

# Symbolism of Food in Hinduism

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## INTRODUCTION

Food, for early humans, was just a basic necessity required for survival. Also, food during that period was not that complex, due to the hunting and gathering lifestyle of our ancestors. But there was a phenomenon which caused fundamental shift in the position of food in our daily lives and ingrained itself in our very culture and society- farming [1]. Start of farming and settlement led to mass production of food, generating authority for the person who has more produce to provide for everyone living together. As we move further in the timeline of human history, the formation of several institutions, both primary and secondary, again lead to increase in the importance of food. Food became a means of communication with others- who cooks, who is served first, who cleans after eating, how it is eaten, all denoted some subtle messages.

Religion, as one of the mankind's most prominent secondary institution, has a very heavy influence over the societal norms and customs of the people in the society. Food also came into play in this institution, combining with the laws, stories, myths, customs and ceremonial practices, to build up a specific dietary pattern according to the religious beliefs. Food was molded according to the various details regarding the incidents of the religious figures or the gods, was incorporated into the rituals and practices, was used to promote the unity feeling in the community, and much more. Often, food played a pivotal role in many of the myths of the religions around the world, promoting the importance of food from just a resource to a necessary and important link to understand the various intricacies of the various institutions created by humans [2].

Food can be taken as an important linkage to understand the various connections and meanings behind the complex and intricate rituals, or be used as a commemorative symbol for some incident or story. This relevance is of great interest to an anthropologist. In his article, Brad Wiess explains how study of feasting, food exchange, food offerings and sacrifices can often provide us with a powerful sociocultural link. The types and the variety of food, as well as the symbolism associated with it gave the anthropologists another direction to move forward in understanding the *Homo sapiens*, and helped them provide a fresh perspective of various activities happening in the society.

As food was understood more and more, for anthropologists, it transformed from a linkage to one of the center points of study in its very early days. As the food was one of the most basic part of the social and material culture, it was always involved in the understanding of many things when conducting a field research. Many field researchers and ethnographers have taken special account of the food feasts and the value of the food supply and food articles in that community and area [3]. One of the examples would be the study of Keya Pandey, where she talks about how in the 'food habits of the Ghaddi tribe, they have the custom of praying every single time before consumption of food, and how there is a prohibition on the consumption of meat on the Mondays and Tuesdays of the months, to placate specific gods and goddesses' [4-6].

In this research, an attempt is being made to study about some of the symbolic meanings of food in the religious setting, mainly in hinduism. Analysis on how myths and religious stories may lead to introduction of certain food habits and cuisines that sticks around for the years to come, how the various foods and customs blend in together seamlessly to create the matrix of the relations and customs in the institution of religion [7].

## Connections of Food and Religion

Food is one of the starting points in the mainline myths of many religions- be it the myth of Adam and Eve and their banishment from garden of Eden due to an apple, or the creation of the world as we know it due to 'cooking' of the brahmans, food has been one of the items that people often use to relate to their religious practices and gods. Food was an important aspect of religious studies in the early days too, with the most important one being the lectures of William Robertson Smith on the origin of ancient Hebrew religion. More often, the main focus of the relation between the food and religion was with the anthropologists and sociologists, rather with the scholars of religion [8-11].

In a different light, Mary Douglas's work talks about the idea of purity and pollution in religious setting and how for the food, the ideas can be relative, in the sense that the vessel from which the food is being eaten can be impure but still utilized as a sign of reverence and respect. The water touched by a certain person is 'polluted' but at the same time, it is purified by using the cow's sacred cow dung.

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Here, the relative idea of holy and unholy contradicts the general common sense of the people, often depending on the various variables which are included in the situation. Cow dung, is pretty much impure like the dung of any other animal and can defile even the gods, but, in relative sense to the mortal, it is considered to be pure. The water which was used to wash the female saadhu's feet is considered as sacred and again, was drunk as a means to purify and bless them. Her ideas in this study pretty much shaped the future of the studies of the food [9, 12-16].

Functionalist understandings are especially helpful for exploring the relationships between religion and food in particular contexts like ancient Israel. They also illumine the connections between religion, food, and other culturally constructed systems such as gender norms. Caroline Walker Bynum, in her book, *holy feasts and holy fasts*, shows how the intake and authority over consumption by saints and the women's position affected the development of women's roles in early Christianity and may help to explain the tension around women's leadership in early Christianity, focusing on gender and food expands our understandings of the scope of religion. How the females were canonized in those times but then they were all either famished and undernourished due to all the customary fasts, leading to a reputation of sanctity. This may elaborate on the 2 points that the food practices in the Christians was more central for the women rather than men, and also that both men and women associated food and he involved religious practices and rituals – especially fasting- with women [17].

Also, Gillian M. Bediako, in his book about the study by William Robertson Smith, points out that how the animal worship was prevalent in the Hebrew religion, and the animals that were worshipped were not to be eaten, as they were unclean according to Levitical food laws, suggesting a totem worship institution, as totems are also not eaten by their descendants.

All the above, research works were prominent in presenting a complete and holistic picture of the various religions that they were studying. And the food was one of the main links that was explored, elaborated on and then concluded upon. Thus, from the above we can estimate the importance of involvement of food in religious studies. Ethnography was the preferred tool of study for anthropologists, and there are also many ethnographies that were done for various communities in order to understand their cultural and ritualistic practices. Hence, these ethnographies also contained the accounts of various foods and feasts and how were they related to the whole community and the religious ceremonies. We will now move on to how the food is essential and vital in the Hinduism religion, and how the food and the various culinary habits re interrelate and provide shape and connections to the people who practice this religion [18].

### Food in the Folds of Hinduism

Of the India's over 1 Billion people, over 800 million of them call themselves Hindu, with around 50 million more outside the county. Hinduism is not only numerically one of the largest religions in the world, but it is also one of the oldest, with its roots originating way back in time. In contrast to other ancient religions, it continues to survive in the age-old rituals, the existing temples and the age-old places of pilgrimage. It has changed according to times and adapted itself to the modern era. Klaus K. Klostermaier, in his book talks about how Hinduism is not just a religion, it is a way of life that has permeated in the lives of the Hindus, and embraces all of the aspects of the Indian culture. He also highlights

how the other religions are also influenced by Hinduism to varying degrees, especially the 'aadvivasis', who were influenced so much that many of the tribes have lost their own local languages. But nowadays, in opposition to the concept of Sanskritization, the process of re-assertion of the tribal culture and literature is taking place to preserve those cultural and linguistic heritages [16-18].

The holy books of Hindus include the Vedas, the Upanishads, and many other religious texts and epics about the glory and myths of the Hindu deities, like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, the modern-day language translations are more popular and have influenced a much larger base of people. The teachings in these books is what brings about the majority changes as it contains the various rules, creeds, rituals and methods to perform those rituals. They tell us about what things are right and what things are wrong in the viewpoint of the religious institution. As mentioned in these holy texts, food plays an important part in the various religious rituals, while also being regarded as the important part of the daily life of the people. This can be seen from the point that how 'GHEE', or the clarified butter is one of the most auspicious objects, and the day of the person would go very well if one encounters it first thing in the morning. Food has taken an interesting perspective in the respect for the rules and mostly revolves around the concept of auspicious and in-auspicious, pure or impure.

One of the most important practices that define the religion is the *puja* that is done every day in an average Hindu family. Idol worship, or *Murti puja* is often performed, which involve several intricate steps, starting from welcoming of the deity, to washing him or her to feeding them with the utmost respect and then thanking them for coming to grace them. Klaus K. Klostermaier talks about how the worship that is performed is divided into several steps, accompanied by the *mantras*, or chants. But the central idea for the whole worship is definitely to invite the deities to have a meal at their home, as it is considered sacred for the people if the god visits their family and they will protect them, bless them and help them progress. He also talks about how the offering of food is considered a virtuous act, especially to a *Sanyasi*, and how the people always feel grateful when they come to eat. Here, the gratitude is shown to the guest and not by the guest as the people who are offering food consider it to be an act of good karma and it will help them earn some merit for feeding the people. This signifies food as a medium of acquisition of spiritual satisfaction, while also establishing a good relation between the people of the society, promoting them to help each other with a non-reciprocal mindset. This is one of the core duties that are performed by brahmans in Hinduism, which gradually spread out in whole of India, thus all of the Indian households consider a guest as a 'god', or, "*Atithi Devo Bhava*". Many *sastras* order giving of food to various deities in the house (*puja*), feeding the animals like crow, cow etc. as a method to sacrifice for the gods, believing that gods dwell in them, and us too. Just eating a meal after self-purification is considered as feeding the gods who dwell within. 'Agni', or fire is considered as a guest too, and if anything, edible is burnt, it is said to have reached the gods and the guests, sating them [19].

B. K. Smith pointed out that in Manu Smriti, a holy book containing various rules and regulation for the various customs and the daily life, there is a vivid description of the image of the competition in the society, terming it as *strong* 'eating' the *weak*. Also, there is a very clear statement on praising the non-violence, and declaring that eating meat will lead to them becoming victims of those whom they ate. But, at the same time it also contradicts the same by exempting

the consumption after a sacrifice to the gods and ancestors, all in all giving out a leeway for the meat consumption and portraying the importance of ancestor worship and sacrifice. C. Malamoud views every practice of cooking as a sacrifice, a sacrifice to the gods as, only cooked food will reach them. This is due to the involvement of heat, and the usage of fire, or *Agni*, which is considered as the messenger of gods. Hence in a sense, the brahmins, who conduct the sacrifices for praying, are just in a way 'cooking the world'. According to this, all that human eats is cooked food, which has been sacrificed to the gods [18].

Klaus also talks about how consumption of food is a sin unless one has performed the necessary rituals before, giving light to the fact that even the simple act of eating is sacred, and is considered as committing a sin if they do not eat and starve. It is also considered as disrespect to the food itself, as it is an important resource. Klaus justifies this by bringing in the fact that India, over the long period of time, has experienced many famines and there were multiple times of scarcity. Thus, an Indian need to take care of himself and every Hindu household has local rules regarding health. It is common for the sacred texts to provide instructions, with Upanishads even providing theology with regards to food, which goes, "if the food is pure, the mind becomes pure. When understanding is pure it allows concentration. If this is safeguarded, all fetters to the world are unraveled" [19].

In the various religious books and writings, the concept of vegetarianism and not eating meat is discussed in detail and there are also outlines for the concession of eating meat. Rig Veda condemns the intentional killing of any organism for its consumption as food. Any person found doing so is entitled to the strictest punishment. Various other writings such as Manu smriti and bhagvad purana [1] also discourage meat consumption, the major reason being the impurity of the meat, and the affect it has on the spiritual state of the person, as the various kinds of food have various effects on the body. But there are various levels of food and their consumption according to the varna system and as specified in the writings. Thus, although Hinduism has always advocated the vegetarian diet as a symbol of spiritual diet which helps in the achievement of the single, most important goal - *Moksha*, there was always a concession on the consumption of meat. It was during the period of Gautam buddha, the consumption of meat was totally cast aside and the vegetarianism became the major part of Hinduism.

Carl Olson also talks about how food is viewed as something that contains the elements of life, and how it influences our perception, temperament and emotional changes, leading to longevity and salvation. He also talks about how in devotional Hinduism, the leftover from the meal of the gods is considered divine and contains the blessings from them. Hence, it is consumed in the form of *prasadam*, hence identifying food as a medium for the people to connect to the gods and actually 'obtain' something from them. This highlights the dependency and the role of god for the people, at the same time also suggesting that the emotional dependency is an important part of every human's life, with majority of humanity depending on the gods and the religious beliefs. The book, SAGE encyclopedia of food issues, talks about the three main sub types of food as mentioned in Hindu sacred literature- *Sattvic*, *Rajasic* and *Tamasic*, and how they are one of the important factors in deciding personality traits. *Sattvic* food is considered as light food, and is associated with bringing clarity and perception. It includes mainly the vegetarian ingredients and were the essential diet of the *sadhus* and *sanyaasis*. At the same time *rajasic* food was the stimulating

type, being rather hot, spicy or salty, which when taken in large quantities, was considered the cause of anger problems. *Tamasic* food was considered as heavy and depressing, which can induce sleep when taken in large quantities. Hence, food is not only linked to the relational aspects of the people to the religion, but also emphasizes on the fact that how people should eat to maintain their ideal temperament for the society.

R. S. Khare in a book notes that how White comes to a conclusion regarding the process of "pollution, purification and redemption" and how there are various instances where there has been a clash with the whole concept of 'spiritual food', and how it was justified afterwards, after examining the story of *Vishwamitra* eating dog's hind quarters after almost dying of starvation while going through *dharma* crisis, or *dharam sankata*. Reverse exchange of the food in a symbolic fashion is also seen in various episodes of life of Hindu deities, particularly in *Krishna's* life. How he ate only a bit of the leafy vegetable at his sister, *Draupadi's* home, he also ate dried rice that was brought by *Sudaama* for him. Here, the point of the exchange is reversed and the food that is offered by the person to the god takes the form of love and devotion, of which *Krishna* was very fond of. His early days of heists of churned butter is also glorified and thus become an important food for the devotees of *Krishna*. Also, he goes on to state that food is compared to the cosmic truth, in the sense that is deeply linked with the social-ritual (and Karma-Dharma) distinctions, classifications and customs, and the balances of these roles and truths lead to the ultimate goal of liberation. Thus, food is considered to be one of the distinguishing markers in the field of 'good' and 'bad', demarcated by 'cursed' or 'blessed' food. There is also the concept of 'perfect' (*pakka*) and 'imperfect food' (*kuccha*), often associated with the methods of cooking. *Kuccha* food is said to be imperfect due to it usually being made by boiling and consists of rice or wheat cakes boiled with water. This food is said to be contaminated easily, thus is considered imperfect. On the other hand, when the flour cakes are fried in butter and vegetables that are also cooked with butter, are considered as perfect. Reason being that the butter used is the product of traditionally reverend cow, thus butter has a purifying effect on the food items that are cooked with it [18,19].

According to L. A. Babb, the worship of the gods in temples can be seen as an asymmetrical transaction of food. Food is used as medium of worship where the food is given to the gods and they return it in the form of *jutha*, or leftovers. These leftovers are the *prasada*, which is said to be blessed by the consumption of gods. However impure may be the leftovers, to the Hindus, the food is divine enough to even ignore the caste boundaries in order to partake in the leftovers. According to some myths, the gods and deities are unable to make food for them and thus have to depend on the sacrifices and the offerings by the believers, thus making food as a singular important link between the *Swarg lok* (heaven), *Narak lok* (hell) and *Prithvi lok* (earth). Also, the amount of *prasada* and temple's ability to provide to all of its devotees may translate to the economic power and the importance of the temple. Even in the fields of marriages and kinship, transaction of food is often done in the form of dinners and parties, at an acceptable level and strategically, in order to achieve gain in social status [19].

Feasts are the common face of the festivals celebrated in Hinduism. Every festival has community feasts which are organized in the local areas, where large amounts of people are fed in the name of the god being worshipped on that day. Although the god is the one

being fed first, organization of such feasts is also considered as a huge amount of good karma coming to all the people involved in the organizing of the feast. Very often, there are various legends attached to the reasons of celebration, providing the feast with a mysterious, mythological and cultural background, often having a teaching or an important event attached to the day. Feasts are not limited to the various major festivals only. Even when honoring the dead ancestors, the *pitrs*, and the ghosts, transaction of food takes place under the watch of a brahmin or the gods themselves. The act of feeding the animals in *shrad* (*festival for the remembrance of the dead*), is just symbolic and is done by the people only for the spiritual satisfaction and to show respect for the dead ancestors. In no way is it considered compulsory, and this approach also depends on the beliefs of the person.

As eating food and food itself is an important part of Hinduism, fasting, or no consumption of food is also an important part of the religion. Fasting, in Hinduism is linked with the strengthening of soul and the spirituality of the people. Just like festivals and feasts, fasting also follows some rules and customs associated with it. Scientifically, it benefits the human body physically, like regulating the digestive system of the human body and regulating it. According to Hindu spiritual teachers, in order to receive the blessings, one must sacrifice and fast on certain days. Two kinds of fasting prevalent, i.e. *vrata* and *upvasa* [19]. In *Vrata* one can eat certain kinds of food and regular consumption is prohibited, while in *Upvasa*, one totally shuns food. Fasting is considered as a method of self-sacrifice for spiritual gain and a method of transaction and requesting from deities. It indicates the denial of physical need of the body, in exchange for the spiritual gains for the soul, thus highlighting the importance of the spiritual satisfaction over the worldly satisfaction. Like everything else, brahmins are also considered the prime candidates for fasting, which symbolizes their status, and also according to *puranas*, provides them with the favor of the deities in the present life and also helping them in getting salvation in the next life.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, we can conclude that food, is one of the most important links in the fabric of any religion, and in Hinduism, it holds a special place in symbolic, materialistic and ritualistic sense. Even in everyday consumption, it is linked with various teachings, rituals, and traditions, thus making every meal meaningful and depicting the various aspects of the literature and knowledge of older times. This can also be interpreted as the knowledge that was handed down in the form of food symbolism. The various forms of food practices have all evolved over time, each one having various reasons of doing the thing the way they are done. Symbolic meanings have a significant impact over the usage and importance of the food item. Thus, even when there is food that can be considered as leftovers (*jutha*), that food may be considered very pure in a relative sense. Thus, the concept of purity and pollution can be labeled as a relative concept in reference to Hinduism. Even though core beliefs of Hinduism always promote vegetarianism, there is a symbolic meaning to the preference of the vegetarian diet over meat consumption, majorly connecting to the fact that wrongful killing of living beings is considered as a sin, and also the type of food we eat is a major factor in molding the present life and also the next life of the person eating. Also, food is seen as a major link in the myths and the back stories of the various gods and deities, shedding light on some of the food items and practices

that were influenced by them and also defining the importance of food in providing a link between the various realms of the universe, as described in the Hindu myths. In Hinduism, food, caste and religion are so closely intertwined that there are often links that are specified in the various customs that use food as a marker for the various divisions and religious regulations. Thus, also giving out the perspective of the fact that food is also one of the links that is needed for the extension of the religious boundaries. In caste system too, there is a restriction of transfer of food in between castes, routed with the distinction between pure and impure, but as we see that this distinction is often very vague and thus affects the consumption in various ways. The festivals and feasts often see the consumption of various sweets increase, and suggesting towards the fact that the large scale feasts are often organized as a place for communal gathering, and is often organized to increase two things- the cohesion and bond between the members, and the *Karma* of those who are involved. Lastly, even not eating, and fasting is very much religiously justified as it helps the body of the individual in not only the physical aspects, but also with the spiritual aspect too. Fasting is said to help in the regulating the desire of food, and exchanging it for spiritual gains.

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