

## Food in the Hindu Tradition

“In Vedic texts, the sacrifice plays the pivotal role in [the] perpetual redistribution of food. The sacrifice was the dining hall of the gods; humans fed the divinities in the expectation that the sated diners would, in turn, feed the universe” (Smith 180). Hindus perform sacrifices for many different reasons and most, if not all, involve an offering of food (Yajna) to a selected deity. It is important to note that one must be in a state of purity in order to offer food to the gods.

According to the Havik Brahmin’s three states of pollution, a Havik male must be in the Madi, or purist state in order to worship and feed a god. A Havik female, even when in Madi, is still not pure enough to feed a deity. However, a woman must be in her highest state of Madi to feed a Havik man his dinner. The Hindus see eating as a form of pollution (Rodrigues 68). However, food is still very important within the Hindu culture. It is not only a source of nourishment that sustains life, but it is “synonymous with life and all its goals” (Ravindra 1)

During many stages in a Hindu’s life, food plays a role. For example; in the Investiture with the Sacred Thread (Upanayana) ritual, the boy is “fed by [his mother] like a small child...this is expected to be the final time he will receive food into his mouth from her hands...The boy also begs for his first meal” (Rodrigues 79). Marriage, being one of the most important rites of passage, is celebrated with a huge feast. When the married couple has their first child, Brahmins are invited into the home and offered food in celebration. According to the *Laws of Manu*, Brahmins are quite restricted in who they can accept food from.

A Brahmin should never eat (the food) of those who are drunk, angry, or ill, nor (food) in which hair or bugs have fallen, or which has been intentionally touched by the foot; nor (food) which has been looked at by an abortionist, or touched by a menstruating woman,

or pecked at by a bird, or touched by a dog; nor food sniffed by a cow, nor, most especially, food publicly advertised... nor (food) which someone has sneezed on; nor the food of a slanderer, a liar, or the seller of rituals, nor the food of a tumbler or a weaver, nor the food of an ingrate; nor that of a blacksmith, a member of the Hunter caste (Doniger 1)

Although there are many more restrictions, it is easy to see how eating food can be an ordinary, yet complex task when there are so many limitations to consider. If a Brahmin were to eat any foods treated in such a fashion as described above, that Brahmin would plummet into a high state of pollution. Non-Brahmin Hindus also take heed when eating and accepting food from others for the same reasons. It may seem that some of these dietary boundaries are purely common sense, such as not eating food that has hair or bugs in it. Other boundaries however, appear fairly extreme and would take a great effort to ensure these rules are followed if one wishes to remain pure.

There are three categories of food that can cause anything from health and happiness to disease and sorrow. These categories; Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic are synonymous with the three Gunas (the primary qualities of nature). The Gunas are believed to exist in all human beings and are a part of Prakrti (that which keeps one from realizing absolute reality by binding one to material objects and emotions). The first and purist is Sattvic food. In this category food can be anything such as nuts, fruits, or vegetables. These foods increase one's health, duration of life, strength, and happiness. It is believed that "when food is offered to one's personal deity before eating, the deity would neutralize harmful energies contained in the food" (Jayaram a1). Thus the food becomes pure (Sattvic) and so does the eater of the food. The second is known as

Rajasic (hot) food which can be bitter, salty, meat, garlic, onions or any hot, spicy foods (Saksena 1). It is said this food and/or Guna creates a person who is unhappy, sorrowful and diseased (Jayaram b1). The third and darkest or most intoxicating Guna is called Tamasic. Food under this category would be fermented, or considered untouchable. It would include such foods as meat, fish, poultry and eggs. Eating Tamasic food would make a person dull, sleepy or reckless (Jayaram b 1) Meat is especially important in the Hindu culture. Not for consumption but rather to avoid eating.

It is not the case that Hindus are all vegetarians, but due in part to Karma (action), Hindus refrain from killing, harming and eating any animal unless for ritual purposes or other extreme cases. According to the *Laws of Manu*, “times when one is in extremis [one] can eat any food whatsoever--even meat from a cow or a dog, or food bought by killing your son” (Doniger 1). Karma plays a large role in this belief of keeping animals off the Hindu’s dietary menu. Karma comes from doing, and what you do will affect you in this life and in the next life. Eating, killing or harming an animal is bad Karma and ultimately those that kill and eat animals will have to experience the same amount of suffering due to the effects of Karma. Food is considered to be one of the five “sheaths” that clothes the soul (the other four are breath, mental, intelligence, and bliss), thus “food directly matters to the formation of a Hindu’s inner being and its becoming from one birth to the next” (Ravindra 5) “Eating meat impacts the development of the five sheaths and delays spiritual development” (Jayaram a1)

Spiritual development is life’s purpose for most Hindus. The highest goal in life is to obtain Moksa, or freedom from worldly existence and Karma. Moksa is contrasted with Bhukti which is defined as the enjoyment of worldly pleasures (Rodrigues 52). Food is a worldly pleasure. Many people find satisfaction in food because of its taste, smell and its ability to

eradicate the feeling of hunger. “With food, the [Hindu] regulates his mental states and aesthetic feelings and secures spiritual gains” (Ravindra 9). However, Hinduism offers another religious thought known as fasting. It is believed that fasting will bring you closer to Moksa. Fasting is going for long periods of time without food or with limited amounts of food. Depending on the type of fasting and for what occasion, the time period can vary from a few days to many years. The few Hindus who enter into the fourth life stage (Samnyasin) dedicate their time trying to achieve the goal of Moksa. There are variations of the ideal path, but fasting or restraining from any worldly pleasures is one way in which a Samnyasin attempts to reach the goal of Moksa. “Starvation [becomes] and [remains] a religious goal, even while eating extremely well [remains] a worldly goal” (Doniger 1).

Food is most definitely a complex aspect of Hinduism. With all the different types of food that the world has to offer, Hindus are particular in choosing the food they eat and are also cautious about the source from which the food comes. Worship is taken to a higher level when food is involved. Hindus carry the belief that feeding the gods will keep the cycle of food distribution in motion. Through Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic food categories, Hindus are able to decipher which foods they shall eat in order to gain or avoid certain actions or emotions. In terms of actions, or Karma, Hindus are quite firm when it comes to avoiding the consumption of animals. “Do not kill an animal, for it might be your grandmother, or your grandchild, or you” (Doniger 1). Food is self evident, it is part of Brahman (Ravindra 5) Brahman is equated with Atman (true inner most self) and thus when you eat food, according to Hindus; you are eating yourself because food and you are one in the same. They are both part of Brahman which is the innermost essence of the created universe, the universe itself (Rodrigues 36). Hindu’s hold a

deep knowledge and appreciation for food. "Food reflects survival on one hand and spiritual liberation in the other" (Ravindra 5).

## **REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING**

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### **Related websites**

<http://www.faithandfood.com/Hinduism.php>

<http://www.srcf.ucam.org/cuhcs/sanskaar.article.php?article=food&year=2002>

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**Written by Tiana Mutter-Veitch (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.**