



Cultural and Religious Influences on Dietary Practices

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Abstract

There are several cultures and religions all around the world. They have different beliefs which are incorporated in their food habits. Food is the best way to understand the different way religious beliefs are associated with diversity of culture. For example, in Jainism certain food items like root vegetables, fermented foods, even unfiltered water along with many seeded vegetables are not consumed. In Hindu culture, Bhoga (the food that is offered to the God) is prepared without onion and garlic, as they are considered tamasic food items. Foods are categorized based on their properties and effects on nature or individuals' well-being into three types: tamasic, sattvik, and rajasic. These categories relate to the three modes of material nature in spiritual terms. This paper aims to examine how spirituality can impact well-being and identify challenges in integrating these concepts into daily life.

Keywords: Diet, beliefs, cultural influence, and spirituality.

Introduction

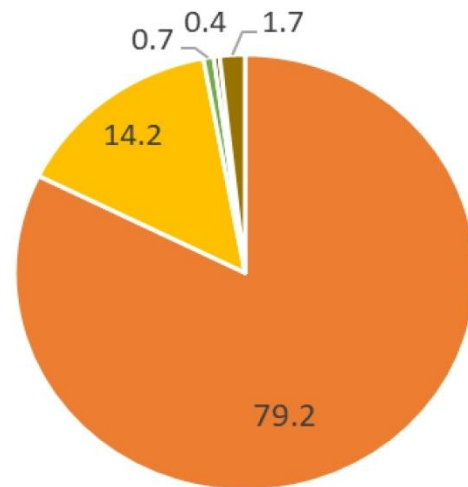
India is known for its cultural diversity as well as inclusiveness of the different religions. The diversity results in different religions practices along with various food habits. The four major religions of the world consist of mainly Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism are called as dharmic religions. Islam was first brought to India during the Umayyad Dynasty of caliphs who appointed a 17-year-old Muhammad bin Qasim to invade the Sindh (an area around the Indus River)¹. After these many other invaders like Mahmud Ghazni and Muhammad Tughlaq expanded the Muslim political dominance in India. Because of this expansion and availability of conversion to Islam many people who would want to escape from the caste system started opting Islam instead of Buddhism. Consequently, entire castes converted to Islam and Buddhism was no longer a popular choice of religion, consequently, slowly wiped out. Today, 79.2% among India's population are Hindus, Muslims make up for 14.2%, and remaining 6% includes Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains².

Due to the exposure to different religious practices and cultural beliefs, food habits are modified. Food is the best way to understand the unique way religious beliefs are associated with diversity of culture.

Dietary Patterns in Various Religions

In a study found that several religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jews, Buddhism and Jainism follow strict diet restrictions. Diet patterns are influenced by religious practices.

This section examines the influence of different religions on dietary restrictions and practices observed by their adherents³.



■ Hindus ■ Muslims ■ Buddhism ■ Jainism ■ Sikhism

Figure-1: Religious distribution of population in India.

Hinduism: Based on a article “Hinduism has different SAMPRADAYAS, a traditional school of religious teachings, based on the god they worship. Several sects emerged out of it such as Vaishnavism (worship of God Vishnu), Shaivism (worship of God Shiva), Shaktism (worship of Hindu goddess Shakti), Smarta sect, orthodox Hindu sect composed of members of the “twice born”, or initiated upper classes

(brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya)⁴. They are characterized by their allegiance to the gods and by their adherence to rules, rituals and conduct mentioned in the ancient texts.

Moreover, India is “land of festivals” due to the rich and diverse cultural heritage there are multitude of celebrations throughout the year. The festivals are deeply rooted in religious, cultural and variety of seasonal traditions enhancing the colors and joyousness of the country’s atmosphere. During the harvest season the festivals of Baisakhi, Pongal and Makar Sankranti are celebrated. Spring brings the colorful festivals of Holi, Gan-gaur, and Vishu according to Culturopedia, 2020⁵.

The importance of these festivals sets the tone of the diet and food practices especially during their celebrations. For example, on Makar Sankranti, something made with Til (Sesame seeds) and Gud (jaggery) chikki or laddoo is prepared and offered to mark the transition of the Sun and to relieve the winter. During Pongal different types of rice recipes are made and offered to the Sun god and various other farm animals as a gesture of appreciation for their bountiful harvest⁶.

Along with these there are several other festivals like; Maha-Shivaratri, Rama Navami, Krishna Janmashtami, Ganesh Chaturthi, Navaratri, Dusshera and Diwali. The purpose of these occasions are meant to realize the connection with the supreme energy and try to purify the mind and soul by refraining from certain activities like not consuming any non-veg food, alcohol, grains and beans, and only accepting several types of gluten free flour like (Rajgira, Singoda, Samoa, Tapioca, as well as nuts and fruits along with some vegetables) to observe fasting and follow a *sattvic* diet. The food that is prepared is offered to the God first and then eaten.

Some festivals occur on specific dates, while others, such as Navratri, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Diwali, are celebrated over multiple days. The significance of these is to follow certain rules and regulations in diet by refraining from meat, eggs, any kind of outside food, alcohol and other beverages. In some cases, people fast from eating grains and consume only fruits and nuts for nine days during Navaratri.

Mainly to practice self-control by learning to focus less on sense enjoyment and exercise detachment from the material things. As stated “diet plays an effective role in maintaining the balance of three modes of material nature like Satvik, Rajasic and Tamasic. The Satvik Diet signifies the finest essence and is regarded as the most wholesome nutrition for a spiritually conscious and healthy lifestyle. A Satvik diet is best for those who desire to reside in a silent, peaceful, and meditative life. Rajasic diet includes foods which aggravate ‘pitta and vata doshas’ and increase anger and restlessness.

They stimulate more fire, outward motion, creativity, aggression, and passion. Tamasic diets are those foods which increases the inner darkness and confusion. They slow metabolism and enhance depression, numbness, and inertia⁷.

Based on the qualities the table below shows a brief classification of the food items and their categories⁸.

Table-1: Classification of foods.

Satvik Food that are pure, light and sweet	Rajasic Foods that are spicy and stimulating	Tamasic Foods that are heavy and dull
Whole grains	Eggs	Red Meat, chicken, fish
Milk and ghee	Onions and Garlic	Mushrooms, Onions and garlic, winter squash
Beans and Legumes	Radishes, Eggplant, hot peppers, tomatoes, sea vegetables	Artificial Sweeteners, Alcohol and recreational drugs
Nuts and seeds	Fermented foods and yogurt	Stale, overripe or spoiled foods, fried or burned foods
Fresh vegetables	Refined sugar	Unripe fruits
Herbs and spices (lesser amounts)	Caffeinated drinks (coffee, soda), tobacco and other stimulants	Preservatives or artificial ingredients.
Natural Sweeteners (honey)	Spicy, heavily seasoned, or salted foods	Frozen or canned foods
Cold Pressed oils	Junk and fast foods	Refined grains

आहारस्त्वपिसर्वस्यत्रिविधो भवति
प्रियरू ।
यज्ञस्तपस्तथादानं तेषां भेदमिमंश
ृणु ॥ ७ ॥

आयुरसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिवि
वर्धनारू ।
रस्यारू स्निग्धारू
स्थिराहृद्या आहारारू
सात्त्विकप्रियारू ॥ ८ ॥

कटुम्ललवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्ष
विदाहिनरू ।
आहाराराजसस्येष्टादुरूखशोकामयप
रदारू ॥ ९ ॥

यातयामंगतरसंपूतिपर्युषितंचयत् ।
उच्छिष्टमपिचामेध्यं भोजनंतामसंप
रियम् ॥ १० ॥

Textbox 1 Bhagvad Geeta verses 17.7 to 17.10

According to chapter seventeen verse seven to ten of Bhagavad Gita, affirms the significance of diet and the nature of food that we should be consuming and their impact on the mental, physical and our spiritual health.

“The food each person prefers is of three kinds, according to the three modes of material nature. The same is true of sacrifices, austerities, and charity. Foods dear to those in the mode of goodness increase the duration of life, purify one’s existence, and give strength, health, happiness, and satisfaction. Such foods are juicy, fatty, wholesome, and pleasing to the heart. Foods that are too bitter, too sour, salty, hot, pungent, dry and burning are dear to those in the mode of passion, such foods cause distress, misery and disease. Food prepared more than three hours before being eaten, food that is tasteless, decomposed, and putrid, and food consisting of remnants and untouchable things is dear to those in mode of darkness⁹.”

In Hinduism there are many branches for worship some are the followers of the Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism or Smarta sect. One such popular follower of the Vaishnavism (worship of Vishnu) is International Society for Krishna consciousness (ISKCON).

It originated in the Gaudiya region of West Bengal. Therefore, their principles of food and eating are based on the ancient Hindu scriptures like Ayur-Veda mentioned in International Society for Krishna Consciousness¹⁰. In a book “The Higher Taste” compiled by ISKCON devotees explained the importance of vegetarianism and prepping of food and offering it to the Supreme creates a sublime pleasure in the heart. It also discussed; the purpose of the food is to enhance longevity and bodily strength as well as to purify the mind and consciousness. Hence, a person who is active in a spiritual life must offer the food to God before having and consequently, the offered food will eventually clear the way for spiritual progress. The section also mentions the other principles of food eating such as eating at fixed times, eating in a pleasant atmosphere, combining the food wisely, sharing the *prasada* (the food that is offered to the Lord is *Bhog* and when it is served and shared with others it is known as *prasada*) with others¹¹. Additionally, being clean, eating moderately, not drinking too much water during meals as well as not wasting food and trying an occasional fast are some other relative principles.

ISKCON philosophy follows Ekadashi fasting. Ekadashi refers to ‘the eleventh’, day in the fortnight belonging to a lunar month and the moon is believed to control the mind. Mind consists of material things. When the food is consumed it is not only taken through our mouth but through all the senses. Hence, the food contributes to making up the mind or the mind-stuff.

The importance of Ekadashi in Vaishnava devotees is immense, they believe everything is cooked for Vishnu and a Vaishnava

should not take anything eatable that is not offered to Lord Vishnu. The fasting includes not consuming any types of grains, dal, peas, beans, legumes, bean type vegetables, mustard seeds, and derivatives of these foods such as mustard oil, soyabean oil, rice bran oil etc. but rock salt, pepper and cumin. Non grain items like tapioca preparations (Sabudana khichdi) and Quinoa (a pseudocereal) are included in the long with other gluten free flours like Amaranth, water chestnut, and Samoa etc. The importance of Ekadashi is not merely fasting, but it is about remembering Lord Krishna’s glories and chanting of his holy names to advance one’s spirit¹³.

Jainism: As there are different beliefs and philosophies and sections within Hinduism they are alike in Jainism too. Among many ancient religions in India, Jainism is among them. Their history is traced back to the succession of their twenty-four teachers known as “tirthankaras” Their principal festivals include Mahamastakabhisheka festival, Mahavir Jayanti, Paryushana and Diwali. It also talks about non-violence (Ahimsa), Truthfulness (Satya), Non-Stealing (Achaurya), Celibacy (Brahmacharya) and non-possessiveness (Aparigraha) as their fundamental principles¹⁴.

Jains also believe in cycle of rebirth like Hindus and Buddhists. Additionally, in the philosophy of rebirth; determined by one’s Karma. In Jainism it is believed that bad karma is accumulated by harming living things plants and animals alike. Therefore, they obey ameticulous vegetarian dietary pattern. Moreover, they do not even consume any root vegetables because detaching the root would destroy the plant¹⁵. In research by Pew Research Center found out that about 92% of Jains are vegetarians and two by thirds of Jains around 67% abstain from eating root vegetables like potatoes, onions, garlic, carrots, and radishes as well as eggplant. Instead, they focus on including more green leafy vegetables, fruits, beans, lentils and grains in their regular diet¹⁶. Their emphasis on the purification of food before consuming to minimize the harm to living organisms consists of cautiously picking up the fresh produce, washing it thoroughly and practicing mindful cooking techniques. They also avoid consuming fermented foods or those with high likelihood of containing micro-organisms. To preserve the nutrition and natural taste simple methods like boiling and steaming are used. Another popular principle of Jainism is Anekantavada which recognizes the complexity of truth and open-mindedness and understanding different perspectives¹⁷.

As assumed in Jainism “fasting includes giving up all food and water for 1 day, 3 days or 8 days, even alternative day of the year: twice a year etc. Like Hindus Jains fast on certain days of lunar cycle when the moon changes on 8th and 14th day of each fortnight. Jains fast when the season changes and during the monsoon when fasting is thought to also offer protection against illness. During the *Paryushan Maha Parva* fasting means complete abstinence from any sort of food or drink¹⁸.”

Buddhism: Buddhism is founded by Siddhartha Gautama in the late 6th century. Buddhism attempts to extract from the life experiences and teachings of Buddha along with the “spirit or essence” of his teachings called as dhamma or dharma. The central doctrine of the Buddhism revolves around the Four Noble Truth and the Eight-Fold Path. Buddha advocated a moderate or balanced lifestyle plus cultivation of mental and emotional composure through meditation and morality¹⁹.

Based on the teachings of the Buddha Buddhism follows diet restrictions. It preaches a lacto-vegetarian diet, which excludes poultry and fish. On the contrary, some followers might consume meat and other animals if they aren't butchered for their needs. It also prohibits alcohol and other strong-smelling plants like garlic, onion, chives, leeks and shallots. The diet consists of plant products which comprises of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains, legumes and beans but may add in few animal products as well. “Fasting practices in Buddhism involves from noon to the dawn of the following day”²⁰.

Abrahamic religion: The three religions of the world to be specific Christianity, Judaism and Islam are collectively meant to be as the Abrahamic religions. As mentioned “according to tradition, Abraham (Bible refers to him as Abram and Jews, Christians and Islam all consider themselves Abraham's spiritual descendants”²¹. Islam's massive expansion in India during 12th century was by the Sufis. The Islamic religion is based on the five pillars namely, profession of faith (Shahada), Prayer (salat), Alms (zakat), fasting (sawm), and pilgrimage (hajj)²².

A study reported that there is a fundamental practice of fasting in Abrahamic religions as well. The concept of fasting is like the other religions; it's for the well-being of mind as well as soul. The effects of religious fasting in Islam during the time Ramadan includes abstaining oneself from drinking alcohol, eating as well as refrain from other sensory pleasures since sunrise till evening for around a month. The fasting tradition includes eating one generous meal after sunset and a delicate meal by daylight²³.

The Islamic dietary practices and habits revolve around their religious teachings mentioned in their religious book. These include the *halal* (lawful), *Haram* (forbidden), *Makrooh* (discouraged), *Mashbooh* (doubtful), *Dhabiha* (Slaughtered) categories of the food processing methods. Based on the beliefs in Islam “the prohibited item in Islam includes pork and pork products, meat, blood and blood products, alcohol and intoxicants, animals not slaughtered properly, carnivorous animals and birds of prey, reptiles and insects, certain marine animals, products containing *Haram* ingredients”²⁴.

The basic idea of meat consumption in Islam should involve the proper slaughtering of the animals by invoking the name of Allah (their God) and giving a proper certification of *Halal* to make it a safer choice. Also, in absence of a clear alternative one can even choose to eat outside these dietary laws to sustain

as well as opting for a vegetarian alternative. Mostly, there are not many restrictions in diet in Islam rather how the food or meat is processed. In Islamic practices, meat collection, processing, and cooking are essential during *Qurbani*, which involves making a sacrifice before consumption.

Christian Dietary Practices: Christians generally consider all types of food to be acceptable within their dietary practices. This includes a wide variety of food groups such as meats, fish and other seafood, milk and dairy products, fruits, vegetables, breads and cereals, as well as soups, sauces, fats, oils, and beverages. The Christian approach to diet is broad and inclusive, reflecting the belief that no food is forbidden for consumption.

During the time of Lenten season (February to April). The beginning of six weeks of Ash Wednesday till Good Friday Catholics do not consume meat, but fasting is a personal choice for Protestants. During Lent, people avoid meat but may eat seafood like crayfish, prawns, crab, and fish, which provide quality protein, vitamins, and fatty acids that can help reduce cardiovascular risk²⁵.

In a report it is mentioned that although for Christians, all foods are acceptable except Orthodox Christians who adhere to Vegan diet throughout fasting. Furthermore, to Lenten season, three distinct periods of fasting are observed, along with the specific days dedicated to both fasting and feasting. During these times, fish is only eaten on weekends, and there are restrictions on consuming dairy products, eggs, olive oil or any type of oil during major fasting periods. Alcohol is avoided on fasting days, though wine may be consumed on certain weekends and beer in some conventional contexts²⁶.

Judaism is another branch of the Abrahamic religions. In Jewish customs, *Kashrut* refers to the set of dietary laws that specify permissible foods and dietary practices, including how foods should be prepared and consumed. It is believed to be handed down directly from Moses. *Kosher* dietary practices include eating only animals with cloven hooves that chew cud and are slaughtered humanely, consuming only fish with fins and scales (excluding oysters, octopus, squid, etc.), and waiting one to six hours between eating milk and meat, depending on various traditions²⁷.

During the time of Jewish Sabbath, it is stated to observe moderation from work, excluding eating. It is glorified to consume three full meals. Meals are prepared in advance, and it includes *Matzo* ball soup, *Gefilte* fish, Assorted meats, *Challah* bread, side dishes include vegetables, cheese, *kugel* casserole, potatoes, noodles and fruit as well as rice/grain dishes and Desserts²⁸.

Additionally, two most important holidays in the Jewish culture are Jewish new year *Rosh Hashanah*; the beginning of the year and the day of mercy, also widely named as the day of atonement or the day of purification (*Yom Kippur*). The Jewish

new year is celebrated typically during September or early October.

The Jewish new year, known as Rosh Hashanah, is celebrated typically during September or early October and marks a time of reflection and renewal in Jewish tradition. The day of repentance is called Yom Kippur. It takes place ten days after Rosh Hashanah. It involves abstaining from food, drink, work, media, and other activities related to daily life. The traditions consist of the blowing of the Shofar, asking forgiveness and Tashlikh, food and greetings. The dietary practice dining honey dipped apples for sweet year, for representing ever continuing cycle of life; round challah, and pomegranates to mark the bright jewels of positive actions²⁹.

Challenges in Spiritual Well-Being

Many challenges exist today in following the religious dietary practices due to several factors like high competition, shrinking work-life balance, rising workloads, and changing family traditions, along with easy access to ready to cook options. Making mindful choices in shopping and meal preparation can help build a healthier future for the next generation. Aggressive marketing of unhealthy food, especially to children, makes it essential for consumers to read nutrition labels and research healthier substitutes. However, due to recent efforts such as announcement of the Year of Millets, the Zero Hunger challenge, and initiatives for food security, have raised awareness about healthy options and the importance of sustainable agriculture³⁰.

Discussion

There are many religions in the world, they are associated with several dietary practices. The takeaway from this is to understand the importance of dietary patterns and how it affects our body. In an interview offounding Acharya of ISKCON he mentioned “you are what you eat” so paying attention and being aware about what are we consuming, how are we taking and when are we eating should be the most crucial aspects of dietary practice as published in a book by Prabhupada³¹. Every religion discusses the practice of detachment from material things, self-control, and performing devotional services. But the diet the portion of earth that we consume very much affects our thoughts and actions. Eventually, our spiritual journey and growth. That’s why ancient texts have discussed so much about the types of food and diet and the ways of eating in Ayurveda and Bhagavad Gita respectively. The types of diet sattvic, rajasic, tamasic or foods that make up the main portion of daily dietary practices are linked with modes of material nature and hence when certain types of food are consumed in significant amounts in a diet, the thoughts and personality traits tend to dominate towards the characters. Hence, the importance of fasting, and abstinence from food items during festivals is advised and followed sincerely by many. As the aim of the festivals, and rituals is to connect with the supreme power and purify the soul as well as

mind and body. This can be only achieved when one thoroughly understands the purpose of food and diet consciously.

Conclusion

Healthy dietary practices not only create an advantage for an individual in a broader picture it also affects the nation’s healthcare burden and expenditure. Therefore, belonging to a land of many renowned and enlightened spiritual gurus it is very crucial that we pay close attention to our food practices in today’s busy and stressful lives. In a nutshell, India is a land of diverse cultural and religious practices with abundant knowledge about spirituality and their relationship with food, diet and eating systems as compiled in Ayurveda texts. Therefore, focusing on trying to adopt those ways can pave a way for our future generations to be able to be healthy in a holistic manner. As healthy habits shape resilient minds and sharpen intellectual abilities to sustain the challenges of the vastly evolving technologically advancing futures.

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