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The Gastronomy of the Divine: Alimentary Pluralism and Ritual Diversity in Sanatana Dharma

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ABSTRACT

Within Hindu religious traditions, *prasada* (sacred offerings) functions as a powerful socio-religious medium through which communities express ideas of purity and pollution, spirituality, and collective identity. Practices related to *parasad* vary significantly across sects, regions, and ritual systems, reflecting the broader phenomenon of alimentary pluralism in the *Sanatana Dharma*. While mainstream ideas frequently associate Hindu dietary practices with a uniform, monolithic *Sattvika* (vegetarian) ideal, many temple lineages, particularly those associated with *Shakta* traditions and localised folk traditions—incorporate non-vegetarian offerings (*bali*), fish, and meat within their core ritual system. These traditions often symbolise transgressive sacrality, where elements viewed as impure within the orthodox broader framework acquire a sacred form through regional ritual and spiritual processes. The paper further examines how food practices become markers of social boundaries, cultural negotiation, and sectarian identity. By using a comparative qualitative approach, this paper compares the highly policed *Sattvika* protocols of the Jagannath temple in Puri with the *Rajsika* transgressive sacrality of the Kamakhya temple in Assam. Furthermore, the study broadens its scope to look at the regional sacrality of fish in Bengali *Saktism* and meat offerings to *Grama-devatas* across many regions in India, mapping the profound impact of regional ecology symbolising alimentary pluralism.

Keywords: Alimentary Pluralism, *Prasada,* Purity and Pollution, *Sakta* Traditions, and Transgressive Sacrality.

Introduction:

Food, Ritual, and the Alimentary Matrix

Across human civilisations, food within a religious context functions as more than just biological sustenance; it constitutes a dense, highly coded symbolic language that demarcates the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Within the matrix of *Sanatana Dharma,* dietary discipline and rituals are structurally tied to cosmic order (*Ṛta)*, internal psychological or spiritual disposition *(Gunas*), and social organisation.

A key aspect of this ritual intersection is *prasada*— a Sanskrit term literally denoting divine grace, favour, protection, or kindness. In the context of temple ritualism*, prasada* implies food or material offerings that undergo sacred spiritual transformation. Food is first prepared under stringent ritual protocols and offered to a deity as *naivedya* (the initial unconsecrated offering). Through the gaze, touch, or spiritual consumption by the deity during *puja,* the offering is infused with divine energy and grace. This food, when redistributed to the devotee community, is no longer ordinary food (*anna*); it is the physical embodiment of divine grace. The consumption of *prasada* is an act of sensory, emotional, and spiritual communion, establishing a direct link between the human devotee and the supreme form.

However, the empirical reality of *prasada* across the Indian subcontinent radically overturns contemporary, flattened assumptions of universal Hindu vegetarianism. The dietary landscape of Hindu ritualism is explicitly pluralistic, showcasing the vast internal diversity of the Hindu temple lineages. While on one side, mainstream *Vaiṣṇava* lineages enforce strict vegetarianism based on the ethics of *Ahiṃsa* (non-injury) and the cultivation of *Sattva* (clarity, purity, and calmness). Conversely, *Sakta*, Tantric, and localized folk ("Little Tradition") shrines routinely include the offering of fish, meat, and ritual blood sacrifice (*Bali*) to appease the active, fierce (*Ugra)* manifestations of cosmic energy (*Sakti*).

This coexistence of both the vegetarian and non-vegetarian foodscapes in the *Prasada* presents a critical sociological enquiry: how do these diametrically opposed culinary systems operate within a singular religious framework without resulting in structural fracture? This paper applies an interdisciplinary anthropological and sociological approach to decode and analyse how these dual expressions of sacred food negotiate caste hierarchy, regional ecology, scriptural authority, and cultural continuity.

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Objectives of the Study

i. To study the sociological, anthropological, and devotional significance of *prasada* within Hindu religious traditions.
ii. To analyse the functioning of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian *prasada* practices across prominent Indian temple lineages.
iii. To explore how ideas of purity, pollution, and ritual hierarchy are maintained, challenged, or transformed through sacred food traditions.
iv. To analyse the connection between caste, regional ecology, and culinary practices within temple spaces.
v. To evaluate the coexistence and cross-pollination of Brahmanical ("Great Tradition") and folk ("Little Tradition") religious frameworks through their respective food practices.
vi. To critically evaluate contemporary structural transformations in *prasada* traditions under the influence of modernisation, globalisation, middle-class Sanskritisation, and legal-ethical state interventions.

Methodology

This paper is descriptive and analytical in nature and follows a qualitative framework based primarily on secondary research. The empirical baseline of this study is grounded on an extensive review of literature ranging from several foundational texts in the sociology of religion, cultural anthropology, ethnographic monographs, and scriptural-historical analyses of Hindu temple rituals.

The theoretical framework of the study further integrates the structural-functionalist approach to social systems championed by Mary Douglas and Louis Dumont, alongside M.N. Srinivas's dynamic model of cultural mobility. Instead of viewing the temple food practices only through a theological or normative perspective, the study treats food as a social institution that clearly reflects power relations and inherent social structures. This paper also uses a comparative case study approach, specifically tracking the *Sattvika* food rituals of the west-central coast (Puri, Odisha) and the *Rajasika* Tantric lineages of the northeast (Kamakhya, Assam). These cases offer a clear lens for examining the ideological boundaries and continued adaptability of alimentary pluralism within historical and contemporary Indian traditions.

Theoretical Framework: Purity, Pollution, and the Symbolic Order

In order to deconstruct the sociological realm of the sacred offering in the form of Prasad, it is necessary to delve into the classic anthropological frameworks governing food, taboo, and social structure. Since food has always been an integral part of the Indian ritualistic landscape, it has become a tool for drawing social boundaries.

a. Mary Douglas: "Matter Out of Place" and Structural Taboo

In her foundational text *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas argued that uncleanness or impurity is not an absolute, isolated property; rather, it is "matter out of place". Certain elements are considered impure when they disrupt a society's cherished system of categories. Social orders maintain their stability by creating strict boundaries and labelling any transgression of those boundaries as a spiritual and cultural pollutant. Within mainstream, orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism, the culinary classification system is anchored in a strict hierarchy of the three cosmic properties (*gunas*): '*sattva'* (purity, light), '*rajas*' (passion, dynamism), and '*tamas*' (darkness, decay). Across the majority of Hindu traditions, the cosmos is structured around ideals of non-ahimsa and *sattvic* foods. In this orthodox taxonomy, meat, fish, alcohol, and even certain root vegetables (like onions and garlic) are classified as *tamasika* or *rajasika*. The *Tamasika* and *Rajasika* foods are treated as "matter out of place" within standard sacred cultural perimeters because they are believed to disrupt the spiritual clarity prescribed for Vedic or *Sattvika* worship. A non-vegetarian *prasad* that involves flesh, blood, and the taking of life is usually viewed as boundary-blurring.

b. Louis Dumont: The Pure/Impure Binary and Caste Commensality

In his seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), sociologist Louis Dumont posited that the structural core of the Indian caste system is the absolute ideological opposition between the pure and the impure. According to him, this binary opposition shapes social relations and is maintained through the rules of commensality—the social codes specifying who can cook food, who can serve it, and with whom one can share a meal. Traditionally, Hindu society categorises food into "*Kacha*" (unfried, simple water-based foods like boiled rice) and "*Pacca"* (fried, ghee-based foods). *Kacha* food is considered more vulnerable to ritual pollution; it can only be accepted from individuals of an equal or higher ritual caste status. Through this caste-based lens, food becomes more than just a medium of nourishment. It also functions as a weapon of social distance. Through everyday cooking practices, these markers of social hierarchy and distance are reinforced into the social system.

Historical Evolution: The Vedic Sacrificial Past vs. Post-Buddhist Ahimsa Reform

The modern idea of Hinduism as a uniformly vegetarian religion is a historical construction. To understand how *Sattvika* (pure/vegetarian) and *Rajasika* (non-vegetarian/stimulating) food rituals came to coexist, it is

crucial to look at the historical shifts that have taken place in the Indic religious landscape.

a. The Vedic Ritual Matrix and Early Animal Offerings

The crux of the earliest phase of Hinduism, seen in the Vedic *Saṃhitas* and *Brahmaṇas,* was centred on the *yajna*—a highly structured sacrificial ritual. These ancient rituals were highly organised, and offerings of grain, clarified butter (*ghṛta)*, and domestic animals (such as goats, rams, and bulls) were ritually dedicated to the Vedic Gods.

The priests (*Ṛtviks*) and patrons (*Yajamanas)* who performed the *yajnas* (sacrificial offerings) consumed part of these offerings. In the Vedic period animal sacrifice was not considered profane slaughter; it was seen as a sacred act meant to ensure cosmic stability, the sustenance of earth's fertility, military victory, and the maintenance of the structural order of the universe (*Ṛta*).

b. The *Sramaṇic* Revolution and the Rise of *Ahiṃsa*

In the Axial Age (circa 6th century BCE), there was the rise of *Sramaṇic* movements—most notably Buddhism and Jainism—that launched a radical critique against the Vedic sacrificial mechanism and promoted the ideals of *ahimsa* (non-violence). These movements criticised animal sacrifice and encouraged compassion and non-cruelty towards all living beings.

As a response to these completely opposite ideological challenges, mainstream Brahmanical traditions underwent a profound internal restructuring. Experts within the *Upaniṣadic* and later *Puraṇic* lineages incorporated the doctrine of *Ahiṃsa* (non-injury) into their core ethical frameworks.

With the passage of time, vegetarian food associated with the *Sattvika* ideals became a marker of purity, spiritual discipline and higher caste identity. Mainstream Hindu ritualistic traditions accepted *Sattvika* food as the main norm in public religious practices and temple worship, while animal sacrifices slowly became a socially marginalised ritualistic practice.

Case Study I: The *Vaiṣṇava* Tradition and the *Sattvika Mahaprasada* of Jagananth Puri

The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, stands as one of the most predominant institutional manifestations of *Sattvika* ritualism. Its scared temple kitchen, famously known as the *Rosaghara*, reflects sacred culinary operations within a highly sophisticated preservation of ancient Indic knowledge systems (IKS) centred on structural purity.

a. The Idea of the *Rosaghara*

The temple kitchen operates under strict traditional codes that clearly define the boundary between ritual cleanliness and pollution. Cooking in the sacred kitchen is the task assigned to only the *Suaras* (traditional temple cooks), whose role is passed down through generations. The traditional temple cooks use a unique method of cooking through a unique layered thermodynamic architecture in which unglazed earthen pots known as *kudua* are stacked one above the other over open wood fires. A most interesting process takes place in this architecture where the pot placed on the top cooks first, a magical phenomenon devotees believe takes place due to the blessings of Goddess Lakṣmi.

From a sociological angle, the sacred kitchen of Jagannath Puri gives more importance to ritual purity and sacred intention than the mere physical production of food. If anything considered an impure or polluting element—such as a dog—breaches the sacred perimeter of the sacred kitchen, the entire food is instantly treated as impure. The cooked food is then buried within the temple premises; purification rituals are undertaken, and the entire cooking process again begins.

b. The *Chappan Bhog* and Colonial Exclusion

The *Chappan Bhog*, a daily offering of 56 food items to Lord Jagannath, is strictly vegetarian and prepared as per *Sattvika* principles that promote purity, calmness, and spiritual balance. In the preparation of the sacred *Bhog,* the temple strictly follows traditional food practices, excluding vegetables such as green chillies, tomatoes, potatoes, and cauliflowers that entered the Indian Territory during the colonial period.

Instead, the sacred offerings made to the deities are prepared using native indigenous ingredients such as yams, ginger, ash gourd, and native varieties of rice. By using indigenous ingredients, the temple preserves the purity and ensures continuity of its ancient ritualistic traditions.

The food offered achieves the status of *Mahaprasada* (Great Grace) only after it is offered to the Tantric deity Goddess *Bimala*, seated within the temple complex itself. This ancient practice showcases the blending of *Vaishava* and *Shakta* traditions enclosed in a vegetarian ritual system.

c. Commensality and Social Levelling in the *Ananda Bazar*

The *Ananda Bazar* (Market of Joy), present within the temple complex, represents a radical, localised subversion of Dumont's purity-pollution hierarchy. Within this sacred space, the usual caste-based notions of purity and pollution, the markers of social distanciation, are all set aside.

Devotees from both uppercase Brahmin families and historically marginalised communities sit and eat together in the same sacred space, sometimes even sharing food from the same *Kudua* (earthen pot). As per *Vaishnava* belief, the divine grace of Lord Jagannath and

his siblings is something that transcends the ascribed social division. Thus, the sharing of *Mahaprasada* becomes a powerful institutional space for social levelling.

Case Study II: The *Rajasika* Reality and Transgressive Sacrality at Kamakhya

On the other pole of Sanatana Dharma stands the *Sakta* Tantric complex, most famously exemplified by the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. Unlike the purity-centred *Sattvika* principles, the *Sakta* traditions understand the universe through the lens of *Rajas* (power, energy, and passion) and *Tamas* (destruction, transformation, and change). The *Rajas* and *Tamas* forces are believed to be the expressions of the divine, fierce feminine energy, or *Shakti*.

a. The Religious Aspect of *Bali* (Blood Offering/Animal Sacrifice)

It will be an epistemological error to understand the practice of animal sacrifice (*Bali*) at Kamakhya as simply an ordinary slaughter from a modern secular perspective. In *Tantrism*, *Bali* carries a deep spiritual meaning, as is evident from ethnographic and textual analyses of North-east Indian Tantric lineages.

As per the Tantric traditions of North-east India, the sacrificial animal, which is usually a male goat, undergoes ritual transformation and is considered an energy offering to the Divine Mother (Shakti). The act of *Bali* is believed to confer liberation (*moksha*) to the souls of the sacrificed animals.

The offering of flesh and blood can also be understood as a way to satisfy the fierce (*ugra*) form of the goddess. The tradition of *Bali* does not just simply mean an act of violence, but it represents the sacred cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

b. Sacred Transgression and *Maha-Kaula-Prasada*

Following the ritual sacrifice, the meat is prepared according to secret ritual Tantric codes and distributed among the devotees as *Maha-Kaula-Prasada*. When viewed from a sociological lens, this embodies what Mary Douglas defined as the sacralisation of the anomalous or "transgressive sacrality", wherein things considered forbidden or impure are elevated to the status of being sacred.

In most orthodox Brahmanical frameworks, consumption of meat, fish, and alcohol *(madya)* is viewed as impure and polluting. However, in the Tantric traditions these same substances are ritually purified and consumed as the sacred grace of *Shakti*. This showcases the tantric belief in non-dualism—the idea that clean and unclean, pure and impure are all ultimately human constructions and lose their meaning in front of the Mother Goddess.

This sacralisation of the body and biology is also clearly reflected in the temple's celebration of the Ambubachi Mela, where the menstruating goddess is venerated as the ultimate source of cosmic fertility, creation, and power. This festival challenges social taboos related to menstruation and the female body by treating them as sacred rather than impure.

c. Ecological Foundations and the Blending of Traditions

The local geography and environment also play a major factor in influencing the religious traditions, as is evident from the continued practice of non-vegetarian *prasada* in certain parts of Bengal, Odisha, Assam, and Kashmir. In mountainous areas and river-based regions, fish and meat form the baseline of human survival. As a result, the "little traditions" of indigenous, folk, tribal, and agrarian religions naturally blend with the "great tradition" of *Sanskritic* Hinduism.

Instead of strictly imposing vegetarianism on all the regions, these blended traditions adopted the local dietary food cultures and ecological conditions. Foods naturally available in the local environment were incorporated in the religious rituals and offered to the deities as sacred offerings. This blending of the traditions reflects how Hindu traditional rituals evolve differently across regions while remaining attached to the greater spiritual cord.

Folk Deities and Regional Expressions of Alimentary Pluralism

The coexistence of vegetarian and non-vegetarian *prasada* in temple traditions in Hinduism is further supported by many regional food practices across the Indian landscape.

a. The Great Traditions and Little Traditions: Robert Redfield's Perspective

Anthropologist Robert Redfield used the concepts of *"Great Tradition"* and *"Little Tradition"* to explain cultural diversity. The Great Tradition represents the formal, elite, text-based, highly Sanskritised form of religious practices maintained by literate specialists. The Little Tradition, on the other hand, represents the localised, oral, vernacular culture of village communities, folk practitioners, and tribal and agrarian groups.

In *Sanatana Dharma*, these two traditions are not completely divergent. Rather, they constantly influence each other through a continuous process of mutual borrowing and negotiation. Folk food practices and ritual offerings to the deities are the prime areas where this intersection becomes more prominent.

b. Envisioning the Sacredness of Fish in Bengali Saktism

In the land of West Bengal, where the river strongly influences everyday life and dietary habits, fish is not seen as any ordinary food; it holds deep religious and cultural significance. It represents auspiciousness, fertility, and

prosperity. This ecological reality is directly integrated into the sacred sphere.

During Durga Puja and in prominent shrines like Kalighat and Tarapith, fish are prepared according to specific rites and offered to the goddess as *bhog*. After the ritual offering, the *prasada* is then distributed among the families and ascetics alike.

This ritualistic practice shows how local ecological conditions play a determining role in shaping religious traditions and rituals. In Bengali *Shakta* worship, an ordinary dietary staple becomes a sacred medium of connection with the divine grace.

c. The *Kula-devatas* and *Grama-devatas* of Southern and Western India

Across the Deccan Plateau, South India, and Western regions like Maharashtra and Goa, the worship of *Kula-devatas* (family or clan protector deities) and *Grama-devatas* (village guardian deities) reflects a huge diversity of food-related ritual practices. Deities such as Khaṇḍoba, Mariamman, and Mulaverna are offered and worshipped through annual festivals (*jatras*), in which they are offered roasted meat and indigenously prepared alcoholic drinks as ritual offerings. Interestingly, these rituals to appease the local deities are often performed by non-Brahmin priests. As answers to their devotion, the deities protect the community from epidemics, droughts, and malevolent forces.

The meat offered to the *Kula-devatas* and *Grama-devatas* is distributed among all the devotees. This practice reinforces social harmony and strengthens the community's solidarity. Moreover, such practices demonstrate that in various folk religious traditions, the divine is something that is actively connected with everyday material life.

Sociological Analysis: Sanskritisation and Contemporary Change

The contemporary landscape of ritual food practices in the Indian landscape is undergoing rapid modification. This rapid transformation can be best understood through M.N. Srinivas's (1966) framework of Sanskritisation. The term refers to the process by which regional, local, or historically marginalised communities or groups adopt the customs, practices, rituals, and way of living of the upper-caste *Sanskritic* communities in order to elevate their status in the caste hierarchy.

a. The *Sattvikisation* of Shrines and Influence of the Middle Class

In many rural and semi-urban parts of India, there is a growing trend wherein several regional folk shrines are drifting apart from their ancestral non-vegetarian *prasada* traditions and adopting a homogenised vegetarian baseline ritualistic practice.

This transition has been further reinforced and strengthened and is accelerated by the rise of an urban, educated, globalised Hindu middle class that usually views *Sattvika* vegetarianism as the most ideal form of dietary practice in Santana Dharma. Resultantly, many older and region-specific ritual practices are slowly losing their form or are being replaced in order to fit the modern notion of religious social status.

b. Ecological Disconnection and the Loss of the "Little Traditions"

The increasing dominance of *Sattvika* practices has led to the gradual weakening of various regional and folk traditions commonly referred to as the "little traditions". When indigenous communities start abandoning the practice of offering their local yields of fish, wild meat, or local grains to their deities, a vital part of their archive of localised ecological memory, communal identity, and traditional heritage is also destroyed.

The rich diversity of India's sacred ritual landscape is gradually turning into a homogenised religious culture. The local food practices often preserve the indigenous knowledge about the local environment and the native communities. The decline in sacred traditions has erased the link between the local population and their immediate environment.

Modern Challenges: Judicial Activism and Constitutional Crises

Today, several non-vegetarian and sacrificial practices within *Sanatana Dharma* face an existential threat from the modern legal frameworks and modern animal-rights discourses influenced by Western philosophy.

a. The Clash of Epistemology

In recent times, Indian courts have, in several cases, frequently intervened to regulate or ban animal sacrifice by referring to the ideas of public "decency", sanitation, and animal welfare. These interventions by the Indian judiciary are often based on secular concerns. However, such interventions come into direct conflict with the constitutional "Right to Freedom of Religion" guaranteed under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India.

This debate represents an intense epistemological growing tension between the state-based judiciary values system and the traditional religious systems. While modern secular states seek to regulate public practice through uniform standards, many regional religious communities continue to follow their long-established ritual traditions rooted in their communal history and regional practice.

b. Divergent Ethical Paradigms

The disagreement surrounding ritual animal sacrifice emerges from different theological and ethical viewpoints regarding animals.The modern secular paradigm considers animals as secular "subjects with rights",

prioritising their protection from physical harm within a utilitarian framework.

In contrast, *Shakta* or Tantric theology classifies the animal as a sacred embodiment of the cosmic energy. In Tantric and *Shakta* traditions, *Bali* is not considered an ordinary act of violence but a sacred act associated with sacred exchange, transformation, and cosmic order.

In a multicultural and plural society it becomes important for the legal and political institutions to understand and take into cognisance the religious rationality behind these practices rather than dismissing their traditions through a culturally biased perspective.

Conclusion: Diversity within Sanatana Dharma

The wide range of *prasada* traditions in Hinduism—spanning from the highly policed vegetarian *Mahaprasada* of Puri to the sacrificial rituals of Kamakhya—showcases that *Sanatana Dharma* is fundamentally and deeply pluralistic in nature. Rather than complying with just one fixed religious model, it incorporated within its folds multiple traditions guided by regional culture, local sacred practices, and ancient theology. This study highlights three major observations:

a. **Ritual Meaning Transcends Ingredient:** In Hindu ritual practice, the sacredness of food is not just determined by its vegetarian or non-vegetarian nature. Rather, its meaning depends on several factors such as ritual intention (*bhava*), religious lineage (*sampardaya*), and the sacred context in which the offering is made to the supreme form.

b. **Indigenous knowledge systems support Ritualistic Diversity**: The Indic knowledge systems do not promote an explicitly universalised dietary regime for all. Instead, they accept that individuals possess fundamentally different psychological and spiritual orientations (*Gunas*). As a result, Hindu traditions provide different forms of worship and dietary frameworks tailored to the requirements of specific individuals and communities.

c. **The Mandate for Academic Regional Documentation:** The present age of globalisation and cultural standardisation is gradually moving towards the creation of uniform religious practices. In light of such a scenario, documenting and preserving the regional and folk rituals and traditions becomes academically important. Preserving the diverse food rituals of the Hindu traditions helps preserve the pluralistic character of *Sanatana Dharma*.

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