

A World of Nourishment
Reflections on Food in Indian Culture

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Preface, and a homage to Professor Giuliano Boccali

Today as in the past, perhaps no other great culture of humankind is so markedly characterised by traditions in the field of nutrition as that of South Asia. These traditions see manifold forms of significance interweaving, according to broadly distinctive peculiarities. In India, in fact, food has served to express religious values, philosophical positions or material power, and between norms and narration Indian literature has dedicated ample space to the subject, presenting a broad range of diverse or variously aligned positions, and evidence of their evolution over time. This book provides a collection of essays on the subject, taking a broad and varied approach ranging chronologically from Vedic antiquity to the evidence of our own day.

The preliminary versions of the essays collected here were presented at an International Seminar held at the University of Milan in 2014 (*Food and Fasting. Nourishment in Indian Literature, Art and Thought*, 18-20 September 2014). The Seminar was organised in the framework of the solid tradition that has, since 1998, seen regular collaboration in rotating Seminars on various aspects of the literature and culture of India in the Indological Centres of a number of European universities. The group organising these rotating Seminars has grown over time and now includes, apart from the University of Milan, the Charles University in Prague, the Jagiellonian University of Cracow, the University of Warsaw, the University of Calicut (India), and the University of Cagliari. As also evidenced by this volume, the Seminars see the participation of scholars from numerous other Italian and international universities, and the fruit of this collaboration is to be seen in a great many publications.¹ One of the founders and promoters of this regular series of activities, and indeed the main organiser of the Seminar, the results of which are presented here, is Professor Giuliano Boccali. After his long experience of teaching Iranian Philology at the 'Ca' Foscari' University of Venice and the University of Milan, he served as full professor in Indological studies in Venice for 10 years, and subsequently, from 1997 to 2014, in Milan. In fact, Italian and international Indology are greatly indebted to his work as a scholar and as promoter of activities. We are indeed delighted to be able to dedicate this book

1. An updated list of the Seminars derived from this collaboration and the related publications can be consulted at the website of the Indological disciplines of the University of Milan (<http://users.unimi.it/india/>), at the English page 'Seminars and events' and the Italian page 'Convegni e seminari'.

to him, with gratitude and affection, as one of the tributes that his Milanese school and the community of scholars of Indological studies wish to pay him.

The approach adopted for this collection of essays, as previously mentioned, covers a very broad chronological span, in accordance with the fields explored in the various contributions. As far as possible, they have been arranged in chronological order in terms of sources and periods examined, and in part, generally without excessive temporal divergences, in conceptual clusters. The first essays look back to Vedic antiquity. A celebrated Ṛgvedic hymn dedicated to food (*Rgveda* 1.187) comes under the essentially linguistic analysis of Massimo Vai (University of Milan), while Joanna Jurewicz (University of Warsaw) concentrates her analysis on some passages of the cosmogonies of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*. Here she applies both philological and cognitive linguistics methodologies as tools to reconstruct what she considers an accomplished expression of fully coherent philosophical thought. With Edeltraud Harzer (University of Texas at Austin, USA) we move on to analysis of the ‘formative forces that largely contributed to an ambivalence towards eating meat’, approached in particular through study of Buddhist sources and passages of the *Mahābhārata*. Again, the *Mahābhārata* comes under the scrutiny of Danielle Feller (University of Lausanne), investigating the different pictures offered by different passages of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* of the Pāṇḍavas’ diet during their exile in the forest. Fabrizia Baldissera (University of Florence), on the other hand, looks into the significance of fasting on the basis of an ample range of ancient sources, analysing its various purposes, such as a means to achieve purity, obtain a boon, or make a voluntary pledge or expiation.

A group of papers then takes us in the direction of South India. Jaroslav Vacek (Charles University in Prague) presents a vast annotated repertoire of terms for different foods and beverages in Sangam literature, where the ample references to such topics ‘appear to be another aspect of the very realistic image of everyday life offered by the Sangam Anthologies’, and which, in the words of the author, would well deserve further systematic studies. Alexander Dubyanskiy (Moscow State University), by contrast, considers the significance attributed to food in ancient Tamil literature: ‘how food enters the sphere of Tamil culture and literature, what semantics it acquires, and how it is used with poetical purposes’, while in the paper by Chettiarthodi Rajendran (University of Calicut, India), we find a survey of the discourses on food by the Vidūṣaka, the comic character, in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kerala’s traditional Sanskrit theatre. In the paper by Cinzia Pieruccini (University of Milan), a short story included in Daṇḍin’s *Daśakumāracarita* is analysed not only for the precious evidence on the food that was actually consumed in southern – Tamilian – India at the time, but also to highlight what appears to be the main purpose of the author, i.e. exaltation of the pure Brahmanical customs of that area of India to which he himself belongs.

After Sanskrit theatre and Daṇḍin, also the next two papers deal with *kāvya*, the classical courtly literature of India. Lidia Szczepanik (Jagiellonian University,

Cracow) discusses *dūtakāvya*, ‘messenger-poetry’, presenting poetical works in which the messenger is a bird, either a *haṃsa* or a *kokila*, focusing in particular on the birds’ sustenance during their journeys. Alessandro Battistini (Sapienza – University of Rome) offers ‘a complete review and translation of the passages dealing with *kāvyaṭpāka*, the “ripeness of poetry”, throughout the whole history of Sanskrit poetics’, a theory whose origins seem to lie in comparison ‘between poetry and fruit, the same idea that underlies the notion of the *rasa* “sap/aesthetic experience”’. Again, from *kāvya*, and indeed from other branches of literature and from visual arts, Hermina Cielas (Jagiellonian University, Cracow) draws her evidence, presenting a wide-ranging survey on the historical consumption of betel.

The focus is now on South Indian religious practices with the paper by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz (Jagiellonian University, Cracow), who investigates the Pāñcarātrika texts on the subject of the food offered to the deity, and in particular on its treatment after the offering itself, when ‘it contains (...) [the deity’s] energies, which are potentially dangerous’. Then Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University, Cracow) deals with some narrations – and in particular accounts drawn from adaptations of the *Bṛhatkathā* – as well as folk traditions concerning food endowed with the power to promote pregnancy.

With the paper by Danuta Stasik (University of Warsaw) we move on to a different literary and linguistic milieu. Through analysis of battle passages in Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas* the author comes to her main conclusion, namely that in these passages ‘Tulsīdās repeatedly uses food and eating imagery (...) to expound the soteriological dimension of Rām Bhakti. (...) This imagery, first of all, refers to Rām’s image as the all-devouring Time/Death and to the *bhakta*’s longing to be united with his Lord’. In turn, Stefania Cavaliere (University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’) offers a detailed study of Keśavdās’s *Vijñānagītā* (1610), a philosophical work where the theme of food ‘is used as a metaphor for any worldly temptation binding the self to the *samsāra*, but also represents the means to restrain one’s own appetites and advance spiritually and ethically towards liberation’.

The paper by David Smith (Lancaster University) presents an extensive survey of Indian representations of aphrodisiacs, starting from modern examples and going back in time: from modern advertisements to illustrated manuscripts, and on to the temples of Khajuraho and elsewhere. It is followed by an analysis of Akbar’s – at least – semi-vegetarianism by Giorgio Milanetti (Sapienza – University of Rome), where contemporary sources are discussed to highlight this attitude of the great Mughal emperor in the framework of a very elaborate and peculiar concept of kingship.

More recent Hindi literature is taken into account in the following papers. Tatiana Dubyanskaya (Jagiellonian University, Cracow) offers a critical analysis of the lively passages dedicated to the food-bazaar by Bharatendu Harishchandra in his six-act farce *Andher Nagarī Chaupaṭṭ Rājā* (lit. *The Blind/Anarchic City*

[with] *a Defunct King*, 1881). Donatella Dolcini (University of Milan) proposes a reading of *Kafan (Shroud)* by Prem Chand (1880–1936), singling out the revocation of twelve different aspects of hunger in this celebrated short story. The next three papers investigate the relationship between food and women in present-day India. Dagmar Marková (Prague), and Monika Browarczyk (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań) discuss the subject as treated in works by contemporary Hindi woman authors, while Sabrina Ciolfi (University of Milan) offers some examples of how Hindi cinema portrays the traditional women's fasts and their role as cooks and providers of food. In turn, Gautam Chakrabarti (Freie Universität Berlin) focuses on the multifaceted evolution of colonial Calcutta's cuisine in the framework of Bengali detective fiction, thus delineating 'a variegated portraiture of dietary habits and consumption-patterns of new, intercultural dishes that respond to (...) the changing demands of a rapidly-transforming society, which was still deeply tied to its civilisational ethos and cultural capital'.

The next two papers deal with recent works of Indian literature in English. Daniela Rossella (University of Potenza) analyses the different and highly metaphorical connotations of food and especially flesh, as food and as that of the human body, in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), a novel which moves between India and the USA. Alessandro Vescovi (University of Milan) proposes some reflections on this novel, too, and on Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), pointing out how food appears to highlight the tensions between globalizing modernity and the continuance of India's age-old traditional dietary habits in these two works. Finally, the paper by Maria Angelillo (University of Milan) presents some results of extensive fieldwork among the Kalbeliya caste of Rajasthan, where peculiar funeral customs include, among other ritual acts, truly 'extravagant feasting and food distribution'.

While these essays as a whole reveal an exceptionally wide-ranging approach, we also wish to point out how useful and, indeed, in many respects indispensable such a broad view is when exploring an area so rich in implications and so crucial to Indian culture. Modern and contemporary attitudes to food in India can, in fact, only be understood in a diachronic perspective. On the other hand, to understand Indian antiquity it is essential to take into account that ultimately, as indeed is the case today in the sweeping changes entailed by globalisation, we are dealing with a culture that has always shown manifold tendencies, tensions and developments occurring within the framework of constant self-analysis and reflection.

In such a complex cultural blend, the wide-ranging approach has allowed a *fil rouge* to be outlined: the relationship between food and the feminine figure is transverse to manifold papers, confirming what was announced in 1995 by Patrick Olivelle, in his famous review essay *Food in India* («Journal of Indian Philosophy» 23, 367-380), about another fundamental work on this subject, *The Eternal Food*, by R. S. Khare (SUNY Press, Albany 1992). Both scholars highlighted the importance of the women-food connection in their studies, although

they recognized that such an issue had yet to be given proper attention. In this sense the essays collected here can be considered the founding point of more in-depth research. In particular, the relationship of food to women is traced out from three different aspects, which can be summarized in the archetypical figure of Annapūrṇā (M. Browarczyk's paper) or in the modern cinematographic feminine stereotype (S. Ciolfi's paper): food and eroticism; food and fecundity; food and feminine virtuous status.

The first of these three aspects of food is hinted at in A. Dubyanskiy's and J. Vacek's papers, related to the Tamil literature and culture, and, according to L. Szczepanik, is a main concern of *dūtakāvya* texts; aphrodisiac practices also relied on the magic 'sex-food' connection as focused on by D. Smith and H. Cielas; likewise, S. Cavaliere's paper underlines the relation between desire and food, since stomach and uterus are conceived of as 'sympathetically' corresponding. The theme of food and fecundity is the focus of both L. Sudyka's essay with its particular reference to mango fruits and also A. Dubyanskiy's paper; D. Dolcini connects it to the maternal role, in which the starving condition results from the death of the wife-mother.

However, these two aspects of the 'women-food' relationship are frequently interwoven with the third one, that is food and the feminine virtuous status: aphrodisiac substances can only be handled by 'good and auspicious' women (see D. Smith, H. Cielas and S. Cavaliere), and likewise, feminine fecundity is the most significant trait of the virtuous status of women. Thus, on the one hand, such a *subhaga* characteristic makes a woman 'the ideal one', worthy of being married and becoming a 'wife', as explained in C. Pieruccini's paper; on the other hand, the virtual good wife, endowed with 'auspicious signs', is depicted as equivalent to the devoted worshipper, in a Bhaktic religious perspective, as in M. Czerniak-Drożdżowicz's paper. In the light of this devotional tendency, some of D. Feller's and E. Harzer's observations could be even more interesting: the fact that it is especially women who practice vegetarianism, as opposed to meat-eating warrior customs.

Finally, the same 'women-food' relationship in its manifold aspects is dealt with in a modern critical key in the last papers, with particular reference to Anglo-Indian literature: here the representation of woman's condition assumes a more pregnant meaning, merely in consideration of the traditional feminine role in relation to food outlined above.

We hope that these partially sketched remarks will also be 'good' and 'auspicious' for any research yet to come.

Cinzia Pieruccini, Paola M. Rossi