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### Review Article

## Himachali dham: Food, culture, and heritage

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### ABSTRACT

Dham, a popular traditional feast prepared during marriages, local festivals, and special occasions of Himachal Pradesh, is a complete food not only according to Ayurveda but also nutritionally. The ethnic foods, include *rajmah madra*, *kadi*, *khatta*, *sepu badi*, and so forth, exhibit a treasure of food heritage and are an integral component of the diet of the people in the state. The cuisine is developed keeping in mind not only the geographical and climatic conditions of the state but also according to the traditional methods under natural conditions mostly from the staple ingredients.

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पूजयेदशनं नतियं अद्याच्चैनमकुत्सयन् ।

दृष्ट्वा दृष्येत् प्रसीदेच्च प्रतनिन्देच्च सर्वशः ॥

पूजति ह्यशनं नयिं बलमूर्जं च यच्छति ।

अपूजति तु तद्भुक्तं उभयं नाशयेददिं ॥

(Manusmriti, 2.51–52, 57)

[Devnagri Script]

*“Food should always be worshipped and taken with the utmost reverence. The sight of food should delight one’s heart and fill it with joy. It should always be cherished whatever the situation.”*

(Manusmriti, 2.51–52, 57)

### 1. Introduction

Himachal Pradesh, a northern mountainous state of India, is famous for its rich diversity in terms of traditions, culture, dress, language, and art. The rich culture and traditions of Himachal

Pradesh are reflected in its cuisine that encompasses a wide range of delicacies enriching the palate with a plethora of aroma and taste [1]. The food is different in terms of taste, variety, and style of cooking; be it north, south, central east, or west India, each part has its own distinct quality, yet woven together with the common thread of spices and mouth-watering flavors. The difficult terrain acts as a fortress safeguarding the state’s culture and traditions from external influences, and one can still witness the prevalence of age-old traditions in the rural pockets of the state during its fairs, festivals, and social ceremonies [2].

*Dham*, a local term for lunch/traditional feast prepared in *Himachali* style and served during ceremonies, provides an opportunity to be familiarized with the delicacies of the state. It is very hard to separate Himachal Pradesh and *dham* as it forms an integral part of *Himachali* traditions. *Himachali dham* is not just an insignia of tradition but also a mark of practical “Vedic” knowledge and is, thus, not only popular in Himachal Pradesh but also loved across the world. It is believed that initially *dham* was served in the temples as *prasad*, and hence, the entire meal is *satwik*. However, eventually, *dham* is now served during every auspicious occasion and gathering such as marriages, family events, and religious events in Himachal Pradesh. Another unique aspect of *dham* is that usually no vegetables are used in any of the

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dishes. It is purely made from various types of lentils and dairy products [3].

*Charak Samhita* talks about the importance of *Ahaar* and *Vihaar*. *Ahaar* means right food that is the combination of *Satvic*, *Rajsic*, and *Tamsic* food. *Satvic* food is nonstimulating and energy-providing food. *Rajsic* food consists of delicacies, which stimulates body and mind. They often cause aggressiveness and irritability, whereas *Tamsic* food is considered detrimental causing sedative effects [4]. *Dham*, which earlier was served in the temples as *prasad*, was prepared in a *satvic* manner, avoiding garlic and onions and using *dahi*, *khoya*, and a unique mixture of spices. *Vihaar* stands for right recreational activity. *Himachali dham* is held during marriage ceremonies, religious events, family functions, and other social gatherings that provide a perfect spot for relaxation, recreation, and relationship.

## 2. History

Chamba, one of the most beautiful regions of Himachal Pradesh, was saved by the mighty Dhauladhars from the successive waves of Muhammadan invasion. When just like the plains in Kashmir, Sikandar Butshikan ruthlessly destroyed the temples built by Lalitaditya and his successors, the sacred mountains of Dhauladhars protected Hinduism and Chamba till eternity. The brazen-carved cedar wood idols of Meru Verman at the ancient shrines are the glorious testaments of the same. Thanks to the mighty snow-clad mountain barriers for even protecting the Himachali cuisine, which since the Vedic era has remained intact and untouched by the Islamic cuisine.

The legend has it that the kings of Chamba were the descendants of Kusha, the son of Lord Ram. It is said that Raja Meru came from Ayodhya at an early age and conquered the mountains. King Jaisthambh, one of the descendants of Raja Meru, was so bewitched by the Kashmiri foods that he wished to recreate those Kashmiri dishes in the local Chamba tradition with the complete yield of the province, to be offered to the local Goddess for her benevolence. In that period, Chamba was known for *rajmah* (red kidney beans), a variety of spices, and milk. The unification of the style of cooking of Chamba and Kashmir and the amalgamation of the local crops led to the creation of a novel dish *madra*, and hence, *dham* came into the fore. *Madra* is cooked in ghee/oil, and the uniqueness of this dish lies in its taste, wherein it is possible to perceive all the unique flavors individually, without the overwhelming flavors of onions and tomatoes [5].

Legends have it that the now famous *Kangri madra* was brought by the brides of Chamba to Kangra. However, owing to the local unavailability of *rajmah*, it underwent a transformation and *kabuli chana/chhole* (chickpea), instead of *rajmah*, is now used to prepare the now famous *Kangri madra*. In fact, the *madra* has become a cuisine technique. Almost every district of Himachal Pradesh has its own unique *madra* being served in *dham*s from time immemorial.

## 3. Preparations of dham

Firewood required for cooking food is called "*samdah*". The village priest suggests an auspicious date, months before *dham*'s actual date, and all the villagers are invited on that day. Men cut the firewood, and women cook food for them while singing folk songs.

Cooking authentic *Himachali* cuisine is an extremely laborious and time-consuming task, which generally takes approximately 12 hours for preparation. As *dham* in ancient times was offered to Gods in the temples, and owing to the caste system and some religious customs prevalent at that time, only a group of Brahmin cooks known as "*botis*" used to prepare the *dham*. For many centuries, these *botis* have preserved the secret recipes of the *dham* and have handed them to their younger generations just by the word of mouth. Even now, every village has a *boti* of its own, who cooks authentic dishes to be served as a *dham* during festivals and community functions. *Botis* usually wear a *dhoti* and cook/serve the whole *dham* barefoot and are very strict about the hygiene and sanitation inside the kitchen, so much so that during the preparation of *dham*, people must enter the kitchen barefoot and have to first clean their hands, only then work is assigned to them [5,6]. In ancient times, after the completion of *dham*, every *boti* was given a bagful of wheat for his services.

## 4. Dham cooking room/rasialu

The temporary kitchen is usually built outside the main house with bamboo sticks as main pillars and steel sheets as roof. The preparations for *dham* begin a night before when all the containers are collected from people in the village/town. In the morning, every villager brings milk and buttermilk to the temporarily created kitchen; being an agrarian society, most of them have these things in abundance at home. Many times, some vegetables such as pumpkins and so forth are also arranged within the villages, depending on the season. After finishing their work at home, all villagers come together and help *botis* in cutting vegetables and arranging other stuff such as spices and so forth. Almost every family in the village participates in this work.

The food is cooked in a long 6 × 2 feet trench with the help of firewood. The deep trench with fire is called "*char*" or "*tiun*" and has various other names (Fig. 1B). As already discussed, firewood used for cooking *dham* and dry wood are arranged few weeks in advance. Before preparing the *dham*, *botis* worship the *char/tiun* and then start the cooking process. This traditional method helps in destroying the harmful germs in the surrounding area of the kitchen [5–7].

## 5. Cooking and serving style

Thick copper and brass vessels called "*Charoti*" or "*Batloi*" with broad base and narrow opening are used for cooking (Fig. 1A),



**Fig. 1.** (A) *Panihara*, a person responsible for filling water, cleaning, and washing utensils. His duty is to clean the *paintn* area after each batch finishes partaking food. In this figure, he is cleaning the *Charoti/Batloi*. *Charoti/Batloi* is brass or copper vessels used for cooking *dham*. (B) *Boti* (Brahmin cook) is preparing *dham* in *batloi/charoti* in a deep trench with fire, called "*Char*" or "*Tiun*". (C) The food is served to people sitting in *paintn*/lines on the ground in leaf plates called *pattals*, made of dried leaves of *tour/sal* or banyan trees.

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