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In My Opinion

The Sacred Act of Eating

A Hindu foodie reflects on the endangered daily ritual of food preparation and enjoyment

By Deepa Iyer

In my great grandmother's house in Thanjavur, every meal represented an elaborate ritual. She washed a fresh set of clothes every night, rose daily at 4 am, while the rest of the house still slumbered, and took a bath before cooking. Prior to touching any ingredients, she prayed before a faded wall covered with frame after frame of Hindu iconography. Only then would she start to prepare the meal.

When we sat down to eat, on the floor across from the prayer wall, the meal itself was systematic. First, someone laid plantain leaves on the cleaned floor. Then, the men recited Sanskrit prayers, pouring a little water into their right palms and circling their leaves with it to signify cleansing the mind and heart before approaching the food. Somebody took a little food and left it outside for the crows, to return part of the food to nature. Normally I was designated as the crow feeder.

After all this, the meal would commence with a clatter of sounds, colors, textures and tastes. We ate deftly, using our right hands to gracefully sweep food across the plantain leaf and lift it to our mouths. When the last morsel disappeared, several family members would say an old Sanskrit adage meaning "May the ones providing this food be happy and healthy." The customs and the food contributed to a celebration of community and utter deliciousness.

Today I try to think of my food in this context. I love how truly delicious food can engage all five senses at once. Ripe, bright vegetables, their lush skins just begging to be chopped. The smell of spices--cumin, turmeric, saffron, coriander,

mint--dancing lightly across the air. The inquisitive tang of my grandmother's freshly churned butter. Crispy, warm pain au chocolat, or the sweet, slightly acidic tenor of fresh mango sorbet.

Hindu culture has an extensive culinary theology that ascribes ritual and mystical importance to food. Food is a manifestation of Brahman, the supreme energy motivating the universe. "Food is God," my mother would tell me, as I pushed curry moodily around my plate as a child. At the time, I couldn't relate; eating quickly was a ticket to getting outside. Although I didn't revel in food, I always loved the rituals. They made meals more interesting for a child who would rather be playing with friends on the block.

Hindu scriptures point to three forces that influence food's nutrition: pathra shuddhi, the cleanliness of the cooking vessels; paka shuddhi, the chef's cleanliness and mental attitude; and pachaka shuddhi, the quality of ingredients. Because "you are what you eat," Hindus believe that these three shuddhis, or purities, directly transfer to the eater.

The practical message? Eat like it's your last meal, and be thoroughly aware of every bite. In Hindu culture, eating is a ritual: a sacrifice to the Supreme, unified by the recognition that process (cooking), object (food), and individual are all inextricably connected.

That's why, for me, eating is not just about satiating a hungry stomach. It's about taking the time to prepare a varied meal and presenting it in an aesthetically pleasing way. I always eat sitting down, and try to eat unhurriedly, really tasting each bite. It's a way to ground myself in the evenings after work, a near-meditative experience.

I've noticed that we tend to collectively push the seemingly mundane tasks that are critical to survival, like eating, into the background. For many, food is a steady, often mechanized habit. Yet, it has a depth that cannot be ignored. The next time you see something yummy, turn it into your own ritual: sit down, dig in, and enjoy every bite.

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