

Hindu Dietary Laws

For The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America, 2nd edition

The religion of Hinduism was created in India, a country with distinct regional cuisines focused on cereals, legumes, some fruits and vegetables and a plethora of dairy. The face of modern Indian cuisine has been changing; more people eat meat and middle class families regularly dine out at restaurants and fast food places. But a majority of Indians still practice Hinduism, and this religion has had an undeniable impact on the eating habits of its followers.

Religion Basics. Hinduism is a diverse religion that represents a mixture of customs and beliefs, with a history stretching back to 3,000 years before Christ. One goal of Hinduism is to help individuals find a path that allows their souls to become one with God, often called the “Ultimate Being”. Nonviolence and compassion towards other, including animals, is another important goal of Hinduism. The religion is tolerant of many different schools of thought, which allows followers to adapt the religion to their own needs, and this includes eating habits.

Hindus have a variety of gods and goddesses they can choose to worship, some which appear in multiple incarnations, others with wives and children that are also worshiped. Three significant gods are *Brahma* the creator, *Vishnu* the preserver, and *Shiva* the destroyer. Hindus base their belief system off of a selection of holy scriptures, the most important of which is known as the *Vedas*, written between 1500 and 900 B.C. Other important scriptures include *Dharmasastras*, *Upanishads*, and *Puranas*, and the epics, *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*.

The caste system is a part of Hindu culture that is based on the belief that an individual is born into a certain social class where they stay for their entire life. This caste classification would traditionally determine one’s occupation in life and social interactions (including meal time), but today, only orthodox Hindus follow the rules of the caste system strictly. The highest caste is known as the *Brahmins* or the religious caste. The *Kshatriyas* come next as the warrior caste, and then the *Vaisyas* as the trade and agricultural caste, followed by the *Sudras*, whose job it is to serve the upper three castes.

Food and Religion. Certain foods carry a 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* (clarified butter) is considered to be a very pure substance, which makes it ideal for religious ceremonies. It is used to cook food and to make candles for Hindu services. Mangoes are also considered auspicious, and are the favorite fruit of the deity *Ganesha*, remover of all obstacles.

Sharing with the Gods. All of the scriptures offer food and dietary suggestions that have been followed by Hindus for years. One suggestion is that all food should be sacrificed to the gods before consuming, and that food is called *prasad*. While performing *puja* (Hindu temple service), the *prasad* offered to the gods can range from *ghee* to yogurt to fruit, nuts or sweets. Once the *puja* is over, the *prasad* is fed to worshippers, who eat to purify their mind and spirit.

Pure vs. Polluted food. Other scriptures focus on additional dietary laws. The *Atharva Veda*, for example, discusses the hot and cold balance of food on the body (as does any Ayurvedic medical text), and in *Upanishads*, it notes “Purity of thoughts depends on the purity of food.” The idea of food being pure or polluted is a common concept in Hinduism, where the quality of food one eats and with whom one dines is an important determinant of character.

Family caste determines pure and polluted foods by stating who should cook the food, what they should cook and who to eat with. Among orthodox Hindus, eaters can accept food made by people of the same caste or higher, or but not from a lower caste, which is why many professional cooks are *Brahmins*. The kitchen is considered a holy place, and everything that takes place in it must be equally pure. In most families, the eldest female cooks meals after bathing and dressing in fresh clothing. Food is cooked based on sight and smell, not taste. Indian cooks who taste their food while cooking pollute it with their saliva.

Only certain foods are acceptable to pass from caste to caste, such as raw foods. North Indian Hindus base what food is acceptable to give away on two concepts: *kutcha* foods and *pukka* foods. *Kutcha* foods are foods that are traditionally roasted or boiled, such as rice, foods without *ghee*, and these are not given away. *Pukka* foods are traditionally cooked in *ghee*, like fried breads, various sweets, etc. The *ghee* makes the food pure to all castes, so *pukka* foods are often given away at community festivals, feasts and temples.

Pure and polluted food becomes a tricky subject when it comes to hosting guests. Hospitality is of the utmost importance to a Hindu household, no matter how wealthy or poor. Hosts accept guests with love and generosity because it is considered a virtue. When it comes to dining companions, it is acceptable to dine with people of equal caste or higher. Hosts may serve a lower caste person food, but they would not dine with them. *Brahmins* cannot accept food from other castes, and they must also eat alone, secluded from the impurity of lower castes.

Vegetarianism. Many Hindu scriptures talk about how avoiding meat is considered virtuous, but vegetarianism is not a religious rule. Many Hindus choose to be vegetarians because it supports other Hindu beliefs of nonviolence and equality. Hindu vegetarians traditionally avoid eating meat, poultry, fish and eggs, and orthodox Hindus will additionally avoid eating onions, garlic, mushrooms, alcohol, tea and coffee.

Brahmins are vegetarians, but regional variations have always existed. For example, many Hindus in south India refer to fish as “fruit of the sea”, and vegetarians consume fish regularly. *Kshatriyas* tend to eat meat, and *Vaisyas* (many of whom were traditionally farmers) eat meat if locally acceptable. The bottom class, *Sudras*, eat meat when they can afford it (meat is expensive in India, so even meat-eating households will not eat it every day).

Among the castes that regularly eat meat, beef is restricted because scriptures state that cows are to be worshiped as a “Universal Mother”. In Hindu culture, cows are a symbol of life whose hard work in the field and ability to produce useful products like dairy and dung has been long respected. Slaughtering a cow is illegal in almost all of India, and more than 200 million cows roam freely around towns and cities.

Feasting and Fasting. The concepts of feasting and fasting are very common in Hinduism. Many festivals and religious holidays are celebrated by feasting on specific foods or fasting, that is, avoiding food consumption. However, fasting can extend beyond a holiday, and the variety of reasons Hindus fast can range from material (some women fast to maintain beauty) to spiritually deep (to worship through sacrifice, to bless the family).

There are a large variety of fasting methods- some people fast on a specific day of the week or a holiday. Some people avoid all food except water, others will restrict how often or what they eat. *Kutcha* foods, which tend to be boiled and basic, are acceptable, while others will follow the rules of *phalahar* meal, which abstains from *anna*, foods that are grown using special equipment (rice, wheat, lentils, etc.), and allows *phala* foods, or foods grown without special equipment, like fruit, vegetables and breads made from alternative flours. One of the most famous cases of Hindu fasting occurred when Mahatma Gandhi, a spiritual and political leader, used fasting as a passive way to forward his ideas as a social reformer in India in the early to mid 1900s.

Special Occasion Foods. Hindus enjoy their many festivals, using them to celebrate gods, a new harvest season or historical events. Some festivals are celebrated throughout the country, and others are more regional events, the focus of all being community and food.

Festivals. *Makar Sankranti* (known as *Lohri* in the north) is a festival that celebrates the coldest day of winter (mid-January) as the sun moves to the north. Those who can take a bath in a nearby river, share gifts with the less fortunate and hand out sweets in addition to praying. Some traditional sweets include *revri*, a flat round sweet made of sesame seeds and *jaggery* (a dark sugar derived from palms); *jalebis* (chickpea batter deep fried and soaked in a sugar syrup); and *halwa*, a fudge-like sweet made from shredded vegetables, sugar and *ghee*.

Shivaratri (also known as *Mahashivaratri*) is observed in February or March to celebrate Lord *Shiva*. Instead of food consumption marking this holiday, fasting is more common, with people fasting as little as 24 hours and as long as 21 days. A *lingam*, or oval-shaped stone, is worshiped as a symbol of *Shiva*, and bathed in cooling foods to balance out *Shiva*'s hot temper. This includes water, milk, honey, yogurt and *ghee*.

Holi is a popular holiday in mid-March that is said to represent spring, *Shiva*'s wedding procession and the mischievous antics of *Krishna* as a child. Bonfires are lit to clean the air of evil, and children throw colored powders and paints onto their friends and family. Special foods served include *puranpoli* in the West, a flat bread stuffed with a sweetened mix of lentils, nuts and other fillings. Alcohol is allowed at *Holi*, as is *thandai*, an intoxicating drink made from the dried leaves of the hemp plant, almonds and sugar.

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 *Krishna*'s favorite foods, milk, *ghee* and yogurt. Special foods for this holiday are sweets like *shrikand* (yogurt cardamom pudding) and *kheer*, a special thick rice pudding.

Ganesh Chaturthi focuses on the birthday of *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed son of Lord *Shiva* and wife *Parvati*. *Ganesha* is the remover of all obstacles, and many worship him before going

into an important project. Models and pictures of *Ganesha* are displayed for ten days before being washed in water. The holiday is celebrated with *Ganesha*'s favorite sweet, *modaka*, a sweetened dumpling made with coconut and *jaggery*.

Diwali is known as the festival of light, and happens anytime from mid-October to mid-November to celebrate *Rama*'s return from 14 years of exile after he defeated evil *Ravana* in the epic, *The Ramayana*. Colorful light bulbs are hung to decorate houses, and friends and family exchange sweets and gifts. Even farmers will celebrate by feeding their cows sweets for the holiday.

Marriage, Pregnancy and Death. When it comes to wedding celebrations, nothing is more important to Hindu ceremonies than the food served at the reception. The actual content of the meal varies based on region and caste, but all start with rice and end with sweets. *Brahmins* and orthodox Hindus serve vegetarian meals, South Indian meals will have *sambars* (vegetable stew) and *rasams* (spicy soup with lentils and tamarind juice), where as West Bengali meals will include more fish and meat dishes. Almost all the meals are served on traditional fresh banana leaves, and guests eat with their hands.

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.

When a family member passes away, all cooking and eating stops in a household until a cremation takes place. Strict eating patterns are followed for ten to thirteen days, with orthodox Hindus fasting for all but one meal a day, and some meat-eating families going vegetarian. On the 13th day after death, when deceased is said to move on, family and friends break the fast with a feast.

Bibliography

Achaya, K.T. *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Bahador, Om Lata. *The Book of Hindu Festivals and Ceremonies* New Dehli: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 1997.

Barer-Stein, Thelma. "Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan" In *You Eat What You Are: People, Culture and Food Traditions*, pp 201-213. Toronto: Firefly Books, 1999.

Kilara, Arun and K.K. Iya. "Food and Dietary Habits of the Hindu" *Food Technology* (October 1992): 94-104.

Philip, Thangam. "Hindu Festivals" in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture* edited by Solomon H. Katz, pp 200-202, New York: Scribner/Thomson Gale, 2003.

Philip, Thangam. "Hinduism" in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture* edited by Solomon H. Katz, pp 202-203, New York: Scribner/Thomson Gale, 2003.

Philip, Thangam. "India, Northern" in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture* edited by Solomon H. Katz, pp 252-258, New York: Scribner/Thomson Gale, 2003.

Taylor-Sen, Colleen. *Food Culture in India* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Leena Trivedi-Grenier