# From Mughal Royalty to National Symbol: A Qualitative Ethnographic Study of Nihari in Pakistan

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## Abstract

This study discusses the socio-historical development of nihari, a slow-cooked meat stew often consumed in Pakistan. It explores how the dish is linked to the late Mughal courtly kitchens in Lahore and how it now serves as a symbol of national identity. By framing nihari as an edible archive, this study employs a qualitative approach that integrates historical studies, ethnographic studies, and culinary anthropology to discuss its recipe as a palimpsest. It treats the recipe as a palimpsest, recording changes such as Mughal syncretism, colonial dislocation, nation-building after partition, and globalization. The results indicate that the democratization of nihari as an elite Mughal breakfast into national food occurred through assimilation into Karachi- and Peshawar-specific urban foodscapes. In each city, the dish was adapted to local preferences. Simultaneously, it strategically maintained links with aristocratic food traditions. These dynamics place nihari at the center of cultural negotiation: it organizes collective memory, mediates social distinction, and enables participants to experience national history sensorally as they cross postmodern social lines.

***Keywords:*** Mughal cuisine, Pakistani cuisine, Nihari, Culture and identity, Royal cuisines.

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## 1. Introduction

Nihari is a slow-cooked meat stew that is spicy, labor-intensive, and historic in Pakistan. It serves as more than just a dish; often, it acts as a medium of cultural memory and national identity. Its name is usually linked to nahar (morning/day), a clue that fits the narrative of the dish as a nourishing breakfast for Mughal court nobles. Over time, nihari left elite kitchens, entered markets, and became a key part of both urban and rural foodways. Its spread allows us to explore social, political, and economic changes in the area.

In this paper, it is argued that nihari is an edible archive. Its recipe is a palimpsest in which the layers of history are written down: syncretic Mughal court cuisines, the shocks of the colonial era, post-partition nation-building projects (Toor, 2011), and the forces of globalization and diasporic events in the modern world. The analysis follows the path of the dish, involves regional variation as a political aspect and not a mere issue of taste, and examines how nihari can be used to mark and replicate Pakistani identity. This study is methodologically based on food studies (Ray, 2004), cultural anthropology (Marchand, 2010), and historical sociology, which occupies a research gap in which national cuisines are usually taught as superior to the social biographies of specific dishes. By doing so, it serves to discuss food as a practice of belonging (Roy, 2010), social differentiation (Farb and Armelagos, 1980), and the creation of intangible cultural heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). It is argued by focusing on the material practice of the dish, that is, slow simmering, use of deg pots, and the handling of fat, spice, and marrow, and the narratives that circulate around the dish in restaurants, homes, and media. By attending to recipes and service customs as historical evidence, the paper can link culinary art to larger issues of cultural reproduction and social transformation.

This study is located at the crossroads of various arguments in critical food studies and other interconnected areas. It approaches food as one way of negotiating power, mobility, and cultural exchange (Belasco, 2008; Wilk, 2006) and does not dismiss the

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methodological assertions of sensory ethnography, especially the focus on embodied knowledge and multisensory practice (Pink, 2009). Nihari mobilization in the context of nationalism is considered through the prism of gastronationalism (DeSoucey, 2010), and its affective appeal in the setting of the migrants is viewed through the lens of literature on culinary nostalgia (Mannur, 2010) and migration, food, and memory (Sutton, 2001). The study fits South Asian historiographical directions by substituting homogenizing histories of national food with an interest in interdependence and regional politics, down to the level of a single dish (Sengupta, 2010). The article provides a dish-centered microhistory to shed light on larger patterns in Pakistani society, such as repetitive negotiations between an imperial past and a democratic present, by connecting the material culture of the cooking deg (pot) (Weingarten, 2018) to the political economy of spices and exchange (Laidlaw, 2010). To ensure that the argument remains down-to-earth and not romantic, the Methods section defines the research design, sampling logic, data collection, and analytical strategy by which nihari is explored as an edible archive. This stance has also acknowledged that foods become national upon state narration, but through the daily routine repetition, the choreography of eating, and through transgenerational reproduction of the tales of taste. In other words, the case of nihari is conveniently applicable to the overall purpose of the paper to demonstrate how one preparation can expose the layered histories and disputed politics that are usually hidden in general descriptions of cuisine.

This paper follows the history of creation of nihari as a Pakistani national dish. It is based on a multidisciplinary qualitative methodology comprising historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and culinary anthropology, which suggests that nihari is an edible archive. The discussion demonstrates the convergence of the stories of royal birth, domestic cooking, and regional diversity to create its symbolic nature. Focusing on nihari, this research paper illustrates how food is an active site through which historical memory, social distinction, and national identity are negotiated.

## 2. Literature Review

Food scholarship has always taken the approach of discussing cuisine as a cultural process through which social order is voiced, not nutritional practice per se. Hierarchy, intimacy, purity, belonging, and meals can be coded in patterns and rules (Douglas, 1972). In contrast, political economy and stratification have had an effect on the development of cuisines: elite high cuisines have been associated with specialization, institutional patronage, and channels through which cuisine knowledge is formalised and transmitted; everyday foodways have been more associated with continuity, constraint, and improvisation (Goody, 1982). Cultural-studies approaches follow this analysis by demonstrating how food mediates identity by describing the differences between our food and theirs as a normal part of the routine (e.g., media narratives, restaurant discourse, taste talk) and stating that food can mediate identity through representation (e.g., media representations, restaurant discourse, taste talk) (Ashley et al., 2004). When the name of a dish is nihari, which has a meaning that is being extensively anchored in narratives about its creation, such framing makes people focus on the social life of the dish: who prepares it, who is selling it, who is eating it, and which stories are being told about it.

The theme of authenticity that is viewed not as a characteristic feature of cuisine but as an interactional one is also one of the primary problems of this literature. The classic literature about ethnic restaurants shows how one can create authenticity through the application of language menu, allusion to tradition, space, and spatial customer expectation (Lu and Fine, 1995). The postcolonial feminist criticism is also based on the fact that the pursuit of culinary difference may result in inequality when assumed as adventure or spectacle (Heldke, 2003). Traditionally, food has served as a highly concentrated site of identity politics within South Asian locations, where religion, locality, and migration have complicated any individual's ownership of an origin (Narayan, 1995). Recent heritage-and-market scholarship argues that authenticity is continuously being negotiated by consumers, states, businesses, and media performers, and typically through labels and narratives of what can be an acceptable taste and experience (Shahrin and Hussin, 2023). The context of authenticity, founded on the past, space, time, and folklore by Rana (2022), is also grounded, but the discourse focuses on the oral continuation of food stories despite the discontinuity of the documentation. This type of argument especially applies to nihari because the food is constantly authenticated by claims of royalty, urbanization, and indicators of experience such as slow-cooked foods, spices, temperance, and marrow, rather than a single standardized preparation.

A second research area deals with heritage-making: foods are not always old to be heritage; in other words, they are selected, controlled, and politicized. A conceptualization of heritage as a product exists in

heritage studies, and on that note, institutions and professionals legitimize particular histories and turn ordinary practices into national property (Harrison, 2013). The concept of intangible heritage is highly discussed in the context of culinary practice, inscription, and listing have become one of the ways to stabilize problematic traditions and make some regions, classes, or voices legitimate custodians of the past (Hafstein, 2008; Smith and Akagawa, 2009). The political-economic regime of heritage is also defined as a scenario in which the states, the international organizations, as well as the market players co-produce the thing being safeguarded, marketized, and urged (Bendix et al., 2013). The tourism and rural development studies utilize traditional cuisine as a resource, which can determine the tourism and investment packages as local (Bessiere, 1998). These frameworks can be instrumental in explaining why those dishes bearing high narrative capital, like narratives of royal origin, associations with ancient city sites, and ritual cooking, in particular, lend themselves to national symbolism.

Cuisine is also a nation by food studies, whereby everyday practice and statecraft are united. Banal nationalism, as such a concept by Billig, helps in comprehending how national belonging can be duplicated with the assistance of the everyday repetition; the meal, which is eaten on a daily basis, can be national as it is a normal one (Billig, 1995). Still in this line of thought, Ichijo and Ranta (2016) believe that countries produce their national foods based on the interplay between bottom-up practices and top-down projects, among them being branding, festivals, tourism, and policy. Scholars call food a soft power on the global level. Rockower (2012) considers gastrodiplomacy, national promotion through food, and Chapple-Sokol (2013) considers culinary diplomacy in a bigger perspective as national promotion by food to support cross-cultural understanding and relationships. This literature can help in the study of the way nihari is spiritually lifted by the restaurant, eating holidays, diasporic festivities, and media that make national identity consumable and sentimental. In both the promotional talk and in the geography of consumption on a daily basis of nihari, i.e., food streets, local cafes, and state events, and in the talk with which the dish is consumed, as familiar and prestigious, one can find such practices in the Pakistani case.

Historiography Criticism of the celebratory history of heritage cuisine is becoming more popular in South Asian historiography, and food historians are reclaiming marginal food history and forecasting how communal politics, class, and gender recreate the imagined and remembered tradition (Sharma and Lambert-Hurley, 2023). Lambert-Hurley (2023) suggests that food has historically been used to denote identity and differentiation among South Asian Muslims across time, space, and social classes in modes of change that are hard to reduce to a communal typology. Other sources of tracing the movement of dishes across worlds of cultural-linguistic worlds include reference books of culinary vocabularies and histories of ingredients (Achaya, 1998). These perspectives are significant in the example of nihari, as the symbolic significance of nihari cannot be separated from the remainder of the Indo-Persian and North Indian food world and consequent reinvention of the Muslim food in modern South Asia.

The so-called Mughlai cuisine, as the works on the Mughal food culture also indicate, was not just the outcome of the palate of the elite, but also the service and labour infrastructures. Vermani (2022) demonstrates that the courtly food was based on the unique division of labor and kitchen system according to which the culinary practice and subsequent production of the category Mughlai were formed. The Mughal food culture is also documented by Sensory history, according to which the process of food preparation and consumption involved spices, scents, and perfumes as well, and smelling became a target of social control and feminine control over bodies (Vermani, 2023). These strategies imply that nihari should be understood as a food that traverses between craft, work, and the degree of sensation, not only due to the discourses of elite patronage.

Finally, the urban, feminist, and diaspora scholarship provides sources based on which to explain the mechanism of transmitting the foods between the elite associations and the mass consumption. Feminist food studies observe that culinary labour is gendered and subject to hierarchical and asymmetrical relations, and thus may render some forms of expertise eminently visible as tradition and quite normal as service. The mediation of pleasures and risks of urban food introduced by the street food work comprises procurement, regulation, hygiene politics, and social space of the urban environment (Solomon, 2015). It also shows that the right to eat at social locations is gendered because of the standards of respectability and safety (Ribadeau Dumas, 2024). Diaspora scholarship argues that cuisines are not merely preserved in the new land but rather modified to meet new restrictions, interest and desires (Duruz, 2010). The study of the immigrant food economies by Ray unites the flavor and the mobility of the classes and negotiation of the South

Asian foods in the urban foodscapes (Ray, 2011; 2016). Digital food research also indicates that online food research changes the notion of authenticity since recipes today can be accessed, observed, and distributed online, and this changes the circulation of culinary knowledge (Lupton and Feldman, 2020).

Together, these literatures provide an imaginary map of learning about nihari as a dish through which authenticity is narrated and negotiated (Rana, 2022; Shahrin and Hussin, 2023), heritage is granted and commodified (Bendix et al., 2013; Harrison, 2013; Smith and Akagawa, 2009), and nation is replicated through ordinary practice and symbolic projection (Billig, 1995). Nevertheless, to a considerable extent, academic literature continues to address South Asian cuisines at the higher levels of categories, i.e., Mughlai, Muslim cuisine, street food, diasporic cuisine, and digital circulation, rather than following the sociohistorical itinerary of a specific dish. Further discussion of the nihari can therefore connect the Mughal sensual labour with contemporary Pakistani national symbolism in showing the ways in which nihari can be applied as an edible memory, identity work, and social transformation.

## 3. Methods

This study has assumed a multidisciplinary approach of qualitative research design in order to understand the historical process of nihari and the current circumstances of social life. As the dish is tied to both the histories of the Mughal court and to the current-day criticism of national symbolism, this study is a compilation of historical research, on-the-ground work in the ethnography, and cooking anthropology, all of which target a different tier of the palimpsest of nihari. The fieldwork was conducted at Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Islamabad, which were selected to capture Mughal memories of culinary in the present context, frontier foodways, post-partition mobility, and symbolism of nationalism. The sites were sampled purposefully based on maximum-variation techniques that included ustad chefs and khansama lineages, street vendors, home cookers, and food historians or community members who consume nihari as ritual food. The recruitment was done among restaurants and food streets as well as inside community networks and snowball referrals to access special craft lineages and family backgrounds. The sampling was also carried out in an iterative process to thematic saturation, and negative cases that complicated the extensive adoption of origin stories were sought.

The semi-structured interviews were to be used, to make them comparable and at the same time have the ability to develop a narrative. A total of 48 participants were sampled, and 12 each of the four key field sites, such as Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Islamabad, gave equal representation to the regions. Fieldwork was carried out during a time span of 14 months and interviews took place but were not more than 60 to 90 minutes. As practical, interviews were taped and transcribed. Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto sources were translated very carefully keeping in mind the main emic categories including ustad (master chef), maghaz (marrow), deg (cooking pot), and dum pukht (slow-cooking technique). In other cases when it was impossible to record the notes, elaborate contemporary notes were made. All information were kept anonymous and kept in safe places to ensure privacy of participants as well as security of proprietary culinary knowledge, according to the known practice of ethnography (Pink, 2009).

The historical aspect relied on the archival and textual investigation to provide the nihari emergence and to contextualize oral histories with the greater political-economic transformation. The sources were cookbooks and food descriptions related to the Mughal era and royal kitchen books like the Ain-i-Akbari and eighteenth and nineteenth-century colonial-era papers that mention preparations of slow-cooked meat. Traveling accounts and chronicles were interpreted as placed viewpoints and not impartial accounts. The choice of sources focused on relevance, including references to morning stews, cooked breakfast at the courts, or courtly meals, and used cross-checking to reduce colonial and nationalist bias. These sources were placed in the context of secondary literature on Mughal food, colonial restructuring of the city, Partition, and Pakistani foodways, as well as local archives and collections related to Lahore Fort and the Walled City. The practice views archives as disputable as opposed to being transparent: documentary traces were construed in conjunction with modern assertions of authenticity by chefs and vendors, and historical and ethnographic evidence were able to address each other.

The ethnographic observation added to the archival record through the documentation of the contemporary practice, labor, and consumption. Observations were made in nihari houses, street stands, and home kitchens, and were repeated by rhythms of preparation (overnight simmering and a morning service). A survey guide was used to follow cookware and heat, sequencing spice, thickening, marrow, garnish, and the social choreography of eating. Discussions in focus groups with food historians

and community members were used as a shared interpretive space, even on such occasions as Muharram and Eid mornings. To take up media circulation and diaspora narratives, the paper recorded interviews and informal discussions with migrants and created a purposive media archive comprising television clips, blogs, and popular videos on social media that explicitly position nihari as a royal, authentic, or national. Where feasible, a sequence of observations was used to record the process of changing late-night preparation to the dawn service, the flow of ingredients, the heat management during extended periods, and the organization of work in kitchens and stalls.

The culinary analysis discussed recipes as evidence in comparison, and not as a list of prescriptions. Recipes were gathered by word of mouth, direct observation, cookbooks, restaurant histories, and through the Internet and brought to a standardized matrix, relating ingredients, sequencing, heat control, thickening, and accompaniments. The discussion followed regional and setting variation in spice blends (such as garam masala accents in Lahore and anise or saffron accents in some versions of Peshawari), meat options (beef, mutton, and sometimes chicken), time-technologies (overnight dum pukht and pressure cooking) as compromises among taste, industry, and convenience. Hospitality, class performance, and taste codes were explained by serving conventions like naan, kulcha, taftan, ginger, green chilies, and lemon that were mentioned as serving conventions through which they communicate. The accompanying documentation also facilitated study of the way in which diners adjust the sensations of heat, richness, and aroma during consumption and the connections between these adjustments and local conceptions of what nihari is supposed to be.

It was analyzed through an iterative process of qualitative analysis that involved comparing archival materials, interviews, fieldnotes, recipe matrices, and media traces to develop a grounded account of change without creating one myth about the origin of nihari. Sensitizing concepts employed in thematic coding included gastronationalism, culinary nostalgia, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; DeSoucey, 2010; Mannur, 2010) and inductive codes based on vocabularies of taste, lineage, and pride of the participants used. The coding was done following open coding to the focused thematic grouping, which was aided by the creation of analytic memos and comparison across sites and categories of participants. The triangulation, an audit trail of the analytic decisions, and member checks were used to strengthen the credibility, as the major interpretations were presented to the chosen group of participants. Ethical practices included obtaining informed consent, anonymizing all participants as P1, P2, P3, and so forth, and not collecting proprietary spice blends. Limitations are those of the gaps in the archives, possible bias in colonial and postcolonial sources, unequal access to rural forms, and the situated subjectivity of taste. These approaches provide an empirical foundations of the Results section when considered together. Reflexive practice involved frequent analytic learning debriefs with peers to question the over-exit readings and to make sure that interpretive assertions were rooted in the evidential record. In order to enhance reliability, the coding was carried out at several stages. Descriptive codes were used to record settings, actors, ingredients, tools, and occasions first. Second, these descriptions were connected through interpretive codes with assertions regarding authenticity, status, and nation. Third, the comparison between Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Islamabad was done using cross-site matrices, and the narratives would overlap or differ. Throughout uncertainties, alternative explanations, where the archive and field materials had been pulled in different directions, were documented in writing in the form of analytic memos. Such a rigorous process enabled the analysis to be sensitive to change and, at the same time, generate an account of the social life of nihari that was coherent. Moreover, significant terms and evaluative phrases had their own internal log of translation decisions, to allow changes in the meaning of words and phrases in Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto to be tracked during analysis. Metaphors and humor provided by the participants were paraphrased conservatively so that the intent could be retained without it causing colloquial exaggeration in formal prose.

## 4. Results

The results are delivered as intersecting themes, and not a linear chronology, through drawing on triangulated archival records, interviews, participant observation, recipe comparison, and media analysis. When combined, they demonstrate nihari as a complicated cultural artifact where the royal succession and the democratization are intertwined. The process of historical reconstruction theorizes that the shift toward national symbolism of the dish did not necessarily originate among Mughal elites and run through a continuous line to the subsequent publics, but was a sequence in which remnants of aristocratic prestige were conserved and the dish came to be widely

available. There exist oral histories and documentary sources that tie the beginnings of nihari to Mughal-period Lahore, where slow cooking, specialized spice mixtures, high-quality cuts, and some luxury spices, such as saffron, registered imperial trade links. In the nineteenth century, however, there were already references to nihari circulating outside palaces and, already in the late nineteenth century, there were descriptions of nihari as being popular among urban working populations in Lahore, indicating a process disseminated by economic and social disturbance.

The sociohistorical discourse of nihari is a process that is being maintained and redefined through the lived experiences and voices of the cooks, sellers, and eaters of nihari. Their testimonies reflect a dynamic process in which royal heritage is being claimed, modified, and democratized in various social and geographical contexts.

The arguments of authenticity are commonly based on histories of hereditary competence and material tradition, and present-day practice is directly connected to Mughal history. A fifth-generation khansama in the Walled City of Lahore, P1, frames his professional identity as a form of instinctive guardianship:

*"It is not written out, but a handwritten recipe. This was carried out to nobles early in the morning by my grandfather. Everybody now consumes it, but the taste of that respect cannot be forgotten."*

This alliance with a history of royal service has been tactfully applied in business environments. P2, the owner of a high-end restaurant in Islamabad, explicitly sells this ancestry:

*"It is prepared on the menu under Shahi Nihari. The story justifies the Mughal breakfast price. It is not only what people are purchasing, but the taste of that magnificence."*

On the other hand, street retailers tend to base authenticity on the continuation of the work process rather than the heredity of aristocracy, focusing instead on accessibility. This distinction is expressed by P3, who owns a stall on Burns Road in Karachi:

*"This reja (cart) was started by my grandfather following the Partition. We may lack chandeliers, but we have an equal portion of all-night dum. Our regulars feel that there is truth in the pot, not in a pleasant story."*

The spread of the dish into various urban environments has required such adjustments that it has developed unique regional identities while retaining a strategic connection to the ideal of the royal. P4, a migrant home cook originally from Lucknow and now based in Karachi, recounts her negotiation with her new place:

*"There they can afford delicacy in Lahore. Here, life is faster, louder. My nihari is stuffed with more mirch—it opens your eyes, it holds you there. But I do not leave out the deg and the overnight dum; our Mughal izzat (honor)."*

Peshawar represents an adaptive food city shaped by local identity and practicality. Street vendor P5 explains:

*"Saffron? That is for weddings. My customers do not desire glitz or power. I never miss the bone marrow, however. That is the rooh (soul) of nihari—for the wealthy and the poor alike."*

Meanwhile, P6, a Peshawar-based home cook, uses a local ingredient to claim ownership without severing the historical bond:

*"We add a pinch of crushed aniseed at the end—a frontier thing. It makes it ours. But does it make it less Mughal? No, it renders the Mughal a welcome home."*

The cultural power of nihari is divided along gendered lines, thereby establishing discontinuous yet interdependent repositories of knowledge. A Lahore-based culinary historian, P7, notes:

*"The ustad is the master of the open. But in secrecy, the recipe book of the matriarch is the genuine archive. The wisdom of a people lies in the unsusang vapomakinha."*

This gendered separation highlights how the production of so-called authentic tradition within the household is frequently dependent on the unpaid labour and culinary expertise of women.

For diasporic communities, nihari becomes a mobile store of memory and identity. P8, a second-generation Pakistani-born Londoner, identifies his mother's recipe as a sensory map:

*"We had buffalo meat back home, she says. This is do, though the garam masala must be from my village. It is her map of belonging."*

The plate also enables a conscious and collective sense of nationality among consumers. P9, a university student in Karachi, describes the weekly ritual:

*"Getting into the queue feels like a ritual... you taste history, and you take breakfast with your city."*

Taken together, these voices demonstrate nihari not as a static icon but as a message—an active, oral, and consumed negotiation. It is a dish whose definition has been, and continues to be, shaped and reshaped in kitchens, markets, and memories.

The central finding was that there was regional variation. The ethnographic material suggests that the city-specific taste regimes develop both under the influence of the local agricultural and market conditions and as a result of conscious attempts to establish a connection with the royal taste. Menus in Lahore are also lined with cookers and eaters who construct the dish in Mughal sophistication with an accent on measured spicing and treasured bone marrow (maghaz) as a sensory signal of tradition. The continuity is occasionally emphasized by historic restaurants in the Walled City using tools and techniques that they introduce as a heritage, as in the case of heavy pots and long simmering. Karachi versions, in their turn, are typically characterized as being more bold and hotter in flavor, attributing this attribute to the migrant nature of the city and the competitive nature of its restaurant industry, but still addressing the signs of the royal by means of a plot and more luxurious garnishes (in some instances). Such distinctions were often described through the prism of civic pride and culinary competition, and each city placed its variant of it as both local and national. Other Karachi-based explanations also focused on such additions as dried fruits or nuts as conspicuous marks of generosity, along with reference to elite idioms of affluence, as well as adjusting to local preferences. Some of the owners of shops in Lahore based their legitimacy on the Walled City, their outlets as historic places, and focused on continuity using heavy-deg pots, brass ladles, and long-established service rituals. These items were also displayed by some proprietors less as indicators of unbroken technique than as decorative aids, and restraint in spicing was associated by them with an image of courtly elegance. In contrast, Karachi cooks tended to see intensity as an expression of cosmopolitanism and sturdiness, and some of their participants indicated that they employed richer garnishes as an indicator of generosity. At different locations, regional taste claims thus served the function of claims to history, to social status, to the privilege of national oratory.

Consumption rituals also contextualize nihari as an aristocratic relic and a food that is popular. Breakfast outings, in particular at weekends, were particularly acute in the urban locations, whereby the families wait in line outside the specialized restaurants that simulate heritage in terms of decor, architecture, and service patterns in accordance with the Mughal magnificence. An examination of Lahore food districts reveals that these trips can be ritualized, structured around early mealtime, reminiscent of the courtly breakfast schedule, and around modes of hospitality that are a way of bringing high-end manners of service to the masses. In other households that belong to the upper classes, hierarchies are also reproduced by the practices of serving as a host, such as regulations on who gets the good stuff, like marrow. Meanwhile, the dish continues to be popular in non-fine dining and allows cross-class consumption without completely losing its elite overtures. The visits to the weekend crowds were especially prominent in Lahore, and a few participants also reported about the midweek gatherings as a routine pattern to certain communities and places of work.

The connection between the class and commercialization explains why royal provenance is perpetuated and reused in modern markets. Upscale restaurants in the urban centres commonly promote nihari as being of higher quality in terms of foregrounding better cuts, refined atmosphere, and even purported family recipes that are said to have originated in the courtly settings, and are highly pricier than those offered in the street-food areas. The branding activities can be interpreted as a way of regaining the popularity of food by means of elite narration and aesthetic signifiers. On the other hand, long-established nihari sellers tend to balance claims of origin with claims of accessibility, and to represent themselves as guardians of living tradition. In both of the settings, the research noted a conflict between democratization via accessibility and perpetuated exclusivity in the secretive transfer of the so-called royal technique and spice information. In some instances, respondents referred to differences in prices as being dramatic, sometimes by saying tens of times greater, to highlight the monetization of royal storytelling. A number of high-end places used menus that were written like a heritage story, with background tales, ingredient lists, and mentioning family recipes, or even Mughal archives. Arches, patterned tiles, and lighting that were intended to reflect imperial style would often be used to furnish the spaces of restaurants. This, as one interviewee put it, is a cycle where a dish gains popularity because of mass consumption, and is re- popularized by means of curated exclusivity. On the other end of the market, vendors occasionally opposed such a rebranding by being more focused on the continuity of labor and craft over luxury, arguing that what makes the dish valid is time, heat, and patience, but not decoration.

Gendered continuities and revisions can also be seen in production sites. The preparation of nihari in business is highly male-dominated, a trend that cooks and proprietors tend to explain using apprenticeship systems and descent that recalls the Mughal khanama

system. On-site observations revealed that there were mostly male kitchen brigades, with some of the workers stating that they are the descendants of specialized culinary families. But there is another genealogy of home cooking. Interviews (particularly in older Lahore families) placed a strong emphasis on the role of women in maintaining, and further developing, family recipes, encompassing descriptions of matrilineal transmission in connection with zenana kitchens and elite household servants. According to this gendered geography, the authority to control the authentic nihari, in the public domain, is often masculinized, and the reproduction of the technique in the household can continue based on the labour of women.

The diasporic writings tell us that nihari is a mobile repository of belonging. Migrant respondents constructed the concepts of slow cooking and attentive service as a way of staying connected to home and, in a few instances, a hypothetical Mughal history. Replacement of the ingredients that were not available was typical, but time and again, connoisseurs tried to maintain what they considered to be a “royal technique by timing, spices sequencing, and serving forms that they equated to etiquette. To a great number of second-generation Pakistanis, the acquisition of skills in cooking nihari was characterized as cultural training and a claim to their origin. Aristocratic connotations, in these situations, may take on new symbolic force since they offer a prestigious idiom of marking Pakistani identity in the context of multiculturalism. An example of such a respondent is the one who said that they used duck fat instead of ghee, but insisted on making the dish slow and overnight cooking, so as not to lose what they perceived as the essence of the dish.

Royal accounts are further increased through the digital and mass media circulation. On Pakistani food TV, food blogs, and influencer videos, nihari is discussed over and over again in terms of Mughal provenance, authentic preparation, and who can prepare the most royal taste. Viral food frequently idealizes preparation by using traditional equipment and staged presentation, and can have quantifiable feedback effects in food establishments as sellers get cued by visual indicators, themed menus, or symbolic imagery to match the expectations of their customers as impressed online. The research has also identified a difference between the generations: older customers are more likely to relate royal connotation with experienced family backgrounds, and younger demographics follow it with historical interest and aesthetic fantasy. A number of the respondents directly associated the prevalence online with more foot traffic, and some vendors said they changed garnish, signs, or plating to fit the image that was going around a social media network.

Lastly, the narrative of the respondents highlights that the royal lineage of nihari makes it a part of Pakistani national identity, which is occasionally referred to as democratic royalty that can be offered by everyday meals. Based on historical review and interview testimony, post-Partition cultural initiatives were more and more shaping the dish as Mughal heritage and national treasure. Nihari can be served in formal affairs and with fancy accompaniments in state and diplomatic situations, but in popular celebrations and in the people's events, nihari circulates in mass events and festivals. This elite halo and mass access reflect the more general tensions of national narratives that both glorify and reinvent the Mughal past. The ability of the dish to retain these contradictions within it enables it to serve as a convenient symbol of a national narrative that tends to waver between boasting of imperial inheritance and promises of popular inclusion.

## 5. Discussion

As it has been shown in this paper, the sociohistorical pathway of nihari has led to the development of the multi-layered signifier of Pakistani national identity. The results show that this is not a progressive story of the diffusion of the elite, but a continuous negotiation process between the past and present, aristocracy and accessibility. Developing the extensive empirical evidence provided in the Results, this discussion elaborates three major theoretical arguments that place nihari in more general discourses of food studies, nationalism, and cultural memory.

To begin with, nihari is a tasty palimpsest, a juxtaposing number of historical assertions that are stacked, argued, and digested. The authenticity of the dish does not lie in any fixed original recipe, but is continually recreated by what Rana (2022) describes as the oral continuation of food stories. Performative claims of authenticity using material residues (the deg), spatial ancestry (the Walled City), and embodied craft (dum pukht), connect modern practice to Mughal regimes of food preparation (Vermani, 2022). This act is an example of gastronationalism (DeSoucey, 2010) in which regional difference as Lahore perfect marrow focus and Karachi aggressive spicing become a claim to an iconic national identity that is of shared interest but in a contentious manner. The dish thereby serves as a culinary chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981), in which time and space are condensed: the overnight simmer reminds of a fantasized courtly temporality, and the

representation of the modern breakfast queue ritualizes that temporality to the masses. It depicts heritage as still being created rather than maintained in the present by sensory, material, and narrative practices (Harrison, 2013).

Second, nihari discloses dialectical opposition of democratization and distinction on which culinary nationalism is founded. It has become a significant democratization of access in its integration into urban foodscapes, and it is consistent with the idea of banal nationalism proposed by Billig (1995), in which the nation is replicated into everyday and routine practices such as the weekend nihari breakfast. However, the same popularization is stimulated by new types of social distinction. As the results indicate, the upscale restaurants re-sacrify the dish by re-packaging the exclusivity of the past, heritage menus, imperial decor, and economic and cultural capital in the form of premium prices and this transforms historical capital into economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This forms a circle of self-reinforcement where mass consumption is the source of a reaction of elite reclamation. At the same time, the gendered space of culinary knowledge consolidates these hierarchies the masculinized, commercially infused, professional lineages of khansama, and the feminized, reproductive knowledge of the authentic recipe. Therefore, Nihari is portrayed as a location in which the hierarchy of classes and gender are destabilized by the mass and recreated through the new modes of commodification and knowledge.

Thirdly, nihari serves as a portable, sentimental archive of diasporic and digital community and alters the essence of cooking authenticity. To the diaspora, the dish is an "edible memory" (Sutton, 2001), a sensory channel back to a homeland usually envisioned through a royalist Mughal past. This points to the fact that culinary nostalgia (Mannur, 2010) places emphasis on embodied practice and emotional attachment and not on strict authenticity, such as the use of duck fat instead of ghee that nevertheless still gives the sense of slow cooking. More importantly, this process is enhanced and transformed by digital media (Lupton and Feldman, 2020). Media socialization of history provokes the new, visual economies of authenticity as well. A case in point is the interrelation between online Mughal aesthetics and offline restaurant branding that can be described as the construction of a politicized image of the past, in which a few images of the past are selectively deployed to justify present-day market practices (Mughal aesthetic) (Hobsbawm, 1983). This digital flow distorts the boundaries between the research, performance, and consumption making a global audience engage in the story of royalties. That way, it also opens up the borders of the national imagined community (Anderson, 1983) and loosens its established geographical and cultural groundings, forming new hybridities of meaning.

This work shows how a dish-based micro-history can be useful in untangling the macro-social processes. Taking the recipe of nihari as a palimpsest and the dish as an edible archive, the analysis relates the closeness of culinary practice to more general ideas of identity formation, social stratification and memory work (Appadurai, 1986; Fischler, 1988). It not only transcends the categorical studies of the Mughlai or national cuisine, but also follows the sociohistorical itinerary of one single preparation in order to fill a gap in South Asian food studies. Their findings also make theorizing gastronationalism more difficult by demonstrating that nationalism is negotiated in ways beyond what state-centered projects can achieve, and in more specific ways through the lens of everyday market encounters, gendered labor and online narratives.

The gaps in the historical record of the archive, especially of the vernacular foodways of the non-elite, require a recourse to colonial and postcolonial sources with their own biases. Moreover, because the study is urban, although not random, the rural and peri-urban variants of nihari are under-researched. Further work might investigate how this edible archive framework can be extended to other meals, how this framework may be comparatively applied across national settings of South Asia, or how the effects of digital food media on culinary tradition may be longitudinally examined.

Nihari is not just another national dish, but it is a deep social book. Its story summarizes the main contradictions of Pakistani modernity: between regionalism and nationalism, imperialism and democratization, tradition and commercialism. The strength of nihari is specifically in its ability to contain these contradictions in the same, savoury, and repeatable experience, to provide a taste of the past that becomes always re-created: simmersed, served, and re-made with each pot.

The missing points of the historical record of the archive, particularly of the non-elite, necessitate a resort to colonial sources and postcolonial sources with their own bias (Appadurai, 1988; Collingham, 2006; Sen, 2015). In addition, due to the urban nature of the study, despite the non-randomness, the rural and peri-urban versions of nihari are under investigated, indicating the necessity to consider the ethnography and comparative food, memory, and identity

(Holtzman, 2006; Sutton, 2008; Wilk, 1999). Future research could explore the ways in which such an edible archive structure can be applied to other meals (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002; Counihan and Van Esterik, 2013), the ways in which this structure could be comparatively applied to other South Asian national contexts (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Long, 2010; Malik, 2021), or how the impact of digital food media on culinary tradition could be longitudinally studied (Evans, 2014; Hayes-Conroy, & Hayes-Conroy, 2013). These extensions would also be more apt to work closely with questions of heritage governance and intangible cultural policy (Bortolotto, 2013; UNESCO, 2003), or questions of street food economies and urban consumption (Cardoso et al., 2014; Finkelstein, 2014).

Lastly, nihari may not merely be any other national food, but it is a profoundly social book. Its plot condenses the key contradictions of Pakistani modernity: between regionalism and nationalism (Appadurai, 1988; Wilk, 1999), imperialism and democratization (Collingham, 2006; Sen, 2010), tradition and commercialism (Julier, 2013; Finkelstein, 2014). Food ideologizes itself through sensory practice as studies of taste, embodiment and culinary meaning assert (Abbots, 2017; Korsmeyer, 1999; Lupton, 1996). This tension of contradictions within the same, savoury, and repeatable experience is the strength of nihari that makes it possible to offer a taste of the past that becomes continually re-created: simmers, served and re-made with every pot (Connerton, 1989; Mintz, 1985; Raviv, 2003; Cwiertka, 2013; Counihan, 2004).

## 6. Conclusions

Nihari is not just a historical dish; its history as a dish at the Mughal court as a breakfast and as a national food summarizes the major dimensions of the socio-political history of Pakistan. The dish was not diffused via a mere elite trickle-down. Rather, the gradual desacralization allowed even more generalized audiences to access remnants of aristocratic symbolism, which allowed aspiration and belonging to be practiced in the form of ordinary eating.

The politics of regional pride is also embodied in the dish, with the different styles of various cities, such as Lahore being more refined and focused on marrow, and Karachi being more aggressive with its profile being influenced by migration and competition in the market. Meanwhile, nihari unveils the long-term social structures: commercial production is still mostly male and still tends to be arranged by apprenticeship, and domestic knowledge is often shared among female groups. Commodification leads to new types of class division, but the techniques and materials that might have otherwise become obsolete can also be maintained by market attention. This trend indicates the greater argument of the paper that the meanings of nihari are created by the play of labor, narrative, and consumption as opposed to being contained as a separate entity in the dish.

Outside the national boundaries, the nihari plays the role of a carnal bearer of memory among the diaspora communities, linking generations to a selectively conceived homeland. In all the settings, the dish is a culinary chronotope where time, work, and identity will come together in a single sensory experience. Nihari still keeps Pakistanis connected, challenging, and renegotiating the possibilities of what Pakistani identity may entail in their daily lives as a dynamic edible archive.

## Declarations

### *Competing Interest*

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial competing interests.

### *Funding*

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### *Ethics Statement*

This study was conducted following the principles of ethical research. Given its ethnographic nature and the absence of sensitive personal data, formal ethics committee approval was not required under institutional guidelines.

### *Data Availability Statement*

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### *AI statement*

Generative AI tools were used only in a limited and controlled manner for language editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the authors.

### *Author's Contributions*

T. Zahra (0009-0008-7046-2362): *Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Project Administration, Supervision.*

F. Perono Cacciafoco (0000-0002-0977-063X): *Writing – Review & Editing, Resources.*

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