

# Meeting 13: From úc-c<sup>h</sup>iṣṭa to pra-sādá

Food & diet in the Vedic religion

Nikhil Surya Dwibhashyam

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# Meeting agenda

- (Re)introduction to discussion group
- Today's topic præsentation
- Free discussion

# Why a Vedá discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
  - Sámhitā-s
  - Bráhmaṇa-s
  - Others?
- Vedá-s vs. Vedánta & Upaniṣád-s
  - Later monism (ádvāita) vs. earlier dualism (dvāitá)
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

# What is there to discuss?

- History & linguistics
- Metaphysics of religion
- Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
- Moral principles
- Nuances of Śrāutá ritual

# Our plans

- Weekly meetings on Sundays at 1200 EDT
  - Followed by more in-depth literature meeting at 1330 EDT
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed in depth every week
- Format:
  - Præsentation
  - Free-form discussion
- Eventually something more

# WhatsApp group

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/IXCQEkhfrcwHI7CNY8Fgat>

# Let's introduce ourselves!

- Name
- School (if student)
- How you found this group
- Briefly: background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

## Some questions to consider

- What was the spiritual significance of food? of sacrificing it?
- How did materialistic concerns about food interact with spiritual concerns? Is this dichotomy valid for the Vedic religion?
- What sort of diet did the Vedic Ārya-s have? What foods were most beloved by them?
- What food is morally prohibited in the Vedic religion?

# What is food's significance?

## ■ Central to Vedic metaphysics

- *Annādāś ca vā idam sárvam ánnam ca*: “The food-eater & the food are everything here.” (ŚB 11.1.16.19)
- *Anna-jīvanām h' idam sárvam*: “Everything here lives on food.” (ŚB 7.5.1.20)
- Eating as conquest: Índra & Vṛtrá (ŚB 1.6.3.17)
  - Food & society: attṛ vs. ádya

## ■ Sacrifice & reciprocity

- Link between the mundane & the heavenly, carried through Agní (dūtá)

# What is food's significance?

- Of course, central to human relations
  - Material realities: famine &c.
  - *Paro-gavyū́tí · á́nirāḿ ápa kṣ́ú́d<sup>h</sup>am*: “Drive away weakness & hunger to the distant plains!” (RV 8.60.20)
  - Gift-giving, generosity, enmity

*Ná sá sák<sup>h</sup>ā · yó ná dádā́ti sák<sup>h</sup>ye  
sacā-b<sup>h</sup>úve · sácāmā́nāya pitváḥ.*

He is not a friend who giveth not to his friend,  
to his comrade who pursues food.

—RV 10.117.4

# The role of food in sacrifice

- Sacrifice was literal, material, & costly.
  - Extravagance
  - Material purposes:
    - *Dehí me dádāmi te* (e.g. TS 1.8.4.1)
  - *Literally* carried up to the Gods
    - Iṣṭā-pūrtá & Svargá
    - *Svad<sup>h</sup>á ca yátra tṛptiś ca / tátra mām amṛtaṁ kṛd<sup>hi</sup>* (RV 9.113.10)
    - Harmful food in Nírṛti (AV 5.19.3, 6.63.1): blood, hair
    - *Ná'sy' āmúṣmiṁ loké 'nnaṁ kṣīyate*: “His food perishes not in yonder world.” (TS 1.7.3.4)
- Úc-c<sup>h</sup>iṣṭa: leavings
  - Important differences from prasādá!

## The food hymn: ṚV 1.187

- *Pitú* (from  $\sqrt{pi}$  “swell”): nourishment (food & drink)
  - Including *sóma*! cf. ṚV 1.187.8–9
- *Asmākam avitā b<sup>h</sup>ava*: “Be our helper!” (ṚV 1.187.2)
- *Sák<sup>h</sup>ā su-śévav ádvayāḥ*: “friend dear & guileless” (ṚV 1.187.3)
- *Tué pito mahānaam / Devānaam máno hitám*: “In thee, O food, is set the spirit of the great Gods.” (ṚV 1.187.6)
- See also the ghee hymn, ṚV 4.58.

# The Vedic Ārya-s' diet

- Grains: yáva (barley?), dhānā́, saktu, odaná
- Beans: māṣa, mudgá
- Fruit (phála): melon (urvāruká)
- Aquatic plants: ávakā
- & others, e.g. sóma, alcohol (súrā, e.g. ṚV 1.116.7)
- But chiefly, animal products
  - Honey (mád<sup>h</sup>u)
  - Dairy: milk (kṣīrá, dugdhá, páyas), curd (dad<sup>h</sup>án), butter (sarpís), ghee (ghṛtá), sour cream (mástu), mixture (āmíkṣā)
  - Meat (mās, e.g. ṚV 1.161.10): buffalo (mahiṣá, e.g. ṚV 5.29.8), goat (ajá, e.g. ṚV 1.162.4), sheep (meṣá, e.g. ṚV 10.91.14); rarely horses (e.g. ṚV 1.162.9) & kine (e.g. ṚV 10.86.14)

# Dietary restrictions in the Vedá-s

- Discussed at our 7<sup>th</sup> meeting
- Certainly no vegetarianism: this is Vedic literature 101
  - Interesting question: Is vegetarianism *compatible* with the Vedic religion?
- Beef generally not permitted (*ághnyā*), especially from cow (female)
  - But, exceptions for very special sacrifices, & only for oxen & barren (*vaśá*) kine
- Horse consumption seems also to have been very rare.
- No reference to actual cannibalism at all despite metaphors, not even in *puruṣa-medhá*
- Alcohol was generally allowed but seems to have been discouraged or prohibited in certain classes even in Vedic times.
- Other recommendations—manner/time of eating, cleanliness, &c.?

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- What food is morally prohibited in the Vedic religion?

## Some interesting papers & articles

- Ganesh, S. "The Hindu view on food & drink." *Indica Today*, 2020.
- Guha, D. S. "Food in the Vedic tradition." *India Int. Cent. Q.*, 1985.
- Lopez, C. "Food & immortality in the Veda: a gastronomic theology?" *Electron. J. Vedic Studies*, 1997.
- Smith, B. K. "Eaters, food, & social hierarchy in ancient India." *J. Am. Acad. Relig.*, 1990.