

## Hindu Cooking: food for thought

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Hindu culture is probably the only lifestyle in the world that links food and way of thinking so closely. The importance of cooking can be assessed by simply looking at the importance of the kitchen in the Hindu home. Apart from the pooja room (pooja: small offerings to the deity mainly consisting of light, incense, flowers, fruits, sweetmeats and money) the kitchen is the most holy place in the house. It is revealing though to analyze the basic meaning of the word 'holy' in both Sanskrit and Hindi. The word used is pavitra, which actually means pure, clean, cleansing, etc. As the saying "Cleanliness is Godliness" clearly shows, purity is one of the most important concepts in the practical way of life that Hinduism is. This is a thing that is not easily noticed by a short-time western visitor to India. The teeming masses that fill the streets wherever one can see, making it quite impossible to keep everything impeccably clean. But when one visits the home and sees the care that is taken of the cooking vessels and the way of touching – or rather not touching – them, one starts to have an idea about the meticulous care that Hindus take in order to keep things clean according to their own rules.

Just as the temple, the kitchen will only be entered without footwear. Shoes or sandals are considered dirty because of dust or because they are made of skin of dead animals who did not die a natural death. This is the reason why you can see many religious people in India wearing plastic or – more traditional – wooden footwear, which might be less comfortable, but they are considered materials that involve no impurity when produced. For the same reason it is adding insult to injury if you beat someone with a shoe. Of course, in India most people take off their shoes even before entering the house in order to keep everything clean. This precaution becomes obvious, if one takes into account that in many rural households everything is placed on the ground, and chairs are not commonly in use. The ground functions so to speak as a table. Also in the kitchen, the stove or heater is generally on ground level, and the cooking is done while sitting on the ground or on a very low stool. Of course the cook him-/herself has many rules to obey if the food is meant for important persons, and especially so when it is meant as an offering to God. Hindu society and its rules found their origins in a tribal society. This is clearly seen in the fact that like in all tribes in the world, one can only marry inside this group, though outside the smaller family. This tribal structure accounted for the later caste system and the rules of intermarriage and interdining. Normally one only shares meals with friends (who are equals of course), or with people from whom it is known that they follow rules of cleanliness. And of course the most important thing is to know that the food was cooked by a clean person. Therefore it is necessary that the cook is from good family if she is not a family member and that she takes a complete bath before even entering the kitchen or the pooja room.

In some families the whole cooking will be done in the very early morning, after performing the necessary cleansing rituals and before everybody is awake. A good cook should be able to cook without touching (i.e.: without tasting or smelling) the food. This is done because the deity should be the first to enjoy the preparation. Anything that is cooked is considered an offering and it is said in the Laws of Manu: "The person who cooks only for himself eats nothing but error, for the food left over from the sacrifice is the food intended for good men." This is the reason why the cook will in most cases serve the deity, the guests and the family first, before eating anything him-/herself.

It is obvious that the food meant for sacrifice should be of the very best quality, and of course clean and pure. To know what kind of food is fit for offerings, the rule of triguna or the "three qualities" can be applied. These three qualities can be used to make a division of practically everything under the sun. They qualify anything from food to

plants, animals, people and so on. The names of the three categories are sattvik, rajasik and tamasik.

Sattvik food is food that does not upset the stomach and is light to digest, cow's milk is a good example. It should not be too spicy nor too fat or heavy. No living creature should be harmed in order to obtain sattvik food. The eating of this pure food will enhance the sattvik qualities of the person who eats it. Thus food for which no animals had to be killed will have a subtle influence on the thoughts and character, it will make one pure and non violent, in other words, fit for a spiritual life.

Rajasik food makes one active and is more stimulating. Good examples are onion, garlic, strong spices and meat. It is a diet fit for warriors.

Tamasik food has the quality of making somebody lazy and inactive. It is hard to digest and drains the life power away to the stomach. Stale or non-nutricious food, such as the artificial components in modern fast-food, is the most tamasik.

It is evident from the above that only sattvik food is fit to be offered to God and is widely preferred as daily food. Therefore it is no wonder that India counts some two hundred million vegetarians, and this is not because they can't afford to buy meat, as some simplistic minds think. Although it is equally famous for tempting dishes with poultry, mutton or fish, India can truly be called the country par excellence for vegetarians. Vegetarianism is already mentioned in the "Anushasan Parva" of the Mahabharata where 30 kings are listed who refrain from taking meat themselves, and 18 kings who had banned meat-eating from their kingdoms. So we can easily say the Indians perfected the art of vegetarian cooking since at least 3000 years. It is not without reason that the vegetarians in the west have taken inspiration from these great dishes of the world.

Since there is specific food prescribed for inducing specific qualities, it cannot surprise us that there are innumerable regulations pertaining to the food to be served on specific days and festivals. These special dishes so much create an atmosphere around the festival, that sometimes the name of the dish becomes the colloquial name for the festival itself as is the case for "Pongal" in South India or "Khitcheri" in the North for the same festival of Makara Sankranti.

India is of course also the land of spices, and the Indian art of seasoning can simply not be matched. It is quite common for an Indian cook to use some 10 or more spices in only one dish. And of course special dishes require special flavours and the amount of different spices may go up to thirty or more. Very specific for Indian kitchen is the technique of frying the spices to make the flavour come out completely. And the specific spice-mixtures like garam masala, panch masala and what we call curry powder are world famous.

The spices, however, are more than just a flavour. Several among them have preserving, disinfectant and medicinal value. This is of major importance in a hot climate like in India. These medicinal values are described in "Ayurveda", the Hindu medical system or "science of lifespan", but it is amazing to see how many common people benefit because they have a good working knowledge of medical science. Among all categories of people one finds housewives who are able to prepare some medicinal tea against colds and other minor ailments.

Consequently we can easily counter the male chauvinists who say that "A woman's place is in the kitchen" by remarking that this is a much revered and special place indeed.

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