

TRADITION

Food: Friend Or Foe?

Food cooked and eaten with reverence is both nutrition and medicine

WHEN HINDU PARENTS EXPLAIN THE meaning and purpose of our household rituals and traditions, children tend to embrace them and carry this knowledge into their futures. One of my most vivid recollections from my years at home in Bihar is the set of rituals my family followed around food, and which I now carry forward. Our parents taught us to talk to the plants that grew in abundance in our kitchen garden and ask for their forgiveness before cutting, pruning or necessary uprooting. We'd thank them for providing us with fruits, vegetables and flowers. We were trained to pick only what we needed, thus harvesting was a daily process.

Before we started cooking, my mother would bathe while chanting about the river Ganga. She cleaned the stove and kitchen thoroughly, and decorated the stove top and the floor around it with simple *kolam*, a floral or geometric design made with rice flour. She said a prayer to Ganapati asking Him to help the cooking to progress without obstacles, and another to Agni asking Him to in-



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Home grown: Dr. Vatsala Sperling, 38, is a trained microbiologist. She was born in Bihar, India, and now lives in Vermont, in the northeastern USA.

fuse the food with vital warmth, life and energy. Because the food would be offered first to God, she never sampled tidbits to ascertain taste—yet she seasoned to perfection.

Mother would take all the finished dishes to the prayer room. After lighting the prayer lamp, our parents would chant a prayer for Goddess Annapoorna and meditate for a few moments. Then mother would take out portions for our two cows and their calves, for the birds who visited our garden and for

any person who might come by asking for food.

Prior to mealtime, our eldest sister would make sure all the children (six, including herself) had taken baths, combed their hair, brushed their teeth, put on clean clothes and had *tilak* (third-eye dot) and *vibhuti* (holy ash) on their foreheads.

After prayers, we would sit on the floor in a semicircle around mother. Anyone who came by at mealtime was offered food and sent home afterward with a pack of goodies. Picking, choosing or rudely demanding food was not allowed. Mother and father explained to us that the food on our plate was made possible by all the plants in our garden working around the clock to produce it. Mother cooked the food with devotion because she loved us. The food had acquired specific taste and texture because of the grace of Agni and, finally, the relationship between food, hunger and body remained healthy and normal because of the extreme grace

of Ma Annapoorna—the Mother who nurtures the entire creation. Thus, they explained, all food is a priceless gift of love from Nature, Mother, and symbol of the infinite grace of Gods and Goddesses. It is *prasad*, food offered to God, and it would be a sin to humiliate, neglect, waste or disrespect food or to express greed, lust or aggressiveness when eating. It would also be a sin not to share food with other human beings, animals and birds.



Daily Bread: Food prepared with love, care and devotion is better medicine and better nutrition than anything science and technology has to offer

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Most mealtime stories told by our mother revolved around concepts like thankfulness, expressing gratitude toward nature and the Gods whose grace keeps us in good, physical, mental and emotional health and see that we can partake and enjoy food and benefit from its life-nurturing qualities. We also saw our parents fasting on all religious occasions and donating their share of food to the temple to be given away to the poor.

My pursuit of academic milestones took me away from my home in my late teens, and I spent the next twelve years in two universities, living in dormitories where huge industrial-sized kitchens manufactured food for up to two thousand students at a time. All requirements for a *sattvic* menu, all rules

ing calories and fearing some food ingredients as if they were poisons as lethal as cyanide. They appear to be looking at food with trepidation, suspicion and fear, as if it is their enemy and would destroy them if consumed. They fast with missionary zeal—but their only concern in fasting is with losing weight and flattening abdominal flab. I also read about various illnesses afflicting people and about how corrective nutritional measures might improve the long-term outcome of these various illnesses regardless of the highly stressed, TV addicted and intoxicated state of the population.

Apparently, since I was a child in the sixties to now in the nineties, science and technology have achieved a lot by discovering more and more information about food, its farming, harvesting, storage, transportation and biochemical nature. Scientists can predict how many calories and how many grams of any particular nutrient consumed might result in a certain amount of longevity, muscle mass or bone density—perhaps even predict the perfect diet to result in that elusive goal, immortality.

But this wealth of information on every aspect of food seems to miss an essential point. This material focus has stripped off the reverential, devotional, prayerful and thankful attitude towards food, ignoring the manner in which it is prepared and consumed. It seems food is seen more



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Wholesome Foursome: Dr. Sperling is joined by artist and author Harish Johari (center) and friends for meal preparation in the Sperling's Vermont home

of purity were treated with utter disregard. To the food service, providing a vegetarian dish meant removing pieces of meat and serving the leftover potatoes from the same dish. Being a strict vegetarian, on such days I lived on *chapatis* and fruit jams.

Nevertheless, every time I sat at the dining table with hundreds of other hungry, angry, complaining, shouting, disinterested, hurried and abusive youngsters, I tried to shut out the noise and visualize the sacred atmosphere around food preparation at our home. I would visualize my mother's face that always expressed devotion and love, and then whatever food was in front of me took on special meaning. It became a *prasad*. My attitude was soon noted by cooks and servers, and they began taking personal care of my vegetarian needs.

Since marrying a US-based book publisher, Ehud C. Sperling, and moving to the United States to begin a family with him, I saw for the first time elaborate nutritional labels printed on the packaging of both raw and prepared food. I see many people count-

as a curse than as a blessing. Seeing my parents, who appear to be healthy youngsters though they are in their seventies and eighties, and recalling my years at home, it is apparent to me that how food affects one's body, mind and soul is a direct result of one's own individual attitude in growing, harvesting, cooking, sharing and eating that food.

The great challenge facing me now is the preservation of these values for my son Mahar. I want to teach him the rituals and prayers of thankfulness and gratitude around food as soon as he is big enough to participate in kitchen activities. If need be, later in his life he can learn to read labels about calories, cholesterol, salt, sugar, protein and vitamins. Until then I hope to teach him what I learned as a child from my parents—to look at food as a blessing and a friend, to take the minimum of what he needs to sustain good health and always to thank the Goddess Annapoorna for Her generosity and grace.

By DR. VATSALA SPERLING, Vermont

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