THE FOOD OF THE GODS VERSUS HUMAN FOOD IN SOUTH INDIA *

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Trying to distinguish the gods from humans by their food might seem strange to many Indians. « We offer what we have and eat what we offer » I was often told during my research on the food of the gods in South India. Though a closer look reveales numerous differences the above statement is justified as a hard and fast rule, because there are, indeed, many more similarities between the food of the gods and human food than there are differences.

In the following I shall examine these similarities and differences and furthermore point out parallels and the absence of such parallels between food exchange and communal eating in

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religious and social contexts. These comparisons, it is hoped, will provide information about the Hindu concept of deity and the role of purity and pollution in Hinduism.

1. Similarities between the food of the gods and human food

The major similarities between the food of the gods and human food are to be found in the way food may be used to distinguish different categories of persons in Hindu social life and different categories of gods in the Hindu pantheon.

Contrary to tribal India in which the foods eaten and avoided often distinguish men from women, adults from children, chiefs from commoners, priests from laymen etc. (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1975: 397-398; 403; 406-407) in Hindu India there are very few precise food rules for these social roles. On the other hand, food behaviour is made an important distinguishing factor in the caste hierarchy. Also among the gods there are very few "social" roles characterized by distinctive foods. In the major Sanskritic temples the presiding deity is treated like a king in all respects including his food. He is normally offered the same *naivedya* 'food offering' as the minor deities of his entourage, but he has precedence and receives food in bigger quantities, which may be seen as a parallel to the master/servant relationship.

Also the male/female dichotomy in the pantheon is emphasized less by the type of food than by the respective quantities of food the gods and goddesses receive and the fact that the wife eats after her husband, just as it usually happens in an Indian house. Curiously enough this hierarchy is even valid in temples named after a goddess, as for instance in Draupadī temple, Pondichery. At meal times the presiding deity Draupadī is only the ninth to be fed. Her *naivedya* first goes to Vināyakar, the remover of obstacles, then to Kṛṣṇa, her supreme god, then to Kunti, her mother-in-law, then to the five Pāṇḍavas, her husbands, and then only to her.

In social life most Hindu women share the vegetarian or non-vegetarian habits of their male family members. Where they do not they may consent to cook non-vegetarian dishes but without tasting them and keeping the cooking vessels separate. The other way round I have never met. A non-vegetarian wife married to a vegetarian husband would be conceivable only in highly westernized

surroundings and in intercaste marriages. Though less pronounced than among Hindus male/female asymmetry in the consumption of non-vegetarian food is also found among Westerners. The YWCA hostel in Madras noticed this fact and put it to practical use. For two breakfasts at the same price they provided two hard boiled eggs for my husband and one for myself. When I protested they explained that experience had taught them that female guests used to send back one egg. The distinction between men and women according to their consumption of non-vegetarian food tends to equate the gentle sex with "gentler" food habits. In India this is the dominant image of woman, but there exists another one, that of woman as Śakti who is thought to be more active and by extension fiercer than contemplative man. In the human sphere the idea of woman as Śakti does not lead to feeding women with particularly "strengthening" items except at puberty, but it is evident in popular beliefs about female sexuality. Contrary to the Western cliché, which holds woman to be sexually more passive, in India she is believed to be more passionate. It may be recalled that the main reason advanced to justify child-marriage was that the young girl's passions must be directed into socially approved channels.

In the divine sphere the "taming of the shrew" through marriage is evident in the change of character and food preferences of the village goddess after her marriage to a high god, usually Śiva. She instantly gives up her taste for blood, becomes all sweetness and even develops a sweet tooth. The idea of the goddess as Śakti may be expressed by distinctive food offerings. The most common case is the village goddess who still receives blood sacrifice, while the village god Aiyanār in Tamilnad, for instance, refuses such an offering (in the process of Sanskritization it may also be the other way round: the powerful goddess may now conform to high-caste food standards and the bloody sacrifice goes to one of her male servants). Not only village shrines also Sanskritic temples, where no blood sacrifice is permitted, occasionally stress the power-aspect of the goddess by offering her an extra *naivedya* in the form of a "strengthening" sweet or salty cooky (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977a: 549).

The cultural concept which attributes character to food and then postulates a correspondence between the character of the food eaten and the character of the eater may determine human food choices just as it accounts for numerous distinctive food offerings to the gods. This concept is found in various parts of the world,

Western countries included. In India, however, it has received a quasi philosophical elaboration in the theory of the three *guṇas* as expounded in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (XVII, 8-10). This concept is not limited to gentleness and fierceness reflected in the diet, it also applies to physical strength. Everywhere in South India the benevolent but warlike monkey-god Hanumān known for his strength receives "strengthening" offerings of various kinds. In Tamilnad these consist of black gram cookies (*vaṭai*) strung up in a garland as if their power were to be multiplied in a chain reaction. In the human sphere, the equation of "strengthening" food with physical activity and fighting spirit may be seen in the Kṣatriyas' freedom to eat meat in spite of their high social position and in the fact that the Kanya-Kubja Brahmins studied by Khare (1966: 234) justify their meat-eating deviance by their military past. The same idea is also evident in the Tamil "Military Hotel". This type of restaurant does not necessarily cater for soldiers but serves non-vegetarian "warrior" fare. The concept of meat = strength is so deeply rooted in the human mind that it may even appear in modern scientific guise. The somewhat outmoded nutritional distinction between "high quality" animal proteins and "low quality" vegetable proteins is another version of the same theme. Cultural materialist Ross (1978: 2) readily espoused it and asserted that "animal protein is a major limiting factor in human adjustment to the Amazonian forest" trying hard to attribute his own view of deer and tapir as "protein packages" to South American Indians.

The analogy between the character of the food eaten and the character of the eater is equally apparent in the alimentary distinctions between Śiva and Viṣṇu in South India (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977c: 510). More than by the types of food they are said to like they differ by the relative quantity of food they are offered. The ascetic god Śiva receives more frugal offerings, a typical dish is pure rice (*suddhanna*) boiled without salt or other condiments, while the affable Viṣṇu is more frequently treated to a full-course meal. Rich food is thought of as "cooling" the stomach and the eye and coolness is associated with joyfulness and good nature. On the other hand, ascetics due to their austerities (*tapas*) accumulate heat and are given to outbursts of fury. Since aggressive persons are believed to prefer *rājasika* (passions-raising) food, when Śiva receives a rice and curry meal he does not disdain green chillies considered to be *rājasika*, while the even-tempered Viṣṇu rejects chillies altogether.

In the Hindu pantheon the major hierarchical distinction expressed through food is between pure and impure deities, and just as with human beings this distinction admits of a certain amount of grading. In Mysore Harper (1959: 227) found a tripartite division into benevolent vegetarian high gods (*devaru*) at the top, both benevolent and malevolent meat-eating *devates* in the middle and always malevolent blood-demanding *devvas* at the bottom of the hierarchy. This tripartite division is not found in the whole of South India as far as the meat/blood distinction is concerned. In my experience meat is much more rarely offered than blood and deities accepting the former also accept the latter, but the vegetarian/non-vegetarian opposition holds good everywhere.

The gods resemble human in the relative value attributed to vegetarian and non-vegetarian food and the consumption of alcohol and teetotalism. Persons relishing meat and alcohol remain at heart convinced that abstinence from both is preferable and therefore turn pure vegetarians and teetotallers at most ceremonial occasions. Thus vegetarianism and teetotalism are convenient common denominators for all types of persons and that explains the popularity of vegetarian restaurants in India, apart from economic reasons. Similarly, vegetarian offerings are a common denominator for all types of deities and no blood-thirsty goddess would take offence at being offered rice-pudding by a vegetarian, while it would be an impardonable insult to offer meat to a vegetarian god.

The fact that the gods resemble humans in making great use of staple foods, having a taste for local specialities and eating their devotees' family meals is too obvious to need any comment. The gods, however, resemble humans also in their attitude towards food in another way. In North India, according to Khare (1976: 95), all important deities have their own preferences with regard to food. My data from South India do not confirm this statement. It rather seems that a distinction is made between the highest gods Śiva and Viṣṇu, somewhat aloof and mostly concerned with the cosmic order on the one hand, and their more human forms and *avatārs* as well as minor deities inclined to intervene directly in wordly affairs on the other (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1978: 101-102). The former receive mainly standardized offerings, just as VIPs at official banquets are treated to international cuisine. The latter such as Kṛṣṇa, Gaṇeśa or Māriyamman have pronounced food preferences which makes it easy for their worshippers to delight them on the occasion of their festivals or whenever a boon is desired.

just as in the intimacy of the family every mother knows the idiosyncratic tastes of her family members and will prepare their favourite dishes whenever she wants to please them in particular.

There is another minor similarity between the food behaviour of the gods and that of their devotees. It only applies to a few gods, generally of Vaiṣṇava persuasion, but is so typical of India that it may be worth mentioning. Eating in India is a private matter and Manu (1971: chapt. III, 239) decreed that « A Caṇḍāla and a boar, a cock and also a dog, a woman in her courses and a eunuch, may not see the Brahmans eating ». This prescription is no longer taken literally, of course, but vestiges survive in the institution of the ladies' room in South Indian restaurants and in the fact that most hotel guests prefer to eat in their rooms rather than in the dining hall, even though there is an extra charge on room service. Similarly, in some South Indian temples, a curtain is drawn, when *naivedya* is offered to assure the divine eater's privacy (this is not to be confused with the drawing of a curtain in front of a vegetarian god in order to spare him the unpleasant sight of blood sacrifice offered to a blood-thirsty deity residing in the same temple compound).

The above similarities between human food behaviour in social life and divine food behaviour in religious ritual seem to support the social anthropologists' frequent contention that the religious structure would simply be modelled after the social structure. Against this contention I want to point out that the similarities are only part of the story. The existing differences will show that sometimes the social model does not apply at all and in other cases serves only as its opposite pole. Furthermore, I do not see any logical necessity for postulating the primacy of society with respect to religion. Since both society and religion have been created by the minds of the same people (at least in India, where neither the caste system nor the Hindu religion have been introduced from outside) similarities are bound to appear. Favourite concepts and values such as purity and pollution, the hot/cold classification, the stress on hierarchy, the relativity of values, the high esteem for austerity and vegetarianism may be expected to exist in the Hindu social life and religion. This is not to deny that some aspects of religion may be influenced by society but it may also be the other way round. The concept of woman as Śakti with its alimentary corollary, for instance, seems to have originated in religion and been only partially extended to the human sphere. If the human parallels to the

food of the gods are particularly numerous this has obviously to do with the fact that the food of the gods normally becomes food for humans and that a person may offer his ordinary meal to his household gods. In other less material parts of religion social parallels tend to be fewer. Mary Douglas (1970: 163) admits that her ingenious theory about the social matrix of religious ideas is hard to prove in the field of Indian religion, because of its great complexity. I should like to go further and claim that Indian culture completely refutes all alleged correspondences between grid and group and the degree of ritualism, because extreme ritualism, world renunciation, interior *bhakti* religiosity, ecstatic trance cults, philosophico-religious monism and dualism all comfortably co-exist with the same rigid social system.

2. Differences between the food of the gods and human food in South India

The daily schedule of *naivedya* in the great Sanskritic temples reflects the human habit of taking light meals in the morning and at night and a substantial dinner at about noon, but otherwise there are no exact parallels between the food of the gods and human food. Apart from specific temple traditions, the number of *naivedyas* depends very much on economic conditions. In the biggest temples and centres of pilgrimage the gods may eat various types of food up to 6-7 times a day (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1978: 91-92) thus outdoing even the most gluttonous human being. Conversely, in village shrines there may be no fixed *pūjā* and the deities may receive food offerings only on rare occasions less frequently than even an ascetic would be able to bear. Also the dishes offered do not faithfully reflect human fare; in temples there is much more emphasis on spiced or sweetened rice preparations, snacks for humans, than on the typical South Indian rice and curry. Some foods such as *suddhanna* would never do by itself for any Hindu but it is apparently sufficient for Siva and other gods.

These differences, however, are only minor ones, the major distinctions between the food of the gods and human food lie in the food avoidances of the gods. With very few exceptions, what may be offered to the gods may also be eaten by the worshipper, but not necessarily vice versa. Since I have dedicated a separate paper (1977b: 357-373) to the foods disliked by the gods I shall limit myself here to the salient points. Considering the importance

of ritual purity in India, it is not surprising that the common denominator of the foods not customarily offered or strictly forbidden to be offered is their insufficient purity. However, given that hierarchy partly based on the concept of purity and pollution is found in the gods, man and food and that the food eaten partly determines the ritual status of the gods and man, naturally hierarchical relations are complicated. The only observation that can be made without restriction is that the highest gods are purer and more concerned about purity in the choice of their food on all occasions than the highest Brahmin on ceremonial occasions. For all other gods and humans this unilinear hierarchy holds good in most cases but it may also disappear or be inverted.

In South India nowadays nearly all the gods residing in great Sanskritic temples are vegetarians. The superiority of the high gods with respect to their priesthood therefore cannot be symbolized by vegetarianism since also the priests are vegetarians. The Hindu *paṇḍits* however, who for millennia have been accustomed to making subtle philosophical distinctions have had no difficulty in elaborating numerous gradations of purity also within the vegetarian food category.

In Sanskritic temples even more rigorous precautions are taken to prevent the food from all possible contamination than in orthodox Brahmin houses. While in the latter the cooking is normally the task of women, in temples with Brahmin priesthood the collaboration of women is forbidden. At Alampur, Andhra Pradesh, I had the opportunity of observing an interesting exception to this rule. Just as in every other important Śiva temple there also women are normally excluded from cooking *naivedya,* but for a Vedic *homa* ceremony (offering into the fire) the priest's wife prepared the dough. This fact obviously indicated that contrary to Hindu ritual in Vedic ceremonies the concept of purity and pollution is less important. In temples in which non-Brahmin priests officiate, independently of the deity worshipped, purity rules are always relaxed and women may do the cooking.

South India has no exact equivalent of the North Indian *pakkā/kaccā* distinction of food, but the principles of this classification also serve either to eliminate some vegetable foods completely from the menu of the gods or to restrict them to minor deities. Water is an important carrier of pollution and hence the precautions taken about who cooks the boiled rice for the gods. Water, however, may also be applied to food before cooking: by parboiling

rice, soaking rice to prepare flattened rice or soaking pulses in order to prepare split pulse. Parboiled rice which is commonly used in human food, (it has a higher vitamin content) is almost always excluded from *naivedya* in South Indian temples and houses; split pulse is thought to be insufficiently pure for the high gods residing in temples, while in domestic ritual it may sometimes be offered; flattenened rice appears in some temple menues in South Kanara, but a distinction is made between the highest and purest god Viṣṇu who refuses it and Gaṇeśa and the goddess who having lesser purity scruples accept it.

Spices and condiments are favourite means of expressing hierarchical distinctions between the gods and humans. In ritual cooking unrefined brown sugar is substituted for white sugar. This may seem strange, because the whiteness of refined sugar might be thought to be a guarantee of purity. The reason for this seeming paradox is said to be that white sugar may be refined with the help of bone-ashes. It has therefore been contaminated by contact with a dead animal, one of the most powerful agents of pollution. Besides, the preference given to jaggery over its modern equivalent also falls under the general avoidance of modern foods to be discussed below.

Salt is considered to be a stimulant in India and has therefore a somewhat *rājasika* connotation. Persons performing partial fasts may abstain from it simultaneously as an austerity, since it is difficult to do without salt in hot weather, and as a means to raise their level of purity by avoiding all items smacking of impurity. The latter principle is extended to the food of the gods in Kerala. In no Keralese temple, not even in those dedicated to minor deities, salty food is offered to my knowledge (with the only exception of Padmanābhasvāmi temple, Trivandrum, in which Tamil influence is strong). I wonder whether cultural materialist Neumann (1977: 296-308; my comment and his reply 1978: 412-415) who tried to explain salt taboos at puberty and pregnancy by decreased physiological need would also consider the physiology of the gods or whether he would assert that Nambutiri priests, lay devotees and mendicants who consume the sweet *prasād* (consecrated food) due to some mutation need less salt than other people in a hot and humid climate.

Strong spices being deficient in purity Viṣṇu refuses all chillies while somewhat less refined Śiva tolerates green ones. Red chillies, however, are never used in South Indian temple cooking except at

its north-eastern fringe in Andhra Pradesh. The burning sensation they leave in the mouth need not exceed that of green chillies but this quality is psychologically enhanced by their burning red colour associated with heat, passion and violence which makes red chillies particularly *rājasika*. For garlic the prohibition is absolute in temple and domestic ritual and has its parallel in the South Indian Brahmins' distaste for the smelly bulb. As to onions, high gods are a little more discriminating in their food than their Brahmin priesthood. Onions are not added to *naivedya* prepared in Sanskritic temples but may be contained in offerings to lower deities. Besides, Brahmins and non-Brahmins offer their daily meals spiced with onions to their household deities whoever they may be.

Also a number of fruits and vegetables are not thought fit for the palates of the gods either because they have intrinsic qualities evoking an association of impurity or because they are customarily prepared during ancestor worship and have thus been indirectly contaminated by the impurity of death. Among the vegetables not used in South Indian temple cooking there is the group of so-called "English" vegetables such as tomatoes, carrots, cabbage etc. These have been introduced or popularized by the British and are now common ingredients in curries among all castes, but due to their relative newness they have not yet acquired ritual status. In this case the primary criterion of distinction between the gods and humans is orthodoxy. The high gods are more orthodox than the most orthodox Brahmin who in ordinary life must make some concessions to changing conditions not foreseen or approved by the sacred scriptures. All religions of the world are conservative and all innovations start in informal everyday life and tend to enter religious ritual only after having become thoroughly accultured. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hindu gods refuse food and drink not hallowed by tradition. Staples like tea and coffee, "Britannia" biscuits, popular *tiffins* (snacks) of North Indian origin etc. are unthinkable as offerings to any god in South India. If a new item happens to be prestige food, this fact may outweigh traditionalism, expensive pineapples and apples have thus become offerings in three of the four Dravidian states. Orthodox Nambutiri Brahmins of Kerala, however, will offer neither. It is a well-known fact that food habits are among the cultural traits most resistant to change and this apparently also applies to the gods. In spite of the general reluctance to introduce innovations in ritual, South Indian priests do not think that the gods might take offence at the use of electric

light and loudspeakers in the temples, but refuse to extend modernization to the food of the gods.

So far I have been concerned with the greater exclusiveness of the high gods in eating with respect to their worshippers of all castes. The lower deities may be less discriminating in their food than the high gods but in their case also purity precautions must be taken; the raw rice/parboiled rice distinction, for instance, is even made by tribes in Central and Eastern India (Kochar 1966: 244; Rosner 1964: 405). In the following I shall draw attention to two foods, both offered to minor deities, which do not become *prasād* and do not form part of the normal diet of any Hindu no matter what his caste may be. The first of these food items is blood. A number of village deities thirst for blood. Blood is spilled on the ground in front of them or sprinkled on their idols. Despite the similarity of this rite to *abhiṣeka* (the bathing or anointing of the idol) and the fact that people sometimes speak of blood *abhiṣeka* nobody would dream of collecting some of the blood and distribute it as *tirtha* 'holy water' as it happens in the case of true *abhiṣeka*. Besides, though the deity is thought to drink the blood and the *pūjāri* impersonating the deity may suck it or did so in the past (Whitehead 1921: 99), blood sacrifice is not called *naivedya* but *bali* and the dead animal's body is consumed later as ordinary food and not as *prasād*. Hindus unlike Muslims and Jews do not drain their meat from blood to the last drop, but this does not mean that blood as such is part of normal Hindu diet. The working of blood into sausages, as it is done in some Western countries, would be distasteful to most Indian meat eaters. I have come across of only one case of blood as food in South India and this not in fieldwork but in the shortstory *Eṅkō yārō yārukkākavō* 'Whom does it benefit?' by the Tamil writer Jeyakanthan (1973: 159). In the tale blood is fried by low castes and consumed in connection with a drinking bout and prostitution, three actions evoking similar association of moral depravity and ritual impurity. In accordance with the important distinction between external and internal pollution, worshippers do not shun external contact with sacrificial blood and may apply it to their foreheads, but would not debase themselves so far as to ingest it.

The second offering not normally considered human food and not becoming *prasād* are raw eggs. Just as in the case of blood sacrifice the offering of raw eggs belongs to the Hindu "little tradition". In using this term I am well aware that it is only a conve-

nient label separating gross categories whose boundaries are rather blurred. Both blood sacrifice and the offering of raw eggs as a rule occur only in village shrines with non-Brahmin priesthood but in Subrahmanya temple, Peralassery, North Kerala, where Nambutiri priests officiate, the offering of raw eggs is part of the ritual. The exclusive recipient of egg offerings is the snake and the deviance of the above temple becomes understandable, when we remember that Subrahmanya may be equated with the snake. In addition to the offering of milk to snake deities practiced all over India, in parts of the four South Indian states raw eggs may be offered to them by placing such eggs near the presumed abode of a snake (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977a: 555). The reason for offering milk and eggs to snakes is probably the association of fertility evoked by both the food and the divine recipient. In the human sphere, though all eggs are considered impure, hard boiled eggs in curry sauce form part of normal Indian non-vegetarian diet. In the course of modernization and westernization the English egg-breakfast with fried eggs (but without bacon) has become widely accepted in South India and the rest of the subcontinent and some vegetarians have transformed themselves into "eggetarians". Raw eggs, however, are quite a different matter. As something immature and imperfect they are doubly impure. Besides, the eating of raw eggs is more associated with the destruction of life and hence contrary the principle of *ahiṃsa* than the eating of hard-boiled eggs considered no longer living things. Whatever the reason may be, South Indian egg-eaters would normally feel disgusted at the mere thought of drinking a raw egg. Nevertheless, raw eggs may be recommended not so much as food than as a "strengthening" tonic. In Tamilnad girls at puberty may be obliged to drink raw eggs, occasionally even in pure vegetarian families (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1973: 6). Some women, however, told me that they could not bring themselves to do so and took the eggs boiled instead. Thus the deities relishing blood and raw eggs reveal themselves in a way to be impurer than even their lowliest worshippers who normally avoid such diet.

This observation contradicts the strong tendency revealed earlier to distinguish the gods from humans by stressing their greater purity, if not with respect to all Hindus so at least with respect to their traditional worshippers. The interesting implications of this contradiction for the concept of purity and pollution in the Hindu religion will be discussed in the last chapter.

3. Food transactions between the gods and humans in South India

The ritual offering of food is a two-way transaction because the *naivedya* offered to the deity returns to the offerer as *prasād*. The offering of *naivedya* without eating the *prasād* would be a grave offence to the deity just as a human host might feel offended, if a guest refuses what he offered him. Stories told during Satyanārāyana *pūjā*, a festival popular in the Deccan states, are designed to stress this point. Offering food to Satyanārāyana, a form of Viṣṇu, and omitting to eat the *prasād*, even unintentionally, causes all sorts of misfortune, but observing the rules of religion and consuming the *prasād* brings wealth and happiness. The importance of taking *prasād* is also illustrated by the custom of sending *prasād* by mail to devotees who paid for *pūjā* but could not be present during its performance.

It thus is not only desirable but compulsory to eat *prasād* but due to hierarchical differences between the gods on the one hand and human beings on the other, some contradictions and problems may arise. With regard to North India Khare (1976: 100-101) equates the rank of the *prasād* with the rank of the deity. My experience in South India does not confirm this statement. The cook's level of ritual purity is the all-important criterion except in the case of the lowest among supernaturals. If a Brahmin *purohit* 'family priest' is invited to officiate at a ceremony in a non-Brahmin house he will offer to the deities worshipped there food cooked by the ladies of the house along with uncooked items such as coconuts, bananas, sugar etc. At the end of the *pujā* he will distribute all types of *prasād* among the members of the family but he himself will eat only the uncooked *prasād*, independent of the rank of the deity worshipped. Nowadays, in order to obviate such problems, a Brahmin cook may be asked to prepare the food for the ceremony.

No high caste Hindu will temporarily give up his vegetarian principles to worship a meat-eating deity and take *prasād*, but even if the village deity is a vegetarian, the high caste worshipper will accept *prasād* only if it has been prepared and distributed by a Brahmin priest. Telugu Brahmins known to me have deviced the interesting strategy of double *prasād* in order to be able to worship a powerful blood-thirsty village goddess. At their house they cook vegetarian *naivedya* for the goddess and divide it into two parts. One part they offer to the goddess in their house with-

out immediately consuming *prasād*, the other they offer to the goddess in the village shrine giving her *prasād* to the non-Brahmin *pūjāri* who officiates. On returning home they eat the *prasād* of the offering made in their house. This complicated method consistent with the rules of ritual purity allows all concerned to be satisfied: the goddess is duly honoured, the *pūjāri* and the Brahmin worshippers themselves enjoy the benefit of *prasād*.

Pocock (1973: 61-63) has given some examples of individual solutions to similar ritual problems in rural Gujarat. Bhattiji, a local godling, used to have only a low caste *pūjāri* who prepared a vegetarian kedgeree for him. Now Bhattiji has also acquired a Brahmin priest who does not cook but limits himself to splitting the coconuts brought by all castes and distributing them as *prasād*. It is up to the conscience of the individual high caste Patidar worshipper whether he eats only the *prasād* distributed by the Brahmin priest, freely accepts the *prasād* cooked by the *pūjāri* or steers a middle course by tasting only a little of the latter "out of respect for the god". When no Brahmin priest officiates and the deity is of a frankly impure type, the question of *prasād* becomes even more tricky. Pocock mentions a case, in which Patidars tried to calm their conscience about having consumed tainted *prasād* by abstaining from sexual intercourse the following night or asserting that no salt was in the food. Pocock seems puzzled by the latter fact, but it becomes clear in the light of what has been said about the impurity of salt, which would aggravate the situation and the austerity involved in the abstention from it, which might be thought to compensate for the fault committed. Individual and regional differences in the treatment of *prasād* have probably always existed but will become more common now that not only Harijans have begun to enter Sanskritic temples but also village deities are increasingly upgraded and worshipped by high castes.

While the *prasād* of deities occupying intermediate rank may be subject to different treatment, the food offered when exorcising demons or performing black magic never becomes *prasād* to my knowledge. It is thrown away, burnt or left at a burning ground. In these cases, of course, no Brahmin priest officiates, but what makes the food inedible even to the members of low castes is the fact that it has been in contact with extremely polluting beings. Also the ancestor's *prasād* rarely becomes food for the living not even in Brahmin houses, where it is mediated by Brahmin cooks and offerers. Such *prasād* is felt to be too much tainted by the

pollution of death to be edible for humans and is usually given to crows and cows.

The passage of food from humans to the gods and subsequently from the gods to humans calls to mind food transactions which serve as an indicator of caste rank in ordinary life. In the Hindu society, as it is well known, accepting food from a person implies that the receiver considers himself to be equal or inferior to the giver. The greater prestige of the giver is probably grounded in the high moral value attributed to generosity. The principle is applied consistently in the social sphere, however, in ritual food transactions between humans and their gods an inconsistency appears, which has not failed to strike the anthropologist. The god who is believed to be superior to man has no objection to accepting cooked food from a person, which makes him equal if not inferior to that person. This inconsistency may be explained in at least three ways.

Babb thinks that the god consents to some loss of dignity caused by his acceptance of cooked food from an inferior — even a Brahmin priest in the state of ritual purity (*maṭi*) can never attain the perfect purity of a high god — foreseeing that he will triumph immediately afterwards. Since only untouchables will eat leavings, Babb (1975: 53-61) argues, the worshipper by eating *prasād*, the leavings of the god, debases himself to the level of an untouchable in front of the god and consequently « the equilibrium which had been disturbed by the initial prestation is once more restored. The god has received payment with honor, and therefore the proper hierarchy has been maintained ». The following objections may be raised against this interpretation. First, it attributes to all Hindu gods a calculating spirit which the high gods at least do not seem to merit. Second, it puts too much emphasis on the payment aspect in ritual offerings. The rationales for such offerings range from downright bribes in order to obtain boons and payments for benefits received to disinterested gifts to the god who strictly speaking does not need anything. In daily temple *pūjā* and domestic ritual the latter aspect undoubtedly dominates. Third, the equation of *prasād* with human leavings is highly debatable. *Prasād* is the food left over by the god but divine leftovers cannot be put on a par with human leavings in my opinion. Everywhere in India the terms for the two are quite distinct. The primary meaning of *pra-sāda* is clearness as of water or of a voice (Macdonell 1965: 183), which denotes the exact opposite, i.e. the

absence of all impurity. Besides, the impurity of leavings is above all due to their contamination by saliva and since the gods are normally thought of taking only the essence of *naivedya* there cannot be any contamination by saliva. Khare also stresses the latter fact and clearly distinguishes *prasād* from North Indian *jutha* (1976: 101). Furthermore, the same power which allows pollution to work not only by direct contact but also over a distance attaches to a blessing. *Naivedya* placed in front of the deity imbibes itself with divine essence and becomes consecrated food. The equation of *prasād* with human leavings therefore seems to miss the point completely.

The *bhakti* tradition provides another more likely explanation of the hierarchical inconsistency in the exchange of food between the worshippers and their gods. In India as elsewhere the offering of food to the gods and its subsequent consumption by the worshippers has a very long history and also the *bhakti marga* 'salvation by devotion alone' has been preached at least since the time of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Therefore I do not believe like Khare (1976: 103) that « ideologically, *prasād* is very much a new cultural code that flowered with the spread and the strength of the *bhakti* movement ». No doubt, however, the rituals of *naivedya* and *prasād* have experienced a rise in recent years. In South India, as a matter of fact, it is in the Vaiṣṇava temples, particularly connected with the modern upsurge of *bhakti*, that the most sumptuous meals are served to the gods and the longest lists of *prasāds* are sold to devotees. A well-known story tells of a simple-minded tribal woman who wished to please her favourite god by offering him fruits. Before doing so she tasted a little bit of each fruit to make sure to choose only the very best for her god. This behaviour, of course, broke the most elementary rules of ritual purity, because by tasting the fruits she offered leavings contaminated by her saliva, but lo behold!, the god did not take offence and even granted her *mokṣa* (liberation). The same idea, which is expressed in exemplary form in this story, may apply to all food offerings. As long as there is true devotion the god may overlook the slight difference in rank between himself and the ritually pure worshipper and accept what is lovingly offered to him.

A third way of explaining the hierarchical inconsistencies in the food transactions between the worshippers and their gods would be to disregard the social model. In my view it is unwarranted to think that concepts governing the transfer of food between

the members of the Hindu caste system must apply exactly in the same way to religious ritual. Certainly the concept of purity and pollution is relevant and care is taken to avoid offering any food suspected of impurity in order to emphasize the superiority of the gods. It is not at all sure, however, that the gods are considered like Brahmins who traditionally accept food only from their own castemen and from whose hands theoretically all other castes can eat. The gods cannot be caste-conscious when it comes to cooked food. As no goddess will prepare their food they have to rely on a somewhat inferior human cook, if they desire a warm meal at all. If human criteria were applicable the offering of food could have easily been restricted to raw food and other pollution resistant items, which even a Brahmin may accept from a Harijan. As no such solution has been adopted, clearly the social analogy does not hold.

Though the rules governing the unilateral transfer of food among members of the caste system do not seem to be applicable when cooked food is offered to the gods, it cannot be denied that a person's ritual status is important not only when offering food but also for any other contact with the divine. Otherwise the great Sanskritic temples would not have been closed to untouchables until recently, menstruating women would not be prohibited from entering a temple, the *garbha gṛha 'sanctum sanctorum'* of many temples would not be barred to non-Hindus and — with a few noteworthy exceptions — laymen would not be forbidden to touch the idol. In the light of these stringent purity rules another inconsistency appears. The same deity who in a Sanskritic temple cannot be approached let alone fed by a low caste person, in the house of that person accepts *naivedya* without taking offence. Incidentally, while caste pollution with respect to approaching and feeding the gods varies according to the scene of the ritual, temporary bodily pollution remains constant. Menstruating and parturient women as well as persons under death pollution are prohibited from entering their domestic *pūjā* rooms just as they are from entering Sanskritic temples. Also while the high gods are more particular than minor gods about the caste status of the persons approaching them the latter are as touchy as the high gods or more so when it comes to bodily pollution. This fact clearly shows the more fundamental nature of bodily pollution with respect to caste pollution and should make those wary who try to reduce the Hindu concept of pollution to caste pollution.

Babb (1975: 193-197) attempts to solve the problem of the varying purity standards of the Hindu deities according to their place of residence by proposing a double concept of deity. The deity in an operational sense would be a specific object of worship to which attaches purity; the deity in a nominal sense would be constituted by its name and a cluster of attributes including power but not purity. In this view « only in a nominal and analogical sense does the family worshipping Viṣṇu in its own shrine worship the same deity as in a major temple ». Though I find this idea interesting it does not completely convince me. The paradox of unity in multiplicity arises whenever idols are worshipped. It also exists in Catholic countries, where different localities worship different Virgins simultaneously convinced that all are one and the same mother of Christ and that their Virgin is their special patroness. What is more, in spite of the basic unity of all Virgins, one particular idol may be widely recognized to be more miraculous than the others. In the Christian case there is probably no logical explanation for this paradox, it just has to be believed; in the Hindu case, however, the concept of the *avatār* would seem to provide an elegant explanation. Hindu deities may incarnate themselves in every object and person. Mythology is full of stories about lowly devotees who as a boon for austerities performed had a deity born as their child or were allowed to raise a deity as their foster child. These human *avatārs* of the great gods are identical in essence with the deities residing in Kailāsa or Vaikuṇṭha but at the same time they belong to the family of their human parents and share to some extent their level of purity. Along these lines I explain the fact that the high gods do not hesitate to accept food in a non-Brahmin house. In three of the four South Indian states non-Brahmins apparently have no qualms to offer in their domestic *pūjās* food to the gods who in temples accept it only from Brahmin priests. In Kerala, however, the inconsistency has struck people and non-Brahmins there told me that they would not offer in their homes cooked food to Kṛṣṇa, for instance, but would give the raw materials to a Nambutiri priest who cooks and offers it on their behalf.

The concept of the *avatār* suggests a further consideration. Though the gods may incarnate themselves in any idol, some incarnations represent their true essence better than others and hence call for greater respect and purity scruples. The gods residing in major temples may thus be thought to correspond closer to their

prototypes than their namesakes in private *pujā* rooms. Even the idols in the temples differ in this respect, which explains the practice of pilgrimage to temples housing famous idols. In South India, for instance, the prototype of Murukan on earth resides at Palni and the prototype of Aiyappan lives at Sabarimala. It is not surprising therefore that more ritual precautions have to be taken about their food than in the case of less perfect incarnations worshipped in private *pūjā* rooms.

4. Communal eating of the food of the gods versus human food

To conclude the comparison between the food of the gods and human food I shall briefly refer to the social dimension of comunal eating. All over the world eating not only serves to satisfy one's physiological needs but the meal is made a social event uniting the family, a group of friends or a larger community. In India the family is only partially united by eating together because the wife customarily eats after her husband and it is the serving of food by the wife to her husband and elders rather than the actual eating which stresses the family bond. Incidentally, the same hierarchical inconsistency we have noted when cooked food is offered to a deity by a human being also appears when a wife serves food to her husband. In India the husband occupies a ritually and socially higher position than his wife and yet he accepts food from her. Convenience and practical realism, I think, are responsible for this slight departure from rules governing the transfer of cooked food. If the husband does not want to do the cooking himself (as he may do when his wife's ritual status sinks still lower during menstrual or birth pollution), he has to accept cooked food from his wife. Such informality, however, is only tolerated in the intimacy of the family, for public occasions male cooks tend to be engaged. In India the social significance of eating together is most clearly seen in the caste meal. It symbolizes the union and ritual equality of all caste members, or better subcaste members, and reasserts it in the case of the readmission of an excommunicated person after he has expiated his sin and provided a meal for his whole subcaste.

The common meal of the congregation is a recurrent religious feature. It has been made the central rite of Christianity and also stands out in Sikhism. Though Hinduism is a much more individualistic religion without a true Church, the consumption of *prasād*

also plays a role in the cohesion of the religious community. However, considering the hierchical principles governing commensality in Hindu India, the *prasād* bond does not extend as far as communal eating in egalitarian religions. Till the passing of the Temple Entry Act true commensal equality in Sanskritic temples only existed in the Jagannath temple of Puri, where all Hindus irrespective of caste have always been allowed to enter and consume together the *prasād* of cooked rice and *dhal*. This extraordinary case, in which the *prasād* bond truly unites all Hindu worshippers (foreigners and even western Harekrishna followers are prohibited from entering) in my view may be explained in two ways. Ritual and mythology seem to point to the incorporation and upgrading of tribal or low caste deities in the figures of Jagannath and his wife Lakṣmi. Their relative lack of caste-consciousness may have been retained resulting in the localized abolition of untouchability. A parallel exists in the Keralese favourite deity Aiyappan, almost certainly of tribal origin, in whose worship also secular hierarchy is nearly abolished. A second explanation might be that untouchability and the preoccupation with purity and pollution in general, though being important features of Hinduism have never been indispensable ones, just as no other feature of Hinduism is, if we define the religion polythetically according to a novel approach to concept formation (Shweder 1977: 645-646). Virasaivism, for instance, has remained a part of Hinduism in spite of its various deviances, one of which is the theoretical abolition of pollution. Also for the profoundly Hindu figure of the *sannyāsi* it does not matter by whom he is given food as alms, at least in theory. One might argue therefore that at the highest spiritual level the distinction between purity and pollution is meaningless and Jagannath, as the lord of the world, occupies an eminent spiritual position. On the other hand, just as their high value renders gold and silk resistant to pollution, *prasād* coming from the highest source may be thought to be impenetrable to pollution and thus permit the commensality of all Hindus, high and low.

Also in South Indian Sanskritic temples the hierarchical distance between humans is less when eating *prasād* than when taking secular food. In the secular context, the crucial distinction is between raw and cooked food or pollution resistant and pollutable food in general. Pollutable food restricts commensality to one's family and caste, pollution-resistant food permits much wider circulation. In the presence of the deity there is no such distinction.

All types of *prasād*, raw and cooked, pollution-resistant or not, are distributed among all worshippers. Even before the admittance of Harijans these included members of different touchable castes who would not otherwise eat together. There is also no distinction between worshippers according to sex and age; women and children do not eat after men, as it happens in the family. A certain reduction of the hierarchical distance among members of different castes may also characterize the consumption of the *prasād* of minor deities. Babb's villagers of Central India (1975: 37) stressed the fact that at their *matar* festival there was no untouchability, since everybody including the untouchables were given the milk *prasād* of the cowherd god. A closer look at the *prasād*, however, reveals that the abolition of untouchability was less radical, since it consisted of milk, an antidote against pollution.

In the worship of lower deities served by non-Brahmin *pūjāris* or at ceremonies in non-Brahmin houses with mixed attendance even *prasād* is not always able to wipe out all hierarchical distinctions among worshippers. As we have seen before, South Indian Brahmins may either completely refuse *prasād* on these occasions or accept only uncooked items. Babb (1975: 46) mentions another case in which hierarchy was preserved: at a ceremonial recitation in honour of Durgā the cooked *prasād* of the goddess was distributed among all persons present, but the Brahmin priest was served first and in a separate room. Thus the eating of *prasād* followed almost exactly the rules observed during a multicaste feast, when high castes are served first and members of different castes are seated in separate rows.

5. The Hindu concept of deity as revealed by food rituals

In the preceding exposition we have seen that the eating habits of the Hindu gods reveal them to be both similar to and different from human beings. Similarities predominate and differences are by degree rather than in essence. This reflects, of course, the Hindu concept of deity which does not distinguish radically between god and man. The term "god" presupposes man to be its polar opposite and it is a truism that all religions conceive their gods as somehow distinct from human beings otherwise worship would be meaningless. Polytheistic religions such as Hinduism, however, tolerate a fair amount of similarities between the two,

while monotheistic religions tend to stress distinction. The latter tendency probably reaches its culminating point in Islam.

Lokhandwalla with regard to the Ismaili heresy speaks of « an abolute unwillingness to ascribe any characteristic to God which might conceivably have anything in common with the created being, to the point of avoiding a noun while referring to God » (Malik 1977: 152). In such a religion, naturally, there can be no question of endowing God with human qualities (except perhaps a certain complacency in hearing his praise?), let alone physiological desire for food. The ancient Hebrews though also denying their God anthropomorphic features saw him less radically different from themselves. He did not disdain food but chose the food medium to mark a clear distinction between himself and his people. Apart from a number of items he shared with them, blood and fat were reserved for him and absolutely forbidden to them (Blome 1934: 166).

The lack of absolute distinction between the Hindu gods and their worshippers is, of course, not limited to the alimentary field. Not only do the gods have human forms and *avatārs*, also human beings may become deified. A faithful wife who committed *sati* may be worshipped as a village goddess and a hero who sacrificed his life for the common good may become a god. Just as in other religions in Hinduism the gods differ from humans by being immortal, but in Hindu mythology minor gods may die — to be instantly resurrected by a major god — and immortality is a less distinctive feature of the gods when also human beings are believed to be constantly reborn. The Hindu gods, similar to human beings, marry and have children. However, curiously enough, the latter physiological characteristic is preferably singled out to mark a distinction between the gods and humans in Hinduism and other religions. While the gods and goddesses closely resemble humans in their food and sex-behaviour and the goddesses may even menstruate, divine births almost always occur ectopically or in some other abnormal non-human way.

The Hindu gods, in my opinion, distinguish themselves from humans above all in power and purity. Both power and purity are not equally distributed among all the gods of the pantheon, but exist in various gradation. The purest gods are the most powerful but a decrease in purity does not entail an equal decrease in power. The power of an impure god is only less extensive than that of a

Sanskritic god, but unrivalled in his special field of competence, hence the necessity for vegetarians to worship powerful non-vegetarian deities despite the complications their *prasād* gives rise to. In ritual all gods are indisputably superior in power to all worshippers, otherwise the latter would not ask the formers' help and protection. In religious philosophy and mythology, however, hierachical inversions may occur. Not only can the gods be cajoled into granting blessings and material benefits to humans — this is common to all pragmatic forms of religion — but a person by appropriate austerities may surpass his human condition and become as powerful and even more powerful than the gods. This unique Hindu concept of man and indirectly of deity is expounded by yogic philosophy and illustrated by many myths. A *ṛsi* 'seer' by submitting himself to severe and prolonged austerities may succeed in obliging a major god, almost against the latter's will, to grant him a boon likely to cause trouble even to the god himself. In the end the correct hierarchy is restored, the too powerful *ṛsi* succumbs due to his excessive pride or is outwitted by the god. Thus the inversion of the normal hierarchy between the gods and man with regard to power is only partial and temporary, but that it has been visualized at all is striking enough.

Conversely, the superiority of the gods to man with regard to purity is never questioned by Hindu philosophy and mythology to my knowledge, but in the ritual of *naivedya* and *prasād* the hierarchy of purity becomes relative. On the basis of their *naivedya* and the acceptability of their *prasād* four status groups among the gods may be distinguished in South India:

1. the highest and purest strictly vegetarian gods enjoy ritually higher status than all worshippers and extra precautions must be taken in the choice and preparation of their food in order to meet their purity standard;

2. lower vegetarian deities stand on a nearly equal footing with their high caste devotees, whose normal vegetarian food they willingly accept and who in turn will eat their *prasād*, if mediated by a Brahmin priest;

3. meat-eating and blood-demanding deities rank higher than their non-vegetarian worshippers, but lower than vegetarian Hindus who may or may not worship them, but would never eat their impure non-vegetarian *prasād;*

4. blood-thirsty demons and semi-divine ancestors occupy the lowest position; the *prasād* of the former is never acceptable to any worshipper and that of the latter only exceptionally becomes food for their living family members.

The classification traced above ranks the gods and humans along a consistent purity-impurity continuum. There are, however, isolated instances in which an inversion occurs. We have already met the case of minor deities who by accepting blood and raw eggs reveal themselves to be less purity-minded and impurer than even their non-vegetarian worshippers.

A similar inversion of the normal hierarchical relation between Hindus and their gods with respect to purity may be concluded from the decision taken by the temple authorities at Kolar Gold Fields, Karnataka, after written consultation with the Saṅkara *Maṭha*, Sringeri, the highest religious institution of Smārta Brahmins and Hindus in general (Gnanambal 1973: 54-56). In the evening of the day fixed for the car-festival followed by Brahmin feeding a lunar eclipse was foreseen. In order to avoid the inauspicious influence of this astronomical event, the car-festival, i.e. the procession of the gods, was arranged a few hours earlier than usual so that it would be finished before the actual eclipse. For the Brahmin feeding, however, the whole day was thought to be insufficiently pure and the ceremony was therefore postponed until the next day. In my experience all food served on such occasions is first offered to the gods and the Brahmin guests consume only *prasād* (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1978: 93-94). Implicitly therefore the eclipse might also pollute the food of the gods, but the temple authorities did not ask about the appropriateness of offering *naivedya* on the day of a lunar eclipse and seemed concerned only about the purity of the food eaten by humans.

The disposal of the ancestors' *prasād* provides another instance of an apparent inversion of divine and human purity standards. In South India the ancestors' *prasād*, which due to its contact with death has mostly become inedible for the family members performing *śrāddha* 'death ceremony', may be given either to crows or cows. While such polluted food would seem to be appropriate fare for crows, rather impure themselves and believed to be the ancestors' representatives, the offering of tainted food to the cow is inconsistent with the normal attitude towards the sacred animal, the embodiment of purity.

These last three examples seem to contradict the numerous cases mentioned earlier in which extra precautions in the choice and preparation of *naivedya* were taken in order to satisfy the desire of the gods for purity. In their primary concern with man and his purity these deviant cases remind of the *yogi* bent on increasing his own power with a certain disregard of the gods. However, another interpretation is conceivable which rejoins what has been said about the superior power of the gods acknowledged in ritual. Just as in everyday life woman is considered the weaker vessel with respect to man and has to take extra precautions about her food and other aspects of behaviour, in the ritual sphere human beings are the weaker vessel with respect to the gods and have to be extra careful about their purity, especially because the gods have made scrupulous purity the *sine qua non* condition for approaching them. In this sense the superior power of the gods enables them to cope with cosmic and bodily pollution better than their worshippers. This interpretation seems to fit particularly well the pure and sacred cow which receives *prasād* too impure for humans. The same power which makes it produce pollution resistant and purifying substances (*pañcagavya*) may also make her neutralize the pollution danger in food too great for humans.

In sum, despite numerous similarities between the food of the gods and human food in South India, which seem to point to egalitarian relations between the gods and their worshippers, hierarchical distinctions are never lost sight of. The hierarchy between the gods and humans as it emerges from the comparison of their food is primarily one of purity. The gods surpass humans in purity and require purer food than they do. Exceptions to this general rule occur mostly when high castes are worshipping deities of lower castes.

Undoubtedly, purity is one of the highest values in Hinduism and therefore the strictest rules of purity govern the worship of the gods. This is the major theme, but occasionally two minor themes are discernible inverting or negating the main one. One minor theme sees the gods above all in their power aspect and thus holds them to be resistant rather than vulnerable to pollution. As a corollary of this view human beings may at times be more worried about becoming polluted themselves than they are about shielding their gods against pollution. Another minor theme considers the divine not only to be pollution resistant but to tran-

scend purity and pollution. This theme is apparent at Puri, where caste pollution has been abolished, in Virasaivism and above all in the figure of the world renouncer for whom all distinctions between pure and impure are meaningless. If this second minor theme acquires momentum, it may help Hinduism to survive unharmed the onslaught of modernity which brings in its wake a decreased concern with ritual purity and pollution.

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Summary

The food of the gods and human food in South India as well as the exchange of food and communal eating in ritual and social contexts are compared in order to gain information about the Hindu concept of deity and the role of purity and pollution in Hinduism.

The predominance of similarities over differences in divine and human food behaviour reflects the fact that the Hindu gods are not conceived as radically different from man. Rather than being due only to unilateral borrowing from the social field, the similarities seem to correspond mostly to certain concepts and values created by the Indian mind which may appear in both religion and society. The interpretation of food exchange in ritual according to the model of food transactions in the caste society seems to be misleading.

Most differences between the food of the gods and human food reveal a hierarchy of purity, the gods surpassing humans in purity and

requiring purer food than humans. However, the existence of grades of purity among the gods and among their worshippers complicates the picture. On the basis of the food offered (*naivedya*) and the acceptability of the consecrated food returned to the worshipper (*prasād*) four ritual status groups among the gods may be distinguished. Though the greater purity of the gods and their particular concern with pollution in comparison to man is a major theme in Hinduism, occasionally two minor themes are discernible which invert and even negate this major theme.

Sommario

L'autrice confronta i cibi degli dei e degli uomini nell'India meridionale nonché lo scambio di cibi e la commensalità nei contesti rituale e sociale per trarre informazioni sul concetto indù della divinità e sul ruolo della purezza e della polluzione nell'induismo.

Il predominio delle somiglianze sulle differenze nel comportamento alimentare degli dei e degli uomini riflette il fatto che gli dei indù non sono concepiti radicalmente differenti dagli uomini. Piuttosto che essere dovute soltanto a prestiti unilaterali dal campo sociale, tali somiglianze sembrano corrispondere per lo più a certi concetti e valori creati dalla mente indiana i quali possono apparire sia nella religione che nella società. L'interpretazione dello scambio di cibi nel rituale secondo il modello del trasferimento di cibi nella società di caste sembra errata.

La maggior parte delle differenze fra i cibi degli dei e quelli degli uomini rivela una gerarchia di purezza; gli dei cioè superano gli uomini in purezza e richiedono cibi più puri che non questi ultimi. L'esistenza di gradi di purezza, sia fra gli dei che fra i loro fedeli, però rende questo quadro più complicato. Sulla base dei cibi offerti (*naivedya*) e dell'accettabilità dei cibi consacrati e restituiti ai fedeli (*prasād*) si possono distinguere quattro gradi di status rituale fra gli dei. Sebbene la maggiore purezza degli dei e la loro particolare preoccupazione per la polluzione rispetto agli uomini siano un tema dominante nell'induismo, appaiono talvolta anche due temi che invertono e perfino negano questo tema dominante.