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# Traditional Food And Mental Health Among Youth: A Comprehensive Review

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## Abstract

**Background:** The mental health of youth is a growing concern globally, and dietary practices are increasingly recognized as a contributing factor. In India, traditional food practices are deeply intertwined with cultural identity and have been hypothesized to influence mental health. This review aims to explore the relationship between traditional Indian food and mental health among youth, covering studies from 2000 to 2020.

**Objective:** The objective of this comprehensive review is to evaluate and synthesize research findings on how traditional Indian dietary patterns impact mental health among Indian youth. By consolidating existing evidence, this review seeks to provide insights into the potential benefits and limitations of traditional diets in promoting mental well-being.

**Methods:** A comprehensive search of databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar was conducted using keywords such as "traditional Indian food," "mental health," "youth," and "dietary patterns." Studies published between 2000 and 2020 that focused on Indian youth and examined the impact of traditional foods on mental health were included. Data were extracted on study design, sample size, population characteristics, and key findings. The quality of the studies was assessed, and results were synthesized.

**Results:** A total of 30 studies met the inclusion criteria. The findings suggest that traditional Indian diets, which are often rich in vegetables, legumes, and spices, are generally associated with positive mental health outcomes. Specifically, adherence to traditional dietary patterns was linked to lower levels of depression and anxiety in several studies. However, some studies reported mixed results, indicating that the impact of traditional diets may vary based on factors such as socioeconomic status, lifestyle, and urban versus rural settings.

**Conclusion:** The review highlights that traditional Indian foods may have a beneficial impact on mental health among youth, but the evidence is not uniform. The benefits of traditional diets can be influenced by various factors, including overall lifestyle and socioeconomic conditions. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes and examine the interplay between dietary patterns and psychosocial factors to better understand the relationship between traditional diets and mental health.

**Keywords:** Traditional Food, Mental Health and Youth.

## **Introduction**

### **Dietary Patterns and Mental Health**

Diet has long been recognized as a critical factor influencing physical health, but its role in mental health is gaining increasing attention. Emerging research in nutritional psychiatry suggests that dietary patterns can significantly affect mental health outcomes, including mood, cognitive function, and overall psychological well-being. Various nutrients and dietary components have been associated with mental health conditions, including vitamins, minerals, omega-3 fatty acids, and antioxidants (Miller et al., 2019).

For youth, who are undergoing significant physical and psychological development, the impact of diet on mental health can be particularly pronounced. Adolescents and young adults are vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, which can be exacerbated by poor dietary habits. Nutritional deficiencies or imbalances during this critical developmental period may contribute to or worsen mental health problems (Sarris et al., 2015).

### **Traditional Indian Diets**

In India, dietary practices are deeply influenced by cultural, religious, and regional factors, resulting in a diverse range of traditional diets. These diets typically emphasize the consumption of a variety of grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and spices, which are believed to offer a range of health benefits. For instance, traditional Indian meals often include ingredients like turmeric, which contains curcumin, known for its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, and has been linked to improvements in mood and cognitive function. (Reddy, P., & Sharma, N. 2020).

Traditional Indian diets vary significantly across regions due to differences in local ingredients, climate, and cultural practices. North Indian diets often feature wheat-based staples like roti and paratha, with an emphasis on dairy products and legumes (Khanna, 2017). South Indian diets are predominantly rice-based, with dishes like dosa and idli being

staples (Pant, 2018). East Indian diets include a significant amount of rice and fish, with dishes like macher jhol being common (Sood, 2015). West Indian diets, particularly in Gujarat and Maharashtra, are characterized by a mix of wheat and rice, and diverse vegetable dishes (Tiwari, 2016).

Ayurveda, the ancient system of medicine originating from India, plays a crucial role in shaping traditional Indian diets. According to Frawley (2000), Ayurvedic principles emphasize the balance of the three doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha) and influence dietary choices based on individual constitution and seasonal changes. This holistic approach promotes the consumption of foods that balance bodily energies and support overall health.

Traditional Indian diets are often praised for their health benefits, owing to their use of diverse and nutrient-rich foods. Research highlights the role of spices such as turmeric and cumin, which are integral to Indian cooking and offer anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties (Krishna, 2019). Furthermore, the emphasis on plant-based foods and moderate use of animal products aligns with contemporary recommendations for a balanced diet (Pant, 2018).

Modern interpretations of traditional Indian diets reflect a blend of historical practices with contemporary dietary trends. Krishna (2019) explores how traditional recipes are adapted to fit modern lifestyles while maintaining their cultural essence. This adaptation helps preserve traditional dietary practices while making them accessible and relevant to current health trends.

Traditional Indian food practices also reflect a balance of taste, temperature, and texture, aiming to achieve nutritional and therapeutic benefits. The inclusion of spices such as ginger, cumin, and coriander, along with fresh fruits and vegetables, is thought to enhance digestive health, reduce inflammation, and support mental well-being (Kumar et al., 2017).

### **Mental Health Issues among Indian Youth**

According to the National Youth Policy (NYP) 2014, youth in India are defined as individuals aged 15-29 years, which constitutes approximately 27.5% of the population or 33 crore people (National Youth Policy 2014, 2014). Mental health issues among Indian youth are a growing concern, with increasing prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress reported in recent years. According to the National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-16), approximately 7.3% of adolescents aged 13-17 years experienced mental health disorders, with anxiety and depressive disorders being the most common (NIMHANS, 2016). The rise in mental health issues among youth can be attributed to various factors, including academic pressure, socio-economic challenges, and rapid urbanization.

The impact of traditional diets on mental health in Indian youth is a critical area of investigation. Traditional diets might offer protective benefits against mental health issues, but modern dietary shifts and lifestyle changes could influence these outcomes. For example, the increasing adoption of Western dietary patterns, characterized by high consumption of processed foods and low nutritional value, may counteract the benefits of traditional diets and contribute to the rise in mental health problems (Micha et al., 2017).

## **Rational for the Review**

Despite the potential benefits of traditional Indian diets, there is a need for a systematic evaluation of the evidence linking these diets to mental health outcomes among Indian youth. Existing research on this topic is diverse, and findings are not always consistent. Some studies suggest that traditional diets positively influence mental health, while others report mixed or inconclusive results.

This review aims to address these inconsistencies by comprehensively analyzing the literature from 2000 to 2020. By evaluating the evidence on traditional Indian food practices and their impact on mental health, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how traditional diets affect mental well-being in Indian youth. The findings could inform public health policies, dietary guidelines, and interventions aimed at improving mental health outcomes among young people in India.

The rationale for conducting a comprehensive review on the relationship between traditional food and mental health among Indian youth from 2000 to 2020 is grounded in several key factors:

### **1. Rising Mental Health Concerns:**

There is a growing recognition of mental health issues among Indian youth, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, and stress. Understanding the role of dietary factors, specifically traditional food, in influencing mental health outcomes can provide valuable insights for prevention and intervention strategies.

### **2. Significance of Traditional Diets:**

Traditional Indian diets are known for their rich nutritional profile and cultural significance. These diets often include a variety of nutrient-dense foods that may impact mental health positively. However, with increasing globalization and urbanization, dietary patterns are shifting towards processed foods. Reviewing the existing literature can help assess how traditional foods influence mental health amidst these changes.

### **3. Lack of Comprehensive Synthesis:**

Although individual studies have explored aspects of traditional food and mental health, there has been a lack of comprehensive synthesis of this body of research. A comprehensive review can aggregate findings, identify trends, and provide a holistic understanding of the relationship between traditional food consumption and mental health outcomes.

### **4. Cultural and Regional Relevance:**

India's diverse cultural and regional dietary practices mean that traditional foods vary significantly across the country. Analyzing the relationship between traditional diets and mental health within this context can uncover region-specific patterns and cultural nuances that are essential for tailored health recommendations.

### **5. Evidence-Based Policy and Practice:**

The findings from this review can inform policymakers, healthcare providers, and educators about the potential benefits of incorporating traditional foods into dietary guidelines and mental health interventions. Evidence-based recommendations can help integrate traditional food practices into modern nutritional strategies to enhance mental well-being.

### **6. Addressing Modernization Effects:**

People's eating habits have changed as cities and towns have grown, with fewer people eating traditional foods. Figuring out how these changes affect mental health can help people protect healthy eating habits from the past and lessen the bad effects of current eating trends.

### **7. Gap in Existing Research:**

The review aims to fill in gaps in previous research by putting together results from the last 20 years and looking at the effects of traditional diets on mental health in a planned way. That's why this all-around approach can help show where more study is needed and give us a fuller picture of how diet affects mental health.

### **8. Promoting Holistic Health Approaches:**

Taking a more holistic approach to health can be helped by combining old-fashioned food habits with new nutritional science. The review looks at the connection between traditional foods and mental health to help create balanced diets that honour cultural history while also dealing with modern health problems.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this comprehensive review is to comprehensively evaluate and synthesize existing research on the relationship between traditional Indian dietary patterns and mental health outcomes among Indian youth, focusing on studies published from 2000 to 2020. The review aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

### **1. Evaluate the Impact of Traditional Indian Diets on Mental Health**

The primary objective of this review is to assess how adherence to traditional Indian dietary practices influences mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and overall well-being among Indian youth. By analyzing empirical evidence from various studies, the review seeks to determine whether traditional diets are associated with positive, neutral, or negative effects on mental health. This includes examining the nutritional components of traditional diets that might contribute to mental health benefits or risks.

### **2. Identify Common Finding and Patterns**

A secondary objective is to identify and summarize common findings and patterns across the literature. This involves aggregating results from diverse studies to highlight recurring themes, such as specific dietary components that are consistently associated with mental health improvements or challenges. By synthesizing these patterns, the review aims to provide a clearer understanding of the overall impact of traditional Indian diets on mental health.

### **3. Explore the Influence of Socioeconomic and lifestyle Factors**

The review will also look at how lifestyle, socioeconomic class, and location (urban vs. rural) may affect the link between traditional diets and mental health. It is important to understand these background factors in order to make sense of the differences in study results and figure out how different groups of people might react differently to traditional meals.

### **4. Highlight Gaps and Recommend Future Research Directions**

An important purpose of this review is to identify gaps in the current literature and suggest areas for future research. By pinpointing methodological limitations, inconsistencies in findings, and under-researched aspects of the topic, the review aims to provide recommendations for future studies. This includes suggesting

more rigorous research designs, exploring longitudinal studies, and examining the interplay between dietary patterns and psychosocial factors.

## **5. Inform Public Health and Nutritional Guidelines**

Finally, this review aims to help make public health policies and dietary suggestions that are more relevant to Indian youth. The review aims to help the creation of dietary guidelines and other programs that promote mental health by giving evidence-based information on how traditional foods affect mental health. This is especially important because of the need for culturally suitable eating plans and the rise in mental health problems among young people.

## **Research Questions**

**The following study questions have been made to help guide this review:**

1. How do traditional Indian dietary patterns influence mental health outcomes among youth?
2. What are the common benefits or drawbacks associated with traditional Indian foods in relation to mental health?
3. How do cultural, socioeconomic, and lifestyle factors mediate the relationship between traditional diets and mental health in Indian youth?
4. What gaps exist in the current literature, and what areas require further investigation?

## **Scope and structure**

This review will comprehensively search for and analyze studies published between 2000 and 2020 that focus on Indian youth and traditional dietary patterns. The review will cover various study designs, including cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies, and randomized controlled trials, to provide a comprehensive overview of the evidence. The subsequent sections will detail the methodology used for the literature search, data extraction, and quality assessment, followed by a synthesis of findings and a discussion of implications.

By addressing these research questions and objectives, this review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how traditional Indian food practices affect mental health among youth and to inform public health strategies and dietary guidelines tailored to this population.

## **Methodology**

## **Search Strategy**

A comprehensive search was conducted across major databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar using keywords such as "traditional Indian food," "mental health," "youth," and "dietary patterns." Inclusion criteria were studies published between 2000 and 2020, focusing on Indian youth and examining traditional foods' effects on mental health outcomes.

## **Data Extraction**

Data were extracted from selected studies, including author(s), publication year, study design, sample size, population characteristics, and key findings related to traditional Indian food and mental health.

## **Quality Assessment**

Studies were evaluated for quality based on study design, methodological rigor, and relevance. The quality of evidence was classified as high, moderate, or low to assess the robustness of findings.

## **Result**

### **Overview of Studies**

There were 30 studies that met the conditions for inclusion. There were different types of designs used in these studies, such as cross-sectional polls, longitudinal studies, and randomised controlled trials. Most of the studies were done in cities, with only a few focussing on people living in rural places.

## **Impact of Traditional Food on Mental Health**

### **Positive associations**

Several studies reported positive associations between traditional Indian diets and improved mental health outcomes. For example, Sharma et al. (2018) found that a traditional Indian diet, rich in vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, was associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety among adolescents. Similarly, a study by Patel and Gupta (2016) observed that adherence to traditional dietary practices, such as consuming turmeric and other spices known for their anti-inflammatory properties, was linked to reduced symptoms of depression.

### **Mixed Findings**



The results of other studies were not as clear. One study by Desai et al. (2014) discovered that traditional foods had some health benefits, but they didn't have a significantly different effect on mental health compared to modern diets. This shows that the link between diet and mental health might be affected by things like lifestyle and socioeconomic status.

### **Cultural and Socioeconomic Influences**

The impact of traditional foods on mental health can be influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors. Research by Singh et al. (2017) highlighted that traditional diets in rural areas, which are often high in fresh produce and low in processed foods, were beneficial for mental health. In contrast, urban youth consuming traditional foods alongside a stressful lifestyle did not experience the same mental health benefits.

## **Discussion**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The review indicates that traditional Indian foods generally have a positive impact on mental health, particularly when consumed as part of a balanced diet. However, results are not consistent across all studies, and the benefits of traditional diets can be influenced by various factors, including the overall lifestyle and socioeconomic conditions of the youth.

The interpretation of findings from the comprehensive review on the relationship between traditional food and mental health among Indian youth from 2000 to 2020 reveals several key insights and implications:

#### **1. Positive Correlation Between Traditional Foods and Mental Health:**

The review consistently indicates a positive correlation between the consumption of traditional foods and improved mental health outcomes. Traditional diets, which often include a variety of nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, appear to support cognitive function and emotional well-being. These foods are rich in essential vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, which are crucial for brain health and mood regulation.

#### **2. Nutrient Density and Mental Health:**

Many studies highlight that traditional diets are typically more nutrient-dense compared to modern processed foods. Nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins, and minerals like zinc and magnesium, commonly found in traditional foods, play significant roles in mental health. The presence of these nutrients in traditional diets may contribute to reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety among youth.

#### **3. Cultural and Psychological Factors:**

Traditional foods often come with cultural and social significance, which can enhance their impact on mental health. The cultural context in which traditional foods are consumed may provide emotional support and a sense of identity and belonging, which can positively influence mental health. However, the psychological comfort derived from traditional foods should be balanced with their nutritional content to fully understand their impact.

#### **4. Impact of Modernization and Urbanization:**

The shift towards processed and convenience foods due to modernization and urbanization has been associated with negative effects on mental health. The decline in traditional food consumption in favor of less nutritious alternatives could be contributing to rising rates of mental health issues among Indian youth. This underscores the need to address dietary transitions and promote the integration of traditional foods in modern diets.

#### **5. Variability Across Regions and Populations:**

The findings reveal considerable variability in how traditional foods impact mental health across different regions and populations within India. Regional dietary practices and food availability play a significant role in shaping these outcomes. Therefore, interventions and recommendations need to be tailored to local dietary traditions and cultural contexts.

#### **6. Need for Comprehensive Approaches:**

The evidence suggests that while traditional foods have potential benefits for mental health, a comprehensive approach is needed. This includes not only encouraging traditional food consumption but also addressing other factors such as socioeconomic conditions, lifestyle changes, and mental health services. Integrating traditional foods into a balanced diet alongside modern nutritional knowledge could be more effective in supporting mental well-being.

#### **7. Call for Further Research:**

The review highlights the need for further research to better understand the mechanisms through which traditional foods influence mental health. Longitudinal studies, culturally sensitive research designs, and the exploration of specific nutrients and dietary patterns are necessary to build a more detailed and actionable understanding of this relationship.

Overall, the findings from the literature review underscore the importance of traditional foods in promoting mental health among Indian youth. They highlight both the benefits of maintaining traditional dietary practices and the challenges posed by modern dietary shifts. Future research should build on these insights to develop strategies that preserve the positive aspects of traditional diets while addressing contemporary dietary and lifestyle changes.

## **Limitations**

The limitations of the reviewed studies include variability in study designs, small sample sizes, and differences in dietary assessments. Many studies did not control for confounding variables such as physical activity, family environment, and urban versus rural settings.

The comprehensive review on the relationship between traditional food and mental health among Indian youth from 2000 to 2020, while insightful, has several limitations that should be acknowledged:

- 1. Heterogeneity of Studies:**

The included studies varied widely in their methodologies, sample sizes, and measures of mental health and dietary assessment. This heterogeneity can make it challenging to draw generalizable conclusions and compare results across studies.

- 2. Cultural and Regional Differences:**

The diversity in traditional foods and dietary practices across different regions of India means that findings from studies conducted in one region may not be applicable to others. This variation can limit the ability to generalize findings to the entire population of Indian youth.

- 3. Cross-Sectional Design:**

Many studies utilized cross-sectional designs, which provide a snapshot of the relationship between traditional food consumption and mental health at a single point in time. This approach does not allow for the examination of causality or long-term effects.

- 4. Self-Reported Data:**

The reliance on self-reported data for both dietary intake and mental health assessments can introduce bias and inaccuracies. Participants may underreport or over report their food consumption and mental health status, affecting the reliability of the findings.

- 5. Limited Scope of Traditional Foods:**

Some studies may have focused on a limited range of traditional foods, potentially overlooking other significant dietary elements that could influence mental health. This limitation could lead to an incomplete understanding of the role of traditional diets.

## 6. **Sample Representativeness:**

The representativeness of the study samples may be a concern, as many studies included convenience samples or participants from specific settings (e.g., urban vs. rural areas). This could affect the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Indian youth.

## 7. **Confounding Factors:**

The studies reviewed may not always account for confounding variables such as socioeconomic status, physical activity, or family history of mental health issues, which can also impact mental health outcomes and dietary habits.

## 8. **Evolution of Dietary Practices:**

The review spans two decades, during which significant changes in dietary patterns and food environments may have occurred. The impact of these changes on mental health may not be fully captured, potentially limiting the relevance of older studies.

## 9. **Publication Bias:**

There may be a publication bias towards studies with positive findings or those that focus on specific aspects of traditional food and mental health, which could skew the overall understanding of the relationship.

Addressing these limitations in future research will be crucial for gaining a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of how traditional foods influence mental health among Indian youth. This will help in developing more effective and culturally appropriate interventions to support mental well-being.

## **Future Research Directions**

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes to better understand the long-term effects of traditional diets on mental health. Additionally, studies should examine the interaction between traditional dietary patterns and other psychosocial factors, including stress and socio-economic conditions.

Future research on the relationship between traditional food and mental health among Indian youth should focus on several key areas to further our understanding and enhance

practical applications. Based on the insights from the systematic literature review covering the years 2000 to 2020, the following directions are recommended:

**1. Longitudinal Studies:**

Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of traditional diets on mental health. This approach can help determine the sustained impact of dietary patterns over time and establish causal relationships more robustly.

**2. Cultural Variations:**

Investigate the influence of specific traditional foods across different regions and cultural groups within India. Given the diverse culinary practices and food traditions, research should explore how regional variations affect mental health outcomes differently.

**3. Nutritional Interventions:**

Develop and assess nutritional interventions based on traditional food practices aimed at improving mental health. Such interventions should be designed to integrate traditional foods into contemporary dietary patterns while addressing modern lifestyle challenges.

**4. Mechanisms of Impact:**

Explore the biological and psychological mechanisms through which traditional foods influence mental health. Research should focus on identifying specific nutrients and dietary components that contribute to mental well-being and their interactions with psychological processes.

**5. Impact of Modernization:**

Examine the effects of urbanization and globalization on the consumption of traditional foods and their mental health outcomes. This includes studying how shifts in dietary patterns due to modernization impact the mental health of Indian youth.

**6. Policy and Community Engagement:**

Investigate how policies and community programs can promote the inclusion of traditional foods in the diets of Indian youth. Research should focus on strategies for raising awareness and encouraging the preservation of traditional food practices.

## 7. **Technology and Innovation:**

Utilize technology to develop tools and platforms that promote traditional food consumption among youth. This could include mobile apps, educational programs, and social media campaigns designed to highlight the benefits of traditional diets.

## 8. **Interdisciplinary Approaches:**

Adopt interdisciplinary approaches that combine nutrition science, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between traditional food and mental health.

By addressing these areas, future research can provide deeper insights into how traditional foods contribute to mental health and offer practical solutions to integrate beneficial dietary practices into modern lifestyles. This will ultimately help in formulating effective strategies to support the mental well-being of Indian youth.

### **Conclusion**

This comprehensive highlights the potential benefits of traditional Indian foods on the mental health of youth but also underscores the need for more robust research to confirm these findings. Understanding how traditional diets influence mental health can inform culturally sensitive interventions to support youth well-being. (Kumar, Sharma, & Patel, 2020).

In conclusion, the comprehensive review spanning from 2000 to 2020 reveals a complex and multifaceted relationship between traditional food and mental health among Indian youth. The evidence highlights that traditional diets, rich in locally sourced ingredients and culturally significant foods, have a notable impact on mental well-being. These traditional foods often provide essential nutrients and antioxidants that support cognitive function and emotional stability, thus contributing positively to mental health.

Conversely, the review also identifies challenges, such as the influence of modernization and urbanization, which have led to a shift towards processed and convenience foods. This shift can adversely affect mental health, emphasizing the need to balance traditional dietary practices with modern lifestyle demands.

Overall, maintaining traditional dietary practices could play a crucial role in promoting mental health among Indian youth. However, it is essential to address the challenges posed by changing food environments and integrate traditional dietary elements with contemporary nutritional knowledge to foster optimal mental well-being. Further research should continue to explore these dynamics and develop strategies to preserve beneficial traditional food practices while adapting to modern needs.

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