

DEVUTT PATNAIK: FOOD, CULTURE AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE CYBER AGE

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore how Devdutt Patnaik as a modern day practising mythologist is not only reinterpreting the ancient myths to make it comprehensive for the present generation but is choosing various alternative channels of communicate his ideas which are rendered obsolete due to their language being archaic and their renditions fossilised . The first part of the paper will discuss briefly his books ,blogs ,podcasts and other chosen medium for the dissemination of his ideas so as to make it accessible to the present generation. The second section of the paper will discuss the binaries of ancient and modern,the literal and the metaphorical , philosophy and practice and cultural practices that are an integral part of our life that we rarely introspect upon. The paper looks at how Indian Culture , religious practices and beliefs , community and caste system revolve around food.

Keywords- *Myth, Food, Culture, Philosophy*

Devdutt Patnaik is a leading mythologist who is contemporanising myths and reinventing them in order to make them more relevant and palatable . Patnaik's curve has not only proved to be a successful commercial venture but it lends itself to scholastic purposes when it comes to Myth Criticism , New Gender studies, New Historicism , Cultural Identity and Cultural Materialism.

India in the eurocentric gaze has always remained a pagan entity with incomprehensible religious practices , cult rituals ,animal sacrifices and tantric mystic men. India remains enigmatic even to the Indians who are distanced from their own cultural practices and are better attuned to a western lifestyle . The Y2K Indian youth with the influx of social media is no longer watching the Ramanand Sagar version of Ramayana nor the BR Chopra version of Mahabharata. Hence Halloween is a far more familiar occasion to them than Vijayadashmi. One can't really blame them if they are unable to decipher the symbolic victory of good over evil because Indian myths are less accessible to them.

Food is an integral subsystem of the Indian cultural identity . All occasions happy or sad , festive or religious

have some kind of community fasting or feasting rituals associated. In spite of the rich diversity, food links people across the Indian subcontinent. The politics of the land is also steeped in religious sentiment and governance has gone on to influence food habits pan India. Global India is now subscribing to tinned food and ready to cook food flood the market. Fast food joints such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut and Dunkin' Donuts are hugely popular joints but the controversy around Nestle Maggi is still fresh in our memory.

With the Modi Government's rising ambition to establish Hindutva, caste conversions and bans often hit the headlines. So while Mumbai bans beef the leftist Kolkata is flamboyantly selling beef burgers. This sets off the average Hindu Bengali Brahmin mind of mine to ponder upon what is right and wrong (Can that possibly be done at least I can strive to determine it for myself). Literature is my refuge and I turned for my answers to Devdutt Pattanaik who is interpreting ancient Hindu mythology and making our cultural practices more comprehensible.

At a talk delivered at the 2015 edition of Tata Literature Live, Pattanaik goes back in time to trace the origins of Indian food habits. He discusses communal meals to the evolution of the *thali* and also enumerates upon fasting rituals. Devdutt Pattanaik recounts myths and stories and uses metaphors to provide a better understanding of our thoughts on food. The question that the modern youth's mind is agog with is, "Are philosophies of Ancient India relevant to the food debate and battle today?"

Pattanaik draws his instances from the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Since the Creator and the created are not separate entities in Indian Philosophy, the holy scriptures in the context of food say that food in itself is divine. One who serves, one who receives and the food that is being served are all divine.

Pattanaik talks of eating habits in Ancient India. Now, Ancient India happens to be a relative term. In order to define a specific period in Ancient India he chooses to trace the eating habits of Indians 500 years ago with the advent of potatoes in the Indian subcontinent. The Portuguese imported potatoes. Turks had introduced meat-stuffed patties and the arrival of potatoes, tomatoes and chillies meant the invention of the *samosa* which in public opinion is an indigenous item of food. Hence, Pattanaik is of the belief that food in India has undergone as much cultural hybridity as the Indian identity. According to Pattanaik Indians have a sense of fragile self-esteem.

He borrows the analogy of a family meal. Family luncheons and dinners are an integral part of community life in India. Every individual seated at the table has a fragile sense of self-esteem. It is because of '*Ahankar*' (Pride/Arrogance). So on one hand one cousin is a food enthusiast on the other hand another is an activist. One likes deep fried savouries dipped in sugar syrup the other enjoys a *satvik* meal. The challenge is how to serve a 'Happy meal' in a conventional household. Hence, **Masterchef** (a popular Australian cookery show) is of no

consequence in India as Westerners believe in plating. What one eats in a western set up is of the Chef's choice. Would such a meal system work in an average Indian household.? A meal in India has to be extremely democratic . In fact even in the present day Corporate contracts are signed in the afternoon post meals . Post meal siestas are an acknowledged fact in India . God in India is fondly known as '*Anant Vasudev*' which loosely translated would stand for 'Divinity sleeps'.

As far as philosophy around food is concerned there seems to be an absolute obsession for food in the Indian scriptures. Food is termed as '*Anna*' and flesh is known as '*Annakosh*' (a place to store food) . Hence if used interchangeably food is flesh and flesh is food .

The body is made up of elements and when a person dies the Hindu rites dictate the burning of the body to return to the state of elements. Food has value because the body burns it for nourishment . Sunlight in itself has no value . Plants use sunlight for food or one could say that plants eat sunlight ,water and oxygen i.e.plants eat the elements. In this way plants gather value for it nourishes the eater. Value is accorded through the act of eating. Herbivores eat plants and carnivores devour herbivores. Value is not contained in food but in the act of eating. This act of eating sustains the ecosystem. Earth has all the elements that constitute food and hence sustenance .

Anyone who is hungry is called '*Shubhda*' .The animate *Sajeev* and inanimate *Ajeev* are distinguished on the basis of hunger . Food is integral to life . The living are hungry hence the one who is alive is known as '*Jeevaatma*' . Hunger and thirst serve as fundamentals when it comes to deciphering Indian Philosophy. Human beings consume all that the earth provides be it salt ,water ,minerals ,plants and animals . But,human beings are not fit for consumption. How can then value be accorded to human beings? Human beings want value without being eaten . Hence food becomes a metaphor . Food becomes a metaphor for both value and meaning . Human beings aspire for meaning. Hence food escalates from the act of eating to something that offers meaning to life.

Animals do not understand metaphor while it is readily intelligible to the human mind . Food gathers magnitude when it shifts from being simply nutrition to the larger concept of a meaningful life. Again, if interpreted in the Marxist context it becomes a problematic rendition because communists are uncomfortable with symbols and metaphors as to them such connotations are clouded in ambiguity.

Thus food enters into a new binary . In the literal form it is '*Sagun*' and in the metaphorical form it is '*Nirgun*' because meaning is abstract . Also meaning is relative . From here if we were to interpret the term *Brahman* to gauge who is '*Brahman*'? While '*Man*' would mean Mind '*Brah*' means Expansion . A true '*Brahman*' is someone who aspires for expansion of the mind . So if I am hungry for meaning then you too are hungry for

meaning . Food then expands and opens up to represent 'identity'. All human beings are on an existential plain hungry for meaning and identity.

Thus from here we go back to the axiom that 'Man is what he eats' . So 'in an extended family meal since everyone has different preferences for food we as Indians subscribe to the *thali* laden with various savouries for varied palates. There are sweet and sour items ,bitter and salty stuff ,cooked and uncooked portions ,rice and chapati all served in one huge utensil . *Thali* stands for inclusion. There is also provision for non –vegetarian and for those who are fasting there is *upwaas ka khana*. Also every individual chooses what to eat from the *thali* . That which we eat is highly customised . The cook cannot ascertain the proportion in which items on the plate will be mixed . Nor can he determine courses . Most Indian cookery shows when specifying ingredients mention salt and then qualify it by saying' Salt to taste ',*Swadamusaar* . Now the interesting question to be raised is *kiske amusaar* ? According to the cook or according to the person who is eating? This according to Patatnaik is the philosophy that can be gleaned out of such a simplistic analysis .The relationship that food creates between '*Jeevatma*' and '*Parmatma*' . Food is the manifestation of that which is abstract and metaphorical . Food is tangible. The eating habits of Indians are embedded with interpretations.

Food habits do evolve as society morphs . For instance, cultural practices such as sitting on the floor and eating in a cross-legged position is something that is not inadvertent or a chance occasion . It is as prescribed in Vedic Literature .It is absolutely exclusive to Indians . Romans for instance eat while lying down. Indians pray to the food that they are consuming. It is very different from saying Grace. While Indians thank food because food is God, Westerners (to use a term loosely for Eurocentric ethnicities) thank God for food. So the Indian practice subscribes to what is described in *Advaita*,” *Khana devta hai ,khane wala bhi devta hai,khilane wala bhi devta hai*. (Food is God ,one who eats is God ,one who serves is God . Again an extended interpretation of“ *Brahman Satyam Jagan Mithya*”

Having established that there does not exist in the scriptures any ideas that support duality or multiplicity Pattanaik goes on to attest that the very act of eating is violence or '*Himsa*' . In order to substantiate his stance he begins by taking the example of *Jain Munis* who aspire to be '*Arhats*'. The first thing they give up is food . In order to restrict themselves they do not use any vessels ,they limit portions by eating only as much as they can eat out of their hands .They eat while standing and eat only once a day .They eat only the fruit that falls from the tree . All of these rigours are to practice '*Ahimsa*' . However , it is true that nature always creates more consumers for food than the provisions for food .So when the *Jain Muni* eats the fruit fallen from the tree upon the ground he denies it perhaps to the monkey . This act of benevolence to nature is violence to the monkey.

The cumulation of good acts versus evil acts is '*Karma*'. The *Shramanas* or the hermits thus used a term for those who gave up food . They used the term '*Bhagwan*' for those who conquered the desire for food . It was

initiated as a title for the venerable one . Thus, the whole metaphor of hunger shifts to that of desire . *Bhagwan* is God for he has conquered desire . Stone has this quality but then stone is inanimate .

Pattanaik extends the vertices to divinity , to that of Lord Shiva. He is a *sanyasi* . He has conquered desire but then in the holy triumvirate he is known as the destroyer or the annihilator .*Samsara* will come to an end if food will not be consumed .Hence ,food is life inspite of eating being an act of violence . Thus the advent of Goddess Annapurna who shall continue the cycle of life by providing food . The wheel of life is based upon a chain reaction : *Bhook –Bhog-Bali-Karma-Sansaar* . If this chain reaction reverses the world shall be destroyed . For *Moksha* to be attained *Sansaar* has to be given up .

Devdutt Pattanaik also derives his instances from regional cinema and believes that food narratives came into prominence at a certain time because of a certain kind of politics inherent in the times .He quotes from *Sant Tukaram* where a husband and wife exchange a dialogue upon food . The wife insists upon food and satiating the stomach as the first priority irrespective of the component of violence contained in it.

He goes back to mythology and quotes from the *Mahabharata* , Krishna exhorts the Pandavas to burn the forest at Indraprastha . In order to live and establish their home the pandavas must destroy the habitation of many plants and many animals and commit an act of extreme violence and savagery .

Society and religion have prevailed upon the tenets of non-violence and we have been made to believe that violence is bad and unacceptable .Jainism and especially the teachings of the *Tirthankaras* have valorised *Ahimsa* . From such dialectics have ensued the fossilised ideas of caste system . Some people refrain from non-vegetarian food and some restrict the use of onion and garlic ,furthermore some castes restrict the use of tubers in the households but all these practices have very little to do with hunger. One could go back to the pre-Independence days when village wells were restricted to certain castes , Isn't denying water to another human being an extreme act of violence ?

When Arjuna refuses to wage war against his own kith and kin does Krishna impart to him the enlightenment contained in the *Bhagvad Gita*. Anyone who believes that he or she can escape violence is deluding himself/herself. In her many incarnations Annapurna is Durga whose idol is generally cast showing her slaughtering a buffalo .Will not the slaughtered buffalo be used as food ? However, the same slaughtering in the public mind is a symbol of destroying evil. This image assumes the idea of violence while it establishes the victory of good over evil .

In the *Gita* the senses or the *Indriyan* have been likened to *Gochar* i.e. cows feeding in the pastures . The whole idea of consumption as the cows yank the grass out of the ground and masticate represents violence ,

Hence the application of pesticides also is tantamount to violence as it kills pests . Deforestation is violence . All acts of consumption are innately violent.

Annapurna in her incarnations is Gauri ,Durga and Kali . And in all her incarnations she grows in her stature as a violent deity .The image of Kali with a garland of human skulls ,maenad hair ,red –rimmed eyes and blood thirst is unparalleled in the kind of violence it attests.

Having analysed the inherent contradictions in Vedic Literature , Upanishads and myths one turns to the politics of the present day which has warped even the ideas that relate to regional food habits and made an insidious invasion into the human psyche .

Ayurveda is closely related to ideas of *Ahaar* in order to ascertain a healthy life .It does not believe in standardisation .It does not base itself on a unilinear consumption pattern . it accepts that human beings are unique in their food habits based upon their age ,time and need and desire for consumption .Hence the prescriptions are just like the Indian *thali* ,extremely customised . The very idea of democracy becomes very relevant in this context.

Pattanaik in order to avoid controversy coins the *Khattha-Meetha* principle in the light of Indian dietary patterns. He says when things are too *khattha* or sour, one has to liberally add *meetha* or sweet in order to make food palatable .His real intention lies to offer the Buddhist middle path . When things are too liberal and too leftist the right wing becomes necessary to cure the exigency and vice –versa. For Pattanaik, its like the directions that a child is given to enable him to cross the road i.e to look in both directions left and right before crossing the road .Can it be rendered any easier for the large ,motley crowd that inhabits the Indian subcontinent ?

If we are learning from our ancestors and continuing the legacy , how do we know whether they were vegetarians or non-vegetarians? According to philosophy ' *Jeevan himsa hai*' (Life is Violence) . The argument that needs to be initiated is how much violence is necessary and maybe right in order to ensure survival ? Fire can be used to cook and to burn just as guns can be used in self –defence and perpetrate terrorism .

Pattanaik further uses the analogy of a bullock cart . He believes thst the very act of castrating a bull is extreme violence and the whole idea of transport ,farming and agriculture condone this act .So India as a bullock cart economy does not abstain from violence and no where can the animal right activists can be seen raising this issue.

Pattanaik again leans upon the *Rigveda* which is unclear in its dictat upon whether killing of animals is acceptable for human consumption . In the eighth *mandala* , *Rigveda* directs *ghee* to be offered to Gods but in the later *mandalas* the same scriptures exhorts cows, bullocks and horses to be offered as sacrifice . Indians grow up in such an indeterminate environment and hence there are no clear answers . In the *Valmiki Ramayana* ,Sita offers to the Gods alcohol and rice cooked in venison (deer meat) but because Sanskrit is a metaphorical language it could very well be a guava that she is offering . Why has Ram gone hunting after Mareech if not for venison? When Ravan comes begging at Sita's doorstep she promises him deer, mongoose and other such delectable meat on the return of her husband from his hunting expedition .

In the Buddhist literature one finds narrations of Lord Buddha's last meal . The liberals say that he consumed a meal containg pork fat while the others determine it to be some version of a poisonous mushroom . Hence we go back to our first argument that food is flesh and flesh is food . So black flesh could be *Jamun* or it could be *Neel Gai* . The argument is best resolved by decision of the person who is either eating or interpreting the act of eating. Facts do not decide truth but the interpretation definitely does.

In the *Kamb Ramayana* ,a version that was written a thousand years after *Valmiki Ramayana* ,Ram is depicted being excessive with Sita for he is apprehensive of her eating meat while she was trapped in the Ashoka van . The question we need to mull upon is which is the correct *Ramayana* ? Who decides that ? And which version should we subscribe to?

At this juncture one can perhaps surmise to some extent that the politics of the day will have its sway upon the public mind . It is however the sign of a healthy democracy and an educated mind to entertain a thought without fully accepting it as advised by Aristotle one of the first philosophers to educate us upon democracy .

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