



BUDDHIST FOOD ETHOS: A HISTORICAL STUDY ON THE NON-BRAHMANICAL FOOD IN ANCIENT INDIA AS DEPICTED IN THE BUDDHIST SOURCES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RICE, MILK AND MEAT

Samprikta Biswas

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details: Research Scholar
Department of History, Jadunath
School of Social Sciences, Assam
University, Silchar, Assam, India,

Corresponding Author: Samprikta
Biswas

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.240205010>

Abstract

Food in ancient India was considered a sacred entity by the ancient Indians. Beginning from the Rigvedic times an elaborate food culture evolved in ancient India which was followed by the Brahmanical times and continued to the next period where non-Brahmanical way of life became a part of society. The inception of non-Brahmanical philosophies gave birth to Buddhism. The food concepts influenced by Buddhism emerged out of the Vedic and Brahmanical matrix. As a result of which they naturally had multiple common characteristics with the Vedic and Brahmanical food ethos but they had some very specific distinct elements as well. The focus of this paper is to know about the Buddhist food in ancient India as depicted in the Buddhist sources and to identify the uniqueness of the Buddhist food ethos. Its primary focus is rice, milk and meat and the different preparations of food that were in vogue using these items.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Food, Jatakas, Meat, Milk, Nikaya, Rice*

Buddhism emerged in the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. Buddhism brought about significant changes in the social and cultural sphere in the ancient Indian society. The emergence of Buddhism was a counter to the Brahmanical religion which had its deep roots embedded in the society. Due to this religio-cultural shift there were numerous changes in the society. Food being an inevitable part of the social structure also got influenced and changes occurred with respect to the consumption of different food items. Though the basic food concepts remained the same as that of the Vedic and Brahmanical period as it naturally emerged out of them but they also developed new elements that corresponded with the Buddhist philosophy. The Buddhist works represent food and food items with a non-Brahmanical point of view. Buddhist works have listed food in four different categories namely soft food such as boiled rice, hard food such as fruits and vegetables, beverages and relishable items.

In the northeastern part of India rice was produced abundantly. The people in these areas took rice as their staple food. They took rice as food in different forms. Apart from these fruits, vegetables, milk, fish, meat constituted the chief articles of diet. The Nikayas mention various kinds of rice which existed in Ancient India. The varieties of rice were Sali¹, vrihi², daddula³. Pali sources also mention Sali-tandula, i.e., husked rice⁴. A high quality of rice was used as the staple food by the higher classes of the society and lower quality rice was used by the common people⁵. The Digha-Nikaya mentions Tandula-homa⁶ i.e., which was a sacred offering of rice. Majjhima Nikaya, the Samyutta Nikaya, the Anguttara Nikaya and the Jatakas mention different types of pulses or dalas like Muggas⁷, Masura, Kalai⁸ etc. which were also produced in ancient India. During this period people used to take old rice⁹ Jatakas mention that people consumed three years old rice. This three-year old rice was expensive and was accessible to the rich families of the society but the common people could not afford it. The Pali word 'Bhatta'¹⁰ or 'Bhakta' meant cooked rice at the time of Buddha. The Jatakas also mention the term Bhattakaraka¹¹, which was used for people who prepared food and the term Bhatta-Vetana¹² for those who were working to take food as professional fees or wages. Pali texts used 'Odana'¹³ for denoting boiled rice. Rice was a staple food grain which was accompanied by pulses or Supā and vegetables¹⁴. Jatakas also mention that people used to take meat or fish¹⁵ with rice. Meat with rice was also eaten by the sages and the hermit people¹⁶. Ghee was added to the preparation of meat and rice to enhance its flavour¹⁷. Once Sāriputta was invited by Bimbadevi to a dinner where rice, fresh fish¹⁸ and ghee were served¹⁹.

The Buddha himself allowed his followers to consume milk. Milk mixed with pungent spices which was used to cure cold.²⁰ Rice with condensed milk²¹ was in vogue during this period. This was considered as the best breakfast by Lord Buddha who also

mentioned it to be consumed by the Bhikku Sangha and described the qualities of such food and advised them to take it²². Honey was also mixed with condensed milk²³. Kummāsa²⁴ was a coarse food of the poor which was taken with milk. Buddhists consider milk and milk products as essential food items. In this period yāgu was a preparation of milk and rice which was liquid in consistency and consumed as a drink²⁵. Yāvāgu was the food of the poor people in this region. Yāvāgu was prepared with mustard oil, tamarind, chilly and salt(lona)²⁶. Sattu²⁷ or roasted gram flour was also taken during the time of Buddha. Different preparations of milk of cows²⁸, goats, buffaloes were in vogue and milk products²⁹ such as ghee (ghrita)³⁰, butter or mākhan³¹, chānnā³² and khira³³ were very popular items of the diet. From the Vedic times milk and milk products was an important part of the diet which continued in the time of Buddha as well. According to the Nikayas milk and milk products like curd, butter and ghee were in vogue³⁴. Along with milk, wild fruits³⁵ and vegetables³⁶ also got a place in the list of food items. During this period mango³⁷, rose apple³⁸, kadati-phala³⁹, black-berry and different types of fruits and vana-mula-phala⁴⁰ as well as grounds and pumpkins vegetables were taken as food.

From the prehistoric period people used to consume meat and they were very much fond of it. Rigveda mention that Indra and Agni took meat of animals⁴¹. Satapatha Brahmana mentions ritual offerings of horse, bull, ox, cow, sheep etc. as sacrificial animals⁴². According to Satapatha Brahmana meat was used as best food and the hermit Yajna-valka also took meat⁴³.

During the time of Buddha meat was an important food of the people. Although the Buddha and his followers preached non-violence, yet there was no change in the habit of the people and they used to take meat as food. There are mentions of considerable non-vegetarian people in the Buddhist works.⁴⁴ Meat markets existed in Mithila⁴⁵, and Buddhist works also mention fishermen selling fish in different places and there are mentions of slaughter houses as well.⁴⁶ Buddhist works mention consumption of fish and meat. Venison, oxen, horse, and birds was also consumed.⁴⁷ Apart from that sheep, goats, poultry, swine, monkeys, pigeons and beef was also eaten for meat.⁴⁸ The flesh of sheep was cooked in oil after marinating it with salt and pepper.⁴⁹ Meat preparation included roasting of Venison and birds on fire.⁵⁰ Another common preparation of meat was a soup. Meat was cooked with Ghee, curds and spices.⁵¹ Horse meat was prepared with spices and vinegar.⁵² A meat soup was prepared with Rohita fish and eaten Sali rice to enhance its taste.⁵³ Buddhist works mention consumption of seasoned meat. Buddhists believed that those who killed the animals are guilty rather than those who ate flesh of those animals.⁵⁴ Buddha advocated for non-violence. He restricted the killings of animals and asked his followers not to kill animals or fish for food. People were allowed to eat meat of wild animals in times of illness or distress.⁵⁵ The Buddhist monks accepted meat from the families who used to offer⁵⁶. According to the Mahaparinibbana-Suttana, Lord Buddha himself ate pork meat in the house of Candala⁵⁷. The Buddha did not prohibit meat, but his prohibition towards eating of meat was limited to the bhikkus. If any family gave them meat, they were at a liberty to take the same.

The Nikayas mention the killing of cows, sheep, goats, pigs, deer and slaughter-houses⁵⁸. They mention meat and fish as an important part of their diet⁵⁹. As a result of which, butchers⁶⁰, a separate community arose in the society. They used to catch animals, birds and used to kill the same the same to sell the meat to the people. In this they maintained their livelihood. They used to carry meat to the city market in carts to sell it⁶¹. During marriage ceremony people took meat. In the royal kitchen meat and fish were prepared⁶².

According to Pali literature, the most favourable meat in those days were peacocks⁶³, wild animals⁶⁴, goose⁶⁵, deer etc. A person who used to kill deer was known as deer-hunter⁶⁶. He used to carry meat of deer in cart to the city-market for the purpose of selling it⁶⁷. People also used to eat pork⁶⁸. The Nikayas mention that they used to slaughter pigs⁶⁹ and pork as fee to offer prayer⁷⁰. It was a custom in those days to kill the pigs on the occasion of marriage ceremonies⁷¹. The Jataka stories describe that not only the ordinary people but the people who belonged to higher castes also used to eat porks. But the pig must be of wild pig which is permitted by the Sastrakarās. As it is prohibited⁷² in the Dharmasutra to eat the domestic pigs, the people of higher castes did not take the same as edible. But in the pali literature there is no such indication. Sometimes prior to killing, a pig was fed in such a manner so that it became healthy.⁷³ Beef was not prohibited but a section of the society had respect towards cows. It was decided not to kill the beneficial ox or agricultural bull. The Pali Nikayas mention cow-slaughter⁷⁴, slaughter-house⁷⁵, and the knives were used to kill cows⁷⁶. Jatakas mention that the beneficial cows and oxen were not be killed during famines⁷⁷. According to the Jataka story peoples were in the habit of eating meat of pigeon⁷⁸, duck, birds of similar nature, peacock, crows and hens⁷⁹. The Pali Nikaya mention that fish⁸⁰ was taken as food by all the classes of the society. All the Brahmanas and non-brahmanas in the society used to take fish very much. In royal kitchen different dishes of fish were prepared⁸¹. During the time of Buddha there were many fish eaters and many persons were engaged in the business of fish.

The philosophy of Buddhism stands on the principle of non-violence. But Lord Buddha himself did not restrict himself to the consumption of meat nor did he restrict his followers or monks to do away with the consumption of meat. The Buddhists did not believe that purity comes through food. Buddhist works mention that those who kill animals are at fault not the ones who consume the flesh. Buddha preferred non-violence and condemned killing of animals. But he did not restrict his followers to become vegetarians.

Apart from rice, milk and meat people during this period also were fond of fruits and vegetables. Fruits like Jujube, rose apple, mango, dates, plantain, coconut, grapes were in vogue. Vegetables like cucumber, brinjal, bottle gourd, radish, leafy vegetables, stalks of lotus were widely consumed.

Sweeteners like honey was very popular. Sugarcane juice and jaggery too were used to sweeten different dishes. Salts, spices and condiments too were used to enhance flavour. The Vinaya pitaka mentions five types of salts like black salt, red salt, kitchen salt, sea salt and rock salt. Spices like turmeric, dry ginger, asafoetida, pepper were used. Oilseeds like sesamum was the most important. Apart from that mustard seeds were also used.

Buddhist works mention that people consumed and manufactured intoxicating drinks. Liquors were consumed by the people. Buddhist works also mention taverns and shops for drinking. During festivals and feasts people drank liquors amongst friends. Liquors were termed as Sura and madya. Spiced wine was called maireya which were very popular. Among other beverages fruit juice and fruit syrups were in vogue. Fruit syrups were prepared from ripened mango juice, rose apple, grapes, coconut. Sometimes syrups were prepared with honey, jaggery, sugar as well. All these beverages are important as the followers of Buddha consumed these beverages in the evening as they did not take any meals in the evening. Water was the most essential beverage. Water was brought from the mountain springs for drinking purposes.

Conclusion

Buddhism emerged naturally out of the Vedic and Brahmanical way of life. Buddhism gave birth to a non-Brahmanical way of life in the ancient Indian society which affected food as well. Buddhist food ethos had many characteristics of both Vedic and Brahmanical food but it also had some distinct elements. The Buddhist sources have many references of food items that were in vogue during the time of Buddha. The staple food of the people in the north eastern part of the subcontinent where Buddhism emerged was rice. It was the most important part of the Buddhist food ethos. Rice was prepared in many ways and its relevance still exists today in this part of the world. Apart from that milk was an important part of the diet. The consumption of milk and milk products began in the Vedic times which continued in the Buddhist time as well. Milk products were consumed largely whether it was butter or ghee or curd. Milk with rice was consumed largely as it was a popular preparation that even Buddha himself consumed it. Meat was in vogue during the time of Buddha. Though non-violence was the key element of the Buddhist religion but the followers of Buddhism were allowed to take meat. They believed that the killers of animals were at fault not those who consumed the flesh. This ideology still exists today among the Buddhists. Apart from these fruits, vegetables, salts, spices, oilseeds, beverages were also an essential part of the diet during the time of Buddha. The importance of rice, milk and meat was so much that it still occupies the most important place in the diet of the people of this region. The preparations using them are still consumed today. Though few changes have occurred with time but the basic food ethos has remained the same. These items and their preparations have stood the test of time and retained their essence at the very core and is still in vogue today.

Acknowledgement: No

Authors Contribution: *Samprika Biswas:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No funding.

Declarations/Consent for Publication: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References

- ¹ Digha Nikaya I, 105; II,293; Majjima Nikaya.I, 57; Anguttara Nikaya.V. 213; Jātaka. I, 429, 484; II,110, 135, 378; IV, 276; VI, 367.
- ² Vinaya Pitaka. IV.264; Jātaka. I, 429; iii,356; Milinda-Panha.102, 267; Visuddhimagga.383
- ³ Digha Nikaya. I, 166; Majjhima Nikaya. I, 78; 343; Anguttara.Nikaya.I, 241, 295
- ⁴ Sumangalavilasini. I, 93
- ⁵ Jātaka. I, 486
- ⁶ Digha Nikaya. I,9
- ⁷ Sumangalavilasini. I, 83
- ⁸ Majjhima Nikaya. I, 57, 80; III, 90; Anguttara Nikaya. IV, 108; Sutta-Nipata. 3/10. Jātaka. I, 429, II, 74.
- ⁹ Bhojajaniya- Jataka, (no. 23); Mahilamukha-jataka, (no. 26)
- ¹⁰ Jātaka. IV, 43
- ¹¹ Sumangalavilasini. I, 157; Jataka, I, 150
- ¹² Digha Nikaya. III, 191; Sumangalavilasini. I, 296
- ¹³ Digha Nikaya. I, 76
- ¹⁴ Ibid. I, 166; Majjhima-Nikaya. I. 78, 156; Anguttara Nikaya. I, 241, 295; II, 206
- ¹⁵ Anguttara Nikaya. III. 301
- ¹⁶ Kesava Jātaka, (no. 346)
- ¹⁷ Digha-Nikaya. I, 9
- ¹⁸ Anguttara Nikaya. III, 301.
- ¹⁹ Supatta-Jataka, (no. 292)
- ²⁰ Jataka. 127
- ²¹ Samyutta-Nikaya. I, 166
- ²² Mahavagga, 6/24-25
- ²³ Vinaya Pitaka. I, 4; Majjhima Nikaya. I, 114

- ²⁴ Digha Nikaya. I, 76; Majjhima Nikaya. II, 17
²⁵ Vinaya Pitaka. I, 46; II, 223
²⁶ Anguttara Nikaya. I, 210
²⁷ Vinaya Pitaka. II, 116; Ja. III, 343
²⁸ Digha Nikaya. I, 201
²⁹ Sappi-tela navanitadadhi, ibid. I, 141
³⁰ Ibid. I, 201
³¹ Ibid. I, 201
³² Ibid
³³ Ibid
³⁴ Anguttara Nikaya. II. 96
³⁵ Pavattaphala-bhojano bhavissami, Digha Nikaya. I, 101
³⁶ Saka-bhakkho Vahoti, ibid, 166
³⁷ Digha Nikaya. I, 46, 53, 235
³⁸ Jātaka. V, 465
³⁹ Ibid. V, 37
⁴⁰ Digha Nikaya. I, 166
⁴¹ Rigveda. 10/91/14
⁴² Satapatha Brahmana. 11/7/1/3
⁴³ Ibid. 3/1/2/21
⁴⁴ Jataka.537
⁴⁵ Jataka.408
⁴⁶ Jataka.292
⁴⁷ Jataka.420
⁴⁸ Jataka.402, 277, 144
⁴⁹ Jataka.33, 539
⁵⁰ Jataka.512
⁵¹ Jataka.325
⁵² Jataka.138
⁵³ Jataka.292
⁵⁴ Jataka.246
⁵⁵ Vinaya pitaka. III.58
⁵⁶ Mahavagga, 6/23/10-15
⁵⁷ Digha Nikaya. II, 127
⁵⁸ Majjhima Nikaya. I, 364; II, 193
⁵⁹ Digha Nikaya. I, 5
⁶⁰ Majjhima Nikaya. I, 364; II, 193
⁶¹ Jātaka. III, 49
⁶² Ibid. I, 242
⁶³ Digha Nikaya. III, 201
⁶⁴ Majjhima Nikaya. I, 450
⁶⁵ Samyutta Nikaya. I, 148
⁶⁶ Jātaka. III, 184
⁶⁷ Ibid. III, 49
⁶⁸ Sumangalavilasini, III, 821
⁶⁹ Samyutta Nikaya. II, 257; Anguttara Nikaya. II, 207; III, 303
⁷⁰ Anguttara Nikaya. III, 49
⁷¹ Jātaka, I, 196-97
⁷² Apastambha Dharma Sutra, 1/5/17/29
⁷³ Jātaka. I, 197
⁷⁴ Digha Nikaya. II, 294; Majjhima Nikaya. I, 58; II, 193
⁷⁵ Majjhima Nikaya. I, 364
⁷⁶ Ibid, I, 449
⁷⁷ Jātaka. II, 135
⁷⁸ Ibid. II, 382
⁷⁹ Ibid. II, 175
⁸⁰ Digha Nikaya. I, 166
⁸¹ Jātaka. II, 243-43

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2024. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to

the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>