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# The *Values of Food: Exploring Food as a Site of Values in Oral Literature*

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## Abstract

A fair share of Indian folklore revolves around food, it is used to impart wisdom and teach. Through the retelling of epics and folk tales, our ancestors have also tried to impart culinary knowledge. The first part of the paper explores how oral literature of folktales, parables, fables, rhymes and bedtime stories employ food to impart culturally significant values. The second part of the paper would explore food at the heart of interpersonal relationships.

By drawing a parallel between food and literary imagination, this paper will explore the patterns of consumption, properties of food and how food is represented in a literary context. What is the truth of food when juxtaposed with a network of values? And can one conceive of an emotional life outside food? This paper aims to throw light on texts such as the Panchtantra, the stories of Tenali Raman, the stories of Akbar and Birbal, the Jataka Tales and other oral literatures and retelling of popular stories in epics such as the Mahabharata. The aim is to find out how food is a looking glass into a culture and its values and if these values are culture specific or universal.

**Key Words:** Folklore, Food, Culinary knowledge, Interpersonal relationship, Culturally significant values

## Introduction

India is not new to either the Oral tradition of stories telling. The art of orally transmitting and preserving knowledge, art, ideas and cultural material to one generation to another is Oral tradition. Jan Vansina, who is regarded as the major innovator in the historical methodology of oral history specifies that the message must be oral statements spoken, sung or called out on musical instruments only; "There must be transmission by word of mouth over at least a generation". This transmission through speech or song and may include folktales, ballads, chants, prose or verses and it is possible for a society to transmit oral history, oral literature, oral law and other knowledge orally without developing a writing system, or in parallel to a writing system. So, oral tradition is information, memories and knowledge held in common by a group of people, over many generations, and it is not the same as testimony or oral history (Jan). Oral tradition has been an ancient human tradition found in all corners of the world. Hinduism uses an oral tradition, in parallel

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to a writing system, to transmit their canonical scriptures, secular knowledge such as *Sushruta Samhita*, hymns and mythologies from one generation to the next. Ancient Indians also developed techniques for listening, memorization and recitation of their knowledge, in *Gurukuls* (schools), while maintaining exceptional accuracy of their knowledge across the generations (Lopez Jr, Witzel 68-71). India is rich in his oral tradition of storytelling finding its origin in both the pedagogic needs and in entertainment.

Apart from the obvious, where our bodies use food as fuel, providing nutrients for our body to function properly, food is also represented a great deal in a literary context, not just in a disguise of cook books and blogs but also as a looking glass into a culture and its values. This paper will explore the role of food in the retelling of stories, though largely seen as mere bedtime stories, they play an important part in imparting the knowledge and wisdom, a way in which moral lessons were taught but not preached.

#### Food in Text

Consumption patterns and ceremonies, the conscious decision of feasting and who to feast with, and the explanations for these practices are the key to comprehend human culture. Despite the fact that food and related symbolism have for quite some time been a part of writing, food and patterns of consumption is seen as a universal experience. Topics associated with food are normal among a wide range of both visual and verbal effect. Food is additionally an important subject in women's and children's writing.

Some authors use the food, its projection in language and time of consumption to its full potential. For instances, Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* gives us the fantasy land of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory; the teatime dramatizing states of harmony or disharmony in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, uses food liberally, as a vehicle to express strong childhood emotions. Among fiction authors, Ernest Hemingway was significant in his ability to make a specific state of mind via his accounts on food he had his characters eat local dishes, permitting a passionate access to the world they were a part of in novels like *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. In Indian contemporary writers, Anita Nair's *Alphabet Soup for Lovers* tells the story of a middle aged woman's love affair using ingredients used in an Indian household from day to day as metaphor for life, love and anguish.

### Food and Oral Literatures

#### Panchatantra

Food featuring in stories dates back to time between 100 BC and AD 500 with Panchatantra, a collection of Indian animal fables, which has had extensive circulation both in India and throughout the world. In theory, the Panchatantra is intended as a textbook of *niti* ("policy," especially for kings and statesmen); the aphorisms tend to glorify shrewdness and cleverness rather than altruism. The original text is a mixture of Sanskrit prose and stanzas of verse, with the stories contained within one of the five frame stories. The introduction, which acts as an enclosing frame for the entire work, attributes the stories to a learned Brahmin named Vishnusharman, who used the form of animal fables to instruct the three dull-witted sons of a king.(Panchatantra)

The Panchatantra is a series of inter-woven fables, many of which deploy metaphors of anthropomorphized animals with human virtues and vices to achieve "the wise conduct of life"(Ryder, Olivelle). These fables implied morals that appealed to larger communities with certain local variations. Take the story of "The Monkey and the Crocodile" in book 4, Loss of Gains for instance. It is among the earliest Panchatantra illustrations in monumental sculpture in India summarized as:

Once upon a time, in a forest, there lived a monkey who resided on a jamoon (berry) tree, which was on the banks of a river. In the same forest, there lived a crocodile and his wife. One day the crocodile came to the banks of the

river and rested under the tree. The kind-hearted monkey offered him some fruits. The crocodile came back the next day for more fruits as he loved them. As days passed by, the crocodile and the monkey became good friends. One day the monkey sent some fruits for the crocodile's wife. She ate the fruits and like them, but was jealous as she didn't like her husband spending time with the monkey. She told her husband, "If the fruits are so juicy, I wonder how sweet the monkey's heart would be. Get me the heart of the monkey." The crocodile was not willing to kill his friend but had no choice. He invited the monkey to his house for dinner and said that his wife would like to meet him. The monkey was happy but couldn't swim, so the crocodile took him on his back. The crocodile was happy that he had tricked the monkey, however, while talking he blurted out the real reason for taking the monkey home. The clever monkey said, "You should have told me earlier, I left my heart on the tree. We must go back and get it." The crocodile believed and took him back to the tree and that is how the clever monkey saved his life. (Ryder 381-388)

Also a Swahili fairy tale, this story uses edibles of two types, the fruits, which were presented to the crocodile by the monkey, as a gesture of kindness and goodwill, food acted as the foundation of their friendship. Another, the heart of the monkey which was so desired by the crocodile's wife that it led the crocodile to commit an immoral act. The moral of the story was to teach that one must choose their company wisely as our biggest enemy can be disguised as a friend but on the same hand it also shows two emotions in the spectrum of many namely greed and kindness both finding their basis in food.

### **Jataka tales**

Another famous example can be drawn from the Jataka tales, which are a voluminous body of literature, concerning the previous births of Gautama Buddha in both human and animal form. The Jatakas are amongst the earliest Buddhist literature, with metrical analysis methods dating their average contents to around the 4th century BCE and according to A. K. Warder, the Jatakas are the precursors to the various legendary biographies of the Buddha, which were composed at later dates. (Warder) The Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of these tales tend to maintain the Buddhist morality of their Pali equivalents. These stories and motifs are translations from the Pali but others are instead derived from vernacular oral traditions prior to the Pali composition. (Voth)

Though the story of "The Fox and the Crow" finds its origin in Aesop's Fables, it has an Eastern equivalent in Jataka tales. What seems to be a depiction of the tale on a painted vase discovered in excavations at Lothal (southernmost cities) from the Indus Valley Civilization suggests that the story may have been known there at least a thousand years earlier than any other source. (Ghosh 83) Summarized as follows:

A black crow was sitting on a tree with a piece of cheese in its beak. A fox was passing by under the same tree and saw the piece of cheese in the crow's beak. She made an evil plan to get the cheese from the crow. The sly fox started to praise the crow's beauty. It admired crow's feathers, tail, eyes and beak. The fox said, "Oh, crow! Your voice is so beautiful! Can you sing a song for me?"

On hearing this, the crow was flattered and it did not want to lose the chance of more praises. So he began to sing "Caw! Caw! Caw!" When the foolish crow opened its mouth to sing, the piece of cheese fell towards the fox. The clever fox crafts the piece of cheese and said, "You have an ugly voice. You keep your song and I'll have the cheese!"

The moral of this story is that one must not trust flattery coming from others. A very early Indian version of it exists in the Buddhist scriptures as the Jambhu-Khadaka-Jataka. In this version there is a jackal instead of a fox which flatters the crow's voice. Some variants of the story have the crow feeding in a rose-apple tree as he replies that it requires

nobility to discover the same in others and shakes down some fruit for the jackal to eat as a reward. In some local versions of the story with which the children in central India grew it was either flesh or *roti* (chapati) and *appam* (pancake, originating from Sri Lanka or the southern tip of India, made with fermented rice batter and coconut milk) for the children in the south of India. Through this story an important lesson that related to flattery emerges, food here is used to depict the greed of the sly jackal for, his actions, its reactions and results. In this story the motive was the food and everything else a byproduct to accomplish it.

### **Tales of Tenali Raman**

Many traditional stories such as epics, folktales, legends, and myths in India have grown out of religion, and were originally told in the context of communities in which one religion was predominant. In such situations, one function of these stories was to teach and support the myths, rituals, and doctrines of the community's religion.

Numerous traditional styles of storytelling practiced throughout India involve alternation between speaking and singing. In Tamil Nadu, this is true of the genres: on the Orthodox Hindu level, Harikatha (God Stories); on the professional folk level, Villupattu (Bow Songs); and on the domestic folk level, Kathaiyum Paattum (Story and Song). Raja-Rani Kathai (King-Queen Stories) and Paatti Kathai (Grandmother Stories) -- that is, folk tales of various types are told in the latter genre, Kathaiyum Paattum. Studying Kathaiyum Paattum and transposing some of its form and content into English is a great challenge and opportunity for Storytelling Revivalists in Tamil Nadu. (Blackburn)

Let us consider the following story of how Tenali Raman came to be with the blessing of Goddess Kali:

After learning and continuous recitation of the Kali mantra taught by a monk, Tenali Raman was blessed by the goddess herself. The Goddess showed up with two gold pots to Raman and said, "One pot contains milk of wealth the other milk of wisdom. You can choose but only one" Raman was hesitant. "Oh! Devi, how can I choose one over the other?" He doubted. Devi said "If you drink the milk of wealth, you will become rich. On the other hand the milk of wisdom makes you wise and intelligent", Goddess narrated its qualities. Raman, mixed the two and drank it as he emptied the pot of milk within seconds. "Oh! goddess, please pardon me. I want to be both rich and wise one's life becomes meaningful only he achieves both wealth and wisdom" Raman justified his action. "You are clever", said the Goddess. "But who told you to mix the milk in both pots? As a punishment, I curse you to become a jester", Devi proclaimed, Raman begged the Goddess not to curse him. "Oh! Goddess, I want to become a good poet as well as a jester. There is also a mistake on your part. You held the two pots of milk in your hands simultaneously. That means you too consider both knowledge and wealth equally important. Why can I disrespect either *Saraswati* (Goddess of wisdom) or *Laxmi* (Goddess of wealth)?" Kali was impressed with his intellect and was in a fix. "You shall become a good poet and but the coming generation will remember you as a jester" after blessing Raman the Goddess is disappeared. (Imatty 5-6)

Tenali's was one of the eight great poets in the court of Emperor of Vijayanagara and had a brilliant sense of humor and his tales reveal some or all facets of his character - intelligence, fair play, wit. In the story above we see how Tenali Raman was blessed by Goddess Kali to become what he is known for today. Here we see that the two major attributes associated with human and human life namely, wisdom and wealth are to be imparted through the consumption of milk. Goddess Kali offers Tenali Raman with the one pot contains milk of wealth the other milk of wisdom, milk in this text acts gives a symbolic meaning. In the sense of the vocabulary; both the consumption of knowledge and wealth can be interpreted differently and both of these can be consumed as well as mixed.

## Stories of Akbar and Birbal

Birbal, was a Hindu Brahmin consultant in the court of the Mughal ruler, Akbar. He is for the most part known in the Indian subcontinent for the folklore which center around his mind. Birbal was delegated by Akbar as a minister "mantri" and used to be an artist, poet laureate and vocalist in around 1556– 1562. He had a close relationship with Emperor Akbar and was a standout among his most vital squires, called the navaratnas (nine gems of Akbar). Before the end of Akbar's rule, local folklore rose including Birbal's associations with Akbar, depicting him as being incredibly witty and clever. As the stories became prevalent in India, he turned out to be considerably to a greater degree a legendary figure over the Indian subcontinent. These stories include him outmaneuvering rivals in the court and now and then even Akbar, utilizing just his knowledge and wit, frequently with giving clever and humorous reactions; he not only entertained but also impressed Akbar. From the twentieth century onward, plays, movies and books dependent on these folk tales were made.

In the folk tales, he is always portrayed as a pious Hindu, being elder than Akbar, and being morally strict in the midst of opposing Muslim courtiers, who are shown plotting against him; his success was only because of his skill and he convinces the Emperor to favour Hinduism over Islam. He is thus depicted as acquiring religious, political and personal influence over Akbar, using his intelligence and sharp tongue and never resorting to violence. However, historically he never played such a role. (Khanna 24-44, Janik 92)

The following story is one of the most famous lore of Akbar and Birbal famously know as 'Birbal's Khichri', summarized as follows:

Taking a walk on a cold winter day alongside a lake, Birbal expressed a thought that came to him, that a man would do anything for money. Akbar said "I don't think a man would spend an entire night in the cold water of this lake for money." Birbal replied "I am sure I can find such a person." Akbar promised a reward to such a person with a thousand gold coins.

Birbal searched far and wide until he found a poor man who was desperate enough to accept the challenge. The poor man entered the lake and Akbar had guards posted near him to make sure that he really did as promised.

The next morning the guards took the poor man to Akbar, he asked the poor man if he had completed the challenge and the poor man agreed. Akbar then asked the poor man how he managed to spend the night in the lake. The poor man replied that there was a street lamp nearby and he kept his attention affixed on the lamp and away from the cold. Akbar declared that there would be no reward as the poor man had survived the night in the lake by the warmth of the street lamp. Devastated, the poor man went to Birbal for help.

The next day, Birbal did not go to court. Akbar wondered where he was sent a messenger to his home. The messenger came back saying that Birbal would come once his *Khichri* (rice) was cooked. Akbar waited for hours but Birbal did not come. Finally he decided to go to Birbal's house and see what he was upto.

He found Birbal sitting on the floor near some burning twigs and a bowl filled with Khichri hanging five feet above the fire. The king and his attendants couldn't help but laugh. Akbar said to Birbal "How can the Khichri be cooked if it so far away from the fire?" Birbal answered "The same way the poor man received heat from a street lamp that was more than a furlong away." Akbar understood his mistake and gave the poor man his reward.

The moral of the story is that a small ray of hope is enough to inspire the one who is ready to work hard to turn his dream into a reality. In the story above Birbal uses the process of cooking food as a metaphor to teach a valuable lesson. He uses the analogy of the process involved in cooking as an allegory since it requires not only require culinary knowledge, ingredients but also takes time.



## Food: Values and Culture

The ancient traditions of oral literature served the purpose of a code of conduct by which the society was guided and oral literature, particularly folktales, provided a system of laws through which a code of conduct was established. Food seeps into our consciousness at a very early age through folktales, parables, fables, rhymes and bedtime stories and the idea of it, feast, its preparation and consumption have been a major part of teaching valuable lessons and morality as well as culinary knowledge. Adding to the vivid tapestry of memories was Indian lore stories like “Tenali Raman and the Mango Tree”, “Birbal ki Khichdi” and “The Pigeon and The Crow”; folktales from Buri aair Xaadhu from Assam and Thakurmar Jhuli from Bengal. These *kisse kahaaniyaan*(stories), with rich descriptions of dishes and ingredients, take us on a time travel in two magical ways: they paint a vivid picture of culinary practices and eating cultures of those times and also take us back to the childhood moment we heard those stories.

Pritha Sen, chef of the French-Bengali eatery, Mustard, in Goa and Mumbai, talks about the *Mangalkabyas*, a large corpus of narrative poetry composed in Bengal in the 15th and 18th centuries. This has local histories and food memories and sharing culinary knowledge. Sen mentions Narayan Deb's *Padmapuran* (15th century), which has an elaborate list of ingredients and dishes cooked by one of the characters. She has introduced one dish from it, the *aam katla*, on the menu till the mango season lasts. A lot of these tales have references to food – as it could be chewed and digested, the same ways morals and values are supposed to.

According to experts, through the retelling of epics and folk tales, our ancestors have tried to impart culinary wisdom. Vinod Garde, corporate chef, Sid Hospitality, which owns brands such as Pot Pourri, Lemon Leaf, Soy Street and Tight, across Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, elaborates on this with a story, which his grandma told him, about Lord Ganesha's love for *ukadiche modak*. The sweet was created when Shiva, Parvati and Ganesha were visiting Anasuya, wife of the sage Atri. In the course of the meal, she realized that none of the delicacies could satiate Lord Ganesha's hunger, and she created a sweet made with jaggery and coconut. The use of fresh regional ingredients for the filling and using steaming as a technique are examples of simple cooking, which have been handed down through time,” he says. (Food in Fables, Folktales and Epics)

## Conclusion

It can be said that in stories known through oral transmission, food plays a huge part of the narrative as greed is always associated with food and food is the basic need of humans and animals alike. A lot of our actions are dependent on the need to eat as it is important for our survival. Since our hunger and need to feed ourselves and our family and governs our actions, a lot of these stories show us the ethical or moral path to achieve our daily bread and butter.

Many of these values are universal instead of cultural. They talk about the truth which applies to the entire human race. These stories tell the audience how to distinguish between the right and wrong, the moral and immoral and this finds evidence in Aesop's fables where stories with different variation convey the same morals. Despite of being from a different part of the world which is culturally different, these stories share same morals with the East making the morals of the story a code of conduct to be followed by the a commoner.

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