alligator friend, Al Dente, as they embark on food adventures in their town. With her *'Taste Bud Travel Guide'* in hand, Kalamata visits local restaurants, markets, and food stalls, trying out dishes from various cultures. Each culinary experience is not just about tasting the food but also about understanding its cultural significance, meeting the people behind the dishes, and appreciating the love and effort that goes into cooking. Through Kalamata's adventures, readers are introduced to various cultures, traditions, and stories behind the dishes, emphasising the importance of cultural appreciation and understanding. Kalamata's bond with Al Dente and their shared love for food underscores the themes of friendship, adventure, and discovery.

Jo Kosmides Edwards' illustrations are vibrant, colourful, and detailed. They capture the essence of each food adventure, the emotions of the characters, and the diverse settings of Kalamata's culinary journey. Sarah Thomas' storytelling is engaging, making it easy for young readers to follow Kalamata's adventures and be inspired by them. Beyond the delightful story, the book serves as an educational tool, introducing children to different cultures, cuisines, and the importance of being open-minded. Kalamata, with her curiosity and

adventurous spirit, is a relatable and inspiring character for young readers. The book serves as a reminder of the vast culinary world out there, waiting to be explored, one dish at a time.

Prominent Themes in These Books

- 1. *Family and Community:*** Food is often a central part of family and community gatherings, and children's stories about food can reflect this. Stories may show families coming together to cook, share meals, and celebrate traditions. They may also explore the importance of community support and co-operation in creating and enjoying different dishes.
- 2. *Identity and Belonging:*** Food can be a powerful way to connect with one's cultural heritage and identity. Children's stories about food from different cultures can help children learn about and appreciate the diversity of human experience. They can also help children feel a sense of belonging to a larger community.
- 3. *Tradition and Change:*** Food traditions can be passed down from generation to generation, but they can also evolve over time. Children's stories about food can explore the tension between tradition and change. They may show characters

who are struggling to maintain their cultural heritage while also embracing new ideas and experiences.

- 4. *Adventure and Discovery:*** Food can be a source of excitement and exploration. Children's stories about food may take readers on culinary adventures to new places and cultures. They may also explore the challenges and rewards of learning about new foods and preparing them.
- 5. *Creativity and Imagination:*** Food can be a canvas for creativity and imagination. Children's stories about food may feature characters who use their imagination to come up with new and delicious dishes. They may also explore the power of food to bring people together and create lasting memories.

Character Development in These Books

Character development plays an indispensable role in storytelling across all genres, but its significance is amplified in children's literature. More than just spinning captivating tales, children's stories sculpt young minds, introducing them to characters who, through their challenges and victories, become role models. Character development is pivotal in children's literature and stories centred around culinary traditions can foster global

awareness and appreciation. It also helps in:

- 1. Reflecting Growth and Learning:** Children are in a constant state of growth and discovery. Similarly, characters in children's literature often embark on journeys of personal growth, learning from mistakes, and adapting to new experiences.
- 2. Teaching Empathy:** Well-developed characters allow young readers to step into another's shoes, understanding feelings and perspectives different from their own. This fosters empathy, so crucial for personal relationships and understanding diverse worldviews.
- 3. Establishing Morals and Values:** Stories are often built around moral lessons. Through character development, authors can showcase virtues like honesty, kindness, perseverance, and the consequences of actions, helping children internalise these values.
- 4. Making Stories Memorable:** Characters often remain etched in our memories not just because of their adventures but due to their distinct personalities and relatability. Memorable characters can instil a lifelong love for reading.

5. Addressing Complex Issues:

Children's fiction often tackles complex issues like family problems, or identity. Through nuanced character development, these topics can be approached in a way that's accessible for young readers, allowing them to process difficult themes.

6. Promoting Diversity and Inclusivity:

Modern children's literature emphasises diverse characters from various backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. As these characters develop and overcome challenges, it sends a powerful message about acceptance, equality, and the universality of certain experiences.

7. Encouraging Imagination:

Dynamic characters with unique quirks, dreams, and challenges inspire children to envision a world beyond their immediate surroundings. This not only entertains but fuels creativity and imaginative play—vital components of cognitive development.

8. Serving as Role Models:

Characters often serve as role models. Their journeys, choices, and evolutions provide templates for behaviour, resilience, and problem-solving. Children often emulate characters they admire, incorporating their virtues into their own lives.

9. *Engaging the Reader:* At its core, character development keeps young readers engaged. Children are more likely to stay invested in a story when they care about a character's fate, rooting for their successes and sympathising with their challenges.

10. *Fostering Independence:* As characters grapple with challenges and make decisions, they often showcase independence and self-reliance. Young readers, in turn, are inspired to be proactive, resourceful, and self-confident in their endeavours.

Target Audience and Usage of these Books in Schools

Target audience for such books include pre-schoolers and early elementary schoolers. While pre-schoolers (4–6 years), with their expanding imagination, are eager for more layered narratives and even wordless tales that let them be the storytellers, early elementary schoolers (6–8 years), with their growing comprehension skills, look for diverse genres, from fiction to biographies. These books can also be used in school, as children's stories based on culinary traditions can be a valuable tool for teaching children about different cultures. These stories can help children to learn about the history and significance of certain foods, as well as the different ways

that food can be used to celebrate important occasions.

One way to use these stories in schools is to incorporate them into social studies lessons. For example, a teacher could read a story about a traditional dish from a particular culture and then lead a discussion about the history and significance of that dish. Another way to use these stories in schools is to incorporate them into basic cooking classes. For example, a teacher could read a story about a traditional dish from a particular culture and then lead students in preparing that dish with the teacher's guidance. This would allow students to learn about the different ingredients and cooking techniques that are used to make the dish, as well as the cultural significance of the dish. It can also be used to teach children about nutrition. For example, a story about a traditional dish that is high in nutrients and could lead to a discussion about the importance of a balanced diet. The teacher could also ask students to find out other nutritious traditional dishes from different cultures and share their findings with the class.

Expanding on the idea of integrating these stories into other subjects, for example, integrating mathematics by calculating quantities for recipes or science by understanding the chemistry behind certain culinary processes would also be beneficial. Overall, by incorporating all this, teachers can help children to develop

a deeper understanding of the world around them. By integrating these stories into the academic curriculum and daily life, educators and parents can cultivate a generation that's both globally aware and appreciative of diverse culinary landscapes.

CONCLUSION

Children's literature that revolves around culinary traditions is not just about food but encapsulates profound themes of identity, growth, and community. The characters

within these stories offer more than just entertainment; they inspire young readers, leaving impressions that shape their understanding of the world. When utilised effectively in educational environments, these narratives have the potential to bridge cultural divides, foster empathy, and ignite curiosity. By embracing the diverse tales of culinary traditions, educators and parents can provide children with a holistic, enriched perspective on the world's cultures and cuisines.

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