

Sheherwali Cuisine: UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Nomination

Identification and Definition of the Element

Sheherwali cuisine is a traditional vegetarian culinary practice of the Sheherwali community, primarily located in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. Originating over 300 years ago, it evolved from the Oswal Jain community that migrated from Rajasthan and settled in Eastern India.

This cuisine represents a living tradition characterized by a refined synthesis of Rajasthani, Bengali, Mughal, Awadhi, and European culinary influences. It is distinguished by its exclusive vegetarianism, elaborate cooking techniques, use of rich ingredients such as ghee, dried fruits, saffron, rose water, and kewra, and a strong cultural philosophy of nazakat (refinement and precision).

Sheherwali cuisine includes a wide range of dishes such as ***Kheere ki Kachori, Saloni Mewa ki Khichdi, Bode Ka Boondi, Nimas and Kutti Mirchai ka Achar***. A defining cultural trait is the centrality of sweets, which are consumed before, during, and after meals.

The element is transmitted across generations within families and communities and continues to be practiced in daily cuisine, especially during festivals, social gatherings, and seasonal occasions.

Contribution to Visibility and Awareness of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The inscription of Sheherwali cuisine on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List would enhance visibility of a unique culinary tradition that exemplifies cultural exchange, adaptation, and coexistence.

It highlights how migration, trade, and intercultural interactions contributed to the evolution of a distinctive food culture. Recognition would promote awareness of vegetarian culinary diversity, traditional knowledge systems, and the role of food as a medium of cultural identity.

Furthermore, it would encourage dialogue among communities, foster respect for cultural diversity, and inspire safeguarding efforts for other lesser-known culinary traditions globally.

Safeguarding Measures

The viability of Sheherwali cuisine faces challenges due to modernization, changing lifestyles, and limited commercial adaptation. To ensure its safeguarding, the following measures are proposed:

- Documentation of traditional recipes, techniques, and oral histories
- Community-led workshops and culinary festivals to promote knowledge transmission
- Inclusion of Sheherwali cuisine in cultural and educational programs
- Encouragement of local entrepreneurship and curated culinary experiences
- Promoting Sheherwali Food Festivals in different parts of the country
- Digital archiving and dissemination through media platforms
- Publishing multiple editions of cookbooks distributed globally

The Murshidabad Heritage Development Society, in collaboration with community members, is committed to implementing these measures to ensure the continuity of the tradition.

Community Participation and Consent

The nomination of Sheherwali cuisine has been prepared with the active participation and free, prior, and informed consent of the Sheherwali community and associated stakeholders.

This includes traditional practitioners, family custodians, Jain community members, and cultural representatives in India, specially Bengal. The community recognizes this cuisine as a vital part of its identity and heritage.

All participating communities have expressed their full support for the nomination and their commitment to safeguarding and promoting the element. A formal consent letter from the Murshidabad Heritage Development Society has been submitted as part of this nomination.

Inclusion in an Inventory

Sheherwali cuisine is proposed to be included in regional and national inventories of intangible cultural heritage maintained by relevant cultural bodies in India.

Efforts were made by the Murshidabad Heritage Development Society to document and catalogue the culinary practices, recipes, and cultural significance of the cuisine as part of a structured inventory system. This process has involved collaboration with community members, researchers, and cultural institutions to ensure accurate and comprehensive representation. Notable representations include the Sheherwali community spread across the country.

The inclusion of Sheherwali cuisine in such inventories will further strengthen its recognition and support ongoing safeguarding initiatives.

Submitting Body: Murshidabad Heritage Development Society