

At the centre of Immortality

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Food is the tactile bridge between our lives and the world around us. It is through food that we find connections, both to the world outside and the inner world that we carry encapsulated within us wherever we travel.

This connection is made evident in the Mahabharata in a charming story involving Krishna. Once, Duryodhana deliberately encouraged Durvasa to visit the Pandavas. He was hoping that their hospitality, in the forest, would fall short of the honour owed to Durvasa and his large retinue and that the Pandavas would then invoke the wrath of that irascible sage.

The sage and his followers reached the home of the Pandavas. Yudhisthira welcomed them, directed them to the river to perform their ablutions before they ate. However, Draupadi had finished eating for the day. The miraculous *akshaya-patra*, a gift of the sun-god Surya, was empty. It would replenish itself with food only the next day. How would they feed so many guests? In desperation, she prayed to Krishna to help her.

Krishna appeared before her and asked to be fed, saying he was hungry. Draupadi was perplexed. She had asked him to come to her aid, instead he was adding to her troubles, asking for the very thing she did not have. Krishna once again said he was hungry and asked for the vessel. She gave it to him, certain it was empty. To Draupadi's surprise, Krishna found a single grain of rice sticking to the side of the vessel. He ate it and proclaimed himself full to the point of satiation. Instantly the hot-tempered sage and his thousands of followers bathing in the river felt full. So full that they knew they

would not be able to eat a single morsel of what the Pandavas might serve them. Wishing to avoid embarrassment, they left the place.

The question really is, how did Krishna appease their appetites, and save the Pandavas from certain dishonour, by a single grain of rice? The answer to that is found in the Upanishads which contain some of the earliest statements of Indian thought on the subject of food.

The most striking image in the Taittiriya Upanishad, is the idea of human life as a composite of five successive sheaths, ranging from the abstract, supreme bliss, to the material.

The all-pervading Brahman is immanent in each of us, as the Atman, radiating outwards from the inner, the most subtle of sheaths, the *anandamaya kosha* or the sheath of bliss. This sheath corresponds to the causal body, the *karana sharira*. It is wrapped by the sheath of intellect, the *vijnanamaya kosha*. Covering that is the sheath of the mind, *manomaya kosha*. The next sheath, the *pranamaya kosha*, together with the sheaths of mind and intellect, composes the subtle body or *sukshma sharira*. They are held within the sheath of food, *annamaya kosha*, in the shape of a human body, *sthula sharira*. Moving outwards from that within us which is subtle, indefinable, immense, formless we arrive at the manifest, the material, the substantial, the definite- our sentient body, formed by and dependent on food.

When we look around us and see or smell or touch or hear the tangible forms of other human beings, we connect with them at the level of the material, that first sheath that is suffused with food. Perhaps the most miraculous and intimate of these connections is that of birth; a body formed within a body. The umbilical cord is a very powerful symbol of connection through food, conveying

nutrients to all of us within our mothers' wombs, creating over nine months the very first layer, or *annamaya kosha* of our infant bodies.

That connection continues after birth as the infant grows alongside the body of its mother, suckling, deriving immunity, nutrition and a sense of being loved from her milk. A common sight, and the saddest, in our country, is that of emaciated, malnourished female labourers holding their fragile infants to the breast, producing food for them somehow from their starving bodies.

Of the many *samskara*-s relating to childbirth, the *annaprashnam* is an important rite of passage. It marks the first occasion that the growing infant is fed with rice, grain, solid foods. It is weaned gradually in this way, from thriving only on milk to relating to the larger world through community of food.

The story of Krishna eating one tiny grain of rice, and thousands of guests deriving from that simple act a sense of fullness, works at the level of metaphor. It illustrates the way the Brahman pervades everything, working from the inner sheath of bliss through to the outer sheath of food.

The dance of life celebrates movement, our interdependence with nature; from space, a movement to the clouds, from the pregnant clouds, a descent in the form of rain, from the joyous fall of water, a journey to the centre of a plant, from inside the plant, a swelling in the form of grain, from grain to the essence of a human being. Thousands of years have passed since the Upanishads were written, what remains constant is man's essential dependence on food, on the need for agriculture, even in the most developed of nations.

In the process of cooking food, we enter into an intimate connection with the world of the farmer, a world that so many miles

away continues to sow, plant, water, transplant, reap, pluck, dehusk, winnow and then wash, prepare and cook ingredients in the same manner as us. We share in their joys, their sorrows, their celebration of the harvest, eat the fruit of their hard work. Therefore, when farmer after farmer commits suicide because of mounting debt, parched fields, it is an event that is uncomfortably close to us, though we may choose to ignore it.

There is an interesting story of creation in the Aitareya Upanishad. The Brahman decided to give form to the worlds. A cosmic person then arose whose different parts became different deities or gods. They were made subject to hunger and thirst. The gods then asked for a place where they could reside, eat food. The human being was presented to them as their abode where each deity then lived, transformed into a faculty. For example, fire occupied the mouth in the form of speech.

Hunger and thirst were also assigned a place in the body, along with these gods. It was soon discovered that life could not be sustained by thinking of food, nor by hearing of food nor using any of the sense-organs of touch or sight or smell. Food had to be eaten, tasted in the mouth. Only then did food and water appease hunger and thirst. By extension, we know from our own experience that in eating we feed *all* the sense organs, hearing included.

The story contains the important truth that we cannot talk about food without stumbling against the harsh realities of the world. Hunger and thirst exist, people die of famine, starvation. The question of hunger is a very disturbing one. Why is it that there are some endowed with plenty to the point of disregard and waste while there are others who have to beg food everyday in order to survive?

Perhaps in answer to this, the Mahabharata gives great importance to the sharing of food, *anna danam*. 'Because life is sustained by food, and food is life, to give food to others is like giving life to them; and whoever gives food, is known verily as the giver of life.' The Paramacharya of Kanchi had a unique way of effecting *anna danam*. He asked housewives to set aside just one fistful of rice to be shared with the poor.

Although a sannyasi performs his own last rites and is dead to his former life, he remains linked to society through food, through bhiksha. Madhukari is the name given to food collected in this manner from various households, the way a bee gathers pollen from many flowers. When Shankara left his home at the age of eight, to lead the life of a wandering sannyasi, his mother Aryamba worried about him. Who would feed him, she wondered. Shankara reassured her and said that whoever gave him the gift of food would be as a mother to him.

The Mahabharata also says, 'In the food eaten by the householder, there is a share each for the gods of the universe, for one's ancestors, and for all living beings.' In many homes, the first portion of cooked rice is fed to the crows. Doorsteps are decorated with intricate designs made of rice flour; an artistic way of feeding the ants. Rice shaped into balls, pindam, is an integral part of the *shraadhha* ceremony.

It is through food that we connect with the world of myth and history. When Siddhartha, starving, close to death, saw before him a fragrant bowl of payasam, offered with both concern and respect by Sujata, he accepted it at once. He came to the conclusion that one does not attain enlightenment merely by punishing the body. Years later, become the Buddha, he died after having eaten infected pork

received as alms. The Holy Sacrament, bread and wine, *is* the body and the blood of Christ, accepted on the tongue in silent reverence. 'He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh blood, abideth in me, and I in him.' It is a little-known fact that the greatest of the Mughal emperors, Akbar was a vegetarian. It is easier, perhaps, to approach Swami Vivekananda knowing that he loved ice-cream and enjoyed cooking, than by reading through the many volumes of his complete works.

Dasharatha performed a sacrifice and asked the gods for the birth of an heir. A celestial being arose from the flames of the sacrificial fire bearing a pot of payasam. Kaushalya tasted it first and bore Rama. Kaikeyi gave birth to Bharata. Sumitra got two helpings of that potent nectar and so had two sons, Lakshman and Shatrughna. Years later, an old woman named Shabari would offer half-eaten, saliva-polluted fruit to Rama, having tasted them first to judge their degree of ripeness. Wanting to gift him the very best, she became oblivious to propriety and custom.

In Indian mythology, there are deities who preside over the essential components in the creation of food. Indra, giving rain, Vayu, ruling air and Surya, the magnificent sun-god. Bhumi Devi or Bhu devi, the goddess of the Earth is visualised as light green in complexion, the colour of the most tender of paddy-shoots. She carries in her four hands the very things that are obtained from her: a vessel filled with gems, a vessel filled with vegetables, a vessel filled with medicinal herbs and a lotus. Plants, rooted in Bhumi Devi, thrive on water and convert sunlight and air with the help of chlorophyll into food.

The giver of that food, the giver of plenty, Annapurna, is the goddess who presides over the city of Kashi. She is young, with a

round face and three eyes. A dazzling necklace covers her firm, abundant breasts. She carries in her left hand a vessel filled to the brim with honey. In her right hand, a ladle with fragrant steaming rice. Both the vessel and ladle are familiar household utensils, only hers are set with rubies.

When one is hungry, a mother or wife or sister serving food affectionately, with similar utensils, appears like the Goddess Annapurna herself. On the other hand, food given with ill-will or ungraciously or reluctantly is flawed, poisoned by bad attitude as it were. Ayurveda names this sort of food as tainted with *bhava-dosha*.

A single fruit can weave the stories of other eras with our own, like a motif, the ambi or mango-pattern, recurring across the fabric of time. Biting into the sweet flesh of a mango may drive all coherent thoughts from our minds, but in the very moment of tasting it we relive our collective past.

Parvati undertook the most severe of penances to attain the hand of Shiva. She gave up eating even leaves, *a-parna*, and so is known by the name Aparna. Pleased with her austerities, Shiva revealed himself to her under a lone mango tree, *ekammra*.

Once Shiva engaged his sons Ganesha and Kartikeya in a competition. He had one delicious mango, to whom was he to give it? Whichever of them travelled around the world the quickest would be given the mango. Ganesha watched his sprightly, handsome brother Kartikeya vault onto his peacock and speed away. He looked down at his ponderous frame, his slow vehicle the mouse and despaired of victory. Then an idea struck him. He quickly circumambulated his parents, venerating *them* as the embodiment of all three worlds. Pleased with his wit, his quick thinking, Shiva gave him the mango.

When Punitavati, a devout housewife living in the 6th Century B.C., fed a wandering mendicant a mango, to make up for not having fed him a complete meal, she had no way of knowing it would change her life forever. At lunch, her husband asked for the mango she had given away. She prayed to Shiva, and instantly found a mango in her hand. Finding its taste ambrosial, her husband asked her where she had got it from. She told him. He challenged her to prove her story by acquiring another one in the same way. Shiva listened to her prayer and she found a second luscious golden mango in her hand. When her husband tried to grasp it, it disappeared. He realised then that he was married to an extraordinary woman, herself unaware of her greatness. Made of lesser stuff, he abandoned her, moved to another city, took another wife and had a child by her. The very instant that Punitavati discovered this, she prayed to Shiva that she may lose her body of flesh, become a *pey*- departed soul. In that wraith-like, skeletal form she is revered today as Karaikkal Ammaiyaar, the earliest of poets, one of the sixty-three nayanmars of Tamil Nadu.

A mango festival is held in honour of Karaikkal Ammaiyaar every year in the Pondicherry area. Festivals celebrate food with the rhythm of seasons. The harvest is celebrated in different parts of the country in different ways, what is common is the celebration of abundance, the recognition of food as the basic foundation of life and prosperity.

Pongal is celebrated by letting boiling milk rise over the brim of the pot, trickle down the sides; an overflow of plenty. Recently, thousands of homes would have made sevaiyaan and kheer for Id. Ganesh Chaturthi would not be the same without modaks for the elephant-headed god. Gokulashtami evokes all the butter-stealing

pranks of Krishna. The Ugaadi pachadi is made of neem flowers, raw mango, tamarind, chilli and jaggery, a mixture of bitter, sour, salty, hot and sweet tastes, a metaphor for life itself. A festival without food special to it? Impossible.

The grace of God comes to us through food. When we visit the gods at their temples, pleased with us they give us *prasadam*. One visits Tirupati anticipating eagerly of course the darshan of Lord Vekateshwara *but also* the taste of that divine laddu, a gift from Perumal himself for taking the trouble to climb the hill in order to visit him. A most delicious kesari is made by the Dikshitaras of the Chidambaram temple for their Lord Nataraja. Here, *prasadam* nourishes the subtle body with the reassurance that grace exists. The gods themselves are bathed in milk, honey: *abhishekam*, and then offered food as *naivedyam*.

The mind, part of the subtle body, is also nourished by what we eat. Sage Uddalaka demonstrated to his son Shvetaketu the fact that the mind is dependent on food for energy and strength. Shvetaketu fasts for fifteen days and finds that he cannot recite the Veda from memory. Once he has eaten, he can. His father tells him that the most subtle part of food sustains the mind. In the Gita, Krishna describes three kinds of food, satvik, rajasic and tamasic, that affect the quality of the mind in different ways.

When we eat, therefore, we nourish all the sheaths enveloping us. Eating is not an individual act, not even when we are alone, without the company of friends and family. What is at work is the principle illustrated by Krishna in reverse - when we eat, we also connect with the Brahman. We move from the material to the subtle, as the Chandogya Upanishad tells us. 'Verily indeed you eat your food knowing your Universal Self as if it were many. He, however,

who meditates on the Universal Self as of the measure of the span or identical with the self, eats food in all worlds, in all beings, in all selves.'

Food is clearly not a commodity but a connection. That is why it is not to be denigrated, nor treated with indifference but multiplied, made plenty. The sense of bliss inherent in the tasting of food comes from the silent, joyous chant sung by our selves through many ages. '*Aham annam, aham annam, aham annam...*' I am food, I am food, I am food. I am the eater of food. I am the link. We place ourselves at the centre of the immortality, shining brilliant like the sun, by understanding this connection.