

## Food, Faith and Philosophy: An Exploration of Vedic Study

Dr. Sunita A Sangle, Mrs. Awanti S Hodlur

Bharati Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University) Institute of Hotel Management and Catering  
Technology, Pune 411043. sunita.sangle@bharatividyaapeeth.edu awanti.hodlur@bharatividyaapeeth.edu

---

### Abstract

*The culinary traditions of India have a deep-rooted history that can be traced back to the Vedic period. Vedas, the foundational scriptures of Hindu philosophy provide profound insights into the significance of food in ancient Indian society.*

*This research paper explores the foundational role of food in Vedic literature and its lasting influence on Indian dietary culture. Drawing upon the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda, the study examines how food was perceived not merely as sustenance but as a sacred entity interwoven with religion, health, ethics, and cosmic order. Through hymns, rituals, and sacrificial offerings, the Vedas emphasize the divine nature of food (Anna Brahma), its ethical consumption, and its use in yajnas as a bridge between humans and the divine. The paper also investigates the early roots of Ayurveda and the classification of food into sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic categories, highlighting the spiritual and physiological impact of diet.*

*By exploring textual references and scholarly interpretations, this study reveals how Vedic food philosophy shaped ancient Indian agricultural practices, health systems, and ritual traditions, and continues to inform modern perspectives on holistic nutrition, environmental respect, and ethical eating.*

**Key words:** Vedic food tradition, Ancient Indian agriculture, Anna Brahma, food rituals, Soma, Yajna, Ayurveda, Satvic diet.

### Introduction

Food has been an integral part of Indian culture, not only as a source of nourishment but also as a medium for spiritual and philosophical expression. The origins of Indian dietary traditions can be traced back to the Vedas. These sacred texts - Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda offer detailed insights into the role of food in daily life, religious rituals, and health through hymns and rituals.

The Vedas, India's oldest scriptures, contain references to various food items, agricultural techniques, and dietary principles that played a crucial role in shaping the dietary habits of early Indian societies. As noted by Guha (1985), food was central to both domestic life and ritualistic practices, forming a link between the material and spiritual worlds. This paper aims to trace how the philosophies and practices concerning food in the Vedas laid the foundation for Indian food.

### Food in Vedic Texts

The four Vedas provide a wealth of information about the dietary habits of ancient Indians.

A.B. Keith (1925) explains that food in the Vedic period was not just for sustenance but also a tool for religious practice

#### 1. Rigveda

The Rigveda, the oldest of the four Vedas, contains numerous hymns that reference food, agriculture, and sustenance, highlighting their significance in early Vedic society.

According to Y. Athanassakis (2024) early Vedic society primarily followed a plant-based diet, with grains such as barley, wheat, and rice being staple foods. The importance of agriculture is also highlighted in hymns that praise the Gods role in providing abundant harvest and invoked divine blessings for rain and soil fertility.

Milk and dairy products such as ghee, curd, and butter played a crucial role in Vedic rituals and daily consumption. Ghee, in particular, was used extensively in fire sacrifices (yajnas) as an offering to deities. Honey (madhu) was considered a sacred and medicinal food, often used in offerings and consumed for its health benefits. Meat consumption was also prevalent, with references to the sacrifice of animals such as cows, goats, and horses in yajnas (sacrificial rituals). However, Sen (2014) points out, the Vedic attitude toward meat consumption evolved over time, with later texts emphasizing vegetarianism as part of spiritual purity. The Rigveda repeatedly emphasizes that

food is a sacred gift from the gods, meant to be consumed with gratitude and shared among all beings.

### **Rigveda (1.187.10)**

अन्नं बहु कुर्यात्।

This shloka expresses the Vedic wish for prosperity and food sufficiency, highlighting agriculture's importance in human life.

### **Rigveda (10.117.6)**

शतहस्त समयहयर सहस्रहस्त संककर। दशहस्तस्य दयतयरं सतं कुलस्य पोषकः ॥

This verse emphasizes generosity and the duty to share food and resources. It reflects the Vedic principle that food should not be hoarded but distributed to sustain society.

## **2. Yajurveda**

The Yajurveda is primarily a compilation of sacrificial formulas (yajnas) used in Vedic rituals. It provides detailed instructions on performing yajnas (sacrificial rites) and highlights the significance of offerings, including food. Zimmer5 (1946) highlights the symbolic potency of ritual offerings, where food becomes a medium of cosmic communication. Yajurveda contains references to food-related rituals, including the correct way to sit for a meal, making offerings before eating, and purifying food and utensils with water. These practices were considered essential to maintaining physical, spiritual, and cosmic harmony.

Acharya, K.T.6 (1998) mentions that ritualistically food must not be eaten when standing, moving, lying down or when getting up from the lap. Food is to be consumed sitting on the ground only by facing either to the east or north direction. It was a practice to offer morsels of the meal (Naivedya) to the fire as a means of prayers to the deities and ancestors. It was customary to remove part of the food to be offered to bramhins, serpents, dogs and insects. Food for crows was placed outside as it was believed that will carry the message to the world of the spirits.

Another important ritual related to food consumption was sprinkling of water on the banana leaf and also around the eating area for purification (achamana). M. Swaminathan7 (2016) explores the sanskaras, or traditional rites of passage, which include dietary practices aimed at nurturing physical and cognitive development. For example, Annaprashana, the ritual of introducing solid food to an infant, highlights the belief that nutrition is deeply intertwined with spiritual and intellectual growth.

The Yajurveda instructs that food should be consumed with respect, ensuring it is pure and obtained through righteous means. It warns against consuming impure or tamasic (harmful) food, which can lead to physical ailments and spiritual degradation. Food is seen as link between humans, nature and Gods.

### **Yajurveda 1.22**

अकतक : देवो भव।

This teaching emphasizes that serving food to guests, sages, and the needy is a sacred duty. The idea of Annadaanam (donating food) is rooted in this principle. In Vedic tradition, feeding others is considered a noble act. The Yajurveda encourages hospitality and sharing food before eating oneself.

### **Yajurveda 11.83**

अन्नं ब्रह्म, अन्नं कवृषुः, अन्नं कशवः ।

This verse signifies that food is divine and must be treated with reverence. Eating food is not just a physical act but a spiritual one. It represents creation (Brahma), sustenance (Vishnu), and dissolution (Shiva), illustrating the spiritual dimension of nourishment in Vedic philosophy.

The Yajurveda also discusses appropriate and inappropriate food choices, advocating a sattvic (pure) diet. The Yajurveda reflects on ethical eating practices, including the significance of nonviolence (ahimsa). While early Vedic rituals included animal sacrifices, later Vedic texts, including the Yajurveda, began emphasizing vegetarianism as a path to spiritual purity.

## **3. Samaveda**

The Samaveda, is a collection of hymns derived from the Rigveda, and focuses on musical chants and rituals. While

it does not contain extensive original content on food like the Yajurveda or Atharvaveda, it emphasizes the ritualistic and devotional aspects of food offerings, especially through melodic praise of Soma, ghee, milk, and grains. The Samaveda also mentions different methods of food preparation, emphasizing the communal aspect of eating and ritual offerings. The central role of food in rituals is reflected in the chants offered to deities like Indra, Agni, and Soma.

#### Samaveda 179.1

त्वं नो अग्ने वसुकभः सचस्वेकह रर्क पृक वं वयजसयतौ।

This verse associates fire (Agni), an essential element of Vedic rituals, with the prosperity and abundance of food. It signifies the belief that fire sacrifices (yajnas) bring agricultural fertility and sustenance.

#### Samaveda 113.3

सोमः पुनयनः कलशेषु कतष्टकत कवक्षय वसूकन कजघ्नसे सुतः ।

Soma, a sacred drink mentioned frequently in the Vedas, was consumed during rituals and believed to bestow vitality and divine energy. It symbolized both spiritual and physical nourishment.

#### Samaveda 374.5

इमं र्जं संवननं सजन्यं दकिक्यं विार् जमयनयर्।

This verse highlights the use of food, particularly dairy (dadhi - curd or yogurt) and grains, in Vedic rituals. Such offerings were believed to invoke divine favor and agricultural abundance.

#### Samaveda 271.2

आ नो कमत्रयवरुणय चन्द्रवणं घृतपुषं स्विर्य मयदध्वम्।

This verse invokes Mitra and Varuna, requesting food that is pure and rich, signifying the Vedic belief that divine blessings ensure a plentiful and nourishing diet.

#### Samaveda 248.3

प्रणो देवयनय कमहसे र्जत्रः शृण्वन्तु वः सुष्टुक्तवागित्यं नो।

This verse connects food with divine harmony, emphasizing that sacrifices involving grains, milk, and butter were essential in maintaining cosmic balance and social prosperity.

### 4. Atharvaveda

The Atharvaveda, the fourth and most diverse of the Vedas, contains hymns and incantations that address various aspects of life, including health, medicine, prosperity, and daily sustenance. It contains prayers, hymns, and rituals related to food production, nourishment, fertility, digestion, and protection of crops and livestock—making it the most practical Veda in terms of food and health.

The Atharvaveda contains references to the medicinal properties of food, marking the early influence of Ayurveda. It discusses the health benefits of various herbs, spices, and grains, laying the foundation for India's ancient system of holistic healing. According to Olivelle<sup>8</sup> (1995), these early medical ideas contributed to later Ayurvedic texts, where food was prescribed based on an individual's dosha (body constitution). The Atharvaveda considers food (anna) to be the fundamental source of life energy (prana). It emphasizes that proper nourishment leads to strength, longevity, and prosperity.

#### Atharvaveda 7.109.1

अन्नं ब्रह्म, अन्नं ज वनस्य मूलम्।

“Food is Brahma (the Supreme Being), and it is the root of life.”

This verse conveys that food is not just a physical necessity but a spiritual force. Recognizing food as divine encourages mindful and ethical eating.

The Taittiriya Upanishad, as interpreted by Radhakrishnan<sup>9</sup> (1953), reinforces the idea that food is not only a physical necessity but a manifestation of Brahman.”

The Atharvaveda promotes ethical food consumption, advocating for moderation and respect for all living beings. It

warns against overindulgence and highlights the principle of ahimsa (nonviolence) in dietary choices.

#### **Atharvaveda 3.24.5**

अन्नं न परचक्ष त।

This verse teaches reverence for food, discouraging waste and encouraging gratitude for nourishment. In Vedic tradition, food is regarded as sacred, and treating it with respect ensures well-being and abundance.

The Atharvaveda acknowledges the importance of agriculture and the need for an abundant food supply. It contains prayers for fertile land, timely rains, and healthy crops.

#### **Atharvaveda 5.29.6**

अन्नं कबभक्ता स कबभक्ता पृक वं च।

This verse highlights the interconnection between human actions and nature. Proper agricultural and dietary practices not only sustain individuals but also contribute to the well-being of the environment. The Atharvaveda praises milk, ghee, grains, and medicinal plants for their nourishing and healing properties. It mentions that consuming pure and sattvic foods enhances physical strength and spiritual clarity.

#### **Atharvaveda 6.142.3**

मयतय भूकमः पुत्रोऽहम् पृक व्यः ।

This verse reflects the Vedic philosophy of environmental respect and sustainability. Since the Earth provides food, it is considered a motherly figure, and humans must protect and nurture it in return.

The Atharvaveda contains hymns that connect food with health and disease prevention. It emphasizes the consumption of nutritious food for physical and mental well-being.

#### **Atharvaveda 8.2.25**

न कह कहंसय परमं मियम्।

This verse suggests that food should be obtained and consumed in a way that minimizes harm.

This idea later influenced vegetarianism in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

#### **Atharvaveda 12.3.40**

नि सदयसुप्रदय।

Cows were highly valued in Vedic society for their milk, which was used in rituals and daily sustenance. The verse signifies the importance of dairy in Vedic diets and its role in promoting health.

Food in the Atharvaveda is often associated with divine grace. It is considered a sacred gift that must be consumed with gratitude and offered in rituals for spiritual benefits.

#### **The Ayurveda Connection: Food as Medicine**

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, is closely linked to Vedic food traditions. S. Hegde, L.P. Nair, and H. Chandran<sup>10</sup> (2018) discuss how Ayurveda classifies food based on its effects on the body and mind, categorizing it into sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic.

This classification aligns with Vedic teachings that advocate for a balanced and disciplined diet to achieve overall well-being.

The Vedas and later Upanishadic and Ayurvedic texts classify food based on its qualities (Gunas) and effect on consciousness:

#### **Sattvic (Pure) Food**

- Includes fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, nuts, and ghee.
- Promotes clarity, balance, compassion, and spiritual growth.
- Forms the foundation of yogic and temple cuisines.

#### **Rajasic (Stimulating) Food**

- Includes spicy, salty, or overly rich food.

- Induces restlessness, ambition, and excitement.
- Associated with warrior (Kshatriya) diets.

#### **Tamasic (Dulling) Food**

- Includes stale, fermented, overly processed food, and meat.
- Considered harmful to both body and mind as it is heavy and leads to lethargy

This classification continues to influence Indian dietary habits, especially among practitioners of yoga and Ayurveda (Sen4, 2014).

#### **Conclusion**

The legacy of Indian food can be traced back to the Vedic era, where dietary practices were deeply connected to religious beliefs, health, and environmental harmony. The Vedas did not just shape India's spiritual foundation—they shaped its culinary ethos. The reverence for food, the holistic view of diet, and the connection between body, mind, and soul created a food culture that is not just about taste but about harmony. From agricultural hymns and ritualistic offerings to dietary guidelines and the foundation of Ayurveda, the Vedas highlight the spiritual, philosophical, and practical significance of nourishment. Practices such as annadaan (food donation), ethical consumption, purification rituals, and community sharing demonstrate that food was embedded in the moral and spiritual fabric of Vedic life. The legacy of these traditions continues to influence Indian cuisine, dietary practices, and holistic health systems to this day.

While this paper has traced the legacy of Indian food from the Vedic period, there remains vast potential for deeper scholarly inquiry. Future research could explore:

- Comparative studies between Vedic food systems and other ancient civilizations (e.g., Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Chinese dietary cultures).
- The transformation of Vedic dietary practices through the post-Vedic, Buddhist, and medieval periods in India.
- The application of Vedic food philosophy in modern nutritional science and sustainable food systems.

#### **References**

1. Guha, D. S. (1985). Food in the Vedic tradition. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 12(2), 129–139. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23002068>
2. Keith, A. B. (1925). *Religion and philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* (Vols. 1–2). Harvard University Press.
3. Athanassakis, Y. (2024). *The plant-based and vegan handbook: A psychological and multidisciplinary approach*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-63084-2>
4. Sen, C. T. (2014). *Feast and fast: A history of food in India*. Reaktion Books. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Feast\\_and\\_Fast.html?id=UxuLDAAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Feast_and_Fast.html?id=UxuLDAAAQBAJ)
5. Zimmer, H. (1946). *Myths and symbols in Indian art and civilization*. Princeton University Press.
6. Acharya, K. T. (1998). *Indian food: A historical companion*. Oxford University Press.
7. Swaminathan, M. (2016). *Sanskaras: The Vedic perspective of nutrition and learning*. Essen Bildung Konsum Padagogisch.
8. Olivelle, P. (1995). Food in India. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 22(3/4), 59–71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23002231>
9. Radhakrishnan, S. (1953). *The Principal Upanishads*. Harper Collins
10. Hegde, S., Nair, L. P., & Chandran, H. (2018). Traditional Indian way of eating – An overview. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 5(1), 20–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jef.2018.01.002>

