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## Original Research Article

## Food anthropology of Alavi Bohra muslims during Muharram

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The Alavi Bohras, besides their long and distinguished history, have a distinct culture around food and identity, elements of which are still preserved and active by the Alavi Bohras decades after their settlement in Vadodara. They have a typical food pattern in the mourning month of Muharram, which is the first month of the Islamic calendar.

**Objective:** To document the food anthropology and ethnography of foods, ingredients, and dishes of Alavi Bohra Muslims during Muharram using qualitative methods.

**Materials and Methods:** In this cross-sectional study, mixed qualitative methods of ethnographic research were used to understand the diet culture of Alavi Bohras during Muharram – the historic significance of Muharram, assessing the diet quality, type of foods and key ingredients used in cuisines as served in community thaals. Methods like direct observations (n=10 days) of the community kitchen, key informant interviews (n=5) with clerics and cooks, and focus group discussion (n=1) with prominent and learned people of the community.

**Result:** Based on the observations, interviews, and focus group discussion it was found that Alavi Bohras eat food served through the community kitchen on all nine days including Ashura, during Muharram, Food is consumed from thaal, which essentially has two items each day, a sweet and a savory dish served with a milk-based beverage daily and served ad libitum. The thaal comprises all four food groups - namely cereals, millets; pulses; vegetables, and fruits; and Milk and Milk products, egg, meat and fish, oils and fats (ICMR -NIN, 2011).

**Conclusion:** This study showcases the culture of Alavi Bohra Muslims during Muharram, the diet quality of Muharram, and Ashura thaal, which is a completely balanced meal, such thaal can be promoted at large and a comparative account of Muharram by Shia and Sunni Muslims. Rich diversity is observed in the thaal wherein all foods from all 4 groups are incorporated, which is considered healthy and nutritious.

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## 1. Introduction

Any culture has its own body of knowledge on food and beverage and on human behavior related to the same. When the lore, riddles, and anecdotes found among the people are studied critically, those might reveal important insights into cultural contacts of the distant and near past, changes in the collective value system, and various cultural dynamics of

more recent times.<sup>1</sup>

Food is one of the most basic necessities of human life. Food is a ritual and carries with it centuries of belief and tradition. Food practices represent cultural identity, and the socio-economic status in methods opted for choosing, preparing as well as serving food, and all these factors further affect the overall consumption pattern.

Traditional foods are an outcome of the intergenerational transmission of food culture. The nutritional significance of traditional foods needs to be acknowledged and popularized,

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as these foods are socially, culturally, and economically accommodated in communities and are important in ensuring food security, and have great potential in fighting against malnutrition.

India - a country with distinct geography with regional and seasonal variations in vegetation, food habits, and culture. Every religion and community has its specific frame of acquaintance with food and beverage and the anthropological behavior associated with it. Thus, it is important to understand the cultural history and anthropology and transitions if any in food habits as an impact of transcultural influences.<sup>2,3</sup>

An in-depth study of food anthropology of a particular region helps one to understand the traditional and local foods which were part of their cultural cuisine and may or may not be preserved in this era due to the impact of globalization. Based on religion, India has a 79.8% Hindu population, and Muslims account for 14.2% while, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains make up the remaining 6% population.<sup>4</sup>

Among Muslims, there are two main divisions- Sunni and Shia based on the school of mazhab that they follow, of which Sunni are divided into 4 sub-sect and Shia are further divided into 3 sub-sects. Alavi Bohras is Nano Minority Community have a distinct culture in terms of its food, which may have a distinct food culture and need documentation and in-depth analysis in terms of their dietary diversity and nutrient values.

The Muslims observe fast and mourn on some days Muharram - Ashura, the entire month of Ramadan.<sup>5</sup>

Muharram, derived from the Arabic word haram, meaning forbidden, is a month that commemorates Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and the other martyrs of the Battle of Karbala. It also includes specific food traditions that take their cues from history and is considered an equally important aspect of the ceremonies. While Ashura, derived from the Arabic word for the number ten, is the tenth day of the month of Muharram.<sup>6</sup>

The present study is focused on one such type of Muslim, the Alavi Bohras and aims to document their customs and beliefs, food culture and traditional methods of cooking and serving, during one of the mourning months called the Muharram.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted in one of the prime centers of Alavi Bohra community, situated in Vadodara, Gujarat, Western India.

### 2.1. Study population

The Alavi Bohra population is around 8000 around the world, of which around 6500 reside in Vadodara.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.2. Study area

All the concentrated zones of the Alavi Bohra community are located in three areas of the city of Vadodara namely: Wadi Badri Mohalla, Ajwa, and Fakhri Mohalla were covered for the study. Based on the ethnographic and anthropological

research guidelines the methods used to elicit information and understand the food culture of Alavi Bohra during Muharram were as follows:

1. Direct observation (n=10) at community kitchen
2. Key informant interview (n=5) with clerics and cooks,
3. Focus group discussion (n=1) with prominent and learned people of community. The details of the methods used and their importance of applicability in anthropological research are given in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Data collection methods and applicability

Method	Applicability
Key informants Interview	Key informants are people who know a lot about their culture and are, for reasons of their own, willing to share all their knowledge with you. Investigators don't choose these people. These informants have specialized competence in the cultural domain.
Direct Observation	Direct observation is to know what people do, by watching a person or a group of people or by studying the physical traces their behavior leaves behind, which is recorded.

Source: Bernard, H. Russell, 1940– Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches - 4th ed.<sup>8</sup>

For documentation of cuisines, a Google form was designed and shared with community people to collect the experiences and pictures of Muharram and New Year thaal respectively.

Dietary diversity refers to the number and type of foods in a person's diet over a reference period. There is no consensus on the optimal standardized measure for dietary diversity. It is also used as a proxy measure for food security, adequacy of energy/nutrient intake, and diet quality.<sup>8</sup>

The cultural foods were divided into ten categories (FAO, 2016), as the ICMR – NIN,<sup>9</sup> has divided them into four groups only, namely: 1) Cereals, millets, and pulses, 2) Vegetables and fruits, 3) Milk and milk products, egg, meat, and fish 4) Oils & fats and nuts & oilseeds.

These ten food groups are:

1. Grains, white roots and tubers, and plantains
2. Pulses (beans, peas, and lentils)
3. Nuts and seeds
4. Dairy

5. Meat, poultry, and fish
6. Eggs
7. Dark green leafy vegetables
8. Other vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables
9. Other vegetables
10. Other fruits

Classification of foods used by the Alavi Bohra Muslims and calculation of Muharram thaal diversity score (MTDS) was done. Community kitchens are considered an integral part of the Muharram month in order to dedicate all time to mourning. Observation of the Community Kitchen and thaal was done each day, wherein families sit together around the thaal and eat their dinner and break their daily fast.

The data collected based on the ethnographic methods on the Muharram plate/thaal was further analyzed and the MTDS of the Alavi Bohra Muslims was calculated based on the ten food groups.<sup>10</sup> To calculate, one point was given to each food group present in the daily Muharram plate/thaal, and a final score was given to the New Year's Eve thaal and Ashura thaal. The recipes served on the plate were further analyzed for their nutrient content and compared with my Plate. Also, approximate nutritive values of the thaal are calculated and compared with the RDA for an adult reference man and woman.

To understand the approximate nutritional value of the thaal and other cuisines commonly consumed during the first nine days of Muharram were calculated using the Indian Food Composition Tables, 2017 and % Recommended Dietary Allowance of a reference man and woman met by thaal was also calculated. Ten direct observations were done of the community kitchen – while the food was being cooked, distributed, and consumed. Direct observation was also done while a special recipe of Lachko was being made to be kept in the New Year's thaal. One focus group discussion was done with a group of 8 women constituting women of the royal family and other women with knowledge of food rituals as practiced during Muharram, as identified by the female head of the at-Taiyeba committee.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1. Overview of the Alavi Bohras and their settlement in Vadodara

The Alavi Bohras is a close-knit community of Ismaili Shia Muslims, and have a distinct culture around food. Alavi Bohras follow their Alavi Misri calendar, available online for the Alavi Bohra community, to convert Islamic dates as per English, refer to it for offering prayer in different cities and countries, recitation of tasbeeh for each of twelve months, Navaaru – days not considered to be good, days of the month when fast is to be observed, historic event, advice, etc. The Islamic calendar as well as the Alavi Misri calendar counts its days from sunset rather than sunrise.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the narrative by a cleric, Alavi Bohra have 4 community kitchens also known as Jamatkhana in Vadodara that cater to the population of 6500 distributed in around 1200 households with an average family size of 4-6 members. During Muharram and a few other days of religious significance like bara-wafat, and Mithi-shitabi, food is served through the Community kitchens.

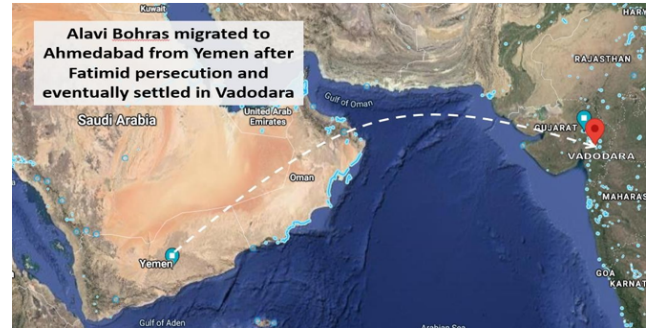


Fig. 1: Migration of Alavi Bohras from Yemen to Vadodara

### 4. Food Culture of Alavi Bohra

Maa'edah (Food) – meals are consumed together sitting on the floor at home or in Jamat-khana by family or community members from a single big plate: called "thaal". It is considered that sociability increases among community members as they sit together and eat from thaal.

There are rules/ etiquettes of eating in a thaal some of which are –

1. Around 7 people sit together and eat from a single thaal,
2. To begin by taking a pinch of salt and reciting "bismillaah"
3. Eat with the right hand
4. Washing hands before and after eating, licking fingers after finishing the meal
5. Never leave even a bit of food in the thaal

### 5. Historical Significance of Muharram

Muharram-ul-haram is the first month of the Islamic calendar as well as the Alavi Misri Calendar and is considered to be of great religious significance, after the holy month of Ramadan-ul-moazzam. Muharram also symbolizes the anniversary of the battle of Karbala, where the grandson of Prophet Muhammad was killed. The massacre is commemorated on the 10th day famously known as the day of Ashura.

The 10th of Muharram is called Ashura, and the traditions relate that the Prophet told his people to fast for 2 days, on either the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram or the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. These fasts are recommended, but not obligatory as in Ramadan.

### 6. Food Culture of Alavi Bohras During Muharram

Based on the findings of the focus group discussion most of the community people choose to fast and attend the religious sermons (majlis and waaz) that are held in the Mosques during the month of Muharram, wherein even the women participate, the food on all nine days of Muharram is through community kitchens (Jamatkhana) adjoined to all Alavi Bohra Mosques.

Alavi Bohra Muslims choose to fast either on the first 9 days of the month or only on the day of Ashura during the holy month of Muharram. On New Year's Eve (Pehli Raat Mubarak) there is a custom of arranging a big thaal decorated with all types of dishes on the first night of a new year in which the entire family sits and eats and prays for a prosperous year. On New Year's Eve, dinner is consumed from a special thaal called "Maa'edato Aale-Mohammad" which is considered like eating table of Prophet Mohammad. On days other than New Year and, the first eight days of the Muharram month, the dinner thaal for all community members is arranged at Jamatkhana, which essentially has two items – a sweet (mithas) coupled with savory (kharash). As known that life has two sides happiness (khushi) and sadness (ghami), each having its unique importance to be faced with gratitude and solidarity. A milk-based beverage (doodh sherbet) is served alongside the mithas and kharash.

#### 6.1. Specification about foods during Muharram

Pehli Raat Mubarak (New Year's Eve), all the members of the family ought to have their dinner together that includes eatables like sugar, salt, milk, fruits (fresh and dry), fish, meat, honey, dates, and Lachko. Kharash is made from vegetables, mutton, chicken, or fish.

#### 6.2. Essentials of ashura thaal

(a) Khichda, (b) Chaulai ni Bhaji (c) Dal Pulav (d)Mutton Tarkari (e) White gosht (f)Kadhi Khichdi (g)Masoor Pulav (h) Biryani

#### 6.3. Desserts commonly consumed in the month of Muharram:

(a) Lachko (b) Zarda/Mutanjan (c) Malida (d) Jamawelu Custard (e) Halwa (f) Doodh Sharbat

The Shi'ite period of mourning commences with the sighting of the crescent moon announcing the first of Muharram and lasts to the fortieth day (Chehellum) after the 10th of Muharram, during this period of mourning, joyous occasions such as weddings and birthdays are not observed.

Shia Muslims across the world, observe the rituals of Muharram with great zeal by practicing chest-beating, which is referred to as Matam, taking a tajiya procession, and re-enacting the day of Karbala. Alavi Bohra, in

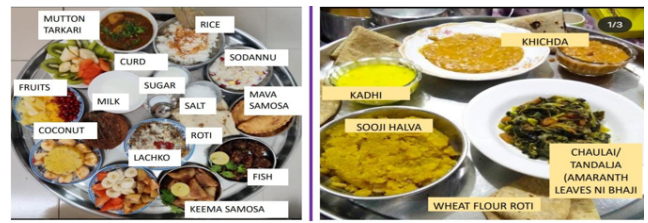


Fig. 2: Alavi Bohra thaal – for new year's (Pehli Raat) and Ashura (10th day)

Table 2: Muharram thaal diversity score MTDS on scale of 10

Food Groups	New Year Thaal (10/10)	Ashura Thaal (8/10)
Cereals, millets, root & tubers	1	1
Pulses and Legumes	1	1
Dark green leafy vegetables	1	1
Other vegetables	1	0
Fruits	1	0
Egg /Poultry	1	1
Mutton/ Fish	1	1
Nuts/ Oilseeds	1	1
Milk /Dairy	1	1
Sugars / Sweets	1	1

Table 3: Approximate nutritive value of Ashura Thaal and % RDA Met

Food Item	Quantity (g)	Energy (kcal)	Protein (g)	Iron (mg)	Calcium (mg)
Mutton	250	534.25	23.60	5.14	178.40
Khichda					
Sooji Halwa	250	331.34	3.93	1.09	12.69
Kadhi	200	196.69	6.55	1.68	856.64
Chaulai Bhaji	150	144.27	7.93	2.90	73.10
Wheat flour	160	382.49	12.26	4.76	35.80
Roti					
Total (Thaal)	1010	1589.04	54.2	15.50	1156
Avg. Per person (5)	202	317.80	10.84	4.20	231.20
% RDA met for Women – Men		19-16 %	18-22%	14-22%	23-23%

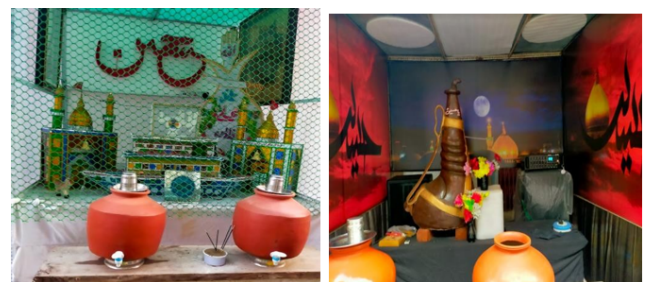


Fig. 3: Sabeel – water stalls elevated in Badri Mohalla during Muharram



Fig. 4: Distinct food items prepared by Alavi Bohra during Muharram

remembrance of the battle of Karbala to empathize and understand the hardships, thirst, and hunger of the martyrs of the battle, there is a tradition of setting up the water stalls (Sabeel), especially for the mourning assemblies (people involved in matam) and other passersby. Many Sabeel are built every year in Badri Mohalla, Vadodara, in a space between the Main Mosque and the residence of the Da'i (Devdi Mubarak). In this mourning month of Muharram, Muslims refrain from taking part in joyous events like marriages.<sup>6</sup>

Alavi Bohras have preserved aspects of their identity, such as dressing, dialect, customs, traditions, and diet. In both festive and everyday contexts, food is frequently associated with a sense of collective identity. Frequent gatherings of relatives are accompanied by meals and narratives that evoke memories, especially in older people, establishing food as a symbol of ethnic identity. Khichdi Palidu has been and is on the family's daily and festive table, at social events, and on religious days, such as that of Muharram.

7. Discussion

Diets worldwide are far from being healthy and have not improved over the last decade. Fruit and vegetable intake is still about 50% below the recommended level of five servings per day which is considered healthy (60% and 40% respectively), and legume and nuts intakes are each more than two-thirds below the recommended two servings per day.

7.1. Muharram from around the world

In Egypt, fasting Muslims prepare a pudding called Ashura made from wheat, nuts, raisins, and rosewater to be had after dinner on that day.

An ethnographic account from Karachi, Pakistan, notes that the distribution of food such as halim, made of wheat, barley, lentils, and spices, with or without meat such as beef, mutton, or chicken, and water is held by many Shias to recompense for the oppressed who died while hungry and thirsty. Sabeel (or stalls for the distribution of water by children to passersby) acknowledge the thirst of those on the battlefield who were cut off from water. Here, the breaking of the day of hunger and thirst, the 10th of Muharram, was observed with halim, roti, milk, and water.<sup>11</sup>

Tradition also holds the occasion of the massacre was utilized by Ibn Ziyad and his troops to denote a time of auspiciousness. "The meal on the tenth of Muharram consists of khichdi (rice cooked with lentils), khatta (tamarind soup), and butti (yoghurt rice); though a staple in many South Indian households, is eaten in most Shii Hyderabad households only during this Muharram meal". Majlis attendees are given tabarruk, consecrated food, which varies from region to region depending on local

Savory	Sweet	Picture
Mutton Tarkari, Rice and Naan	Zardo – sweetened and coloured rice	
Dal Pulav	Rava Halvo – made with semolina, ghee/oil and dry fruits	
Masoor Pulav Kadhi	Mutanjan (White)- sweetened rice	
Chicken Biryani and Raita	Malido – deep fried and crushed dumplings of wheat and semolina	
Kaari Chawal	Anjeer Halva – dessert made of figs and nuts	
Papa Khichdi	Malido -deep fried and crushed dumplings of wheat and semolina	
Daal Chawal	Kheer – milk based delicacy made with vermicelli ; Sherbet – a sweet beverage	
Khichdi Palidu -	Sevayan no zardo – sweetened vermicelli	

Fig. 5: Sweets and savories served during first 9 days through community kitchens during Muharram

cuisines.<sup>12</sup>

Prophet told his people to fast for 2 days, on either the 9th and 10th of Muḥarram or the 10th and 11th. This fast is considered recommended, not obligatory, by Sunni Muslims, having been replaced by Ramadan as the obligatory period of fasting.<sup>13</sup>

Significant in this narrative is that Ḥusayn's small band of followers and family was cut off from access to water from the nearby Euphrates River. (Sabeel). Shi'ite tradition holds that Ḥusayn's sister Zaynab began a period of mourning for her brother, which Shi'ites observe to this day in azadari (mourning) rituals and gatherings at which sermons are made recounting the events leading up to the massacre, elegies recited, prayers offered, and lamentations expressed, alongside processions during which participants, mostly men, will express their grief through matam, consisting of rhythmically striking their chests or their backs with chains or with small sharp blades.

In in South Asia, as part of Karbala-related mourning rituals, meat is avoided during the Muḥarram month because of its association with times of celebration and joy; most Shi'is observe the tenth of Muḥarram not as a fast (roza), connoting auspiciousness, but as a day of faqa, poverty and hunger, in emulation of and solidarity with Ḥusayn and his retinue's hunger and thirst in the 3 days preceding their martyrdom.

In Mysore, during Muharram, people wear plain white or black clothes. In the first 10 days of Muharram, eating meat is avoided, they fast on the day of Ashura. Food is offered, lunch and dinner on the days of Tasua and Ashura in Jafaria Mosque and in some Ashorakhana. Families that wish to give food sends it to mosque or gives its expenses so that food can be given to the mourners in the mosque. Before supper, tea is served, i.e., Indian tea made of tealeaves and milk and for supper, usually vegetarian food and after that mutton Biryani or chicken Biryani with bread and cucumber.<sup>14</sup>

In Hyderabad a dessert is made that combines whole wheat, dried fruits, rose water, spices and sugar and is a wholesome porridge or pudding that is meant to be shared among family and friends after the fasting period. In the specific context of Muharram, this dessert is meant to commemorate the last meal of Hussein and his followers before they died hungry on the battlefield of Karbala. Muharram is linked to a very special aromatic, milk-based sherbet flavored with dried fruits and cardamom. A piece of oudh bark, the root ingredient in the signature perfume of the city is smoked with a piece of charcoal, infusing the drink with an inimitable aroma. This doodh ka sherbet is shared among all those participating in processions as well as fasting during the period. Served chilled, this sherbet is a filling thirst quencher and is meant to be a tribute to the sufferings of Hussein, his family, and followers as they were deprived of water in the run-up to the Battle of Karbala.<sup>15</sup>

## 8. Muharram: A Comparative of Sunni and Shia Muslims

The battle of Karbala became one of the causes of the split between Shia and Sunni Muslims, it happened long before religious differences between Sunni and Shia factions had formed. For Shia Muslims, the month of Muḥarram is a time of intense sadness and mourning.

Shia Muslims in Iraq re-enact the Battle of Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram, and the day of Ashura holds spiritual and historical significance for both Sunni and Shia Muslims. For the Sunni majority, the day is marked with fasting and special prayers in mosques, and take part in mourning ceremonies for Hussein, sermons, and communal meals. The Shi'ite period of mourning, commencing with the sighting of the crescent moon announcing the first of Muḥarram (the Islamic calendar counts its days from sunset rather than sunrise), lasts to the fortieth day (Chehellum) after the 10th of Muḥarram, and during this period of mourning, joyous occasions such as weddings and birthdays are not observed.

For Shia Muslims, it marks the anniversary of the killing of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein during the Battle of Karbala, and is therefore a day of mourning. Shia rites on the day include colourful plays re-enacting, deliver sermons and recount the history of the Battle of Karbala. Some will also recite poetry relating to the life of Hussain, highlighting his virtues. tatbir, which is banned in some counties but still takes place during Ashura. The use of blades, chains and other items to beat oneself symbolizes sacrifice and struggle. Shia worshippers will often wear black as a symbol of mourning and sadness.<sup>16</sup>

Traditional foods and cultural practices are dependent on geographical, composition, preparation, and processing dependent. Specific ingredients and preparations assume significance because of long-standing traditions or socio-religious contexts and are embedded into how communities pray, eat and celebrate festivals.

Identity is maintained through food in diaspora communities. Food makes one feel at home in a new land. Community people defend the diversity of their cuisine in every way, regardless of the new trend toward healthier choices, which calls for using vegetable fats instead of butter, or the adoption of other eating habits because of globalization and multiculturalism or dietary acculturation, particularly in urban environments.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, red and processed meat intake is on the rise and almost five times the maximum level of one serving per week, while the consumption of sugary drinks, which are not recommended in any amount, is going up as well. Despite some variation between regions, no region meets recommendations for healthy diets. Lower-income countries continue to have the lowest intakes of key health-promoting foods such as fruits and vegetables and the highest levels of underweight, while higher-income countries have the

highest intakes of foods with high health and environmental impacts, including red meat, processed meat, and dairy, and the highest levels of overweight and obesity. No region meets recommendations for healthy diets.<sup>7</sup>

Traditional food knowledge is a traditional practice of passing down food, recipes, cooking techniques, and expertise from generation to generation.

Due to the erosion of intergenerational knowledge, diet transition and shrinking dietary diversity, declining social acceptance and health awareness, lack of market integration, and systematic documentation and research, many traditional health foods are on the decline today.

Consequently, the beneficial effects of healthy traditional foods are often not understood by the community. Systematic documentation and research of these traditional practices, incorporation of their health effects in educational curricula, quality standardization, and product improvement are required to revitalize these practices. It is also vital to validate these traditional knowledge practices and strengthen their social, cultural, and economic dimensions in respective communities.

## 9. Conclusion

The food of the Alavi Bohra community is unique and fascinating, during the month of Muharram. Culinary traditions of eating in thaals have played an essential part in the preservation of Alavi Bohras identity. The traditional recipes cooked on the day of Ashura communicate experiences and emotions. Recipes like Khichda (Haleem) gain symbolic meaning, thus, assigning food and culinary traditions as the foundation of the social formation of identity.

## 10. Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable

## 11. Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## 12. Author Contribution

All the authors contributed to the idea and overall construction of this manuscript.

## 13. Source of Funding

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## 14. Conflict of Interest

None.


## 15. Acknowledgment

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