



Cuisine Of Lucknow And Hindi Cinema: A Cultural Analysis

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Abstract-

This paper explores the concerted relationship between Lucknow's rich culinary heritage and its representation in Indian cinema. The city's iconic cuisine, characterized by kababs, biryani, and sheermal, has been a recurring theme in Bollywood films, showcasing its cultural significance and allure. Films like 'Tanu Weds Manu' and 'Ishaqzaade' have not only highlighted Lucknow's architectural and picturesque settings but also its delectable food, introducing the city's culinary identity to the world. This study examines how cinema has contributed to the popularization of Lucknow's cuisine, promoting a cross cultural understanding and appreciation. Through a critical analysis of film narratives and culinary traditions, this research paper is an attempt towards highlighting the intersection of food and cinema which has played a significant role in shaping Lucknow's cultural narrative, making its cuisine an integral part of India's gastronomic and cinematic landscape.

Keywords: Lucknow, cuisine, cinema, Bollywood, gastronomy

The legendary city of Lucknow renowned all over the world for its rich heritage and culture has been adorned with the title of being the '**Creative City of Gastronomy**' by UNESCO in October 2025. This recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy is a testament to Lucknow's deep-rooted culinary traditions and vibrant food ecosystem. "This designation not only honours the city's rich cultural legacy but also opens new avenues for international collaboration. As UNESCO continues to strengthen a global network where culture and creativity support local initiatives, attract investment, and promote social cohesion, Lucknow's inclusion reinforces the powerful role of gastronomy as key element of cultural identity and a driver of sustainable development."-**Tim Curtis** Director and Representative, UNESCO Regional Office for South Asia said.¹ Lucknow is famed for its nawabi cuisine, characterized by the art of slow cooking and preparation of aromatic dishes like the galouti kababs, nihari kulcha, and biryani.

The culinary art of Lucknow is deep rooted in Nawabi traditions and at the same time carries prominent features of the royal Mughlai food. The art of Awadhi cooking and cuisine has been popularized in Indian cinema through movies and scenes celebrating the rich, regal and delicate flavours of the Lukhnawi Dastarkhwan.

Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, is known all over the world as the 'City of Nawabs'. The city flourished as the centre of culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under the patronage of the nawabs of Awadh. The city boasts of an array of architectural marvels that span centuries. However, beyond its monumental history, the city is a haven for culinary enthusiasts, offering an abundance of delectable food including vegetarian and non vegetarian dishes, along with the local street food. The Nawabs of Awadh were famous for the extravagance and patronage given by them to various artists and craftsmen. One of the arts that flourished well and gained prominence under the Nawabs was the art of cooking.



Tunday Kababi

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The cuisines from the kitchens of Awadh were the most sought after. The chefs of Awadh enhanced the traditional dastarkhwan with elaborate dishes like kababs, kormas, kaliya, nihari kulchas, zarda, sheermal, roomali rotis, and parathas. It would be right to say therefore, that the food from the dastarkhwan of Awadh is an experience of aromas and visual delights. Cuisine is a word of French origin that means "kitchen", but it originally comes from the Latin word coquere, which means "to cook". The foods and methods of preparation are traditional and local to a region or population. The cuisine of Lucknow has always been celebrated, along with the performing and culinary arts flourishing under royal patronage. Awadhi cuisine, characterized by inventive techniques, reflects the Nawabs' commitment to culinary excellence. Unique cooking methods like Dum style, Dhungar style, Galavat, Ghee Durust, Loab, Baghar, Gile Hikmat, were developed and popularized by Awadh's Rakabdars (Chefs) and the Bawarchis (Cooks). Besides, the novel and innovative procedures the utensils used for Awadhi cooking were also unique. Worth mentioning here are the Bhagona or the patili, degchi or the pear shaped pot, lagan or the shallow concave utensil and seni or the big round tray. Most of these utensils were made of brass or copper and were used for producing the culinary delights of the dastarkhwan of Awadh. It would be worth quoting here that "*Pahle taam badahu kalam*" i.e. first food and then communication applied well to the nawabi style of food spread which was like a wide canvas used for creating a variety of recipes. The masalachi i.e. the one in charge of preparing a blend of masalas/spices, Bawarchis i.e. the cooks and the Raqabdars, those who served the food perfected the art and the finesse in cooking to such a great extent that it was not to be found in any other part of the country. Abdul Halim Sharar's work on Lucknow mentions in detail certain episodes related to the gastronomical delights of the royal Awadhi kitchen. King Ghazi ud din Haider's chef was known for preparing parathas for him. He is reported to have used thirty seers of ghee in six parathas which speaks largely of the richness of the royal dastarkhwan. Another

interesting anecdote deals with Malika Kishwar wife of Nawab Amjad Ali Shah whose breakfast spread consisted of rogini tikia (bread rich in ghee) and balai (cream). During summers a cooling drink was made of diluted pearls and was served before lunch. Her dinner was a lavish affair where the menu consisted of twenty to thirty items. The dastarkhwan boasted of two or three types of pulaos, several kinds of qormas, kababs, strong broths of meat, vegetables, dates and sweets.²

Lukhnawi cuisine as evident from the examples above brings to the imagination all things rich and royal. It has its own distinct individuality and identity which has been presented on the silver screen often by the film industry. Films are responsible for portrayal of architecture, music, dance and traditions of different regions alongside the complex processes of globalization, modernization, nationalism and other important terms which in technical language people are not very much aware of. Some films which highlight the Lucknow culture with a focus on cuisine include-*Dawat e Ishq*, *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, *Tanu weds Manu* and *Ishaqzaade* to name a few.

The film *Daawat e Ishq*, though set in Hyderabad is extensively shot in Lucknow and can be aptly described as a deliciously romantic film showcasing the Lukhnawi cuisine. This film is a 2014 Indian Hindi language romantic comedy directed by Habib Faisal, and produced by Aditya Chopra under the banner of Yash Raj Films. It stars Parineeti Chopra, Aditya Roy Kapur and Anupam Kher in the lead roles.³ In the film, Gulrez (Parineeti Chopra), the lead character lives with her clerk father (Anupam Kher) in an ordinary muslim neighbourhood in Hyderabad. As Gulrez navigated her desires and expectations, she began to explore ways to fund her aspirations. Meanwhile, her honest father, though hesitant, wanted the best for his daughter. Fed up of the dowry business, Gulrez decides to dupe unsuspecting grooms with section 498A related to dowry related harassment to fund her American dream. Her honest father hesitates to assist her in this plan but ultimately gives in. They shift to Lucknow with a new identity. Among the proposals there is Tariq Haider (Aditya Roy Kapoor), whose swaggering attitude and culinary business makes him an ideal candidate. But then the aroma of love spreads without notice and we are in for a delectable ride.⁴ Director Habib Faisal's culinary storytelling is a feast for the senses. He very intricately weaves food into his narratives, making the mouth water and the heart flutter. In this film he has very beautifully showcased the rich Lucknow kababs with biryani taking center stage, sparking a romance that's as savory as it is sweet. *Daawat e Ishq* (2014) effectively used Lucknow's food culture and traditional architecture to ground its romantic comedy in a specific cultural context.⁵



Daawat e Ishq

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Shatranj ke Khiladi, (1977), an adaptation of Munshi Prem Chand's literary work directed by Satyajit Ray very aptly represents the essence of Lucknow vividly highlighting the culinary delights of Lucknow. The film refers to various varieties of pulav and biryani,⁶ which formed an important element of the food spread in Lucknow. In Premchand's short story, the narrator begins by telling us that 'It was the era of Wajid Ali Shah' and goes on to describe sarcastically the social life of Lucknow whose every aspect was steeped in luxury and idleness. Indifferent to the world outside, the people of Lucknow are passionately absorbed in activities like kite-flying, cock-fighting, dance, music, festive parties and other activities of merry making.⁷

Tanu Weds Manu (2011), a romantic comedy film, brings together Kangana Ranaut and R. Madhavan in a hilarious tale of arranged marriage and quirky relationships. Set against the charming backdrop of Lucknow, the film showcases the city's quaint homes, streets, and alleys, adding to its charm. In the film

shot in Lucknow and Kanpur the culture and cuisine of the nawabi city has been often referred to. The characters are shown navigating the culinary scene of the city.

Another popular film *Bullet Raja* (2013), featuring Saif Ali Khan and Jimmy Sheirgill, is set amidst the gritty world of Uttar Pradesh's mafia and underworld. The movie, which has been shot in Lucknow, features some beautiful locations which showcase the local flavour and the nooks and corners of the city. Hazratganj's homes, with stained glass and high ceilings, add an unspoken charm and authenticity to the movie.⁸ Lucknow's culinary pride isn't just about its legendary non-vegetarian dishes even its vegetarian delights, especially the lip-smacking chaat and savouries, are equally iconic, putting the city on the gastronomic map. Therefore, besides the traditional foods of Lucknow, the chaat, desserts and paan of Lucknow also find mention on the silver screen.

Apart from being showcased in cinema the food of Lucknow has also been a major attraction for the cast and crew of the films shot in the city. The visiting stars are often filmed eating at popular food joints of Lucknow. From Tunday kababi to Royal Café chaat the big Bollywood stars are found enjoying the Lucknowi cuisine in different parts of the city. Every celebrity who visits Lucknow, has only one priority and that's having Lucknow food. More often the A-listers of Bollywood prefer to eat at a local joint to experience the city's authentic flavours. The list of celebrities who have visited Tunday is such that an article can be done independently on the topic. Beginning with the likes of Dileep Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan to Shahrukh Khan, Ranbir Kapoor and many new actors the city has hosted a plethora of stars for its variety of delectable food ranging from the kababs and biryanis to chaat, kulfi, malai makkhan, khasta-kachori and the unparalleled mangoes.

Cinema explores the customs, manner of living, tells about historical past of people and place helping on the one hand understand and know themselves and on the other hand contributing to the creation and dissemination of its image in the world.⁹ Uttar Pradesh's capital city, has been a magnet for Hindi films, and the city's inhabitants are very expressive in their admiration for the stars. Bollywood films often feature the local cuisine, such as biryani and chaat, featuring them as the most popular dish on the set. Lucknow's love for Bollywood is fuelled by the perfect blend of energetic crowds, picturesque settings, mouth-watering food, and a dash of rich Indian heritage. Lucknow's rich culinary heritage and vibrant film culture are a perfect blend, showcasing the city's unique flavour to the world. Through cinema, the city's iconic dishes like kababs, biryani, sheermal, paan and aam (mango) are not just tantalizing taste buds but also becoming ambassadors of Lucknow's rich cultural legacy. Films set in Lucknow often use food as a narrative device, weaving tales of love, community, and tradition, and introducing the city's culinary delights to a global audience. This fusion of film and food fosters cross-cultural understanding, inspiring the new generation to appreciate and celebrate Lucknow's heritage.

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