

Vegetarianism in Hinduism

A commonly recognized trait of the Hindu tradition is the notion of religious vegetarianism. A major reason that the study of Hindu vegetarianism is of particular interest is that the practice emerged some time prior to the Common Era (Bryant 194). The practice of vegetarianism is not universal among Hindus and the instance of practice varies amongst the various classes and the region of the country the sects originated. The exact percentage of vegetarians among Hindus could not be found but it should be noted that based on the 2004 census about a quarter of India's population are vegetarians placing them as the minority. Early Hinduism was heavily involved in animal sacrifice, which still is common among some sects. In order to get a full understanding for the practice of vegetarianism, many aspects of the religion must be looked into. These include prescriptions in the religious texts such as the Vedas and the epics, as well as religious aspects such as Dharma and reincarnation, and religious guides such as the *Laws of Manu*.

The reason to discuss the ritual of animal sacrifice in an article about vegetarianism is because it is important to see where the practice came from and how it came to be. Animal sacrifice has long been a ritual carried out in the Hindu tradition. The Vedas contain material specific to sacrifice, much of which are hymns used in the sacrificial ritual (Bryant 195). One of the most notable sacrifices is the *as vamedha* or the horse sacrifice. This ritual was undertaken by kings who wished to have a son. This is considered one of the most powerful sacrifices and required many animals to perish in the ritual's enactment. This is considered a very powerful ritual and is also very expensive, but was done according to Vedic specifications to appease the gods in order to get what the king needed. The animals used in the sacrifice first had to be ritually slaughtered for use in that sacrifice and the meat was later consumed by those in the Brahmin class (Bryant 195). This is a stark contrast to the Brahmins of modern vegetarian sects, who are commonly the individuals who abstain from eating meat. This is not to say that the symbolism of sacrifice is not still important to Hindus. Offering the gods sacrifices to ensure that they are pleased by humans is still a big part of the religion. However according to the *Laws of Manu* that a sacrifice composed of butter and flour is sufficient to please the gods (Bryant 198).

There are many aspects of the Hindu tradition that would lead to a vegetarian lifestyle. In the Hindu tradition every being on the earth, including animals and insects, contain an *atman* and also has the ability to be reborn in the next life as one of any number of entities (Bryant 194). If humans lead a life full of bad *karma* and an absence of *dharma* then they could be reborn into a lower class, e.g. as a *sudra*, or possibly even an animal. With the idea of an *atman* also came the notion of *ahimsa* which translates roughly as non-violence. *Ahimsa* in the Hindu tradition is extended to all beings with *atman* which is every animal. Since it is believed that all beings have an *atman* then killing and eating any of these beings would not be *dharmic*. The killing of

animals for the purpose of a humans own enjoyment or for a human's subsistence is believed to bring bad *karma*. For instance, scripture has stated that slaying a beast outside of the ritual context of a sacrifice to a god will cause the slayer to dwell in hell for as many days as there were hairs on the beast's body (Bryant 197). It is also stated that those who avoid meat altogether obtain all their desires and fruits equivalent to those obtained with the *as vamedha*, they can even become a sage even in the stage of householder (Bryant 197). So, for an individual that lives the vegetarian life style, it is much easier and cheaper to obtain all the advantages of a high profile sacrifice (Bryant 197).

In the Hindu tradition there is not a single god that is in the highest position, it depends on the worshipers and the god. The notion of vegetarianism thus extends even to the gods. Those only engaging in vegetarianism maintain a form of purity higher than those that are offered animal sacrifices. Those gods that are strictly vegetarian are considered superior "*sanskritic*" deities and are held above the meat eating deities. The *sanskritic* deities are also held to be of a purer nature and are more difficult to defile, and if they do become defiled they become pure more easily. For instance in one temple located in the south of India there are two gods worshipped, Aiyanar and Karuppan. Aiyanar is a vegetarian god and Karuppan is a meat eating god. This is an interesting case study because these two gods are housed in the same temple. When an animal sacrifice is made to Karuppan, a cloth is draped over Aiyanar so that he cannot see the slaughter (Fuller 90). "These two deities exemplify the two fundamental categories of deities, pure vegetarian versus impure meat-eater, as well as the relationship between them is homologous with that between high-ranking vegetarian castes and low ranking non-vegetarian castes"(Fuller 90). All deities are the objects of *puja* at which vegetarian offerings are made, but Karuppan is additionally offered animal sacrifice. In addition, no deities are ever offered only animal sacrifice because that would make them not a deity at all but a demonic spirit craving blood alone (Fuller 90).

The epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are ancient Sanskrit tales that depict ideal actions in different situations such as the actions of an ideal king. These epics also have lessons on killing animals and defiling deities. In the *Ramayana* there is a saying "whatever food a man eats the same is the food to be offered to his deity" (Fuller 103). This means that those worshipping a vegetarian god should be vegetarians in order to maintain that god's purity. The *Mahabharata* contains some of the strongest statements against the harming or animals and the consumption of their flesh (Bryant 198). The *Mahabharata* in fact has three entire chapters dedicated to the evils of eating meat. In one story a sage was impaled on a pike by some thieves. When he asked the god Dharma why this had happened he was told that he had once pricked an insect with a blade of grass and he was now feeling the *karmic* consequences (Bryant 198). Several other stories found in the text depict great spiritual sages either being punished for harming animals or even causing themselves harm in order to save animals. Some of the most powerful words against the eating of flesh come from Bhisma, when he is talking to Yudhisthira, who in the epic is an extremely *dharmic* character. Bhisma tells him that humans who indulge in

a diet of meat are of the vilest of human beings. He also tells him that the righteous in previous ages had gained entry into heaven by sacrificing their lives to protect the lives of other creatures (Bryant 198). The goal in Hinduism is to become liberated and to move beyond the cycle of reincarnation. Because of this it is easy to see why Hindus take on the practice of vegetarianism in order to avoid harming other creatures. These epics are deeply influential in the Hindu tradition and beings such as Bhishma and Yudhisthira are models to be followed examples.

The *Laws of Manu* is a text that is influential for prescribing laws of action in the Hindu tradition. It is classified as a *smirti* (remembered texts), so it is not revealed by the gods. It does not state that animal sacrifice is wrong in fact he states that he subscribes to the customs of the Vedic forefathers. He also states that one who desires to increase his own flesh by the flesh of an animal is the greatest of sinners and that those who harm animals in order to please himself will never find happiness (Bryant 197). This goes back to the notion that all living beings are regarded as having an *atman* and to extinguish this for your own pleasure is unforgivable. “It is in Manu that we find the popular etymology of the term for meat: *mam sah* "me, he" (i.e., the animal whose flesh I eat in this life will devour me in the next world” (Bryant 197). Even though it is acceptable to eat the meat of a sacrifice, vegetarian Hindus avoid the meat altogether in order to ensure that no harm is ever caused to animals by them. The consequences of slaughtering an animal has implications on anyone who is involved in any step of the processing; this includes the butcher, the transporter, the merchant and finally the person consuming the meat.

Whether a Hindu is a vegetarian or not, usually has to do with the caste that they belong to and where they are located. An example of this is in southern India where Brahmin culture tends to be strictly vegetarian. The practice is sometimes shared by high ranking non-Brahmin castes and these individuals tend to claim a higher status because they are following the Brahmin’s superior dietary code (Fuller 93). The Brahmins of the north are also usually vegetarians and it is held in high regard. Fish and meat are more widely eaten in the northern region and individual Brahmins tend to have more “lapses” in their strict vegetarian diets; so vegetarianism is less of an index to Brahminhood than it is in the south (Fuller 93). The warrior caste or Ksatriyas were traditionally a meat eating class. This is so because as the warriors and defenders of the other castes they needed to eat meat in order to increase their material strength. In fact meat eating by this class is held higher than vegetarianism even though it holds less prestige. The merchant class or Vaisyas follow in the footsteps of the Brahmins and are usually vegetarians, sometime even more strictly than the Brahmin caste.

Bibliography & Related Readings

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Websites

http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/baseline/baseline2004.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_vegetarianism

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