Excerpted from: R. S. Khare (1992/1993) ‘Introduction’ to his ((ed.) *The eternal food: Gastronomic ideas and experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.

Food is integral to India's cultural philosophy, since it comprehensively reflects the essence and experience of Indians at personal and collective levels. Food in India is never merely a material substance of ingestion, nor only a transactional commodity. It is synonymous with life and all its goals, including the subtlest and the highest.

…

[Such] a conception of food is conducive to producing a comprehensive semiotics and semantics of food. There is widespread common understanding that foods in India routinely grade people's caste rank, help cure ailments, and reflect innate personal dispositions and spiritual pursuits and attainments. In its sweep and depth, food in India affords the Indianist a cultural lens to see beyond such basic dichotomies of his analysis as the ideal and the practical; self, body and the other; and abstract and concrete.

…

[Foods], in such a view, become clusters of moral expressions and meanings, they also reflect the constraints of the practical world and the imperatives of personal survival, on the one hand, and spiritual liberation, on the other.

…

**Self-Evident Truth**

Food among the Hindus is "self-evident" because it is a dimension of none other than the Creator himself and is integral to the formation of cosmos. A cosmic (rather than anthropocentric) "logic" thus controls the production and circulation of food within creation, and it is a manifestation of Brahman, the ultimate Reality… It is ideal and material at once. It therefore does not admit such … dichotomies as code and substance, symbol and reality, and ideal and practical. To the Hindu, food also does not "represent" Brahman, but it is actually a part of this ultimate reality, Brahman.

In this world and beyond, the cosmic moral order (*dharma*) regulates the availability of food to all creatures. Hindus regard such a truth as self-evident, requiring no further proof and admitting no doubts. When body and self are concerned, food is considered as one of the five "sheaths" … which "clothes'' the soul (*jiva;* the other four sheaths being those of life-breath, mind, understanding, and bliss). Thus, food directly matters to the formation of a Hindu's inner being and its becoming from one birth to the next.

Defined by such a distinct cultural ideology, food is "meaningful" to the Hindu throughout his life. As we know, multiple schemes of food classification establish the rules about *appropriate* eating and feeding practices … The general message of such an approach to food and food transactions seems unmistakable: one must specify as many contexts, conditions, and qualities of foods to be eaten (or not to be eaten) as possible, because the internal states of one's being, within this world and beyond, remain intimately connected to the moral quality and condition of what one eats. Whatever one eats has manifest and hidden, and immediate and remote, consequences on one's body and being … Food in India is therefore never simply a material substance; it is never only what the eyes see. The unseen karma and dharma of the giver and receiver energize it, circulate it, and color it.

…

Thus if food expresses the cosmic truth, showing its ultimate control by the dharma-based principles of cosmic creation and maintenance, it also expresses itself with intricate social-ritual distinctions, classifications, and customary actions, releasing discourses on meaningful action concerning how food, body, and self need to be handled in each other's terms to achieve the Hindu goal of liberation. However, this picture remains incomplete unless we also note that, despite such elaborate schemes, food still retains for the Hindu unpredictable (even mysterious) consequences, and thus requires ever more vigilance in its handling.

…

Food is self-evident to the Hindu in another way. It is for the coveted pursuit of one's own liberation. Food here is the necessary "helper" until all exchanges *cease* between self (*prana*), body, and the world; even the renouncer feeds himself until the absolute Brahman is realized. Within the worldly life (*samsara*), however, food plays a double role—enlightening when approached with austerity and self-control and degrading when sought for sensual indulgence. Within the second frame, sensual food becomes a part of the hall of Maya's\* mirrors, deluding and destroying the indulgent. Unscrupulous pursuit of food and eating in daily life is known to invite diseases and shorten life. Under extreme austerities (*tapas*), on the other hand, any eating is considered a hindrance.

Such a close and intense relationship of food to self (and its spiritual welfare) makes food a subject of "heightened intersubjectivity" among the Hindus, where they routinely take into account the moral backgrounds and powers of those who handle food. Food readily absorbs the qualities of its "carriers" or "feeders" (in Hindi *khilanewale*). If a saint renders food auspicious and blessed, an ordinary person's covetousness, accumulated karmas, ignorance, and moral lapses as surely taint it. Even a saint's lapse pursues him from one birth to the next, until rectified.

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