

# Food in Indian Tradition : Some Observations

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional Indian diets are deeply influenced by *Ayurveda*, which views food as medicine. Meals are planned to balance the body's doshas (energies), harmonizing physical and spiritual well-being. In many rituals, food becomes *prasadam*—blessed offerings to deities, later shared among devotees. It symbolizes divine grace, reinforcing the belief that nourishment is a gift from the gods. This paper deals with food and its significance for health and longevity in human life.

Keywords : Culinary Science, Food, Ayurveda, Dietary Rules.

**Introduction** : Food in Indian tradition is a profound expression of culture, spirituality, and community. Rooted in centuries of history, it is more than nourishment—it's ritual, celebration, and healing. Meals are often infused with symbolic meaning and offered to deities before being consumed. Mentioning that food is the most important aspect of human life it is mentioned-

सर्वभूतानामाहारः स्थितिकारणम् । न त्वाहारादृतेऽस्त्यन्यत् प्राणिनां प्राणधारणम् ॥  
न चाहारसमकिञ्चिद्वैषज्यमुपलभ्यते । शक्यतेऽप्यन्नमात्रेण नरः कर्तुं निरामयः ॥  
भेषजेनोपपन्नोऽपि निराहारो न शक्यते । तस्माद्विषग्भिराहारो महाभैषज्यमुच्य ॥<sup>1</sup>

“Sustenance of living beings is dependent on food. There is nothing other than food that supports the life of living beings. There is no medicine that is comparable to food. It is possible to free a man of ailments solely through diet. On the contrary, one cannot free a man of ailments even through medication if diet is ignored. It is therefore rightly said by physicians that food is the greatest medicine”.

The Sanskrit sources of ancient India indicate eminent contributions in the field of dietetics (Pathyāpathyanirṇaya ) and in the science and art of cooking (Pākaśāstra and Pākakalā). Culinary art can be defined as the art of cooking.

Though, Pakasashtra is not one of the eight branches of Ayurvedic system of medicine as described in the Carakasamhita, however, it is supported by the Ayurvedic theories and concepts. Food being an important subject for both Ayurveda and Pakasastra, it is natural that ideas and concepts from Pakasastra are found in Ayurvedic works and vice versa.

In this article, I present, briefly, some important culinary points based on Indian tradition

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<sup>1</sup>.Kasyapasamhita, Khilasthanam, 4,4-6

**Text sources of Pākāśāstra :** There are many works and manuscripts on Pakasastra . Below are mentioned some important works:

- पाकदर्पणः
- प्रयोगपारिजातः
- क्षेमकुतूहलम्
- भोजनकुतूहलम्
- वैद्यकशब्दसिन्धुः
- तक्रविधिः
- भीमभोजनकुतूहलम्
- रुचिवधूगलरत्नमाला
- ताम्बूलकल्पसङ्ग्रहः

Further, texts like Arthaśāstra, Mānasollāsa, Śukranīti and Śivatattvaratnākara contain valuable information about food and its dietary effects.

**Types of food :** The following foods are listed in ancient texts related to culinary.

1. Grains धान्याः
2. Vegetables शाकाः
3. Spices – एलादयः
4. Milk and milk products क्षीरप्रकरणम्
5. Oils (*tailaprakaraṇam* – तैलप्रकरणम्
6. Sugarcane and its products इक्षुप्रकरणम्
7. Honey मधु – माक्षिक
8. Liquors मद्यम्
9. Meat मांसम्
10. Water जलम्
11. Fruits

To give an example about the honey and its types -

माक्षिकं भ्रामरं क्षौद्रं पौलिकं छात्रलं तथा । आर्य्यमौद्दालकं दालमित्यष्टौ मधुजातयः ॥

mākṣika, bhrāmara, kṣaudra, pautika, chātraka, ārghya, auddālaka and dāla. Of these, makshika is defined as :

नानापुष्परसाहाराः कपिला नवमक्षिकाः । याः स्थूलास्ताभिरुत्पन्नं मधु माक्षिकमुच्यते ॥

The honey that is secreted by young, large bees that are tawny in color and collect nectar from different flowers is called mākṣika<sup>2</sup>.

**The qualities of a good cook :** It is clearly mentioned in below slokas, from Kshemakutuhalam, the qualities of a good cook in cleanly preparing tasty dishes and it is astonishing to know how scientific the ancient cooks are

पितृपैतामहो दक्षः शास्त्रज्ञो मिष्टपाचकः ।  
शैचयुक्तोऽथ भक्ता सूपकारः स शस्यते ॥ 47 ॥

<sup>2</sup>. Rajanighantu, Paniyadi vargah - 115-116

A cook who has inherited his profession from his father and his grandfather, adept in his job, well-versed in his science, capable of preparing savory dishes, clean and faithful is fit for praise.

सूदकारपतिस्तत्र प्रायो वैद्यगुणान्वितः ।  
तत्रत्यजनतत्त्वज्ञस्तत्प्रशासनतत्परः ॥ 50 ॥

Regarding the chef, it is mentioned that he should possess the qualities of a physician. He should be aware of the nature of men working there (in the kitchen) and able to direct them.

The Bhagavadgita mentions three types of food, namely sattvic, rajasik and tamasik foods.

आयुःसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः ।  
रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिरा हृद्या आहाराः सात्त्विकप्रियाः ॥

The food which increases life, purity, strength, health, joy and cheerfulness (good appetite), which are savoury and oleaginous, substantial and agreeable, are dear to the Sattvic (pure) people.

कट्वम्ललवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्षविदाहिनः ।  
आहारा राजसस्येष्टा दुःखशोकामयप्रदाः ॥ 17.9 ॥

The foods that are bitter, sour, saline, excessively hot, pungent, dry and burning, are liked by the Rajasic and are productive of pain, grief and disease.

यातयामं गतरसं पूति पर्युषितं च यत् ।  
उच्छिष्टमपि चामेध्यं भोजनं तामसप्रियम् ॥ 17.10 ॥<sup>3</sup>

That which is stale, tasteless, putrid, rotten, refuse and impure, is the food liked by the Tamasic.

### Utensils used for cooking:

Different metallic vessels used for cooking are described in the text. The vessels are made of gold (haima), silver (raupya), bell-metal (kāmsya), brass (paitala) and iron (āyasa) and their dietetic effects are also detailed. Apart from these, the author mentions the vessels made of glass (kācapātra), earthen vessel (mrnmayapātra), wooden vessel (dārūdbhava), crystal (sphatika) and vaidurya also.

दोषहृत् दृष्टिकृत् पथ्यं हेमं भोजनभाजनम्/ रौप्यं भवति चाक्षुष्यं पित्तहृत् कफवातहृत् ॥  
कामस्य बुद्धिप्रदं रुच्यं रक्तपित्तप्रसादनम्/ पैतलं वातकृद्द्रुक्षम् उष्णम् कृमिकफप्रणुत् ॥  
आयसे काचपात्रे च भोजनं सिद्धिकारकम्/ शोथपाण्डुहरं बाल्यं कामलापहम् उत्तमम् ॥  
शैलजे मृन्मये पात्रे भोजनं श्रीनिवारणम्/ दारूद्धवे विशेषेण रुचिदं श्लेष्मकारी च ॥  
पवित्रं शितलं पात्रघटितं स्फटिकेन यत्/काचेन रचितं तद्वत्तथा वैदुर्यसम्भवम् ॥<sup>4</sup>

### Impact of Serving cooked food on plant-based leaves :

क्षारोष्णकटुकं जन्तु कफघ्नं ज्वरशातनम्/ शितिताज्वरहृत् पथ्यं हस्तिकर्ण्या तु भोजनम् ॥  
अर्कपत्रे भृशं रूक्षं कृमिघ्नम् पित्तकृत् परम्/ गुल्मशूलविषश्वासपाण्डुकुष्ठकफानिलान् ॥  
हन्यात् परमचाक्षुष्यं लघु दीपनपाचनम्/ एरण्डपत्रं वातघ्नं क्रिमिघ्नं पित्तकृत्परम् ॥  
पत्रेषु क्षीरवृक्षाणां तृष्णादाहासपित्तनुत्/ पाण्डुशोथश्वाससोमरोगघ्नं पाटलाशनम् ॥

<sup>3</sup>.Bhagavadgita 17.8 - 10

<sup>4</sup>.Bhojana KutuhalaI.1461-1466

रम्भापत्रेऽशनम् हृद्यं रुच्यं वृष्यं बलाग्निदम् । विषश्रमानिलासेषु हितं पाण्डौ न शस्यते॥  
पालाशपत्रे च मरुत्-श्लेष्मगुल्मोदरप्रणुत् । कफवातम्पीनसघ्नं रुच्यं श्रेष्ठं च बृम्हणम्॥

**Demerits of cooked food :** It has been shown that there are 8 imperfections (अन्नेऽष्टदोषाणां सम्भवः) in cooked rice if not cooked according to the rules

जीवनं जीविनामन्नमृतृक्तं विधिपाचितम् ।  
तदेवाविधिना भुक्तं परिणामे विषोपमम् ॥ 51 ॥

Food is the life of living beings if eaten as per seasonal rules and if cooked according to rules. If eaten contrary to rules, it turns out to be poison-like.<sup>5</sup>

विद्यते ह्यष्टदोषो हि प्रत्यक्षेण प्रमादतः । के ते दोषाः सदाविष्टाः प्रत्यक्षेण बलीयसा ॥ 41 ॥  
ये ते तदाश्रिताः दोषा असृतः पिच्छिलोऽशुचिः ॥ 42 ॥  
क्वथितः शुष्कतो दग्धो विरूपो नर्तुजस्तथा ॥ 43 ॥<sup>6</sup>

The imperfections are; asrta (sour due to non-separation of starch); picchila (sticky), asuci (uncleaned), kvathita (boiled much more), śuska (lessened liquidity), dagdha (overcooked), virūpa (discoloured), anartuja (occurred in against the season).

असृतान्न लक्षणं तद्दोषश्च  
अस्मावितयवागुं यदन्नमसृतमुच्यते । तदन्नं येन भुक्तं चेत् तस्य व्याधिकरं भवेत् ॥ 48 ॥

“The food, whose starch is not expelled out, becomes, sour and is called asrta- anna (un-poured off superfluous water), whosoever eats such type of food, suffers from the diseases”.

#### **Eating specific foods on specific days:**

The Dharmasastra texts, such as Manusmriti, the Jyotihsastra texts and others ordain (vidhi) and prohibit (nishedha) eating specific foods on specific days, constellations (tithi-s), times of the day (day and night) etc.

धात्रीफलं भानुवारे श्रीफलं शुक्रवासरे ।  
शमीफलं मन्दवारे श्रीकामी परिवर्जयेत् ॥

It is mentioned that the consumption of dhatri fruit (Emblica Officinalis) should be avoided on a Sunday, Sripkala (wood apple, also means coconut) on a Friday, the Shami fruit on Tuesday, according to the text Dharmasara.

वीर्यहानिर्यशोहानिः प्रजाहानिस्तथैव च ।  
भवेत्तस्मान्नरो रात्रौ धात्रीं यत्नेन वर्जयेत् ॥

It is further mentioned in Manusmriti that consumption of dhatri should be avoided at night :

आमलक्याः फलं चैव जम्बीरं तित्तिणीफलम्'  
प्रज्ञाप्रताप 'लक्ष्मीवान् सदैव तन्निशं वर्जयेत् ॥

The citron, gooseberry and tamarind shouldn't be eaten during night time as per the following verse :

<sup>5</sup>.Kshemakutuhalam – 3.47, 50-51

<sup>6</sup>.Pakadarpana of Nala, by Madhulika, Chowkhamba Orientalia, Varanasi, p.18-19

### Impact of food upon body and mind

Food can impact human mind and personality immensely. This is clearly mentioned in the Upanishads and Bhagavadgita.

आहारशुद्धौ सत्त्वशुद्धिः सत्त्वशुद्धौ ध्रुवा स्मृतिः ।

स्मृतिलाभे सर्वग्रन्थीनां विप्रमोक्षः।<sup>7</sup>

If one eats pure food, one's mind becomes pure. Purity of mind results in perseverance of memory. Perseverance of memory leads to higher level of consciousness, resulting in freedom from bondages.

युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु ।

युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥<sup>8</sup>

He who is regulated in his habits of eating, sleeping, recreation and work can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system.

### Impact of directions on food:

The Manusmriti mentions that the cardinal direction one is facing to, while eating food, will have different positive effects

आयुष्यं प्राङ्मुखो भुङ्क्ते यशस्यं दक्षिणामुखम् ।

श्रियं प्रत्यङ्मुखो भुङ्क्ते ऋतं भुङ्क्ते ह्युद्मुखः॥<sup>9</sup>

The effects of cardinal directions while eating according to the directions are mentioned in the Manusmriti – while having food, one should face east for longevity, south for fame, west for wealth and north for truth.

**Conclusion :** This brief survey of Pākaśāstra highlighting some important aspects of culinary science, includes the socio-cultural, medicinal, religious and spiritual dimensions of food in Indian tradition. Further, it is necessary that the concepts and ideas mentioned in the traditional texts, such as impact of utensils for cooking and serving cooked foods on plant-based leaves are corroborated with modern experimental methods to authenticate the information.

### References :

1. Pakadarpana of Nala
2. Bhojanakutuhalam
3. Kshemakutuhalam

<sup>7</sup>.Chandogyopanishad 7.26.2

<sup>8</sup>.Bhagavadgita. 6.17

<sup>9</sup>.Manusmriti 2.52