



From Sacred Offerings to Culinary Identity: Tracing the Evolutionary Trajectory of Saraswat Cuisine through Temple Rituals, Migration, and Coastal Adaptation

Harsha Assotikar*

Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Agnel Institute of Food Crafts and Culinary Sciences, Agnel Ashram Verna - Goa 403722, India.

(Corresponding author: Harsha Assotikar)*

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ABSTRACT: Traditional cuisines function as dynamic repositories of cultural memory, embodying complex intersections of religious ideology, ecological adaptation, and socio-political transformation. This study examines the evolutionary trajectory of Saraswat cuisine, a distinctive culinary tradition of the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin (GSB) community, from its origins in temple-centered vegetarian practices rooted in satvik dietary principles to its contemporary manifestations incorporating coastal seafood adaptations. Employing a qualitative interpretative framework integrating archival analysis, temple ethnography, and culinary documentation across five sacred sites in Goa and Karnataka, this research reveals how Saraswat cuisine navigates the tension between ritual purity and ecological pragmatism. Findings demonstrate that the conceptualization of fish as "fruits of the sea" represents a sophisticated theological-ecological negotiation enabling dietary adaptation while maintaining religious orthodoxy. The study identifies three distinct evolutionary phases: temple-ritualistic (pre-migration), transitional-adaptive (coastal settlement), and contemporary-commercial (tourism integration). This research contributes novel insights into how religious communities reconcile doctrinal dietary restrictions with environmental constraints, offering theoretical implications for understanding cultural resilience, adaptive heritage, and the commodification of sacred foodways in tourism contexts. The findings position Saraswat cuisine as intangible cultural heritage with significant potential for sustainable gastronomy tourism while raising critical questions about authenticity preservation in commercialization processes.

Keywords: Saraswat cuisine, food heritage, religious foodways, cultural adaptation, migration studies.

INTRODUCTION

Food transcends mere sustenance to function as a powerful medium of cultural expression, identity formation, and collective memory (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). In religiously stratified societies, culinary practices become particularly significant as markers of ritual purity, caste boundaries, and theological adherence (Appadurai, 1981). The nexus between religion and food in Hindu traditions manifests through complex dietary regulations, ritual offerings, and communal commensality practices that simultaneously reinforce social hierarchies and enable spiritual transactions between devotees and deities (Khare, 1976). Within this broader framework of Hindu food culture, Saraswat cuisine represents a distinctive culinary tradition notable for its negotiation between rigid vegetarian orthodoxy and adaptive coastal pragmatism.

The Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community traces its origins to the now-extinct Saraswati river region, with subsequent migrations to the Konkan coast—including contemporary Goa and South Canara—driven by complex combinations of environmental pressures, political instability, and Portuguese colonial persecution (Nair & Sinha, 2023). This geographical displacement fundamentally transformed Saraswat culinary practices, creating what can be theorized as a "diasporic cuisine" that maintains symbolic connections to ancestral foodways while adapting to new ecological and social contexts. The transition from inland vegetarian traditions to coastal diets incorporating seafood represents not merely dietary change but a sophisticated renegotiation of religious identity, ecological adaptation, and community boundary maintenance.

Historically, Saraswat culinary practices were intimately embedded within temple rituals where food functioned primarily as sacred offering (prasadam) rather than nutritional sustenance. These temple-centered practices emphasized seasonal ingredients, ritual purity protocols, and symbolic meanings aligned with satvik dietary principles that eschewed foods believed to excite passions or dull consciousness (Shenoy & Purushothaman, 2025).

However, settlement along the Arabian Sea coast introduced abundant marine resources that presented both opportunities and theological challenges. The community's innovative conceptualization of fish as "fruits of the sea"—analogous to vegetarian produce rather than sentient animal flesh—exemplifies creative theological interpretation enabling dietary adaptation while maintaining nominal adherence to Brahminical vegetarian ideals (Goud Saraswat Brahmin Cuisine, 2025).

Contemporary Saraswat cuisine thus embodies multiple temporal layers: pre-migration vegetarian orthodoxy, post-migration coastal adaptation, colonial-era influences (particularly Portuguese introductions of ingredients like chillies and vinegar), and recent commercialization through restaurant culture and heritage tourism (Bhandare & Sawant 2022). This temporal complexity raises critical theoretical questions about cultural authenticity, adaptive heritage, and the boundaries between preservation and transformation. Despite its rich historical evolution and contemporary relevance, Saraswat cuisine remains significantly underexplored in academic literature compared to other Indian regional cuisines, with existing studies primarily descriptive rather than analytically rigorous (Nair et al., 2020).

This study addresses this scholarly gap by providing the first comprehensive analysis of Saraswat cuisine's evolution from temple-based ritualistic practices to contemporary commercial manifestations. The research employs food as an analytical lens to understand broader processes of cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, and heritage commodification. By examining how religious communities navigate tensions between doctrinal rigidity and pragmatic adaptation, this study contributes to theoretical conversations in food studies, migration research, religious studies, and heritage tourism scholarship.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks: Food, Culture, and Identity

Food studies scholarship has increasingly recognized cuisine as a complex cultural system encoding social relationships, power dynamics, and historical experiences (Counihan & Van Esterik 2013). Lévi-Strauss's (1969) structuralist analysis positioned cooking as a fundamental cultural transformation process, while Bourdieu's (1984) concept of culinary capital illuminated how food choices reproduce class distinctions and cultural hierarchies. More recently, scholars have emphasized food's role in constructing and maintaining ethnic, regional, and national identities, particularly in diaspora and migration contexts where foodways become crucial vehicles for cultural continuity (Gabaccia, 1998; Ray, 2004).

The relationship between religion and food represents a particularly significant domain where dietary practices encode theological principles, ritual purity concerns, and community boundaries. Douglas's (1966) seminal work on food taboos demonstrated how dietary restrictions function to maintain symbolic order and group cohesion. In Hindu contexts, food classification systems based on qualities (*gunas*) intersect with caste hierarchies, creating elaborate rules governing what, when, how, and with whom one may eat (Khare, 1976; Appadurai, 1981). Temple food practices constitute specialized domains where offerings to deities create hierarchically distributed *prasadam* that simultaneously maintains divine-human relationships and reinforces social stratification (Fuller, 1992).

Migration, Adaptation, and Culinary Change

Migration studies have extensively documented how displaced populations adapt foodways to new environments while maintaining symbolic connections to ancestral cuisines (Harbottle, 2000). The concept of "culinary nostalgia" captures how food memories link migrants to lost homelands, though actual practices inevitably transform through ingredient substitutions, simplified preparations, and fusion with host cultures (Holtzman, 2006). Theoretical models of culinary adaptation range from complete assimilation to rigid preservation, with most communities exhibiting complex negotiations between continuity and change depending on factors including ingredient availability, generational dynamics, and social integration levels (Kalcik, 1984).

The Gaud Saraswat Brahmin migration from the Saraswati region to coastal areas represents a case of forced displacement driven by both environmental factors (river dessication) and political pressures (Portuguese colonial religious persecution in Goa). Historical sources indicate multiple waves of migration over several centuries, creating a geographically dispersed community maintaining connections through shared religious institutions, kinship networks, and cultural practices including cuisine (Nair & Sinha, 2023). This migration pattern generated regional variations in Saraswat cuisine between Goa, South Canara (Mangalore region), and Kerala, with each location exhibiting distinct adaptations to local ingredients and neighboring culinary influences while maintaining core identity markers.

Temple-Centered Food Practices in Hindu Traditions

Temple food systems in Hindu traditions serve multiple functions beyond nutritional provision, including mediating divine-human transactions, distributing religious merit, and reinforcing community solidarity (Babb, 1970; Fuller, 1992). The preparation of temple offerings follows strict purity protocols regarding cook eligibility, ingredient sourcing, cooking methods, and serving practices (Gyansanchay, n.d.). These ritual foods then transform into *prasadam*—divine grace materialized—distributed hierarchically to devotees, creating commensal communities through shared consumption of sanctified substances (Khare, 1992).

The *satvik* dietary framework governing temple foods emphasizes ingredients believed to promote clarity, purity, and spiritual elevation while avoiding *rajasic* (passion-inducing) and *tamasic* (lethargy-inducing) foods (Shenoy &

Purushothaman, 2025). This classification system traditionally excludes not only meat but also certain vegetables like onions and garlic, creating distinctive flavor profiles characterized by subtle spicing and emphasis on inherent ingredient qualities. Temple kitchens thus function as spaces of culinary conservatism, preserving preparation methods and ingredient combinations that may have largely disappeared from everyday domestic cooking.

Coastal Ecology and Dietary Adaptation

The ecological anthropology of food examines how environmental contexts shape culinary practices through ingredient availability, seasonal patterns, and resource constraints (Harris, 1985). Coastal settlements worldwide exhibit dietary patterns heavily featuring seafood and marine resources, though religious and cultural factors mediate the extent and manner of marine food incorporation (Acheson, 1981). The inclusion of fish in ostensibly vegetarian Brahmin diets represents a well-documented phenomenon across Indian coastal communities, though theological justifications and social acceptance vary significantly (Srinivas, 1952).

The Saraswat conceptualization of fish as "fruits of the sea" exemplifies creative theological interpretation enabling ecological adaptation while maintaining symbolic orthodoxy. This linguistic-conceptual strategy parallels similar adaptations in other communities, such as medieval Catholic classification of certain marine animals as "fish" rather than meat, permitting consumption during Lenten fasting periods (Flandrin, 1999). Such examples illustrate how religious dietary systems exhibit flexibility through interpretive strategies when faced with pragmatic pressures, suggesting that theological principles interact dialectically with material conditions rather than determining practices unilaterally.

Contemporary Culinary Tourism and Heritage Commodification

The emergence of culinary tourism as a significant travel motivation reflects broader shifts toward experiential consumption, authenticity-seeking, and cultural immersion in contemporary tourism (Richards, 2012; Hall & Sharples, 2003). Regional cuisines increasingly function as destination markers and tourist attractions, generating economic opportunities while raising concerns about commercialization, standardization, and loss of authenticity (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). The concept of "staged authenticity" captures how tourist-oriented food experiences may present sanitized, simplified versions of traditional cuisines designed for outsider consumption rather than genuine cultural practices (MacCannell, 1973).

Heritage designation frameworks, particularly UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage protocols, increasingly recognize food practices as worthy of protection and promotion (Di Giovine & Brulotte 2014). However, heritagization processes can paradoxically transform living traditions into museum-ified performances, potentially constraining natural evolution while creating new stakeholders and power dynamics around cultural ownership (Sammells, 2014). The integration of Saraswat cuisine into Goa's tourism economy through heritage restaurants, food festivals, and culinary trails thus represents a double-edged phenomenon requiring careful analysis of benefits and risks.

Research Gaps and Contributions

Despite growing scholarly attention to Indian regional cuisines, Saraswat foodways remain significantly underexplored. Existing literature consists primarily of descriptive accounts in culinary guides, community histories, and food blogs rather than rigorous academic analyses (Local Samosa, n.d.; OT EATS, 2025). The limited academic work available tends toward synchronic description of contemporary practices rather than diachronic analysis of historical evolution and adaptation processes (Nair & Sinha, 2023). Furthermore, theoretical engagement with Saraswat cuisine's implications for understanding religious adaptation, diaspora identity, and heritage commodification remains minimal.

This study addresses these gaps by providing the first comprehensive, theoretically informed analysis of Saraswat cuisine's evolution from temple origins through migration adaptation to contemporary commercialization. The research contributes novel empirical documentation of temple food practices across multiple sites, systematic analysis of regional variations between Goa and South Canara, and theoretical insights into how religious communities negotiate orthodoxy and pragmatism in dietary adaptation. These contributions advance scholarly understanding of food's role in cultural resilience, adaptive heritage, and the complex politics of culinary authenticity in tourism contexts. This study pursues three interrelated objectives designed to generate comprehensive understanding of Saraswat cuisine's historical evolution, contemporary significance, and future trajectories.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Epistemological Framework

This study employs a qualitative interpretative approach grounded in cultural studies and historical anthropology epistemologies. Saraswat cuisine is conceptualized as a "text" to be read for meanings, a "practice" to be analyzed for social functions, and a "system" to be understood through structural relationships (Geertz, 1973). The research rejects positivist assumptions of objective culinary essences in favor of constructivist understanding of foodways as continuously negotiated, contextually embedded cultural phenomena shaped by power relations, ecological constraints, and historical contingencies.

The interpretative framework draws on hermeneutic traditions emphasizing thick description, contextual understanding, and meaning-making processes rather than causal explanation or predictive generalization (Denzin &

Lincoln 2011). This approach proves particularly appropriate for exploring how religious communities create theological justifications for dietary adaptations, how foodways encode multiple temporal layers and identity meanings, and how commercialization processes transform heritage practices. The study acknowledges researcher positionality and interpretive selectivity while striving for analytical rigor through systematic data collection, triangulation across multiple sources, and reflexive engagement with theoretical frameworks.

Data Collection Methods

The research employed multiple complementary data collection strategies to enable comprehensive documentation and analytical triangulation:

Historical and Archival Analysis: Systematic review of historical texts, community chronicles, and archival documents tracing GSB migration patterns, settlement histories, and cultural practices. Sources included colonial-era records, temple historical accounts, and community-published histories. This historical documentation established temporal framework and contextual background for understanding culinary evolution.

Culinary Literature Review: Comprehensive examination of cookbooks, recipe collections, and gastronomic writings documenting Saraswat cuisine across different time periods and geographical locations. Traditional handwritten recipe manuscripts, published cookbooks targeting community members, and recent culinary guides for broader audiences were analyzed comparatively to identify continuities, changes, and variations in ingredients, preparation methods, and presentation styles.

Temple Ethnography: Direct observation and documentation of food practices at five strategically selected temple sites representing different geographical locations, historical periods, and institutional scales. Temple visits were conducted during both regular worship periods and major festivals to capture both routine and special occasion food practices. Observations focused on prasadam preparation protocols, ingredient selection, cooking methods, symbolic meanings, distribution patterns, and community participation dynamics.

Table 1: Temple Sites Selected for Ethnographic Documentation.

Temple Name	Location	Geographical Context	Historical Significance	Research Focus
Shri Mangueshi Temple	Ponda, Goa	Original Goan settlement area	Ancient temple relocated during Portuguese persecution	Festival prasadam preparation; ritual purity protocols; community transmission
Shri Shantadurga Temple	Kavlem, Goa	Interior Goa region	Major pilgrimage destination	Seasonal offerings; volunteer cooking practices; recipe preservation
Shri Krishna Temple	Udupi, Karnataka	South Canara region	Prominent institutional temple with extensive food operations	Daily prasadam distribution; mid-day meal programs; systematic food preparation
Shri Mahalasa Narayani Devalaya	Verna, Goa	Modern urban area	Reconstructed temple combining traditional practices with contemporary infrastructure	Modern adaptation of traditional rituals; institutionalized food practices
Shri Navadurga Temple	Borim, Goa	Rural community setting	Community-centered local temple	Grassroots food practices; local ingredient sourcing; collective cooking

Table 1 demonstrates strategic site selection encompassing geographical diversity (Goa and Karnataka), institutional variation (major pilgrimage temples to small community shrines), historical range (ancient temples to modern reconstructions), and functional differences (daily operations to festival-specific practices). This diversity enables comparative analysis of how different contexts shape food practices while identifying common elements reflecting shared Saraswat culinary identity. The inclusion of both Goan and Karnataka sites facilitates examination of regional variations emerging from migration and ecological adaptation. Temple selection prioritized accessibility, representativeness, and willingness of temple authorities to permit research observation, acknowledging that selected sites may not comprehensively represent all Saraswat temple food practices but provide sufficient diversity for analytical insights.

Analytical Procedures

Data analysis proceeded through iterative processes of coding, categorization, pattern identification, and theoretical interpretation characteristic of qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014). Culinary documentation was analyzed for ingredients, preparation methods, flavor profiles, serving practices, and symbolic meanings. Historical sources were examined for evidence of dietary practices, migration influences, and adaptive processes. Temple observations were coded for ritual protocols, purity maintenance, community participation, and knowledge transmission mechanisms.

Comparative analysis identified similarities and differences across temple sites, geographical regions (Goa versus South Canara), and temporal periods (historical accounts versus contemporary practices). This comparison enabled identification of core elements constituting Saraswat culinary identity despite contextual variations, as well as adaptive elements reflecting specific ecological, social, and historical circumstances. Thematic analysis synthesized findings into interpretative frameworks addressing research objectives regarding historical evolution, socio-cultural significance, and contemporary transformation.

Limitations and Delimitations

As a qualitative interpretative study, this research prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of generalization. The temple ethnography focused on five sites selected for strategic representativeness but cannot claim comprehensive documentation of all Saraswat temple food practices. Observations were conducted during specific time periods and may not capture full seasonal or ceremonial variations. The study relies partially on secondary historical sources whose accuracy and completeness cannot be independently verified, though triangulation across multiple sources enhances reliability.

The research focuses primarily on temple-based and public manifestations of Saraswat cuisine, with less emphasis on everyday domestic cooking practices. While acknowledging gender dynamics in food preparation, the study does not deeply examine women's experiences and knowledge systems that merit dedicated research attention. The analysis of contemporary commercialization relies on available documentation rather than extensive interviews with restaurant operators or tourists, suggesting directions for future empirical expansion. These limitations notwithstanding, the study generates substantial novel insights into Saraswat culinary evolution and cultural significance while identifying productive avenues for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phase I: Temple-Ritualistic Origins and Vegetarian Orthodoxy

The earliest documented phase of Saraswat cuisine centers on temple-based practices in the Saraswati river region and early Konkan settlements, characterized by strict adherence to satvik vegetarian principles. Historical accounts and temple records indicate that food preparation in this period functioned primarily within ritual contexts as offerings (naivedya) to deities, with subsequent distribution as prasadam to devotees and temple personnel (Gyansanchay, n.d.). The theological framework underlying these practices emphasized food's spiritual qualities rather than nutritional properties, creating elaborate classification systems distinguishing pure from impure ingredients based on effects on consciousness and ritual efficacy.

Table 2: Core Ingredients and Preparation Principles in Temple-Ritualistic Phase.

Ingredient Category	Specific Items	Symbolic Significance	Preparation Constraints
Grains	Rice (various varieties), wheat	Purity, sustenance, life force	Must be whole, unbroken; prepared by ritually qualified persons
Legumes	Various dals (lentils), chickpeas, mung beans	Protein without violence; satvik nourishment	Soaked and cooked without prohibited spices
Vegetables	Seasonal produce excluding onions, garlic, and root vegetables in some contexts	Divine gifts; seasonal harmony	Fresh, locally sourced; minimal processing
Dairy	Milk, ghee, yogurt, buttermilk	Sacred products of revered animals; purity	From specific cow breeds; prepared with ritual cleanliness
Fruits	Seasonal fruits, particularly coconut, bananas	Natural sweetness; divine offerings	Offered whole or minimally processed
Sweeteners	Jaggery, honey	Auspiciousness; celebratory significance	Used sparingly; natural rather than refined
Spices	Turmeric, cumin, coriander, black pepper, cardamom	Digestive and medicinal properties	Used moderately; avoiding heat-generating combinations
Prohibited Items	Onions, garlic, meat, fish, eggs, alcohol	Tamasic/rajasic qualities; violence; impurity	Complete exclusion from temple contexts

Table 2 reveals the sophisticated classificatory system governing temple food preparation, where ingredient selection reflects theological principles rather than purely nutritional or gustatory considerations. The emphasis on seasonal, locally available ingredients demonstrates ecological awareness and sustainable practices embedded within religious frameworks. The prohibition of certain vegetables like onions and garlic, often justified through beliefs about their effects on consciousness and spiritual purity, creates distinctive flavor profiles emphasizing subtlety and natural ingredient qualities rather than robust spicing. The central role of coconut and rice reflects regional ecology

of coastal and riverine areas, suggesting that even early "orthodox" practices incorporated local ecological realities. The strict ritual purity protocols requiring specific preparation personnel and methods illustrate how food practices maintained caste hierarchies and religious authority structures, with temple kitchens functioning as spaces where these social orders were materially enacted and reproduced.

Temple observations at Shri Mangueshi and Shri Shantadurga temples in Goa revealed continuity of many traditional preparation methods despite contemporary contexts. Prasadam preparation continues to follow elaborate purity protocols including ritual bathing of cooks, use of dedicated cooking vessels and spaces, and sequential preparation order based on food hierarchy. Specific festival foods like modak (steamed rice flour dumplings with coconut-jaggery filling) for Ganesh Chaturthi and various payasam (rice pudding variations) for different occasions maintain recipes transmitted orally across generations with minimal written documentation.

The social organization of temple food preparation in this phase reflected and reinforced community structures. Only men from specific Brahmin families held authorization to prepare temple offerings, creating hereditary roles transmitted through patrilineal descent. Women's exclusion from temple kitchen spaces during menstruation and pregnancy periods enacted ritual purity concerns through bodily regulation. The hierarchical distribution of prasadam following worship—with priests receiving first portions, then male devotees, then women and children—materialized social hierarchies through food distribution patterns (Fuller, 1992).

Phase II: Migration, Coastal Adaptation, and Theological Negotiation

The migration of GSB communities to coastal Konkani regions including Goa, South Canara, and Kerala initiated fundamental transformation in Saraswat culinary practices through encounter with abundant marine resources. This phase, spanning several centuries and continuing through Portuguese colonial periods, witnessed gradual incorporation of seafood while maintaining symbolic connections to vegetarian orthodoxy through creative theological interpretation.

Table 3: Ecological and Theological Factors Enabling Seafood Incorporation.

Factor Category	Specific Elements	Mechanisms of Adaptation	Continuity Elements
Ecological Availability	Abundant coastal fish, shellfish, crustaceans	Proximity to Arabian Sea; daily fish markets; economic accessibility	Seasonal variation; lunar cycle observances
Economic Pragmatism	Limited inland agricultural land; fishing-based local economy	Cost-effectiveness of seafood versus imported vegetarian proteins; local market integration	Preference for locally available resources
Nutritional Requirements	Protein needs in humid coastal climate; limited vegetarian protein sources	Recognition of dietary requirements for sustenance	Continued emphasis on balanced meals
Theological Justification	Conceptualization of fish as "fruits of the sea" (jalachara phala)	Linguistic categorization separating fish from land animals; analogies to vegetable kingdom	Maintenance of prohibitions on other meats
Regional Influence	Neighboring communities' extensive seafood consumption	Culinary exchange with coastal populations; intermarriage	Distinct preparation methods maintaining Saraswat identity
Gradual Acceptance	Multi-generational normalization process	Initial consumption by men outside home; eventual domestic integration	Continued vegetarianism for specific rituals and observances

Table 3 demonstrates that seafood incorporation resulted from complex interplay of ecological, economic, nutritional, and theological factors rather than simple abandonment of vegetarian principles. The conceptualization of fish as "fruits of the sea" represents sophisticated interpretive strategy enabling adaptation while maintaining nominal adherence to Brahminical identity. This linguistic-theological move exemplifies how religious communities exercise agency in negotiating doctrinal boundaries when confronted with pragmatic pressures, challenging simplistic narratives of either rigid orthodoxy or passive assimilation. The selectivity of adaptation—incorporating fish while maintaining prohibitions on other animal products—suggests strategic boundary maintenance preserving sufficient distinctiveness to sustain community identity. The gradual, multi-generational process of acceptance indicates internal contestation and negotiation rather than uniform community consensus, though eventual normalization demonstrates adaptive capacity.

Regional variations emerged during this phase reflecting different ecological contexts and cultural influences. Goan Saraswat cuisine developed distinctive fish curry preparations using kokum (*Garcinia indica*), a local souring agent, creating tangy, light-bodied curries markedly different from the heavier, spicier preparations in neighboring Goan Catholic cuisine (Bhandare & Sawant 2022). South Canara Saraswat cuisine in the Mangalore region incorporated

greater variety of seafood including shellfish and developed different spice blends reflecting Tulu and Kannada culinary influences. Kerala Saraswat adaptations integrated coconut more extensively and developed fusion dishes incorporating elements from Syrian Christian and Nair cuisines.

Specific dishes emerging during this adaptive phase became markers of Saraswat identity across regions despite variations. Bangude pulimunchi (mackerel in tamarind curry), hooman (spiced rice cooked with lentils and vegetables), ambade (sour curry with hog plum), and various fish roe preparations exemplify dishes that maintain recognizable Saraswat characteristics—subtle spicing, emphasis on souring agents, and relatively simple preparation methods—while incorporating coastal ingredients. The development of specific festival menus integrating both vegetarian temple foods and seafood household preparations created temporal rhythms alternating between strict vegetarianism during religious occasions and relaxed inclusion of fish during ordinary periods.

The adaptation process exhibited gender dimensions with men often consuming fish outside homes before domestic incorporation became normalized. This pattern suggests that public male consumption preceded private female cooking, reflecting both practical considerations (men's greater mobility and external dining opportunities) and ideological factors (women as primary guardians of domestic ritual purity). Temple kitchens maintained complete vegetarianism despite household adaptation, creating spatial differentiation between sacred and mundane food spaces that enabled simultaneous preservation of orthodox temple practices and adaptive household cuisines.

Phase III: Colonial Influences and Culinary Fusion

Portuguese colonization of Goa from the early 16th century introduced new ingredients, cooking techniques, and cultural dynamics that influenced Saraswat cuisine despite the community's maintenance of Hindu religious identity and resistance to conversion pressures. While Goan Catholic cuisine underwent more dramatic Portuguese influences through extensive adoption of vinegar, pork, and European cooking methods, Saraswat cuisine exhibited selective incorporation reflecting both culinary experimentation and maintenance of religious boundaries.

Table 4: Portuguese Colonial Influences on Saraswat Cuisine.

Introduced Element	Adoption Pattern	Adaptation Strategy	Persistence of Traditional Alternatives
Chillies (Capsicum species)	Widespread adoption replacing earlier black pepper dominance	Integrated into traditional recipes; created new spice blends	Some temple preparations maintain pre-chilli spicing
Tomatoes	Selective incorporation in coastal fish preparations	Used as souring agent alongside traditional kokum, tamarind	Traditional recipes often specify either/or usage
Potatoes	Gradual adoption for specific preparations	Developed distinctly Saraswat potato preparations (batata song)	Sweet potatoes retained in traditional festival foods
Vinegar	Limited adoption primarily in fish pickling (lonche)	Used sparingly compared to Catholic cuisine; combined with traditional preservatives	Tamarind and kokum remained primary souring agents
Cashews	Widespread adoption as the nut became locally cultivated	Integrated into sweets, desserts, garnishes	Maintained alongside traditional almonds, pistachios
Bread/wheat products	Selective incorporation	Developed Saraswat variations (patoleo, fugias) distinct from Catholic breads	Rice remained staple grain
European cooking techniques	Minimal adoption	Maintained traditional methods (steaming, simple frying, boiling)	Rejection of elaborate European techniques

Table 4 reveals selective rather than wholesale adoption of Portuguese influences, with Saraswat cuisine incorporating primarily ingredient additions (especially chillies) while maintaining traditional cooking methods and flavor principles. This pattern contrasts sharply with Goan Catholic cuisine's more extensive Portuguese fusion, suggesting that religious identity boundaries significantly mediated culinary exchange even within shared geographical contexts. The widespread adoption of chillies represents perhaps the most significant Portuguese influence, fundamentally altering heat profiles across Indian cuisines including Saraswat foodways. However, the integration of chillies into existing recipe frameworks rather than adoption of Portuguese-style preparations indicates creative adaptation rather than passive imitation.

The limited adoption of vinegar despite its centrality in Portuguese and Goan Catholic cooking exemplifies strategic selectivity. Vinegar's association with wine production carried negative connotations given Hindu prohibitions on alcohol consumption, creating ideological barriers to adoption despite its culinary utility. The preference for indigenous souring agents (kokum, tamarind, raw mango) thus maintained both religious appropriateness and

distinctive flavor identity separating Saraswat from Catholic cuisines. Similarly, the complete rejection of pork and beef consumption despite these meats' prominence in Portuguese and Catholic cooking demonstrates how religious dietary boundaries remained non-negotiable even as other adaptations occurred.

The colonial period also witnessed increased documentation of culinary practices as literacy expanded and printing technologies became available. Early community cookbooks began appearing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, representing significant shift from purely oral transmission to written codification (Local Samosa, n.d.). These texts functioned simultaneously to preserve traditional knowledge perceived as threatened by modernization and to standardize practices exhibiting regional variation, creating tensions between documentation as preservation and documentation as normative regulation.

Phase IV: Contemporary Commercialization and Heritage Tourism

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed dramatic transformation of Saraswat cuisine through commercialization in restaurant settings, integration into heritage tourism frameworks, and commodification as cultural product. This phase reflects broader trends in Indian urbanization, tourism development, and nostalgia-driven heritage consumption while raising critical questions about authenticity, ownership, and the implications of making sacred foodways publicly accessible as commercial products.

Table 5: Contemporary Commercial Manifestations of Saraswat Cuisine.

Commercial Format	Representative Examples	Target Audience	Authenticity Strategies	Transformation from Traditional Practice
Heritage Restaurants	Thalassa (Goa), Karavali (various locations)	Tourists seeking "authentic" Goan experience; urban middle-class consumers	Family recipes; traditional serving ware; narrative framing	Elevated pricing; standardized preparations; non-Saraswat staff
Hotel Restaurant Menus	Luxury resorts and heritage hotels in Goa	International and domestic tourists	"Grandmother's recipe" marketing; chef demonstrations	Simplified preparations; fusion adaptations; year-round availability
Food Festivals	Goa Food and Cultural Festival; regional heritage fairs	General public; food enthusiasts	Involvement of community cooks; demonstration formats	Performance aspect; limited menu representation
Cooking Classes	Tourist-oriented culinary workshops	International visitors seeking immersive experiences	Home kitchen settings; family-based instruction	Compressed timeframes; simplified techniques; recipe cards
Packaged Products	Ready-made spice mixes; bottled sauces; instant mixes	Diaspora communities; convenience-oriented consumers	"Authentic Saraswat" labeling; family brand associations	Industrial production; preservatives; standardized flavors
Food Tourism Trails	Heritage walks; culinary tours	Cultural tourists; heritage enthusiasts	Visits to traditional homes; temple food experiences	Curated, staged experiences; commercial intermediation

Table 5 reveals the multifaceted commercialization of Saraswat cuisine across diverse formats targeting varied audiences with different authenticity constructions. The transformation from sacred temple offerings and intimate family meals to publicly accessible commercial products represents fundamental ontological shift in the social meanings and functions of these foodways. Restaurants necessarily standardize recipes to ensure consistency, simplify preparations to enable non-expert replication, and adapt flavors to broader palates, potentially compromising the subtle, acquired-taste characteristics that define traditional Saraswat cuisine for community insiders.

The marketing strategies employed in commercial contexts frequently invoke authenticity through narratives of family inheritance, grandmother's recipes, and traditional methods. However, these authenticity claims often mask significant transformations including ingredient substitutions for cost reduction, preparation shortcuts for efficiency, and flavor modifications for mass appeal. The designation of certain dishes as "authentic Saraswat" while others are excluded creates selective canons that may not reflect the actual diversity and evolution of community food practices, raising questions about who possesses authority to define culinary authenticity.

Tourism integration has generated both opportunities and challenges for Saraswat cuisine's sustainability and cultural significance. Economic benefits include income generation for heritage restaurants, employment for traditional cooks serving as cultural ambassadors, and increased visibility supporting community pride. However,

commodification risks include trivialization of sacred food practices, appropriation by non-community commercial interests, loss of seasonal and ritual contexts that give dishes their original meanings, and pressure to "freeze" traditions to match tourist expectations rather than allowing natural evolution.

Field observations at heritage restaurants in Goa revealed various authentication strategies employed to construct credibility. Physical decor elements including traditional brass serving ware, banana leaves for serving, and architectural features evoking traditional Goan homes create atmospheric authenticity. Staff narratives about recipe origins, family traditions, and cultural meanings provide cognitive authentication. However, investigative inquiries revealed that many "traditional" recipes had been significantly modified—spice levels increased for tourist preferences, cooking times shortened for commercial efficiency, and ingredients substituted based on availability and cost. The gap between rhetorical authenticity claims and actual practice suggests that commercial Saraswat cuisine may increasingly represent simulacrum—copies without originals—rather than genuine cultural transmission.

Contemporary Social Functions and Identity Negotiations

Despite commercialization and secularization pressures, Saraswat cuisine continues to function as significant identity marker and social cohesion mechanism within GSB communities. Family gatherings, particularly during festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Navratri, feature extensive preparation of traditional dishes functioning as occasions for intergenerational knowledge transmission and community affirmation. Weddings and other life-cycle ceremonies maintain elaborate multi-course meals following traditional menus, though caterers increasingly replace family-based collective cooking that historically characterized such events.

The cuisine's role in gender identity construction and women's social positioning merits critical examination. Traditional frameworks positioned women as primary custodians of culinary knowledge, with cooking skills and ability to prepare complex festival foods serving as markers of marriageability and family status (Joaoroque Literary Journal, 2018). While this role offered women certain authority and respect within domestic domains, it simultaneously reinforced their confinement to household spheres and unpaid reproductive labor. Contemporary transformations including women's increased education and labor force participation, nuclear family structures, and commercial food availability have reduced time available for elaborate cooking, creating tensions between heritage preservation expectations and pragmatic realities.

The diaspora dimension adds additional complexity to contemporary identity negotiations. GSB communities dispersed globally through migration for education, employment, and other opportunities maintain connections to Saraswat cuisine as tangible link to community and culture. However, ingredient unavailability, time constraints, and generational cultural shifts create challenges for traditional practice maintenance. Online recipe repositories, YouTube cooking demonstrations, and social media groups dedicated to Saraswat cuisine represent contemporary strategies for knowledge transmission and community building across geographical distances, though these digital mediations transform cooking from embodied practice to visual performance and information transfer.

Regional Variations and Comparative Analysis

The geographical dispersal of GSB communities created distinct regional variations in Saraswat cuisine while maintaining recognizable family resemblances. Comparative analysis between Goan and South Canara manifestations reveals both shared core principles and context-specific adaptations.

Table 6: Regional Variations in Saraswat Cuisine: Goa versus South Canara.

Culinary Element	Goa	South Canara (Mangalore Region)	Underlying Factors
Primary Souring Agents	Kokum dominant; tamarind secondary	Tamarind dominant; kokum less common	Local botanical availability; historical trade patterns
Seafood Varieties	Mackerel, pomfret, prawns, local catches	Wider variety including extensive shellfish use	Different coastal ecologies; fishing traditions
Spice Intensity	Moderate, subtle flavor emphasis	Generally more robust, influenced by Mangalorean cuisine	Neighboring cultural influences; local spice cultivation
Coconut Usage	Extensive in both savory and sweet preparations	Extensive; more varied coconut-based gravies	Shared coastal ecology; coconut cultivation prominence
Rice Varieties	Preference for local red rice varieties	Diverse rice usage including white varieties	Agricultural traditions; local cultivation patterns
Bread Preparations	Patoleo, fugias, amboli	Dosas, idlis adapted with Saraswat modifications	Different neighboring culinary influences (Portuguese vs. South Indian)
Festival Foods	Ganesh Chaturthi modak; Diwali chaklis	Krishna Janmashtami preparations; different festival calendar emphasis	Religious calendar differences; community organization patterns
Vegetable Preparations	Specific local vegetables (tender jackfruit, cashew fruit)	Broader South Indian vegetable repertoire	Agricultural diversity; market availability

Table 6 demonstrates that regional variations result from complex interplay of ecological factors (botanical and marine resource availability), cultural influences (neighboring cuisine characteristics), historical patterns

(Portuguese colonization in Goa; South Indian cultural context in Canara), and community organization (different temple networks; festival calendars). These variations illustrate that Saraswat cuisine, while maintaining recognizable identity markers, exhibits considerable internal diversity challenging essentialist notions of singular authentic tradition. The greater spice intensity in Mangalorean Saraswat cuisine compared to Goan variants reflects absorption of broader South Indian flavor preferences, while Goan versions show selective Portuguese ingredient influences (particularly in bread preparations), demonstrating how the same community adapts differently to distinct regional contexts.

The persistence of shared elements despite geographical separation and divergent influences suggests that certain core principles constitute non-negotiable identity markers. The emphasis on fresh seasonal ingredients, preference for subtle rather than aggressive spicing, centrality of coconut and rice, and particular combinations of sweet-sour-spicy flavors characterize Saraswat cuisine across regions. These commonalities enable mutual recognition among community members despite recipe variations, functioning as embodied markers of shared identity that transcend geographical boundaries.

Heritage Designation and Policy Implications

Recent initiatives toward heritage designation and cultural protection for Saraswat cuisine reflect growing recognition of food as intangible cultural heritage worthy of preservation. However, heritagization processes raise complex questions about boundaries, authority, and consequences of official recognition.

The potential application for Geographical Indication (GI) status for specific Saraswat preparations would parallel successful cases like Darjeeling tea or Basmati rice, offering legal protection against appropriation while enhancing market positioning (Rangnekar, 2011). However, determining eligible products, defining authentic preparation standards, and establishing governance structures present significant challenges. The internal diversity of Saraswat cuisine across regions and families complicates standardization required for GI designation, potentially necessitating choices between different variants that could generate community conflicts.

UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage framework offers alternative recognition mechanism emphasizing living practice preservation rather than product standardization. However, UNESCO processes require demonstration of heritage's vitality within community practice, community-based safeguarding measures, and broad community consent—criteria that may be difficult to establish given commercialization trends, generational shifts, and diaspora dispersal. Furthermore, international heritage designation could paradoxically accelerate commodification as global recognition attracts commercial interest and tourist attention.

State-level heritage initiatives in Goa, including proposals for Saraswat cuisine inclusion in cultural tourism packages and potential establishment of heritage food museums, offer more localized approaches but raise questions about governmental role in cultural preservation and potential bureaucratic standardization of living traditions. The involvement of tourism departments in heritage designation creates unavoidable commercial dimensions potentially compromising preservation objectives with development imperatives.

Recommendations

For Community Stakeholders

Documentation Initiatives: Community organizations should prioritize systematic documentation of traditional recipes, preparation methods, and associated cultural knowledge before generational transmission breaks occur. Documentation should employ multimedia formats (video demonstrations, oral histories, written recipes) and involve diverse community members representing regional and generational variations. However, documentation should avoid prescriptive standardization that constrains natural evolution.

Intergenerational Transmission Programs: Structured programs facilitating knowledge transfer from elder practitioners to younger generations, including cooking workshops, mentorship programs, and family documentation projects, can supplement weakening informal transmission mechanisms. These should emphasize not merely recipe mechanics but cultural contexts, symbolic meanings, and social functions.

Heritage Recognition Pursuit: Community consensus-building around potential GI designation or UNESCO intangible heritage application, while navigating internal diversity and avoiding commercialization acceleration, could enhance visibility and preservation support. Any heritage designation should maintain community control over representation and benefit distribution.

For Tourism and Hospitality Sectors

Authentic Experience Design: Tourism operators should develop experiential offerings providing genuine cultural immersion rather than superficial consumption, including temple food experiences with proper contextual framing, home dining programs supporting community members economically, and culinary trails connecting food to broader cultural landscapes.

Community Benefit Mechanisms: Commercial use of Saraswat cuisine should incorporate revenue-sharing with community organizations, employment of community members as cultural interpreters, and support for cultural preservation initiatives to ensure benefits flow to heritage bearers rather than external appropriators.

Ethical Marketing: Tourism marketing should avoid exoticization, essentialization, or misrepresentation of Saraswat cuisine, instead employing community voices in representation and acknowledging cuisine's living, evolving nature rather than presenting it as frozen tradition.

For Policy Makers

Supportive Regulatory Frameworks: Government policies should facilitate temple food operations, community-based culinary tourism, and traditional ingredient sourcing while maintaining appropriate food safety oversight. Regulations should be calibrated to traditional small-scale operations rather than imposing industrial standards incompatible with heritage practice.

Heritage Infrastructure: Investment in facilities supporting heritage food documentation, presentation, and transmission, including community culinary centers, heritage food museums, and documentation resource centers, can provide physical infrastructure for preservation efforts.

Integrated Cultural Policy: Saraswat cuisine preservation should be integrated into broader cultural heritage policies addressing language, arts, and religious practices, recognizing food's interconnections with these other heritage dimensions rather than treating it as isolated domain.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has traced the evolutionary trajectory of Saraswat cuisine from its origins in temple-centered vegetarian practices through migration-driven coastal adaptation to contemporary commercial manifestations, revealing cuisine as dynamic cultural system negotiating religious orthodoxy, ecological constraints, and socio-economic change. The findings demonstrate that Saraswat foodways function as living archives encoding historical experiences, theological principles, migration memories, and community identity while exhibiting remarkable adaptive capacity.

The conceptualization of fish as "fruits of the sea" exemplifies sophisticated theological reasoning enabling pragmatic dietary adaptation without abandoning religious identity, challenging simplistic narratives of either rigid tradition or wholesale modernization. The spatial differentiation between temple vegetarianism and household seafood incorporation demonstrates strategic orthodoxy maintenance in symbolically central domains while allowing peripheral variation. Regional variations between Goa and South Canara illustrate how shared community identity accommodates geographical diversity through common core principles permitting local adaptation.

Contemporary commercialization through heritage restaurants, tourism integration, and commodity packaging represents both opportunity and threat for Saraswat cuisine's sustainability. Economic benefits include income generation, employment, and enhanced visibility supporting community pride. However, commercialization risks include ontological transformation from sacred to profane, standardization reducing diversity, appropriation by external interests, and pressure toward authenticity simulation rather than living practice. Heritage designation initiatives through GI protection or UNESCO recognition offer potential preservation support but carry dangers of bureaucratic standardization and commodification acceleration.

The theoretical contributions of this research extend beyond Saraswat cuisine specifics to illuminate broader processes of religious dietary adaptation, heritage commodification, culinary identity negotiation, and the complex relationships between continuity and change in cultural practices. The study demonstrates that heritage preservation cannot mean freezing traditions at particular historical moments but must accommodate ongoing evolution while supporting transmission of core values and knowledge systems to new generations and contexts.

FUTURE SCOPE

This research opens several promising avenues for future investigation:

1. **Comparative Studies:** Future research could compare Saraswat culinary adaptation with other Brahmin communities (such as Kashmiri Pandits, Bengali Brahmins, or Tamil Brahmins) to understand variations in religious dietary negotiation across different ecological and historical contexts.
2. **Generational Perspectives:** Longitudinal studies examining how younger generations of Saraswats navigate traditional foodways in urban, diaspora, and globalized contexts would provide insights into intergenerational transmission and transformation of culinary heritage.
3. **Sustainability Assessment:** Quantitative research assessing the environmental sustainability of Saraswat cuisine's seafood practices, including fishing methods, species selection, and seasonal consumption patterns, could contribute to sustainable gastronomy tourism development.
4. **Economic Impact Analysis:** Comprehensive economic studies measuring the financial contributions of Saraswat cuisine to local economies through heritage restaurants, food tourism, and cultural festivals would support evidence-based policy development.
5. **Digital Documentation:** Creating comprehensive digital archives documenting Saraswat recipes, cooking techniques, ritual practices, and oral histories would support preservation efforts and educational initiatives while making heritage accessible to researchers and community members globally.
6. **Tourism Development:** Action research examining optimal models for sustainable gastronomy tourism development in Saraswat communities could balance economic benefits with cultural preservation, providing practical guidance for heritage tourism initiatives.
7. **Nutritional Analysis:** Scientific studies analyzing the nutritional composition and health benefits of traditional Saraswat dishes could contribute to contemporary wellness tourism and health-focused culinary heritage promotion.

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