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Ritual Eating, Ritual Devotion: Body and Embodiment in Hinduism

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MALS Theology
Abstract

Ritual Eating, Ritual Devotion: Body and Embodiment in Hinduism

The sacralization of food is apparent in all religious systems; most often this is achieved through dichotomizing the food options into categories of purity and pollution. These simple bifurcated categories of food create a measure of holiness and devotion. While this is a significant part of initially understanding the theological relationship between food, the body, and the divine, it stops short of the ultimate communion of, and relationship between, human and god. One must begin with why certain foods have been labeled as polluting and others as conducive to purity, only then can you move to a deeper understanding of the ritualization of the pure foods that connect with, and embody the divine

Arguing that Mary Douglas' idea of purity and pollution plays a role in the sacralization of food, but does not go far enough is central. There are numerous prohibitions of food dictated by god(s) and recorded in sacred texts which works to present a "holy diet" serving as the most auspicious, everyday interaction with the edible world. However, the mere consumption of the proscribed foods is not the highest order of edible material; that is reserved for the food ritually offered to the gods. It is through the ingestion of ritualized food, which has been imbued with grace from spiritual contact with the divine that a religious man understands himself as phenomenally situated on the precipice of divinity wiping away all illusions and coming into a fuller communion with god during the consumption of the sacred, blessed food.

Applying Catharine Bell's ritual theories to the consumption of ritualized food it is possible to understand the dialogue that takes place within this specific context. This dialogue begins at

the intersection of food, the body, and the divine to further inform and interpret the unique relationship of food and ritual. Through this lens I focus my research specifically on ritual eating in devotional traditions of Hinduism.

Within the Hindu tradition of Vaiṣṇavism, and more specifically the devotees of Kṛṣṇa, there is a semiotic relation to the nature of existence, food, and *mokṣa* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). The ingestion of ritually offered food and its effects on the mind, body, and soul can be linked to the existential notions of authentic and in-authentic or auspicious or inauspicious. To live a life polluted by *māyā* (illusion) is, at its base, to be living in-authentically since one is clouded by the false trivialities that blind one from truly existing in accordance with reality to its fullest. The method of expelling *māyā* is to partake in the *prasāda* - the “leftovers” from the food ritually offered to Kṛṣṇa. This blessed food offering is then returned to the devotee for consumption and creates a temporary realization of the true ontological reality by wiping away all *māyā* resulting in a temporary union of man and god only realized in final liberation.

The ritual process surrounding *prasāda* seeks to create a sacred reality which unifies the qualities of food and god in order to offer the devotee an authentic and auspicious relation to the nature of the cosmos. This union of food and god, being produced and sustained by the ritual process, allows for food to become divine not because it was created by god or set part as a proscription for holy life, but because it becomes a part of god. Consumption of *prasāda* aids in the quest for the end of the *saṁsāric* cycle (the cycle of rebirth) that is perpetuated by living in *māyā*. Employing lenses from religious studies and body studies, the paper argues that ritual eating reinforces the agency of body and embodiment in Hinduism, which is the crux of ritual devotion.