

## **Hindu Food Restrictions**

### **For The Sage Encyclopedia of Food Issues (2015)**

India is the birth place of the religion of Hinduism, and has diverse regional cuisines centered on dairy, legumes, produce and cereals. In India and Hinduism, food is more than just a tool for survival. It has cultural meaning relating to purity, ritual, kinship and social stratification. As a result, Hinduism offers many dietary restrictions that followers can chose to abide by. Modern Indian cuisine has been changing to include more meat and a dining out culture for middle class families. But a majority of Indians still practice Hinduism which has had an undeniable impact on the eating habits of its followers. This entry will concentrate on Hindu dietary restrictions by first, examining how Hindu asceticism affects diets, then by looking at Hindu diets for special life events, and finally, exploring the modern Hindu diet in India and abroad.

#### **Hinduism Basics**

It has been said that Hinduism is not a single religion, but rather a compilation of various values and practices with endless variations based on Vedic traditions (which include the oldest scriptures of Hinduism). Important principles of the religion include non violence and compassion towards all humans and animals, that the soul is eternal, and karma (the moral law of cause and effect). Hinduism is very tolerant of other schools of thought, and so followers are able to pick which parts of the religion to incorporate into their lives, including dietary restrictions.

There are many Gods available for worship within Hinduism, each one representing a certain aspect of God, and some of which appear in many different embodiments. For example, there

is *Brahma* the creator, who is responsible for the creation of everything and one on earth, as well as *Vishnu* the preserver, and *Shiva* the destroyer. These three Gods are quite significant in Hinduism, but many more exist, such as Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, recognized by his elephant head. Hindus decide what to include in their belief systems as well as which Gods to worship based on their own interpretations of Hindu Holy Scriptures, including the *Vedas*, *Dharmasastras*, *Upanishads & Puranas*, as well as epics like *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*.

Hindus use a caste system with a classification that determines a person's career and social interactions (especially around meal time). In ancient times, it was believed that this social class would never change throughout a lifetime. Today, only orthodox Hindus abide strictly by the rules of the caste system. The highest caste is the Brahmin, or religious class, then the Kshatriyas or the warrior class, then Vaisyas as the agricultural class, and finally the Sudras, or the peasant class that takes care of the upper classes.

### **Hindu Asceticism and Diet**

Food in India is more than a biological need for survival; it is also a cultural construct, and as a result, every part of the Indian relationship with food has different meaning. Whether they are growing food, cooking, selling it or eating, it represents ideas of ritual, purity, kinship, personal ethics and social hierarchy. Food in India is linked to physical and spiritual health, and so Hinduism offers different levels of ascetic practice to achieve the best of both.

### **Fasts and Feasts**

*Personal Life*

Fasting, or refraining from some or all types of food or drink (especially for religious observance), is an important aspect to Hinduism that many follow for a variety of reasons and in a range of ways. Some Hindus fast as a way to worship through self-sacrifice, as a method of physical cleansing, or to ask a favor of God. Other use fasting to make a statement, like when spiritual and political leader Mahatma Gandhi fasted to encourage the British to resolve moral dilemmas in India. When a person in the family passes away, the regular eating and cooking patterns of the household are changed for ten to thirteen days. This results in different forms of fasting, like having one meal a day, meat-eating families going vegetarian, only taking in water, etc. The fast is ended with a feast for family and friends, and some serve a special vegetarian meal every year on the anniversary of the death.

### *Holidays*

Religious-based holidays in India are a time when fasting or feasting is done on a community level. For example, *Shivaratri* (also known as *Mahashivaratri*) is observed in February or March to celebrate Lord *Shiva*, and fasting is common, for as little as 24 hours and as long as 21 days.

*Janmashtami* is a festival that commemorates the birthday of *Krishna*, said to be one of the forms of Lord *Vishnu*. The holiday is celebrated with a feast including *Krishna's* favorite foods: milk, *ghee* and yogurt, and sweets like *shrikand* (yogurt cardamom pudding).

### **The Gods and Food**

#### *Foods with Religious Significance*

Certain foods carry religious significance in Hinduism. Rice is regularly served at most temples, and is used symbolically during wedding ceremonies as a sign of past and future wealth and prosperity. *Ghee* (or clarified butter) is used in everything from cooking to making candles for

Hindu services. Because it is considered “pure”, *ghee* is used in many religious ceremonies.

Different deities have favorite foods that are often included in religious ceremonies as an offering. For example, Lord Ganesha was known to love mangoes and modaka, a sweet dumpling, so both can be found in ceremonies for Ganesha.

### *Feeding the Gods*

One of the regular duties of a Hindu is to offer food to the gods before eating. The food being offered to the gods is called *prasad*, and this happens during *puja*, or a Hindu prayer service, both at home and in temples. Fruit, nuts and sweets are common *prasad* items, and are traditionally placed in front of a picture or statue of a god while praying over it. Afterward, the food is considered blessed, and is fed to worshippers as a way to cleanse their spirit and mind.

### **Food Types**

#### *Pure vs. Polluted Food*

A common saying in Hinduism is “Purity of thought depends on purity of food.” As such, foods can either be labeled “pure” or “polluted”, based on who made the food, what is being eaten, and with whom. Kitchens are considered a holy place that must be kept pure, and the cook of the family (typically the eldest female) must bathe first, and then cook by sight and smell rather than taste (tasting while cooking = polluting).

Hospitality is very important to Hindus, and is considered a very virtuous trait. Being a gracious host is a religious duty, and the entire family pitches in by giving up beds to visiting guests, and serving delicious food and plenty of tea, snacks and sweets. Traditional Hindu rules still followed by Orthodox Hindus can complicate matters. One can only consume food made by an equal or higher caste, and a Brahmin cannot accept any food from lower castes and must eat

alone. A higher caste may serve a lower caste, but may not dine with them to avoid pollution.

These laws grew out of hygienic concerns, but eventually grew to represent social stratification.

### *Pukka and Kaccha Foods*

There are a few foods that are acceptable to pass from different castes, and those foods are known as pukka. Pukka foods are made by frying or basting in *ghee*, a pure substance, and so many fried breads and sweets made with ghee are shared with the community at temple and festivals. Foods meant just for the family include ones that are boiled or roasted (rice, vegetables, dal) are called kaccha, and they are not considered safe to pass between different castes.

### *Food Balance*

Another way Hindus classify foods is based on their effect on the body and aiming to achieve a good balance between different types of foods. There are three categories: Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic. Sattvic foods are considered to be easily digestible, and bring clarity and perception. These foods include mango, pomegranates, rice, tapioca, sweet potato, lentils, milk, and yogurt. Rajasic foods are hot, spicy or salty and stimulants, but in large amounts agitate the mind, causing anger. These foods include apples, bananas, corn, potatoes, tamarind, pickles and chutneys, sour cream, fish and chicken. Tamasic foods are considered depressing and sleep-inducing in large amounts. These foods include dark meat, cheese, wheat, brown rice, garlic, onion, avocado, watermelon, and plums.

### **Vegetarians**

Although many Hindus are vegetarians, vegetarianism is not a rule of Hinduism. It does say that avoiding meat is considered virtuous, but there are many other reasons why Hindus chose to

avoid meat. Meat is very expensive, so even the families that do eat meat consume it sporadically. Higher castes like Brahmins tend to be vegetarians, as do worshippers of Vishnu. Some avoid meat for health reasons, while others do it for animal welfare concerns. The cow is not worshipped by Hinduism, but is respected as a hard worker, and so it is illegal to slaughter cows in most of the country.

### **Life Event Diets**

#### **Marriage**

Food is incredibly important to marriage ceremonies. Sweets can be feed between the two families as a symbol of connecting. The actual content of the meal varies based on region and caste, but all start with rice and end with sweets. For example, South Indian meals will have *sambars* (vegetable stew) and *rasams* (spicy soup with lentils and tamarind juice), while West Bengali meals will include more fish and meat dishes. Almost all meals are served on traditional fresh banana leaves, and guests eat with their hands.

#### **Pregnancy**

Food served to women during pregnancy is all about balancing the body out. Pregnancy is considered a “hot” condition, so “hot” foods like meat, eggs, bananas, and mangoes are avoided, while “cool” foods featuring milk products are better because they are thought to give a woman more strength. In North India, a woman five months along is fed dried dates, coconut, and sweets like laddoos from her parents.

#### **Festivals**

Festivals in India are plentiful and are based around religious events, history, or agriculture.

*Makar Sankranti*

This festival celebrates the sun's journey to the northern hemisphere. Traditional activities include Hindus bathing in rivers, giving gifts to the poor and handing out sweets, like fresh roasted corn and sweets like jalebi, or deep fried chickpea batter soaked in sugar syrup, and halwas, or sweets made from shredded vegetables, ghee and sugar.

## **The Modern Hindu Diet**

### **In India**

The restaurant culture in India is relatively new, and it is changing the future of Hindu dining. Previously, dining out was considered uncleanly, and to this day, many orthodox Hindus refrain from doing so. But as the Indian middle class has been growing, many American fast food restaurants have come into the country, tempting younger generations to dine out and eat a more Western diet. The traditional rules of Hindu diets have relaxed over the generations, with different castes dining together, families eating meat, and less importance on pure vs. polluted foods. Only orthodox Hindus strictly follow all of the traditional Hindu dietary restrictions.

### **Around the World**

When Hindu immigrants move abroad, especially to the United States, they are forced to practice a more inclusive form of Hinduism. To restrict eating between castes would make for very small communities of Hindus, and so the few temples that exist in the new country tend to discard their sectarian Hindu beliefs to celebrate the many different religious and community needs. Indian grocery stores pop up in the new countries close to Hindu communities, and remain a link to their diet in India. Diet changes in the new country vary from person to person, with some people wishing to completely assimilate, some wishing to completely reject a new culture, and others making some changes and adapting their traditions. It is common for Hindu

immigrants to eat only Indian food at home, but more Western food while at work. Some continue to be vegetarians, while others branch out to experience meat. While cooking in India is mainly a woman's job, male immigrants tend to learn how to cook with tips from relatives back in India, especially males without a female Indian partner.

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***See Also:*** *Ayurveda and Diet; Cultural Identity and Food; Ethnic Grocery Stores; Vegetarianism.*

### **Further Readings:**

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