

## **“Diet” in the Hindu Scriptures.**

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Nutrition is a world-wide problem to-day. Though wholesome natural food-stuffs are produced in enormous quantities, the “mechanistic” civilization of to-day with its “artificial” amenities of life, the craze for speed and more speed, and the overcrowding of huge masses of populations in cities and industrial centres, has been responsible for the colossal problem of malnutrition in a world of potential plenty. The evil of malnutrition of the masses is more sharply defined in the poorer, non-industrial countries; of course, in India, there is the evil, though the contributory causes apart from poverty are altogether different.

In India, the solution of the problem of nutrition, for the huge rural population, may be said to be intertwined with the question of the amelioration of the lot of cattle and the cow; in short, the solution is in the word “milk”—and it is a hopeful sign that this question is day by day gaining increasing recognition, no less a personage than our present Viceroy being deeply interested in it. Adulteration of foods and food-stuffs—deliberate or otherwise—is another danger; compounds of sulphur, arsenic and other poisonous substances are employed in the preparation, preservation and marketing and distribution

of foods—the so-called “tinned and canned” foods which require only to be opened with a “can-opener” on the dining table. Even flour, white bread-flour, is said to be “bleached” to ensure a whiter colour, by means of chemicals. These unavoidable unwholesome elements in the food of the American people have been calculated statistically by experts to reduce the normal average life of every individual by five to ten years. Though conditions in India are altogether different, for which we ought to be thankful, we have to be on the guard; for the so-called “tinned and canned” foods are finding their way to India, too. We in India have to learn a lot from the West, but there are phases of the Western civilization that are to be eschewed—and their mode and materials of food-stuffs, and of the dizzy assorted variety of drinks, “cocktails” rather, is one major aspect against which we ought to be on the guard. The regulations regarding diet that are to be found scattered in the Hindu scriptures were obviously intended for a less complicated society than the contemporary one; in fact, though the culinary art formed one of the perfected fine arts of the ancients, it is beyond our comprehension to imagine what would be the reaction of Bhīma or Nala, master craftsmen of the culinary art, if they were made to confront one of the fashionable cafes of Europe or America ! But those regulations give us a glimpse of the spirit in which we have to solve the problem and what our object is always to be—

however complicated the circumstances may be.

‘शरीरमात्रं खलु धर्मसाधनम्’—the physical body is the basis and prime vehicle for the discharge of our *Dharma*, duty. So, that the body should be kept in good condition goes without saying, and what we eat, as a factor of bodily health, is an important consideration. Food was considered to play a part in the moulding of human character and personality, too. A system of human metabolism was propounded by Dhanwantari, the Hindu Aesculapius, which was later developed and the view was held that of the essence of the assimilated food, the best one-third nourished the brain; the next third, the *jñāna-indriyas* (organs of perception) and the last one-third, the *karma-indriyas* (the organs of action). The classification of food, into Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic, in the *Gītā* is well known. Of the three *guṇas* though a predominance of Sattvic character was insisted upon, for a Kṣatriya the cultivation of Rajasic characteristics was considered desirable, to befit the nature of his duties. *Oru podhu yogī, iru podhu bhogī, thiru podhu unbān rogiye* is a Tamil aphorism attributed to the poet-saintess Auvai—Valluvar’s sister—, which when rendered into English will read: “He who eats only once a day is indeed a *yogī*; he who eats twice is a *bhogī*, an enjoyer; but he who eats thrice or more a day is a victim of perpetual ill-health.” “He must not eat anything whose oleaginous essence has been taken out” runs one of Manu’s numerous injunctions with regard to diet, “nor over-load

his stomach with food; and let him not eat anything too early in the morning or evening, nor take anything in the night, if he has been over-replete in the day." The Āyurveda advises that only half the stomach is to be filled with solid food, one quarter with water and a quarter to be left empty. In the *Manu-Saṁhitā*, flesh diet has been discountenanced. The sannyāsīs who dwelt in the forests were totally debarred from partaking of even grain, and subsisted on kandas, mūlas and phalas—roots, tubers and fruits—and those who were averse to injuring even these sentient things subsisted on dry and brown leaves that naturally dropped from the trees. Cow's milk augmented intellectual and spiritual unfoldment, it was claimed, and hence the sanctity of the cow. 'वृतेन वर्द्धते बुद्धिः' (literally: intellect is sharpened by cow's ghee)—runs a Sanskrit saying. The householder was forbidden to partake of his meal without making sure if any guests or sannyāsīs were in the village and "shall give cooked food to Brahmachārīs, etc., who do not cook their meals; and after keeping enough food for his relations and dependants, he shall distribute the residue among the birds and beasts." Strict silence was enjoined to be

observed during meals and no table-talk was permissible; but pious people repeated the name of "Govinda" or "Kṛṣṇa" while taking their food. Finally, the meal was to be consecrated and offered as a sacrifice to the Supreme Absolute before being partaken of. Even the *sannyāsī*, who had renounced all, sacrificed the "root, tuber or fruit" to Śrī Kṛṣṇa—"Śrī Kṛṣṇārpaṇamastu !"

In short, in the choice and mode of our partaking of food,—which is so essential for the maintenance of the *sthūla śarīra*, without which the vehicle of the soul cannot continue to exist,—great caution, deliberation and consideration was sought to be exercised and hence the regulations, which the Dharma-Śāstras prescribed; and they were but part of that *āchāra*, an ideal way of leading life not only to make worldly life a success, but to realize the purpose of life itself,—that "ethical standard" which "must be unflinchingly applied to daily life" and the object of which is "the spiritual and psychic blending of man with Nature". It is not the dead letter of the rules and regulations, but the *spirit* of that *āchāra*, which alone can solve the complicated problems that confront modern society—including the "diet" question.

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The food that has been offered to the manes, that which has been cooked by a woman who has recently brought forth a child, and food cooked by an unknown person should not be eaten. The milk also of a cow that has recently calved should not be taken. The food provided by an usurer is equivalent to dirt, while that provided by a woman living on prostitution is equivalent to filth.

