

# Why home-made dinners are more than a meal in India

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The average Indian spends over 13 hours a week behind a stove, and, in 2014, consumed just 151 calories from packaged snack foods each day. Yet despite these positive dietary habits, India has the world's third highest obesity rate. So where are all those extra calories coming from?

## AUTHORS

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**LOCATIONS:**  
INDIA

**SECTORS:**  
EATING AND DRINKING  
GENERAL FOOD



## HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Indulgent home-made meals and cultural norms are contributing to India's growing obesity crisis
- 02** Indians have a mindset that children "being chubby" is a good thing and that this needs to change quickly
- 03** A lack of education is a serious handicap when it comes to trying to change old ways of thinking and the traditional Indian diet
- 04** Eating out in India is based more on social and convenience purposes than anything to do with taste
- 05** The popularity of dabbawalas in Mumbai – delivering 200,000 lunches each day – highlights the love of the home-made in India
- 06** Companies like Feazt and Cookfresh are developing the country's food-tech sector, delivering 'home-cooked' experiences in varied and novel ways

## DATA

- People in India spend over 13 hours cooking each week, compared to the global average of fewer than six and a half hours
- In 2014, while the average person consumed 765 calories a day from packaged snack foods, the average Indian only consumed 151
- India has the world's third highest obesity rate
- 48% of Indians surveyed missed home cooking when they were away for work or in another city or country
- 58% of young Indians don't consider obesity a disease
- Just 6% of the young Indian population is involved in some kind of physical activity
- Food services are a \$50 billion market, growing at 16-20% per year

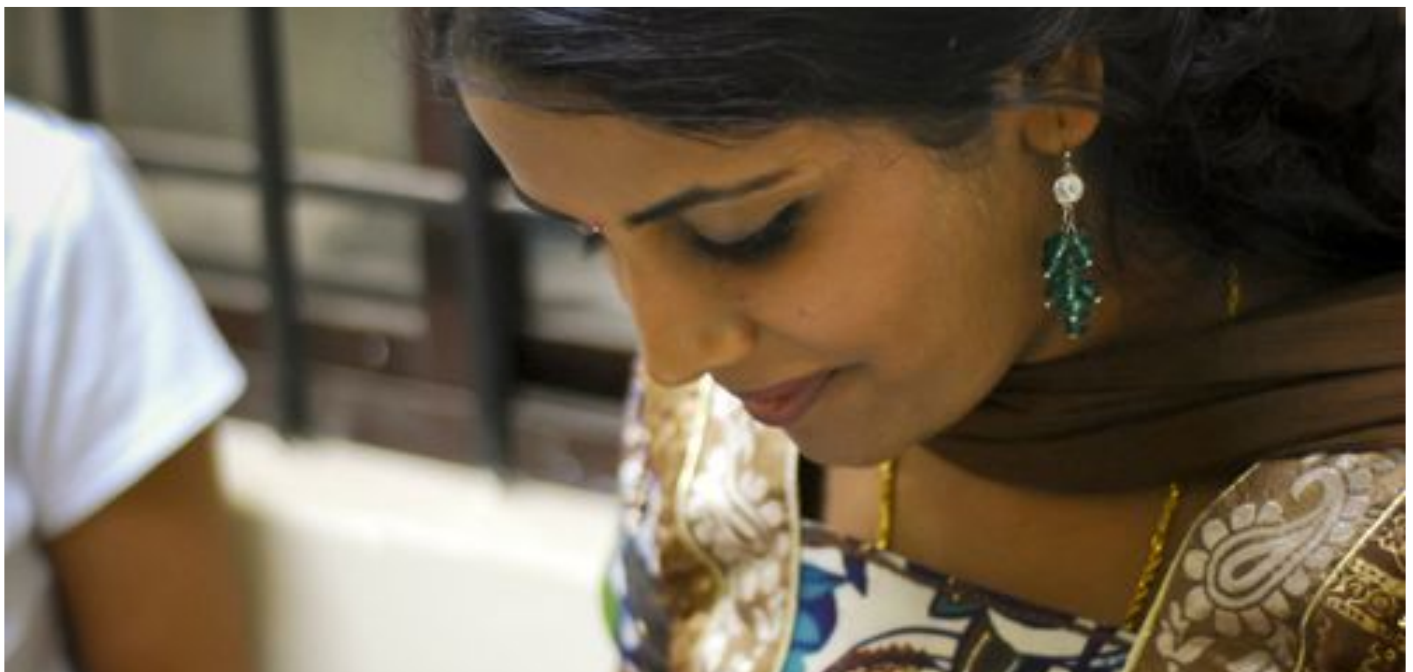
## SCOPE

On the outskirts of New Delhi, in a two-storey house that is home to three generations, Neena Arora – known as Mrs. Arora to all her neighbours and friends – cooks. Mrs. Arora, aged 57, not only enjoys cooking for the entire family, but she's known in the colony for her melt-in-the-mouth gaajar ka halwa, her mutton curry with meat that falls off the bone, and the vegetable pakoras she sends around when the weather gets nice. She packs it off and sends it, via her children, to neighbours' homes.

Food has always been more than just fuel, no matter where you come from. It is community, it is ritual, it is a peace offering, a way to form bonds and friendship. In eastern cultures, especially, even as the pace of life gets faster and people turn more inwards, food has remained that connection, the thread that connects neighbours and friends, distant relations and close ones, new friends and old.

While globally, people cook fewer than six and a half hours each week, Indians spend an average of 13 hours a week behind a stove. [1] So little is eaten outside of the home that in 2014 the average Indian consumed just 151 calories a day from packaged snack foods, compared to the global average of 765 calories.

Despite these positive dietary habits, India has the world's third highest obesity rate. [2] Where are all those extra calories coming from? The answer is home-made food and the many cultural ideas these meals encompass.



Indians spend an average of 13 hours a week behind a stove

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## HOW DO INDIANS COOK AT HOME?

The milk boiled, Mrs. Arora adds a kilogram of grated carrot to the pot and just as much sugar. Three hours later, when the sweet dish she's cooking to celebrate her 17-year-old daughter's good exam results finishes cooking, she scoops up two large spoons of ghee (clarified butter) and mixes it in.

“That’s to create shine on the dish,” she says. “Plus, it’s customary that when you’re serving other people, you give them your most rich and expensive food. There’s nothing more rich than ghee. Or expensive.” [3]

In Indian culture, guests in your home are considered in the image of God. “You wouldn’t skimp on giving God the best food because of counting calories, would you?” Mrs. Arora says. “If God came up to you and said ‘Take me to the temple’, would you say, ‘No, you need to lose weight. Walk the ten kilometres’? Of course not. You’d say ‘I’ll carry you on my back if I have to’. It’s the same with food.” [3]

Guest visits and social events, as extravagant and food-focused as they may be, are not the only culprits in India’s obesity epidemic. Indians love their food, especially home-cooked meals. Home cooking is among the top three things they miss when traveling for work, outranking speaking in their own language. Just under half of people surveyed missed home cooking when they were away for work or in another city or country. [4]



Taste is paramount while health is an afterthought

Nicolas Mirguet, Creative Commons (2013)

## CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

But the way food is prepared in the home is beginning to give experts pause. Older habits of eating more than required need to change, says Dr. Sakthivel Sivasubramanian, an endocrinologist at The Hormone Clinic in Tiruchi. In an interview with The Hindu, he notes that Indians have a mindset that children “being chubby” is a good thing and that this needs to change quickly. “In India, childhood obesity is trickling down to the poor due to wrong eating habits,” he says. [5]

A lack of education is a serious handicap when it comes to trying to change old ways of thinking and the traditional Indian diet. Preeti Chawla, a 32-year-old freelance nutritionist from New Delhi, knows only too well the challenges of trying to change an older generation’s perceptions about food. “It’s not just that they won’t change, it’s that they see no reason to,” she says. “This generation, like Westerners of the eighties, were sold the idea of chicken nuggets actually having real

chicken and microwaved food having no negative impact. We've debunked a lot of those lies and us millennials know it, but the message hasn't quite reached our middle-aged parents." [6]

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Preeti Chawla, freelance nutritionist

While her generation is more health and food-conscious, Chawla says there's an alarming trend towards replacing atta (flour made from semi-hard wheat varieties and low in gluten) with more 'modern and Western' flour such as refined and bleached wheat flour used in packaged bread. She adds that ghee, while full of benefits, is overused in Indian cooking and therefore counterproductive.

"The problem is serious as over 58% of young adults do not consider obesity a disease and thus have a casual approach about the problem," says bariatric surgeon Jayashree Todkar. Only 28% of the Indian population knows the scientific definition of obesity and the associated health hazards. "The most worrisome fact is that the young, Indian male population does not view obesity as a health hazard, but view it only as a matter of size and shape. A meagre 6% of the young Indian population is involved in some kind of physical activity," Todkar says. [7]



To many young Indians, obesity is just a matter of size and shape

Viren Kaul, Creative Commons (2010)

## THE HOME-COOKED BUSINESS

While in the West, restaurant and take-out meals are considered better tasting than their home-made counterparts, eating out in India is based more on social and convenience purposes than anything to do with taste. 'Nothing beats the taste of mother's cooking' is a commonly held belief among Indians young and old, and therefore, when looking for high quality, tasty, and cheap options, home-cooked meals win out every time.

The dabbawalas are a prime example of this. Renowned worldwide and studied by the Harvard Business School, these delivery men have become a part of Mumbai's fabric, transporting 200,000 home-cooked lunches each day in a feat of logistical brilliance. [8]

How it works is like this; thousands of housewives prepare home-cooked lunches each morning. The dabbawalas – 5,000 men who transport the packed tiffins – pick up these freshly made lunches and transport them around Mumbai to be delivered to the right recipient just in time for their lunch break.

❧ It's hard work, no doubt about it. But the dabbawalas feel that serving food is serving God so they feel happy to do this business

Pawan Agarwal, head of the Mumbai Dabbawala association

The dabbawala delivery system has been awarded a six-sigma level of efficiency, which means that they make about one mistake in every six million deliveries. And they're ubiquitous about town in their white kurtas, navigating Mumbai's notoriously bad traffic on their bicycles. "It's hard work, no doubt about it," says Pawan Agarwal, head of the Mumbai Dabbawala association. "But they feel that serving food is serving God so they feel happy to do this business." [8]

Despite decades of service, the dabbawalas now face new challenges, opening up opportunities for new businesses and experiments. Problems include a fall in the number of women who cook for the service and expanded options for customers, who can go online and order from a broader menu. Additionally, dabbawalas cannot use the new Navi Mumbai Metro, a transit system that went online in 2014. [9]



Mumbai's dabbawalas average just one mistake every six million deliveries

Meena Kadri, Creative Commons (2009)

## INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

India's food start-up sector is as hot as the food itself. There's money in the economy, Indians are rising up the financial ladder, and the influence of Western culture is stronger than ever, leading to projections that the food services industry is worth \$50 billion, growing at 16-20% per year. [10]

"Every few years a new problem becomes a keystone area for the start-up ecosystem," says Alok Goel, CEO of FreeCharge, a mobile top-up provider. "It grabs everyone's attention, and many teams start solving that problem with different innovative approaches. 2007 was the year of e-commerce in India. 2010 was the year of cabs. It looks like 2015 is turning out to be the year of food tech. There are about a dozen companies; some are internet restaurants, some are curated food marketplaces and others are logistics arms for restaurants." [10]

The main difficulty faced by restaurants in India is that they can lack the warmth and nostalgia of home-made food. As a response, companies like [Feazt](#) and [Cookfresh](#) have set about delivering that 'home-cooked' experience to consumers in varied and novel ways.

❧ I wanted to bring people back from their computers to a dining table that encompasses the real joy of a meal

Gopi Krishna, co-founder of Feazt

Feazt wants to get people socialising over hard-to-replicate, home-cooked meals. Would-be dinner party hosts can use the platform to post a menu online, with interested attendees signing up and paying a small fee for the meal. "I wanted to bring people back from their computers to a dining table that encompasses the real joy of a meal," says co-founder Gopi Krishna. With slots filling up fast, Feazt is helping revive the family-style dinner environment.

Cookfresh encourages people to try new foods, delivering high-quality ingredients based on a user-selected recipe. [Fromahome](#) is also tapping into a desire for the home-cooked, creating a community of 'homemakers' and selling their meals online. [11]

While Indians won't soon lose their desire for home-made meals, the success of these start-ups suggests that they may be willing to change their dining habits. As more of the population gains access to the internet, smartphones and, to an extent, wearables, the food-tech market could evolve to tackle India's growing obesity crisis. But will anything convince India's families to sacrifice taste for health?

Mridu Khullar Relph is a writer, entrepreneur, and content strategist. She has written and consulted for The New York Times, Time, CNN, ABC News, The Independent, The Christian Science Monitor and more.

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