

Request for Proposals (RFP)

FOOD CULTURE ALLIANCE – CONSUMER RESEARCH STUDY

Issued by: The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)

Table of Contents

1. Project Background and Scope of Work
2. Literature Review
3. Research Design
4. Deliverables and Timeline
5. Instructions for Responding
6. Terms and Conditions

I. Project Background and Scope of Work

Background

The Food Culture Alliance (FCA), hosted by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), is commissioning research to validate and develop a deeper understanding of cultural factors influencing food consumption in India. These insights will be used as the basis for developing an implementation strategy to heighten society's preferences for nutritious and sustainable diets.

Building on an initial Scoping Study (please see more on this below), this RFP aims to confirm and/or develop our early thinking on what aspects of food culture are most important, understand their impact on sustainable and nutritious food preferences, and capture the language used by consumers in this space.

Given India's cultural complexity, this research will require a layered approach, combining observational with ethnographic methods to capture cultural, symbolic, and emotional meanings within food practices.

Objectives

This RFP seeks a research partner to:

1. Capture lived food behaviours and the language people use to describe/ characterise them.
2. Identify themes in food behaviours and relate them to our initial synthesis of Indian Food Culture Codes (x3) and surface other relevant codes.
3. Provide input (through online discussions) into the GAIN/FCA team's prioritisation of the food behavioural themes on the basis of their potential impact on sustainable and nutritious diets.
4. Understand how the cultural codes are expressed in food behaviours, what and who is driving the codes, and the channels of this influence.

II. Context

Research shows that culture is a critical link between food supply chains, nutrition and environmental outcomes. The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security (HLPE, 2017) finds that a holistic, conceptual framework for food systems that explicitly recognises the role of culture is essential for achieving sustainable, nutritious, and inclusive food security outcomes.

Deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, values, and norms inform food preferences in India. Factors such as wellness, social mobility, and seasonality significantly shape food behaviours (Fischler, 1988; Rozin, 2002). India's food practices, imbued with values like balance, community participation, and openness to new influences, require a deep cultural lens for meaningful understanding (Kaur & Singh, 2017).

The [Food Culture Alliance](#) views food culture as a significant driver of large-scale consumption changes. It aims to leverage food culture to create strategic shifts towards a shared vision for the future - a world where society prefers nutritious and sustainable foods. The Food Culture Alliance's [strategic framework](#), shaping narratives, social identities, cultural beliefs, and culinary systems around food, provides the basis for structuring intervention strategies.¹ As a result, reshaping it requires collective, at-scale efforts that are beyond the capacity of a single organisation or actor (e.g., government). Given the important role that culture plays in mediating food choices, it becomes essential to clearly define the dimensions of food culture (particular to a country or region) if one is to seek to leverage its profound impact. To begin the process Food Culture Alliance undertook a Food Culture Scoping Review.

II. Literature review

1. The Food Culture Scoping Review

The Food Culture Scoping study used both secondary and primary research methods:

- Secondary Research: Included government documents, academic papers, media reports, and other credible sources.
- Primary Research: Involved interviews with experts from various domains, including the food industry, health and lifestyle, education, and government officials.

From the six dimensions identified in the scoping study, the Food Culture Alliance in India synthesised these into three food cultural codes; these are currently viewed as having the most potential to influence and shape food culture.

Table 1: Dimensions chosen to influence India's Food Culture strategically

Principles	Beliefs	Values	Norms
Wellness	Food has more profound power connected to healing the body than just satiating hunger.	Rhythm of body and seasons, including the food's connection to the earth	Balance
Participation	The custodian of food is the bridge between the food and the eaters	Cooking and preparation as the duty to nourish	Connecting
Openness	Consumption as a signal of upward mobility,	Worldliness	Exploration, curiosity

¹ Food Culture Alliance. Levers of Change: Strategies for Transforming Food Systems. 2023 Nov. Available from: <https://foodculturealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/levers-of-change.pdf> This report outlines strategic approaches to transforming food systems, directly informing the strategic dimensions identified for influencing India's food culture.

Wellness

Beliefs:

1. **Food's Profound Power:** This belief emphasises that food is not just about satisfying hunger. It recognises food's deeper, more profound power in healing and maintaining the body. In the Indian context, where food is often seen as medicine, traditional Ayurvedic practices and holistic health approaches are prevalent. This principle aligns well with existing beliefs and can be leveraged to promote healthier eating habits.

Values:

1. **Rhythm of Body and Seasons:** This value highlights the connection between food, the body's natural rhythms, and the seasons. It acknowledges that our food should be in harmony with nature's cycles. This value belief can drive a return to seasonal eating and local food practices, enhancing health and environmental sustainability.

Norms:

1. **Balance:** The norm of balance in food culture refers to achieving harmony in diet, incorporating a variety of nutrients, and balancing indulgence with moderation. In India, where dietary diversity is rich but also prone to extremes (like excessive spice or sugar), promoting balance can help address lifestyle-related health issues.
2. **Connecting to the Earth:** Norms around connecting food to its source, understanding where it comes from, and appreciating its journey from farm to table can foster more sustainable food practices. This norm can encourage organic farming and reduce reliance on processed foods.

Participation

Beliefs:

- 1) **Custodian of Food:** This principle views those who prepare food as custodians or guardians, bridging the gap between the food and those who consume it. This can elevate the status of cooks and farmers, fostering respect for their societal roles.

Values:

- 1) **Duty to Nourish:** This value emphasises that cooking and preparing food is aimed at nourishing others. It can promote the idea that food preparation is a meaningful and respected activity, encouraging more people to cook at home and appreciating the efforts of those who do.

Norms:

- 1) **Connecting:** This expectation is that meals are meant to be shared to build and maintain relationships. Sharing meals strengthens family bonds and community ties and encourages communal eating practices integral to Indian culture.

Openness

Beliefs:

- 1) **Upward Mobility:** Consumption patterns are social mobility indicators. Exploring different types of foods, especially those considered luxurious or exotic, can signal their social and economic status. This belief can drive interest in diverse and novel culinary experiences.

Values:

- 1) **Worldliness:** Promotes an appreciation for and openness to new, worldly experiences (e.g., dishes, cooking practices, and ingredients). It can help integrate international food trends into the Indian food culture, enriching it further.

Norms:

- 1) **Exploration and Curiosity:** The expectation is about trying new foods and curious about different culinary traditions. The exploration allows one to participate in the experience of the upper classes. It also aligns with the Indian spirit of hospitality and diversity, promoting a more inclusive and broad-minded approach to food.

By strategically focusing on these principles - *Wellness, Participation, and Openness* - efforts to shape food culture in India can align with deeply held cultural beliefs and values while encouraging healthier, more sustainable, and more inclusive food practices.

III. Research Design

1. Research Design Considerations

The proposed research design (see below) recognises the challenges of studying Indian Food Culture given the diversity of geographic, ethnic, religious and demographic contexts. The suggestion of blending observational and ethnographic approaches aims to provide a mechanism to identify foci (step 1) and the depth of interrogation to understand the dynamics of those focus areas (step 2).

Observational Methods in Complex Cultural Contexts

Observation provides valuable insights into visible food behaviours, however, presents some challenges:

- social media is unrepresentative of lived behaviours
- alignment between social media/ audience segments
- costs of direct observational messages.

However, observation alone can miss the layered meanings associated with food (Geertz, 1973; Appadurai, 1981), in particular, risks overlooking symbolic associations like purity or status, which require deeper, prolonged engagement (Malinowski, 1922).

Relating abstract food codes with observed food behaviours

The synthesised food culture codes are constructs created from desk research and expert interviews, whilst observed behaviours are lived experiences. Consideration needs to be given to how to connect these two different sources via:

- internal (agency/GAIN) codification
- limited in-depth ethnography (this will be challenging in terms of having a vocabulary to represent the codes)

Ethnography and Longitudinal Engagement

Ethnographic methods allow researchers to capture the “why” behind food behaviours, providing a richer understanding of cultural and symbolic meanings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

2. Research Design

The proposed research is a single project comprising two steps focused on the following geography and audiences.

Geographical Focus

Vendors should propose a detailed costed proposal for two alternative geographies:

1. Western and Central UP
2. Eastern UP+Bihar+Jharkhand (i.e., the Bhojpuri belt).

Audience

In alignment with the "**India 123**" framework, as outlined in the *Indus Valley Annual Report 2024* by Blume Ventures, this research study will focus on the "**India 2**" segment, representing the aspirational middle class or lower-middle class. This demographic constitutes approximately 40% of Indian households, translating to around 120 million households. The India 2 segment is characterised by:

1. Households with moderate but rising income levels.
2. Aspirations for upward economic mobility.
3. Increased consumption patterns indicative of their growing disposable income.

For the purposes of this study, the target group will specifically comprise **individuals aged 18–40 years** residing in **Tier-II cities** or the **peri-urban areas of Tier-I cities**. This definition provides a structured and data-driven approach to identifying the research demographic, ensuring alignment with recognized socio-economic classifications. Vendors must also incorporate ethnographic and participatory methods alongside observation to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

Step 1: Defining Foci for In-depth Analysis

Objective

1. Capture lived food behaviours and the language people use to describe/ characterise them.
2. Identify themes in food behaviours and relate them to the existing synthesised Indian Food Culture Codes (x3) and surface other relevant codes.
3. Support GAIN/FCA, to segment the themes in food behaviours based on their impact on preferences toward sustainable and nutritious diets and identify areas of focus.

Methodology

This step should be routed in observational methods to identify lived food behaviours and accompanying preferences. In responding to the RFP, agencies should address the methodological challenges expressed in the design considerations section above.

Step 2: Understanding Behavioural Associations and Labels

Objective

4. Understand how the cultural codes are expressed in the food related behaviours that are the focus following step 1, what and who drives the codes, and the channels of this influence.

Methodology

The agency will select appropriate ethnographic methods with supporting rationale to capture nuanced consumer preferences, influences, and the mechanisms through which they act.

Stimuli Development

Respondents to this RFP should articulate their approach to stimuli development for the chosen ethnographic methods by:

- sharing examples from previous research and explaining their relevance to this project
- demonstrating how stimulus will elicit discussions of the food culture codes, using vernacular language and lived food experiences.
- utilising the outputs of step 1 to prompt deep understanding

IV. Deliverables and Timeline

Agencies are encouraged to propose timelines detailing the sub-steps between the broad milestones below. Overall, we expect the study to be executed in no more than three months.

Deliverable	Description	Due Date
Inception Report	Detailed plan including segmentation frameworks, methodologies (ethnography, observation), and stimuli approach	MM/DD/YYYY
Preliminary Results	Emerging insights, segmented across frameworks and enriched by ethnographic methods.	MM/DD/YYYY
Draft Report	Draft report of findings segmented by socio-economic, cultural, and ethnographic dimensions	MM/DD/YYYY
Final Report	Final report including comprehensive analysis and recommendations segmented by chosen frameworks	MM/DD/YYYY

V. Instructions for Responding to this RFP

1. Proposal Content

Research Proposal: A maximum 5-page outline detailing:

- Framework for Participant Sampling & Selection: Choice of SEC, SCR, or LSM framework(s) with justification.
- Methodology: Explanation of observational, ethnographic, and participatory methods to address research objectives 1-4.
- Timeline: Timeline segmented by activity, including a Gantt chart.
- Budget: Detailed budget with cost justification for each step and method.
- Team Profiles: Expertise in ethnographic and observational methods in complex cultural contexts.

2. Submission Format

Submission Address: Send proposals to rfp@gainhealth.org with the “FCA India Consumer Research – Proposal.”

Deadline: Proposals must be submitted by 3rd January 2025.

3. Budget Requirements

Include all direct and indirect costs in INR with a clear budget justification for chosen methodologies and frameworks.

VI. Terms and Conditions

Proposal Validity: Must remain valid for 60 days post-submission.

Evaluation: Proposals will be reviewed based on segmentation framework selection, understanding of the scope, and technical approach, particularly in ethnographic and participatory methods.

Rights of Rejection: GAIN reserves the right to reject any or all proposals.

Intellectual Property: Ownership of findings, data, and materials will vest with GAIN, subject to contract terms.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist* 8 (3): 494–511.
- Atkinson, Paul, and Martyn Hammersley. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Blume Ventures. (2024). *Indus Valley Annual Report 2024: Charting India's Digital Economy*. Retrieved from <https://blume.vc/reports/indus-valley-annual-report-2024>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fischler, Claude. 1988. "Food, Self, and Identity." *Social Science Information* 27 (2): 275–92.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE). 2017. *Nutrition and Food Systems*. Rome: FAO. <https://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe>.
- Kaur, Bhavneet, and Gurmeet Singh. 2017. "Traditional Food Beliefs and Practices in India." *Indian Journal of Cultural Studies* 45 (3): 245–59.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge.
- Rozin, Paul. 2002. "The Cultural Psychology of Food." In *Handbook of Food Studies*, edited by Carol Young and Robert Davis, 200–21. Oxford: Oxford University Press.