

Anthropological and Culinary Customs of Some of the Major Religions in India – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christian Religion

Dr. Marie Fernandes

1.0. Introduction

India is a multi-cultural country in which some of the major religions of the world flourish. It has a sizeable number of three of the biggest world religions, Christianity Hinduism and Islam. India, the second most populated country in the world with over 1,190,619,020 (that is, over one billion) (IndiaStat.com) has the largest population of people adhering to Hinduism, the oldest religion in the world (80.5% of Indian Population), Zoroastrianism (less than 0.2 % of India's Population) the oldest revealed world religion and the Bahá'î faith (2.2 million people in India) anywhere in the world. The Muslim population in India (13.5% of Indian Population) is the second largest in the world. The Christian Population of India (2.3% of Indian Population) is the third largest religion of India. India is also home to Sikhs (2%), Buddhists (0.8%), Jains (0.4%) and Jews (less than 20,000 people).ⁱ The largest concentration of Jews in India still remains in Bombay (particularly in Thane, a suburb of Mumbai) - but they are only about 4000 in number - a mere fraction of the vitality they once generated in the city. One of the unique aspects of Indian culture is the tolerance and peaceful coexistence of so many religions existing side by side with one another.

Diversity of religions and multi-faceted social environments that have shaped dietary laws, food and rituals associated with them has made it difficult for cultural anthropologists and historians to analyze culinary customs internationally. However, most scholars of religion today would agree that religions provide humans with meaningful structures that often involve food.ⁱⁱ Customs surrounding food are among the principal means by which human groups maintain their distinctiveness and help provide their members with a sense of identity.ⁱⁱⁱ Food customs and dietary laws vary according to culture or to religious tradition. Different types of food regulations are characteristic of groups at different levels of cultural or socio-technological development. Each society has its own symbolic value to different foods.

Examining connections between food and religion demonstrates how religion functions in cultures, and why religious experiences are important for believers. Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* asserted that religion provides

meaning, identity, and structure within cultural systems. Religion reflects the human desire for order, but it provides order because people believe it has its origins in the divine.^{iv} Food often figures prominently in functional interpretations of religion. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the father of modern anthropology, described food as a kind of language that helps human beings express their basic perceptions of reality. He observed that rules about eating cooked and raw foods in some cultures are dictated by sacred stories, myths, and prohibitions. These rules reflect underlying notions about differences between nature and culture.^v Food and drink are almost universally associated with hospitality. In most cultures there are explicit or implicit rules that food or drink be offered to guests. In fact, food is seen as a material expression of building social relationships in human society. At the same time there is the belief in every religion that there are foods and drinks that are in some way polluting or defiling.

Religion plays a major role in the Indian way of life. India is the birth place of four of the world's major religious traditions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, and boasts of so many other religions including Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and the Bahá'í Faith. The vast majority of Indians engage in religious rituals, worship, and other religious activities. Dietary habits are significantly influenced by religion. The majority of Hindus, and so the majority of Indians are vegetarian^{vi} and this can be traced back to the Rig Veda which proclaims "Do not harm anything".^{vii} This came to prominence during the rule of Ashoka, a promoter of Buddhism. With this in mind we shall study the influence of food on four Indian religions, viz., Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity.

2.0. Culinary Customs in Hinduism

2.1. Cultural significance of meal in Hinduism

According to the Bhagavad-Gita, all beings come into existence from food^{viii} which is a gift from God, to be treated with great respect. In the words of the Laws of Manu^{ix}, "food that is always worshipped, gives strength and manly vigor; but eaten irreverently, it destroys them both." Hindu Scripture repeatedly uses food as a symbolic expression having a variety of contexts and meaning. There is food for the organism, food for the eyes, food for thought, food for the soul, food for the dead, food for the gods, food for the elements, food for the sacrifices and finally food for Brahman (the Ultimate Reality).^x Further, Brahman is food (Taittiriya Upanishad III, 6).^{xi} In another passage of the Taittiriya Upanishad, food is seen as the first, middle and final stage of all beings: "From food are produced all creatures which dwell on earth. Then they live by food, and in the end they return to food. For food is the oldest of all beings, and therefore it is called

panacea (sarvaushadha, that is, consisting of all herbs, or quieting the heat of the body of all beings)” They who worship food as Brahman, obtain all food. For food is the oldest of all beings, and therefore it is called panacea. From food all creatures are produced; by food, when born, they grow. Because it is fed on, or because it feeds on beings, therefore it is called food (anna).^{xii}

The Maitri Upanishad attempts to give one of the many important meanings of food: “That form of the blessed Vishnu which is called the All-supporting—that, verily, is the same as food. Verily, life (*prâna*) is the essence of food; mind, of life; understanding (*vijñâna*), of mind; bliss, of understanding.’ He becomes possessed of food, life, mind, understanding, and bliss who knows this”.^{xiii}

The basic meaning of food in Hinduism is seen in the parable of the creation of food by Prajapati, the Lord of creatures, who exclaimed “Here are the worlds and the guardians of the worlds. Let me create food for them...”.^{xiv} The connotation here implies that only food that is digested and assimilated by one’s digestive breath (*apana*) is food.^{xv} Another important meaning of food is that, “All creatures live by food, and in the end they return to food”.^{xvi} One can infer from this text that there is no being that is for itself and every being is seen as food for something else or someone else. Yet another meaning of food is given in Maitri Upanishad which states that “Verily, all things here fly forth, day by day, desiring to get food. The sun takes food to himself by his rays. Thereby he gives forth heat. When supplied with food, living beings here digest. Fire, verily, blazes up with food.’ This world was fashioned by Brahma with a desire for food. Hence, one should reverence food as the Soul (*Âtman*)”.^{xvii} This implies that to be food is to be subject to the one who eats the food.^{xviii} When we consume food it shows that there is an intimate union with the earth, a deep communion with all things that grows from the earth. It is important to realize that the process of eating food is akin to a baby clinging to the feeding breast of mother earth.^{xix} Indian families usually eat in silence but is often accompanied by rituals and prayers. In the Bhagavad-Gita, the consumption of food is understood as appeasing the divine fire (*vaicvânara*) in the body of living beings.^{xx} The family meal eaten together strengthens the bonds and fuses the human and the divine dimension. Women would offer food to their ancestors before they would sit down to eat. They would give food to the birds to eat or to the cow. Sometimes food would be given to the bhikshu (monk) as a symbolic gesture of offering to the poor.^{xxi}

In the Hindu tradition, the earth has an important place. The altar is placed as close as possible to the earth and the introductory prayer recited is “Forgive me, mother earth, for keeping my feet on your breast”. As an expression of their self-

gift to the Lord, devotees offer fruits, flowers, cereals and grain and the priest who accepts them places them on the altar showing deep gratitude for the earth (prthivi).^{xxii} Pure water (apas), the juice of the earth is used for purification. The entire ritual revolves around the sacred fire (agni) and awakens in the devotees a consciousness of the entire cosmos of which they are integral parts and to which they have a sacred duty and responsibility.^{xxiii}

At the very heart of Hinduism is the belief that the Almighty permeates everything. Some Hindus offer their food to their personal God mentally before eating it. Others never eat their daily food without consecrating a small portion to God, and also giving a portion to a needy person passing by or a cow. This involves a great amount of cleanliness. Why do devout Hindus offer food to God? First, it makes the act of eating a sacrificial ritual and signifies internalization of sacrifice, thus making one's body a sacrificial altar. Second, it is believed that offering food to gods is a mark of self-surrender and devotion.^{xxiv} Some Hindus offer food to five vital breaths (pranas), namely prana, apana, vyana, udana, samanaya and then to Brahman seated in the heart.^{xxv} On specific days in a year, food is offered to the departed souls.

Certain rituals are followed before eating food. Food is eaten only in clean places since the Hindu law books forbids eating food in unclean places. When food is served, water is sprinkled around it, accompanied by some mantras or prayers. This is meant to purify the food and make it worthy for the gods. The offering to God is usually done on a plate reserved for making offerings by ringing a bell and chanting verses and prayers. After the offering is made to god, the plate is usually washed and kept aside before Hindus eat the food. Many devout Hindus consider it their daily duty to worship at the dawn after bathing (at a family shrine, and would include the lighting a lamp and offering foodstuffs before the images of deities) and recitation from religious verses.^{xxvi}

There are slokas that praise the act of giving and sharing. "Teiha dattan appradayobhyo bhunkte stena eva saha". This means that 'whatever we have are God's bounties and the one who enjoys them without sharing with others is verily a thief.' The concept of welcoming strangers and sharing every last bit of food and water with them is a noteworthy aspect of Hindu philosophy.^{xxvii} There are sacred Hindu texts that emphasize the importance of serving guests before one's self. The Vedas emphasize that 'Food is life' and therefore food should be given to others, because it is the highest offering one can humanly give.

Hinduism has in its philosophy the rigid social stratification of a caste system, reinforced by aspects of religious thought. The Hindu caste system is understood

primarily in terms of who can cook for and who can eat with whom. Eating with others implies social and ritual equality. If the rules for eating are breached, it represents a threat to the social order and to the individual's sense of identity. Religious purity is attached to the maintenance of social boundaries. One who cooks for and serves food to another must be the recipient's equal or superior in rank. Only in this way can the latter avoid pollution. Violation of these eating taboos constitutes defiance of caste and observance of the etiquette is indication of the acceptance of caste.^{xxviii} Brahmins, the highest caste, maintain their purity by avoiding foods touched by those of lower castes. Till the middle of this century, Brahmins ate only food prepared by people of their own caste, since it was thought that the qualities of the cook enter the food by a kind of osmosis. Yet Brahman-prepared food is permitted to everyone. In ancient Hindu sacred myth, Brahman created the world by cooking it in sacrifice, thus performing a priestly act. A Brahman's privileged status in society still is still enforced by his role as priest. He stands between the gods and rest of the world. As the ancient Hindu texts declare, the world cooked by the Brahman is to fulfill its duties to him.^{xxix}

It may help to remember an old Indian saying: *Dane dane pe likha hai khane wale ka naam* - "On each grain is written the name of the eater." The people who turn up on your doorstep are meant to be there, part of your karma, part of the big cosmic play. A guest is God, not an intruder. All Hindus have a heart to receive the guest as God. In traditional Indian culture, as soon as a guest visits you, you are given a glass of water.

Lavina Melvani writes: "Hospitality is an important Hindu value. She tells the story of Lord Krishna. When his boyhood friend, Sudama – hungry, impoverished and in rags – arrived at the palace, the guards almost did not allow him in. But Lord Krishna, overjoyed to see his old friend, received him with open arms and joyfully led him to his throne. He personally washed his feet and fed him with his own hands. Sudama had brought him a humble gift, a handful of parched rice tied onto the corner of his shawl and was too ashamed to give it to him in front of all the fine courtiers, but Lord Krishna opened the pouch and ate the grains with pleasure and appreciation. To him, the true value of this valueless gift lay in the affection with which it had been offered."^{xxx}

"If Lord Krishna was the perfect host, then Sri Ram embodied the perfect guest. During his exile in the forest, he visited Subari, a lowly woman who in her devotion and anxiety to give him only the very best, tasted each berry before she fed it to him. With grace Sri Ram accepted her offering, seeing the love with which it was given. There are so many stories of God Vishnu himself donning beggar's raiment and coming to the door for alms. So, the next time the doorbell

rings, welcome your guests with an open heart. Look beyond the facial features, the clothing and the physical bodies into the eternal soul which glows within each of us like the purest of gold. This is the Self that scripture says is immortal, the one that water cannot wet, sword cannot cut nor fire burn. And so, bending low, with folded hands, welcome the divine Paramatma, the God who is within each of us”.^{xxxix}

Food is served to guests and the poor at important ceremonies and festivities. Serving food to the poor and the needy, to the pious and the religious and to the birds, insects and animals is very good karma.^{xxxix} “Whenever you happen to come across any of these, don’t fail to offer any thing suitable - food, cloth, vehicle, money, jewellery etc as appropriate - to a saint or a monk, a cow or such animal, a student (bachelor), temple, a worshipper, pregnant woman, child, hungry person, beggar, destitute, a dead body being carried. The help you do comes back in multiples later...”.^{xxxix} In ancient India it was a religious duty to serve food to the begging students and sadhus and to the Brahmanas. According to the Rig Veda, “He who, possessed of food, hardens his heart against the weak man, hungry and suffering, who comes to him for help... He is liberal who gives to anyone who asks for alms, to the homeless, distressed man who seeks food... He is no friend who does not give to a friend, to a comrade who comes imploring for food”.^{xxxix} Food is also distributed to people at the end of many religious ceremonies. Many Hindu temples distribute food freely every day to the visiting devotees.^{xxxv}

2.2. Hindu Feasts

In Hinduism, birth, marriage, and death involve sets of religious customs. The Hindu year, using the lunar calendar, is studded with a number of religious feasts (*utsava*). Major life-cycle rituals include annaprashan (a baby’s first intake of solid food). On the eight day of the dark half of Úrâvana (July-August), the Vaisnavas all over India (and particularly in Bengal) celebrate the birthday of the child-god Krishna. This feast is called Krishna-Jayanti or Gokulastamî and dishes of sweets are presented to Krishna and then eaten by the family members. On the 4th day of the bright half of Bhadrâpada (August-September), all classes except the strict Vaishnavas celebrate the feast of Ganeúa Caturthî. Ganeúa, the elephant god is invoked for wisdom and patience. Rice puddings, of which the god is said to like, flowers and dûrvâ grass are presented. During the Navarâtra festival (called the nine night’s festival), celebrated from the first to the tenth day of the bright half of Âsvina (September-October), devotees will take only one meal of fruits and milk-sweets a day. On the last three days of Navarâtra. Sarasvatî, the gentle wife of Bramâ, is more elaborately worshipped. An image of the goddess or in its place a dish of rice topped with a coconut is brought into the house; toys and books are displayed around it. In the evening Sarasvatî’s

praises are sung and sweets and pân are distributed. A strict fast which is kept thus far is broken by a lavish feast. Dîvali or Dîpâvali (“row of lights”) is a major Hindu festival which takes place from the 13th of the dark half of Âsvina (September-October) to the 2nd of the bright half of Kârttika, and is a complex festival of five different feasts. On the 13th day of the dark half of Mâgha (January-February), the festival of Mahâúivarâtri (“the great night of Úiva”) is celebrated all over India. It is dedicated to Úiva under the symbol of the Linga. A fast is kept during the whole tithi and a vigil at night, especially by all unmarried girls who wish to secure a husband as accomplished as Úiva was for Umâ. At every third hour of the vigil, the Linga is worshipped by means of rituals and sacred formulas. The Linga is bathed in milk and honey and ketakî flowers and betel leaves are offered. The day is devoted to feasting.^{xxxvi}

2.3. Hindu Fasting, Marriage rituals and Funeral rites

Fasting has been practiced worldwide by the founders and followers of many religions. In the religions of ancient peoples and civilizations, fasting was a practice to prepare persons, especially priests and priestesses, to approach the deities. Zoroastrianism prohibits fasting, because of its belief that such a form of asceticism will not aid in strengthening the faithful in their struggle against evil. Hindu fasting is done to purify the mind and body and to develop the quality of detachment. Many Hindus fast on special occasions as a mark of respect to their personal gods or as part of their penance. On Durga Navami festival day, many Hindus observe a strict fast and pray. The diet of such a person would include potatoes without turmeric, garlic, ginger or onion. On this day of fast, one may also eat fruit and root vegetables. Curd, tea, coffee, milk, and water are also permitted. According to some Hindu texts, observing the right kinds of fast can alone give one liberation from the cycle of life and death.

Hindus in general value animal life because of the concept of respect of all creation. They practice strict vegetarianism, often with reference to ahimsâ (non-violence). Most Hindus will not consume beef or beef products since they venerate the cow. More than that is left to the personal choice of the Hindu, whether to be strictly vegetarian or showing preference for vegetarian dishes over meat dishes. Sometimes there is social pressure on an individual to refrain from eating certain foods that are considered unclean or unacceptable. Violations of such dietary rules and regulations are treated as polluting the individual and has its own consequences on the family.^{xxxvii}

Hindu marriage rituals vary according to region and caste. Even the modern Hindu law has left this matter to family custom. A Hindu marriage takes place at an auspicious time and place and Agni, the god of fire is the heavenly witness of a marriage. The spouses walk around the fire seven times (called the

mangalphera rite) and pledge total support to each other. During this time, the ritual of *saptapadī* (called seven steps) occurs where the couple takes the seven steps together and the bride steps on seven heaps of rice. With every step one taken, a vow or promise is chanted by the priest who asks the bride and bridegroom to repeat after him. The last step seals bride and groom in holy matrimony.

In South India, the wedding meal is always vegetarian and served on a banana leaf. Banana leaves are used by Hindus and Buddhists as a decorative element for auspicious functions, marriages, and ceremonies. The banana leaf is also used as it is believed that the hot rice will release the coating on the banana leaf, which aids in digestion. Some Indians also believe that the banana leaf gives a special taste to the food served on it. There are multiple courses of food. There is a particular sequence in which the food is served and a specific place for every food item on the leaf.^{xxxviii} The wedding feast is generally a lunch. Guests are made welcome into the venue of the meal and invited to sit down on the floor, cross-legged, as is traditional, or else at tables for the modern Hindus. Normally, no forks and spoons are provided for the meal. One has to eat with one's hands.^{xxxix} For the Hindu, to completely enjoy Indian food, it must be eaten with one's fingers. Moreover, it is the belief that many Indian foods such as naan or roti (types of flat bread) are best eaten in this way. What some Indians do is that they break the bread, dip it in one of the condiments — curry or chutney — before eating it. Hence, one has to wash one's hands before eating and on completion of the meal.

Death is inauspicious in Hinduism, and cremation is the usual way of disposing bodies, preferable on the day of death itself. During the days immediately following the funeral, the family is highly polluted and remains so till the final rites (*úrâddha*) are performed. These *úrâddha* rites are offerings of rice balls (*pinda*) to the deceased for ten days, (recapitulating the ten lunar months of the embryo's gestation).^{xl} This is done to construct a body for the deceased in the next world, the world of the ghosts. After this ten day period, the ghostly body is complete and with the rite called *sapindikarana*, it moves into the realm of the ancestors (*pitr-loka*).

2.4. Hindu Shrines

Pûjâ is offering vegetarian food, flowers and incense to a deity. All deities accept these offerings. In the temple, a *pûjâ* might take place in an elaborate manner, with the recitation of sacred verses (*mantras*) by the temple priest (*pûjâri*) and the offering of a variety of foods to the god. Plates of boiled rice and sweets are offered to the deity (*naivedya*) accompanied by the strong smell of incense and loud ringing of bells. The rice is later consumed by the priests and the temple

officials. Many people present such pūjās to gaze upon the deity, to have its *darṣana* (vision of the deity) and to receive back the offered food blessed by the god (called *prasāda*).^{xli}

3.0. Culinary Customs in Buddhism

Focusing on food and gender expands our understanding of the scope of religion. Feminist scholars have shown that women may be religious experts through their control of food in societies where previous scholarship has focused on the male exclusivity of sacred knowledge.^{xlii} According to Van Esterik, it is the women whose feeding of the Thai Buddhists monks and deities that primarily determines the attainment of merit and thus shapes the eternal destiny of the living and dead Buddhists.^{xliii}

Though Buddhists have always claimed to be vegetarian, not all Buddhists were or are vegetarians. At the time of Buddha, eating meat was not forbidden. However, members of the *śiṃgha* were not allowed to kill animals for food. But they were allowed to eat meat given to them by householders if it had not been killed specially for them.^{xliiv} According to Peter Harvey, in Theravāda countries, vegetarianism is usually admired but little practiced. The Buddhists Eightfold Path is considered the right livelihood and the wrong livelihood list includes a slaughterer, a butcher and a hunter, all of which have been considered despised jobs in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism.^{xliiv} The Lankāvatāra Sūtra^{xlivi} clearly states: “The bodhisattva who regards all beings as if they were his own child cannot indulge in flesh eating”.^{xliivii} The food of a bodhisattva includes rice, barley, beans, clarified butter, oil, honey, molasses and sugar. Today, a number of monasteries, including Namgyal Dratsang, the monastery of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, no longer allow meat to be cooked in their kitchens and there are a small but growing number of monks and nuns have abandoned meat eating altogether.^{xliiviii} Many Buddhists prefer not to be dogmatic and do not want to absolutely forbid the eating of meat. It is left to the conscience of the individual to take into account the intention and with the guidance of precepts, to make a mature decision.^{xliix}

4.0. Culinary Customs in Judaism

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s “Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are”¹ translates in the words of one woman recently interviewed after cooking a family meal, “Food is Judaism for me. I don’t think about it. It is who I am”. Social anthropologist Mary Douglas has demonstrated how food communicates ideas about holiness that provide identity and order. A person is affiliated to and belongs to a certain group through a set of rituals, customs and sacred meals

eaten. The family or clan would not consume certain foods and drink because they considered them to be polluting or defiling. The ancient Hebrew dietary laws functioned as controls on one's identity in a context in which aggression by other tribes and their gods was a possibility. According to Douglas, to be holy is to be wholly separate. Israelites were "clean" because apart from obeying God's covenantal order, they were not mixing with outsiders and their gods. This separation was also seen in dietary restrictions such as the prohibition against eating pork. The Israelites who considered themselves as the chosen people of God, did not make an animal that is not clearly like other grazing animals part of itself by consuming it. Purity of food and body helped to strengthen the boundaries of Israelite society and religion. The Jewish dietary laws of kashruth have continued to be among the distinguishing marks of Jewish identity and lifestyle through the centuries.^{li}

In Israeli kibbutzim (communal settlements), the communal dining room is a keystone institution, and commensality is one of the hallmarks of kibbutz life. The decline of communal eating and the increasing frequency of refrigerators, cooking gadgets, and private dining in kibbutz homes are seen as a sign of the decline of kibbutzim. In many communes in the United States, there is a single facility for cooking and dining. Dinners must be taken communally and private dining is taken as a sign that one would like to leave the group.^{lii}

Judaism, which developed many dietary laws and customs, observes several annual fast days, primarily on days of penitence (such as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement) or mourning. Thus on the Day of Atonement, which falls in September or October, the Jew makes a total examination of his or her behavior. The day is spent in prayer and repentance in the synagogue. And neither food nor drink are taken for a full twenty four hours. The dietary laws and customs of Judaism are based on the prior assumption of social stratification or, at least, of a sense of separateness as seen in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Further, according to Mary Douglas the prohibition to eat pork (see *Leviticus* 11:1-8) arises because pigs do not meet all the criteria of "normal" farm animals: cattle, sheep and goats, which all had cloven hooves and chewed their cud. Pigs have a cleft in their hooves, but they don't chew their cud. Therefore they are unclean. Thus, forbidden foods that may not be consumed include all animals, the products of animals that do not chew the cud and do not have cloven hoofs (e.g., pigs); fish without fins and scales; the blood of any animal; shellfish (e.g., oysters, shrimp, crabs) and all other living creatures that creep; and those fowl enumerated in the Bible (e.g., vultures, hawks, owls). All foods not stated in these categories may be eaten.^{liii} People who eat food that is unclean are themselves unclean and are prohibited from approaching the Temple.

In the many covenants made between Yahweh and His people, it was a meal often sealed the covenant. In the Book of Exodus 24:9-11, on Mt. Sinai, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders “beheld God, and ate and drank.” It was within this setting that the Gospel of Luke records the table fellowship of Jesus.

One of the characteristics of the Passover holiday in Judaism is the eschewal of all foods containing leaven, the consumption only of foods that have been designated as *Kasher la-Pesach*, “kosher for Passover,” and the use of special sets of utensils during the seder dinner that have not been used during the rest of the year. But these too are post biblical customs that have been given the status of law. The Bible prescribes only the eating of unleavened bread during the Passover season.

Jewish women, whose ritual and secular status was considered inferior to men, were not to make or touch pickles, wine, or beet soup if they had not been ritually cleansed after their menses. If a Jewish woman violated this customary rule, these foods would get spoiled. Further, it is the duty of housewives to make sure that meat and dairy foods are not mixed, that ritually slaughtered meat is not blemished, and that cooking equipment and utensils for meat and dairy are separated.^{liv}

According to Jewish rabbis, biblical texts indicated that humanity was vegetarian before the Flood, but after the Flood, God gave humanity permission to eat meat explicitly. Sacrificial programmes that existed in the Temple times involved not only sacrificing animals but also eating them. Both meat and wine are essential to a celebration and not eating meat signifies that one is mourning.^{lv}

Table fellowship for the Jews was more than a simple social event. To eat together with others meant to belong together (cfr. 2 Kings 25: 29). Sharing a meal led to the building of trust and brotherhood (cfr. Gen 26: 30; Gen 31: 54). Further, a guest who was invited for a meal was somehow considered to belong to that family. It was the meal that cemented the ties and bonds of fellowship between the host and the guest. Yet another aspect of ancient Jewish table fellowship was the recitation of a prayer before the start of the meal called *berakah* (an expression of praise or thanks directed to God). The Jews do not eat any meal without praising and thanking God. A Sabbath meal is only an augmented form of an ordinary Jewish meal. It is characteristic of the Sabbath observance to have a specially fine family dinner at which the best silver and china are used. Special braided breads called the *halloth* are blessed together with the wine. Prayers over bread and wine are recited in Jewish homes as a grace before meals – such as, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast created the fruit of

the vine”. There is also a long doxology after the meal to thank God for the food.^{lvi}

5.0. Culinary Customs in Christianity:

5.1. Cultural significance of meal in Christianity

Functionalist understandings of religion are useful for exploring the relationships between religion and food in particular contexts like ancient Israel. They demonstrate the connections between religion, food, and other cultural systems such as gender norms. Scholars such as Corley have shown how Graeco-Roman table etiquette affected the development of women’s roles in early Christianity and may help to explain the tension around women’s leadership in early Christianity.^{lvii} Carolyn Bynum’s study of medieval Christian mysticism shows that women exercised control and spiritual power through refusing to eat or eating only in a spiritual manner.^{lviii} Mircea Eliade affirms that religion is primarily about belief in the supernatural, which for him, lies at the heart of the sacred. Religion gives one a sacred experience and includes sacred time and sacred space, narrative (myth), and activity (ritual). Hence religion according to Eliade, essentially concerns the otherworldly expressed and responded to through patterns, which often involve food. Meals can return even the most secular person to another time and place. For example, Thanksgiving Day in the U.S., a secular holiday that celebrates consumerism, still centers on a meal modeled on sacral elements such as the sacrificial fowl and harvest fruits, where the sacred survives in the stuffed turkey and the mashed potatoes.^{lix} However, believers today may or may not reflect on the importance of food for their religious practices. The religious traditions and customs of diet and food were so essential in the past, but is there a waning of these religious influences in Christianity today? Does food still play an important role in Christianity today?

From the very beginning of Christianity, food and drink have indicated the fact that the Christian religion is not only personal but also communal. In the First letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians he wrote: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians: 10: 17). “My brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (1 Corinthians 11: 33). The invitation to break bread together emphasizes that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a communal prayer: as we eat the bread, drink the wine, and praise God, we are constantly aware of our humble presence together before God. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*^{lx} stated: “So long as we eat our bread together, we shall have sufficient even for the least.

Not until one person desires to keep his own bread for himself does hunger ensue”. His powerful words bring out the community dimension of food: “The table fellowship of Christians implies obligation. It is our daily bread that we eat, not my own. We share our bread. Thus we are firmly bound to one another not only in the Spirit but in our whole physical being. The one bread that is given to our fellowship links us together in a firm covenant. Now none dares go hungry as long as another has bread, and anyone who breaks this fellowship of the physical life also breaks the fellowship of the Spirit”.

In Biblical times, almost every covenant was sealed with a common meal. Parties ate together as if they were members of the same family or clan. Conversely, refusal to eat with someone was a mark of anger and a symbol of ruptured fellowship. In fact, if after sharing a meal, the person turned against the host or the one who provided the meal, it was considered the greatest act of betrayal (cfr. Mathew 26: 23 when Jesus foresaw that “the one who dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me”)

Often during his public ministry Jesus shared meals with various people – friends, public officials, tax collectors and sinners. Each of the meals with Jesus either as host or guest, had their own particular significance and message. The banquet at the home of Levi the tax collector (Luke 5: 27-39), Jesus welcomed all who responds to his call, and showed that he came precisely for the social and religious outcasts and not for those who considered themselves righteous. At the meal at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7: 36-50), Jesus forgave the sins of the sinner woman who repented and became his disciple. Jesus showed that the person is acceptable to God who sees the interior attitude no matter what past the person had. In the breaking of bread for the five thousand at Bethsaida (Luke 9: 10-17), Jesus showed his disciples that their mission was to nourish the crowd, not only in word, but also in deed.

When Jesus was offered hospitality at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10: 38 -42), he demonstrated that, like Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet, genuine care for persons is far more important than attending to conventions and preparing delicious food. In a second meal at the home of a Pharisee (Luke 11: 37-54), Jesus challenged the mindset of the Pharisees who focused on the external observance of the law with the priority of interior attitudes. During a Sabbath meal at the home of a leading Pharisee (Luke 14: 1-6), Jesus cured a man afflicted by dropsy, indicating that his presence, specially on the Lord’s day, restores one back to health.

At a meal in tax collector Zacchaeus’ house, (Luke 19: 1-10), Jesus declared Zacchaeus to be like the prodigal son who was lost but is now saved. At the

Last Supper (Luke 22: 14-38), a formal meal between Jesus, the host and his disciples as his invited guests, Jesus cared for and loved each of them, he washed their feet and was ready to lay down his life for all of them, including the one who betrayed him.

This Last Supper was the climactic part of Jesus' mission for the kingdom of God.^{lxi} Jesus' appearance to the disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35) shows how disheartened disciples who were not able to recognize him in their midst till the breaking of the bread. Encountering the entire community in Jerusalem (Luke 24: 36 – 49), Jesus asked them – “Have you anything to eat?” The disciples then recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread and eating with him became witnesses to his passion-death-resurrection. The deeper message of this was that only those who accept the gospel of the passion-death-resurrection (which includes a call to repentance) can recognize the living Jesus in the breaking of the bread.^{lxii}

These incidents in the life of Jesus show us how Jesus used the setting of a meal to put forth his message of the forgiveness of sins and the possibility of a new relationship with God and with one's fellow humans.^{lxiii} Hence Jesus' table-fellowship had a profound salvific meaning. “The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God”.^{lxiv} By habitually dining with the religious and social outcasts of society, demonstrated in a most convincing way that God's love is not conditional, not restricted to the religious elite, but reaches out to everyone. There are no outcasts for God.^{lxv}

5.2. Christian Fasting

Some Western religions, viz. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emphasize fasting during certain periods. Roman Catholicism has a forty day period of Lent, a period of mortification (including practices of fast and abstinence) and is meant to be a period of penitence before Easter. This Lenten observance had been modified since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council to allow greater individual choice, with mandatory fasting only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Protestant churches leave the decision to fast to individual church members.

6.0. Conclusion

The various religious traditions of India share with one another a common history, a common way of living and a common outlook, all taken together and called Indianness. There is much unity in spite of the rich cultural and religious diversity. There are certain human and humane values and a sense of the sacred that shows

our distinctiveness as Indians. Hospitality permeates Indian culture, both on a personal and institutional level. One cannot go to even the humblest home in India without being honored with food and drink. It is these aspects that keep us together and give us the feeling of brotherhood. This is so well reflected in our National Anthem, a poem addressed to God. Even though we don't have anything to eat, the guests are never left hungry and are always looked after by the members of the family. Elders and the respect for elders is a major component in Indian culture. It is a for people of every religion to ritual to pray to one's God, whether for success in a job, whether before or after a meal, whether to praise God for his marvels. There is always an association with the Sacred in one's life. In India, the family culture is all about love and concern for one another. Family traditions are unique in terms of cooking, rituals and beliefs. It is usually the woman who does the cooking and again it is the woman who eats a meal last, after everyone is served. These rich values in a person always remain unchanged because they are deeply rooted within our hearts, mind, body and soul which we receive from our culture. Even though India is a country of various religions and caste our culture tells us just one thing '*phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*'.

It is our hope that these sterling qualities of Indians, visibly seen in our culinary customs, help us to forget our differences and bring peace and harmony to the entire Indian sub continent. The Cardinal Paul Poupard Chair at St. Andrew's College, Mumbai is striving to do its best to promote inter-religious and intercultural dialogue among our youth through our courses and cultural activities.

End Notes:

- i Nationmaster.com (Statistics of the year 2000). Indian census of 2001 counted 69,601 Parses in India.
- ii Corrie E. Norman, *Religion and Food* in Food and Culture Encyclopedia. The Gale Group, Inc, 2003.
- iii Yehudi A. Cohen, Ed. "Article on Dietary law" in Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010.
- iv Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- v Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Peter Brooks (tr.) (2008) [1997]. "The Culinary Triangle". In Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. *Food and Culture: A Reader* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge. pp. 36–43 (28–35 in first edition). Originally published as Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Peter Brooks (tr.) (Autumn 1966). "The Culinary Triangle". *The Partisan Review* 33: 586–96.
- vi *Sketches of India: with forty photographic illustrations* By Joan Valérie Bondurant.
- vii Akshoy Kumar Mazumdar, *The Hindu History*.
- viii Bhagavad-Gita 3:14: Food comes from rains. Rains originate from the performance of sacrifices. And sacrifice is born out of doing prescribed duties.

- ix ‘The Laws of Manu’ or ‘Manava Dharma Shastra’ is one of the standard books in the Hindu canon, and a basic text for all gurus to base their teachings on. It is one of the supplementary arms of the Vedas. This ‘revealed scripture’ comprises of 2684 verses, divided into twelve chapters and includes norms of domestic, social, and religious life in India (circa 500 BC) under the Brahmin influence. These laws are fundamental to the understanding of ancient Indian society. See Laws of Manu, Ch II, no. 55. Further “Excessive eating is prejudicial to health, to fame, and to (bliss in) heaven; it prevents (the acquisition of) spiritual merit, and is odious among men; one ought, for these reasons, to avoid it carefully” (Laws of Manu, Ch II, No. 57).
- x Chandogya Upanishad VII, 9, 2
- xi The *Taittiriya* Upanishad is one of the older, “primary” Upanishads commented upon by Shankara. The mystical idea of the union between food and the person eating it matches the union between the sacrifice and the Supreme Being. In the following text, Brahman is food and the concluding words express the mystical rapture of the sacrificer; “*Oh, wonderful! (3) I am food! (3) I am a food-eater (3)!*” (Taittiriya Upanishad III,10.5). This verse is recited in weekly temple liturgy in Vishnu Temples all over the world. The Vedic sacrifice after describing Brahman as food, identifies himself with Brahman both as food and as eater. (Vasudha Narayanan, “The Hindu Tradition” in World Religions. Eastern Traditions, ed. Willard Oxtoby, Oxford University Press, Ontario, 1996, p. 90-91.
- xii *Taittiriya* Upanishad, II, 2 (i.e. Second Valli, Second Anuvaka).
- xiii Maitri Upanishad VI, 13. Namely, the one who recognizes this will come to possess food, life, mind, understanding and bliss. See also Francis D’Sa, “Christian Eucharist and YAJÑA” in *The Eucharist and Life*, ed. Kurien Kunnumpuram, St. Paul’s Publication, Bangalore, 2006, p. 259-260.
- xiv Aitareya Upanishad 1,3, 1-10.
- xv Francis D’Sa, *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- xvi *Taittiriya* Upanishad, II, 2.
- xvii Maitri Upanishad VI, 12.
- xviii Francis D’Sa. *Ibid.*, p/ 262.
- xix Sebastian Painadath, *The Eucharist as Sacrament of the Earth* in “Body, Bread, Blood: Eucharistic Perspectives from the Indian Church”, ed. Francis Gonsalves, Vidyajyoti/ISPCK Contextual Theological education Series, 21, Delhi, 2000, p. 140.
- xx Bhagavad-Gita 15: 14 (in Sanskrit): *aham vaisvanaro bhutva, praninam deham asritah, pranapana-samayuktah, pacamy annam catur-vidham* meaning “I am the fire of digestion in the bodies of all living entities, and I join with the air of life, outgoing and incoming, to digest the four kinds of foodstuff.”
- xxi Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, *The Passion of the Womb: Women Re-living the Eucharist* in “Body, Bread, Blood: Eucharistic Perspectives from the Indian Church”, ed. Francis Gonsalves, Vidyajyoti/ISPCK Contextual Theological education Series, 21, Delhi, 2000.

- xxii Painadath, *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- xxiii Sebastian Painadath, "Hindu Rites of Passage and the Christian Sacraments" in *The Way Supplement* 94 (1999): 131-140.
- xxiv Jayaram V, Hinduism and Food (www.hinduwebsite.com)
- xxv Jayaram V, Hinduism and Food (www.hinduwebsite.com)
- xxvi Country Studies. The Library of Congress. September 1995.[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+in0055\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+in0055)). Retrieved on 19-04-2007.
- xxvii Lavina Melwani, "Hindu Hospitality: The Gods Amongst Us", in *Hinduism Today*, Himalayan Academy, Sep 27, 2009.
- xxviii Encyclopedia Britannica, "Dietary law", 2010.
- xxix Malamoud, Charles. *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*. Translated by David White. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- xxx Levina Melvani, *Hinduism Today*, Himalayan Academy, 2007.
- xxxi Melvani, 2007.
- xxxii Karma is the concept of action or deed. In Indian belief, the karmic effects of all deeds are viewed as actively shaping past, present, and future experiences.
- xxxiii Kamandakiya Niti Sara is a work on polity by Kamandaka, based mainly on the Arthashastra. The Arthashastra is a comprehensive treatise on statecraft that gives cohesion to the political thinking of Kautilya's predecessors.
- xxxiv Rig Veda 10.117.1-6.
- xxxv Jayaram V, Hinduism and Food (www.hinduwebsite.com)
- xxxvi A. Huart, *Hindu Calendar and Festivals* in *Religious Hinduism*, ed. E. De Smet and J Neuner, The Bombay St. Paul Society, 1996, p. 182-189.
- xxxvii Werner Menski, "Hinduism" in *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, eds. Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 38.
- xxxviii See Vibha Karnik, "A Taste of South India – Bisi Bele Bhaath" in *One Life to Eat* by Sabera, 30 June 2010 (<http://onelifetoeat.com>). As narrated by Karnik: "The first dish to be served is the payasa, a milk-based sweet dish. It is always served on the lower right hand corner. One must eat this first as it is symbolic of the happy event. Then follows multiple courses of sumptuous, delicious food. The payasa is followed by salt, pickle, a salad dish called kosambari, and playa which could be vegetables like cabbage, beans or eet root cooked with mustard seeds and coconut which are all served on the leaf. A flavored rice dish such as lemon rice, tamarind rice or mint rice comes next. This is served on the left hand side of the leaf. The meal ends with the main course (no, not dessert), which consists of rice eaten with a lentil preparation. Bisi Bele Bhaath, which literally translates to Hot Pulse Rice, is a common lentil dish served as the main course".

- xxxix One has to use only one's right hand throughout the meal and never touch any food with one's left hand. In Indian culture, many people see the left hand as "unclean" and are offended when people use it to touch their food and mouth.
- xl Knipe, "Sapindikarana: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven", in Reynolds and Waugh, eds., *Religious Encounters with Death* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p. 111-124.
- xli Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996. The word *prasâda* literally means clarity but means 'divine favour', a gift from the deity.
- xlii Food and Culture Encyclopedia on "Religion and Food".
- xlili Van Esterik, Penny. "Feeding Their Faith: Recipe Knowledge Among Thai Buddhist Women." In *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*, edited by Carol M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan, pp. 81-97. Newark, N.J.: Harwood Academic Press, 1998.
- xliv Peggy Morgan, "Buddhism" in *Ethical issues in Six Religious Traditions*, ed. Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p. 90.
- xlv Peter Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 161.
- xlvi The Lankâvatâra Sûtra is a sutra of Mahâyâna Buddhism. The sùtra narrates a teaching between the Buddha and a bodhisattva named Mahâmati ("Great Wisdom").
- xlvii D.T. Suzuki, *Studies in the Lankâvatâra Sùtra*, London: Routledge, 1930, p. 369.
- xlviii Tsofdruk Rangdrol Shabkar, *Food of Bodhisattvas, Buddhist Teachings from Abstaining from Meat*, Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, 2004.
- xlix Peggy Morgan, *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- l Brillat-Savarin, *The physiology of taste, or Meditations of transcendent gastronomy*, 1826. In the original French: "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es."
- li Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966.
- lii Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010
- liii *Ibid.*
- liv Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010.
- lv Clive Lawton, "Judaism" in *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, eds. Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 189-190.
- lvi Alan Segal, "The Jewish Tradition" in *World Religions. Western Traditions*. Ed. William Oxtoby. Oxford University Press, Ontario, 1996, p. 108-109
- lvii Corley, Kathleen E. *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.

- lviii Bynum, Carolyn Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- lix Corrie E. Norman, *Religion and Food, Ibid.*
- lx Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gemeinsames Leben*, 1938.
- lxi Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Eucharist in the New Testament and the Early Church, Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Eucharist in Luke's Gospel*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1996. The message of the passion-death-resurrection was a call to repentance promising the forgiveness of sins. All those who shared the table of the Lord were to preach this message "in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem"(Luke 24: 47). p. 94. See also Sr. Teresa Joseph, fma, "Dining with Jesus" in *The Examiner*, Mumbai, 22 March 1997, p. 22-23.
- lxii LaVerdiere, *Ibid.*, p. 93-94.
- lxiii Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*,(London: SCM Press, 1967)107.
- lxiv Joaquim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, The Proclamation of Jesus. London: SCM Press, 1967, p. 116.
- lxv George Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its significance for Dalit Christians in India Today" in I. Padinjarekuttu, ed.) *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, vol. I, Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999, p. 233-234.

Bibliography:

- Grassi, Joseph. *Broken Bread and Broken Bodies. The Lord's Supper and World Hunger*. Maryknoll, NT: Orbis Books, 2004.
- Knuuumpuram, Kurien, ed. *The Eucharist and Life. Indian Christian Reflections on the Lord's Supper*. Mumbai: The Bombay St Paul Society, 2006.
- Gonsalves, Francis, ed. *Body, Bread, Blood. Eucharistic Perspectives from The Indian Church*. Delhi: Vidyajyoti/ ISPCK Contextual Theological Education Series 21, 2000.
- Deiss, Lucien. *It's The Lord's Supper. The Eucharist of Christians*. London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1986.
- Morgan, Peggy and Clive Lawton, eds. *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- De Smet, R and J. Neuner. *Religious Hinduism*. Fourth Revised Edition. Mumbai: The Bombay St Paul Society, 1996.
- O'Flaherty, Wendy, ed. *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.
- Oxtoby, Willard, ed. *World Religions. Eastern Traditions*. Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1996.

- Oxtoby, Willard, ed. *World Religions. Western Traditions*. Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Smith, Dennis. *From Symposium to Eucharist. The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Puri, Bahrati. *Engaged Buddhism. The Dalai Lama's Worldview*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Thomas, P. *Hindu Religion, Custom and Manners*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co, 1956.
- Fernandez, Erasto. *The Bread that we Break*. Bombay, St Paul Press Training School, 1980.
- Reynolds, Frank and Earle Waugh, eds. *Religious Encounters with Death*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1977.
- Counihan, Carol M. and Steven L. Kaplan, eds. *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*. Newark, N.J.: Harwood Academic Press, 1998.
- Malamoud, Charles. *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*. Translated by David White. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Shabkar, Tsofdruk Rangdrol. *Food of Bodhisattvas, Buddhist Teachings from Abstaining from Meat*, Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Amsterdam: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004.
- Suzuki, D.T. *Studies in the Lankavatâra Sûtra*, London: Routledge, 1930.
- Harvey, Peter. *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966.
- Corley, Kathleen E. *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.
- Bynum, Carolyn Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Perrin, Norman. *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1967.
- Jeremias, Joaquim. *New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, The Proclamation of Jesus. London: SCM Press, 1967.
- Padinjarekuttu, I, ed. *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, Vol. I, Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999.
- Lavina Melwani, "Hindu Hospitality: The Gods Amongst Us", in *Hinduism Today*, Himalayan Academy, Sep 27, 2009.
- Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.2010.
- Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme. *The physiology of taste, or Meditations of Transcendent Gastronomy*, Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1826.