

Ancient Indian Food and Related Philosophies

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Abstract: Ancient Indian food is influenced by its religions, customs, and traditions, it is not easy to group it like the food of the Western world. It is a country where the climatic conditions are also so varied, that the availability of produce too determines the way the food is cooked. The strongest influence on Indian food is from ancient roots. Ayurveda deals with areas concerning the healthy and long life of human beings. The origins of the food of Aryans date back to 1500 BC. The food of these people does not only deal with natural herbs and spices, it covers the whole aspect of life. It discusses the purpose of being born. It preaches that we live to eat and do not eat to live. Ayurveda talks about the aspects of mental as well as physical health and it suggests that the way to salvation is through healthy living, which includes eating good and living life on ethical code of conduct. The very famous phrase 'you are what you eat' probably is the origin of the teachings of Aryans literature. Life, in ayurveda, has been described as the combination of mind, body, and soul. A healthy body will practice and preach healthy thoughts, which in turn will reform a soul and thus will help reach salvation. These food habits talks about foods that regulate the health and even emotions of human beings. The usage of oil in winters and ghee in summers is still widely followed in many Indian homes. Ancient Indian food revolves around the concept that our body is made up of three elements—fire, air, and water, commonly referred in Sanskrit as vatta, pitta, and kappa. Ayurveda believes that rise of ailments and diseases are due to the imbalance in these elements. Even today, when doctors diagnose us with any ailment, we are advised to refrain from some kind of foods.

Keywords: Puja, Pala, Kachcha, Pucca, Channa, Amla, Dhal, Dosa, Khichdi, Mung.

Introduction: Aryan influence was strong enough to persist even to this day. Aryans were strict towards the rule and regulations related to food. The kitchen was considered the seat of ritual, and was in fact located next to the *puja* room. The cook was expected to have a bath, change into fresh cloths and only then enter the kitchen. Once cooking had started, he could not leave the kitchen till it was over; if he did so he would be considered polluted. The inmates of the house are in the kitchen and had a wash their hands, feet and mouth before sitting down on the floor to eat. After they had finished, there was a similar thorough washing of the mouth and the hands. Though this was considered a part of the ritual, it was obviously aimed at cleanliness and good hygiene.

They ate food of disposal plates made of leaves. A common one was the large banana leaf, but there were others made by joining together leaves of banyan of the *palas* tree using small splinters of bamboo.

Even cups were made by folding up these leaves and using bamboo-splinter hooks in ingenious ways. After the meal, these were all thrown away so that no pollution passed from one person to another. Water could be sipped but had to be poured into themouth, so that lips did not come in contact with the rim of cup used. There was a strong belief against eating food that was even slightly stale. For example, if two meals were eaten in a day, no material from first meal could be eaten at the second; everything had to be cooked fresh, especially boiled food. This obviously because of the fear of spoilage of food, which of course is very rapid in hot climates, and can cause serious infections. In the semi-religious instructions, one can see over again the emphasis Aryans placed on good hygiene and good sanitation.

In the orthodox Aryan rituals, two kinds of food were distinguished; one was called *kachcha* food and other *pucca* food. *Kachcha* food consisted of things like boiled rice, chapattis and boiled dhal, which were common every day foods cooked in kitchen and eaten by the family at every meal without leaving the premises of the kitchen. *Pucca* foods were those fried in oil, and these foods could be shared with non-family members without incurring any pollution.

Frying was, therefore, an important early concept in the Aryan way of life. Great sanctity was attached to the use of ghee for frying. The Aryans looked down upon any other cooking oil and insisted that everything should be fried in pure ghee. The older inhabitants of India had used oils like those of sesame, mustard and coconut, and gradually these also began to find a place in Aryan cooking for special purposes to import their own flavors. But the high value placed on ghee still persists in India, wherever one can afford to by the use of ghee.

The Aryans place a very high value on food. One of the *Upanishads* says:

“Man consists of essence of food. From food all
Creatures are produced, and by food do they grow.”

Food was not simply for sustenance, or taste, or nutrition, but was believed to have certain spiritual qualities. The purpose of food was to join together the spiritual aspiration of the person eating the food with the higher purpose of living. Food was part of a large moral cosmic cycle in which the spiritual part of human nature had to be sustained as much as bodily functions of living and breathing. While many of these theories may be considered fanciful, it did lead to an exalted place being given for food in the entire business of living and of one's ultimate purpose.

Hospitality was another part of these ethical ideas. It was believed that the highest merit went to someone who shared his food even when he had just enough to himself. Guests had to be treated with great honor. Among these who had to receive high hospitality were widows, any relative, and even animals like dogs and crows. Giving with a good heart was the moral behind numerous stories and verses, and was considered a virtue in itself. The giver was indeed blessed.

A number of practices were developed in regard of food preparation which is now realized to be of high nutritional value. Thus, from very early days, the parching and puffing of grains like rice wheat and barley was practiced. Another early concept was that of sprouting: grains like wheat, ragi, green gram or *channa* were soaked in water and wrapped in a wet cloth till they started to sprout. After two or three days, when the

sprouts were about a centimeter long, they were used as food. Scientists have shown that several vitamins, increase enormously in content during the sprouting process: vitamin C goes up ten times, and several vitamin of the B group are doubled. Also, the iron constituents present are broken down into similar forms and become available to the body.

Pickling again a very old Indian practice, conserving vitamins for use when fresh food is not available. Two excellent examples are pickled lime and pickled amla, which are both rich in vitamin C. Another good practice handed down from these Aryan times was the use of plenty of green leafy vegetables at every meal. Another fine concept developed long ago was the blending of differing types of proteins by using cereals and *dhal* together. There are some examples of such blended food; one is *khichdi*, in which rice and pulses are cooked together. The *dosa* of south India uses rice and *uraddhal*, and in addition the mixture is fermented so that it becomes far more easily digestible and also more nutritious.

The copious use of fruits and vegetables was another admirable feature of Indian food from early times. The Buddhists especially stressed this aspect, and even their stories and their sculptured *stupas* have delightful depictions of the abundant flora of India.

In the famous manual of statecraft written in 300 BC, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, a balanced meal of gentleman is described. This consists of rice 500gm, *dhal* 125gm, oil 56gm and salt 5gm, respectively. This balanced diet mentioned so long ago is the same is essential as the so-called recommended balanced diet which the Indian council of Medical Research laid down in 1987. In another famous volume the *Susrutha Samhita*, there is a list of foods recommended for everyday consumption. This includes aged winter rice, *mung dhal*, deer meat, honey, rainwater and rock salt. Even today this would be an excellent prescription for a balanced of meal.

The *Charaka Samhita* and the *Susrutha Samhita*, originally composed about the 6th 5th century centuries BC, but with accretions thereafter over several centuries, set down the principles and practice of Ayurveda. This system of medicine is concerned with the wellbeing of body, mind and spirit by bringing them into harmony. Diet is the most important way of doing this, and *Charaka* says:

Without a proper diet, medicines are of no use;

With a proper diet, medicines are unnecessary.

Ayurvedic dietary is all the six major tastes, namely, sweet, sour, salty, astringent, pungent and bitter. Including foods meant for licking, sucking, chewing and drinking, should have textural variety. Even today this will be seen in a full traditional wedding meal of any community and region.

The Aryans ate meat of all kinds as we have seen. A meal is described in *Ramayana* as follows:

Cleanly cooks, under the supervision of diligent
Stewards, several large pieces of meat roasted on spits;
Meat cooked as curries and sauces made of tamarind
And pomegranate; young buffalo claws roasted on spits
With ghee dropping on them; the same fried in ghee,
seasoned with acids, rock salt and fragrant leaves; large

haunches of venison boiled in different ways with spices
and mangoes, and sprinkled over with condiments;
shoulders and rounds of animals dressed in ghee,
sprinkled over with sea-salt and powdered black pepper,
and garnished with radishes, pomegranates, lemon,
fragrant herbs, asafetida and ginger.

However, even from the very early Aryan period, there was a feeling of unease expressed at the use of beef as food. The argument was mainly as economic one. Cows were useful on the farm, and they gave so many good things to human beings, like milk, urine, dung and leather. It was realized that valuable recourses were being sacrificed when one killed a cow just to eat it. In the beginning the prohibition was mainly against cows rather than bulls, but later on cattle meat as a whole began to be given up.

Gautama Buddha was very opposed to killing for sacrificial purposes or for eating, and his humanitarian views brought many Hindus into the Buddhist fold. Another great religious leader, Mahavira, was even stronger in this regard, and his followers, the Jains, became very strict vegetarians. These trends led Hinduism also to respect vegetarian sentiments. In place of the animal head used in the past in ritual sacrifices, vegetable materials such as coconuts and pumpkins came to be used. Gradually, the Brahmins became total vegetarians and gave up all forms of animal food. It is interesting to know remember that it was only in India at that time (about 600 BC) that a totally vegetarian diet was even possible, because of the very large number of cereals, pulses, vegetables and fruits that were available in the country.

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