

# Meals and Celebrations in Asian Cultures

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## 1. Introduction

Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are," wrote renowned gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825. Food is a very important and necessary part of our lives. It sustains us, giving meaning, order, and values to our lives. Food reflects the symbolism in our ideological systems. Sharing food has been a way for people of all cultures to create and sustain a bond with others. It also plays an important part in our identity construction, our religious practices, and our socialization. It is a vital part in our celebrations.

We use food for a variety of purposes and the food that we choose to eat is selected because of many different influences. In many religions, food is a communicative symbol where we experience and perceive God's love and life. Foodways can thus tell us a lot about the society in which they play a part. This paper will highlight the facts that we communicate messages by means of as well as about food, and we can look at foodways to discern cultural presuppositions underlying our communicative styles and religious experiences.

## 2. Food, Meals and Culture

All living organism need to sustain themselves to be alive. But, our human sustenance takes a form of culture. Food becomes a meal through a process of culture. Even animals need to eat food but this food becomes a meal for human beings because of its cultural moorings. It is in the first few years of a child's life that the mother and other members of the family teach it to discriminate between food and non-food, and how, when and in what order to eat it. These rules we carry with ourselves throughout our life though we might modify or change them as we go along.

Consuming food is a cultural activity, which has several symbolic meanings. We eat food because we need it to live, it is what gives us the nutrients that we need for our bodies to grow. Another reason we eat food is because of psychological reasons. If we are happy, we eat; if we are sad, we eat; boredom, depression, and loneliness are other reasons that we eat. Communities are kept together with the cultural and symbolic meaning of food (Humphrey, 1991.). We use food for social needs. When we have friends, usually we have some form of food to offer them,

whether it is a light snack or a full meal. Food items themselves have meaning attached to them.

Normally, People who have the same culture share the same food habits, that is, they share the same assemblage of food variables. Peoples of different cultures share different assemblages of food variables. We might say that different cultures have different food choices (Brown, 1984). All the same, within the same culture, the food habits are not at all necessarily homogeneous. In fact, as a rule they are not. Within the same general food style, there are different manifestations of food variables of a smaller range, for different social situations. People of different social classes or occupations eat differently. People on festive occasions, in mourning, or on a daily routine eat again differently.

Different religious sects have different eating codes (Penner, 1991). Men and women, in various stages of their lives, eat differently. These variations may be influenced by the natural resources that are available for its use. All the same, food is not everything in the environment which can be used for sustaining and nourishing the human body. The environment only sets the limits and provides challenge to human ingenuity. Certain items, animal, vegetable and mineral, are selected by the culture as fit for human consumption and many others as not. In most cases, the selected items are consumed after being processed in certain ways which are again prescribed by culture.

### **3. Food, Culture and Communication**

The role of food in different cultures throughout time and in all parts of the world is very interesting and revealing how societies and cultures have been communicating with the symbolism of food. Beyond merely nourishing the body, what we eat and with whom we eat can inspire and strengthen the bonds between individuals, communities, and even countries. There is no closer relationship than kin, and food plays a large part in defining family roles, rules, and traditions.

What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who is at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is rich with meaning. Food participates in multiple symbolic systems in a society. To discern some of the meanings that can be read into the patterning of food in a meal will reveal to us the communicative characteristic of food and meal. Choices people make with respect to what, when, where, and how they eat is related to the cultural communication of that community with regard to social relationship of that society.

Nations or countries are frequently associated with certain foods. People also connect to their cultural or ethnic group through similar food patterns. Immigrants often use food as a means of retaining their cultural identity. People from different cultural backgrounds eat different foods. The ingredients, methods of preparation, preservation techniques, and types of food eaten at different meals vary among cultures.

In addition to impacting food choices, culture also plays a role in food-related etiquette. People in Western societies may refer to food-related etiquette as *table manners*, a phrase that illustrates the cultural expectation of eating food or meals at a table. Some people eat with forks and spoons; more people use fingers or chopsticks. However, utensil choice is much more complicated than choosing chopsticks, fingers, or flatware. Among some groups who primarily eat food with their fingers, diners use only the right hand to eat. Some people use only three fingers of the right hand. Among other groups, use of both hands is acceptable. In some countries, licking the fingers is polite; in others, licking the fingers is considered impolite (and done only when a person thinks no one else is watching). Rules regarding polite eating may increase in formal settings.

The amount people eat and leave uneaten also has symbolic meaning in cultures. Some people from Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries might leave a little bit of food on their plates in order to indicate that their hunger has been satisfied (Kittler 2001). Cooks from other locations might be offended if food is left on the plate, indicating that the guest may have disliked the food. Similarly, a clean plate might signify either satisfaction with the meal or desire for more food.

Even the role of conversation during mealtime varies from place to place. Many families believe that mealtime is a good time to converse and to “catch up” on the lives of family and friends. Among other families, conversation during a meal is acceptable, but the topics of conversation are limited. In some Southeast Asian countries it is considered polite to limit conversation during a meal (Kittler 2001).

#### **4. Symbolic Meaning of Food in Asian Cultures**

Food has many symbolic meanings. It has a symbol of hospitality, status, welcome and acceptance. In her book *Welcoming Ways*, Andrea Alban Gosline describes dozens of culinary customs from around the globe. In Uzbekistan mothers whisper these words to their new babies: “My little meat, my little fat, my little honey, my grasshopper, my tiny moon, light of my eyes.”

In China Red eggs are incorporated into the naming and welcome ceremony when the baby is one month old. In the Chinese tradition food and health go together. Food not only affects health as a matter of general principle, the selection of the right food at any particular time must also be dependent upon one's health condition at that time. Food, therefore, is also medicine. The Chinese way of eating is further characterized by the ideas and beliefs about food, which actively affect the ways in which food is prepared and taken. Indeed, perhaps one of the most important qualifications of a Chinese gentleman was his knowledge and skill pertaining to food and drink (Simoons, 1991).

In India, food is not exchanged between unequal castes. Food is a symbol of hierarchical status as well as equality. There are minute rules as to what sort of food or drink can be accepted by a person and from what castes. Traditionally, the practices in the matter of food and social intercourse divided the people of India into different segments. Social customs relating to food divided the people of India into five groups. First, the twice born castes consisting of mainly Brahmins; the second, those castes at whose hands the twice-born can take "Pakka" food; third, those castes at whose hands the twice-born cannot accept any kind of food but may take water; fourth, castes that are not untouchable yet are such that water from them cannot be used by the twice-born; last come all those castes whose touch defiles not only the twice-born but any orthodox Hindu. All food is divided into two classes, "Kachcha" and "Pakka", the former being any food in the cooking of which water has been used, and the latter all food cooked in butter ("ghi") without the addition of water. As a rule a man will never eat "Kachcha" food unless it is prepared by a fellow caste-man, which in actual practice means a member of his own endogamous group, whether it be caste or sub-caste, or else by his Brahmin "Guru" or spiritual guide. But in practice most castes seem to take no objection to "Kachcha" food from a Brahmin. A Brahmin can accept "Kachcha" food at the hands of no other caste. As for the "Pakka" food, it may be taken by a Brahmin at the hands of some of the castes only. A man of higher caste cannot accept "Kachcha" food from one of the lower, though the latter may regale himself with similar food offered by a member of one of the castes accepted to be higher than his own (Ghurye, 1932:7). Thus food is a symbol of hierarchy of castes.

## **5. Participation in a Meal is the Celebration of Renewal of Relationships**

Eating is a social act, and one of the marks or symbols of a family is eating together. Food is also a part of our many celebrations. In many cultures in Asia, eating together by its family members is an important value. Similarly in American

Samoa most family activities and ceremonies center on eating. A host family demonstrates its prosperity or societal rank by providing large quantities of food (Shovic 1994). However, the way that food is used in celebrations varies from home to home, state to state, and country to country. The celebrations that we have and the ways that we celebrate them are affected by our culture (Fieldhouse, 1986: 3).

Thus, gathering around a table, uniting as friends and family is an important aspect of food and celebrations. Food and celebrations unite people in the same family, giving them a common bond. A celebration of all sorts, and the food that adorns them brings people from all over the world closer together around one table. When we celebrate it is usually with people we love and trust, or are trying to get to know. Food is a powerful element that can bring together many different people. The smell of food also is powerful in that it is able to bring old memories and events to mind, a certain meal and its smell can remind a person of home.

## **6. Meal is a Celebration of Life Linked to Rites of Passage**

We have pointed out that the food we eat is intricately linked to our culture and geography. Our festivals, marriages, pregnancies, births and deaths are ruled by the special food to be made, eaten or fed to others. Even seasons are defined by the type of food and drink that should ideally be consumed at that time of the year. Thus meal is a celebration of life linked to rites of passage.

### ***i) Life is a Celebration***

Celebrations in families and societies are marked with rites of passage, and at the height of every rites of passage there is a celebration of a community meal. Participating in the meals of the celebration of a family (rites of passage) or any other celebration means participating in the joy and sorrows and the very struggle of life of a family or a community. Let us elaborate on this point.

In all cultures, life is a celebration of giving meaning to different events of human existence. Life is experienced as pulsating and rhythmical. It is a combination of breaks and re-unions. Rituals and rites are the means by which these experiences of life are communicated. Most of these rites and rituals are filled with meaning, giving an interpretation to the process of life. Hence, experiences of humankind are heavily embedded in cultural symbols, particularly those of rituals and celebrations. These rites and rituals help the members of the community to encounter the changes in their own life and in the environment. As it will be shown shortly, meal is an essential part and the culmination and completion of

the celebration of the rites of passage of a community. Community meals are connected to these rituals, symbols and myths.

In order to be alive and active a culture has to relive its experiences. This means the experiences which are stroed in rituals must be enacted, myths recited, narratives told, events of importance celebrated. These enactments, recitals, tellings and performances transform and enable the people involved to re-experience the heritage of their culture. "Life consists of retellings" (Bruner 1986:12). It is in this sense that meals which form a part and parcel of a community ritual is a celebration of that community.

## ***ii) Meals and Celebrations are Essential Part of Rites of Passage***

Every invidual in a society undergoes different phases of life such as birth, puberty, adulthood, old-age and death. From birth till death human beings take up different positions in life such as childhood, youth, marriage and parenthood. All these changes and positions in life involve different responsibilities and each such change disturbs the individual's equilibrium in relationship within his family and society. A person's ability to handle these situations are marked with uncertainties. Hence, these distrurbances which involve marked changes in the habitual interaction rates of an individual are known as crisis (Chapple and Coon 1942:484). Every culture meets these crisis situations through various rituals so that an individual may pass through these stages without much stress and strain. These rites and rituals are called rites of passage by the well known social scientist Arnold van Gennep (Cf. Gennep 1960). These rites and rituals literally mark the passage of an individual from one state in his relations with other people to an another state.

The purpose of these rituals and celebrations are to transform an individual from one stage of life to another. These rites and celebrations are seen as both indicators and vehicles of transition from one socio-cultural state and status to another – childhood to maturity, virginity to marriage, childlessness to parenthood, sickness to health, death to ancestory, and so on. These ceremonies and specific rites also pay an important role in the ordering and reordering of social relations (Gluckman 1962:4).

For example, in the Dravidian cultures when a girl comes of age, her m ovements and interactions are restricted; she is confined to her home for a certain period of time until a number of rites and rituals are performed (Diehl 1956:185). These rites and rituals are aimed at changing the quality of time and staus for the girl who has come of age as well as for the members of the family. The girl is no more an ordinary small girl. She is different now. This change of status in her

life and for the members of the family and relations mark with rituals of Rites of Passage. In the words of Kimball, "The person who enters a status at variation with the one previously held becomes "sacred" to the others who remain in the profane state. It is this new condition which calls for rites eventually incorporating the individuals into the group and returning him to the customary routines of life. These changes may be dangerous, and at least, they are upsetting to the life of the group and the individual. The transitional period is met with rites of passage which cushion the disturbance" (1960:ix). Similarly, in other life-crisis rituals such as marriage, death, etc. the rites of passage changes the quality of time for the people who are undergoing these rituals. At the culmination of every rite of passage there is a celebration marked with a community meal.

Van Gennep saw "regeneration" as a law of life and of the universe: the energy which is found in any system gradually becomes spent and must be renewed at intervals. For him, this regeneration is accomplished in the social world by the rites of passage given expression in the rites of death and renewal of life. The essential part of this regeneration is a community meal which renews the community itself and the intimate relationships of the members of a community.

Let us take an example from Korean Culture. Naming of a child is a rite of passage which accompanies a festive meal. In Korean culture, there are prescribed rules, timing, rites and procedures in the naming of a child. After a lapse of some time a child is named. For a boy a temporary name, called a birth name, was to be replaced by a proper name upon attaining majority. A girl would have no childhood name.

On the 100<sup>th</sup> day after the birth, a sumptuous banquet is held. If the child is the first and male, the banquet is especially elaborate. Many varieties and large quantities of food are prepared and a large number of guests are invited. Parents also present rice cakes to the neighbours. The guests invited to the 100<sup>th</sup> day party come with presents, often in the form of gold rings.

On the first birthday of a child another big party is given, which is called the "*tol*" banquet. The child is dressed as resplendently as possible, often to its dismay and discomfort, and is set before a "*tol*" table with an assortment of rice cakes and symbolic items such as a hank of yarn, money, stationery, and a book. The adults enjoy predicting the child's fortune as the child picks one of the items. If it picks the yarn it is supposed to live long; if the writing-brush it is presumed to possess a scholarly talent, and if money it will be blessed with wealth, etc. (see Korean Overseas Information Service, 1978:328-329).



When this routine is over, relatives and acquaintances are invited to enjoy the food, and the congratulations and presents of the guests are given.

Similarly celebrations of other rites of passage also follow a festive meal. In Korean culture, marriage is considered the most important single event for the entire family as well as the bride and groom, to be witnessed by many acquaintances and close relatives. The marriage celebration is marked by a family meal with relatives and friends (see Korean Overseas Information Service, 1978:328-329).

The food chosen during these celebrations will depend upon the cultural meaning of food in each society. To narrate this point, I draw examples from India and China in the next section of this paper.

### ***iii) Meals and Celebrations are Essential Part of the Cyclical Rituals***

Van Gennep applied his system of “regeneration” to the analysis of feast and festivals in all cultures. Every feast and festival is characterized by the celebration of a community or a family meal. As we just saw, Van Gennep found regeneration is very essential in every society. Cyclical rituals are part of this regeneration.

In almost all human societies work and life tend to be governed by seasonal and ecological rhythms. Changes in the environment, such as the alteration of the seasons and even the succession of day and night, the phases of the moon, or the progression of the seasons in their annual cycle involve a disturbance of all the members of a group. They are crises because in many societies, the food supply and the means of livelihood are so dependent upon the vagaries of the environment and its climatic conditions that these human groups live in a perpetual state of anxiety and uncertainty. Moreover the changes in nature exert an alteration in the occupational rhythm of life. Consequently, these changes involve a readjustment of the interaction rates.

For example, in a country like India which is predominantly agricultural, important crisis, that is, crisis which involve relatively great changes of interaction rates, come in the spring at planting time, and in the fall at harvest. Some of the extensive cyclical rituals, such as the harvest rites, mark the end of a period of technical activity; others like planting ceremonies, mark the beginning of such a period. The ritual techniques used in these crisis enable individuals affected by the changes to build up the new interaction rates needed to restore their equilibrium. Human life need to be adjusted to these changes in nature. Accordingly every culture marks culturally recognized



points in the passage of time such as first fruits, harvest, mid-summer, new year, new moon, etc. (cf. James 1961).

Normally, the “Rites of Passage” are associated with non-periodic changes such as birth and death, illness, and so on. The “Cyclical Rituals” on the other hand, are usually connected with the periodic changes; the daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly changes which are associated with changes in technology through the alteration of day and night and of the seasons. Most characteristically, however, the non-periodic changes producing the rite of passage affect a single individual specially, and the rest of the group only through their relations with him, while those producing the Cyclical Rituals affect all the members of the group together. These rites, coming periodically, help to reinforce the habitual relations within the society. E.D. Chappell and C.S. Coon (1942) call these rites and rituals as “rites of intensification”, since the goal of these celebrations is the strengthening of group unity.

These rites which accompany and bring about the change of year, season, or month are also, according to Van Gennep, ceremonies of passage. Certain feasts and festivals in different parts of Asia and in other geographical areas of the world may include rites of expulsion of winter and incorporation of spring – the one dies and the other is reborn (Gennep 1960:178-180).

Invariably the celebration of these feast and festivals are marked with food symbolism in the meals of their culture. We will study some of them in Asian Cultures.

## **7. Quality of a Meal Influences the Personality of People**

As pointed out above, the food chosen during the community celebrations at the rites of passage will depend upon the cultural meaning of food in each society. Many cultures in Asia consider that there is an intimate relationship between the type of meals (food) we take and our personality. To narrate this point, I draw examples from India and China.

### ***i) Food and Celebration in Indian Culture***

In India food is classified into different psychological qualities based on the nature of food into hot and cold. There is also a classification of diets on the basis of their compatibility with certain life-styles which are arranged hierarchically. *Satva* (righteous), *rajas* (energetic) and *tamas* (inactive) are three dominant qualities or virtues, and one who aspires to. Hence according to the hierarchy of caste, and according to the psychological qualities expected in their

behaviour, different castes will choose food items in their meals in any celebration. An individual or a caste group which aspires to lead a *satvic* life-style must be vegetarian, teetotaler, and s/he or the caste group has to avoid, among other things, garlic and onion. They must also avoid chillies, and highly spiced food. Many upper caste Hindus, especially Brahmins, people who follow Jain religion and holy men regard vegetarianism as the only diet compatible with that condition of living.

‘*Rajas*’ food includes meat-eating and the spices, and is regarded as appropriate to those doing manual labour, and for soldiers and others who have to live by using physical force or violence.

‘*Tamas*’ is gluttony especially in spicy meats and liquor. This type of food is regarded as part of an overall sensuous life-style.

The different caste communities according to their caste regulations choose food which is appropriate in their celebrations (Srnivas, 1984:107).

## *ii) Food and Celebration in Chinese Culture*

The Chinese meals in celebrations are based on its distinctive understanding of food and health. The Chinese’s underlying principles in meal preparation is based on the bodily functions the *yin-yang* principles. Many foods are also classifiable into those that possess the *yin* quality and those of the *yang* quality. When *yin* and *yang* forces in the body are not balanced, problems result. Proper amounts of food of one kind or the other may then be administered (i.e., eaten) to counterbalance the *yin* and *yang* disequilibria. If the body were normal, overeating of one kind of food would result in an excess of that force in the body, causing diseases. Hence, food selected in celebrations take the above aspects of dietary principles (Simoons, 1991).

At least two other concepts belong to the native Chinese food tradition. One is that, in consuming a meal, appropriate amounts of both *fan* and *ts’ai* should be taken. In fact, of the two, *fan* is the more fundamental and indispensable. The other concept is frugality. Overindulgence in food and drink is a sin of such proportions that dynasties could fall on its account (Simoons, 1991).

## **8. Meals and Celebrations at Cyclical Rituals in Asian Cultures**

As pointed out above, in Asia too, the different cultural communities have developed their own rites and rituals for centuries to giving meaning to their life experience in terms of linear and cyclic rituals. The culmination of these

celebrations are marked with community or family meals. We will see some of the meals connected to cyclical rituals in Asian cultures.

### *i) In Chinese Culture*

Celebration of the New Year is a cyclical ritual in all cultures. In Chinese culture, it is very elaborate. This is celebrated with a special festive meal. It is a time to gather with family, honor ancestors and celebrate with a big banquet that symbolizes prosperity in the New Year.

Most of the dishes served during Chinese New Year (also known as Spring Festival) are symbolic of something positive, hopeful and indicating newness of life. Chicken and fish, for example, symbolize happiness and prosperity—especially when served whole. Dishes made with oranges represent wealth and good fortune because they are China’s most plentiful fruit. Noodles represent longevity; therefore, they should never be cut! Duck symbolizes fidelity, while eggs signify fertility. Bean curd or *tofu*, however, is avoided because its white color suggests death and misfortune.

Dishes are also chosen based on homonyms—words that either are spelled the same or sound the same as other words. Fish (*yu*) is served because it sounds similar to the Chinese word for plenty; whole fish represents abundance. Turnips are cooked because their name (*cai tou*) also means “good luck.”

Another popular Chinese New Year dish is *jiaozi*, dumplings boiled in water. In some areas of China, coins are placed in the center of *jiaozi*. Whoever bites into one of these dumplings will have an exceptionally lucky year.

The Chinese celebrations include certain specific items of food. This food in celebrations is related to the symbolic meaning of that food item. The symbolic significance of a food may be based on its appearance or on how the Chinese word for it sounds. Here are several symbolic Chinese foods:

#### *a) Eggs*

Eggs hold a special symbolic significance in many cultures, and China is no exception. The Chinese believe eggs symbolize fertility. After a baby is born, parents may hold a “red egg and ginger party,” where they pass out hard boiled eggs to announce the birth. (In some regions of China the number of eggs presented depends on the sex of the child: an even number for a girl, and an odd number if a boy has been born).

#### *b) Noodles*

Noodles are a symbol of longevity in Chinese culture. They are as much a part of a Chinese birthday celebration as a birthday cake with lit candles is in

many countries. Since noodles do symbolize long life, it is considered very unlucky to cut up a strand.

**c) *Fish***

Although westerners sometimes balk at the sight of a entire fish lying on a plate, in China a fish served whole is a symbol of prosperity. In fact, at a banquet it is customary to serve the whole fish last, pointed toward the guest of honor. Fish also has symbolic significance because the Chinese word for fish, *yu*, sounds like the word for riches or abundance, and it is believed that eating fish will help your wishes come true in the year to come.

**d) *Duck***

Chinese wedding banquet is marked with a mouthwatering platter of Peking duck on the banquet table. Ducks represent fidelity in Chinese culture. Also, red dishes are featured at weddings as red is the color of happiness. (You'll find them served at New Year's banquets for the same reason.)

**e) *Chicken***

In Chinese culture, chicken forms part of the symbolism of the dragon and phoenix. At a Chinese wedding, chicken's feet (sometimes referred to as phoenix feet) are often served with dragon foods such as lobster. Chicken is also popular at Chinese New Year, symbolizing a good marriage and the coming together of families (serving the bird whole emphasizes family unity).

**f) *Seeds (lotus seeds and watermelon seeds)***

During the Chinese New Year celebration Chinese eat snacks with different types of seeds in them. The seed-filled treats represent bearing many children in Chinese culture.

**g) *Fruit - Tangerines, Oranges and Pomelos***

Tangerines and oranges are passed out freely during Chinese New Year as the words for tangerine and orange sound like luck and wealth, respectively. As for pomelos, this large ancestor of the grapefruit signifies abundance, as the Chinese word for pomelo sounds like the word for "to have."

**h) *Cake***

The sweet, steamed cakes are so popular during the Chinese New Year season. Cakes such as Sticky Rice Cake have symbolic significance on many levels. Their sweetness symbolizes a rich, sweet life, while the layers symbolize rising abundance for the coming year. Finally, the round shape signifies family reunion.

## *ii) In India Culture*

In India there is no one New Year celebration. Each cultural groups have their own New Year in their respective annual calendar at different times of the year. Hence, it is impossible to narrate meal pattern for all the cultural groups of India. Hence, an example of only one cultural group is given here, namely Maharashtra.

Maharashtra is one of the linguistic states in India located at the middle west of Indian subcontinent. The people of this State speak Marathi as their mother tongue and belong to that culture. Among them celebration of a new year is to mark a new beginning. It is known as Gudhi – Padawa. It is the first day (Shuddha Pratipada) of the month of Chaitra. This new beginning is marked by a custom of erecting a long bamboo decorated with a silk-cloth and silver-vessel, a garland of sweets and neem-leaves. This is called Gudhi. After worshipping the Gudhi, it is taken down in the evening after sunset and sweet from the garland is distributed among the children. The meal of that day contains sweets. One peculiar custom, which characterizes Gudhi-Padawa, is the eating of neem-leaves before taking of the sweetmeats.

Celebration of the New Year teaches us that we need a constant transformation, renewal and rejuvenation. We need constant revision and criticism of our previous orderings of thought and behaviour. It is the celebration of life and death. During the celebration of the Gudhi-Padawa eating of neem-leaves before taking of the sweetmeats is very special. This reminds people, at the beginning of the New Year, that life is made up of both joys and sorrows, and we need to be ready to face both (Thomas, 1971:3-4).

## **9. Divine Meal in Asian Religions**

Food has a symbolic meaning in almost all religions. In some religions such as Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity the eating of regular meals is intertwined with ritual acts. In the Hindu family, among the higher castes the morning meal is first offered to the domestic deities before being consumed. Eating must also be undertaken wherein a ritually pure condition, and a greater degree of purity is required while cooking. The kitchen is one of the “purest” places in a Hindu house (Srinivas, 1984: 103).

Around the world, Muslims fast during Ramadan, believed to be the month during which the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, was given from God to the Prophet Muhammad. During this month, Muslims fast during daylight hours, eating and drinking before dawn and after sunset. Orthodox Jews follow dietary laws,

popularly referred to as a *kosher* diet, discussed in Jewish scripture. The dietary laws, which describe the use and preparation of animal foods, are followed for purposes of spiritual health ( Rhodes, Web online).

Many followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism are vegetarians, in part, because of a doctrine of noninjury or nonviolence. Abstinence from eating meat in these traditions stems from the desire to avoid harming other living creatures. Though not more than about 28 % of the population are vegetarians in India, in spite of this vegetarians have a high ritual status in India, and are extremely articulate (Srinivas, 1984:105).

Meal binds the members of a religious community. It is a custom among the Muslims to sit for a common festival meal along with the guests around a large plate, in the middle of which all the food is kept. The guests as well as hosts eat together by drawing the portion that each one likes to consume. On feast days, Muslims will normally send a piece of cooked mutton also to the houses of the neighbours who may belong to other religious traditions.

In India, among some tribes, there is a ritual meal around a reconciliation experience. It could happen that a boy from one clan has fallen in love and eloped with a girl from another clan, which union is normally forbidden. This makes the tribes enemies of each other, and tensions rise. If normalcy has to be restored, it is arranged that the elders first come together and discuss what has happened and how the problem is to be solved. When the dialogue succeeds, both the clans celebrate with a meal as a sign of reconciliation and mutual trust.

In the South of India there lives a tribal community known as Todas. Two basic principles rule their community, namely a) A woman is impure, b) The buffalo is very sacred. In their culture, the buffalo is normally is not killed and consumed for food. However, once a year, a prize buffalo is killed and the entire communities consumes it as a festival. It is believed by them that this meal helps them to have the life of the divinity within themselves.

The Sikh religious community in India has a special community meal in their tradition. The Hindus have a concept of “Prasad” (Divine Food) in their religious traditions. Let us elaborate on these two types of Divine Food.

#### ***a) Langar (Community Meal of the Sikhs)***

Langar (in Punjabi language) is the term used in the Sikh religion for the free, vegetarian food served in a Gurdwara and eaten by everyone sitting as equals. Langar is also a fundamental element of Sufism, especially the Chishti Order. Langar is served in the precincts of a Sufi Dergah in the Langar Khana and is

served out of a massive pot called a “Deg,” and is not necessarily vegetarian. Langar is also a practice of the Ravidasi faith, and follows the same format as the Sikh practice (^ <http://www.searchsikhism.com/institution.html> ).

The Sikh Langar or free kitchen was started by the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak. It is designed to uphold the principle of equality between all people of the world regardless of religion, caste, colour, creed, age, gender or social status. In addition to the ideals of equality, the tradition of Langar expresses the ethics of sharing, community, inclusiveness and oneness of all humankind. “..the Light of God is in all hearts.”

At Langar, only vegetarian food is served. This is done to ensure that all people, with whatever dietary restrictions will feel welcome to eat as equals.

The institution of “Guru ka Langar” has served the community in many ways. It has ensured the participation of Sikhs in a task of service for mankind, even Sikh children help in serving food to the participants of Langar. Langar also teaches the etiquette of sitting and eating in a community situation, which has played a great part in upholding the virtue of sameness of all human beings; providing a welcome, secure and protected sanctuary.

Everyone is welcome to share the Langar; no one is turned away. The food is normally served twice a day, every day of the year. Each week a family or several families volunteer to provide and prepare the Langar. This is very generous, as there may be several hundred people to feed, and caterers are not allowed. All the preparation, the cooking and the washing-up is also done by voluntary helpers.

The Sikh Gurus exhorted their followers to regard everyone as their own brother. We are brothers born of the same father. ‘Our Father is one and we are all his children.’ We are members of one family. All the Gurus showed in actual life how this percept of the ‘Brotherhood of Man’ was to be lived out; the free kitchen is perhaps the best demonstration of the same Love and active sympathy for the downtrodden. The free kitchen is an institution where these noble ideals can be practiced. A Sikh Gurdwara is a central place of worship and langar is a place for serving each other. In a langar a mingling of all classes is provided and in dining together realization of the truth ‘all food is gift of God and that prejudices about it are entirely invalid’.

#### ***b) Prasad (Hinduism – Prasad- Divine Food)***

Prasâda (Sanskrit), prasâd/prashad (Hindi), Prasâda in (Kannada), prasâdam (Tamil) or prasadam (Telugu) is both a mental condition of generosity, as well as



a material substance that is first offered to a deity (in Hinduism) and then consumed.

Prasada is the sacred food offering of the Lord. During Kirtans (Singing hymns), worship, Puja, Havan and Arati, the devotee offers sweet rice, fruits, jaggery, milk, coconut, plantain and such other articles to the Lord, according to his ability. After offering them to the Lord, they are shared between the members of the house or the Bhaktas (devotees) in a temple. From ancient Indian tradition the sharing of food has significance also for the personal relationship between those who partake in the food. To take only the remains of the food, what is left over after the other person has eaten, is a sign of humility, an expression of honour to him who eats first. Hindus believe that the prasad has the deity's blessing residing within it. In contemporary Hindu religious practice in India, the desire to get **prasada** and have darshan are the two major motivations of pilgrimage and temple visits.

Prasada is that which gives peace. Water, flowers, rice, etc., are offered to the Lord in worship. When a sacrifice is performed, the participants share the Prasada which bestows the blessings of the gods. Prasad is extremely sacred. There is no restriction of any kind in taking prasad.

Tukaram, the great mystic and poet of Maharashtra in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, makes abundant use of food and meal to express divine experience in his sacred poetries (*abhangas*). Tukaram sees in the meal not only the symbol of communion with God but also the bond of mutual spiritual fellowship. Devotees are drawn together by the common gift which they receive from God. Their devotion becomes a source of social solidarity and integration (Neuner, 1987: xvi).

## 10. Conclusion

Human life is a pilgrimage to one's eternal destiny. One cannot proceed on this pilgrimage without the food required day by day on this journey. Cultural and spiritual traditions have developed a language of symbols to express the importance of food in human life. Food and meals have much significance in the social and cultural life of a community. Family, community and village bonding takes place through eating together. Food also plays an important role in the renewal of relationships and reconciliation. Life is a journey, rites and rituals are the means by which a family and society reaffirms its members to face the challenges of life. At the height of all these rites of passage there is a community meal which bonds the members of a community. Similarly, according to the ecological changes in the environment, feast and festivals are organized to meet the tensions arising from these changes. Here too, festive meals play an important

role in strengthening group solidarity and community fellow feeling. There is an intimate relationship between food and religious experiences of people in different cultures. In many religions meal is a symbol of communion with God and also the bond of mutual spiritual fellowship. The food offered at religious places become a source of social solidarity and integration.

As a concluding remark it may be said that there is an intimate relationship between food, culture and religion. There is a community dimension in this relationship.

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