A REVIEW ESSAY

FOOD IN INDIA


The cultural landscape of India, from the earliest Vedic period to contemporary times, is littered with food. As a biological necessity, as an economic commodity, as the primary ingredient of ritual and social transactions, as a medium of social and familial interaction, as a marker of social boundaries, as a principle of classification, and as a focus of ethical concerns of both religious virtuosi and common people, food has always been and continues to be at the heart of Indian ritual practice, social behavior, common etiquette, and theological speculation. The Vedic sacrifices, often involving the killing of a sacrificial victim, just as their vegetarian counterparts in modern temples, are essentially offerings of food to the gods. Eating the leftovers of these divine meals provides a major point of contact with the divine for sacrificers and devotees alike (Wezler 1978). In a contemporary celebration of the cowherd god Kṛṣṇa in the region of Braj, the central attraction is the “mountain of food” (*annakūṭa*) created and consumed by the devotees (Toomey 1992). Every Indian life-cycle rite is celebrated with a feast. Food links the dead with the living in periodic *śrāddha* oblations. Food links the Buddhist and Jaina monks with the laity and the Hindu *saṃnyāsins* with the common folk in the ritual of daily begging — the giving and the receiving of food.

Issues relating to food — what one is permitted to eat, how one should prepare it, when and how much one should eat, from whom one can accept it, with whom one can eat — these are central questions both in the legal literature of dharmaśāstra and in the minds of ordinary people. An ancient Vedic text uses food and eating to classify all reality — food and eaters of food, that’s all there is! A similar thought is echoed in the famous creation hymn of the *Rgveda* (10.90.4) when it divides all things into those that

*Journal of Indian Philosophy* **23:** 367—380, 1995.
eat and those that do not eat. While fasting is the most common penitential act of ordinary people, ambivalence toward, and even fear of, food is a hallmark of most traditions of Indian asceticism (Olivelle 1991).

The cultural construction of food that transforms it from a nutritional necessity to a medium of thought and communication is, of course, a common human phenomenon. Anthropologists have long recognized that food habits encode social structures and relationships, and that the study of food is an important key to understanding a society. The food habits of people living in simple societies — the so-called primitive cultures — have been a constant focus, therefore, of ethnographic and anthropological inquiry. Until recent times, however, we have not seen a similar scholarly interest in the cultural use of food in what is commonly regarded as the "major" religious and cultural traditions, even though the cultural obsession with food is even more marked in them than in simpler societies. The anthropologist Mary Douglas in many of her writings has pioneered the application of anthropological categories and methods to the study of complex societies, including the contemporary (Douglas 1984 [1966], 1982 [1970]). Her "Deciphering a Meal" (in Douglas 1975), a structural study of the modern British meal, and "The Abominations of Leviticus" (in Douglas 1982), an analysis of ancient Jewish food prohibitions, are exemplary in pointing out how detailed and careful analyses of food habits can be as fruitful for the study of complex cultures as they are for that of simpler societies.

The historian Caroline Walker Bynum (1987), likewise, has shown how the study of food can open new avenues of inquiry into the religious history of medieval Europe. Bynum has drawn our attention to the close relation between food and women; men may be involved in the production of food, but it is usually women who convert food into a meal. At least within the family, food is one social product over which women have control. In pregnancy and lactation, women transform their own body as food for their offspring. These unique experiences make food a stronger symbol and experience for women than it is for men. Food, Bynum has shown, permitted medieval women to gain some form of control over their selves and their circumstances, often through extraordinary means such as the refusal to take food at all. Phenomena
related to food and fasting play a more central role in the claim to holiness of female saints than they do in the lives of their male counterparts. Bynum's work demonstrates how important the study of food is for understanding the lives and histories of women in medieval Europe; but its importance surely applies as well to other times and to other parts of the world.

If ever there was a doubt as to the power of food as a medium of expression and control even in modern urban and technological societies, the recent increase of "food disorders" — anorexia and bulimia — to epidemic proportions should lay it to rest. Anorexia has also permitted interesting parallel studies between modern fasting girls and pre-modern anorexic saints and thrown significant light on the cultural creation of food, as well as of holiness and sickness (Bell 1985). Such anthropological and historical studies of food in the West should provide fruitful models for the study of the rich Indian materials.

R. S. Khare, whose recently edited book *The Eternal Food* (Khare 1992) is the catalyst for this essay, has been a pioneer in the study of food in India. In two early works on the subject (Khare 1976a, 1976b), Khare argued convincingly for the need to combine detailed anthropological work with the study of the Hindu religious and cultural attitudes toward and cosmological speculations regarding food. "Foods for the Hindus represent essentially two interrelated dimensions — as a nutriment for remaining alive and as a cultural principle of cosmological creation" (Khare 1976b, 119). These two aspects of food — bodily nutrition and cultural construct — are inextricably intertwined. Khare contends, correctly I believe, that even the most practical nutritional and economic issues relating to food, such as malnutrition and the efficiency of production and distribution, cannot be dealt with adequately in isolation from the cultural conceptions and attitudes toward food prevalent among the people.

In an attempt to synthesize the various cultural conceptions of food in India, Khare (1979b, 136) presents the following useful model of what he regards as the four central "food cycles" in Indian culture (Figure 1).

These four cycles, where the larger subsumes the smaller, include within their scope all of reality from gods and creative principles to organic and inorganic matter. None of these cycles is
completely independent of the others. The ritual, the social, the economic, the medical, and the nutritional are seen here as inextricably intertwined in practice, thought, and attitudes, and all these dimensions have some connection with the “spiritual” quest of liberation. Good and proper food not only creates a good body (medicine) but also a good mind (yoga). What you eat both reflects what you are and determines what you will be (Khare 1992, 27–52; White 1992). What one eats both demarcates one’s social boundaries and demonstrates one’s spiritual aspirations.

Carol Brekenridge’s (1986) important paper “Food, Politics and Pilgrimage in South India, 1350–1650 A.D.,” for example, demonstrates the close connection between food offerings to gods (cycle III) and the political economy of the region (cycle II). Rich and powerful people donate food to the temple at Tirupati. After it is offered to god, however, this food is recycled as “divine leftovers” and distributed among various segments of the population.
For a number of reasons, this substantial economy of divine leftovers had considerable cultural and political significance. First, by contributing to the diet of the deity, the donor partook of the deity’s royal authority. By receiving and controlling the most significant share of these leftovers, the donor publicly established his leadership over his constituency, whether it was a family, caste, sect, lineage, or little kingdom. In subsequently redistributing his share to his followers, dependents, and kinsmen, a donor would gain the superiority associated with asymmetric food transactions between human beings. By allocating this redistributive privilege to other powerful local persons and institutions (such as monasteries, feeding houses, and sects), he could increase his horizontal networks in the complex political economy of Tirupati while cementing his more diffused prestige with pilgrims, transients, and the needy, who were the last links in the chain of food consumption at Tirupati (Brekenridge 1986, 38. Original italics).

The aim of his recently edited volume, Khare eloquently argues, is to go beyond the particular customs, rules, and meanings of food and to discover the underlying “gastrosemantics” of Indian civilization. Gastrosemantics, according to Khare (1992, 44, n. 2),

may be generally defined as a culture’s distinct capacity to signify, experience, systematize, philosophize, and communicate with food and food practices by pressing appropriate linguistic and cultural devices to render food as a central subject of attention. To refer to the cultural depth and density of meanings foods invoke, I will employ “gastrosemantics.”

The frame of reference for the study of Indian gastrosemantics is what Khare perceives as the Hindu ideological conception of food. Khare recognizes that this conception is neither simple nor unequivocal; it is semantically dense and multilayered.

[Food] is a moral (i.e., dharma-ordained) substance, a semiotic field, and a comprehensive “discourse”.... Thus if food expresses the cosmic truth, showing its ultimate control by the dharma-based principles of cosmic creation and maintenance, it also expresses itself with intricate social-ritual (and karma-dharma) distinctions, classifications, and customary actions, releasing discourses on meaningful action concerning how food, body, and self need to be handled in each other’s terms to achieve the Hindu goal of liberation. However, this picture remains incomplete unless we also note that, despite such elaborate schemes, food still retains for the Hindu unpredictable (even mysterious) consequences, and thus requires ever more vigilance in its handling. This character of food is in some important ways a “limitless field” where language, speech, and action continuously work in each other’s terms. Once we become used to approaching food within such an expanding paradigm of significance and interpretation, we
will see how often major rituals centrally locate “food acts” and “events” because they extend and even magnify what speech and action want to convey (Khare 1992, 6).

The papers included in the volume largely exemplify this approach. Akliukar, Toomey, and Moreno explore the diverse ways food is used as ritual substance and devotional image and metaphor. Akliukar examines food imagery in the writings of several medieval Marathi saints — Jñānadeva, Nāmadeva, Ekanātha, and Tukārāma — while Toomey and Moreno study the uses of food in the Kṛṣṇa rituals of Braj and in Śaiva temple rites of South India, respectively. All these essays demonstrate how bhakti practice and rhetoric often subvert and invert many of the accepted meanings and rules of food, a theme taken up also by Ramanujan. White examines the relationship between food and caste boundaries, focusing on the anomalous status of the so-called “dog-cookers” of Hindu mythology. Seneviratne’s essay deals with the aesthetic and experiential aspects of the Sri Lankan meal, demonstrating how the aesthetic is intertwined there with the medical, moral, and the spiritual dimensions of food. Ramanujan’s contribution attempts to collect a variety of Indian food images from the ancient Upaniṣads down to modern times and to examine how these images are related to social reality and medical knowledge. The bhakti subversion of food images is exemplified in this poem of Basavaṇṇa cited by Ramanujan (1992, 237):

Milk is left over
from the calves.
Water is left over
from the fishes,
flowers from the bees.

How can I worship you,
O Śiva, with such offal?
But it’s not for me
to despise leftovers,
so take what comes,

lord of the meeting rivers.

For the Marathi saints also, god is as eager to eat his devotee's
leftovers (*ucchīṣṭa*) as the devotees are eager to eat divine leftovers (*prasāda*; Akhujar 1992, 106). Ramanujan’s collection of images is rich and delightful. Consider this story about the Parsi immigration to Gujarat (Ramanujan, 1992, 238):

When the Parsis first came to Gujarat, the king didn’t want them to settle there. He had already too many people in the kingdom. So he sent the Parsi community a diplomatic, symbolic message: a full glass of milk, to indicate the glass could contain no more. The Parsis poured a spoonful of sugar into it and stirred it, and sent back the glass of milk: indicting that, like sugar, they would mix with the population, take no extra space, and sweeten it all. The king was pleased and persuaded. The Parsis came to stay.

The connection between food and sex is, of course, well known. An old and famous Upanisadic text, for example, connects food with semen and eating with sexual intercourse:

Man, Gautama, is in fact a fire. . . . In that very fire gods offer food. Semen springs from that oblation. Woman, Gautama, is in fact a fire. . . . In that very fire gods offer semen. The fetus springs from that oblation.4

Ramanujan (1992, 238–40) offers several delightful modern examples, many that would bring delight to the hearts of all Freudians. I cite but one, the story of the celibate Praneshacarya’s initiation “into the four things all animate beings share: food, sex, fear, and sleep,” by a young woman named Chandri:

Touching full breasts he had never touched, Praneshacarya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them. The strength in his legs ebbing, Chandri sat the Acharya down, holding him close. The Acharya’s hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, “O Amma!” [Mother] Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him. Then she took off her sari, spread it on the ground, and lay on it hugging Praneshacarya close to her, weeping, flowing in helpless tears (Ramanujan 1992, 240).

Cultural historians cannot but applaud the approach advocated by Khare that calls on anthropologists to examine the broader cultural, ideological, and historical contexts within which the subjects of their study are located. In many areas of cultural analysis, historians and Indologists have benefited enormously from the ethnographic labors and theoretical insights of social-anthropologists. In an age when disciplinary boundaries are becoming increasingly irrelevant, anthropologists themselves have begun to
realize the value of historical, textual, and philosophical studies of ancient and medieval India for their descriptive and interpretive undertakings.

It is here that some criticism can be leveled at the manner the “Hindu ideology” of food is portrayed in Khare’s work. Perhaps unintentionally, Khare reifies the category “Hindu” and treats it as an unchanging essence whose attitude toward food can be discovered by examining texts, rituals, and ethnographic data from widely different regions and periods of time. He speaks of “the Hindu world,” “the Hindu food,” “the Hindu system,” “the Hindu gastrosemantics” (Khare 1992, 28—29), and so forth, as if “the Hindu” is a univocal and uniform reality. Accordingly, Khare asserts, for example, that “within the Hindu world, one should eat only enough to live” (Khare 1992, 31), and speaks about “the popular Hindu intuition concerning the absence of opposition between spirit and matter” (Khare 1992, 33). Sometimes Khare’s “Hindu” appears to have strong Advaita overtones: “Hindu’s self (microcosm) is only a projection of the Ātman (the universal self). Cosmos, including food, is visualized within this Self (macrocosm). One’s self is a reflection of Self” (Khare 1992, 29). At one point Khare (1992, 41) explicitly asserts the unity of the Hindu perspective:

The pervasive unifying logic of the Hindu food derives from the nature of the Hindu’s cosmology. The Creator of the Hindu universe is a yogi, a conjoiner. Like him, food’s cosmic place and meanings are therefore held self-evident and indisputable; they are found one with the rest of the cosmic moral order.

The problem I raise is rather simple: is there a single food ideology which can be termed “Hindu” and which remains constant across time, regions, and sects? Is the Hindu conception of “self” consistent and uniform? The answer clearly is no. There is no single Hindu attitude toward food, as there is no constant or consistent Hindu view of self. Surely, Hindus subscribing to the Bhakti traditions or to cosmologies based on Sāmkhya-Yoga would dispute Khare’s assertion that the “Hindu’s self is only a projection of the Ātman.” I do not mean to imply by this that there are no continuities within the various cultural attitudes toward food found in India across time, space, castes, and sects. But a history of the cultural creation of food in India has to go beyond these generalities.
The deep historical, sectarian, and regional differences in food habits and attitudes are as much a part of the history of food in India as the obvious continuities. Ramanujan (1992, 222), in his contribution to Khare’s volume, appears to sense this problem in his remarks on the synchronic tendency of anthropology and on the need for historical study: “My concern here is synchronic; I wish someone would explore the social history of these images and ideas.”

An interesting counterpoint to Khare’s reification of “Hindu” is Brian K. Smith’s (1990) seminal article “Eaters, Food, and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India: A Dietary Guide to a Revolution in Values.” The Vedic classification of reality into eaters and food, as Smith demonstrates, far from being an early example of the romanticized vision of universal oneness, is in reality a practical observation regarding a dog-eat-dog world, where the big fish do indeed eat the small fry. The Vedic rites and ritual knowledge were primarily directed at winning this war for naked power. How to become the eater rather than the food, the big fish rather than the small? This is the quest of the priestly writers of the Brāhmaṇas and even of some of the authors of the Upaniṣads.

Thomas Szasz once wrote that “In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten: in the human kingdom, define or be defined.” In Vedism, the two clauses of Szasz’s aphorism were collapsed; social classes were defined in terms of eaters and food. A natural world categorized into dominating feeders and dominated food was reprojected as the paradigm for the “natural” order of the social world. . . . The eater is superior to his food, in society as well as in nature. . . . The nature of the social life is described more specifically in terms of the interrelations between the social classes or varnas. Society’s classes, like nature’s, are divided into eaters and food (Smith 1991, 186–87).

Kṣatriyas and all the lower classes are thus food for Brahmins. Kṣatriyas in turn eat the common folk, Vaiśyas, but they may not eat Brahmins! Smith sees the changes in the food metaphors (purity, for example, rather than power) and the rise of vegetarianism that took place at the conclusion of the Vedic period as harbingers of a revolution in values related to the rise in importance of ascetic traditions.

Ascetic attitudes toward food, of course, are themselves not uniform and have changed over time. In my article on food and the Indian ascetic (Olivelle 1991), I examined some features of those
attitudes as reflected in the ancient ascetic literature. By and large, the Indian ascetic traditions viewed food with extreme ambivalence. Ascetics attempted to minimize their contact with and efforts at procuring food, and precisely because of that concern they were obsessed with food. The extent to which an individual has freed himself from food was often viewed as an indicator of his or her advance in holiness.

This criterion is nowhere more evident than in Jainism. Paul Dundas, in his “Food and Freedom: The Jaina Sectarian Debate on the Nature of the Kevalin” (1985), has addressed the theological debate between the Digambaras and the Svetambaras on the question of a liberated individual’s (kevalin), especially a Tirthaṅkara’s, relationship to food. Did (and does) a kevalin or a Tirthaṅkara experience hunger? Svetambaras answer in the affirmative, and their position “is that there is nothing about eating and hunger which is fundamentally at variance with the attainment of omniscience” (Dundas 1985, 177). Dundas points out that this theological position underscores the Svetambara view of the Tirthaṅkara’s salvific mission and his involvement with the world. A tangible manifestation of this attitude is the Svetambara practice of placing food offerings in front of the images of the Tirthaṅkaras.6 Digambaras, on the other hand, deny the possibility that an omniscient person, especially a Tirthaṅkara, could feel hunger or be dependent on food. The Jaina example of fasting unto death is clearly linked to the perception that food is the final link of a person to the world. And contrary to Khare’s (1992, 31) assertion that among Hindu ascetics “there is no provision for death by starvation,” religious suicide by fasting was clearly not limited to Jaina ascetics (Olivelle 1978).

The Jaina debate, and similar controversies regarding the status of a jīvātmukta (“a person liberated in this life”) within the Brāhmaṇical tradition, point to an interesting dichotomy within the Indian religious traditions regarding the perfect individual. He/she is either a person for whom everything is food (Vedic paradigm) or a person who does not need, and is therefore beyond the realm of, food (Digambara paradigm). In the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (3.8.8), within which the former paradigm is often dominant, we already see evidence of the emerging new paradigm; speaking of the Imperishable, Yājñavalkya says: “It does not eat anything; and no one eats it!”
In an interesting way this ties up with the way medieval ascetics divided the world into those who cook and those who do not, in obvious contrast to the Vedic "food and eaters of food." Ascetics who do not cook are superior to but dependent on the householders who cook and who are obliged to share their food with those who do not cook. A medieval text remarks:

If a man ignores those who do not cook and feeds people who do cook, all his labor with regard to divine and ancestral rites will be in vain.7

Feeding those who do not cook (read religious mendicants!) becomes the central obligation of those who are permitted to cook within this new culinary ethic. Hyperbole is heaped upon hyperbole in medieval works that extol the virtues of giving food to ascetics:

One should first pour water on the ascetic's hand, then give the almsfood, and finally pour water on his hand again. That almsfood is equal to Mount Meru, and that water is comparable to the ocean. Viṣṇu himself eats in the house of a man where an ascetic eats. The triple world eats in the house of a man where Viṣṇu eats.

The pouring of water while giving almsfood has been ordained to satiate the gods and ancestors. They become sated indeed when that food is given. Even if a man gives the entire earth, it would not equal the merit of preparing almsfood and giving it to a mendicant, who is an image of Viṣṇu.8

A significant aspect of the history of food in India that most studies have almost totally neglected is the relationship of food to women. I have already alluded to Bynum (1987), whose studies have shown admirably the urgent need for relating the study of food to the lives of women. This is true in India, I believe, as it is in Europe. Did the women of India use their power over food to control what Bynum calls "their self and their circumstances" the way medieval European women did and modern anorexic women in the west continue to do? Khare (1992, xii) is sensitive to this issue and recognizes the need for more focused study of food in the lives of Indian women:

The accounts in this book recognize the woman's presence and role in an implicit way, essentially by context of discussion and by level of idealization. . . . However, this is no substitute for more systematic studies of the subject of women and food within South Asian societies and cultures (original italics).
We know that in India, as in Europe, women did and do most of the domestic cooking. We know that it is women who look after the ritual purity of the food and the hearth. We know that it is the women of the household who undertake most of the weekly, monthly, and annual fasts, often for the benefit of the entire family. Yet, a book such as that of Bynum on the role of food in the lives of women in medieval or modern South Asia remains yet to be written.

The numerous studies of ways humans use food both as a commodity and as a cultural construct point to a central principle: food in human societies and cultures is a heavily encoded substance. It carries multiple levels and dimensions of meaning, all of which even those who speak this coded language may be unable to articulate verbally or even to bring to the level of reflective thought. How can we decode the language of food? Where can we find the uncoded or precoded message?

If language is a code, where is the precoded message? The question is phrased to expect the answer: nowhere. In these words a linguist is questioning a popular analogy. But try it this way: if food is a code, where is the precoded message? Here, on the anthropologist's home ground, we are able to improve the posing of the question. A code affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events (Douglas 1975, 249).

This is both the challenge and the reward of studying food: rhetoric, images, attitudes, etiquette, practices, habits, prohibitions, prescriptions, feasts, and fasts — all these bear messages about society. They can indeed tell us more about a society than almost any other single element of a culture. Khare's writings, as well as the conference he has organized and the books he has edited, have provided important impetus and direction to the exploration of this subject within Indian history and society. But we have barely begun to scratch the surface of this enormous and enormously important subject within the complex Indian society and its long history.
NOTES

1 Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, 11.1.6.19; on this question see Smith 1991.
3 Bhāraddārayaka Upaniṣad, 6.2.12—13; Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 5.7—8.
4 I say “unintentionally,” not merely to be polite. Khare is clearly aware of the changing attitudes toward food in Indian history, as when he discusses the problem later-day vegetarians face when confronted by the Vedic practice of animal sacrifice and meat eating: Khare 1992, 20, n. 7.
6 For a broader study of food habits, both domestic and ritual, within the Jaina communities of North India, see Mahias 1985. Mahias’ study, unfortunately, is very detailed in ethnographic description but lacks interpretive depth. She does not address in any detail the types of questions or issues raised by Khare or Dundas.
8 Ibid., 7.306—307, 313—314.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Note: A comprehensive bibliography of food in India is given in Khare and Rao 1986. Useful bibliographies are also given after each paper in Khare 1992.)


University of Texas at Austin
USA

PATRICK OLIVELLE